

The Daughter of Venice

By Max Pemberton

I

There were many lovers for Nina, the daughter of Barbarino, the clown, after that Venice had become her patron; but none was more persistent nor more abhorrent to her than Alvisè, the jeweller. Nina said that his face was like a sheet of old copper which a smith had beaten with a hammer. She used to draw it in chalk upon the walls by which she passed when she went from her father's booth to the convent near the Arsenal. She would imitate his amatory gestures, his hoarse, croaking rhapsodies, and make the whole school laugh until there was not a dry eye in the room. And yet, in her heart, she was very much afraid of him and of her father's greed. She feared that the moneybags of old Alvisè would be too much for the covetous eyes of Barbarino, the clown.

"They will make me marry him. My father will wish it," she declared to Frà Giovanni one day, when the friar came to the convent to see her. But Giovanni laughed at her.

"You are the daughter of Venice now, *Nina mia*," he said, "not even the Serene Prince could compel you to marry unless you consent. Go on with your painting and your music, and do not think of anything so foolish."

She protested with a little shrug of her pretty shoulders.

"How can I go on when they wait for me at the convent door every day,—Vittore Capello, and Leopardi, and Lando, the German count, and others? Oh, it is an army, Excellency, and I am their general. They follow me to my father's house. They bring me flowers every day, and fruit from Chioggia, and the little chains the goldsmiths make. You cannot understand these things."

Frà Giovanni shook his head. He was often at the convent of the Cistercian nuns since Venice had sent Nina there to be educated. When he did not come she wrote to him a long letter, full of her own progress, of her joys and sorrows.

"I can understand anything where little Nina is concerned," he said, amused at her strange *naïveté* and her manner of speaking; "it would not surprise me even to hear that Alvisè, the jeweller, follows her, too."

Nina became very serious.

"Oh," she said, "I do not like to tell you. Yesterday he wrote and asked me to go to Palestrina with him. He said that he would hang a rope of diamonds round my neck if I would answer him. When I left my father's house last night and crossed the bridge by the church of San Francesco, I thought that I saw him standing in the shadow. You cannot mistake Alvisè,—he has the face of a wolf and his eyes are burning coals. I saw him again as I crossed our own bridge, and then I ran. It is not good to remain with the wolves when the sun has set. To-day I laugh at myself—last night I was frightened. You will not understand that,—you, who were never frightened, Excellency."

She was a pretty picture standing there in her simple dress of black cloth with white lace at her wrists and neck; but Frà Giovanni was too much occupied by his own thoughts to pay much heed to her words. Serious as the purpose of his life was, he had always loved a good jest; and the expression upon his face, as he stood there in the hall of the convent, was one which implied a very good jest indeed.

“Child,” he exclaimed, turning to her earnestly, “if Alvisè, the jeweller, should wait for you to-night, stop and speak to him. Promise that you will go to Palestrina with him to-morrow. Do not be afraid; I shall be near you.

He spoke as though it were a matter of very great importance; and she looked at him for a moment with questioning eyes. Then the truth dawned upon her, and she burst into a merry laugh.

“Scavezzo,” she cried, clapping her hands with a child’s joy, “a new Scavezzo, and he is to be punished. I am to go to Palestrina with him. I shall be his wife. Holy Virgin, what a day to dream of!”

But the friar raised his finger warningly.

“Wait,” he said, “we will laugh to-morrow when you return, Nina.”

II

It was in the afternoon of the same day that Nina paid her customary visit to her old friends, the clowns of the Piazzetta. When she had their news she spoke to them of many things, but always mysteriously as though she treasured a great secret.

“I cannot tell you,” she exclaimed in answer to their many questions; “you will know to-night, for Frà Giovanni is passing here, and he will speak to you.

Old Barbarino, the clown, who was busy painting a mask against the day when Carnival should come again, grunted with satisfaction.

“Ha!” he said, “it is always a good day when Frà Giovanni comes to the booth of Barbarino, the clown. What lucky wind brings him here to-night, *Nina mia*.²”

“No wind at all, but a wolf’s head, father, which, if you scratch it properly, will shed diamonds in your hand.”

Barbarino spilled a great drop of paint upon the mask, and stood with the crimson colour dripping on his own clothes.

“Body of seven lightnings!” said he, “but that is a wolf I would like to meet every day.”

She laughed at his candour, and, the allotted hour passing all too swiftly, she left them at last in their perplexity. They could hear her singing,—

“*Maridite, maridite, donzela,*”

as she turned to the great square, and so towards her school in the convent of the Cistercian nuns. When she was gone, old Barbarino took up his brushes again, and began, to wash the paint from the mask and from his own clothes.

“A plague on the hussy!” said he, “with her tales of wolves’ heads. Who ever heard of a wolf that drove a fox from his hole? Nevertheless, my friends, the friar comes here, and we must be ready against his coming. Saint John! I could drink a flask of Chianti this night!

He smacked his lips in pleasant anticipation and resumed his work.

Nina, meanwhile, was threading the narrow passages, and crossing the narrow bridges which would lead her to the church of San Francesco, and to the place where old Alvisè, the jeweller, so often had waited for her. Still singing the people’s wedding song, she ran on past the church of San Zaccaria, past the school of San Giorgio, on towards the northern quays of the city and the gardens, where the trees were green and flowers scented the air. Once she stopped to ask herself what she should say to the jeweller if he spoke to her; but she thought that the occasion would find the words, and so continued her journey; nor did she pause again until she crossed the bridge

by the church of San Francesco and saw the jeweller himself waiting for her, as she had hoped, in the shadow of the western porch.

He was a little man with shrunken face and eagle eye. In spite of his fine clothes and the diamonds which sparkled upon his vest, he wore a hideous aspect, as of some old wolf come out of his lair at sundown. In a general way, little Nina was far too nimble to find herself embarrassed by his amatory designs; but on this occasion she lagged, as Frà Giovanni had wished, when she came to the bridge; and though her heart beat quick while she counted her strange lover's footsteps, nevertheless she permitted him to come up with her.

"Signorè," she said, stopping suddenly and confronting him, "why do you follow me? Why do you wish to speak to me?"

He bent his withered old body until the very bones seemed to crack.

"Signorina," he answered, "if you will look in the glass to-night, you will not need to ask me that question again. As for speaking to you, it is to tell you of the diamonds in the house of Alvise, the jeweller."

He put out a lean and shrunken hand and took her firmly by the wrist. No one else that she could see was in the square; and all the fears that she had imagined came surging back to frighten her.

"Signorè," she cried, feigning a child's laugh, "what have I to do with the diamonds of Alvise, the jeweller?"

He whispered his answer in her ear.

"To wear them, pretty one; to wear them—perhaps as his wife, who knows? Oh, he is rich as any in the city. And he is not too old to love you, my dear. What say you, would you see his jewels now?"

She looked round about her before she answered him. He thought that her friends were near; but she still believed herself to be alone with him.

"Not here, signorè," she said; "to-morrow at Palestrina, as you promised. I shall be in the public garden at three o'clock,—alone and waiting."

If an angel had come down from Heaven to speak of his salvation, old Alvise could not have been more surprised. A joy as the joy of youth suffused his shrivelled and hideous face. His eyes shone with a bright light. He tried to draw the girl towards him and to kiss her. But at the very moment when she began to struggle with him, a young fisherman crossed the square before the church, and stumbled so heavily against the jeweller that he reeled back into the porch as though struck by a blow.

"A plague upon your clumsy feet, rascal," he roared; "are you drunk, then, that you walk like that?"

The fisherman did not so much as glance at him. Nina herself had looked for a moment into the stranger's face and recognised him. He was Gerardo, the servant of Frà Giovanni. Someone had been near her, after all, then! She took courage at the assurance, and ran on quickly to the convent gate. But Alvise, the jeweller, watched her with the eyes of an animal.

"To-morrow," he said to himself, "tomorrow she shall see the diamonds—but they will be in my ears."

III

It was exactly half-past two o'clock on the following day when old Alvise, of the wolf's head, as the lads in Venice called him, closed his shop in the Merceria and set out to meet little Nina in

the seclusion of the public garden at the eastern extremity of the city. Very early that morning he had boxed the ears of the boy who assisted him in the shop and had sent him about his business. Very early, too, he had put on his fine clothes of black satin and scarlet, and had buttoned his costly cape about his shoulders. He had worn those clothes but once before, and that was on the feast of the Ascension, when Venice wedded the Adriatic. What more fitting than that he should wear them for the second time when he, Alvisè, the jeweller, would talk of marriage and of love to one whom they called the Daughter of Venice.

He had been an amorous old rogue for many a year; but, skilled as he was in those arts which win upon the love of women, he was troubled on this June day, and his hand trembled as he turned the key in the door of his shop, and set off nimbly toward the public garden. After all, Nina had powerful friends. It would never do for those friends to hear of this intrigue. Even Venice, who had become the child's patron, might be led to interfere on her behalf.

What that would mean the old man dare not contemplate. He had always been very fearful of the law and the police. He never passed the prisons without a shudder of loathing and of dread. He remembered as he threaded the narrow streets, and looked often to the right and to the left of him, that the real ruler of Venice, Frà Giovanni, went often to the convent to see the clown's daughter. The memory put a chain upon his feet; he was half of a mind to turn back again.

"Oh, come!" he said to himself, reflecting upon it, as he stood at the door of the church of San Zaccaria, "what have I to fear, after all? I will tell them I mean to marry her. And she will not have spoken to anyone. She is not such a fool. Trust the pretty jewels to blind her eyes. A clown's daughter! Odd if the law should prevent me making love to her!"

His argument revived his drooping courage. He hurried on to the public garden, and scarcely had he entered it before he saw little Nina herself, dressed so prettily in a gown of white, with a scarlet hood about her neck and shoulders, that he stood mute in admiration.

"Well," she said,—and she found it difficult to control her excitement,—"it is you, then, and the clocks struck three ten minutes ago."

He was flattered that she should reproach him for being late; and he bent his old body in a tremendous bow, while his face was lighted under its skin of parchment with the fires of his anticipations.

"Signorina," he said, "I stopped so often on my way to remind myself of your favours that I forgot the hour and the place."

He would have kissed her hand, but she snatched it from him, and ran toward the quay where a gondola was moored.

"Not here," she said, as though by-and-by he might do as he pleased with her; "wait until we are on the water. As you did not come, I called a gondola. Did I not do well, Signor Alvisè?"

In spite of his haste and his pleasure, old Alvisè cast a searching look at her and at the gondola she had called. Suspicion wrestled with him for a moment; but a man will be blind to many obstacles when he sets out to the pursuit of a woman, and after an instant's hesitation he entered the boat, and sat down beside her.

If he had not been in such a hurry, perchance the strange troubles of that day of days would never have overtaken him. But his haste was the haste of love, and he did not see that the boatman, who now sent the black gondola dancing across the lagoon, was Gerardo, the servant of Frà Giovanni, the same fisherman who had stumbled against him so maliciously last night.

Unhappily for him, old Alvisè was entirely unaware of the identity of the man who rowed him. A sense of rest and silence and sweet content was everywhere. The jeweller pinched himself to

be quite sure that he was awake. He could not believe it even yet; could not believe that he sat in a gondola, and that the prettiest eyes in all Venice were looking into his own laughingly.

“Ah,” he exclaimed, so soon as they were well out on the broad of the lagoon, “so thou hast come to old Alvise at last. I have waited long for this day, little Nina.”

His old eyes shone like reddening coals. He tried to clasp her in his arms and to kiss her; but she was quick as light, and before his hand had touched her, she stood far from him in the bow of the gondola.

“Patience, old Alvise,” she cried merrily; “a little patience and I will talk to thee.”

“Why do you run away from me?” he asked. “Are you not here to be kind to me to-day? Come back and hear what I have to say to you. Come back and see what old Alvise has brought for you.”

She came a little way toward the awning and thrust out her hand.

“Show me the gifts you promised me,” she said, tossing her little head with the air of a *bravo*.

He looked at her with astonishment in his cunning old eyes. A woman’s greed was a familiar thing to him; but that this mere child should hunger for diamonds as some fine lady of Venice was like a douche upon his ardour.

“No,” he said; “I will show you the jewels when you are here at my side, little Nina.”

She shrugged her shoulders as though it were a matter of indifference to her.

“Oh,” she said, “this is how you reward my love. What shall I say to them when I go back? How shall I tell them?”

There had been a leer of satisfaction on the old man’s face until this time, but he leered no more when she had spoken. A sudden suspicion set his heart beating and brought blood to his cheeks. He turned his little red eyes upon her and she saw the light of fear in them.

“What is that? What do you say, child?” he asked sharply.

She threw herself down upon the cushion at his side, for she feared his kisses no longer. He had never seen so pretty a thing as the child who lay there resting on her elbows and looking up into his face; but his fear was greater than his passion.

“I said that I shall have a poor tale to tell to my father and to Frà Giovanni when I go home to-night.”

“They knew that you were coming to Palestrina with me?”

“Certainly they did. Should I hide it from them? ‘I am going to Palestrina with old Alvise, the jeweller,’ I said, ‘and he will give me diamonds for you.’ And now—what shall I tell them, Signor Alvise?”

The jeweller clenched his hands. He could have struck her in that moment.

“Home!” he roared, climbing to his feet with the vigour of a lad, “back to Venice; do you hear me, out there?”

His words were addressed to Gerardo, the gondolier; and Gerardo answered at once.

“Certainly, signorè—but what of the others?”

“How, the others?”

“As I say, Excellency, the black gondola. It has been following us for the last ten minutes.”

Had the fellow pronounced a sentence of death, the old jeweller could not have turned paler. Half believing, unwilling to believe, he drew back the curtains of the awning and looked out over the sunlit lagoon.

“The good God help me!” he cried, letting the curtain fall again; “there are the police, as he says.”

Nina buried her face in a cushion that he might not see her laughing. When she looked up at him she was very serious, and the great black eyes seemed to pity him.

"Dear friend," she said, "how sorry I am for you. It must be Frà Giovanni who has told them. They will carry you to the dungeons, and I shall never see you again."

He did not hear her. He was mumbling to himself as one whose wits had gone at the news. The police—the terrible police of Venice—were on his heels at last. He said that he might never see the sunshine again. Wild dreams of escape racked him. He drew back the curtain, went forward, and spoke to Gerardo once more.

"A hundred ducats if you get to Fusina before them," he cried. "I have friends there; they will save me."

Gerardo, the gondolier, let the lapping water play upon his oar. He did not appear to be in any hurry at all.

"It would be possible, Excellency," he said slowly; "yet how do I know that you will pay me?"

"Devil," cried the miser, "hold that purse; there are two hundred and fifty ducats in it. They are yours if I escape."

Gerardo held his oar between his knees and began deliberately to untie the leathern purse which the jeweller thrust into his hand.

"You are a generous man, Excellency, and God forbid that I should not deal honestly with you. Let us count the money now, that the signorina may be witness."

Alvise raised his hands to Heaven. The delay found the boat of the police drawing very near to them. The jeweller seemed already to feel the manacles on his wrist. He was no longer conscious that the prettiest girl in Venice sat at his side.

"Row, row!" he cried. "In pity's name, row!"

Gerardo tied up the purse with great deliberation. He took a few powerful strokes, and then stopped suddenly again.

"Excellency," he exclaimed, "in the matter of this bargain, of its conditions, and its circumstances—"

"Oh, for pity's sake—will you not row, fellow? To Fusina—I have friends there. Another hundred ducats."

Gerardo nodded his head. The long black gondola, with the police for its masters, was within a stone's throw now. The miser, gibbering, and white with terror, watched it as he would have watched an apparition of the night.

"Oh," he said, "I am lost, lost! A curse on the day. Will you not row, fellow? Do you not see them?"

"If your Excellency will be pleased to point the direction—"

It was not to be borne. The driven man, snarling with anger and fear, raised his clenched fist to strike the gondolier. But before the blow fell, the other boat came up, and the Captain of the Police was at the jeweller's side.

"Alvise Falier," said he, "I arrest you in the name of the Serene Prince."

IV

The black gondola, driven by six oars, returned to Venice swiftly. Unlike other gondolas upon the lagoon in the month of June, it had a felze, or roof for its cabin; and this cabin shielded the prisoner from the prying eyes of the curious. He sat there, dumb and paralysed with terror. The

presentiment which had haunted him all his life had come true at last. He, Alvise, the jeweller, had fallen into the clutches of the police.

There were six of them in his cabin, great fellows, clothed from head to foot in black, and wearing black masks. They did not speak to the prisoner or to each other. They sat as figures carved from ebony. Their silence was more dreadful than their words, old Alvise thought. He could not bring himself to believe that he had committed any great crime against Venice; yet this display of the justice of Venice, these forbidding figures, black and voiceless, chilled his very heart.

“Signori,” he pleaded at last, “where are you taking me to; what have I done to merit the displeasure of the Serene Prince?”

The six men bowed towards him as one, but did not answer him, and he shrank back from their silence with his fears made new. When the boat had gone a little way further, the Captain, who had arrested him, rose suddenly and clapped a bandage upon his eyes.

“A thousand excuses, signorè,” he said as he did so, “but it is in kindness to you that I act.”

It was a simple thing to do, yet if the Captain had pricked old Alvise with a sword, he could not have been more fearful. Often had he heard of the unnameable sights in the dungeons of the palace. They were taking him to those dungeons at last; and they had put a bandage over his eyes in mercy.

“Oh!” he said, “God help me! You are taking me to the prisons, signori?”

The Captain answered him very courteously,—“Not so, Signor Alvise; we are taking you to the house prepared for him who is to be the husband of the Daughter of Venice.”

A new light, the light of a tremendous hope, burst upon old Alvise.

“How!” he said, “Venice wishes me to marry her, then. Oh, glory be to God for that saying, signorè! Surely she shall never find a better husband.”

He sat up as one made strong at the words. He could not see the smiles behind the masks of those who watched him. Nor could he learn anything from the Captain’s voice when he was answered.

“Signorè,” said the Captain, “it is the wish of Venice that you marry Nina, the daughter of Barbarino, the clown, after proof has been made of your goodness and of your courage. We are now at the palace where that proof shall be put to the test.”

Alvise laughed like a boy.

“What an idea!” he said. “A proof of my goodness, indeed. I will soon tell them all about that, and as for my courage—”

He did not finish the sentence, for a hand was laid upon his shoulder just then, and he knew that they were leading him from the gondola and up a flight of stone steps into some building. It would be into the hall of the palace, he thought. There were no words to depict his surprise when, on the bandage being snatched from his eyes, he found himself thrust forward into a little room which was the most curious room he had ever seen.

Twelve feet square, perhaps, by as many in altitude, the room was hung from floor to ceiling in black velvet. Save for the rays of a dim lantern swinging from the black drapery of the ceiling, and for a glow of coal in a furnace, there was not a gleam of light in the place. Indeed, so dark was it that the jeweller rubbed his eyes for many moments before they showed him anything at all in the room.

When vision returned to him, he saw that the furniture of the apartment was as odd as its drapery. A brazier with live coals glowing; a pair of ominous pincers, a branding iron, a long flat

wooden bench, an iron bowl,—these were the ornaments of that chamber of mysteries. Old Alvise looked at them for a moment, and then a terror past understanding seized upon him.

“The God of my fathers help me,” he said; “I am in the torture-chamber, and they will burn me with that iron.”

There was no greater coward in Venice than this copper-faced old rogue; no, nor any woman more timid. When he was quite sure of the things he saw, he uttered a scream which was heard half across the Piazzetta. At the same moment, one of the velvet curtains behind him was opened quickly and four men passed into the chamber.

“Signorè,” the first of them said suavely, “we thought that we heard you call.”

“Oh,” he cried, grovelling before them, “take me from this place, signori; take me quickly.”

“Not so,” cried the other; “we are here to minister to your pleasures, Signor Alvise, and to further your happiness. As the doctors of Venice, we shall now put you to the proof, and see if the city may safely intrust her daughter to you.”

The jeweller looked at him with eyes of terror.

“Oh,” he said, “you are a doctor, then!”

“As you say, Excellency, a doctor of Bologna, and these gentlemen are my colleagues.”

He pointed to the other three, who were dressed as he was. The hesitating jeweller had never seen such strange robes in all his life. Long gowns of scarlet, with odd figures painted upon them, covered the men’s bodies. Sugar-loaf hats of prodigious size bobbed together as the surgeons consulted in low and menacing tones. They were all masked, and they carried strange instruments in their hands. It was impossible to take courage in such a place, and with such men. But old Alvise made a pretence of doing so.

Well,” he said, “if it is your wish to speak to me, Excellencies, I am ready.”

“Not to speak to you, signorè,” said the first of the surgeons, “but to make an examination of your heart, which, if you please, we would now look at.”

The jeweller tried to laugh merrily.

“Oh,” he said, “this is how the Serene Prince jests with me, then. Who ever heard of a man wearing his heart where a doctor could see it?”

“You will understand that presently, signorè. Meanwhile, it is our duty to proceed. Take courage; we shall deal with you as gently as possible.”

He put out his hand, and grasped his prisoner by the shoulder. His three colleagues pressed round the shivering wretch, and threw him roughly on the bench, where they bound him hand and foot, and cast a cloth over his eyes. He had half believed, until this moment, that they were jesting with him as they said; but he remembered, while they bound him, how terrible the jests of Venice could be; and he cried out again with terror when the cloth covered his eyes.

“Oh,” he wailed, “what are you going to do to me; what have I done that you should punish me?”

The surgeon answered him as one who comforts a child.

“Excellency,” he said, “fear nothing. We are the doctors of Venice, and we understand our business. We are now about to operate upon you so that we may see your heart. But we shall pour unguents into your wounds when we have done, and you will feel nothing.”

He lifted the cloth a little, that the quivering wretch might see what was going on. Alvise opened his eyes, which shone as a madman’s, and began to stare about him wildly. He knew then that Venice had sentenced him to death, and was contriving his death in this horrid spirit of the jest she loved so well. All round him the terrible red hats were bobbing. He saw one of the doctors carry in a great instrument of wood, with a twisted handle and a sharp point of steel;

another brought the iron bowl and put it near the torture-bench; a third stirred the coals; a fourth sharpened a knife ominously.

“Saints and angels!” he moaned, “it is true, then; they will cut out my heart and cast it into the water. They have done it to many a prisoner. The Mother of God have mercy on me! That instrument is an auger to pierce my flesh. That bowl is for my blood. Was ever such a punishment heard of?”

He lay very still; his lips were blue and trembling. All that went on fascinated him horribly. When the great instrument with the steel point was raised above his breast, and they tore his shirt from his bosom, he howled as a wolf that is wounded.

“I cannot bear it!” he cried; “I cannot bear it! Kill me and make an end, signori. You are devils to torture a man like this.”

One of the doctors, he who carried the bowl, raised his hand deprecatingly.

“Hush, hush!” he exclaimed, “what folly is this? Are we not here to tell Venice of your courage? Take heart, then, and think upon the day of your marriage. You will suffer a little pain now; but to-morrow we shall sew up your wounds and all will be well. Play the man, Signor Alvise, I beg of you.

The prisoner’s head sank back upon the wooden bench. He tried to speak to them, but no words came from his lips. When the great auger was raised above his body, he uttered a low moan, which became a resounding shriek as he felt the shining steel cut his flesh. A moment later, another pain, sharp and unmistakable, in the very centre of his back, told him that the blade had cut through his body. He listened during an instant of agony and heard a “drip, drip” into the bowl. He thought that his life’s blood was flowing thus; and with one long-drawn howl of agony, he fainted.

V

It was growing dark in Venice without when Alvise, the jeweller, came back to consciousness. The sun had disappeared behind the Western hills, and twilight hovered for a few short minutes upon the city of waters. But the wretched prisoner was mindful neither of the hour nor of the place. He opened his eyes in a gloomy cell, yet could not remember how he had come to that cell. He stared at tile bed of straw upon which he lay, at the monstrous bolts and bars of the tremendous door, yet could not gather any thread of circumstance which would help his wandering mind. That he was in one of the dungeons of the palace he knew well. Yet how had he come there—how?

When memory came back to him it was swift and torturing and sudden. He did not think of little Nina, or of his meeting in the garden with her, or of that merry hour upon the lagoon. The lesser facts of the day had vanished from his mind. Only the memory of the doctors of Bologna remained; the terrible four who had been sent by Venice to punish him.

With quivering hands he tore open his shirt and saw that his breast was red and slightly scarred. They had let him live after all, then,—these devils of the torture-chamber,—they had sewn up his wounds as they promised. Yet to what end, he asked? Was it that they might visit him with new tortures, with refinements of cruelty his mind dare not contemplate?

An hour, perhaps, passed in the contemplation of his hopeless circumstances. It was quite dark by this time and he was very hungry,—so hungry that he forgot those other fears of torture, and cried loudly that his gaolers should come to him. To his surprise, a man carrying a lantern appeared immediately in the cell. Alvise could not imagine whence or how he came, for the door

did not open nor did he hear a footstep. Yet there the man stood, and his greeting was that of a servant.

“Excellency,” he said, “you were pleased to call me.”

“Signorè,” exclaimed the trembling prisoner, “is it the wish of your master that I die of hunger?”

“Of hunger, Excellency. What an idea! Name but the dish you would fancy, and I will bring it on the instant.”

Alvise stared at the fellow in astonishment. “Oh,” he said, “I will remember your name, signorè, if ever I see my home again. Bring me a dish of fowl, and you shall find no more grateful man in Venice.”

The gaoler bowed very politely.

“The price of a dish of fowl is a hundred golden ducats, signor. Give me your bond now, and I will bring it before the clock strikes again.”

He spoke with assumed carelessness, as though the price named were a trifle which no rich man would think twice about. The jeweller, on his part, sat down upon his bed again and buried his face in his hands.

“It is of hunger that I am to die, then, after all,” he groaned. “A hundred ducats? I have not so much money in all the world.”

The gaoler laughed.

“Excellency,” he said, “you think so now, but when you have been in this place for twenty hours, you will be surprised to find how rich you are. Do not make any mistake. Everything here has its price. For a dish of meat—a hundred ducats; for a pitcher of water—two hundred ducats; for wine and candles and a bed from your own house—five hundred ducats. For liberty—”

Old Alvise looked up quickly.

“For liberty!” he exclaimed.

“As I say, Excellency, for liberty, a thousand ducats.”

The jeweller stood up. He stretched out a trembling hand for the paper which the other held.

“Give me your bond that I may sign it,” he said. “I will pay the thousand ducats in my own house this night. God be thanked that I should hear your words.”

The gaoler slapped him on the back cheerily.

“Ha!” he cried. “I knew that we had a man of sense to deal with. Let me hold the lantern, signorè, while you set your name to the paper. I have an inkhorn at my wrist, and here is a passable feather.”

He held up the lantern, and the old man wrote, with shaking hand, the promise that he would pay a thousand golden ducats to the holder of the document.

“Now,” he cried, when he had signed it, “I will go with you, signorè.”

The gaoler laughed and blew out his lantern.

“Excellency,” he answered, “there is no need to go with me. Your liberty lies beyond these walls. Walk through them and you will find it.”

He disappeared silently, mysteriously, as he had come. The frenzied cry of rage and anger which the old man uttered, remained unanswered. Alvise stood alone in the cell. He thought that he could hear voices beyond the walls; even the voices of women. But he knew now that Venice would never let him go. She would cheat him of his fortune and then she would kill him.

“Your liberty lies beyond these walls. Walk through them and you will find it.”

Desperately he recalled the gaoler’s words, and cursed the lips which had uttered them. An army, he said, could not shake the bolts of that tremendous door. And Venice had lied to him by

the mouth of this jester. A miser at heart, the thought of the bond he had signed drove him to desperation. He began to pace the cell as a caged beast; he cried aloud that the man should return to him; he raised his fist and went to beat upon the great wall of stone; but at the first blow he stood thunderstruck and trembling; nor did he move a hand again until many minutes had passed.

He had struck a blow at the wall, indeed, yet his hand had fallen upon space. No stone had scarred his flesh; no jagged edges of the mortar had hurt his fingers when the blow fell. Nevertheless, there was the wall before him; there, the great door. Moonlight, rippling in the cell, showed him everything as no lantern could have done. Dazed and perplexed beyond imagination, he began to think that he was the victim of some supernatural visitation; and he shrank back to the bed affrighted and with a prayer upon his lips. Were the walls but phantoms, then? Could his gaolers move them at their pleasure? He cringed with terror at the possibility; the clock struck the new hour before he moved again.

It was nearly midnight when he recalled his gaoler's mysterious words for the second time. "Liberty beyond the walls." He repeated the promise to himself again, and began to reflect upon it a little sanely. What did the fellow mean when he said that the prisoner must walk through the great girdle of stone they had put about him? Was it altogether a jest; could there be even a grain of truth in it? Fearful still, expecting he knew not what, he rose at last from his bed and walked for the last time to the great door. A moment later he had fallen headlong through it, and lay upon the ground stupefied with fear and amazement.

"Viva, old Alvisè! Viva, the lover of Nina! They have bored a hole in him, my friends, to let in some sense. What courage! What a man!"

Alvisè heard the cries, but knew nothing of their meaning. Timidly he looked up and saw that he was at the very door of the booth wherein lived Barbarino, the clown, and his merry satellites. A miracle, he said; yet no miracle to the people, gathered upon the Piazzetta to welcome him. For the people knew that the cell of Alvisè, the jeweller, had been made of painted cloth. They had waited patiently for him to fling himself against the mock door of it, and so to fall in the street. And now they were rewarded, in a measure heaped up and overflowing.

"Viva, old Alvisè! Viva, the lover of Nina!"

All were there upon the Piazzetta,—clowns and mock doctors, and harlequins and dancing girls. Even the great instrument of torture was held aloft and lighted by the torches the masqueraders carried. The bowl, the terrible bowl,—they thrust it under the miser's nose, and he regarded it shudderingly.

It contained the red wine of Burgundy.

"Viva, Alvisè! Viva, the husband of Nina!"

So the people greeted him. But the old man crept off to his home; and many a month passed before he lifted his head again, or looked upon the face of a woman.

And little Nina laughed that night as Frà Giovanni had promised her.

"Oh," she said, "they pricked his chest and pricked his back, and he believed that they had bored a hole in him."