

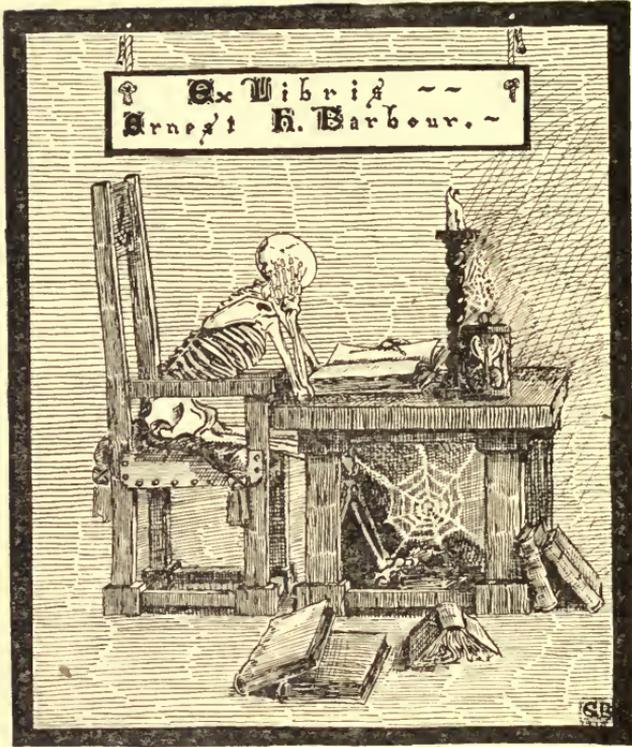


UNDER THE WITCHES' MOON



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Under the Witches' Moon

THE ROMANCES
OF
NATHAN GALLIZIER



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Castel del Monte
The Sorceress of Rome
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The Crimson Gondola



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THE PAGE COMPANY
53 BEACON STREET, BOSTON, MASS.



"It was that of a man coming towards her" (See page 143)

Under the Witches' Moon

A Romantic Tale
of Mediaeval Rome

BY

Nathan Gallizier

Author of "The Crimson Gondola," "The Hill of Venus,"
"The Court of Lucifer," "The Sorceress of Rome,"
"Castel del Monte," Etc.



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*“TO some Love comes so splendid and so soon,
With such wide wings and steps so royally,
That they, like sleepers wakened suddenly,
Expecting dawn, are blinded by his noon.*

*“To some Love comes so silently and late,
That all unheard he is, and passes by,
Leaving no gift but a remembered sigh,
While they stand watching at another gate.*

*“But some know Love at the enchanted hour,
They hear him singing like a bird afar,
They see him coming like a falling star,
They meet his eyes — and all their world's in flower.”*

ETHEL CLIFFORD.

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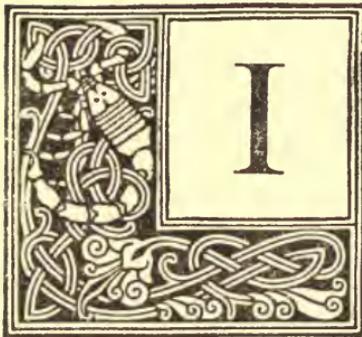
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BOOK THE FIRST

UNDER THE WITCHES' MOON

CHAPTER I

THE FIRES OF ST. JOHN



It was the eve of St. John in the year of our Lord Nine Hundred Thirty-Five.

High on the cypress-clad hills of the Eternal City the evening sun had flamed valediction, and the last lights of the dying day were fading away on the waves of the Tiber whose changeless tide has rolled down through

centuries of victory and defeat, of pride and shame, of glory and disgrace.

The purple dusk began to weave its phantom veil over the ancient capital of the Cæsars and a round blood-red moon was climbing slowly above the misty crests of the Alban Hills, draining the sky of its crimson sunset hues.

The silvery chimes of the Angelus, peeling from churches and convents, from Santa Maria in Trastevere to Santa Maria of the Aventine, began to sing their message of peace into the heart of nature and of man.

As the hours of the night advanced and the moon rose higher in the star-embroidered canopy of the heavens, a vast concourse of people began to pour from shadowy lanes and thoroughfares, from sanctuaries and hostelries, into the

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Piazza Navona. Romans and peasants from the Campagna, folk from Tivoli, Velletri, Corneto and Terracina, pilgrims from every land of the then known world, Africans and Greeks, Lombards and Franks, Sicilians, Neapolitans, Syrians and Kopts, Spaniards and Saxons, men from the frozen coast of Thulé and the burning sands of Arabia, traders from the Levant, sorcerers from the banks of the Nile, conjurers from the mythical shores of the Ganges, adventurers from the Barbary coast, gypsies from the plains of Sarmatia, monks from the Thebaide, Normans, Gascons and folk from Aquitaine.

In the Piazza Navona booths and stalls had been erected for the sale of figs and honey, and the fragrant products of the Roman osterié.

Strings of colored lanterns danced and quivered in the air. The fitful light from the torches, sending spiral columns of resinous smoke into the night-blue ether, shed a lurid glow over the motley, fantastic crowd that increased with every moment, recruited from fishermen, flower girls, water-carriers and herdsmen from the Roman Campagna.

Ensnared in the shadow of a roofless portico, a relic of the ancient Circus Agonalis, which at one time occupied the site of the Piazza Navona, and regarding the bewildering spectacle which presented itself to his gaze, with the air of one unaccustomed to such scenes, stood a stranger whose countenance revealed little of the joy of life that should be the heritage of early manhood.

His sombre and austere bearing, the abstracted mood and far-away look of the eyes would have marked him a dreamer in a society of men who had long been strangers to dreams. For stern reality ruled the world and the lives of a race untouched alike by the glories of the past and the dawn of the Pre-Renaissance.

He wore the customary pilgrim's habit, almost colorless from the effects of wind and weather. Now and then a

chance passer-by would cast shy glances at the lone stranger, endeavoring to reconcile his age and his garb, and wondering at the nature of the transgression that weighed so heavily upon one apparently so young in years.

And well might his countenance give rise to speculation, were it but for the determined and stolid air of aloofness which seemed to render futile every endeavor to entice him into the seething maelstrom of humanity on the part of those who took note of his dark and austere form as they crossed the Piazza.

Tristan of Avalon was in his thirtieth year, though the hardships of a long and tedious journey, consummated entirely afoot, made him appear of maturer age. The face, long exposed to the relentless rays of the sun, had taken on the darker tints of the Southland. The nose was straight, the grey eyes tinged with melancholy, the hair was of chestnut brown, the forehead high and lofty. The ensemble was that of one who, unaccustomed to the pilgrim's garb, moves uneasily among his kind. Yet the atmosphere of frivolity, while irritating and jarring upon his senses, did not permit him to avert his gaze from the orgy of color, the pandemonium of jollity, that whirled and piped and roared about him as the flow of mighty waters.

One of many strange wayfarers bound upon business of one sort or another to the ancient seat of empire, whose worldly sceptre had long passed from her palsied grip to the distant shores of the Bosphorus, Tristan had arrived during the early hours of the day in the feudal and turbulent witches' cauldron of the Rome of the Millennium.

And with him constituents of many peoples, from far and near, had reached the Leonine quarter from the Tiburtine road, after months of tedious travel, to worship at the holy shrines, to do penance and to obtain absolution for real or imaginary transgressions.

From Bosnia, from Serbia and Hungary, from Negropont

and the islands of the Greek Archipelago, from Trebizond and the Crimea it came endlessly floating to the former capital of the Cæsars, a waste drift of palaces and temples and antique civilizations, for the End of Time was said to be nigh, and the dread of impending judgment lay heavily upon the tottering world of the Millennium.

A grotesque and motley crowd it was, that sought and found a temporary haven in the lowly taverns, erected for the accommodation of perennial pilgrims, chiefly mean ill-favored dwellings of clay and timber, divided into racial colonies, so that pilgrims of the same land and creed might dwell together.

A very Babel of voices assailed Tristan's ear, for the ancient sonorous tongue had long degenerated into the lingua Franca of bad Latin, though there were some who could still, though in a broken and barbarous fashion, make themselves understood, when all other modes of expression failed them.

All about him throbbed the strange, weird music of zitherns and lutes and the thrumming of the Egyptian Sistrum. The air of the summer night was heavy with the odor of incense, garlic and roses. The higher risen moon gleamed pale as an alabaster lamp in the dark azure of the heavens, trembling luminously on the waters of a fountain which occupied the centre of the Piazza Navona.

Here lolled some scattered groups of the populace, discussing the events of the day, jesting, gesticulating, drinking or love-making. Others roamed about, engaged in conversation or enjoying the antics of two Smyrniote tumblers, whose contortions elicited storms of applause from an appreciative audience.

A crowd of maskers had invaded the Piazza Navona, and the uncommon spectacle at last drew Tristan from his point of vantage and caused him to mingle with the crowds, which increased with every moment, their shouts and gibes and the clatter of their tongues becoming quite deafening to his

ears. Richly decorated chariots, drawn by spirited steeds, rolled past in a continuous procession. The cries of the wine-venders and fruit-sellers mingled with the acclaim of the multitudes. Now and then was heard the fanfare of a company of horsemen who clattered past, bound upon some feudal adventure.

Weary of walking, distracted by the ever increasing clamor, oppressed with a sense of loneliness amidst the surging crowds, whose festal spirit he did not share, Tristan made his way towards the fountain and, seating himself on the margin, regardless of the chattering groups, which intermittently clustered about it, he felt his mood gradually calm in the monotony of the gurgling flow of the water, which spurted from the grotesque mouths of lions and dolphins.

The stars sparkled in subdued lustre above the dark, towering cypresses which crowned the adjacent eminence of Monte Testaccio, and the distant palaces and ruins stood forth in distinctness of splendor and desolation beneath the luminous brightness of the moonlit heavens. White shreds of mist, like sorrowing spirits, floated above the winding course of the Tiber, and enveloped in a diaphanous haze the cloisters upon St. Bartholomew's Island at the base of Mount Aventine.

For a time Tristan's eyes roamed over the kaleidoscopic confusion which met his gaze on every turn. His ear was assailed by the droning sound of many voices that filled the air about him, when he was startled by the approach of two men, who, but for their halting gait, might have passed unheeded in the rolling sea of humanity that ebbed and flowed over the Piazza.

Basil, the Grand Chamberlain, was endowed with the elegance of the effeminate Roman noble of his time. Supple as an eel, he nevertheless suggested great physical strength. The skin was of a deep olive tinge. The black, beady eyes were a marked feature of the countenance. Inscrutable

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and steadfast in regard, with a hint of mockery and cynicism, coupled with an abiding alertness, they seemed to penetrate the very core of matter.

He wore a black mantle reaching almost to his feet. Of his features, shaded by a hood, little was to be seen, save his glittering minx-eyes. These he kept alternately fixed upon the crowds that surged around him and on his companion, a hunchback garbed entirely in black, from the Spanish hat, which he wore slouched over his face, to the black hose and sandals that encased his feet. A large red scar across the low forehead heightened the repulsiveness of his countenance. There was something strangely sinister in his sunken, cadaverous cheeks, the low brow, the inflamed eyelids, and his limping gait.

Without perceiving or heeding the presence of Tristan they paused as by some preconcerted signal.

As the taller of the two pushed back the hood of his pilgrim garb, as if to cool his brow in the night breeze, Tristan peered into a face not lacking in sensuous refinement. Dark supercilious eyes roved from one object to another, without dwelling long on any particular one. There was somewhat of a cynical look in the downward curve of the eyebrows, the thin straight lips and the slightly aquiline nose, which seemed to imbue him with an air of recklessness and daring, that ill consorted with his monkish garb.

Their discourse was at first almost unintelligible to Tristan. The language of the common people had, at this period of the history of Rome, not only lost its form, but almost the very echo of the Latin tongue.

After a time, however, Tristan distinguished a name, and, upon listening more attentively, the burden of the message began to unfold itself.

"Why then have you ventured out of your hell-hole of iniquity, when discovery means death or worse?" said Basil, the Grand Chamberlain. "Do the keeps and dungeons of

the Emperor's Tomb so allure you? Or do you trust in some miraculous delivery from its vermin-haunted vaults?"

At these words Rome's most dreaded bravo, Il Gobbo of the Catacombs, snarled contemptuously.

"You are needlessly alarmed, my lord. They will not look for Il Gobbo in this company, though even a mole may walk in the shadow of a saint."

Basil regarded the speaker with mingled pity and contempt.

"There is room for all the world in Rome and the devil to boot."

Il Gobbo chuckled unpleasantly.

"Besides — folk about here show a great reverence for a holy garb —"

"Always with fitting reservations," interposed the Grand Chamberlain sardonically. "I have had it in mind at some time or other to relieve the Grand Penitentiary. The good man's lungs must be well nigh bursting with the foul air down there by the Tomb of the Apostle. He will welcome a rest!"

"Requiescat," chanted the bravo, imitating the nasal tone of the clergy.

Basil nodded approval.

"He at one time did me the honor of showing some concern in my spiritual welfare. Know you what I replied?" —

The bravo gave a shrug.

"'Father,' I said, when he urged me to confess, 'pray shrive some one worthier than myself. But — if you must needs have a confession — I shall whisper into your holy ear so many interesting little episodes, so many spicy peccadillos, and — to enhance their interest — mention some names so high in the grace of God —'"

"And the reverend father?"

"Looked anathema and vanished" —

Basil paused for a moment, after which he continued with a sigh:

"It is too late! The Church is to be purified. Not even the pale shade of Marozia will henceforth be permitted to haunt the crypts of Castel San Angelo — merely for the sake of decorum. There is nothing less well bred than memory!"

For a moment they relapsed into silence, watching the shifting crowds, then Basil continued:

"Compared with this virtuous boredom the last days of Ugo of Tuscany were a carnival. One could at least speed the travails of some one who required swift absolution."

"Can you contrive to bring about this happy state?" queried Il Gobbo.

"It is always the unexpurgated that happens," Basil replied sardonically.

"I hope to advance in your school," Il Gobbo interposed with a smile.

"I have long had you in mind. If you are in favor with yourself you will become an apt pupil. Remember! He who is dead is dead and long live the survivor."

"In very truth, my lord, breath is the first and last thing we draw —" rejoined the bravo, evidently not relishing the thought that death might be standing unseen at his elbow.

"Who would end one's days in odious immaculacy," Basil interposed grandiloquently, "even though you will not incur that reproach from those who know you from report, or who have visited your haunts? But to the point. There are certain forces at work in Rome which make breathing in this fetid air a rather cumbersome process."

"I doubt me if they could teach your lordship any new tricks," Il Gobbo replied, somewhat dubiously.

The Grand Chamberlain smiled darkly.

"Good Il Gobbo, the darkest of my tricks you have not yet fathomed."

"Perchance then the gust of rumor blows true about my lord's palace on the Pincian Hill?"

“What say they about my palatial abode?” Basil turned suavely to the speaker.

There was something in the gleam of his interrogator’s eyes that caused Il Gobbo to hesitate. But his native insolence came to the rescue of his failing courage.

“Ask rather, what do they not say of it, my lord! It would require less time to recite—”

“Nevertheless, I am just now in a frame of mind to shudder soundly. These Roman nights, with their garlic and incense, are apt to befuddle the brain, — rob it of its power to plot. Perchance the recital of these mysteries would bring to mind something I have omitted.”

The bravo regarded the speaker with a look of awe.

“They whisper of torture chambers, where knife and screw and pulley never rest — of horrors that make the blood freeze in the veins — of phantoms of fair women that haunt the silent galleries — strange wails of anguish that sound nightly from the subterranean vaults —”

“A goodly account that ought vastly to interest the Grand Penitentiary — were it — with proper decorum — whispered in his ear. It would make him forget — for the time at least — the dirty Roman gossip. Deem you not, good Il Gobbo?”

“I am not versed in such matters, my lord,” replied the bravo, ill at ease. “Perhaps your lordship will now tell me why this fondness for my society?”

“To confess truth, good Il Gobbo, I did not join you merely to meditate upon the pleasant things of life. Rather to be inspired to some extraordinary adventure such as my hungry soul yearns for. As for the nature thereof, I shall leave that to the notoriously wicked fertility of your imagination.”

The lurid tone of the speaker startled the bravo.

“My lord, you would not lay hands on the Lord’s anointed?”

Il Gobbo met a glance that made the blood freeze in his veins.

"Is it the thing you call your conscience that ails you, or some sudden indigestion? Or is the bribe not large enough?"

The bravo doggedly shook his head.

"Courage lieth not always in bulk," he growled. "May my soul burn to a crisp in the everlasting flames if I draw steel against the Lord's anointed."

"Silence, fool! What you do in my service shall not burden your soul! Have you forgotten our compact?"

"That I have not, my lord! But since the Senator of Rome has favored me with his especial attention, I too have something to lose, which some folk hereabout call their honor."

"Your honor!" sneered the Grand Chamberlain. "It is like the skin of an onion. Peel off one, there's another beneath."

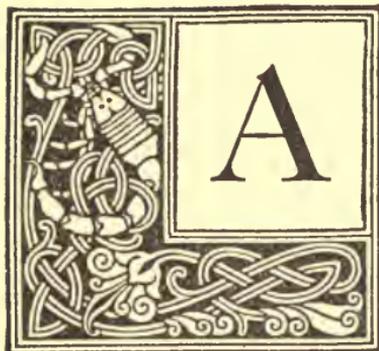
"My skin then —" the bravo growled doggedly. "However — if the lord Basil will confide in me —"

"Pray lustily to your patron saint and frequent the chapel of the Grand Penitentiary," replied Basil suavely, beckoning to Il Gobbo to follow him. "But beware, lest in your zeal to confess you mistake my peccadillos for your own."

With these words the two worthies slowly retraced their steps in the direction of Mount Aventine and were soon lost to sight.

CHAPTER II

THE WEAVING OF THE SPELL



AFTER they had disappeared Tristan stood at gaze, puzzled where to turn, for the spectacle had suddenly changed.

New bands of revellers had invaded the Piazza Navona, and it seemed indeed as if the Eve of St. John were assuming the character of the ancient Lupercalia, for the endless variety of

costumes displayed by a multitude assembled from every corner of Italy, Spain, Greece, Africa, and the countries of the North, was now exaggerated by a wild fancifulness and grotesque variety of design.

Tristan himself did not escape the merry intruders. He was immediately beset by importunate revellers, and not being able to make himself understood, they questioned and lured him on, imploring his good offices with the Enemy of Mankind.

Satyrs, fauns and other sylvan creatures accosted him, diverting their antics, when they found themselves but ill repaid for their efforts, and leaving the solitary stranger pondering the expediency of remaining, or wending his steps toward the Inn of the Golden Shield, where he had taken lodging upon his arrival.

These doubts were to be speedily dispelled by a spectacle

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which attracted the crowds that thronged the Piazza, causing them to give way before a splendid procession that had entered the Navona from the region of Mount Aventine.

Down the Navona came a train of chariots, preceded by a throng of persons, clad in rich and fantastic Oriental costumes, leaping, dancing and making the air resound with tambourines, bells, cymbals and gongs. They kept up an incessant jingle, which sounded weirdly above the droning chant of distant processions of pilgrims, hermits and monks, traversing the city from sanctuary to sanctuary.

The occupants of these chariots consisted of a number of young women in the flower of youth and beauty, whose scant apparel left little to the imagination either as regarded their person or the trade they plied. The charioteers were youths, scarcely arrived at the age of puberty, but skilled in their profession in the highest degree.

The first chariot, drawn by two milk-white steeds of the Berber breed, was inlaid with mother-of-pearl, with gilded spokes and trappings that glistened in the light of a thousand colored lanterns and torches, like a vehicle from fairyland. The reins were in the hands of a youth hardly over sixteen years of age, garbed in a snow white tunic, but the skill with which he drove the shell-shaped car through the surging crowds argued for uncommon dexterity.

Tristan, from his station by the fountain, was enabled to take in every detail of the strange pageant which moved swiftly towards him, a glittering, fantastic procession, as if drawn out of dreamland; and so enthralled were his senses that he did not note the terrible silence which had suddenly fallen upon the multitude.

As a half-slumbering man may note a sudden brilliant gleam of sunshine flashing on the walls of his chamber, Tristan gazed in confused bewilderment, when suddenly his stupefied senses were aroused to hot life and pulsation, as he fixed his straining gaze on the supreme fair form of the

woman in the first car, standing erect like a queen, surveying her subjects.

In the silence of a great multitude there is always something ominous. But Tristan noted it not. Indeed he was deaf and blind to everything, save the apparition in the shell-shaped car, as it bounded lightly over the unevenly laid tufa of the Navona.

Was it a woman, or a goddess? A rainbow flame in mortal shape, a spirit of earth, air, water or fire?

He saw before him a woman combining the charm of the girl with the maturity of the thirties, dark-haired, exquisitely proportioned, with clear-cut features and dark slumbrous eyes.

She wore a diaphanous robe of pale silk gauze. Her wonderful arms, white as the fallen snow, were encircled by triple serpentine coils of gold. Else, she was unadorned, save for a circlet of rubies which crowned the dusky head.

Her sombre eyes rested drowsily on the swarming crowds, while a smile of disdain curved the small red mouth, as her chariot proceeded through the frozen silence.

Suddenly her eye caught the admiring gaze of Tristan, who had indeed forgotten heaven and earth in the contemplation of this supremest handiwork of the Creator. A word to the charioteer and the chariot came to a stop.

Tristan and the woman faced each other in silence, the man with an ill-concealed air of uneasiness, such as one may experience who finds himself face to face with some unknown danger.

With utter disregard for the gaping crowds which had gathered around the fountain she bent her gaze upon him, surveying him from head to foot.

"Who are you?" she spoke at last, and he, confused, bewildered, trembling, gazed into the woman's supremely fair face and stammered:

"A pilgrim!"

Her lips parted in a smile that revealed two rows of small white, even teeth. There was something unutterable in that smile which brought the color to Tristan's brow.

"A Roman?"

"From the North!"

"Why are you here?"

"For the salvation of my soul!"

He blushed as he spoke.

Again the strange smile curved the woman's lips, again the inscrutable look shone in her eyes.

"For the salvation of your soul!" she repeated slowly after him. "And you so young and fair. Ah! You have done some little wickedness, no doubt?"

He started to reply, but she checked him with a wave of her hand.

"I do not wish to be told. Do you repent?"

Tristan's throat was dry. His lips refused utterance. He nodded awkwardly.

"So much the worse! These little peccadillos are the spice of life! What is your name?"

She repeated it lingeringly after him.

"From the North — you say — to do penance in Rome!"

She watched him with an expression of amusement. When he started back from her, a strange fear in his heart, a wave of her hand checked him.

"Let me whisper a secret to you!" she said with a smile.

He felt her perfumed breath upon his cheek.

Inclining his ear he staggered away from her dizzy, bewildered.

Presently, with a dazzling smile, she extended one white hand and Tristan, trembling as one under a spell, bent over and kissed it. He felt the soft pressure of her fingers and his pulse throbbed with a strange, insidious fire, as reluctantly he released it at last.

Raising his eyes, he now met her gaze, absorbing into

his innermost soul the mesmeric spell of her beauty, drinking in the warmth of those dark, sleepy orbs that flashed on him half resentfully, half mockingly. Then the charioteer jerked up the reins, the chariot began to move. Like a dream the pageant vanished — and slowly, like far-away thunder, the voice of the multitudes began to return, as they regarded the lone pilgrim with mingled doubt, fear and disdain.

With a start Tristan looked about. He was as one bewitched. He felt he must follow her at all risks, ascertain her name, her abode.

Dashing through the crowds that gave way before him, wondering and commenting upon the unseemly haste of one wearing so austere a garb, Tristan caught a last glimpse of the procession as it entered the narrow gorge that lies between Mount Testaccio and Mount Aventine.

With a sense of great disappointment he slowly retraced his steps, walking as in the thrall of a strange dream, and, after inquiring the direction of his inn of some wayfarers he chanced to meet, he at last reached the Inn of the Golden Shield, situated near the Flaminian Gate, and entered the great guest-chamber.

The troubled light of a melancholy dusk was enhanced by the glimmer of stone lamps suspended from the low and dirty ceiling.

Notwithstanding the late hour, the smoky precincts were crowded with guests from many lands, who were discussing the events of the day. If Tristan's wakeful ear had been alive to the gossip of the tavern he might have heard the incident in the Navona, in which he played so prominent a part, discussed in varied terms of wonder and condemnation.

Tristan took his seat near an alcove usually reserved for guests of state. The unaccustomed scene began to exercise a singular fascination upon him, stranger as he was among strangers from all the earth, their faces dark against the

darker background of the room. Brooding over a tankard of Falernian of the hue of bronze, which his oily host had placed before him, he continued to absorb every detail of the animated picture, while the memory of his strange adventure dominated his mind.

Tristan's meagre fund of information was to be enriched by tidings of an ominous nature. He learned that the Pontiff, John XI, was imprisoned in the Lateran Palace, by his step-brother Alberic, the Senator of Rome.

While this information came to him, a loyal son of the Church, as a distinct shock, Tristan felt, nevertheless, strangely impressed with the atmosphere of the place. Even in the period of her greatest decay, Rome seemed still the centre of the universe.

Thus he sat brooding for hours.

When, with a start, he roused himself at last, he found the vast guest-chamber well-nigh deserted. The pilgrims had retired to their respective quarters, small, dingy cells, teeming with evil odors, heat and mosquitoes, and the oily Calabrian host was making ready for the morrow.

The warmth of the Roman night and the fatigue engendered after many leagues of tedious travel on a dusty road, under the scorching rays of an Italian sky, at last asserted itself and, wishing a fair rest to his host, who was far from displeased to see his guest-chamber cleared for the night, Tristan climbed the crooked and creaking stairs leading to the chamber assigned to him, which looked out upon the gate of Castello and the Tiber, where it is spanned by the Bridge of San Angelo.

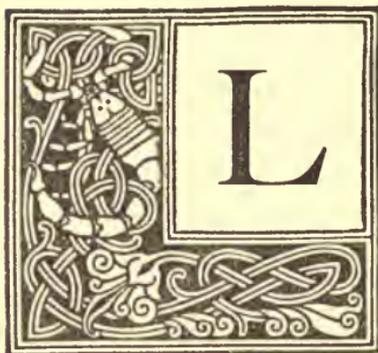
The window stood open to the night air, on which floated the perfumes from oleander and almond groves. The roofs of the Eternal City formed a dark, shadowy mass in the deep blue dusk, and the cylindrical masonry of the Flavian Emperor's Tomb rose ominously against the deep turquoise of the night sky.

Soon the events of the day and the scenes of the evening began to melt into faint and indistinct memories.

Sleep, deep and tranquil, encompassed Tristan's weary limbs, but in his dreams the events of the evening were obliterated before scenes of the past.

CHAPTER III

THE DREAM LADY OF AVALON



LIKE a disk of glowing gold the sun had set upon hill and dale. The gardens of Avalon lay wrapt in the mists of evening. Like flowers seemed the fair women who thronged the winding paths. From fragrant bosquets, borne on the wings of the night wind came the faint sounds of zitherns and lutes.

He, too, was there, mingling joyous, carefree, with the rest, gathering the white roses for the one he loved. Dimly he recalled his delight, as he saw her approach in the waning light through the dim ilex avenue, an apparition wondrous fair in the crimson haze of slowly departing day, entering his garden of dreams. With strangely aching heart he saw them throng about her in homage and admiration.

At last he knelt before her, kissing the white hand that lay passive within his own.

How wonderful she was! Never had he seen anything like her, not even in this land of flowers and of beautiful women. Her hair was warm as if the sun had entered into it. Her skin had the tints of ivory. The violet eyes with the long drooping lashes seemed to hold the memories of a thousand love thoughts. And the small, crimson mouth, so witch-like, so alluring, seemed to hold out promise of fulfilment of dizzy hopes and desires.

“It is our golden hour,” she smiled down at him, and the white fingers twined the rose in her hair, wove a girdle of blossoms round her exquisite, girlish form.

To Tristan she seemed an enchantment, an embodied rose. Never had he seen her so fair, so beautiful. On her lips quivered a smile, yet there was a strange light in her eyes, that gave him pause, a light he had never seen therein before.

She beckoned him away from the throng. “Come where the moonlight dreams.”

Her smile and her wonderful eyes were his beacon light. He rose to his feet and took her hand. And away they strayed from the rest of the crowd, far away over green lawns, emerald in the moonlight, with, here and there, the dark shadow of a cypress falling across the silvery brightness of their path. Little by little the gardens were deserted. Fainter and fainter came the sounds of lutes and harps. The shadows of the grove now encompassed them, as silently they strode side by side.

“This is my Buen Retiro,” she spoke at last. “Here we may rest — for awhile — far from the world.”

They entered the rose-bower, a wilderness, blossoming with roses and hyacinths and fragrant shrubs — a very paradise for lovers. —

The bells of a remote convent began to chime. They smote the silence with their silvery peals. The castle of Avalon lay dark in the distance, shadowy against the deep azure of the night sky.

When the chimes of the Angelus had died away, she spoke.

“How wonderful is this peace!”

Her tone brought a sudden chill to his heart.

As she moved forward, he dropped his wealth of flowers and held out his hands entreatingly.

“Dearest Hellyayne,” he said, “tarry but a little longer — ”

She seemed to start at his words, and leaned over the back of the stone bench, which was covered with climbing

roses. And suddenly under this new light, sad and silent, she seemed no longer his fair companion of the afternoon, all youth, all beauty, all light. Motionless, as if shadowed by some dire foreboding, she stood there and he dared not approach. Once he raised his hand to take her own. But something in her eyes caused the hand to fall as with its own weight.

He could not understand what stayed him, what stayed the one supreme impulse of his heart. He did not understand what checked the words that hovered on his lips. Was it the clear pure light of the eyes he loved so well? Was it some dark power he wot not of?

At last he broke through his restraint.

"Hellayne —" he whispered low. "Hellayne — I love you!"

She did not move.

There was a deep silence.

Then she answered.

"Oh, why have you said the word!"

What did she mean? He cried, trembling, within himself. And now he was no longer in the moonlit rose-bower in the gardens of Avalon, but in a dense forest. The trees meeting overhead made a night so black, that he saw nothing, not even their gnarled trunks.

Hellayne was standing beside him. A pale moonbeam flickered through the interwoven branches.

She pointed to the castle of Avalon, dim in the distance. He made a quick forward step to see her face. Her eyes were very calm.

"Let us go, Tristan!" she said.

"My answer first," he insisted, gazing longingly, wistfully into the eyes that held a night of mystery.

"You have it," she said calmly.

"It was no answer," he pleaded, "from lover to lover —"

"Ah!" she replied, in her voice a great weariness which

he had never noted before. "But here are neither loves nor lovers. — Look!"

And he looked.

Before them lay a colorless and lifeless sea, under the arch of a threatening sky. Across that sky dark clouds, with ever-changing shapes, rolled slowly, and presently condensed into a vague shadowy form, while the torpid waves droned a muffled and unearthly dirge.

He covered his eyes, overcome by a mastering fear of that dread shape which he knew, yet knew not.

He knelt before her, took the hands he loved so well into his own and pressed upon them his fevered lips.

"I do not understand — " he moaned.

She regarded him fixedly.

"I am another's wife — "

His head drooped.

"When my eyes first met yours they begged that my love for you might find response in your heart," he said, still holding on to those marvellous white hands. "Did you not accept my worship?"

She neither encouraged nor repulsed him by word or gesture. And he covered her hands with burning kisses. After his passionate outburst had died to silence she spoke quietly, tremulously.

"Tristan," she began, and paused as if she were summoning courage to do that which she must. "Tristan, this may not be."

"I love you," he sobbed. "I love you! This is all I know! All I shall ever know. How can I support life without you? heart of my heart — soul of my soul? — What must I do, to win you for my own — to give you happiness?"

A negative gesture came in response.

"Is sin ever happiness?"

"The priests say not! And yet — our love is not sinful — "

"The priests say truth." Hellayne interposed calmly.

He felt as if an immense darkness, the chaos of a thousand spheres, suddenly encompassed him, threatening to plunge him into a bottomless abyss of despair.

Then he made a quick forward step. Her face was close to his. Wide eyes fastened upon him in a compelling gaze.

"Tell me!" he urged, his own eyes lost in those unfathomable wells of dreams. "When love is with you — does aught matter? Does sin — discovery — God himself — matter!"

With a frightened cry she drew back.

But those steady, questioning eyes, sombre, yet aflame, compelled the shifting violet orbs.

"Tell me!" he urged again, his face very close to her face.

"Naught matters," she whispered faintly, as if under a spell.

Then her gaze relinquished his, as she looked dreamily out upon the woods. There was absolute silence, lasting apace. It was the stillness of a forest where no birds sing, no breezes stir. Then a twig snapped beneath Helayne's foot. He had taken her to his heart and, his strong arms about her, kissed her eyes, her mouth, her hair. She suffered his caresses dreamily, passively, her white arms encircling his neck.

Suddenly he stiffened. His form was as that of one turned to stone.

In the shadow of the forest beneath a great oak, hooded, motionless, stood a man. His eyes seemed like glowing coals, as they stared at them. Helayne did not see them, but she felt the tremor that passed through Tristan's frame. The mantle's hood was pulled far down over the man's face. No features were visible.

And yet Tristan knew that cowed and muffled form. He knew the eyes that had surprised their tryst.

It was Count Roger de Laval.

The muffled shadow was gone as quickly as it had come.

It was growing ever darker in the forest, and when he looked up again he saw that Hellyayne's white roses were scattered on the ground. Her scarf of blue samite had fallen heedlessly beside them. He lifted it and pressed it to his lips.

"Will you give it to me?" he said tremulously. "That it may be with me always —"

There was no immediate response.

At last she said slowly:

"You shall have it — a parting gift —"

He seized her hands. They lay passively within his own.

There was a great fear in his eyes.

"I do not understand —"

She loosened the roses from her hair and garb before she made reply. Silently, like dead leaves in autumn, the fragrant petals dropped one by one to earth. Hellyayne watched them with weary eyes as they drifted to their sleep, then, as she held the last spray in her hand, gazing upon it she said:

"When you gave them to me, Tristan, they were sweet and fresh, the fairest you could find. Now they have faded, perished, died —"

He started to plead, to protest, to silence her, but she continued:

"Ah! Can you not see? Can you not understand? Perchance," she added bitterly, "I was created to adorn the fleeting June afternoon of your life, and when this scarf is torn and faded as these flowers, let the wind carry it away, — like these dead petals at our feet —"

She let fall the withered spray, but he snatched it ere it touched the ground.

"I love you," he stammered passionately. "I love you! Love you as no woman was ever loved. You are my world — my fate — Hellyayne! Hellyayne! Know you what you say?" —

She gazed at him, with eyes from which all life had fled.

"I am another's," she said slowly. "I have sinned in loving you, in giving to you my soul. And even as you stood there and held me in your arms, it flashed upon me, like lightning in a dark stormy night — I saw the abyss, at the brink of which we stand, both, you and I." —

"But we have done no wrong — we have not sinned," he protested wildly.

She silenced him with a gesture of her beautiful hands.

"Who may command the waters of the cataract, go here, — or go there? Who may tell them to return to their lawful bed? I have neither power nor strength, to resist your pleading. You have been life and love to me, all, — all, — and all this you are to-day. And therefore must we part, — part, ere it be too late —" she concluded with a wild cry of anguish, "ere we are both engulfed in the darkness." —

And he fell at her feet as if stunned by a thunderbolt.

"Do not send me away —" he pleaded, his voice choked with anguish. "Do not send me from you."

"You will go," she said softly, deaf to his prayers. "It is the supreme test of your love, great as I know it is."

"But I cannot leave you, I cannot go, never to see you more —" and he grasped the cool white hands of the woman as a drowning man will grasp a straw.

She did not attempt, for the time, to take them from him. She looked down upon him wistfully.

"Would you make me the mock of Avalon?" she said. "Once my lord suspects we are lost. And, I fear, he does even now. For his gaze has been dark and troubled. And I cannot, will not, expose you to his cruelty. You know him not as I do —"

"Even therefore will I not leave you," he interposed, looking into the sweet face. "He has not been kind to you. His pride was flattered by your ready surrender, and your great beauty is but one of the many dishes that go to

satiate his varied appetites. Of the others you know naught — ”

She gave a shrug.

“ If it be so,” she said wearily, “ so let it be. Nevertheless, I know whereof I speak. This thing has stolen over us like a madness. And, like a madness, it will hurl us to our doom.”

Though he had seen the dark, glowering face among the branches, he said nothing, not to alarm her, not to cause her fear and misgiving. He loved her spotless purity as dearly as herself. To him they were inseparable.

His head fell forward on her hands. Her fingers played in his soft brown hair.

“ What would you have me do? ” he said, his voice choked by his anguish.

“ Go on a pilgrimage to Rome, to obtain forgiveness, as I shall visit the holy shrines of Mont Beliard and do likewise,” she said, steadying her voice with an effort. “ Let us forget that we have ever met — that we have ever loved, — or remember that we loved — a dream.” —

“ Can love forget so readily? ” he said, bitter anguish and reproach in his tones.

She shook her head.

“ It is my fate, — for better — or worse — no matter what befall. As for you — life lies before you. Love another, happier woman, one that is free to give — and to receive. As for me — ”

She paused and covered her face with her hands.

“ What will you do? ” he cried in his over-mastering anguish.

A faint, far-off voice made reply.

“ I shall do that which I must! ”

He staggered away from her. She should not see the scalding tears that coursed down his cheeks. But, as he turned, he again saw the dark and glowering face, the brow

gloomy as a thunder-cloud, of the Count de Laval. But again it was not he. It was the black-garbed, lithe stranger, the companion of the hunchback, who was regarding Helayne with evil, leering eyes.

He wanted to cry out, warn her, entreat her to fly. —

But it was too late.

Like a bird that watches spellbound the approach of the snake, Helayne stood pale and trembling — her cheeks white as death — her eyes riveted on the evil shape that seemed the fiend. But he, Tristan, also was encompassed by the same spell. He could not move — he could not cry out. With a bound, swift and noiseless as the panther's, he saw the sinewy stranger hurl himself upon Helayne, picking her up like a feather and disappear in the gloom of the forest.

With a cry of horror, bathed from head to foot in perspiration, Tristan started from his slumber.

The moonbeams flooded the chamber. The soft breeze of the summer night stole through the open casement.

With a moan as of mortal pain he sat up and looked about.

Was he indeed in Rome?

Had it been but a dream, this echo of the past, this visualized parting from the woman he had loved better than life?

Was he indeed in Rome, to do as she had bid him do, not in the misty, flower-scented rose-gardens of Avalon in far Provence? —

And she — Helayne — where was she at this hour?

Tristan stroked his clammy brow with a hot, dry hand. For a moment the memories evoked by the magic wand of the God of Sleep seemed to banish all consciousness of the present. He cast a fleeting, bewildered glance at the dim, distant housetops, then fell back among his cushions, his lips muttering the name of her who had filled his dream with her never-to-be-forgotten presence, wondering

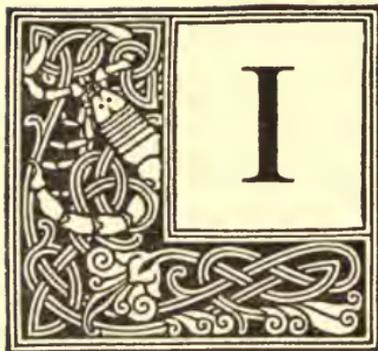
and questioning if they would ever meet again. Thus he tossed and tossed.

After a time he became still.

Once again consciousness was blotted out and the dream realm reigned supreme.

CHAPTER IV

THE WAY OF THE CROSS



IT was late on the following morning when Tristan waked. The sun was high in the heavens and the perfumes from a thousand gardens were wafted to his nostrils. He looked about bewildered. The dream phantoms of the night still held his senses captive, and it was some time ere he came to a realization of the present. In the dream of the night he had lived over a scene in the past, conjuring back the memory of one who had sent him on the Way of the Cross. The pitiless rays of the Roman sun, which began to envelop the white houses and walls, brought with them the realization of the present hour. He had come to Rome to do penance, to start life anew and to forget. So she had bade him do on that never-to-be forgotten eve of their parting. So she had willed it, and he had obeyed.

How it all flooded back to him again in waves of anguish, the memory of those days when the turrets of Avalon had faded from his aching sight, when, together with a motley pilgrims' throng, he had tramped the dusty sun-baked road, dead to all about him save the love that was cushioned in his heart. How that parting from Helayne still dominated all other events, even though life and the world had fallen away from him and he had only prayer for oblivion, for obliteration.

Yet even Hellayne's inexorable decree would not have availed to speed him on a pilgrimage so fraught with hopelessness, that during all that long journey Tristan hardly exchanged word or greeting with his fellow pilgrims. It was her resolve, unflinchingly avowed, to leave the world and enter a convent, if he refused to obey, which had eventually compelled. Her own self-imposed penance should henceforth be to live, lonely and heartbroken, by the side of an unbeloved consort, while Tristan atoned far away, in the city of the popes, at the shrines of the saints.

At night, when Tristan retired, at dawn, when he arose, Hellayne's memory was with him, and every league that increased the distance between them seemed to heighten his love and his anguish. But human endurance has its limits, and at last he was seized by a great torpor, a chill indifference that swept away and deadened every other feeling. There was no longer a To-day, no longer a Yesterday, no longer a To-morrow.

Such was Tristan's state of mind, when from the Tiburtine road he first sighted the walls and towers of Rome, without definite purpose or aim, drawn along, as it were, towards an uncertain goal by Fate's invisible hand. Utterly indifferent as to what might befall among the Seven Hills, he was at times dimly conscious of a presentiment that ultimately he would end up his own days in one of those silent places where all earthly hopes and desires are forever stilled. So much was clear to him. Like the rest of the pilgrims who had wended their way to St. Peter's seat, he would complete the circuit of the holy shrines, kiss the feet of the Father of Christendom, do such penance as the Pontiff should impose, and then attach himself to one party or another in the pontifical city which held out hope for action, since the return to his own native land was barred to him for evermore.

How he would bear up under the ordeal he did not know.

How he would support life away from Helayne, without a word, a message, without the assurance that all was well with her, whether now, his own fate accomplished, others thronged about her in love and adulation,— he knew not.

For the nonce he was resolved to let new scenes, new impressions sweep away the great void of an aching heart, lighten the despair that filled his soul.

In approaching the Eternal City he had felt scarcely any of the elevation of spirit which has affected so many devout pilgrims. He knew it was the seat of God's earthly Vice-regent, the capital of the universal kingdom of the Church. He reminded himself of this and of the priceless relics it contained, the tombs of the Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul, the tombs of so many other martyrs, pontiffs and saints.

But in spite of all these memories he drew near the place with a sinking dread, as if, by some instinct of premonition, he felt himself dragged to the Cross on which at last he was to be crucified.

Many a pilgrim may have seen Rome for the first time with an involuntary recollection of her past, with the hope that for him, too, the future might hold the highest greatness.

Certainly no ambitious fancy cast a halo of romantic hope over the great city as Tristan first saw her ancient walls. He felt safe enough from any danger of greatness. He had nothing to recommend him. On the contrary, something in his character would only serve to isolate him, creating neither admiration nor sympathy.

All the weary road to Rome, the Rome he dreaded, had he prayed for courage to cast himself at the feet of the Vicar of Christ. He did not think then of the Pope, as of one of the great of the earth, but simply as of one who stood in the world in God's place. So he would have courage to seek him, confess to him and ask him what it was it behooved him to do.

Thus he had walked on — with stammering steps, bruising

his feet against stones, tearing himself through briars — heeding nothing by the way.

And now, the journey accomplished, he was here in supreme loneliness, without guidance, human or divine, thrown upon himself, not knowing how to still the pain, how to fill the void of an aching heart.

Would the light of Truth come to him out of the encompassing realms of Doubt?

When Tristan descended into the great guest-chamber he found it almost deserted. The pilgrims had set out early in the day to begin their devotions before the shrines. The host of the Golden Shield placed before his sombre and silent guest such viands as the latter found most palatable, consisting of goat's milk, stewed lamb, barley bread and figs, and Tristan did ample justice to the savory repast.

The heat of the day being intense, he resolved to wait until the sun should be fairly on his downward course before he started out upon his own business, a resolution which was strengthened by a suggestion from the host, that few ventured abroad in Rome during the Siesta hours, the Roman fever respecting neither rank nor garb.

Thus Tristan composed himself to patience, watching the host upon his duties, and permitting his gaze to roam now and then through the narrow windows upon the object he had first encountered upon his arrival: the brown citadel, drowsing unresponsive in the noon-tide glow, a monument of mystery and dark deeds, the Mausoleum of the Flavian Emperor — or, as it was styled at the period of our story, the Castle of the Archangel.

From this stronghold, less than a decade ago, a woman had lorded it over the city of Rome, as renowned for her evil beauty as for the profligacy and licentiousness of her court. In time her regime had been swept away, yet there were rumors, dark and sinister, of one who had succeeded to her evil estate. None dared openly avow it, but Tristan

had surprised guarded whispers during his long journey. Some accounted her a sorceress, some a thing wholly evil, some the precursor of the Anti-Christ. And he had never ceased to wonder at the tales which enlivened the camp-fires, the reports of her beauty, her daring, her unscrupulous ambition.

On the whole, Tristan's prospects in Rome seemed barren enough. Service might perchance be obtained with the Senator, who would doubtlessly welcome a stout arm and a true heart. This alternative failing, Tristan was utterly at sea as to what he would do, the prescribed rounds of obediences before the shrines and the penances accomplished. He felt as one who has lost his purpose in life, even before he had been conscious of his goal.

The strange incidents of his first night in Rome had gradually faded from Tristan's mind with the re-awakening memory of Hellyne, never once forgotten, but for the moment drowned in the deluge of strange events that had almost swept him off his feet.

As the sun was veering towards the west and the lengthening shadows, presaging dusk, began to roll down from the hills it suffered Tristan no longer in the Inn of the Golden Shield. He strode out and made for the heart of Rome.

The desolate aspect of high-noon had changed materially. Tristan began to note the evidences of life in the Pontifical City. Merchants, beggars, monks, men-at-arms, condottieri, sbirri, — the followers of the great feudal houses, hurried to and fro, bent upon their respective pursuits, and above them, silent and fateful in the evening glow, towered the Archangel's Castle, the tomb of a former Master of the World. It reared its massive honey-colored bulk on the edge of the yellow Tiber and beyond rose the dark green cypresses of the Pincian Hill. Innumerable spires, domes, pinnacles and towers rose, red-litten by the sunset, into the stilly evening air. Bells were softly tolling and a distant hum like

the bourdon note of a great organ, rose up from the other side of the Tiber, where the multitudes of the Eternal City trod the dust of the Cæsars into the churches of the Cross.

Interminable processions traversed the city amidst anthems and chants, for, on this day, masses were being sung and services offered up in the Lateran Basilica, the Mother Church of Rome, in honor of Him who cried in the wilderness.

In silent awe and wonder Tristan pursued his way towards the heart of the city. And, as he did so, the spectacle which had unfolded itself to his gaze became more varied and manifold on every turn.

The lone pilgrim could not but admit that the shadows of worldly empire, which had deserted her, still clung to Rome in her ruins, even though to him the desolation which dominated all sides had but a vague and dreamlike meaning.

Even at this period of deepest darkness and humiliation the world still converged upon Rome, and in the very centre of the web sat the successor of St. Peter, the appointed guardian of Heaven and Earth.

The chief pagan monuments still existed: the Pantheon of Agrippa and the Septizonium of Alexander Severus; the mighty remains of the ancient fanes about the Forum and the stupendous ruins of the Colosseum. But among them rose the fortress towers of the Roman nobles. Right there, before him, dominating the narrow thoroughfare, rose the great fortress pile of the Frangipani, behind the Arch of the Seven Candles. Farther on the Tomb of Cæcilia Metella presented an aspect at once sinister and menacing, transformed as it now was into the stronghold of the Cenci, while the Cætani castle on the opposite side attracted a sort of wondering attention from him.

This then was the Rome of which he had heard such marvelous tales! The city of palaces, basilicas and shrines had sunk to this! Her magnificent thoroughfares had become squalid streets, her monuments were crumbled and forgotten,

or worse, they were abused by every lawless wretch who cared to seize upon them and build thereon his fortress or palace. A dismal fate indeed to have fallen to the former mistress of the world! Far better, he thought, to be deserted and forgotten utterly, like many a former seat of empire, far better to be overgrown with grass and dock and nettle, to be left to dream and oblivion than to survive in low estate as had this city on the banks of the Tiber.

With these reflections, engendered no less by the air of desolation than by the occasional appearance of armed bands of feudal soldiery who hurled defiance at each other, Tristan found himself drawn deeper and deeper into the heart of Rome, a hotbed of open and silent rebellion against the rule of any one who dared to lord it over the degenerate descendants of the former masters of the world. Here representatives of the nations of all the earth jostled one another and the poor dregs of Romulus; or peoples of wilder aspect from Persia or Egypt, within whose mind floated mysterious Oriental wisdom, bequeathed from the dawn of Time. And as the scope of Tristan's observation widened, the demon of disillusion unfolded gloomy wings over the far horizon of his soul. And the Tiber rolled calmly on below, catching in its turbid waves the golden sunset glow.

Now and then he encountered the armed retinue of some feudal baron clattering along the narrow ill-paved streets, chasing pedestrians into adjacent doorways and porticoes and pursuing their precipitate retreat with outbursts of banter and mirth.

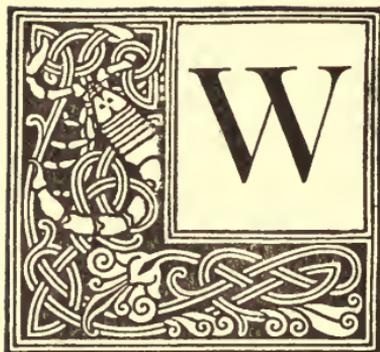
Unfamiliar as Tristan was with the factions that usurped the dominion of the Seven Hills, the escutcheons and coats-of-arms of these marauding parties meant little to him. Now and then however it would chance that two rival factions clashed, each disputing the other's passage. Then, only, did he become alive to the dangers that beset the unwary in the city of the Pontiff, and a sudden spirit of recklessness and

daring, born of the moment, prompted the desire to plunge into this seething vortex, if but to purchase temporary oblivion and relief.

He faced the many dangers of the streets, loitering here and there and curiously eyeing all things, and would eventually have lost himself, when the mantle of night began to fall on the Seven Hills, had he not instinctively remarked that the ascending road removed him from the river.

CHAPTER V

ON THE AVENTINE



WHEN Tristan at last regained his bearings, he found himself among the convents and cloisters on Mount Aventine. His eyes rested wearily on the eddying gleam of the Tiber as it wound its coils round the base of the Mount of Cloisters, thence they roamed among the grass and weed-grown ruins of ancient

temples and crumbling porticoes, which rose on all sides in the silent desolation.

Just then a last gleam of the disappearing sun touched the bronze figure of the Archangel on the summit of Castel San Angelo, imbuing it for an instant with a weird effect, as though the ghost of some departed watchman were waving a lighted torch aloft in the heavens. Then the glow faded before a dead grey twilight, which settled solemnly over the melancholy landscape.

The full moon was rising slowly. Round and large she hung, like a yellow shield, on the dark, dense wall of the heavens. In the distance the faint outlines of the Alban Hills and the snow-capped summit of Monte Soracté were faintly discernible in the night mists. In the background the ill-famed ruins of the ancient temple of Isis rose into the purple dusk. The Tiber, in the light of the higher rising

moon, gleamed like a golden ribbon. The gaunt masonry of the Septizonium of Alexander Severus was dimly rimmed with light, and streaks of amber radiance were wandering up and down the shadowy slopes of the Mount of Cloisters, like sorrowing ghosts bound upon some sorrowful errand.

All sense of weariness had suddenly left Tristan. A compelling influence, stronger than himself, seemed to urge him on as to the fulfillment of some hidden purpose.

Once or twice he paused. As he did so, he became aware of the extraordinary, almost terrible stillness, that encompassed him. He felt it enclosing him like a thick wall on all sides. Earth and the air seemed breathless, as if in the throes of some mysterious excitement. The stars, flashing out with the brilliant lustre of the south, were as so many living eyes eagerly gazing down on the solitary human being whose steps led him into these deserted places. The moon herself seemed to stare at him in open wonderment.

At last he found himself before the open portals of the great Church of Santa Maria of the Aventine. From the gloom within floated the scent of incense and the sound of chanting. He could see tapers gleaming on the high altar in the choir. Women were passing in and out, and a blind beggar sat at the gate.

Moved more by curiosity than the desire for worship, Tristan entered and uncovered his head. The Byzantine cupola was painted in vermilion and gold. The slender pillars of white marble were banded with silver and inlaid with many colored stones. The basins for holy water were of black marble, their dark pools gleaming with the colors of the vault. Side chapels opened on either hand, dim sanctuaries steeped in mystery of incense-saturated dusk.

The saints and martyrs in their stiff, golden Byzantine dalmaticas seemed to endow each relic with an air of mystery. The beauty and the mystery of the place touched

Tristan's soul. As in a haze he seemed again to see the pomp and splendor of the sanctuaries of far-away, dream-lost Avalon.

Tristan took his stand by one of the great pillars, and, setting his back to it, looked round the place. There were some women in the sanctuary, engaged in prayer. Tristan watched them with vacant eyes.

Suddenly he became conscious that one of these worshippers was not wholly absorbed in prayer under her hood. Two watchful eyes seemed to consider him with a suggestiveness that no man could mistake, and her thoughts seemed to be very far from heaven.

Once or twice Tristan started to leave the sanctuary, but some invisible hand seemed to detain him as with a magic hold.

In due season the woman finished her devotions and stood with her hood turned back, looking at Tristan across the church. Her women had gathered about her and outside the gates Tristan saw the spear points of her guard. Turning, with a glance cast at him over her shoulder, she swept in state out of the church, her women following her, all save one tall girl, who loitered at the door.

Suddenly it flashed upon Tristan, as he stood there with his back leaning against the pillar. Was not this the woman he had met by the fountain, the woman who had spoken strange words to him in the Navona?

Had she recognized him? Her eyes had challenged him unmistakably when first they had met his own, and now again, as she left the church. They puzzled Tristan, these same eyes. Far in their depths lurked secrets he dreaded to fathom. Her scented garments perfumed the very aisles.

Tristan was roused from his reverie by a woman's hand plucking at his sleeve. By his side stood a tall girl. She was very beautiful, but her eyes were evil. She looked boldly at Tristan and gave her message.

“Follow my mistress,” were her words.

Tristan looked at her, his face almost invisible in the gloom. Only the moonlight touched his hair.

“Whom do you serve?” he replied.

“The Lady Theodora!” came the answer.

Tristan’s heart froze within him. Theodora — the woman who had succeeded to Marozia’s dread estate!

In order to conceal his emotions he brought his face closer to the fair messenger, forcing his voice to appear calm as he spoke.

“What would your mistress with me?”

The girl glanced up at him, as if she regarded the question strangely superfluous.

“You are to come with me!” she persisted, touching his arm.

Tristan’s mouth hardened as he considered the message, without relinquishing his station by the pillar.

What was he to Theodora — Theodora to him? She was a woman, evil, despite her ravishing beauty, so he had gathered during the days of his journey. The spell she had cast over him on the previous evening had vanished before the memory of Hellayne. Her sudden appearance, her witch-like beauty had, for the time, unmanned him. The hardships and privations of a long journey had, for the moment, caused his senses to run rampant, and almost hurled him into the arms of perdition. Yet he had not then known. And now he remembered how they all had fallen away from him, as from one bearing on his person the germs of some dread disease. The terrible silence in the Navona seemed visualized once again in the silence which encompassed him here. Yet she was all powerful, so he had heard. She ruled the men and the factions. In some vague way, he thought, she might be of service to him.

Tossed between two conflicting impulses, Tristan slowly followed the girl from the church and, crossing the great,

moonlit court that lay without, entered the gardens which seemed to divide the sanctuary from some hidden palace. Mulberry trees towered above the lawns, studded with thick, ripening fruit. Weeping ashes glittered in the moonlight. Cedars and oaks cast their shade over broad beds of mint and thyme.

The girl watched Tristan closely, as she walked beside him, making no effort to conceal her own charms before eyes which she deemed endowed with the power of judgment in matters of this kind. Her mistress had not put her trust in her in vain. She studied Tristan's race in order to determine, whether or not he would waver in his resolve and — she began to speak to him as they crossed the gardens with a simplicity, an interest that was well assumed.

"A good beginning indeed!" she said. "You are in favor, my lord! To have seen her fair face is no small boast, but to be summoned to her presence — I cannot remember her so gracious to any one, since —" she paused suddenly, deliberately.

Tristan regarded her slantwise over his shoulder, without making response. At last, irritated, he knew not why, he asked curtly: "What is your mistress?"

The girl's glance wandered over the great trees and flowers that overshadowed the plaisance.

"She bears her mother's name," she replied with a shrug, "and, like her mother, the blood that flows in her veins is mingled with the fire that glitters in the stars in heaven, a fire affording neither light nor heat, but serving to dazzle, to bewilder. — I am but a woman, but — had I your chance of fortune, my lord, I should think twice, ere I bartered it for a vow, an empty dream."

He gave her a swift glance, wondering at her woman's wit, yet resenting her speech.

"You would prosper?" she queried tentatively at last, casting about in her mind, how she might win his confidence.

"I have business of my own," he replied, evading her question.

She looked up at him, her eyes trembling into his.

"How tall and strong you are! I could almost find it in my heart to love you myself!"

The flattery seemed so spontaneous that it would have puzzled one possessed of greater guile than Tristan to have uncovered her cunning. Nor was Tristan unwilling to seem strong to her; for the moment he was almost tempted to continue questioning her regarding her mistress.

"You may make your fortune in Rome," the girl said with a meaning smile.

"How so?"

"Are you blind? Do you not know a woman's ways? My mistress loves a strong arm. You may serve her."

"That is not possible!"

The girl stared at him and for the moment dropped the mask of innocence.

"What was possible once, is possible again," she said.

Then she added:

"Are you not ambitious?"

"I have a task to perform that may not permit of two masters! Why are you so concerned?"

The question came almost abruptly.

"I serve my lady!" she said, edging towards him. "Is it so strange a thing to serve a woman?"

They had left the garden and had arrived before a high stone wall that skirted the precincts of Theodora's palace. Cypresses and bays raised their tops above the stones. Great cedars cast deep shadows. In the wall there was a door studded with heavy iron nails. The girl took a key that dangled from her girdle, unlocked the door and beckoned to Tristan to enter.

Tristan stood and gazed. In the light of the moon which drenched all things he saw a garden in which emerald grass

plots alternated with beds of strange-tinted orchids, flowers purple and red. At the end of the plaisance there opened an orange thicket and under the trees stood a woman clad in crimson, her white arms bare. She wore sandals of silver, and her dusky hair was confined in a net of gold.

As Tristan was about to yield to the overmastering temptation the memory of Hellayne conquered all other emotions. He turned back from the door and looked full into the girl's dark eyes.

"You will speak to your mistress for me," he said to her, casting a swift glance into the moonlit garden.

The girl looked at him with a puzzled air, but did not stir.

"What am I to say to her?" she said.

"That I will not enter these gates!"

"You will not?"

"No!" He snapped curtly.

"Fool! How you will regret your speech!"

Her face changed suddenly like a fickle sky, and there was something in her eyes too wicked for words.

Without vouchsafing a reply, Tristan turned and lost himself in the desolation of Mount Aventine.

The night marched on majestically.

The moon and her sister planets passed through their appointed spheres of harmonious light and law, and from all cloisters and convents prayers went up to heaven for pity, pardon and blessing on sinful humanity that had neither pity, pardon nor blessing for itself, till, with magic suddenness, the dense purple skies changed to a pearly grey, the moon sank pallidly beneath the earth's dark rim and the stars were extinguished one by one.

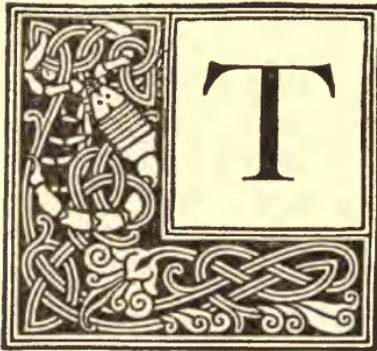
Morning began to herald its approach in the freshening air.

Tristan still slept on his improvised couch, a marble slab he had chosen when he discovered that he had lost his way in the wilderness of the Aventine. His head on his arm he

lay quite still among the flowers, wrapt in a sort of dizzy delirium in which the forms of Theodora and Helayne strangely intermingled, until the riddles of life were blotted out together with the riddles of Fate.

CHAPTER VI

THE COUP



TRISTAN spent the greater part of the day visiting the churches and sanctuaries, offering up prayers for oblivion and peace. His heart was heavy within him. Like the stray leaf that has been torn from its native branch and flutters resistlessly, aimlessly hither and thither, at the mercy of the chance breeze, nevermore

to return to its sheltering bough, so the lone wanderer felt himself tossed about by the waves of destiny, a human derelict without a haven where he might escape the storms of life. Guiltless in his own conscience of an imputed sin, in that his love for Helayne had been pure and holy, Tristan could find little comfort in the enforced penance, while his hungry heart cried out for her who had so willed it. And, as with weary feet he dragged himself through the streets of the pontifical city, he vaguely wondered, if his would ever be the peace of the goal. In the darkness in which he walked, in the perturbation of his mind, he longed more than ever to open his heart to some one who would understand and counsel and guide his steps.

The Pontiff being a prisoner in the Lateran, Tristan's ardent wish to confide in the successor of St. Peter had suffered a sudden and a keen disappointment. There were but Odo of

Cluny, Benedict of Soracté or the Grand Penitentiary, holding forth in the subterranean chapel at St. Peter's, to whom he might turn for ease of mind, and a natural reluctance to lay bare the holiest thoughts man may give to woman, restrained him for the nonce from seeking these channels.

Thus three days had sped, yet naught had happened to indicate that events would shape the course so ardently desired by Tristan.

It was there, on one of the terraces crowning the splendid heights of immortal Rome, with a view of the distant Sabine and Alban hills, fading into the evening dusk, that the memory of the golden days of Avalon returned to him in waves of anguish that almost mastered his resolve to begin life anew under conditions that seemed insupportable.

Again Hellyayne was by his side, as in dream-forgotten Avalon. Again side by side they wandered where the shattered columns of old grey temples, all that remained of a sunny Greek civilization of which they knew nothing, crowned the heights above the lazy lapping waves of the tideless Tyrrhenian sea. There, for whole hours would they sit, the air full of the scent of orange and myrtle; under almond trees, covered with blossoms that sprinkled the emerald ground like rosy snowflakes, and watch the white sails of the far feluccas that trailed the waves in monotonous rhythm to or from the sunlit shores of Africa. The distant headlands looked faint and dreamy, and the sparkling sea broke, gurgling, foaming among the rocks at their feet, as it had broken at the feet of other lovers who had sat there centuries ago, when those shattered columns had been white in their freshness and the temples had been wreathed with the garlands of youth. And the eternal waves said to them what they had said to the dead and forgotten; and the fickle winds sang to them what they had sung to the fair and the nameless, and they stretched forth their hands, and saw but the sea and the sun.

And they knew not the deity to whom those temple columns had been raised, just as he knew not to whose worship those fallen columns had been erected, nor guessed they who had knelt at the holy shrines. And as they sat there, the man and the woman, their eyes probing the depths of living sapphire, they would watch the restless sea-weed that seemed to coil and uncoil like innumerable blue snakes upon a bed of bright blue flames, and the luminous mosses that trembled like blue stars ceaselessly towards the surface that they never, never reached. And down there in the crystal palaces they would fancy that they saw faces as of glancing mermen, even as the lovers of older days had seen passing Tritons and the scaly children of Poseidon.

And again she would croon those sad melancholy songs that came from her lips like faint echoes of Aeolian harps. Now she flung them upon the air in bursts of weird music, to the accompaniment of a breaking wave, songs so passionate and elemental that they seemed the cry of these same radiant waters when churned by the storm into fury. Or they might have been such wailings as spirits imprisoned in old sea caves would utter to the hollow walls, or which the ghosts of shipwrecked crews might send forth from the rocks where they had perished. Or again they might suggest some earthly passion, love, jealousy, the cry of a longing heart, till the dirge seemed to wear itself out and the soul of the listener seemed to sail out of the tempest into bright and peaceful waters like those that skirted dream-lost Avalon, scarcely rippled by the faint breeze of summer, breaking in long unfurling waves among the rocks at their feet. Thus they used to sit long hours, heart listening to heart, soul clinging to soul, while she bared her throat to the scent-laden breezes that fanned her and looked out on the dazzling horizon — till a lightning flash from the clear azure splintered the dream and broke two lives.

For a long time Tristan gazed about, vainly trying to order

his thoughts. Could he but forget! Would but the present engulf the past! —

His adventure at the Church of Santa Maria of the Aventine and his chance meeting with Theodora recurred to him at intervals throughout the day, and he could not but admit that the reports of the woman's beauty were far from exaggerated. Perchance, if the memory of Hellayne had been less firmly rooted in his soul, he, too, might, like many another, have sought solace at the forbidden fount. However, he was resolved to avoid her, for he had seen something in the swift glance she had bestowed upon him that discoursed of matters it behooved him to beware of. And yet he wondered how she had received his denial, she, whom no man had denied before. Then this memory also faded before the exigencies of the hour.

The sun had sunk to rest in a sky of turquoise, crimson and gold, when Tristan found himself standing on the eminence where seven decades later Crescentius, the Senator of Rome, was to build the Church of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli.

Leaning on a broken pillar, Tristan watched the evening light as it spread a veil of ethereal splendor over the Seven Hills and there came to him a strange feeling of remoteness as to one standing upon some hill-set shrine.

Far beneath him lay the Forum. White columns shone roseate in the dying light of day.

Wrapt in deep thoughts and meditations, Tristan descended the stairs leading from the summit whence in after time the name of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli — Holy Mother at the Altar of Heaven — was to ring in the ears of thousands like a beautiful rhythmic chant, and after a time he found himself in the Piazza fronting the Lateran.

Seized with a sudden impulse he entered the church.

Slowly the worshippers began to assemble. Their numbers increased to almost a hundred, though they seemed but as so many shadows in the vast nave. There was something

in their faces, touched by the uncertain glimmer of the tapers and lamps, that filled him with awe, as if he were standing among the ghosts of the past.

At last the holy office commenced.

A very old priest, whose features Tristan could not distinguish, began to chant the Introitus, in deep long drawn notes. Through the narrow windows filtered the light of the rising moon. It did little more than stain the dusk. Over the sombre high altar hung the white ivory figure of the Christ, bowed, sagged, in the last agony. A few blood-red poppies were the only flowers upon the altar. The fumes of incense rose in spiral columns to the vaulted ceiling.

The Kyrie had been chanted, the Gloria in Excelsis Deo. Later the Host was consecrated and the cup before the kneeling worshippers, and the priest was turning to those near him who, as was still the custom in those days, were present to communicate in both kinds.

To each came from his lips the solemn words:

“Corpus Domini Nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam tuam ad Vitam aeternam!”

He dipped his fingers in the cup, cleansing them with a little wine. He consumed the cleansings and turned to read the antiphony with resonant voice.

“I saw the heavens opened and Jesus at the right hand of God. Lord Jesus receive their spirit and lay not this sin to their charge!”

Then, with hands folded over his breast, he moved towards the altar in the centre, touched it with his lips, and, turning once more to the people, said:

“Dominus Vobiscum!”

“Et cum spiritu tuo,” was not answered.

For at that moment rough shouts were heard and through a side door, near a chapel, a body of ruffians rushed into the Basilica, their faces vizored and masked.

With shouts and oaths they made their way towards the

altar. The worshippers scattered, the mail-clad ruffians smiting their way through their kneeling ranks up to the altar where stood the form of a youth clad in pontifical vestments, pale but calm in the face of the impending storm.

It was Pope John XI., held prisoner in the Lateran by Alberic, the Senator of Rome. Tristan had not noted his presence during the ceremony. Now, like a revelation, the import of the scene flashed upon his mind.

Bearing Tristan down by the sheer weight of their numbers, they rushed upon the Pontiff, stripped him of his pallium and chasuble, leaving him but one sacred vestment, the white albe.

Unable to reach the Pontiff's side, unable to aid him, Tristan stood rooted to the spot, an impotent witness of the most heinous sacrilege his mind could picture, almost turned to stone.

Before Tristan's very eyes, before the eyes of the worshippers, who outnumbered the ruffians ten to one, an outrage was being committed at which the fiends themselves would shudder. Violence was being done to the Father of Christendom in his own city, and the craven cowards had but their own safety in mind.

Just what happened Tristan could not immediately remember. For, as he rushed towards the spot where he saw the Pontiff struggling helplessly against his assailants, he was violently thrust back and the ruffians made their way towards a side chapel with their captive. Thus he found himself helplessly borne along in the darkness, and thrust out into the night. Tristan fell beneath their feet and was for a moment so utterly stunned that he could not rise.

As in a dream he heard the leader of the band give a command to his followers. They mounted their steeds which were tethered outside and tramped away into the night.

The sudden appearance of an armed band in the sacred precincts of the Lateran had so terrified and cowed the crowd

of worshippers that even when the doors of the Basilica were left unguarded, not one ventured to give assistance. Like shadows they fled into the night.

When Tristan regained some sort of consciousness he looked about in vain for aid.

Dimly he remembered that the ruffians were mounted, and by the time he summoned succor they would have stowed their captive safely away in one of their castellated fortresses, where one might search for him in vain forever more.

The Piazza in front of the Lateran was deserted. Not a human being was to be seen. Tristan pursued his way through waste spaces that offered no clue. He rushed through narrow and deserted streets, abandoned of the living. He felt like shouting at the top of his voice: "Romans awake! They have abducted the Pontiff." But, stranger as he was, and dreading lest he might share John's fate or worse, he withstood the impulse and at last found himself upon the Bridge of San Angelo before the fortress tomb of the former master of the world, dreaming in the surrounding desolation. Before the massive bronze gate cowered a man-at-arms, drowsing over his pike.

Without a moment's hesitation, Tristan shook the drowsy guardian of the Angel's Castle into blaspheming alertness.

"They have abducted the Pontiff!" he shouted, without releasing his clutch on the gaping Burgundian. "Sound the alarums! Even now it may be too late!"

The man in the brown leather jerkin and steel casque stared open-mouthed at the speaker.

"The Lord Alberic is within —" he stammered at last, with an effort to shake off the drowsiness that held his senses captive.

"Then rouse him in the devil's name," shouted Tristan.

The last words had their effect upon the stolid Northman. After the elapse of some precious moments Alberic himself

emerged from the Emperor's Tomb and Tristan repeated his account of the outrage, little guessing the rank of him with whom he was standing face to face.

But now they were confronted with a dilemma which it seemed would put all Tristan's efforts to naught.

Who were the leaders of the party that had abducted the Pontiff? For thereon hinged their success of intercepting the outlaws.

Tristan's description of the leader did not seem to make any marked impression on the Senator of Rome.

He questioned Tristan with regard to their coat-of-arms or other heraldic emblems. But the author of the outrage had shown sufficient foresight to avoid a hazardous display. There seemed but one alternative; to scour the city of Rome in the uncertain hope of intercepting the outlaws, if they were still within the walls.

Tristan attached himself to the senatorial party, joining in the pursuit. At first their task seemed hopeless indeed. Those they met and questioned had seen no armed band, or, if they had, denied all knowledge thereof. The frowning masonry of the Cenci, Savelli, Frangipani, and Odescalchi, which they passed in turn, returned but an inscrutable reply to their questioning glances.

For a time they continued their fruitless quest. But as if an outrage so horrible had ignited the very air about them, they soon found people stirring, shutters opening and shadowy figures issuing from dark doorways, while folk were running and shouting to one another:

“The Pontiff has been abducted!”

Between cries of rage and shouts of command and indecision on the part of the leader, who knew not in which direction to pursue, an hour had elapsed, when they suddenly heard the clatter of hoofs. A company of horsemen came galloping down the street. Alberic's suspicions that the ruffians would prefer carrying their victim by devious by-

ways to one or the other of their Roman lairs, rather than attempt to leave the city in the teeth of the Senator's guard, seemed realized. Oaths and sharp orders broke the silence of the night.

It was amongst a gigantic pile of ruins, apart from all habitations of the living, that they came to a halt. To a gaunt brick-built tower they drew close, knocking against the iron-studded door, but ere those within could open, they were surrounded, outnumbered ten to one.

Tristan was the first to bound in amongst them.

His eyes quivered upon the steel-clad form of the leader of the band.

At the next moment a blow from Tristan's fist struck him down and, ere he could recover himself, he had been bound, hand and foot, and turned over to the Senator's guards.

His followers, despairing of success, made a sudden dash through the ranks of the people who had been attracted by the melee, riding down a number, injuring and maiming many.

The Senator of Rome ranged his men, now re-inforced by the Prefect's guard, round the drooping form of John, while a howling and shouting mob, ready to wreak vengeance on the first object it encountered in its path, followed in their wake as they made their way towards the Lateran.

An hour later, in a high vaulted, dimly lighted chamber of the Archangel's Castle, Tristan, the pilgrim, and Alberic, the Senator of Rome, faced each other for the second time.

In the course of the pursuit of the ruffians in which he participated, Tristan had been casually informed of the rank of him who led the Senatorial guard in person and when, their object accomplished, he started to detach himself from the men-at-arms, Alberic had foiled his intention by commanding him to accompany him to the fortress-tomb where he himself held forth.

Seated opposite each other, each seemed to scan the

other's countenance before a word was spoken between them.

Alberic's regard of the man who seemed utterly unconscious of the importance of the service he had rendered the Senator betokened approval, and his eyes dwelt for some moments on the frank and open countenance of this stranger, perchance contrasting it inwardly with the complex nature of those about his person in whom he could trust but so long as he could tempt them with earthly dross, and who would turn against him should a higher bidder for their favor appear.

Tristan's first impression of the son of Marozia was that of one born to command. Dark piercing eyes were set in a face, stern, haughty, yet strangely beautiful. Alberic's tall, slender figure, dressed in black velvet, relieved by slashes of red satin, added to the impressiveness of his personality. Upon closer scrutiny Tristan could discover a marked resemblance between the man before him and his half-brother, the ill-fated Pontiff, whom, for political reasons, or considerations of his personal safety, he kept prisoner in the pontifical palace.

But there was yet another present, who apparently took little heed of the stranger, engaged as he seemed in the perusal of a parchment, spread out upon a table before him, — Basil, the Grand Chamberlain.

A whispered conversation had taken place between the Senator and his confidential adviser, for this was Basil's true station in the senatorial household. In the evil days of Marozia's regime he had occupied the same favored position at the Roman court, and, when Alberic's revolt had swept the regime of Ugo of Tuscany and Marozia from Roman soil, the son had attached to himself the man who had shown a marked sagacity and ability in the days that had come to a close.

Basil's complex countenance proved somewhat more of an enigma to the silent on-looker than did the Senator's stern, though frank face.

He was garbed in black, a color to which he seemed partial.

A flat cap of black velvet with a feather curled round the brim, above a doublet of black velvet, close fitting, the sleeves slashed, to show the crimson tunic underneath. The trunk hose round the muscular legs were of black silk and gold thread, woven together and lined with sarsenet. His feet were encased in black buskins with silver buckles, and puffed silk inserted in the slashings of the leather.

The whole suggestion of the dark, sable figure was odd. It was exotic, and the absence of a beard greatly intensified the impression. The face, as Tristan saw it by the light of the taper, was expressionless — a physical mask.

At last Alberic broke the silence, turning his eyes full upon the man who met his gaze without flinching.

“ You have — at your own risk — saved Rome and Holy Church from a calamity the whole extent of which we may not even surmise, had the Pontiff been carried away by the lawless band of Tebaldo Savello. We owe you thanks — and we shall not shirk our duty. You are a stranger. Who are you and why are you here? ”

To the same questions that another had put to him on the memorable eve of his arrival, in the Piazza Navona, Tristan replied with equal frankness. His words bore the stamp of truth, and Alberic listened to a tale passing strange to Roman ears.

And, unseen by Tristan, something began to stir in the dark, unfathomable eyes of Basil, as some unknown thing stirs in deep waters, and the hidden thing therein, to him who saw, was hidden no longer. Some nameless being was looking out of these windows of the soul. One looking at him now would have shrank away, cold fear gripping his heart.

For a moment, after Tristan had finished his tale, there was silence. Alberic had risen and, seemingly unconscious of the presences in his chamber, was perambulating its

narrow confines until, of a sudden, he stopped directly before Tristan.

“ These penances completed, whereof you speak — do you intend returning to the land of your birth? ”

A blank dismay shone in Tristan's eyes. Not having referred to the nature of the transgression, for which he was to do penance, and obtain absolution, he found it somewhat difficult to answer Alberic's question.

“ This is a matter I had not considered,” he replied with some hesitancy, which remained not unremarked by the Senator.

Alberic was a man of few words, and he possessed a discernment far beyond his years. At the first glance at this stranger whom fate had led across his path, he had known that here was one he might trust, could he but induce him to become his man.

He held out his hand.

“ I am going to be your friend and I mean to requite the service you have done the Senator, ere the dawn of another day breaks in the sky. There is a vacancy in the Senator's guard. I appoint you captain of Castel San Angelo.”

Ere Tristan could sufficiently recover from his surprise to make reply, another voice was audible, a voice, soft and insinuating — the voice of Basil, the Grand Chamberlain.

“ My lord — the chain of evidence against Gamba is not completed. In fact, later developments seem to point to an intrigue of which he is but the unwitting victim — ”

Alberic turned to the speaker.

“ The proofs, my Lord Basil, are conclusive. Gamba is a traitor convicted of having conspired with an emissary of Ugo of Tuscany, to deliver the Archangel's Castle into his hands. He is sentenced — he shall die — as soon as we discover his abode — ”

Basil's face had turned to ashen hues.

“ What mean you, my lord? Gamba is awaiting sentence

in the dungeon where he has been confined, ever since his trial — ”

“ The cage is still there,” Alberic interposed sardonically. “ The bird has flown.”

“ Escaped? ” stammered the Grand Chamberlain, rising from his seat and raising his furtive eyes to those of the Senator. “ Then he has confederates in our very midst — ”

“ We shall know more of this anon,” came the laconic reply. “ Will you accept the trust which the Senator of Rome offers you? ” Alberic turned from the Grand Chamberlain to Tristan.

The latter found his voice at last.

“ How shall I thank you, my lord! ” he said, grasping the Senator’s hand. “ Grant me but a week, wherein to absolve the business upon which I came — and I shall prove myself worthy of the lord Alberic’s trust! ”

“ So be it,” the son of Marozia replied. “ A long deferred pilgrimage to the shrines of the Archangel at Monte Gargano will take me from Rome for the space of a month or more. I should like to be assured that this keep is in the hands of one who will not fail me in the hour of need! My Lord Basil — greet the new captain of Castel San Angelo — ”

Approaching almost soundlessly over the tiled floor, the Grand Chamberlain extended his hand to Tristan, offering his congratulations upon his sudden advancement.

Whatever it was that flashed in Basil’s eyes, it was gone as quickly as it had come. His thin lips parted in an inscrutable smile as Tristan, with a bend of the head, acknowledged the courtesy.

For a moment, following his acceptance, Tristan was startled at his own decision. Another would have felt it to be an amazing streak of luck. Tristan was frightened, though his misgivings vanished after a time.

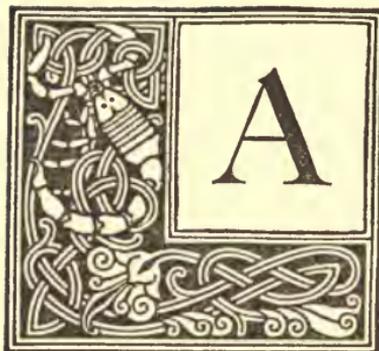
Owing to the lateness of the hour and the insecurity of the

streets Alberic offered Tristan the hospitality of his future abode for the night and the latter gladly accepted.

After Basil had departed, he remained closeted with the Senator for the space of an hour or more. What transpired between these two remained guarded from the outer world, and it was late ere the sentinel on the ramparts saw the light in the Senator's chamber extinguished, wondering at the nature of the business which detained the lord Alberic and the tall stranger in the pilgrim's garb.

CHAPTER VII

MASKS AND MUMMERS



AMID the ruin of cities and the din of strife during the tenth century darkness closed in upon the Romans, while the figures of strange despots emerged from obscurity only to disappear as quickly into the night of oblivion. Little of them is known, save that they ruled the people and the pope with merciless severity,

and that the first one of them was a woman.

The beautiful Theodora the older was the wife of Theophylactus, Consul and Patricius of Rome, but the permanence of her power seemed to have been due entirely to her own charm and personality.

Her daughter Marozia, with even greater beauty, greater fascination and greater gift of daring, played even a more conspicuous part in the history of her time. She married Alberic, Count of Spoleto, whose descendants, the Counts of Tusculum, gave popes and mighty citizens to Rome. One of their palaces is said to have adjoined the Church of S. S. Apostoli, and came later into the possession of the powerful house of Colonna.

Alberic of Spoleto soon died and Marozia, as the chronicles tell us, continued as the temporal ruler of the city and the arbitress of pontifical elections. She held forth in Castel San Angelo, the indomitable stronghold of mediaeval Rome.

In John X. who, in the year 914, had gained the tiara through Theodora, she found a man of character, whose aim

and ambition were the dominion of Rome, the supremacy of the Church.

By the promise of an imperial crown, the pope gained Count Ugo of Tuscany to his party, but Marozia outwitted him, by giving her hand to his more powerful half-brother Guido, then Margrave of Tuscany.

John X., after trying for two years, in spite of his enemies, to maintain his regime from the Lateran, at last fell into their hands and was either strangled or starved to death in the dungeons of Castel San Angelo.

After the death of Guido, Marozia married his half-brother Ugo. The strange wedding took place in the Mausoleum of the Emperor Hadrian, where a bridal hall and nuptial chamber had been arranged and adorned for them.

From the fortress tomb of the Flavian Emperor, Ugo lorded it over the city of Rome, earning thereby the hatred of the people and especially of young Alberic, his ambitious stepson, the son of Marozia and Count Alberic of Spoleto.

The proud youth, forced one day to serve him as a page, with intentional awkwardness, splashed some water over him and in return received a blow. Mad with fury, Alberic rushed from Castel San Angelo and summoned the people to arms. The clarions sounded and the fortress tomb was surrounded by a blood-thirsty mob. In no time the actors changed places. Ugo escaped by means of a rope from a window in the castello and returned to Tuscany, leaving behind him his honor, his wife and his imperial crown, while the youth Alberic became master of Rome, cast Marozia into a prison in Castel San Angelo and kept his half-brother, John XI., a close prisoner in the Lateran.

But the imprisonment of Marozia, and her mysterious disappearance from the scenes of her former triumphs and baleful activity did not end the story of the woman regime in Rome.

There lived in a palace, built upon the ruins of nameless

temples and sanctuaries, and embellished with all the barbarous splendor of Byzantine and Moorish arts, in the remote wilderness of Mount Aventine, a woman, who, in point of physical charms, ambition and daring had not her equal in Rome since the death of Marozia. Theodora the younger, as she is distinguished from her mother, the wife of Theophylactus, by contemporary chroniclers, was the younger sister of Marozia.

The boundless ambition of the latter had left nothing to achieve for the woman who had reached her thirtieth year when Alberic's revolution consigned her sister to a nameless doom.

Strange rumors concerning her were afloat in Rome. Strange things were whispered of her palace on Mount Aventine, where she assembled about her the nobility of the city and the surrounding castelli, and soon her court vied in point of sumptuousness and splendor with the most splendid and profligate of her time.

Her admirers numbered by thousands, and her exotic beauty caused new lovers to swell the ranks of the old with every day that passed down the never returning tide of time.

Some came openly and some came under the cover of night, heavily muffled and cloaked: spendthrifts, gamblers, gallants, men of fashion, officers of the Senator's Court, poets, philosophers, and the feudal lords of the Campagna.

Wealthy debauchees from the provinces, princes from the shores of the Euxine, Lombard and Tuscan chiefs, Northmen from Scandinavia and Iceland, wearing over their gnarled limbs the soft silken tunics of Rome, Greeks, sleek, furtive-eyed, rulers from far-off Cathay, wearing coats of crimson with strange embroidery from the scented East, men from the isles of Venetia and the stormy plains of Thessaly, men with narrow slanting eyes from the limitless steppes of Sarmatia, blond warriors from the amber coasts of the Baltic, Persian princes who worshipped the Sun, and Moors

from the Spanish Caliphate of Cordova; chieftains from the Lybian desert, as restive as their fiery steeds; black despots from the hidden heart of Africa, with thick lips and teeth like ivory, effete youths from Sicily and the Ionian isles, possessed of the insidious beauty of the Lesbian women, adventurers from Samarkand and Bokhara, trading in strange wares and steeped in odor of musk and spices; Hyperboreans from the sea-skirt shores of an ever frozen unimaginable ocean; — from every land under the sun they came to Rome, for the sinister fame of Theodora's beauty, the baleful mystery that surrounded her, and her dark repute proved powerful incentives to curiosity, which soon gave way to overmastering passion, once the senses had been steeped in the intoxicating atmosphere of the woman's presence.

And, indeed, her physical charms were such as no mortal had yet resisted whom she had willed to make her own. Her body, tall as a column, was lustrous, incomparable. The arms and hands seemed to have been chiselled of ivory by a master creator who might point with pride to the perfection of his handiwork — the perfection of Aphrodité, Lais and Phryné melted into one. The features were of such rare mould and faultless type that even Marozia had to concede to her younger sister the palm of beauty. The wonderful, deep set eyes, with their ever changing lights, now emerald, now purple, now black; the straight, pencilled brows, the broad smooth forehead and the tiny ears, hidden in the wealth of her raven hair, tied into a Grecian knot and surmounted by a circlet of emeralds, skillfully worked into the twining bodies of snakes with ruby eyes; the satin sheen of the milk-white skin whose ivory pallor was tinted with the faintest rose-light that never changed either in heat or in cold, in anger or in joy: such was the woman whose long slumbering, long suppressed ambition, coupled with a daring that had not its equal, was to be fanned into a raging holocaust after Marozia's untimely demise.

Concealing her most secret hopes and ambitions so utterly that even Alberic became her dupe, Theodora threw herself into the whirl of life with a keen appreciation of all its thrilling excitement. Vitally alive with the pride of her sex and the sense of its power, she found in her existence all the zest of some breathlessly fascinating game. Men to her were mere pawns. She regarded them almost impersonally, as creatures to taunt, to tempt, to excite, to play upon. Deliberately and unstintingly she applied her arts. She delighted to see them at her feet, but to repel them as the mood changed, with exasperating disdain. Love to her was a word she knew but from report, — or, from what she had read. She knew not its meaning, nor had she ever fathomed its depths.

To revel through delirious nights with some newly-chosen favorite of the moment, who would soon thereafter mysteriously disappear, to be tossed from the embrace of one into the arms of another; in the restless, fruitless endeavor to kill the pain of life, the memory of consciousness, to fill the void of a heart, that, alive to the shallowness of existence, clutches at the saving hope of power, to rule and to crush the universe beneath her feet, a dream, vague, vain, unattainable: this desire filled Theodora's soul.

Her soul was burning itself to cinders in its own fires, — those baleful fires that had proven the undoing of her equally beautiful sister.

Alone she would pace her gilded chambers, feverishly, unable to think, driven hither and thither by the demons of unrest, by the disquietude of her heart. Desperately she threw herself into whatever excitement offered.

But it was always in vain.

She found no respite. Ever and ever a reiterant, restless craving gnawed, like a worm, at her heart.

As she approached the thirtieth year of her life, Theodora had grown more dazzling in beauty. Her body had assumed the wonderful plasticity of marble. Her eyes had become

more unfathomable, more wondrously changeful in hues, like the iridescent waters of the sea.

Living as she did in an age where a morbid trend pervaded the world, where the approach of the Millennium, though no one of the present generation would see the day, was heralded as the End of Time; living as she did in the darkest epoch of Roman history, Theodora felt the utter inadequacy of her life, a hunger which nothing but power could assuage.

Slowly this desire began to grow and expand. She wished to wield her will, not only on men's emotions, but upon their lives as well. Perhaps even the death of Marozia, with its paralyzing influence over her soul, the captivity in the Lateran of her sister's son, and the hateful rule of Alberic, would not have brought matters to a focus, had not the appearance upon the stage of a woman, who, in point of beauty, spirit and daring bade fair to constitute a terrible rival, roused all the dormant passions in Theodora's soul and when Roxana openly boasted that she would wrest the power from the hands of her rival and rule in the Emperor's Tomb in spite of the Pontiff, of Alberic and Marozia's blood-kin, the soul of Theodora leaped to the challenge of the other woman and she craved for the conflict as she had never longed for anything in her life, save perchance, a love of which she had but possessed the base counterfeit.

No one knew whence Roxana had come, nor how long she had been in Rome, when an incident at San Lorenzo in Lucina had brought the two women face to face. Both, with their trains, had simultaneously arrived before the portals of the sanctuary when Roxana barred Theodora's way. Some mysterious instinct seemed to have informed each of the person and ambition of the other. For a moment they faced each other white to the lips. Then Roxana and her train had entered the church, and as she passed the other woman, a deadly challenge had flashed from her blue eyes into Theodora's dark orbs. The populace applauded Roxana's

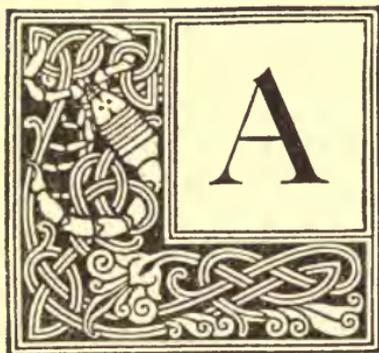
daring, and, in order to taunt her rival, she had established her court on desert Aventine, assembling about her the disgruntled lovers of Theodora and others, whom her disdain had driven to seek oblivion and revenge.

The land of Roxana's birth was shrouded in mystery. Some reported her from the icy regions of the North, others credited her with being the fugitive odalisque of some Eastern despot, a native of Kurdistan, the beauty and fire of whose women she possessed to a high degree.

Such was Roxana, who had challenged Theodora for the possession of the Emperor's Tomb.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SHRINE OF HEKATÉ



THWART the gleaming balconies of the east the morning sun shone golden and the shadows of the white marble cornices and capitals and jutting friezes were blue with the reflection of the cloudless sky. Far below Mount Aventine the soft mists of dawn still hovered over the seven-hilled city,

whence the distant cries of the water carriers and fruit venders came echoing up from the waking streets.

A fugitive sunbeam stole through a carelessly closed lattice of a chamber in the palace of Theodora, and danced now on the walls, bright with many a painted scene, now on the marble inlaid mosaic of the floor. Now and then a bright blade or the jewelled rim of a wine cup of eastern design would flash back the wayward ray, until its shaft rested on a curtained recess wherein lay a faintly outlined form. Tenderly the sunbeams stole over the white limbs that veiled their chiselled roundness under the blue shot webs of their wrappings, which, at the capricious tossing of the sleeper, bared two arms, white as ivory and wonderful in their statuesque moulding.

The face of the sleeper showed creamy white under a cloud of dark, silken hair, held back in a net of gold from the broad smooth forehead. Dark, exquisitely pencilled eye-

brows arched over the closed, transparent lids, fringed with lashes that now and then seemed to flicker on the marble pallor of the cheeks, and the proudly poised head lay back, half buried in the cushions, supported by the gleaming white arms that were clasped beneath it.

Then, as if fearful of intruding on the charms that his ray had revealed, the sunbeam turned and, kissing the bosom that swelled and sank with the sleeper's gentle breathing, descended till it rested on an overhanging foot, from which a carelessly fastened sandal hung by one vermilion strap.

Of a sudden a light footfall was audible without and in an instant the sleeper had heard and awakened, her dark eyes heavy with drowsiness, the red lips parted, revealing two rows of small, pearly teeth, with the first deep breath of returning consciousness.

At the sound one white hand drew the silken wrappings over the limbs, that a troubled slumber and the warmth of the Roman summer night had bared, while the other was endeavoring to adjust the disordered folds of the saffron gossamer web that clung like a veil to her matchless form.

"Ah! It is but you! Persephoné," she said with a little sigh, as a curtain was drawn aside, revealing the form of a girl about twenty-two years old, whose office as first attendant to Theodora had been firmly established by her deep cunning, a thorough understanding of her mistress' most hidden moods and desires, her utter fearlessness and a native fierceness, that recoiled from no consideration of danger.

Persephoné was tall, straight as an arrow, lithe and sinuous as a snake. Her face was beautiful, but there was something in the gleam of those slightly slanting eyes that gave pause to him who chanced to cross her path.

She claimed descent from some mythical eastern potentate and was a native of Circassia, the land of beautiful women. No one knew how she had found her way to Rome.

The fame of Marozia's evil beauty and her sinister repute had in time attracted Persephoné, and she had been immediately received in Marozia's service, where she remained till the revolt of Alberic swept her mistress into the dungeons of Castel San Angelo. Thereupon she had attached herself to Theodora who loved the wild and beautiful creature and confided in her utterly.

"Evil and troubled have been my dreams," Theodora continued, as the morning light fell in through the parted curtains. "At the sound of your footfall I started up — fearing — I knew not what —"

"For a long time have I held out against his pleadings and commands," Persephoné replied in a subdued voice, "knowing that my lady slept. But he will not be denied, — and his insistence had begun to frighten me. So at last I dared brave my lady's anger and disturb her —"

"Frighten you, Persephoné?" Theodora's musical laughter resounded through the chamber. "You — who braved death at these white hands of mine without flinching?"

She extended her hands as if to impress Persephoné with their beauty and strength.

Whatever the circumstance referred to, Persephoné made no reply. Only her face turned a shade more pale.

The draped figure had meanwhile arisen to her full height, as she stretched the sleep from her limbs, then, her question remaining unanswered, she continued:

"But — of whom do you speak? A new defiance from Roxana? A new insult from the Senator of Rome? I would have it understood," this with a slight lift of the voice, "that even were the end of the world at hand, of which they prate so much of late, and heaven and earth to crumble into chaos, I would not be disturbed to listen to shallow plaints and mock heroics."

"It is neither the one nor the other," replied Persephoné

with an apprehensive glance of her slanting eyes over her shoulder, "but my Lord Basil, the Grand Chamberlain. He waits without where the eunuchs guard your slumber, and his eyes are aflame with something more than impatience—"

At the mention of the name a subtle change passed over the listener's face, and a sombre look crept into her eyes as she muttered:

"What can he be bringing now?"

Then, with a sudden flash, she added, tossing back her beautiful head:

"Let the Lord Basil wait! And now, Persephoné, remove from me the traces of sleep and set the couches in better order."

Silently and quickly the Circassian sprang forward and rolled back the curtains from the lattices, letting a stronger but still subdued light enter the chamber, revealing, as it did, many a chased casket, and mirrors of polished steel and bronze, and lighting up exquisite rainbow hued fabrics, thrown carelessly over lion-armed chairs, with here and there an onyx table wonderfully carved.

The chamber itself looked out upon a terrace and garden, a garden filled with such a marvellous profusion of foliage and flowers, that, looking at it from between the glistening marble columns surrounding the palace, it seemed as though the very sky above rested edgewise on towering pyramids of red and white bloom. Awnings of softest pale blue stretched across the entire width of the spacious outer colonnade, where a superb peacock strutted majestically to and fro, with boastfully spreading tail and glittering crest, as brilliant as the gleam of the hot sun on the silver fringe of the azure canopies, amidst the gorgeousness of waving blossoms that seemed to surge up like a sea to the very windows of the chamber.

Filling an embossed bowl with perfumed water, Persephoné bathed the hands of her mistress, who had sunk

down upon a low, tapestried couch. Then, combing out her luxuriant hair, she bound it in a jewelled netting that looked like a constellation of stars against the dusky masses it confined. Taking a long, sleeveless robe of amber, Persephoné flung it about her subtle form and bound it over breast and shoulders with a jewelled band. But Theodora's glance informed her that something was still wanting and, following the direction of her gaze, Persephoné's eye rested on a life-size statue of Hekaté that stood with deadly calm on its inexorable face and slightly raised hands, from one of which hung something that glittered strangely in the subdued light of the recess.

Obeying Theodora's silent gesture, Persephoné advanced to the image and took from its raised arm a circlet fashioned of two golden snakes with brightly enamelled scales, bearing in their mouths a single diamond, brilliant as summer lightning. This she gently placed on her mistress' head, so that the jewel flamed in the centre of the coronet, then, kneeling down, she drew together the unlatched sandals.

Persephoné's touch roused her mistress from a day dream that had set her features as rigid as ivory, as she surveyed herself for a moment intently in a great bronze disk whose burnished surface gave back her flawless beauty line for line.

In Persephoné's gaze she read her unstinted admiration, for, beautiful as the Circassian was, she loved beauty in her own sex, wherever she found it.

Theodora seemed to have utterly forgotten the presence of the Grand Chamberlain in the anteroom, yet, in an impersonal way, her thoughts occupied themselves with the impending tete-a-tete.

Her life had been one constant round of pleasure and amusement, yet she was not happy, nor even contented.

Day by day she felt the want of some fresh interest, some fresh excitement, and it was this craving probably, more

than innate depravity, which plunged her into those disgraceful and licentious excesses that were nightly enacted in the sunken gardens behind her palace. Lovers she had had by the scores. Yet each new face possessed for her but the attraction of novelty. The favorite of the hour had small cause to plume himself on his position. No sooner did he believe himself to be secure in the possession of Theodora's love, than he found himself hurled into the night of oblivion.

A strange pagan wave held Rome enthralled. Italy was in the throes of a dark revulsion. A woman, beautiful as she was evil, had exercised within the past decade her baleful influence from Castel San Angelo. Theodora had taken up Marozia's tainted inheritance. Members of a family of courtesans, they looked upon their trade as a hereditary privilege and, like the ancient Aspasia, these Roman women of the tenth century triumphed primarily by means of their feminine beauty and charms over masculine barbarism and grossness. It was an age of feudalism, when brutal force and murderous fury were the only divinities whom the barbarian conqueror was compelled to respect. Lombards and Huns, Franks and Ostrogoths, Greeks and Africans, the savage giants issuing from the deep Teutonic forests, invading the classic soil of Rome, became so many Herculeses sitting at the feet of Omphalé, and the atmosphere of the city by the Tiber — the atmosphere that had nourished the Messalinas of Imperial Rome — poured the flame of ambition into the soul of a woman whose beauty released the strongest passions in the hearts of those with whom she surrounded herself, in order to attain her soul's desire. To rule Rome from the fortress tomb of the Flavian emperor was the dream of Theodora's life. It had happened once. It would happen again, as long as men were ready to sacrifice at the shrines of Hekaté.

Unbridled in her passions as she was strong in her physical organization, an unbending pride and an intensity of will

came to her aid when she had determined to win the object of her desire. In Theodora's bosom beat a heart that could dare, endure and defy the worst. She was a woman whom none but a very bold or ignorant suitor would have taken to his heart. Perchance the right man, had he appeared on the stage in time, might have made her gentle and quelled the wild passions that tossed her resistlessly about, like a barque in a hurricane.

Suddenly something seemed to tell her that she had found such a one. Tristan's manly beauty had made a strong appeal upon her senses. The anomaly of his position had captivated her imagination. There was something strangely fascinating in the mystery that surrounded him, there was even a wild thrill of pleasure in the seeming shame of loving one whose garb stamped him as one claimed by the Church. He had braved her anger in refusing to accompany Persephoné. He had closed his eyes to Theodora's beauty, had sealed his ears to the song of the siren.

"A man at last!" she said half aloud, and Persephoné, looking up from her occupation, gave her an inquisitive glance.

The splash of hidden fountains diffused a pleasant coolness in the chamber. Spiral wreaths of incense curled from a bronze tripod into the flower-scented ether. The throbbing of muted strings from harps and lutes, mingling with the sombre chants of distant processions, vibrated through the sun-kissed haze, producing a weird and almost startling effect.

After a pause of some duration, apparently oblivious of the fact that the announced caller was waiting without, Theodora turned to Persephoné, brushing with one white hand a stray raven lock from the alabaster forehead.

"Can it be the heat or the poison miasma that presages our Roman fever? Never has my spirit been so oppressed as it is to-day, as if the gloomy messengers from Lethé's

shore were enfolding me in their shadowy pinions. I saw his face in the dream of the night" — she spoke as if soliloquizing — "it was as the face of one long dead —"

She paused with a shudder.

"Of whom does my lady speak?" Persephoné interposed with a swift glance at her mistress.

"The pilgrim who crossed my path to his own or my undoing. Has he been heard from again?"

A negative gesture came in response.

"His garb is responsible for much," replied the Circassian. "The city fairly swarms with his kind —"

The intentional contemptuous sting met its immediate rebuke.

"Not his kind," Theodora flashed back. "He has nothing in common with those others save the garb — and there is more beneath it than we wot of —"

"The Lady Theodora's judgment is not to be gainsaid," the Circassian replied, without meeting her mistress' gaze. "Do they not throng to her bowers by the legion —"

"A pilgrimage of the animals to Circé's sty — each eager to be transformed into his own native state," Theodora interposed contemptuously.

"Perchance this holy man is in reality a prince from some mythical, fabled land — come to Rome to resist temptation and be forthwith canonized —"

Persephoné's mirth suffered a check by Theodora's reply.

"Stranger things have happened. All the world comes to Rome on one business or another. This one, however, has not his mind set on the Beatitudes —"

"Nevertheless he dared not enter the forbidden gates," the Circassian ventured to object.

"It was not fear. On that I vouch. Perchance he has a vow. Whatever it be — he shall tell me — face to face — and here!"

"But if the holy man refuse to come?"

Theodora's trained ear did not miss the note of irony in the Circassian's question.

"He will come!" she replied laconically.

"A task worthy the Lady Theodora's renown."

"You deem it wonderful?"

"If I have read the pilgrim's eyes aright —"

"Perchance your own sweet eyes, my beautiful Persephoné, discoursed to him something on that night that caused misgivings in his holy heart, and made him doubt your errand?" Theodora purred, extending her white arms and regarding the Circassian intently.

Persephoné flushed and paled in quick succession.

"On that matter I left no doubt in his mind," she said enigmatically.

There was a brief pause, during which an inscrutable gaze passed between Theodora and the Circassian.

"Were you not as beautiful as you are evil, my Persephoné, I should strangle you," Theodora at last said very quietly.

The Circassian's face turned very pale and there was a strange light in her eyes. Her memory went back to an hour when, during one of the periodical feuds between Marozia and her younger sister, the former had imprisoned Theodora in one of the chambers of Castel San Angelo, setting over her as companion and gaoler in one Persephoné, then in Marozia's service.

The terrible encounter between Theodora and the Circassian in the locked chamber, when only the timely appearance of the guard saved each from destruction at the hands of the other, as Theodora tried to take the keys of her prison from Persephoné, had never left the latter's mind. Brave as she was, she had nevertheless, after Marozia's fall, entered Theodora's service, and the latter, admiring the spirit of fearlessness in the girl, had welcomed her in her household.

"I am ever at the Lady Theodora's service," Persephoné replied, with drooping lids, but Theodora caught a gleam

of tigerish ferocity beneath those silken lashes that fired her own blood.

"Beware — lest in some evil hour I may be tempted to finish what I left undone in the Emperor's Tomb!" she flashed with a sudden access of passion.

"The Lady Theodora is very brave," Persephoné replied, as, stirred by the memory, her eyes sank into those of her mistress.

For a moment they held each other's gaze, then, with a generosity that was part of her complex nature, Theodora extended her hand to Persephoné.

"Forgive the mood — I am strangely wrought up," she said. "Cannot you help me in this dilemma, where I can trust in none?"

"There dwells in Rome one who can help my lady," Persephoné replied with hesitation; "one deeply versed in the lore and mysteries of the East."

"Who is this man?" Theodora queried eagerly.

"His name is Hormazd. By his spells he can change the natural event of things, and make Fate subservient to his decrees."

"Why have you never told me of him before?"

"Because the Lady Theodora's will seemed to do as much for her as could, to my belief, the sorcerer's art!"

The implied compliment pleased Theodora.

"Where does he abide?"

"In the Trasteveré."

"What does he for those who seek him?"

"He reads the stars — foretells the future — and, with the aid of strange spells of which he is master, can bring about that which otherwise would be unattainable —"

"You rouse my curiosity! Tell me more of him."

An inscrutable expression passed over Persephoné's face.

"He was Marozia's trusted friend."

A frozen silence reigned apace.

“ Did he foretell that which was to happen? ” Theodora spoke at last.

“ To the hour! ”

“ And yet — forewarned — ”

“ Marozia, grown desperate in the hatred of her lord, derided his warnings. ”

“ It was her Fate. Tell me more! ”

“ He has visited every land under the sun. From Thulé to Cathay his fame is known. Strange tales are told of him. No one knows his age. He seems to have lived always. As he appears now he hath ever been. They say he has been seen in places thousand leagues apart at the same time. Sometimes he disappears and is not heard of for months. But — whoever he may be — whatever he may be engaged in — at the stroke of midnight that he must suspend. Then his body turns rigid as a corpse, bereft of animation, and his spirit is withdrawn into realms we dare not even dream of. At the first hour of the morning life will slowly return. But no one has yet dared to question him, where he has spent those dread hours. ”

Theodora had listened to Persephoné's tale with a strange new interest.

“ How long has this Hormazd — or whatever his name — resided in Rome? ” she turned to the Circassian.

“ I met him first on the night on which the lady Marozia summoned him to the summit of the Emperor's Tomb. There he abode with her for hours, engaged in some unholy incantation and at last conjured up such a tempest over the Seven Hills, as the city of Rome had not experienced since it was founded by the man from Troy — ”

Persephoné's historical deficiency went hand in hand with a superstition characteristic of the age, and evoked no comment from one perchance hardly better informed with regard to the past.

“ I well remember the night, ” Theodora interposed.

"We crept down into the crypts, where the dog-headed Egyptian god keeps watch over the dead Emperor," Persephoné continued. "The lady Marozia alone remained on the summit with the wizard — amidst such lightnings and crashing peals of thunder and a hurricane the like of which the oldest inhabitants do not remember —"

"I shall test his skill," Theodora spoke after a pause. "Perchance he may give me that which I have never known —"

"My lady would consult the wizard?" Persephoné interposed eagerly.

"Such is my intent."

"Shall I summon him to your presence?"

"I shall go to him!"

In Persephoné's countenance surprise and fear struggled for mastery.

"Then I shall accompany my lady —"

"I shall go alone and unattended —"

"It is an ill-favored region, where the sorcerer dwells —"

An inscrutable look passed into Theodora's eyes.

"Can he but give me that which I desire I shall brave the hazard, be it ever so great."

The last words were uttered in an undertone. Then she added imperiously:

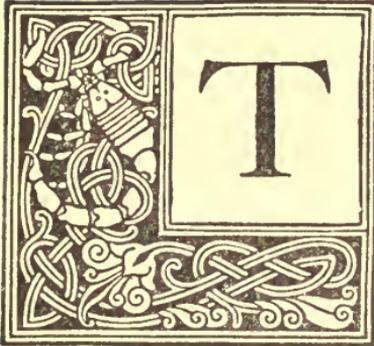
"Go and summon the lord Basil and bid two eunuchs attend him hither! And do you wait with them within call behind those curtains."

Then, as Persephoné silently piled cushions behind her in the lion-armed chair and withdrew bowing, Theodora murmured to herself:

"Hardly can I trust even him in an hour so fraught with darkness and peril. Yet strive as he will, he may not break the chains his passion has woven around his senses."

CHAPTER IX

THE GAME OF LOVE



HE pattering of footsteps resounded on the marble floor of the corridor and the hangings once more parted, revealing the form of a man sombre even in the shadows which seemed part of the darkness that framed his white face.

With eyes that never left the woman's graceful form the visitor slowly advanced and, concealing his chagrin at having been kept waiting like a slave in the anteroom, bent low over Theodora's hand and raised it to his lips.

She had seated herself on a divan which somewhat shaded her face and invited him with a mute gesture to take his seat beside her. Persephoné and the eunuchs had left the chamber.

"Fain would I have departed, Lady Theodora, when the maid Persephoné, who has the devil in her eyes, told me that the Lady Theodora slept," Basil spoke as, with the light of a fierce passion in his eyes, he sank down beside the wondrous form, and his hot breath fanned her shoulder. "But my tidings brook no delay. Closer, fairest lady, that your ear alone may hear this new perplexity that does beset us, for it concerns that which lies closest to our heart, and the time is brief —"

"I cannot even guess your tidings," replied Theodora, withdrawing herself a little from his burning gaze. "For days mischance has emptied all her quivers at me, leaving me not a dart wherewith to strike."

“It is as a bolt from the clear blue,” interposed the Grand Chamberlain. “Yet — how were we to reckon with that which did happen? Every detail had been carefully planned. In the excitement and turmoil which roared and surged over the Navona the task could not fail of its accomplishment and he who was to speed the holy man to his doom had but to plunge into that seething vortex of humanity to make his escape. Surely the foul fiend was abroad on that night and stalked about visibly to our undoing. For not a word have I been able to get out of Il Gobbo who raves that at the very moment when he was about to strike, St. John himself towered over him, paralyzed his efforts, and gave him such a blow as sent him reeling upon the turf. Some say,” — the speaker added meditatively, “it was a pilgrim —”

“A pilgrim?” Theodora interposed, a sudden gleam in her eyes. “A pilgrim? What was he like?”

“To Il Gobbo he appeared no doubt of superhuman height, else had he not affrighted him. For the bravo is no coward —”

“A pilgrim, you say,” Theodora repeated, meditatively.

“Whosoever he is,” Basil continued after a pause, “he seems to scent ample entertainment in this godly city. For, no doubt it was the same who thwarted by his timely appearance the abduction of the Pontiff by certain ruffians, earning thereby much distinction in the eyes of the Senator of Rome who has appointed him captain of Castel San Angelo — and Gamba in whom we placed our trust has fled. If he is captured — if he should confess —”

The color had died out of Theodora's cheeks and she sat bolt upright as a statue of marble, gazing into the shadows with great wide eyes, as in a low voice, hardly audible even to her visitor, she said:

“God! Will this uncertainty never cease? What is to be done? Speak! — For I confess, I am not myself today.” —

Basil hesitated, and a sudden flame leaped into his eyes as they devoured the beauty of the woman beside him, and

raising to his lips the hand that lay inert on the saffron-hued cushion, he replied :

“The lady Theodora has many who do her bidding, yet is the heart of none as true as his, who is even now sitting beside her. Therefore ask of me whatever you will and, if a blade be needed, your slightest favor will fire me to any deed, — however unnameable.” —

Lower the man bent, until his hot breath scorched her pale cheeks. But neither by word nor gesture did she betray that she was conscious of his nearer approach as, in a calm voice, she replied :

“Full well do I know your zeal and devotion, my lord Basil. Yet there hangs in the balance the keen and timely stroke that shall secure for me the dominion of the Seven Hills and the Emperor’s Tomb. For failure would bring in its wake that which would be harder to endure than death itself. Therefore,” she added slowly, “I would choose one whose devotion is only equalled by his blind indifference to that which I am minded to bring about; not one only fired with a passion, which when cooled might leave nothing but fear and hesitation behind.” —

“Has all that has passed between us left you with so ill an opinion of me?” Basil replied, drawing back somewhat ostentatiously. “There are few that can be trusted with that which must be done — and trusted blades are scarce.”

“The more reason that we choose wisely and well,” came the reply in deliberate tones. “How much longer must I suffer the indignity which this stripling dares to put upon his own flesh and blood, — upon myself, who has striven for this dominion with all the fire of this restless soul? How much longer must I sit idly by, pondering over the mystery that enshrouds Marozia’s untimely end? How much longer must I tremble in abject fear of him whom the Tuscan’s churlishness has set up in yonder castello and who conspires with my rival to gain his sinister ends?”

"By what sorcery she holds him captive, I cannot tell," Basil interposed. "Yet, if we are not on our guard, we shall awaken one day to the realization that even the faint chance which remains to us now has passed from our hands. I doubt not but that Roxana will enlist the services of the stranger who in the space of a week, during the lord Alberic's absence, will lord it over the city of Rome!"

With a smothered cry of hate, that drove from Theodora's face every trace of her former mood, she bounded upright.

"What demon of madness possesses you, my lord Basil, to taunt me with your suspicions?" she flashed.

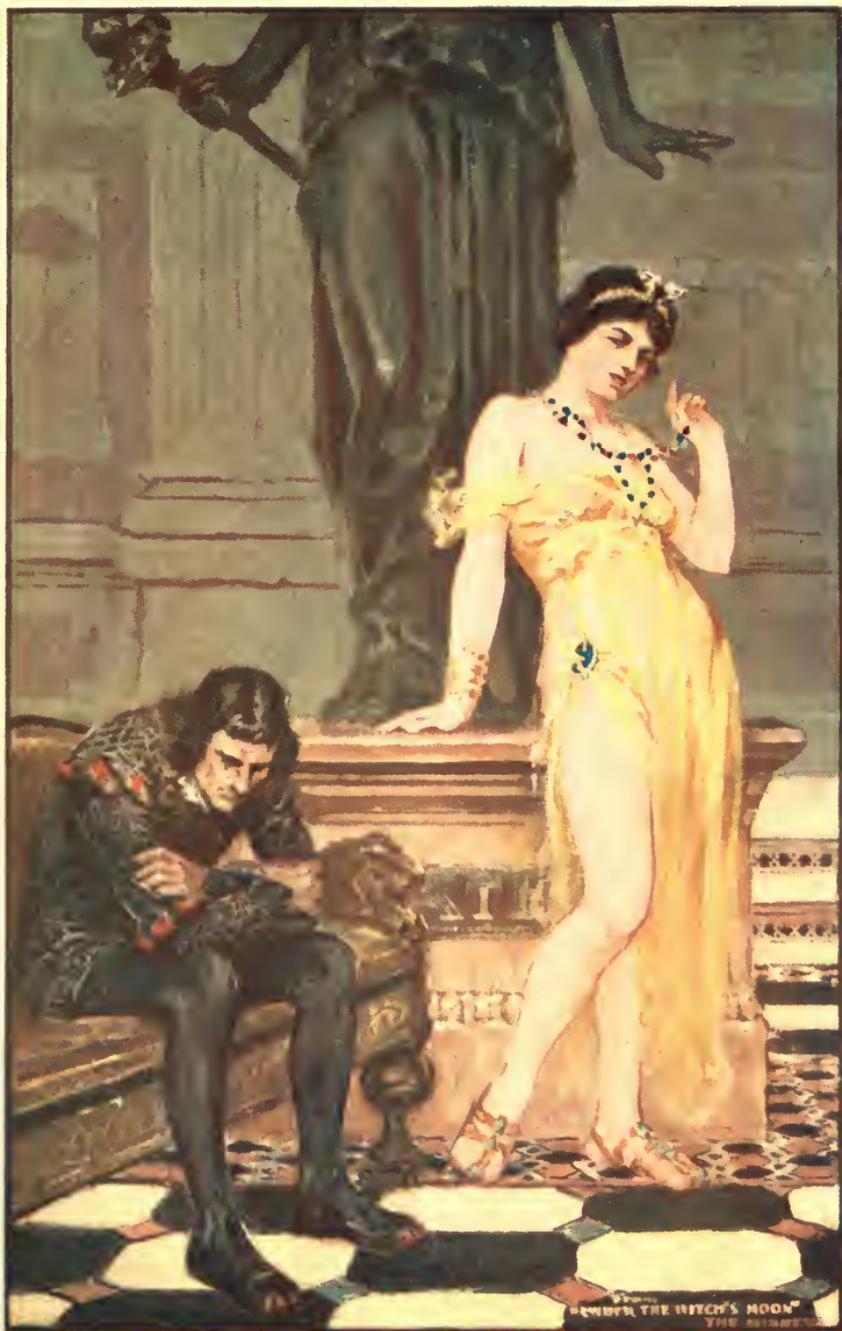
Basil had sped his shaft at random, but he had hit the mark.

In suave and insinuating tones, without relinquishing his gaze upon the woman, he replied:

"I voice but my fears, Lady Theodora, and the urgency of assembling your friends under the banners of your house. What is more natural," he continued with slow and sinister emphasis, "than for a beautiful woman to harbor the desire for conquest, and to profit from so auspicious a throw of fate as the stranger's espousing her part against an equally beautiful, hated rival? Is not the inference justified, that, ignorant of the merits of the feud, which has been raging these many months, he will take the part of the one whose beauty had compelled the Senator's unwitting tribute — as it were?"

He paused for a moment, watching the woman before him from under half-shut lids, then continued slowly:

"Roxana is consumed with the desire to stake soul and body upon attaining her ends, humbling her rival in the dust and set her foot upon her neck. Time and again has she defied you! At the banquet she gave in honor of the Senator of Rome, when one of the guests lamented the Lady Theodora's absence from the festal board, she openly boasted, that in youth as well as in beauty, in strength as in love,



"A strange look passed into Theodora's eyes"

she would vanquish Marozia's sister utterly — and when one of the guests, commenting upon her boast, suggested with a smile that in the time of the Emperor Gallus women fought in the arena, she bared her arms and replied: 'Are there no chambers in this demesne where a woman may strangle her rival?'

Theodora had listened to Basil's recital, white to the lips. Her bosom heaved and a strange fire burnt in her eyes as she replied:

"Dares she utter this boast, woman to woman?" —

Basil, checking himself, gave a shrug.

"Misinterpret not my words, dearest lady," he said solicitously. "It is to warn you that I came. Alberic's attitude is no longer a secret. Roxana is leaving no stone unturned to drive you from the city, to encompass your death — and Alberic is swayed by strange moods. Roxana is growing bolder each day and the woman who dares challenge the Lady Theodora is no coward."

A strange look passed into Theodora's eyes.

"Three days hence," she said, "I mean to give a feast to my friends, if," she continued with lurid mockery, "I can still number such among those who flock to my bowers. I shall ask the Lady Roxana to grace the feast with her presence —"

A puzzled look passed into Basil's eyes.

"Deem you she will come?"

Theodora's lips curved in a smile.

"You said but just now, my lord, the woman who dares challenge Theodora is no coward —"

"Yet — as your guest — suspecting — knowing —"

"I doubt not, my lord, she is well informed," Theodora interposed with the same inscrutable smile. "Yet — if she is as brave as she is beautiful — she will come — doubt not, my lord — she will come —"

"Nevertheless, I question the wisdom," Basil ventured

to interpose. "A sudden spark — from nowhere — who will quench the holocaust?"

"When Roxana and Theodora meet, — woman to woman — ah, trust me, my lord, it will be a festive occasion — one long to be remembered. Perchance you, my lord, who boast of a large circle know young Fabio of the Cavalli — a comely youth with the air and manners of a girl. Persephoné, my Circassian, could strangle him."

"I know the youth, Lady Theodora," Basil interposed with a puzzled air. "What of him?"

"He once did me the honor to imagine himself in love with me. Did he not pursue me with amorous sighs and burning glances and oaths — my lord — such oaths! Cerberus would wince in Tartarus could he hear but one of them —"

Basil's lips straightened and his eyelids narrowed.

"Pardon, Lady Theodora, if I do not quite follow the trend of your reminiscent mood —"

Theodora smiled.

"You will presently, my lord — believe me — you will presently. When I became satiated with him I sent him on his way and straightway he sought my beautiful rival. I am told she is very fond of him —"

A strange nervousness had seized Basil.

"I shall bid him to the feast," Theodora continued. "'Twere scant courtesy to request the Lady Roxaná's presence without that of her lover. And more, my lord. Since you boast your devotion to me in such unequivocal terms — your task it shall be to bring as your honored guest the valiant stranger who took so brave a part in aiding the Lord Alberic to regain his prisoner, and who, within a week, is to be the new captain of Castel San Angelo." —

Basil was twitching nervously.

"Lady Theodora, without attempting to fathom the mood which prompts the request, am I to traverse the city in quest

of a churl who has hypnotized the Lord Alberic and has destroyed our fondest hopes? ” —

“That it shall be for myself to decide, my Lord Basil,” Theodora replied with her inscrutable smile. “I do not desire you to fathom my mood, but to bring to me this man. And believe me, my Lord Basil—as you value my favor—you will find and bring him to me!”

Half turning she flung a light vesture from off her bosom and the faint light showed not the set Medusa face that meditated unnameable things, but eyes alight with desire and a mouth quivering for kisses.

As he gazed, Basil was suddenly caught in the throes of his passion. He clutched at the ottoman’s carved arms, striving to resist the tide of emotion that tossed him like a helpless bark in its clutches and, suddenly bearing down every restraint, his arms went round the supple form as he crushed her to him with a wild uncontrolled passion, bending her back, and his eyes blazed with a baleful fire into her own, while his hot kisses scorched her lips.

She struggled violently, desperately in his embrace, and at last succeeded, bruised and crushed, in releasing herself.

“Beast! Coward!” she flashed, “Can you not bridle the animal within you? I have it in mind to kill you here and now.”

Basil’s face was ashen. His eyes were bloodshot. The touch of her lips, of her hands, had maddened him. He groaned, and his arms fell limply by his side. Presently he raised his head and, his eyes aflame with the madness of jealousy, he snarled:

“So I did not go amiss, when I long suspected’ another in the bower of roses. Who is he? Tell me quickly, that I may at least assuage this hatred of mine, for its measure overflows.”

His hand closed on his dagger’s hilt that was hidden by

his tunic, but Theodora rose and her own eyes flashed like naked swords as with set face she said :

“Have you not yet learned, my lord, how vain it is to probe the clouds of my mind for the unseen wind that stirs behind its curtains? Aye — crouch at my feet, you miserable slave, gone mad with the dream of my favor possessed and wake to learn, that, as Theodora's enchantments compel all living men, nevertheless she gives herself unto him she pleases. I tell you, you jealous fool, that, although I serve the goddess of night yonder, never till yesterday was my heart touched by the divine enchantments of Venus, nor have the lips ever closed on mine, that could kindle the spark to set my breast afire with longing.”

“Ah me!” she continued, speaking as though she thought aloud. “Will Hekaté ever grant me to find amongst these husks of passion and plotting that great love whereof once I dreamed, that love which I am seeking and which ever flits before me, disembodied and unattainable, like a ghost in the purple twilight? Or, must I wander, ever loved yet unloving, until I am gathered to the realms of shadows, robbed of my desire by Death's cold hand?”

She paused, her lips a-quiver, the while Basil watched her with half-closed eyes, filled with sudden and ominous brooding.

“Who is the favored one?” he queried darkly, “who came and saw and conquered, while others of long-tried loyalty are starving at the fount?”

She gave him an inscrutable glance, then answered quickly :

“A man willing to risk life and honor and all to serve me as I would be served.”

Basil gave her a baffled look.

“Can he achieve the impossible?”

Theodora gave a shrug.

“To him who truly loves nothing is impossible. You are

the trusted friend of the Senator who encompasses my undoing — need I say more? ”

“ Were I not, Lady Theodora, in seeming, — who knows, but that your blood would long have dyed this Roman soil, or some dark crypt contained your wonderful beauty? Bide but the time — ”

An impatient wave of Theodora’s hand interrupted the speaker.

“ Time has me now! Will there ever be an end to this uncertainty? ”

“ You have not yet told me the name of him whose sudden advent on the stage has brought about so marvellous a transformation,” Basil said with an air of baffled passion and rage.

“ What matters the name, my lord? ” Theodora interposed with a sardonic smile.

“ A nameless stranger then,” he flashed with a swiftness that staggered even the woman, astute as she was.

“ I said not so — ”

“ A circumstance that should recommend him to our consideration,” he muttered darkly. “ I shall find him — and bring him to the feast — ”

There was something in his voice that roused the tigress in the woman.

“ By the powers of hell,” she turned on the man whose fatal guess had betrayed her secret, “ if you but dare touch one hair of his head — ”

Basil raised his hand disdainfully.

“ Be calm, Lady Theodora! The Grand Chamberlain soils not his steel with such carrion,” he said with a tone of contempt that struck home. “ And now I will be plain with you, Lady Theodora. All things have their price. Will you grant to me what I most desire in return for that which is ever closest to your heart? ”

Theodora gave a tantalizing shrug.

“ Like the Fata Morgana of the desert, I am all things

to all men," she said. "Remember, my lord, I must look for that which I desire wherever I may find it, since life and the future are uncertain."

There was a silence during which each seemed intent upon fathoming the secret thoughts of the other.

It was Basil who spoke.

"What of that other?"

Theodora had arisen.

"Bring him to me — three days hence — as my guest. Thrice has he crossed my path. — Thrice has he defied me! — I have that in store for him at which men shall marvel for all time to come!"

Basil bent over the white hand and kissed it. Then he took his leave. Had he seen the expression in the woman's eyes as the heavy curtains closed behind him, it would have made the Grand Chamberlain pause.

Theodora passed to where the bronze mirror hung and stood long before it, with hands clasped behind her shapely head, wrapt in deepest thought.

And while she gazed on her mirrored loveliness, an evil light sprang up in her eyes and all her mouth's soft lines froze to a mould of dreaming evil, as she turned to where the image of Hekaté gazed down upon her with inhuman calm upon its face, and, holding out shimmering, imploring arms, she cried:

"Help me now, dread goddess of darkness, if ever you looked with love upon her whose prayers have been directed to you for good and for evil. Fire the soul of him I desire, as he stands before me, that he lose reason, honor, and manhood, as the price of my burning kisses — that he become my utter slave."

She clapped her hands and Persephoné appeared from behind the curtains.

"For once Fate is my friend," she turned with flashing eyes to the Circassian. "Before his departure to the shrines

of the Archangel, Alberic has appointed this nameless stranger captain of Castel San Angelo. Go — find him and bring him to me! Now we shall see," she added, "if all this beauty of mine shall prevail against his manhood. Your eyes express doubt, my sweet Persephoné?"

Theodora had raised herself to her full height. She looked regal indeed — a wonderful apparition. What man lived there to resist such loveliness of face and form?

Persephoné, too, seemed to feel the woman's magic, for her tone was less confident when she replied:

"Such beauty as the Lady Theodora's surely the world has never seen."

"I shall conquer — by dread Hekaté," Theodora flashed, flushed by Persephoné's unwitting tribute. "He shall open for me the portals of the Emperor's Tomb, he shall sue at my feet for my love — and obtain his guerdon. Not a word of this to anyone, my Persephoné — least of all, the Lord Basil. Bring the stranger to me by the postern —"

"But — if he refuse?"

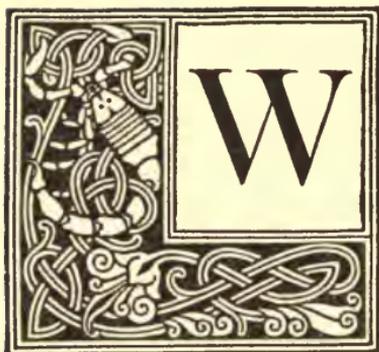
There was something in Persephoné's tone that stung Theodora's soul to the quick.

"He will not refuse."

Persephoné bowed and departed, and for some time Theodora's dark inscrutable eyes brooded on the equally inscrutable face of the goddess of the Underworld, which was just then touched by a fugitive beam of sunlight and seemed to nod mysteriously.

CHAPTER X

A SPIRIT PAGEANT



WHEN, on the day succeeding his appointment Tristan returned to the Inn of the Golden Shield he felt as one in a trance. Like a puppet of Fate he had been plunged into the seething maelstrom of feudal Rome. He hardly realized the import of the scene in which he had played so prominent a part. He had acted upon impulse, hardly knowing what it was all about. Dimly at intervals it flashed through his consciousness, dimly he remembered facing two youths, the one the Senator of Rome — the other the High Priest of Christendom, even though a prisoner in the Lateran. Vaguely he recalled the words that had been spoken between them, vaguely he recalled the fact that the Senator of Rome had commended him for having saved the city, offering him appointment, holding out honor and preferment, if he would enter his service. Vaguely he remembered bending his knee before the proud son of Marozia and accepting his good offices.

In the guest-chamber Tristan found pilgrims from every land assembled round the tables discoursing upon the wonders and perils hidden in the strange and shifting corridors of Rome. Not a few had witnessed the scene in which he had so conspicuously figured and, upon recognizing him, regarded him with shy glances, while commenting upon

the prevailing state of unrest, the periodical seditions and outbreaks of the Romans.

Tristan listened to the buzz and clamor of their voices, gleaning here and there some scattered bits of knowledge regarding Roman affairs.

He could now review more calmly the events of the preceding day. Fortune seemed to have favored him indeed, in that she had led him across the path of the Senator of Rome.

Thus Tristan set out once again, to make the rounds of worship and obedience. These absolved, he wandered aimlessly about the great city, losing himself in her ruins and gardens, while he strove in vain to take an interest in what he beheld, rather distracted than amused by the Babel-like confusion which surrounded him on all sides.

Nevertheless, once more upon the piazzas and tortuous streets of Rome, his pace quickened. His pulses beat faster. At times he did not feel his feet upon those stony ways which Peter and Paul had trod, and many another who, like himself, had come to Rome to be crucified. People stared at his dark and sombre form as he passed. Now and then he was retarded by chanting processions, that wound their interminable coils through the tortuous streets, pilgrims from all the world, the various orders of monks in the habits peculiar to their orders, wine-venders, water-carriers, men-at-arms, sbirri, and men of doubtful calling. Sacred banners floated in the sunlit air and incense curled its graceful spiral wreaths into the cloudless Roman ether.

Surely Rome offered a wide field for ambition. A man might raise himself to a certain degree by subservience to some powerful prince, but he must continue to serve that prince, or he fell and would never aspire to independent domination, where hereditary power was recognized by the people and lay at the foundation of all acknowledged authority. It was only in Central Italy, and especially in Romagna and the States of the Church, where a principle antagonistic

to all hereditary claims existed in the very nature of the Papal power, so that any adventurer might hope, either by his individual genius or courage, or by services rendered to those in authority, to raise himself to independent rule or to that station which was only attached to a superior by the thin and worn-out thread of feudal tenure.

Rome was the field still open to the bold spirit, the keen and clear-seeing mind. Rome was the table on which the boldest player was sure to win the most. With every change of the papacy new combinations, and, consequently, new opportunities must arise. Here a man may, as elsewhere, be required to serve, in order at length to command. But, if he did not obtain power at length, it was his fault or Fortune's, and in either event he must abide the consequences.

Revolving in his mind these matters, and wondering what the days to come would hold, Tristan permitted himself to wander aimlessly through the desolation which arose on all sides about him.

Passing by the Forum and the Colosseum, ruins piled upon ruins, he wandered past San Gregorio, where, in the garden, lie the remains of the Servian Porta Capena, by which St. Paul first entered Rome. The Via Appia, lined with vineyards and fruit-trees, shedding their blossoms on many an ancient tomb, led the solitary pilgrim from the memories of the present to the days, when the light of the early Christian Church burned like a flickering taper hidden low in Roman soil.

The ground sweeping down on either side in gentle, but well-defined curves, led the vision over the hills of Rome and into her valleys. Beneath a cloudless, translucent sky the city was caught in bold shafts of crystal light, revealing her in so strong a relief that it seemed like a piece of exquisite sculpture.

Fronting the Coelian, crowned with the temple church of San Stefano in Rotondo, fringed round with tall and graceful

poplars, rose the immeasurable ruins of Caracalla's Baths, seeming more than ever the work of titans, as Tristan saw them, shrouded in deep shadows above the old churches of San Nereo and San Basilio, shining like white huts, a stone's throw from the mighty walls. Beyond, as a beacon of the Christian world in ages to come, on the site of the ancient Circus of Nero, arose the Basilica of Constantine, still in its pristine simplicity, ere the genius of Michel Angelo, Bramanté and Sangallo transformed it into the magnificence of the present St. Peter's.

For miles around stretched the Aurelian walls, here fallen in low ruins, there still rising in their proud strength. Weathered to every shade of red, orange, and palest lemon, they still showed much of their ancient beauty near the closed Latin gate. High towers, arched galleries and battlements cast a broad band of shade upon a line of peach trees whose blossoms had opened out to the touch of the summer breeze.

Beneath Tristan's feet, unknown to him, lay the sepulchral chambers of pagan patricians, and the winding passage tombs of the Scipios. Out of the sunshine of the vineyard Tristan's curiosity led him into the dusk of the Columbaria of Pomponius Hylas, full of stucco altar tombs. He descended into the lower chambers with arched corridors and vaulted roofs where, in the loculi, stood terra-cotta jars holding the ashes of the freedmen and musicians of Tiberius with their servants, even to their cook.

Returning full of wonder to the golden light of day, Tristan retraced his steps once again over the Appian Way. Passing the ruined Circus of Maxentius, across smooth fields of grass, he saw the fortress tomb of Cæcilia Metella, set grandly upon the hill. It appeared to break through the sunshine, its marble surface of a soft cream color, looking more like the shrine of some immortal goddess of the Campagna than the tomb of a Roman matron.

And, as he wandered along the Appian Way, past the site

of lava pools from Mount Alba, remains of ancient monuments lay thicker by the roadside. Prostrate statues appeared in a setting of wild flowers. Sculptured heads gazed out from half-hidden tombs, while one watch-tower after another rose out of the undulating expanse of the Campagna.

To Tristan the memories of an ancient empire which clung to the place held but little significance.

Here emperors had been carried by in their litters to Albano. Victorious generals returning in their chariots from the south, drove between these avenues of cypress-guarded tombs to Rome. The body of the dead Augustus had been brought with great following from Bovilæ to the Palatine, as before him Sulla had been borne along to Rome amid the sound of trumpets and tramp of horsemen. Near the fourth milestone stood Seneca's villa, where he received his death warrant from an emissary of Nero, and nearby was that of his wife who, by her own desire, bravely shared his fate.

And, last to haunt the Appian Way in the spirit pageant of the Golden Age, a memory destined to lie dormant till the dawn of the Renaissance, was Paul the Apostle, the tent-maker from Tarsus, who entered Rome while Nero reigned in the white marble city of Augustus and suffered martyrdom for the Faith.

It was verging towards evening when Tristan's feet again bore him past the stupendous ruins of the Colosseum, through the roofless upper galleries of which streamed the light of the sinking sun.

After reaching the Forum, almost deserted by this hour, save for a few belated ramblers, he seated himself on a marble block and tried to collect his thoughts, at the same time drinking in the picture which unrolled itself before his gaze.

If Rome was indeed, as the chroniclers of the Middle Ages styled her, "Caput Mundi," the Forum was the centre

of Rome. From this centre Rome threw out and informed her various feelers, farther and farther radiating in all directions, as she swelled out with greatness, drawing her sustenance first from her sacred hills and groves, then from the very marbles and granites of the mountains of Asia and Africa, from the lives of all sorts of peoples, races and nations. And like the Emperor Constantine, as we are told by Ammianus Marcellinus, on beholding the Forum from the Rostra of Domitian, stood wonder-stricken, so Tristan, even at this period of decay, was amazed at the grandeur of the ruins which bore witness to Rome's former greatness.

The sound of the Angelus, whose silvery chimes permeated the tomb-like stillness, roused Tristan from his reveries.

He arose and continued upon his way, until he found himself in the square fronting the ancient Basilica of Constantine.

Notwithstanding the fact that it was a Vigil of the Church, popular exhibitions of all sorts were set upon the broad flagstones before St. Peter's. Street dancing girls indulged on every available spot in those gliding gyrations, so eloquently condemned by the worthy Ammianus Marcellinus of orderly and historical memory. Booths crammed with relics of doubtful authenticity, baskets filled with fruits or flowers, pictorial representations of certain martyrs of the Church, basking in haloes of celestial light, tempted in every direction the worldly and unworldly spectators. Cooks perambulated, their shops upon their backs, merchants shouted their wares, wine-sellers taught Bacchanalian philosophy from the tops of their casks; poets recited spurious compositions which they offered for sale; philosophers indulged in argumentations destined to convert the wavering, or to perplex the ignorant. Incessant motion and noise seemed to be the sole aim and purpose of the crowd which thronged the square.

Nothing could be more picturesque than the distant view of the joyous scene, this Carnival in Midsummer, as it were.

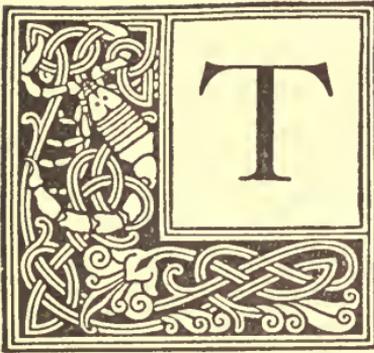
The deep red rays of the westering sun cast their radiance, partly from behind the Basilica, over the vast multitude in the piazza. In unrivalled splendor the crimson light tinted the water that purred from the fountain of Bishop Symmachus. Its roof of gilded bronze, supported by six porphyry columns, was enclosed by small marble screens on which griffins were carved, its corners ornamented by gilded dolphins and peacocks in bronze. The water flowed into a square basin from out of a bronze pine cone which may have come from Hadrian's Mausoleum. Bathed in the brilliant glow the smooth porphyry colonnades reflected, chameleon-like, ethereal and varying hues. The white marble statues became suffused with delicate rose, and the trees gleamed in the innermost of their leafy depths as if steeped in the exhalations of a golden mist.

Contrasting strangely with the wondrous radiance around it, the bronze pine-tree in the centre of the piazza rose up in gloomy shadow, indefinite and exaggerated. The wide facade of the Basilica cast its great depth of shade into the midst of the light which dominated the scene.

Tristan stood for a time gazing into the glowing sky, then he slowly made his way towards the Basilica, the edifice which commemorated the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of Rome, as in its changes it has reflected every change wrought in the spirit of the new worship up to the present hour.

CHAPTER XI

THE DENUNCIATION



THE Basilica of Constantine no longer retained its pristine splendor, its pristine purity as in the days, ere the revival of paganism by the Emperor Julian the Apostate had put a sudden and impressive check upon the meretricious defilement of the glory, for which it was built.

The exterior began to show signs of decay. The interior, too, had changed with the inexorable trend of the times. The solemn recesses were filled with precious relics. Many hued tapers surrounded the glorious pillars, and eastern tapestries wreathed their fringes round the massive altars.

As Tristan entered the incense-saturated dusk of St. Peter's, the first part of the service had just been concluded. The last faint echoes from the voices in the choir still hovered upon the air, and the silent crowds of worshippers were still grouped in their listening attitudes and absorbed in their devotions.

The only light was bestowed by the evening sun, duskily illuminating the emblazoned windows, or by the glimmer of lamps in distant shrines, hung with sable velvet and attended each by its own group of ministering priests.

Struck with an indefinable awe Tristan looked about. At first he only realized the great space, the four long rows of closely set columns, and the great triumphal arch which

framed the mosaics of the apse, where Constantine stood in the clouds offering his Basilica to the Saviour and St. Peter. Then he looked towards the sacred shrines above the Apostle's grave, where lamps burned incessantly and cast a dazzling halo above the high altar, reflected in the silver paving of the presbytery and on the golden gates and images of the Confessio. Immediately behind the altar was revealed a long panel of gold, studded with gems and ornaments, with figures of Christ and the Apostles, a native offering from the Emperor Valentinian III. The high altar and its brilliant surroundings were seen from the nave between a double row of twisted marble columns, white as snow. A beam covered with plates of silver united them and supported great silver images of the Saviour, the Virgin and the Apostles with lilies and candelabra.

To their shrines, to do homage, had in time come the Kings from all the earth: Oswy, King of the Northumbrians, Cædwalla, King of the West Saxons, Coenred, King of the Mercians, and with him his son Sigher, King of the East Saxons. Even Macbeth is said to have made the pilgrimage. Ethelwulf came in the middle of the ninth century, and with him came his son Alfred. In the arcades beneath the columned vestibule of the Basilica, tomb succeeded tomb. Here the popes were buried, Leo I, the Great, being first in line, the Saxon Pilgrim Kings, the Emperors Honorius III and Theodosius II, regarding whom St. John Chrysostomus has written: "Emperors were proud to stand in the hall keeping guard at the fisherman's door."

During the interval between the divisions of the service, Tristan, like many of those present, found his interest directed towards the relics, which were inclosed in a silver cabinet with crystal doors and placed above the high altar. Although it was impossible to obtain a satisfactory view of these ecclesiastical treasures, they nevertheless occupied his attention till it was diverted by the appearance of a monk

in the habit of the Benedictines, who had mounted the richly carved pulpit fixed between two pillars.

As far as Tristan was enabled to follow the trend of the sermon it teemed with allusions to the state of society and religion as it prevailed throughout the Christian world, and especially in the city of the Pontiff. By degrees the monk's eloquence took on darker and more terrible tints, as he seemed slowly to pass from generalities to personal allusions, which increased the fear and mortification of the great assembly with every moment.

From the shadows of the shrine, where he had chosen his station, Tristan was enabled to mark every shade of the emotions which swayed the multitudes and, as his eyes roamed inadvertently towards the chapel of the Father Confessor, he saw a continuous stream of penitents enter the dark passage leading towards the crypts, many of whom were masked.

Turning his head by chance, Tristan's glance fell upon two men who had apparently just entered the Basilica and paused a few paces away, to listen to the words which the monk hurled like thunderbolts across the heads of his listeners. Despite their precaution to wear masks, Tristan recognized the Grand Chamberlain in the one, while his companion, the hunchback, appeared rather uncomfortable in the sanctified air of the Basilica.

Hitherto Odo of Cluny's attacks on the existing state had been general. Now he glanced over the crowd, as if in quest of some special object, as with strident voice he declaimed:

"Repent! Death stands behind you! The flag of your glory shall cease to wave on the towers of your strong citadel. Destruction clamors at your palace gates, and the enemy that cometh upon you unaware is an enemy that none shall vanquish or subdue, not even they who are the mightiest among the mighty. Blood stains the earth and the sky. Its red waves swallow up the land! The heavens grow pale

and tremble! The silver stars blacken and decay, and the winds of the desert make lament for that which shall come to pass, ere ever the grapes be pressed or the harvest gathered. It is a scarlet sea wherein, like a broken and deserted ship, Rome flounders, never to rise again — ”

He paused for a moment and caught his breath hard.

“The Scarlet Woman of Babylon is among us!” he cried. “Hence! accursed tempter. Thou poisoner of peace, thou quivering sting in the flesh, destroyer of the strength of manhood! Theodora! — thou abomination — thou tyrannous treachery! What shall be done unto thee in the hour of darkness? Put off the ornaments of gold, the jewels, wherewith thou adornest thy beauty, and crown thyself with the crown of endless affliction. For thou shalt be girdled about with flame and fire shall be thy garment. Thy lips that have drunk sweet wine shall be steeped in bitterness! Vainly shalt thou make thyself fair and call upon thy legion of lovers. They shall be as dead men, deaf to thine entreaties, and none shall respond to thy call! None shall hide thee from shame and offer thee comfort! In the midst of thy lascivious delights shalt thou suddenly perish, and my soul shall be avenged on thy sins, queen-courtesan of the earth!”

Scarcely had the last word died to silence when a blinding flash of lightning rent the gloom followed by a tremendous crash of thunder that shook the great edifice to its foundation. The bronze portals opened as of their own accord and a terrific gust of wind extinguished every light in the thousand-jetted candelabrum. Impenetrable darkness reigned — thick, suffocating darkness, as the thunder rolled away in grand, sullen echoes.

There was a momentary lull, then, piercing the profound gloom, came the cries and shrieks of frightened women, the horrible, selfish scrambling, struggling and pushing of a bewildered multitude. A veritable frenzy of fear seemed to

possess every one. Groans and sobs, entreaties and curses from those, who, intent on saving themselves, were brutally trying to force a passage to the door, the heart-rending, frantic appeals of the women — all these sounds increased the horror of the situation, and Tristan, blind, giddy and confused, listened to the uproar about him with somewhat of the affrighted, panic-stricken compassion that a stranger in hell might feel, while hearkening to the ceaseless plaints of the self-tortured damned.

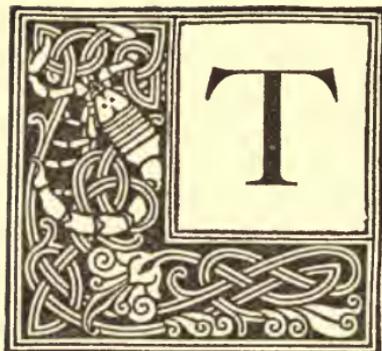
Lost in a dim stupefaction of wonderment, Tristan remained where he stood, while the crowds rushed from the Basilica. As he was about to follow in their wake, his gaze was attracted towards the chapel of the Grand Penitentiary, from which came a number of masked personages while he, to whose keeping were confided crimes of a magnitude that seemed beyond the extensive powers of absolution, was barely visible under the cowl, which was drawn deeply over his forehead.

The thought occurred to Tristan to seek the ear of the Confessor, inasmuch as the Pontiff to whom he had hoped to lay bare his heart could not grant him an audience.

The lateness of the hour and the uncertainty of the fate of the Monk of Cluny prevented him from following the prompting of the moment and, staggering rather than walking, Tristan made for the portals of St. Peter's and walked unseeing into the gathering dusk.

CHAPTER XII

THE CONFESSION



HE storm had abated, but the sheen of white lightnings to southward and the menacing growl of distant thunder that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth held out promise of renewed upheavals of disturbed nature.

The streets of Rome were comparatively deserted with the swiftly approaching dusk, and it occurred to Tristan to seek the Monk of Cluny in his abode on Mount Aventine whither he had doubtlessly betaken himself after his sermon in the Basilica of St. Peter's. For ever and ever the memory of lost Helayne dominated his thoughts, and, while he poured out prayers for peace at the shrines of the saints, with the eyes of the soul he saw not the image of the Virgin, but of the woman for the sake of whom he had come hither and, having come, knew not where to find that which he sought.

From a passing friar Tristan learned the direction of Mount Aventine, where, among the ruins near the newly erected Church of Santa Maria of the Aventine, Odo of Cluny abode. Tristan could not but marvel at the courage of the man whose life was in hourly jeopardy and who, in the face of an ever present menace could put his trust so completely in Heaven as to brave the danger without even a guard. —

Taking the road indicated by the friar, Tristan pursued his solitary path. In seeking the Monk of Cluny his purpose was a twofold one, certainty with regard to his own guilt, in

having loved where love was a crime, and counsel with regard to the woman who, he instinctively felt, would not stop at her first innuendos.

As Tristan proceeded on his way his feelings and motives became more and more perplexed, and so lost was he in thought that, without heeding his way or noting the scattered arches and porticoes, he lost himself in the wilderness of the Mount of Cloisters. The hush was intensified rather than broken by the ever louder peals of thunder, which reverberated through the valleys, and the Stygian darkness, broken at intervals by vivid flashes of lightning, seemed to hem him in, as a wall of basalt.

Gradually all traces of a road vanished. On both sides rose woody acclivities, covered with ruins and melancholy cypresses, whose spectral outlines seemed to stretch into gaunt immensity, in the sheen of the lightnings which grew more and more frequent. The wind rose sobbingly among the trees, and a few scattered rain-drops began to warn Tristan that a shelter of any sort would be preferable to exposing himself to the onslaught of the elements.

Entering the first group of ruins he came to, he penetrated through a series of roofless corridors and chambers into what seemed a dark cylindrical well at the farther extremity of which there gleamed an infinitesimal light. Even through the clamor of the storm that raged outside there came to him the sound of voices from the interior.

Impelled as much by curiosity as by the consideration of his own safety Tristan crept slowly towards the aperture. As he did so, the light vanished, but a crimson glow, as of smouldering embers, succeeded, and heavy fumes of incense, wafted to his nostrils, informed him that his fears regarding the character of the abode were but too well founded. He cowered motionless in the gloom until the storm had abated, determined to return at some time to discover what mysteries the place concealed.

A fresher breeze had sprung up, driving the thunderclouds to northward, and from a clear azure the stars shone in undimmed lustre upon the dreaming world beneath.

For a moment Tristan stood gazing at the immense desolation, the wilderness of arches, shattered columns and ivy-covered porticoes. The hopelessness of finding among these relics of antiquity the monk's hermitage impressed itself at once upon him. Pausing irresolutely, he would probably have retraced his steps, had he not chanced to see some one emerge from the adjacent ruins, apparently bound in the same direction.

Whether it was a presentiment of evil, or whether the fear bred of the region and the hour of the night prompted the precaution, Tristan receded into the shadows and watched the approaching form, in whom he recognized Basil, the Grand Chamberlain. He at once resolved to follow him and the soft ground aided the execution of his design.

The way wound through a veritable labyrinth of ruins, nevertheless he kept his eyes on the tall dark form, stalking through the night before him. At times an owl or bat whirled over his head. With these exceptions he encountered no living thing among the ruins to break the hush of the sepulchral desolation.

The distance between them gradually diminished. Tristan saw the other turn to the right into a wilderness of grottoes, the tortuous corridors of which were at times almost choked up with weeds and wild flowers, but when he reached the spot, there was no vestige of a human presence. Basil had disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him.

Possessed by a sudden fear that some harm might be intended the monk and remembering certain veiled threats he had overheard against his life, he proceeded more slowly and cautiously by the dim light of the stars.

Before long he found himself before a flight of grass grown steps that led up to a series of desolate chambers which,

although roofless and choked with rank vegetation, still bore traces of their ancient splendor. These corridors led to a clumsy door, standing half ajar, from beyond which shone the faint glimmer of a light.

After having reached the threshold Tristan paused.

High, oval-shaped apertures admitted light and air at once, and the dying embers of a charcoal fire revealed a chamber, singularly void of all the comforts of existence. Almost in the centre of this chamber, before a massive stone table, upon which was spread a huge tome, sat the Monk of Cluny, shading his eyes with his right hand and reading half aloud.

For a few moments Tristan regarded the recluse breathlessly, as if he dreaded disturbing his meditations, when Odo suddenly raised his eyes and saw the dark form standing in the frame of the door.

The look which he bestowed upon Tristan convinced the latter immediately of the doubt which the monk harbored regarding the quality of his belated caller, a doubt which he deemed well to disperse before venturing into the monk's retreat.

Therefore, without abandoning his position, he addressed the inmate of the chamber and, as he spoke, the tone of his voice seemed to carry conviction, that the speaker was sincere.

"Your pardon, father," Tristan stammered, "for one who is seeking you in an hour of grave doubt and misgiving."

The monk's ear had caught the accent of a foreign tongue. He beckoned to Tristan to enter, rising from the bench on which he had been seated.

"You come at a strange hour," he said, not without a note of suspicion, which did not escape Tristan. "Your business must be weighty indeed to embolden one, a stranger on Roman soil, to penetrate the desolate Aventine when the world sleeps and murder stalks abroad."

"I am here for a singular purpose, father, — having obeyed the impulse of the moment, after listening to your sermon at St. Peter's."

"But that was hours ago," interposed the monk, resting his hand on the stone table, as he faced his visitor.

"I lost my way — nor did I meet any one to point it," Tristan replied, as he advanced and kissed the monk's hand reverently.

"What is your business, my son?" asked the monk.

Tristan hesitated a moment. At last he spoke.

"I came to Rome not of my own desire, — but obeying the will of another that imposed the pilgrimage. I have sinned, father — and yet there are moments, when I would almost glory in that which I have done. It was my purpose, while at St. Peter's to confess to the Grand Penitentiary. But — I know not why — I chose you instead, knowing that you would give truth for truth."

The monk regarded his visitor, wondering what one so young and possessed of so frank a countenance might have done amiss.

"You are a pilgrim?" he queried at last.

"For my sins —"

"Of French descent, yet not a Frenchman —"

Tristan started at the monk's penetration.

"From Provence, father," he stammered, "the land of songs and flowers —"

"And women —" the monk interposed gravely.

"There are women everywhere, father."

"There are women and women. Perchance I should say 'Woman.'"

Tristan bowed his head in silence.

The monk cast a penetrating glance at his visitor. He understood the gesture and the silence with that quick comprehension that came to him who was to reform Holy Catholic Church from the abuse of decades — as an intuition.

"But now, my son, speak of yourself," said the monk after a pause.

"I lived at the court of Avalon, the home of Love and Troubadours."

"Of Troubadours?" the monk interposed dreamily. "A worldly lot — given to extolling free love and what not —"

"They may sing of love and passion, father, but their lives are pure and chaste," Tristan ventured to remonstrate.

"You are a Troubadour?" came the swift query.

"In my humble way." Tristan replied with bowed head. The monk nodded.

"Go on — go on!"

"At the court of Avalon I met the consort of Count Roger de Laval. He was much absent, on one business or another, — the chase — feuds with neighboring barons. — He chose me to help the Lady Hellayne to while away the long hours during his absence —"

"His wife! What folly!"

"The Count de Laval is one of those men who would tempt the heavens themselves to fall upon him rather than to air himself beneath them. That his fair young wife, doing his will among men given to the chase and drinking bouts, and the society of tainted damsels, should long for something higher, she, whom he regarded with the high air of the lord of creation — that she should dare dream of some intangible something, for which she hungered, and craved and starved —"

"If you are about to confess, as I conceive, to a wrong you have done to this same lord," interposed the monk, "your sin is not less black if you paint him you have wronged in odious tints."

"Nevertheless I am most sorry to do so, father," Tristan interposed, "else could I not make you understand to its full extent his folly and conceit by placing me, a creature of

emotion, day by day beside so fair a being as his young wife. Therefore I would explain."

"It needs some explanation truly!" the monk said sternly.

"The Count de Laval is a man whose conceit is so colossal, father, that he would never think it possible that any one could fail in love and admiration at the shrine which he built for himself. A man of supreme arrogance and self-righteousness."

"Sad, indeed —" mused the monk.

"Our thoughts were pagan, drifting back to the days when the world was peopled with sylvan creatures — with the deities of field and stream —"

"Mere heathen dreams," interposed the monk. "Go on! Go on!"

"I then felt within myself the impulse to throw forth a minstrelsy prophetic of a new world resembling that old which had vanished. It was not to be a mere chant of wrath or exultation — it was to sound the joy of the earth, of the air, of the sun, of the moon and the stars, — the song of the birds, the perfume of the flowers —"

"Words that have but little meaning left in this stern world wherein we dwell —"

"They had meaning for me, father. Also for her. They were to both of us a bright and mystical ideal, in the fumes of which we steeped our souls, — our very selves, till our natures seemed to know no hurt, seemed incapable of evil —"

"Alas — the greater the pity!"

"I was sure of myself. She was sure of me. I loved her. Her presence was to me as some intoxication of the soul — some rare perfume that captivates the senses, raising the spirit to heights too rarefied for breath —"

"And you fell?"

The words came from the monk's lips, slowly, inexorably, as the knell of fate.

“I — all, but fell!” stammered Tristan. “One day in a chamber far removed from the inhabited part of the castle we sat and read. And suddenly she laid her face close to mine and with eyes in whose mystic depths lurked something more than I had ever seen in them before asked why, through Fate’s high necessity, two should forever wander side by side, longing for each other — their longing unsatisfied — when the hour was theirs —”

Again Tristan paused.

The monk regarded him in silence.

“You fell?” the question came again.

“In that moment, father, I was no more myself, no more the one whose art is sacred and alone upon the mountain summit of his soul. Its freedom and aspirations were no more. I was undone, a tumbled, wingless thing. My pride had fled. Long, long I looked into her eyes, and when she put her wonderful white arms about me, I, in a dizzy moment of desire, dropped my face to hers. Then was love all uttered. Straightway I arose. I clasped her in my arms. I kissed — I kissed her —”

The monk regarded him sternly, yet not unkindly.

“It was a sin. Yet — there is more?”

Tristan’s hands were clasped.

“One evening in the rose garden — at dusk — the evening on which she sent me from her — bade me go to Rome to obtain forgiveness for a sin of which I could not repent.”

The monk nodded. “Go on! Go on!”

“The world had fallen away from us. We stood in a grove, our arms about each other. Suddenly I saw a face. I withdrew my arm, overwhelmed by all the shame of guilt. The face vanished and, passion overmastering once more, we touched our lips anew. It was the last time we were to see each other. I left behind the wondrous silken hair my hands had touched in our last mad caress. I left behind that tender face and form. She made no attempt to follow,

or to call me back. I hastened to my chamber, and there I fought anew with all that evil impulse of my youth, to face the shame, as long as joy endured. If I had sinned in mind against my high ideal might I not some day recover it and be purified?"

"What of God and Holy Church?" queried the monk.

"To them I gave no heed, but to my honor. This upheld me."

The monk gave a nod.

"I left Avalon. It seemed as if without her my life were ebbing away. I joined a pilgrim party, and now my pilgrimage is ended. What must I do to still this inward craving that will not leave my soul at peace?"

He ended in a sob.

The monk had relapsed into deep thought, and Tristan's eyes were riveted on the ascetic form in silent dread, as to what would be the verdict.

At last Odo broke the heavy silence.

"You have committed a grievous sin — adultery — nay, speak not!" he said, as Tristan attempted to remonstrate against the dire accusation. "The seed of every act slumbers in the mind ere its pernicious shoots are manifest in deeds. He who looks upon a woman with the desire to possess her has already committed adultery with her. Yet — not one in a thousand would have done so nobly under such temptation!"

The monk's voice betrayed some feeling as he placed his hand on Tristan's bowed head.

"I shall consider what penances are most fit for one who has transgressed as you have, my son. It is for your future life — perchance Holy Orders —"

Tristan raised his head imploringly.

"Not that, father, — not that! I am not fit!"

The monk regarded him quizzically.

"The lust of the eye is mighty and the fever of the world

still burns in your veins, my son, rebelling against the passion that chastens and purifies. Nevertheless, the Church desires no enforced service. She wishes to be served through love, not with aversion and fear. Continue to do penance, implore His forgiveness, and that He may take from you this worldly desire."

Kissing anew the hand which the monk extended, Tristan arose, after Odo had made upon him the holy sign.

"I shall obey your behest," he said in a low, broken voice, then withdrew, while the Monk of Cluny returned to his former pursuit, unconscious that another had witnessed and overheard the strange confession from a recess in the wall.

As one in a trance Tristan left the Monk of Cluny, his heart filled with gratitude for the man who, in the midst of a world of strife and unrest, had listened to his tale and had not dealt harshly with him, but had received him sympathetically, even while rebuking the offence. While the penances imposed upon him were not severe, Tristan chafed nevertheless under the restraint they laid upon his soul.

What was his future life to be? What new vistas would open before him? What new impressions would superimpose themselves upon the memories of the past—the memory of Hellayne?

As he passed the church of Santa Maria of the Aventine, Tristan saw the portals open. Puzzled over the problems he was face in the days to come, he entered the dim shadows of the sanctuary.

All that night Tristan knelt in solitary prayer.

The great church was empty and silent, unlit save for the lamp upon the altar. There Tristan kept his vigil, his tired, tearful eyes upon the crucifixion, searching his own heart.

The night of silence brought him no vision and shed no light upon his path. The pale dawn found him still upon

his knees before the altar, his eyes upon the drooping form of the crucified Christ.

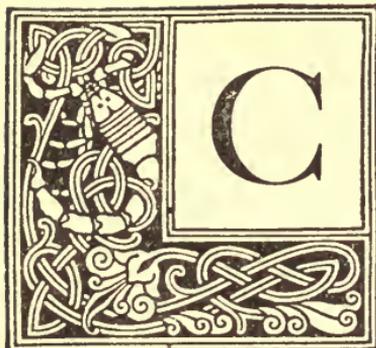
Thus the monks found him when they entered for early Matins. At last he arose, in his sombre eyes a touching resignation and infinite regret.

END OF BOOK THE FIRST

BOOK THE SECOND

CHAPTER I

THE GRAND CHAMBERLAIN



CASTEL SAN ANGELO, the Tomb of the Flavian Emperor, seemed rather to have been built for a great keep, a break-water as it were to stem the rush of barbarian seas which were wont to come storming down from the frozen north, than for the resting-place of the former master of the world. Its constructors had aimed at nothing less than its everlastingness. So thick were its bastioned walls, so thick the curtains which divided its inner and outer masonry, that no force of nature seemed capable of honeycombing or weakening them. Hidden within its screens and vaults, like the gnawings of a foul and intricate cancer, ran dark passages which discharged themselves here and there into dreadful dungeons, or secret places not guessed at in the common tally of its rooms.

These oubliettes were hideous with blotched and spotted memories, rotten with the dew of suffering, eloquent in their terror and corruption and darkness of the cruelty which turned to these walls for security. The hiss and purr of subterranean fires, the grinding of low, grated jaws, the flop and echo of stagnant water that oozed from a stagnant inner moat into vermin-swarmling, human-haunted cellars: these sounds spoke even less of grief than the hellish fer-

ment in the souls of those who had lorded it in this keep since the fall of the Western Empire.

On this night there hung an air of menace about the Mausoleum of the Flavian Emperor which seemed enhanced by the roar and clatter of the tempest that raged over the seven-hilled city. Snaky twists of lightning leaped athwart the driving darkness, and deafening peals of thunder reverberated in deep, booming echoes through the inky vault of the heavens.

In one of the upper chambers of the huge granite pile, which seemed to defy the very elements, in a square room, dug out of the very rock, containing but one window that appeared as a deep wedge in the wall, piercing to the sheer flank of the tower, there sat, brooding over a letter he held in his hand, Basil, the Grand Chamberlain.

The drowsy odor of incense, smouldering in the little purple shrine lamp, robbed the air of its last freshness.

A tunic of dark velvet, fur bound and girt with a belt of finest Moorish steel, was relieved by an undervest of deepest crimson. Woven hose to match the tunic ended in crimson buskins of soft leather. The mantle and the skull cap which he had discarded lay beside him on the floor, guarded by a tawny hound of the ancient Molossian breed.

By the fitful light of the two waxen tapers, which flickered dismally under the onslaught of the elements, the inmate of the chamber slowly and laboriously deciphered the letter. Then he placed it in his doublet, lapsing into deep ruminatation, as one who is vainly seeking to solve a problem that defies solution.

Rising at last from his chair Basil paced the narrow confines of the chamber, whose crimson walls seemed to form a fitting background for the dark-robed occupant.

Outside, the storm howled furiously, flinging gusty dashes of rain and hail against the stone masonry and clattering noisily with every blow inflicted upon the solid rock.

When, spent by its own fury, the hurricane abated for a moment, the faint sound of a bell tolling the Angelus could be heard whimpering through the night.

When Basil had left Theodora after their meeting at the palace, there had been a darker light in his eyes, a something more ominous of evil in his manner. While his passion had utterly enslaved him, making him a puppet in the hands of the woman whose boundless ambition must inevitably lead her either to the heights of the empire whereof she dreamed, or to the deepest abyss of hell, Basil was far from being content to occupy a position which made him merely a creature of her will and making. To mount the throne with the woman whose beauty had set his senses aflame, to rule the city of Rome from the ramparts of Castel San Angelo, as Ugo of Tuscany by the side of Marozia, this was the dream of the man who would leave no stone unturned to accomplish the ambition of his life.

In an age where certain dark personalities appeared terribly sane to their contemporaries, their occult dealings with powers whose existence none questioned must have seemed terribly real to themselves and to those who gazed from afar. When the mad were above the sane in power, and beyond the reach of observation, there was no limit to their baleful activity.

Basil, from the early days of his youth, had lived in a world of evil spirits, imaginary perhaps for us, but real enough for those who might at any moment be at his mercy. Stimulating his mad desire with the potent drug which the Saracens had brought with them from the scented East, he pushed his hashish-born imaginings to the very throne of Evil. His ambition, which was boundless, and centred in the longed for achievement of a hope too stupendous even for thought, had intimately connected him with those whose occult researches put them outside the pale of the Church, and the power he wielded in the shadowy world

of demons was as unchallenged as that which he felt himself wielding in the tangible world of men.

Among the people there was no end to the dark stories of magic and poison, some of them real enough, that were whispered about him, and many a belated rambler looked with a shudder up to the light that burned in a chamber of his palace on the Pincian Hill till the wee, small hours of the night. Had he been merely a practitioner of the Black Arts he would probably long since have ended his career in the dungeons of Castel San Angelo. But he was safe enough as one of the great ones of the world, the confidant of the Senator of Rome; safe, because he was feared and because none dared to oppose his baleful influence.

Basil pondered, as if the solution of the problem in his mind had at last presented itself, but had again left him, unsatisfied, in the throes of doubt and fear.

Rising from his seat he again unfolded the letter and peered over its contents.

“Can we regain the door by which we have entered?” he soliloquized. “Can we conquer the phantom that haunts the silent chambers of the brain? Were it an eye, or a hand, I could pluck it off. However, if I cannot strangle it, I can conquer it! Shall it forever blot the light of heaven from my path? Shall I forever suffer and tremble at this impalpable something — this shade from the abyss of hell — that is there — yet not there?”

He paused for a moment in his perambulation, gazing through the narrow unglazed window into the storm-tossed night without. Now and then a flash of lightning shot athwart the inky darkness, lighting up dark recesses and deep embrasures. The sullen roar of the thunder seemed to come from the bowels of the earth.

And as the Grand Chamberlain walked, as if driven by some invisible demon, the great Molossian hound followed him about with a stealthy, noiseless gait, raising its head

now and then as if silently inquiring into its master's mood.

When at length he reseated himself, the huge hound cowered at his feet and licked its huge paws.

The mood of the woman for whom his lust-bitten soul yearned as it had never yearned for anything on earth, her words of disdain, which had scorched his very brain, and, above all, the knowledge that she read his inmost thoughts, had roused every atom of evil within his soul. This state of mind was accentuated by the further consideration that she, of all women whom he had sent to their shame and death, was not afraid of him. She had even dared to hint at the existence of a rival who might indeed, in time, supersede him, if he were not wary.

For some time Basil had been vaguely conscious of losing ground in the favor of the woman whom no man might utterly trust save to his undoing. The rivalry of Roxaná, who, like her tenth-century prototypes, was but too eager to enter the arena for Marozia's fateful inheritance, had poured oil on the flames when Theodora had learned that the Senator of Rome himself was frequenting her bowers, and she was not slow to perceive the agency that was at work to defeat and destroy her utterly.

By adding ever new fuel to the hatred of the two women for each other Basil hoped to clear for himself a path that would carry him to the height of his aspirations, by compelling Theodora to openly espouse him her champion. Sooner or later he knew they would ignite under each other's taunts, and upon the ruins of the conflagration he hoped to build his own empire, with Theodora to share with him the throne.

Alberic had departed for the shrines of the Archangel at Monte Gargano. Intent upon the purification of the Church and upon matters pertaining to the empire, he was an element that needed hardly be reckoned with seriously. A successful coup would hurl him into the dungeons of his

own keep, perchance, by some irony of fate, into the very cell where Marozia had so mysteriously and ignominiously ended her career. Once in possession of the Mausoleum, the Germans and Dalmatians bought and bribed, he would be the master — unless —

Suddenly the huge beast at his feet raised its muzzle, sniffing the air and uttering a low growl.

A moment later Maraglia, the Castellan of Castel San Angelo, entered through a winding passage.

“What brings you here at this hour, with your damned butcher’s face?” Basil turned upon the newcomer who had paused when his gaze fell upon the Molossian.

The brutal features of Maraglia looked ghastly enough in the flickering light of the tapers and Basil’s temper seemed to deepen their ashen pallor.

“My lord — it is there again, — in the lower gallery — near the cell where the Lady Marozia was strangled — ”

“By all the furies of Hell! Since when are you in the secrets of the devil? ”

“Since I held the noose, my Lord Basil,” replied the warden of the Emperor’s Tomb doggedly. “Though I knew not at the time whose breath was being shortened. It was all too dark — a night just like this — ”

“Perchance your memory, going back to that hour, has retained something more than the mere surmise,” Basil glowered from under the dark, straight brows. “How many were there? ”

“There were three — all masked, my lord. But their voices were their own — ”

“You possess a keen ear, my man, as one, accustomed to dark deeds and passages, well should,” Basil interposed sardonically. “Deem you, in your undoubted wisdom, the lady has returned and is haunting her former abode? Once upon a time she was not wont to abide in estate so lowly. And, they say, she was beautiful — even to her death.”

“And well they may,” Maraglia interposed. “I saw her but twice. When she came, and before she died.”

“Before she died?”

“And the look she bent upon him who led the execution,” Maraglia continued thoughtfully. “She spoke not once. Dumb and silent she went to the fishes. When the Lord Alberic arrived, it was all too late —”

“All too late!” Basil interposed sardonically. “The fishes too were dumb. Profit by their example, Maraglia. Too much wisdom engenders death.”

“The death rattle of one sounds to my ears just like that of another, my lord,” Maraglia replied, quaking under the look that was upon him. “And the voices of the few who still abide are growing weaker day by day.”

“They shall not much longer annoy your delicate ears,” Basil replied. “The Senator who has found this abode somewhat too draughty has departed for the holy shrines, to do penance for the death of his mother. He suspects all was not well. He would know more. Perchance the Archangel may grant him a revelation. Meanwhile, we must to work. The new captain appointed by the Senator enters his service on the morrow. A holy man, much given to contemplation over the mysteries of love. His attention must be diverted. Every trace of life must be extinct — this very night. No proofs must be allowed to remain. Meanwhile, what of the apparition whereof you rave?”

“It is there, my lord, as sure as my soul lives,” replied the castellan. “A shapeless something, preceded by a breath, cold as from a newly dug grave.”

“A shapeless something, say you? Whence comes it and where goes it? For whose diversion does it perambulate?”

“The astrologer monk perchance who improvises prophecies.”

“Then let his improvising damn himself,” replied Basil

sullenly. "To call himself inspired and pretend to read the stars! How about his prophecy now?"

"He holds to it!"

"What! That I have less than one month to live?"

"Just that — no more!" —

Basil gave the speaker a quick glance.

"What niggardly dispensation and presumption withal! This fellow to claim kinship with the stars! To profess to be in their confidence, to share the secrets of the heavens while he is smothered by darkness, utter and everlasting. The heavens mind you, Maraglia! My star! It is a star of darker red than Mars and crosses Hell — not Heaven! In thought I watch it every night with sleepless eyes. Is it not well to cleanse the earth of such lying prophets that truth may have standing room? Where have you lodged him?"

"In the Hermit's cell —"

"Well done! Thereby he shall prove his asceticism. Let practised abstinence save him in such a pass! He shall eat his words — an everlasting banquet. A fat astrologer — by the token — as I hear, was he not?"

"He was fat when he entered."

"Wretch! Would you starve him? Remember the worms and the fishes — your friends. Would you cheat them? Hath he foretold his end?"

"Ay — by starvation."

"He lies! You shall take him in extremis and, with your knife in his throat, give him the lie. An impostor proved. What of the night?"

"It rains and thunders."

"Why should we mind rain and thunder? Lead me to this madman, and, incidentally, to this phantom that keeps him company. Why do you gape, Maraglia? Move on! I follow!"

Maraglia was ill at ease, but he dared not disobey. Taking

up one of the candles, he led the way, trembling, his face ashen, his teeth chattering, as if in the throes of a chill.

Through a panel door in the wall they descended a winding stairway, leaving the dog behind. The flight conducted them to a private postern, well secured and guarded inside and out. As they issued from this the howl of blown rain met and staggered them. Looking up at the cupola of basalt from the depths of that well of masonry, it seemed to crack and split in a rush of fusing stars. Basil's mad soul leapt to the call of the hour. He was one with this mighty demonstration of nature. His brain danced and flickered with dark visions of power. He appeared to himself as an angel, a destroying angel, commissioned from on high to purge the world of lies.

"Take me to this monk!" he screamed through the thunder.

Deep in the foundation of the northeastern crypts the miserable creature was embedded in a stone chamber as utterly void and empty as despair. The walls, the floor, the roof were all chiselled as smooth as glass. There was not a foothold anywhere even for a cat, neither door, nor traps, nor egress, nor window of any kind save where, just under the ceiling, the grated opening by which he had been lowered, admitted by day a haggard ghost of light. And even that wretched solace was withdrawn as night fell, became a phantom, a diluted whisp of memory, sank like water into the blackness, and left the fancy suddenly naked in the self-consciousness of hell. Then the monk screamed like a madman and threw himself towards the flitting spectre. He fell on the smooth surface of the polished rock and bruised his limbs horribly. Yet the very pain was a saving occupation. He struck his skull and revelled in the agonizing dance of lights the blow procured him. But one by one they blew out; and in a moment dead negation had him by the throat again, rolling him over and over, choking him under

enormous slabs of darkness. Gasping, he cursed his improvidence, in not having glued his vision to the place of the light's going. It would have been something gained from madness to hold and gloat upon it, to watch hour by hour for its feeble redawn. Among all the spawning monstrosities of that pit, with only the assured prospect of a lingering death before him, the prodigy of eternal darkness quite overcrowded that other of thirst or starvation.

Yet the black gloom broke, it would seem, before its due. Had he annihilated time and was this death? He rose rapturously to his feet and stood staring at the grating, the tears gushing down his sunken cheeks. The bars were withdrawn, in their place a dim lamp was intruded and a face looked down.

"Barnabo — are you hungry and a-thirst?"

The voice spoke to him of life. It was the name he had borne in the world and he wondered who from that world could be addressing him.

He answered quaveringly.

"Of a truth, I am hungry and a-thirst."

"It is a beatitude," replied the voice suavely. "You shall have your fill of justice."

"Justice!" screamed the prisoner. "I fear it is but an empty phrase."

"Comfort yourself," said the other. "I shall make a full measure of it! It shall bubble and sparkle to the brim like a goblet of Cyprian. Know you the wine, monk? A cool fragrant liquid, that gurgles down the arid throat and brings visions of green meadows and sparkling brooks —"

"I ask no mercy," cried the monk, falling on his knees and stretching out his lean arms. "Only make an end of it — of this hellish torment."

"Torment?" came the voice from above. "What torment is there in the vision of the wine cup — or, for that matter, a feast on groaning tables under the trees? Are

you not rich in experiences, Barnabo, — both of the board and of love? Remember the hours when she lay in your arms, innocent, save of original sin? Ah! Could she see you now, Barnabo — how you have changed! No more the elegant courtier that wooed Theodora ere despair drove you to don the penitential garb and, like Balaam's ass, to raise your voice and prophesy! Deem you — as fate has thrown her into these arms of mine — memory will revive the forgotten joys of the days of long ago? ”

“Mercy — demon!” gasped the monk. His swollen throat could hardly shape the words.

Basil laughed and bent lower.

“Answer me then — you who boast of being inspired from above — you who listen to the music of the spheres in the dead watches of the night — tell me then, you man of God — how long am I to live? ”

“Monster, relieve me of your sight!” shrieked the unhappy wretch.

“It is the light,” mocked Basil. “The light from above. Raise your voice, monk, and prophesy. You who would hurl the anathema upon Basil, the Grand Chamberlain, who arrogated to yourself the mission to purge the universe and to summon me — me — before the tribunal of the Church — tell me, you, who aspired to take to his bed the spouse of the devil, till the white lightnings of her passion seared and blasted your carcass, — tell me — how long am I to live? ”

An inarticulate shriek came from within.

“By justice — till the dead rise from their graves.”

“Live forever — on an empty phrase? ” Basil mocked. “Are you, too, provisioned for eternity? ”

He held out his hand as if he were offering the starving wretch food.

The monk fell on his knees. His lips moved, but no sound was audible.

"Perchance he hath a vision," Basil turned to Maraglia who stood sullenly by.

"Oh, dull this living agony."

"How long am I to live?"

"Now, hear me, God," screamed the monk. "Let not this man ever again know surcease from torment in bed, at board, in body or in mind. Let his lust devour him, let the worm burrow in his entrails, the maggot in his brain! May death seize and damnation wither him at the moment when he is nearest the achievement of his fondest hopes!"

Basil screamed him down.

An uncontrollable terror had seized him.

"Silence, beast, or I shall strangle you!"

"Libertine, traitor, assassin — may heaven's lightnings blast you —"

For a moment the two battled in a war of screeching blasphemy.

At the next moment the grate was flung into place, the light whisked and vanished, a door slammed and the Stygian blackness of the cell closed once more upon the moaning heap in its midst.

Basil's eyes gleamed like live coals as he turned to Maraglia, who, quaking and ashen, was babbling a prayer between white lips.

"Make an end of him!" he snarled. "He has lived too long. And now, in the devil's name, lead the way above!"

A flash of lightning that seemed to rend the very heavens illumined for a moment the dark and tortuous passage, its sheen reflected through the narrow port-holes on the blackness of the walls. It was followed by a peal of thunder so terrific that it shook the vast pile of the Emperor's Tomb to its foundations, clattering and roaring, as if a thousand worlds had been rent in twain.

Maraglia, who had preceded the Grand Chamberlain with the taper, uttered a wild shriek of terror, dropped the

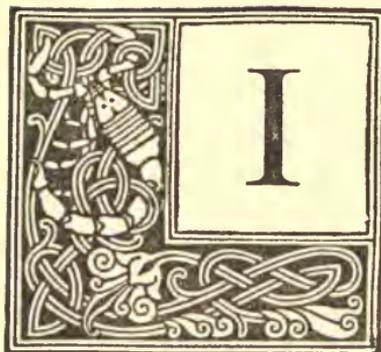
light, causing it to be extinguished and his fleeting steps carried him down a night-wrapped gallery as fast as his limbs would carry him, utterly indifferent to Basil's fate in the Stygian gloom.

Paralyzed with terror, the Grand Chamberlain stared into the inky blackness. For a moment it had seemed to him as if a breath from an open grave had indeed been wafted to his nostrils.

But it was neither the thunder, nor the lightning, neither the swish of the rain nor the roar of the hurricane, that had prompted Maraglia's outcry and precipitate flight and his abject terror, as we shall see.

CHAPTER II

THE CALL OF EBLIS



IN the lurid flash that had illumined the gallery, lighting up rows of cells and deep recesses, Basil had seen, as if risen from the floor, a black, indefinable shape, wrapped in a long black mantle, the hood of which was drawn over its face. Through its slits gleamed two eyes, like live coals. Of small stature and apparently great age, the bent apparition supported itself by a crooked staff, the fleshless fingers barely visible under the cover of the ample sleeve, and resembling the claws of some bird of prey.

At last the terror which the uncanny apparition inspired changed to its very counterpart, as, defiance in his tone, the Grand Chamberlain made a forward step.

“Who goes there? — Friend or foe of the Lord Basil?” —

His voice sounded strange in his own ears.

A gibbering response quavered out of the gloom.

“What matters friend or foe as long as you grasp the tenure of power?”

Basil breathed a sigh of relief.

“I ought to know that voice. You are Bessarion?”

“I have waited long,” came the drawling reply.

There was a pause brief as the intake of a breath.

“What do you demand?” —

“You shall know in time.”

“ In time comes death! ”

“ And more! ”

“ It is the hour that calls! ”

“ Are you prepared? ”

“ Show me what you can do! ”

“ For this I am here! Are you afraid? ”

The air of mockery in the questioner's tone cut the speaker to the quick.

In the intermittent flashes of lightning Basil saw the shapeless form cowering before him in the dusk of the gallery, barring the way. But again it mingled quickly with the darkness.

“ Of whom? ” Basil queried.

There was another pause.

“ Of the Presence! ”

“ That craven hound Maraglia has upset the light,” muttered Basil. “ I cannot see you.”

“ Can you not feel my presence? ” came the gibbering reply.

“ Even so! ”

“ Know you what high powers of night control your life — what dark-winged messengers of evil fly about you? ”

“ Your words make my soul flash like a thunder cloud.”

“ And yet does your power stand firm? ”

“ It rests on deep dug dungeons, where the light of heaven does not intrude. I spread such fear in men's white hearts as the craven have never known.”

A faint chuckle came in reply.

“ Only last night I saw you in the magic crystal sphere in which I read the dire secrets of Fate. Above your head flew evil angels. Beneath your horse's hoofs a corpse-strewn path.”

“ The time is not yet ripe.”

“ Time does not wait for him who waits to dare.”

An evil light flashed from Basil's eyes.

"What can you do?"

Response came as from the depths of a grave.

"I shall conjure such shapes from the black caves of fear as have not ventured forth since madness first began to prowl among the human race, when the torturing dusk drowns every helpless thing in livid waves of shadow. It is the spirit of your sire that draws the evil legions to you."

Basil straightened in surprise.

"What know you of him?" he exclaimed. "Dull prayers and fasts and penances, not such freaks as this, were the only things he thought of."

From the cowed form came a hiss.

"Fool! Not that grunting and omnivorous swine who took the cowl, begat you! Your veins run with fiery evil direct from its fountainhead. No, no, — not he!"

"Not he?" shrieked the Grand Chamberlain. "If I am not his progeny, then whose?"

"Some mighty lord's."

"The Duke of Beneventum?"

"One greater yet."

"King Berengar?"

"One adored by him as his liege."

"Ha! I guess it now! It was Otto the Great, he whose fury gored the heart of the Romans."

"One greater still."

"Earth hath no greater lord."

"Is there not heaven above and hell below? Your sire rules the millions who have donned fear's stole forever. He is lord of lords, where all the lips implore and none reply."

A flash of lightning gleamed through the gallery.

A shadow passed over Basil's countenance, like a swift sailing cloud.

Darkness supervened, impenetrable, sepulchral.

"Well may you cower," gibbered the shape in its inexorable monotone. "For you came into this life among

the death-fed mushrooms that grow where murder rots. The moon-struck wolves howled for three nights, and ill-omened birds flapped for three days around the tower where she who gave you life breathed her last."

A fitful muttering as of souls in pain seemed to pervade the night-wrapped galleries, with sultry storm gusts breathing inarticulate evil. No light save the white flash of the lightning revealed now and then the uncanny form of the speaker. The smell of rotting weeds came through the crevices of the wall.

When Basil, spell-bound, found no tongue, the dark shape continued:

"Wrapped in midnight's cloak, nine witches down in the castle moat sang a baptismal hymn of horror as you saw the light. As mighty brazen wings sounded the roaring of the tempest-churned seas. And above you stood he who holds the keys to thought's dark chambers, he in whose ranks the sullen angels serve, whose shadowy dewless wings cast evil on the world. And I am he whose palace rings with the eternal Never!"

Frozen with terror Basil listened.

The thunder growled ever louder. A vampire's bark stabbed the darkness; the shriek of witches rose above the tempest, there was a rattling of bones as if skeletons were rising from their graves. All round the Emperor's Tomb the ghouls were prowling, and the soulless corpses were as restless as the fleshless souls that whimpered and moaned in the night. Giant bats flew to and fro like evil spirits. The great peals shook the huge pile from vault to summit. The running finger of the storm scribbled fiery, cabalistical zigzags on the firmament's black page. And in every peal, louder and louder as the echoes spread, Basil seemed to hear his name shrieked by the weird powers of darkness, till, half mad with terror, he cried:

"Away! Away! Your presence flings dark glare like glowing lava —"

"I come across the night," replied the voice, "ere death has made you mine! Deserve the doom that is prepared for those who do my bidding. You have shot into my heart a ray of blackest light —"

Basil held out his hands, as if to ward off some unseen assailant.

"Whirl back into the night —" he shrieked, but the voice resumed, mocking and gibbering.

"Only a coward will shrink from the dreadful boundaries between things of this earth and things beyond this earth. I have sought you by night and by day — as fiercely as any of those athirst pant round hell's mock springs! In the great vaults of wrath, in the sleepless caverns, whose eternal darkness is only lighted by pools of molten stone that bathe the lost, where, in the lurid light, the shadows dance — I sit and watch the lakes of torment, taciturn and lone. I summon you to earthly power — to the fulfillment of all your heart desires!" —

The voice ceased. All the elements of hell seemed to roar and shriek around the battlemented walls.

There was a pause during which Basil regained his composure.

At last the dread shadow was looming across his path. An undefined awe crept over him, such as dark chasms instill; an awe at his own self. He would fain have been screened from his own substance. By degrees he welcomed the tidings with a dark rapture. In himself lay the substance of Evil. It was not the Angel of Light that ruled the reeling universe. It was the shadow of Eblis looming dark and terrible over the lives of men. Long before he had ever guessed what rills of flaming Phlegethon ran riot in his veins, had he not felt his pulses swell with joy at human pain, had he not played the fiend untaught? Could not

the Fiend, as well as God, live incarnate in human clay? Was not the earth the meeting ground of Heaven and Hell? And why should not he, Basil, defying Heaven, be Hell's incarnation? —

Ay — but the day of death and the day of reckoning! Would his parentage entail eternal fire, or princely power and sway in the dark vaults of nameless terror? Should he quail or thrill with awful exaltation?

“And — in return for that which I offer up — King of the dark red glare — will you give to me what I crave — boundless power and the woman for which my soul is on fire?”

“Have you the courage to snatch them from the talons of Fate?” came back the gibbering reply.

A blinding flash of lightning was succeeded by an appalling crash of thunder.

“From Hell itself!” shrieked Basil frenzied. “Give me Theodora and I will fill the cup of torture that I have seized on your shadowy altars, and quaff your health at the terrific banquet board of Evil in toasts of torment — in wine of boundless pain!”

In the quickly succeeding flashes of lightning the dark form seemed to rise and to expand.

“I knew you would not fail me! Come!”

For a moment Basil hesitated, fingering the hilt of his poniard.

“Where would you lead me?” he queried, his tone far from steady. “How many of these twilights must I traverse before I see him whom you serve?”

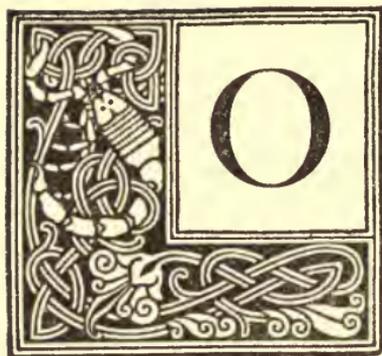
“That you shall know to-night!”

In the deep and frozen silence which succeeded the terrible peals of thunder their retreating footsteps died to silence in the labyrinthine galleries of the Emperor's Tomb.

Only the dog-headed Anubis seemed to stare and nod mysteriously.

CHAPTER III

THE CRYSTAL SPHERE



UTWARDLY and in daylight there was nothing noticeable about the sixth house in the Lane of the Sclavonians in Trastevere beyond the fact that it was a dwelling of a superior kind to those immediately surrounding it, which were chiefly ill-favored cottages of fishermen and boatmen, and had about it

an air of almost sombre retirement.

It stood alone within a walled court, containing a few shrubs. The windows were few, high and narrow, and the front bore a rather forbidding appearance. One ascending to the flat roof would have found it to command on the left a desolate view of a square devoted to executions, and on the right a scarcely more cheerful prospect over the premises belonging to the convent of Santa Maria in Trastevere. Had the visitor been farther able to penetrate into the principal chamber of the first floor, on the night of the scene about to be related, he might indeed have found himself well repaid for his trouble.

This chamber, which was of considerable size and altogether devoid of windows, being lighted during the daytime by a skylight, carefully blinded from within, was now duskily illumined by a transparent device inlaid into the end wall and representing the beams of the rising moon gleaming from a sky of azure. The extremity of the room, which

fronted the symbol, was semi-circular and occupied by a narrow table, before which moved a tall, shadowy form that paused now and then before a fire of fragrant sandal wood, which burned in a brazen tripod, passing his fingers mechanically, as it would seem, through the bluish flame. In its unsteady flicker the strange figures on the walls, which had defied the decree of Time, seemed to nod fantastically when touched by a fitful ray.

This was Hormazd, the Persian, the former confidant and counsellor of Marozia, in the heyday of her glory. In those days he had held forth in a turret chamber on the summit of Castel San Angelo, where he would read the stars and indulge his studies in the black arts to his heart's content. Driven forth by Alberic, after Marozia's fall, the Persian had taken up his abode in the Trastevere, where he continued to serve those who came to him for advice, or on business that shunned the light of day.

Now and then the Oriental bent his tall, spare form over a huge tome which lay open upon the table, the inscrutable, ascetic countenance with the deep, brilliant eyes seemingly plunged in deep, engrossing thought, but in reality listening intently, as for the approach of some belated caller.

The soft patter of hurried footsteps on the floor of the corridor without soon rewarded his attention. The rustle of a woman's silken garments caused him to give a start of surprise. A heavy curtain was raised and she glided noiselessly into his presence.

The woman's face was covered with a silken vizard, but her coronet of raven hair no less than the matchless figure, outlined against the crimson glow, at once proclaimed her rank.

The first ceremony of silent greeting absolved, the Persian's visitor permitted the black silken cloak which had enveloped her from head to toe, to fall away, revealing a form exquisitely proportioned. The ivory pallor of the

throat, which rose like a marble column from matchless shoulders, and the whiteness of the bare arms, seemed even enhanced by the dusky background whose incense-laden pall seemed to oppress the very walls.

"I am trusting you to-night with unreserved confidence," the woman spoke in her rich, vibrant voice. "Many serve me from motives of selfishness and fear. Do you serve me, because I trust you."

She laid her white hand frankly upon his arm and the Persian, isolated above and below the strongest impulses of humanity, shivered under her touch.

"What is it you desire?" he questioned after a pause.

"If you possess the knowledge with which the vulgar credit you," the woman said slowly, not without an air of mockery in her tone, "I hardly need reveal to you the motives which prompted this visit! You knew them, ere I came, even as you knew of my coming!"

"You speak truly," said Hormazd slowly, now completely master of himself. "For even to the hour it was revealed to me!"

The woman scanned him with a searching look.

"Yet I had confided in none!" she said musingly. "Tell me then who I am!"

"You are Theodora!"

"When have we met before?" —

"Not in this life, but in a previous existence. Our souls touched then, predestined to cross each other on a future plane."

She removed her silken vizard and faced him.

The dark eyes at once challenged and besought. No sculptor could have chiselled those features on which a divinity had recklessly squandered all it had to bestow for good or for evil. No painter could have reproduced the face which had wrought such havoc in the hearts of men.

Like summer lightnings in a dark cloudbank, all the emotions of the human soul seemed to have played therein and left it again, forging it in the fires of passion, but leaving it more beautiful, more mysterious than before.

The Oriental regarded her in silence, as she stood before him in the flickering flame of the brazier.

"In some previous existence, you say?" she said with dreamy interest. "Who was I then — and who were you?"

"Two driftless spirits on the driftless sea of eternity," he replied calmly. "Foredoomed to continue our passage till our final destiny be fulfilled."

"And this destiny is known to you?"

"Else I had watched in vain. But you — queen and sorceress — do you believe in the message?"

She pondered.

"I believe," she said slowly, "that we make for ourselves the destiny to which hereafter we must submit. I believe that some dark power can foretell that destiny, and more — compel it!" —

Hormazd bowed ever so slightly. There was a dawning gleam of satire in his brilliant eyes, a glimpse which was not lost on her.

Again the question came.

"What is it you desire?"

Theodora gave an inscrutable smile that imparted to her features a singular softness and beauty, as a ray of sunlight falling on a dark picture will brighten the tints with a momentary warmth of seeming life.

"I was told," she spoke slowly, as if trying to overcome an inward dread, "that you are known in Rome chiefly as being the possessor of some mysterious internal force which, though invisible, is manifest to all who place themselves under your spell! Is it not so?"

The Persian bowed slightly.

"It may be that I have furnished the Romans with some-

thing to talk about besides the weather; that I have made a few friends, and an amazing number of enemies — ”

“ The latter argues in your favor,” Theodora interposed. “ They say, furthermore, that by this same force you are enabled to disentangle the knots of perplexity that burden the overtaxed brain.”

Hormazd nodded again and the sinister gleam of his eyes did not escape Theodora’s watchful gaze.

“ If this be so,” the woman continued, “ if you are not an impostor who exhibits his tricks for the delectation of the rabble, or for sordid gain — exert your powers upon me, for something, I know not what, has frozen up the once overflowing fountain of life.”

The Oriental regarded her intently.

“ You have the wish to be deluded — even into an imaginary happiness? ”

Theodora gave a start.

“ You have expressed what I but vaguely hinted. It may be that I am tired ” — she passed her hand across her brow with a troubled gesture — “ or puzzled by some infinite distress of living things. Perchance I am going mad — who knows? But, whatever the cause, you, if report be true, possess the skill to ravish the mind away from its trouble, to transport it to a radiant Elysium of illusions and ecstasies. Do this for me, as you have done it for another, and, whatever payment you demand, it shall be yours! ”

She ceased.

Faintly through the silence came the chimes of convent bells from the remote regions of the Aventine, pealing through the fragrant summer night above the deep boom of distant thunder that seemed to come as from the bowels of the earth.

Hormazd gave his interrogator a swift, searching glance, half of pity, half of disdain.

“ The great eastern drug should serve your turn,” he

replied sardonically. "I know of no other means wherewith to stifle the voice of conscience."

Theodora flushed darkly.

"Conscience?" she flashed in resentful accents.

The Persian nodded.

"There is such a thing. Do you profess to be without one?"

Theodora's eyes endeavored to pierce the inscrutable mask before her. The ironical curtness of the question annoyed her.

"Your opinion of me does little honor to your wisdom," she said after a pause.

"A foul wound festers equally beneath silk and sack-cloth," came the dark reply.

"How know you that I desire relief from this imaginary malady?"

The Oriental gave a shrug.

"Why does Theodora come to the haunts of the Persian? Why does she ask him to mock and delude her, as if it were his custom to make dupes of those who appeal to him?"

"And are they not your dupes?" Theodora interposed, her face a deeper pallor than before.

"Of that you shall judge after I have answered your questions," Hormazd returned darkly. "There are but two things in life that will prompt a woman like Theodora to seek aid of one like myself." —

"You arouse my curiosity!"

"Disappointment in power — or love!"

There was a silence.

"Will you help me?"

She was pleading now.

The Oriental sparred for time. It was not his purpose to commit himself at once.

"I am but one who, long severed from the world, has long

recognized its vanities. My cures are for the body rather than the soul."

Theodora's face hardened into an expression of scorn.

"Am I to understand that you will do nothing for me?" she said in a tone which convinced the Persian that the time for dallying was past.

The words came slowly from his lips.

"I can promise you neither self-oblivion nor visionary joys. I possess an internal force, it is true, a force which, under proper control, overpowers and subdues the material, and by exerting this I can, if I think it well to do so, release your soul, that inner intelligence which, deprived of its mundane matter, is yourself, from its house of clay and allow it a brief interval of freedom. But — what in that state its experience may be, whether joy or sorrow, I cannot foretell."

"Then you are not the master of the phantoms you evoke?"

"I am merely their interpreter!"

She looked at him steadfastly as if pondering his words.

"And you profess to be able to release the soul from its abode of clay?"

"I do not profess," he said quietly. "I can do so!"

"And with the success of this experiment your power ceases? You cannot tell whether the imprisoned creature will take its course to the netherworld of suffering, or a heaven of delight?"

"The liberated soul must shift for itself."

"Then begin your incantations," Theodora exclaimed recklessly. "Send me, no matter where, so long as I escape from this den of the world, this dungeon with one small window through which, with the death rattle in our throats, we stare vacantly at the blank, unmeaning horror of life. Prove to me that the soul you prattle of exists, and if mine can find its way straight to the mainsprings of this revolving creation, it shall cling to the accursed wheels and stop them, that they may grind out the torture of life no more."

She stood there, dark, defiant, beautiful with the beauty of the fallen angel. Her breath came and went quickly. She seemed to challenge some invisible opponent.

The tall sinewy form by her side watched her as a physician might watch in his patient the workings of a new disease, then Hormazd said in low and tranquil tones:

“You are in the throes of your own overworked emotions. You are seeking to obtain the impossible — ”

“Why taunt me?” she flashed. “Cannot your art supply the secret in whose quest I am?”

The Persian bowed, but kept silent.

Again, with the shifting mood, the rare, half-mournful smile shone in Theodora’s face.

“Though you may not be conscious of it,” she said, laying her white hand on his trembling arm, “something impels me to unburden my heart to you. I have kept silence long.”

Hormazd nodded.

“In the world one must always keep silence, veil one’s grief and force a smile with the rest. Is it not lamentable to think of all the pent-up suffering, the inconceivably hideous agonies that remain forever unrevealed? Youth and innocence — ”

Theodora raised her arm.

“Was I ever — what they call — innocent?” she interposed musingly. “When I was young — alas, how long it seems, though I am but thirty — the dream of my life was love! Perchance I inherited it from my mother. She was a Greek, and she possessed that subtle quality that can never die. What I was — it matters not. What I am — you know!”

She raised herself to her full height.

“I long for power. Men are my puppets. And I long for love! I have sought it in all shapes, in every guise. But I found it not. Only disillusion — disappointment have been my share. Will my one desire be ever fulfilled?”

"Some day you shall know," he said quietly, keeping his dark gaze upon her,

"I doubt me not I shall! But — when and where? Tell me then, you who know so much! When and where?"

Hormazd regarded her quizzically, but made no immediate reply.

After a time she continued.

"Some say you are the devil's servant! Show me then your power. Read for me my fate!"

She looked at him with an air of challenge.

"It was not for this you came," the Persian said calmly, meeting the gaze of those mysterious wells of light whose appeal none had yet resisted whom she wished to bend to her desires.

The woman turned a shade more pale.

"Then call it a whim!"

"What will it avail?"

Her eyes flashed.

"My will against — that other."

A flash of lightning was reflected on the dark walls of the chamber. The thunder rolled in grand sullen echoes down the heavens.

She heard it not.

"What are you waiting for?" she turned to Hormazd.

There was a note of impatience in her tone.

"You are of to-day — yet not of to-day! Not of yesterday, nor to-morrow. To some in time comes love —"

"But to me?"

His voice sank to a frozen silence.

She stood, gazing at him steadily. She was very pale, but the smile of challenge still lingered on her lips.

"But to me?" she repeated.

He regarded her darkly.

"To you? Who knows? — Some day —"

“ Ah! When my fate has chanced! Are you a cheat then, like the rest? ”

He was silent, as one in the throes of some great emotion. She took a step towards him. He raised both hands as if to ward her off. His eyes saw shapes and scenes not within the reach of other's ken.

“ Tell me the truth, ” she said calmly. “ You cannot deceive me! ”

Hormazd sprinkled the cauldron with some white powder that seethed and hissed as it came in contact with the glowing metal and began to emit a dense smoke, which filled the interior of the chamber with a strange, pungent odor.

Then he slowly raised one hand until it touched Theodora. Dauntless in spirit, her body was taken by surprise, and as his clammy fingers closed round her own she gave an involuntary start. With a compelling glance, still in silence, he looked into her face.

A strange transformation seemed to take place.

She was no longer in the chamber, but in a grove dark with trees and shrubbery. A dense pall seemed to obscure the skies. The atmosphere was breathless. Even as she looked he was no longer there. Great clouds of greenish vapor rolled in through the trees and enveloped her so utterly as to shut out all vision. It was as if she were alone in some isolated spot, far removed from the ken of man. She was conscious of nothing save the insistent touch of his hand upon her arm.

Gradually, as she peered into the vapors, they seemed to condense themselves into a definite shape. It was that of a man coming towards her, but some invisible agency seemed ever to retard his approach. In fact the distance seemed not to lessen, and suddenly she saw her own self standing by, vainly straining her gaze into space, indescribable longing in her eyes.

A flash of lightning that seemed to rend the vault of heaven

was followed by so terrific a peal of thunder that it seemed to shake the very earth.

A shriek broke from Theodora's lips.

"It is he! It is he!" she cried pointing to the curtain. Hormazd turned, hardly less amazed than the woman. He distinctly saw, in the recurrent flash, a face, pale and brooding, framed by the darkness, of which it seemed a part.

At the next moment it was gone, as if it had melted into air.

Theodora's whole body was numb, as if every nerve had been paralyzed. The Persian was hardly less agitated.

"Is it enough?" she heard Hormazd's deep voice say beside her.

She turned, but, though straining her eyes, she could not see him. The flame in the tripod had died down. She was trembling from head to foot.

But her invincible will was unshaken.

"Nay," she said, and her voice still mocked. "Having seen the man my soul desires, I must know more. The end! I have not seen the end! Shall I possess him? Speak!"

"Seek no more!" warned the voice by her side. "Seek not to know the end!"

She raised herself defiantly.

"The end!"

He made no reply. She saw the white vapors forming into faces. The hour and the place of the last vision were not clear. She saw but the man and herself, standing together at some strange point, where time seemed to count for naught.

Between them lay a scarf of blue samite.

After a protracted silence a moan broke from Theodora's lips.

The Persian took no heed thereof. He did not even seem to hear. But, beneath those half-closed lids, not a movement of the woman escaped his penetrating gaze. Though possessed with a vague assurance of his own dark powers, controlled by his nerve and coolness, Hormazd could read

in that fair, inscrutable face far more than in the magic scrolls.

And as he scanned it now, from under half-shut lids, it was fixed and rigid as marble, pale, too, with an unearthly whiteness. She seemed to have forgotten his presence. She seemed to look into space, yet even as he gazed, the expression of that wonderfully fair face changed.

Theodora's eyes were fierce, her countenance bore a rigid expression, bright, cold, unearthly, like one who defies and subdues mortal pain.

The tools of love and ambition are sharp and double-edged, and Hormazd knew it was safer to trust to wind and waves than to the whims of woman.

But already her mood had changed and her face had resumed its habitual expression of inscrutable repose.

"Is it the gods or the devil who sway and torture us and mock at our helplessness?" she turned to the Oriental, then, without waiting his reply, she concluded with a searching glance that seemed to read his very heart.

"Report speaks true of you. Unknowingly, unwittingly you have pointed the way. Farewell!"

Long after she had disappeared Hormazd stared at the spot where her swiftly retiring form had been engulfed by the darkness. Then, weighing the purse, which she had left as an acknowledgment of his services, and finding it sufficiently heavy to satisfy his avarice, the Persian stood for a time wrapped in deep thoughts.

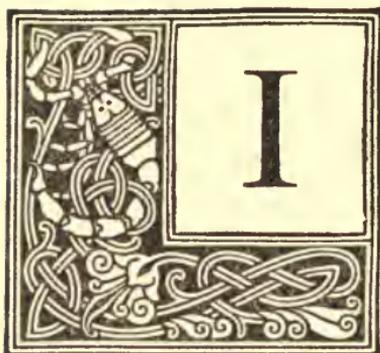
"That phantom at least I could not evoke!" he muttered to himself. "Who dares to cross the path of Hormazd?"

The thunder seemed to answer, for a crash that seemed to split the seven hills asunder caused the house to rock as with the force of an earthquake.

With a shudder the Persian extinguished the fire in the brazier and retreated to his chamber, while outside thunder and lightning and rain lashed the summer night with the force of a tropical hurricane.

CHAPTER IV

PERSEPHONÉ



IT was not Tristan's other self, conjured by the Persian from the mystic realms of night which Theodora had seen outlined against the dark curtain that screened the entrance into the Oriental's laboratory. The object of her craving had, indeed, been present in the body, seeking in the storm that suddenly lashed the city the shelter of an apparently deserted abode. Thus he had unwittingly strayed into the domain of the astrologer, finding the door of his abode standing ajar after Theodora had entered.

A superstition which was part and parcel of the Persian's character, caused the latter to regard the undesired presence in the same light as did Theodora, the more so as, for the time, it served his purpose, although, when the woman had departed, he was puzzled no little over a phenomenon which his skill could not have conjured up. Tristan had precipitately retreated, so soon as the woman's outcry had reached his ear, convinced that he had witnessed some unholy incantation which must counteract the effect of the penances he had just concluded and during the return from which the tempest had overtaken him.

Thoroughly drenched he arrived at the Inn of the Golden Shield and retired forthwith, wondering at the strange scene which he had witnessed and its import.

Tristan arose early on the following day.

On the morrow he was to enter the service of the Senator of Rome, who had departed on his pilgrimage to the shrines of Monte Gargano.

Tristan resolved to make the most of his time, visiting the sanctuaries and fitly preparing himself to be worthy of the trust which Alberic had reposed in him. Yet his thoughts were not altogether of the morrow. Once again memory wandered back to the sunny days in Provence, to the rose garden of Avalon, and to one who perchance was walking alone in the garden, along the flower-bordered paths where he had found and lost his greatest happiness. —

Persephoné meanwhile had not been idle. It pleased her for once to propitiate her mistress, and through her own spies she had long been informed of Tristan's movements, being not altogether averse to starting an intrigue on her own account, if her mistress should fail sufficiently to impress the predestined victim. Her own beauty could achieve no less.

Drawing a veil about her head and shoulders so as effectually to conceal her features, she proceeded to thread her way through the intricate labyrinth of Roman thoroughfares. When she reached her destination she concealed herself in a convenient lurking place from which she took care not to emerge till she had learned all she wished from one who had dogged Tristan's footsteps all these weary days.

"What do you want with me?" asked the latter somewhat disturbed by her sudden appearance, as he came out of the little temple church of San Stefano in Rotondo on the brow of the Cælian Hill.

Persephoné had raised her veil and in doing so had taken care to reveal her beautiful white arms.

"I am unwelcome doubtless," she replied, after a swift glance had convinced her that there was no one near to witness their meeting. "Nevertheless you must come with me — whether you will or no. We Romans take no denial. We are not like your pale, frozen women of the North."

Subscribing readily to this opinion, Tristan felt indignant, nevertheless, at her self-assurance.

"I have neither time nor inclination to attend upon your fancies," he said curtly, trying to pass her. But she barred his passage.

"As for your inclination to follow me," Persephoné laughed — "that is a matter for you to decide, if you intend to prosper in your new station."

She paused a moment, with a swift side glance at the man. Persephoné had not miscalculated the effect of her speech, for Tristan had started visibly at her words and the knowledge they implied.

"As for your time," Persephoné continued sardonically, "that is another matter. No doubt there are still a few sanctuaries to visit," she said suggestively, with tantalizing slowness and a tinge of contempt in her tones that was far from assumed. "Though I am puzzled to know why one of your good looks and courage should creep like a criminal from shrine to shrine, when hot life pulsates all about us. Are your sins so grievous indeed?"

She could see that the thrust had pierced home.

"This is a matter you do not understand," he said, piqued at her persistence. "Perchance my sins are grievous indeed."

"Ah! So much the better," Persephoné laughèd, showing her white teeth and approaching a step closer. "The world loves a sinner. What it dislikes is the long-faced repentant transgressor. You are a man after all — it is time enough to become a saint when you can no longer enjoy. Come!"

And the white arm stole forth and a white hand took hold of his mantle.

Every word of the Circassian seemed to sting Tristan like a wasp. His whole frame quivered with anger at her taunts, but he scorned to show it, and putting a strong constraint upon his feelings he only asked quietly:

“What would you with me? Surely it was not to tell me this that you have tracked me hither.”

Persephoné thought she had now brought the metal to a sufficiently high temperature for fusion. She proceeded to mould it accordingly. Nevertheless she was determined to gain some advantage for herself in executing her mistress' behest.

“I tracked you here,” she said slowly, “because I wanted you! I wanted you, because it is in my power to render you a great service. Listen, my lord, — you must come with me! It is not every man in Rome who would require so much coaxing to follow a good-looking woman — ”

She looked very tempting as she spoke, but her physical charms were indeed sadly wasted on the pre-occupied man before her, and if she expected to win from him any overt act of admiration or encouragement, she was to be woefully disappointed.

“I cannot follow you,” he said. “My way lies in another direction. Besides — you have said it yourself — I am now in the service of another.”

“That is the very reason,” she interposed. “Have you ever stopped to consider the thousand and one pitfalls which your unwary feet will encounter when you — a stranger — unknown — hated perchance — attempt to wield the authority entrusted to you? What do you know of Rome that you should hope to succeed when he, who set you in this hazardous place, cannot quell the disturbances that break out between the factions periodically?”

“And why should you be disposed to confer upon me such a favor?” Tristan asked with instinctive caution. “I am a stranger to you. What have we in common?”

Persephoné laughed.

“Perchance I am in love with you myself — ever since that night when you would not enter the forbidden gates. Perchance you may be able to serve me in turn — some day.

How cold you are! Like the frozen North! Come! Waste no more time, if you would not regret it forevermore." —

There was something compelling in her words that upset Tristan's resolution.

Still, he wavered.

"You have seen my mistress," Persephoné resumed, "the fairest woman and the most powerful in Rome — a near kinswoman, too, of your new master — the Senator."

The words startled Tristan.

"It needs but a word from her to make you what she pleases," she continued, as they delved into the now darkening streets. "She is headstrong and imperious and does not brook resistance to her will."

Tristan remembered certain words Alberic had spoken to him at their final parting. It behooved him to be on his guard, yet without making of Theodora an open enemy. "Be wary and circumspect," had been the Senator's parting words.

"Did the Lady Theodora send you for me?" he asked, with some anxiety in his tone. "And how did you know where to find me in a city like this?"

"I know a great many things — and so does my mistress," Persephoné made smiling reply. "But she does not choose every one to be as wise as she is. I will answer both your questions though, if you will answer one of mine in return. The Lady Theodora did not mention you by name," Persephoné prevaricated, "yet I do not think there is another man in Rome who would serve her as would you. — And now tell me in turn. — Deem you not, she is very beautiful?"

"The Lady Theodora is very beautiful," Tristan replied with a hesitation that remained not unremarked. "Yet, what is there in common between two strangers from the farthest extremities of the earth?"

"What is there in common?" Persephoné smiled. "You will know ere an hour has sped. But, if you would take

counsel from one who knows, you will do wisely to ponder twice before you choose — your master. Silence now! Step softly, but follow close behind me! It is very dark under the trees.”

They had arrived on Mount Aventine. Before them, in the dusk, towered the great palace of Theodora.

After cautioning him, Persephoné led Tristan through a narrow door in a wall and they emerged in a garden. They were now in a fragrant almond grove where the branches of the trees effectually excluded the rays of the rising moon, making it hardly possible to distinguish Persephoné's tall and lithe form.

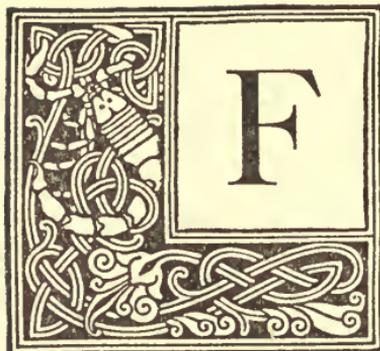
Presently they emerged upon a smooth and level lawn, shut in by a black group of cedars, through the lower branches of which peeped the crescent moon and, turning the corner of a colonnade, they entered another door which opened to Persephoné's touch and admitted them into a long dark passage with a lamp at the farther end.

“Stay here, while I fetch a light,” Persephoné whispered to Tristan and, gliding away, she presently returned, to conduct him through a dark corridor into another passage, where she stopped abruptly and, raising some silken hangings, directed him to enter.

“Wait here. I will announce you.” —

CHAPTER V

MAGIC GLOOMS



LOADS of soft and mellow light dazzled Tristan's eyes at first, but he soon realized the luxurious beauty of the retreat into which he had been ushered. It was obvious that, despite a decadent age, all the resources of wealth had been drawn upon for its decoration. The walls were painted in frescoes of the

richest colorings and represented the most alluring scenes. Around the cornices, relics of imperial Rome, nymphs and satyrs in bas-relief danced hand in hand, wild woodland creatures, exultant in all the luxuriance of beauty and redundancy of strength; and yonder, where the lamp cast its softest glow upon her, stood a marble statue of Venus Anadyomené, her attitude expressive of dormant passion lulled by the languid insolence of power and tinged with an imperious coquetry, the most alluring of all her charms.

Tristan moved uneasily in his seat, wishing that he had not come, wondering how he had allowed himself to be thus beguiled, wondering what it was all about, when a rustling of the hangings caused him to turn his head. There was no more attraction now in bounding nymph or marble enchantress. The life-like statue of Venus was no longer the masterpiece of the chamber for there, in the doorway, appeared Theodora herself.

Tristan rose to his feet, and thus they stood, confronting

each other in the subdued light — the hostess and her guest — the assailant and the assailed.

Theodora trembled in every limb, yet she should have remained the calmer of the two, inasmuch as hers could scarcely have been the agitation of surprise. Such a step indeed, as she had taken, she had not ventured upon without careful calculation of its far reaching effect. Determined to make this obstinate stranger pliable to her desires, to instill a poison into his veins which must, in time, work her will, she had deliberately commanded Persephoné to conduct him to this bower, the seductive air of which no one had yet withstood.

Theodora was the first to speak, though for once she hardly knew how to begin. For the man who stood before her was not to be moulded by a glance and would match his will against her own. Such methods as she would have employed under different circumstances would here and now utterly fail in their intent. For once she must not appear the dominant factor in Rome, rather a woman wronged by fate, mankind and report. Let her beauty do the rest.

“I have sent for you,” she said, “because something tells me that I can rely implicitly on your secrecy. From what I have seen of you, I believe you are incapable of betraying a trust.”

Theodora’s words had the intended effect. Tristan, expecting reproach for his intentional slight of her advances, was thrown off his guard by the appeal to his honor. His confusion at the sight of the woman’s beauty, enhanced by her gorgeous surroundings, was such that he did but bow in acknowledgment of this tribute to his integrity.

Theodora watched him narrowly, never relinquishing his gaze, which wandered unconsciously over her exquisite form, draped in a diaphanous gown which left the snowy arms and hands, the shoulders and the round white throat exposed.

"I have been told that you have accepted service with the Lord Alberic, who has offered to you, a stranger, the most important trust in his power to bestow."

Tristan bowed assent.

"The Lord Alberic has rewarded me, far beyond my deserts, for ever so slight a service," he replied, without referring to the nature of the service.

Theodora nodded.

"And you — a stranger in the city, without counsellor — without friend. Great as the honor is, which the Senator has conferred upon you — great are the pitfalls that lurk in the hidden places. Doubtlessly, the Lord Alberic did not bestow his trust unworthily. And, in enjoining above all things watchfulness — he has doubtlessly dropped a word of warning regarding his kinswoman," here Theodora dropped her lids, as if she were reluctantly touching upon a distasteful subject, "the Lady Theodora?"

As suddenly as she had dropped her lids as suddenly her eyes sank into the unwary eyes of Tristan. The scented atmosphere of the room and the woman's nearness were slowly creeping into his brain.

"The Lord Alberic did refer to the Lady Theodora," he stammered, loth to tell an untruth, and equally loth to wound this beautiful enigma before him.

"I thought so!" Theodora interposed with a smile, without permitting him to commit himself. "He has warned you against me. Admit it, my Lord Tristan. He has put you on your guard. And yet — I fain would be your friend —"

"The Lord Alberic seems to count you among his enemies," Tristan replied. The mention of an accepted fact could not, to his mind, be construed into betraying a confidence.

Theodora smiled sadly.

"The Lord Alberic has been beguiled into this sad attitude by one who was ever my foe, perchance, even his. Time will tell. But it was not to speak of him that I summoned

you hither. It is because I would appear lovable in your eyes. It is, because I am not indifferent to your opinion, my Lord Tristan. Am I not rash, foolish, impulsive, in thus placing myself in the power of one who may even now be planning my undoing? One who on a previous occasion so grievously misjudged my motives as to wound me so cruelly? ”

The woman's appeal knocked at the portals of Tristan's heart. Would she but state her true purpose, relieve this harrowing suspense. She had propounded the question with a deepening color, and glances that conveyed a tale. And it was a question somewhat difficult to answer.

At last he spoke, stammeringly, incoherently:

“I shall try to prove myself worthy of the Lady Theodora's confidence.”

She seemed somewhat disappointed at the coldness of his answer, nevertheless her quick perception showed her where she had scored a point, in making an inroad upon his heart. And her critical eye could not but approve of the proud attitude he assumed, the look that had come into his face.

She edged a little closer to him and continued in a subdued tone.

“A woman is always lonely and helpless — no matter what may be her station. How liable we are to be deceived or — misjudged. But I knew from the first that I could trust you. Do you remember when we first met in the Navona? ”

Again the warm crimson of the cheek, again the speaking flash from those luring eyes. Tristan's heart began to beat with a strange sensation of excitement and surprise. To love this wonder of all women — to be loved by her in return — life would indeed be one mad delirium.

“How could I forget it? ” he said, more warmly than he intended, meeting her gaze. “It was on the day when I arrived in Rome.”

Her eyes beamed on him more benevolently than ever.

"I saw you again at Santa Maria of the Aventine. I sent for you," she said, with drooping lids, "because I so wanted some one to confide in. I have no counsellor, — no champion — no friend. The object of hatred to the rabble which stones those to-day before whom it cringed yesterday — I am paying the penalty of the name I bear — kinship to one no longer among the living. But you scorned my messenger. Why did you?"

She regarded Tristan with expectant, almost imploring eyes. She saw him struggling for adequate utterance. Continuing, she held out to him her beautiful hands. Her tone was all appeal.

"I want you to feel that Theodora is your friend. That you may turn to her in any perplexity that may beset you, that you may call upon her for counsel whenever you are in doubt and know not what to do. And oh! I want you to know above all things how much you could be to me, did you but trust — had not the drop of poison instilled by the Senator set you against the one woman who would make you great, envied above all men on earth!"

Tristan bent over Theodora's hands and kissed them. Cool and trusting, yet with a firm grasp, they encircled his burning palms and their whiteness caused his senses to reel.

"In what manner can I be of service to the Lady Theodora?" he spoke at last, unable to let go of those wonderful hands that sent the hot blood hurtling to his brain.

Theodora's face was very close to his.

As she spoke, her perfumed breath softly fanned his cheeks.

She spoke with well-studied hesitancy, like a child that, in preferring an overbold request, fears denial in the very utterance.

"It is a small thing, I would ask," she said in her wonderfully melodious voice. "I would once again visit the places where I have spent the happy days of my childhood, the

galleries and chambers of the Emperor's Tomb. You start, my Lord Tristan! Perchance this speech may sound strange to the ears of one who, though newly arrived in Rome, has heard but vituperations showered upon the head of a defenceless woman, who, if not better, is at least not worse than the rest of her kind. Yes —" she continued, returning the pressure of his fingers and noting, not without inward satisfaction, a soft gleam that had dispelled the sterner look in his eyes, "those were days of innocence and peace, broken only when the older sister, my equal in beauty, began to regard me as a possible rival. Stung by her taunts I leaped to her challenge and the fight for the dominion of Rome was waged between us with all the hot passion of our blood. Marozia conquered, but Death stood by unseen to crown her victory. The Mount of Cloisters is my asylum. The gates of the Emperor's Tomb are sealed to me forever more. Why should Alberic, disregarding the ties of blood, fear a woman — unless he hath deeply wronged her, even as he has wronged another who wears the crown of thorns upon earth?"

Theodora paused, her lids half-shut as if to repress a tear; in reality to scan the face of him who found her tale most strange indeed.

And, verily, Tristan was beginning to feel that he could not depend upon himself much longer. The subdued lights, the heavy perfume, the room itself, the seductive beauty of this sorceress so near to him that her breath fanned his cheeks, the touch of her hands, which had not relinquished his own, were making wild havoc with his senses and reason.

Like many a gentle and inexperienced nature, Tristan shrank from offending a woman's delicacy, by even appearing to question the truth of her words, and he doubted not but that here was a woman who had been sinned against much more than she had sinned, a woman capable of gentler, nobler impulses than were credited to her in the common reckoning. It required indeed a powerful constraint upon

his feelings not to give way to the starved impulse that drove him to forget past, present and future in her embrace.

A sad smile played about the small crimson mouth as Theodora, with a sigh, continued:

"I have quaffed the joys of life. There is nothing that has remained untasted. And yet — I am not happy. The fires of unrest drive me hither and thither. After years of fiercest conflict, with those of my own sex and age, who consider Rome the lawful prey of any one that may usurp Marozia's fateful inheritance, I have had a glimpse of Heaven — a Heaven that perchance is not for me. Yet it aroused the desire for peace — happiness — love! Yes, my Lord Tristan, love! For though I have searched for it in every guise, I found it not. Will the hour every toll — even for me? Deem you, my Lord Tristan, that even one so guilt lost as Theodora might be loved?"

"How were it possible," he stammered, "for mortal eyes to resist such loveliness?"

His words sounded stilted in his ears. Yet he knew if he permitted the impulse to master him he would be swept away by the torrent.

The woman also knew, and woman-like she felt that the poison rankled in his veins. She must give it time to work. She must not precipitate a scene that might leave him sobered, when the fumes had cleared from his brain.

Putting all the witchery of her beauty into her words she said, with a tinge of sadness:

"I fear I am trespassing, my Lord Tristan. It is so long, since I have unveiled the depths of my heart. Forget the request I have made. It may conflict with your loyalty to my Lord Alberic. I shall try to foster the memories of the place which I dare not enter —"

She had ventured all upon the last throw, and she had conquered.

"Nay, Lady Theodora," Tristan interposed, with a se-

riousness that even staggered the woman. "There is no such clause or condition in the agreement between the Lord Alberic and myself. It is true," he added in a solemn tone, "he has warned me of you, as his enemy. Report speaks ill of you. Nevertheless I believe you."

"I thank you, my Lord Tristan," she said, releasing his hands. "Theodora never forgets a service. Three nights hence I am giving a feast to my friends. You will not fail me?"

"I am happy to know," he said, "that the Lady Theodora thinks kindly of me. I shall not fail her. And now" — he added, genuine regret in his tone — "will the Lady Theodora permit me to depart? The hour waxes late and there is much to be done ere the morrow's dawn."

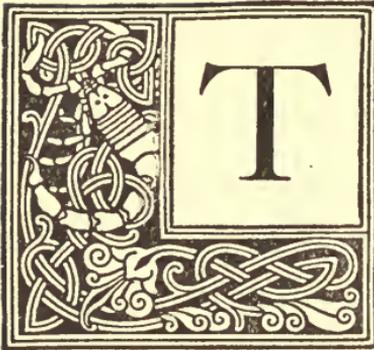
Theodora clapped her hands and Persephoné appeared between the curtains.

"Farewell, my Lord Tristan. We shall speak of this again," she said, beaming upon him with all the seductive fire of her dark eyes, and he, bowing, took his leave.

When Persephoné returned, she was as much puzzled at the inscrutable smile that played about her mistress' lips as she had been at Tristan's abstracted state of mind, for, hardly noting her presence, he had walked in silence beside her to the gate, and had there taken silent leave. —

CHAPTER VI

THE LURE OF THE ABYSS



THE sun had sunk to rest in fleecy clouds of crimson and gold.

The clear and brilliant moonlight of Italy enveloped hill and dale, bathing in its effulgence the groves, palaces and ruins of the Eternal City. The huge pile of the Colosseum was bathed in its rosy glow, raising itself in

serene majesty towards the beaming night sky.

A few hours later a great change had come over the heavens. The wind had sprung up and had driven the little downy clouds of sunset into a great, black mass, which it again tore into flying tatters that it swept before it. The moon rose and raced through the dun and silver. Below it, in the vast spaces of the deserted amphitheatre, from whose vomitories pale ghosts seemed to flit, the big boulders and rain-left pools looked dim and misty. Night had cast her leper's cloak on nature and the moon seemed the leprous face.

Deepest silence reigned, broken only by the occasional hoot of an owl, or the swishing of a bat that whirled its crazy flight in and out the labyrinthine corridors.

By the largest of these boulders stood the dark cloaked form of a man. As the moon-thrown shadows of the clouds swept over him and the rude rock by which he stood looking up at the sky, his black mantle flapped in the wind and clung to his limbs, making him look even taller than he was.

At the feet of Basil cowered the huge Molossian hound.

As the wind grew stronger and the clouds above assumed more fantastic shapes, it raised its head and gave voice to a low whine. On the distant hillocks a myriad dusky flames seemed to writhe and hiss and dart through tinted moon-gleams.

Three times he whistled — and in the misty, moonlit expanse countless forms, as weird as himself, seemed to rise and form a great circle about him.

Were they the creatures of his brain which had at last given way in the excitement of the hour? Were they phantoms of mist and moon, wreathing round him from the desolate marshes? Or were they real beings of flesh and blood, congregations of crime and despair, mad with the misery of a starving century, the horrors of serfdom and oppression that had united in the great reel of a Witches' Sabbath?

Round him they circled, at first slowly, — like the curls of a marsh, then faster and ever faster, till his eyes could scarcely follow them as they rotated about him in their horrible dance of madness and sin.

Black clouds raced over the moon. The reddish gleam of a forked tongue of fire illumined the dark heavens, and thunder went pealing down the hills. Suddenly out of the underbrush arose a black form, about the height and breadth of a man, but without the distinct outlines of one. Basil's face grew white as death, and his gaze became fixed as he clutched at the rock for support. But the next moment he seemed to gain his reassurance from the knowledge that he had seen this phantom before. The dog lay at his feet and continued its low tremulous whine.

"You have kept the tryst," gibbered the bent form as it slowly approached, supporting itself upon a crooked staff of singular height.

"Else were I not the man to compel fate to do my bidding," responded the Grand Chamberlain. "Fear can have no part in the compact which binds us. I have live things under

my feet that clog my steps and grow more stubborn day by day." —

"Deem you, you can keep your footing in the black lobbies of hell?" gibbered the cowled form. "For you will need all your courage, if you would reach the goal!"

Basil, for a moment, faced his shadowy interlocutor in silence. There was a darker light in his eyes when he spoke.

"Give me but that which my soul desires and I shall run the gauntlet unflinchingly. I shall brace my courage to the dread experiment."

A fierce gust of wind shook the cypresses and holm oaks into shuddering anxiety.

"You are about to embark upon an enterprise more perilous than any man now living has ever ventured upon," spoke the cowled form. "Your soul will travel through the channels, through which the red and fiery tide rolls up when the volcano wakes. Each time it wakes the lava washes over the lost souls, which, chained to rings in the black rock, glow like living coals, but leaves them whole, to undergo their fate anew. Do you persist?"

"Give me what I desire —"

"Ay — so say they all — but to grovel in the dust before the Unknown Presence which they have defied."

"Who are you to taunt me with a fear my soul knows not?" Basil turned to the black-robed form, stretching out his hand as if to touch his mantle.

A magnetic current passed through his limbs that caused him to drop his arm with a cry of pain.

Forked lightnings leaped from one cloud-bank to another. Distant thunder growled and died among the hills.

"I have seen the fall of Nineveh and Babylon. I was present at the destruction of the Holy City by the legions of Titus, I witnessed the burning of Rome by Nero and the fall of the temple of Serapis. I stood upon Mount Calvary under the shadow of the world's greatest tragedy."

The voice of the speaker died to silence.

Basil's hand went to his head, as if he wished to assure himself whether he was awake or in the throes of some mad dream.

It is a narrow boundary line, that divides the two great realms of sanity and madness. And the limits are as restless as those of two countries divided from each other by a network of shifting rivers. What belonged to the one overnight may belong to the other to-morrow.

An overmastering dread had seized upon Basil at the speech of the uncanny apparition. Was not he, too, pushing his excursions now into the one realm, now into the other? And who would know in which of the two to seek for him?

"Have you indeed wandered upon earth ever since those days?" he stammered, once more slave to his superstition.

The apparition nodded.

"I have drunk deep from the black wells of despair. I have raised the shadowy altars of him who was cast out of the heavens, higher and higher, till they almost touch the throne of the Father."

"Your master then is Lucifer —"

"Cannot the Fiend as well as God live incarnate in human clay? Is not the earth the meeting ground of Heaven and Hell? Why should not Basil, the Grand Chamberlain, be Hell's incarnation?" —

"What then must I do to deserve the crimson aureole?"

"Espouse the cause of him who rules the shadows. He will give to you what your soul desires. One of the shadowy congregation that rules the world through fear, make quick wings for Time, that crawls through eternity like a monstrous snake, while with starved desire your eyes glare at the fleeting things of life — dominion, power and love, that you may snatch from fate! Only by becoming one of us can your soul slake its thirst. Speak — for my time is brief —"

When Basil turned towards the bent form of the speaker

his gaze fell upon a gleaming knife which Bessarion had produced from under the loose folds of his gown.

For a moment the two stood face to face. Neither spoke, each seemingly intent upon fathoming the thoughts of the other. The wind hissed and screamed through the corridors of the Colosseum.

It was Basil who broke the silence.

"What is it, you want?"

"Bare your left arm!"

There was a natural hollow in the rock, that the weather had scooped out in the stone altar.

Basil obeyed.

The gibbering voice rose again above the silence.

"Hold it over the basin!"

The lightnings twisted and streamed like silvery adders through the dark vaults of the heavens, and terrific peals of thunder shook the shuddering world in its foundations.

The bent form raised the knife.

Three drops of blood dripped, one by one, into the hollow of the stone.

Bessarion chanted some words in an unintelligible jargon as, with a claw-like hand, he bound up the wound in Basil's arm.

"At midnight — in the Catacombs of St. Calixtus — you will stand face to face with the Presence," the apparition spoke once more.

The next moment, after a fantastic salutation, he had vanished, as if the earth had swallowed him, behind a projecting rock.

Basil remained for a time in deep rumination. The Molossian hound rose up from the ground as soon as the adept of the black arts had disappeared, and, sitting on its haunches, gazed inquisitively into its master's face.

Suddenly it uttered a growl.

At the next moment the misshapen form of an African

Moor crouched at the feet of the Grand Chamberlain. Noiselessly and swiftly as a panther he had sped through the waste spaces of the amphitheatre, and even Basil could not overcome a feeling of revulsion as he gazed into the hairy, bestial features of Daoud, whom he employed when secrecy and despatch were essential to the success of a venture.

Red inflamed eyelids gleamed from a face whose cadaverous tints seemed enhanced by wiry black hair that hung in disordered strands from under a broad Spanish hat. Daoud was undersized in stature, but possessed prodigious strength, and the size of his hands argued little in favor of him who had incurred the disfavor of his master or his own.

This monster in human guise Basil had acquired from a certain nobleman in the suite of the Byzantine ambassador extraordinary to the Holy See.

Basil looked up at the moon which just then emerged from the shadow of a cloud. Then he gave a nod of satisfaction.

"Your promptness argues well for your success," he turned to his runner who was cowering at his feet, the ashen face with the blinking and inflamed eyes raised to his master. "Know you the road to southward, my good Daoud?"

The Moor gave a nod and Basil proceeded.

"You must depart this very night. Take the road that leads by Benevento to the Shrines of the Archangel. You will overtake the Senator and deliver into his hands this token. You will return forthwith and bring to me — his answer. Do I make myself quite clear to your understanding, my good Daoud?"

The Moor fell prostrate and touched Basil's buskin with his forehead.

"Up!" the latter spurned the kneeling brute. "Tomorrow night must find you in the Witches' City."

With these words he placed into the Moor's hand a small article, carefully tied and sealed.

The twain exchanged a mute glance of mutual understanding, then Daoud gave a bound, darted forward and shot away like an arrow from the bow. Almost instantly he was out of sight.

The hound bounded after him but, obedient to his master's call, instantly returned to the latter's feet.

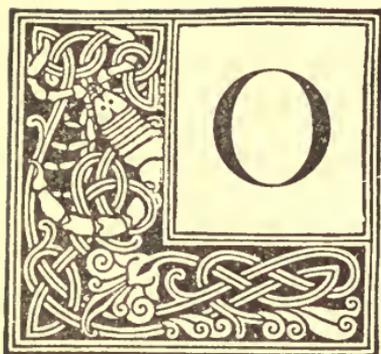
For some time Basil remained near the rock where the weird ceremony had taken place.

"The Rubicon is passed," he muttered. "The stars — or the abyss."

Then, slowly quitting the stupendous ruins of the Amphitheatre, he took the direction of the Catacombs of St. Calixtus.

CHAPTER VII

THE FACE IN THE PANEL



ON the following day Tristan entered upon his duties as captain of the Senator's guard.

The first person upon whom he chanced on his rounds at the Lateran was the Grand Chamberlain, who inquired affably how his penitences were progressing and expressed the hope that he had received final absolution, and that his sins would not weigh too heavily upon his soul. Basil commended him for his zeal in the cause of the Senator, hinting incidentally that his duties between the Lateran and Castel San Angelo need not deprive him of the society of the fair Roman ladies, who would welcome the stranger from Provence and would doubtlessly enmesh his heart, if it were not well guarded. He then proceeded to caution Tristan with respect to his exalted prisoner. Numerous attempts at abduction had been made from time to time, Tristan having, by his prowess and daring, prevented the last, emanating doubtlessly from the Pontiff's nearest kith and kin. The men under him could be fully relied upon. Nevertheless, it behooved him to be circumspect.

After a time Basil departed, and Tristan went about his business, inspecting the guard and familiarizing himself with the place where he was to keep his first watch.

The level beams of the evening sun filled the Basilica of St. John in Laterano. There were pearl lights and lights of

sapphire; falling radiances of emerald and blood-red; vague translucent greens, that seemed to tremble under spiral clouds of incense.

Now the sun was sinking behind Mount Janiculum. The clouds at the zenith of the heavens were rose-hued, but it was growing dark in the valleys, and the great church began to take on sombre hues. It seemed to frown upon him, to warn him not to enter, an impression he was long afterwards to remember, as he strode through the high-vaulted corridors.

He hesitated, till the sound of a distant chant reached his ear. With a sort of fascination he could not account for, he watched the advance of the slowly gathering gloom, as an increasing greyness stole into the chapels.

Evening was about to take the veil of night.

The light left the stained-glass windows and the church grew darker and darker. The altar steps lay now in purple shadows that were growing deeper and denser each moment.

Shadowy forms seemed to be moving about in the sanctuaries. Soon a monk entered with a taper, lighting the lights before some remote shrines. Tristan could not distinguish his features, for the light was very dim. Yet it enabled him to see that there were a few belated worshippers in the church.

After a time the great nave was deserted. As the lone monk passed quickly through a sphere of thin light, Tristan gave a start. It seemed a ghost in a cassock that had vanished in the sacristy. He told himself that the impression was absurd, but he could not throw it off. He had caught a momentary glimpse of a face that had no human likeness, and the way in which the cassock had flapped about the limbs of the fleeting form seemed to suggest that it clothed a frame that had lost its flesh.

Superstitious fear began to creep over him. He felt that he must seek the open, escape the haunting incense-saturated pall, these dim sepulchral chapels. Such light as there was,

save what emanated from the candles on the altar, came from a stone lamp which cast its glimmer on the vanishing form.

In every corner of the vast nave now lay fast gathering darkness. The figures of the saints seemed vague and formless. The altar loomed dim in the shadows.

All these things Tristan noted.

The whole interior of the church was now steeped in the dense pall of night, illumined only by the faint radiance of the lamp upon the altar, which seemed rather to intensify than to lift the gloom.

A faint footfall was audible behind the carven screen, near the entrance to the chapels. A figure, almost lost in the gloom, glided into the nave, and shadows were falling about him like thin veils.

It was an unusual hour for monks to be abroad. None the less, he seemed sure of himself, for he proceeded without hesitation to the altar, shrouded as it was in utter darkness, but for the light of one faint taper, which gleamed afar, like a star in the nocturnal heavens, driving the gloom a few paces from the carven stone. There the shrouded form seemed to melt into the very pall of night that weighed heavily upon the time-stained walls of the Mother Church of Rome.

At first Tristan thought it was some belated penitent seeking forgiveness for his sins, but when the dark-robed form did not return he strode towards the altar to see if he might perchance be of assistance to him.

When Tristan reached the altar steps he could discover no trace of a human being, though he searched every nook and corner and peered into every chapel, examined every shrine.

Seized with a strange restiveness he began to pace up and down before the altar steps. He was far from feeling at ease. He remembered the warning of the Grand Chamberlain. He remembered the strange tales he had heard whispered of the Pontiff's prison house.

Tristan suddenly paused.

He thought he heard sibilant whispers and the low murmur of voices from behind the screen at the eastern transept of the Capella, and at once he began assembling the things in his mind which might beset him in the hour of darkness.

The Chapel of the Most Holy Saviour of the Holy Stairs, the Scala Santa of the present day, adjoins the Lateran Church. At the period of which we write it was still the private chapel of the popes in the Patriarchium, and was called the Sancta Sanctorum on account of the great number of precious relics it enshrines.

To this chapel Tristan directed his steps, oppressed by some mysterious sense of evil. By a judicious disposition of the men under his command he had, after a careful survey of the premises, placed them in such a manner that it would be impossible for any one to gain access to the stairs leading to the Pontiff's chamber.

Had it been a hallucination of his senses conjured up by his sudden fear?

Not a sound broke the stillness. Only the echoes of his own footsteps reverberated uncannily from the worn mosaics of the floor. In the dim distance of the corridors he saw a shadow moving to and fro. It was the guard before the entrance to a side-chapel of the Basilica.

What caused Tristan to pause in the night gloom of the corridor leading to the Pontifical Chapel he did not know. He seemed as under a strange spell. At a distance from him of some five feet, in the decorated wall, there was a dark panel some two feet in height and of corresponding breadth, looking obliquely towards the Pontifical Chapel. The panel contained a small round opening, a spy-hole which communicated with a secret chamber in the thickness of the wall.

A slight rustling noise came from behind the masonry. Tristan heard it quite distinctly. It suggested the passing of naked feet over marble.

Suddenly, noiselessly the panel parted.

A sudden gleam of white, blinding light shot into the chapel like a spear of silver.

Tristan paused with a start, looking swiftly and inquiringly at the black slit in the wall and as he did so the spear of light shifted a little in its passing.

A face, white with the pallor of death, ghastly and hideous as a corpse that has retained upon its set features the agony of dying, peered out from blackness into blackness.

A tremor shook Tristan's frame from head to toe. He could not have cried out, had he wished to. He felt as one grazed by a lightning bolt. Then, in a flash that made his heart and soul shudder within him, he knew.

He had seen looking at him a face — the clean shaven face of a man. But it was not human. It bore the terrible stigmata of the unquenchable fire; an abominable vision of the lust that cannot be satiated, the utter, unconquerable, fiendish malevolence of Hell. A harsh, raven-like croak broke the stillness, and at the sound of that cry the terrible face vanished with the swiftness of a trick. Instead, a long arm, clothed in a black sleeve, stole through the opening. A flash, keen as that of the lightning, cut the air and a dagger struck the mosaic floor at Tristan's feet with such force that its point snapped after shattering the stone, drawing fire from the impact.

Bounding back, Tristan uttered a shrill cry of terror, but when he looked in the direction of the panel only dim dun dusk met his eyes.

Rushing frantically from the corridor he now called with all his might. His outcries brought the guards to the scene. Briefly, incoherently, almost mad with terror, he told his tale. They listened with an air of amazement in which surprise held no small share. Then they accompanied him back to the chapel.

Arriving near the spot he was about to point to the dagger,

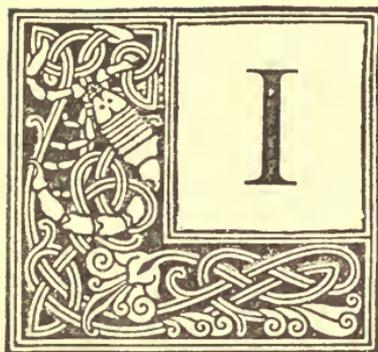
to corroborate his wild tale. But the dagger had disappeared. Only the shattered marble of the floor lent testimony and credence to his words.

On the following morning an outcry of horror arose from all quarters of Rome.

On the night which preceded it, the Holy Host had been taken from the Pontifical Chapel in the Lateran.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SHADOW OF ASRAEL



It was ten in the morning.

Deep silence reigned in the strange walled garden on the Pincian Hill that surrounded the marble villa of the Grand Chamberlain. Only the murmur of the city below and the soft sounds of bells from tower and campanile seemed to break the dreamlike stillness as they be-

gan to toll for High Mass.

In a circular chamber lighted only by lamps, for there were no windows, and daylight never penetrated there, before an onyx table covered with strange globes and philtres, sat Basil.

The walls of the chamber were of wood stained purple. The far wall was hidden by shelves on which were many rolls of vellum and papyrus, spoils of pagan libraries of the past. There were the works of monks from all the monasteries of Europe, illuminated by master hands, the black letter pages glowing with red and gold, almost priceless even then. In one corner of the room stood an iron chest, secured by locks. What this contained no one even dared to guess.

As the chimes from churches and convents reached his ears, Basil's face paled. Something began to stir in the dark unfathomable eyes as some unknown thing stirs in deep water. Some nameless being was looking out of those windows of the soul. Yet the rest of the face was unruffled

and expressionless, and the contrast was so horrible that a spectator would have shrank away, cold fear gripping his heart, and perhaps a cry upon his lips.

Basil had closed the heavy bronze doors behind him when he had entered from the atrium. The floor of colored marbles was flooded with the light from the bronze lamps. Before him was a short passage, hardly more than an alcove, terminating in a door of cedarwood behind a purple curtain.

In the dull yellow gleam of the lamps the chamber seemed cold, full of chill and musty air.

In a moment however the lamps seemed to burn more brightly, as Basil's eyes became adjusted to their lights.

There was the silence of the tomb. The lamps burnt without a flicker, for there was not a breath of air to disturb their steady glow. The plan of the room, its yellow lights, its silence, its entire lack of correspondence with the outside world, was Basil's own. He had designed it as a port, as it were, whence to put out to sea upon the tide of his ever-changing moods in the black barque of sin.

For some time he remained alone in the silent room, dreaming and brooding over greatness and power, that terrible megalomania that is the last and rarest madness of all.

He had read of Caligula, Nero, and Domitian, of Heliogabalus, whose madness passed the bounds of the imaginable. Like gold and purple clouds, bursting with sombre light and power, they had passed over Rome and were gone.

Then thoughts of the popes came to him, those supreme rulers of the temporal and spiritual world whose dominion had been so superb, since they first began to crown the emperors, one hundred and thirty-five years ago.

In a monstrous and swiftly moving panorama they passed through a brain that worked as if it were packed in ice. And yet one and all had gone into the dark. The power of none had been lasting and complete.

But into his reverie stole a secret glow, into his blood an

intense, ecstatic quickening. For them the hour had tolled. Each step in life was but one nearer the grave. Not so was it to be with him.

A black fire began to burn round his heart, coiling there like a serpent, as he thought of the illumination that was his, the promise he had received — deep down in the crypts of the Emperor's Tomb and again in the Catacombs of St. Calixtus. And he had fallen down and worshipped, had given his soul to Darkness and abjured the Light.

Satan should rule again on earth. For this had been revealed to him by the High Priest of Satan himself, then in a vision by the Lord of Evil. To penetrate the mysteries of Hell with his whole heart and soul, to strike chill terror into the hearts of those who worshipped at the altars of Christ, had become Basil's ambition for which he would live and die.

Basil sat dreaming and gloating over his coming glory; a glory in which the woman whose beauty had stung him with maddening desire should share, even if he had to drag her before the dark throne upon which sat the Unspeakable Presence. The yellow light of the lamps fell upon his unnatural and mask-like face as he sat rigid in his chair hypnotized by Hell.

Christ had thrown his great Cross upon the feasts and banquets of the gods. On his head was a crown of thorns and the Stigmata upon his hands and feet. And the goblets of red gold had lost their brightness. The pagan gods were stricken dumb. They had faded away in vapor and were gone.

And with them the fierce joy of living had left the world. Christ reigned upon earth, implanting conscience in the souls of men, that robbed ecstasy of its fruition and infused the most delicious cup touched with the Aliquid Amari of the poet.

Basil paced the narrow confines of the room, and from his lips came the opening stanza of that dreadful parody of the

Good Friday hymn sung by the votaries of Satan: "Vexilla Regis Prodeunt Inferni."

Already the banners of the advancing hosts were in the sky. Soon — soon would he appear himself — the Lord of Darkness!

The room suddenly grew very chill, as if the three dread winds of Cocytus were blowing through the chamber.

There was a slim rod of copper suspended from the wall, close to the couch of dull grey damask upon which he had been reclining. He pulled it and somewhere away in the villa a gong sounded. A moment later a drab man, lean as a skeleton and bald as an egg, with slanting eyes in an ashen face and a stooping gait, came gliding noiselessly into the lamplit room. He wore a long black cassock, which covered his fleshless form from head to toe.

"Has no one called?" Basil turned to his factotum.

"A stranger," came the sepulchral reply. "He bade me give you this!"

Basil took the scroll which his famulus handed to him and cut the cord.

A fiendish smile passed over his face and lighted up the dark, sinister eyes. But quickly as the mood had come it left. It fell from him as a dropped cloak.

He stood upright, supporting himself on the onyx table, while Horus, who only understood in a dull dim way his master's moods, assisting him in all his villainies, but confessing his own share to a household priest, stood impassively by.

"Give me some wine!" Basil turned to the sinister Major Domo, and the latter disappeared and returned with a jug of Malvasian.

The Grand Chamberlain grasped the jug which Horus had brought him and held it with shaking fingers to his mouth. When he had drank deep he dismissed his famulus, struck a flint and burnt the scroll to pallid ashes. Then he staggered

out into the hall of colored marbles and through it to the garden doors.

The bronze gates trembled as they swung back upon their hinges, and as the full noon of the quiet garden burst upon Basil's eyes he fancied he saw the fold of a dark robe disappear among the cypresses.

And now the hot air of high noon wrapped him round with its warm southern life, flowing over the lithe body within the silken doublet, drawing away the inward darkness and the vaulting flames within his soul and reminding his sensuous nature that the future held gigantic promise of love and power.

The great tenor and alto bells of St. John in Lateran were beating the echoes to silver far away. The roofs and palaces, domes and towers of Rome, were bathed in sunlight as he advanced to the embrasure in the wall and once more surveyed the city.

The heat shimmered down and, through the quivering sunlit air, the colors of the buildings shone like pebbles at the bottom of a pool and the white ruins glowed like a mirage of the desert.

An hour later, regardless of the vertical sun rays that beat down upon the tortuous streets of the city with unabated fervor, the Grand Chamberlain rode through the streets of Rome, attended by a group of men-at-arms with the crest of the Broken Spear in a Field of Azure embroidered upon their doublets.

As the cavalcade swept through the crowded streets, with their pilgrims from all parts of the world, the religious in their habits, men-at-arms, flower-sellers, here and there the magnificent chariot of a cardinal, many of the people lowered their eyes as Basil cantered past on his black Neapolitan charger, trapped with crimson. More than one made the sign of the horn, to avert the spell of the evil eye.

When Basil reached the Lateran he found a captain of the noble guard with two halberdiers in their unsightly liveries

guarding the doors. They saluted and Basil inquired whether the new captain of the guard was within.

"The Lord Tristan is within," came the reply, and Basil entered, motioning to his escort to await his return outside.

The Grand Chamberlain traversed several anterooms, speaking to one or the other of the senatorial guard, and on every face he read consternation and fear. Little groups of priests stood together in corners, whispering among each other; the whole of the Lateran was aroused as by a secret dread. Such deeds, though they were known to have occurred, were never spoken of, and the priests of the various churches that had suffered desecration wisely kept their own counsel.

In this, the darkest age in the history of Rome, when crime and lust and murder lurked in every corner, an outrage such as this struck every soul with horror and awe. It was unthinkable, unspeakable almost, suggesting dark mysteries and hidden infamies of Hell, which caused the blood to run cold and the heart to freeze.

When Basil had made his way through the crowded corridors, receiving homage, though men looked askance at him as he passed, he came to a chamber usually reserved for a waiting room in times when the Pontiff received foreign envoys or members of the priesthood and nobility; a privilege from which the unfortunate prisoner in the Lateran was to be forever debarred.

Basil entered this chamber, giving orders that he was to be in no wise disturbed until he called and those outside heard him lock and bar the door from within.

In the exact centre of the wall, reaching within two feet of the ground, there was a large picture of St. Sebastian, barbarously painted by some unknown artist.

Basil approached the picture and pressed upon the flat frame with all his strength. There was a sudden click, a whirring, as of the wheels of a clock. Then the picture

swung inward, revealing a circular stairway of stone, mounting upward. Without replacing the panel door, Basil mounted the stairs for nearly a hundred steps, until he came to a door upon which he beat with the hilt of his poniard.

An answering knock came from within, and the door opened. Basil entered a small chamber, lighted from above by a window in a small dome.

A bat-like figure stood before a table, covered with strange manuscripts. As Basil entered, a thin black arm emerged from the folds of the gown, which the inmate of the chamber wore. Then, with a quick bird-like movement, an immensely thin hand twisted like a claw, wrinkled, yellow and of incredible age, was stretched out toward the newcomer.

On the second finger of this claw was a certain ring. Basil bent and kissed the ring. There was another deft and almost imperceptible movement. When the hand reappeared the ring was gone.

"It has been done?" Basil turned to the dark-robed form in bated whispers.

The voice that answered seemed to come from a great distance. The lips in the waxen face scarcely moved. They parted, that was all. Yet the words were audible and distinct.

"It was done. Last night."

"You were not seen?"

"I wore the mask."

"Is it here?" Basil queried, his eyes flickering with a faint reflection of that hate which had blazed in them earlier in the day.

"It is not here."

"Where is it?"

"You shall know to-night!"

The light faded out of Basil's eyes.

"What of the new captain?"

"His presence is a menace."

In Basil's eyes gleamed a sombre fire.

"I, too, owe him a grudge. In good time!"

"The time is Now!"

"Patience!" replied the Grand Chamberlain. "He will work his own undoing. We dare not harm him yet."

"Only a miracle saved him last night."

"Are there not other churches in Rome?" —

"Ay!" mouthed the black form. "But the time of the great sacrifice draws near —"

"I knew not it was so near at hand," interposed Basil with a start.

"The Becco Notturmo demands a bride!"

"How am I to help you in these matters?"

"Am I to counsel the Lord Basil?" sneered the shape.

"You drew the crimson ball."

"When is it to be?"

"Three weeks from to-night. Mark you — a stainless dove!"

Basil nodded, an evil smile upon his lips.

"It shall be as you say! As for that other — I am minded to try his mettle —"

"So be it!" said the shape. "Leave me now! You will hear from me. My familiars are everywhere."

Without another word Basil arose and left the chamber. In the corridor below he met Tristan.

"I know all," he cut short the speech of the new captain of the guard. "All Rome is full of it. How did it happen? And where?"

"Attracted by a noise as of slippers feet passing over marble, I entered the corridor of the Sacred Stairs, when one of the panels parted. A devilish apparition stood within, throwing the beam of its lantern into the chapel. When a chance ray of light disclosed my presence the shape of darkness hurled a poniard. It missed me, thanks be to Our Lady, struck the mosaic of the floor and broke in two."

“You have the pieces?” Basil queried affably and with much concern.

“I ran to the end of the gallery, shouting to my men,” Tristan replied. “When we returned the blade had disappeared.”

“Where was it?” Basil queried with much concern and soon they faced the shattered mosaic.

Basil examined the spot minutely.

“From yonder panel, you say?” he turned to Tristan.

“The third from the Capella,” came the ready reply.

“Have you searched the premises?”

“From cellar to garret.” —

“And discovered nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“What of the panel?”

“It defies our combined efforts.”

“Strange, indeed.”

Basil strode to the wall and struck the spot indicated by Tristan with the hilt of his poniard. Then he tested the wall on either side.

“Can your ear detect any difference in sound?”

A negative gesture came in response, and with it a puzzled look passed into Tristan’s eyes.

“Have you seen the Pontiff?”

“We reported the matter to His Holiness.”

“And?”

“His Holiness raised his eyes to heaven and said: ‘Even God’s Vicar has no jurisdiction in Hell!’”

“Was that all he said?”

“That was all!”

There was a silence during which Basil seemed to commune with himself.

“It is indeed a matter of grave concern,” he said at last. “Treason stalks everywhere. I will send for my Spanish Captain, Don Garcia. He may be of assistance to you.”

And Basil turned and walked down the corridor.

After a time Tristan walked out upon the terrace looking toward the Cœlian Hill.

A brilliant light beat upon domes and spires and pinnacles, and flooded the august ruins of the Cæsars on the distant Palatine and the thousand temples of the Holy Cross with scintillating radiance which poured down from the intense blue of heaven. —

The long lights of the afternoon were shifting towards the eventide, giving place to a limpid and colorless light that silvered the adjacent olive groves.

Tristan roused himself with a start. The sense of moving like a ghost among a world of ghosts had left him. He was once more awake and aware. But even now his sorrow, his fears, his hopes of winning again to some safe harbor in the storm tossed Odyssey of his life, were numbed. They lay heavy within him, but without urgency or appeal.

What did it matter after all? Life was a little thing, a forlorn minstrel that evoked melancholy strains from a pipe of oaten straw. Life was a little thing, nor death a great one. For his part he would not be loth to take his poppies and fall asleep.

At one time or another such moods must come to all of us and be endured. We must enter into the middle country, that dull Sahara of the soul, a broad belt of barren land where no angels seem to walk by our side, nor can the false voices of demons lure us to our harm.

This is the land where we are imprisoned by the deeds of others and never by our own. What we do ourselves will send us to Heaven or to Hell; but not to the middle country where the plains of disillusion are.

At last the sunset came.

The ashen color of the olive-trees flashed out into silver, the undulating peaks of the Sabine Mountains became faintly flushed and phantom fair, as in a tempest of fire the sun sank

to rest. The groves of ilex and arbutus seemed to tremble with delight, as the long red heralds touched their topmost boughs.

The whole landscape seemed to smile a farewell to departing day. The chimes of the Angelus trembled on the purple dusk.

Night came on apace.

Tristan re-entered the Lateran Basilica, set the watch and arranged with Don Garcia to spend the night in the sacristy, while Don Garcia was to guard the approaches to the Pontifical Chapel to prevent a recurrence of the horrible sacrilege of the preceding night.

One by one the worshippers left the vast nave of the church. After a time the sacristans closed the heavy bronze doors and extinguished the lights, all but the one upon the altar.

When they, too, had departed, and deepest silence filled the sacred spaces, Tristan emerged from a side chapel and took his station near the entrance to the sacristy, where, on the preceding night, he had seen the shadow disappear.

How long he had been there in dread and wonder he did not know, when two cloaked and hooded figures emerged slowly out of the gloom. He could not tell whence they came or whether they had been there all the time. They bent their steps towards the sacristy and, as they were about to pass Tristan in his hiding-place, they paused as if conscious of another presence.

"As we proceed in this matter," whispered the one voice, "I grow fearful. You know my relations to the Senator —"

"Your anxiety moves me not," croaked the other voice. "Deem you to attain your ends by mortal means?"

The voice caused Tristan to shudder as with an ague, though he saw not him who spoke.

"What of yourself?" whispered the first speaker.

"Have you forgotten," came the hoarse reply, "that either I am soulless, or else my spirit, damned from its beginning,

will scarce be saved by the grace of Him I dare not name! You are defiled in the very conversing with me."

The tone in which these words were spoken, either defied answer, or, if a response was made, it did not reach Tristan's ears as they slowly, noiselessly, proceeded upon their way.

Tristan vaguely listened for the echo of their retreating footsteps as, passing behind the altar, they disappeared, as if the earth had swallowed them.

Now he was seized with a terrible fear. What, if they were to repeat the sacrilege? He thought he recognized the voice of the first speaker; but this no doubt was but a trick of his excited imagination.

Determined to prevent so terrible a crime, he crept cautiously down the narrow passage through which they had disappeared. Six steps he counted, then he found himself in a room which seemed to be part of the sacristy, yet not a part, for a postern stood open through which gleamed the misty moonlight.

There was little doubt in Tristan's mind that they had passed out through this postern which had been left unguarded, and he found his conjectures confirmed, when his eye, accustoming itself to the radiance without, saw two misty figures passing along the road that leads past the Coelian Hill through fields of ruins.

Taking care so they would not be attracted by the sound of his steps, Tristan crept in the shadows of roofless columns, shattered porticoes and dismantled temples, half hidden amid the dark foliage that sprang up among the very fanes and palaces of old. At times he lost sight of his quarry. Again they would rise up before him like evil spirits wandering through space.

As Tristan continued in his pursuit, he began to be beset by dire misgivings.

The twain had vanished as utterly as if the earth had swallowed them and he paused in his pursuit to gain his

bearings. Had he followed two phantoms or two beings in the flesh? Had he abandoned his watch for two penitents who had perchance been locked in the church?

What might not be happening at the Lateran at this very moment! How would Don Garcia construe his absence?

A tremor passed through his limbs. He started to retrace his steps, but some unknown agency compelled him onward.

Penetrating the gloomy foliage, Tristan found himself before a large ruin, grey and roofless, from the interior of which came, muffled and indistinct, the sound of voices.

Two men were stealthily creeping beneath the shadow of a wall that extended for some distance from the ruin.

Both wore long monkish garbs and were muffled from head to toe. Over their faces they wore vizors with slits for eyes and mouth. One of the twain was spare, yet muscular. His companion walked with a stooping gait and supported himself by a staff.

The light which had attracted Tristan, emanated from a lantern which they had placed on the ground and which they could shade at will, but which cast its fitful glimmer over the grass plot, revealing what appeared to be a grave, from which the mould had been thrown up. At a short distance there stood a black and stunted yew tree. Before this they paused.

Now, from under his black cassock, the taller produced a strange object, the nature of which Tristan was unable to discover by the fitful light of the moon.

No sooner was it revealed to his companion, than the latter began to chant a weird incantation, in which he who held the strange object joined.

Louder and more strident grew their voices, and, notwithstanding the warmth of the summer night, Tristan felt an icy shudder permeate his whole being while, with a strange fascination, he watched the twain.

Now he who supported himself by a staff uttered a shrill inarticulate outcry, and, producing a long, gleaming knife

from under his cassock, stabbed the thing viciously, while his voice rose in mad, strident screams:

“Emen Hetan! Emen Hetan! Palu! Baalberi! Emen Hetan!”

The fit of madness seemed to have caught his companion. Producing a knife similar to that of the other he, too, stabbed the object he held in his hand, shrieking deliriously:

“Agora! Agora! Patrisa! Agora!”

An hour was to come when Tristan was to learn the terrible import of the apparently meaningless jumble which struck his ear with mad discordance.

Suddenly he felt upon himself the insane gleam of two eyes, peering from the slits of the bent figure's mask.

There was a death-like stillness, as both looked towards the intruder. Tristan would have fled, but his feet seemed rooted to the spot. His energies were paralyzed as under the influence of a terrible spell.

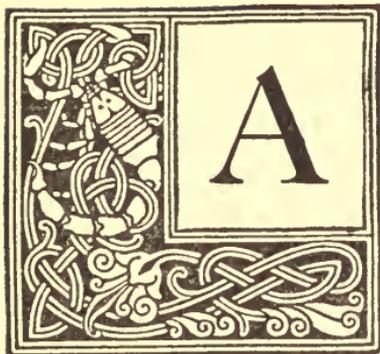
The stooping form raised aloft a small phial. A bluish vapor floated upward, in thin spiral curls.

The effect was instantaneous. Tristan was seized by a great drowsiness. His limbs refused to support him. He no longer felt the ground under his feet. His hand went to his head and, reeling like a drunken man, he fell among the tall weeds that grew in riotous profusion around the ancient masonry.

The setting moon shone out from behind a fleecy cloud, and in the pallid crimson of her light the ill-famed ruins of the ancient temple of Isis rose weird and ghostly in the summer night.

CHAPTER IX

THE FEAST OF THEODORA



FAIRY-LIKE radiance pervaded the great pavilion in the sunken gardens of Theodora on Mount Aventine.

It was a vast circular hall, roofed in by a lofty dome of richest malachite, from the centre of which was suspended a huge globe of fire, flinging blood-red rays on the amber colored silken carpets and tapestries that covered floors and walls. The dome was supported by rows upon rows of tall tapering crystal columns, clear as translucent water and green as the grass in spring, and between and beyond these columns were large oval shaped casements set wide open to the summer night, through which the gleam of a broad lake, laden with water lilies, could be seen shimmering in the yellow radiance of the moon.

The centre of the hall was occupied by a long table in the form of a horseshoe, upon which glittered vessels of gold, crystal and silver in the sheen of the revolving globe of fire, heaped with all the accessories of a sumptuous banquet, such as might have been spread before the ancient gods of Olympus in the heyday of their legendary prime.

Strange scents assailed the nostrils: pomegranate and frankincense, myrrh, spikenard and saffron, cinnamon and calamus mingled their perfume with the insidious distillations

of the jasmine, and spiral clouds of incense rose from tripods of bronze to the vaulted ceiling.

Inside the horseshoe, black African slaves, attired in fantastic liveries of yellow and blue, crimson and white, orange and green, carried aloft jewelled flagons and goblets, massive gold dishes and great platters of painted earthenware.

There were wines from Cyprus and Malvasia, from Montepulciano and the sunny slopes of Hymettus, Chianti and *Lacrymae Christi*.

The almost incredible brilliancy of the assembled company, contrasting with the fantastic background, caught the eye as with a stab of pain, held the gaze for a single instant of frozen incredulity, then gripped the throat in a choking sensation by reason of its wonder.

Lounging on divans of velvet and embroidered satin from the looms of fabled Cathay, set in the old Roman fashion round the table, eating, drinking, gossiping and occasionally bursting into wild snatches of song, were a company of distinguished looking personages, richly and brilliantly attired, bent upon enjoying the pleasures offered by the immediate hour. All who laid claim to any distinction in the seven-hilled city were there, the lords of the Campagna and of the adjacent fiefs of the Church. Strangers from all parts of the inhabited globe were there, steeping their bewildered brain in the splendors that assailed their eyes on every point; from Africa and Iceland, from Portugal and India, from Burgundy and Aquitaine, from Granada and from Greece, from Germania and Provence, from Persia and the Baltic shores. Their fantastic and semi-barbaric costumes seemed to enhance the grotesque splendor of the banquet hall.

The Romans were acquainting their guests with the exalted rank of the woman who ruled the city as surely as ever had Marozia from the Emperor's Tomb. And the strangers listened wide-eyed and with bated breath.

Near the raised dais which Theodora was to occupy, at the

head of the table, there were three couches reserved for guests who, like the hostess, had not yet arrived.

Below these, by the side of a martial stranger with the air of one who would fain sweep the board clear of his neighbors on either hand, devouring his food in fierce silence, sat the Prefect of Rome, endeavoring to expound the qualities of his countrymen to the silent guest, interspersing his encomiums now and then with a rapturous eulogy of Theodora.

“Monstrous times have robbed us Romans of the power of the sword. But they cannot rob us of the power of the spirit, which will endure forever.”

The stranger replied with a stony stare of contempt.

Beside the Lord Atenulf of Benevento sat a tall girl with heavy coils of blue black hair, eyes that smouldered with a sombre light, curved carnation lips set in a perfect, oval face, and seeming more scarlet than they were, owing to her ivory pallor, the tint of the furled magnolia bud which is, perhaps, only seen to perfection in Italy and especially in Rome.

She looked at the grave-faced guest with quickened eyes.

Snatching some vine leaves from a pyramid of grapes, as purple as the tapestries of Tyre, she arose and laying her hand on the stranger's arm, said laughingly:

“Oh, what a brow! Dark as a thundercloud in June. Let me crown you with the leaves of the vine! Perchance the hour will evoke the mood!”

She twisted the leaves into a wreath and dropped them lightly on his head. The eyes of the silent guest, set in a face of sanguine color, leered viciously, with the looks of one who believes himself, however mistakenly, master of himself. There was a contemptuous curl about his lips. They were thick lips and florid.

“Ah!” he turned to the girl in a barbarous jargon, “you are one of those who go veiled in the streets.”

And as he spoke his eyes leered with yet livelier malice.

The girl shrank back.

"Those who go veiled know more than ordinary folk," she replied, then mingled with the other guests.

A young woman of great beauty, with light hair and blue eyes sat beside young Fabio of the Cavalli. Her bare arms, white as snow, and of exquisite contour, encircled his neck, while he drank and drank. Now and then she sipped of the wine, *Lacrymae Christi* from Viterbo, of the greenish straw color of the chrysoberyl.

Some one had put red poppy leaves in Roxana's hair, and as she sat by the side of the youth, she had the air and appearance of a Corybante.

Now and then she gave a glance at the purple curtain in the background, and one who watched her closely might have seen a strange sparkle in the depths of her clear blue eyes. With a look of disappointment she turned away, as not a ripple of air stirred the curtain's heavy fold. Then her arms stole anew round the youth, who drained one goblet after another, as if each succeeding one yielded up a new secret to him.

Roxana marked it well.

Her eyes danced to his, whenever Fabio's gaze stole towards the purple curtain which screened the mysterious garden beyond, in which the spray of a fountain cast silvery showers into branch-shadowed thickets, hidden retreats and silent, leafy alcoves, where flowers swooned in the moonlight and gave up their perfume for love.

From the immobile sable hangings the youth's eyes wandered back to Roxana's face, but there lurked something strange in their depths.

"Am I not more beautiful than Theodora?" whispered the woman by his side, extending her marble arms before her lover.

"You are beautiful, my Roxana," he stammered. "But Theodora is the most beautiful woman on earth."

Roxana turned very white at his words.

“ She has challenged me to come to her feast,” she said in a low tone, audible only to Fabio. “ Let her look to herself! ”

And her eyes were alight with the desire of the meeting.

On an adjoining couch reclined the huge jelly of a man who looked like Pan, enormously swollen and bloated. His paunch bellied out over the table like a full blown sail. His face was stained with many a night of wine. The mulberry eyes twinkled merrily. The swollen lips babbled incessantly.

It was the Lord Boso of Caprara.

“ They say that seven devils were cast out of Magdalene — ” he turned to Roxana —

The Lord of Norba interposed.

“ De mortuis nil nisi bene! Natura abhorret vacuum! I drink to the thirst to come! ”

And he raised his goblet and tossed it off.

The Lord Atenulf rose to his feet, swaying and supporting himself with one hand on the table. His great swollen face, big as a ham, creased itself into merriment.

“ Let the wine ferret out the thirst! ” he shouted, and drained off his tankard.

“ Argus hath a hundred eyes! A butler ought to have a hundred hands! ” shouted the Lord of Camerino. “ Wine, — slaves! Wine, — fill up in the name of Lucifer! ”

“ My tongue is peeling! ”

“ Wine! Wine! ”

The Africans filled up the empty tankards.

“ Privatio praesupponit habitum! ” opined the Prefect of Rome.

“ We drink to Life and the fleeting Hour. ”

“ Pereat Mors. ”

And the goblets clanged.

“ Who speaks of Death? ” shrieked young Fabio of the Cavalli, attempting to rise. The wine was taking effect on his brain.

Roxana drew him back on the couch beside her.

“ Fill the goblets! A brimmer of Chianti, red as blood — ”

“ Or the poppies in Roxana’s hair! ”

“ Wine from Samos — sweetened with honey.”

“ A decoction of Nectar and Ambrosia.”

The strangers who crowded the vast hall began to join in the mirth and jollity of their Roman hosts, their Oriental apathy or frozen stolidity melting slowly in the fumes of the wines.

A curtain had parted and a bevy of girls clad in diaphanous gowns of finest silver gauze made their way into the banquet hall and took their seats, as choice directed, beside the guests. Peals of laughter echoed through the vaulted dome, and excited voices were raised in clamorous disputations and contentious arguments. The wine began to flow more lavishly. The assembled guests grew more and more careless of their utterances. They flung themselves full length upon their luxurious couches, now pulling out handfuls of flowers from the tall malachite jars that stood near, and pelting the dancing girls for idle diversion, now summoning the attendant slaves to refill their wine cups, while they lay lounging at ease among the silken cushions.

There was a moment’s silence, sudden, unexplained, like the presage of some dark event.

The slow solemn boom of a bell sounded the hour of midnight.

The voices had ceased.

With one accord, as though drawn by some magnetic spell, all turned their eyes towards the purple curtain through which Theodora had just entered, and, rising from their seats, they broke into boisterous welcome and acclaim. Young Fabio of the Cavalli whose flushed face had all the wanton, effeminate beauty of a pictured Dionysos, reeled forward, goblet in hand and, tossing the wine in the air, so that it splashed down at his feet, staining his garments, he shouted:

“ Vanish dull moon and be ashamed, for a fairer planet



"Fill the goblets! A brimmer of claret, red as blood —"

"Or the poppies in Roxana's hand!"

"Wine from Samos — sweetened with honey."

"A libation of nectar and Ambrosia!"

The strangers who crowded the hall now began to join in the mirth and festivity of their Persian hosts, their Oriental spirits or frozen stolidity melting away in the fumes of the wine.

A waiter had paried and a boy in gold-embroidered diaphanous gowns of finest silver gauze, with a crown of pearls, came into the banquet hall and took their seats on long cushions beside the guests. Peals of laughter, cheerful songs, the wailed dome, and excited voices were raised in a storm of insipid and contentious arguings. The feast began to flow more lavishly. The convivial guests grew more and more careless of their utterances. They were reclining on large, soft cushions upon their luxurious couches, now gilded and decorated with flowers from the full malachite vases that stood on the tables. The dancing girls for the entertainment of the guests were without slaves to refill their wine cups when they were empty, but among the silken cushions.

There was a moment's silence, sudden, unexpected, like the presage of some dark event.

The slow solemn boom of a bell sounded the hour of midnight.

The music had ceased.

With one accord, as though drawn by some magnetic spell, all turned their eyes towards the purple curtain through which Theodore had just entered, and, rising from their seats, they broke into volunterous welcome and acclaim. Young Yano of the Cavalry whose husked fate had all the sublime, agonate beauty of a pictured Demoyes, reeled forward, goblet in hand and, tossing the wine in the air, so that it splashed down at his feet, staining his garments, he shouted:

"Vanish evil men and be chained, for a fairer planet



"Pelting the dancing girls for idle diversion"

rules the midnight sky! To Theodora—the Queen of Love!”

He staggered a few paces towards her, holding the empty goblet in his hand. His hair tossed back from his brows and entangled in a half-crushed wreath of vine-leaves, his garments disordered, his demeanor that of one possessed of a delirium of the senses, he stared at the wonderful apparition when, meeting Theodora's icy glance, he started as if he had been suddenly stabbed. The goblet fell from his hand and a shudder ran through his supple frame.

By the side of the Grand Chamberlain, who was garbed in black from head to toe, Theodora descended the steps that led from the raised platform into the brilliant hall.

Greeting her guests with her inscrutable smile, she moved as a queen through a crowd of courtiers, the changing lights of crimson and green playing about her like living flame, her head, wreathed with jewelled serpents, rising proudly erect from her golden mantle, her eyes scintillating with a gleam of mockery which made them look so lustrous, yet so cold.

Thus she strode towards the dais, draped in carnation-colored silks and surmounted by an arch of ebony.

For the space of a moment she paused, surveying her guests. A film seemed to pass over her eyes as her gaze rested upon one who had slowly arisen and was facing her in white silence.

With a slight bend of the head Roxana acknowledged Theodora's silent greeting; then, amidst loud shouts of acclaim she sank languidly upon her couch, trying to soothe the young Fabio, who had raised his fallen goblet and held it out to a passing slave. The latter refilled it with wine, which he gulped down thirstily, though the purple liquid brought no color to his drawn and ashen cheek.

Theodora paid no heed to the youth's discomfiture, but Roxana's face was white as death, and her lips were set as the lips of a marble mask as she gazed towards the ebony arch, upon which the eyes of all present were riveted.

With a rustle as of falling leaves Theodora's gorgeous mantle had released itself from its jewelled clasps, and had slowly fallen on the perfumed carpet at her feet.

A sigh quivered audibly through the hall, whether of joy, hope, desire or despair it was difficult to tell. The pride and peril of matchless loveliness was revealed in all its fatal seductiveness and invincible strength. In irresistible perfection she stood revealed before her guests in a robe of diaphanous silver gauze, which clung like a pale mist about the wonderful curves of her form and seemed to float about her like a summer cloud. Her dazzling white arms were bare to the shoulders. A silver serpent with a head of sapphires girdled her waist.

Sinking indolently among the silken cushions of the dais, where she gleamed in her wonderful whiteness like a glistening pearl, set in ebony, Theodora motioned to her guests to resume their places at the board.

She was instantly obeyed.

The Grand Chamberlain took what appeared to be his accustomed seat at her right, the seat at her left remaining vacant. For a moment Theodora's gaze rested thereon with a puzzled air, then she seemed to pay no farther heed.

But a close observer might have noted a shade of displeasure on the brow of the Grand Chamberlain, which no attempt at dissimulation could dispel.

A triumphant peal of music, the clash of mingled flutes, hautboys, tubas and harps rushed through the dome like a wind sweeping in from tropical seas.

Basil turned to Theodora with a searching glance.

"One couch still awaits its guest."

She nodded languidly.

"Tristan — the pilgrim. He is late. Know you aught of him, my lord?"

There was an air of mockery in her tone, not unmingled with concern.

Basil's thin lips straightened.

"Perchance the holy man hath other sheep in mind. What is he to you, Lady Theodora? Your concern for him seems of the suddenest."

"What is it to you, my lord?" she flashed in return. "Am I accountable to you for the moods that sway my soul?"

A mocking laugh startled both the Grand Chamberlain and Theodora.

Low as the words between them had been spoken, they had reached the ear of Roxana. Watchful of every shade of expression in Theodora's face, she was resolved to take up the gauntlet her hated rival had thrown to her, to draw her out of her defences into open conflict, for which she longed with all the fire of her soul. Determined to wrest the dominion of Rome from Marozia's beautiful sister, she was resolved to stake her all, counting upon the effect of her wonderful beauty and her physical perfection, which was a match for Theodora's in every point.

This desire on Roxana's part was precipitated by the strange demeanor of young Fabio of the Cavalli. From the moment Theodora had entered the banquet hall his fevered gaze had devoured her wonderful beauty. A feverish restlessness had taken possession of the youth and he had rudely repelled Roxana when she tried to soothe his wine-besotten brain.

"Perchance," she turned to Theodora, "remembering how Circé of old changed her lovers into swine, the sainted pilgrim no longer worships at Santa Maria of the Aventine."

Theodora started at the sound of her rival's hated voice as if an asp had stung her.

"Perchance the well-known blandishments of our fair Roxana might accomplish as much, if report speaks true," she replied, returning the smouldering challenge in the other woman's eyes.

"And why not?" came the purring response. "Am I not your match in body and soul?"

Every vestige of color had faded from Theodora's cheeks. For a moment the two women seemed to search each other's souls, their bosoms heaving, their eyes alight with the desire for the conflict.

Roxana slowly arose and strode toward the vacant seat at Theodora's left.

"When you circled the Rosary on yesternight, fairest Theodora," she purred, "was he not there — waiting for you?"

Instead of Theodora, it was Basil who made reply.

"Of whom do you speak?"

Again the silvery ripple of Roxana's laughter floated above the din.

"Perchance, my Lord Basil, our fair Theodora should be able to enlighten you on that point —"

"Of whom do you speak?" Basil turned to the woman.

There was something ominous in his eyes. His face was pale.

Theodora regarded him contemptuously, her dark slumbrous eyes turning from him to the woman.

"Beware lest I be tempted to strangle you," she spoke in a low tone, her white hands opening and closing convulsively.

"Like Persephoné, your Circassian, — in the Emperor's Tomb?" came the taunting reply.

Theodora's face was white as lightning.

"I should not leave the work undone!"

"Neither should I," came the purring reply, as Roxana extended her wonderful hands and arms. "Meanwhile — will you not inform your guests of the story of the pilgrim, who wellnigh caused Marozia's sister to enter a nunnery?"

A group of listeners had gathered about.

Basil was swaying to and fro in his seat with suppressed fury.

"One convent at least would be damned from gable to refectory," he muttered, emptying the tankard which one of the Africans had just replenished.

Theodora regarded him icily. Her inscrutable countenance gave no hint of her thoughts. She did not even seem to hear the questions which fell thick and fast about her, but there was something in the velvet depths of her eyes that would have caused even the boldest to tremble in the consciousness of having incurred her anger.

The Lord of Norba reeled towards the couch, where Roxana had taken her seat, blinking out of small watery eyes and flirting with his lordly buskins.

“How came it about?”

“What was he like?”

Theodora turned slowly from the one to the other. Then with a voice vibrant with contempt she said:

“A man!”

“And you were counting your beads?” shouted the Lord Atenulf in so amazed a tone, that the guests broke out into deals of laughter.

“It was then it happened,” Roxana related, without relating.

“How mysterious,” shivered some one.

“Will you not tell us?” Roxana challenged Theodora anew.

Their eyes met. Roxana turned to her auditors.

“Our fair Theodora had been suddenly touched by the spirit,” she began in her low musical voice. “Withdrawing from the eyes of man she gave herself up to holy meditations. In this mood she nightly circled the Penitent’s Rosary at Santa Maria of the Aventine, praying that the saint might take compassion upon her and deliver unto her keeping a perfect, saintly man, pure and undefiled. And to add weight to her own prayers, we, too, circled the Rosary; Gisla, Adelhita, Pamela and myself. And we prayed very earnestly.”

She paused for a moment and looked about, as if to gauge the impression her tale was producing on the assembled guests. Her smiling eyes swept the face of Theodora who was listening as intently as if the incident about to be related

had happened to another, her sphinx-like face betraying not a sign of emotion.

"And then?"

It was Basil's voice, hoarse and constrained.

"Then," Roxana continued, "the miracle came to pass before our very eyes. Behind one of the monolith pillars there stood one in a pilgrim's garb, young and tall of stature. His gaze followed our rotations, and each time we circled about him our fair Theodora offered thanks to the saint for granting her prayer —"

She paused and again her gaze mockingly swept Theodora's sphinx-like face.

"And then?" spoke the voice of Basil.

"When our devotions had come to a close," Roxana turned to the speaker, "Theodora sent Persephoné to conduct the saintly stranger to her bowers. And then the unlooked for happened. The saintly stranger fled, like Joseph of old. He did not even leave his garb."

There was an outburst of uproarious mirth.

"But do these things ever happen?" fluted the Poet Bembo.

"In the realms of fable," shouted the Lord of Norba.

"Now men have become wiser."

"And women more circumspect."

Theodora turned to the speaker.

"Perchance traditions have been merely reversed."

"Some recent events do not seem to support the theory," drawled the Grand Chamberlain.

Theodora regarded him with her strange inscrutable smile.

"Who knows, — if all were told?"

"The fact remains," Roxana persisted in her taunts, "that our fair Theodora's power has its limits; that there is one man at least whom she may not drug with the poison sweetness of her song."

In Theodora's eyes gleamed a smouldering fire, as she met the insufferable taunts of the other woman.

“Why do you not try your own charms upon him, fairest Roxana?” she turned to her tormentor. “Charms which, I grant you, are second not even to mine.”

Roxana’s bosom heaved. A strange fire smouldered in her eyes.

“And deem you I could not take him from you, if I choose?” she replied, the pupils of her eyes strangely dilated.

“Not if I choose to make him mine!” flashed Theodora.

Roxana’s contemptuous mirth cut her to the quick.

“You have tried and failed!”

“I have neither tried nor have I failed.”

“Then you mean to try again, fairest Theodora?” came the insidious, purring reply.

“That is as I choose!”

“It shall be as I choose.”

“What do you mean, fairest Roxana?”

“I mean to conquer him — to make him mine — to steep his senses in so wild a delirium that he shall forget his God, his garb, his honor. And, when I have done with him, I shall send him to the devil — or to you, fairest Theodora — to finish, what I began. This to prove you a vain boaster, who has failed to make good every claim you have put forth — ”

Theodora was very pale. In her voice there was an unnatural calm as she turned to the other woman.

“You have boasted, you will make this austere pilgrim your own, body and soul — you will cast the tatters of his soiled virtue at my feet. I did not desire him. But now” — her eyes sank into those of the other woman, “I mean to have him, — and I shall — with you, fairest Roxana, and all your power of seduction against me! I shall have him — and when I have done with him, not even you shall desire him — nor that other, whom you serve — ”

Both women had risen to their feet and challenged each other with their eyes.

"By the powers of darkness, you shall not!" Roxana returned, pale to the lips.

"Take him from me — if you can!" Theodora flashed. "I shall conquer you — and him!"

At this point the Grand Chamberlain interposed.

"Were it not wise," he drawled, looking from the one to the other, "to acquaint this holy man with the perils that beset his soul, since the two most beautiful and virtuous ladies in Rome seem resolved to guide him on his Way of the Cross?"

There was a moment of silence, then he continued in the same drawl, which veiled emotions he dared not reveal in this assembly.

"Deem you, the man who journeyed hundreds of leagues to obtain absolution for having kissed a woman in wedlock has aught to fear from such as you?"

Ere Theodora could make reply the tantalizing purring voice of Roxana struck her ear.

"Surely this is no man —"

"A man he is, nevertheless," Basil retorted hotly. "One night I wandered out upon the silent Aventine. Losing myself among the ruins, I heard voices in the abode of the Monk of Cluny. Fearing, lest some one should attempt to harm this holy friar," he continued, with a side glance at Theodora, "I entered unseen. I overheard his confession."

There was profound silence.

It seemed too monstrously absurd. Absolution for a kiss!

Roxana spoke at last, and her veiled mockery strained her rival's temper to the breaking point. Her words stung, as needles would the naked flesh.

"Then," she said with deliberate slowness, "if our fair Theodora persist in her unholy desire, what else is there for me to do but to take him from her just to save the poor man's soul?"

Theodora's white hands yearned for the other woman's throat.

"Deem you, your charms would snare the good pilgrim, should I will to make him mine?" she flashed.

"Why not?" Roxana purred. "Shall we try? Are you afraid?" —

"Of you?" Theodora shrilled.

A strange fire burnt in Roxana's eyes.

"Of the ordeal! Once upon a time you took from me the boy I loved. Now I shall take from you the man you desire!"

"I challenge you!"

"To the death!" Roxana flashed, appraising her rival's charms against her own. Her further utterance was checked by the sudden entrance of one of the Africans, who prostrated himself before Theodora, muttering some incoherent words at which both the woman and Basil gave a start.

"Have him thrown into the street," Basil turned to Theodora.

"Have him brought in," Theodora commanded.

For the space of a few moments intense silence reigned throughout the pavilion. Then the curtains at the farther end parted, admitting two huge Africans, who carried between them the seemingly lifeless form of a man.

An imperious gesture of Theodora directed them to approach with their burden, and a cry of surprise and dismay broke from her lips as she gazed into the white, still features of Tristan.

He was unconscious, but faintly breathing, and upon his garb were strange stains, that looked like blood. The Africans placed their burden on the couch from which Roxana had arisen, and Theodora summoned the Moorish physician Bahram from the lower end of the table, where he had indulged in a learned dispute with a Persian sage. The other guests thronged about, curious to see and to hear.

The Grand Chamberlain changed color when his gaze first lighted on the prostrate form and he felt inclined to make light of the matter hinting at the effect of Italian wines upon

strangers unaccustomed to the vintage. The ashen pallor of Tristan's cheeks had not remained unremarked by Theodora, as she turned from the unconscious victim of a villainy to the man beside her, whom in some way she connected with the deed.

Basil's comment elicited but a glance of contempt as, approaching the couch whereon he lay, Theodora eagerly watched the Moorish physician in his efforts to revive the unconscious man. Tristan's teeth were so tightly set that it required the insertion of a steel bar to pry them apart.

Bahram poured some strong wine down the throat of the still unconscious man, then placed him in a sitting position and continued his efforts until, with a violent fit of coughing, Tristan opened his eyes.

It was some time, however, until he regained his faculties sufficiently to manifest his emotions, and the bewilderment with which his gaze wandered from one face to the other, would have been amusing had not the mystery which encompassed his presence inspired a feeling of awe. The Moorish physician, upon being questioned by Theodora, stated, some powerful poison had caused the coma which bound Tristan's limbs and added, in another hour he would have been beyond the pale of human aid. More than this he would not reveal and, his task accomplished, he withdrew among the guests.

From the Grand Chamberlain, whose stony gaze was riveted upon him, Tristan turned to the woman who reclined by his side on the divan. His vocal chords seemed paralyzed, but his other faculties were keenly alive to the strangeness of his surroundings. Perceiving his inability to reply to her questions, Theodora soothed him to silence.

Vainly endeavoring to speak, Tristan partook but sparingly of the refreshments which she offered to him with her own hands. She was now deliberately endeavoring to enmesh his senses, and her exotic, wonderful beauty could not but accomplish with him what it had accomplished with all who came

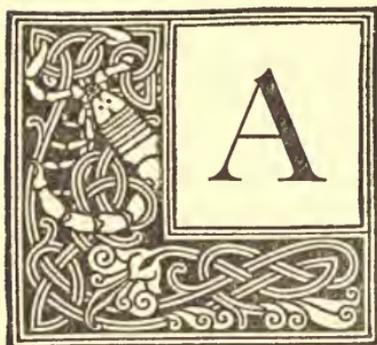
under its fatal spell. An insidious, sensuous perfume seemed to float about her, which caused Tristan's brain to reel. Her bare arms and wonderful hands made him dizzy. Her eyes held his own by their strange, subtle spell. Unfathomed mysteries seemed to lurk in their hidden depths. Without endeavoring to engage him in conversation, much as she longed to question him on certain points, she tried to soothe him by passing her cool white hands over his fevered brow. And all the time she was pondering on the nature of his infliction and the author thereof, as her gaze pensively swept the banquet hall.

The guests had, one by one, returned to their seats. Theodora also had arisen, after having made Tristan comfortable on the couch assigned to him.

Unseen the heavy folds of the curtain behind her parted. A face peered for a moment into her own, that seemed to possess no human attributes. Theodora gave a hardly perceptible nod and the face disappeared. The Grand Chamberlain took his seat by her side and Roxana flinging Theodora a glittering challenge seated herself beside Tristan.

CHAPTER X

THE CHALICE OF OBLIVION



DELIRIUM of the senses such as he had never experienced to this hour began to steal over Tristan, as he found himself seated between Theodora, the fairest sorceress that ever triumphed over the frail spirit of man — and Roxana, who was whispering strange words into his bewildered ears.

Across the board the gloomy form of the Grand Chamberlain in his sombre attire loomed up like a shadow of evil in a garden of strangely tinted orchids.

How the time passed on, he could not tell. Peals of laughter resounded now and then through the vaulted dome and voices were raised in clamorous disputations that just sheered off the boundary-line of actual quarrel.

Theodora seemed to pay but little heed to Tristan. Roxana had coiled her white arms about him and, whenever he raised his goblet, their hands touched and a stream of fire coursed through his veins. Only now and then Theodora's drowsy eyes shot forth a fiery gleam from under their heavily fringed lids.

Roxana smiled into her rival's eyes and, raising a goblet of wine to her lips, kissed the brim and gave it to Tristan with an indescribably graceful swaying motion of her whole form that reminded one of a tall white lily, bowing to the breeze.

Tristan seized the cup eagerly, drank from it and returned it and, as their hands touched again, he could hardly restrain himself from giving way to a transport of passion. He was no longer himself. His brain seemed to reel. He felt as if he would plunge into the crater of a seething volcano without heeding the flames.

Even Hellyayne's pale image seemed forgotten for the time.

The guests waxed more and more noisy, their merriment more and more boisterous. Many were now very much the worse for their frequent libations, and young Fabio particularly seemed to display a desire to break away from all bonds of prudent reserve.

He lay full length on his silken divan, singing little snatches of song to himself and, pulling the vine-wreath from his tumbled locks, as though he found it too cumbersome, he flung it on the ground amid the other debris of the feast. Then, folding his arms lazily behind his head, he stared straight and fixedly at Theodora, surveying every curve of her body, every slight motion of her head, every faint smile that played upon her lips. She was listening with an air of ill-disguised annoyance to Basil, whose wine-inflamed countenance and passion-distorted features left little to the surmise regarding his state of mind.

On the couch adjoining the one of Fabio of the Cavalli reclined a nobleman from Gades, who, having partaken less lavishly of the wine than the rest of the guests, was engaged in a dispute with the burly stranger from the North, whose temper seemed to have undergone little change for the better for his having filled his paunch.

In the barbarous jargon of tenth century Latin they commented upon Theodora, upon the banquet, upon the guests and upon Rome in general, and the Spaniard expressed surprise that Marozia's sister had failed to revenge Marozia's death, contenting herself to spend her life in the desert wastes of Aventine, among hermits, libertines and fools.

Notwithstanding his besotten mood Fabio had heard and understood every word the stranger uttered. Before he, to whom his words was addressed could make reply, he shouted insolently :

“ Ask Theodora why she is content to live in her enchanted groves instead in the Emperor's Tomb, haunted by the spectre of strangled Marozia ! ”

A terrible silence followed this utterance. The eyes of all present wandered towards the speaker. The Grand Chamberlain ground his teeth. Every vestige of color had faded from his face.

“ Are you afraid ? ” shouted Fabio, raising himself upon his elbows and nodding towards Theodora.

The woman turned her splendid, flashing orbs slowly upon him. A chill, steely glitter leaped from their velvety depths.

“ Pray, Fabio, be heedful of your speech,” said she with a quiver in her voice, curiously like the suppressed snarl of a tigress. “ Most men are fools, like yourself, and by their utterance shall they be judged ! ”

Fabio broke out into boisterous mirth.

“ And Theodora rules with a rod of iron. Even the Lord Basil is but a toy in her hands ! Behold him, — yonder.”

Basil had arisen, his hand on the hilt of his poniard. Theodora laid her white hand upon his arm.

“ Nay — ” she said sweetly, “ this is a matter for myself to settle.”

“ A very anchorite,” the mocking voice of Fabio rose above the silence.

A young noble of the Cætani tried to quiet him, but in vain :

“ The Lord Basil is no monk.”

“ Wherefore then his midnight meditations in the devil's own chapel yonder, in which our fair Theodora officiates as Priestess of Love ? ”

“ Midnight meditations ? ” interposed the Spaniard, not knowing that he was treading on dangerous ground.

“Ask Theodora,” shouted Fabio, “how many lovers are worshipping at her midnight shrine!”

The silence of utter consternation prevailed. Glances of absolute dismay went round the table, and the stillness was as ominous as the hush before a thunderclap. Fabio, apparently struck by the sudden silence, gazed lazily from out the tumbled cushions, a vacant, besotten smile upon his lips.

“What fools you are!” he shouted thickly. “Did you not hear me? I bade you ask Theodora,” and suddenly he sat bolt upright, his face crimsoning as with an access of passion, “why the Lord Basil creeps in and out her palace at midnight like a skulking slave? Ask him why he creeps in disguise through the underground passage. Ay—stranger,” he shouted to Tristan, “you are near enough to our lady of Witcheries. Ask her how many lovers have tasted of the chalice of oblivion?”

Another death-like silence ensued.

Even the attendants seemed to move with awed tread among the guests.

Theodora and Roxana had risen almost at the same time, facing each other in a white silence.

Roxana extended her snow-white arms towards Theodora.

“Why do you not reply to your discarded lover?” she taunted her rival. “Shall I reply for him? You have challenged me, and I return your challenge! I am your match in all things, Lady Theodora. In my veins flows the blood of kings—in yours the blood of courtesans. There is not room on earth for both of us. Does not your coward soul quail before the issue?”

Theodora turned to Roxana a face, white as marble, her eyes preternaturally brilliant. “You shall have your wish—even to the death. But—before the dark-winged messenger enfolds you with his sable wings you shall know Theodora as you have never known her—nor ever shall again.”

From the woman Theodora turned to the man.

"Fabio," she said in her sweet mock-caressing tone, "I fear you have grown altogether too wise for this world. It were a pity you should linger in so narrow and circumscribed a sphere."

She paused and beckoned to a giant Nubian who stood behind her chair.

"Refill the goblets!"

Her behest executed she clinked goblets with Roxana. An undying hate shone in the eyes of the two women as they raised the crystal goblets to their lips.

Theodora hardly tasted of the purple beverage. Roxana eagerly drained her cup, then she kissed the brim and offered the fragrant goblet to Tristan, as her eyes challenged Theodora anew.

Ere he could raise it to his lips, Theodora dashed the goblet from Tristan's hands and the purple wine dyed the orange colored carpet like dark stains of blood.

White as lightning, her eyes ablaze with hidden fires, her white hands clenched, Roxana straightened herself to her full height, ready to bound at Theodora's throat, to avenge the insult and to settle now and here, woman to woman, the question of supremacy between them, when she reeled as if struck by a thunderbolt. Her hands went to her heart and without a moan she fell, a lifeless heap, upon the floor.

Ere Tristan and the other guests could recover from their consternation, or fathom the import of the terrible scene, a savage scream from the couch upon which Fabio reclined, turned the attention of every one in that direction.

Fabio, suddenly sobered, had risen from his couch and drained his goblet. It rolled upon the carpet from his nerveless grasp. For a moment his arms wildly beat the air, then he reeled and fell prone upon the floor. His staring eyes and his face, livid with purple spots, proclaimed him dead, even ere the Moorish physician could come to his aid.

Theodora clapped her hands, and at the signal four giant

Nubians appeared and, taking up the lifeless bodies, disappeared with them in the moonlit garden outside.

The Grand Chamberlain, rising from his seat, informed the guests that a sudden ailment had befallen the woman and the man. They were being removed to receive care and attention.

Though a lingering doubt hovered in the minds of those who had witnessed the scene, some kept silent through fear, others whose brains were befuddled by the fumes of the wine gave utterance to inarticulate sounds, from which the view they took of the matter, was not entirely clear.

The shock had restored to Tristan the lost faculty of speech. For a moment he stared horrified at Theodora. Her impassive calm roused in him a feeling of madness. With an imprecation upon his lips he rushed upon her, his gleaming dagger raised aloft.

But ere he could carry out his intent, Theodora's clear, cold voice smote the silence.

"Disarm him!"

One of the Africans had glided stealthily to his side, and the steel was wrenched from Tristan's grip.

"Be silent, — for your life!" some one whispered into his ear.

Suddenly he grew weak. Theodora's languid eyes met his own, utterly paralyzing his efforts. A smile parted her lips as, without a trace of anger, she kissed the ivory bud of a magnolia and threw it to him.

As one in a trance he caught the flower. Its fragrance seemed to creep into his brain, rob his manhood of its strength. Sinking submissively into his seat he gazed up at her in wondering wistfulness. Was there ever woman so bewilderingly beautiful? A strange enervating ecstasy took him captive, as he permitted his eyes to dwell on the fairness of her face, the ivory pallor of her skin, the supple curves of her form. As one imprisoned in a jungle exhaling poison miasmas loses all

control over his faculties, feeling a drowsy lassitude stealing over him, so Tristan gave himself up to the spell that encompassed him, heedless of the memories of the past.

Now Theodora touched a small bell and suddenly the marble floor yawned asunder and the banquet table with all its accessories vanished underground with incredible swiftness. Then the floor closed again. The broad centre space of the hall was now clear of obstruction and the guests roused themselves from their drowsy postures of half-inebriated languor.

Tristan drank in the scene with eager, dazzled eyes and heavily beating heart. Love and hate strangely mingled stole over him more strongly than ever, in the sultry air of this strange summer night, this night of sweet delirium in which all that was most dangerous and erring in his nature waked into his life and mastered his better will.

Outside the water lilies nodded themselves to sleep among their shrouding leaves. Like a sheet of molten gold spread the lake over the spot where Roxana and Fabio had found a common grave.

Surrounding this lake spread a garden, golden with the sleepy radiance of the late moon, and peacefully fair in the dreaminess of drooping foliage, moss-covered turf and star-sprinkled violet sky. In full view, and lighted by the reflected radiance flung out from within, a miniature waterfall tumbled headlong into a rocky recess, covered and overgrown with lotus-lilies and plummy ferns. Here and there golden tents glimmered through the shadows cast by the great magnolia trees, whose half-shut buds wafted balmy odors through the drowsy summer night. The sounds of flutes, of citherns and cymbals floated from distant bosquets, as though elfin shepherds were guarding their fairy flocks in some hidden nook. By degrees the light grew warmer and more mellow in tint till it resembled the deep hues of an autumn sunset,

flecked through the emerald haze, in the sunken gardens of Theodora.

Another clash of cymbals, stormily persistent, then the chimes of bells, such as bring tears to the eyes of many a wayfarer, who hears the silvery echoes when far away from home and straightway thinks of his childhood days, those years of purest happiness.

A curious, stifling sensation began to oppress Tristan as he listened to those bells. They reminded him of strange things, things to which he could not give a name, odd suggestions of fair women who were wont to pray for those they loved, and who believed that their prayers would be heard in heaven and would be granted!

With straining eyes he gazed out into the languorous beauty of the garden that spread its emerald glamour around him, and a sob broke from his lips as the peals of the chiming bells, softened by degrees into subdued and tremulous semitones, the clarion clearness of the cymbals again smote the silent air.

Ere Tristan, in his state of bewilderment, could realize what was happening, the great fire globe in the dome was suddenly extinguished and a firm hand imperiously closed on his own, drawing him along, he knew not whither.

He glanced about him. In the semi-darkness he was able to discern the sheen of the lake with its white burden of water lilies, and the dim, branch-shadowed outlines of the moonlit garden. Theodora walked beside him, Theodora, whose lovely face was so perilously near his own, Theodora, upon whose lips hovered a smile of unutterable meaning. His heart beat faster; he strove in vain to imagine what fate was in store for him. He drank in the beauty of the night that spread her star-embroidered splendors about him, he was conscious of the vital youth and passion that throbbed in his veins, endowing him with a keen headstrong rapture which is said to come but once in a lifetime, and which in

the excess of its folly will bring endless remorse in its wake.

Suddenly he found himself in an exquisitely adorned pavilion of painted silk, lighted by a lamp of tenderest rose lustre and carpeted with softest amber colored pile. It stood apart from the rest, concealed as it were in a grove of its own, and surrounded by a thicket of orange-trees in full bloom. The fragrance of the white waxen flowers hung heavily upon the air, breathing forth delicate suggestions of languor and sleep. The measured cadence of the waterfall alone broke the deep stillness, and now and then the subdued and plaintive thrill of a nightingale, soothing itself to sleep with its own song in some deep-shadowed copse.

Here, on a couch, such as might have been prepared for Titania, Theodora seated herself, while Tristan stood gazing at her in a sort of mad, fascinated wonderment, and gradually increasing intensity of passion.

The alluring smile and the quick brightening of the eyes, so rare a thing with him who, since he had left Avalon, was used to wear so calm and subdued a mask, changed his aspect in an extraordinary manner. In an instant he seemed more alive, more intensely living, pulsing with the joy of the hour. He felt as if he must let the natural youth in his veins run riot, as Theodora's beauty and the magic of the night began to sting his blood.

Theodora's eyes danced to his. She had marked the symptoms and knew. Her eyes had lost their mocking glitter and swam in a soft languor, that was strangely bewitching. Her lips parted in a faint sigh and a glance like fire shot from beneath her black silken lashes.

"Tristan!" she murmured tremulously and waited. Then again: "Tristan!"

He knelt before her, passion sweeping over him like a hurricane, and took her unresisting hands in his.

"Theodora!" he said, bending over her, and his voice,

even to his own ears had a strange sound, as if some one else were speaking. "Theodora! What would you have of me? Speak! For my heart aches with a burden of dark memories conjured up by the wizard spell of your eyes!"

She gently drew him down beside her on the couch.

"Foolish dreamer!" she murmured, half mockingly, half tenderly. "Are love and passion so strange a thing that you wonder — as you sit here beside me?"

"Love!" he said. "Is it love indeed?"

He uttered the words as if he spoke to himself, in a hushed, awe-struck tone. But she had heard, and a flash of triumph brightened her beautiful face.

"Ah!" and she dropped her head lower and lower, till the dark perfumed tresses touched his brow. "Then you do love me?"

He started. A dull pang struck his heart, a chill of vague uncertainty and dread. He longed to take her in his arms, forget the past, the present, the future, life and all it held. But suddenly a vague thought oppressed him. There was the sense that he was dishonoring that other love. However unholy it had been, it was yet for him a real and passionate reality of his past life, and he shrank in shame from suppressing it. Would it not have been far nobler to have fought it down as the pilgrim he had meant to be than to drown its memory in a delirium of the senses?

And — was this love indeed for the woman by his side? Was it not mere passion and base desire?

As he remained silent the silken voice of the fairest woman he had ever seen once more sent its thrill through his bewildered brain in the fateful question:

"Do you love me, Tristan?"

Softly, insidiously, she entwined him with her wonderful white arms. Her perfumed breath fanned his cheeks; her dark tresses touched his brow. Her lips were thirstily ajar.

He put his arms about her. Hungrily, passionately, his

gaze wandered over her matchless form, from the small feet, encased in golden sandals, to the crowning masses of her dusky hair. His heart beat with loud, impatient thuds, like some wild thing struggling in its cage, but though his lips moved, no utterance came.

Her arms tightened about him.

"You are of the North," she said, "though you have hotter blood in your veins. Now under our yellow sun, and in our hot nights, when the moon hangs like an alabaster lamp in the sky, a beaten shield of gold trembling over our dreams — forget the ice in your blood. Gather the roses while you may! A time will come when their soft petals will have lost their fragrance! I love you — be mine!"

And, bending towards him, she kissed him with moist, hungry lips.

He fevered in her embrace. He kissed her eyes — her hair — her lips — and a strange dizziness stole over him, a delirium in which he was no longer master of himself.

"Can you not be happy, Tristan?" she whispered gently. "Happy as other men when loved as I love you!"

With a cold sinking of the heart he looked into the woman's perfect face. His upturned gaze rested on the glittering serpent heads that crowned the dusky hair, and the words of Fabio of the Cavalli knocked on the gates of his memory.

"Happy as other men when they love — and are deceived," he said, unable to free himself of her entwining arms.

"You shall not be deceived," she returned quickly. "You shall attain that which your heart desires. Your dearest hope shall be fulfilled, — all shall be yours — all — if you will be mine — to-night."

Tristan met her burning gaze, and as he did so the strange dread increased.

"What of the Grand Chamberlain?" he queried. "What of Basil, your lover?"

Her answer came swift and fierce, as the hiss of a snake.

“ He shall die — even as Roxana — even as Fabio, he who boasted of my love! You shall be lord of Rome — and I — your wife — ”

Her words leaped into his brain with the swift, fiery action of a burning drug. A red mist swam before his eyes.

“ Love! ” he cried, as one seized with sudden delirium. “ What have I to do with love — what have you, Theodora, who make the lives of men your sport, and their torments your mockery? I know no name for the fever that consumes me, when I look upon you — no name for the ravishment that draws me to you in mingled bliss and agony. I would perish, Theodora. Kill me, and I shall pray for you! But love — love — it recalls to my soul a glory I have lost. There can be no love between you and me! ”

He spoke wildly, incoherently, scarcely knowing what he said. The woman’s arms had fallen from him. He staggered to his feet.

A low laugh broke from her lips, which curved in an evil smile.

“ Poor fool! ” she said in her low, musical tones, “ to cast away that for which hundreds would give their last life’s blood. Madman! First to desire, then to spurn. Go! And beware! ”

She stood before him in all her white glory and loveliness, one white arm stretched forth, her bosom heaving, her eyes aflame. And Tristan, seized with a sudden fear, fled from the pavilion, down the moonlit path as if pursued by an army of demons.

A man stepped from a thicket of roses, directly into his path. Heedless of everything, of every one, Tristan endeavored to pass him, but the other was equally determined to bar his way.

“ So I have found you at last, ” said the voice, and Tristan, starting as if the ground had opened before him, stared into the face of the stranger at Theodora’s board.

"You have found me, my Lord Roger," he said, after recovering from his first surprise. "Here I may injure no one — you, my lord, least of all! Leave me in peace!"

The stranger gave a sardonic laugh.

"That I may perchance, when you have told me the truth — the whole truth!"

"Ask, my lord, and I will answer," Tristan replied.

"Where is the Lady Helayne?" —

The questioning voice growled like far off thunder.

Tristan recoiled a step, staring into the questioner's face as if he thought he had gone mad.

"The Lady Helayne?" he stammered, white to the lips and with a dull sinking of the heart. "How am I to know? I have not seen her since I left Avalon — months ago. Is she not with you?"

The Lord Laval's brow was dark as a thunder cloud.

"If she were with me — would I be wasting my time asking you concerning her?" he barked.

"Where is she, then?" Tristan gasped.

"That you shall tell me — or I have forgotten the use of this knife!"

And he laid his hand on the hilt of a long dagger that protruded from his belt.

Tristan's eyes met those of the other.

"My lord, this is unworthy of you! I have never committed a deed I dared not confess — and I despise your threat and your accusation as would the Lady Helayne, were she here."

Steps were heard approaching from the direction of the pavilion.

"I am a stranger in Rome. Doubtless you are familiar with its ways. Some one is coming. Where shall we meet?"

Tristan pondered.

“At the Arch of the Seven Candles. Every child can point the way. When shall it be?”

“To-morrow, — at the second hour of the night. And take care to speak the truth!”

Ere Tristan could reply the speaker had vanished among the thickets.

For a moment he paused, amazed, bewildered. Roger de Laval in Rome! And Helayne — where was she? She had left Avalon — had left her consort. Had she entered a convent? Helayne — where was Helayne?

Before this dreadful uncertainty all the events of the night vanished as if they had never been.

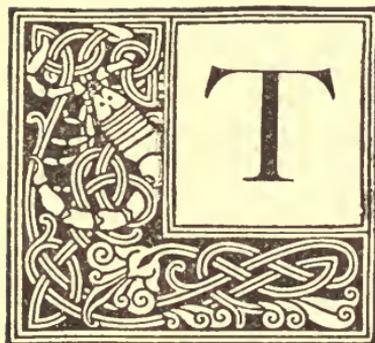
For a long time Tristan remained where Roger de Laval had left him. The cool air from the lake blew refreshingly on his heated brow. A thousand odors from orange and jessamine floated caressingly about him. The night was very still. There, in the soft sky-gloom, moved the majestic procession of undiscovered worlds. There, low on the horizon, the yellow moon swooned languidly down in a bed of fleecy clouds. The drowsy chirp of a dreaming bird came softly now and again from branch shadowed thickets, and the lilies on the surface of the lake nodded mysteriously to each other, as if they were whispering a secret of another world.

At last the moon sank out of sight and from afar, softened by the distance, the chimes of convent bells from the remote regions of the Aventine were wafted through the flower scented summer night.

BOOK THE THIRD

CHAPTER I

WOLFSBANE



THE early summer dawn was creeping over the silent Campagna when Tristan reached the Inn of The Golden Shield.

As one dazed he had traversed the deserted, echoing streets in the mysterious half-light which flooded the Eternal City; a light in which everything was sharply defined yet

seemed oddly spectral and ghost-like.

Deep down in his heart two emotions were contending, appalling in their intensity and appeal. One was an agonized fear for the woman he loved with a love so unwavering that his love was actually himself, his whole being, the sacrament that consecrated his life and ruled his destiny.

She had left Avalon; she had left him to whom she had plighted her troth. Where was she and why was Roger de Laval in Rome?

An icy fear gripped his heart at the thought; a nameless dread and horror of the terrible scene he had witnessed at the midnight feast of Theodora.

For a time he was as one obsessed, hardly master of himself and his actions. In an age where scenes such as those he had witnessed were quickly forgotten the death of Roxana and young Fabio created but little stir. Rome, just emerging from under the dark cloud of Marozia's regime, in the throes of ever-recurring convulsions, without a helmsman to guide

the tottering ship of state, received the grim tidings with a shrug of apathy; and the cowed burghers discussed in awed whispers the dread power of one whose vengeance none dared to brave.

Tristan's unsophisticated mind could not so easily forget. He had stood at the brink of the abyss, he had looked down into the murky depths from which there was no escape once the fumes had conquered the senses and vanquished resistance. With a shudder he called to mind, how utterly and completely he had abandoned himself to the lure of the sorceress, how little short of a miracle had saved him. She had led him on step by step, and the struggle had but begun.

No one was astir at the inn.

He ascended the stairs leading to his chamber. The chill of the night was still lingering in the dusky passages. He lighted the taper of a tiny lamp that burnt before an image of the Mother of Sorrows in a niche.

Then he sank upon his couch. His vitality seemed to be ebbing and his mind clouding before the problems that began to crowd in upon him.

Nothing since he left Avalon, nothing external or merely human, had stirred him as had his meeting with Theodora. It had roused in him a dormant, embryonic faculty, active and vivid. What it called into his senses was not a mere series of pictures. It created a visual representation of the horrified creature, roused from the flattering oblivion of death to memory and shame and dread, nothing really forgotten, nothing past, the old lie that death ends all pitifully unmasked.

He shuddered as he thought of the consequences of surrender from which a silent voice out of the far off past had saved him — just in time.

His life lay open before him as a book, every fact recorded, nothing extenuated.

A calm, relentless voice bade him search his own life, if he

had done aught amiss. He had never taken or desired that which was another's. Yet his years had been a ceaseless perturbation. There had been endless and desperate clutchings at bliss, followed by the swift discovery that the exquisite light had faded, leaving a chill gloaming that threatened a lonely night. And if the day had failed in its promise what would the night do?

His soul cried out for rest, for peace from the enemy; peace, not this endless striving. He was terrified. In the ignominious lament there was desertion, as if he were too small for the fight. He was demanding happiness, and that his own burden should rest on another's shoulders. How silent was the universe around him! He stood in tremendous, eternal isolation.

Pale and colorless as a moonstone at first the ghostly dawn had quickened to the iridescence of the opal, flaming into a glory of gold and purple in the awakening east.

And now the wall in the courtyard was no longer grey. A faint, clear, golden light was beginning to flow and filter into it, dispelling, one by one, the dark shadows that lurked in the corners. Somewhere in the distance the dreamer heard the shrill silver of a lark, and a dull monotonous sound, felt rather than heard, suggested that sleeping Rome was about to wake.

And then came the sun. A long golden ray stabbed the mists and leaped into his chamber like a living thing. The little sanctuary lamp before the image of the Blessed Virgin glowed no more.

After a brief rest Tristan arose, noting for the first time with a degree of chagrin that his dagger had not been restored to him.

It was day now. The sun was high and hot. The streets and thoroughfares were thronged. A bright, fierce light beat down upon dome and spire and pinnacle, flooding the august ruins of the Cæsars and the thousand temples of the Holy

Cross with brilliant radiance from the cloudless azure of the heavens. Over the Tiber white wisps of mist were rising. Beyond, the massive bulk of the Emperor's Tomb was revealed above the roofs of the houses, and the olive groves of Mount Janiculum glistened silvery in the rays of the morning sun.

It was only when, refreshed after a brief rest and frugal refreshments, Tristan quitted the inn, taking the direction of Castel San Angelo, that the incidents leading up to his arrival at the feast of Theodora slowly filtered through his mind.

Withal there was a link missing in the chain of events. From the time he had left the Lateran in pursuit of the two strangers everything seemed an utter blank. What mysterious forces had been at work conveying him to his destiny, he could not even fathom and, in a state of perplexity, such as he had rarely experienced, he pursued his way, paying little heed to the life and turmoil that seethed around him.

Upon entering Castel San Angelo he was informed that the Grand Chamberlain had arrived but a few moments before and he immediately sought the presence of the man whose sinister countenance held out little promise of the solution of the mystery.

In an octagon chamber, the small windows of which, resembling port-holes, looked out upon the Campagna, Basil was fretfully perambulating as Tristan entered.

After a greeting which was frosty enough on both sides, Tristan briefly stated the matter which weighed upon his mind.

The Grand Chamberlain watched him narrowly, nodding now and then by way of affirmation, as Tristan related the experience at the Lateran, referring especially to two mysterious strangers whom he had followed to a distant part of the city, believing they might offer some clue to the outrage committed at the Lateran on the previous night.

Basil regarded the new captain with a mixture of curiosity and gloom. Perchance he was as much concerned in discov-

ering what Tristan knew as the latter was in finding a solution of the two-fold mystery. After having questioned him on his experience, without offering any suggestion that might clear up his visitor's mind, Basil touched upon the precarious state of the city and its hidden dangers.

Tristan listened attentively to the sombre account, little guessing its purpose.

"Much have I heard of the prevailing lawless state," he interposed at last, "of dark deeds hidden in the silent bosom of the night, of feud and rebellion against the Church which is powerless to defend herself for the want of a master-hand that would evoke order out of chaos."

The dark-robed figure by his side gave a grim nod.

"Men are closely allied to beasts, giving rein to their desires and appetites as the tigers and hyenas. It is only fear that will restrain them, fear of some despotic invisible force that pervades the universe, whose chiefest attribute is not so much creative as destructive. It is only through fear you can rule the filthy rabble that reviles to-day its idol of yesterday."

There was an undercurrent of scorn in Basil's voice and Tristan saw, as it were, the lightning of an angry or disdainful thought flashing through the sombre depths of his eyes.

"What of the Lady Theodora?" Tristan interposed bluntly.

Basil gave a nameless shrug.

"She bends men's hearts to her own desires, taking from them their will and soul. The hot passion of love is to her a toy, clasped and unclasped in the pink hollow of her hand."

And, as he spoke, Basil suited the gesture to the word, closing his fingers in the air and again unclosing them.

"As long as she retains the magic of her beauty so long will her sway over the Seven Hills endure," he added after a brief pause.

"What of the woman who paid the penalty of her daring?" Tristan ventured to inquire.

Basil regarded the questioner quizzically.

"There have been many disturbances of late," he spoke after a pause. "Roxana's lust for Theodora's power proved her undoing. Theodora will suffer no rival to threaten her with Marozia's fate."

"I have heard it whispered she is assembling about her men who are ready to go to any extreme," Tristan interposed tentatively, thrown off his guard by Basil's affability of manner.

The latter gave a start, but recovered himself.

"Idle rumors. The Romans must have something to talk about. Odo of Cluny is thundering his denunciations with such fervid eloquence that they cannot but linger in the rabble's mind."

"The hermit of Mount Aventine?" Tristan queried.

"Even he! He has a strange craze, a doctrine of the End of Time, to be accomplished when the cycle of the *sæculum* has run its course. A doctrine he most furiously proclaims in language seemingly inspired, and which he promulgates to farther his own dark ends."

"A theory most dark and strange," Tristan replied with a shudder, for he was far from free of the superstition of the times.

Basil gave a shrug. His tone was lurid.

"What shall it matter to us, who shall hardly tread this earth when the fateful moment comes?"

"If it were true nevertheless?" Tristan replied meditatively.

A sombre fire burnt in the eyes of the Grand Chamberlain.

"Then, indeed, should we not pluck the flowers in our path, defying darkness and death and the fiery chariot of the All-destroyer that is to sweep us to our doom?"

Tristan shuddered.

Some such words he had indeed heard among the pilgrim throngs without clearly grasping their import. They had

haunted his memory and had, for the time at least, laid a restraining hand upon his impulses.

But the mystery of the Monk of Cluny weighed lightly against the mystery of the woman who held in the hollow of her hand the destinies of Rome.

Basil seemed to read Tristan's thoughts.

Reclining in his chair, he eyed him narrowly.

"You, too, but narrowly escaped the blandishments of the Sorceress, blandishments to which many another would have succumbed. I marvel at your self-restraint, not being bound by any vow."

The speaker paused and waited, his eyes lying in ambush under the dark straight brows.

The memory still oppressed Tristan and the mood did not escape Basil, who stored it up for future reckoning.

"Perchance I, too, might have succumbed to the Lady Theodora's beauty, had not something interposed at the crucial moment."

"The memory of some earlier love, perchance?" Basil queried with a smile.

Tristan gave a sigh. He thought of Helayne and the impending meeting with Roger de Laval.

His questioner abandoned the subject. Master in dissimulation he had read the truth on Tristan's brow.

"Pray then to your guardian saint, if of such a one you boast," he continued after a pause, "to intervene, should temptation in its most alluring form face you again," he said with deliberate slowness. "You witnessed the end of Fabio of the Cavalli?" —

Tristan shuddered.

"And yet there was a time when he called all these charms his own, and his command was obeyed in Theodora's gilded halls."

"Can love so utterly vanish?" Tristan queried with an incredulous glance at the speaker.

Basil gave a soundless laugh.

"Love!" he said. "Hearts are but pawns in Theodora's hands. Her ambition is to rule, and he who can give to her what her heart desires is the favorite of the hour. Beware of her! Once the poison of her kisses rankles in your blood nothing can save you from your doom."

Basil watched the effect of his words upon his listener and for the nonce he seemed content. Tristan would take heed.

When Tristan had taken his leave a panel in the wall opened noiselessly and Il Gobbo peered into the chamber.

Basil locked and bolted the door which led into the corridor, and the sinister, bat-like form stepped out of its dark frame and approached the inmate of the chamber with a fawning gesture.

"If your lordship will believe me," he said in a husky undertone, "I am at last on the trail."

"What now?"

"I may not tell your nobility as yet."

"Do you want another bezant, dog?"

"It is not that, my lord."

"Then, who does he consort with?"

"I have tracked him as a panther tracks its prey — he consorts with no one."

"Then continue to follow him and see if he consorts with any — woman."

"A woman?"

"Why not, fool?"

"But had your nobility said there was a woman —"

"There always is."

"Your nobility let him go — and yet — one word —"

"I must know more, before I strike. I knew he would come. There is more to this than we wot of. Theodora is infatuated with his austerity. He has jilted her and she smarts under the blow. She will move heaven and earth to bring him to her feet. Meanwhile there are weightier matters

to be considered. Perchance I shall pay you an early call in your noble abode. Prepare fitly and bid the ghosts troop from their haunted caves. And now be off! Your quarry has the start!"

Il Gobbo bowed grotesquely and receded backward towards the panel which closed soundlessly behind him.

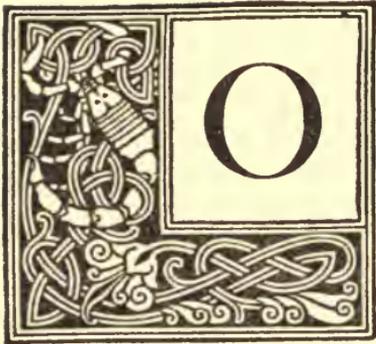
Basil remained alone in the octagon cabinet.

He strode slowly towards one of the windows that faced to southward and gazed long and pensively out upon the undulating expanse of the Roman Campagna.

"Three messengers, yet none has returned," he muttered darkly. "Can it be that I have lost my clutch on destiny?"

CHAPTER II

UNDER THE SAFFRON SCARF



ONCE again the pale planets of night ruled the sky, when Tristan emerged from his inn and took the direction of the Palatine.

All memories of his meeting with the Lord Basil had faded before the import of the coming hour, when he was to stand face to face with him who held in his hand the fate of two beings destined for each other from the beginning of time and torn asunder by the ruthless hand of Fate.

There was not a sound, save the echo of his own footsteps, as Tristan wound his way through the narrow streets, high cliffs of ancient houses on either side, down which the white disk of the moon penetrated but a yard or two.

At the foot of the Palatine Hill, cutting into the moonlight, the Colosseum rose before him, gaunt, vast, sinister, a silhouette of enormous blackness, pierced as with innumerable empty eyes flooded by greenish, ghostly moonlight. Necromancers and folk practising the occult arts dwelled in ancient houses built with the honey-colored Travertine, stolen from the Hill of the Cæsars. It was said that strange sounds echoed from the arena at night; that the voices of those who had died for the faith in the olden days could be heard screaming in agony at certain periods of the moon.

Gigantic masses of gaunt masonry rose around him as,

with fleet steps, he traversed the deserted thoroughfares. In the greenish moonlight he could discern the tumbled ruins of arches and temples scattered about the dark waste. His gaze also encountered the frowning masonry of more recent buildings. The castellated palace of one of the Frescobaldi had been reared right across that ancient site, including in its massive bulk more than one monument of imperial days.

As he approached the region of the Arch of the Seven Candles, as the Arch of Titus with its carving of the Jewish Candelabrum borne in triumph was then called, Tristan walked more warily.

The reputed dangers of the Campo Vaccino knocking at the gates of his memory, he loosened the sword in his scabbard.

He had, by this time, arrived at the end of the street, that curves towards the Arch of Titus, which commands the avenue of lone holm-oaks, leading towards the Appian Way.

Suddenly a man emerged from the shadows. He was armed with sword and buckler, his body was covered with hauberk of mail and he wore the conical steel casque in vogue since Norman arms served as the military model.

Roger and Tristan confronted each other, the former's face tense, drawn, white; the latter with calm eyes in which there was the light of a great regret. An expression not easy to read lay in Laval's eyes, eyes that scanned Tristan from under half-shut lids.

"So you have come?" the stranger said brutally, after a brief and painful pause.

"I have never broken my word," Tristan replied.

"Well spoken! I shall be plain and brief, if you will own the truth."

"I have nothing to conceal, my lord."

Roger's eyes gleamed with yet livelier malice.

"Where is the Lady Hellayne? Where is my wife?"

"As God lives, I know not. Yet — I would give my life, to know."

"Indeed! You may be given that chance. You are frank at least —"

"I may have wronged you in heart, my lord, — but never in deed —" Tristan replied.

"What I have seen, I have seen," the other snarled viciously. "Perchance this silent devotion accounts also for many other things."

"I do not understand, my lord."

"Soon after your flight the Lady Helayne departed, without a word."

"So you were pleased to inform me."

"I was not pleased," spat out Laval. "How do you explain her flight?"

"I do not explain, my lord. I have not seen or heard from the Lady Helayne since I left Avalon."

"Then you still aver the lie?"

Tristan raised himself to his full height.

"I am speaking truth, my lord. Why, indeed, should she have left you without even a word?"

Roger eyed the man before him as a cat eyes a captured bird at a foot's distance of mock freedom.

"Why, indeed, save for love of you?"

Tristan raised his hands.

"Deep in my heart and soul I worship the Lady Helayne," he said. "For me she had but friendship. Else were I not here!"

"A sainted pilgrim," sneered the Count, "in the Groves of Enchantment. And for such a one she left her liege lord."

His mocking laughter resounded through the ruins.

"You wrong the Lady Helayne and myself. Of myself I will not speak. As concerns her —"

"Of her you shall not speak! Save to tell me her abode."

"Of her I shall speak," Tristan flashed. "You are insulting your wife —"

"Take care lest worse befall yourself," snarled Laval, advancing towards the object of his wrath.

Tristan's look of contempt cut him to the quick.

"You think to bully me as you bully your menials," he said quietly. "I do not fear you!"

"Why, then, did you leave Avalon, if it was not fear that drove you?" drawled Laval, his eyes a mere slit in the face, drawn and white.

The utter baseness and conceit in the speaker's nature were so plainly revealed in his utterance that Tristan replied contemptuously:

"It was not fear of you, my lord, but the Lady Hellayne's expressed desire that brought me to Rome."

"The Lady Hellayne's desire? Then it was she who feared for you?"

"It was not fear for my body, but my soul."

"Your soul? Why your soul?"

"Because my love for her was a wrong to you, my lord, — even though I loved her but in thought." —

"On that night in the garden — you embraced in thought?"

The leer had deepened on the speaker's face.

"A resistless something impelled —"

"And you a fair and pleasant-featured youth, beside Roger de Laval — her husband. And now you are here doing penance at the shrines, at the Lady Theodora's shrine?"

"What I am doing in Rome does not concern you, my lord," Tristan interposed firmly. "I did not attend the Lady Theodora's feast of my own choice —"

"Nor were you in her pavilion of your own choice. Yet a pinch more of penance will set that right also."

"I take it, my lord, that I have satisfied your anxiety," Tristan replied, as he started to pass the other.

Laval caught him roughly by the shoulder.

"Not so fast," he cried. "I shall inform you when I have done with you —"

Tristan's face was white, as he peered into the mask of cunning that leered from the other's countenance. Perchance he would not have heeded the threat had it not been for his anxiety on Hellyayne's account. He suspected that Laval knew more than he cared to tell.

"For the last time I ask, where is the Lady Hellyayne?"

The Count's form rose towering above him, as he threw the words in Tristan's face.

"For the last time I tell you, my lord, I know not," Tristan replied, eye in eye. "Though I would gladly give my life to know."

"Perchance you may. I have been told the Lady Hellyayne is here in Rome. Wherefore is she here? Can it be the spirit that prompted the pilgrimage to her lost lover? Will you take oath, that you have not seen her?"

The speaker's eyes blazed ominously.

Tristan raised his head.

"I will, my lord, upon the Cross!"

Roger's heavy hand smote his cheek.

"Liar!" —

A woman who at that moment crept in the shadows of the Arch of Titus saw Tristan, sword in hand, defending himself against a man apparently much more powerful than himself. For a moment or two she gazed, bewildered, not knowing what to do. Tristan at first seemed to stand entirely on the defensive, but soon his blood grew hot and, in answer to his adversary's lunge, he lunged again. But the other held a dagger in his left hand and with it easily parried the blade. The next pass she saw Tristan reel. She could bear no more and rushed screaming towards some footmen with torches who were standing outside a dark and heavily shuttered building.

Tristan and Roger de Laval rushed at each other with

redoubled fury. Both had heard the cry and their blows rang out with echoing clatter, filling the desolate spaces with a sound not seldom heard there in those days. It was a struggle of sheer strength, in which the odds were all against Tristan. He began to yield step by step. Soon a yet fiercer blow of his antagonist must bring him down to his knees, and he fell back farther, as a veritable rain of blows fell upon him.

Four men followed by a woman rushed to the scene.

"Haste! Haste!" she cried frantically. "There is murder abroad!"

She fancied she should behold the younger man already vanquished by his more vigorous enemy. On the contrary, he seemed to have regained his strength and was now pressing the other with an agility and vigor that outweighed the strength of maturity on the part of his adversary.

All was clear in the bright moonlight, as if the sun had been blazing down upon them, and, as the woman leaped forward, she beheld Tristan's assailant gain some advantage. He was pressed back along the Arch towards the spot where she stood.

What now followed she could not see. It was all the work of a moment. But the next instant she saw the elder man raise his arm as if to strike with his dagger. Tristan staggered and fell, and the other was about to strike him through when, with a wild, frantic outcry of terror, she rushed between them, arresting the blow ere it could fall.

"Helayne!"

A cry in which Tristan's smothered feelings broke through every restraint winged itself from the mouth of the fallen man.

"Tristan!" came the hysterical response.

Roger had hurled his wife aside, his eyes flaming like live coals under their bushy brows.

Those whom Helayne had summoned to Tristan's aid, when she first arrived on the scene of the conflict, unacquainted

with the cause of the quarrel and doubtful which side to aid, stood idly by, since with Tristan's fall there seemed to be no farther demand for their services, nor did Roger's towering stature invite interference.

In the heat of the conflict with its attendant turmoil none of those immediately concerned had remarked a procession approaching from the distance which now emerged from the shadow of the great arch into the moonlit thoroughfare.

It was headed by four giant Nubians, carrying a litter on silver poles, from between the half-shut silken curtains of which peered the face of a woman. In its wake marched a score of Ethiopians in fantastic livery, their broad, naked scimitars glistening ominously in the moonlight.

The litter and its escort arrived but just in time. Ere Laval's blade could pierce the heart of his prostrate victim, Theodora had leaped from her litter and thrown her saffron scarf over the prostrate youth.

With all the outlines of her beautiful form revealed through the thin robe of spangled gauze she faced the irate aggressor and her voice cut like steel as she said:

"Dare to touch him beneath this scarf! This man is mine."

Laval drew back, but his glaring eyes, his parted lips and his labored breath argued little in favor of the fallen man, even though the blow was, for the moment, averted.

With foam-flecked lips he turned to Theodora.

"This man is mine! His life is forfeit. Stand back, that I may wipe this blot from my escutcheon."

Theodora faced the speaker undauntedly.

Ere he could reply, a woman's voice shrieked.

"Save him! Save him! He is innocent! He has done naught amiss!"

Hellayne, whom the Count had hurled against the masonry of the arch, bruising her until she was barely able to support herself, at this moment threw herself between them.



"Thrown her saffron scarf over the prostrate youth"

"Who is this woman?" Theodora turned to Tristan's assailant. "Who is this woman?" Hellyayne's eyes silently questioned Tristan.

Laval's sardonic laughter pealed through the silence.

"This lady is my wife, the Countess Hellyayne de Laval, noble Theodora, who has followed her perjured lover to Rome, so they may do penance in company," he replied sardonically. "His life is forfeit. His offence is two-fold. Within the hour he swore he knew naught of her abode. But — since you claim him, — by ties this scarf proclaims — take him and welcome! I shall not anticipate the fate you prepare for your noble lovers!"

The two women faced each other in frozen silence, in the consciousness of being rivals. Each knew instinctively it would be a fight between them to the death.

Theodora surveyed Hellyayne's wonderful beauty, appraising her charms against her own, and Hellyayne's gaze swept the face and form of the Roman.

Tristan had scrambled to his feet, his face white with shame and rage. From Theodora, in whose eyes he read that which caused him to tremble in his inmost soul, he turned to Hellyayne.

"Oh, why have you done this thing, Hellyayne, why? — oh, why?"

Roger de Laval laughed viciously.

"It was indeed not to be expected that the Lady Hellyayne would find her recalcitrant lover in the arms of the Lady Theodora."

With an inarticulate outcry of rage Tristan was about to hurl himself upon his opponent, had not Theodora placed a restraining hand upon him, while her dark eyes challenged Hellyayne.

All the revulsion of his nature against this man rose up in him and rent him. All the love for Hellyayne, which in these days had been floating on the wings of longing, soared anew.

But his efforts at vindication in this strangest of all predicaments were put to naught by the woman herself.

"Hear me, Helayne — it is not true!" he cried, and paused with a choking sensation.

Helayne stood as if turned to stone.

Then her eyes swept Tristan with a look of such incredulous misery that it froze the words that were about to tumble from his lips.

With a wail of anguish she turned and fled down the moonlit path like a hunted deer.

"Up and after her!" Laval shouted to the men whom Helayne had summoned to the scene and these, eager to demonstrate their usefulness, started in pursuit, Roger leading, ere Tristan could even make a move to interfere.

Helayne had fled into the open portals of a church at the end of the street. She tottered and fell. Crawling through the semi-darkness she gasped and leaned against a pillar. She saw a small side chapel, where, before an image of the Virgin, guttered a brace of tapers. But ere she reached the shrine her pursuers were upon her. As, with a shriek of mortal fear she fell, she gazed into the brutal features of Roger de Laval. His lips were foam-flecked, revealing his wolfish teeth.

It was then her strength forsook her. She fell fainting upon the hard stone floor of the church. —

For apace Tristan and Theodora faced each other in silence.

It was the woman who spoke.

Her voice was cold as steel.

"I have saved your life, Tristan! The weapon which my slaves have taken from you awaits the call of its rightful claimant."

She reentered her litter while Tristan stood by, utterly dazed. But, when the slaves raised the silver poles, she gave him a parting glance from within the curtains that seemed to electrify his whole being.

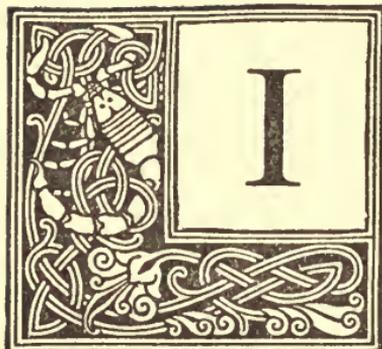
After the litter-bearers and their retinue had trooped off, Tristan remained for a time in the shadow of the Arch of the Seven Candles.

He knew not where to turn in his misery, nor what to do.

In the same hour he had found and lost his love anew.

CHAPTER III

DARK PLOTTINGS



It was past the hour of midnight.

In a dimly lighted turret chamber in the house of Hormazd the Persian there sat two personages whose very presence seemed to enhance the sinister gloom that brooded over the circular vault.

The countenance of the Grand Chamberlain was paler than usual and there was a slight gathering of the eyebrows, not to say a frown, which in an ordinary mortal might have signified little, but in one who had so habitual a command of his emotions, would indicate to those who knew him well an unusual degree of restlessness. His voice was calm however, and now and then a bland smile belied the shadows on his brow.

At times his gaze stole towards a dimly lighted alcove wherein moved a dark cowled figure, its grotesque shadow reflected in distorted outlines upon the floor.

"The Moor tarries over long," Basil spoke at last.

"So do the ends of destiny," replied a voice that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth.

"He is fleeter than a deer and more ferocious than a tiger," the Grand Chamberlain interposed. "Nothing has ever daunted him, nor lives the man who would thwart him and live. Can you tell me where he is now?"

"Patience!" came the sepulchral reply. "The magic disk reveals all things! Anon you shall know."

Informed by daily gossip and the reports of his innumerable spies, Basil was aware of a growing belief among the people that the power he wielded was not altogether human, and he would have viewed it with satisfaction even had he not shared it. Seeing in it an additional force helpful to the realization of his ambition, he had thrown himself blindly into the vortex of black magic which was to give to him that which his soul desired.

In this chamber, filled with strange narcotic scents and the mysterious rustling of unseen presences, by which he believed it to be peopled, with the aid of one who seemed the personified Principle of Evil, Basil assembled about him the forces that would ultimately launch him at the goal of his ambition.

This devil's kitchen was the portal to the Unseen, the shrine of the Unknown, the observatory of the Past and the Future, and the laboratory of the Forbidden. There were dim and mysterious mirrors, before which stood brazen tripods whose fumes, as they wreathed upward, gleamed with dusky fires. It was in these mirrors that the wizard could summon the dead and the distant to appear darkly, in scarcely definable glimpses. But he could also produce apparitions more vivid, more startling and more beautiful. Once, in the dark depths of the chamber, Basil had seen a woman's phantom apparition suddenly become strangely luminous, her garments glowing like flames of many colors, that shifted and blent and alternated in ceaseless dance and play, waving and trembling in unearthly glory, till she seemed to be of the very flame herself. The reflection of the world of shadows was upon her; its splendors were wrapping her round like a mantle. He watched her with bated breath, not daring to speak. And brighter, ever brighter, dazzling, ever more dazzling, had grown the flaming phantom, till the wondrous transfiguration reached the height of its beauty and its terror. Then the

phantom of murdered Marozia, evoked at his expressed desire from the land of shadows, had faded, dying slowly away in the mysterious depths of the mirror, as the fires that produced it sank and died in white ashes.

There could be no doubt. It was the emissary of Darkness himself who held forth in this dim, demon-haunted chamber where he had so often listened to the record of his awful visions. He had made him see in his dreadful ravings the great vaults of wrath, where dwelt the dread power of Evil. He had made him see the King of the Hopeless Throngs on his black basaltic throne in the terrific glare-illuminated caves, where Michael had cast him and where Pain's roar rises eternally night and day. He had made him see the great Lord of the Doomed Shadows, receiving the homage of those dreadful slaves, those terror-spreading angels of woe whose hand flings destruction over the earth and sea and air, while flames were fawning and licking his feet with countless tongues.

And then he had shown to him a spirit mightier and more subtle than any of those great wild destroyers who rush blindly through nature, a spirit who starts in silence on her errand, whom none behold as, creeping through the gloom, she undermines, unties and loosens all the pillars of creation, with no more sign nor sound than a black snake in the tangled grass, till with a thunder that stuns the world the house of God comes crashing down — dread Hekaté herself.

Was there any crime he had left undone?

His subterranean prisons in which limbs unlearned to bend and eyes to see concealed things whose screams would make the flesh of a ghost creep, if flesh one had.

But now there was a darker light in Basil's eyes, a something more ominous of evil in his manner. The wizard's revelation had possessed his soul and his whole terrible being seemed intensified. With the patience of one conscious of a superhuman destiny he waited the summons that was to

come to him, even though his soul was consumed by devouring flames.

For he had come yet upon another matter; an inner voice, whose appeal he dared not ignore, had informed him long ago of his waning power with Theodora. From the man wont to command he had fallen to the level of the whimpering slave, content to pick up such morsels as the woman saw fit to throw at his feet. Only on the morning of this day, which had gone down the never returning tide of time, a terrible scene had passed between them. And he knew he had lost.

Basil had been an unseen witness of Theodora's and Tristan's meeting in the sunken gardens on the Aventine. Every moment he had hoped to see the man succumb to charms which no mortal had yet withstood upon whom she had chosen to exert them, and on the point of his poniard sat Death, ready to step in and finish the game. From the fate he had decreed him some unknown power had saved Tristan. But Basil, knowing that Theodora, once she was jilted by the object of her desire, would leave nothing undone to conquer and subdue, was resolved to remove from his path one who must, sooner or later, become a successful rival. By some miraculous interposition of Providence Tristan had escaped the fate he had prepared for him on the night when he had tracked the two strangers from the Lateran. He had had him conveyed for dead to the porch of Theodora's palace. But Fate had made him her mock.

Never had Basil met Theodora in a mood so fierce and destructive as on the morning after she had destroyed Roxana and her lover, and had, in turn, been jilted by Tristan. And, verily, Basil could not have chosen a more inopportune time to press his suit or to voice his resentment and disapprobation. Theodora had driven every one from her presence and the unwelcome suitor shared the fate of her menials. Her dark hints had driven the former favorite to madness, for his passion-inflamed brain could not bear the thought that the

love he craved, the body he had possessed, should be another's, while he was drifting into the silent ranks of the discarded. He knew for a surety that Theodora was not confiding in him as of old. Had she somehow guessed the dread mystery of the crypts in the Emperor's Tomb, or had some demon of Hell whispered it into her ear during the dark watches of the night?

A flash of lightning followed by a terrific peal of thunder roused him from his reveries. The storm which had threatened during the early hours of the evening now roared and shrieked round the tower and the very elements seemed in accord with the dark plottings in Hormazd's chamber.

"How much longer must I wait ere the fiends will reveal their secrets?" Basil at last turned to the exponent of the black arts.

The wizard paused before the questioner.

"To what investigation shall we first proceed?"

"You must already have divined my thoughts."

"I knew the instant you arrived. But there is an incompleteness which makes my perceptions less exact than usual."

"Where are my messengers? To the number of three have I sped. None has returned."

The Oriental touched a knob and the lamps were suddenly extinguished, leaving the room illumined by the red glow of the oven. Then he bade his visitor fix his eyes on the surface of the disk.

"Upon this you will presently behold two scenes."

He poured a few drops of something resembling black oil upon the disk, which at once spread in a mirror-like surface. Then he began to mutter some words in an Oriental tongue, and lighted a few grains of a chemical preparation which emitted an odor of bitter aloë. This, when the flames had subsided, he threw upon the oil which at the contact became iridescent.

Basil looked and waited in vain.

The conjurer exhausted all the selections which he thought

appropriate. The oil gradually lost the changing aspect it had acquired from the burning substance, and returned to its dull murky tints, and the interest which had appeared on Basil's features gave place to a contemptuous sneer.

"Are you, after all, but a trickster who would impose his art upon the unwary?"

The magician did not reply to this insult, nor did it seem to affect him visibly.

"We must try a mightier spell," he said, "for hostile forces are in conjunction against us."

By a small tongs he raised from the fire the metallic plate that had been lying upon it. Its surface presented the appearance of oxidized silver with a deep glow of heat.

Upon this he claimed to be able to produce the picture of past or future events, and many scenes had been reflected upon the magic shield.

He now poured upon it a spoonful of liquid which spread simmering and became quickly dissipated in light vapors. Then he busied himself with scattering over the plate some grains that looked like salt which the heated metal instantly consumed.

At the end of a few moments he experienced what resembled an electric or magnetic shock. His frame quivered, his lips ceased to repeat the muttered incantations, his hand firmly grasped the tongs by which he raised the metal aloft, now made brighter by the drugs just consumed, and upon which appeared a white spot, which enlarged till it filled the lower half of the plate.

What it represented it was difficult to say. It might have been a sheet or a snow drift. Basil felt an indefinable dread, as above it shimmered forth the vague resemblance of a man on horseback, apparently riding at breakneck speed.

Slowly his contour became more distinct. Now the horseman appeared to have reached a ford. Spurring his steed, he plunged into the stream whose waters seemed for a time to

carry horse and rider along with the swift current. But he gained the opposite shore, and the apparition faded slowly from sight.

"It is the Moor!" cried Basil in a paroxysm of excitement. "He has forded the rapids of the Garigliano. Now be kind to me O Fate — let this thing come to pass!"

He gave a gasp of relief, wiping the beads from his brow.

The cowled figure now walked up to the central brazier, muttering words in a language his visitor could not understand. Then he bade Basil walk round and round it, fixing his eyes steadily upon the small blue flame which danced on the surface of the burning charcoal.

When giddiness prevented his continuing his perambulation he made him kneel beside the brazier with his eyes riveted upon it.

Its fumes enveloped him and dulled his brain.

The wizard crooned a slow, monotonous chant. Basil felt his senses keep pace with it, and presently he felt himself going round and round in an interminable descent. The glare of the brazier shrank and diminished, invaded from outside by an overpowering blackness. Slowly it became but a single point of fire, a dark star, which at length flamed into a torch. Beside him, with white and leering face, stood the dark cowled figure, and below him there seemed to stretch intricate galleries, strangled, interminable caves.

"Where am I?" shrieked the Grand Chamberlain, overpowered by the fumes and the fear that was upon him.

"Unless you reach the pit," came the dark reply, "farewell forever to your schemes. You will never see a crown upon your head."

"What of Theodora?" Basil turned to his companion, choking and blinded.

"If the bat-winged fiends will carry you safely across the abyss you shall see," came the reply.

A rush as of wings resounded through the room, as of monstrous bats.

"Gehenna's flame shall smoothe her brow," the wizard spoke again. "When Death brings her here, she shall stand upon the highest steps, in her dark magnificence she shall command — a shadow among shadows. Are you content?"

There was a pause.

The storm howled with redoubled fury, flinging great hailstones against the time-worn masonry of the wizard's tower.

"Then," Basil spoke at last, his hands gripping his throat with a choking sensation, "give me back the love for which my soul thirsts and wither the bones of him who dares to aspire to Theodora's hand."

The wizard regarded him with an inscrutable glance.

"The dark and silent angels, once divine, now lost, who do my errands, shall ever circle round your path. Everlasting ties bind us, the one to the other. Keep but the pact and that which seems but a wild dream shall be fulfilled anon. They shall guide you through the dark galleries of fear, till you reach the goal."

"Your words are dark as the decrees of Fate," Basil replied, as the fumes of the brazier slowly cleared in his brain and he seemed to emerge once more from the endless caverns of night, staring about him with dazed senses.

"You heed but what your passion prompts," the cowed figure interposed sternly, "oblivious of that greater destiny that awaits you! It is a perilous love born in the depths of Hell. Will you wreck your life for that which, at best, is but a fleeting passion — a one day's dream?"

"Well may you counsel who have never known the hell of love!" Basil cried fiercely. "The fiery torrent that rushes through my veins defies cold reason."

The cowed figure nodded.

"Many a ruler in whose shadow men have cowered, has

obeyed a woman's whim and tamely borne her yoke. Are you of those, my lord?"

"I have set my soul upon this thing and Fate shall give to me that which I crave!" Basil cried fiercely.

The wizard nodded.

"Fate cannot long delay the last great throw."

"What would you counsel?" the Grand Chamberlain queried eagerly, peering into the cowed and muffled face, from which two eyes sent their insane gleam into his own.

"Send her soul into the dark caverns of fear — surround her with unceasing dread — let the ghosts of those you have sent butchered to their doom surround her nightly pillow, whispering strange tales into her ears, — then, when fear grips the maddened brain and there seems no rescue but the grave — then peals the hour."

Basil gazed thoughtfully into the wizard's cowed face.

"When may that be?"

"I will gaze into the silent pools of my forbidden knowledge with the dark spirits that keep me company. I have mysterious rules for finding day and hour."

"I cannot expel the passion that rankles in my blood," Basil interposed darkly. "But I will tear out my heart strings ere I shirk the call. An emperor's crown were worth a tenfold price, and ere I, too, descend to the dread shadows, I mean to see it won."

"These thoughts are idle," said the wizard. "Only the weak plumb the depths of their own soul. The strong man's bark sails lightly on victorious tides. Your soul is pledged to the Powers of Darkness."

"And by the fiends that sit at Hell's dark gate, I mean to do their bidding," Basil replied fiercely. "Else were I indeed the mock of destiny. Tell me but this — how did you obtain a knowledge at which the fiend himself would pale?"

The wizard regarded him for a moment in silence.

“ You who have peered behind the curtain that screens the dreadful boundaries — you who have seen the pale phantom of Marozia, whom you have sent to her doom, — how dare you ask? ”

Basil had raised both hands as if to ward off an evil spirit.

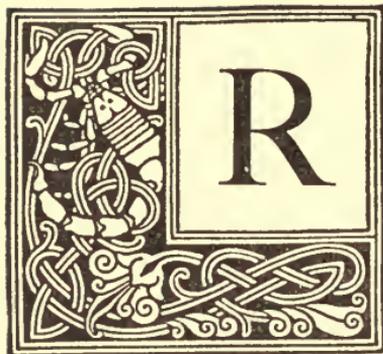
“ This, too, then is known to you? Tell me! Was what I saw a dream? ”

“ What you have seen — you have seen,” the cowled form replied enigmatically. “ The cocks are crowing — and the pale dawn glimmers in the East.”

Throwing his mantle about him, Basil left the turret chamber and, after creeping down a narrow winding stair, he made for his villa on the Pincian Hill.

CHAPTER IV

FACE TO FACE



ROGER DE LAVAL had chosen for his abode in Rome a sombre and frowning building not far from the grim ways of the Campo Marzo, half palace half fortalice, constructed about a huge square tower with massive doors. Like all palace fortresses of the time which might at any moment have to stand a siege, either at the hands of a city mob or at those of some rapacious noble, it contained in its vaulted halls and tower chambers all the requisites for protracted resistance as well as aggression. On the walls between flaunting banners hung the many quartered shields and the dark coats of chain, the tabards of the heralds and the leathern jerkins of the bowmen. On the shelves between the arches stood long rows of hauberks and shining steel caps. Dark tapestries covered the walls and the bright light of the Roman day fell muted through the narrow slits in the sombre masonry which served as windows.

It was not to seek his wife that Roger had come to Rome, and his meeting with Tristan in the gardens of Theodora had been purely accidental. While his vanity and selfishness had received a severe shock in Hellyayne's departure, without even a farewell, he had not allowed an incident in itself so trifling to disturb the even tenor of his ways. He had loved to display her at his feasts as one displays some exceeding handsome plaything that gives pleasure to the senses; otherwise

he and the countess had no common bond of interest. Hellayne was the only child of one of the most powerful barons of Provence, and had been given in marriage to the older man before she even realized what the bonds implied. Only after meeting Tristan had the awakening come, and youth sought youth.

That which brought every one to Rome in an age when Rome was still by common consent the centre of the universe, such as the Saxon Chronicles of the Millennium pronounce it, had also caused Roger de Laval to seek the Holy Shrines, not in quest of spiritual benefit, but of temporal aggrandizement, in the character of an investiture from the Vicar of Christ himself. His disappointment at finding the head of Christendom a prisoner in his own palace was perhaps only mitigated by the disclosure that he should have to rely upon his own fertility of mind for the realization of a long-fostered ambition.

On one of his visits to the Lateran, hoping to obtain an interview with the Pontiff, he had met Basil as representative of the Roman government, in the absence of Alberic, and a sinister attraction had sprung up between them in the consciousness that each had something to give the other lacked. This bond was even strengthened by Basil's promise to aid the stranger in the attainment of his desires, and at last Roger had confided in Basil the story of the shadow that had spread its gloomy pinions over the castle of Avalon. Basil had listened and suggested that the Lord Laval drown his sorrows at the board of Theodora. Therein the latter had acquiesced, with the result that he met Tristan on that night.

Hellayne was sitting alone by the window in a long silent gallery. She could not take her eyes off the restless outline of the clouds where head on head and face on face continued taking shape. In vain her teased brain tried to see but clouds. Two nights ago had not a horrid face grinned at her from out of these same clouds? The face of a wolf it had seemed. And it had taken human shape and changed to the face of the

man who had brought her to this abode from the sanctuary where she had fallen by the shrine.

And yet, as she looked at the sun, whose beams were fast dwindling on the bar of the horizon, how she yearned to keep the light a little longer, if only a few short minutes. She could have cried out to the sun not to leave her so soon, again to wage her lonely war with the Twilight and with Fear. For during the hours of day her lord was away. Business of state he termed what took him from her side. With a leer he left and with a leer he was wont to return. And with him the memory of his meeting with Tristan!

She had found him again, the man she loved! Found him — but how? And Helayne covered her burning eyes with her white hands.

This other woman who had stepped in between her and Tristan, who had laid a detaining hand upon his arm and had silently challenged her for his possession — what was she to him?

For three days and three nights the thought had tormented her even to the verge of madness. Had she sacrificed everything but to find him she loved in the arms of another? Silently she had borne the taunts of her lord, his insults, his vile insinuations. He did not understand. He never understood. What of it? In the great balance what mattered it after all?

She must see Tristan. She must hear the truth from his own lips. In vain she puzzled her brain how to reach him. She remembered his last outcry of protest. There was a mystery she must solve. Come what might, she was once more the woman who loved. And she was going to claim the payment of love!

As regarded that other, to whom she had bound herself, her conscience had long absolved her of an obligation that had been forced upon her. Had fate and fact not proved the thing impossible? Had fate not cast them again and again

into each other's arms and made mock of their conscience? Nature had made them lovers, let it be the will of God or the devil.

And lovers till death should they be henceforth. He belonged to her. Away with faith — away with fear of this world, or the next. Away with all but the dear present, in which the brutality of others had set her free. For a moment her thoughts turned almost pagan.

Was she to return to the old, loveless life in that far corner of the earth, while he whom she loved took up a new existence in the centre of the world, loving another to whose ambition he might owe a great career? She needed indeed to sit in silence, she who had done daring things without a misgiving, as if impelled by a power not her own. She had done them, marvelling at her own courage, at her own faith in him she loved, and she had not faltered.

The torturing dusk was drowning every living thing in pallid waves of shadow. One by one, through the wan gallery in which she was locked, the motley spectres of night would pass in all their horrors, and begin their crazy, soundless nods and becks.

Suddenly she cowered back, shuddering, with her eyes fixed on the darkening depths of the gallery and her day dreams died, like pale ashes crumbling on the hearth.

Roger de Laval had entered and was regarding her with a malignant leer that almost froze the blood in her veins. She knew not what business had taken him abroad. Nevertheless she was assured that some dark deed was slumbering in the depths of his soul.

“Are you thinking of your fine lover?” he said as he slowly advanced towards her. “You are grieved to have your thoughts broken into by your husband? No doubt you wish me dead —”

“Spare me this torture, my lord,” she entreated. “I have answered a thousand times —”

"Then answer again —"

"I swear before God and the Saints he is guiltless. He knew not I was in Rome."

"Swear what you will! A woman's oath is but a wind upon one's cheek on a warm summer day — gone ere you have felt it. The oath of a woman who has followed her lover —"

"I have not done so!"

"You have done your best to make the world believe it."

"What of yourself?" There was a ring of scorn in her voice.

"You have brought me to shame!"

"What of the women you have shared with me?"

Hellayne's eyes met those of her tormentor.

"It is a man's part!"

"And you are a man!"

"One at least shall have cause to think so."

"Perchance you will have him murdered. Why not kill me, too? That, too, is a man's part."

He gave a great roar.

"And who says that I shall not?"

An icy fear, not for herself, but for Tristan, gripped her heart. She tried to hide it under a mantle of indifference.

"What have you ever done to make yourself beloved?"

"By Beelzebub — you — the runaway mistress of a fop — dares to question me — her rightful lord?"

"Who made the laws that bound me to your keeping? They are man-made, and God knows as little of them as he knows of you. It was your measureless conceit, your boundless egotism, that whispered to you that any woman should feel honored, should deem it the height of glory, to be your wife."

"And is it not?"

She shuddered.

"You never dreamed there might be something in the

depths of my soul that cried out for more than the mere comforts and exigencies of existence! Something that craved love, companionship, and, above all, friendship. What have you done to waken this little slumbering voice which died in the shadow of your tremendous egotism? ”

He stared at her.

“ He has taught you this speech, by God! ”

“ He has awakened my true self! What was I to you but part of your magnificence, a thing to make your fellows envious — ”

He roared. She continued:

“ The one decent woman of your life — your world — ”

His eyes glared.

“ So then, this low-born churl is a better man than I? ”

“ At least he knew I had a soul of my own.”

“ Skillfully cultivated to his own sweet ends.”

“ His ends were innocent, else had he not fled.”

“ Knowing that you would follow him.”

“ He knew naught.”

“ That remains to be seen.”

“ It was you who brought us together! ” she said with quiet scorn. “ You were so sure in your pride and your power and of my own timidity that you thought it impossible that something might defy them. And you could not understand that another might be so much closer to my nature, or that I had a nature of my own. In those days I well remember, ere my heart had strayed too far, I tried to waken you to the great danger. I tried to speak of mine. But you would not be apprised of aught that would seem a concession to your pride. So we are come to this! ”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“ Come to what? ” he thundered.

“ My ruin — and your disgrace! ”

His breast heaved.

“ Of you I know nothing. As for myself — I suffer no

disgrace. I am too much a man of sense for that. Not a soul but thinks that you are absent with my consent. A pilgrimage to Rome! Many a woman has, for her soul's good gone alone. Not a soul, I warrant, has thought of your connection with that fellow's plight. Not a soul but thinks that this is the sole cause of your disappearance. And when I, too, went I was careful to leave the rumor behind."

He stepped closer, his breath fanning her pale cheeks. She looked almost like a ghost in the grey twilight.

"And now —" he continued, licking his sensuous lips, "you are found — you are found — my beautiful wife — you are found — and — to the eyes of the world at least — unstained. One alone whose lips are sealed, knows."

Hellayne's lips tightened.

"And a woman."

A strange expression came into his face.

"Have you spied upon me, too?"

"You forget the meeting at the Arch."

"No woman will spread the story of a rival's claims!"

There was a pause, then he continued, with deliberate slowness:

"You shall come back with me — my beautiful Hellayne — my wife in name, if not in deed! And you shall submit to my caresses, knowing, as I do, how loathsome they are. And you shall smile — smile — and appear happy — my wife henceforth in name only. And you shall smile no less at what henceforth your lord's pleasure may be with other women — fair as yourself — and you shall grow old and grey, and the thing you call your soul shall die and wither up your beauty — and never a word shall pass your lips anent this chastisement. And at last you shall die — and be laid by — and not a soul shall ever be the wiser for your shame."

Hellayne covered her face with her hands.

"And if I should refuse to accept this fate?"

"Then you shall be flung into a nunnery."

“ And if I refuse to become a nun? ”

“ Then your lover shall pay the price — with his blood instead of yours. Know you the woman he so madly loves? ”

“ It is a lie! ” she shrieked.

There was a moment's silence.

“ Her name is Theodora. Saw you ever fairer creature? ”

“ God! ”

“ I want your answer! ” leered the man.

“ I do not refuse! ”

An evil smile curved his lips.

“ I knew you would be reasonable — my fair Hellyne! ”

His lips were parted in a fatuous smile. He pictured to himself the pain at the parting and indeed his satisfaction was so great that he decided to prolong it yet a little longer. How amusing it would be to watch the face of him who had dared to love Hellyne. Knowing as now he did all the motives for his actions, it gave him pleasure to think that he could mar the astonishing good fortune of this adventurer who had found employment in the service of Alberic by the intrusion of this passion for another woman. It would be real joy to see this creature of sentiment thus torn and tortured. And it was yet a greater joy to force Hellyne to witness the struggle, forced to smile at the conquest of her lover by another woman. And he would watch the pangs of their suffering till the day of his departure.

With her own blue eyes Hellyne should witness the love of him she had so madly followed, estranged by the beauty of Theodora, whose lure no mortal might resist.

After he had entered his own chamber, Hellyne flew like a mad thing down the gloom-haunted gallery. Could she but escape from this humiliation — even through death's doors — she would not shrink. She felt, if she remained, she would go mad.

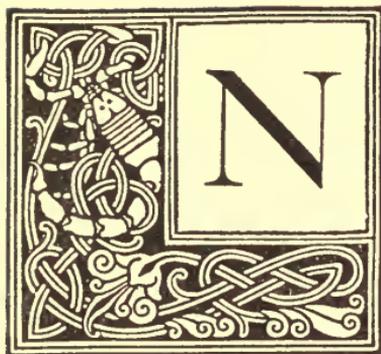
It was true, then! Tristan loved another. The old love

had been forgotten and cast aside! All her fears and misgivings returned in one mad whirl.

Frantically she tried to remove the heavy bolt when she was paralyzed by a demoniacal laugh that issued behind her and swooning she fell at the feet of the man whose name she bore.

CHAPTER V

THE CRESSETS OF DOOM



EVER had Tristan's feelings been more hopelessly involved than since that eventful night by the Arch of the Seven Candles when, like a ghost of the past, Hellyne had once more crossed his path and had given his solemn pledge the lie. And the more Tristan's thoughts reverted to that fateful hour,

when his oath seemed like so many words written upon water, and the man who believed him guilty held his life in the hollow of his hand, the greater grew his misery and unrest. Physically exhausted, mentally startled at the vehemence of his own feelings, he was suffering the relapse of a passion which he thought had burnt itself out, letting his mind drift back to the memory of happier days — days now gone forever.

Why had she followed him? What was she doing here? Was the old fight to be renewed? And withal happiness mingled with the pain.

In the midst of these thoughts came others.

Had she accompanied the Count Laval to Rome and were his questionings mere pretense, to surprise the unguarded confession of a wrong of which he knew himself sinless? Had she been here all these days, seeking him perchance, yet not daring to make her presence known?

And now where was she? Hardly found had he lost her? And see her he must — whatever the hazard, even to death.

How much he had to say to her. How much he had to ask. Her presence had undone everything. Was the old life to begin again, only with a change of scenes?

He had read her love for him in her eyes, and he could have almost wished that moment to have been his last, ere the untimely arrival of Theodora saved him from the death stroke of his enraged enemy. For he had seen the light fade from Hellayne's blue eyes when she faced the other woman, and Laval's taunts had found receptive ears. Everything had conspired against him on that night, even to seeming the thing he was not, and with a heart heavy to breaking Tristan scoured the city of Rome for three days in quest of the woman, but to no avail.

His duties were not onerous and the city was quiet. No farther attempts had been made to liberate the Pontiff and the feuds between the rival factions seemed for the nonce suspended.

Nevertheless Tristan felt instinctively, that all was not well. Night after night Basil descended into the crypts of the Emperor's Tomb, sometimes alone, sometimes with one or two companions, men Tristan had never seen. Ostensibly the Grand Chamberlain visited the cells of certain prisoners of state, and one night Tristan ventured to follow him. But he was seized with so great a terror that he resolved to confide in Odo of Cluny, who possessed the entire confidence of the Senator of Rome, and be guided by his counsel.

In the meantime, like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, the terrible thing had happened again. From the churches of Santa Maria in Trastevere and Santa Sabina of the Aventine, the Holy Host had been taken, notwithstanding the increased number of guards keeping watch in the sanctuaries.

Rome shivered in the throes of abject terror. People whispered in groups along the thoroughfares, hardly daring to raise their voices, and many asserted that the Antichrist had returned once more to earth and that the End of Time

was nigh. Like a dread foreboding of evil it gripped Tristan's soul.

And day and night interminable processions of hermits and monks traversed the city with crosses and banners and smouldering incense. Their chants could be heard from the ancient Flaminian to the Appian Gate.

Once more the shades of evening laid their cool touch upon the city's fevered brow, and as the distant hills rose into a black mass against the sunset two figures emerged on the battlements of the Emperor's Tomb and gazed down on the dimmed outlines of the Pontifical City.

Before them lay a prospect fit to rouse in the hearts of all who knew its history an indescribable emotion. There, before them, lay the broad field of Rome, whereon the first ominous activities of the Old World's conquerors had been enacted. There in the mellow light of eve, lay the Latin land, once popular and rich beyond all quarters of the earth since the plain of Babylon became a desert, and now no less deserted and forlorn. And from the height from which these two looked down upon it, its shallow hills and ridges were truly minimized to the aspect of one mighty plain, increasing the vast sense of desolation. Rome — Rome alone — denied the melancholy story of disaster, utter and complete, the work of Goth and Hun and of malarial terror.

But now over all this solemn prospect was the luminous blue light of evening, fading to violet and palest yellow in the farthest west, where lay the Tyrrhene Sea.

Presently one of the two laid aside his cloak and, baring his arms to the kiss of the wind that crept softly about them, said in weary accents:

“Never in all my life, Father, have I known a day to pass as tardily as this, for to me the coming hour is fraught with evil that may abide with me forever, and my soul is eager to know its doom, yet shrinks from the sentence that may be passed.”

Odo of Cluny looked into Tristan's weary face.

"I, too, have a presentiment of Evil, as never before," the monk replied, laying a gentle hand on his companion's shoulder. "There are things abroad in Rome — one dares not even whisper. The Lord Alberic chose an evil hour for his pilgrimage to Monte Gargano. Have you no tidings?"

"No tidings," reechoed Tristan gloomily.

Odo of Cluny nodded pensively.

"It seems passing strange. I know not why —" his voice sank to a whisper. "I mistrust the Grand Chamberlain. Whom can we trust? A poison wind is blowing over these hills — withering — destroying. The awful sacrilege at Santa Maria in Trastevere, following so closely upon the one at the Lateran, is but another proof that dark powers are at work — powers defying human ken — devils in human shape, doomed to burn to a crisp in the eternal fires."

"Meanwhile — what can we do?"

"Have you seen the Lord Basil?" —

"He was much concerned, examined the place in person, but found no clue."

"Are your men trustworthy?"

"I know not, Father! For a slight service I chanced to do the Lord Alberic he made me captain of the guard in place of one who had incurred his displeasure. My men are Swiss and Lombards, a Spaniard or two — some Calabrians — no Romans."

"Therein lies your salvation," interposed the Benedictine. "How many guard this tomb?"

"Some four score men — why do you ask?"

"I hardly know — save that there lurks some dark mystery behind the curtain. Let no man — nor woman — relax your watchfulness. There are tempests that destroy even the cedars of Lebanon," the monk continued with meaning.

"And such a one may burst one night."

"Your words are dark, Father, and fill me with misgivings."

“And well they should,” Odo interposed with a penetrating glance at the young captain. “For rumor hath it that another bird has strayed into the Lady Theodora’s bower — ”

Tristan colored under the monk’s scrutiny.

“I was present at her feast. Yet I know not how I got there!”

The monk looked puzzled.

“Now that you have crossed the dark path of Marozia’s sister I fear the ambushed gorge and the black arrow that sings from the hidden depths. Why seek the dark waters of Satan, when the white walls of Christ rise luminously before you?”

“What is the import of these strange words so strangely uttered?” Tristan turned to the monk with a puzzled air.

“That shall be made known to you in time. Treason lurks everywhere. Seal your ears against the Siren’s song. Some say she is a vampire returned to earth, doomed to live on, as long as men are base enough to barter their soul for her kisses. And yet — how much longer? The Millennium draws nigh. The End of Time is near.”

There was a pause. Tristan tried to speak, but the words would not come from his lips.

At last with an effort he stammered:

“At the risk of incurring your censure, Father — even to the palace of Theodora must I wend my steps to recover that which is my own.”

And he informed the Monk of Cluny how he had lost his poniard and his scarf of blue Samite.

“Why not send one you trust to fetch them back?” protested the monk. “It is not well to brave the peril twice.”

“Myself must I go, Father. For once and all time I mean to break her spell.”

“Deem you to accomplish that which no man hath — and live?”

“There is that which shall keep my honor inviolate,” Tristan replied.

The cloudless sky was shot with dreamy stars, and cooling breezes were wafted over the Roman Campagna. Through the stillness came the muffled challenges of the guard.

The twain crossed the ramparts of the Mausoleum in silence, holding to their way which led towards a postern, when suddenly, out of the battlements' embrasure, peered two gray, ghastly faces, which disappeared as suddenly. But Tristan's quick eye had marked them and, plucking at the monk's sleeve, he whispered:

"Look yonder, Father — where stand two forms that scan us eagerly. My bewildered brain refuses me the knowledge I seek, yet I could vouch the sight of them is somehow familiar to my eyes."

"That may well be," replied the monk. "For all this day long have I been haunted by the consciousness that our movements are being watched. Yet, I marvel not, for until Purgatory receive the soul of this accursed wanton, there is neither peace nor security for us. Her devilish hand may even now be informing all this dark plot, that seethes about us," Odo of Cluny concluded in apprehensive tones.

Presently they drew near the great gateway, before which the flicker of cressets showed a company of the guard, with breast plates and shields, their faces hidden by the lowered visors of their Norman casks. Among them they noted a wizened eunuch, who, after peering at them with his ferret-like eyes, pointed to a door sunk in the wall, the while he whispered something in Tristan's ear. Thereupon Odo and Tristan entered the guard chamber.

It was deserted.

Beneath the cressets' uncertain gleam, as they emerged beyond, stood the eunuch with the same ferret-like glance, pointing across the dim passage, to, where could be made out the entrance to a gallery. The group behind them stood immobile in the flickering light and the space about them was naught but a shadowy void. Yet, as they went, their ears

caught the clink of unseen mail, the murmur of unseen voices, and Tristan gripped the monk's arm and said in husky tones:

"By all the saints, — we are fairly in the midst of Basil's creatures. An open foe I can face without shrinking, but I tell you this peril, ambushed in impenetrable night, saps my courage as naught else would. If but one battle-cry would shatter this numbing silence, one simple sword would flash, as it leaps from its scabbard, I should be myself again, ready to face any foe!"

They entered the half gloom of a painted gallery where dog-headed deities held forth in grotesque representation beside the crucified Christ. They stole along its whole deserted length until they reached a door, hardly discernible in the pictured wall. The lamps burned low, but in the centre of the marble floor a brazier sent up a brighter flame, filling the air with a fragrance as of sandal wood.

Tristan's hand groped for a spring along the outer edge of the door. At his touch a panel receded. Both he and the monk entered and the door closed noiselessly behind them. Tristan produced a candle and two flints from under his coat of mail. But ere he could light it by striking the flints, the approach of a dim light from the farther end of the tortuous gallery caused him to start, and both watched its approach with dread and misgiving.

Soon a voice fell on their ear, answered by another, and Tristan swiftly drew his companion into a shadowy recess which concealed them while it yet enabled them to hear every word spoken by the two.

"Thus we administer justice in Rome," said the one speaker, in whom Tristan recognized the voice of the Grand Chamberlain.

"Somewhat like in our own feudal chateaux," came back the surly reply.

Tristan started as the voice reached his ear. How came Roger de Laval here in that company?

"You approve?" said the silken voice.

"There is nothing like night and thirst to make the flesh pliable."

"Then why not profit thereby? — But are you still resolved upon this thing?" —

There was a pause. The voice barked reply:

"It is a fair exchange."

Their talk died to a vague murmur till presently the harsher voice rose above the silence.

"Well, then, my Lord Basil, if these matters be as you say, — if you will use your good offices with the Lady Theodora —"

"Can you doubt my sincerity — my desire to promote your interests — even to the detriment of my own?"

His companion spat viciously.

"He who sups with the devil must needs have a long spoon. What is to be your share?"

"Your meaning is not quite clear, my lord."

"Naught for naught!" Roger snarled viciously. "Shall we say — the price of your services?"

"My lord," piped Basil with an injured air, "you wrong me deeply. It is but my interest in you, my desire to see you reconciled to your beautiful wife —"

"How know you she is beautiful?" came the snarling reply.

"I, too, was an unseen witness of your meeting at the Arch of the Seven Candles," Basil replied suavely.

"Was all Rome abroad to gaze upon my shame?" growled Basil's companion. "Though — in a manner — I am revenged," he continued, through his clenched teeth. "Instead of giving her her freedom, I shall use her shrinking body for my plaything — I shall use her so that no other lover shall desire her. As for that low-born churl —"

With a low cry Tristan, sword in hand, made a forward lunge. The monk's grip restrained him.

"Madman!" Odo whispered in his ear. "Would you court certain death?"

The words of the twain had died to a whisper. Thus they were lost to Tristan's ear, though he strained every nerve, a deadly fear for Hellayne weighting down his soul.

The two continued their walk, passing so near that Tristan could have touched the hem of their garbs. Basil was importuning his companion on some matter which the latter could not hear. Laval's reply seemed not in accord with the Grand Chamberlain's plans, for his voice became more insistent.

"But you will come — my lord — and you will bring your beautiful Countess? Remember, her presence in Rome is no longer a secret. And — whatever the cause which prompted her — pilgrimage, would you have the Roman mob point sneering fingers at Roger de Laval?" —

"By God, they shall not!"

"Then the wisdom of my counsel speaks for itself," Basil interposed soothingly. "It is the one reward I crave."

There was a pause. Whatever of evil brooded in that brief space of time only these two knew.

"It shall be as you say," Roger replied at last, and from their chain mail the gleam of the lantern they carried evoked intermittent answer.

When their steps had died to silence Tristan turned to the monk. His voice was unsteady and there was a great fear in his eyes.

"Father, I need your help as have I never needed human help before. There is some devil's stew simmering in the Lord Basil's cauldron. I fear the worst for her —"

Odo shot a questioning glance at the speaker.

"The wife of the Count Laval?" he returned sharply.

"Father — you know why I am here — and how I have striven to tear this love from my heart and soul. Would she had not come! Would I had never seen her more — for where is it all to lead? For, after all, she is his wife — and I am the transgressor. But now I fear for her life. You

have heard, Father. I must see her! I must have speech with her. I must warn her. Father — I promise — that shall be all — if you will but consent and find her — for I know not her abode.”

“ You promise — ” interposed the monk. “ Promise nothing. For if you meet, it will not be all. All flesh is weak. Entrust your message to my care and I shall try to do your bidding. But see her no more! Your souls are in grave peril — and Death stands behind you, waiting the last throw.”

“ Even if our souls should be forever stamped with their dark errors I must see her. I must know why she came hither — I must know the worst. Else should I never find rest this side of the grave. Father, in mercy, do my bidding, for gloom and misery hold my soul in their clutches, and I must know, ere the twilight of Eternity engulfs us both.”

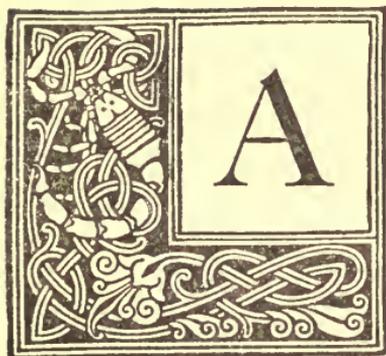
“ We will speak of this anon,” the Monk of Cluny interposed, as together they left the gallery, now sunk in the deepest gloom and, passing through the vaulted corridors, emerged upon the ramparts. No sign of life appeared in the twilight, cast by the towering walls, save where in the shadowy passages the dimmed lights of cressets marked the passing of armed men.

Below, the city of Rome began to take shape in the dim and ghostly starlight, thrusting shadowy domes and towers out of her dark slumber.

In the distance the undulating crests of the Alban Hills mingled with the night mists, and from the nearby Neronian Field came the croaking of the ravens, intensifying rather than breaking the stillness.

CHAPTER VI

A MEETING OF GHOSTS



VOICE whose prompting he could not resist, impelled Tristan, after his parting from the Monk of Cluny, to follow the Grand Chamberlain, who had taken the direction of the Pinician Hill. His retreating form became more phantom-like in the misty moonlight, as viewed from the ramparts of the Emper-

or's Tomb. Nevertheless, mindful of the parting words of the monk, and filled with dire misgivings, Tristan set out at once. True to his determination, he procured a small lantern and a piece of coarse thick cloth, which he concealed under his cloak, then, by a solitary pathway, he followed the direction he had seen Basil take. The Bridge of San Angelo was deserted and not a human being was abroad.

After a time he arrived at a small copse, where Basil's form had disappeared from sight. Clearing away the underbrush, Tristan came to what seemed a fissure in a wall, which cast a tremendous shadow over the surrounding trees and bushes. Creeping in as far as he dared, he paused, then, with mingled emotions of expectancy and apprehension which affected him so powerfully that for a moment he was hardly master of his actions, he slowly and carefully uncovered his lantern, struck two flints and lighted the wick.

His first glance was intuitively directed to the cavity that opened beneath him.

Of Basil he saw no trace, notwithstanding he had seen him enter the cavity at the point where he himself had entered. Ere long however, he heard a thin, long-drawn sound, now louder, now softer; now approaching, now receding, now verging toward shrillness, now returning to a faint, gentle swell. This strange, unearthly music was interrupted by a succession of long, deep rolling sounds, which rose grandly about the fissures above, like prisoned thunderbolts striving to escape. Roused by the mystery of the place and the uncertainty of his own purpose, Tristan was, for a moment, roused to a pitch of such excitement that almost threatened to unsteady his reason. Conscious of the danger attending his venture, and the fearful legends of invisible beings and worlds, he was constrained to believe that demons were hovering around him in viewless assemblies, calling to him in unearthly voices, in an unknown tongue, to proceed upon his enterprise and take the consequences of his daring.

Thus he remained for a time, fearful of advancing or retracing his steps, looking fixedly into the trackless gloom and listening to the strange sounds which, alternately rising and falling, still floated around him. The fitful light of his lantern suddenly fell upon a shape that seemed to creep through one of the stone galleries. In the unsteady gleam it appeared from the distance like a gnome wandering through the bowels of the earth, or a forsaken spirit from purgatory.

Had it been but a trick of his imagination, or had his mortal eyes seen a denizen of the beyond? At last he aroused himself, trimmed with careful hand his guiding wick and set forth to penetrate the great rift.

He moved on in an oblique direction for several feet, now creeping over the tops of the foundation arches, now skirting the extremities of the protrusions in the ruined brickwork, now descending into dark, slimy, rubbish-choked chasms, until the rift suddenly diminished in all directions.

For a moment Tristan paused and considered. He was almost tempted to retrace his steps, abandoning the purpose upon which he had come. Before him stretched interminable gloom, brooding, he knew not over what caverns and caves, inhabited by denizens of night.

He moved onward, with less caution than he had formerly employed, when suddenly and without warning a considerable portion of brickwork fell with lightning suddenness from above. It missed him, else he should never had known what happened. But some stray bricks hurled him prostrate on the foundation arch, dislocating his right shoulder, and shattering his lantern into atoms. A groan of anguish rose to his lips. He was left in impenetrable darkness.

For a short time Tristan lay as one stunned in his dark solitude. Then, trying to raise himself, he began to experience in all their severity the fierce spasms, the dull gnawings that were the miserable consequences of the injury he had sustained. His arm lay numbed by his side, and for the space of some moments he had neither the strength nor the will to even move the sound limbs of his body.

But gradually the anguish of his body awakened a wilder and strange distemper in his mind, and then the two agonies, physical and mental, rioted over him in fierce rivalry, divesting him of all thoughts, save such as were aroused by their own agency. At length, however, the pangs seemed to grow less frequent. He hardly knew now from what part of his body they proceeded. Insensibly his faculties of thinking and feeling grew blank; he remained for a time in a mysterious, unrefreshing repose of body and mind, and at last his disordered senses, left unguided and unrestrained, became the victims of a sudden and terrible illusion.

The black darkness about him appeared, after an interval, to be dawning into a dull, misty light, like the reflection on clouds which threaten a thunderstorm at the close of day. Soon this atmosphere seemed to be crossed and streaked

with a fantastic trellis work of white, seething vapor. Then the mass of brickwork which had fallen in, grew visible, enlarged to an enormous bulk and endowed with the power of locomotion, by which it mysteriously swelled and shrank, raised and depressed itself, without quitting for a moment its position near him. And then, from its dark and toiling surface, there rose a long array of dusky shapes, which twined themselves about the misty trellis work above and took the palpable forms of human countenances.

There were infantile faces wreathed with grave worms that hung round them like locks of slimy hair; aged faces dabbled with gore and slashed with wounds; youthful faces, seamed with livid channels along which ran unceasing tears; lovely faces distorted into the fixed coma of despairing gloom. Not one of these countenances exactly resembled the other. Each was stigmatized by a revolting character of its own. Yet, however deformed their other features, the eyes of all were preserved unimpaired. Speechless and bodiless they floated in unceasing myriads up to the fantastic trellis work, which seemed to swell its wild proportions to receive them. There they clustered in their goblin amphitheatre, and fixedly and silently they glared down, without exception, on the intruder's face.

Meanwhile the walls at the side began to gleam out with a light of their own, making jaded boundaries to the midway scenes of phantom faces. Then the rifts in their surface widened, and disgorged misshapen figures of priests and idols of the olden time, which came forth in every hideous deformity of aspect, mocking at the faces of the trellis work, while behind and over the whole soared shapes of gigantic darkness. From this ghastly assemblage there came not the slightest sound. The stillness of a dead and ruined world was about him, possessed of appalling mysteries, veiled in quivering vapors and glooming shadows.

Days, years, centuries seemed to pass, as Tristan lay

gazing up in a trance of horror into this realm of peopled and ghostly darkness.

At last he staggered to his feet. He must find an egress or go mad. Slowly raising himself upon his uninjured arm, he looked vainly about for the faintest glimmer of light. Not a single object was discernible about him. Darkness hemmed him in, in rayless and triumphant obscurity.

The first agony of the pain having resolved itself into a dull changeless sensation, the vision that had possessed his senses was now, in a vast and shadowy form, present only to his memory, filling the darkness with fearful recollections and urging him on, in a restless, headlong yearning, to effect his escape from this lonely and unhallowed sepulchre.

"I must pass into light. I must breathe the air of the sky, or I shall perish in this vault," he muttered in a hoarse voice, which the fitful echoes mocked by throwing his words as it were, to each other, even to the faintest whisper of its last recipient.

Gradually and painfully he commenced his meditated retreat.

Tristan's brain still whirled with the emotion that had so entirely overwhelmed his mind, as, staggering through the interminable gloom, he set forth on his toilsome, perilous journey.

Suddenly however he paused, bewildered, in the darkness. He had no doubt mistaken the direction, and a gleam of light, streaming through the fissure of the rock, informed him that there were others in this abode of darkness, beside himself.

Had he come upon the object of his quest?

For a moment Tristan's heart stood still, then, with all the caution which the darkness, the danger of secret pitfalls and the risk of discovery suggested, he crept toward the crevice until the glow gradually increased. From the bowels of the earth, as it were, voices were now audible; they seemed to issue from the depths of a cavern directly below where Tris-

tan stood. Groping his way carefully along the wall of rock, he at last reached the spot whence the light issued and presently started at finding himself before an aperture just wide enough to admit the body of a single man. A sort of perpendicular ladder was formed in the wall of narrow juttings of stone, and below these was the rock chamber from which the voices proceeded.

It was some time ere the confusion of his ideas and the darkness allowed Tristan to form any notion of the character of the locality, when it suddenly dawned upon him that he had strayed into a place regarding which he had heard and wondered much: the Catacombs of St. Calixtus.

This revelation was by no means reassuring, although the presence of others held out hope that he would discover an exit from this shadowy labyrinth.

For a moment Tristan remained as one transfixed, as he gazed from his lofty pinnacle into the shadowy vault below.

He saw a stone table, lighted with a single taper, in the centre of which lay an unsheathed dagger, and an object the exact character of which he could not determine in the half gloom, also a brazen bowl. About a dozen men in cloaks with black vizors stood around, and one, taller than the rest, the gleam of whose eyes shone through the slits of his mask, appeared to be concluding an address to his companions.

The words were indistinguishable to Tristan but, when the speaker had concluded, a dark murmur arose which subsided anon. Then those present crowded around the stone table. The taper was momentarily obscured by the intervening throng, and Tristan could not see the ceremony, though he could hear the muttered formula of an oath they seemed to be taking. What he did see caused the chill of death to run through his veins.

The group again receding, the man bared his left arm, raised the dagger on high and let it descend. Tristan saw the blood weltering slowly from the self-inflicted wound,

trickling drop by drop into the brazen bowl, which another muffled figure was holding. Then each one present repeated the ceremony, he who was presenting the bowl being the last to mingle his blood with that of the rest.

Then another stepped forth and, raising the bloody knife on high, stabbed the object that lay upon the table. Some mysterious signs passed between them, meaningless words that struck Tristan's ear with the vague memory of a dimly remembered dream. Then he who seemed to be the speaker raised the object on high and, walking to a niche, concealed in the shadows, placed it in, what seemed to Tristan, a fissure in the rock.

Like ghosts returning to the bowels of the earth, they glided away, silently, soundlessly, and soon the silence of death hovered once again in the rock caverns of the Catacombs of St. Calixtus.

In breathless suspense, utterly oblivious of the injury he had sustained, Tristan gazed into the deserted rock chamber where the dim light of the taper still flickered in a faint breath of air wafted from without.

Hardly did the hearts of the Magi when the vision of the Star in the East first dawned upon their eyes experience a transport more vivid than that which animated Tristan when he found his terrible stress relieved.

But almost immediately a reaction set in and a dire misgiving extinguished the quick ray of hope that had lighted his heart, luring him on to escape from these caverns of Death.

By a strange mischance they had neglected to extinguish the taper. They might return at any moment and, his presence discovered, the doom in store for the intruder on their secret rites was not a matter of surmise. Composing himself to patience, Tristan waited, glaring as a caged tiger at the gates whose opening or closing might spell freedom or doom. At last, after a considerable lapse of time, moments that seemed eternity, he resolved to hazard the descent.

Slowly and painfully moving, with the pace and perseverance of a turtle, he writhed downward upon his unguided course until he reached the bottom of the cavern. Breathless with exhaustion after his breakneck descent, he waited in the shadow of a projecting rock. When the deep sepulchral silence remained undisturbed, he advanced toward the fissure in the rock where one of the muffled company had placed the mysterious object.

Tristan's quest was not at once rewarded. The shelving in the rock cavern, being irregular and almost indistinguishable, offered no clue to the mystery. A great fear was upon him, but he was determined, to discover the meaning of it all.

Suddenly he paused. A small cabinet of sandal wood, concealed behind the jutting stone, had caught his eye. It was painted to resemble the rock and the untrained eye would not linger upon it. A small keyhole was revealed, but the key had been taken away.

Tristan stood irresolute, with straining eyes and listening ear. Not a sound was audible. Even the piping of the night wind in the rock fissures seemed to have died to silence. With quick resolution he inserted one of the sharp-edged flints and gave a wrench.

When the top receded he could not repress an outcry. A chill coursed coldly through his veins. His breath came and went in sobs, as from one half drowned.

He only glanced at what was before him for the fraction of a second. But he knew what had made the very soul within him shudder and his bones grind, as if in mortal agony.

It was as though Hell itself had opened the gates. He staggered back in a paroxysm of horror. —

With a grim, set face Tristan closed the top of the cabinet and replaced it on the rocky ledge. Thus he stood, his face buried in his hands. Could the All-seeing God permit such an outrage and let the perpetrators live?

But there was no time for reflection. At any moment one

of the muffled phantoms might return, and indeed he thought he heard steps approaching through one of the rock galleries. He crouched in breathless, agonized suspense, for it did not suffer him longer in these caverns of crime and death.

He dimly remembered the direction in which the nocturnal company had departed and, after some research, he discovered a narrow corridor that seemed to slope upward through the gloom. His lantern having been broken to atoms, the taper held out little promise of life beyond a brief space of time during which he must find the entrance of the cavern, if he did not wish to meet a fate even worse than death in the event of discovery.

Grimly resolved Tristan raised the flickering taper and entered the gallery on his left. The Stygian gloom almost extinguished the feeble light, though he noted every object he passed, every turn in the tortuous ascent.

After some time which seemed eternity he at last perceived a dim glow at the extremity of the gallery, and soon found himself before the outer cavity of the stone wall, in a region of the city that seemed miles removed from the place where he had entered.

It was near daybreak. The moon shone faintly in the grey heavens and a vaporous mist was sinking from shapeless clouds that hovered over the course of the Tiber.

Tristan looked about his solitary lurking place, but beheld no human being in its lonely recesses. Then his eyes fixed themselves with a shudder upon the glooming vault from which he had made his escape.

He was on the track of a terrible mystery, a mystery which shunned the light of day and of heaven. He must fathom it, whatever the risk. A strange new energy possessed him. His life at last seemed to have a purpose. He was no longer a rolling stone. There was work ahead. His future course stood out clearly defined, as Tristan turned his back upon the Catacombs of St. Calixtus and took the direction of the

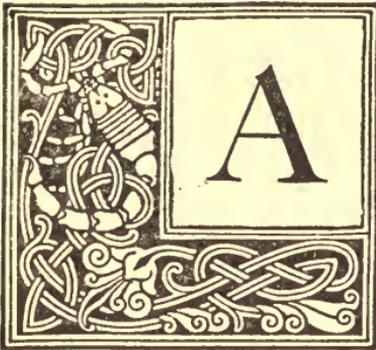
Aventine. To Odo, the Monk of Cluny, he must confide the terrible discovery he had made in the mephitic caverns of the Catacombs. To him he must turn for counsel, of which he stood sorely in need. And in some way which he could not account for to himself, Tristan felt as if the fate of Hellayne was bound up in these dreadful mysteries. At first the thought seemed absurd, but somehow it gained upon him and began to add new weight to his burden. Could he but see her! Could he but have speech with her. A great dread seized him at the thought of what might be her fate at the present hour. What would she think of him who seemed to have abandoned her in the hour of dire distress, when she needed him above all men on earth?

Did her intuition, did her heart inform her that he had roamed the city for days in the hope of finding her? Had her heart informed her that, like a spirit judged and condemned, he found neither rest nor peace in his vain endeavors to discover her abode? Was she sinking under her loneliness, perishing from uncertainty of her fate, doubts of his allegiance? To what perils and miseries had he exposed her, and to what end? He groaned in despair, as his mind reverted from the dark present to the happy past. A past, forever gone! —

A faint streak of light crept across the East, permeating the grey dawn with roseate hues as Tristan re-entered the Emperor's Tomb to partake of an hour or two of much needed rest, ere the business of the new-born day claimed him its own.

CHAPTER VII

A BOWER OF EDEN



AFTER some hours of much needed rest Tristan started out to find the Monk of Cluny. The task he had set himself was not one easy of execution, since the Benedictine friar was wont to visit the Roman sanctuaries following the promptings of the spirit without adhering to a definite routine. Thus the

greater part of the day was consumed in a futile quest of him of whose counsel he stood sorely in need.

At the hour of sunset Tristan set anew upon his quest. His feet carried him to a remote region of the city, and when he regained his bearings he found himself before the convent of Santa Maria del Priorata with its environing groves of oleander and almond trees.

The moon was floating like a huge pearl of silver through vast seas of blue. The sleeping flowers were closed, like half-extinguished censers, breathing faint incense on the night's pale brow. From some dark bough a nightingale was shaking down a flood of song. The fountains from their stone basins leaped moonward in the passion of their love and seemed to fall sobbing back to earth. The night air breathed hot and languorous across the gardens of the Pincian Mount. Lutes tinkled here and there. And the magic of the night thrilled Tristan's soul. As in a trance his gaze

followed the white figure that was moving noiselessly down a moss grown path. A thick hedge of laurel concealed her now. Then she paused as if she, too, were enraptured by the magic of the night.

The moon illumined the central lawn and the whispering fountains. Tall cypresses seemed to intensify the shade. In the distance he could faintly discern the white balustrade, crowning a terrace where green alleys wound obscurely beneath the canopy of darkest oak, and moss and violet made their softest bed. In the very centre of it was a small domed temple, a shrine to Love.

Tristan's senses began to swoon. Was it a hallucination—was it reality? A moon maiden she seemed, made mortal for a night, to teach all comers love in the sacred grove.

“Helayne! Helayne!”

His voice sounded strange to his own ears.

As in a dream he saw her come towards him. She came so silent and so pale in the spectral light that he feared lest it was the spectre of his mind that came to meet him. And once more the voice cried “Helayne!” and then they lay in each other's arms. All her reluctance, all her doubts seemed to have flown at the sound of her name from his lips.

“Helayne! Helayne!” he whispered deliriously, kissing her eyes, her hair, her sweet lips, and folding her so close to him, as if he would never again part from her he loved better than life. “At last I have found you! How came you here? Speak! Is it indeed yourself, or is it some mocking spirit that has borrowed your form?”

And again he kissed her and their eyes held silent commune.

“It is I who have just refound you!” she whispered, as he looked enraptured into the sweet girlish face, the face that had not changed since he had left Avalon, though she seemed to have become more womanly, and in her eyes lay a pathetic sorrow.

What a rapture there was in that clear tone. But she

trembled as she spoke. Would he understand? Would he believe?

“But — why — why — are you here?” he stammered.

“I have sought you long.”

“You have followed me? You are not then a nun?”

“You see I am not.”

“But why — oh why, — have you done this thing?”

She made no answer.

“You are here in Rome — and he is here. And you did not know?”

“I knew!” she replied with a little nod, like a questioned child.

“You knew! And he believes that I knew!”

“That is a small matter, dear. For he knows, that you knew not.”

The endearment startled him. It seemed to cast her faith upon him.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

“I came because I had to come! I had no choice —!”

“No choice! Then why did you send me away?”

She gave a little shrug.

“I knew not how much I loved you.”

“And yet, dearest, you cannot remain here. You know his moods better than any one else — and you know if he finds us — for your own sake, dearest, you cannot remain.”

In the warmth of his entreaty he had used as endearing words as she. They were precious to her ears.

“Let him come!” she said, nestling close to him. “Let him come and kill me!”

She glanced about. He pointed to the castellated building that rose darkly beyond the holm-oaks.

“Yonder — is yonder your abode?” he stammered.

Suddenly the woman in her gained the mastery.

“Oh no! No! No! Let us hide! Wretch that I am, to risk your life with mine.”

She had flung herself upon him. Around them rioted roses in wild profusion. To him it seemed like a bosquet of Eden. Upon his breast she sobbed. But no consideration of past or present could restrain his hand from gently soothing her silken hair.

"Oh, why did you leave me?" she cried. "Why could we not have loved without all this? Surely two souls can love — if love they must — without doing wrong to any one."

His arms stole about her.

"Speak to me! Speak to me!" she whispered with upturned face.

"Had I known that this would happen, I should have known that I did foolishly," he replied. "You should have known, dearest. You thought to kill our love by cutting it to earth. You have but made its roots grow deeper down into the present and the future!"

She nodded dreamily.

"Perchance you speak truth!" she said. "You see me here by your side, having crossed leagues and leagues to seek your soul, my home — my only home forever. And as surely as the bee goes back to its one hallowed oak have I refound you. And as surely as the ocean knows that every breath of vapor lifted from its face shall some day come back to its breast, so surely did you know that your love must return to you."

"Unless," he said, "it sinks into the unseen springs that are so deep that they are lost from sight forever."

"Lost — nothing is lost. The deepest water shall break out some day and reach the lake — the river. Then, why not now? I am one who cannot wait for eternity."

"And yet, eternity I fear, is waiting for us!"

There was a deep silence, lasting apace.

"Ah, I know," she said at last. "I know I ought to think as you do. I should be conscience stricken now, as I was then. I should be glad that you left me. But I am not — I am not. I am here, dearest, to ask you if you love me still?" —

"Love you?" he replied in a transport, holding her close, while he covered her eyes and her upturned face with kisses. "I love you as never woman was loved — as the night loves the dew in the cups of the upturned flowers — as the nightingale loves the dream that weaves its phantom webs about her bowers. I love you above everything in heaven or on earth. You knew the answer, dearest. Why did you ask?"

"I see it in your eyes. You love me still," she crooned, her beautiful white arms about his neck, "notwithstanding—"

He started. And yet, after the scene she had witnessed on that night, her doubts were but too well-founded. Yet she had not queried before.

"Strange fortunes crossed my path since I came here," he said. "Ambition lured — I followed, as one who lost his way. Would you have had me do otherwise?"

In his eyes she read the truth. Yet the shadow of that other woman had come between them as a phantom.

"Oh, no, — although I never thought that you were made for statecraft."

"I am in the service of the Senator. And the Senator of Rome is her foe."

"And you?"

"I am his servant."

She laughed nervously.

"I never thought you would come to this, my love."

"Nor ever should I have thought so. But fate is strange. The Holy Father is imprisoned in the Lateran. To him I wended my way. But the only service I did him was to prevent his escape — unwittingly. I visited the sanctuaries. But though prayers hovered on my lips, repentance was not in my heart. And then it came to pass. And I feel like one borne in a bark that has neither sail nor rudder. And if, instead of being far-floated to these Roman shores, I am headed for a port where all is security and peace, can I prevent

it? I am borne on! I close my eyes and try to think that Fate has intended it for my good."

"For your good!" she said bitterly.

"For yours no less, perchance."

"How so, dearest? What good can come to me from your soul's security? To me, who believe our love is right-ful?"

"And yet you sent me from you — into darkness — loneliness — despair?"

She stroked his hair.

"It was fear as well as conscience that prompted. You once said that all things are right, that may not be escaped. You said, that if God was at the back of all things, all things were pure —"

"I know I said it! But, what I meant, I know not now. I saw things strangely then."

"There were days when I, too, lost my vision," she said softly, "when I said to myself: there is truth and truth — the higher and the lower. It was the higher, if you like to call it so, Tristan, that prompted the deed. Since then I have come down to earth, and the lower truth, more fit for beings of clay, proclaims my presence here —"

"What will you do?" he queried anxiously.

"I know not — I know not! I came here to be with you — without ever a thought of meeting him again whom I have wronged — if wronged indeed I have. He has vowed to kill you! Oh, to what a pass have I brought you — my love — my love! Let us fly from Rome! Let us leave this city. He will never know. And as for me — he but loves me because I am fair to look upon, and lovable in the eyes of another. What I have suffered in the silence, in the darkness, you will never know. You shall take me with you — anywhere will I go — so we shake the dust of this city from our feet."

She leapt at him again and flung her arms about his neck,

her face upturned. He had neither will nor power to release himself. He scarcely had the strength to speak the words which he knew would stab her to the heart.

Even ere he spoke she fell away from him as if she had read his mind.

"So you persuaded him of your repentance," she cried. "You are friends over the body of your murdered love! And I — who gave all — am left alone, — the foe of either. It was nobly done."

He stared at her as if he thought she had gone mad.

"Listen, Helayne," he urged, taking her hands in his, in the endeavor to soothe her. "What spirit of evil has whispered this madness into your ears? Even just now you said, he has sworn to kill me. How could there be reconciliation between Roger de Laval and myself — who love his wife?"

"Then what is it?" she queried, her eyes upon his lips as if she were waiting sentence to be pronounced upon her.

"I am the Senator's man!"

The words fell upon her ears like the knell of doom.

"He will release you! I will go to him — if your pride is greater, than your love."

She was all woman now, deaf to reason and entreaty, thinking of nothing but her great love of him.

He drew her down beside him on the marble seat.

"Listen, Helayne! You do not understand — you wrong me cruelly. Naught is there in this world that I would not do to make you happy — you, whose love and happiness are my one concern while life endures. But this thing may not be. The Senator of Rome is away on a pilgrimage. He has chosen me to watch over this city till his return. Danger lurks about me in every guise. Its nature I know not. But I do know that there is some dark power at work plotting evil. There is one I do not trust — the Lord Basil."

Helayne gave a start.

"The bosom friend, so it would seem, of the Count Laval." The color had left Tristan's face.

"You have met?"

"He appears to have taken a great liking to my lord. Almost daily does he call, and they seem to have some secret matter between them."

Tristan gripped Hellyayne's hand so fiercely that she hardly suppressed an outcry.

"Have you surprised any utterance?"

"Only a name. They thought I was out of earshot."

"What name?"

"Theodora!"

She watched him narrowly as she spoke the word.

He gave a start.

"Theodora," Hellyayne repeated slowly. "She who saved your life when my poor efforts failed."

There was a tinge of bitterness in her tone which did not escape Tristan's ear. Ere he could make reply, she followed it up with the question:

"What is there between you and her?"

"For aught I know it is some strange whim of the woman, call it infatuation if you will," he replied, "which, though I have repelled her, still maintains. It was at her feast I first met the Lord Roger face to face."

"How came you there?" she questioned with pained voice.

Tristan recounted the circumstances, concealing nothing from the time of his arrival in Rome to the present hour. Hellyayne listened wearily, but the account he gave seemed rather to irritate than to reconcile her to him, who thus laid bare his heart before her.

"And so soon was I forgot?" she crooned.

"Never for a moment were you forgot, my Hellyayne," he replied with all the fervor of persuasion at his command. "At all times have I loved you, at all times was your image enshrined in my heart. Theodora is all-powerful in Rome,

as was Marozia before her. The magistrates, the officers of the Senator's court, are her creatures, — Basil no less than the rest. Would that the Lord Alberic returned, for the burden he has placed upon my shoulders is exceeding heavy. But you, my Hellyayne, what will you do? I cannot bear the thought of knowing you with him who has wrecked your life, your happiness."

In Hellyayne's blue eyes there was a great pain.

"Why mind such trifles since you but think of yourself?"

"You do not understand!" he protested. "Can I with honor abandon the trust which the Senator has imposed? What if the dreadful thing should happen? What if sudden sedition should sweep his power into the night of oblivion? Could I stand face to face with him, should he ask: 'How have you kept your trust?'"

Steps were approaching on the greensward.

Hellyayne turned pale and Tristan's arm closed about her, determined to defend her to the death against whosoever should dare intrude.

Then it was as if some impalpable barrier had arisen between the man and the woman. It seemed the last hard malice of Fate to have brought them so near to what was not to be.

Hardly had Tristan drawn her throbbing bosom to his embrace when a dark shadow fell athwart their path and, looking up, he became aware of a forbidding form that stood hard by, wrapped in a black mantle that reached to his heels. From under a hood which was drawn over his face two beady eyes gleamed with smouldering fire, while the hooked nose gave the face the semblance of a bird of prey, which illusion the cruel mouth did little to dispel.

Hellyayne, too, had seen this phantom of ill omen and was about to release herself from Tristan's arms, her face white as her robe, when the speech of the intruder arrested her movement.

“ A message from the Lady Theodora.”

A hot flush passed over Tristan's face, giving way to a deadly pallor as, hesitating to take the proffered tablet, he replied with ill-concealed vexation:

“ Whom does the Lady Theodora honor by sending so ill-favored a messenger? ”

The cowed figure fixed his piercing eyes first upon Tristan then upon Helayne.

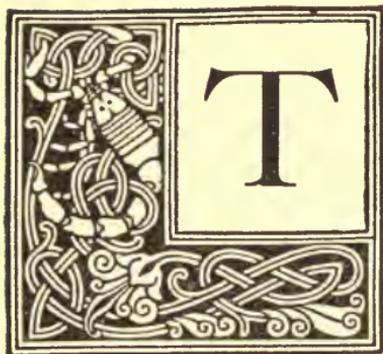
“ The Lord Tristan will do well to pay heed to the summons, if he values that which lies nearest his heart.”

But ere he, for whom the message was intended, could take it, Helayne had snatched it from the messenger, had broken the seal and devoured its contents by the light of the moon which made the night as bright as day.

Then, with a shrill laugh, she cast it at Tristan's feet and, ere the latter could recover himself, both the woman and the messenger had gone and he stood alone in the bosquet of roses, vainly calling the name of her who had left him without a word to his misery and despair.

CHAPTER VIII

AN ITALIAN NIGHT



THE palace of Theodora on Mount Aventine was aglow with life and movement for the festivities of the evening. The lights of countless cressets were reflected from the marble floor of the great reception hall and shone on the rich panelling, and the many-hued tapestries which decked the walls.

In the shadow of the little marble kiosk which rose, a relic of a happier age, among oleander and myrtles, shadowed by tall cypresses, silent guardians of the past, Theodora and Basil faced each other. The white, livid face of the man gave testimony to the passions that consumed him, as his burning gaze swept the woman before him.

"I have spoken, my Lord Basil! Should some unforeseen mischance befall him I have summoned hither, look to it that I require not his blood at your hands."

Theodora's tone silenced all further questioning. After a pause she continued: "And if you desire farther proof that this man shall not stand against my enchantments, pass into yonder kiosk and through its carven windows shall you be able to witness all that passes between us."

She ceased with quivering lips, the while Basil regarded her from under half-shut lids, filled with sudden brooding, and for a space there was silence. At last he said in a low, unsteady voice:

"So I did not err when my hatred rose against this puppet

of the Senator's, who came to Rome to do penance for a kiss. You love him, your foe, while I, your utter slave, must stand by and, with aching heart, see your mad desire bring all our schemes to naught."

His hand closed on his dagger hilt, but Theodora's eyes flashed like bared swords as with set face she said:

"Fool! — to see but that which lies in your path, not the intricate nets which are spread in the darkness. I mean to make this man my very own! His fevered lips shall close on mine, and in my embrace he shall climb to the heaven of the Gods. He shall be mine! He shall do my bidding utterly. He shall open for me the gates of the Emperor's Tomb. He shall stand beside me when I am proclaimed mistress of Rome! For my love he shall defy the world that is — and the world that is not."

"And what of the woman he loves?" Basil snarled venomously, and the pallor of Theodora's face informed him that the arrow he had sped had hit the mark.

She held out her wonderful statuesque arms, then, raising herself to her full height, she said:

"Is the pale woman from his native land a match for me? What rare sport it shall be to make of this Hellayne a mock, and of her name a memory, and put Theodora's in its high place. Do you doubt my power to do as I say?"

"Verily I do believe that you love this pilgrim," Basil said sullenly. "And while I am preparing the quake that shall tumble Alberic's dominion into dust and oblivion, you are making him the happiest of mortals. And deem you I will stand by and see yon dotard reap the fruits of my endeavors and revel where I, your slave, am starving for a look?"

"Well have you chosen the word, my lord — my slave! For then were Theodora indeed the puppet of a lust-bitten subject did she heed his mad ravings and his idle plaints. Know, my lord, that my love is his to whom I choose to give it, his who gives to me that in return which I desire. And

though I have drunk deep of the goblet of passion, never has my heart beat one jot the faster, nor has the fire in my soul been kindled until I met him whom this night I have summoned."

"And deem you, fairest Theodora, that the sainted pilgrim will come?" Basil interposed with an evil leer.

An inscrutable smile curved Theodora's crimson lips.

"Let that be my affair, my lord, but — that everything may be clear between us — know this: when I summoned him, after he had spurned me on the night when I intended to make him the happiest of men, it was to torture him, to make a mock of him, to arouse his passions till they overmastered all else, till in very truth he forgot his God, his honor, and the woman for whose kisses he does such noble penance — but now —"

"But now?" came the echo from Basil's lips.

"Who says I shall not?" Theodora replied with her inscrutable smile. "Who shall gainsay me? You — my lord?"

There was a strange light in Basil's eyes, kindled by her mockery.

"And when he kneels at your feet, drunk with passion — laying bare his soul in his mad infatuation — who shall prevent this dagger from drinking his heart's blood, even as he peers into the portals of bliss?"

Theodora's eyes flashed lightnings.

"I shall kill you with my own hands, if you but dare but touch one hair of his head," she said with a calm that was more terrible than any outburst of rage would have been. "He is mine, to do with as I choose, and look well to it, my lord, that your shadow darken not the path between us. — Else I shall demand of you such a reckoning as none who may hear of it in after days shall dare thwart Theodora — either in love or in hate."

Basil's writhing form swayed to and fro; passion-tossed he tried in vain to speak when she raised her hand.

With a gesture of baffled wrath and rage Basil bowed low. A sudden light leaped into his eyes as he raised her hand to his lips. Then he retreated into the shadow of the kiosk.

A moment later Tristan came within view, walking as one in a trance. Mechanically he passed towards the banquet hall. Then he paused, seeming to wait for some signal from within.

A hand stole into his and drew him resistlessly into the shadows.

"Why do you linger here? Behold where the moonlight calls."

"Where is your mistress?" Tristan turned to the Circassian.

A strange smile played on Persephoné's lips.

"She awaits you in yonder kiosk," she replied, edging close to him. "Take care you do not thwart her though — for to-day she strikes to kill."

"It is well," Tristan replied. "It must come, and will be no more torture now than any other time."

Persephoné gave a strange smile, then she led him through a cypress avenue, at the remote end of which the marble kiosk gleamed white in the moonlight.

Pointing to it with white outstretched arm she gave him a mock bow and returned to the palace.

His lips grimly set, Tristan, insensible to the beauty of the summer night, strode down the flower-bordered path. Woven sheets of silvery moonlight, insubstantial and unreal, lay upon the greensward. The sounds of distant lutes and harps sank down through the hot air. The sky was radiant with the magic lustre of a great white moon, suspended like an alabaster lamp in the deep azure overhead. Her rays invaded the sombre bosquets, lighted the trellised rose-walks and cast into bold relief against the deep shadows of palm and ilex many feathery fountain sprays, crowning flower-filled basins of alabaster with whispering coolness.

The path was strewn with powdered sea shells and bordered

on either side with rare plants, filling the air with exquisite perfume. Between thickets of yellow tufted mimosa and leafy bowers of acacia shimmered the crystal surface of the marble cinctured lake, tinted with pale gold and shrouded by pearl-hued vapors. — Pink and white myrtles, golden-hued jonquils, rainbow tinted chrysanthema, purple rhododendrons, iris, lilac and magnolia mingled their odors in an almost disconcerting orgy, and rare orchids raised their glowing petals with tropical gorgeousness from vases of verdigris bronze in the moonlight.

At the entrance of the marble kiosk, there stood the immobile form of a woman, half hidden behind a cluster of blooming orchids.

The silver light of the moon fell upon the pale features of Theodora. Her gaze was fixed upon the dark avenue of cypress trees, through which Tristan was swiftly approaching.

She stood there waiting for him, clad in misty white, like the moonbeams, yet the byssus of her garb was no whiter than was the throat that rose from the faultless trunk of her body, no whiter than her wonderful hands and arms.

Tristan's lips tightened. He had come to claim the scarf and dagger. To-night should end it all. There was no place in his life for this woman whose beauty would be the undoing of him who gave himself up to its fatal spell.

As he stood before her, a gleam of moonlight on his broad shoulders, Theodora felt the blood recede to her heart, the while she gazed on his set, yet watchful face. His silence seemed to numb her faculties and her voice sounded strange as, extending her hand, she said:

“Welcome, my Lord Tristan.”

He bowed low, barely touching the soft white fingers.

“The Lady Theodora has been pleased to summon me and I have obeyed. I am here to claim the dagger which was taken from me and the scarf of blue samite.”

Theodora glanced at him for a moment, the blood drumming

in her ears and driving a coherent answer from her mind, while Tristan met her gaze without flinching, with the memory of Helayne in his heart.

"Presently will I reveal this matter to you, my Lord Tristan," she said at last. "Meanwhile sit you here beside me — for the night is hot, and I have waited long for your coming."

For a moment Tristan hesitated, then he took his seat beside her on the marble bench, his brain afire, as he mused on all the treachery her soft bosom held.

"You look strangely at me, Tristan," she said in a low tone, dropping all formality, "almost as if it gave you pain to sit beside me. Yet I cannot think that a man like you has never rested beside a beautiful woman in an hour of solitude and passion."

A laugh, soft as the music of the Castalian fountain, fell on Tristan's ear, but as he sat without answer, she continued, her face very close to his:

"Strange, indeed, my words may sound in your ears, Tristan — and yet — can it be that you are blind as well as deaf to the call of the Goddess of Love, who rules us all?"

She paused, her lips ajar, her eyes alight with a strange fire, such as he had seen therein on the night in the sunken gardens, beyond the glimmering lake.

"And what have I to give to you, Lady Theodora," he said at length. "What can you expect from me, the giving of which would not turn my honor to disgrace and my strength to water?"

At his words she rose up and, towering her glorious womanhood above him, glided behind the marble bench and, leaning hot hands upon his shoulders, bent low her head, till strands of perfumed hair rested on his tense features.

"Do you love power, Tristan?" she said with low, yet vibrant voice. "I tell you that, if you give yourself to me, there are no heights to which the lover of Theodora may not climb. The way lies open from camp to palace, from sword

to sceptre, and, though the aim be high, at least it is worth the risk. Steep is the path, but, though attainment seems impossible, I tell you it is the wings of love that shall raise you and bid you soar to flights of glory and rapture. I offer you a kingdom, if you will but lay your sword at my feet and yet more besides, for, Tristan, I offer you myself."

The perfumed head bent lower and the scented cloud fell more thickly upon him as he sat there, dazed and enchanted out of all powers of resistance by the misty sapphire eyes that gleamed amid it, and seemed to drag his soul from out of him. Now his head was pillowed on her soft bosom and her white arms were about him, while lingering kisses burnt on his unresponsive lips, when suddenly she faced round with a cry, for there, directly before them in the clearing, stood a woman, whose gleaming white robe, untouched by any color, save that of the violet band that bound it round her shoulders, seemed one with the sun-kissed hair, tied into a simple knot.

Hellayne stood there as if deprived of motion, her blue eyes wide with horror and pain, her curved lips parted, as if to speak, though no sound came from them, until Tristan turned and, as their glances met, he gave a strangled groan and buried his face in his hands.

Theodora stood immobile, with blazing eyes and terrible face, then she clapped her hands twice and at the sound two eunuchs appeared and stood motionless awaiting their mistress' behest. For apace there was silence, while Theodora glanced from the one to the other, quivering from head to foot with the violence of the passion that possessed her, casting anon a glance at Tristan who stood silent, with bowed head.

At length she glided up to him and, as she laid her two white hands on his broad shoulders, Tristan shuddered and felt a longing to make an end of all her evil beauty and devilish cunning. Then, deliberately, she took the scarf of blue samite, which lay beside her and put her foot upon it.

“ This is very precious to you, Tristan, is it not? ” she said in her sweet voice, while her witching eyes sank into his. “ I was about to tell you how you might serve me, and deserve all the happiness that is in store for you when I was interrupted by the appearance of this woman. Can you tell me, who she is, and why she is regarding you so strangely? ”

As she spoke she turned slowly towards Hellyayne whose face was pale as death.

A spasm of rage shook Tristan, at the sight of the woman who regarded him out of wide, pitiful eyes, but even as he longed to pierce the heart of her who was striving to wreck all he held dear, Odo of Cluny's warning seemed to clear his brain of the rage and hate that was clouding it, and in that instant he knew, if he played his part, he held in his hand the last throw in the dread game, of which Rome was the pawn.

“ In all things will I do your bidding, Lady Theodora, — for who can withstand your beauty and your enchantment? ” said a voice that seemed not part of himself.

Theodora turned to Hellyayne.

“ You have heard the words the Lord Tristan has spoken, ” she said in veiled tone of mockery. “ Tell me now, did you not know that I was engaged upon matters of state when you intruded yourself into our presence? ”

For a moment the blue eyes of Hellyayne flashed swords with the dark orbs of Theodora. There was a silence and the two women read each other's inmost thoughts, Hellyayne meeting Theodora's contemptuous scorn with the keen look of one who has seen her peril and has nerved herself to meet it.

To Tristan she did not even vouchsafe a glance.

“ I followed one, perjured and forsworn, ” she said in tones that cut Tristan's very soul, while a look of immeasurable contempt flashed from her blue eyes. “ You are welcome to him, Lady Theodora. I do not even envy you his memory. ”

Ere Theodora could reply, Hellyayne, with a choking sob, turned and fled down the moonlit path like some hunted thing, and ere either realized what had happened she had vanished in the night.

Tristan, dreading the worst, his soul bruised in its innermost depths, cursing himself for having permitted any consideration except Hellyayne's life to interfere with his preconceived plans, started to follow, when Theodora, guessing his purpose, suddenly barred his way.

Ere he could prevent, she had thrown her arms about him and her face upturned to his stormy brow she whispered deliriously, utterly oblivious of two eyes that burnt from their sockets like live coals:

"I love you! I love you!" and her whole being seemed ablaze with the fire of an all-devouring passion. "Tristan, I love you with a love so idolatrous, that I could slay you with these hands rather than be spurned, be denied by you. Love me Tristan — love me! And I shall give you such love in return as mortals have never known. I am as one in a trance — I cannot see — I cannot think! I, the woman born to command — am begging — imploring — I care not what you do with me — what becomes of me. Take me! — I am yours — body and soul!"

Her face was lighted up by the pale rays of the moon. But, though his senses were steeped in a delirium that almost took from him his manhood, the gloom but deepened on Tristan's brow, while with moist hungry lips she kissed him, again and again.

At last, seemingly on the verge of merging his whole being into her own, he succeeded in extricating himself from the steely coils of those white arms.

"Lady Theodora," he said in cold and constrained tones, "I am too poor to return even in part such priceless favors of the Lady Theodora's love!"

Stung in her innermost soul by his words, trembling from

head to foot with the violence of her emotions, she panted in a passion of anger and shame.

"You dare? This to me? Since then you will not love me — take this —"

Above him, in her hand, gleamed his own unsheathed dagger.

Tristan with a supple movement caught the white wrist and wrenched the weapon from her.

"The Lady Theodora is always true to herself," he said with cutting irony, retreating from her in the direction of the lake.

She threw out her arms.

"Tristan — Tristan — forgive me! Come back — I am not myself."

He paused.

"And were you Aphrodite, I should spurn your love, — I should refuse to kiss the lips, which a slave, a churl has defiled."

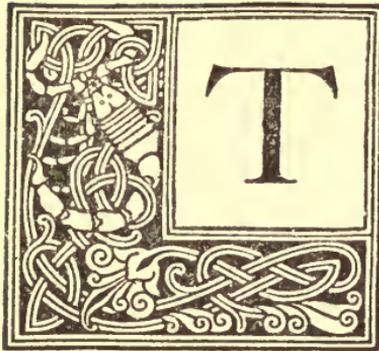
"You spurn me," she laughed deliriously. "Perchance, you are right. And yet," she added in a sadder tone, "how often does fate but grant us the dream and destroy the reality. Go — ere I forget, and do what I may repent of. Go! My brain is on fire. I know not what I am saying. Go!"

As Tristan turned without response, a gleam of deadly hatred shone from her eyes. For a long time she stood motionless by the kiosk, staring as one in a trance down the long cypress avenue, whose shadows had swallowed up Tristan's retreating form.

The spectral rays of the moon broke here and there through the dense, leafy canopy, and dream-like the distant sounds of harps and flutes were wafted through the stillness of the starlit southern night.

CHAPTER IX

THE NET OF THE FOWLER



HE appearance of Basil who had emerged from the kiosk and regarded Theodora with a look in his pale, passion distorted features that seemed to light up recesses in his own heart and soul which he himself had never fathomed, caused the woman to turn. But she looked at the man with an almost un-

knowing stare. Notwithstanding a self-control which she rarely lost, she had not found herself. The incredible had happened. When she seemed absolutely sure of the man, he had denied her. Her ruse had been her undoing. For Hellaayne's presence had been neither accidental, nor had Hellaayne herself brought it about. The messenger who had summoned Tristan had skillfully absolved both commissions. He was to have brought the woman to the tryst, that she might, with her own eyes, witness her rival's triumph. In her flight she had vanquished Theodora.

Stealthily as a snake moves in the grass, Basil came nearer and nearer. When he had reached Theodora's side he took the white hand and raised it, unresisting, to his lips. His eyes sought those of the woman, but a moment or two elapsed ere she seemed even to note his presence.

He bent low. There was love, passion, adoration in his eyes and there was more. Theodora had over acted her

part. He had seen the fire in her eyes and he knew. It was more than the determination to make Tristan pliable to her desires in the great hour when she was to enter Castel San Angelo as mistress of Rome. He saw the abyss that yawned at his own feet, and in that moment two resolves had shaped themselves in Basil's mind, shadowy, but gaining definite shape with each passing moment, and, while his fevered lips touched Theodora's hand, all the evil passions in his nature leaped into his brain.

Suddenly Theodora, glancing down at him, as if she for the first time noted his presence, spoke.

"Acknowledge, my lord, that I have attained my ends! For, had it not been for the appearance of that woman, I should have conquered — ay — conquered beyond a doubt."

But when she looked at him she hardly recognized in him the man she knew, so terribly had rage and jealousy distorted his countenance.

"How can I gainsay that you have conquered, fairest Theodora," he said, "when I heard the soft accents of your endearments and your panting breath, as you drowned his soul in fiery kisses? 'Tis but another poor fool swallowed up in the unsatisfied whirlpool of your desires, another victim marked for the holocaust that is to be. But why did the Lady Theodora cry out and bring the tender love scene to a close all unfinished?"

"By pale Hekaté, I had almost forgot the woman! Why did I permit her to go without strangling her on the spot?" she cried, the growing anger which the man's speech had aroused, brought to white heat in the reminder.

"The honor of being strangled by the fair hands of the Lady Theodora may be great," sneered Basil. "Yet I question if the Lady Hellayne would submit without a struggle even to so fair an opponent."

"Why do you taunt me?" Theodora flashed.

"Why?" he cried. "Because I witnessed another reaping

the fruit of the deeds I have sown — another stealing from me the love of the woman I have possessed, — one, too, held in silken bondage by another's wife. Rather would I plunge this knife into my own heart and — ”

Theodora's bosom heaved convulsively.

“Put up your dagger, my lord,” she said, with a wave of her hand. “For, ere long, it shall drink its fill. Strange it is that I — the like of whose beauty, as they tell me, is not on earth — should be conquered by a woman from the North — that the fires of the South should be quenched by Northern ice. I could almost wish that matters had run differently between her and myself, for she is brave, else had she not faced me as she did.”

“What else can you look for, Lady Theodora, from one sprung from such a race?” replied the man sullenly. “I tell you, Lady Theodora, if you do not ward yourself against her, she will vanquish you utterly, body and soul.”

“The future shall decide between us. I am still Theodora, and it will go hard with you, if you interpret my will according to your own desires. I foresee that we shall have need of all our resources when the hour tolls that shall see Theodora set upon the throne that is her own, and then — let deeds speak, not words.”

“Since when have you found occasion to doubt the sureness of my blade, Lady Theodora?” answered Basil, a dark look in his furtive eyes.

“Peace, my lord!” interposed Theodora. “Why do you raise up the ghost of that which has been between us? Bury the past, for the last throw that is in the hands of destiny ends the game which has been played round this city of Rome these many weary days.”

“And had you, Theodora, of a truth won over this Tristan,” came the dark reply, “so that one hour's delight in your arms would have caused him to forget the world about him — what of me who has given to you the love, the devotion of a slave?”

At the words Theodora flung wide her shimmering arms and cried:

"I tell you, my lord, that as I hold you and every man captive on whom my charms have fallen, so shall I hold in chains the soul of this Tristan, even though he resist — to the last."

"Full well do I know the potency of your spell," answered Basil with lowering eyes, "and, I doubt me, if such is the case. Nevertheless, I warn you, Lady Theodora, not to place too great a share of this desperate venture on the shoulders of one you have never proved."

A contemptuous smile curved Theodora's lips as she rose from her seat. With a single sweep her draperies fell from her like mist from a snow-clad peak, and for the space of a moment there was silence, broken only by Basil's panting breath. At last Theodora spoke.

"Man's honor is so much chaff for the burning, when the darts of love pierce his brain. With beauty's weapons I have fought before, and once again the victory shall be mine!"

There was an ominous light in Basil's eyes.

"Beware, lest the victory be not purchased with the blood of one whom your fickleness has chosen to sit in the empty seat of the discarded. At the bidding of a mad passion have you been defeated."

A flood of words surged irresistibly to Basil's lips, but at the sight of Theodora's set face the words froze in the utterance. But when the woman stared into space, her face showing no sign that she had even heard his speech, he continued:

"And when you are stretched out on a bed of torment and call for death to ease your pain, let the bitterest pang be that, had you enlisted my blade and cherished the devotion I bore you, this night's work would have set the seal of victory on our perilous venture."

"Blinded I have been," said Theodora, a strange light

leaping to her eyes, "to all the devotion which now I begin to fathom more clearly. Answer me then, my lord! Is it only to slake the pangs of mad jealousy that you taunt me with words which no man has dared to speak — and live?"

The sheen of a drawn dagger flashed above his head. Basil faced the death that lurked in Theodora's uplifted arm and he replied in an unmoved voice:

"Lady Theodora, if you harbor one single doubt in your mind of him who has worked your will on those you consigned to their doom and laid their proud heads low in the dust of the grave, let your blade descend and quit me according to what I have deserved. Nay — Lady Theodora," he continued, as her white arm still hovered tense above him, "it is quite evident your love I never had, your trust I have lost! Therefore send my soul to the dim realms of the underworld, for I have no longer any desire for life."

He was gazing up at her with eyes full of passionate devotion, when of a sudden the blade dropped from her grasp, tinkling on the stone beneath, and, burying her face in her hands, Theodora burst into an agony of tears that shook her form with piteous sobbing.

"By all the saints, dear lady, weep not," Basil pleaded, placing gentle hands upon her shoulders. "Rather let your dagger do its work and drink my blood, than that grief should thus undo you."

"Truly had some evil spirit entered into me," she spoke at length in broken accents, "else had I not so madly suspected one whose devotion to me has never wavered. Can you forgive me, my lord, most trusted and doubted of my friends?"

With a fierce outcry the man cast himself at her feet, and, bending low, kissed her hands, while, in tones, hoarse with passion, he stammered:

"Let me then prove my love, Lady Theodora, most beautiful of all women on earth! Set the task! Show me how to

win back that which I have lost! Let me become your utter slave."

And, so saying, he swept the unresisting woman into his grasp, and as her body lay motionless against his breast the sight of her lips so close to his own sent the hot blood hurtling through his fevered brain.

Theodora shuddered in his embrace.

He kissed her, again and again, and her wet lips roused in him all the demoniacal passions of his nature.

"Speak," he stammered, "what must I do to prove to you the love which is in my heart — the passion that burns my soul to crisp, as the fires of hell the souls of the damned?"

Theodora's eyes were closed, as if she hesitated to speak the words that her lips had framed. He, Tristan, had brought her to this pass. He had denied, insulted her, he had made a mock of her in the eyes of this man, who was kneeling at her feet, bond slave of his passions. By his side no task would have seemed to great of accomplishment. And whatever the fruits of her plotting he was to have shared them. How she hated him; and how she hated that woman who had come between them. As for him whose stammering words of love tumbled from his drunken lips, Theodora could have driven her poniard through his heart without wincing in the act.

"If you love me then, as you say," she whispered at last, "revenge me on him who has put this slight upon me!"

A baleful light shone in Basil's eyes.

"He dies this very night."

She raised her hands with a shudder.

"No — no! Not a quick death! He would die as another changes his garment — with a smile. — No! Not a quick death! Let him live, but wish he were dead a thousand times. Strike him through his honor. Strike him through the woman he loves."

For a pace Basil was silent. Could Theodora have read his

thoughts at this moment the weapon would not have dropped from her nerveless grasp.

“ Ah! ” he said, and a film seemed to pass over his eyes in the utterance. “ There is nothing that shall be left undone — through his honor — through the woman he loves.”

She utterly abandoned herself to him now, suffering his endearments and kisses like a thing of stone and thereby rousing his passions to their highest pitch. She could have strangled him like a poisonous reptile that defiled her body, but, after having suffered his embrace for a time, she suddenly shook herself free of him.

“ My lord — what of our plans? How much longer must I wait ere the clarions announce to Rome that the Emperor’s Tomb harbors a new mistress? What of Alberic? What of Hassan Abdullah, the Saracen? ”

Basil was regarding her with a mixture of savage passion, doubt, incredulity and something like fear.

“ The death-hounds are on Alberic’s scent,” he said at last, with an effort to steady his voice, and hold in leash his feelings, which threatened to master him, as his eyes devoured the woman’s beauty. — “ Hassan Abdullah is even now in Rome.”

“ Can we rely upon him and his Saracens when the hour tolls that shall see Theodora mistress of Rome? ”

“ Weighing a sack of gold against the infidel’s treachery, it is safe to predict that the scales will tip in favor of the bribe — so it be large enough.”

“ Be lavish with him, and if his heart be set on other matters — ”

She paused, regarding the man with an inscrutable look. Shrewd as he was, he caught not its meaning.

“ Why not entrust to his care the Lady Hellayne? ”

The devilish suggestion seemed to find not as enthusiastic a reception as she had anticipated.

“ After having seen the Lady Theodora,” Basil said, his

eyes avoiding those of the woman, "I fear the Lady Helayne will appear poor in Hassan Abdullah's eyes."

Theodora had grown pensive.

"I do not think so. To me she seemed like a snow-capped volcano. All ice without, all fire within. Perchance I should bow to your better judgment, my lord, and perchance to Hassan Abdullah's, whose good taste in preferring the Lady Theodora cannot be gainsaid. But, our guests are becoming impatient. Take me to the palace."

Basil barred the woman's way.

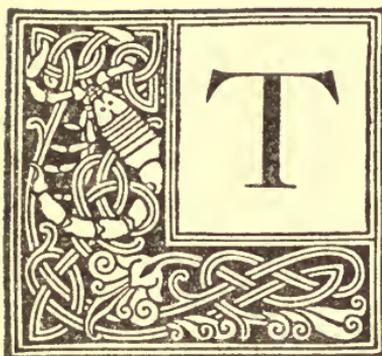
"And when you have reached the summit of your desire, will you remember certain nuptials consummated in a certain chamber in the Emperor's Tomb, between two placed as we are and mated as we?"

Theodora's lips curved in one of those rare smiles which brought him to whom she gave it to her feet, her abject slave.

"I shall remember, my lord," she said, and, linking her arm in his, they strode towards the palace.

CHAPTER X

DEVIL WORSHIP



THE dawn of the following day brought in its wake consternation and terror. From the churches of the two Egyptian Martyrs, Sts. Cosmas and Damian, the Holy Host had been taken during the preceding night. Frightened beyond measure, the ministering priests had suffered the terrible secret to leak out, and this circumstance, coupled with the unexplained absence of the Senator, the tardiness of the Prefect to start his investigations, and the captivity of the Pontiff, threw the Romans into a panic. It was impossible to guard every church in Rome against a similar outrage, as the guards of the Senator were inadequate in number, and, consisting chiefly of foreign elements, could not be relied upon.

The early hours of the morning found Tristan in the hermitage of Odo of Cluny. To him he confided the incidents of the night and his adventure in the Catacombs. To him he also imparted the terrible discovery he had made.

Odo of Cluny listened in silence, his face betraying no sign of the emotion he felt. When Tristan had concluded his account he regarded him long and earnestly.

“I, too, have long known that all is not well, that there is something brewing in this witches’ cauldron which may not stand the light of day.—”

"But what is it?" cried Tristan. "Tell me, Father, for a great fear as of some horrible danger is upon me; a fear I cannot define and which yet will not leave me."

Odo's face was calm and grave. The Benedictine monk had been listening intently, but with a detached interest, as to some tale which, even if it concerned himself, could not in the least disturb his equanimity. With his supernatural quickness of perception he knew at once the powers with which he had to cope. Tristan had told him of the devilish face in the panel during the night of his first watch at the Lateran.

"The powers of Evil at work are so great that only a miracle from heaven can save us," he said at last. "Listen well, and lose not a word of what I am about to say. Have you ever heard of one Mani, who lived in Babylonia some seven hundred years ago and founded a religion in which he professed to blend the teachings of Christ with the cult of the old Persian Magi?"

A negative gesture came in response. Tristan's face was tense with anxiety. Odo continued:

"According to his teachings there exist two kingdoms: the kingdom of Light and the kingdom of Darkness. Light represents the beneficent primal spirit: God. Darkness is likewise a spiritual kingdom: Satan and his demons were born from the kingdom of Darkness. These two kingdoms have stood opposed to each other from all eternity — touching each other's boundaries, yet remaining unmingled. At last Satan began to rage and made an incursion into the kingdom of Light. Now, the God of Light begat the primal man and sent him, equipped with the five pure elements, to fight against Satan. But the latter proved himself the stronger, and the primal man was, for the time, vanquished. In time the cult of the Manichæans spread. The seat of the Manichæan pope was for centuries at Samarkand. From there, defying persecutions, the sect spread, and obtained a foothold in

northern Africa at the time of St. Augustine. Thence it slowly invaded Italy."

Tristan listened with deep attention.

"The original creed had meanwhile been split up into numerous sects," Odo of Cluny continued. "The followers of Mani believed there were two Gods, — the one of Light, the other of Darkness, both equally powerful in their separate kingdoms. But lately one by the name of Bogumil proclaims that God never created the world, that Christ had not an actual body, that he neither could have been born, nor that he died, that our bodies are evil, a foul excrescence, as it were, of the evil principle. Maintaining that God had two sons — Satan the older and Christ the younger — they refuse homage to the latter, Regent of the Celestial World, and worship Lucifer. And they hold meetings and perform diabolical ceremonies, in which they make wafers of ashes and drink the blood of a goat, which their devil-priests administer to them in communion."

Odo of Cluny paused and took a long breath, fixing Tristan with his dark eyes. And when Tristan, stark with horror, dared not trust himself to speak, Odo concluded:

"This is the peril that confronts us! And Holy Church is without a head, and the cardinals cannot cope with the terrible scourge. It is this you saw, my son, and, had your presence been discovered, you would never again have greeted the light of day."

At last Tristan found his tongue.

"God forbid that there should be such a thing, that men should worship the Fiend."

"Nevertheless they do," Odo replied, "and other things too awful for mortal mind to credit."

The perspiration came out on Tristan's brow. Although he was prepared for matters of infinite moment and knew that this interview might well be one of the decisive moments of his life, he yet possessed the detached attitude of mind

which was curious of strange learning and information, even in a crisis.

"And you have known this, Father?" he said at last, "and you have done nothing to check the evil?"

"We are living in evil times, my son," Odo replied. "I have long known of the existence of this black heresy, which has slowly spread its baleful cult, until it has reached our very shores. But that they would dare to establish themselves in the city of the Apostle, this I was not prepared to accept, until the terrible crime at the Lateran removed the last doubt. And now I know that the foul thing has obtained a footing here, and more than that, I know that some high in power are affiliated with this society of Satan, that would establish the reign of Lucifer among the Seven Hills. Did you not tell me, my son, of one, terrible of aspect, who peered through the panel in the Capella Palatina on the night of that first and most horrible outrage?"

"One who looked as the Fiend might look, did he assume human guise," Tristan confirmed with a nod.

"The high priest of Satan," Odo returned, "a familiar of black magic — the most terrible of all heinous crimes against Holy Church. A wave of crime is rolling its crimson tide over the Eternal City such as the annals of the Church have never recorded. It started in the reign of Marozia, and Theodora is leagued with the fiend, as was her sister before her."

Odo paused for a moment, breathing deep, while Tristan listened spellbound.

"Have you ever pondered," he continued with slow emphasis, "why the Lord Alberic entrusted to you, a stranger, so important a post as the command of the Emperor's Tomb? That there may be one he does not trust and who that one may be?"

Tristan gave a start.

“ There is one I do not trust — one who seems to wrap himself in a poison mist of evil — the Lord Basil.”

“ Be wary and circumspect. Has he of late come to the Tomb? ”

“ Three days ago — in company with a stranger from the North — one I may not meet and again look upon heaven.”

“ The woman’s husband? ” Odo queried with a penetrating glance.

Tristan colored.

“ How these two met I cannot fathom.”

“ Remember one thing, my son, their alliance portends evil to some one. What did they in the crypts? ”

“ The Lord Basil seems to have taken a fancy to exploring the cells,” Tristan replied. “ Those who have followed him report that he holds strange converse with the ghost of some mad monk whom he starved into eternity.”

“ And this converse — what is its subject? ” Odo queried with awakening interest.

“ A prophecy and a woman,” Tristan replied. “ Though those who heard them were so terror stricken at their infectious madness that they fled — not daring to tarry longer lest they would find themselves in the clutches of the fiend.”

“ A prophecy and a woman,” Odo repeated pensively. “ The Lord Alberic has confided much in me — his fears — his doubts! For even he knows not, how his mother came to her untimely end.”

“ The Lady Marozia? ”

“ The tale is known to you? ”

“ Rumors — flimsy — intangible — ”

“ One night she was mysteriously strangled. The Lord Alberic was almost beside himself. But the mystery remained unsolved.”

After a pause Odo continued:

“ I, too, have not been idle. We must lull them in security! We must appear utterly paralyzed. Our terror will increase

their boldness. Their ultimate object is still hidden. We must be wary. The Lord Alberic must be informed. We must spike the bait."

"I have despatched a trusty messenger in the guise of a peasant to the shrine of the Archangel," Tristan interposed.

"God grant that he arrive not too late," Odo replied. "And now, my son, listen to my words. A great soul and a stout heart must he have who sets himself to such a task as is before you! We are surrounded by the very fiends of Hell in human guise. Speak to no one of what you have seen. If you are in need of counsel, come to me!"

Odo raised his hands, pronouncing a silent blessing over the kneeling visitor and Tristan departed, dazed and trembling, wide-eyed and with pallid lips.

As he passed Mount Aventine the dark-robed form of a hunchback suddenly rose like a ghost from the ground beside him and, approaching Tristan, muttered some words in an unintelligible jargon. Believing he was dealing with a beggar, Tristan was about to dismiss the ill-favored gnome with a gift, which the latter refused, motioning to Tristan to incline his ear.

With an ill-concealed gesture of impatience Tristan complied, but his strange interlocutor had hardly delivered himself of his message when Tristan recoiled as if he had seen a snake in the grass before him, every vestige of color fading from his face.

"At the Lateran?" he chokingly replied to the whispered confidence of the hunchback.

The latter nodded.

"At the Lateran."

Ere Tristan could recover from his surprise, his informant had disappeared among the ruins.

For some time he stood as if rooted to the spot.

It was too monstrous — too unbelievable and yet — what could prompt his informant to invent so terrible a tale?

At midnight, two nights hence, the consecrated wafer was to be taken from the tabernacle in the Lateran!

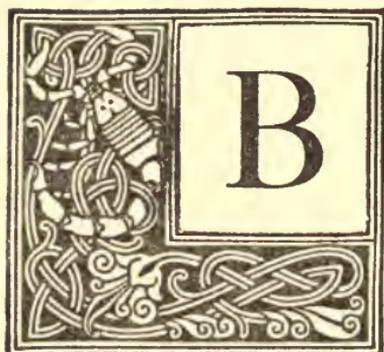
Perchance he had spoken even to one of the sect who had, at the last moment, repented of his share in the contemplated outrage.

If it were granted to him to deliver Rome and the world from this terror! A strange fire gleamed in his eyes as he returned to Castel San Angelo.

Himself, he would keep the watch at the Lateran and foil the plot.

CHAPTER XI

BY LETHE'S SHORES



ASIL the Grand Chamberlain was giving one of his renowned feasts in his villa on the Pincian Mount. But on this evening he had limited the number of his guests to two score. On his right sat Roger de Laval, the guest of honor, on his left the Lady Hellayne. Over the company stretched a canopy of cloth

of gold. The chairs were of gilt bronze, their arms were carved in elaborate arabesques. The dishes were of gold; the cups inlaid with jewels. There was gayety and laughter. Far into the night they caroused.

Hellayne's face was the only apprehensive one at the board. She was pale and worn, and her countenance betrayed her reluctance to be present at a feast into the spirit of which she could not enter. She was dimly conscious of the fact that Basil devoured her with his eyes and her lord seemed to find more suited entertainment with the other women who were present than with his own wife. Only by threats and coercion had he prevailed upon her to attend the Grand Chamberlain's banquet. With a brutality that was part of his coarse nature he now left her to shift for herself, and she tolerated Basil's unmistakable insinuations only from a sense of utter helplessness.

Her beauty had indeed aroused the host's passion to a point where he threw caution to the winds. The exquisite

face, framed in a wealth of golden hair, the deep blue eyes, the marble whiteness of the skin, the faultless contours of her form — an ensemble utterly opposed to the darker Roman type — had aroused in him desires which soon swept away the thin veneer of dissimulation and filled Hellyayne with a secret dread which she endeavored to control. Her thoughts were with the man by whom she believed herself betrayed, and while life seemed to hold nothing that would repay her for enduring any longer the secret agonies that overwhelmed her, it was to guard her honor that her wits were sharpened and, believing in the adage that danger, when bravely faced, disappears, she entered, though with a heavy heart, into the vagaries of Basil, but, like a premonition of evil, her dread increased with every moment.

And now the host announced to his guests his intention of leaving Rome on the morrow for his estate in the Rocca, where an overpunctilious overseer demanded his presence.

Raising his goblet he pledged the beautiful wife of the Count de Laval. It was a toast that was eagerly received and responded to, and even Hellyayne was forced to appear joyous, for all that her heart was on the point of breaking.

She raised her goblet, a beautiful chased cup of gold, in acknowledgment. But she did not see the ill-omened smile that flitted over the thin lips of Basil, and she wished for Tristan as she had never wished for him before.

After a time the guests quitted the banquet hall for the moonlit garden, and Basil's attentions became more and more insistent. It was in vain Hellyayne's eyes strained for her lord. He was not to be found. —

It was on the following morning when the horrible news aroused the Romans that the young wife of the strange lord from Provence had, during the night, suddenly died at the banquet of the Grand Chamberlain. From a friar whom he chanced to pass on his way to the Lateran Tristan received the first news.

Fra Geronimo's face was white as death, and his limbs shook as with a palsy. He had been the confessor of the Lady Helayne, the only visitor allowed to come near her.

"Have you heard the tidings?" he cried in a quavering voice, on beholding Tristan.

"What tidings?" Tristan returned, struck by the horror in the friar's face.

"The Lady Helayne is dead!" he said with a sob.

Tristan stared at him as if a thunderbolt had cleft the ground beside him. For a moment he seemed bereft of understanding.

"Dead?" he gasped with a choking sensation. "What is it you say?"

"Well may you doubt your ears," the friar sobbed. "But Mater Sanctissima, it is the truth! Madonna Helayne is dead. They found her dead — early this morning — in the vineyard of the Lord Basil."

"In the vineyard of the Lord Basil?" came back the echo from Tristan's lips.

"There was a feast, lasting well into the night. The Lady Helayne took suddenly ill. They fetched a mediciner. When he arrived it was all over."

"God of Heaven! Where is she now?"

"They conveyed her to the palace of the Lord Laval, to prepare her for interment."

Without a word Tristan started to break away from the friar, his head in a whirl, his senses benumbed. The latter caught him betime.

"What would you do?"

Tristan stared at him as one suddenly gone mad.

"I will see her."

"It is impossible!" the friar replied. "You cannot see her."

From Tristan's eyes came a glare that would have daunted many a one of greater physical prowess than his informant.

"Cannot? Who is to prevent me?"

"The man whom fate gave her for mate," replied the friar.

"That dog —"

"A brawl in the presence of death? Would you thus dishonor her memory? Would she wish it so?"

For a moment Tristan stared at the man before him as if he heard some message from afar, the meaning of which he but faintly guessed.

Then a blinding rush of tears came to his eyes. He shook with the agony of his grief regardless of those who passed and paused and wondered, while the friar's words of comfort and solace fell on unmindful ears.

At last, heedless of his companion, heedless of his surroundings, heedless of everything, he rushed away to seek solitude, where he would not see a human face, not hear a human voice.

He must be alone with his grief, alone with his Maker. It seemed to him he was going mad. It was all too monstrous, too terrible, too unbelievable.

How was it possible that one so young, so strong, so beautiful, should die?

Friar Geronimo knew not. But his gaze had caused Tristan to shiver as in an ague.

He remembered the discourse of Basil and his companion in the galleries of the Emperor's Tomb.

Twice was he on the point of warning Helayne not to attend Basil's banquet.

Each time something had intervened. The warning had remained unspoken.

Would she have heeded it?

He gave a groan of anguish.

Helayne was dead! That was the one all absorbing fact which had taken possession of him, blotting out every other thought, every other consideration.

She was dead — dead — dead! The hideous phrase

boomed again and again through his distracted mind. Compared with that overwhelming catastrophe what signified the Hour, the Why and the When. She was dead — dead — dead!

For hours he sat alone in the solitudes of Mount Aventine, where no prying eyes would witness his grief. And the storm which had arisen and swept the Seven Hilled City with the vehemence of a tropical hurricane seemed but a feeble echo of the tempest that raged within his soul.

She was dead — dead — dead, The waves of the Tiber seemed to shout it as they leapt up and dashed their foam against the rocky declivities of the Mount of Cloisters. The wind seemed now to moan it piteously, now to shriek it fiercely, as it scudded by, wrapping its invisible coils about him and seeming intent on tearing him from his resting place.

Towards evening he rose and, skirting the heights, descended into the city, dishevelled and bedraggled, yet caring nothing what spectacle he might afford. And presently a grim procession overtook the solitary rambler, and at the sight of the black, cowed and visored forms that advanced in the lurid light of the waxen tapers, Tristan knelt in the street with head bowed till her body had been borne past. No one heeded him. They carried her to the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, and thither he followed presently, and, in the shadow of one of the pillars of the aisle, he crouched, while the monks chanted the funeral psalms.

The singing ended the friars departed, and those who had formed the cortege began to leave the church. In an hour he was alone, alone with the beloved dead, and there on his knees he remained, and no one knew whether, during that horrid hour, he prayed or blasphemed.

It may have been toward the third hour of the night when Tristan staggered up, stiff and cramped, from the cold stone. Slowly, in a half-dazed condition, he walked down the aisle and gained the door of the church. He tried to open it, but

it resisted his efforts, and he realized it was locked for the night.

The appreciation of his position afforded him not the slightest dismay. On the contrary, his feelings were rather of relief. At least there was none other to share his grief! He had not known whither he should repair, so distracted was his mind, and now chance or fate had settled the matter for him by decreeing that he should remain.

Tristan turned and slowly paced back, until he stood beside the great, black catafalque, at each corner of which a tall wax taper was burning. His steps rang with a hollow sound through the vast, gloomy spaces of the cold and empty church. But these were not matters to occupy his mind in such a season, no more than the damp, chill air which permeated every nook and corner. Of all of these he remained unconscious in the absorbing anguish that possessed his soul.

Near the foot of the bier there was a bench, and there he took his seat and, resting his elbows on his knees, took his dishevelled head between his trembling hands. His thoughts were all of her whose poor, murdered clay lay encased above him. In turn he reviewed each scene of his life where it had touched upon her own. He evoked every word she had spoken to him since they had again met on that memorable night.

Thus he sat, clenching his hands and torturing his dull inert brain while the night wore slowly on. Later a still more frenzied mood obsessed him, a burning desire to look once more upon the sweet face he had loved so well. What was there to prevent him? Who was there to gainsay him?

He arose and uttered aloud the challenge in his madness. His voice echoed mournfully along the aisles and the sound of the echoes chilled him, though his purpose gathered strength.

Tristan advanced, and, after a moment's pause, with the silver embroidered hem of the pall in his hands, suddenly

swept off that mantle of black cloth, setting up such a gust of wind as all but quenched the tapers. He caught up the bench upon which he had been sitting and, dragging it forward, mounted it and stood, his chest on a level with the coffin lid. His trembling hands fumbled along its surface. He found it unfastened. Without thought or care how he went about the thing, he raised it and let it crash to the ground. It fell on the stone flags with a noise like thunder, booming and reverberating through the gloomy vaults.

A form all in purest white lay there beneath his gaze, the face covered by a white veil. With deepest reverence, and a prayer to her departed soul to forgive the desecration of his loving hands, he tremblingly drew the veil aside.

How beautiful she was in the calm peace of death! She lay there like one gently sleeping, the faintest smile upon her lips, and, as he gazed, it was hard to believe that she was truly dead. Her lips had lost nothing of their natural color. They were as red as he had ever seen them in life.

How could this be?

The lips of the dead are wont to assume a livid hue.

Tristan stared for a moment, his awe and grief almost effaced by the intensity of his wonder. This face, so ivory pale, wore not the ashen aspect of one that would never wake again. There was a warmth about that pallor. And then he bit his nether lip until it bled, and it seemed a miracle that he did not scream, seeing how overwrought were his senses.

For it had seemed to him that the draperies on her bosom had slightly moved, in a gentle, almost imperceptible heave, as if she breathed. He looked — and there it came again!

God! What madness had seized upon him, that his eyes should so deceive him! It was the draught that stirred the air about the church, and blew great shrouds of wax down the taper's yellow sides. He manned himself to a more sober mood and looked again.

And now his doubts were all dispelled. He knew that he

had mastered any errant fancy, and that his eyes were grown wise and discriminating, and he knew, too, that she lived! Her bosom slowly rose and fell; the color of her lips, the hue of her cheek, confirmed the assurance that she breathed!

He paused a second to ponder. That morning her appearance had been such that the mediciner had been deceived by it and had pronounced her dead. Yet now there were signs of life! What could it portend, but that the effects of a poison were passing off and that she was recovering?

In the first wild excess of joy, that sent the blood tingling and beating through his brain, his first impulse was to run for help. Then Tristan bethought himself of the closed doors and he realized that, no matter how loudly he shouted, no one would hear him. He must succour her himself as best he could, and meanwhile she must be protected from the chill night air of the church, cold as the air of a tomb. He had his cloak, a heavy serviceable garment, and, if more were needed, there was the pall which he had removed, and which lay in a heap about the legs of the bench.

Leaning forward Tristan slowly passed his hand under her head and gently raised it. Then, slipping it downward, he thrust his arm after it, until he had her round the waist in a firm grip. Thus he raised her from the coffin, and the warmth of her body on his arms, the ready bending of her limbs, were so many added proofs that she lived.

Gently and reverently Tristan raised the supple form in his arms, an intoxication of almost divine joy pervading him as the prayers fell faster from his lips than they had ever since he had recited them on his mother's knee. He laid her on the bench, while he divested himself of the cloak.

Suddenly he paused and stood listening with bated breath. Steps were approaching from without.

Tristan's first impulse was to rush towards the door, shouting his tidings and imploring assistance. Then, a sudden, almost instinctive dread caught and chilled him.

Who was it that came at such an hour? What would any one seek in the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin at dead of night? Was the church indeed their goal, or were they but chance passers-by?

That last question remained not long unanswered. The steps came nearer. They paused before the door. Something heavy was hurled against it. Then some one spoke.

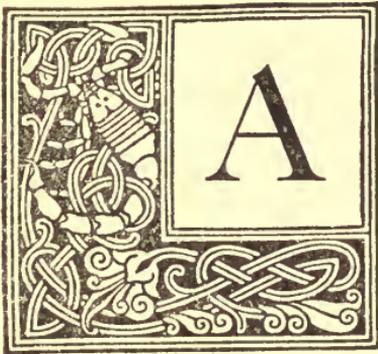
“It is locked, Tebaldo! Get out your tools and force it!”

Tristan's wits were working at fever pace. It may have been that he was swift of thought beyond any ordinary man, or it may have been a flash of inspiration, or a conclusion to which he leapt by instinct. But in that moment the whole problematical plot was revealed to him. Poisoned forsooth she had been, but by a drug that but produced for a time the outward appearance of death, so truly simulated as even to deceive the most learned of doctors. Tristan had heard of such poisons, and here, in very truth, was one of them at work. Some one, no doubt, intended secretly to bear her off. And to-morrow, when men found a broken church door and a violated bier, they would set the sacrilege down to some wizard who had need of the body for his dark practices.

Tristan cursed himself in that dark hour. Had he but peered earlier into her coffin while yet there might have been time to save her. And now? The sweat stood out in beads upon his brow. At that door there were, to judge by the sound of their footsteps and voices, some five or six men. For a weapon he had only his dagger. What could he do to defend her? Basil's plans would suffer no defeat through his discovery when to-morrow the sacrilege was revealed. His own body, laying cold and stark beside the desolated bier, would be but an incident in the work of profanation they would find; an item that in no wise could modify the conclusion at which they would naturally arrive.

CHAPTER XII

THE DEATH WATCH



STRANGE and mysterious thing is the working of terror on the human mind. Some it renders incapable of thought or action, paralyzing their limbs and stagnating the blood in their veins; such creatures die in anticipating death. Others, under the stress of that grim emotion have their wits preter-

naturally sharpened. The instinct of self-preservation assumes command and urges them to swift and feverish action.

After a moment of terrible suspense Tristan's hands fell limply beside him. At the next he was himself again. His cheeks were livid, his lips bloodless. But his hands were steady and his wits under control.

Concealment — concealment for Helayne and himself — was the thing that now imported, and no sooner was the thought conceived than the means were devised. Slender means they were, yet since they were the best the place afforded, he must trust to them without demurring, and pray to God that the intruders might lack the wit to search. And with that fresh hope it came to him that he must find a way as to make them believe that to search would be a waste of effort.

The odds against him lay in the little time at his disposal.

Yet a little time there was. The door was stout, and those outside might not resort to violent means to break it open lest the noise arouse the street.

With what tools the sbirri were at work he could not guess, but surely they must be such as to leave him but a few moments. Already they had begun. He could distinguish a crunching sound as of steel biting into wood.

Swiftly and silently Tristan set to work. Like a ghost he glided round the coffin's side, where the lid was lying. He raised it and, after he had deposited Helayne on the ground, mounted the bench and replaced it. Next he gathered up the cumbrous pall and, mounting the bench once more, spread it over the coffin. This way and that he pulled it, until it appeared undisturbed as when he had entered.

What time he toiled, the half of his mind intent upon his task, the other half was as intent upon the progress of the workers at the door.

At last it was done. Tristan replaced the bench at the foot of the catafalque and, gathering up the woman in his arms, as though her weight had been that of a feather, he bore her swiftly out of the radius of the four tapers into the black, impenetrable gloom beyond. On he sped towards the high altar, flying now as men fly in evil dreams, with the sensation of an enemy upon them, and their progress a mere stand still.

Thus he gained the chancel, stumbling against the railing as he passed, and pausing for an instant, wondering whether those outside had heard. But the grinding sound continued and he breathed more freely. He mounted the altar stairs, the distant light behind him feebly guiding him on, then he ran round to the right and heaved a great sigh of relief upon finding his hopes realized. The altar stood a pace or so from the wall, and behind it there was just such a concealment as he had hoped to find.

Tristan paused at the mouth of that black well, and even

as he paused something that gave out a metallic sound, dropped at the far end of the church. Intuition informed him that it was the lock which the miscreants had cut from the door. He waited no longer, but like a deer scudding to cover, plunged into the dark abyss.

Hellayne, wrapped in his cloak, as she was, he placed on the ground, then crept forward on hands and knees and thrust out his head, trusting to the darkness to conceal him.

He waited thus for a time, his heart beating almost audibly in the intermittent silence, his head and face on fire with the fever of sudden reaction.

From his point of vantage it was impossible for Tristan to see the door that was hidden in the black gloom. Away in the centre of the church, an island of light in that vast well of blackness, stood the catafalque with its four waxen tapers. Something creaked, and almost immediately he saw the flames of those tapers bend toward him, beaten over by the gust that smote them from the door. Thus he surmised that Tebaldo and his men had entered. Their soft foot-fall, for they were treading lightly now, succeeded, and at last they took shape, shadowy at first, then clearly defined, as they emerged within the circle of the light.

For a moment they stood in half whispered conversation, their voices a mere boom of sound in which no words were to be distinguished. Then Tristan saw Tebaldo step forward, and by his side another he knew by his great height — Gamba, the deposed captain. Tebaldo dragged away, even as Tristan had done, the pall that hid the coffin. Next he seized the bench and gave a brisk order to his men.

“Spread a cloth!”

In obedience to his command, the four who were with him spread a cloak among them, each holding one of its corners. Apparently they intended to carry away the dead body in this manner.

The sbirro now mounted the bench and started to remove

the coffin lid, when a blasphemous cry of rage broke from his lips that defied utterly the sanctity of the place.

“By the body of Christ! The coffin is empty!” —

It was the roar of an enraged beast and was succeeded by a heavy crash, as he let fall the coffin lid. A second later a second crash waked the midnight echoes of that silent place.

In a burst of maniacal fury he had hurled the coffin from its trestles.

Then he leaped down from the bench and flung all caution to the winds in the rage that possessed him.

“It is a trick of the devil,” he shouted. “They have laid a trap for us, and you have never even informed yourselves.”

There was foam about the corners of his mouth, the veins had swollen on his forehead, and from the mad bulging of his eyes spoke fury and abject terror. Bully as Tebaldo was, he could, on occasion, become a coward.

“Away!” he shouted to his men. “Look to your weapons! Away!”

Gamba muttered something under his breath, words the listener’s ear could not catch. If it were a suggestion that the church should be searched, ere they abandoned it! But Tebaldo’s answer speedily relieved his fears.

“I’ll take no chances,” he barked. “Let us go separately. Myself first and do you follow and get clear of this quarter as best you may.”

Scarcely had the echoes of his footsteps died away, ere the others followed in a rush, fearful of being caught in some trap that was here laid for them, and restrained from flying on the instant but by their still greater fear of their master.

Thanking Heaven for this miraculous deliverance, and for his own foresight in so arranging matters as to utterly mislead the ravishers, Tristan now devoted his whole attention to Hellayne. Her breathing had become deeper and more regular, so that in all respects she resembled one sunk into

healthful slumber. He hoped she would waken before the elapse of many moments, for to try to bear her away in his arms would have been sheer madness. And now it occurred to him that he should have restoratives ready for the time of her regaining consciousness. Inspiration suggested to him the wine that should be stored in the sacristy for altar purposes. It was unconsecrated, and there could be no sacrilege in using it.

He crept round to the front of the altar. At the angle a candle branch protruded at the height of his head. It held some three or four tapers and was so placed as to enable the priest to read his missal at early Mass on dark winter mornings. Tristan plucked one of the candles from its socket and, hastening down the church, lighted it from one of the burning tapers of the bier. Screening it with his hand he retraced his steps and regained the chancel. Then, turning to the left, he made for a door which gave access to the sacristy. It yielded and he passed down a short, stone flagged passage and entered a spacious chamber beyond.

An oak settle was placed against one wall, and above it hung an enormous, rudely carved crucifix. On a bench in a corner stood a basin and ewer of metal, while a few vestments, suspended beside these, completed the appointments of the austere and white-washed chamber. Placing his candle on a cupboard, he opened one of the drawers. It was full of garments of different kinds, among which he noticed several monks' habits. Tristan rummaged to the bottom, only to find therein some odd pairs of sandals.

Disappointed, Tristan closed the drawer and tried another, with no better fortune. Here were undervests of fine linen, newly washed and fragrant with rosemary. He abandoned the chest and gave his attention to the cupboard. It was locked, but the key was there. Tristan's candle reflected a blaze of gold and silver vessels, consecrated chalices, and several richly carved ciboria of solid gold, set with precious

stones. But in a corner he discovered a dark brown, gourd-shaped object. It was a skin of wine and, with a half-suppressed cry of joy, he seized upon it.

At that moment a piercing scream rang through the stillness of the church and startled him so that for some moments he stood frozen with terror, a hundred wild conjectures leaping into his brain.

Had the ruffians remained hidden in the church? Had they returned? Did the screams imply that Hellyayne had been awakened by their hands?

A second time it came, and now it seemed to break the hideous spell that its first utterance had cast over him. Dropping the leathern bottle he sped back, down the stone passage to the door that abutted on the church.

There, by the high altar, Tristan saw a form that seemed at first but a phantom, in which he presently recognized Hellyayne, the dim rays of the distant tapers searching out the white robe with which her limbs were draped. She was alone, and he knew at once that it was but the natural fear consequent upon awakening in such a place, that had evoked the cry he had heard.

"Hellyayne!" he called, advancing swiftly to reassure her. "Hellyayne!"

There was a gasp, a moment's silence.

"Tristan?" she cried questioningly. "What has happened? Why am I here?"

He was beside her now and found her trembling like an aspen.

"Something horrible has happened, my Hellyayne," he replied. "But it is over now, and the evil is averted."

"What is it?" she insisted, pale as death. "Why am I here?"

"You shall learn presently."

He stooped, to gather up the cloak, which had slipped from her shoulders.

“Do you wrap this about you,” he urged, assisting her with his own hands. “Are you faint, Helayne?”

“I scarce know,” she answered, in a frightened voice. “There is a black horror upon me. Tell me,” she implored again, “Why am I here? What does it all mean?”

He drew her away now, promising to tell her everything once she were out of these forbidding surroundings. He assisted her to the sacristy and, seating her upon a settle, produced the wine skin. At first she babbled like a child, of not being thirsty, but he insisted.

“It is not a matter of quenching your thirst, dearest Helayne. The wine will warm and revive you! Come, dearest — drink!”

She obeyed him now, and having got the first gulp down her throat, she took a long draught, which soon produced a healthier color, driving the ashen pallor from her cheeks.

“I am cold, Tristan,” she shuddered.

He turned to the drawer in which he had espied the monks’ habits and pulling one out, held it for her to put on. She sat there now in that garment of coarse black cloth, the cowl flung back upon her shoulder, the fairest postulant that ever entered upon a novitiate.

“You are good to me, Tristan,” she murmured plaintively, “and I have used you very ill! You do not love that other woman?” She paused, passing her hand across her brow.

“Only you, dearest — only you!”

“What is the hour?” she turned to him suddenly.

It was a matter he left unheeded. He bade her brace herself, and take courage to listen to what he was about to tell. He assured her that the horror of it all was passed and that she had naught to fear.

“But — how came I here?” she cried. “I must have lain in a swoon, for I remember nothing.”

And then her quick mind, leaping to a reasonable conclusion, and assisted perhaps by the memory of the shattered

catafalque which she had seen, her eyes dilating with a curious affright as they were turned upon his own, she asked of a sudden;

“ Did you believe that I was dead? ”

“ Yes,” he replied with an unnatural calm in his voice.

“ Every one believed you were dead, Helayne.”

And with this he told her the entire story of what had befallen, saving only his own part therein, nor did he try to explain his own opportune presence in the church. When he spoke of the coming of Tebaldo and his men she shuddered and closed her eyes. Only after he had concluded his tale did she turn them full upon him. Their brightness seemed to increase, and now he saw that she was weeping.

“ And you were there to save me, Tristan? ” she murmured brokenly. “ Oh, Tristan, it seems that you are ever at hand when I have need of you! You are, indeed, my one true friend — the one true friend that never fails me! ”

“ Are you feeling stronger, Helayne? ” he asked abruptly.

“ Yes — I am stronger! ”

She rose as if to test her strength.

“ Indeed little ails me save the horror of this thing. The thought of it seems to turn me sick and dizzy.”

“ Sit then and rest! ” he enjoined. “ Presently, when you feel equal to it, we shall start out! ”

“ Whither shall we go? ” she asked.

“ Why — to the abode of your liege lord.”

“ Why — yes — ” she answered at length, as though it had been the last suggestion she had expected. “ And when he returns,” she added, after a pause, “ he will owe you no small thanks for your solicitude on my behalf.”

There was a pause. A hundred thoughts thronged Tristan's mind.

Presently she spoke again.

“ Tristan,” she inquired very gently, “ what was it that brought you to the church? ”

"I came with the others, Helayne," he replied, and, fearing such questions as might follow — questions he had been dreading ever since he brought her to the sacristy, he said:

"If you are recovered, we had better set out."

"I am not yet sufficiently recovered," she replied. "And, before we go, there are a few points in this strange adventure that I would have you make clear to me! Meanwhile we are very well here! If the good fathers do come upon us, what shall it signify?" —

Tristan groaned inwardly and grew more afraid than when Basil's men had broken into the church an hour ago.

"What detained you after all had gone?"

"I remained to pray," he answered, with a sense of irritation at her persistence. "What else was there to do in a church?"

"To pray for me?"

"Assuredly."

"Dear, faithful heart," she murmured. "And I have used you so cruelly. But you merited my cruelty — Tristan! Say that you did, else must I perish of remorse."

"Perchance I deserved it," he replied. "But perchance not so much as you bestowed, had you understood my motives," he said unguardedly.

"If I had understood your motives?" she mused. "Ay — there is much I do not understand! Even in this night's business there are not wanting things that remain mysterious, despite the elucidations you have supplied. Tell me, Tristan — what was it that caused you to believe, that I still lived?"

"I did not believe it," he blundered like a fool, never seeing whither her question led.

"You did not?" she cried, with deep surprise, and now, when it was too late, he understood. "What was it then that induced you, to lift the coffin lid?" —

"You ask me more than I can tell you," he answered

almost roughly, for fear lest the monks would come at any moment.

She looked at him with eyes that were singularly luminous.

"But I must know," she insisted. "Have I not the right? Tell me now! Was it that you wished to see my face once more before they gave me over to the grave?"

"Perchance it was, Hellaayne," he answered. Then he suggested their going, but she never heeded his anxiety.

"Do you love me then so much, dearest Tristan?"

He swung round to her now, and he knew that his face was white, whiter than the woman's had been when he had seen her in the coffin. His eyes seemed to burn in their sockets. A madness seized upon him and completely mastered him. He had undergone so much that day of grief, and that night the victim of a hundred emotions, that he no longer controlled himself. As it was, her words robbed him of the last lingering restraint.

"Love you?" he replied, in a voice that was unlike his own. "You are dearer to me than all I have, all I am, all I ever hope to be! You are the guardian angel of my existence, the saint to whom I have turned mornings and evenings in my prayers! I love you more than life!"

He paused, staggered by his own climax. The thought of what he had said and what the consequences must be, rushed suddenly upon him. He shivered as a man may shiver in waking from a trance. He dropped upon his knees before her.

"Forgive," he entreated. "Forgive — and forget!"

"Neither forgive nor forget will I," came her voice, charged with an ineffable sweetness, such as he had never before heard from her lips, and her hands lay softly on his bowed head as if she would bless and soothe him. "I am conscious of no offence that craves forgiveness, and what you have said to me I would not forget if I could. Whence springs this fear of yours, dear Tristan? Has not he to

whom I once bound myself in a thoughtless moment, he who never understood, or cared to understand my nature, he whose cruelty and neglect have made me what I am to-day, lost every right, human or divine? Am I more than a woman and are you less than a man that you should tremble for the confession which, in a wild moment, I have dragged from you? For that wild moment I shall be thankful to my life's end, for your words have been the sweetest that my poor ears have ever listened to. I count you the truest friend and the noblest lover the world has ever known. Need it surprise you then, that I love you, and that mine would be a happy life if I might spend it in growing worthy of this noble love of yours? "

There was a choking sensation in his throat and tears in his eyes. Transport the blackest soul from among the damned in Hell, wash it white of its sins and seat it upon one of the glorious thrones of Heaven, — such were the emotions that surged through his soul. At last he found his tongue.

"Dearest," he said, "bethink yourself of what you say! You are still his wife — and the Church grants no severance of the bonds that have united two for better or worse."

"Then shall we see the Holy Father. He is just and he will be merciful. Will you take me, Tristan, no matter to what odd shifts a cruel Fortune may drive us? Will you take me? "

She held his face between her palms and forced his eyes to meet her eyes.

"Will you take me, Tristan? " she said again.

"Hellayne — "

It was all he could say.

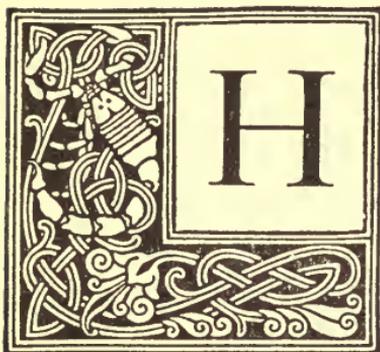
Then a great sadness overwhelmed him, a tide that swept the frail bark of happiness high and dry upon the shores of black despair.

“To-morrow, Helayne, you will be what you were yesterday.”

“I have thought of that,” she said, a slight flutter in her tone. “But—Helayne is dead.—We must so dispose that they will let her rest in peace.” —

CHAPTER XIII

THE CONVENT IN TRASTEVERE



HE stared at her speechless, so taken was he with the immensity of the thing she had suggested. Fear, wonder, joy seemed to contend for the mastery.

“Why do you look at me so, Tristan?” she said at last.

“What is it that daunts you?”

“But how is this thing possible?” he stammered, still in a state of bewilderment.

“What difficulty does it present?” she returned. “The Lord Basil himself has rendered very possible what I suggest. We may look on him to-morrow as our best friend —”

“But Tebaldo knows,” he interposed.

“True! Deem you, he will dare to tell the world what he knows? He might be asked to tell how he came by his knowledge. And that might prove a difficult question to answer. Tell me, Tristan,” she continued, “if he had succeeded in carrying me away, what deem you would have been said to-morrow in Rome when the coffin was found empty?” —

“They would naturally assume that your body had been stolen by some wizard or some daring doctor of anatomy.”

“Ah! And if we were quietly to quit the church and be clear of Rome before morning — would not the same be said?”

He pondered a while, staggered by the immensity of the risk, when suddenly a memory flashed through his mind that left his limbs numb as if they had been paralyzed by a thunderbolt.

It was the night on which the terrible crime at the Lateran was to be committed. Even now it could not be far from the midnight hour. Did he dare, even for the consideration of the greatest happiness which the world and life had to give, to forego his duty towards the Church and the Senator of Rome? "

Hellayne noted his hesitancy.

"Why do you waste precious moments, Tristan?" she queried. "Is it that you do not love me enough?"

A negative gesture came in response, and his eyes told her more than words could have expressed.

At last he spoke.

"If I hesitate," he said, trying to avoid the real issue, instead of stating it without circumlocution, "it is because I would not have you do now of what, hereafter, you might repent. I would not have you be misled by the impulse of a moment into an act whose consequences must endure while life endures."

"Is that the reasoning of love?" she said very quietly. "Is this cold argument, this weighing of issues consistent with the hot passion you professed so lately?"

"It is," he replied. "It is because I love you more than I love myself, that I would have you ponder, ere you adventure your life upon a broken raft such as mine. You are still the wife of another."

"No!" she replied, her eyes preternaturally brilliant in the intensity of her emotion. "Hellayne, the wife of Roger de Laval, is dead—as dead to him, as if she in reality were bedded in the coffin. Where is he? Where is the man who should have been where you are, Tristan? I venture to say his grief did not overburden him. He will find ready con-

solation in the arms of another for the wife who was to him but the plaything of his idle hours. He never loved me! He even threatened to shut me up within convent walls for the rest of my days if I did not return with him — his mistress, — his wife but in a name, a thing to submit to his loathsome kisses and caresses, while her soul is another's. He himself and death, which perchance he himself decreed, have severed bonds no persuasion would have tempted me to break. Tristan, I am yours — take me."

She held out her beautiful arms.

He was in mortal torment.

"Nevertheless, Hellyayne, to-night of all nights it may not be —" he stammered. "Listen, dearest —"

"Enough!" she silenced him, as she rose. She swept towards him and, before he knew it, her hands were on his shoulders, her face upturned, her blue eyes holding his own, depriving him of will and resistance.

"Tristan," she said, and there was an intensity almost fierce in her tones, "moments are fleeting, and you stand there reasoning with me and bidding me weigh what already is weighed for all time. Will you wait until escape is rendered impossible, until we are discovered, before you will decide to save me and to grasp with both hands the happiness that is yours; this happiness that is not twice offered in a lifetime?"

She was so close to him that he could almost feel the beating of her heart. He was now as wax in her hands. Forgotten were all considerations of rank and station. They were just man and woman whose fates were linked together irrevocably. Under the sway of an impulse he could not resist, he kissed her upturned face, her lips, her eyes. Then he broke from her clasp and, bracing himself for the task to which they stood committed by that act, he said, the words tumbling from his lips:

"Hellyayne, we know not who is abroad to-night. We

know not what dangers are lurking in the shadows. Tebaldo and his men may even now be scouring the streets of Rome for a fugitive, and once in their power all the saints could not save us from our doom. I know not the object of this plot of which you were the victim, and even the Lord Roger may be but the dupe of another. I will take you to the convent of the Blessed Sisters of Santa Maria in Trastevere, that you may dwell there in safety until I have ascertained that all danger is past. You shall enter as my sister, trying to escape the attention of an unwelcome suitor. But the thing that chiefly exercises my mind now is how to make our escape unobserved."

Hellayne nodded dreamily.

"I have thought of it already."

"You have thought of it?" he replied. "And of what have you thought?"

For answer she stepped back a pace and drew the cowl of the monk's habit over her head until her features were lost in the shadows. Her meaning was clear to him at once. With a cry of relief he turned to the drawer whence he had taken the habit in which she was arrayed and, selecting another, he hastily donned it above the garments he wore.

No sooner was it done than he caught her by the arm.

There was no time to be lost. Moments were flying.

If he should be too late at the Lateran!

"Come!" he said in an urgent voice.

At the first step she stumbled. The habit was so long that it cumbered her feet. But that was a difficulty soon overcome. Without regarding the omen, he cut with his dagger a piece from the skirt, enough to leave her freedom of movement and, this accomplished, they set out.

They crossed the church swiftly and silently, then entered the porch, where he left her in order to peer out upon the street. All was quiet. Rome was wrapt in sleep. From the moon he gleaned it wanted less than an hour to midnight.

Drawing their cowls about their faces, they abandoned the main streets, Tristan conducting his charge through narrow alleys, deserted of the living. These lanes were dark and steep, the moonlight being unable to penetrate the chasms formed between the tall, ill-favored houses. They stumbled frequently, and in some places he carried her almost bodily, to avoid the filth of the quarter they were traversing.

The night was solemn and beautiful. Myriads of stars paved the deep vault of heaven. The moon, now in her zenith, hung like a silver lamp in the midst of them; a stream of quivering, rosy light, issuing from the north, traversed the sky like the tail of some stupendous comet, sending forth, ever and anon, corruscations like flaming meteors.

At last they reached the Transtiberine region and the convent of Santa Maria in Trastevere hove into sight. The range of habitations around were in a ruinous state and the whole aspect of the region was so dismal as to encourage but few rambles to venture there after nightfall.

Passing through the ill-famed quarter of the Sclavonians, where, in after time, one of the blackest crimes in history was committed, Tristan and Hellaïne at last arrived before the gates of the convent. They had spoken but little, dreading even the faintest echo of their footsteps might bring a pursuer on their track. Their summons for admission was, after a considerable wait, answered by the porter of the gate, who, upon seeing two monks, relinquished his station by the wicket and descended to inquire into their behest.

Hellaïne shrank up to Tristan, as the latter stated their purpose and the old monk, unable to understand the jargon of his belated caller, withdrew, mumbling some equally unintelligible reply.

Hellaïne's eyes were those of a frightened deer.

"What will he do, Tristan?" she whispered, "Oh, Tristan, do not leave me! I feel I shall never see you again, Tristan — my love — take me away — I am afraid —"

He held her close to him.

“There is nothing to fear, my Hellyayne! To-morrow night I shall return and place you safely where we may see each other till I have absolved my duties to the Senator. Do not fear, sweetheart! Of all the abodes in Rome the sanctity of the convent is inviolate! But I hear steps approaching — some one is coming. Courage, dearest — remember how much is at stake!”

Another moment and they stood before the Abbess of Santa Maria in Trastevere.

Summoning all his presence of mind, Tristan told his tale and made his request. Danger lurking in the infatuation of a Roman noble was threatening his sister. She had fled from his innuendos and begged the convent's asylum for a brief space of time, when he, Tristan, would claim her. He explained Hellyayne's attire, and the Abbess, raising the woman's head, looked long and earnestly into her face.

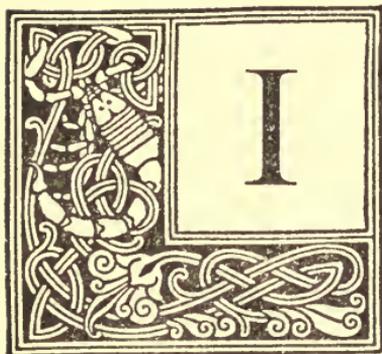
What she saw seemed to confirm of the truth of Tristan's speech, and she agreed readily to his request. Tristan kissed Hellyayne on the brow, then, after a brief and affectionate farewell and the assurance that he would return on the following day, he left her in charge of the Blessed Sisters. With a sob she followed the Abbess and the gates shut behind them.

For a moment Tristan felt as if all the world about him was sinking into a dark bottomless pit.

Then, suppressing an outcry of anguish, his winged feet bore him across Rome towards the Basilica of St. John in Lateran.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PHANTOM OF THE LATERAN



It still lacked a few minutes of midnight when Tristan arrived at the Lateran. The guard had been set in all the chapels, as on the night when he had kept the watch before.

Without confiding his purpose to any one, he traversed the silent corridors until he came to the chapel where he was to

watch all night.

The men-at-arms were posted outside the door. A lamp was burning in the corridor, and strict orders had been given that no person whatsoever was to pass into the chapel.

After assuring himself that all was secure, Tristan seated himself in a chair which stood in the centre of the chapel.

The place was dim and ghostly. A red lamp burnt before the Blessed Sacrament, and from the roof of the chapel hung another lamp of bronze. The light was turned low, but it threw a slight radiance upon portions of the mosaic of the floor.

Tristan unbuckled his sword and placed it ready to hand. The whole of the Basilica was hushed in sleep. There was a heaviness and oppression in the air, and no sound broke the stillness in the courts of the palace.

Memory flared up and down like the light of a lamp, as Tristan pondered over the changes and vicissitudes of his life, with all its miseries and heart-aches, as he thought of the future and of Helayne. Danger encompassed them on

every side. But there had been even greater terrors when he had plucked her from the very grip of Death, from the midst of her foes.

And then he began to pray, pray for Hellyayne's happiness and safety, and his whispering voice sounded as if a dry leaf was being blown over the marble floor, and when it ceased the silence fell over him like a cloak, enveloping him in its heavy, stifling folds.

He had been on guard in the Lateran before, but the silence had never seemed so deep as it was now. His mind, heated and filled with the events of the past days, would not be tranquil. And yet there was a deadly fascination in this profound silence, in which it seemed his own mind and the riot of his thoughts were living and awake.

What, if even now some lurking danger were approaching through the thousand corridors and anterooms of the palace! For on this night the enemies of Christ were abroad, silently unfurling the sable banners of Hell.

The thought was almost unbearable. It was not fear which Tristan felt, rather a restlessness he was unable to control. Although the night was no hotter than usual, perspiration began to break out upon his face, and he felt athirst. The fumes of incense that permeated the chapel, increased his drowsiness.

With something of an effort Tristan strode to the door and opened it. In the corridor two men-at-arms were on guard, one standing against the wall, the other walking slowly to and fro. The men reported that all was well, and that no one had passed that way. Tristan closed the door and returned inside. He walked up the chapel's length and then, his drawn sword beside him on the marble, knelt in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament which he had come to guard.

There, for a little, his confused and restless mind found peace.

But not for long.

A drowsiness more heavy and insistent than any he had ever known began to assail him. It billowed into his brain, wave after wave. It assailed him with an irresistible, physical assault. He fought against it despairingly and hopelessly, knowing that he would be vanquished. Once, twice, sword in hand, as though the long blade could help him in the fight, he staggered up and down the chapel. Then, with a smothered groan, he sank into the chair, the sword slipping from his grasp. He felt as if deep waters were closing over him. There was a sound like dim and distant drums in his ears, a sensation of sinking, lower, ever lower, — then utter oblivion.

And now silence reigned, silence more intense than his mind had ever known.

The red lamp burned before the Host. The lamp in the centre of the chapel threw a dim radiance upon the bowed form of Tristan, whose sword crossed the mosaics of the floor.

Silence there was in the whole circuit of the Lateran.

Even the Blessed Father, prisoner in his own chamber, was asleep. The domestic prelates, the whole vast ecclesiastical court were wrapt in deep repose.

In the chapel of St. Luke the silence was broken by the deep breathing of Tristan. It was not the breathing of a man in healthy sleep. It was a long-drawn catching at the breath, then once more a difficult inhalation. The men-at-arms outside in the corridor heard nothing of it. The sound was confined to the interior alone.

The ceiling of the chapel was painted, and the various panels were divided by gilded oak beadings.

Almost in the centre, directly above where Tristan reposed in leaden slumber, was a panel some two feet square, which represented in faint and faded colors the martyrdom of St. Sebastian.

Suddenly, without a sound, the panel parted.

If the sleeper had been awake he would have seen almost at his feet a swaying ladder of silk rope, which for a moment or two hissed back and forth over the tessellated floor.

Now the dark square in the painted ceiling became faintly illumined. In its dim oblong a formless shape centred itself. The faint hiss from the end of the silken rope ladder recommenced and down the ladder from the roof of the chapel descended a formless spectre, with incredible swiftness, with incredible silence.

The spider had dropped from the centre of its web. It had chosen the time well. It was upon its business.

The trembling of the rope ladder ceased. Without a sound the black figure emerged into the pale light thrown by the central lamp. The figure was horrible. It was robed in deepest black, and as it made a quick bird-like movement of the head, the face, plucked as from some deadly nightmare, was so awful that it seemed well that Tristan was unconscious.

The High Priest of Satan stood in the chapel of the Lateran. His quick, dexterous fingers ran over Tristan's sleeping form. Then he nodded approvingly.

There was a soft pattering of steps and now the black form passed out of the circle of light and emerged into the red light of the lamp, which burned before the altar.

Above, upon the embroidered frontal, were the curtains of white silk edged with gold — the gates of the tabernacle.

A long, lean arm, hardly more than a bone, drew apart the curtains. Mingling with the heavy breathing of the sleeping man there was a sharp sound, most startling in the intense silence.

It was a bestial snarl of satisfaction. It was followed by abominable chirpings of triumph, cold, inhuman, but real.

Tristan slept on. The men-at-arms kept their faithful watch. In the whole of the Lateran Palace no one knew that the High Priest of Satan was prowling through the precincts and had seized upon his awful prey.

He thrust the Holy Host into a silver box, and placed it next to his bosom. Then he drew a wafer of the exact size and shape of the stolen Host from the pocket of his robe. Gliding over to Tristan he thrust this unconsecrated wafer into his doublet.

Then the black bat-like thing mounted to the ceiling. The lemon-colored light reappeared for a moment. In its glare the dark phantom looked terrific, like a fiend from Hell. The rope ladder moved silently upwards, and the painted panel with the arrow-pierced Sebastian dropped soundlessly into its place.

The red lamp burnt in front of the tabernacle. But the chapel was empty now.

At dawn the unexpected happened.

The guards, expecting to be relieved, found themselves face to face with a special commission, come to visit the Lateran. It consisted of the Cardinal-Archbishop of Ravenna, the Cardinal of Orvieto, the Prefect of the Camera and Basil the Grand Chamberlain.

After having made the rounds they at last arrived before the chapel of St. Luke. They found the two men-at-arms stationed at the door, alert at their post. The men were exhausted; their faces appeared grey and drawn in the morning light, but they reported that no one had passed into the chapel, nor had they seen anything of Tristan since midnight, when he had questioned them.

The doors of the chapel were locked. Tristan held the keys. Repeated knocks elicited no response.

The Archbishop of Ravenna looked anxiously at the Prefect of the Camera.

"I do not like this, Messer Salviati," he said in a low voice. "I fear there is something wrong here."

"Beat upon the door more loudly," the Prefect turned to one of the halberdiers, and the man struck the solid oak with the staff of his axe, till the whole corridor, filled with the

ghostly advance light of dawn, rang and echoed with the noise.

The Prefect of the Camera turned to the Archbishop.

"It would seem the Capitano has fallen asleep. That is not a thing he ought to have done — but as the chapel seems inviolate we need hardly remain longer."

And he looked inquiringly at the Grand Chamberlain.

The latter shook his head dubiously.

"I fear the Capitano can hardly be asleep, since we have called him so loudly," he said, looking from the one to the other. "I would suggest that the door of the chapel be forced."

They were some time about it. The door was of massive oak, the lock well made and true. A man-at-arms had been despatched to another part of the Lateran to bring a locksmith who, for nearly half an hour, toiled at his task.

It was accomplished at last and the four entered the chapel.

It stretched before them, long, narrow, almost fantastic in the grey light of morning.

The painted ceiling above held no color now. The mosaics of the floor were dead and lifeless. In the centre of the chapel, with face unnaturally pale, sat Tristan, huddled up in the velvet chair. By his side lay his naked sword.

The lamp which was suspended from the centre of the ceiling had almost expired.

In front of the altar the wick, floating on the oil, in its bowl of red glass, gave almost the only note of color against the grey.

As they entered the chapel, the four genuflected to the altar. And while the Prefect and Basil went over to where Tristan was sleeping in his chair, and stood about with alarmed eyes, the Cardinal of Orvieto and the Archbishop of Ravenna approached the tabernacle with the proper reverences, parted the curtains and staggered back, indescribable horror in their faces.

The Holy Host had disappeared.

The priests stared at each other in terror. What did it mean? Again the Body of Our Lord had been taken from His resting-place. The captain of the guard was asleep in his chair. Verily the demons were at work once more and Hell was loosed again.

The Archbishop of Ravenna began to weep. He covered his face with his hands. As he knelt upon the altar steps, great tears trickled through his trembling fingers, while he sent up prayers to the Almighty that this sacrilege might be discovered and its perpetrators brought to justice. On either side of him knelt the priests who had come into the chapel after them. Their hearts were filled with fear and sorrow.

The Cardinal of Ravenna rose at last.

His old, lean face shone with holy anger and sorrow.

"An expiatory service will be held in this chapel before noon," he addressed those present. "I shall myself say Mass here. Meanwhile the whole of the palace must be aroused. Somewhere the emissaries of Satan have in their possession the Blessed Sacrament. See that the secret Judas does not escape us!"

Almost upon his words there came a loud wail of anguish from the centre of the chapel where Tristan was still huddled in his chair.

Basil had opened the doublet at his neck, as if to give him air, and the Prefect of the Camera, who was standing by, clapped his hands to his temples, and groaned like a soul in torment.

The two ecclesiastics hurried down from the altar steps.

Upon the lining of Tristan's doublet there lay the large round wafer, which every one present believed to be the consecrated Host.

The Cardinal-Archbishop reverently took the wafer from Tristan and held it up in two hands.

The men-at-arms sank to their knees with a rattle and ring of accoutrement.

Every one knelt.

Then in improvised procession, His Eminence restored the wafer to the tabernacle.

Tristan was dragged out of the chapel.

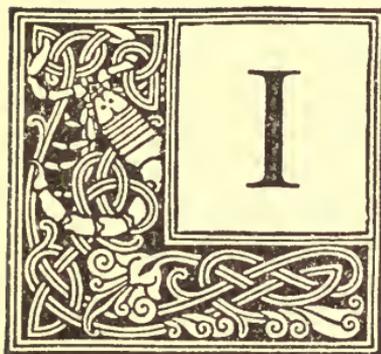
In the corridor horror-stricken men-at-arms buffeted him into some sort of consciousness. His bewildered ears caught the words: "To San Angelo," as he staggered between the men-at-arms as one in the thrall of an evil dream, leaving behind him a nameless fear and horror among the monks, priests and attendants at the Lateran.

END OF BOOK THE THIRD

BOOK THE FOURTH

CHAPTER I

THE RETURN OF THE MOOR



IN a domed chamber of the Emperor's Tomb there sat two personages engaged in whispered conversation, Basil and a weird hooded phantom that seemed part of the dread shadows which crowded in upon the room, quenching the dying light of day. Deep silence reigned. Only the monotonous tread of

the sentries broke the stillness as they made the rounds above them.

It was Basil who spoke.

"All is going well! We shall prevail! We shall set up the throne of Ebony in the stead of the Cross. I bow to your wisdom, my master! The promised reward shall not fail you!"

As he spoke, the thin, black arm of his vis-a-vis trembled for a moment in the ample folds of his black gown. Then, with a quick, bird-like movement, a thin hand, twisted like a claw, wrinkled and yellow, was stretched out towards the Grand Chamberlain.

On the second finger of this claw there was a ring. Basil bent and kissed it.

Basil began to speak in his ordinary, conversational tone, but there was a strange gleam in his eyes.

"It has been accomplished," he said. "They tell me all Rome is astir!"

The voice that replied seemed to come from a great distance; the lips of the waxen face hardly moved. They parted, that was all.

"It has been done! I took it myself! It was the Host which the Cardinal of Ravenna had consecrated on that morning."

"And you were not seen?"

"I was not," came the whispered reply. "As a measure of precaution I wore the mask which I use to go about the churches at night. I met no one."

"Is it here?" Basil queried eagerly.

"It is not here," replied the voice. "It must be kept until the night of the great consecration, when Lucifer himself shall sit upon the ebony throne and demand his bride — his stainless dove. Where is she now?"

The light had faded out of Basil's eyes, and his face was ashen.

"One has been found, worthy of even as fastidious a master as he, whom we both serve. Well-nigh had she escaped us, had not one who never fails me tracked her on that fatal night, when her body lay in her coffin ready to be consecrated to the Nameless one."

From the eyeless sockets of the shadow-mask a phosphorescent gleam shot towards the Grand Chamberlain.

"What of the man?"

"The wafer was discovered on a certain captain of the guard who hath crossed my path to his undoing once too often. The Church herself shall pronounce sentence upon him — through me!"

"And — that other?"

There was a pause.

"Her husband! — He deems her dead, nor grieves he overmuch, believing, as he does, that her love was another's — even his whom I have marked for certain doom. I have it in my mind to try what a jest will do for him."

The lurid tone of the speaker seemed to impress even his shadowy companion.

“A jest?”

“He shall attend the great ceremony,” Basil explained. “And he shall behold the stainless dove. When is it to be?” he added after a pause.

“When is it to be?”

“Six nights hence — on the night of the full moon.”

“And then you shall give to me that which I crave, and the forfeit shall be paid.”

“The forfeit shall be paid,” the voice re-echoed from the shadows, and to Basil it seemed as if the damp, cold breath from an open grave had been wafted to his cheeks.

Like a phantom that sinks back into the night of the grave, whence it had emerged, Bessarion vanished from the chamber. In his place stood Hormazd, who had noiselessly entered through a panel in the wall.

Basil greeted him with a silent nod.

“What of the messenger?” he turned to the Oriental.

“He returns within the hour,” replied the voice.

“What are his tidings?” Basil queried eagerly. “Is Alberic in the land of shadows, where she dwells who gave him birth?”

“Sent by the same relentless hand across the Styx,” the cowed figure spoke, yet Basil knew not whether it was a question or a statement.

He gave a start.

“Tell me, how are secrets known to you at which Hell itself would pale?” he turned with unsteady tone to his companion.

“Those of the shadows commune with the shadows,” came the enigmatical reply. “Is everything prepared?”

“When the brazen tongue from the Capitol tolls the hour, the blow shall fall,” Basil replied. “Hassan Abdullah and his Saracens are anchored off the port of Ostia. The Epirotes

and Albanians in the Senator's service are bribed to our cause. Rome is in the throes of mortal terror. Even the Monk of Cluny is under the spell, and has ceased to arraign the Scarlet Woman of Babylon. The dread of the impending judgment day will succor our cause. And — once installed within these walls as master of Rome — with Theodora by my side — you shall have full sway, to do whatever your dark fancies may prompt. You shall have a chamber and a laboratory and be at liberty to roam at will through your devil's kitchen."

The cowed figure gave a silent nod, but, before he could speak, the door leading into the chamber opened as from the effect of a violent gust of wind, and a shapeless form, that seemed half human, half ape, flew at Basil's feet, who recoiled as if a ghost had arisen before him from the floor.

For a moment Basil stared from Daoud the Moor, to his shadowy visitor, then he bade the runner arise and commanded him in some Eastern tongue to unburden himself.

With many protestations of his devotion the monster produced a bundle which Basil had not noted, owing to the swiftness with which the African had entered the chamber. Panting, with deft, though trembling fingers, Daoud untied the cords and a bloody head, severed from its trunk, rolled upon the floor of the chamber, and lay still at Basil's feet. It had lost all human semblance and exhaled the putrid odor of the grave.

Basil started to his feet, staring from the Moor to Hormazd.

"Dead —" his pale lips stammered. Then, turning to his dark companion, he added by way of encouragement to himself:

"You gave me truth!"

Daoud was cowering on the floor, his eyes staring into the shadows, where hovered the Persian's almost invisible form.

A nod from Basil caused him to rise.

“ Away with it! ” shrieked the Grand Chamberlain overcome with terror. “ See that no one sets eyes upon it! ”

The Moor wrapped the severed head into the blood-stained cloth and darted from the chamber.

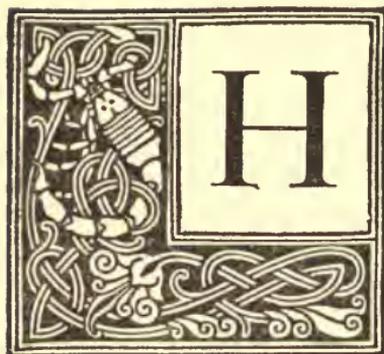
Then Basil turned to his visitor.

“ In six days Rome shall hail a new master! Let then the sable banners of Hell be unfurled and the Nameless Presence rejoice upon his ebony throne! And now do you come with me into the realms of doom that gape below, that your eyes may be gladdened by that which is in store for you! ”

Taking up a torch, Basil lighted it with the aid of two flints and the twain trooped out of the chamber into the shadowy corridor leading into the crypts of the Emperor's Tomb.

CHAPTER II

'THE ESCAPE FROM SAN ANGELO



HIDDEN away in some secret vault of the great honey-colored Mausoleum Tristan found himself when the men-at-arms had departed, and he had regained his full senses. Color had faded out of everything. The rock walls were lifeless and grey. The immense silence of the tomb surrounded him. The rayless gloom was without relief, save what sparse light filtered through a narrow grated window so high in the wall that nothing could be seen from below, save the sky.

The torture of it all he could have endured very well. There was something greater. It was the thought of Helayne. This dreadful uncertainty swung like a bell in his brain, cut through the fibre of his being. And when these thoughts came over him in his lone confinement he beat his hands upon the stone and wept.

They had placed him in a cell, which seemed to have been hollowed out of the Travertine rock. It was small, built in the thickness of the mighty Roman walls. Tristan set his teeth hard, prepared to endure. He knew well enough what it meant. He would be confined in this living tomb till his enemies thought his spirit was broken, and then he would be summoned before a tribunal of the Church.

Once a day, and once only, the door of his cell opened.

By the smoky light of a torch, his gaoler pushed a pitcher of water and a machet of bread into his prison. Then the red light died and darkness and silence supervened. Yet it was not the ordinary darkness which men know. Through the haunted chambers of Tristan's mind fantastic forms began to chase each other, evil things to uncoil themselves and raise their heads. More and more drearily the burden of the days began to press upon him. What availed heroic endurance?

But it was not only darkness, nor was it only despair. Nor was it only silence. It was a strange impalpable something which haunted his restless, enforced vigil; a dim inchoate nothingness, that drove him to the verge of madness. Though day draped the sky with blue and golden banners, to tell the sons of men that Night was past and they need not longer fear, for Tristan darkness was not a transient thing, but an awful negation of hope.

All of this Tristan could have endured, had not the thought of Helayne unnerved him utterly.

She was safe — so he hoped — in the Convent of Santa Maria in Trastevere. But, as hour succeeded hour, his assurance began to pale. Everything had been arranged with the Abbess. But — had she indeed eluded her pursuers? The empty coffin had no doubt long been discovered. Did they believe she was dead, or did the hand who had dealt the blow in the dark, the vigilant eye that had pursued her every step, plot further mischief?

He thought of Odo of Cluny. The monk was influential, but there was, at this hour, in Rome, one even more powerful, and he doubted not but that by his agency the wafer had been placed into his doublet, though the events of that fateful night from the time he had entered the Lateran, were like a black blot upon his memory.

Had Odo even sought admission to his cell? Did he, too, believe him guilty? Had his ears, too, been poisoned by the monstrous lie? To him he might indeed have turned; of him

he might have received assurance of Hellyayne's fate; and in return he might have reassured her who was pining at the Convent of Santa Maria in Trastevere.

But, was she ignorant indeed of what was happening in the seven-hilled city of Rome? Would not the rumor of the terrible outrage committed at the Lateran knock even at the silent walls of the convent? A captain of the Senator's guard caught red-handed in the perpetration of a crime too heinous for the human mind to conceive!

He reviewed his own life, the close of which seemed very near at hand. Free from cunning and that secret conceit which is peculiarly alarming to natures that know themselves to be, in all practical matters, confounded and confused, he had, in a short time, found himself placed upon the world's greatest stage, a world little fit for dreamers and for dreams. He had been plunged into the inner circles of the mighty struggle, impending between Powers of Light and the Powers of Darkness, upon a sea he knew not how to navigate, and upon whose cliffs his ship had stranded.

One evening, when the cold greyness of an early twilight had enveloped the city, and from the darkening sky every now and then was heard a sound of approaching thunder, Tristan, counting the weary hours of his unbroken solitude, which he could but measure by the appearance and departure of his gaoler, had been more restless than usual. He had hoped to be summoned for early trial before those high in the Church, when, in Odo of Cluny, he would find an advocate, who alone might save him from his doom. But nothing had happened. Nothing had broken the dreary, maddening monotony, save now and then the shriek and curses of a maddened fellow-prisoner, or the moans of a wretch who was dying of thirst or hunger.

Whoever the powers that dominated his life, they evidently had not decreed his immediate death, as if they were rejoicing in the torture of false hopes which each recurrent day waked

in his breast, and which each departing day extinguished. The food never varied, and the water intended for the cleansing of his body was so sparse that he had to husband it as a precious possession till the goaler refilled the bronze ewer on the succeeding day.

When waking from feverish, troubled slumbers, broken by the squeaking of the rats that scurried over the filthy floor of his dungeon, and other presences that caused him to pray for a speedy death from this slow torture, he found himself nevertheless listening for the approach of the goaler who, after dispensing his bounty, departed as he had come, silent as the tomb, without making reply to Tristan's queries.

Escape, to all appearances, seemed quite beyond the scope of possibility. Yet, with failing hopes, the spirit of Tristan seemed to rise. Had not his good fortune been with him ever since he arrived at Rome? Had he not, by some miraculous decree of destiny, again met the woman he loved better than all the world? And then, they had left him his dagger. After all, not such wretched company in his present plight.

It was on the eve of the third day when the voices of men coming down the night-wrapt passage struck his wakeful ear.

In one of the speakers he recognized Basil.

"And you are quite sure no one saw you enter?" he said to his companion.

"No one!" came the snarling reply. "Nevertheless — they are on my track. I breathe the air of the gibbet which burns my throat."

"And you are positive no one recognized you?" spoke the silken voice.

"No one."

"Take courage, Hormazd. Then there is little danger, yet you should take care that no one may see you. We are surrounded by spies."

"Do you not trust Maraglia?"

"I trust none! You will therefore remain a short time concealed in this subterranean passage."

"Subterranean?"

There was a note of terror in the Oriental's voice.

"That is to say — the vaults! Here you will find honorable and pleasant company, who will not betray you. You will find straw in abundance and each day Maraglia will bring you something to eat. Go slowly. How do you like the abode?"

"Not even the devil can find me here."

"No one will find you here!"

"No one knows where I am," Hormazd interposed dubiously.

"Nor ever shall."

"It is of no consequence. So I am safe."

"You are safe enough. Lower your head and take care not to stumble over the threshold. Here — this side — enter."

"Enter," re-echoed the other. Then there was a pause.

"It is very evident, you are afraid —"

"Afraid? No — but I am thinking we always know⁷ when we enter such places — never when we shall leave them."

"How? Did I not say to-morrow night?"

"But if you should not come for me?"

"What profit would your death be to me? Where shall I find another wizard to bring to foretell the death of another Alberic?"

Tristan gave an audible gasp at these words. He felt his limbs grow numb. Had his ears heard aright? Surely they had not. Some demon had mocked him, to drive him mad. Ere he could regain his mental balance, the voice of the Grand Chamberlain's companion again struck his ear.

"But if you should not come, my lord?"

"You could scream!"

"What would that avail?"

“Mind you — I might have to stay here myself for sheltering such a patriarch as you.”

“Nevertheless — to guard against all risks — leave the door open — ”

He entered, but the door turned immediately upon its hinges.

“My Lord Basil—” shrieked Hormazd, “the door is shut—”

“I stumbled against it.”

“Bring a light — open the door — ” came a muffled voice from within.

“I shall soon return.”

“Do not forget the light.”

“Light!—Ay! You shall not want for light, — if what I say be not false: *Et lux perpetua luceat eis*,” chanted the Grand Chamberlain in Requiem measure, as he strode away.

Silence, deep and sepulchral, succeeded. Tristan cowered on the floor, his face covered with his hands. If what he had overheard was true, he, too, was lost. What had happened? Who was the Grand Chamberlain’s companion?

Now Hormazd began to scream and rave in the darkness. Terrible execrations broke from the Oriental’s lips, as he hurled his body against the iron bars of his prison cell. Demoniactal yells waked the silent echoes. The other prisoners, alarmed and rendered restless, soon joined in, and soon the dark vaults of the Emperor’s Tomb resounded with a veritable pandemonium, a chorus of the damned that caused Tristan to put his fingers to his ears lest he, too, go mad.

At nine o’clock that night the last visit was to be paid the prisoners. At nine o’clock Maraglia, the Castellan, came, attended by the guard, which waited outside. The Castellan was in a state of nervous excitement. As he entered Tristan’s cell he looked about, as if he dreaded a listener, then he approached his prisoner and whispered something into his ear.

For a moment Tristan knew not what was happening to him. Was he alone with a mad man and was Maraglia too possessed? —

The Castellan, to prove his assertion that he was a bat, began forthwith to squeak, and waved his arms, as if they were wings.

Curious stories were told about Maraglia. No one knew, why he had retained his post so long amidst ever recurring changes, and it was whispered that he was subject to strange possessions of the mind. He faced his prisoner nervously, fingering a poniard in his belt. Tristan watched his every gesture.

A little foam came out of the corners of Maraglia's lips. He wrung his hands and his voice rose into a sort of shriek. He jerked his head half round towards the men-at arms outside in the gallery. The screams of Hormazd continued.

"It is the Ape of Antichrist," he whispered to Tristan. "I have a mind to try conclusions with him. Close the door."

Tristan's wits, preternaturally sharpened in his predicament put words in his mouth which he seemed unable to account for. He had heard rumors of the Castellan. Perchance he might turn his madness to account.

"I can tell you much," he said. "But not here! But one thing I perceive. You are approaching one of your bad spells."

Maraglia shrank back against the door. His face was pale as death.

"Then you know?" he squeaked.

Tristan nodded. The torch which the Castellan had placed in an iron holder that projected from the wall, was burning low and the resinous fumes filled the cell.

"Something I know — but not all! Yet, I believe I can cure you —"

"I am about to turn into a bat! And when I go abroad I

scream like a bat — in a thin, high pitched tone. And I flap my arms — and fly away — thus — ”

Tristan nodded wisely.

“ I know the symptoms — they are of Satan. Nevertheless, I can cure you.”

“ Without conference with the evil powers? ”

Tristan pondered.

“ You shall not imperil your soul! But — take heed! It is well that you have spoken to me of these matters. For, from feeling that you are a bat, a bat you will become.”

Maraglia was pale as a ghost.

“ Then I was just in the nick of time? ”

“ You are already half immersed,” Tristan replied in a deep and menacing tone. “ Take heed lest you be utterly drowned.”

The Castellan shivered as one in an ague.

“ Every Friday at midnight the Black Mass is said by one Bessarion, that is of unthinkable age — a hideous wizard and High Priest of Satan. It is he who has cast the spell over me.”

Hope mounted high in Tristan. The alert confidence of his companion animated him and he felt almost as if the great ordeal was over. A distant bell was tolling. Its tones came in muffled cadence into the night wrapt corridors of the Emperor's Tomb.

Nevertheless he shivered at the Castellan's confession. Maraglia, then, was under the spell of this Wizard of Hell.

“ I have seen him stalking through these galleries,” he turned to his gaoler. “ But I possess a spell which renders him harmless. He cannot touch me — nor breathe his evil breath into my soul. I can compel him to take away the spell he has cast over you — that is, if you so wish it.”

The Castellan squeaked and waved his arms.

“ You would do this for me? ”

“ If you will not betray me. For only a more powerful

spell than that which he possesses can take away the curse he has put upon you."

"Ah! If you would do this! It is coming upon me now. I am going mad. I am a bat!"

And Maraglia squeaked like a whole company of dusky mice, and flapped his arms as if he were about to fly away.

"This very night will I do it," Tristan replied. "But you must help me."

"What can I do?"

Tristan cast all upon one throw.

"Remove your guards from this corridor and leave me a light and a rope."

"It is but reasonable," Maraglia returned. "I will fetch them. When appears the wizard?"

"At midnight! See that I am not disturbed."

Maraglia nodded. Fear had almost deprived him of his senses.

"Last time I saw him he came from yonder corridor," Tristan informed the Castellan.

"That may not be!" the latter replied. "Unless he hath wings. This passage leads to the ramparts."

"It is possible I have been confused by the darkness," Tristan replied pensively. "Nevertheless, I will oblige you, Messer Maraglia."

The Castellan retired with many manifestations of his gratitude, leaving Tristan in possession of a lantern, a candle and a coil of rope.

It was midnight.

The sharp click of a flint upon steel was repeated several times before a spark fell upon the tinder and it caught with a blue, ghostly flicker. There were strange reflections in Tristan's cell. Curious steely lights played upon him.

Then the candle ignited. The glow widened out. Tristan peered about cautiously. The door of his cell had been left unfastened by Maraglia. He had no fear of his prisoner

escaping. No one had ever escaped from these vaults, except to certain death.

He crept out into the corridor. It was dark as in the realms of the underworld. The silence of the tomb prevailed. After a time the passage made a sharp turn at right angles. A cooler air blew upon his face, wafted through an unbarred embrasure, beyond which showed a star-lit night without a moon, but not wholly dark.

Drawing himself up into the embrasure he stood at last upon a broad sill of stone. A cool breeze eddied around him. He was at an immense height. A vast portion of Rome lay below. The Tiber seemed like a river of lead. Far away to the left the dark cypresses of the Pincian Hill cut into the night sky in sombre silhouette. He was above the tombs of Hadrian and Caracalla.

Tristan shivered despite himself as he fastened the rope he had secured from the unwary Castellan to the stone ledge. It was not fear; but that actual, physical shrinking, which induces nausea, had him in its grip.

“There is Rome,” he said to himself with a savage chuckle.

He made a stirrup loop and curved it round a boss of antique tile, which stretched above the abyss like a gargoyle. Then, with infinite precaution, he lowered the coil of rope.

Dawn was already heralded in the East. A faint grey light appeared in the direction of the Alban Hills. From over the Esquiline came the shrill trumpeting of a cock.

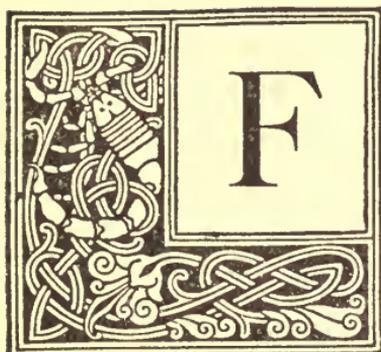
There was a horrible moment as Tristan's hands left the roof edge and he fell a foot to grasp the rope. He curled his legs about it, got it between his crossed feet and began to let himself down. The sinews of his arms seemed to creak. Once he passed an open window and distinctly heard the snores of the men-at-arms who were sleeping within. The descent seemed interminable. As seen from above, had there been any one to watch him, his form grew less and less. From a man it seemed to turn into an ape; from an ape as a

night bird groping down the Mausoleum's side; from a bird it dwindled to a spider, spinning downward on a taut thread. Up there, on the height, the rope groaned and creaked upon the curved tile from which it hung. But tile and fibre held. Once his feet rested upon a leaden water pipe and he clung and swayed, glad of a momentary release from the frightful strain upon his arms. That was almost the last conscious sensation. Clinging to the rope he came down quick and more quickly. His arms rose and fell with the precision of a machine. At last he felt his feet upon solid ground, where he reeled and staggered like a drunken man.

He had traversed a hundred thirty-five feet of air.

CHAPTER III

THE LURE



FOR three whole days Hellyayne consumed herself waiting for Tristan, and she began to feel listless and dispirited. She had long acknowledged to herself the necessity of his presence, and how much his love had influenced her thoughts and actions ever since she had known him — a period that now seemed of infinite length. She found herself perpetually recalling the origin and growth of this love. She dwelt with a strange pleasure on her terrible plight, when, believing she was dead, he had remained with her body. As evening approached she strolled down to the Tiber, with a strange persistency and the vague expectation of Tristan's return. She now trusted him utterly, since that last and most potent proof of his love for her.

On the first day this dreamy, imaginative existence was delightful. The region of the Trastevere at the period of our story was but sparsely populated, and the great convent, with its church of Santa Maria, dominated the lowly fisher huts, scattered over its precincts. Hellyayne, during these quiet evening hours, when only the sounds of far-off chimes from churches and convents smote the silence with their silver tongues, and during which hours the Abbess of Santa Maria permitted her to leave the silent walls of her asylum for a

short walk to the Tiber's edge, rarely ever saw a human being. Only at dusk, when the fishermen and boatmen returned from their daily routine, she saw them pass in the distance, like phantoms that come and go and vanish in the evening glow.

On the second day there came a feeling of want; the consciousness that there was a void which it would be a great happiness to fill. This grew to a longing for those hours which had glided by so quickly and sweetly. At intervals there came the startling thought: if she should never see him again! Then her heart stopped beating, and her cheek paled with the thought of the bare possibility.

Thus the third day sped, and when Hellyayne still remained without tidings from Tristan her anxiety slowly changed to a great fear. She could hardly contain herself during the long hours of the day, and though she spent hours and hours in prayer for his return, her heart seemed to sink under the weight of her fear and sorrow. She was alone — alone in Rome — exposed to dangers which her great beauty rendered even more grave than those that beset an ordinary person. She feared lest Basil was scouring the city for the woman who had so mysteriously baffled his desires, and she dreaded the hatred of Theodora, whose infatuation for her lover had rather increased than diminished in the face of Tristan's resistance. How long would he be able to withstand, if Theodora had decreed his undoing?

There were moments when a mad jealousy and despair surged up in Hellyayne's heart, yet she hesitated to confide her fears and anxiety to the Abbess, voicing only her disquietude at Tristan's prolonged absence. Then only the latter informed Hellyayne of a strange rumor which had found its way into the Trastevere. Three nights ago a terrible sacrilege had been committed at the Lateran, during the small hours of the night, and on the following morning, during an inspection by some high prelates of the Church, the crim-

inal had been discovered in the person of a captain of the Senator's guard, who had but recently arrived in Rome, and had been placed in high command by the Senator himself, whom he had so cruelly betrayed.

Three nights ago! It was on the night of the terrible crime from whose consequences she had been saved just in the nick of time. With painful minuteness Hellyayne recalled, or tried to recall, every incident, every detail, every utterance of her lover. But there was nothing at which she could clutch save — but it was sheer madness. Surely it was some horrid nightmare. Again she sought the Abbess, later in the day, questioning her regarding the name of him who had been taken in the commission of so heinous an offence. It was some time ere the Abbess could recall a name strange in her own land, and Hellyayne, with the persistency of desperation, withheld any aid, so as not to offer a clue to the one she dreaded to hear. But the strain proved too great. Almost with a shriek she demanded to know if, perchance, the name was Tristan. The Abbess regarded her questioner strangely. "Tristan is the name. Do you know this man, my child?"

Hellyayne was on the point of fainting. Everything grew black before her eyes, and she would have fallen, had not the Abbess supported her.

"A countryman of mine," she said, dreading lest by revealing their connection she might herself be held in custody. "He came to Rome on a pilgrimage. Surely there is some horrible mistake! He could not! He could not!"

The Abbess placed an arm round the trembling girl.

"If he can prove that he is innocent, the Cardinal-Archbishop will not suffer a hair of his head to be touched," she tried to console Hellyayne whose head rested on her shoulder. She seemed utterly crushed. Surely — it was too monstrous — too unbelievable. Yet as the moments sped on, an icy, sickening fear gripped her heart. She recalled an incident of that last evening with Tristan which, but for what had

happened or was rumored to have happened, she would have utterly ignored. She had noted her lover's restlessness, and his apparent haste in leaving her at the convent gates. She recalled now that he repeatedly glanced at the moon and did, at one time, comment upon the lateness of the hour. He had not seemed anxious to prolong their *tete-a-tete*, and he had not been heard from in three days. Surely, no matter where he was, he could have sent a message, verbal or otherwise. And the crime had happened during the small hours of the night—after he had left her! It was too horrible to ponder upon!

That there was some dreadful mystery which surrounded this deed of darkness and Tristan's share therein, Helayne did not question. But how was she, a woman, a stranger, alone in Rome, to aid in clearing it up and reveal her lover's innocence? There was no doubt in her mind, but that he was the victim of some devilish conspiracy — perchance a thread of that same web which had entangled her to her undoing. But how to convince the Cardinal-Archbishop of Tristan's innocence, when the facts surrounding the terrible discovery were unknown to her?

“ This man is, no doubt, very dear to you,” said the Abbess at last.

Helayne shrank before the questioner and averted her face. But the Abbess was resolved to know more, once her suspicions were aroused.

“ Could it perchance be he who brought you here three nights ago — your brother? ” she queried with a kind, though penetrating glance at the woman who was trembling like an aspen, her face colorless, her eyes dimmed with tears.

A silent nod convinced the Abbess of the truth of her surmise. She stroked Helayne's silken hair.

“ It is a dreadful crime of which he stands accused, one for which there is no remission — no pardon here or hereafter,” she said sorrowfully.

“He is innocent,” sobbed Helayne. “He is as pure as the light, as the flowers. There is some dreadful mistake. He must be saved before it is too late! Oh — dear mother — could you not intercede for him with His Eminence?”

The Abbess regarded her as if she thought her protegee had suddenly lost her reason. To intercede with the Cardinal-Archbishop for one who stood committed of so heinous an offence, taken in the very act, — one who, perchance, was implicated in all those other terrible outrages committed in the various sanctuaries of Rome! Nevertheless she made allowance for Helayne’s hysterical plea.

“Has he never mentioned these matters to you?” She queried kindly, hoping to draw the girl out.

“What matters?” Helayne queried, with wide eyes, and the question convinced the Abbess that the woman knew nothing.

“These dark practices,” replied the Abbess. “For this is not the first offence. Even within this very moon cycle the Holy Host has been taken from the Church of Our Blessed Lady yonder. And all efforts to discover the guilty one have failed.”

“I had not heard of it,” said Helayne. “I have not been long in Rome. Nor has he. About a month, I should say.”

“A month?”

“And he knew nothing of this. Nor knew he even one person in this whole city.”

“Wherefore then came he?”

Helayne explained and the Abbess listened. Helayne’s account, which was impersonal, impressed her protectress in so far as she knew she spoke truth. For, if here was an impostor, it was the cleverest she had ever faced and, while a stranger to the world and to worldly affairs, the stamp of truth was too indelibly written upon Helayne’s brow to even permit of the shadow of a doubt. Perhaps it was for this reason the Abbess refrained from questioning her farther,

for she had been somehow curious of the relation between the woman and the man who had brought her here.

Here was matter for thought indeed. For, if the man was guilty and, notwithstanding Hellyayne's protestations, the Abbess was in her own mind convinced that the Cardinal-Archbishop of Ravenna could not be deceived in matters of this kind, what was to become of the woman he had placed in her charge? There were also other matters equally grave which oppressed the Abbess' mind. Hellyayne's connection with one who had committed the unspeakable crime might militate against her remaining at the convent. Yet she hesitated to send her out into the world, unprotected and alone.

For a time there was silence. Hellyayne, utterly exhausted from the recital of a past, which had reopened every wound in her heart, causing it to bleed anew, anxious, afraid, doubting and wondering how far her protectress might go, stood before the woman who seemed to hold in her hand both her own fate and that of her lover.

"I will retire to my cell and pray to the Blessed Virgin for light to guide my steps," the Abbess said at last, laying her hand on Hellyayne's head. "Do not venture away too far," she enjoined, "and come to me after the Ave Maria. Perchance I may then know what to counsel."

Hellyayne bowed her head and kissed the hem of the Abbess' robe.

After she had left, Hellyayne remained standing where she was, transfixed with anxiety and grief.

What forces of gloom and evil encompassed her on all sides? The man to whom she had given her youth and beauty, who had plucked the flower which others had vainly desired, instead of cherishing the gift she had bestowed upon him, had trampled the delicate blossom in the dust. He, to whom her heart belonged ever since she had power to think, was doomed for a deed too terrible to name. She had been ruthlessly sacrificed by the one, and now the other had

failed her, and a third tried to encompass her ruin. And she was alone — utterly alone!

What was she to do? To request an audience of the Cardinal-Archbishop was little short of madness. In her own heart Hellaïne doubted seriously that the Abbess would concern herself any further about her or her distress. Nevertheless she felt that something must be done. This inertia which was creeping over her would drive her mad. But first of all she must know the nature of the charge placed against the man she loved before she would determine what to do. In vain she taxed her tired brain for a ray of hope in the encompassing gloom.

The long lights of the afternoon crossed and recrossed the sanctuary of Santa Maria in Trastevere when Hellaïne, after an hour of fervent prayer, emerged from its portals and took the direction of the Tiber, where she sat on her accustomed seat and brooded over her misery.

At last the sunset came. The ashen color of the olive trees flashed out into silver. The mountain peaks of distant Alba became faintly flushed and phantom fair as, in a tempest of fire, the sun sank to rest. The forests of ilex and arbutus on the Janiculum Hill seemed to tremble with delight as the long red heralds touched their topmost boughs. The whole landscape seemed to smile farewell to departing day.

As she sat there, Hellaïne's attention was attracted to a woman who had paused near the river's edge. There was nothing remarkable either in her carriage or apparel. It was a wrinkled hag, swart, snake-locked, cowled, her dress jingling with sequins, her right hand clawed upon a crooked staff. She appeared, in fact, just an old Levantine hoodie-crow of the breed which was familiar enough in Rome in those cataclysmic days, when all sorts of queer, tragic fowl were being driven northward from over seas before the tidal wave of invading Islam. Her speech as well as her manners and dress betrayed Oriental origin.

As she hobbled up to where Helayne was seated she stopped and asked some trifling question about her way, which Helayne pointed with some hesitation, explaining that she was herself a stranger in Rome, and knew not the direction of the city.

The old crone seemed interested.

"In yonder cloister — yet not of it?" she queried, pointing with the crooked staff to the convent walls that towered darkly behind them in the evening dusk.

Her penetration startled Helayne.

"How did you guess, old mother?" she queried with a look of awe, which was not unremarked by the other.

"Ay — there is lore enough under these faded locks of mine to turn the foulest cesspool in Rome as clear as crystal, or to change this staff whereon I lean into a thing that creeps and hisses," she said with a low laugh.

Helayne shrank back from her with a gesture of dismay. Believing implicitly in their power, she felt a deadly fear of those who professed the black arts.

The old woman read her thoughts.

"My daughter," she said, "be not afraid of the old woman's secret gifts. Mine is a harmless knowledge, gained by study of the scrolls of wise men, in my own native land. Fear not, I say, for I, who have pored over those mystic characters till my eyes grew dim, can read your sweet pale face as plainly as the brazen tablets in the Forum, and I can see in it sorrow and care and anxiety for one you love."

Helayne gave a start.

It was true! But how had the old crone found it out! She glanced wistfully at her companion, and the latter, satisfied she was on the right track, proceeded to answer that questioning glance. —

"You think he is in danger, or in grief," she continued mysteriously, "and you wonder why he does not come. What would you not give, my poor child, to see him this very

moment — to look into his face — his eyes. And I can show him to you, if you will. I am not ungrateful, even for a slight service.”

The blood mounted to Hellyayne's brow, and a strange light kindled in her eyes, while a soft radiance swept over her face such as comes into every countenance when the heart vibrates with an illusion to its happiness, as though the silver cord thrilled to the touch of an angel's wing. It was no clumsy guess of the wise woman to infer that the woman before her loved.

“What mean you?” asked Hellyayne eagerly. “How can you show him to me? What do you know of him? Where is he? Is he safe?”

The wise woman smiled. Here was a bird flying blindly into the net. Take her by her affections, there would be little difficulty in the capture.

“He is in danger — in grave danger,” she replied. “But you could save him, if you only knew how. He might be happy, too, if he would. But — with another!”

To do Hellyayne justice, she heard only the first sentence.

“In grave danger,” she repeated. “I knew it! And I could save him! Oh, tell me where he is, and what I can do for him?”

The wise woman pulled a small mirror from her bosom.

“I cannot tell you,” she replied. “But I can show him to you. Only not here, where the shadow of any chance passer-by might destroy the charm. Let us turn aside into yonder ruins. There is no one near, and you shall gaze without interruption into the face of him you love —”

It was but a short way off, though the ruins which surrounded it made the place lonely and secluded. Had it been twice the distance however, Hellyayne would have accompanied her new acquaintance for Tristan's sake, in the eagerness to obtain tidings of his fate. As she approached

the ruins she could not repress a faint sigh, which was not lost on her companion.

"It was here you parted," she said. "It is here you shall see him again."

This was scarcely a random shaft, for it required little penetration to discover that Helayne had some tender association connected with a spot, the solitude of which appealed to her in so great a degree.

Nevertheless the utterance convinced Helayne of her companion's supernatural power and, though it roused alarm, it excited curiosity to a still greater degree.

"Take the mirror in your hand," whispered the wise woman, when they reached the portico, casting a searching glance around. "Shut your eyes while I speak the charm that calls him three times over, and then look steadily on its surface till I have counted ten."

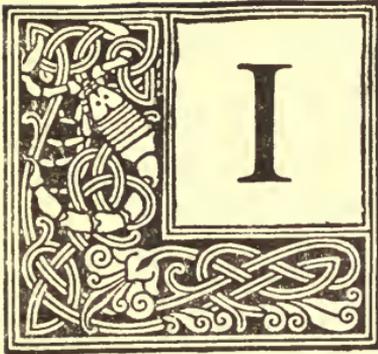
Helayne obeyed these instructions implicitly. Standing in the centre of the ruin with the mirror in her hand, she shut her eyes and listened intently to the low solemn tones of the woman's chanting, while from the deep shadows of the ruin there stole out a muffled form and at the same time a half-dozen sbirri rose from their different hiding places among the ruins.

Ere the incantation had been twice repeated, the leader threw a scarf over Helayne's head, muffling her so completely that an outcry was impossible.

Resistlessly she felt herself taken up and carried to a chariot, which was waiting a short space away. A moment later the driver whipped the horses into a gallop and the vehicle with its occupants and burden disappeared in the gathering dusk.

CHAPTER IV

A LYING ORACLE



IT was an eventful night in Rome and, although for that reason well adapted to deeds of violence, the tumult and confusion exacted great caution from those who wished to proceed without interruption along the streets.

A storm had burst as out of a clear sky, and was sweeping in its fury throughout a large portion of the city. Like all similar outbreaks, it gathered force from many sources unconnected with its original course.

Rome was the theatre that night of a furious strife between the great feudal houses which lorded it over the city.

The Leonine city with its protecting walls did not exist until some decades later. Thus, not only hordes of marauding Saracens, but Franks and Teutons used to make occasional inroads to the very gates of the city. On this evening Pandulph of Benevento, having taken umbrage at some decision of the Sacred Consistory regarding the lands he held as fief of the Church, conferring upon him a title which was disputed by Wido of Prænesté, had broken into the city and a bloody and obstinate conflict was being waged between his forces and the soldiers of the Church. The Roman nobles, ever restless and ready to revolt alike from the authority of the Emperor or of the Church, would not let this glorious opportunity pass without reminding those in power that they had

built upon a volcano. They joined in the fray, some taking the part of the invader, others of the Church.

An hour or two before sunset an undisciplined horde of mercenaries, armed cap-a-pie, and formidable chiefly for the wild fury with which they seemed inspired, attacked the Mausoleum of the Flavian Emperor. The assailants, having no engines of war either for protection or assault, suffered severely from the missiles showered upon them by the besieged. Being repulsed after repeated assaults, they threw flaming torches into the houses that lined the river on the opposite shore and withdrew. From another quarter of the city a large body of Epirotes, who had hoisted the standard of the Lord Gisulph of Salerno and had already suffered one defeat, which rather roused their animosity than quelled their ardor, were advancing in good order. Before the Lateran they met the forces of Pandulph of Benevento, and a terrible hand-to-hand encounter ensued. Nor was man the only demon on the scene. Unsexed women with bare bosoms, wild eyes and streaming hair, the very outcast of the Roman scum, their feet stained with blood, flew to and fro, stimulating each other to fresh atrocities with wine, caresses and ribald mirth. It was a feast of Death and Sin. She had wreathed her white arms about the spectral king and crowned his fleshless head with her gaudy garlands, wrapped him in a mantle of flame and pressed the blood-red goblet to his lips, maddening him with her shrieks of wild, mocking mirth, the while mailed feet trampled out the lives of their victims on the flagstones of Rome.

Through a town in such a state of turmoil and confusion Tebaldo took it upon himself to conduct in safety the prize he had succeeded in capturing, not, it must be confessed, without many hearty regrets that he had ever embarked on the enterprise.

It was indeed a difficult and perilous task. He had been compelled to dismiss his men long ago, in order not to attract

attention. There was but room for himself and one stout slave, beside the charioteer and his captive. The latter had struggled violently and required to be held down by sheer force, nor, in muffling her screams, was it easy to observe the happy medium between silence and suffocation. Also, it was indispensable in the present state of lawlessness to avoid observation, and the spectacle of a golden chariot with a woman prisoner, gagged and veiled, the whole drawn by four spirited black steeds, was not calculated to avoid suspicion and comment. Stefano, Tebaldo's underling, had indeed suggested a litter, but this had been overruled by his comrade on the score of speed, and now the congestion of the streets made speed impossible. To be sure, this enabled his escort to keep up with them at a distance, but a fight at this present moment was little to Tebaldo's taste. The darkness which should have favored him was dispelled by the numerous conflagrations in the various parts of the city, and when the chariot was stopped and forced to run into a by-street, to avoid a crowd running toward the Campo Marzo, Tebaldo felt his heart sink within him in an access of terror such as even he had rarely felt before.

Up one street, down another, avoiding the main thoroughfares, now rendered impassable by the throngs, the charioteer directed his steeds towards Basil's palace on the Pincian Hill.

Hellayne seemed to have either fainted, or resigned herself to her fate, for she had ceased to struggle and cowered on the floor of the chariot, silent and motionless. Tebaldo hoped his difficulties were over, and promised himself never again to be concerned in such an affair. Already he imagined himself safe on his patron's porch, claiming his reward, when his advance was stopped by a pageant, which promised a protracted and hazardous delay.

Winding its slow way along, with all the pomp and splendor attending it, a procession of chariots crossed in front of

Tebaldo's steeds, and not a man in Rome would have dared to break in upon the train of Theodora, who was abroad to view the strife of the factions, utterly indifferent to the perils of the venture.

It may be that something whispered to Helayne that, of the two perils confronting her, what she contemplated was the lesser, and no sooner did the car stop to let the chariots pass, than, tearing away the bandage, she uttered a piercing scream, which brought it to a halt at once, while Tebaldo, trying to wear a bold front, quaked in every limb.

At a signal from the woman in the first chariot her giant Africans seized the shaking Tebaldo and surrounded his chariot. Already a crowd of curious spectators was gathering, and the glare of the bonfires, kindled here and there, shed its light on their dark, eager faces, contrasting strangely with the veiled form of a woman, cold and immobile as marble.

Two of the Africans seized Tebaldo, and buffeted him unceremoniously to within a few paces of the occupant of the chariot. Here he stood, speechless and trembling, anger and fear contending for the mastery, which changed to dismay as the woman raised her veil with a hand gleaming white as ivory.

"Do you know me?"

Whatever he had intended to say, the words died on Tebaldo's lips.

"The Lady Theodora!"

"You still have your wits about you," replied the woman.

"Whom have you there?"

The cold sweat stood on the brow of Basil's henchman.

"The run-away mistress of my lord," he said, looking from right to left for some one to prompt him, some escape from the dilemma.

"Who is your master?" Theodora queried curtly.

"The Lord Basil —"

"The Lord Basil!" shrilled Theodora. "Indeed I knew

not he had lost a mistress. Yet I saw him within the hour and had speech with him." —

Stefano had meanwhile come up, composed and sedate, little guessing the quality of his companion's interlocutor, with the air of a man confident in the justice of his case.

"Where are you taking this woman?" Theodora queried.

Tebaldo attempted to speak, but Stefano anticipated him.

"To the palace of my Lord Basil on the Pincian Hill, noble lady," he said with many obese bows. "Suffer us to proceed, for the streets are becoming more unsafe every moment and our lord will not be trifled with in matters of this kind."

"Indeed," Theodora interposed. "Is his heart so much set upon this prize? Ho there, Bahram — Yussuff — bring the woman here!"

Tebaldo tried to worm himself out of the clutch of the black giants, in order to prevent them from obeying Theodora's order, but he found the situation hopeless and was about to address Theodora when the latter bade him be silent. —

"The woman shall speak for herself," she said in a tone that suffered no contradiction and, in another moment, Hellyayne, lifted by four muscular arms from the chariot of her abductors, stood, released of her bandages, before Theodora.

All color left the Roman's face as she gazed into the pallid and anguished features of the woman whom of all women on earth she feared and hated most, the woman who dared to enter the arena with her for the love of the one man whom she was determined to possess, if the universe should crumble to atoms. Hellyayne's fear upon beholding Theodora gave way to her pride as she met the dark eyes of the Roman in which there might have been a gleam of pity or a flash of scorn.

But, ere Hellyayne could speak, finding herself, caught like a poor hunted bird, in one net, ere she had well escaped the other, Theodora turned to Tebaldo.

“ Tell the Lord Basil, the woman he craves is under Theodora's roof, and — if so he be inclined — he may claim her at my hands — ”

The gleaming white arm went out, and ere Hellaayne knew what happened, she found herself raised into the second chariot, where sat a tall girl of great beauty, Persephoné, the Circassian.

A signal to the charioteer and the pageant moved with slightly increased speed towards the Aventine, while Tebaldo and Stefano, out-witted and non-plussed, stared after the vanishing procession as if they were encompassed by a nightmare. Then, simultaneously, they broke out into such a chorus of vituperation that the by-standers shrank back from them in horror, and they soon found themselves, their chariot and its driver, almost the only human beings in the now deserted thoroughfare.

Hellaayne meanwhile sat, utterly dazed, next to Persephoné. Terrified by the danger she had escaped, and scarcely reassured by the manner of her rescue she seemed as one in a stupor, unable to think, unable to speak.

Persephoné regarded her with a strange fascination, not unmingled with curiosity. Hellaayne's fair and wonderful beauty appealed strangely to the Circassian, while, with her native intuition, she wondered whether Theodora's act was prompted by kindness or revenge.

Hellaayne seemed, for the first time, to note her companion. Looking into Persephoné's eyes she shuddered.

“ Where are we going? ” she whispered, gazing about in a state of bewilderment, as the procession slowly wound up the slopes of the Mount of Cloisters, and the broad ribbon of the Tiber gleamed below in the moonlight.

A strange smile curved Persephoné's lips.

“ To the Groves of Enchantment, ” she replied. “ You are the guest of the Lady Theodora. ”

Hellayne brushed back the silken hair from her brow as if she were waking from a troubled dream.

She gave a swift glance to her companion, another to the winding road and, suddenly rising from her seat, started to leap from the chariot.

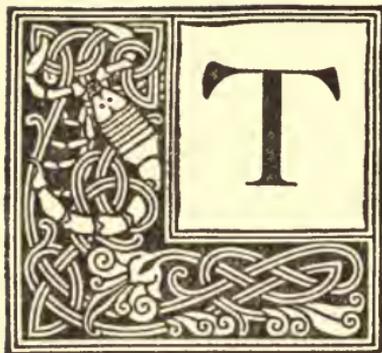
Ere she could carry out her intent, she was caught in the Circassian's arms.

A silent, but terrible struggle ensued. Notwithstanding her harrowing experiences of the past days, despair had given back to Hellayne the strength of youth. But in the lithe Circassian she found her match and, after a few moments, she sank back exhausted, Persephoné's arms encircling her like coils of steel, while her smiling eyes sank into her own.

The palace of Theodora rose phantom-like from among its environing groves in the moonlight, and the chariots dashed through the portals of the outer court, which closed upon the fantastic procession.

CHAPTER V

BITTER WATERS



HE dawn was creeping over the Sabine mountains when Tristan, after having made good his escape from the dungeons of Castel San Angelo, reached the hermitage of Odo of Cluny on distant Aven tine.

Fatigued almost to the point of death, bleeding and bruised, only his unconquerable will had

urged him on towards safety.

His first impulse, after crossing the bridge of San Angelo, was to go to the Convent of Santa Maria in Trastevere. He abandoned this plan upon saner reflection. Doubtlessly all Rome was instructed regarding the crime of which he stood accused. Recognition meant arrest and a fate he dared not think of. Tears forced themselves into Tristan's eyes, tears of sheer despair and hopelessness. Now, that he was free, he dared not follow the all-compelling impulse of his heart, assuage the craving of his soul, to learn if Hellayne was safe.

After a few moments rest in the shadow of a doorway he set out to seek the one man in all Rome to whom he dared reveal himself.

Not a soul seemed astir. Dim dusk hovered above the high houses beyond the Tiber, between whose silent chasms Tristan, dreading the echo of his own footsteps, made his way towards the Church of the Trespontine. Thus, after a cir-

cuitous route through waste and desert spaces, he reached the Benedictine's hermitage.

Odo stared at the early visitor as if a ghost had arisen from the floor before him. He had just concluded his devotions and Tristan, fearing lest the Monk of Cluny might believe in his guilt, lost no time in stating his case, pouring forth a tale so fantastic and wild that his host could not but listen in mingled horror and amaze.

Beginning with the moment when he had been informed of Hellayne's sudden death, he omitted not a detail up to the time of his escape from the dungeon, which to him meant nothing less than the antechamber of death. Minutely he dwelt upon his watch in the Lateran, laying particular stress upon the deadly drowsiness, which had gradually overtaken him, binding his limbs as with cords of steel. Graphically he depicted his awakening, when he found himself surrounded by the high prelates of the Church who faced him with the supposed evidence of a crime of which he knew nothing. And lastly he repeated almost word for word the strange discourse he had overheard in his dungeon between Basil and the Oriental.

A ghastly pallor flitted over the features of Odo of Cluny at the latter intelligence.

"If this be true indeed — if Alberic is dead — woe be to Rome! It is too monstrous for belief, and yet — I have suspected it long."

For a time Odo relapsed into silence, brooding over the tidings of doom, and Tristan, though many questions struggled for utterance, waited in anxious suspense.

At last the monk resumed.

"I see in this the hand of one who never strikes but to destroy. The blow falls unseen, yet the aim is sure. I have not been idle, yet do I not hold in my hand all the threads of the dark web that encompasses us. Of the crime of which you stand accused I know you to be innocent. Nevertheless

— you dare not show yourself in Rome. Your escape from your dungeon once discovered, not a nook or corner of Rome will remain unsearched. They dare not let you live, for your existence spells their doom. They will not look for you in this hermitage. It has many secret winding passages, and it will be easy for you to elude them. Therefore, my son, school your soul to patience, for here you must remain till we have assembled around the banner of the Cross the forces of Light against the legions of Hell."

"What of the woman, Father, who is awaiting my return at the Convent of Santa Maria in Trastevere?" Tristan turned to the monk in a pleading, stifled voice. "Doubtless the terrible rumor has reached her ear."

He covered his face with his hands, while convulsive sobs shook his whole frame.

Odo tried to soothe him.

"This is hardly the spirit I expected of one who has hitherto shown so brave a front, and whose aim it is not to anticipate the blows of chance."

"Nevertheless, Father, it is more than I can bear. I have no lust for life, and care not what fate has in store for me, for my heart is heavy within me, and all the fountains of my hopes are dried up, until I know the fate of the Lady Hellayne — and know from her own lips that she does not believe this devilish calumny."

A troubled look passed into Odo's face.

"If she still is at the convent of the Blessed Sisters of Trastevere she is undoubtedly safe," he said, but there was something in his tone which struck Tristan's ear with dismay.

"You are keeping something from me, Father," he said falteringly. "Tell me the worst! For this anxiety is worse than death. Where is the Lady Hellayne? Is she — dead?"

"Would she were," replied the monk gloomily. "I wished to spare you the tidings! She was taken from the convent

on some pretext — the nature of which I know not. At present she is at the palace of Theodora on Mount Aventine.”

Tristan sat up as if electrified.

“At the palace of Theodora?” he cried. “How is this known to you?”

“Little transpires in Rome which I do not know,” Odo replied darkly. “It seems that those whom the Lord Basil entrusted with the task of abducting the woman were in turn outwitted by Theodora who, in rescuing her from a fate worse than death at the hands of the Grand Chamberlain, has perchance consigned her to one equally, if not more, cruel.”

A moan broke from Tristan’s lips. Then he was seized with a terrible fit of rage.

“Then it is Theodora’s hand that has sundered us in the flesh as her witches’ beauty had estranged our hearts. More merciless than a beast of prey she did not strike Hellyayne with death, so that I might have sentinelled her hallowed tomb, and with her sweet memory for company might have watched for the coming of my own hour to join her again! I have lost my love — my honor — my manhood — at the hands of a wanton.”

Odo tried for a time, though in vain, to calm him by reminding him that Hellyayne would rather suffer death than dishonor. As regarded himself, he was convinced that Theodora would have moved heaven and earth to have set him free, had not his supposed crime concerned the Church and the Cardinal-Archbishop was adamant.

“Oft, in my visions,” he concluded, speaking lower, as if his mind strove with some vague elusive memory, “have I heard the voice of Theodora’s doom cried aloud. A cruel fate is yours indeed — and we can but pray to the saints that the worst may be averted from the woman who has suffered so much.”

“Something must be done,” Tristan interposed, his fierce mood gaining the mastery over every other feeling. “I care

not if the minions of the devil take me back to the prison that leads to death, so I snatch her prey from this arch-courtesan of the Aventine."

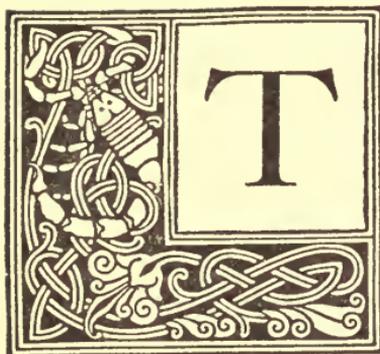
Odo laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"Madman! You are but planning your own destruction. And, if you die, wherein will it benefit the woman who is left to her fate? You are weak from the night's work and your nerves are overwrought. Follow me into the adjoining room even though the repast be meagre. We will devise some means to rescue the Lady Hellayne from the powers of darkness and, trusting in Him who died that we may live, we shall succeed."

Pointing to the drooping form of the crucified Christ on the opposite wall of his improvised oratory, Odo beckoned to Tristan to follow him, and the latter accompanied the Benedictine into the adjoining rock chamber, where he did ample justice to the frugal repast which Odo placed before him, and of which the monk himself partook but sparingly.

CHAPTER VI

FROM DREAM TO DREAM



THEODORA'S sleep had been broken and restless. She tossed and turned upon her pillow. It was weary work to lie gazing with eyes wide open at the fantastic shadows cast by the flickering night lamp. It was still less productive of sleep to shut them tight and abandon herself to the visions thus cre-

ated which stood out in life-like colors and refused to be dispelled. Do what she would to forget him, Tristan ever and ever stood before her, towering like a demigod above the mean, effeminate throng that surrounded her. She could no longer analyze her feelings. She believed herself to be bewitched. She had not reached the prime of womanhood without having sounded, as she thought, every chord of the human heart. Descendant from a family of courtesans, such as had ruled Rome during the tenth century, she had tasted every cup, as she thought, that promised gratification and excitement. She had been flattered, courted, loved, admired. Yet she had remained utterly cold to all these experiences, and none of her lovers could boast that her passion had endured beyond the hour. The terrible fascination she exercised over all men made them slaves in her hands, blind instruments of her will. But, as the years went by, the utter disgust she felt with these hordes of beasts that thronged her bowers, was only equalled by a mad desire for power, a

struggle, which alone could bring to her oblivion. To rule had become a passion with the woman, who had no heart interest that made life worth living. The fleeting passion for Basil had long ceased to kindle a responsive fire in her veins. Fit but to be her tool, she was determined to rid herself of him as soon as her ambition should have been realized.

Suddenly the unbelievable had come to pass. She had met a man. Not one of those crawling, fawning reptiles who nightly desecrated her groves, but a man who might have steered her life into different channels, who might have directed the flight of her soul to regions of light, instead of chaining it to the dark abyss among the shadows. It was a new sensation altogether. This intense and passionate longing she had never felt before. But in its novelty it was absolutely painful. For the man whom she craved with all the fibres of her being, to whom her soul went out as it had never gone out to mortal, had scorned her.

Her fame had proved more potent than her beauty.

Tristan's continued indifference had roused in her all the demons in her nature. Her first impulse had been revenge at any price. Her compact with Basil was the fruit of her first madness. Even now she would have rescinded it had Tristan but shown a softer, kindlier feeling towards her. Some incongruous whim had prompted her to choose for her instrument the very man whom in her heart she loathed, whose attentions were an insult to her. For, in her own heart, Theodora held herself to be some God-decreed thing, like the Laides and Thaides and Phrynes of old. She could not escape her destiny.

With all her self-command Theodora's feelings had almost overpowered her. Ever since the tidings of Tristan's supposed crime and captivity had reached her ear, she had taxed her brain, though in vain, to bring about his rescue. For once her efforts were baffled and she met a resistance which

all the tigerish ferocity of her nature could not overcome. Tristan was in the custody of the Church. In his guilt Theodora did not believe, rather did she suspect foul play at the hands of one of whom she would demand a terrible reckoning. She thought of Tristan night and day, and she was determined to save him, whatever the hazard, — save him for herself and her love. Her spies were at work, but meanwhile she must sit idly by and wait — wait, though the blood coursed like lava through her veins. She dared confide in none, nor could she even have speech with the man she loved. She had managed to curb her feelings and to preserve an outward calm, while Persephoné prepared her for repose. The latter was much puzzled by her mistress's mood, but she retired to her own couch carefree, while Theodora writhed in an agony such as she had never known before.

Yet, fate had been kind to her, — kinder than she had dared to hope. By some fatal throw of chance the woman Tristan loved — her rival — had fallen into her hands. While this circumstance did not in itself take the sting of Tristan's insult from the wound, she would, at least, be revenged upon the cause of her suffering.

When, on that memorable evening at the Arch of the Seven Candles, she had first met Hellyayne face to face, when first the truth had flashed upon her and she knew herself rejected for that white lily from the North, a hatred such as she had never known had crept into her heart, a hatred to which fresh fuel was added from the consciousness of her rival's beauty, her strength, her youth. With all the fire of her southern temperament she longed to meet this woman, to conquer her, to take from her the man she loved.

Morning brought in its wake its unfailing accession of clear-sightedness and practical resolve. Long before she rose she had made up her mind where and how to strike. Nothing remained but to choose the weapon and to put a keener edge upon the steel.

When Persephoné came to assist her mistress, she wondered how the mood of the evening had passed. While attiring Theodora, the Circassian could not but wonder at the marvellous beauty of this woman who had bent the hearts of men to her desires like wind blown reeds, only to break them and cast them at their feet. Only on the previous day a new wooer had entered the lists; a man rude of speech and manner, vain withal and self-satisfied, had laid gifts at Theodora's feet. Roger de Laval was the great man's name. He came from some far away, fabled land, and it was rumored that he had come to Rome to seek his truant wife. Having surprised her in the arms of her lover, whom she had followed, he had killed both. Such a temper was to the liking of Persephoné, and, as her soft white fingers played around her mistress' throat, in the endeavor to fasten her rose-colored tunic, she could hardly restrain herself from encircling that white throat and strangling the woman who had spurned the attentions of one for whose love she would have sacrificed her soul.

"What of the Lady Hellayne?" Theodora broke the heavy silence.

"She remains in the chamber which the Lady Theodora has assigned to her." Persephoné replied.

"Are the eunuchs at their post?"

"Before her door and beneath her windows."

Theodora gave a nod.

"Bring the Lady Hellayne here!"

"The Lady Theodora has not breakfasted."

"I know! Yet I would not delay this meeting longer."

Persephoné hesitated.

"The Lady Hellayne is in a perilous mood —"

"I should love nothing better than to find her so," Theodora replied, extending her two snowy arms, whose steely strength Persephoné knew so well. "I long for the conflict with this marble statue as I have never longed for anything

in my life. I could find it in my heart to be happy if she destroyed me with those white hands that rival mine, if she but stepped out of her reserve, her marble calm, if her soul ignited from mine."

"If I know aught about her kind, the Lady Theodora will do well to be wary," Persephoné replied demurely.

The covert taunt had its instantaneous effect.

"Deem you I fear this white siren from the North?" Theodora flashed, regarding herself in the bronze mirror and brushing a stray lock of hair from her white brow.

"What will you do with her, Lady Theodora?" Persephoné purred.

Theodora's face was very white.

"There are times when nothing but the physical touch will satisfy. And now go and fetch hither the Lady Hellayne that I may hear from her own lips how she fared under the roof of her rival."

Persephoné departed from the room, while Theodora arose and, stepping to the casement, looked out into the blossoming gardens that encircled her palace.

Her beauty was regal indeed, as she stood there brooding, her bare arms dropping by her side. But for the expression of the eyes, in which a turmoil of passion seemed to seethe, the wonderful face in repose would have seemed that of an angel rather than a woman meditating the destruction of another.

After a time Persephoné returned. By her side walked Hellayne.

Her beauty seemed even enhanced by the expression of suffering revealed in the depths of her blue eyes. She wore a dark robe, almost severe in its straight lines. The loose sleeves revealed her white arms. Her hair was tied in a Grecian knot.

At a sign from Theodora Persephoné left the room.

For a moment the two women faced each other in silence,

fixing each other with their gaze, each trying to read the thoughts of the other.

It was Helayne who spoke.

"The Lady Theodora has desired my presence."

"It was my anxiety for your welfare, Lady Helayne," Theodora replied, inviting her to a seat, while she seated herself opposite her visitor. "After the trying experiences of yesterday I do not wonder at the shadows that creep under your eyes. They but prove that my anxiety was well founded. May I ask if you rested well?"

"I owe you thanks, Lady Theodora, for your timely aid," Helayne replied in cold, passionless accents. "They tell me I was in dire straits, though I cannot conceive who should care to abduct one who would so little repay the effort."

"Enough to infatuate him, whoever he was, with a beauty as rare as it is wonderful," Theodora replied, forced to an expression of her own admiration at the sight of the exquisite face, the white throat, the wonderful arms and hands of her rival. "I but did what any woman would do for another whose life she saw imperilled. Your wonderful youth and strength will soon restore you to your former self. Deign then to accept the hospitality of this abode until such a time."

There was a pause during which each seemed to search the soul of the other.

It was Helayne who spoke.

"I thank you, Lady Theodora. Nevertheless I intend to depart at the earliest. I can picture to myself the anxiety of the Blessed Sisters of Santa Maria in Trastevere at my mysterious disappearance."

"You intend taking holy orders?"

Theodora's question was pregnant with a strange wonder. A negative gesture came in response.

"The convent proved a haven of refuge to me when I was sorely tried."

"Yet — you cannot return there," Theodora interposed.

"You would not be safe. Know you from whose minions my Africans rescued you on yester eve?"

Hellayne's wide eyes were silent questioners.

"Then listen well and ponder. You were in the power of the Lord Basil. And that which he desires he usually obtains."

Hellayne covered her face with her hands.

"The Lord Basil!"

"You know him, Lady Hellayne?"

"Slightly. He was wont to call upon the man I once called my husband."

"The man you deserted for another."

Hellayne's eyes glittered like steel.

"That is a matter which concerns only myself, Lady Theodora," she said coldly. "You saved my honor — perchance my life. For this I thank you. I shall depart at once."

She walked to the door, opened it and recoiled.

Before it stood two Africans with gleaming scimitars.

White to the lips, Hellayne closed the door and faced Theodora.

"Lady Theodora — why are these there?"

Theodora's smouldering gaze met the fire in the other woman's eyes.

"Those who come to the bowers of Theodora, remain," she said slowly.

"Am I to understand that you will detain me by force within these walls of infamy?"

"Your language is a trifle harsh, fairest Lady Hellayne," Theodora replied mockingly. "Your over-wrought nerves must bear the burden of the blame. Yet, whatever it may please you to call the place where Theodora dwells, always remember, I am Theodora. You have heard of me before."

"Yes — I have heard of you before!"

The calm and cutting contempt which lingered in these words stung Theodora like a whip-lash.

"You know then, Lady Helayne, it is your will against mine! We have met before!"

"You mean to detain me here, against my will?"

"Whether I detain you or no — shall depend upon yourself. We are two women — young, — beautiful — passionate — determined to win that which we deem our happiness. I will be plain with you. All the reverses and heartaches of months and days are wiped out in this glorious moment when I hold you here in my power. For once my guardian angel, if I can still boast of one, has been kind to me. He has delivered you into my hands — and I shall bend or break you!"

Helayne listened to this outburst of passion with outward calm, though her heart beat so wildly that she thought the other woman must hear it through the deadly silence which prevailed for a space.

"You will bend or break me, Lady Theodora?" Helayne replied with a pathetic shrug. "There is nothing that you could do that would even leave a memory. I have suffered that in life which makes you to me but the nightmare of an evil dream."

"We shall see, Lady Helayne," Theodora replied, her passion kindling at the other woman's calm.

"What then is the ransom you desire, Lady Theodora?" Helayne continued sardonically. "A woman of your kind desires but one thing — and gold I do not possess —"

Theodora's eyes scanned Helayne's pale face.

"Lady Helayne," she said slowly, "of all the things in heaven or on earth there is but one I desire: Tristan, — the man you love — the man who loves you with a passion so idolatrous that, did I possess but the one thousandth atom of what he gives to your ice cold heart, I should deem myself blessed above all women on earth. Give him to me — renounce him — and you are free to go wherever your fancy may lead you."

Hellayne regarded the speaker as if she thought she had gone mad.

"Give him to you?" she said, hardly above a whisper, but her tone stung Theodora to the quick.

"To me!" she said. "Look at me! Am I not beautiful? Am I not created to make man happy? What woman may match herself with me? Even your pale beauty, Lady Hellayne, is but as a disembodied wraith as compared to mine. To me! To me! You are young, Lady Hellayne. What can the sacrifice matter to you? To you it can mean little. There are other men with whom you may be happy. For me it spells salvation — or eternal doom! For I love him, I love him with my whole heart and soul, love him as never I loved the thing called man before! He has shown to me one glimpse of heaven, and now I mean to have him, to atone for a past that was my evil inheritance, to taste life ere I too descend to those shadowy regions whence there is no return. Lady Hellayne," she continued, hardly noting the expression of horror and loathing that had crept into Hellayne's countenance. "You have heard of me — you know who I am — and what! Those who went before me were the same, generations, perchance. It rankles in our blood. But there is salvation—even for such as myself. To few it comes, but I have seen the star. It is the love of a man, pure and true. Where such a one is found, even the darkness of the grave is dispelled. I have lived and loved, Lady Hellayne! I have been loved as few women have. I have hurled myself into this mad whirlpool to forget — but forget I could not. Man, the beast, is ever ready to drag the woman who cries for life and its true meaning back into the mire. He alone of all has spurned me — he alone has resisted the deadly lure of my charms. Never have I spoken to woman before as I am speaking to you, Lady Hellayne. Hear my prayer! — Renounce him!"

Hellayne stared mute at the speaker, as if her tongue

refused her utterance. Was she going mad? Theodora, the courtesan queen of Rome, trying to obtain salvation by taking from her her lover? She could almost have found it in her heart to laugh aloud. A death-bed repentance that made the devils laugh! In her virginal purity Helayne could not fathom what was going on in the soul of a woman who had suddenly awakened to the terror of her life and was snatching at the last straw to save herself from drowning in the cesspool of vice.

Theodora, with her woman's intuition, saw what was going on in the other woman's soul. She noted the slow transformation from amazement to horror, and from horror to defiance. She saw Helayne slowly raising herself to her full height, and approaching her, who had risen, until her breath fanned her cheek.

"Give him to you, Lady Theodora? Surely you must be mad to even dream of so monstrous a thing."

She was very white, and her hands were clenched as if she forcibly restrained herself from flying at her opponent's throat.

Theodora's self-restraint was slowly waning. She knew she had pleaded in vain. She knew Helayne did not understand, or, if she understood, did not believe.

She spoke calmly, yet there was something in her voice that warned Helayne of the impending storm.

"Listen, Lady Helayne," she said. "You are alone in Rome! At the mercy of any one who desires you! Your lover is accused of the most heinous crime. He has taken the consecrated wafer from the chapel in the Lateran and, who knows, from how many other churches in Rome."

Helayne's eyes sank into those of the other woman.

"No one knows better than yourself, Lady Theodora, how utterly false and infamous this accusation is. Tristan is a devout son of the Church. His whole life bears testimony thereof."

"If the Consistory pronounce him guilty, who will believe him innocent?" came the mocking reply.

"His God—his conscience—and I," Hellyayne replied quietly.

"Will that save his life—which is forfeit?" Theodora interposed.

"Where is he? Oh, where is he?"

For a moment Hellyayne gave way to her emotions.

"He lies in the vaults of Castel San Angelo," Theodora replied, "awaiting his doom."

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" Hellyayne moaned, covering her face with her hands and sobbing convulsively.

"His rescue—though difficult of achievement—lies with you," Theodora said, veiling her inmost feelings. She was staking all on the last throw.

"With me?" Hellyayne turned to her piteously.

"I will tell you," Theodora interposed, placing her white hands on Hellyayne's shoulders. "The Consistory has spoken—" she lied—"and no power on earth can save your lover from his doom save—myself!"

"How may that be?"

"I know the ways of the Emperor's Tomb. Its denizens obey me! If you love him as I do you will bring the sacrifice and save his life."

"Oh, save him if you can, Lady Theodora," Hellyayne prayed, her hands closing round Theodora's wrists. "Save him—save him."

"I shall, if you will do this thing, I ask," Theodora replied, sinking her dark orbs into the blue depths of Hellyayne's.

"What am I to do?"

"It is easy. Here are stylus and tablet. Write to the Lord Basil to meet you at the Groves of Theodora. A hint of love, passion, promise—fulfillment of his desires—then give it to me. It shall save your lover."

For a moment Hellyayne stared wild-eyed at the woman.

It was as if she had heard a voice, the meaning of which she no longer understood.

Then, in her unimpassioned voice, she turned to Theodora.

"Only the fiend himself and Theodora could ask as much!"

The blood was coursing like a stream of lava through Theodora's veins.

Would Hellaayne but step out of her reserve! Would she but abandon her icy calm!

"Then you refuse?" she flashed.

"I defy you," Hellaayne replied. "Do your worst! Rather would I see him dead than defiled by such as you!"

"Would you, indeed?" Theodora returned with a deadly calm. "Nevertheless, when first we met, he, for the mere asking, gave to me a scarf of blue samite, a chased dagger, tokens from the woman he had loved."

Theodora paused, to watch the effect of the poison shaft she had sped. She saw by Hellaayne's agonized expression that it had struck home.

"For the last time, Lady Hellaayne, do my bidding!"

Hellaayne had regained her self-possession. With a supreme effort she fought down the pain in her heart.

"Never!" came the firm reply.

"Then I shall take him from you!"

"Deem you, I have aught to fear from such as you?" Hellaayne said slowly, the blue fire of her eyes burning on the pale face of Theodora. "Deem you, that Tristan would defile his manhood with the courtesan queen of Rome?"

A gasp, a choking outcry, and Theodora's white hands closed round Hellaayne's throat. Though their touch burnt her like fire, Hellaayne did not even raise her hands.

Fearlessly she gazed into Theodora's face.

"I am waiting," she said with the same passionless voice, but there was something in her eyes that gave the other woman pause.

Theodora's hands fell limply by her side. What she read

in Helayne's eyes had caused her, perchance, for the first time, to blanch.

She clapped her hands.

The door opened and Persephoné stood on the threshold.

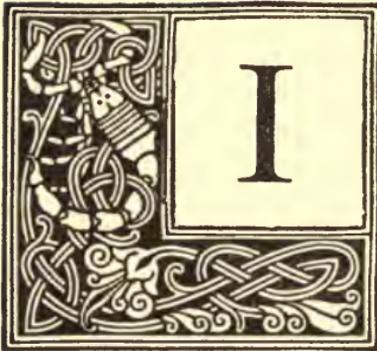
She had listened, and not a word of their discourse had escaped her watchful ears.

"The Lady Helayne desires to return to her chamber," Theodora turned to the Circassian, and without another word Helayne followed her guide.

Yet, as she did so, her head was turned towards Theodora and in her eyes was an expression so inscrutable that Theodora turned away with a shudder, as the door closed behind their retreating forms, leaving her alone with her overmastering agony.

CHAPTER VII

A ROMAN MEDEA



It was a moonless night. —

Deep repose was upon the seven hilled city. The sky was intensely dark, but the stars shone out full and lustrous. Venus was almost setting. Mars glowed red and fiery towards the zenith; the constellations seemed to stand out from the infinite spaces behind them.

Orion glittered like a giant in golden armour; Cassiopeia shone out in her own peculiar radiance and the Pleiades in their misty brightness.

A litter, borne by four stalwart Nubians, and preceded by two torch bearers, slowly emerged from the gates of Theodora's palace and took the direction of the gorge which divides the Mount of Cloisters from Mount Testaccio.

Owing to the prevailing darkness which made all objects, moving and immobile, indistinguishable, the inmates of the litter had not drawn the curtains, so as to admit the cooling night air. There was a fixedness in Theodora's look and a recklessness in her manner that showed anger and determination. It struck Persephoné, who was seated by her side, with a sort of terror, and for once she did not dare to accost her mistress with her usual banter and freedom.

Theodora had spent the early hours of the evening in a half obscured room, whose sable hangings seemed to reflect the unrest of her soul. She had forbidden the lamps to be

lighted, brooding alone in darkness and solitude. Then she had summoned Persephoné, ordered her litter-bearers and commanded them to take her to the house of Sidonia, a woman versed in all manner of lore that shunned the light of day.

"It must be done! It shall be done!" she muttered, her white face tense, her white hands clenched.

Suddenly her hand closed round Persephoné's wrist.

"She defies me, knowing herself in my power," she said. "We shall see who shall conquer."

"The Lady Helayne is as fearless of death, as yourself, Lady Theodora," Persephoné replied. "Indeed, she seemed rather to desire it, for no woman ever faced you with such defiance as did she when you put before her the fatal choice."

Theodora's face shone ghostly in the nocturnal gloom.

"We shall see! She shall desire death a thousand fold ere she quits the abode I have assigned to her. God! Not even Roxana had dared to say to me what this one did."

"Nor would her shafts have struck so deep a wound," Persephoné interposed with studied insolence.

Theodora's grip tightened round the girl's wrist.

"You admire the Lady Helayne?" she said softly, but there was a gleam in her eyes like liquid fire.

"As one brave woman admires another!" Persephoné replied fearlessly, turning her beautiful face to the speaker.

"You may require all your courage some day to face another task," Theodora replied. "Beware, lest you tempt me to do what I might regret."

Persephoné turned white. Her bosom heaved. Her eyes met Theodora's.

"I shall welcome the ordeal with all my heart!"

Theodora relapsed into silence, oppressed by dark thoughts, the memory of unresisted temptations, a chaotic world where black unscalable rocks, like circles of the Inferno, hemmed her in on every side, while devils whispered into her ears

the words that gave shape and substance to her desire to destroy her rival in the love of the one man whom, in all her changeable life, she had truly desired.

“ Deem you, that I have aught to fear from such as you? Deem you, that Tristan would defile his manhood with the courtesan queen of Rome? ”

The words still boomed in her ears, the words and the tone in which they had been hurled in her face.

Even to this moment she knew not what restrained her from strangling Helayne. It seemed to her that only in a physical encounter could she quench the hatred she bore this white, beautiful statue who never raised her voice while the fire of her blue eyes seared her very soul.

A thousand frightful forms of evil, stalking shapes of death, came and went before her imagination, which caused her to clutch first at one, then at another of the dire suggestions that came in crowds which overwhelmed her powers of choice. Then, like an inspiration from the very depths of Hell, a thought flashed into her mind, and, no sooner conceived, than she determined upon its execution.

The laboratory of the woman whom Theodora was seeking on this night was in an old house midway in the gorge. In a deep hollow, almost out of sight, stood a square structure of stone, gloomy and forbidding, with narrow windows and an uninviting door. Tall pines shadowed it on one side, a small rivulet twisted itself, like a live snake, half round it on the other. A plot of green grass, ill-kept and teeming with noxious weeds, fennel, thistle and foul stramonium, was surrounded by a rough wall of loose stone; and here lived the woman who supplied all those who desired her wares, and plied her nocturnal trade.

Sidonia was tall and straight, of uncertain age, though she might have been reckoned at forty. The whiteness of her skin was enhanced by her blue black hair and lustrous black eyes. Far from forbidding, she exercised a sinister charm

upon those who called upon her, and who vainly tried to reconcile her trade with the traces of a great beauty. Yet her thin, cruel lips never smiled, unless she had an object to gain by assuming a disguise as foreign to her as light is to an angel of darkness.

Hardly any known poison there was, which was not obtainable at her hands. In a sombre chest, carved with fantastic figures from Etruscan designs, were concealed the subtle drugs, cabalistical formulas and alchemic preparations which were so greatly in demand during those years of darkness.

In the most secret place of all were deposited, ready for use, a few phials of a crystal liquid, every single drop of which contained the life of a man, and which, administered in due proportion of time and measure, killed and left no trace.

Here was the sublimated dust of the deadly night-shade which kindles the red fires of fever and rots the roots of the tongue. Here was the fetid powder of stramonium that grips the lungs like an asthma, and quinia that shakes its victims like the cold hand of the miasma in the Pontine Marshes. The essence of poppies, ten times sublimated, a few grains of which bring on the stupor of apoplexy, and the sardonic plant that kills its victims with the frightful laughter of madness upon their countenance, were here. The knowledge of these and many other cursed herbs, once known to Medea in the Colchian land, and transplanted to Greece and Rome with the enchantments of their use, had been handed down by a long succession of sorcerers and poisoners to the woman, who seemed endowed by nature as the legitimate inheritrix of this lore of Hell.

At last the litter of Theodora was set down by its swarthy bearers before the threshold of Sidonia's house. Theodora alighted and, after commanding the Africans to await her return, ascended the narrow stone steps alone and knocked at the door. After a brief wait, shuffling steps were heard

from within, and a bent, lynx-eyed individual of Oriental origin opened the door, inviting the visitor to enter. She was ushered into a dusky hallway, in which brooded strange odors, thence into a dimly lighted room, the laboratory of Sidonia.

Hardly had she seated herself when the woman entered and stood face to face with Theodora.

The eyes of the two women instantly met in a searching glance that took in the whole ensemble, bearing, dress and almost the very thoughts of each other. In that one glance each knew and understood; each knew that she could trust the other, in evil, if not in good.

And there was trust between them. The evil spirits that possessed their hearts clasped hands, and a silent league was formed in their souls ere a word had been spoken.

Sidonia wore a long, purple robe, totally unadorned. The sleeves were wide, and revealed her white, bare arms. Her finely cut features were crossed with thin lines of cruelty and cunning. No mercy was in her eyes, still less on her lips, and none in her heart, cold to every human feeling.

"The Lady Theodora is fair to look upon," Sidonia broke the silence. "All women admit it; all men confess it." And her gaze swept the other woman, who was clad in an ample black mantle which ended in a hood.

"Can you guess, why I am here?" Theodora replied. "You are wise and know a woman's desire better than she dares avow."

"Can I guess?" replied Sidonia, returning Theodora's scrutiny. "You have many lovers, Lady Theodora, but there is one who does not return your passion. And, you have a rival. A woman, more potent than yourself, has, notwithstanding your beauty, entangled the man you love, and you are here to win him back and to triumph over your rival. Is it not so, Lady Theodora?"

"More than that," replied the other, clenching her white

hands and gazing into the eyes that met her own with a look of merciless triumph at what she saw reflected therein.

“It is all that — and more —”

Sidonia met her eager gaze.

“You would kill your rival!” she said with a smile upon her lips. “There is death in your eyes — in your voice — in your heart! You would kill the woman. It is good in the eyes of a woman to kill her rival — and women like you are rare!”

“Your reward shall be great,” Theodora said with an inquisitive glance at the woman who had read her inmost thoughts.

“To kill woman or man were a pleasure even without the profit,” replied Sidonia, darkly. “I come from a race, ancient and terrible as the Cæsars, and I hate the puny rabble. I have my own joy in making my hand felt in a world I hate and which hates me!”

She held out her hands, as if the ends of her fingers were trickling poison.

“Death drops on whomsoever I send it,” she continued, “subtly, secretly. The very spirits of air cannot trace whence it comes.”

“I know you are the possessor of terrible secrets,” Theodora replied, fascinated beyond all her experiences with the woman and her trade.

“Such secrets never die,” said the poisoner. “Few men, still fewer women, are there who would not listen at the door of Hell to learn them. Let me see your hand!”

Theodora complied with her abrupt demand and laid her beautiful white hand into the no less beautiful one of the woman before her.

Her touch, though the hand was cool, seemed to burn, but Theodora’s touch affected the other woman likewise for she said:

“There is evil enough in the palm of your hand to destroy

the world! We are well met, you and I. You are worthy of my confidence. These fingers would pick the fruit off the forbidden tree, for men to eat and die! Lady Theodora — I may some day teach you the great secret — meanwhile I will show you that I possess it!"

With these words she walked to the chest, took from it an ebony casket and laid it upon the table.

"There is death enough in this casket," she said, "to kill every man and woman in Rome!"

Theodora fastened her gaze upon it, as if she would have drawn out the secret of its contents by the very magnetism of her eyes. For, even while Sidonia was speaking, a thought flashed through her visitor's mind — a thought which almost made her forget the purpose on which she had come. She laid her hands upon it caressingly, trembling, eager to see its contents.

"Open it!" said Sidonia. "Touch the spring and look!"

Theodora touched the little spring. The lid flew back and there flashed from it a light which for a moment dazzled her by its very brilliancy. She thrust the cabinet from her in alarm, imagining she inhaled the odor of some deadly perfume.

"Its glitter terrifies me!" she said. "Its odor sickens."

"Your conscience frightens you," sneered Sidonia.

Theodora rose to her feet, her face pale, her eyes alight with a strange fire.

"This to me?" she flashed.

For a moment the two women faced each other in a white silence.

A strange smile played upon Sidonia's lips.

"The Aqua Tofana in the hands of a coward is a gift as fatal to its possessor as to its victim!"

"You are brave to speak such words to Theodora!"

Sidonia gave her an inscrutable glance.

"Why should I fear you? Even without these, — woman

to woman," she replied, as she drew the casket to herself and took out a phial, gilt and chased with strange symbols.

Sidonia took it up and immediately the liquid was filled with a million sparks of fire. It was the Aqua Tofana, undiluted, instantaneous in its effect, and not medicable by antidotes. Once administered there was no more hope for its victim than for the souls of the damned who have received the final judgment. One drop of the sparkling water upon the tongue of a Titan would blast him like Jove's thunderbolt, shrivel him up to a black, unsightly cinder.

This terrible water was rarely used alone by the poisoners, but it formed the basis of a hundred slower potions which ambition, fear or hypocrisy, mingled with the element of time, and colored with the various hues and aspects of natural disease.

Theodora had again taken her seat and leaned towards Sidonia, supporting her chin in the palm of her hands, as she bent eagerly over the table, drinking in every word as the hot sand of the desert drinks in the water that falls upon it.

"What is that?" she pointed to a phial, white as milk and seemingly harmless, and while she questioned, her busy brain worked with feverish activity. The Aqua Tofana she had used when she struck down Roxana and her too talkative lover on the night of the feast in her garden. But now she required a different concoction to complete the vengeance on her rival.

"This is called Lac Misericordiae," replied Sidonia. "It brings on painless consumption and decay! It eats the life out of man or woman, while the moon empties and fills. The strong man becomes a skeleton. Blooming maidens sink to their graves blighted and bloodless. Neither saint or sacrament can arrest its doom. This phial" — and she took another from the cabinet, replacing the first — "contains innumerable griefs that wait upon the pillows of rejected

and heartbroken lovers, and the wisest mediciner is mocked by the lying appearances of disease that defy his skill and make a mock of his wisdom."

There was a moment's silence. At last Theodora spoke.

"Have you nothing that will cause fear — dread — madness — ere it strikes the victim dumb forever more? Something that produces in the brain those dreadful visions — horrid shapes — peopling its chambers where reason once held sway? "

For a moment Sidonia and Theodora held each other's gaze, as if each were wondering at the wickedness of the other.

"This," Sidonia said at last, taking out a curiously twisted bottle, containing a clear crimson liquid and sealed with the mystic Pentagon, "contains the quintessence of mandrakes, distilled in the alembic, when Scorpio rules the hour. It will produce what you desire."

"How much of it is required to do this thing? "

"Three drops. Within six hours the unfailing result will appear."

"Give it to me! "

"You possess rare ingenuity, Lady Theodora," said Sidonia, placing her hand in that of her caller. "If Satan prompts you not, it is because he can teach you nothing, either in love or stratagem."

She shut up her infernal casket, leaving the phial of distilled mandrakes, shining like a ruby in the lamp light, upon the table. By its side lay a bag of gold.

Theodora arose. The eyes of the two women flashed in lurid sympathy as they parted, and Sidonia accompanied her visitor to the door.

As she did so a heavy curtain in the background parted and the white face of Basil peered into the empty room.

After a brief interval Sidonia returned.

Her face had again assumed its forbidding aspect as,

removing the phials and seemingly addressing no one, she said:

“We are alone now!”

At the next moment Basil stood in the chamber. His eyes burned with a feverish lustre, and there was a horror in his countenance which he strove in vain to conceal.

“This must not be,” he said hoarsely. “Why did you give her this devil’s brew?”

And staggering up to the table he gripped the soft white wrist of the woman with fingers of steel.

Sidonia’s eyes narrowed as she gazed into those of the man.

“Do you love that one, too?” she said, wrenching herself free. “Or have you lied to her as you have lied to me?”

“Your voice sounds like the cry from a dark gallery that leads to Hell,” Basil replied. “You, alone, have I loved all these years, and for your fell beauty have I risked all I have done and am about to do!”

“Fear speaks in your voice,” Sidonia replied with a cruel smile upon her lips. “You are in my power, else had you long ago consigned me to a place whence there is no return. With me the secret of another’s death would go to the grave.”

“Nay, you do not understand!” Basil interposed. “The woman who has aroused Theodora’s maddened jealousy is nothing to me. But I have other plans concerning her — she must be saved!”

“Other plans?” replied Sidonia darkly. “What other plans? What sort of woman is she who can arouse the jealousy of Theodora?”

“White and cold as the snows of the North.”

“A stranger in Rome?”

“The wife of one whose days are numbered, if I rightly read the oracle.”

“What is this plan?” Sidonia insisted.

“She is to be delivered to Hassan Abdullah, as reward for his aid in the great stroke that is about to fall.”

In the distance whimpered a bell,

“And, when the hour tolls — the hour of which you have so often prated — when you sit in the high seat of the Senator of Rome — where then will I be, who have watched your power grow and have aided it in its upward flight?”

Basil's face lighted up with the fires within.

“Where else but by my side? Who dares defy us and the realms of the Underworld?”

“Who, indeed?” Sidonia replied with a dark, inscrutable glance into Basil's face. “Perchance I should not love you as I do were you not as evil as you are good to look upon! I love you, even though I know your lying lips have professed love to many others, even though I know that Theodora has kindled in you all the evil passions of your soul. Beware how you play with me!”

She threw back her wide sleeves and two dazzling white arms encircled Basil's neck.

“Await me yonder,” she then turned to her visitor, pointing to a chamber situated beyond the curtain. “We will talk this matter over!”

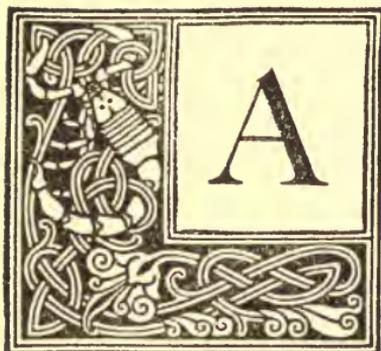
Basil retired and Sidonia busied herself, replacing the different phials in the ebony chest.

After having assured herself that everything was in its place, she picked up the lamp and disappeared behind the curtain in the background.

Deep midnight silence reigned in the gorge of Mount Aventine.

CHAPTER VIII

IN TENEBRIS



ANOTHER day had gone down the never returning tide of time. The sun was sinking in a rosy bed of quilted clouds. All day long Hellyayne had sat brooding in her chamber, unable to shake off the lethargy of despair that bound and benumbed her limbs, rousing herself at long intervals just suffi-

ciently to wring her hands for very anguish, without even the faintest ray of hope to pierce the black night of her misery.

Just as a white border of light had been visible on the edge of the dark cloud that hung over her, just as she had refound the man whose love was the very breath of her existence, her evil star had again flamed in the æscendant and, losing him anew, she had utterly lost herself. She struggled with her thoughts, as a drowning man amid tossing waves, groping about in the dark for a plank to float upon, when all else has sunk in the seas around him.

She had hardly touched the food which Persephoné herself had brought to her. Yet it seemed to her the Circassian had regarded her strangely, as she placed the viands before her. She had tried to frame a question, but her lips seemed to refuse the utterance, and at last Persephoné had departed, with the mocking promise to return later, to inquire how the Lady Hellyayne had spent the day.

Now it seemed to her as if a poison breath of evil was slowly permeating the narrow confines of her chamber. Something she had never before experienced was floating before her vision, was creeping into her brain, was booming in her ears, was turning her blood to ice.

Was it the voiceless echo of an ill-omened incantation, handed down through generations of poisoners and witches from the time of pagan Rome?

“Hecaten voco,
Voco Tisiphonem,
Spargens avernales aquas,
Te morti devoveo; te diris ago.”

Was she going mad?

Hellayne's hands went to her forehead.

“I think I am sane,” she said to herself, “at least — as yet.”

Would Heaven not come to her aid? She was but a weak woman who in vain — too often in vain — had tried to snatch a few moments of happiness from life. Ah! If Death knew what a service he would render her! But no! She would brace her heart strings more than ever. She would renew her fight with dusk and madness. She would face and challenge each mad phantom — make it speak — reveal itself, — or she would break the silence of that monstrous place at least with her own voice. Though flesh was weak she would be strong to-night — but — ah God! here they came trooping out of the night.

She cowered back, shuddering, her eyes fixed on the dusky depths of the chamber.

It was the blue one — the one whose limbs and cheeks seemed made of pale blue ice. She felt her limbs growing numb. But she would bar its way.

The finger of the freezing shape was on its lip. Did it

mean that it was dumb? Well, then, let it speak by signs. The dim blue rays that draped its silence quaked like aspens.

"Who are you?" she forced herself to speak. "Are you Hate? You shake your head? Are you Despair? No? Not that? Then you must be Fear!"

The figure nodded with a horrible grin.

"Fear of what?"

The phantom passed its finger slowly across its throat.

She held on to the panelling to keep from falling. Her woman's strength had bounds. But she recovered herself and forced herself to speak.

"Ah!" she said, "it is this she contemplates? How soon? I needs must know. How many twilights have I still to live, before they sink my body in yonder lotus pond?"

The phantom held up three fingers.

"Only three," Hellyayne babbled like a child, talking to herself. "Well — pass upon your way, phantom. — You have given me all you had to give — three dusks to rise to Heaven."

She raised her eyes in prayer and a strange rapture came into her face. But it vanished suddenly — and once more she stared, shuddering, into the gloom.

For craze and hell still prevailed.

Look, there it came!

What new and monstrous phantom was swaying and groping towards her? A headless monk! — The air grew black with horror. Horror shrivelled her skin, was raising the roots of her hair.

It was for her he was groping. Her wits were beginning to leave her. She had to move this way and that to avoid him. She felt, if he only touched her, madness would win the day. And he groped and groped, and she seemed to feel him near to her.

"Away! Away!" she shrieked. But she was wasting her breath. He had neither eyes to see nor ears to hear.

And he groped and groped, as if he felt her already under his vague, white hands.

"Help — God!" she shrieked.

Nature could not cope with such shapes as these!

And Hellyayne fell forward in a swoon.

It was late in the night when she regained consciousness. She opened her eyes. The shapes of dusk had gone. She was alone — alone on the stone floor of the chamber. Everything was still in the long dusky gallery beyond. Perhaps it was all over for the night, and yet — what was there upon the threshold?

"Oh, my God! my God!" she cried. "Let me die — only not this horror!"

There the phantom stood. Its scarlet mantle glimmered almost black. She dared not turn her back. She dared not shut her eyes. He made neither sign, nor beck, nor nod. But, like a crazy shadow, he circled round and round her, soundlessly, as if he were treading on velvet.

"Keep off — keep off!" she shrieked. "Protect me, oh my God! Madness is closing in upon me!"

And with a sudden, desperate movement she rushed at the phantom to tear the crimson mask from its face.

Her arms penetrated empty air.

With a moan she sank upon the floor. Her arms spread out, she lay upon her face.

The swoon held her captive once more.

But the dream was kinder to Hellyayne than life.

She stood upon a rocky promontory in her own far-off land of Provence.

Before her spread the peace of the wide, glimmering sea.

What are these golden columns through which the water glistens?

A man stood within the ruins of a great temple, the sea before him, violet hills behind. From the summit of an

island mountain in the bay the lilt of a tender song was drifting upwards.

And, as he sang, the great sea stirred. It heaved, it writhed, it rose. With onward movement, as of a coiling serpent, the whole vast liquid brilliance rushed upon the temple. Mighty billows of beryl curved and broke in sheets of white foam.

"Fear nothing," said the man. "Your river has found the sea!"

It was Tristan's voice.

From the distance came the faint tolling of a bell, forlorn, as from a forest chapel, infinitely sweet and tremulous. In a faint light, like a mountain mist at dawn, the whole scene faded away, and Helayne was in a garden — a rose garden. She had been there before, but how different it all was. She was being smothered in roses. Flame roses every one — curled into fiery petal whorls, dancing in the garden dusk under a red, red sky.

Ah! There it is again, the terrible face, leering from among the branches, the face that froze the blood in her veins, that made her heart turn cold as ice and filled her soul with horror.

It is the Count Laval. He is seeking her, seeking her everywhere. Horns are peering out from under his scarlet cap, and he has long claws.

Now she is fleeing through the rose garden, faster, faster, ever faster. But he is gaining upon her. From bosquet to bosquet, from thicket to thicket; she hears his approaching steps. Now she can almost feel his breath upon her neck.

At last he has overtaken her.

Now he is circling round her, nearer and nearer, extending his hands towards her, while she follows his movement with horror-stricken eyes.

But her strength, her body, are paralyzed.

As his hands close round her throat, his eyes gloating with

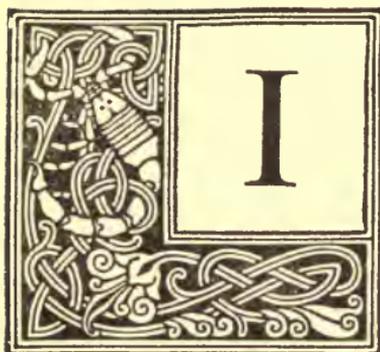
dull malice, she covers her face with her hands and falls with a shriek.

And as she lies there before him, dead, he looks down upon her with a strange smile upon his lips and casts his scarlet mantle over her.

Once more Helayne is in the throes of a swoon.

CHAPTER IX

THE CONSPIRACY



It was a night, moonless and starless. Deep silence brooded over the city. Not a ray of light was in the sky. A dense fog hung like a funeral pall over the Seven Hills, and a ceaseless, changeless drizzle was sinking from the heavy clouds whose contours were indistinguishable in the noc-

turnal gloom. The Tiber hardly moaned within his banks. The city fires hissed and smouldered away under the descending rain, soon to be extinguished altogether.

It was about the second watch of the night when two men, wrapped in dark mantles that covered them from head to foot, quitted the monastery of San Lorenzo and were immediately swallowed up by the darkness.

The night by this time was more dismal than ever. The wind began to rise, and its fitful gusts howled round the stern old walls of the monastery, or rustled in the laurels and cypresses by which it was surrounded. The great gates were shut and barred. Hardly a light was to be seen along the entire range of buildings.

Suddenly a postern gate opened, and what appeared to be a monk, drawing his black cowl completely over his head, came forth and hurried along in the direction of the river.

Tristan and his companion, emerging from their hiding-

place, followed at the farthest possible distance which allowed them to retain sight of their quarry. Through a succession of the worst and narrowest by-lanes of the city they tracked him to the Tiber's edge.

Here, dark as it was, a boat was ready for launching. Five or six persons were standing by, who seemed to recognize and address the monk. Keeping in the shadows of the tall, ill-favored houses, the twain contrived to approach near enough to hear somewhat that was said.

"The light over yonder has been burning this half hour," said one of the men.

"I could not come before," said he in the monk's habit. "I was followed by two men. I threw them out, however, before I reached the monastery of San Lorenzo. But — by all the saints — lose no more time! We have lost too much, as it is."

He entered the boat as he spoke. It was pushed out into the water, and in another moment the measured sound of oars came to their ears.

Odo of Cluny turned to his companion.

"Tell me, did he who spoke first and mentioned the light yonder on St. Bartholomew's Island — a light there is yonder, sure enough — did he resemble, think you, one we know?"

"Both in voice and form," replied Tristan.

"My thoughts point the same way as yours!"

"I should know that voice wherever I heard it," Tristan muttered under his breath. "But what of the light?"

Dimly through the mist the red glow was discernible.

"It beams from the deserted monastery," Odo replied after a pause.

"Can we put across?" Tristan queried.

"The question is not so much to find a boat as a landing-place, where we shall not be seen."

"There is a boat lying yonder. If my eyes do not deceive me, the boatman lies asleep on the poop."

“ Know you aught of the men who rowed down the river? ”
Odo turned to the boatman, after he had aroused him.

The latter stared uncomprehendingly into the speaker’s face.

“ I know of no men. I fell asleep for want of custom. It is a God-forsaken spot,” he added, rubbing his eyes. “ Who would want a boat on a night like this? ”

“ We require even such a commodity,” Odo replied.

The boatman returned a dull, unresponsive glance and did not move from his improvised couch.

“ Take your oars and row us to the Tiber Island,” Odo said sternly, “ unless you would bring upon yourself the curse of the Church. We have a weighty matter that brooks no delay. And have a care to avoid that other boat which has preceded yours. We must not be seen.”

Something in Odo’s voice seemed to compel, and soon they were afloat, the boatman bending to his oars. They drifted through the dense mist and soon a dilapidated flight of landing stairs hove in sight, leading up to the deserted monastery.

“ Had we chosen the usual landing-place, we should have found two boats moored there — I saw them as we turned.” Odo turned to his companion. “ Yet we dare not land here. We should be seen from the shore.”

Directing their Charon to row his craft higher up, Odo soon discovered the place of which he was in quest. It was a little cove. The rocks which bordered it were slippery with seaweed, and in that misty obscurity offered no very safe footing.

Here the boat was moored, and Odo and his companion clambered slowly, but steadily, over the rocks and, in a few moments, had made good their landing.

Having directed the boatman to await their call in the shadow of the opposite bank, where he might remain unseen, they continued to grope their way upward, till they reached the angles of a wall which converged here, sheltered by a

projecting pent house. Voices were heard issuing from within.

"We must have ample security, my lord," said a speaker, whose voice Odo recognized as the voice of Basil. "You require of us to do everything. You exact ties and pledges and hostages, and you offer nothing."

"I am desirous of sparing, as much as may be, the blood of my men," replied the person addressed. "Rome must be my lord's without conflict."

"That may — or may not be," said the first speaker. "But so much you may say to the Lord Ugo. If he expects to reconquer Rome, he will need all the forces he can summon."

"A wiser man than you or I, my lord, has said: 'Never force a foe to stand at bay,'" interposed a third. "Reject our offers, and we, whom you might have for your friends, you will have for your most bitter and determined foes. Accept our terms, and Rome, together with the Emperor's Tomb, is yours!"

"What terms are contained in this paper?" queried Ugo's emissary.

"They are not very difficult to remember!" returned the Grand Chamberlain. "But I might as well repeat them here. First — the revenues of all the churches to flow to the Holy See."

"Proceed."

"Utmost security of life, person and property to those who are aiding our enterprise."

"It is well," said the voice. "So much I can vouch for, my lord. Is that all?"

"All — as far as conditions go," returned the third speaker.

"It is not all, by St. Demetrius," cried Basil. "I claim the office I am holding with all its privileges and appurtenances, to give no account to any one of the past or the future."

“What of the present?” interposed the voice.

“You never could imagine that I perilled my neck only to secure your lord in his former possessions, which he so cowardly abandoned,” said Basil contemptuously. “I claim the hand of the Lady Theodora —”

“Theodora?” cried the envoy of Ugo of Tuscany, turning fiercely upon the speaker. “Surely you are mad, my lord, to imagine that the Lord Ugo would peril his reign with the presence of this woman within the same walls that witnessed the regime of her sister —”

“Mind your own business, my lord,” interposed Basil. “What the man thinks who fled from Castel San Angelo at the first cry of revolt, the man who slunk away like a thief in the night, is nothing to me. We make the conditions. It is for him to accept or reject them, as he sees fit.”

A rasping voice, speaking a villainous jargon, made itself heard at this juncture.

“What of my Saracens, mighty lord?” Hassan Abdullah, for no lesser than the great Mahometan chieftain was the speaker, turned to the Grand Chamberlain. “I, too, am desirous of sparing the blood of my soldiers and, insofar as lies within my power, that of the Nazarenes also. For it is written in the book: Slavery for infidels — but death only for apostates.”

“Our compact is sealed beyond recall,” Basil made reply.

“Then you will deliver the woman into my hands?”

There was a pause.

“She shall be delivered into the hands of Hassan Abdullah! And he will sail away with his white-plumed bird — the fairest flower of the North — and the ransom of a city.”

“Yet I do not know the lady’s name,” said the Saracen.

“This I should know — else how may she heed my call?”

“Those who love her call her Hellayne.”

At the name Tristan started so violently that the monk caught his arm in a grip of steel.

"Silence — if you value your life," Odo enjoined.

"When and where is she to be delivered into my hands?" Hassan Abdullah continued.

"The place will be made known to you, my lord," Basil replied, "when the Emperor's Tomb hails its new master."

"Here is an infernal plot," Odo whispered into Tristan's ear, "spawned up by the very Prince of Darkness."

"What can we do?" came back the almost soundless reply. "Hellayne to be delivered over to this infidel dog! Nay, do not restrain me, Father —"

"There are six to two of us," Odo interposed. "Silence! Some one speaks."

It was the voice of the envoy of Ugo of Tuscany.

"Although it seems like a taunt, to fling into the face of my lord the sister of the woman who was the cause of his defeat —"

"His coward soul was the cause of the Lord Ugo's defeat," Basil interposed hotly. "In the dark of night, by means of a rope he let himself down from his lair, to escape the wrath of the fledgling he had struck for an unintentional affront. Did the Lord Ugo even inquire into the fate of the woman who perished miserably in the dungeons of the Emperor's Tomb?"

"Let us not be hasty," interposed another. "The Lord Ugo will listen to reason."

"The conditions are settled," Basil replied. "On the third night from to-night!"

The conspirators rose and, emerging from the ruined refectory, made their way down to their boat.

Soon the sound of oars, becoming fainter and fainter, informed the listeners that the company had departed.

Tristan's face was very white.

"What is to be done?" he turned pathetically to the monk who stood brooding by his side. "I almost wish I had let my fate overtake me —"

“Do not blaspheme,” Odo interposed. “Sometimes divine aid is nearest when it seems farthest removed. In three days the blow is to fall! In three days Rome is to be turned over to the infidels who are ravaging our southern coasts, and the Tuscan is once more to hold sway in the Tomb of the former Master of the World. But not he — Basil will rule, for Ugo has his hands full in Ivrea. With Basil Theodora will lord it from yonder castello. He will let the Lord Ugo burn his hands and he will snatch the golden fruit. I will pray that this feeble hand may undo their dark plotting.”

“What is Rome to me? What the universe?” Tristan interposed, “if she whom I love better than life is lost to me?”

The monk turned to him laying his hand upon his shoulder.

“You have been miraculously delivered from the very jaws of death. You will save the woman you love from dishonor and shame.”

Odo pondered for a pace then he continued:

“There is one in Rome — who is encompassing your destruction. The foul crime in the Lateran of which you were the victim is but another proof of the schemes of the Godless, who have desecrated the churches of Christ for their hellish purposes. We must find their devil’s chapel, hidden somewhere beneath the soil of Rome. None shall escape.”

“How will you bring this about, Father?” Tristan queried despairingly.

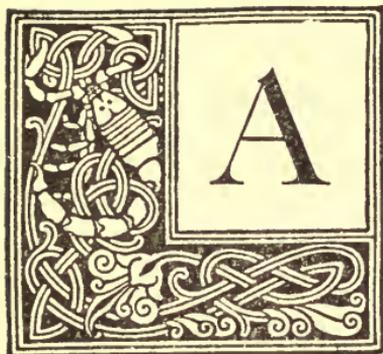
“The soldiers of the Church have not been bribed,” Odo replied. “Listen, my son, and do you as I direct. On to-morrow’s eve Theodora gives one of her splendid feasts. Go you disguised. Watch — but speak not. Listen — but answer not. Who knows but that you may receive tidings of your lost one? As for myself, I shall seek one whose crimes lie heavily upon him, one who trembles with the fear

of death, at whose door he lies — Il Gobbo — the bravo. His master has dealt him a mortal wound to remove the last witness of his crimes. Come to me on the second day at dusk.”

Emerging from the shadows of the wall, Tristan hailed the boatman, and a few moments later they were being rowed towards a solitary spot near the base of the Aventine, where they paid and dismissed their Charon and disappeared among the ruins.

CHAPTER X

THE BROKEN SPELL



GAIN there was feasting and high revels in the palace of Theodora on Mount Aventine. Colored lanterns were suspended between the interstices of orange and oleander trees; and incense rose in spiral coils from bronze and copper vessels, concealed among leafy bowers. The

great banquet hall was thronged with a motley crowd of Romans, Greeks, men from the coasts of Africa and Iceland, Spaniards, Persians, Burgundians, Lombards, men from the steppes of Sarmatia, and the amber coast of the Baltic. Here and there groups were discussing the wines or the viands or the gossip of the day.

The guests marvelled at the splendor, wealth and the variegated mosaics, the gilded walls, the profusion of beautiful marble columns and the wonderfully groined ceiling. It was a veritable banquet of the senses. The fairylike radiance of the hall with its truly eastern splendor captivated the eye. From remote grottoes came the sounds of flutes, citherns and harps, quivering through the dreaming summer night.

On ebony couches upon silver frames, covered with rare tapestries and soft cushions, the guests reclined. Between two immense, crescent-shaped tables, made of citron wood and inlaid with ivory, rose a miniature bronze fountain,

representing Neptune. From it spurted jets of scented water, which cooled and perfumed the air.

Not in centuries had there been such a feast in Rome. Mountain, plain and the sea had been relentlessly laid under tribute, to surrender their choicest towards supplying the sumptuous board.

Nubian slaves in spotless white kept at the elbows of the guests and filled the golden flagons as quickly as they were emptied. A powerful Cyprian wine, highly spiced, was served. Under its stimulating influence the revellers soon gave themselves up to the reckless enjoyment of the hour.

As the feast proceeded the guests cried more loudly for flagons of the fiery ecobalda. They quaffed large quantities of this wine and their faces became flushed, their eyes sparkled and their tongues grew more and more free. The temporary restraint they had imposed upon themselves gradually vanished. In proportion as they partook of the fiery vintage their conviviality increased.

The roll-call was complete. None was found missing. Here was the Lord of Norba and Boso, Lord of Caprara. Here was the Lord Atenulf of Benevento, the Lord Amgar, from the coasts of the Baltic; here was Bembo the poet, Eugenius the philosopher and Alboin, Lord of Farfa. Here was the Prefect of Rome and Roger de Laval. He, too, had joined the throng of idolators at the shrine of Theodora. The Lord Guaimar of Salerno was there, and Guido, Duke of Spoleto.

The curtain at the far end of the banquet hall slowly parted.

On the threshold stood Theodora.

Silent, rigid, she gazed into the hall.

Like a sudden snow on a summer meadow, a white silence fell from her imagination across that glittering, gleaming tinselled atmosphere. Everywhere the dead seemed to sit around her, watching, as in a trance, strange antics of the grimacing dead.

A vision of beauty she appeared, radiantly attired, a jewelled diadem upon her brow. By her side appeared Basil, the Grand Chamberlain.

When her gaze fell upon the motley crowd, a disgust, such as she had never known, seized her.

She seated herself on the dais, reserved for her, and with queenly dignity bade her guests welcome.

Basil occupied the seat of honor at her right, Roger de Laval at her left.

Had any one watched the countenances of Theodora and of Basil he would have surprised thereon an expression of ravening anxiety. To themselves they appeared like two players, neither knowing the next move of his opponent, yet filled with the dire assurance that upon this move depended the fate of the house of cards each has built upon a foundation of sand.

At last the Count de Laval arose and whirled his glass about his head.

“Twine a wreath about your cups,” he shouted, “and drink to the glory of the most beautiful woman in the world — the Lady Theodora.”

They rose to their feet and shouted their endorsement till the very arches seemed to ring with the echoes. His initiative was received with such favor by the others that, fired with the desire to emulate his example, they fell to singing and shouting the praise of the woman whose beauty had not its equal in Rome.

Theodora viewed the scene of dissipation with serenity and composure, and, by her attitude she seemed, in a strange way, even tacitly to encourage them to drink still deeper. Faster, ever faster, the wine coursed among the guests. Some of them became more and more boisterous, others were rendered somnolent and fell forward in a stupor upon the silken carpets.

Theodora, whose restlessness seemed to increase with

every moment, and who seemed to hold herself in leash by a strenuous effort of the will, suddenly turned to Basil and whispered a question into his ear.

A silent nod came in response and the next moment a clash of cymbals, stormily persistent, roused the revellers from their stupor. Then, like a rainbow garmented Peri, floating easefully out of some far-off sphere of sky-wonders, an aerial maiden shape glided into the full lustre of the varying light, a dancer nude, save for the glistening veil that carelessly enshrouded her limbs, her arms and hands being adorned with circlets of tiny golden bells which kept up a melodious jingle as she moved. And now began the strangest music, music that seemed to hover capriciously between luscious melody and harsh discord, a wild and curious medley of fantastic minor suggestions in which the imaginative soul might discover hints of tears and folly, love and madness. To this uncertain yet voluptuous measure the glittering girl dancer leaped forward with a startling abruptness and, halting as it were on the boundary line between the dome and the garden beyond, raised her rounded arms in a snowy arch above her head.

Her pause was a mere breathing spell in duration. Dropping her arms with a swift decision, she hurled herself into the giddy mazes of a dance. Round and round she floated, like an opal-winged butterfly in a net of sunbeams, now seemingly shaken by delicate tremors, as aspen leaves are shaken by the faintest wind, now assuming the most voluptuous eccentricities of posture, sometimes bending down wistfully as though she were listening to the chanting of demon voices underground, and again, with her waving white hands, appearing to summon spirits to earth from their wanderings in the upper air. Her figure was in perfect harmony with the seductive grace of her gestures; not only her feet, but her whole body danced, her very features bespoke abandonment to the frenzy of her rapid movement.

Her large black eyes flashed with something of fierceness as well as languor; and her raven hair streamed behind her like a darkly spread wing.

Wild outbursts of applause resounded uproariously through the hall.

Count Roger had drawn nearer to Theodora. His arms encircled her body.

Theodora bent over him.

"Not to-night! Not to-night! There are many things to consider. To-morrow I shall give you my answer."

He looked up into her eyes.

"Do you not love me?"

His hot breath fanned her cheeks.

Theodora gave a shrug and turned away, sick with disgust.

"Love — I hardly know what it means. I do not think I have ever loved."

Laval sucked in his breath between his teeth.

"Then you shall love me! You shall! Ever since I have come to Rome have I desired you! And the woman lives not who may gainsay my appeal."

She smiled tauntingly.

He had seized her hand. The fierceness of his grip made her gasp with pain.

"And whatever brought you to Rome?" she turned to him.

"I came in quest of one who had betrayed my honor."

"And you found her?"

"Both!" came the laconic reply.

"How interesting," purred Theodora, suffering his odious embrace, although she shuddered at his touch.

"And, man-like, you were revenged?"

"She has met the fate I had decreed upon her who wantonly betrayed the honor of her lord."

"Then she confessed?"

"She denied her guilt. What matter? I never loved her. It is you I love! You, divine Theodora."

And, carried away by a gust of passion, he drew her to him, covering her brow, her hair, her cheeks with kisses. But she turned away her mouth.

She tried to release herself from his embrace.

Roger uttered an oath.

"I have tamed women before — ay — and I shall tame you," he sputtered, utterly disregarding her protests.

She drew back as far as his encircling arms permitted.

"Release me, my lord!" she said, her dark eyes flashing fire. "You are mad!"

"No heroics — fair Theodora — Has the Wanton Queen of Rome turned into a haloed saint?"

He laughed. His mouth was close to her lips.

Revulsion and fury seized her. Disengaging her hands she struck him across the face.

There was foam on his lips. He caught her by the throat. Now he was forcing her beneath his weight with the strength of one insane with uncontrollable passion.

"Help!" she screamed with a choking sensation.

A shadow passed before her eyes. Everything seemed to swim around her in eddying circles of red. Then a gurgling sound. The grip on her throat relaxed. Laval rolled over upon the floor in a horrible convulsion, gasped and expired.

Basil's dagger had struck him through, piercing his heart.

Slowly Theodora arose. She was pale as death. Her guests, too much engaged with their beautiful partners, had been attracted to her plight but by her sudden outcry.

They stared sullenly at the dead man and turned to their former pursuits.

Theodora clapped her hands.

Two giant Nubians appeared. She pointed to the corpse at her feet. They raised it up between them, carried it out and sank it in the Lotus lake. Others wiped away the stains of blood.

Basil bent over Theodora's hands, and covered them with kisses, muttering words of endearment which but increased the discord in her heart.

She released herself, resuming her seat on the dais.

"It is the old fever," she turned to the man beside her. "You purchase and I sell! Nay" — she added as his lips touched her own — "there is no need for a lover's attitude when hucksters meet."

Though the guests had returned to their seats, a strange silence had fallen upon the assembly. The rythmical splashing of the water in the fountain and the labored breathing of the distressed wine-bibbers seemed the only sounds that were audible for a time.

"But I love you, Theodora," Basil spoke with strangely dilated eyes. "I love you for what you are, for all the evil you have wrought! You, alone! For you have I done this thing! For you Alberic lies dead in some unknown glen. For you have I summoned about us those who shall seat you in the high place that is yours by right of birth."

Theodora was herself again. With upraised hand, that shone marble white in the ever-changing light, she enjoined silence.

"What of that other?" she said, while her eyes held those of the man with their magic spell.

"What other?" he stammered, turning pale.

"That one!" she flashed.

At that moment the curtain parted again and into the changing light, emitted by the great revolving globe, swayed a woman. At first it seemed a statue of marble that had become animated and, ere consciousness had resumed its sway, was slowly gaining life and motion, still bound up in the dream existence into which some unknown power had plunged her.

As one petrified, Basil stared at the swaying form of Hel-layne. A white transparent byssus veil enveloped the

beautiful limbs. Her wonderful bare arms were raised above her head, which was slightly inclined, as in a listening attitude. She seemed to move unconsciously as under a spell or as one who walks in her sleep. Her eyes were closed. The pale face showed suffering, yet had not lost one whit of its marvellous beauty.

The revellers stared spellbound at what, to their superstitious minds, seemed the wraith of slain Roxana returned to earth to haunt her rival.

Suddenly, without warning, the dark-robed form of a man dashed from behind a pillar. No one seemed to have noted his presence. Overthrowing every impediment, he bounded straight for Helayne, when he saw the lithe form snatched up before his very eyes and her abductor disappear with his burden, as if the ground had swallowed them.

It seemed to Tristan that he was rushing through an endless succession of corridors and passages, crossing each other at every conceivable angle, in his mad endeavor to snatch his precious prey from her abductor when, in a rotunda in which these labyrinthine passages converged, he found himself face to face with an apparition that seemed to have risen from the floor.

Before him stood Theodora.

Her dark shadow was wavering across the moonlit network of light. The red and blue robes of the painted figures on the wall glowed about her like blood and azure, while the moonlight laid lemon colored splashes upon the varied mosaics of the floor.

His pulses beating furiously, a sense of suffocation in his throat, Tristan paused as the woman barred his way.

"Let me pass!" he said imperiously, trying to suit the action to the word.

But he had not reckoned with the woman's mood.

"You shall not," Theodora said, a strange fire gleaming in her eyes.

"Where is Helayne? What have you done with her?"

Theodora regarded him calmly from under drooping lashes.

"That I will tell you," she said with a mocking voice. "It was my good fortune to rescue her from the claws of one who has again got her into his power. Her mind is gone, my Lord Tristan! Be reconciled to your fate!"

"Surely you cannot mean this?" Tristan gasped, his face under the monk's cowl pale as death, while his eyes stared unbelievably into those of the woman.

"Is not what you have seen, proof that I speak truth?" Theodora interposed, slightly veiled mockery in her tone.

"Then this is your deed," Tristan flashed.

Theodora gave a shrug.

"What if it were?"

"She is in Basil's power?"

"An experienced suitor."

"Woman, why have you done this thing to me?"

His hands went to his head and he reeled like a drunken man.

Theodora laid her hands on Tristan's shoulders.

"Because I want you — because I love you, Tristan," she said slowly, and her wonderful face seemed to become illumined as it were, from within. "Nay — do not shrink from me! I know what you would say! Theodora — the courtesan queen of Rome! You deem I have no heart — no soul. You deem that these lips, defiled by the kisses of beasts, cannot speak truth. Yet, if I tell you, Tristan, that this is the first and only time in my life that I have loved, that I love you with a love such as only those know who have thirsted for it all their lives, yet have never known but its base counterfeit; if I tell you — that upon your answer depends my fate — my life — Tristan — will you believe — will you save the woman whom nothing else on earth can save?"

"I do not believe you," Tristan replied.

Theodora's face had grown white to the lips.

"You shall stay — and you shall listen to me!" she said, without raising her voice, as if she were discoursing upon some trifling matter, and Tristan obeyed, compelled by the look in her eyes.

Theodora felt Tristan's melancholy gaze resting upon her, as it had rested upon her at their first meeting. Was not he, too, like herself, a lone wanderer in this strange country called the world! But his manhood had remained unsullied. How she envied and how she hated that other woman to whom his love belonged. Softly she spoke, as one speaks in a dream.

She had gone forth in quest of happiness — happiness at any price. And she had paid the forfeit with a poisoned life. The desire to conquer had eclipsed every other. The lure of the senses was too mighty to be withstood. Yet how short are youth and life! One should snatch its pleasures while one may.

How fleet had been the golden empty days of joy. She had drained the brimming goblet to the dregs. If he misjudged her motive, her self-abasement, if he spurned the love she held out to him, the one supreme sacrifice of her life had been in vain. She would fight for it. Soul and body she would throw herself into the conflict. Her last chance of happiness was at stake. The poison, rankling in her veins, she knew could not be expelled by idle sophisms. Life, the despot, claimed his dues. Had she lived utterly in vain? Not altogether! She would atone, even though the bonds of her own forging, which bound her to an ulcered past, could be broken but by the hand of that crowned phantom: Death.

Now she was kneeling before him. She had grasped his hands.

"I love you!" she wailed. "Tristan, I love you and my love is killing me! Be merciful. Have pity on me. Love

me! Be mine — if but for an hour! It is not much to ask! After, do with me what you will! Torture me — curse me before Heaven — I care not — I am yours — body and soul. — I love you!”

Her voice vibrated with mad idolatrous pleading.

He tried to release himself. She dragged herself yet closer to him.

“Tristan! Tristan!” she murmured. “Have you a heart? Can you reject me when I pray thus to you? When I offer you all I have? All that I am, or ever hope to be? Am I so repellent to you? Many men would give their lives if I were to say to them what I say to you. They are nothing to me — you alone are my world, the breath of my existence. You, alone, can save me from myself!”

Tristan felt his senses swooning at the sight of her beauty. He tried to speak, but the words froze on his lips. It was too impossible, too unbelievable. Theodora, the most beautiful, the most powerful woman in Rome was kneeling before him, imploring that which any man in Rome would have deemed himself a thousand fold blessed to receive. And he remained untouched.

She read his innermost thoughts and knew the supreme moment when she must win or lose him forever was at hand.

“Tristan — Tristan,” she sobbed — and in the distant grove sobbed flutes and sistrum and citherns — “say what you will of me; it is true. I own it. Yet I am not worse than other women who have sold their souls for power or gold. Am I not fair to look upon? And is all this beauty of my face and form worthless in your eyes, and you no more than man? Kill me — destroy me — I care naught. But love me — as I love you!” and in a perfect frenzy of self-abandonment she rose to her feet and stood before him, a very bacchante of wild loveliness and passion. “Look upon me! Am I not more beautiful than the Lady Hellayne? You shall not — dare not — spurn such love as mine!”

Deep silence supervened. The expression of her countenance seemed quite unearthly; her eyes seemed wells of fire and the tense white arms seemed to seek a victim round which they might coil themselves to its undoing.

The name she had uttered in her supreme outburst of passion had broken the spell she had woven about him.

Hellayne — his white dove! What was her fate at this moment while he was listening to the pleadings of the enchantress?

Theodora advanced towards him with outstretched arms.

He stayed her with a fierce gesture.

“Stand back!” he said. “Such love as yours — what is it? Shame to whosoever shall accept it! I desire you not.”

“You dare not!” she panted, pale as death.

“Dare not?”

But she was now fairly roused. All the savagery in her nature was awakened and she stood before him like some beautiful wild animal at bay, trembling from head to foot with the violence of her passion.

“You scorn me!” she said in fierce, panting accents, that scarcely rose above an angry whisper. “You make a mockery of my anguish and despair — holding yourself aloof with your prated virtue! But you shall suffer for it! I am your match! You shall not spurn me a third time! I have humbled myself in the dust before you, I, Theodora — and you have spurned the love I have offered you — you have spurned Theodora — for that white marble statue whom I should strangle before your very eyes were she here! You shall not see her again, my Lord Tristan. Her fate is sealed from this moment. On the altars of Satan is she to be sacrificed on to-morrow night!”

Tristan listened like paralyzed to her words, unable to move.

She saw her opportunity. She sprang at him. Her arms coiled about him. Her moist kisses seared his lips.

“Oh Tristan — Tristan,” she pleaded, “forgive me, forgive! I know not what I say! I hunger for the kisses of your lips, the clasp of your arms! Do you know — do you ever think of your power? The cruel terrible power of your eyes, the beauty that makes you more like an angel than man? Have you no pity? I am well nigh mad with jealousy of that other whom you keep enshrined in your heart! Could she love, like I? She was not made for you — I am! Tristan — come with me — come —”

Tighter and tighter her arms encircled his neck. The moonbeams showed him her eyes alight with rapture, her lips quivering with passion, her bosom heaving. The blood surged up in his brain and a red mist swam before his eyes.

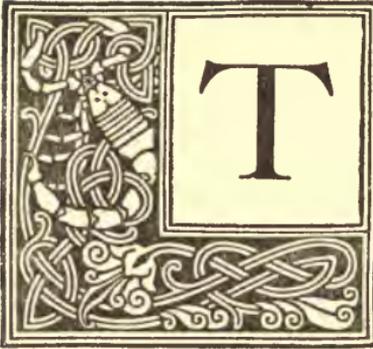
With a supreme effort Tristan released himself. Flinging her from him, he rushed out of the rotunda as if pursued by an army of demons. If he remained another moment he knew he was lost.

A lightning bolt shot down from the dark sky vault close beside him as he reached the gardens, and a peal of thunder crashed after in quick succession.

It drowned the delirious outburst of laughter that shrilled from the rotunda where Theodora, with eyes wide with misery and madness, stared as transfixed down the path where Tristan had vanished in the night.

CHAPTER XI

THE BLACK MASS



THE night was sultry and dismal. Dense black clouds rolled over the Roman Campagna, burning blue in the flashes of jagged lightnings and the low boom of distant thunder reverberated ominously among the hills and valleys of Rome, when three men, cloaked and wearing black velvet masks, skirted the huge mediæval wall with which Pope Leo IV had girdled the gardens of the Vatican and, passing along the fortified rampart which surrounded the Vatican Hill, plunged into the trackless midnight gloom of deep, branch-shadowed thickets.

Not a word was spoken between them. Silently they followed their leader, whose tall, dark form was revealed to them only among the dense network of trees and the fantastic shapes of the underbrush, when a flash of white lightning flamed across the limitless depths of the midnight horizon.

Not a sound broke the stillness, save the menacing growl of the thunder, the intermittent sighing of the wind among the branches, or the occasional drip-drip of dewy moisture trickling tearfully from the leaves, mingling with the dreamy, gurgling sound of the fountains, concealed among bosquets of orange and almond trees.

From time to time, as they proceeded upon their nocturnal errand, the sounds of their footsteps being swallowed up by

the soft carpet of moss, they caught fleet glimpses of marble statues, gleaming white, like ghosts, from among the tall dark cypresses, or the shimmering surface of a marble-cinctured lake, mirrored in the sheen of the lightnings.

The grove they traversed assumed by degrees the character of a tropical forest. Untrodden by human feet, it seemed as though nature, grown tired of the iridescent floral beauty of the environing gardens, had, in a sudden malevolent mood, torn and blurred the fair green frondage and twisted every bud awry, till the awkward, mis-shapen limbs resembled the contorted branches of wind-blown trees. Great jagged leaves covered with prickles and stained with blotches as of spilt poison, thick brown stems, glistening with slimy moisture and coiled up like the sleeping bodies of snakes, masses of blue and purple fungi, and blossoms seemingly of the orchid-species, some like fleshly tongues, others like the waxen yellow fingers of a dead hand, protruded spectrally through the matted foliage, while all manner of strange overpowering odors increased the swooning oppressiveness of the sultry, languorous air.

Arrived at a clearing they paused.

In the distance the Basilica of Constantine was sunk in deep repose. All about them was the pagan world. Goat-footed Pan seemed to peer through the interstices of the branches. The fountains crooned in their marble basins. Centaurs and Bacchantes disported themselves among the flowering shrubs and, dark against the darker background of the night, the vast ramparts of Leo IV seemed to shut out light and life together.

The Prefect of the Camera turned to his companions, after peering cautiously into the thickets.

"We must wait for the guards," he said in a whisper. "It were perilous to proceed farther without them."

Tristan's hand tightened upon his sword-hilt. There were tears in his eyes when he thought of Helayne and all that

was at stake, the overthrow of the enemies of Christ. He had, in a manner, conquered the terrible fear that had palsied heart and soul as they had started out after nightfall. Now, taking his position as he found it, since he felt that his fate was ruled by some unseen force which he might not resist, he was upheld by a staunch resolution to do his part in the work assigned to him and thereby to merit forgiveness and absolution.

Notwithstanding the enforced calm that filled his soul, there were moments when, assailed by a terrible dread, lest he might be too late to prevent the unspeakable crime, his energies were almost paralyzed. Silent as a ghost he had traversed the grove by the side of his equally silent companions, more intent upon his quarry than the patient, velvet-footed puma that follows in the high branches of the trees the unsuspecting traveller below.

Was it his imagination, was it the beating of his own heart in the silence that preceded the breaking of the storm; or did he indeed hear the dull throbbing of the drums that heralded the approach of the crimson banners of Satan?

The wind increased with every moment. The thunder growled ever nearer. The heavens were one sheet of flame. The trees began to bend their tops to the voice of the hurricane. The air was hot as if blown from the depths of the desert. As the uproar of the elements increased, strange sounds seemed to mingle with the voices of the storm. Black shadows as of dancing witches darkened the clearing, spread and wheeled, interlaced and disentwined. In endless thousands they seemed to fly, like the withered and perishing leaves of autumn.

Involuntarily Tristan grasped the arm of the Monk of Cluny.

"Are these real shapes — or do my eyes play me false?" he faltered, an expression of terror on his countenance, such as no consideration of earthly danger could have evoked.

“To-night, my son, we are invincible,” replied the monk. “Trust in the Crucified Christ!”

Across the plaisance, washed white by the sheen of the lightnings, there was a stir as of an approaching forest. Tristan watched as in the throes of a dream.

A few moments later the little band was joined by the newcomers, masked, garbed in sombre black and heavily armed, three-score Spaniards, trusted above their companions for their loyalty and allegiance to Holy Church. Among them Tristan recognized the Cardinal-Archbishop of Ravenna, the Bishop of Orvieto and the Prefect of Rome.

Odo of Cluny noted Tristan's shrinking at the sight of the two men who had been present when the terrible accusation had been hurled against him on that fatal morning — the accusation in the Lateran, which had launched him in the dungeons of Castel San Angelo.

He comforted the trembling youth.

“They know now that the charge was false,” he said. “To-night we shall conquer. We shall set our foot upon Satan's neck.”

Withdrawing under the shelter of the trees, regardless of the increasing fury of the storm, the leaders held whispered consultation.

Before them, set in the massive wall, appeared a door not more than five feet high, studded with large nails.

The Prefect of Rome bent forward and inserted a gleaming piece of steel in the keyhole. After a wrench or two, which convinced the onlookers that the door had been long in disuse, it swung inward with a groan. The Prefect, with a muttered imprecation, beckoned his followers to enter, and when they were assembled in what appeared to be a courtyard, he took pains to close the door himself, to avoid the least noise that might reach the ear of those within the enclosure.

At the far end of this courtyard a shadowy pavilion arose, culled from the Stygian gloom by the sheen of the lightnings.

It seemed to have been erected in remote antiquity. A circular structure of considerable extent, its ruinous exterior revealed traces of Etruscan architecture. No one dared set foot in it, for it was rumored to be the abode of evil spirits. Its interior was reported to be a network of intricate galleries, leading into subterranean chambers, secret and secluded places into which human foot never strayed, for, not unlike the catacombs, it was well-nigh impossible to find the exit from its labyrinthine passages without the saving thread of Ariadné.

At a signal from the Prefect of the Camera all stopped. Heavy drops of rain were falling. The hurricane increased in fury.

It was a weird scene and one the memory of which lingered long after that eventful night with Tristan.

Black cypresses and holm-oaks formed a dense wall around the pavilion on two sides. In the distance the white limbs of some pagan statues could be seen gleaming through the dark foliage. And, as from a subterranean cavern, a distant droning chant struck the ear now and then with fateful import.

Now the Prefect of Rome threw off his cloak. The others did likewise. Their masks they retained.

"There is a secret entrance, unknown even to these spawns of hell, behind the pavilion," he addressed his companions in a subdued tone, hardly audible in the shrieking of the storm. "It is concealed among tall weeds and has long been in disuse. The door is almost invisible and they think themselves safe in the performance of their iniquities below."

"How can we reach this pit of hell?" Tristan, quivering with ill-repressed excitement interposed at this juncture. He could hardly restrain himself. On every moment hung the life of the being dearer to him than all the world, and he chafed under the restraint like a réstive steed. If they should be too late, even now!

But the Prefect retained his calm demeanor knowing what was at stake. It was not enough to locate the chapel of Satan. Those participating in the unholy rites must not be given the chance to escape. They must be taken, dead or alive, to the last man.

"We have with us one who is familiar with every nook in the city of Rome," the Prefect turned to the Cardinal-Archbishop of Ravenna. "Long have we suspected that all is not well in the deserted pavilion. But though we watched by day and by night nothing seemed to reward our efforts, until one stormy night a dreadful shape with the face of a devil came forth, and the sight so paralyzed those who watched from afar that they fled in dismay, believing it was the Evil One in person who had come forth from the bowels of the earth. From yonder door a dark corridor leads to a shaft whence it winds in a slight incline into the devil's chapel below. The latter is so situated that we can watch these outcasts at their devotions, unseen, our presence unguessed. This way! Let silence be the password. Keep in touch with each other, for the darkness is as that of the grave."

A flash of lightning that seemed to rend the very heavens enveloped them for a moment in its sulphureous glare, followed by a crash of thunder that shook the very earth. The hurricane shrieked, and the rain came down in torrents.

They had advanced to the very edge of the underbrush, stumbling over the heads and torsos of broken statues that lay among parasitic herbage. Monstrous decaying leaves curled upward, leprous in the lightnings. A poison mist seemed to hover over this lonely and deserted pleasure-house of ancient Pelasgian days.

Skirting the haunted pavilion, unmindful of the onslaught of the elements, they took a path so narrow that they could but advance in single file. This path had been cut and beaten by the Prefect's guards, for the weeds and under-

brush luxuriated, until they mounted some ten feet against the walls of the pavilion.

They had now reached the back wall and proceeded in utter darkness broken only by the flashes of lightning. They passed through a half-ruined archway and at last came to a halt, prompted by those in front, whose progress had been stopped by, what the others guessed to be, the door. They had to work warily, to keep it from falling inward. At last the movement continued and they entered the night-wrapt corridor.

Tristan had taken his station directly behind the Prefect of Rome. The ecclesiastics, for their own protection, had been assigned the rear.

By the sheen of lightnings a pile of brushwood was revealed to the sight, which the Prefect, in a low tone, ordered to be cleared away, whereupon a circular opening appeared, like the entrance of a well.

The Prefect summoned the leaders around him.

For a moment they stood in silence and listened.

Between the peals of the thunder which rolled in terrifying echoes over the Seven Hills, the trained ear could distinguish a strange, droning sound that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth.

"Even now the Black Mass is commencing," he turned to Tristan. "We are but just in time."

After a pause he continued:

"We must proceed in darkness. The faintest glimmer might betray our presence. I shall lead the way. Let each follow warily. Let each be in touch with the other. Let all stop when I stop. We shall arrive in a circular gallery, whence we may all witness the abomination below. From this gallery several flights of winding stairs lead into the devil's chapel. Let us descend in silence. When you hear the signal — down the quick descent and — upon them!"

One by one they disappeared in the dark aperture. Their

feet touched ground while they still supported themselves on their arms. They found themselves in a subterranean chamber, in impenetrable darkness, whose hot, damp murk almost suffocated the intruders.

Slowly, with infinite caution, in infinite silence, they proceeded. Every man stretched his hand before him to touch a companion.

The passage began to slant, yet the incline was gradual. Their feet touched soft earth which swallowed the sound of their steps. There was neither echo nor vibration, only murky silence and the night of the grave.

A low, droning sound, infinitely remote, a sound not unlike that of swarming bees heard at a great distance, was now wafted to their ears.

A shudder ran through that long chain of living men, who were carrying the Cross into the very abyss of Hell.

For they knew they were listening to the infernal choir, they were approaching the hidden chapel of Satan. The chant began to swell. Still they continued upon their descent.

The imprisoned air became hotter and murkier, almost suffocating in its miasmatic waves that assailed the senses and seemed to weigh like lead upon the brain.

Now the tunnel turned sharply at right angles and after proceeding some twenty or thirty paces in Stygian darkness, a faint crimson glow began suddenly to drive the nocturnal gloom before it, and they emerged in a gallery, terminating in a number of dark archways, from which narrow winding stairs led into the hall below. Small round apertures, resembling port-holes, permitted a glimpse into the chapel of Satan, and a weird, droning chant was rising rhythmically from the night-wrapt depths of the pavilion.

Following the example of the leader, they stole on tiptoe to the unglazed port-holes and gazed below, and eager, yet trembling, with the anticipation of the dread mysteries they were about to witness.

At first they could not see anything distinctly, owing to the crimson mist that seemed to come rolling into the chapel as from some furnace and their eyes, after having been long in the darkness, refused to focus themselves. But, by degrees, the scene became more distinct.

In the circular chapel below dim figures, robed in crimson, moved to and fro, bearing aloft perfumed cressets on metal poles, and in its flickering light an altar became visible, hung with crimson, the summit of which was lost in the gloom overhead. Here and there indistinct shapes were stretched in hideous contortions on the pavement, and as others drew nigh, these rose and, throwing back their heads, made the vault re-echo with deep-chested roaring.

Suddenly the metal bound gates of a low arched doorway, faintly discernible in the uncertain light, seemed to be unclosing with a slow and majestic movement, letting loose a flood of light in which the ghostly faces of the worshippers leapt into sudden clearness, men and women, all seemingly belonging to the highest ranks of society. The crimson garbs of the officiating priests showed like huge stains of blood against the dark-veined marble.

Tristan gazed with the rest, stark with terror. The blood seemed to freeze in his veins as his eyes swept the circular vault and rested at the shrine's farther end, where branching candlesticks flanked each the foot of two short flights of stairs that led up to the summit of the great altar, garnished at the corner with hideous masks, and sending up from time to time eddies of smoke, through the reek of which some two score of men watched the ceremony from above.

Dim shapes passed to and fro. The droning chant continued. At length a shapeless form evolved itself from the crimson mist, approached the altar and cast something upon it. Instantly a blaze of light flooded the shrine, and in its radiance a weazened, bat-like creature was revealed, garbed in the fantastic imitation of a priest's robes.

Approaching the infernal altar, upon which lay obscene symbols of horror, he mounted the steps and his figure melted into the gloom.

With the cold sweat streaming from his brow, with a shudder that almost turned him dizzy, Tristan recognized Bessarion. The High Priest of Satan sat upon the Devil's altar. There was stir and movement in the chapel. Then a deep silence supervened.

Petrification fell upon the assembly. All voices were hushed, all movement arrested. From the black throne, surrounded by terror, where sat the great Unknown, came a dull hoarse roar, like the roar of an earthquake.

The words were unintelligible to the champions of the Cross. They were answered by the Sorcerer's Confession, the hideous, terrible contortion of the Credo, and then Tristan's ears were assailed by the sounds he had heard on that fatal night, ere he lost consciousness, and again in the Catacombs of St. Calixtus, sounds meaningless in themselves, but fraught with terrible import to him now!

"Emen Hetan! Emen Hetan! Palu! Baalberi! Emen Hetan!" —

Pandemonium broke loose.

"Agora! Agora! Patrisa! Agora!"

There was screeching of pipes, made of dead men's bones. A drum stretched with the skin of the hanged was beaten with the tail of a wolf. Like leaves in a howling storm the fantastic red robed forms whirled about, from left to right, from right to left. And in their midst, immobile and terrible, sat the Hircus Nocturnus, enthroned upon the shrine.

When at last they stopped, panting, exhausted, the same voice, deafening as an earthquake, roared:

"Bring hither the bride — the stainless dove!"

A chorus of hideous laughter, a swelling, bleating cacophony of execration, so furious and real that it froze the listeners' blood, answered the summons.

Then, from an arch in the apse of the infernal chapel, came four chanting figures, hideously masked and draped in crimson.

With slow, measured steps they approached. The arch was black again. Deep silence supervened.

Now into the centre came two figures.

One was that of a man robed in doublet and hose of flaming scarlet. The figure he supported was that of a woman, though she seemed a corpse returned to earth.

A long white robe covered her from head to toe, like the winding sheet of death. Her eyes were bound with a white cloth. She seemed unable to walk, and was being urged forward, step by step, by the scarlet man at her side.

Again pandemonium reigned, heightened by the crashing peals of the thunder that rolled in the heavens overhead.

“ Emen Hetan! Emen Hetan! Palu! Baalberi! Emen Hetan! ”

The bleating of goats, the shrieks of the tortured damned, the howling of devils in the nethermost pit of Hell, delirious laughter, gibes and execrations mingled in a deafening chorus, which was followed by a dead silence, as anew the voice of the Unseen roared through the vault:

“ Bring hither the bride, the stainless dove! ”

There was a tramp of mailed feet.

Like a human whirlwind it came roaring down the winding stairs, through the vomitories into the vault. The rattling of weapons, shouts of rage, horror and dismay mingled, resounding from the vaulted roof, beaten back from the marble walls.

With drawn sword Tristan, well in advance of his companions, leaped into the chapel of Satan. When the identity of the staggering white form beside the scarlet man had been revealed to him, no power in heaven or earth could have restrained him. Without awaiting the signal he bounded with a choking outcry down the shaft.

But, when he reached the floor of the chapel, he recoiled as if the Evil One had arisen from the floor before him, barring his advance.

Before him stood Theodora.

She wore a scarlet robe, fastened at the throat with a clasp of rubies, representing the heads of serpents. Her wonderful white arms were bare, her hands were clenched as if she were about to fly at the throat of a hated rival and a preternatural lustre shone in her eyes.

“You!”

Tristan's words died in the utterance as he surveyed her for the space of a moment with a glance so full of horror and disdain that she knew she had lost.

“Yes — it is I,” she replied, hardly above a whisper, hot flush and deadly pallor alternating in her beautiful face, terrible in its set calm. “And — though I may not possess you — that other shall not! See!”

Maddened beyond all human endurance at the sight that met his eyes Tristan hurled Theodora aside as she attempted to bar his way, as if she had been a toy. Rushing straight through the press towards the spot, where the scarlet man, his arms still about the drooping form of Hellayne, had stopped in dismay at the sudden inrush of the guards, Tristan pierced the Grand Chamberlain through and through. Almost dragging the woman with him he fell beside the devil's altar. His head struck the flagstones and he lay still.

The Prefect himself dashed up the steps of the ebony shrine and hurled the High Priest of Satan on the flagstones below. Bessarion's neck was broken and, with the squeak of a bat, his black soul went out.

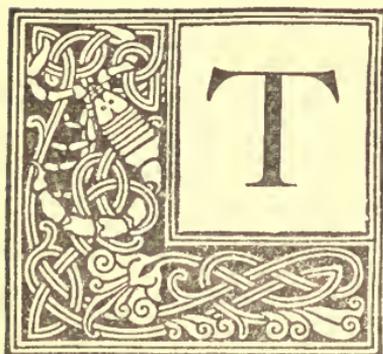
While the guards, giving no quarter, were mowing down all those of the devil's congregation who did not seek salvation in flight or concealment, Tristan caught the swooning form of Hellayne in his arms, calling her name in despairing

accents, as he stroked the silken hair back from the white clammy brow. She was breathing, but her eyes were closed.

Then he summoned two men-at-arms to his side, and between them they carried her to the world of light above.

CHAPTER XII

SUNRISE



HE thunder clouds had rolled away to eastward.

A rosy glow was creeping over the sky. The air was fresh with the coming of dawn.

Softly they laid Helayne by the side of a marble fountain and splashed the cooling drops upon her pale face. After a time she opened her eyes.

The first object they encountered was Tristan who was bending over her, fear and anxiety in his face.

Her colorless lips parted in a whisper, as her arms encircled his neck.

“You are with me!” she said, and the transparent lids drooped again.

Those who had not been slain of the congregation of Hell had been bound in chains. Among the dead was Theodora. The contents of a phial she carried on her person had done its work instantaneously.

Suddenly alarums resounded from the region of Castel San Angelo. There was a great stir and buzz, as of an awakened bee hive. There were shouts at the Flaminian gate, the martial tread of mailed feet and, as the sun's first ray kissed the golden Archangel on the summit of the Flavian Emperor's mausoleum, a horseman, followed by a glittering retinue, dashed up the path, dismounted and raised his visor.

Before the astounded assembly stood Alberic, the Senator of Rome.

Just then they brought the body of Theodora from the subterranean chapel and laid it silently on the greensward, beside that of Basil, the Grand Chamberlain.

The Cardinal-Archbishop of Ravenna was the first to speak.

"My lord, we hardly trust our eyes. All Rome is mourning you for dead."

Alberic turned to the speaker.

"With the aid of the saint I have prevailed against the foulest treason ever committed by a subject against his trusting lord. The bribed hosts of Hassan Abdullah, which were to sack Rome, are scattered in flight. The attempt upon my own life has been prevented by a miracle from Heaven. But — what of these dead?"

Odo of Cluny approached the Senator of Rome.

"The awful horror which has gripped the city is passed. Christ rules once more and Satan is vanquished. This is a matter for your private ear, my lord."

Odo pointed to the kneeling form of Tristan, who was supporting Hellayne in his arms, trying to soothe her troubled spirit, to dispel the memory of the black horrors which held her trembling soul in thrall.

Approaching Tristan, Alberic laid his hand upon his head.

"We knew where to trust, and we shall know how to reward! My lords and prelates of the Church! Matters of grave import await you. We meet again in the Emperor's Tomb."

Beckoning to his retinue, Alberic remounted his steed, as company upon company of men-at-arms filed past — a host, such as the city of Rome had not beheld in decades, with drums and trumpets, pennants and banderols, long lines of glittering spears, gorgeous surcoats, and splendid suits of mail.

The forces of the Holy Roman Empire were passing into the Eternal City.

At their head the Senator of Rome was returning into his own.

At last they were alone, Tristan and Helayne.

His companions had departed. With them they had taken their dead.

Helayne opened her eyes. They were sombre, yet at peace.

“Tristan!”

He bent over her.

“My own Helayne!”

“It is beautiful to be loved,” she whispered. “I have never been loved before.”

“You shall be,” he replied, “now and forever, before God and the world!”

The old shadow came again into her eyes.

“What of the Lord Roger?”

She read the answer in his silence.

A tear trickled from the violet pools of her eyes.

Then she raised herself in his arms.

“I thought I should go mad,” she crooned. “But I knew you would come. And you are here — here — with me,— Tristan.”

He took her hands in his, his soul in his eyes.

The sun had risen higher through the gold bars of the east, dispelling the grey chill of dawn.

She nestled closer to him.

“Take me back to Avalon, to my rose garden,” she crooned. “Life is before us — yonder — where first we loved.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her eyes and the small sweet mouth.

A lark began to sing in the silence.

THE END

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