# THE OCCASION

## By Zona Gale and Jill Menkey

LUCIA, with a yellow flower above her ear and a tinkling bangle bracelet on one arm to belie her shabby gown, stopped spellbound beside a billboard on the main street of Marathon. She was typically, exquisitely Italian, and she ought to have stood all day at the gates of the Barberini palace, selling pomegranates. To this truth the yellow flower and the bangle bracelet did homage in their emphasis of how painfully Lucia was unlike Marathon's main street, save the poster that had been mounted on the billboard overnight. Lucia seemed a little like that poster. The poster said:

Society Event Extraordinary! Signor Bellini announces the appearance, for one night only, of the *Signorina Mona* Ariso in her presentation of "*La Zingara*" — "*La Boheminne*" — "The Bohemian Girl" in Italian. Surrounded by a cyclorama of incomparable voices, matchless artists, and spectacle scenery. Society Event Extraordinary!

There were other names, but Lucia saw none of them. She looked up and down the street, with its tired, six o'clock throng, for some one to tell her whether what she barely, breathlessly hoped could possibly be true. She fled toward a row of little houses set like squat, covered dishes, each in a door yard, hardly bigger than a table. In one of the tiny table yards, its ugliness softened by a streaming sunset, a lad of twenty, Italian as Lucia, sat on a bench beneath a struggling oleander. He was playing on a violin, and the old, cracked instrument spoke with passionate distinctness.

"Beppo!" Lucia cried, standing before him. "The Ariso! Mona Ariso! She is coming!"

The boy with the violin stared up at her. "Not—" he said, but his eyes lighted.

"It is—I tell you, it is!" Lucia cried. "Who else? We cared for her mother—Agnese Ariso, when she was here—oh, very long ago—and ill. Do you not remember—no? In the hotel my mother was housekeeper. Has the Agnese Ariso not held me on her knee? Did she herself not teach me to be Arline—to sing—to act—to wear her very skirt? You have seen the skirt she gave me—how can you doubt that this is her daughter? I tell you it shall be the Mona Ariso—coming to sing here—but here!"

Beppo clenched his fist. "She shall hear you sing then," he said shortly.

"To sing!" said Lucia sadly. "I? But how? Who is to do this?" she asked, and on the instant all her vivacity was gone, and she stood shrugging her shoulders at the one whom she suddenly remembered to be herself.

"I will do this," said Beppo, his brown face glowing. "First, you shall do it yourself. Next, if you cannot, I will do this."

Lucia shook her head. "We!" she said, palms outward.

"Also, she shall speak to you!" said Beppo stoutly. "When you go to see her, Lucia, will your heart beat?"

"At the thought—now?" Lucia cried. "But why not? What should one's heart do but beat?"

"That is true," said Beppo, nodding. "But people do not know that," he added wisely. "When the heart beats they run away. That is very foolish."

They talked until the sunset faded and the dusk crept into the poor little yard. Lucia was going over it all again, and once more Beppo listened breathlessly. Six years before, when Lucia was twelve, the great Agnese Ariso, lying prisoner with a twisted ankle at the Marathon hotel, had heard the little girl singing in the corridor, had called her to her, bidden her sing, and had cried out to Lucia's mother, "But she has a voice like no voice in the world—with the life of two voices!" Thereafter, for her amusement in the time of her enforced idleness, the Signora Ariso had taught the little girl her own rôle in "*La Zingara*," and Lucia had danced and sung before her as the Gipsy Arline, had all but learned to sing from Arline's tender waking song to the finale. It had been pastime for the Ariso. It seemed more than a fortunate chance for the little girl, for the signora had appeared in Marathon at all only by reason of a railway awkwardness which was wont to leave travelers Marathon bound over night.

But nothing had come of the fortunate chance, and Lucia had lived silently in Marathon; until now, by the same railway awkwardness, and because, the local papers said, "the signorina remembered Marathon's ovation to her distinguished mother," Signorina Mona Ariso was to sing "*La Zingara*" in the Marathon opera house. But all these years, while Lucia had dreamed and wept with longing to sing what sang itself to her, she had gone over and over what the Signora Agnese had taught her, and had made it her own.

And now the time was come! She would go to Mona Ariso, she would speak to her in the voice of her longing, and Mona Ariso must understand.

"And what if she takes you away—that woman?" asked Beppo almost fiercely.

"Why, then, please Heaven, I will go with her—that woman!" Lucia cried. "What else?"

Beppo looked at her, her face glowing like a rose in the dusk. "But I love you," he reminded her sullenly.

For answer she darted a little away and broke into Arline's tender waking song:

> I dreamed I dwelt in marble halls . . .
> And that you loved me still—

she sang, with all her poignant, passionate youthfulness, in her full, amazing tones, and all her matchless tenderness. Beppo, seeing this shadowy Lucia, realized almost in misery how magical her great beauty must prove to others.

"Oh, you foolish Beppo!" Lucia said. "Always, always—here, there—in a world of a thousand towns—'I love you'! See what I will do when she comes! I will make her name a time when you shall play for the master of the Ariso's orchestra. I have decided."

"Lucia," said Beppo breathlessly, "you will do this for me? You shall not! I go myself. But—you would do this for me?"

Lucia nodded, laughing.

Beppo looked up at the little oleander, and through it to the stars. "I will win the whole world for her!" he told himself passionately. "I will carry the world away to some other place, and give her what it will be!"

"Beppo!" She Cried. "She Is Coming!"

A week later Lucia, with a yellow flower above her ear, and a tinkling bangle bracelet on one arm, and the lace petticoat that had been Agnese Ariso's fluttering below her cheap blouse, stepped, with a very pretty timidity, into the office of the Marathon hotel. "I wish to see the Signorina Mona Ariso, please," she announced at the desk. The clerk puckered his pale lips and stared. Lucia was so exquisitely Italian, so unlike the hotel lobby! "The sig-norina," said the clerk in his unwinking way, "is not to be disturbed until eleven."

Lucia went out past the lobby idlers with her first sinking of the heart. At eleven Lucia was there to ask again. The signorina was at breakfast. At twelve Lucia asked for her again. The signorina had gone to drive. Lucia haunted the hotel door, deaf to the comments of the loungers at the entrance. And when the signorina at last returned, driving in the elephantine brougham, Marathon's most luxurious cab, with Brainey, who played a mouth organ, on the box, Lucia was waiting close to the curb. This, then, was she!

When Lucia first saw her the Signorina Mona Ariso was laughing. "See, Madame Bovo—it is an occasion, such a day!" Lucia heard her saying as the carriage stopped. The signorina wore something made of lace, in great meshes, with a fluttering scarf, and jewels on three fingers of a gesturing hand. Beside her sat a querulous little woman whose wrap was drawn high about her throat, and whom the signorina, still laughing, serenely preceded as she stepped to the curb.

Lucia went quickly forward and stood before them. The girl's face was pale and her breath was quick and, in her fear, her voice was suddenly scarcely audible. "Signorina," she said in Italian, "if you would hear me! Will you not let me—"

It was wonderful how the signorina did it—wonderful, if it had not been so cruel. She stepped across the walk, still smiling, and her eyes were unseeing, like the eyes of one who speaks another tongue. The hand, jeweled on three fingers, was momentarily lifted to her fluttering scarf as she swept past Lucia and entered the door of the hotel.

Lucia took a swift step forward. "Signorina!" she cried.

Then the querulous little woman spoke to Lucia, not sharply, but with a kind of weary impersonality. "You mustn't speak to people you don't know, my child," she said. "Ask at the hotel desk for whatever you want." She looked over her shoulder. "There are no free seats, you know," she added kindly.

Lucia went blindly home. To sing was so easy! The world was so difficult! Her grief was a kind of rage that longed to spend itself, but her heart was heavy as a child's, in incalculable disappointment.

Beppo was sitting in the yard, under the poor little oleander. He came to meet her, his brown face thrust eagerly forward. One look in her eyes told him of some tragedy. "She said—what did she say?" he cried.

Lucia sobbed, and did not hide her face. "All

"Signorina," She Said, "if You Would Hear Me!"