

The Haunted Gondola

By Max Pemberton

I

There had been a growing fear of the mystery for many days, but when the Feast of the Ascension came at last, panic fell upon the city; and even the voices of the priests were powerless to control the terror of the people. Strangers coming to Venice stood awestruck in the great square, unable to believe that this was the city of their dreams. No bells rang out a joyous welcome to the weary traveller; no processions passed from the splendid churches; no clowns fooled upon the Piazzetta; no music was heard upon the lonely waters. Even the palaces of the rich were closed, and by the alleys where the poor herded, prophets stood to cry, "Woe to Venice, for the Day of Judgment is at hand!"

There had been a growing fear of the mystery; yet none could say why he feared or what enemy had come down to the city to strike at the best of her sons and the wisest of her councillors. Nevertheless, men said that death was everywhere,—death by the poniard, death of a strange sickness, the swift lurking death which struck unseen and paid no penalties.

At first mere gossip to make chatter for the day, the story of another victim killed by a bravo, the dread of the sickness of the East, men found it no more than the common peril of the age they lived in. But anon it took a swift and terrible turn,—for a fisherman, coming in from Alberoni, declared that he had seen the death-ship upon the lagoon and that the destruction of the city was at hand.

"I saw it, signori; I heard the death-bell ringing. A man lay upon the ship with a dagger in his heart. Before the Cross I swear it. He who rowed the boat was not of this world. There were devils to set the sails of it; there was the fire of hell at the prow. Let the city hearken, for it is the warning of God."

The tale was told to the Council and to the police on the eve of the great feast. It spread through the city as the news of a mighty disaster. No child in Venice was so young that he had not heard his mother tell the story of the death-ship; the story of that phantom gondola, which spirits rowed upon the lagoons of Venice to warn the city of some misfortune about to visit her, to tell of sickness, perchance, and of the harvesting of death.

Even strong men quailed at the news of it. Women held their children in their arms and hurried to the churches; the priests proclaimed the judgment of God and denounced the sins of the people. But the omen of death was everywhere. And anon a new terror came swiftly upon the trembling city. For an unknown hand set red crosses upon the houses of the doomed, and where the hand wrote, there a man died before the sun dawned again.

The fisherman told his tale, and Venice listened greedily. From that moment all thought of masquerade and carnival ceased. The bells of the churches rang no more; there were no lights in the cafés on the great square; the booths of the clowns were shut, and the zanni starved within them. Even the educated, who laughed at the fisherman's story, laughed no more when every morning brought some new account of assassination and of fatality.

"A fool's tale," they said; "and yet we see men die. Some enemy of Venice, surely, has come back to reckon with her. She has dealt roughly with the best of her soldiers since the monk Giovanni ruled us. Sforza, lord of Milan; Andrea Foscari, the swordsman; Christoforo, Count of

Carmagnola,—such men, when they are banished, do not sleep in the mountains. Let the police get news of them, and they will know why the red cross is on the houses.”

But the poor, grown old in their superstitions, would listen to no words of reason.

“The death-ship is on the sea!” they cried.

“We have looked upon it with our own eyes. Those who have died are but grains of the harvest which must fall. Woe to Venice, for this is the Day of Judgment!”

II

The Feast of the Ascension passed, and all day long a crowd of the terrified people gazed seawards over the still lagoon, as though it might see with its own eyes the phantom ship, which had come out of the unknown to warn the city.

In the booth of old Barbarino, the first of the clowns of Venice, gloomy faces and heavy sighs marked the close of those black hours. Little Nina herself,—Nina the dancing-girl, who had been called the Daughter of Venice,—no one listened to her when she laughed at the people’s stories.

“Who can call back the sun?” exclaimed old Barbarino, wearily, as the seemingly interminable day at length drew to its close; “every morning a body in the water, every night the death-ship on the lagoon. Shall we create the stars, my daughter, as Joshua in the Scriptures? Do your nuns teach you that?”

Nina, the child of the people, clung lovingly to her superstitions; but the education, which Venice had given her at the convent of the Cistercian nuns, had done not a little to moderate them.

“Your death-ship is a cloud upon the water,” she said quietly; “if the people are frightened to-day, they will laugh tomorrow. He who sets the red crosses upon the houses will go presently to the columns of the Piazzetta, and there will be a rope for his neck. Era Giovanni is in Rome, or we should have come to our senses before this day. But they say that the Ascension brings him back, and then—”

She spoke as a little prophetess, for her faith in the great monk, Giovanni, the ruler of Venice, was unshaken. She had won his friendship for herself and for the clowns who flocked to her father’s booth. In her eyes Frà Giovanni was all-powerful to work miracles, even to raise the very dead. Had he been in Venice, she argued, a word from him would have quieted the people’s folly and brought them back to reason. But old Barbarino, who had never loved the priests, was to be put off with no such tale.

“Let your monk make us bread from the stones and I will believe in him,” he retorted. “If he is the people’s friend, as he says, why does he permit the people to die? Believe it not, little Nina. We shall be on the road to Florence before the week is out, and God help us as we go.

She would not argue with him, but quitted that melancholy home of hers, and set out to wander, she knew not whither. It was the first hour of evening then; no gondolas were to be seen on the canals at such an hour. The cafés, the shops, the theatres were all deserted. In the churches the music of vespers for the dead made a dirge of the night. Men, masked and with their cloaks muffled about their faces, went hurriedly to their homes. The hand of the unknown assassin might be raised for them at any corner. Panic drove them to their houses. A young priest, standing at the door of the church of Santa Maria della Salute, recognised the little dancing-girl as she put off her boat from the quay, and bade her begone.

“It is for such as you that Venice is to perish,” he said harshly.

Nina did not answer him. She was accustomed to the contempt of the priests. The love of Venice and the friendship of the master of Venice were her recompense. And now, as she sought her consolation, she was recalled to a memory of this friend by the voice of one of the people's prophets, who cried from the bridge of Rialto,—

“Woe to Venice, for the red cross is on the house of Giovanni, the priest, and tomorrow he must die.”

III

The dancing-girl heard the words, clear and distinct above the murmur of voices and the rippling water. They were repeated again and again as the prophet turned towards the narrow streets of the Merceria. She heard them echoing afar as a low murmur of sound, and still she sat terrified and motionless.

“The red cross is on the house of Giovanni, the priest, and to-morrow he must die.”

Until this time she had paid little heed to the stories of assassination and of death, of which the whole city was full. Perchance she did not credit them, or set them down to the terror of the women and the ignorance of the people. But now the truth of them came to her in an instant. Era Giovanni—the great priest who had been her friend when she was friendless,—the benefactor who had saved her father from his follies a hundred times—would the unknown assassin strike even at him? The thought brought the blood to her cheeks. From the first moment when she heard the prophet crying, it came to her that God had sent her to the bridge that she might hear the words and help her friend.

She had left her father's booth in the little boat the clowns used upon the lagoon. The house of the Capuchin monk stood upon the island known as the Guidecca, the island of the Jews. To reach it she must cross the great expanse of water before the Piazzetta; that lagoon whereon the apparition had been seen; that lagoon which no boatman of Venice would now face after nightfall, even though one had offered him a thousand ducats for the ferry.

Fear of it appalled her; yet courage drove her on. She would dare all for her friend's sake. To warn Frà Giovanni,—to warn her friend, who had been in Rome and might know nothing of the red cross or its meaning! She braved all else in that consuming desire.

Her boat touched the quay of the priest's house just as darkness came down upon the city. A lantern at the gate of it showed her the red cross painted boldly upon the postern. She was still debating how she should tell Frà Giovanni her news when she saw the monk himself pacing the garden and coming towards her. He, in turn, had heard the splash of oars; and when he observed the little boat and the face of her who rowed it, a cry of wonder escaped him.

“Thou, child—and alone!”

She did not know how to answer him. The keen black eyes of the monk seemed to read her very heart. She could not tell him why she had come to the house. There was nothing hidden from the mind of Frà Giovanni, she thought. And he must have laughed at her already.

“I heard them crying strange things at Rialto,” she stammered; “they said that you had come back from Rome and that the red cross was upon the house. I could not hear such things, Excellency; I came to tell you of them.”

She laughed at herself afterwards because she had called him “Excellency,” but he was asking himself what courage was that which had carried the dancing-girl where no boatman dared to pass.

“You came alone, Nina; did you not fear the people's stories?” he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"The things we fear need not be true," she said. "I heard the stories,—how that men die every day in Venice, and that the death-ship is on the waters. But who will trouble about a dancing-girl? Men do not strike at the poor while there are the rich of the city to think about. It is of you I would speak, father. There was no hope while you were in Rome, but now, you will save the city from its follies, you will give the people bread again?"

She stood pleading before him. He remembered another day three years ago, when, on that very spot, she had told him of the conspiracy in the church of the Servites, and had begged of him the life of the man she loved, Christoforo, the banished Count of Carmagnola. He said to himself that in all Italy there was not one with the courage and the heart of this little dancing-girl.

"Nina," he said very gently, "was it that I might save your father's house again that you came here to-night?"

She was silent at the question. He read her answer in that silence, and took both her hands in his.

"Not so," he said; "I know your story, little one. Go now to your home again. Three years ago you saved Venice from her enemies. Who knows that you may not save her once more this night? Go back across the waters, then, and fear nothing, whatever sights you see. And if men question you—as assuredly they will—bid them look upon the waters, where they shall find the answer of Venice and of Giovanni the monk."

He led her to the *riva* of the house, and watched her boat earnestly as she rowed it towards the darkness of the lagoon.

"They will follow her," he muttered to himself; "they will follow her."

Swiftly turning, he called a servant to him. "Let the police know that we have need of them," he said. "The clown's daughter will show us to-night the house of the assassins."

IV

Though it was a night of May, and there had been a great heat of the sun all day, heavy mists steamed up from the waters of the lagoon; and so black was the hour that little Nina in her boat soon lost sight of the welcome lights upon the island, and could discern no lanterns upon the Piazza or even in the houses by the nearer church of Santa Maria della Salute. While she was talking to the priest, all memory of her fears had left her; but now that she rowed alone upon the broad of the channel an apprehension, as great as any she had ever known, came back to trouble her, and to set her hands trembling upon the oars.

These tales the people told; how if there should be truth in them! She remembered the story of the fisherman, who swore before the Cross that he had seen the death-ship of the fables—that phantom gondola which the dead rowed and the spirits of the dead haunted. She said she would believe in no tale so foolish, and, so saying, began to believe in it the more.

It was very dark upon the lagoon, and strangely silent. Sometimes sturdy strokes shot her boat swiftly towards the distant Piazzetta. Or, again, she would drift with the sleepy current, and listen for the voices of her imagination. Always she remembered the strange words of the priest: "Who knows that you may not save Venice this night!" Whatever befell, Era Giovanni would protect her, she thought.

Yet how could she, Nina, the daughter of Barbarino the clown, save Venice? Once before, in the church of the Servites, she had lived through a night of terror, and had discovered those who would have betrayed the city. She had delivered up to justice the man whom, in her folly, she

had chosen to love. But such a night would never return. She said that she was alone on the waters, and that God looked down upon her. She did not know that the enemies of Venice were watching her as she rowed. "A spy," they said, and were determined already upon her punishment.

The remembrance that none would trouble about a dancing-girl gave her heart, and carried her a little way further toward her home. When she ceased to row for the second time, a sound as of a muffled oar beating the waters struck suddenly upon her ears, and held her wondering. She was sure that she heard the sound; sure that it was quite near her. Yet when she peered into the darkness she saw nothing but the quaint figures of the mist, the little waves, and the black water of the stream. It would be some venturesome traveller who knew nothing of the people's stories, she said. A sense of loneliness and of danger approaching was not to be resisted. If the people had not lied! If there should be strange sights upon the lagoon!

She rowed again a little way; again she let her boat drift upon the stream. But this time no surmise, no sound of muffled oars held her still. In all her life she had never known so great a premonition of danger. For a strange light fell suddenly upon her face; it came she knew not whence. The surrounding water shone as silver beneath its rays; she saw the light as a bright phosphorescent glow upon her boat, upon her hands. Everything about her was enveloped in it. She sat spellbound with the rays of that unearthly lantern turned full upon her.

The light shone out and darkness succeeded to it. She heard the sound of muffled oars no more; only the surging of the waves as they beat against the prow of a ship. And she became conscious of some presence; a presence which was not of things known but of the mysteries unnameable. The fisherman had told a true tale, after all, then! Dread of something beyond the knowledge of men appalled her. She feared to see the death-ship; and, fearing, her eyes beheld it.

Again the white light shone upon the waters. The fount of it hung as a ball of fire above the still lagoon. In the aureole of the light, she beheld a long, black gondola; and he who rowed it had the face as of the devils in the pictures of the painters. Prone in the cabin of the boat, where candles burned and windows of glass permitted all the world to wonder at the sight, there lay the body of a man with a veil thrown across his face. She perceived that the man did not move and that his limbs were rigid; she knew that Venice would hear again tomorrow of the death of one of her sons.

At the bow of the gondola there stood a strange figure, as of a man masked in a beast's head, with horns and large ears, and a sword in his hand. A flame of red fire, burning at his feet, cast a crimson glow upon the shining blade and the strange disguise. Nina had never seen, even in the fantasies of the painters, a spectacle so terrible. She did not cry out; she did not try to speak to the man; no fear of things human withered her courage. She thought that she had seen a vision from the world beyond the grave; from that world of which the priests had spoken to terrify the people and bring them to repentance.

A vision, indeed, yet one very near to her eyes now. She could distinguish the ring upon the finger of the dead man who lay in the cabin; she could see the mirror of the great lantern which diffused the phosphorescent light. He who held the sword, and was masked in the beast's head, gave an order to the steersman, and turned towards her. She did not raise her voice nor move from her seat. All things happened as in some moment of her sleep.

She saw the shadow of the great boat magnified and approaching; she beheld more clearly the visage of him who stood at the bow; she felt strong arms winding about her body as the man stooped and lifted her to the deck of the gondola. The end had come, she thought—and neither

speaking to them nor wrestling with the hand that held her, she fainted in the arms of the unknown, and the ship and lights vanished from her sight.

V

Nina recovered consciousness in a vast room, like to no room she had ever seen. They had laid her on a couch of silk; and in her waking moments she believed that she was in her father's booth again, and that all she had suffered had been the terror of a dream. But when she opened her eyes, she beheld a roof painted by one of the great artists of Venice; and from the ceiling a great chandelier of glass depending; and in the chandelier many candles brightly burning.

Anon, she turned her eyes towards the centre of the room, and perceived there a table shining with an abundance of silver, and half hidden by fruit and flowers and the long red flasks for the wine. None but a noble of the city could sit at such a table, she thought. Nor could she so much as imagine how she came to such a place, or why she lay, with limbs benumbed and a strange sense of physical weakness, alone in that great room.

There had been no one near her when first she opened her eyes; but while she was still trying to gather up the threads of her own strange story, she distinguished the voices of people in an antechamber, and presently someone uttered the name of Era Giovanni, and she heard men laughing at it. After a little while the laughter ceased, and a voice exclaimed:

“If it lie between the priest and Francesco, there will be a monk the less at dawn.”

Nina heard the voice, and understood it. Her wits were ever quick; and out of the story of the night they were shaping the truth for her. The phantom gondola—those that rowed it were but men, after all, then! The banished enemies of Venice must be its masters, employing it to terrify the people, and to cloak their own crimes. There was no other mystery but the mystery of vengeance awakened. Those who had set the red cross upon the house of the father of Venice were those in whose power she was.

“If it lie between the priest and Francesco!—”

She repeated the words, and began to find the meaning of them. She said that while she was a prisoner in that unknown house the assassin had gone already to the island of the Jews. When the sun rose, the man who had bestowed so great a friendship upon her, the man whom Venice loved as never she had loved citizen before; would be no more. Her own helplessness seemed pitiful to her as she confessed the truth. If she had been a man! There were tears in her eyes when she remembered that a brave man might have saved her friend.

It was a splendid apartment in which she now found herself—a room in one of the greatest of the palaces, she thought. She could see immense painted doors, which shut it off from the antechamber; one of these doors was half-open, and she distinguished, beyond it, the glitter of the gold on the doublet of a man, and the hilt of a sword studded with diamonds. There had been no time to think of herself as yet; but when she saw the man she became conscious of her peril; and with a step trained to lightness from her childhood, she darted across the room towards the long windows of the balcony.

If she could but open those windows, and cry out to any gondolier who might pass the house! When she drew back the curtains, the folly of her plan disclosed itself, for the window was boarded over, and bands of iron drew the boards together so that no ray of light could pass the chinks.

She drew back from the window as from the bars of a prison. The splendour of the room had put out of her head until this moment the memory of the circumstances under which she had

come to the house. But now she realised them fully. The enemies of Venice had known of her visit, and had trapped her. There could be no hope that she might ever leave that room again to go and tell of all the things she had seen and the voices she had heard. The men would kill her to save themselves. She had looked upon the sun and the water for the last time.

She was but a child still in mind, if not in years, and the fear of death was very terrible to her. Gifted with an imagination above the common, she foresaw the moment when she would lie, still and voiceless, upon the floor of the room. There could be no hope of mercy in that place. She heard her heart beating as she crept from the window; she feared even the velvet tread of her little feet.

A man entered the room and stood to watch her curiously. He was a young man, and he wore a suit of black velvet, slashed with gold. She met his gaze face to face, and recognised him as Andrea Foscari, a noble whom Venice had banished three years before that day. There was no look of anger on his face, for the beauty of the dancing-girl, as she stood in the aureole of light, fascinated him.

"Well," he said, "so our little prisoner is awake again.

"My lord," she asked pitifully, "why have you brought me to this house?"

"I have brought you to sup, little Nina. The spirits were hungry, and would not wait."

He spoke banteringly, and turned to call his companions.

"Gian," he said, "here is the little spy waiting for her supper. She is going to tell us why she went to the Guidecca to-night. Let Benedetto bring the guitar, and she will dance for us—eh, my Nina, you will show us afterwards how you dance upon the Piazzetta?"

He came nearer to her and clasped her hand. She drew back from him, for his fingers were hot and burning and she knew that he was lying to her.

"Tell me," he asked in a low voice, "what carried you to the Guidecca to-night?"

"My lord," she answered vaguely, "I must go back to my home. My father is waiting for me!"

He laughed ironically.

"Oh," he said, "the clown weeps for his daughter; clown's tears, little Nina, which we will go to see to-morrow—when you have earned your liberty."

Other men came into the room to the number of four, men in robes of violet and white, with jewels sparkling at their throats and in the hilts of their daggers. One of them, who seemed to be their leader, a man with the fair hair of a Saxon, came towards the girl and clutched her arm savagely.

"Child," he said, "why were you upon the lagoon to-night?"

"My lord," she exclaimed, still thinking of her home, "let me go to my father's house and I will tell no one—"

He stamped his foot angrily.

"Answer me," he said, "or they shall find your body in the water. What brought you upon the lagoon to-night?"

She looked up at him and answered unflinchingly:

"I went to warn Giovanni, the priest."

An oath rose to the man's lips. He half unsheathed his dagger. She thought that he was about to strike her down; but, as he stood irresolute, someone entered the room, and all eyes were turned towards the door.

"Christoforo—you here!"

Nina heard the name, but did not dare to raise her eyes.

Christoforo, the lord of Carmagnola, the man who had been a leader of Venice three years before that day, the man whose life she had saved in the church of the Servites—was he, then, among the assassins?

The Count entered the room quickly. He looked at the girl and at the men who surrounded her. There was a flush of blood to his cheeks when he saw the half-sheathed dagger; and he did not need to ask the intention of him who held it.

“Great God!” he cried. “Have you brought me from the mountains for this?”

The man’s hand dropped to his side. He answered mockingly.

“Ha!” he said, “here is our patron, then. But you come to Venice too late, Count. The work is done. Francesco is already at the priest’s house. This child followed us on the lagoon to-night, and we brought her here. Release her, and she will carry our story to the police. You will share our bed, and we have not made it with feathers.”

Carmagnola heard him contemptuously.

“You were born to the bravo’s cloak, Galeazzo,” he said scornfully; “by all accounts you have worn that cloak well in Venice. Come, let me see this tale-bearer.”

He pushed the man roughly aside, and crossed to the girl’s side.

“Who are you, child?” he asked in a gentle voice.

She raised her head and looked at him. A great cry of recognition escaped his lips. He had last seen Nina of Venice in the church of the Servites, and she had saved his life there.

“Thou!” he said, “here in the Palazzo Andrea?”

“It is I, Lord Count,” she answered simply. He raised her in his arms. The others stood dumb; they knew that they were face to face with one of the greatest swordsmen in Italy.

“Little Nina,” he asked, “what brought you to this house?”

She did not know why she answered him as she did, or how it was that the priest’s words came to her in that instant. Another’s will commanded her to speak, and she said very quietly:

“Lord Count, if you will look upon the water, you will see my answer.

Carmagnola regarded her perplexedly. Silence, the silence of curiosity, was upon the others. Foscari, himself, ran to the window, and opening a panel in the boards looked out at the black canal below. When he had stood there an instant he turned to the others, and they saw the whiteness of his face.

“Well?” they asked.

“The ship is there, and a body is on the bier,” he replied. “It is the body of Francesco.”

A savage cry of rage burst from the lips of Galeazzo as he and the three remaining ran to the window. They thought that they had heard a lie, but when they looked out they saw their own death-ship; and upon it there lay the body of the assassin Francesco, who had been sent to the house of Giovanni, the priest. A dagger was still in the man’s heart; his head lay over the gunwale of the boat, and the water lapped upon his streaming hair.

“Well,” asked Carmagnola, “and what do you see, signori?”

“The work of the spy whose hand you hold!” exclaimed Galeazzo, fiercely. “Yonder lies Francesco, dead. Would you send the child back now, signore?”

He did not wait for any answer, but drew his dagger, and stood anew to the attack. For an instant Nina heard the cries of the four; she beheld the blades flashing as points of silver in the light; she saw the figure of the lord of Carmagnola as he drew his sword and beat the daggers down. Then, as in some hour of miracle, the great doors of the room were burst open, and she knew that the Guards of Venice were the masters of the house.

“Signori,” said the Captain of the Guard, ironically, “they wait for you at the Palace.”

No one answered him. They knew that he had spoken a sentence of death.

VI

Very early on the following morning the story of Nina of Venice was known throughout the city. Frà Giovanni told it, and added ornament to it. She, the dancing girl, had crossed the lagoon, that lagoon where no boatman of Venice would have ventured after sunset for an oar of gold; she had crossed it to save the priest whom Venice loved. The police had followed her as she went. Unknowingly she had been the link between them and the house of the assassins. They had seen her dragged from her boat; had followed the phantom gondola and learnt at last that the Palazzo Andrea sheltered the enemies of Venice.

Day had scarcely dawned when a mighty concourse of the people gathered before the booth of Barbarino, the clown, and proclaimed with frenzied cries that the night of mystery was no more.

"She has shown to Venice the house of the assassin. *Viva*, Nina, the dancer. *Viva*, our daughter! There was no death-ship, after all, comrades. It lies yonder at the *riva* of the Palace. Long life to our Father Giovanni."

Nina heard the cries, yet showed her face to none. She had not slept through those hours of excitement and of fear. She remembered one who then lay in the dungeons of the Palace. He might even then be dead. She cared nothing for the people's favour or the rewards of which they spoke. She loved a man to whom she had spoken but twice in her life. When the sun set she knew that her lover would have ceased to live.

"They will punish the innocent with the guilty," she thought. "There will be none to believe it. No one will listen to Nina, the dancing-girl."

So she reasoned as the day broke, and all the world of Venice flocked to the great Piazza. Terror dominated the city no more. Death no longer stalked the dark places. Fathers would not weep for sons to-morrow, nor mistresses for their lovers. What the Signori of the Night had been unable to do, this waif of the booths had done. She had saved Venice from her follies, and the city would remember.

There had been a meeting of the Council of Three at six o'clock that morning; but it was noon before the Guards of the Palace came to the booth on the Piazzetta and asked for the clown's daughter.

"The Signori await her in the Council Chamber," the Captain said. "Let her fear nothing, for all is known."

The people heard the words and came anew to the door of the booth. Above the clamour of their voices, the music of bells and the blare of trumpets prevailed. No procession which Carnival had given to Venice surpassed that procession to the Palace. Women wept; children cast flowers in the path the Guards must tread. But Nina saw neither the flowers nor the people. The face of the man she loved was ever before her. She had heard again the words he had spoken to her yesterday.

Within the Palace there were many of the nobles of the city, of her priests and her rich men. A great crowd thronged the staircase leading to the Sala dei Capi where the Three sat. Nina distinguished no faces, heard none of the compliments addressed to her. She remembered afterwards that she stood as one in a dream while the President of the Three spoke to her. But there were few of his words which she could repeat, and it was not until the end of his address that she began to listen to it.

“The city will reward you, in some part at our dictation, in some part as you yourself shall choose. The Palazzo Andrea, forfeit to the State by reason of the crimes you have discovered, will be held in perpetuity by you and the children that shall be born to you. Beyond this, Venice gives you the life of one of the six prisoners you brought to justice last night. In that choice she seeks nothing but your own will and pleasure; she imposes no conditions. He whom you name will today be sent to the Palazzo Andrea, where his place of captivity must be.”

A smile of amusement passed over the faces of those in the room. Nina did not understand it. One of the officers, who was at her side, whispered: “Answer the Lord President, child.”

She stared at him, and said nothing.

“Well,” continued the President, “and the name of the prisoner to whom the Serene Prince is willing to grant this conditional pardon?”

“My lord,” she said, “I do not understand, I do not hear—”

He took her hand encouragingly.

“Child,” he said, “Venice gives you the life and the custody of one of those condemned by her to death this day. There are the prisoners. Name one of them to us, and he is this moment free.”

He made a signal to the guard, and those who last night had supped in the Palazzo Andrea were brought into the room. An overwhelming consciousness of happiness came suddenly to the trembling dancing-girl. She fell at the feet of Christoforo, the Count of Carmagnola.

“My lords,” she said, “I have chosen.”