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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Unequal Odds

FOR days the sun had risen and set in cloudless splendor, hanging through the long summer day in a sapphire sky, flooding the beautiful country with gold, making the air heavy with perfume and sense of summer.

Mastino della Scala, standing at the door of his tent, hardly saw the glory and the brightness, the splendor of the great chestnuts, all deep green and snowy white, the proud beauty of the heaped-up flowers, the vivid richness of the foliage; for his heart was too sore for the finest sun that ever shone to ease it.

He had waited long, and waited hopelessly. In the tent behind him, Tomaso and a page polished his armor. For once Mastino was without his sword; yesterday he had donned it and waited expectantly for the answer to the challenge he could not believe Visconti could refuse. It was his fault to think the best of men, a fault that had cost him dear when he had trusted Count Conrad, a fault that had cost him the insult now of Visconti's answer to his message.

"I have tried everything, and in everything I have been outwitted or betrayed. I am helpless, powerless. Will it last until the end?" The thought burned across Mastino's heart like fire.

"Would it last until the end?" The dazzling sun blinded him, the waving of the green made him giddy; he lifted the flap of the tent and entered.

After the glare of the dark and gloom were welcome. The tent was large and bare, only the two boys in their quiet dresses and the bright armor, shining over the worn grass, only these and Ligozzi seated near the entrance watching Mastino with anxious eyes.

Della Scala could not speak to him. He avoided his eyes, he talked to him so often on this one theme. He could not meet his friend's eyes, so often humiliated with failure, with nothing but fresh disaster to speak of.

In silence he paced up and down the tent, Ligozzi's gait, bowing of his body, his eyes, he also did not care to speak of.

Mastino had left the entrance half open, and a great shaft of sunlight fell across the ground like a branch of yellow flowers.

And Della Scala passed it fell upon him, showing clearly his erect figure in his leathern doublet, his fine worn face and the unhappiness in his eyes, his hands locked behind his back.

The next instant he had passed into the shadow, and Ligozzi, rising from where he sat and shook the covering into place. Twice Mastino had passed, twice he had seen the look on his face and he did not care to see it again.

The tent was hot. Tomaso and the page laid the armor down in silence, overawed by the silent figure pacing to and fro.

Outside it was quiet, too, only now and then the tramp of horses or the tramp of men as they moved from one part of the field to another.

At last Mastino spoke, stopping before Ligozzi suddenly.

"I have not told thee yet," he said, "but a messenger has arrived from D'Este. There have been some slight successes with my army and he thinks that I should join him."

"And leave Milan?" he thinks it is hopeless, now Roman leagues with Visconti—he thinks it better to hold what we have nor risk it all by careless daring—but I—I shall stay here, Ligozzi.

Ligozzi was silent; he knew D'Este's words were true; he knew Mastino knew it also. There was nothing to be said.

"I shall advance on Milan," continued Della Scala. "If the D'Este's troops are not to join me, I will advance alone with my mercenaries."

He sat down on the wooden bench, frowning with nervous hands his gold belt and the dagger that hung there.

"Why dost thou not speak?" he said, after a moment's pause, suddenly turning to Ligozzi. "Dost thou, too, think it hopeless?"

There was a wistful eagerness in his voice that struck to Ligozzi's heart; he could not utter a word.

"With waiting, my lord," he replied. "With new allies—"

But Della Scala cut him short.

"I see, Ligozzi, I see. I am a man wanting to be persuaded against himself; yet do I still hope—against myself—to rescue—"

"To rescue my wife, wouldst thou say?" flashed Mastino. "No, I do not want that; but I would know if I could know it; but I shall hope to conquer in fair fight. Will it do the attempt at guile avail us? We were betrayed; open force were better."

Ligozzi's anger rose at the thought of that betrayal.

"I would I had the slaying of the traitors," he cried.

Mastino smiled sadly.

"What were we to her? She loved, perchance, I would have done the same—for Isotta."

"Thou wert ever too gentle, my lord," returned Ligozzi. "Could woman love Visconti?"

can they? It can not be I shall never see her again! God can not mean that—though he take all from me, though he humiliate me before my enemy, he can not mean that! No! Visconti is not leashed with heaven; it can not be! It can not be!"

"No," said Ligozzi; "even Visconti would not dare to harm the duchess. Ye will see her again, my lord."

Della Scala turned away to the other end of the tent; it was plain to him Ligozzi's heart was not in the comfort that he gave, that he thought with the others that they would do well to fall back from Milan, join the Estes and hold it for a while.

"But the duke will understand," said Mastino in his heart. "I will never go back alive—without my wife."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Viper

HE duke of Milan has sent a secret embassy to Mastino della Scala, lying crushed outside Milan—a secret embassy he had long been meditating. The master stroke of his policy should be the duke of Verona's ruin and his complete triumph.

And the moment of his sending was well chosen. The two days of which Mastino spoke had passed. The answer from D'Este at Novara had been unfavorable. His plans, he said, were to march back to Modena and Ferrara, protecting that part of Lombardy, held now by Julia Gonzaga's men alone, against Visconti; he would wait for his army to come up; he would wait for Mastino, but not long; his duty lay inside Modena and Ferrara, not outside the hopeless walls of Milan.

And Mastino had set his teeth and taken his answer in silence.

That night there was a wild attack on the walls of Milan, a sudden and so fierce, that it almost seemed as if the ramparts must fall before the furious onslaught.

For five hours the Veronese and the defenders had struggled on the walls. Twice Mastino had wrenched the towers of the western gate from the enemy's hand; twice he had been driven back, leaving his dead piled high. A third desperate attempt had also been lost, and Della Scala fell back to Brescia, with frightfully diminished numbers, and mad with the agony of final defeat. His cause seemed hopeless. And in the moment of his hopelessness Visconti's embassy arrived.

"Give Della Scala one day to consider," Visconti said to Giannotto, who accompanied De Lana on this mission. "And if he mislikes the terms, say thou art to carry them to Ippolito D'Este."

It was evening, and very still. Visconti stepped onto the balcony and looked through the clustered pillars of its arcade into the garden.

The setting sun blended all flowers alike with gold; a little breeze shook the leaves and stirred the mine that clung to the carved sandstone, fluttering its white stars delicately; the sky was very clear, as pure as a shell and tinted like a wild rose.

Today he had not with her happiness. His eyes rested on Isotta's dark prison with an utter satisfaction in gazing on this evidence of his power over Della Scala. And then he looked to Graziosa's face, and a shade crossed his face. Even he himself he would not yet admit it—but with her it was not perfect success.

Once Valentine's cruel stab Graziosa had given silent and dull, and her beauty had gone with her happiness. She looked no wife for a Visconti. Torn from his setting, her fresh face lost its charm; the simplicity that had pleased him in her father's house was gone, and she was now a creature of the meekness and devotion that had flattered his vanity now angered it—in his eyes she had no more presence than a serving maid; she was making his choice a mock before all Milan with her beauty and her own palaces.

Visconti frowned to himself as he thought of her. She had said no word, she had uttered no reproach; she had remained passive and dull; but she was grown a mere shadow, a reflection of her former self.

"Maybe her folly will wear away," mused Visconti moodily. "But if not—if she prefers her father before me—she may have him yet."

Today he had not with her happiness. This was the first thought he had spared her; now he had a free moment and he would visit her—see for himself if her humor should promise of changing.

"My lady Graziosa, Vistarnini, who hath not spirit for her destiny, who hath not the greatness to be proud to be a duchess of Milan."

She rose and fumbled among the folds of her fallen gown; she found something small she grasped tight in her cold fingers.

"I am so lonely," she whispered to herself—"so lonely. I want some one—to kiss me—good bye."

She rose and fumbled among the folds of her fallen gown; she found something small she grasped tight in her cold fingers.

"I am not brave—ah, I fear I am not brave!"

She rested her head against the arm of her chair as if collecting herself; then with a smile, lifted it with a show of courage.

The wind blew the unlatched window open showing the city roofs and the wall, distant and gray; then it fell to rest on the floor.

He saw Tisio and his pages in the distance—behind them the white marble summer house, standing on a gentle eminence half hidden in laurel; and as he advanced through the clustering towers he saw enter the low door, the scarlet liveries of the pages flashing through the deep green.

The perfect evening was like music in its calm loneliness. Visconti felt its charm; he was ever alive to obvious beauty, and none of his artist's perceptions could have walked this glorious summer garden at such an hour unmoved. His heart softened toward Graziosa; she had saved Milan—for his sake; in his great triumph he could afford to remember it and the affection that prompted it, and set to her credit much else she seemed to lack.

He picked a white rose from the bush that crossed his path and struck it in his belt; he remembers that she had often worn them—there was a bush in Agnolo's bower, and they reminded him of her. He looked up at the white summer house, a square tower distinct against the sky; the top window was open wide, then suddenly blew to—and Visconti stared at it so curiously and so suddenly that a pang shot through his heart. Then he advanced with a quicker step toward the marble summer house.

Graziosa stood in its upper chamber, a circular room broken by three large windows—the walls a marvel of serpentine and jasper, and casements a glory of stained glass, through which there poured the last rays of the setting sun, flooding everything with a thousand different colors.

A carved marble bench ran around the walls and above it shallow niches, in one of which stood a gilt lamp. On the floor lay a forgotten lute, tied with a knot of cherry colored ribbons.

Graziosa unlatched one of the windows; it opened center wise, and the girl stooped one hand to the lute, the sun making her golden bright from head to



Tisio, he said, she's dead!

foot. Before her lay Milan the beautiful, with its trees and gardens, clear in the setting sun that sunk a fiery ball, behind the distant, purple hills. Graziosa breathed heavily. The tower looked toward the western gate; the sun caught the roof of a little house beside it, the roof of a house and a flock of white doves that flew around it, as if looking for something they could not find. Near rose the square tower of a little church, Santa Maria Nuova.

Graziosa stepped back into the room, letting the window fall with a clang. Some one must come soon. With a piteous little gesture she pulled at the jeweled fastening of her stiff satin robe. For some moments her trembling fingers could not undo the great pearl clasp. At last it opened and the yellow robe fell apart.

A rope of pearls bound her waist; with a hasty movement she undid them and let the gorgeous dress that felt stiff and gemmed onto the marble floor. Beneath was the blue robe she had worn when she first came to the palace.

With hasty fingers she pulled the ornaments from her hair, throwing them to the ground. Her long curls fell about her shoulders; a little sob shook her throat; she looked wistfully around and sank into the chair, almost little while she sat, silent, with closed eyes, panting.

Suddenly the sun sank, leaving the room dull, all the light and color gone. Graziosa opened her eyes with a little cry.

"I am so lonely," she whispered to herself—"so lonely. I want some one—to kiss me—good bye."

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smoothing her dress, and whispering comfort in her unhearing ears.

Suddenly the door swung under an impetuous hand. It was the duke, but Tisio was not startled.

"Gian!" he said, the kind to her; talk to her poor thing!"

Visconti stepped into the room, looking at Tisio keenly.

"Where is she?" he asked, for in the gloom he could not at once see the silent figure in the corner. "Where is she, Tisio?"

"The girl with the pretty hair—" began his brother; but Visconti grasped him by the arm with a cry.

"Bring me a light!" he cried, "a light—"

With trembling hands Tisio lit the lamp and brought it near. Its yellow light fell over Visconti's green dress and Graziosa's bright hair.

"If it should be so," muttered Visconti, "if it should be so—"

The light was faint, but it showed him enough. He looked into her face, and his own changed darkly.

"Tisio," he said, "she's dead! Graziosa is dead!"

He bent closer, eagerly.

"Get help, Tisio! help!"

And Tisio, eager, alert, put the lamp in the window, where it flung long, ghostly shadows, and sped calling down the stairs.

Visconti had sent for help, yet even while he sent he knew it useless; she was dead! He stood looking at her. Poison!—she had poisoned herself. Something was tightly locked in her right hand; he forced the fingers apart, and looked at it—poison.

"How dared she do it?" he muttered, with an everdarkening face. "How dared she? who gave it her? Who dared to give her?"

He would never have thought it lay in her to do this. All Milan must know she had preferred to die rather than be his bride. He had failed in this, though he had sworn he could not. He would never share his throne before them all—the woman who loved him for himself alone. He remembered Valentine.

At his feet lay the satin garments of the Jewess, Graziosa had flung aside; she would not wear them. Not all his power could do that; not all his pride, all his ambition, could make her wear the crown, without the love. Gian Visconti stamped his foot. How dared she? How dared she!

Her eyes would never sparkle at his coming nor sadden at his goodbye. And Visconti, coming back to look at her again, was awed; affection stirred anew, and something like respect at the sight of her still dignified.

"Fill up with wine," he said. The page obeyed.

"Now bring the glass and follow me," said Visconti, and left the room, the boy behind him.

Before his sister's door he paused. Soldiers guarded it; within could be heard footsteps and anxious, frightened voices, the whispers of the tragedy. The key was turned; he entered, opening the door quietly, admitting himself and the page, the guard closing it behind him.

The room was lofty, and, like all Visconti's rooms, ill-lit. A great crucifix hung at the far end, and before it knelt Valentine. When she heard the door she turned and started to her feet.

"Put the wine down and go," said Visconti to the page.

"Ah, no!" cried Valentine. "Let the page stay, Gian!"

She stepped forward with imploring eyes upon the boy.

"Go," said Visconti again.

"I shall not give her," cried Valentine, in sudden desperate fear, seeing her brother's face. "Stay!"

The wretched page hesitated, but not for long. Visconti turned once more, and he tapped on the door to be let out, making no more ado.

Visconti watched him go, then stepped to the inner door and locked it on the women whispering and quaking within.

Valentine tried to speak; the words died away on her tongue; she fell back against the tapestry, grasping it in both hands, as if to hold herself up.

Visconti seated himself at the table on which the page had stood the glass, and resting his face on his hands he looked at her. The Viper on his doublet seemed to writhe, alive.

"Graziosa is dead," he said.

Valentine's eyes grew wild with fear. "I did not kill her," she cried. "I did not kill her, Gian!"

"I found her dead," said Visconti, still looking at her.

Valentine writhed against the wall, wringing her hands. "She slew herself," she moaned. "I did not kill her!"

"I shall not kill thee," said Gian. "I shall not touch thee; I shall not lay a hand on thee," smiled Visconti. "Then I shall not die! I shall not die!"

She staggered to her feet, with an effort to be calm.

beautiful hair falling over her shoulders, her face hidden; then suddenly uplifted it again to Visconti, who sat looking at her, motionless.

"Gian! I loved thee once, when we were little children—did I not? I have forgotten it, and so hadst thou until this moment—drink!"

Valentine sprang up in a paroxysm of uncontrollable terror.

"I cannot! I cannot! Kill me thyself!"

"With this!" and Visconti touched his dagger. "No; a smoother death for one so fair."

Valentine flew to the door and clung to it.

"Philippe! Philippe!" she shrieked. "Conrad! Costanza!"

Valentine rose suddenly, with such force as to fling over the chair.

"Come and take it," he whispered. "Come and take it," he said.

She came slowly, one hand against the wall, her long shadow flickering before her.

Visconti watched her, motionless. "Make haste," he said. "Make haste," he said.

"Drink!" said Visconti, leaning with narrowing eyes across the space between them. "Drink in the Della Scala's health; thou didst once before."

Valentine raised her head and looked at him, and grew fascinated with terror. She crouched away from him and lifted the glass to her lips.

Visconti bent nearer and she drank, putting it down half empty with a shudder and staring eyes.

Visconti smiled, and brought the evil of his face still nearer.

"Drink the rest," he said. "Drink it, Valentine!"

Still in silence she obeyed him. When the empty glass stood before him, Visconti turned away, taking his eyes from her with a laugh, and walked toward the door.

Valentine's gaze followed him with a look of utter woe; still she said nothing, from her parted lips there came no sound.

He looked back over his shoulder at her, standing there with her face toward him, with all expression gone, with unseeing eyes.

"I will leave thee," he said savagely, "to await—the morning."

She seemed roused by the sound of his voice, and stepped forward with a cry on her white lips.

But the door closed heavily—the room was in darkness, or was it her sight failed her? Everything swam before her in a blackening mist; she grasped at the table and fell across it, senseless, with unseeing eyes.

The dawn was breaking, filling the room with a gray and ghostly light; the great curtains looked black and gloomy, and the corners of the room were filled with strange and moving shadows. Through an open window, the sun shone brightly, and Valentine's sick forehead. She opened her eyes. The empty glass met her gaze, the fallen chair was beside her; she looked at them strangely. She was still alive.

"Gian's poison is slow," she said, and smiled at her own words.

After a time she rose and stumbled to the window.

"When the sun rises I shall be dead, or perhaps I shall live till noon," she said to herself.

She looked at the estrade and sat beside the open window, resting her head against the woodwork, singing to herself.

Suddenly the whole gray sky flushed purple—the sun rose above the horizon. Valentine looked down into the garden, the sight seemed to awaken memories.

"Hush!" She laid her fingers on her mouth. "Hush, Conrad—if Gian hears us—has thou velvet shoes on—hush! He treads warily—ah, but it is no use—he poisoned me! he poisoned me!"

She rocked herself to and fro.

"In a tall glass with white lines—it was not Gian—it was the Viper from the Standard—all green and silver—all green and silver—"

She dropped her head forward, then raised it with trembling lips.

"Conrad! come and save me!" Then she fell to laughing, whispering under her breath, "she might have to live. 'If to noon—how many!'"

entrance into the blinding summer day, and then back at Ligozzi. "I fear they come with no honorable terms—from Visconti victorious."

"They would never dare come with dishonorable terms—to thee, my lord," returned Ligozzi.

Mastino laughed bitterly.

"Dare! He is Visconti—with near all Italy at his back—he knows no such words as shame or honor. And I must see his messengers," he added, after a pause, "no such words now as pride or refusal."

Ligozzi turned, but hesitated at the entrance.

"And—alone?" he asked. "They are from Visconti!"

"Alone may be skillful in dagger thrusts and poison," said Mastino. "Nay, that is not what I fear, Ligozzi." But he unstrapped his sword and laid it on the table in front of him. "All the same, I will have thee with me, Ligozzi. I see not why I should humor thee too far; thou shalt have naught to say thou mayst not hear."

Ligozzi left, and Mastino sat alone, his head in his hands, his elbows resting on the table.

It was blazing hot, the very crown of summer, languid and golden, with a haze of purple sky beating down on the swooning trees; noon, the sun at its height, the stillness of great heat in the air.

Mastino raised his head and looked out on it. "What was Gian Visconti planning now?"

He had some faint foreboding—a secret embassy from Milan—and following so swiftly on that last crushing blow; following so swiftly as to come upon him still helpless from it—would had it to say and to his ears alone? He had some faint foreboding as he sat there. But it was not long Ligozzi, exercising due precaution, returned with the two Milanese.

Giannotto stepped forward with a smooth, keenly observed, but stopped a little surprised at the one occupant of the tent—the tall man with the proud dark face.

"My lord—the prince?" he asked.

"I am Della Scala," said Mastino, and he turned to De Lana, who looked an obvious soldier, and the worthier of the two. "Your errand, sir? I would hear you quickly."

"We have greetings from our lord, the duke of Milan," replied De Lana, his speech and bearing uneasy, like one trying to gain time. He had always disapproved his mission, and never more so than now, standing face to face with Della Scala.

Here was some one very different from the man he had expected, and it tended to confuse him.

Della Scala's dignity was his own, not that of pomp and splendor, the terror of crime, or the duality of power, that made Visconti feared and obeyed. As plainly attired as any of his soldiers, Mastino's Milanese with something new to them—the sense of worth.

They were not trained to dealings with it.

"Greetings from Gian Visconti, duke of Milan," took up the secretary. "He wishes to bring terms of peace for your acceptance, my lord."

Mastino was silent a space, and Ligozzi, standing behind his chair, looked at them with an ill concealed abomination that Giannotto's quick eyes noticed keenly.

"My lord, is the one with you to be trusted even as yourself?" he asked, submissively. "For our mission, prince, is secret."

"It is my friend," said Mastino, shortly. "And now these terms of peace?"

"The duke is weary of the war," said De Lana. "He hath powerful allies, my lord."

He made the choice of means to crush me," interposed Mastino, his bright eyes fell on the speaker, "are in his hands, you would say? Perhaps; and yet, messenger, I ask for no quarter from Gian Visconti." De Lana bowed.

"Do you master of the noble lord; only terms as between equals."

Mastino smiled bitterly.

"That is generous in Gian Visconti, seeing we are not—equals."

Gian Visconti's loving greetings. To the point, in a few words, continued Della Scala, as the secretary still hesitated.

"The duke of Milan, this; the duke of Milan will leave you Verona, where you may rule under his protection, provided you now put into his hands every other town you or your allies now hold."

Mastino flushed and half rose.