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CHIVALRY

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CHAPTER I
THE LADY OF ROVIETO

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WHEN his father was hanged, his mother died of a broken heart.

For the same reason he is known to history merely as Colombo da Siena. His arms—azure, a dove statant argent—are of his own adoption and, *in rebus*, merely expressive of his patronymic, for all that he came of an armigerous family and possessed the right to a patrician name and to some famous quarterings. Behind his disdain of one and the other lies the tragedy that was not without influence on his life. He was, in fact, the only son of that Lord of Terrarossa, Sigismondo Barberi, whom the Florentines dispossessed and deservedly put to death for treachery. He was ten or eleven years of age when he was left orphaned and destitute to face the world; and that he did not perish is due to a saintly brother of his mother's, a Franciscan of the Large Observance, who sheltered him in his tender years from evil.

Later, as the lad grew, deepening in resemblance to his mother and displaying other qualities which endeared him to Fra Franco, his uncle, the question arose of finding a place for him in life. The friar would have made a

determined attempt to obtain his reinstatement in the lordship which his father's villainy had forfeited; and that humble little brother of Saint Francis was not without influence. But in this he met the sternest opposition from Colombo.

"Since the forfeiture was deserved and just, it stands as an expiation. In some sort it serves to cancel the offence. If we retract a payment we revive a debt. So, let it be."

After vain arguments, the friar yielded to the clarity and honesty of the boy's logic, abandoned the attempts he was setting on foot, and addressed himself to other prospects for his nephew.

In later years Colombo would frequently insist that his natural inclinations were entirely pacific. He loved nature and would have found his proper vocation in her service and in agrarian pursuits. But it also happened that he was equipped with rather more than the perception which, as his namesake the Genoese navigator was to demonstrate, is necessary so as to apprehend the obvious. It is, I fancy, the whole secret of his success in life, as it is of many another's. It showed him in his nonage that a man born into the turbulence that constantly distracted the Italian Peninsula in the second half of the Quattrocento, should make haste to determine whether he would range himself with the sheep or with the wolves, since mankind in that time, and particularly in that land of unrest, offered no further choice.

The sheep were the toilers: the merchants, the peasants, the craftsmen, the artificers, even the clergy. The wolves were the princes and those who served them in their quarrels over the soil upon which those toilers had their

being. To be industrious, productive, law-abiding, was to be in danger of unending harassment, to be constantly in peril of being plundered, fined, ruined or even slaughtered.

Considering all this Colombo reached the conclusion that if his natural inclinations did not urge him to become a wolf, even less did they urge him to remain a sheep.

Thus he states his case. But whilst scarcely conscious of it himself, his history states it otherwise. Accounting extinguished the house from which he sprang, there were in him from an early age the vague stirrings of an ambition to found another, infinitely more splendid, that should be entirely the work of his own hands and brain. Since he could not be a descendant without shame, he would become an ancestor of whom his posterity should be proud.

It is not to be asserted that he had deliberately set out with this intention when at the age of sixteen we find him trailing a pike in the service of his native Siena. Rather did the notion grow in him with his own vigorous and rapid growth until it took definite shape during that Sicilian campaign when first his name was blared from Fame’s trumpet across the length and breadth of Italy. He was in his twenty-eighth year by then and he had learnt the trade of arms under that great soldier Bartolomeo Colleoni. From modest beginnings in Colleoni’s company, with the command of ten helmets, he had risen rapidly to the position of one of that famous captain’s most trusted lieutenants.

Then, soon after Colleoni entered Venetian service Colombino—by which affectionate diminutive he had come to be known in the company—had separated from him, and

forming a small condotta of his own, of a hundred lances, he had taken his sword, as it were, to Bellona’s market-place.

In the Sicilian campaign of which before all was over he was constrained by the favour of fortune to take complete command on behalf of Aragon, he won not only fame, but enough wealth to acquire the homestead and vineyard on Montasco, in Sienese territory, which he was gradually and nobly to extend.

He was resting there after his labours in the summer of 1455, and with him were two other condottieri who had linked their fortunes with his own and had come to range themselves under his banner: the tough, elderly, worldly-wise Florentine soldier of fortune Giorgio di Sangiorgio, and the portly jovial Aragonese Don Pablo Caliente.

I suspect that it would be at about this time that he began to dream of scaling the summits. He did not lack for models. There was Colleoni himself, now grown old, but still nominally Captain-General of the Venetian forces, covered with honour and lord of great possessions. There was Francesco Sforza, now Duke of Milan and disputing with Venice the prepotency in the north, whose beginnings had been as humble as Colombino’s. There was Carmagnola, who had won to sovereignty before he had lost his head. And there were a dozen others whom Colombino could call to mind who by the trade of arms had raised themselves to princely estate. Like them, so might he come by the sword to found a dynasty. Already the Sicilian war had set his feet upon the road to those heights.

Nor were his ambitions a mere greed of power and possessions. He was imbued with the conviction that where

he governed he would govern wisely and well, so that the governed should bless his name and find in him not a ravager, but a protector. He was guided by lofty ideals belonging to the age of chivalry rather than to his own age, which was already accounting chivalry a chimera. He entertained knight-errantly notions of succouring the helpless, of upholding the weak against the insolent strong; notions to be expressed in a benign rule, different, indeed, from the ruthless despotism practised by the Princes of the states that made up Italy.

You realize that much though Colombino had learned in eight-and-twenty years of a life that had been rich and varied in its experiences, he had still to learn that in the world of his day ambition and chivalrous ideals could not journey far as yoke-fellows. It was about to be demonstrated to him at the date at which, after this brief prelude, I am about to take up his history, or, at least, so much of it as it has seemed to me worth while to assemble from the various sources in which it may be sought.

Scarcely had he come to rest at Montasco, scarcely had he, as it were, doffed his harness and turned his mind from thoughts of war to matters concerned with the noble mansion he was building and to considerations of the husbandry he found so attractive, when the call reached him to a task that was not merely to weave a dominant pattern into the tapestry of his destiny, but was to bring a change into his outlook, and so into his very nature. It was just such a call as his chivalry must leap to answer. It came from the Sovereign Countess of Rovieto, that Eufemia de’ Santi, who with nothing in her life to place her in the

memory of posterity, has yet been given by the brush of Antonello da Messina a fame as enduring as his canvas.

It was the end of a hot day of August, and Colombino sat at supper with his two captains in a room of the princely house, a part of which was still in the making. They were sitting with windows wide to the welcome breeze of sunset, when from the distance they heard the hoof-beats that announced a messenger breasting the hillside.

Someone from Siena, they supposed, until a servant entered with the letter whose source he announced. When Colombino had read it, he tossed it to his captains and by a gesture invited their attention to it.

Sangiorgio took it up, scanned it, frowning, and was thoughtful at the end. Caliente, on the other hand, having read it, was moved to a jovial satisfaction.

“Praised be Our Lady for this mark of favour. I never hoped we should find work again before going into winter quarters. It serves to show that your fame will now give you little rest, Don Colombo.”

There was a flash of white teeth in the Spaniard’s broad, good-humoured face, with the vivid red lips that told of the rich abundant blood in his veins, and the heavy jowl that was blue from the razor. The contrast between him and the tall, angular and saturnine Sangiorgio, was stressed now by the fact that the older man looked as sour as Don Pablo was gay. Tugging at his dagger of grizzled beard, Sangiorgio took the letter again, and read it a second time.

It was from the Countess of Rovieto, and she wrote at length. Filippo della Scala, Lord of Verona, was arming to invade her territory, to enforce a claim to it based on his

kinship with her late husband. The resources of della Scala, strained by his share in the long-drawn struggle between Venice and Milan, did not permit him to engage for his purposes one of the free companies that stood for hire in Italy. Therefore he had sent his agents into the Swiss cantons to recruit among the mountaineers who were to be had upon reasonable terms. This made Time her ally, thanks to the warning she had received. Forestalling him, it was her aim and hope to strike the first blow, to invade his territory whilst he was still unprepared; and when he sued for peace she would impose such terms that there would be a definite end to his pretensions. To carry out this design, she invited into her service Messer Colombo da Siena and his Company of the Dove.

When at last Sangiorgio looked up, Colombino nodded to him across the board.

“A woman of spirit that. A woman who understands the cardinal principle of war: that attack is the best defence and that victory often goes to the first blow. A rare woman, on my soul.”

Sangiorgio wrinkled his long beak of a nose, dropped the sheet with a suggestion of scorn and made a gesture as of dusting his fingers. “Rare, yes. I thank God for it. If there were more such women there would be fewer men.”

Colombino raised his brows; Caliente swung his bulk round as on a pivot, so as to face his brother captain. Sangiorgio explained himself.

“Her history is more interesting than savoury. You need to learn something of it. She was born in the year that Lucca broke from Florence. So that she cannot yet be more than

three and twenty; and already she has disposed of two husbands. The first was a patrician of the Milanese House of Visconti, an injudicious fool who went about Rovieto roaring in his jealousy of a Roman visitor, Gerolimini, until he suddenly dropped dead, stricken, most oddly, in mid-winter, by a malarial fever. Faith in that fever is not increased when we discover that she married Gerolimini three months after Visconti's death. And then Gerolimini, who suffered from the common ambition to govern, refused to understand that the consort of a sovereign is not necessarily a sovereign himself.

"It was a presumption for which a judgment overtook him. He broke his neck in a fall from his horse, one day whilst hunting. At least, that is how the records run. He was hunting alone at the time. When they found him he was in a supine condition as if he had been laid out, and no sign of damage or disorder to his garments.

"As you say, Colombino, a rare woman, and a fortunate. Perhaps even a dangerous."

Colombino's answer was cold with reproof. "At present she is, on the contrary, a woman in danger."

"Which is just when such a woman will be most dangerous."

"Shall we leave old wives' ill-natured gossip, and come to business?" Colombino pointed to the letter. "What concerns me is her desire to hire us."

But Sangiorgio was not to be reproved out of his sardonic pessimism.

"It may well concern you. I ask myself how does she propose to pay. Her father, Todescano, all but ruined Rovieto before he died. She, following with filial piety in the

footsteps of her spendthrift sire, has completed Rovieto's bankruptcy. Della Scala, she says here," and contemptuously he flicked the document, "is without resources to hire one of the mercenary companies in Italy. She, with still fewer ducats, invites the Company of the Dove into her Service. How will she pay for it? I ask again."

"That is what I had better go and ascertain," said Colombino.

"I could make a guess that would save you the trouble."

"Ribaldry is natural to an old soldier."

"And credulity to a young one. I began that way myself. I've learnt wisdom since, which you call ribaldry. And that letter wouldn't take me to Rovieto."

"I shall set out to-morrow," said Colombino quietly.

"Is she beautiful, at least?" Don Pablo asked his brother captain.

"They say so."

"Then why scowl? Or are you so old that you've forgotten everything? A beautiful woman, Giorgio, is worth any journey."

Sangiorgio looked from the smiling Don Pablo to the thoughtful Colombino.

"God help you both," he said, and gave his attention to the wine.

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As prompt in action as he was swift in decision—and it has been said that this was the whole secret of his successes—he was in the saddle before sunrise on the

morrow, riding down the slopes of Montasco to take the road north, with ten lances to escort him and lend him consequence.

His dispositions had all been made last night before seeking his bed; and since speed was of the first importance, they were made on the assumption, ignoring Sangiorgio's pessimism, that the business side of the matter would be agreeably settled.

To his captains his orders were to marshal, equip and follow with the Company of the Dove. In those days its strength was of three hundred lances of three men to the lance, and at the moment these were at rest in quarters provided for them up and down the Siennese contado. Further, his captains were provisionally to enlist Falcone's condotta of three hundred men which was known to be idle at Imola and any other small free companies that should suffice to make up a total strength of two thousand helmets, which Colombino accounted sufficient for the business.

Nor did he neglect other matters. He held, before sleeping, a long consultation with his steward Palombari on matters concerned with his building plans and also with the planting of some vines that were being brought from the district of Orvieto, which Colombino believed should do well in the soil of Montasco.

Three days later he was at Rovieto, and his meeting with the Countess Eufemia was one of mutual surprises.

Lightly though he might have held Sangiorgio's account of her, yet enough of it had remained in his mind to lead him to expect to look upon a Maenad. Instead he found a child, as it seemed to him; and this not merely in years, but

in spirit; for Colombino still nourished the belief that a countenance is the mirror of the soul, and here he beheld a countenance that was all candour, gentleness and golden loveliness. So slight and virginal and innocent of aspect was she as to defy belief that she was in her second widowhood, and to put to shame the vile slanders of which Sangiorgio, by more than innuendo, had made himself the mouthpiece.

On her side she had expected, from Colombino's name, to behold a diminutive man. She had drawn a mental picture of him short and sturdy and most likely bow-legged from the paddle, one who as a result of his trade would be rude and uncouth. Instead she beheld a tawny-headed youngster, some six feet tall, broad at the shoulders, tapering thence to the waist and over lean athletic flanks to the ground. His shaven face, with its starkly defined bone structures, its lofty brow and powerful jaw, its dark solemn eyes and stern mouth, was remarkable, if not for beauty, at least for strength. Borrowing assurance from success, he bore himself with the airs of a great prince, and he came dressed like one, in a fur-trimmed houppelande of dove-grey velvet, with a girdle of hammered gold and a heavy gold-hilted dagger on his hip.

Her glance at the first sight of him, when he stepped into her council-chamber, fell away as if before an effulgence. Then it returned, not only to observe but to admire; and this with a boldness which the mere softness of her eyes translated into candour.

His reception was formal, which did not at all surprise him for he had already learned that states are very much

like individuals, and that the smaller their consequence the greater is the ceremony with which they seek to inflate it.

The officer of the guard who received him in the courtyard of the citadel, passed him on to a chamberlain, who in turn delivered him over to a gentleman-usher, by whom he was conducted to the council-chamber where her highness waited.

On a shallow dais at the head of the council table she was enthroned in a great gilded chair of state, which should have lent importance to her, but merely served to stress her small daintiness and childlike airs. At the table, three on her right, and two on her left, sat the five members of the Council of Rovieto, all of them elderly, sober-looking men. These five rose as Colombino entered and inclined their heads in greeting. The Countess, retaining her exalted seat, graciously waved him to the foot of the table, where a stool had been set, and invited him to sit.

Then, when the others had rustled down again into their places, drawing their robes about their knees, it was the Countess, herself, who addressed him. She uttered a few words of welcome and of thanks to him for his prompt response to her appeal, stilted words which had been obviously prepared for the occasion, and then, more fluently, she came at once to an exposition of her needs and her intentions.

Whilst these elaborated the matter of her letter they added so little to the information which it had contained that he was almost impatient for the end of her address. And scarcely had she ceased than he was speaking.

“Yes, yes,” he approved her closing words. “It is ever the first blow that counts the most. Often when it strikes one who is unprepared for it, it proves the last.” Whilst his eyes were fully and squarely upon her, he was conscious that the five councillors had turned their heads in his direction and were owlishly regarding him. He went smoothly on. “Already I have so disposed that my lances should be here by Sunday. By Tuesday of next week I should cross the frontiers of Verona. I’ll be upon Della Scala before he is even aware that I am marching.”

Eyes as blue as the Adriatic shone upon him with intoxicating wonder. Sensuous lips, alluringly red in the winsome pallor of the little face, were parted in a sudden smile. “The eagle or the hawk were a more proper device for you, Ser Colombino, than the dove.”

“Della Scala shall say that presently.” He rose, swaggering a little and displaying himself, his glance enveloping her like a flame; and so they remained, absurdly, staring at each other, until one of the councillors cleared his throat with a rasping sound, which in itself was a herald of hostility.

It was old Della Porta, the dean of the Council, who thus harshly broke the spell that was settling upon those children. Lean and vulturine with his bald head and long beak of a nose, he sat forward, tapping the table with his knuckly fingers. He was a practical man who took his office seriously and whose humour consequently had been soured by endless endeavours to check the wayward wastefulness of his mistress. He had been dismayed by her high-handed resolve to call in a mercenary company which they had not

the means to pay, and he was rendered now the more impatient of these assumptions that already all was settled where yet there had been no mention of a contract or its essentials.

“And the terms, Messer Colombo?”

Colombino, still with his eyes upon the Countess, scarcely seemed to awaken. He sighed audibly. “Ah! The terms?”

His vagueness went to swell Della Porta’s irritation.

“The terms, indeed. We must know to what we engage ourselves.”

The other four grumbled their concurrence.

By his peremptory tone Della Porta had drawn at last the Captain’s eyes upon himself.

Considering that gaunt unloveliness, the young man descended from his ecstasy. He remembered that he had to find wages for his troops.

He sat down again, and leaned his elbow on the table. It was not clear to any why, indeed, he had risen. He became coldly practical.

“The monthly pay of a lance in the Company of the Dove is twenty ducats, with fifty ducats each for my two captains, and say thirty ducats each for some three other captains of fortune who will be enrolled with their companies, so as to make up a strength of two thousand men, which I judge necessary for the enterprise. Then there will be ten ducats apiece for the sutlers of the Company, of whom there will be fifty. And, of course, the rationing of my troops and the fodder for their horses will be your affair during the term of our engagement.”

One of the councillors groaned, another swore softly. Della Porta, in tight-lipped silence, was setting down figures on a sheet. Colombino watched the quill as it scratched and spluttered, yet conscious that madonna's eyes were upon him the while. At last the bald old councillor flung down the pen in an obvious heat. His face was white.

"In round figures that will be not less than twenty thousand ducats a month."

Colombino spread his elegant hands. "War is not cheap. You'll observe, sirs, that no provision has yet been made for wastage in the course of the campaign, loss of horses, tents, munitions and the like, which it is impossible to estimate in advance. Nor do your figures include any provision for myself. Normally I require a thousand ducats on the contract, a thousand ducats monthly as my pay, and three thousand ducats upon the successful close of a campaign."

The Council became visibly agitated. "God save us!" exclaimed one of its members, whilst another in sour sarcasm offered the comment: "You grow rich at that trade, sir."

Colombino smiled into his eyes. Upon occasion he could employ, said Caliente, a smile that would have melted the heart of a Gorgon.

"If I do, it is an assurance that I close my campaigns successfully." He had hardly at this date undertaken as many as the answer would imply. But it sufficed to silence his critic.

Della Porta was stroking his bald head in agitation. At last he exploded into speech.

“We have not the means, sir. I must be frank. We have not the means to pay you.” And with a reproachful eye on the Countess, he added: “We had not the right to bring you here.”

Ignoring him, her silvery voice followed swiftly upon his raucousness.

“You said, I think, ‘normally’, Ser Colombino.” She was leaning forward and there was entreaty in every delicate line of her. “Can that mean that it is in your generous mind to make an exception from your norm?”

“Unless it is, sir,” interposed a councillor named Pagolo, “your journey to Rovieto has been vain.” He was almost rude. “I’ll be even more frank than Messer Della Porta. Our treasury is empty, and taxation has so drained our people that little more is to be extracted, however much we squeeze them.”

“Messer Pagolo,” the lady’s voice reproved him, and there was a touch of acid in its sweetness, “we did not bring Messer Colombo here to weary him with Rovietan politics....”

“What I ask myself, madonna, is why we brought him here at all.”

Colombino’s sudden rising silenced the general ill-humoured rumblings that applauded Messer Pagolo. He stood squarely confronting the Countess and his question was a challenge.

“Is this indeed the case?”

She winced under his peremptoriness. She seemed to shrink in her vast chair of state, and to grow yet smaller and more childlike, so that his heart reproached him for the

brutality he used. There was a breathless fluttering of her bosom, and very wistfully she fell to studying her fine white hands where they lay in the lap of her gown of royal blue. She fetched a sigh for only eloquent answer.

“Alas!”

A moment he stood in silence, straight and tense, his solemn eyes inscrutably considering her. In that moment he took one of his swift decisions.

“I am dismissed, then? You are not to engage me?”

But it was Della Porta who made bold to answer him. “Not unless you can materially abate your terms.”

The Captain, however, did not seem to have heard him; for with his eyes upon the Countess he continued to wait for her reply. None came. She sat with those demurely folded hands, her abashed gaze lowered to them, a stricken little figure, calculated to awaken all a man’s chivalry by its lovely wistfulness. Sangiorgio, had he been present, would have accused her of depending upon the eloquence of her silence. But in the absence of that curmudgeon, Colombino heard only the voice of his ideals, of his knightly aspirations to succour the afflicted, and of something more. Here in this lovely lady, beset by a greedy enemy who proposed to dispossess her, with none to lean upon in her hour of need save these unfeeling, cross-grained dotards, was a subject for chivalrous endeavour.

He turned at last to the Council table. “Messer Della Porta, will you give me leave alone with her highness for a little while?” The question was a dismissal that included his brethren with Della Porta.

But the councillor scowled. “To what end, sir? We here compose the Council of Rovieto, and it is our sacred duty ...”

He got no further. Madonna Eufemia cut into the pompous sentence with a voice suddenly sharp. “You have leave to go. All of you.”

Della Porta made as if to speak, then checked, and expressed by the compression of his lips his awareness of the futility of resistance. He rose, bowed, not without a suspicion of irony, and waved his fellow-councillors before him from the chamber.

There was a spell of silence between the soldier and the lady after the door had closed. She sat very stiffly in her tall chair, grasping the arms of it, whilst he paced the length of the room, on the grey walls of which frescoed vermilion demi-lions climbed to the groined ceiling. When he came to a halt before her, it was to perch himself unceremoniously on the edge of the massive board. His houppelande fell open, and he swung a long, shapely, vigorous leg that was clad in creaseless grey like all the rest of him.

Still at a loss for words to express the thing in his mind, he continued to consider with reverent eyes this woman who seemed made for love, whilst she, fluttering a little under his odd regard, waited for him to break the silence.

At last he approached the position by one of those skirmishes on the flank which he had found so profitable in the field.

“It is being said of me, madonna, that I am as hard in a bargain as in action. And God knows it’s true enough. I have been inclined to adapt my prices to the needs of those who hire me, rather than to the work that is to do. Considering

your desperate need, I came intending to ask twice what I have asked for my condotta and twice the sum I have named as my own price. Upon perceiving your necessitous condition, I halved my pretensions. Considering, further, madonna, it comes now to this: that my price to serve you shall be what you choose to make it."

"What ... What I choose to make it?" Ingenuous eyes of heavenly blue opened wider in candid wonder. "What I choose to make it?"

"It is no riddle, lady." There was a kindling in his voice. "It is not for a slave to talk of wages."

"A slave?"

He stood up again.

"It is what the lovely sight of you has made me."

There was a startled questioning wonder in her glance. Then a smile that was no more than a deprecatory shadow flitted across that little face, pale as a lenten rose.

"You have known me less than an hour."

"That is just the time that I have loved you."

Thus, judging the moment come, he staked all upon that bombardment. Either the citadel would lower the bridge to him, or he would be beaten back in rout, a presumptuous assailant who challenged more than he could sustain.

It brought her to her feet abruptly, her countenance now aflame, and her voice held the warmth of injured pride.

"You go very fast, sir."

"Always, madonna. Speed makes for victory."

"I am a woman, not a fortress."

"I thank God for it."

At this she began a laugh that changed into a sob, and left him puzzled. She stepped down from the dais, as if to approach him; then she checked and set a hand to her broad low brow. It was a gesture of bewilderment, almost of helplessness.

“Let me understand. Do you say that because of ... because of this, you will serve me without guerdon?”

“Without guerdon, madonna, beyond such guerdon as love claims.”

“Oh! Oh!” She was white again and breathless. Her lips twisted scornfully. “Not so nobly selfless, after all. You are to be paid, then, when all is said.”

“What I am paid in love I can pay back. In love there are no debts.”

“I am at school, I think.”

“Have done,” he cried. “I’ll not be mocked.”

“I see. I am to take your insolence seriously.”

But the masterful young captain accounted that skirmishing had gone far enough. He put forth a hand, and pulled her to him. Thus, abruptly, she found herself in his arms, her breast against his breast, his eyes probing her own, as if to scan the soul within their limpid depths.

Startled, ruffled, by his hands, affronted by his assumptions, she struggled with the fierceness of a kitten, but struggled with an increasing feebleness, until at last, as if her strength were spent, she lay resigned, her head against his shoulder. And then, accounting this a surrender, without more ado he bowed his tawny head and kissed her on the lips.

She grew heavier against him, as if faint, her round eyes narrow now and a queer smile at the corners of her mouth. She sighed.

“By your coils I judge you more colubrine than columbine.”

“So that my coils hold you their nature is no matter. I may be a dove in name, but I am a hawk by nature. Where I stoop, I bind.” His ardent young lips played over her face and neck, and set her quivering. “When will you marry me?”

At that question she grew suddenly not merely still, but stiff.

“Marry you?” quoth she, aghast.

“What else were you supposing?”

“Mother in Heaven! Not content, my dove, to be a hawk, you aspire to become an eagle.”

“Would you mate with less?”

“It is the mating that would make you so,” she proudly reminded him.

He smiled. “Yet without that mating you are unmade. Della Scala will drive you from your eyrie. I ask no more than I can earn: to share the nest I shall have preserved.”

She delivered herself from his arms and stood confronting him. If still by her slightness suggesting the child, yet there was a dignity about her that was of the woman accustomed to command.

“Is that your price?”

“When you shall have confessed that you love me. Not before.”

“You need that, too?” She laughed as she looked up at him. “You would fit the place, for you were surely born to

rule. You command all things. Even love. Oh yes. You command that, my lord." And then sharply, she concluded: "I'll marry you when you have broken Della Scala."

Some little colour kindled in his cheeks. His eyes sparkled. "I am content," he said, and there he checked his exultation so as to deal once more with matters practical. "I will ask, then, only that you provide the ducats for my lances."

The intrusion of business at such a moment shocked her, as her countenance announced. "Lord! Will you palter? With a princedom in your grasp?" Then she showed him that she too could be practical even amid transports. "Levy the means to pay your men from the Veronese when you invade them."

"It is contrary to usage," he objected. "And it is imprudent until the end is assured."

She flung back her head the better to laugh at him. But all that he noticed was the lovely line of her neck that was thus displayed more fully.

"Usage? By my faith, we conform with usage, you and I, as we do with prudence. You've yet to face the Council with this bond of ours."

"With you beside me I'd face Hell unshaken."

Upon that assurance he gathered her to him and kissed her again, then let her go recall her councillors, who waited glooming in the outer gallery.

When she had told them of the bond, but not how it was forged, Della Porta, perceiving a harlotry in this, was once again confirmed in his conviction that he served a woman whose wickedness was unfathomable.

Similar was Sangiorgio's view when, a week later, he marched the glittering Company of the Dove and the enrolled auxiliaries up to the walls of Rovieto and encamped it in the meadows by the river.

"So that's the price she pays you for your service! Body of God! I might have guessed that it would be just so that she would mend her bankruptcy, abusing your youth and your ..."

"No more of your infamies!" roared Colombino in a sudden white-heat of passion. "It is of the family of all the other lies that are published against her. And you are no better than a bawdy fishwife that you must be retailing them. It was not she, let me tell you, who offered the price. It was I who demanded it."

"You would suppose so," growled Sangiorgio unabashed, his leathern, weather-beaten cheeks aglow with anger.

"Suppose it? Do I not know what passed?"

"To be sure you'll believe you do. There's nothing clumsy in that woman's arts. She looks like a saint in a cathedral window. Are you married yet?"

Colombino controlled his wrath. He answered loftily. "That is for when Della Scala is broken."

"I could find it in my heart to pray he breaks you instead. It might prove the lesser evil. Her husbands are not lucky, Colombino."

But at this Colombino loosed his passion again, and it was such as Sangiorgio had never yet seen in one who normally was of a calm rarely found in men of twice his years. He came striding across the tent towards his captain, his hand reaching for the dagger on his hip.

“The devil burn your filthy tongue, Giorgio. Will you make it the agent of scandal about that sweet saint? Go look in her face, you fool, and behold in it the evidence of your baseness.”

Sangiorgio was a brave man; but he was also prudent. He deemed it best to drop a subject so inflammatory. But as he went thereafter about the business of his command he seemed to his men and to his fellow-officers to be suffering from loss of spirit.

Three days later the Company of the Dove departed on its warlike errand. With blare of trumpets, with azure and silver bannerols fluttering above a forest of spears, trailing in its wake a great siege-train of arbalests and rams and leathern cannon hooped with steel, it paraded under the walls of Rovieto thronged with townsfolk, and past the Tower of Luna, from the battlements of which the Countess viewed it, her Council in attendance.

Colombino rode last of all, with two esquires to bear his lance and shield and helm. Save for his tawny head, encased in a skull-cap of crimson velvet, he was in armour, a glittering silver figure on a white charger, whose housings of blue and silver trailed almost to the ground. He raised his mace aloft to salute the Countess as he passed, and the slight, fair, childlike figure waved a blue scarf to him in answer.

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Colombino came down upon the Veronese with the swift sudden fury of a summer hurricane. It is a method of

campaigning that has distinguished other great soldiers before and since his day, and one that presently came to be regarded as his normal practice.

Della Scala, whose agents were still levying troops in the cantons, was taken completely by surprise. It passed his understanding. Building confidently upon the state of exhaustion of the Rovietan treasury, and the Countess Eufemia's consequent inability to raise an army against him, he had been going leisurely about his preparations and was still entirely unready. That of all mercenary companies the Company of the Dove should have been hired to invade him, increased his wonder and his rage. He had heard of the exorbitancy of Colombo da Siena. Where had the Countess found the gold Messer Colombo would demand before he would put an army into the field? He set his spies to discover the answer to this question, and he raged the more when eventually they brought it him. If Colombino should, indeed, come to reign in Rovieto, as the consort of the Countess, the Lord of Verona would never again find it possible to sleep in peace. Such a neighbour, he supposed, would keep him constantly alert.

From what had happened by the time Della Scala had news of the compact made, it looked as if that unpleasant future were neither improbable nor distant. The fortresses of the Veronese had been going down before the forward sweep of the invader, like so many Jerichoes, at the mere sound of his trumpets. An inadequate army hastily assembled to hold him in check until reinforcements could be obtained and until Verona could be victualled for the

siege that was clearly imminent, was smashed to atoms in a single engagement with the Company of the Dove.

Within a fortnight of crossing the frontiers of the Veronese, Colombino had swept up to the walls of Verona. Since the place was too strong to be carried by assault, at least until hunger should have emaciated its defenders, he drew up his lines of circumvallation, linking them across the river, above and below the city, by chains of barges, and he sat down to besiege it.

Della Scala was reduced to despair. Ruin complete and utter stared him in the face. Odd countrymen who found their way into the city brought him news of dreadful ravages in the countryside. Not only was the Company of the Dove victualling itself by ruthless raids, but Colombino was paying his lances with gold extorted by way of indemnities from the fiefs he had reduced. Della Scala swore in terms picturesquely blasphemous that the man was behaving like a brigand. He swore, too, a frightful reckoning. This when his rage was hottest. In cooler moments, realizing his impotency, he doubted if he would survive to present it. Next, as men do when they see little prospect of help from man, Filippo Della Scala turned his thoughts to Heaven. He ordered public prayers and processions and made extravagant votive offerings. Then coming to doubt the efficacy of even these spiritual measures, he taxed his wits to discover physical means of meeting his difficulties.

Here again, both he and his brother Giacomo discovered in themselves a sterility of invention that was reducing them to hopelessness until Giacomo, remembering something, conceived the notion of buying Colombino. Before