PART II

THE POPE

CHAPTER I

CARDINAL LUIGI CAPRAROLA

The evening service in the Basilica of St. Peter was over; pilgrims, peasants and monks had departed; the last chant of the officiating Cardinal's train still trembled on the incense-filled air and the slim novices were putting out the lights, when a man, richly and fantastically dressed, entered the bronze doors and advanced a little way down the centre aisle.

He bent his head to the altar, then paused and looked about him with the air of a stranger. He was well used to magnificence, but this first sight of the chapel of the Vatican caused him to catch his breath. Surrounding him were near a hundred pillars, each of a different marble and carving; they supported a roof that glittered with the manifold colours of mosaic; the rich walls were broken by numerous chapels, from which issued soft gleams of purple and violet light; mysterious shrines of porphyry and cipolin, jasper and silver showed here and there be- hind red lamps. A steady glow of candles shone on a mosaic and silver arch, beyond which the high altar sparkled like one great jewel; the gold lamps on it were still alight, and it was heaped with white lilies, whose strong perfume was noticeable even through the incense.

To one side of the high altar stood a purple chair, and a purple footstool, the seat of the Cardinal, some-times of the Pontiff. This splendid and holy beauty abashed, yet inspired the stranger; he leant against one of the smooth columns and gazed at the altar

The five aisles were crossed by various shafts of delicate trembling light that only half dispersed the lovely gloom; some of the columns were slender, some massive—the spoils from ancient palaces and temples, no two of them were alike; those in the distance took on a sea-green hue, luminous and exquisite; one or two were of deep rose red, others black or dark green, others again pure ghostly white, and all alike enveloped in soft shadows and quivering lights, violet, blue and red.

The novices were putting out the candles and preparing to close the church; their swift feet made no sound; silently the little stars about the high altar disappeared and deeper shadows fell over the aisles.

The stranger watched the white figures moving to and fro until no light remained, save the purple and scarlet lamps that cast rich rays over the gold and stained the pure lilies into colour, then he left his place and went slowly towards the door.

Already the bronze gates had been closed; only the entrance to the Vatican and one leading into a side street remained open.

Several monks issued from the chapels and left by this last; the stranger still lingered.

Down from the altar came the two novices, prostrated themselves, then proceeded along the body of the church.

They extinguished the candles in the candelabra set down the aisles, and a bejewelled darkness fell on the Basilica.

The stranger stood under a malachite and platinum shrine that blinded with the glimmer and sparkle of golden mosaic; before it burnt graduated tapers; one of the novices came towards it, and the man waiting there moved towards him.

“Sir,” he said in a low voice, “may I speak to you?”

He spoke in Latin, with the accent of a scholar, and his tone was deep and pleasant.

The novice paused and looked at him, gazed intently and beheld a very splendid person, a man in the prime of life, tall above the ordinary, and, above the ordinary, gorgeous to the eyes; his face was sunburnt to a hue nearly as dark as his light bronze hair, and his Western eyes showed clearly bright and pale in contrast; in his ears hung long pearl and gold ornaments that touched his shoulders: his dress was half Eastern, of fine violet silk and embroidered leather; he carried in his belt a curved scimitar inset with turkis, by his side a short gold sword, and against his hip he held a purple cap ornamented with a plume of peacocks’ feathers, and wore long gloves fretted in the palm with the use of rein and sword.

But more than these details did the stranger’s face strike the novice; a face almost as perfect as the masks of the gods found in the temples; the rounded and curved features were over-full for a man, and the expression was too indifferent, troubled, almost weak, to be attractive, but taken in itself the face was noticeably beautiful.

Noting the novice’s intent gaze, a flush crept into the man’s dark cheek.

“I am a stranger,” he said. “I want to ask you of Cardinal Caprarola. He officiated here to-day?”

“Yea,” answered the novice. “What can I tell you of him? He is the greatest man in Rome—now his Holiness is dying,” he added.

“Why, I have heard of him—even in Constantinople. I think I saw him—many years ago, before I went to the East.”

The novice began to extinguish the candles round the shrine.

“It may be, sir,” he said. “His Eminence was a poor youth as I might be; he came from Flanders.”

“It was in Courtrai I thought I saw him.”

“I know not if he was ever there; he became a disciple of Saint Ambrose of Menthon when very young, and after the saint’s death he joined the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Paris—you have heard that, sir?”

The stranger lowered his magnificent eyes.

“I have heard nothing—I have been away—many years; this man, Cardinal Caprarola—he is a saint also—is he not? . . . tell me more of him.”

The youth paused in his task, leaving half the candles alight to cast a trembling glow over the man’s gold and purple splendour; he smiled.

“Born of Dendermonde he was, sir, Louis his name, in our tongue Luigi, Blaise the name he took in the convent—he came to Rome, seven, nay, it must be eight years ago. His Holiness created him Bishop of Ostia, then of Caprarola, which last name he retains now he is Cardinal—he is the greatest man in Rome,” repeated the novice.

“And a saint?” asked the other with a wistful eagerness.

“Certes, when he was a youth he was famous for his holy austere life, now he lives in magnificence as befits a prince of the Church . . . he is very holy.”

The novice put out the remaining candles, leaving only the flickering red lamp.

“There was a great service here to-day?” the stranger asked.

“Yea, very many pilgrims were here.”

“I grieve that I was too late—think you Cardinal Caprarola would see one unknown to him?”

“If the errand warranted it, sir.”

From the rich shadows came a sigh.

“I seek peace—if it be anywhere it is in the hands of this servant of God—my soul is sick, will he help me heal it?”

“Yea, I do think so.”

The youth turned, as he spoke, towards the little side door.

“I must close the Basilica, sir,” he added.

The stranger seemed to rouse himself from depths of unhappy thoughts, and followed through the quivering gloom.

“Where should I find the Cardinal?” he asked.

“His palace lies in the Via di San Giovanni in Laterano, any will tell you the way, sir.” The novice opened the door. “God be with you.”

“And with you;” the stranger stepped into the open and the church door was locked behind him.

The purple after-glow still lingered over Rome; it was May and sweetly warm; as the stranger crossed the Piazza of St. Peter the breeze was like the touch of silk on his face; he walked slowly and presently hesitated, looking round the ruined temples, broken palaces and walls; there were people about, not many, mostly monks; the man glanced back at the Vatican, where the lights had begun to sparkle in the windows, then made his way, as rapidly as his scant knowledge served, across the superb and despoiled city.

He reached the Via Sacra; it was filled with a gay and splendid crowd, in chariots, on foot, and on horse, that mingled unheeding with the long processions of penitents winding in and out the throng, both here and in the Appian Way. He turned towards the Arch of Titus; the ladies laughed and stared as he passed; one took a flower from her hair and threw it after him, at which he frowned, blushed, and hastened on; he had never been equal to the admiration he roused in women, though he disliked neither them nor their admiration; he carried still on his wrist the mark of a knife left there by a Byzantine Princess who had found his face fair and his wooing cold; the laughter of the Roman ladies gave him the same feeling of hot inadequacy as when he felt that angry stab.

Passing the fountain of Meta Sudans and the remains of the Flavian Amphitheatre, he gained the Via di San Giovanni in Laterano leading to the Cælimontana Gate.

Here he drew a little apart from the crowd and looked about him; in the distance the Vatican and Castel San Angelo showed faintly against the remote Apennines; he could distinguish the banner of the Emperor hanging slackly in the warm air, the little lights in St. Peter’s.

Behind him rose the Janiculum Hill set with magnificent palaces and immense gardens, beneath the city lay dark in the twilight, and the trees rising from the silent temples made a fair murmur as they shook in their tipper branches.

The stranger sighed and stepped again into the crowd, composed now of all ranks and all nationalities; he touched a young German on the shoulder.

“Which is Cardinal Caprarola’s palace?”

“Sir, the first.” He pointed to a gorgeous building on the slope of the hill.

The stranger caught a glimpse of marble porticoes half obscured by soft foliage.

With a “Thank you” he turned in the direction of the Palatine.

A few moments brought him to the magnificent gates of the Villa Caprarola; they stood open upon a garden of flowers just gleamingly visible in the dusk; the stranger hesitated in the entrance, fixing his gaze on the luminous white walls of the palace that showed between the boughs of citron and cypress.

This Cardinal, this Prince, who was the greatest man in Rome, which was to say in Christendom, had strangely captured his imagination; he liked to think of him as an obscure and saintly youth devoting his life to the service of God, rising by no arts or intrigues but by the pure will of his Master solely until he dominated the great Empire of the West; the stranger now at his beautiful gates had been searching for peace for many years, in many lands, and always in vain.

In Constantinople he had heard of the holy Frankish priest who was already a greater power than the old and slowly dying Pope, and it had comforted his tired heart to think that there was one man in a high place set there by God alone—one, too, of a pure life and a noble soul; if any could give him promise of salvation, if any could help him to redeem his wasted, weak life, it would be he—this Cardinal who could not know evil save as a name.

With this object he came to Rome; he wished to lay his sins and penitence at the feet of him who had been a meek and poor novice, and now by his virtues was Luigi Caprarola as mighty as the Emperor and as innocent as the angels.

Shame and awe for a while held him irresolute, how could he dare relate his miserable and horrible story to this saint? . . . . but God had bidden him, and the holy were always the merciful.

He walked slowly between the dim flowers and bushes to the stately columned portico; with a thickly beating heart and a humble carriage he mounted the low wide steps and stood at the Cardinal's door, which stood open on a marble vestibule dimly lit with a soft roseate violet colour; the sound of a fountain came to his ears, and pungent aromas mingled with the perfume of the blossoms.

Two huge negroes, wearing silver collars and tiger-skins, were on guard at each column of the door, and as the new-comer set foot within the portals one of them struck the silver bell attached to his wrist.

Instantly appeared a slim and gorgeous youth, habited in black, a purple flower fastened at his throat.

The stranger took off his cap.

"This is the residence of his Eminence, Cardinal Caprarola?" he asked, and the hint of hesitation always in his manner was accentuated.

"Yea," the youth bowed gracefully; "I am his Eminence's secretary, Messer Paolo Orsini."

"I do desire to see the Cardinal."

The young Roman's dark eyes flashed over the person of the speaker.

"What is your purpose, sir?"

"One neither political nor worldly;" he paused, flushed, then added, "I would confess to his Eminence; I have come from Constantinople for that—for that alone."

Paolo Orsini answered courteously.

"The Cardinal hears confession in the Basilica."

"Certes, I know, yet I would crave to see him privately, I have matters relating to my soul to put before him, surely he will not refuse me." The stranger's voice was unequal, his bearing troubled, as the secretary curiously observed; penitents anxious for their souls did not often trouble the Cardinal, but Orsini's aristocratic manner showed no surprise.

"His Eminence," he said, "is ever loath to refuse himself to the faithful; I will ask him if he will give you audience; what, sir, is your quality and your name?"

"I am unknown here," answered the other humbly; "lately have I come from Constantinople, where I held an office at the court of Basil, but by birth I am a Frank, of the Cardinal's own country."

"Sir, your name?" repeated the elegant secretary.

The stranger's beautiful face clouded.

"I have been known by many . . . but let his Eminence have the truth—I am Theirry, born of Dendermonde."

Paolo Orsini bowed again.

"I will acquaint the Cardinal," he said. "Will you await me here?"

He was gone as swiftly and silently as he had come; Theirry put his hand to a hot brow and gazed about him.

The vestibule was composed of Numidian marble toned by time to a deep orange hue; the capitals of the Byzantine columns were encrusted with gold and supported a ceiling that glittered with violet glass mosaic; gilt lamps, screened with purple or crimson silk, cast a coloured glow down the sloping walls; a double staircase sprang from the serpentine and malachite floor, and where the gold hand-rails ended a silver lion stood on a cipolin pillar, holding between his paws a dish on which burnt aromatic incense; in the space between the staircases was an alabaster fountain—the basin, raised on the backs of other silver lions, and filled with iridescent sea shells, over which the water splashed and fell, changed by the lamplight to a glimmering rose purple.

Either side the fountain were placed great bronze bowls of roses, pink and white, and their petals were scattered over the marble pavement. Against the walls ran low seats, cushioned with dark rich tapestries, and above them, at intervals, marvellous antique statues showed white in deep niches.

Theirry had seen nothing more lavishly splendid; Cardinal Caprarola was no ascetic whatever the youth Blaise may have been, and for a moment Theirry was bewildered and disappointed—could a saint live thus?

Then he reflected; good it was to consider that God, and not the Devil, who so often used beauty and wealth for his lures, had given a man this.

He walked up and down, none to watch him but the four silent and motionless negroes; the exquisite lights, the melody of the fountain, the sweet odours that rose from the slow-curling blue vapours, the gorgeous surroundings, lulled and soothed; he felt that at last, after his changeful wanderings, his restless unhappiness, he had found his goal and his haven.

In this man's hands was redemption, this man was housed as befitted an Ambassador of the Lord of Heaven.

Paolo Orsini, in person as rare and splendid as the palace, returned.

"The Cardinal will receive you, sir," he said; if the message astonished him he did not show it; he bowed before Theirry, and preceded him up the magnificent stairs.

The first landing was entirely hung with scarlet embroidery worked with peacocks' feathers, and lit by pendent crystal lamps; at either end a silver archway led into a chamber.

The secretary, slim and black against the vivid colours, turned to the left; Theirry followed him into a long hall illuminated by bronze statues placed at intervals and holding scented flambeaux; between them were set huge porphyry bowls containing orange trees and oleanders; the walls and ceiling were of rose-hued marble inlaid with basalt, the floor of a rich mosaic.

Theirry caught his breath; the Cardinal must possess the fabled wealth of India. . .

Paolo Orsini opened a gilt door and held it wide while Theirry entered, then he bowed himself away, saying—

"His Eminence will be with you presently."

Theirry found himself in a fair-sized chamber, walls, floor and ceiling composed of ebony and mother-of-pearl.

Door and window were curtained by hangings of pale colours, on which were stitched in glittering silks stories from Ovid.

In the centre of the floor was a Persian carpet of a faint hue of mauve and pink; three jasper and silver lamps hung by silken cords from the ceiling and gave the pale glow of moonlight; an ivory chair and table raised on an ebony step stood in one corner; on the table was a sand clock, a blood-red glass filled with lilies and a gold book with lumps of turkis set in the covers; on the chair was a purple velvet cushion.

Opposite this hung a crucifix, a scarlet light burning beneath it; to this, the first holy thing Theirry had seen in the palace, he bent the knee.

Incense burnt in a gold brazier, the rich scent of it growing almost insupportable in the close confined space.

A silver footstool and a low ebony chair completed the furniture; against the wall facing the door was a gilt and painted shrine, of which the glittering wings were closed, but Theirry, turning from the crucifix, bent his head to that.

A great excitement crept into his blood, he could not feel that he was in a holy or sacred place, awaiting the coming of the saint who was to ease the burden of his sin, yet what but this feeling of relief, of righteous joy should be heating his blood now. . .

The dim blue light, the strong perfumes were confusing to the senses; his pulses throbbed, his heart leapt; it did not seem as if he could speak to the Cardinal . . . then it seemed as if he could tell him everything and leave—absolved.

Yet—and yet—what was there in the place reviving memories that had been thrust deep into his heart for years . . . a certain room in an old house in Antwerp with the August sunlight over the figure of a young man gilding a devil . . . a chamber in the college at Basle and two youths bending over a witch's fire . . . a dark wet night, and the sound of a weak voice coming to him . . . Frankfort and a garden blazing with crimson roses, other scenes, crowded, horrible . . . why did he think of them here . . . in this remote land, among strangers . . . here where he had come to purge his soul?

He began to murmur a prayer; giddiness touched him, and the blue light seemed to ripple and dim before his eyes.

He walked up and down the soft carpet clasping his hands.

All at once he paused and turned.

There was a shiver of silks, and the Cardinal stepped into the chamber.

Theirry sank on his knees and bowed his throbbing head.

The Cardinal slowly closed the door; a low rumble of thunder sounded; a great storm was gathering over the Tyrrhenian Sea.

CHAPTER II

THE CONFESSION

" 'In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spinitus Sancti,' I give you greeting," said the Cardinal in a low grave voice; he crossed to the ivory chair and seated himself.

Theirry lifted his head and looked eagerly at the man who he hoped would be his saviour.

The Cardinal was young, of the middle height, of a full but elegant person and conveying an impression of slightness and delicacy, though he was in reality neither small nor fragile. His face was pale, by this light only dimly to be seen; he wore a robe of vivid pink and violet silk that

spread about the step on which his chair was placed; his hands were very beautiful, and ornamented with a variety of costly rings; on his head was a black skull-cap, and outside it his hair showed, thick, curling and of a chestnut-red colour; his foot, very small and well shaped, encased in a gold slipper, showed beneath his gown.

He caught hold of the ivory arms of his seat and looked straight at Theirry with intense, dark eyes.

"On what matters did you wish to speak with me?" he asked.

Theirry could not find words, a choking sense of horror, of something dreadful and blasphemous beyond all words clutched at his heart . . . he stared at the young Cardinal . . . he must be going mad. . . .

"The air—the incense makes me giddy, holy father," he murmured.

The Cardinal touched a bell that stood by the sand clock, and motioned to Theirry to rise.

A beautiful boy in a white tunic answered the summons.

"Extinguish the incense," said the Cardinal, "and open the window, Gian . . . it is very hot, a storm gathers, does it not?"

The youth drew apart the painted curtains and unlatched the window; as the cooler air was wafted into the close chamber Theirry breathed more freely.

"The stars are all hidden, your Eminence," said Gian, looking at the night. "Certainly, it is a storm."

He raised the brazier, shook out the incense, leaving it smouldening greyly, went on one knee to the Cardinal, then withdrew backwards.

As the door closed behind him Luigi Caprarola turned to the man standing humbly before him.

"Now can you speak?" he said gravely.

Theirry flushed.

"Scarcely have I the heart . . . your Eminence abashes me, I have a sickening tale to relate . . . hearing of you I thought, this holy man can give me peace, and I came half across the world to lay my troubles at your feet; but now, sir, now—I fear to speak, indeed, am scarce able, unreal and hideous it seems in this place."

"In brief, sir," said the Cardinal, "ye have changed your mind—I think ye were ever of a changeful disposition, Theirry of Dendermonde."

"How does your Eminence know that of me is, alas! true."

"I see it in your face," answered the Cardinal, "and something else I see—you are, and long have been, unhappy."

"It is my great unhappiness that has brought me before your Eminence."

Luigi Caprarola rested his elbow on the ivory chair arm and his cheek on his palm; the pale, dim light was full on his face; because of something powerful and intense that shone in his eyes Theirry did not care to look at him.

"Weary of sin and afraid of Heaven ye have come to seek absolution of me," said the Cardinal.

"Yea, if it might be granted me, if by any penitence I might obtain pardon."

Then Theirry, whose gaze was fixed on the ground as he spoke, had an extraordinary vivid impression that the Cardinal was laughing; he looked up quickly, only to behold Luigi Caprarola calm and grave.

A peal of thunder sounded, and the echoes hovered in the chamber.

"The confession must come before the absolution," said the Cardinal. "Tell me, my son, what troubles you."

Theirry shuddered.

“It involves others than myself. . . .”

“The seal of the confession is sacred, and I will ask for no names. Theirry of Dendermonde, kneel here and confess.”

He pointed to the ivory footstool close to his raised seat; Theirry came and humbly knelt.

The curtains fluttered in the hot wind, a flash of lightning darted in between them and mingled with the luminous colour cast by the faint lamps.

The Cardinal took up the gold book and laid it on his knee, his pink silk sleeve almost touched Theirry’s lips . . . his garments gave out a strange and beautiful perfume.

“Tell me of these sins of thine,” he said, half under his breath.

“I must go far back,” answered the penitent in a trembling voice, “for your Eminence to understand my sins—they had small beginnings.”

He paused and fixed his gaze on the Cardinal’s long fair fingers resting across the gold cover of the breviary.

“I was born in Dendermonde,” he said at length. “My father was a clerk who taught me his learning. When he died I came to Courtrai. I was eighteen, ambitious and clever beyond other scholars of my age. I wished above everything to go to one of the colleges. . . .”

He gave a hot sigh, as if he could still recall the passionate throb of that early desire.

“To gain a living I taught the arts I was acquainted with, among others I gave lessons in music to the daughter of a great lord in Courtrai . . . in this manner I came to know her brother, who was a young knight of lusty desires.”

The Cardinal was listening intently; his breathing seemed hardly to stir his robe; the hand on the gilt and turkis cover was very still.

Theirry wiped his damp forehead, and continued—

“He was, as I, restless and impatient with Courtrai . . . but, unlike me, he was innocent, for I,”—he moistened his lips—“I about this time began to practise—black magic.”

The thunder rolled sombrely yet triumphantly round the seven hills, and the first rain dashed against the window.

“Black magic,” repeated the Cardinal, “go on.”

“I read forbidden books that I found in an old library in the house of a Jew whose son I taught—I tried to work spells, to raise spirits; I was very desperate to better myself, I wished to become as Alcuin, as Saint Jerome—nay, as Zerdusht himself, but I was not skilful enough. I could do little or nothing. . . .”

The Cardinal moved slightly; Theirry, in an agony of old bitter memories, torn between horror and ease at uttering these things at last, continued in a low desperate voice—

“The young knight I have spoken of was in love with a mighty lady who came through Courtrai, he wished to follow her to Frankfort, she had given him hopes that she would find him service there—he asked me to bear him company, and I was glad to go . on the journey he told me of his marriage to the daughter of a neighbouring lord—and—though that is no matter here—he knew not if she were alive or dead. but he knew of the place where she had last been known of, and we went thither—it was in the old, half-deserted town of Antwerp. . . .”

“And the young knight hoped to find she was dead,” interrupted the Cardinal. “Was she, I wonder?”

“All the world thought so. It is a strange story, not for my telling; we found the house, and there we met a youth, who told us of the maid’s death and showed us her grave. .

The thunder, coming nearer, shook the palace, and Theirry hid his face in his hands.

“What of this youth?” asked the Cardinal softly, tell me of him.”

“He ruined me—by night he came to me and told of his studies—black magic! black magic! . . . cast spells and raised a devil . . . in a mirror he showed me visions, I swore with him faithful friendship . . . he ruined my soul—he sold some of the goods in the house, and we went together to Basle College.”

“Ye make him out your evil angel,” said the Cardinal. “Who was he?”

“I know not; he was high-born, I think, dainty in ways and pleasant to look upon; my faltering soul was caught by his wiles, for he spoke of great rewards; I know not who he was, man or demon . . . I think he loved me.”

There was a little silence in the chamber, then the Cardinal spoke.

“Loved you?—what makes you think he loved you?”

“Certes, he said so, and acted so . . . we went to Basle College—then, I also thought I loved him . . . he was the only thing in the world I had ever spoken to of my hopes, my desires . . . we continued our experiments . . . our researches were blasphemous, horrible, he was ever more skilful than I . . . then one day I met a lady, and then I knew myself hideous, but that very night I was drawn into the toils again . . . we cast a spell over another student—we were discovered and fled the college.”

A flash of lightning pierced the blue gloom like a sword rending silk; Theirry winced and shuddered as the thunder crashed overhead.

“Does your tale end here?” demanded the Cardinal. “Alas! alas! no; I fell from worse sin to worse sin—we were poor, we met a monk, robbed him of God His moneys, and left him for dead . . . we came to Frankfort and lived in the house of an Egyptian hag, and I began to loathe the youth because the lady was ever in my thoughts, and he hated the lady bitterly because of this; he tempted me to do murder for gain, and I refused for her sake.” Theirry’s voice became hot and passionate. “Then I found that he was tempting her—my saint! but I had no fear that she would fall, and while she spurned him I thought I could also, ay, and I did . . . but she proved no stronger—she loved her steward, and bid him slay his wife: ‘You staked on her virtue,’ the Devil cried to me, ‘and you’ve lost! lost!’ ”

The sobs thickened his voice, and the bitter tears gathered in his beautiful eyes.

“I was the youth’s prey again, but now I hated him for his victory . . . we came back to Frankfort, and he was sweet and soft to me, while I was thinking how I might injure him as he had injured me . . . I dwelt on that picture of—her—dishonoured and undone, and I hated him, so waited my chance, and the night we reached the city I betrayed him for what he was, betrayed him to whom I had sworn friendship . . . well, half the town came howling through the snow to seize him, but we were too late, we found a flaming house . . . it burnt to ashes, he with it . . . I had had my revenge, but it brought me no peace. I left the West and went to the East, to India, Persia, to Greece, I avoided both God and the Devil, I dreaded Hell and dared not hope for Heaven, I tried to forget but could not, I tried to repent but could not. Good and evil strove for me, until the Lord had pity . . . I heard of you, and I have come to Rome to cast myself at your feet, to ask your aid to help throw myself on God His mercy.”

He rose with his hands clasped on his breast and his wild eyes fixed on the white face of Luigi Caprarola; thunder and lightning together were rending the hot air; Theirry’s gorgeous dress glimmered in gold and purple, his face was flushed and exalted.

“God wins, I think, this time,” he said in an unsteady voice. “I have confessed my sins, I will do penance for them, and die at least in peace—God and the angels win!”

The Cardinal rose; with one hand he held to the back of the ivory chair, with the other he clasped the golden book to his breast; the light shining on his red hair showed it in filmy

brightness against the wall of ebony and mother-of-pearl; his face and lips were very pale above the vivid hue of his robe, his eyes, large and dark, stared at Theirry.

Again the lightning flashed between the two, and seemed to sink into the floor at the Cardinal's feet.

He lifted his head proudly and listened to the following mighty roll; when the echoes had quivered again into hot stillness he spoke.

"The Devil and his legions win, I think," he said. "At least they have served Dirk Renswoude well."

Theirry fell back, and back, until he crouched against the gleaming wall.

"Cardinal Caprarola!" he cried fearfully. "Cardinal Caprarola, speak to me! even here I hear the fiends jibe!

The Cardinal stepped from the ebony dais, his stiff robes making a rustling as he walked; he laughed.

"Have I learned a mien so holy my old comrade knows me not? Have I changed so, I who was dainty and pleasant to look upon, your friend and your bane?"

He paused in the centre of the room; the open window, the dark beyond it, the waving curtains, the fierce lightning made a terrific background for his haughty figure.

But Theirry moaned and whispered in his throat. "Look at me," commanded the Cardinal, "look at me well, you who betrayed me, am I not he who gilded a devil one August afternoon in a certain town in Flanders?"

Theirry drew himself up and pressed his clenched hands to his temples.

"Betrayed!" he shrieked. "It is I who am betrayed. I sought God, and have been delivered unto the Devil!"

The thunder crashed so that his words were lost in the great noise of it, the blue and forked lightning darted between them.

"You know me now?" asked the Cardinal.

Theirry slipped to his knees, crying like a child.

"Where is God? where is God?"

The Cardinal smiled.

"He is not here," he answered, "nor in any place where I have been."

An awful stillness fell after the crash of thunder; Theirry hid his face, cowering like a man who feels his back bared to the lash.

"Cannot you look at me?" asked the Cardinal in a half-mournful scorn; "after all these years am I to meet you—thus? At my feet!"

Theirry sprang up, his features mask-like in their unnatural distortion and lifeless hue.

"You do well to taunt me," he answered, "for I am an accursed fool, I have been seeking for what does not exist—God!—ay, now I know that there is no God and no Heaven, therefore what matter for my soul . . . what matter for any of it since the Devil owns us all!"

The storm was renewed with the ending of his speech, and he saw through the open window the vineyards and gardens of the Janiculum Hill blue for many seconds beneath the black sky.

"Your soul!" cried the Cardinal, as before. "Always have you thought too much, and not enough, of that; you served too many masters and not one faithfully; had you been a stronger man you had stayed with your fallen saint, not spurned her, and then avenged her by my betrayal."

He crossed to the window and closed it, the while the lightning picked him out in a fierce flash, and waited until the after-crash had rocked to silence, his eyes all the while not leaving the shrinking, horror-stricken figure of Theirry.

"Well, it is all a long while ago," he said. "And I and you have changed."

"How did you escape that night?" asked Theirry hoarsely; hardly could he believe that this man was Dirk Renswoude, yet his straining eyes traced in the altered older face the once familiar features.

As the Cardinal moved slowly across the gleaming chamber Theirry marked with a horrible fascination the likeness of the haughty priest to the poor student in black magic.

The straight dark hair was now curled, bleached and stained a deep red colour, after the manner of the women of the East; eyes and brows were the same as they had ever been, the first as bright and keen, the last as straight and heavy; his clear skin showed less pallor, his mouth seemed fuller and more firmly set, the upper lip heavily shaded with a dark down, the chin less prominent, but the line of the jaw was as strong and clear as ever; a handsomer face than it had been, a remarkable face, with an expression composed and imperious, with eyes to tremble before.

"I thought you burnt," faltered Theirry.

"The master *I* serve is powerful," smiled the Cardinal. "He saved me then and set me where I am now, the greatest man in Rome—so great a man that did you wish a second time to betray me you might shout the truth in the streets and find no one to believe you."

The lightning darted in vain at the closed window, and the thunder rolled more faintly in the distance.

"Betray you!" cried Theirry, wild-eyed. "No, I bow the knee to the greatest thing I have met, and kiss your hand, your Eminence!"

The Cardinal turned and looked at him over his shoulder.

"I never broke *my* vows," he said softly, "the vows of comradeship I made to you; just now you said you thought I loved you, then, I mean, in the old days . . ."—he paused and his delicate hand crept over his heart—"well, I . . . loved you . . . and it ruined me, as the devils promised. Last night I was warned that you would come to-day and that you would be my bane . . . well, I do not care since you *are* come, for, sir, I love you still."

"Dirk!" cried Theirry.

The Cardinal gazed on him with ardent eyes.

"Do you suppose it matters to me that you are weak, foolish, or that you betrayed me? You are the one thing in all the world I care for. . . . Love! what was your love when you left her at Sebastian's feet?—had she been my lady I had stayed and laughed at all of it. . . ."

"It is not the Devil who has taught you to be so faithful," said Theirry.

For the first time a look of trouble, almost of despair, came into the Cardinal's eyes; he turned his head away.

"You shame me," continued Theirry; "I have no constancy in me; thinking of my own soul, almost have I forgotten Jacobea of Martzburg—and yet

"And yet you loved her."

"Maybe I did—it is long ago."

A bitter little smile curved the Cardinal's lips.

"Is that the way men care for women?" he said. "Certes, not in that manner had I wooed and remembered, had I been a—a—lover."

“Strange that we, meeting here like this, should talk of love! “ cried Theirry, his heart heaving, his eyes dilating, “strange that I, driven round the world by fear of God, that I, coming here to one of God’s own saints, should find myself in the Devil’s net again; come, he has done much for you, what will he do for me?”

The Cardinal smiled sadly.

“Neither God nor Devil will do anything for you, for you are not single-hearted, neither constant to good nor evil; but I—will risk everything to serve your desires.”

Theirry laughed.

“Heaven has cast the world away and we are mad! You, *you* famous as a holy man—did you murder the young Blaise? I will back to India, to the East, and die an idol-worshipper. See yonder crucifix, it hangs upon your walls, but the Christ does not rise to smite you; you handle the Holy Mysteries in the Church and no angel slays you on the altar steps— let me away from Rome!”

He turned to the gilt door, but the Cardinal caught his sleeve.

“Stay,” he said, “stay, and all I promised you in the old days shall come true—do you doubt me? Look about you, see what I have won for myself. . . .”

Theirry’s beautiful face was flushed and wild. “Nay, let me go. . . .”

The last rumble of the thunder crossed their speech.

“Stay, and I will make you Emperor.”

“Oh devil!” cried Theirry, “can you do that?”

“We will rule the world between us; yea, I will make you Emperor, if you will stay in Rome and serve me; I will snatch the diadem from Balthasar’s head and cast his Empress out as I ever meant to do, and you shall bear the sceptre of the Cæsars, oh, my friend, my friend!”

He held out his right hand as he spoke; Theirry caught it, crushed the fingers in his hot grasp and kissed the brilliant rings; the Cardinal flushed and dropped his lids over sparkling eyes.

“You will stay?” he breathed.

“Yea, my sweet fiend, I am yours, and wholly yours; lo! were not rewards such as these better worth crossing the world for than a pardon from God?”

He laughed and staggered back against the wall, his look dazed and reckless; the Cardinal withdrew his hand and crossed to the ivory seat.

“Now, farewell,” he said, “the audience has been over-long; I know where to find you, and in a while I shall send for you; farewell, oh Theirry of Dendermonde!”

He spoke the name with a great tenderness, and his eyes grew soft and misty.

Theirry drew himself together.

“Farewell, oh disciple of Sathanas! I, your humble follower, shall look for fulfilment of your promises.

The Cardinal touched the bell; when the fair youth appeared, he bade him see Theirry from the palace.

Without another word they parted, Theirry with the look of madness on him. . .

When Luigi Caprarola was alone he put his hand over his eyes and swayed backwards as if about to fall, while his breath came in tearing pants . . . with an effort he steadied himself, and, clenching his hands now over his heart, paced up and down the room, his Cardinal’s robe trailing after him, his golden rosary glittering against his knee.

As he struggled for control the gilt door was opened and Paolo Orsini bowed himself into his presence.

“Your Eminence will forgive me,” he began.

The Cardinal pressed his handkerchief to his lips.

"Well, Orsini?"

"A messenger has just come from the Vatican, my lord—"

"Ah!—his Holiness?"

"Was found dead in his sleep an hour ago, your Eminence."

The Cardinal paled and fixed his burning eyes on the secretary.

"Thank you, Orsini; I thought he would not last the spring; well, we must watch the Conclave."

He moved his handkerchief from his mouth and twisted it in his fingers.

The secretary was taking his dismissal, when the Cardinal recalled him.

"Orsini, it is desirable we should have an audience with the Empress, she has many creatures in the Church who must be brought to heel; write to her, Orsini."

"I will, my lord."

The young man withdrew, and Luigi Caprarola stood very still, staring at the gleaming walls of his gorgeous cabinet.

CHAPTER III

THE EMPRESS

Ysabeau, wife of Balthasar of Courtrai and Empress of the West, waited in the porphyry cabinet of Cardinal Caprarola.

It was but little after midday, and the sun streaming through the scarlet and violet colours of the arched window, threw a rich and burning glow over the gilt furniture and the beautiful figure of the woman; she wore a dress of an orange hue; her hair was bound round the temples with a chaplet of linked plates of gold and hung below it in fantastic loops; wrapped about her was a purple mantle embroidered with ornaments in green glass; she sat on a low chair by the window and rested her chin on her hand. Her superb eyes were grave and thoughtful; she did not move from her reflective attitude during the time the haughty priest kept her waiting.

When at last he entered with a shimmer and ripple of purple silks, she rose and bent her head.

"It pleases you to make me attendant on your pleasure, my lord," she said.

Cardinal Caprarola gave her calm greeting.

"My time is not my own," he added. "God His service comes first, lady."

The Empress returned to her seat.

"Have I come here to discuss God with your Eminence?" she asked, and her fair mouth was scornful.

The Cardinal crossed to the far end of the cabinet and slowly took his place in his carved gold chair.

"It is of ourselves we will speak," he said, smiling. "Certes, your Grace will have expected that."

"Nay," she answered. "What is there we have in common, Cardinal Caprarola?"

"Ambition," said his Eminence, "which is known alike to saint and sinner."

Ysabeau looked at him swiftly; he was smiling with lips and eyes, sitting back with an air of ease and power that discomposed her; she had never liked him.

"If your talk be of policy, my lord, it is to the Emperor you should go."

"I think you have as much influence in Rome as your husband, my daughter."

There was a dazzling glitter of coloured light as the Empress moved her jewelled hands.

"It is our *influence* you wish, my lord—certes, a matter for the Emperor."

His large keen eyes never left her face.

"Yea, you understand me."

"Your Eminence desires our support in the Conclave now sitting," she continued haughtily. "But have you ever shown so much duty to us, that we should wish to see you in St. Peter's seat?

She thought herself justified in speaking thus to a man whose greatness had always galled her, for she saw in this appeal for her help an amazing confession of weakness on his part.

But Luigi Caprarola remained entirely composed.

"You have your creatures in the Church," he said, "and you intend one of them to wear the Tiara—there are sixteen Cardinals in the Conclave, and I, perhaps, have half of them. Your Grace, you must see that your faction does not interfere with what these priests desire—my election namely."

"Must?" she repeated, her violet eyes dilating. "Your Eminence has some reputation as a holy man—and you suggest the corruption of the Conclave."

The Cardinal leant forward in his chair.

“I do not play for a saintly fame,” he said, “and as for a corrupted Conclave—your Grace should know corruption, seeing that your art, and your art alone, achieved the election of Balthasar to the German throne.”

Ysabeau stared at him mutely; he gave a soft laugh.

“You are a clever woman,” he continued. “Your husband is the first King of the Germans to hold the Empery of the West for ten years and keep his heel on the home lands as well; but even your wits will scarcely suffice now; Bohemia revolts, and Basil stretches greedy fingers from Ravenna, and to keep the throne secure you desire a man in the Vatican who is Balthasar’s creature.”

The Empress rose and placed her hand on the gilded ribbing of the window-frame.

“Your Eminence shows some understanding,” she flashed, pale beneath her paint; “we gained the West, and we will keep the West, so you see, my lord, why my influence will be *against* you, not with you, in the Conclave.”

The Cardinal laid his hand lightly over his heart.

“Your Grace speaks boldly—you think me your enemy?”

“You declare yourself hostile, my lord.”

“Nay, I may be a good friend to you—in St. Peter’s.”

She smiled.

“The Conclave have not declared their decision yet, your Eminence; you are a great prince, but the Imperial party have some power.”

The Cardinal sat erect, and his intense eyes quelled her despite herself.

“Some power—which I ask you to exert in my behalf.”

She looked away, though angry with herself that his gaze overawed her.

“You have declared your ambition, my lord; your talents and your wealth we know—you are too powerful already for us to tolerate you as master in Rome.”

“Again you speak boldly,” smiled the Cardinal. “Perhaps too boldly—I think you will yet help me to the Tiara.”

Ysabeau gave a quick glance at his pale, handsome face framed in the red hair.

“Do you seek to bribe me, my lord?” She remembered the vast riches of this man and their own empty treasury.

“Nay,” said Luigi Caprarola, still smiling. “I threaten.”

“Threaten!” At once she was tempestuous, panting, furious; the jewels on her breast sparkled with her hastened breathing.

“I threaten that I will make you an outcast in the streets unless you serve mc well.”

She was the tiger-cat now, ready to turn at bay, Marozia Porphyrogentris of Byzantium.

“I know that of you,” said the Cardinal, “that once revealed, would make the Emperor hurl you from his side.”

She sucked in her breath and waited. “Melchoir of Brabant died by poison and by witchcraft.”

“All the world knows that”—her eyes were long and evil; “he was bewitched by a young doctor of Frankfort College who perished for the deed.”

The Cardinal looked down at the hand on his lap.

“Yea, that young doctor brewed the potion—you administered it.”

Ysabeau took a step forward into the room. “You lie . . . I am not afraid of you—you lie most utterly. . . .”

Luigi Caprarola sprang to his feet.

“Silence, woman! speak not so to me! It is the truth, and I can prove it!”

She bent and crouched; the plates of gold on her hair shook with her trembling.

"You cannot prove it"—the words were forced from her quivering throat; "who are you that you should dare this—should know this?"

The Cardinal still stood and dominated her.

"Do you recall a youth who was scrivener to your Chamberlain and friend of the young doctor of rhetoric—Theirry his name, born of Dendermonde?"

"Yea, he is now dead or in the East. . . ."

"He is alive, and in Rome. He served you well once, Empress, when he came to betray his friend, and you were quick to seize the chance—it suited him then to truckle to you . . . I think he was afraid *of* you . . . he is not now; *he* knows, and if I bid him he will speak."

"And what is his bare word against my oath and the Emperor's love?"

"I am behind his word—I and all the power of the Church."

Ysabeau answered swiftly.

"I am not of a nation easily cowed, my lord, nor are the people of our blood readily trapped—I can tear your reputed saintship to rags by spreading abroad this tale of how you tried to bargain with me for the Popedom."

The Cardinal smiled in a way she did not care to see.

"But first I say to the Emperor—your wife slew your friend that she might be your wife, your friend Melchoir of Brabant—you loved him better than you loved the woman—will you not avenge him now?"

The Empress pressed her clenched hands against her heart and, with an effort, raised her eyes to her accuser's masterful face.

"My lord's love against it all," she said hoarsely. "He knows Melchoir's murderer perished in Frank-fort in the flames, he knows that I am innocent, and he will laugh at you—weave what tissue of falsehoods you will, sir, I do defy you, and will do no bargaining to set you in the Vatican."

The Cardinal rested his finger-tips on the arm of the chair, and looked down at them with a deepening smile.

"You speak," he answered, "as one whom I can admire—it requires great courage to put the front you do on guilt—but I have certain knowledge of what I say; come, I will prove to you that you cannot deceive me—you came first to the house of a certain witch in Frankfort on a day in August, a youth opened the door and took you into a room at the back that looked on to a garden growing dark red roses; you wore, that day, a speckled green mask and a green gown edged with fur."

He raised his eyes and looked at her; she moved back against the wall, and outspread her hands either side her on the gleaming porphyry.

"You threatened the youth as I threaten you now—you knew that he had been driven from Basle College for witchcraft, even as I know you compassed the death of your first husband, and you asked him to help you, even as I ask you to help me now."

"Oh!" cried the Empress; she brought her hands to her lips. "How can you know this?"

The Cardinal reseated himself in his gold chair and marked with brilliant, merciless eyes the woman struggling to make a stand against him.

"Hugh of Rooselaare died," he said with sudden venom—"died basely for justly accusing you, and so shall you die—basely—unless you aid me in the Conclave."

He watched her very curiously; he wondered how soon he would utterly break her courage, what new turn her defiance would take; he almost expected to see her at his feet.

For a few seconds she was silent; then she came a step nearer; the veins stood out on her forehead and neck; she held her hands by her side—they were very tightly clenched, but her beautiful eyes were undaunted.

"Cardinal Caprarola," she said, "you ask me to use my influence to bring about your election to the Popedom—knowing you as I know you now I cannot fail to see you are a man who would stop at nought . . . if I help you I shall help my husband's enemy—once you are in the Vatican, how long will you tolerate him in Rome? You will be no man's creature, and, I think, no man's ally—what chance shall we have in Rome once you are master? Sylvester was old and meek, he let Balthasar hold the reins—will you do that?"

"Nay," smiled the Cardinal. "I shall be no puppet Pope."

"I knew it," answered the Empress with a deep breath; "will you swear to keep my husband in his place?"

"That will not I," said Luigi Caprarola. "If it please me I will hurl him down and set one of my own followers up. I have no love for Balthasar of Courtrai."

Ysabeau's face hardened with hate.

"But you think he can help you to the Tiara—"

"Through you, lady—you can tell him I am his friend, his ally, what you will—or you may directly influence the Cardinals, I care not, so the thing be done; what I shall do if it be not done, I have said."

The Empress twisted her fingers together and suddenly laughed.

"You wish me to deceive my lord to his ruin, you wish me to place his enemy over him—now, when we are harassed, here and in Germany, you wish me to do a thing that may bring his fortunes to the dust— why, you are not so cunning, my lord, if you think you can make me the instrument of Balthasar's down-fall!"

The Cardinal looked at her with curiosity.

"Nevertheless your Grace will do it—sooner than let me say what I can say."

She held up her head and smiled in his face. "Then you are wrong; neither threats nor bribery can make me do this thing—say what you will to the Emperor, I am secure in his good affections; blight my fame and turn him against me if you can, I am not so mean a woman that fear can make me betray the fortunes of my husband and my son."

The Cardinal lowered his eyes; he was very pale.

"You dare death," he said, "a shameful death—if my accusation be proved—as proved it shall be."

The Empress looked at him over her shoulder. "Dare death!" she cried. "You say I have dared Hell for—him!—shall I be afraid, then, of paltry death?"

Luigi Caprarola's breast heaved beneath the vivid silk of his robe.

"Of what *are* you afraid?" he asked.

"Of nothing save evil to my lord."

The Cardinal's lids drooped; he moistened his lips.

"This is your answer?"

"Yea, your Eminence; all the power I possess shall go to prevent you mounting the throne you covet so—and now, seeing you have that answer I will leave, my courtiers grow weary in your halls."

She moved to the door, her limbs trembling beneath her, her brow cold, her hands chilled and moist, and her heart shivering in her body, yet with a regal demeanour curbing and controlling her fear.

As she opened it the Cardinal turned his head. “Give me a little longer, your Grace,” he said softly. I have yet something to say.”

She reclosed the door and stood with her back against it.

“Well, my lord?”

“You boast you are afraid of nothing—certes, I wonder—you defy me boldly and something foolishly in this matter of your guilt; will you be so bold in the matter of your innocence?”

He leant forward in his chair to gaze at her; she waited silently, with challenging eyes.

“You are very loyal to your husband, you will not endanger your son’s possible heritage; these things, you tell me, are more to you than shame or death; your lord is Emperor of the West, your son King of the Romans—well, well—you are too proud—”

“Nay,” she flashed, “I am not too proud for the wife of Balthasar of Courtrai and the mother of a line of Emperors—we are the founders of our house, and it shall be great to rule the world.”

The Cardinal was pale and scornful, his narrowed eyes and curving mouth expressed bitterness—and passion.

“Here is the weapon shall bring you to your knees,” he said, “and make your boasting die upon your lips—you are not the wife of Balthasar, and the only heritage your son will ever have is the shame and weariness of the outcast.”

She gathered her strength to meet this wild enormity. “Not his wife . . . why, you rave . . . we were married before all Frankfort . . . not Balthasar’s wife!

The Cardinal rose; his head was held very erect; he looked down on her with an intense gaze.

“Your lord was wed before.”

“Yea, I know . . . what of it?

“This—Ursula of Rooselaare lives!

Ysabeau gave a miserable little cry and turned about as if she would fall; she steadied herself with a great effort and faced the Cardinal desperately.

“She died in a convent at Flanders—this is not the *truth—”*

“Did I not speak truth before?” he demanded. “In the matter of Melchoir.”

A cry was wrung from the Empress.

“Ursula of Rooselaare died in Antwerp,” she repeated wildly—“in the convent of the White Sisters.”

“She did not, and Balthasar knows she did not—he thinks she died thereafter, he thinks he saw her grave, but he would find it empty—she lives, she is in Rome, and she is his wife, his Empress, before God and man.”

“How do you know this?” She made a last pitiful attempt to brave him, but the terrible Cardinal had broken her strength; the horror of the thing he said had chilled her blood and choked her heart-beats.

“The youth who helped you once, the doctor Constantine . . . from him Balthasar obtained the news of his wife’s death, for Ursula and he were apprenticed to the same old master—ask Balthasar if this be not so—well, the youth lied, for purposes of his own; the maid lived then, and is living now, and if I choose it she will speak.”

“It is not possible,” shuddered the Empress; “no—you wish to drive me mad, and so you torture me—why did not this woman speak before?”

The Cardinal smiled.

“She did not love her husband as you do, lady, and so preferred her liberty; you should be grateful.”

“Alive, you say,” whispered Ysabeau, unheeding, “and in Rome? But none would know her, she could *not* prove she was—his—Ursula of Rooselaare.”

“She has his ring,” answered Luigi Caprarola, “and her wedding deeds, signed by him and by the priest—there are those at Rooselaare who know her, albeit it is near twenty years since she was there; also she hath the deposition of old Master Lukas that she was a supposed nun when she came to him, and in reality the wife of Balthasar of Courtrai; she can prove no one lies buried in the garden of Master Lukas’s house, and she can bring forward sisters of the Order to which she belonged to show she did not die on her wedding day—this and further proof can she show.”

The Empress bowed her head on her breast and put her hand over her eyes.

“She came to you—sir, with . . . this tale?”

“That is for me to say or not as I will.”

“She must be silenced! By Christus His Mother she must be silent!”

“Secure me the casting vote in the Conclave and she will never speak.”

“I have said. I . . . cannot, for his sake, for my son’s sake—”

“Then I will bring forth Ursula of Rooselaare, and she shall prove herself the Emperor’s wife—then instantly must you leave him, or both of you will be excommunicated—your alternative will be to stay and be his ruin or go to obscurity, never seeing his face again; your son will no longer be King of the Romans, but a nameless wanderer—spurned and pitied by those who should be his subjects—and another woman will sit by Balthasar’s side on the throne of the West!”

The Empress set her shoulders against the door.

“And if my lord be loyal to me as I to him—to me and to my son—”

“Then will he be hounded from his throne, cast out by the Church and avoided by men; will not Lombardy be glad to turn against him and Bohemia?”

For a little while she was silent, and the Cardinal also as he looked at her, then she raised her eyes to meet his; steadily now she kept them at the level of his gaze, and her base, bold blood served her well in the manner of her speech.

“Lord Cardinal,” she said, “you have won; before you, as before the world, I stand Balthasar’s wife, nor can you fright me from that proud station by telling of—this impostor; yet, I am afraid of you; I dare not come to an issue with you, Luigi Caprarola, and to buy your silence on these matters I will secure your election—and afterwards you and my lord shall see who is the stronger.”

She opened the door, motioning him to silence.

“My lord, no more,” she cried. “Believe me, I can be faithful to my word when I am afraid to break it . . . and be you silent about this woman Ursula.” The Cardinal came from his seat towards her.

“We part as enemies,” he answered, “but I kiss the hem of your gown, Empress, for you are brave as you are beautiful.”

He gracefully lifted the purple robe to his lips.

“And above all things do I admire a constant woman;” his voice was strangely soft.

Her face, cold, imperial beneath the shining gold and glittering hair, did not change.

“But, alas, you hate me!” he suddenly laughed, raising his eyes to her.

“To-day I cannot speak further with you, sir.”

She moved away, steadying her steps with difficulty; the two chamberlains in the ante-chamber rose as she stepped out of the cabinet.

“Benedictus, my daughter,” smiled the Cardinal, and closed the door.

His face was flushed and bright with triumph; there was a curious expression in his eyes; he went to the window and looked out on purple Rome.

"How she loves him still!" he said aloud; "yet— why do I wonder?—is he not as fair a man as—"

He broke off, then added reflectively, "Also, she is beautiful."

His long fingers felt among his silk robes; he drew forth a little mirror and gazed at his handsome face with the darkened upper lip and tonsured head.

As he looked he smiled, then presently laughed.

CHAPTER IV

THE DANCER IN ORANGE

Theirry walked slowly through the gorgeous ruins of Imperial Rome; it was something after noon and glowingly hot; the Tiber curled in and about the stone houses and broken palaces like a bronze and golden serpent, so smooth and glittering it was.

He followed the river until it wound round the base of Mount Aventine; and there he paused and looked up at the Emperor's palace, set splendidly on the hill.

Above the dazzling marble floated the German standard, vivid against the vivid sky, and Frankish guards were gathered thick about the magnificent portals.

The noble summit of Soracté dominated the distance and the city; over the far-off Campagna quivered a dancing vapour of heat; the little boats on the Tiber rested lazily in their clear reflections, and their coloured sails drooped languidly.

Theirry marked with a vacant gaze the few passersby; the mongrel crowd of Rome—Slav, Frank, Jew or Greek, with here and there a Roman noble in a chariot, or a German knight on horseback.

He was not considering them, but Cardinal Caprarola.

Several days now he had been in the city, but there had come no message from the Cardinal; a dozen times he had gone over every word, every little incident of his strange interview in the palace on the Palatine with a wild desire to assure himself of its truth; had he not been promised the Imperial crown?—impossible that seemed, yet no more impossible than that Dirk Renswoude should have become a Prince of the Church and the greatest man in Rome.

He could not think of those two as the same; different forms of the same devil, but not actually the same man, the same flesh and blood . . . black magic! . . . it was a terrible thing and a wonderful; if he had served the fiend better what might it not have done for him, what might not it still do? Neither could he understand Dirk's affection or tenderness; even after the betrayal his one-time comrade was faithful to those long-ago vows. .

He looked at the Golden Palace on the Aventine—Emperor of the West!

Balthasar reigned there now . . . well, why not he? . . . with the Devil as an ally . . . and there was no God.

His beautiful face grew sombre with thought; he walked thoughtfully round the base of the hill, remarked by those coming and going from the palace for his splendid appearance and rich Eastern dress.

A little Byzantine chariot, gilt, with azure curtains and drawn by a white horse, came towards him; the occupant was a lady in a green dress; the grooms ran either side the horse's head to assist it up the hill; the chariot passed Theirry at a walking pace.

The lady was unveiled, and the sun was full on her face.

It was Jacobea of Martzburg.

She did not see him; her car continued its slow way towards the palace, and Theirry stood staring after it.

He had last seen her ten years, and more, ago, in her steward's arms in the courtyard of Castle Martzburg; beyond them Sebastian's wife. . . .

He wondered if she had married the steward, and smiled to think that he had once considered her a saint; ten years ago, and he had not yet learnt his lesson; many men had he met and none holy, many women and none saintly, and yet he had been fool enough to come to Rome because he believed God was triumphant in the person of Luigi Caprarola. . . .

A fool's reward had been his; Heaven's envoy had proved the Devil incarnate, and he had been mocked with the sight of the woman for whose sake he had made pitiful attempts to be clean-souled; the woman who had, for another man's love, defied the angels and taken her fate into her own hands.

For another man's sake!—this the bitterest thought of all bitter thoughts yet—and yet—he did not know if he had ever loved her, or only the sweet purity she was a false symbol of—he was sure of nothing. This way and that his mind went, ever hesitating, ever restless—his heart was ready as water to take the colour of what passed it, and his soul was as a straw before the breath of good and evil.

The sound of cymbals and laughter roused him from his agitated thoughts.

He looked along the road that wound by the Tiber and saw a little crowd approaching, evidently following a troupe of jugglers or mountebanks.

As they came nearer to where he loitered, Theirry, ever easily attracted by any passing excitement or attraction, could not choose but give them a half-sullen attention.

The centre of the group was a girl in an orange gown, they who followed her the mere usual citizens of Rome, some courtiers of the Emperor's, soldiers, merchants' clerks, and the rabble of children, lazy mongrel foreigners and Franks.

The dancer stopped and spread a scarlet carpet on the roadway; the crowd gathered about it in a circle, and Theirry drew up with the rest, interested by what interested them—the two facts, namely, that marked the girl as different from her kind.

Firstly, she affected the unusual modesty or coquetry of a black mask that completely covered her face, and, secondly, she was attended only by an enormous and hideous ape.

She wore a short robe in the antique style, girdled under her bosom, and fastened on her shoulders with clasps of gold; gilt sandals, closely laced, concealed her feet and ankles; round her bust and arms was twisted a gauze scarf of the same hue as her gown, a deep, bright orange, and her hair, which was a dark red gold, was gathered on the top of her head in a cluster of curls, and bound with a violet fillet.

Although the mask concealed her charms of face, it was obvious that she was young, and probably Greek; her figure was tall, full, and splendidly graceful; she held a pair of brass cymbals and struck them with a stormy joyousness above her proud head.

The ape, wearing a collar of bright red stones and a long blue jacket trimmed with spangles, curled himself on the corner of the carpet and went to sleep.

The girl began dancing; she had no music save her cymbals, and needed none.

Her movements were quick, passionate, triumphant; she clashed the brass high in the air and leapt to meet the fierce sound; her gold-shod feet twinkled like jewels, the clinging skirt showed

the beautiful lines of her limbs, and the gauze floating back revealed her fair white arms and shoulders.

Suddenly she lowered the cymbals, struck them together before her breast, and looked from right to left.

Theirry caught the gleam of her dark eyes through the holes in her mask.

For a while she crouched together, panting, then drew herself erect, and let her hands fall apart.

The burning sun shone in her hair, in the metal hems of her robe, in her sandals, and changed the cymbals into discs of fire.

She began to sing; her voice was deep and glorious, though muffled by the mask.

Slowly she moved round the red carpet, and the words of her song fell clearly on the hot air.

"If Love were all!
  His perfect servant I would be,
Kissing where his foot might fall,
  Doing him homage on a lowly knee,
    If Love were all!

If Love were all!
  And no such thing as Pride nor Empery,
Nor, God, nor sins or great or small,
    If Love were all!

She passed Theirry, so close, her fluttering robe touched his slack hand; he looked at her curiously, for he thought he knew her voice; he had heard many women sing, in streets and in palaces, and, somewhere, this one.

"If Love were all!
  But Love is weak,
And Hate oft giveth him a fall,
  And Wisdom smites him on the cheek,
    If Love were all!

If Love were all!
  I had lived glad and meek,
Nor heard Ambition call
And Valour speak,
    If Love were all!

The song ended as it had begun on a clash of cymbals; the dancer swung round, stamped her foot and called fiercely to the ape, who leapt up and began running round the crowd, offering a shell and making an ugly jabbering noise.

Theirry flung the hideous thing a silver bezant and moved away; he was thinking, not of the dancer with the unknown memory in her voice, but of the lady in the gilt chariot behind the azure curtains how little she had changed!

A burst of laughter made him look round; he saw a quick picture: the girl's orange dress flashing in the strong sunlight, the ape on her shoulder hurling the contents of the shell in the air, which glittered for a second with silver pieces, and the jesting crowd closing round both.

He passed on moodily into the centre of the town; in the unrest and agitation of his thoughts he had determined to seek Cardinal Caprarola, since the Cardinal gave no sign of sending for him,

even of remembering him; but to-day it was useless to journey to the Palace on the Palatine, for the Conclave sat in the Vatican, and the Cardinal would be of their number.

The streets, the wine shops, the public squares were full of a mixed and excited mob; the adherents of the Emperor, who wished to see a German pontiff, and they who were ardent Romans or Churchmen came, here and there, to open brawls; the endless processions that crossed and re-crossed from the various monasteries and churches were interrupted by the lawless jeers of the Frankish inhabitants, who, under a strong Emperor and a weak Pope, had begun to assume the bearing of conquerors.

Theirry left them all, too concerned, as always, in his own small affairs to have any interest in larger issues; he turned into the Via Sacra, and there, under the splendid but broken arch of Constantine, he saw again the dancing girl and her ape.

She looked at him intently; of that he could have no doubt, despite her mask, and, as he turned his hesitating steps towards the Palatine, she rose and followed him.

As he ascended the narrow grey road that wound above the city, he kept looking over his shoulder, and she was always there, following, with the ape on her shoulder.

They passed scattered huts, monasteries, decaying temples and villas, and came out on to the deserted stretches of the upper Palatine, where the fragmentary glories of another world lay under the cypress and olive trees.

Here Theirry paused, and again looked, half fearfully, for the bright figure of the dancer.

She stood not far from him, leaning against a slender shaft of marble, the sole remaining column of a temple to some heathen god; behind it a blue-green grove of cypress arose, and behind them the city lay wrapt in the sparkling mist of noonday, through which, at intervals, gleamed the dusky waters of the Tiber.

The mighty walls showed brown and dark against the houses they enclosed, and the dusty vineyards scorched in the sun that blazed on the lantern of St. Peter and the angel on Castel del' Angelo.

The stillness of great heat was over city and ruins, noiseless butterflies fluttered over the shattered marble, and pale narcissi quivered in the deep grass; the sky, a bronze gold over the city and about the mountainous horizon, was overhead a deep and burning blue; a colour that seemed reflected in the clusters of violets that grew about the fallen masonry.

Theirry flung himself on a low marble seat that stood in the shade of a cypress, and his blood-red robe was vivid even in the shadow; he looked at the veiled city at his feet, and at the dancing girl resting against the time-stained, moss-grown column.

She loosened the cymbals from her hands and flung them on the ground; the ape jumped from her shoulder and caught them up.

Again she sang her passionate little song.

"If Love were all!
  His faithful servant I would be,
Kissing where his foot might fall,
  Doing him homage on a lowly knee,
    If Love were all!"

As she sang, another and very different scene was suddenly brought to Theirry's mind; he remembered a night when he had slept on the edge of a pine forest, in Germany—many years ago—and had suddenly awoke—nay, he had dreamt he heard singing, and a woman's singing . . . if it were not so mad a thought he would have said—this woman's singing.

He turned bitter, dark eyes towards her—why had she followed him?

Swiftly and lightly she came across the grass, glittering from head to foot in the sunlight, and paused before him.

"Certes, you should be in Rome to-day," she said. "The Conclave come to their decision this afternoon; do you wish to hear it announced from the Vatican?"

"Nay," smiled Theirry. "I would rather see you dance."

Her answer was mocking.

"You care nothing for my dancing—I would wager to stir any man in Rome sooner than you!"

Theirry flushed.

"Why did you follow me?" he asked in a half-indifferent dislike.

She seated herself on the other end of his marble bench.

"My reasons are better than my dancing, and would, could I speak them, have more effect on you."

The light hot wind ruffled back the gauze from her beautiful arms and shoulders; her bright hair and masked face were in shadow, but her gold-sandalled foot, which rested lightly on the wild, sweet violets, blazed in the sunshine.

Theirry looked at her foot as he answered—

"I am a stranger to Rome and know not its customs, but if you are what you seem you can have no serious reason in following me."

The dancing girl laughed.

"A stranger! then that is why you are the only man in Rome not waiting eagerly to know who the new Pope will be."

"It is curious for a wandering minstrel to have such interest in holy matters," said Theirry.

She leant towards him across the length of the bench, and the perfume of her orange garments mingled with the odour of the violets.

"Take me for something other than I appear," she replied, in a mournful and passionate voice. "In being here I risk an unthinkable fate—I stake the proudest hopes . . . the fairest fortune. . . ."

"Who are you?" cried Theirry. "Why are you masked?"

She drew back instantly, and her tone changed to scorn again.

"When there are many pilgrims in Rome the monks bid us poor fools wear masks, lest, with our silly faces, we lure souls away from God."

Theirry stared at the proud city beneath him. "Could I find God," he said bitterly, "no fair face should beguile me away—but God is bound and helpless, I think, at the Devil's chair."

The dancer crushed her bright foot down on the violets.

"I cannot imagine," she said intensely, "how a man can spend his life looking for God and saving his own soul—is not the world beautiful enough to outweigh heaven?"

Theirry was silent.

The dancing girl laughed softly.

"Are you thinking of—her?" she asked.

He turned with a start.

"Thinking of whom?" he demanded.

"The lady in the Byzantine chariot—Jacobea of Martzburg."

He sprang up.

"Who are you, and what do you know of me?"

"This, at least—that you have not forgotten her!— Yet you would be Emperor, too, would you not?"

Theirry drew back from her stretched along the marble seat, until his crimson robe touched the dark trunks of the cypress trees.

"Ye are some witch," he said.

"I come from Thessaly, where we have skill in magic," she answered.

And now she sat erect, her yellow dress casting a glowing reflection into the marble.

"And I tell you this," she added passionately. "If you would be Emperor, let that woman be—she will do nought for you—let her go!—this is a warning, Theirry of Dendermonde!"

His face flushed, his eyes sparkled.

"Have I a chance of wearing the Imperial crown?" he cried. "May I—I, rule the West?—Tell me that, witch!"

She whistled the ape to her side.

"I am no witch—but I can warn you to think no more of Jacobea of Martzburg."

He answered hotly.

"I love not to hear her name on your tongue; she is nothing to me; I need not your warning."

The dancer rose.

"For your own sake forget her, Theirry of Dendermonde, and you may be indeed Emperor of the West and Cæsar of the Romans."

The gold gleaming on her robe, her sandals, in her hair, confused and dazzled him, the hideous ape gave him a pang of terror.

"How came you by your knowledge?" he asked, and clutched the cypress trunk.

"I read your fortune in your eyes," she answered. "We in Thessaly have skill in these things, as I have said. . . . Look at the city beneath us—is it not worth much to reign in it?"

The gold vapour that lay about the distant hills seemed to be resolving into heavy, menacing clouds.

Theirry, following the direction of her slender pointing finger, gazed at the city and saw the clouds beyond.

"A storm gathers," he said, and knew not why he shivered suddenly until his pearl earrings tinkled on the collar round his neck.

The dancer laughed, wildly and musically.

"Come with me to the Piazza of St. Peter," she said, "and you shall hear strange words."

With that she caught hold of his blood-red garments and drew him towards the city.

The perfume from her dress and her hair stole into his nostrils; the hem of her tunic made a delicate sound as it struck her sandals, the violet ribbon in her fillet touched his face . . . he hated the black, expressionless mask; he had strange thoughts under her touch, but he came silently.

As they went down the road that wound through the glorious desolation Theirry heard the sound of pattering feet, and looked over his shoulder.

It was the ape who followed them; he walked on his hind legs . . . how tall he was!—Theirry had not thought him so large, nor of such a human semblance.

The dancer was silent, and Theirry could not speak; when they entered the city gates the dun-coloured clouds had swallowed up the gold vapour and half covered the sky; as they crossed the Tiber and neared the Vatican the last beams of the sun disappeared under the shadow of the oncoming storm.

Enormous crowds were gathered in the Piazza of St. Peter; it seemed as if all Rome had assembled there; many faces were turned towards the sky, and the sudden gloom that had overspread the city seemed to infect the people, for they were mostly silent, even sombre.

The enormous and terrible ape cleared an easy way for himself through the crowd, and Theirry and the dancing girl followed until they had pushed through the press of people and found themselves under the windows of the Vatican.

The heavy, ominous clouds gathered and deepened like a pall over the city; black, threatening shapes rolled up from behind the Janiculum Hill, and the air became fiery with the sense of impending tempest.

Suspense, excitement and the overawing aspect of the sky kept the crowd in a whispering stillness.

Theirry heard the dancing girl laugh; she was thrust up close against him in the press, and, although tall, was almost smothered by a number of Frankish soldiers pressing together in front of her.

"I cannot see," she said—"not even the window—"

He, with an instinct to assist her, and an impulse to use his strength, caught her round the waist and lifted her up.

For a second her breast touched his; he felt her heart beating violently behind her thin robe, and an extraordinary sensation took possession of him.

Occasioned by the touch of her, the sense of her in his arms, there was communicated, as if from her heart to his, a high and rapturous passion; it was the most terrible and the most splendid feeling he had ever known, at once an agony and a delight such as he had never dreamed of before; unconsciously he gave an exclamation and loosened his hold. She slipped to the ground with a stifled and miserable cry.

"Let me alone," he said wildly. "Let me alone

"Who are you?" he whispered excitedly, and tried to catch hold of her again; but the great ape came between them, and the seething crowd roughly pushed him.

Cardinal Maria Orsini had stepped out on to one of the balconies of the Vatican; he looked over the expectant crowd, then up at the black and angry sky, and seemed for a moment to hesitate.

When he spoke his words fell into a great stillness.

"The Sacred College has elected a successor to St. Peter in the person of Louis of Dendermonde, Abbot of the Brethren of the Sacred Heart in Paris, Bishop of Ostia and Cardinal Caprarola, who will ascend the Papal throne under the name of Michael II."

He finished; the cries of triumph from the Romans, the yells of rage from the Franks were drowned in a sudden and awful peal of thunder; the lightning darted across the black heavens and fell on the Vatican and Castel San' Angelo. The clouds were rent in two behind the temple of Mars the Avenger, and a thunderbolt fell with a hideous crash into the Forum of Augustus.

Theirry, whipped with terror, turned with the frightened crowd to flee . . . he heard the dancing girl laugh, and tried to snatch at her orange garments, but she swept by him and was lost in the surge.

Rome quivered under the onslaught of the thunder, and the lightning alone lit the murky, hot gloom.

"The reign of Antichrist has begun!" shrieked Theirry, and laughed insanely.

CHAPTER V

THE POPE

The chamber in the Vatican was so dimly, richly lit with jewelled and deep-coloured lamps that at first Theirry thought himself alone.

He looked round and saw silver walls hung with tapestries of violet and gold; pillars with columns of sea-green marble and capitals of shining mosaic supported a roof encrusted with jasper and jade; the floor, of Numidian marble, was spread with Indian silk carpets; here and there stood crystal bowls of roses, white and crimson, fainting in the close, sweet air.

At the far end of the room was a dais hung with brocade in which flowers and animals shone in gold and silver on a purple ground; gilt steps, carved and painted, led up to a throne on the dais, and Theirry, as his eyes became used to the wine-coloured gloom, saw that some one sat there; some one so splendidly robed and so still that it seemed more like one of the images Theirry had seen worshipped in Constantinople than a human being.

He shivered.

Presently he could discern intense eyes looking at him out of a dazzle of dark gold and shimmering shadowed colours.

Michael II moved in his seat.

"Again do you not know me?" he asked in a low tone.

"You sent for me," said Theirry; to himself his voice sounded hoarse and unnatural. "At last—"

"At last?"

"I have been waiting—you have been Pope thirty days, and never have you given me a sign."

"Is thirty days so long?"

Theirry came nearer the enthroned being.

"You have done nothing for me—you spoke of favours."

Silver, gold and purple shook together as Michael II turned in his gorgeous chair.

"Favours!" he echoed. "You are the only man in Christendom who would stand in my presence; the Emperor kneels to kiss my foot."

"The Emperor does not know," shuddered Theirry; "but I do—and knowing, I cannot kneel to you . . . Ah, God!—how can you dare it?"

The Pope's soft voice came from the shadows. "Your moods change—first this, then that; what humour are you in now, Theirry of Dendermonde; would you still be Emperor?"

Theirry put his hand to his brow.

"Yea, you know it—why do you torture me with suspense, with waiting? If Evil is to be my master, let me serve him . . . and be rewarded."

Michael II answered swiftly.

"I was not the one to be faithless to our friendship, nor shall I now shrink from serving you, at any cost—be you but true."

"In what way can I be false?" asked Theirry bitterly. "I, a thing at your mercy?"

The Pope held back the blossom-strewn brocade so that he could see the other's face.

"I ask of you to let Jacobea of Martzburg be."

Theirry flushed.

"How ye have always hated her! . . . since I came to Rome I have seen her the once."

The Pope's smooth pale face showed a stain of red from the dim beams of one of the splendid lamps; Theirry observed it as he leant forward.

"She did not marry her steward," he said.

The Pope's eyes narrowed.

"Ye have been at the pains to discover that?"

Theirry laughed mournfully.

"You have won! you, sitting where you sit now, can afford to mock at me; at my love, at my hope—both of which I placed once at stake on—her—and lost! . . . and lost! Ten years ago—but having again seen her, sometimes I must think of her, and that she was not vile after all, but only trapped by you, as I have been . . . Sebastian went to Palestine, and she has gone unwed."

The Pope gave a quick sigh and bit his lip.

"I will make you Emperor," he said. "But that woman shall not be your Empress."

Again Theirry laughed.

"Did I love her even, which I do not—I would put her gladly aside to sit on the Imperial throne!—Come, I have dallied long enough on the brink of devilry—let me sin grandly now, and be grandly paid!"

Michael II gave so quick a breath the jewels on his breast scattered coloured light.

"Come nearer to me," he commanded, "and take my hand—as you used to, in Frankfort . . . I am always Dirk to you—you who never cared for me, hated me, I think—oh, the traitors our hearts are, neither God nor devil is so fierce to fight

Theirry approached the gold steps; the Pope leant down and gave him his cool white hand, heavy with gemmed rings, and looked intently into his eyes.

"When they announced your election—how the storm smote the city," whispered Theirry fearfully; were you not daunted?"

The Pope withdrew his hand.

"I was not in the Conclave," he said in a strange tone. "I lay sick in my villa—as for the storm—"

"It has not lifted since," breathed Theirry; "day and night have the clouds hung over Rome—is not there, after all, a God?"

"Silence!" cried the Pope in a troubled voice.

"You would be Emperor of the West, would you not?—let us speak of that."

Theirry leant against the arm of the throne and stared with an awful fascination into the other's face.

"Ay, let us speak of that," he answered wildly; "can all your devilries accomplish it? It is common talk in Rome that you secured your election by Frankish influence because you vowed to league with Balthasar—they say you are his ally—"

The dark intense eyes of Michael II glittered and glowed.

"Nevertheless I will cast him down and set you in his place—he comes to-day to ask my aid against Lombardy and Bohemia; and therefore have I sent for you that you may overhear this audience, and see how I mate and checkmate an Emperor for your sake."

As he spoke, he pointed to the other end of the room where hung a sombre and rich curtain.

"Conceal yourself—behind that tapestry—and listen carefully to what I say, and you will understand how I may humble Balthasar and shake him from his throne."

Theirry, not joyous nor triumphant, but agitated and trembling with a horrible excitement, crept across the room and passed silently behind the arras.

As the long folds shook into place again the Pope touched a bell.

Paolo Orsini entered.

"Admit the Emperor."

The secretary withdrew; there was a soft sound in the ante-chamber, the voices of priests.

Michael II put his hand to his heart and fetched two or three quick panting breaths; his full lips curved to a strange smile, and a stranger thought was behind it; a thought that, if expressed, would not have been understood even by Theirry of Dendermonde, who of all men knew most of his Holiness.

This it was—

"Did ever lady meet her lord like this before, or like this use him to advance her love!"

A heavy tread sounded without, and the Emperor advanced into the splendid glooms of the audience-chamber.

He was bare-headed, and at sight of the awe-inspiring figure, went on his knees at the foot of the dais.

Michael II looked at him in silence; the silver door was closed, and they were alone, save for the unseen listener behind the arras.

At last the Pope said slowly—

"Arise, my son."

The Emperor stood erect, showing his magnificent height and bearing; he wore bronze-hued armour, scaled like a dragon's breast, the high gold Imperial buskins, and an immense scarlet mantle that flowed behind him; his thick yellow hair hung in heavy curls on to his shoulders, and his enormous sword made a clatter against his armour as he moved.

Theirry, cautiously drawing aside the curtain to observe, dug his nails into his palms with bitter envy.

Behold the man who had once been his companion—little more than his equal, and now—an Emperor!

"You desired an audience of us," said the Pope. "And some tedium may be spared, for we can well guess what you have to say."

A look of relief came into Balthasar's great blue eyes; he was no politician; the Empress, whose wits alone had kept him ten years on a throne, had trembled for this audience.

"Your Holiness knows that it is my humble desire to form a firm alliance between Rome and Germany. I have ruled both long enough to prove myself neither weak nor false, I have ever been a faithful servant of Holy Church—"

The Pope interrupted.

"And now you would ask her help against your rebellious subjects?"

"Yea, your Holiness."

Michael II smiled.

"On what right does your Grace presume when you ask us to aid you in steadying a trembling throne?"

Balthasar flushed, and came clumsily to the point.

"I was assured, Holy Father, of your friendliness before the election—the Empress—"

Again the Pope cut him short.

"Cardinal Caprarola was not the Vicegerent of Christ, the High Priest of Christendom, as we are now—and those whom Louis of Dendermonde knew, become as nothing before the Pope of Rome, in whose estimate all men are the same."

Balthasar's spirit rose at this haughty speech; his face turned crimson, and he savagely caught at one of his yellow curls.

“Your Holiness can have no object in refusing my alliance,” he answered. “Sylvester crowned me with his own hands, and I always lived in friendship with him—he aided me with troops when the Lombards rebelled against their suzerain, and Suabia he placed under an interdict——”

“We are not Sylvester,” said the Pope haughtily— “nor accountable for his doings; as you may show yourself the obedient son of the Church so may we support you—otherwise!—we can denounce as we can uphold, pull down as we can raise up, and it wants but little, Balthasar of Courtrai, to shake your throne from under you.”

The Emperor bit his lip, and the scales of his mail gleamed as they rose with his heavy breathing; he knew that if the power of the Vatican was placed on the side of his enemies he was ruined.

“In what way have I offended your Holiness?” he asked, with what humility he could.

The fair young face of Michael II was flushed and proud in expression; the red curls surrounding the tonsure fell across his smooth forehead; his red lips were sternly set and his heavy brows frowned.

“Ye have offended Heaven, for whom we stand,” he answered. “And until by penitence ye assoil your soul we must hold you outcast from the mercies of the Church.”

“Tell me my sins,” said Balthasar hoarsely. “And what I can do to blot them out—masses, money, lands—”

The Pope made a scornful movement with his little hand.

“None of these can make your peace with God and us—one thing only can avail there.”

“Tell it me,” cried the Emperor eagerly. “If it be a crusade, surely I will go—after Lombardy is subdued.”

The Pope flashed a quick glance over him. “We want no knight-errantry in the East; we demand this—that you put away the woman whom you call your wife.”

Balthasar stared with dilating eyes.

“Saint Joris guard us!” he muttered; “the woman whom I call my wife!”

“Ysabeau, first wedded to the man whom you succeeded.”

Balthasar’s hand made an instinctive movement towards his sword.

“I do not understand your Holiness.”

The Pope turned in his chair so that the lamplight made his robe one bright purple sheen.

“Come here, my lord.”

The Emperor advanced to the gold steps; a slim fair hand was held out to him, holding, between finger and thumb, a ring set with a deep red stone.

“Do you know this, my lord?” The Pope’s brilliant eyes were fixed on him with an intent and terrible expression.

Balthasar of Courtrai looked at the ring; round the bezel two coats of arms were delicately engraved in the soft red gold.

“Why,” he said in a troubled way, “I know the ring—yea, it was made many years ago “

“And given to a woman.

“Certes—yea—”

“It is a wedding ring.”

Again the Emperor assented, his blue eyes darkened and questioning.

“The woman to whom in your name it was given still lives.”

“Ursula of Rooselaare!” cried Balthasar.

“Yea, Ursula of Rooselaare, your wife.”

“My first wife who died before I had seen her, Holiness,” stammered the Emperor.

The Pope's strange handsome face was hard and merciless; he held the wedding ring out on his open palm and looked from it to Balthasar.

"She did not die—neither in the convent, as to your shame you know, nor in the house of Master Lukas."

Balthasar could not speak; he saw that this man knew what he had considered was a close secret of his own heart alone.

"Who told you she was dead?" continued the Pope. "A certain youth, who, for his own ends, I think, lied, a wicked youth he was, and he died in Frankfort for compassing the death of the late Emperor—or escaped that end by firing his house, the tale grows faint with years; 'twas he who told you Ursula of Rooselaare was dead; he even showed you her grave—and you were content to take his word—and she was content to be silent."

"Oh, Christus!" cried the Emperor. "Oh, Saint Joris!—but, holy father—this thing is impossible! He wrung his hands together and beat his mailed breast. "From whom had you this tale?"

"From Ursula of Rooselaare."

"It cannot be . . . why was she silent all these years? why did she allow me to take Ysabeau to wife?"

A wild expression crossed the Pope's face; he looked beyond the Emperor with deep soft eyes.

"Because she loved another man."

A pause fell for a second, then Michael II spoke again.

"I think, too, she something hated you who had failed her, and scorned her—there was her father also, who died shamefully by Ysabeau's command; she meant, I take it, to revenge that upon the Empress, and now, perhaps, her chance has come."

Balthasar gave a dry sob.

"Where is this woman who has so influenced your Holiness against me? An impostor! do not listen to her!"

"She speaks the truth, as God and devils know!" flashed the Pope. "And we, with all the weight of Holy Church, will support her in the maintenance of her just rights; we also have no love for this Eastern woman who slew her lord "

"Nay, that is false"—Balthasar ground his teeth. "I know some said it of her—but it is a lie."

"This to me!" cried the Pope. "Beware how ye anger God's Vicegerent."

The Emperor quivered, and put his hand to his brow.

"I bend my neck for your Holiness to step on—so you do not ask me to listen to evil of the Empress."

The Pope rose with a gleam of silk and a sparkle of jewels.

"Ysabeau is not Empress, nor your wife; her son is not your heir, and you must presently part with both of them or suffer the extremity of our wrath—yea, the woman shall ye give into the hands of the executioner to suffer for the death of Melchoir, and the child shall ye turn away from you—and with pains and trouble shall ye search for Ursula of Rooselaare, and finding her, cause her to be acknowledged your wife and Empress of the West. That she lives I know, the rest is for you."

The Emperor drew himself up and folded his arms on his breast.

"This is all I have to say," added the Pope. "And on those terms alone will I secure to you the throne."

"I have but one answer," said Balthasar. "And it would be the same did I deliver it in the face of God—that while I live and have breath to speak, I shall proclaim Ysabeau and none other as

my wife, and our son as an Empress's son, and my heir and successor; kingdom and even life may your Holiness despoil me of—but neither the armies of the earth nor the angels of heaven shall take from me these two—this my answer to your Holiness."

The Pope resumed his seat.

"Ye dare to defy me," he said. "Well—ye are a foolish man to set yourself against Heaven; go back and live in sin and wait the judgment."

Balthasar's flesh crept and quivered, but he held his head high, even though the Pope's words opened the prospect of a sure hell.

"Your Holiness has spoken, so also have I," he answered. "I take my leave."

Michael II gazed at him in silence as he bent his head and backed towards the silver door.

No other word passed between Pope and Emperor; the gleaming portals opened; the mail of Balthasar's retinue clinked without, and then soft silence fell on the richly lit room as the door was delicately closed.

"Theirry."

The Pope rose and descended from the dais; the dark arras was lifted cautiously, and Theirry crept into the room.

Michael II stood at the foot of the golden steps; despite his magnificent and flowing draperies, he looked very young and slender.

"Well," he asked, and his eyes were triumphant. "Stand I not in a fair way to cast down the Emperor?"

Theirry moistened his lips.

"Yea—how dared you!—to use the thunderbolts of heaven for such ends!"

The Pope smiled.

"The thunders of heaven may be used to any ends by those who can wield them."

"What you said was false?" whispered Theirry, questioning.

The jewelled light flickered over the Pope's face.

"Nay, it was true, Ursula of Rooselaare lives."

"Ye never told me that—in the old days!"

"Maybe I did not know—she lives, and she is in Rome;" he caught hold of the robe across his breast as he spoke, and both voice and eyes were touched with weariness.

"This is a curious tale," answered Theirry in a confused manner. "She must be a strange woman."

"She is a strange woman."

"I would like to see her—who is it that she loves?"

The Pope showed pale; he moved slowly across the room with his head bent.

"A man for whose sake she puts her very life in jeopardy," he said in a low passionate voice. "A man I think, who is unworthy of her."

"She is in Rome?" pondered Theirry.

The Pope lifted an arras that concealed an inner door.

"The first move is made," he said. "Farewell now—I will acquaint you of the progress of your fortunes;" he gave a slight, queer smile; "as for Ursula of Rooselaare, ye have seen her—"

"Seen her?"

"Yea; she wears the disguise of a masked dancer in orange."

With that he pointed Theirry to the concealed doorway, and turning, left him.

CHAPTER VI

SAN GIOVANNI IN LATERANO

In the palace on the Aventine, Balthasar stood at a window looking over Rome.

The clouds that had hung for weeks above the city cast a dull yellow glow over marble and stone; the air was hot and sultry, now and then thunder rolled over the Vatican and a flash of lightning revealed the Angel on Castel San Angelo poised above the muddy waters of the Tiber.

A furious, utter dread and terror gripped Balthasar's heart; days had passed since his defiance of the Pope and he had heard no more of his daring, but he was afraid, afraid of Michael II, of the Church, of Heaven behind it—afraid of this woman who had risen from the dead. . . .

He knew the number of his enemies and with what difficulty he held Rome, he guessed that the Pope intended his downfall and to put another in his place—but not this almost certain ruin disturbed him day and night, no—the thought that the Church might throw him out and consign his soul to smoky hell.

Bravely enough had he dared the Pope at the time when his heart was hot within him, but in the days that followed his very soul had fainted to think what he had done; he could not sleep nor rest while waiting for outraged Heaven to strike; he darkly believed the continual storm brooding over Rome to be omen of God's wrath with him.

His trouble was the greater because it was secret, the first that, since they had been wedded, he had concealed from Ysabeau. As this touched her, in an infamous and horrible manner, he could neither breathe it to her nor any other, and the loneliness of his miserable apprehension was an added torture.

This morning he had interviewed the envoys from Germany and his chamberlain; tales of anarchy and turmoil in Rome, of rebellion in Germany had further distracted him; now alone in his little marble cabinet, he stared across the gorgeous, storm-wrapt city.

Not long alone; he heard some one quietly enter, and because he knew who it was, he would not turn his head.

She came up to him and laid her hand on his plain brown doublet.

"Balthasar," she said, "will you never tell me what it is that sits so heavily on your heart?"

He commanded his voice to answer.

"Nothing, Ysabeau—nothing."

The Empress gave a long, quivering sigh.

"This is the first time you have not trusted me."

He turned his face; white and wan it was of late, with heavy circles under the usually joyous eyes; she winced to see it.

"Oh, my lord!" she cried passionately. "No anguish is so bitter when shared!"

He took her hand and pressed it warmly to his breast; he tried to smile.

"Certes, you know my troubles, Ysabeau, the discontent, the factions—matter enough to make any man grave."

"And the Pope," she said, raising her eyes to his; "most of all it is the Pope."

"His Holiness is no friend to me," said the Emperor in a low voice. "Oh, Ysabeau, we were deceived to aid him to the tiara."

She shuddered.

"*I* persuaded you . . . blame me . . . I was mad. *I* set your enemy in authority."

“Nay!” he answered in a great tenderness. “You are to blame for nothing, you, sweet Ysabeau.”

He raised the hand he held to his lips; in the thought that he suffered for her sake was a sweet recompense.

She coloured, then paled.

“What will he do?” she asked. “What will he do?”

“Nay—I know not.” His fair face overclouded again.

She saw it and terror shook her.

“He said more to you that day than you will tell me!” she cried. “You fear something that you will not reveal to me!”

The Emperor made an attempt at lightness of speech.

“He is a poor knight who tells his lady of his difficulties,” he said. “I cannot come crying to you like a child.”

She turned to him the soft frail beauty of her face and took his great sword hand between hers.

“I am very jealous of you, Balthasar,” she said thickly, “jealous that you should shut me out—from anything.”

“You will know soon enough,” he answered in a hoarse voice. “But never from me.”

The tears lay in her violet eyes as she fondled his band.

“Are we not as strong as this man, Balthasar!”

“Nay,” he shivered, “for he has the Church behind him—to-morrow, we shall see him again—I dread to-morrow.”

“Why?” she asked quickly. “To-morrow is the Feast of the Assumption and we go to the Basilica.”

“Yea, and the Pope will be there in his power and I must kneel humbly before him—yet not that alone—”

“Balthasar! what do you fear?”

He breathed heavily.

“Nothing—a folly, an ugly presentiment, of late I have slept so little.—Why is he quiet?—He meditates something.”

His blue eyes widened with fear, he put the Empress gently from him.

“Take no heed, sweet, I am only weary and your dear solicitude unnerves me—I must go pray Saint Joris to remember me.”

“The Saints!” she cried hotly. “A knife would serve us better could we but thrust it into this Caprarola—who is he, this man who dares menace us?”

The childishly fair face was drawn with anxious love and bitter fury; the purple eyes were wet and brilliant, under her long robe of dull yellow samite her bosom strove painfully with her breath.

The Emperor turned uneasily aside.

The storm,” he said, raising his voice above a whisper with an effort. “I think that it oppresses me and makes me fearful—how many days—how many days, Ysabeau, since we have seen a cloudless sky!”

He moved away from her hastily and left the room with an abrupt step.

The Empress crouched against the marble columns that supported the window, and as her unseeing eyes gazed across the shadowed city a look of cunning calculation, of fierce rage came into her face; it was many years since that sinister expression had marred her loveliness, for,

since her second marriage she had met no man who threatened her or menaced her path or the Emperor's as now did his Holiness, Michael II.

She half suspected him of having broken his vile bargain with her, she rightly thought that nothing save the revelation of his first wife's existence could have so subdued and troubled Balthasar's joyous courage and hopeful heart; she cursed herself that she had been a frightened fool to be startled into making a pact she might have known the Cardinal would not keep; she was bitterly furious that she had helped to set him in the position he now turned against her, it had been better had she refused to buy his silence at such a price—better that Cardinal Caprarola should have denounced her than that the Pope should use this knowledge to unseat her husband.

She had never imagined that she had a friend in Michael II, but she had not imagined him so callous, cruel and false as to take her bribe and still betray her—even though the man had revealed himself to her for what he was, as ambitious, unscrupulous and hard; she had not thought he would so shamelessly be false to his word.

Angry scorn filled her heart when she considered the reputation this man had won in his youth—that indeed he still bore with some—yet it could not but stir her admiration to reflect what it must have cost a man of the Pope's nature to play the ascetic saint for so many years. But his piety had been well rewarded—the poor Flemish youth sat in the Vatican now, lord of her husband's fortunes and her own honour.

Then she fell to pondering over the story of Ursula of Rooselaare, wondering where she was, where she had been these years, and how she had met Cardinal Caprarola. . . . The Empress dwelt on these things till her head ached; impatiently she thrust wider open the stained glass casement and leant from the window.

But there was no breeze abroad to cool her burning brow, and on all sides the sky was heavy with clouds over which the summer lightning played.

Ysabeau turned her eyes from the threatening prospect, and with a stifled groan began pacing up and down the tesselated floor of the cabinet.

She was interrupted by the entry of a lady tall and fair, leading a beautiful child by the hand.

Jacobea of Martzburg and Ysabeau's son.

"We seek for his Grace," smiled the lady. "Wencelaus wishes to say his Latin lesson, and to tell the tale of the three Dukes and the sack of gold that he has lately learnt."

The Empress gave her son a quick glance.

"You shall tell it to me, Wencelaus—my lord is not here."

The boy, golden, large and glorious to look upon, scowled at her.

"Will not tell it you or any woman." Ysabeau answered in a kind of bitter gentleness. "Be not too proud, Wencelaus," and the thought of what his future might be made her eyes fierce.

The Prince tossed his yellow curls. "I want my father." Jacobea, in pity of the Empress's distracted bearing, tried to pacify him.

"His Grace cannot see you now—but presently—" He shook his hand free of hers. "Ye cannot put me off—my father said an hour before the Angelus;" his blue eyes were angry and defiant, but his lips quivered.

The Empress crushed back the wild misery of her thoughts, and caught the child's embroidered yellow sleeve.

"Certes, ye shall see him," she said quietly, "if he promised you—I think he is in the oratory, we will wait at the door until he come forth."

The boy kissed her hand, and, the shadow passed from his lovely face.

Jacobea saw the Empress look down on him with a desperate and heart-broken expression; she wondered at the anguish revealed to her in that second, but she was neither disturbed nor touched; her own heart had been broken so long ago that all emotions were but names to her.

The Empress dismissed her with a glance.

Jacobea left the palace, mounted the little Byzantine chariot with the blue curtains and drove to the church of San Giovanni in Laterano. She went there every day to hear a mass sung for the soul of one who had died long ago.

A large portion of her immense fortune had gone in paying for masses and candles for the repose of Sybilla, one time wife of Sebastian her steward; if gold could send the murdered woman there Jacobea had opened to her the doors of Paradise.

In her quiet monotonous life in a strange land, caring for none, and by none cared for, with a dead heart in her bosom and leaden feet walking heavily the road to the grave, this Sybilla had come to be with Jacobea the most potent thing she knew.

Neither Balthasar nor the Empress, nor any of their Court were so real to her as the steward's dead wife.

She was as certain of her features, her bearing, the manner of her dress, as if she saw her daily; there was no face so familiar to her as the pale countenance of Sybilla with the wide brows and heavy red hair; she saw no ghost, she was not frightened by dreams nor visions, but the thought of Sybilla was continuous.

For ten years she had not spoken her name save in a whisper to the priest, nor had she in any way referred to her; by the people among whom she moved this woman was utterly forgotten, but in Jacobea's bed-chamber stood a samite cushion exquisitely worked with a scarlet lily, and Jacobea looked at it more often than at anything else in the world.

She did not regard this image she had created with terror or dread, with any shuddering remorse or aversion; it was to her a constant companion whom she accepted almost as she accepted herself.

As she stepped from the chariot at the door of San Giovanni in Laterano the gathering thunder rolled round the hills of Rome; she pondered a moment on the ominous clouds that had hung so long over the city that the people began to murmur that they were under God's displeasure, and passed through the dark portals into the dimly illuminated church.

She turned to a little side chapel and knelt on a purple cushion worn by her knees.

Mechanically she listened as the priest murmured over the mass, hurrying it a little that it might not interfere with the Angelus, mechanically she made the responses and rose when it was over with a calm face.

She had done this every day for nine years. There were a few people in the church, kneeling for the Angelus; Jacobea joined them and fixed her eyes on the altar, where a strong purple light glowed and flickered, bringing out points of gold in the moulding of the ancient arches.

A deep hush held the scented stillness; the scattered bent figures were dark and motionless against the mystic clouds of incense and the soft bright lights.

Monks in long brown habits came and stood in the chancel; the bell struck the hour, and young novices entered singing—

> "Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae,
> et concepit de Spiritu Sancto."

The monks knelt and folded their hands on their breasts; the response that still seemed very sweet to Jacobea arose.

"Ave Maria, gratia plena—"

A side door near Jacobea opened' softly and a man stepped into the church. . .
Now the priest was speaking.

"Ecce ancilla Domini,
fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum."

A strong sense that the new-comer was observing her made Jacobea turn, almost unconsciously, her head towards him as she repeated the "Ave Maria."

A tall richly-dressed man was gazing at her intently; his face was in shadow, but she could see long pearls softly gleam in his ears.

"Et Verbum caro factum est,
et habitavit in nobis."

The deep voices of the monks and the subdued tones of the worshippers again answered; Jacobea could distinguish the faltering words of the man near her.

"Ora pro nobs,
Sancta Del Genitrix."

Jacobea bent her head in her hands, as she replied—

"Ut digni efficiamur
promissionibus Christi."

Priests and novices left the church, the monks filed out and the bent figures rose.

The man stepped from the shadows as Jacobea rose to her feet, and their eyes met.

"Ah—you!" said Jacobea; she had her hands on her breviary as he had seen them long ago.

She was so little moved by meeting him that she began to clasp the ivory covers, bending her head to do so.

"You remember me?" asked Theirry faintly.

"I have forgotten nothing," she answered calmly. "Why do you seek to recall yourself to me?"

"I cannot see you and let you pass."

She looked at him; it was a different face from the one he had known, though little changed in line or colour.

"You must hate me," he faltered.

The words did not touch her.

"Are you free of the devils?" she asked, and crossed herself.

Theirry winced; he remembered that she believed Dirk was dead, that she thought of the Pope as a holy man. . .

"Forgive me," he murmured.

"For what?"

"Ah—that I did not understand you to be always a saintly woman."

Jacobea laughed sadly.

“You must not speak of the past, though you may think of nothing else, even as I do—we might have been friends once, but the Devil was too strong for us.”

At that moment Theirry hated Dirk passionately; he felt he could have been happy with this woman, and with her only in the whole world, and he loathed Dirk for making it impossible.

“Well,” said Jacobea, in the same unmoved tone, “I must go back—farewell, sir.”

Theirry strove with speech in vain; as she moved towards the door he came beside her, his beautiful face white and eager.

Then, by a common impulse, both stopped.

Round one of the dark glittering pillars a brilliant figure flashed into the rich light.

The masked dancer in orange.

She stepped up to Theirry and laid her fingers on his scarlet sleeve.

“How does Theirry of Dendermonde keep his word!” she mocked, and her eyes gleamed from their holes; “is your heart of a feather’s weight that it flutters this way and that with every breath of air?”

“What does that mean?” asked Jacobea, as the man flushed and shuddered. “And what does she here in this attire?”

The dancer turned to her swiftly

“What of one who drags his weary limbs beneath a Syrian sun in penitence for a deed ye urged him to?” she said in the same tone.

Jacobea stepped back with a quick cry, and Theirry seized the dancer’s arm.

“Begone,” he said threateningly. “I know you, or who you feign to be.”

She answered between laughter and fear.

“Let me go—I have not hurt you; why are you angry, my brave knight?”

At the sound of her voice that she in no way lowered, a monk came forward and sternly ordered her from the church.

“Why?” she asked. “I am masked, holy father, so cannot prove a temptation to the faithful!”

“Leave the church,” he commanded, “and if you would worship here come in a fitting spirit and a fitting dress.”

The dancer laughed.

“So I am flung out of the house of God—well, sir and sweet lady, will you come to the Mass at the Basilica to-morrow?—nay, do, it will be worth beholding—the Basilica to-morrow! I shall be there.”

With that she darted before them and slipped from the church.

Man and woman shuddered and knew not why.

A peal of thunder rolled, the walls of the church shook, and an image of the Virgin was hurled to the marble pavement and shivered into fragments.

CHAPTER VII

THE VENGEANCE OF MICHAEL II

From every church and convent in Rome the bells rang out; it was the Feast of the Assumption and holiday in the city.

Strange, heavy clouds still obscured the sky, and intermittent thunder echoed in the distance.

The Basilica of St. Peter was crowded from end to end; the bewildering splendour of walls, ceiling and columns was lit by thousands of wax tapers and coloured lamps; part of the church

had been hung with azure and silver; the altar steps were covered in cloth of gold, the altar itself almost hidden with lilies; the various gleaming hues of the marble, orange, rose, pink, mauve, grey and white, the jewel-like sparkle of the mosaic capitals, the ivory carving on the rood screen, the silver arch before the high altar, the silk and satin banners of the church resting here and there before the walls, all combined into one soft yet burning magnificence.

The vast congregation all knelt upon the marble floor, save the Emperor and his wife, who sat under a violet canopy placed opposite the pulpit.

Balthasar wore the imperial purple and buskins; round his brows was the circlet that meant dominion of the Latin world, but his comely face was pale and anxious and his blue eyes troubled. Ysabeau, seated close beside him, sparkled with gems from her throat to her feet; her pale locks, twisted with pearls, hung over her bosom; she wore a high crown of emeralds and her mantle was cloth of silver.

Between them, on a lower step of the dais, stood their little son, gleaming in white satin and overawed by the glitter and the silence.

Surrounding the throne were ladies, courtiers, Frankish knights, members of the Council, German Margraves, Italian nobles, envoys from France, Spain, and resplendent Greeks from the Court of Basil.

Theirry, kneeling in the press, distinguished the calm face of Jacobea of Martzburg among the dames of the Empress's retinue; but he sought in vain through the immense and varied crowd for the dancer in orange.

A faint chant rose from the sacristy, jewelled crosses showed above the heads of the multitude as the monks entered holding them aloft, the fresh voices of the choristers came nearer, acolytes took their places round the altar, and the blue clouds of incense floated over the hushed multitude.

The bells ceased.

The rise and fall of singing filled the Basilica.

Cardinal Orsini, followed by a number of priests, went slowly down the aisle towards the open bronze doors.

His brilliant dalmatica shivered into gleaming light as he moved.

At the door he paused.

The Pontifical train was arriving in a gorgeous dazzle of colour and motion.

Michael II stepped from a gilt car drawn by four white oxen, whose polished horns were wreathed with roses white and red.

Preceded by Cardinals, the vivid tints of whose silk robes burnt in the golden brightness of the Basilica, the Pope passed down the aisle, while the congregation crouched low on their knees and hid their faces.

Emperor and Empress rose; he looked at his son, but she at the Pontiff, who took no heed of either.

Monks, priests and novices moved away from the high altar, where the rows upon rows of candles shone like stars against the sparkling, incense-laden air.

He passed to his gold and ivory seat, and the Cardinals took their places beside him.

Ysabeau, as she resumed her place beside her lord, gazed across the silent, kneeling crowd at Michael II.

His chasuble was alive with the varying hues of jewels, the purple and crimson train of his robes spread to right and left along the altar steps, the triple crown gave forth showers of light from its rubies and diamonds, while the red hair of the wearer caught the candle-glow and shone

like a halo round his pale calm face, so curiously delicate of feature to be able to express such resolution, such pride.

His under-garment of white satin was so thickly sewn with pearls that the stuff was hardly visible, his fingers so covered with huge and brilliant rings that they looked of an unnatural slenderness by contrast; he held a crozier encrusted with rubies that darted red fire, and carbuncles flashed on his gold shoes.

The beautiful dark eyes that always held the expression of some passion for ever surging up, for ever held in before reaching expression, were fixed steadily on the bronze doors that now closed the church.

A little tremor of thunder filled the stillness, then the fair, faint chant of the boys arose.

"Gaudeamus omnes in Domino,
diem festum celebrantes
Sub honore Beatae
Mariae Virginis, ..."

Ysabeau murmured the words under her breath; none in the devout multitude with more sincerity.

As the notes quivered into silence Cardinal Orsini murmured a prayer, to which a thousand responses were whispered fervently.

And again the thunder made sombre echo. The Empress put her hand over her eyes; her jewels seemed so heavy they must drag her from the throne, the crown galled her brow; the little Wencelaus stood motionless, a bright colour in his cheeks, his eyes brilliant with excitement; now and then the Emperor looked at him in a secretive, piteous manner.

There was an involuntary stir among the people as the rich voices of the men took up the singing at the end of the epistle, a movement of joy, of pleasure in the triumphant music.

"Alleluia, alleluia,
Assumpta est Maria in Coelum;
Gaudet exercitus Angelorum.
Alleluia."

Then the Pope moved, descended slowly from the dais and mounted the steps of the high altar, his train upheld by two Archbishops.

Emperor and Empress knelt with the rest as he performed the office of the mass; an intense stillness held the rapt assembly, but as he turned and displayed the Host, before the vast multitude who hid their eyes, as he held it like a captured star above the hushed splendour of the altar, a crash of thunder shook the very foundations of the church, and the walls shivered as if mighty forces beat on them without.

Michael II, the only man erect in the crouching multitude smiled slowly as he replaced the Eucharist; lightning' darted through the high coloured windows and quivered a moment before it was absorbed in the rich lights.

The voices of the choir rose with a melancholy beauty.

"Kyrie eleison,
Christe eleison,
Kyrie eleison."

The Pope turned to the altar; again the thunder rolled, but his low, steady voice was heard distinctly chanting the “Gloria in excelsis Deo” with the choir.

At the finish Cardinal Orsini took up the prayers, and a half-muffled response came from the crowd.

“Gloria tibi, Domine.”

Every head was raised, every right hand made the sacred sign.

“Laus tibi, Christe.”

The Pope blessed the multitude and returned to his seat.

Then as Emperor and Empress rose from their knees a soft, bright sound of movement filled the Basilica; Ysabeau put out her hand and caught hold of her husband’s.

“Who is this?” she asked in a whisper.

He turned his eyes in the direction of her gaze.

Down the chancel came a tall monk in the robe of the Order of the Black Penitents; his arms were folded, his hands hidden in his sleeves, his deep cowl cast his face into utter shadow.

“I thought Cardinal Colonna preached,” whispered Balthasar fearfully, as the monk ascended the pulpit. “I know not this man.”

Ysabeau looked at the Pope, who sat motionless in his splendour, his hands resting on the arms of the gold chair, his gaze riveted on the black figure of the monk in the glittering pulpit; a faint smile was on his lips, a faint colour in his cheeks, and Ysabeau’s hand tightened on the fingers of her lord.

The monk stood for a moment motionless, evidently contemplating the multitude from the depth of his hood; Balthasar thought he gazed at him, and shivered.

A strange sense of suspense filled the church, even the priests and Cardinals about the altar glanced curiously at the figure in the pulpit; some women began to sob under the influence of nameless and intense excitement.

The monk drew from his sleeve a parchment from which swung a mighty seal, slowly he unfurled it; the Empress crouched closer to Balthasar.

The monk began to speak, and both to Ysabeau and her husband the voice was familiar—a voice long silent in death.

“In the name of Michael II, servant of servants of God and Vicegerent of Christ, I herewith pronounce the anathema over Balthasar of Courtrai, Emperor of the West, over Ysabeau, born Marozia Porphyrogentris, over their son, Wencelaus, over their followers, servants and hosts! I herewith expel them from the pale of Holy Church, and curse them as heretics!

“I forbid any to offer them shelter, food or help, I hurl on their heads the wrath of God and the hatred of man, I forbid any to attend their sick-bed, to receive their confession or to bury their bodies!

“I cut asunder the ties that bind the Latin people in obedience to them, and I lay under an interdict any person, village, town or state that succours or aids them against our wrath! May they and their children and their children’s children be blighted and cursed in life and in death, may they taste misery and desolation on the earth before they go to everlasting torment in hell!”

And now the cowled monk caught up one of the candles that lit the pulpit, and held it aloft.

“May their race perish with them and their memories be swallowed in oblivion—thus! As I extinguish this flame may the hand of God extinguish them!

He cast the candle on to the marble floor beneath the pulpit, the flame was immediately dashed out, a slow smoke curled an instant and vanished.

"For Balthasar of Courtrai cherishes a murderess on the throne, and until he cast her forth and receive his true wife this anathema rests upon his head!"

Emperor and Empress listened, holding each other's hands and staring at the monk; as he ended, and while the awe of utter fear held the assembly numb, Ysabeau rose. . . .

But at that same instant the monk tossed back his cowl and revealed the stern, pale features of Melchoir of Brabant, crowned with the imperial diadem. . . .

A frenzied shriek broke from the woman, and she fell across the steps of the throne; her crown slipped from her fair head and dazzled on the pavement.

Groaning in anguish Balthasar stooped to raise her up . . . when he again looked at the pulpit it was empty.

Ysabeau's cry had loosened the souls of the multitude, they rose to their feet and began to surge wildly towards the door.

But the Pontiff rose, approached the altar and began calmly to chant the Gratias.

Balthasar gave him a wild and desperate look, staggered and fiercely recovered himself, then took his child by the hand, and supporting with the other the Empress, who struggled back to life, he swept down the aisle, followed by a few of his German knights.

The people shuddered away to right and left to give him passage; the bronze doors were opened and the excommunicated man stepped into the thunder-wrapt streets of the city where he no longer reigned.

CHAPTER VIII

URSULA OF ROOSELAARE

"Say I have done well for you—it seems that I must ask your thanks."

The Pope sat at a little table near the window of his private room in the Vatican and rested his face on his hand.

Leaning against the scarlet tapestries that covered the opposite wall was Theirry, clothed in chain mail and heavily armed.

"You think I should be grateful?" he asked in a low voice, his beautiful eyes fixed in a half-frightened, wholly fascinated way on the slim figure of the other.

Michael II wore a straight robe of gold-coloured silk and a skull-cap of crimson and blue; no jewels nor any suggestion of pomp concealed the youthfulness, almost frailty of his appearance; the red hair made his face the paler by contrast; his full lips were highly coloured under the darkened upper lip.

"Grateful?" he repeated, and his voice was mournful. "I think you do not know what I have done—I have dared to cast the Emperor from his throne—lies he not even now without the walls, defying me with a handful of Frankish knights? Is not the excommunication on him?"

"Yea," answered Theirry. "And is it for my sake ye have done this?"

"Must you question it?" returned Michael, with a quick breath. "Yea, for your sake, to make you, as I promised, Emperor of the West—my vengeance had else been more quietly satisfied—" He laughed. "I have not forgot all my magic."

Theirry winced.

“The vision in the Basilica was proof of that—what are you who can bring back the hallowed dead to aid your schemes?”

Michael II answered softly.

“And who are you who take my aid and my friendship, and all the while fear and loathe me?”

He moved his hand from his face and leant forward, showing a deep red mark on his cheek where the palm had pressed.

“Do you think I am not human, Theirry?” He gave a sigh. “If you would believe in me, trust me, be faithful to me—why, our friendship would be the lever to move the universe, and you and I would rule the world between us.”

Theirry fingered the arras beside him.

“In what way can I be false to you?”

“You betrayed me once. You are the only man in Rome who knows my secret. But this is truth, if again you forsake me, you bring about your own downfall—stand by me, and I will share with you the dominion of the earth—this, I say, is truth.”

Theirry laughed unhappily.

“Sweet devil, there is no God, and I have no soul!—there, do not fear—I shall be very faithful to you—since what is there for man save to glut his desires of pomp and wealth and power?”

He moved from the wall and took a quick turn about the room.

“And yet I know not!” he cried. “Can all your magic, all your learning, all your riches, keep you where you are? The clouds hang angrily over Rome, nor have they lifted since Orsini announced you Pope—the people riot in the streets—all beautiful things are dead, many see ghosts and devils walking at twilight across the Maremma. . . . Oh, horror!—they say Pan has left his ruined temple to enter Christian churches and laugh in the face of the marble Christ—can these things be?”

The Pope swept back the hair from his damp brow. “The powers that put me here can keep me here—be you but true to me!”

“Ay, I will be Emperor”—Theirry grasped his sword hilt fiercely—“though the world I rule rot about me, though ghouls and fiends make my Imperial train—I will join hands with Antichrist and see if there be a God or no!”

The Pope rose.

“You must go against Balthasar. You must defeat his hosts and bring to me his Empress, then will 1 crown you in St. Peter’s.”

Theirry pressed his hand to his forehead.

“We start to-morrow with the dawn—beneath the banner of God His Church; I, in this mail ye gave me, tempered and forged in Hell!”

“Ye need have no fear of failure; you shall go forth triumphantly and return victoriously. You shall make your dwelling the Golden Palace on the Aventine, and neither Heliogabalus nor Basil, nor Charlemagne shall be more magnificently housed than you. .

Michael seemed to check his words suddenly; he turned his face away and looked across the city which lay beneath the heavy pall of clouds.

“Be but true to me,” he added in a low voice.

Theirry smiled wildly.

“A curious love have you for me, and but little faith in my strength or constancy—well, you shall see, I go forth to-morrow, with many men and banners, to rout the Emperor utterly.”

“Until then, stay in the Vatican,” said Michael II suddenly. “My prelates and my nobles know you for their leader now.”

"Nay,"—Theirry flushed as he answered—"I must go to my own abode in the city."

"Jacobea of Martzburg is still in Rome," said the other. "Do you leave me to go to *her?"*

"Nay—I know not even where she lodges," replied Theirry hastily.

Michael smiled bitterly and was silent.

"What is Jacobea to me?" demanded Theirry desperately.

The other gave him a sinister glance.

"Why did you approach her after her devotions in San Giovanni in Laterano—speak to her and recall yourself to her mind?"

Theirry went swiftly pale.

"You know that!—Ah, it was the dancer, your accomplice. . . . What mystery is this?" he asked in a distracted way. "Why does not Ursula of Rooselaare come forth under her true name and confound the Emperor?—why does she follow me, and in such a guise?"

Without looking at him Michael answered.

"Maybe because she is very wise—maybe because she is a very fool—let her pass, she has served her turn. You say you do not go to palter with Jacobea, then farewell until to-morrow; I have much to do . . . farewell, Theirry."

He held out his hand with a stately gesture, and, as Theirry took it in his, the curious thought came to him how seldom he had touched so much as Dirk's fingers, even in the old days, so proud a reserve had always encompassed the youth, and, now, the man.

Theirry left the rich-scented chamber and the vast halls of the Vatican and passed into the riotous and lawless streets of Rome.

The storm that had hung so unnaturally long over the city had affected the people; bravoes and assassins crept from their hiding-places in the Catacombs, or the Palatine, and flaunted in the streets; the wine shops were filled with mongrel soldiers of all nations, attracted by the declaration of war from the surrounding towns; blasphemers mocked openly at the processions of monks and pilgrims that traversed the streets chanting the penitential psalms, or scourging themselves in an attempt to avert the wrath of Heaven.

There was no law; crime went unpunished; virtue became a jest; many of the convents were closed and deserted, while their late occupants rejoined the world they suddenly longed for; the poor were despoiled, the rich robbed; ghastly and blasphemous processions nightly paraded the streets in honour of some heathen deity; the priests inspired no respect, the name of God no fear; the plague marched among the people, striking down hundreds; their bodies were flung into the Tiber, and their spirits went to join the devils that nightly danced on the Campagna to the accompaniment of rolling storms.

Witches gathered in the low marches of the Maremma and came at night into the city, trailing grey, fever-laden vapour after them.

The bell-ropes began to rot in the churches, and the bells clattered from the steeples; the gold rusted on the altars, and mice gnawed the garments on the holy images of the Saints.

The people lived with reckless laughter and died with hopeless curses; magicians, warlocks and vile things flourished exceedingly, and all manner of strange and hideous creatures left their caves to prowl the streets at nightfall.

And such under Pope Michael II was Rome, swiftly and in a moment.

Theirry, like all others, went heavily armed; his hand was constantly on his sword hilt as he made his way through the city that was forsaken by God.

With no faltering step or hesitating bearing he passed through the crowds that gathered more thickly as the night came on, and turned towards the Appian Gate.

Here it was gloomy, almost deserted; dark houses bordered the Appian Way, and a few strange figures crept along in their shadow; in the west a sullen glare of crimson showed that the sun was setting behind the thick clouds. Dark began to fall rapidly.

Theirry walked long beyond the Gate and stopped at a low convent building, above the portals of which hung a lamp, its gentle radiance like a star in the heavy, noisome twilight.

The gate, that led into a courtyard, stood half open. Theirry softly pushed it wider and entered.

The pure perfume of flowers greeted him; a sense of peace and security, grown strange of late in Rome, filled the square grass court; in the centre was a fountain, almost hidden in white roses; behind their leaves the water dripped pleasantly.

There were no lights in the convent windows, but it was not yet too dark for Theirry to distinguish the slim figure of a lady seated on a wooden bench, her hands passive in her lap.

He latched the gate and softly crossed the lawn.

"You said that I might come."

Jacobea turned her head, unsmiling, unsurprised.

"Ay, sir; this place is open to all."

He uncovered before her.

"I cannot hope ye are glad to see me."

"Glad?" She echoed the word as if it sounded in a foreign tongue; then, after a pause, "Yes, I am glad that you have come.

He seated himself beside her, his splendid mail touching her straight grey robe, his full, beautiful face turned towards her worn 'and expressionless features.

"What do you do here?" he asked.

She answered in the same gentle tone; she had a white rose in her hands, and turned it about as she spoke.

"So little—there are two sisters here, and I help them; one can do nothing against the plague, but for the little forsaken children something, rend something for the miserable sick."

"The wretched of Rome are not in your keeping," he said eagerly. "It will mean your life—why did you not go with the Empress?"

She shook her head.

"I was not needed. I suppose what they said of her was true. I cannot remember clearly, but I think that when Melchoir died I knew it was her doing."

"We must not dwell on the past," cried Theirry. "Have you heard that I lead the Pope's army against Balthasar?"

"Nay;" her eyes were on the white rose.

"Jacobea, I shall be the Emperor."

"The Emperor," she repeated dreamily.

"I shall rule the Latin world—Emperor of the West!"

In the now complete dark they could scarcely see each other; there were no stars, and distant thunder rolled at intervals; Theirry timidly put out his hand and touched the fold of her dress where it lay along the seat.

"I wish you would not stay here—it is so lonely—"

"I think she would wish me to do this."

"She?" he questioned.

Jacobea seemed surprised he did not take her meaning.

"Sybilla."

"O Christus!" shuddered Theirry. "Ye still think of her?"

Jacobea smiled, as he felt rather than saw.

"Think of her? . . . is she not always with me?"

"She is dead."

He saw the blurred outline of the lady's figure stir.

"Yea, she died on a cold morning—it was so cold you could see your breath before you as you rode along, and the road was hard as glass—there was a yellow dawn that day, and the pine trees seemed frozen, they stood so motionless—you would not think it was ten years ago—I wonder how long it seems to her?"

A silence fell upon them for a while, then Theirry broke out desperately—

"Jacobea— my heart is torn within me— to-day I said there was no God—but when I sit by you . . ."

"Yea, there is a God," she answered quietly. "Be very sure of that."

"Then I am past His forgiveness," whispered Theirry.

Again he was mute; he saw before him the regal figure of Dirk—he heard his words—"Be but true to me"—then he thought of Jacobea and Paradise . . . agony ran through his veins.

"Oh, Jacobea!" he cried at last. "I am beyond all measure mean and vile. . . . I know not what to do. . . . I can be Emperor, yet as I sit here that seems to me as nothing."

"The Pope favours you, you tell me," she said. "He is a priest, and a holy man, and yet—it is strange, what is this talk of Ursula of Rooselaare?— and yet it is no matter."

His mail clinked in answer to his tremor.

"Tell me what I must do—see, I am in a great confusion; the world is very dark, this way and that show little lights, and I strive to follow hem—but they change and move and blind me—and if I grasp one it is extinguished into greater darkness; I hear whispers, murmurs, threats, I believe them, and believe them not, and all is confusion, confusion!"

Jacobea rose slowly from the bench.

"Why do you come to me?"

"Because ye seem to me nearer heaven than anything I know. . . ."

Jacobea pressed the white rose to her bosom. "It is dark now—the flowers smell so sweet—come into the house."

He followed her dim-seen figure across the grass; she lifted the latch of the convent door and went before him into the building.

For a while she left him in the passage, then returned with a pale lamp in her hand and conducted him into a small, bare chamber, which seemed mean in contrast with the glowing splendour of his appearance.

"The sisters are abroad," said Jacobea. "And I stay here in case any ring the bell for succour."

She set the lamp on the wooden table and slowly turned her eyes on Theirry.

"Sir, I am very selfish." She spoke with difficulty, as if she painfully forced expression. "I have thought of myself for so many years—and somehow"—she lightly touched her breast—"I cannot feel, for myself or for others; nothing seems real, save Sybilla; nothing matters save her—sometimes I cry for little things I find dying alone, for poor unnoticed miseries of animals and children—but for the rest . . . you must not blame me if I do not sympathise; that has gone from me. Nor can I help you; God is far away beyond the stars. I do not think He can stoop to such as you and me—and—and—I do not feel as if I should wake until I die—"

Theirry covered his eyes and moaned.

Jacobea was not looking at him, but at the one bright thing in the room.

A samite cushion worked with a scarlet lily that rested on a chair by the window.

“Each our own way to death,” she said. “All we can do is so little compared with that—death—see, I think of it as a great crystal light, very cold, that will slowly encompass us, revealing everything, making everything easy to understand—white lilies will not be more beautiful, nor breeze at summer-time more sweet . . . so, sir, must you wait patiently.”

She took her gaze from the red flower and turned her tired grey eyes on him.

The blood surged into his face; he clenched his hands and spoke passionately.

“I will renounce the world, I will become a monk. . . .”

The words choked in his throat; he looked fearfully round; the lamplight struck his armour into a hundred points of light and cast pale shadows over the whitewashed walls.

“What was that?” asked Jacobea.

One was singing without: Theirry’s strained eyes glistened.

> “If Love were all!
> His perfect servant I would be,
> Kissing where his foot might fall,
> Doing him homage on a lowly knee,
> If Love were all!”

Theirry turned and went out into the dark, hot night.

He could see neither roses, nor fountain, nor even the line of the convent wall against the sky; but the light above the gate revealed to him the dancer in orange, who leant against the stone arch of the entrance and sang to a strange long instrument that hung round her neck by a gleaming chain.

At her feet the ape crouched, nodding himself to sleep.

> “If Love were all I
> But Love is weak,
> And Hate oft giveth him a fall,
> And Wisdom smites him on the cheek,
> If Love were all!

Behind Theirry came Jacobea, with the lantern in her hand.

“Who is this?” she asked.

The dancer laughed; the sound of it muffled behind her mask.

Theirry made his way across the dark to her.

“What do you do here?” he demanded fiercely. “The Pope’s spy, you!”

“May I not come to worship here as well as another?” she answered.

“You know too much of me!” he cried distractedly. “But I also have some knowledge of you, Ursula of Rooselaare!”

“How does that help you?” she asked, drawing back a little before him.

“I would discover why you follow me—watch me.”

He caught her by the arms and held her against the stone gateway.

“Now tell me the meaning of your disguise,” he breathed—“and of your league with Michael II.”

She said a strange little word underneath her breath; the ape jumped up and tore away the man’s hands while the girl bent to a run and sped through the gate.

Theirry gave a cry of pain and rage, and glanced towards the convent; the door was closed; lady and lamp had disappeared in the darkness.

“Shut out!” whispered Theirry. “Shut out!” He turned into the street and saw, by the scattered lanterns along the Appian Way, the figure of the dancer slipping fast towards the city gates.

But he gained on her, and at sound of his clattering step she looked round.

“Ah!” she said; “I thought you had stayed with the sweet-faced saint yonder—”

“She wants none of me,” he panted—“but I—I mean to see your face to-night. . . .”

“I am not beautiful,” answered the dancer; “and you have seen my face—”

“Seen your face!”

“Certes! in the Basilica on the Fête.”

“I knew you not in the press.”

“Nevertheless I was there.”

“I looked for you.”

“I thought ye looked for Jacobea.”

“Also I sought you,” said Theirry. “Ye madden me.”

The ever-gathering tempest was drawing near, with fitful flashes of lightning playing over his jewel-like mail and her orange gown as they made their way through the ruins.

“Do you wander here alone at night?” asked Theirry. “It is a vile place; a man might be afraid.”

“I have the ape,” she said.

“But the storm?”

“In Rome now-a-days we are well used to storms,” she answered in a low voice.

“Yea.”

He did not know what to say to her, but he could not leave her; a strong, a supreme, fascination compelled him to walk beside her, a half-delightful excitement stirred his blood.

“Where are we going?” asked Theirry. The wayside lanterns had ceased; he could see her only by the lightning gleams.

“I know not—why do you follow me?”

“I am mad, I think—the earth rocks beneath me and heaven bends overhead—you lure me and I follow in sheer confusion—Ursula of Rooselaare, why have you lured me? What power is it that you have over me? Wherefore are you disguised?”

She touched his mail in the dark as she answered—

“I am Balthasar’s wife.”

“Ay,” he responded eagerly; “and I do hear ye loved another man—”

“What is that to you?” she asked.

“This—though I have not seen your face—perchance could I love you, Ursula!”

“Ursula!” She laughed on the word.

“Is it not your name?” he cried wildly.

“Yea—but it is long since any used it—”

The hot darkness seemed to twist and writhe about Theirry; he seemed to breathe a nameless and uncontrollable passion in with the storm-laden air.

“Witch or demon,” he said, “I have cast in my lot with the Devil and Michael II his servant—I follow the same master as you, Ursula.”

He put out his hand through the dark and grasped her arm.

“Who is the man for whose sake ye are silent?” he demanded.

There was no answer; he felt her arm quiver under his hand, and heard the hems of her tunic tinkle against her buskins, as if she trembled.

The air was chokingly hot; Theirry’s heart throbbed high.

At last she spoke, in a half-swooning voice.

“I have taken off my mask . . . bend your head and kiss me.”

Invisible and potent powers drew him towards her unseen face; his lips touched and kissed its softness. . . .

The thunder sounded with such a terrific force and clash that Theirry sprang back; a cry of agony went up from the darkness. He ran blindly forward; her presence had gone from his side, nor could he see or feel her as he moved.

A thousand light shapes danced across the night; witches and warlocks carrying swinging lanterns, imps and fiends.

They gathered round Theirry, shrieking and howling to the accompaniment of the storm.

He ran sobbing down the Appian Way, and his pace was very swift, for all the mail he carried.

CHAPTER IX

POPE AND EMPRESS

The Pope walked in the garden of the Vatican, behind him Cardinal Orsini and Cardinal Colonna; the first carried a cluster of daisies, white and yellow, strong in colour and pungent of odour, the second tossed up and down a little ball of gold and blue silk.

Both talked of the horrible state of Rome, of the unending storm hanging over the capital, of the army that had gone forth three days ago to crush the excommunicated Emperor.

Michael II was silent.

They went along the marble walks and looked at the goldfish in the basin under the overhanging branches of the yellow rose bushes; they passed the trellis over which the jasmine clustered, and came out on the long terrace, where the peacocks flashed their splendour across the grass.

Oleanders grew here, and lilies; laurel trees rose against the murky heavens that should have shown blue, and curious statues gleamed beside the dark foliage.

Cardinal Colonna dropped his ball and let it roll away across the close grass, and Michael slackened his pace. He wore a white robe, his soft heavy red hair showing a brilliant colour above it; his dark eyes were thoughtful, his pale mouth resolutely set. The Cardinals fell further behind and conversed with the greater ease.

Suddenly the Pope paused and stood waiting, for Paolo Orsini, with a sprig of pink flower at his chin, was coming across the lawn.

Michael II tapped his gold-shod foot on the marble path. “What is it, Orsini?”

The secretary went on one knee.

“Your Holiness, a lady, who will neither unveil nor give her name, has obtained entry to the Vatican and desires to see your Holiness.”

The Pope’s face darkened.

“I thought ye had brought me news of the return of Theirry of Dendermonde! What can this woman want with us?”

“She says it is a matter of such import it may avert the war, and she prays, for the love of God, not to be denied.”

Michael II reflected a moment, his slim fingers pulling at the laurel leaves beside him.

“We will see her,” he said at length. “Bring her here, Orsini.”

The yellow clouds broke over a brief spell of sunshine that fell across the Vatican gardens, though the horizon was dark with a freshly gathering storm; Michael II seated himself on a bench where the sun gleamed.

"Sirs," he said to the two Cardinals, "stand by me and listen to what this woman may say."

And picking a crimson rose from a thorny bush that brushed the seat, he considered it curiously, and only took his eves from it when Paolo Orsini had returned and led the lady almost to his feet.

Then he looked at her.

She wore a dark rough dress showing marks of ill usage, and over her face a thick veil.

This she loosened as she knelt, and revealed the exceedingly fair, sad face of Ysabeau the Empress.

Michael II went swiftly pale, he fixed large wide eyes on her.

"What do you here, defying us?" he demanded.

She rose.

"I am not here in defiance. I have come to give myself up to punishment for the crime you denounced—the crime for which my lord now suffers."

Michael crushed the rose in his hand and the Cardinals glanced at each other, having never seen him show agitation.

"It did not occur to your Holiness," said Ysabeau, facing him fearlessly, "that I should do this; you thought that he would never give me up and you were right—crown, life, heaven he would forfeit for love of me, but I will not take the sacrifice."

The fitful sunshine touched her great beauty, her fair, soft hair lying loosely on her shoulders, her eyes shadowed and dark, her hollow face.

"Mine was the sin," she continued. "And I who was strong enough to sin alone can take the punishment alone."

At last Michael spoke.

"Ye slew Melchoir of Brabant—ye confess it!"

Her bosom heaved.

"I am here to confess it."

"For love of Balthasar you did it. . . ."

"As for love of him I stand here now to take the consequences."

"We have fire on earth and fire in hell for those who do murder," said Michael II; "flames for the body in the market-place, and flames in the pit for the soul, and though the body will not burn long, the soul will burn for eternity."

"I know—do what you will with me."

The Pope cast the crushed rose from him.

"Has Balthasar sent you here?"

She smiled proudly.

"I come without his knowledge." Her voice trembled a little. "I left a writing telling him where I had gone and why—" Her hand crept to her brow. "Enough of that."

Michael II rose.

"Why have you done this?" he cried angrily.

Ysabeau answered swiftly.

"That you may take the curse off him—for my sin you cast him forth, well, if I leave him, if I accept my punishment, if he be free to find the—woman—who can claim him, your Holiness must absolve him of the excommunication."

Michael flushed.

"This comes late—too late;" he turned to the Cardinals. "My lords, is not this love a mad thing?—that she should hope to cheat Heaven so!"

"My hope is not to cheat Heaven but to appease it," said Ysabeau; and the sun, making a pale glimmer in her hair, cast her shadow faintly before her to the Pontiff's feet. "If not for myself, for him."

"This foolish sacrifice," said Michael, "cannot avail Balthasar. Since not of his free will ye are parted from him, how is his sin then lessened?"

She trembled exceedingly.

"Now, perchance he *shall* loathe me . . ." she said.

"Had you told him to his face of your crime, would he have given you over to our wrath?"

"Nay," she flashed. "It would have been only noble in him to refuse; but since of myself I am come, I pray you, Lord Pope, to send me to death and take the curse off him."

Michael II looked at his hand; the stem of the red rose had scratched his finger, and a tiny drop of blood showed on the white flesh.

"You are a wicked woman, by your own confession," he said, frowning. "Why should I show you any pity?"

"I do not ask pity, but justice for the Emperor. I am the cause of the quarrel, and now ye have me ye can have no bitterness against him."

He gave her a quick sidelong look.

"Do you repent, Ysabeau?"

She shook the clinging hood free of her yellow hair.

"No; the gain was worth the sin, nor am I afraid of you nor of Heaven. I am not of a faltering race, nor of a name easily ashamed. In my own eyes I am not abashed."

Michael raised his head and their eyes met.

"So you would die for him?"

Ysabeau smiled.

"I think I shall. I do not think your Holiness is merciful ."

He glanced again at the drop of blood on his finger.

"You show some courage, Ysabeau."

She smiled.

"When I was a child I was taught that they who live as kings and queens must not look for age—the flame soon burns away, leaving the ashes—and gorgeous years are like the flame; why should we taste the dust that follows? I have lived my life."

He answered—

"This shall not save Balthasar, nor take our curse from off him; Theirry of Dendermonde has gone forth with many men and banners, and soon the Roman gates shall open to him and victory lead his charger through the streets! And his reward shall be the Latin world, his badge of triumph the Imperial crown. He is our choice to share with us the dominion of the West, therefore no more of Balthasar—ye might speak until the heavens fell and still our heart be as brass!"

He turned swiftly and caught the arm of Cardinal Orsini.

"Away, my lord, we have given this Greek time enough."

Ysabeau fell on her knees.

"My lord, take off the curse!"

"What shall we do with her?" asked Cardinal Colonna.

She clutched, in her desperation, at the priest's white garments.

"Show some pity; Balthasar dies beneath your wrath—"

Paolo Orsini drew her away, while Michael II stared at her with a touch of fear.

"Cast her without the walls—since the excommunication is upon her we do not need her life."

"Oh, sirs!" shrieked Ysabeau, striving after them, "my lord is innocent!"

"Take her away," said Michael. "Cast her from Rome,"—he glared at her over his shoulder—"doubtless the Eastern she-cat will find it worse so to die than as Hugh of Rooselaare perished; come on, my lords."

Leaning on the arm of Cardinal Orsini, he moved away across the Vatican gardens.

Paolo Orsini blew a little whistle.

"You must be turned from the city," he said.

Ysabeau rose from the grass.

"This your Christian priest!" she cried hoarsely, staring after the white figure; then, as she saw the guards approaching, she fell into an utter silence.

As Michael II entered the Vatican the sun was again obscured and the thunder rolled; he passed up the silver stairs to his cabinet and closed the door on all.

The storm grew and rioted angrily in the sky; in the height of it came a messenger riding straight to the Vatican.

Blood and dust were smeared on his clothes, and he was weary with swift travel; they brought him to the ebony cabinet and face to face with the Pope.

"From Theirry of Dendermonde?" breathed Michael, his face white as his robe.

"From Theirry of Dendermonde, your Holiness."

"What says he—victory?"

"Balthasar of Courtrai is defeated, his army lies dead, men and horses, in the vale of Tivoli, and his conqueror marches home to-day."

A shaft of lightning showed the ghastly face of Michael II, and a peal of thunder shook the messenger back against the wall.

CHAPTER X

THE EVENING BEFORE THE CORONATION

The orange marble pillars glowing in the light of a hundred lamps gave the chamber a dazzling brightness; the windows were screened by scarlet silk curtains, and crystal bowls of purple flowers stood on the serpentine floor.

On a low gilt couch against the wall sat Theirry, his gold armour half concealed by a violet and ermine mantle; round his close dark hair was a wreath of red roses, and the long pearls in his ears glimmered with his movements.

Opposite him on a throne supported by basalt lions was Michael II, robed in gold and silver tissues under a dalmatica of orange and crimson brocade.

"It is done," he said in a low eager voice, "and to-morrow I crown you in St. Peter's church; Theirry, it is done."

"Truly our fortunes are marvellous," answered Theirry, "to-day—when I heard the Princes elect me—an unknown adventurer!—when I heard the mob of Rome shout for me—I thought I had gone mad!"

"It is I who have done this for you," said the Pope softly.

Theirry seemed to shudder in his gorgeous mail.

"Are you afraid of me?" the other asked. "Why do you so seldom look at me?"

Theirry slowly turned his beautiful face.

"I am afraid of my own fortunes—I am not as bold as you," he said fearfully. "You never hesitated to sin.

The Pope moved, and his garments sparkled against the gleaming marble wall.

"I do not sin," he smiled. "I am Sin—I do no evil for I am Evil—but you"—his face became grave, almost sad—"you are very human, better had it been for me never to have met you!"

He placed his little hands either side of him on the smooth heads of the basalt lions.

"Theirry—for your sake I have risked everything, for your sake maybe I must leave this strange fair life and go back whence I came—so much I care for you, so dearly have I kept the vows we made in Frankfort—cannot you meet with courage the destiny I offer you?"

Theirry hid his face in his hands.

The Pope flushed, and a wild light sparkled in his dark eyes.

"Was not your blood warmed by that charge at Tivoli? When knight and horse fell before your spears and your host humbled an Emperor, when Rome rose to greet you and I came to meet you with a kingdom for a gift, did not some fire creep into your veins that might serve to heat you now?"

"A kingdom!" cried Theirry, "the kingdom of Antichrist. The victory was not mine—the cohorts of the Devil galloped beside us and urged us to unholy triumph—Rome is a place of horror, full of witches, ghosts and strange beasts!

"You said you would be Emperor," answered the Pope. "And I have granted you your wish, if you fail me or betray me now . . . it is over—for both of us."

Theirry rose and paced the chamber.

"Ay, I will be Emperor," he cried feverishly. "Theirry of Dendermonde crowned by the Devil in St. Peter's church—why should I hesitate? I am on the road to hell, to hell. . . ."

The Pope fixed ardent eyes on him.

"And if ye fail me ye shall go there instantly."

Theirry stopped in his pacing to and fro.

"Why do you say to me so often, 'do not fail me, do not betray me'?"

Michael II answered in a low voice.

"Because I fear it."

Theirry laughed desperately.

"To whom should I betray you! It seems that you have all the world!"

"There is Jacobea of Martzburg."

"Why do you sting me with that name!"

"Belike I thought ye might wish to make her your Empress," said the Pope in sudden mockery.

Theirry pressed his hand to his brow.

"She believes in God . . . what is such to me?" he cried.

"The other day you lied to me, saying you knew not where she was—and straightway ye visited her."

"This is your spy's work, Ursula of Rooselaare."

"Maybe," answered the Pope.

Theirry paused before the basalt throne.

“Tell me of her. She follows me—I—I—know not what to think, she has been much in my mind of late, since I—” He broke off, and looked moodily at the ground. “Where has she been these years—what does she mean to do now?”

“She will not trouble you again,” answered Michael II, “let her go.”

“I cannot—she said I had seen her face—”

“Well, if you have?—take it from me she is not fair.”

“I do not think of her fairness,” answered Theirry sullenly, “but of the mystery there is behind all of it—why you never told me of her before, and why she haunts me with witches in her train.”

The Pope looked at him curiously.

“For one who has never been an ardent lover ye dwell much on women—I had rather you thought on battles and kingdoms—had I been a—were I you, dancer and nun alike would be nothing to me compared with my coronation on the morrow.”

Theirry replied hotly.

“Dancer and nun, as ye term them, are woven in with all I do, I cannot, if I would, forget them. Ah, that I ever came to Rome—would I were still a Chamberlain at Basil’s Court or a merchant’s clerk in India!”

He covered his face with his trembling hands and turned away across the golden room.

The Pope rose in his seat and pressed his jewelled fingers against his breast.

“Would ye had never come my way to be my ruin and your own—would you were not such a sweet fair fool that I must love you! . . . and so, we make ourselves the mock of destiny by these complaints. Oh, if you have the desire to be king show the courage to dare a kingly fate.”

Theirry leant against one of the orange marble pillars, the violet mantle falling away from his golden armour, the fainting roses lying slackly in his dark hair.

“You must think me a coward,” he said, “and I have been very weak—but that, I think, is passed; I have reached the summit of all the greatness I ever dreamed and it confuses me, but when the Imperial crown is mine you shall find me bold enough.”

Michael II flushed and gave a dazzling smile.

“Then are we great indeed!—we shall join hands across the fairest dominion men ever ruled, Suabia is ours, Bohemia and Lombardy, France courts our alliance, Cyprus, the isle of Candy and Malta town, in Rhodes they worship us, and Genoa town owns us master!

He paused in his speech and stepped down from the throne.

“Do you remember that day in Antwerp, Theirry, when we looked in the mirror?” he said, and his voice was tender and beautiful; “we hardly dared then to think of this.”

“We saw a gallows in that mirror,” answered Theirry, “a gallows tree beside the triple crown.”

“It was for our enemies!” cried Michael; “our enemies whom we have triumphed over; Theirry, think of it, we were very young then, and poor—now I have kings at my footstool, and you will sleep tonight in the Golden Palace of the Aventine!” He laughed joyously.

Theirry’s face grew gentle at the old memories.

“The house still stands, I wot,” he mused, “though the dust be thick over the deserted rooms and the vine chokes the windows—when I was in the East, I have thought with great joy of Antwerp.”

The Pope laid his delicate fragrant hand on the glittering vambrace.

“Theirry—do you not value me a little now?”

Theirry smiled, into the ardent eyes.

“You have done more for me than man or God, and above both I do you worship,” he answered wildly. “I am not fearful any more, and to-morrow ye shall see me a king indeed.”

“Until to-morrow then, farewell. I must attend a Conclave of the Cardinals and show myself unto the multitude in St. Peter’s church. You to the palace, on the Aventine, there to sleep soft and dream of gold.”

They clasped hands, a hot colour was in the Pope’s face.

“The Syrian guards wait below and the Lombard archers who stood beside you at Tivoli—they will attend you to the Imperial Palace.”

“What shall I do there?” asked Theirry. “It is early yet, and I do not love to sit alone.”

“Then, come to the service in the Basilica—come with a bold bearing and a rich dress to overawe these mongrel crowds of Rome.”

To that Theirry made no answer.

“Farewell,” he said, and lifted the scarlet curtain that concealed the door, “until to—morrow.”

The Pope came quickly to his side.

“Do not go to Jacobea to-night,” he said earnestly. “Remember, if you fail me now—”

“I shall not fail you or myself, again—farewell.”

His hand was on the latch when Michael spoke once more—

“I grieve to let you go,” he murmured in an agitated tone. “I have not before been fearful, but to-night Theirry smiled.

“You have no cause to dread anything, you with your foot on the neck of the world.”

He opened the door on to the soft purple light of the stairs and stepped from the room.

In a half-stifled voice the Pope called him. “Theirry!—be true to me, for on your faith have I staked everything.”

Theirry looked over his shoulder and laughed.

“Will you never let me begone?”

The other pressed his hand to his forehead.

“Ay, begone—why should I seek to keep you?”

Theirry descended the stairs and now and then looked up.

Always to see fixed on him the yearning, fierce gaze of the one who stood by the gilded rails and stared down at his glittering figure.

Only when he had completely disappeared in the turn of the stairs did Michael II slowly return to the golden chamber and close the gorgeous doors.

Theirry, splendidly attended, flashed through the riotous streets of Rome to the palace on the Aventine Hill.

There he dismissed the knights.

“I shall not go to the Basilica to-night,” he said, “go thou there without me.”

He laid aside the golden armour, the purple cloak, and attired himself in a dark habit and a steel corselet; he meant to be Emperor to-morrow, he meant to be faithful to the Pope, but it was in his heart to see Jacobea once more before he accepted the Devil’s last gift and sign.

Leaving the palace secretly, when they all thought him in his chamber, he took his way towards the Appian Gate.

Once more, for the last time . . . he would suggest to her that she returned to Martzburg. The plague was rampant in the city; more than once he passed the death-cart attended by friars clanging harsh bells; several houses were sealed and silent; but in the piazzas the people danced and sang, and in the Via Sacra they held a carnival in honour of the victory at Tivoli.

It was nearly dark, starless, and the air heavy with the sense of storm; as he neared the less-frequented part of the city Theirry looked continually behind him to see if the dancer in orange dogged his footsteps—he saw no one.

Very lonely, very silent it was in the Appian Way, the only domestic light he came to the little lamp above the convent gate.

The stillness and gloom of the place chilled his heart, she could not, must not stay here. .

He gently pushed the gate and entered.

The hot dusk just revealed to him the dim shapes of the white roses and the dark figure of a lady standing beside them.

"Jacobea," he whispered.

She moved very slowly towards him.

"Ah! you."

"Jacobea—you must not remain in this place!— where are the nuns?"

She shook her head.

"They are dead of the plague days past, and I have buried them in the garden."

He gave a start of horror.

"You shall go back to Martzburg—you are *alone* here?"

Her answer came calmly out of the twilight.

"I think there is no one living anywhere near. The plague has been very fierce—you should not come here if you do not wish to die."

"But what of you?" His voice was full of horror.

"Why, what can it matter about me?"

He thought she smiled; he followed her into the house, the chamber where they had sat before.

A tall pale candle burnt on the bare table, and by the light of it he saw her face.

"Ye are ill already," he shuddered.

Again she shook her head.

"Why do you come here?" she asked gently. "You are to be Emperor to-morrow."

She crept with a slow sick movement to a bench that stood against the wall and sank down on it; her features showed pinched and wan, her eyes unnaturally blue in the pallor of her face.

"You must return to Martzburg," repeated Theirry distractedly; and thought of her as he had first seen her, bright and gay, in a pale crimson dress. . . .

"Nay, I shall return to Martzburg no more," she answered. "He died to-day."

"He?—who died, Jacobea?"

Very faintly she smiled.

"Sebastian—in Palestine. God let me see him then, because I had never looked on him since that morning on which you saw us, sir . . . he has been a holy man fighting the infidel; they wounded him, I think, and he was sick with fever—he crept into the shade (for it is very hot there, sir), and died."

Theirry stood dumb, and the mad hatred of the devil who had brought about this misery anew possessed him.

Jacobea spoke again.

"Maybe they have met in Paradise—and as for me I hope God may think me fit to die—of late it seemed to me that the fiends were again troubling me"—she clasped her hands tightly on her knees and shivered; "something evil is abroad . . . who is the dancer? . . . last night I saw her crouching by my gate as I was making the grave of Sister Angela, and it seemed, it seemed, that she bewitched me—as the young scholar did, long ago."

Theirry leant heavily against the table.

"She is the Pope's spy and tool," he cried hoarsely, "Ursula of Rooselaare!"

Jacobea's dim eyes were bewildered.

"Ah, Balthasar's wife," she faltered, "but the Pope's tool—how should he meddle with an evil thing?"

Then he told her, in an outburst of wild, unnameable feeling.

"The Pope is Dirk Renswoude—the Pope is Antichrist—do you not understand? And I am to help him rule the kingdom of the Devil!"

Jacobea gave a shuddering cry, half rose in her seat and sank back against the wall.

Theirry crossed the room and fell on his knees beside her.

"It is true, true," he sobbed. "And I am damned for ever!"

The lightning darted in from the darkness and thunder crashed above the convent; Theirry laid his head on her lap and her cold fingers touched his hair.

"Since, knowing this, you are his ally," she whispered fearfully.

He answered through clenched teeth.

"Yea, I will be Emperor—and it is too late to turn back."

Jacobea stared across the candle-lit room.

"Dirk Renswoude," she muttered, "and Ursula of Rooselaare—why—was it not to save Hugh of Rooselaare that he rode—that night?"

Theirry lifted his head and looked at her, her utterance was feeble and confused, her eyes glazing in a livid face; he clasped his hands tightly over hers.

"What was Lord Hugh to him?" she asked, "Ursula's father. . . ."

"I do not understand," cried Theirry.

"But it is very clear to me—I am dying—she loved you, loves you still—that such things should be. . . ."

"Whom do you speak of—Jacobea?" he cried, distracted.

She drooped towards him and he caught her in his arms.

"The city is accursed," she gasped; "give me Christian burial, if ever once you cared for me, and fly, fly!"

She strained and writhed in his frantic embrace. "And you never knew it was a woman," she whispered, "Pope and dancer. . . ."

"God!" shrieked Theirry; and staggered to his feet drawing her with him.

She choked her life out against his shoulder, clinging with the desperation of the dying, to him, while he tried to force her into speech.

"Answer me, Jacobea! What authority have you for this hideous thing, in the name of God, Jacobea!"

She slipped from him to the bench.

"Water, a crucifix. . . . Oh, I have forgot my prayers." She stretched out her hands towards a wooden crucifix that hung on the wall, caught hold of it, pressed her lips to the feet. .

"Sybilla," she said, and died with that name struggling in her throat.

Theirry stepped back from her with a strangled shriek that seemed to tear the breath from his body, and staggered against the table.

The lightning leapt in through the dark window, and appeared to plunge like a sword into the breast of the dead woman.

Dead!—even as she uttered that horror—dead so suddenly. The plague had slain her—he did not wish to die, so he must leave this place—was he not to be Emperor to-morrow?

He fell to laughing.

The candle had burnt almost to the socket; the yellow flame struggling against extinction cast a fantastic leaping light over Jacobea, lying huddled along the bench with her yellow hair across the breast of her rough garment; over Theirry, leaning with slack limbs against the table; it showed his ghastly face, his staring eyes, his dropped jaw—as his laughter died into silence.

Fly! Fly!

He must fly from this Thing that reigned in Rome—he could not face to-morrow, he could not look again into the face of Antichrist. . . .

He crawled across the room and stared at Jacobea.

She was not beautiful; he noticed that her hands were torn and stained with earth from making the graves of the nuns . . . . she had asked for Christian burial . . . . he could not stay to give it her. . . .

He fiercely hated her for what she had told him, yet he took up the ends of her yellow hair and kissed them.

Again the thunder and lightning and wild howlings reached him from without, as ghosts and night-hags wandered past to hold court within the accursed city.

The candle shot up a long tongue of flame—and went out.

Theirry staggered across the darkness.

A flash of lightning showed him the door. As the thunder crashed above the city he fled from the convent and from Rome.

CHAPTER XI

THE ANGELS

In a ruined villa, shattered by the barbarians and crumbled by time, sat Ysabeau the Empress looking over the sunless Maremma.

A few olive trees were all that shaded the bare expanse of marshy land, where great pools veiled with unhealthy vapours gleamed faintly under the heavy clouds.

Here and there rose the straight roof of a forsaken convent, or the stately pillars of a deserted palace.

There was no human being in sight.

A few birds flew low over the marshes; sometimes one screamed in through the open roof or darted across the gaping broken doorway.

Then Ysabeau would rise from her sombre silence to spurn them from her with fierce words and stones.

The stained marble was grown with reeds and wild flowers; a straggling vine half twisted round two of the slender columns; and there the Empress sat, huddled in her cloak and gazing over the forlorn marshes.

She had dwelt here for three days; at every sunrise a peasant girl, daring the excommunication, had brought her food, then fled with a frightened face.

Ysabeau saw nothing before her save death, but she did not mean to die by the ignoble way of starvation.

She had not heard of the defeat of Balthasar at Tivoli, nor of the election of Theirry to the crown; day and night she thought on her husband, and pondered how she might still possibly serve him.

She did not hope to see him again; it never occurred to her to return to him; when she had fled his camp she had left a confession behind her—no Greek would have heeded it, but these Saxons, still, to her, foreigners, were different.

And Balthasar had loved Melchoir of Brabant.

It was very hot, with a sullen, close heat; the dreary prospect became hateful to her, and she rose and moved to the inner portion of the villa, where the marigold roots thrust up through the inlaid stone floor, and a remaining portion of the roof cast a shade.

Here she seated herself on the capital of a broken column, and a languid weariness subdued her proud spirit; her head sank back against the stained wall, and she slept.

When she woke the whole landscape was glowing with the soft red of sunset.

She stretched herself, shivered, and looked about her.

Then she suddenly drew herself together and listened.

There were faint voices coming from the outer room, and the sound of a man's tread.

Ysabeau held her breath.

But so close a silence followed that she thought she must have been deceived.

For a while she waited, then crept cautiously towards the shattered doorway that led into the other chamber.

She gained it and gazed through.

Sitting where she had just now sat, under the vine-twisted columns, was a huge knight in defaced armour; his back was towards her; by his side his helmet stood, and the great glittering dragon that formed the crest shone in the setting sun.

He was bending over a child that lay asleep on a crimson cloak.

"Balthasar," said Ysabeau.

He gave a little cry, and looked over his shoulder. "Tell me, my lord," she asked in a trembling voice, as you would tell a stranger, if evil fortune brings you here."

He rose softly, his face flushed.

"I am a ruined man. They have elected another Emperor. Now, I think, it does not matter."

Her eyes travelled in a dazed way to the child.

"Is he sick?"

"Nay, only weary; we have been wandering since Tivoli—"

While he spoke he looked at her, as if the world held nothing else worth gazing on.

"I must go," said Ysabeau.

"Must go?"

"I am cast out—I may not share your misfortunes." Balthasar laughed.

"I have been searching for you madly, Ysabeau."

"Searching?"

And now he looked away from her.

"I thought my heart would have burst when I discovered ye had gone to Rome

"But you found the writing?" she cried.

"Yea—"

"You know—I slew him?"

"I know you went to give your life for me."

"I am accursed!

"You have been faithful to me."

"Oh, Balthasar!—does it make no difference?"

“It cannot,” he said, half sadly. “You are my wife—part of me; I have given you my heart to keep, and nothing can alter it.”

“You do not mock me?” she questioned, shuddering. “It must be that you mock me—I will go away—”

He stepped before her.

“You shall never leave me again, Ysabeau.”

“I had not dared—you have forgiven—”

“I am not your judge—”

“It cannot be that God is so tender!”

“I do not speak for Him,” said Balthasar hoarsely—“but for myself—”

She could not answer.

“Ysabeau,” he cried jealously, “you—could you have lived apart from me?”

“Nay,” she whispered; “I meant to die.”

“That I might be forgiven!”

“What else could I do! Would they had slain me and taken the curse from you!”

He put his arm round her bowed shoulders. “There is no curse while we are together, Ysabeau.”

Her marvellous hair lay across his dinted mail.

“This is sweeter than our marriage day, Balthasar, for now you know the worst of me—”

“My wife!—my lady and my wife!”

He set her gently on the broken shaft by the door and kissed her hand.

“Wencelaus sleeps,” she smiled through tears. “I could not have put him to rest more surely—”

“He slept not much last night,” said Balthasar, “for the owls and flitter mice—and it was very dark with the moon hidden.”

Her hand still lay in his great palm.

“Tell me of yourself,” she whispered.

And he told her how they had been defeated at Tivoli, how the remnant of his force had forsaken him, and how Theirry of Dendermonde had been elected Emperor by the wishes of the Pope.

Her eyes grew fierce at that.

“I have ruined you,” she said; “made you a beggar.”

“If you knew”—he smiled half shyly—“how little I care, for myself—certes, for you.”

“Do not shame me,” she cried.

“Could I have held a throne without you, Ysabeau?”

Her fingers trembled in his.

“Would I had been a better woman, for your sake, Balthasar.”

His swift bright flush dyed his fair face.

“All I grieve for, Ysabeau, is—God.”

“God?” she asked, wondering.

“If He should not forgive?”—his blue eyes were troubled—“and we are cursed and cast out—what think you?”

She drew closer to him.

“Through me!—you grieve, and this is—through me!”

“Nay, our destiny is one—always. Only, I think—of afterwards—yet, if you are—damned, as the priest says, why, I will be so too—”

“Do not fear, Balthasar; if God will not receive me, the little images at Constantinople will forgive me if I pray to them again as I did when I was a child—”

They fell on silence again, while the red colour of the setting sun deepened and cast a glow over their weary faces and the sleeping figure of Wencelaus; the vine leaves fluttered from the ancient marble and the wild-fowl screamed across the marshes.

“Who is this Pope that he should hate us so?” mused Ysabeau. “And who Theirry of Dendermonde that he should be Emperor of the West?”

“He is to be crowned in the Basilica to-day,” said Balthasar.

“While we sit here!”

“I do not understand it. Nor do I now, Ysabeau,”—Balthasar looked at her—“greatly care—”

“But you shall care!” she cried. “If I be all to you, I will be that—I must see you again upon the throne; we will to Basil’s Court. That this Theirry of Dendermonde should sleep to-night in the golden palace!”

“We have found each other,” said the Emperor simply.

She raised his hand, kissed it, and no more was said, while the mists gathered and thickened over the Maremma and the rich hues faded from the sky.

“Who is that?” cried Ysabeau, and pointed across the marsh-land.

A figure, dark against the mists, was running aimlessly, wildly to and fro, winding his way in and out the pools, now and then flinging his arms up in a frantic gesture towards the evening sky.

“A madman,” said Balthasar; “see, he runs with no object, round and round, yet always as if pursued—”

Ysabeau drew close to her husband, as they both watched, with a curious fascination, the man being driven hither and thither as by an invisible enemy.

“Is it a ghost?” whispered Ysabeau; “strangely chilled and horror-stricken do I feel—”

The Emperor made the sign of the Cross.

“Part of the curse, maybe,” he muttered.

Suddenly, as if exhausted, the man stopped and stood still with hanging head and arms; the sun burning to the horizon made a vivid background to his tall dark figure till the heavy noisome vapours rose to the level of the sunset, and the solitary, motionless stranger was blotted from the view of the two watching in the ruined villa.

“Why should we wonder?” said Balthasar. “There must be many men abroad, both Saxon and Roman—”

“Yet, he ran strangely,” she murmured; “and I have been here three days and seen no one.”

“We must get away,” said Balthasar resolutely. “This is a vile spot.”

“At dawn a girl comes here with food, enough at least for Wencelaus.

“I have food with me, Ysabeau, given by one who did not know that we were excommunicate.”

The Empress looked about her fearfully.

“I heard a step.”

Balthasar peered through the mist.

“The man,” whispered Ysabeau.

Out of the dreary vapours, the forlorn and foul mists of the marshes, he appeared, stumbling over the stones in his way . . .

He caught hold of the slender pillar by the entrance and stared at the three with distraught eyes. His clothes were dark, wet and soiled, his hair hung lank round a face hollow and pale but of obvious beauty.

“Theirry of Dendermonde!” exclaimed Balthasar. Ysabeau gave a cry that woke the child and sent him frightened into her arms.

“The Emperor,” said the new-comer in a feeble voice.

Balthasar answered fiercely— “Am I still Emperor to you?—you who to-day were to receive my crown in St. Peter’s church?”

Ysabeau clasped Wencelaus tightly to her breast, and her eyes shone with a wrathful triumph.

“They have cast him out; Rome rose against such a king!”

Theirry shivered and crouched like one very cold.

“Of my own will I fled from Rome, that city of the Devil!”

Balthasar stared at him.

“Is this the man who broke our ranks at Tivoli?”

“Is this he who would be Emperor of the West?” cried Ysabeau.

“You are the Emperor,” said Theirry faintly, “and I pretend no longer to these wrongful honours, nor serve I any longer Antichrist—”

“He is mad!” cried Balthasar.

“Nay,” Ysabeau spoke eagerly—“listen to him.”

Theirry moaned.

“I have nothing to say—give me a place to rest in.”

“Through you we have no place ourselves to rest in,” answered Balthasar grimly. “No shelter save these broken walls you see; but since you have returned to your allegiance, we command that you tell us of this Antichrist—”

Theirry straightened himself.

“He who reigns in Rome is Antichrist, Michael, who was Dirk Renswoude—”

“He perished,” said the Emperor, very pale; “and the Pope was Blaise of Dendermonde.”

“That was the Devil’s work, black magic!” cried Theirry wildly; “the youth Blaise died ten years ago, and Dirk Renswoude took his place

“It is true!” cried the Empress; “by what he said to me I know it true—now do I see it very clearly

But Balthasar stared at Theirry in a confused manner.

“I do not understand.”

The lightning darted through the broken wall, and a solitary winged thing flapped over the roofless villa.

Theirry began to speak.

He told them, in a thick, expressionless voice, all he knew of Dirk Renswoude.

He did not mention Ursula of Rooselaare. As his tale went on, the storm gathered till all light had vanished from the sky, the lightning rent a starless gloom, and the continual roar of the thunder quivered in the stifling air.

In the pauses between the lightning they could not see each other; Wencelaus sobbed on his mother’s breast, and the owls hooted in the crevices of the marble.

Theirry’s voice suddenly strengthened.

“Now, turn against Rome, for all men will join you—a force of Lombards marches up from Trastevere, and the Saxons gather without the walls of the accursed city.”

A blue flash showed them his face . . . they heard him fall. . . .

After a while Balthasar made his way to him through the dark.

“He has fainted,” he said fearfully; “is he, belike, mad?”

“He speaks the hideous truth,” whispered Ysabeau.

Suddenly, at its very height the storm ceased, the air became cool and fragrant, and a bright moon floated from the clouds.

The silver radiance of it, extraordinarily bright and vivid, illuminated the Maremma, the pools, the tall reeds, the deserted buildings, the ruins that sheltered them; the clouds rolled swiftly from the sky, leaving it clear and blazing with stars.

The first moon and the first stars that had shone since Michael II's reign in the Vatican.

Theirry's dark dress and hair, and deathlike face pressed against the marble pavement showed now plainly.

Balthasar looked at his wife; neither dared to speak, but Wencelaus gave a panting sigh of relief at the lifting of the darkness.

"My lord," he said, striving out of his mother's arms, "a goodly company comes across the marsh—"

A great awe and fear held them silent, and the wonderful silver shine of the moon lay over them like a spell.

They saw, slowly approaching them, two knights and two ladies, who seemed to advance without motion across the marsh-land.

The knights wore armour that shone like glass, and long mantles of white samite; the dames were clad in silver tissue, and around their brows were close-pressed wreaths of roses mingled red and white.

Very bright and fair they seemed; the knights came to the fore, carrying silver trumpets; the ladies held each other's hands lovingly, and their gleaming tresses of red and gold wove together as they walked.

They reached the portals of the villa, and the air blew cold and pure.

The lady with the yellow hair who held white violets in her hand, spoke to the other, and her voice was like the echo of the sea in a wide-lipped shell.

They paused; Balthasar drew back before the great light they brought with them, and Ysabeau hid her face, for some of them she knew.

On earth their names had been Melchoir, Sebastian, Jacobea and Sybilla.

"Balthasar," said the foremost Knight, "we are come from the courts of Paradise to bid you march against Rome. In that city reigns Evil, permitted to punish a sinful people, but now her time is come. Go you to Viterbo, there you will find the Cardinal of Narbonne, whom God has ordained Pope, and with him an army; at the head of it storm Rome, and all the people shall join you in destroying Antichrist."

Balthasar fell on his knees.

"And the curse!" he cried.

"'Tis not the curse of God upon you, therefore be comforted, Balthasar of Courtrai, and at the dawn haste to Viterbo."

With that they moved away, and were absorbed into the silver light that transfigured the Maremma.

Balthasar sprang to his feet, shouting—

"I am not excommunicate! I shall be Emperor again. The curse is lifted!"

The moonlight faded, again the clouds rolled up. . . .

Balthasar caught Theirry by the shoulder.

"Did you see the vision?—the angels?"

Theirry came shuddering from his swoon.

"I saw nothing—Ursula . . . Ursula. . . ."

CHAPTER XII

IN THE VATICAN

In the ebony cabinet in the Vatican sat Michael II; an expression of utter anguish marked his face.

On the gold table were spread books and parchments; the sullen light of a stormy midday filtered through the painted curtains and showed the rich splendours of the chamber, the glittering, closed wings of the shrine, the carved gold arms of the Pope's chair, the threads of silver tissue in his crimson robe.

He sat very still, his elbow resting on the table, his cheek propped on his palm, now and then he looked at the little sand clock.

Presently Paolo Orsini entered; the Pope glanced at him without moving.

"No news?" he asked.

"None of the Lord Theirry, your Holiness." Michael II moistened his lips.

"They have searched—everywhere?"

"Throughout Rome, your Holiness, but—"

"Well?"

"Only this, my lord, a man might easily disappear—there is no law in the city."

"He was armed, they said, when he left the palace; have you sent to the convent I told you of—St. Angela, beyond the Appian Gate?"

"Yea, your Holiness," answered Orsini, "and they found nought but a dead woman."

The Pope averted his eyes.

"What did they with her?" Orsini lifted his brows.

"Cast her into the plague pit, Holiness,—that quarter is a charnel-house."

The Pope drew a deep breath.

"Well, he is gone—I do not think him dead,"—he flung back his head—"but the game is over, is it not, Orsini? We fling down our pieces and say—good-night!"

His nostrils dilated, his eyes flashed, he brought his open hand softly on to the table.

"What does your Holiness mean?" asked Orsini.

"We mean that this puppet Emperor of ours has forsaken us, and that our position becomes perilous," answered the Pope. "Cardinal Narbonne, hurling defiance at us from Viterbo, grows stronger, and the mob—do not seek to deceive me, Orsini, the mob clamours against us?"

"It is true, my lord."

The Pope gave a terrible smile, and his beautiful eyes widened.

"And the soldiers mutiny, the Saxons at Trastevere have joined Balthasar and the Veronese have left me—we have not enough men to hold Rome an hour; well, Orsini, you shall take a summons to the Cardinals and we will hold a conclave, there to decide how we may meet our fortune."

He rose and turned towards the window.

"Hark, do you hear how the factions howl below?—begone, Orsini."

The secretary departed in silence.

Mutterings, murmurings, howlings rose from the accursed city to the Pontiff's chamber; lightning darted from the black heavens, and thunder rolled round the hills of Rome.

Michael II walked to and fro in his gorgeous cabinet.

In the three days since Theirry had fled the city, his power had crumbled like a handful of sand; Rome had turned against him, and every hour men fell away from his cause.

The devils, too, had forsaken him; he could not raise the spirits, the magic fires would not burn . . . all was blank darkness and silence.

Up and down he paced, listening to the mob surging in the Piazza of St. Peter.

The day wore on and the storm grew in violence.

Paolo Orsini came again to him, his face pale.

"Half the Cardinals are fled to Viterbo and those remaining refuse to acknowledge your Holiness."

The Pope smiled.

"I had expected it."

"News comes from a Greek runner that Theirry of Dendermonde is with Balthasar's host—"

"Also I expected that," said Michael II wildly.

"And they proclaim you," continued Orsini in an agitated manner, "an impostor, one given to evil practices, and by these means incite the people against you; Cardinal Orvieto has led a thousand men across the marshes to the Emperor's army—"

"And Theirry of Dendermonde has denounced me!" said the Pope.

As he spoke one beat for admission on the gilt door. The secretary opened and there entered an Eastern chamberlain.

"Holiness," he cried fearfully, "the people have set fire to your palace on the Palatine Hill, and Cardinal Colonna, with his brother Octavian, have seized Castel San Angelo for the Emperor, and hold it in defiance of your Grace."

As he finished the lightning darted info the now darkening chamber, and the thunder mingled with the howling of the mob that surged beneath the Vatican walls.

"The captain of my guard and those faithful to me," answered the Pope, "will know how to do what may be done—apprise me of the approach of Balthasar's host, and now go."

They left him; he stood for a while listening to those ominous sounds that filled the murky air, then he pressed a spring in one of the mother-of-pearl panels and stepped into the secret chamber that was revealed.

Cautiously he closed the panel by which he had entered, and looked furtively about him.

The small windowless space was lit only by one blood-red lamp, locked cupboards lined the walls, and a huge globe of faint gold, painted with curious and mystic signs, hung from the ceiling.

The Pope's stiff garments made a soft rustling sound as he moved; his quick desperate breathing disturbed the heavy confined air.

In his pallid face his eyes rolled and gleamed.

"Sathanas, Sathanas," he muttered, "is this the end?"

A throbbing shook the red-lit gloom, his last words were echoed mournfully—

"The end."

He clutched his hands into the jewelled embroidery on his breast.

"Now you mock me—by my old allegiance, is this the end?"

Again the echo from the dark walls—

"The end."

The Pope glared in front of him.

"Must I die, Sathanas—must I swiftly die?"

A little confused laughter came before the echo "swiftly die."

He paced up and down the narrow space.

"I staked my fortunes on that man's faith and he has forsaken me, and I have lost, lost!"

"Lost! lost!

The Pope laughed frantically.

"At least she died, Sathanas, her yellow hair rots in the plague pit now; I had some skill left . . . but what was all my skill if I could not keep him faithful to me—"

He clasped his jewelled hand over his eyes; utter silence followed his words now; the globe of pallid gold trembled in the darkness of the domed ceiling, and the mystic characters on it began to writhe and move.

"Long had I lived with the earth beneath my feet had I not met that fair sweet fool, and I go to ruin for his sake who has denounced me—"

The red lamp became dull as a dying coal.

"Ye warned me," breathed the Pope, "that this man would be my bane—you promised on his truth to you and me to halve the world between us; he was false, and you have utterly forsaken me?"

The echo answered—

"Utterly forsaken. . . ."

The lamp went out.

The pale luminous globe expanded to a monstrous size, the circle of dark little fiends round it danced and whirled madly. .

Then it burst and fell in a thousand fragments at the Pope's feet.

Out of the darkness came a wail as of some thing hurt or dying, then long sighing shook the close air. . . .

The Pope felt along the wall, touched the spring and stepped into the ebony cabinet.

He looked quite old and small and bowed.

Night had fallen; the chamber was lit by perfumed candles in curious carved sticks of soapstone; faint veils of incense floated in the air.

Without the thunder rolled and threatened, and the factions of Rome fought in the streets.

The Pope sank into a chair and folded his hands in his lap; his head fell forward on his breast; his lips quivered and two tears rolled down his cheeks.

The Angelus bells rang out over the city, there were not many to ring now; as they quivered away a clock struck, quite near.

The Pope did not move.

Once again Paolo Orsini entered, and Michael II averted his face.

"Holiness, Balthasar marches on Rome," said the secretary, "the mob rush forth to join him, and if the gates were brass, and five times brass, the Vatican could not withstand them."

The Pope spoke without looking round.

"Will they storm the Vatican?"

"Ay, that they will, Holiness," answered Orsini.

Now the Pontiff turned his white face.

"What may I do?"

"The captain of the guard suggests that ye come to terms with the Emperor, and by submission save your life."

"That I will not."

"Then it were well if your Holiness would flee; there is a secret way out of the Vatican—"

"And that I will not."

Orsini, too, was very pale.

"Then are you doomed to fall into the hands of Balthasar, and he and his faction say—horrible things."

The Pope rose.

"You think they would lay hands on me?

"I do fear it!

"It would be a shameful death, Orsini?"

"Surely not that! I cannot think the Emperor would do more than imprison your Holiness."

"Well, you are very faithful, Orsini."

The young Roman shrugged his shoulders.

"Cardinal Narbonne is a Colonna, Holiness, and I have always found you a generous master."

The Pope went to the window.

"How they howl!" he said through his teeth, "and Balthasar comes nearer, nearer—"

He checked himself abruptly.

"I will dine here to-night, Orsini, see that everything is done as usual."

The secretary bowed himself out of the gilt door. Michael II went to the table on the dais and took from it a scroll of parchment.

Standing in the centre of the room he unrolled it; some verses were written in a scarlet ink on the smooth surface; in a low voice he read aloud the two last.

"If Love were all!
  I had lived glad and meek,
Nor heard Ambition call
  And Valour speak,
    If Love were all!"

He smiled bitterly.

"But Love is weak,

And often leaves his throne,
  Among his scattered roses pale
To weep and moan,
  And I, apostate to his whispered creed,
Shall miss his wings above my pall,
  Nor find his face in this my bitter need,
    When Love is all!"

"The metre halts," said Michael II, "the metre . . . . halts."

He tore the parchment into fragments and scattered them on the floor.

Again the gilt doors were opened, this time a chamberlain entered.

A herald had brought a fierce and grim message from Balthasar.

It spoke of the Pope as Antichrist, and called on him to submit if he would keep his life.

The Pope read it with haughty eyes; when he had finished he rent it across and cast the pieces down among the others.

"And ye shall hang the herald," he said. "We have so much authority."

The chamberlain handed him a second packet, sealed.

"This also the herald brought, Holiness." "From whom?"

“From Theirry of Dendermonde.”

“Theirry of—of Dendermonde?”

“Yea, Holiness.”

The Pope took the packet.

“Let the herald live,” he said, “but cast him into the dungeons.”

The chamberlain withdrew.

For a while Michael II stood staring at the packet, while the thunder crashed over Rome.

Then he slowly broke the seal.

“What curses have you for me?” he cried wildly. “What curses? You!”

He unfolded the long strip of vellum, and went nearer the candles to read it.

Thus it ran—

“The Emperor’s camp, marching on Rome, Theirry of Dendermonde to Michael, Pope of Rome, thus—

“I am approaching madness, I cannot sleep or rest—after days of torment I write to you whom I have twice betrayed. She died on my breast, but I do not care; Balthasar says he saw her walking on the Maremma, but I saw nothing . . . before she died she said something. I think of you and of nothing else, though I have betrayed you, I have never uttered what she said. No one guesses.

“The uncertainty, the horror, gnaw away my heart. So I write this to you.

“This is my message—

“If you are a devil, be satisfied, for your devil’s work is done.

“If you are a man, you have befriended, wronged me, and I have avenged myself.

“If you are that other thing you may be, then I know you love me, and that I kissed you once.

“If this last be true, as I do think it true, have some pity on my long ignorance and believe I have it in me to love even as you have loved.

“Oh, Ursula, I know a city in India where we might live, and you forget you ever ruled in Rome; yonder are other gods who are so old they have forgot to punish, and they would smile on you and me there, Ursula. Balthasar marches on the city, and you must be ruined and discovered—brought to an end so horrible. You have showed me a secret way out of the Vatican, use it now, this night. I am in advance of the host—I shall be without the Appian Gate tonight, and I have means whereby we may fly to the coast and there take ship to India; until we meet, farewell! and in the name of all the passions you have roused in me—come!”

As the Pope read, all the colour slowly left his face; when he had finished he mechanically rolled up the parchment, then unrolled it again.

Thunder shook the Vatican and the mob howled without.

Again he read the letter.

Then he thrust it into one of the candles and watched it blacken, curl, burst into flame.

He flung it on the marble floor and set his gold heel on it, grinding it into ashes.

At the usual hour they served his sumptuous supper; when it was finished and removed, Paolo Orsini came again.

“Will not your Holiness fly, before it is too late?” All traces of anguish and woe had vanished from his master’s features; he looked proud and beautiful.

“I shall stay here; but let them who will, seek safety.”

He dismissed Orsini and the attendants.

It was now late in the evening—and the thunder unceasing.

The Pope locked the door of the cabinet, then went to the gilt table, and wrote a letter rapidly—this he folded, sealed with purple wax and stamped with his great thumb ring.

He sat silent a little while after this and stared with great luminous eyes before him, then roused himself and unlocked a drawer in the table.

From this he took some documents, tied together with orange silk, and a ring with a red stone in it.

One by one he burnt the parchments in the candle, and when they were reduced to a little pile of ashes he cast the ring into the midst of it and turned away.

He crossed to the window, drew the curtains and looked out over Rome.

In the black heavens, above the black hills, hung a huge meteor, a blazing globe of fire with a trail of flame. . . .

The Pope let the silk fall together again.

He took up one of the candles and went to the gold door that led to his bed-chamber.

Before he opened it he paused a moment; the candle-flame lit his vivid eyes, his haughty face, his glittering vestments. .

He turned the handle and entered the dark, spacious room

Through the high, undraped window could clearly be seen the star that seemed to burn away the very sky.

The Pope set the candle on a shelf where it showed dim glimpses of white and gold tapestries, walls of alabaster, a bed of purple and gilt, mysterious, gorgeous luxury. .

He returned to the cabinet and took from the bosom of his gown a little bottle of yellow jade; for the stopper a ruby served.

The thunder crashed deafeningly; the lightning seemed to split the room in twain; the Pope stood still, listening.

Then he blew out the candles and returned to his bed-chamber.

Softly he passed into the scented, splendid chamber and closed the door behind him.

In the little pause between two thunder-peals was the sound of a great key turning in a lock.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SECRET

The mob had stormed the Vatican; Octavian Colonna, with a handful of fighting men, ascended the undefended marble staircase.

The papal guards lay slain in the courtyard and in the entrance hall; chamberlains, secretary, pages, and priests, fled or surrendered.

With the Lord Colonna was Theirry of Dendermonde, who had entered Rome that morning by the Appian Gate and headed a faction of the lawless crowd in their wild attack on the Vatican.

To himself he kept saying—

“I shall know, she did not come; I shall know, she did not come.”

It was early morning; the terrific storm of last night still lingered over Rome; flashes of blue light divided the murky clouds and the thunder hung about the Aventine; the Colonna grew afraid; he waited below in the gorgeous audience-chamber and sent up to the Pope’s apartments, demanding his submission and promising him safety.

The overawed crowd retired into the courtyard and the Piazza while Paolo Orsini ascended the silver stairs.

He returned with this message—

"His Holiness's apartments were locked, nor could they make him hear."

"Break down the doors," said the Colonna, but he trembled.

It was a common thought among the knights that Michael II had escaped; a monk offered to show them the secret passage where his Holiness might be even now; many went; but Theirry followed the attendants to the gilt door of the ebony cabinet.

They broke the lock and entered, fearfully.

On the floor torn fragments of parchments, a pile of ashes with a ruby ring lying in the midst. . . .

Nothing else.

"His Holiness is in his chamber—we dare not enter."

They had always been afraid of him; even now his name held terror.

"The Colonna waits our news!" cried Theirry wildly, "I—I dare enter."

They tiptoed to the other gilt door; it took them some time to remove the lock.

When at last the door gave and swung open they shrunk away—but Theirry passed into the chamber.

The sombre light of dawn filled it; heavy shadows obscured the rich splendours of golden colours, of gleaming white walls; the men crept after him—it seemed to Theirry as if the world had stopped about them.

On the magnificent purple bed lay the Pope; on his brow the tiara glittered, and on his breast the chasuble; the crozier lay by his side on the samite coverlet, and his feet glittered in their golden shoes; by the crozier was a letter and a jade bottle.

The attendants shrieked and fled.

Theirry crept to the bedside and took up the parchment; his name was over the top; he broke the seal.

He read the fair writing.

"If I be a devil I go whence I came, if a man I lived as one and die as one, if woman I have known Love, conquered it and by it have been vanquished. Whatsoever I am, I perish on the heights, but I do not descend from them. I have known things in their fulness and will not stay to taste the dregs. So, to you greeting, and not for long farewell."

The letter fell from Theirry's hand, fluttered and sank to the floor.

He raised his eyes and saw through the window the meteor, blazing over Rome.

Dead. . . .

He looked now at the proud smooth face on the pillow; the gems of the papal crown gleaming above the red locks, the jewelled chasuble sparkling in the strengthening dawn until he was nearly fooled into thinking the bosom heaved beneath.

He was alone.

At least he could know.

The air was like incense sweet and stifling; his blood seemed to beat in his brain with a little foolish sound of melody; a shaft of grey light fell over the splendours of the bed, the roses and dragons, hawks and hounds sewn on the curtains and coverlets; from the Pope's garments rose a subtle and beautiful perfume.

"Ursula," said Theirry; he bent over the bed until the pearls in his ears touched his cheeks.

Without the thunder muttered.

To know—

He lifted the dead Pope’s arm; there seemed to be neither weight nor substance under the stiff silk. He dropped the sleeve; his cold fingers unclasped the heavy chasuble, underneath lay perfumed samite, white and soft.

An awful sensation crept through his veins; he thought that under these gorgeous vestments was nothing—nothing—ashes.

He did not dare to uncover the bosom that lay, that must lie, under the gleaming samite. . . .

But he must know.

He lifted up the fair crowned head to peer madly into the proud features. . . .

It came away in his hands, like crumbling wood that may preserve, till touched, the semblance of the carving . . . so the Pope’s head parted from the trunk.

Theirry smiled with horror and stared at what he held.

Then it disappeared, fell into ashes before his eyes, and the tiara rolled on to the floor.

Gone—like an image of smoke.

He sank across the headless thing on the bed.

“Must I *follow* you to know, follow you to hell?” he whispered.

Now he could open the rich garments.

They were empty of all save dust.

The strange strong perfume was stinging and numbing his brain, his heart; he thought he heard the fiends coming for his soul—at last.

He hid his face in the purple silk robes and felt his blood grow cold.

The room darkened about him, he knew he was being drawn downwards into eternity, he sighed and slipped from the bed on to the floor.

As his last breath hovered on his lips the meteor vanished, the thunder-clouds rolled away from a fair blue sky and a glorious sunrise laughed over the city.

The reign of Antichrist was ended.

Through the Pope’s chamber the notes of silver trumpets quivered.

Balthasar’s trumpets as his hosts marched triumphantly into Rome.

THE END