L. D. Jackle

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THE ADRIATIC BRIDE.

Origin of the annual custom of casting the Ring into the sea, and the marriage of the Doge of Venice to the Adriatic.

Scarcely had Ziani, on his return to Venice, made the Doge acquainted with the unfortunate result of his pacific mission, than he went through the city with a throbbing heart, to see if the plague had yet taken possession of Daponte's cottage. Malapiero followed him, for Ziani had disclosed to him the secret of his love, and he now shared the anxiety of his friend. It was necessary to pass through a considerable part of the city, which disclosed many frightful scenes to their view. Many of the most populous streets were desolate; from several open houses was heard the low moaning of its last inhabitant, dying alone amid the corpses of those most loved. Dead bodies were lying on the steps of the palace, whither they had dragged themselves in order to obtain relief. Children were clinging to their dead mothers, sucking in the poison from their livid but still cherished lips; and in the midst of this frightful scene of misery and horror, men dressed in black were seen stalking about with cold indifference, silently placing the dead on carts, and affixing tickets to the houses, bearing the frightful word "Extinct."

Ziani's heart was seized with dread and horror, but love and anguish gave wing to his steps,—he flew to Daponte's dwelling. The first object that struck his sight was an appalling ticket on the door.

In vain did Malapiero endeavor to hold back his friend; he rushed, pale and like a maniac, into the hut, crying out "Giovanna, Giovanna!" But the hut was empty, the bodies had been taken away;—furniture and clothing were lying about in disorder. Ziani would not quit the bed; he wished to die where Giovanna had ceased to exist, and Malapiero was obliged to take him by main force out of this abode of death.

As they quitted the cottage, a frightful noise at some little distance announced a tumult, and they saw an immense crowd of people rushing towards the palace of the Doge.

"Come, Ziani!" cried Malapiero, forget your own sorrows! come, our presence will be necessary."

The people attributed the whole blame of their misfortune to the Doge; they thought, and with justice, that his imprudent delay on the island of Scio, was the sole cause of the destruction of their fine fleet, and had brought death into their houses, instead of the advantageous sacrifices; they did not shrink from shedding their blood in defence of their country, but in their own homes, to see the lives of all that were dear to them falling a sacrifice to the imprudence of one person, was what they could not brook, and they called for vengeance in the voice of despair and rage. The angry populace surrounded the palace of the Doge—"Down from the throne," they cried; "down with the traitor, who has brought us the plague instead of peace!" The Doge placed dependance on the body-guard; but even amongst these were fathers and sons, who had lost those that were dear to them, so that the tumult continued to increase. Vitali determined, therefore, to risk every thing, and confiding in the love of the people, who had ever been devoted to him, he left his palace and endeavored to tranquilize their mind. With stern dignity, arrayed in his ducal dress and ornaments, he appeared in the midst of the populace who were preparing to attack his palace.

"Here am I, my children!" said he; "judge if you will, it is not I, but God who hath sent the angel of death amongst us!"

At the sight of his venerable figure, the people drew back in an instant; and just at the moment Ziani and Malapiero arrived, who endeavored to appease the enraged multitude. But several voices again cried out, "Down from the throne! No mercy for the traitor! Down with him!" Suddenly a voice was heard from behind, crying out, "Make way! make way! where is the man that has murdered my wife and children?" With these words, an enraged old man pressed forward from the crowd, seized the Doge with the fury of a maniac, and plunged a dagger in his heart. The unfortunate Vitali sunk a victim to his fate, while the assassin walked unimpeded through the astonished crowd, holding aloft his bloody dagger.

But Ziani immediately recognising him to be old Daponte, he hastily pursued him through the deserted streets, and seizing him by the arm, cried, "Wretched man, where is your daughter?"

Daponte looked at him with a phrenzied laugh: "Has death, then, spared you?" said he; "well, come, then, I will lead you to your bride!"

He then, without giving any further answer to his questions, conducted him through several by-streets, to a solitary church-yard. In a corner of it, on a wretched heap of straw, lay Giovanna, struggling with death. Daponte, when his wife and other children had breathed their last, quitted his hut, and half frantic, had brought his daughter to the cemetery. In the madness of despair, he had wished to put an end to the torments of his cherished child, and to his own existence, and for that purpose, had gone into the city to procure a dagger. He was there hurried along with the throng of the enraged populace, and nearly in a state of frenzy had struck the victim of his vengeance.

Ziani threw himself on his knees by Giovanna, and called loudly on her beloved name. She opened her eyes and recognised him, and while a sweet smile played on her pale, disfigured countenance, she made a sign to him to leave her. He thought not on the frightful danger of contagion, but raising the diseased object of his affections, he carried her to his palace, while Daponte followed.

Ziani used every means in his power to save his Giovanna; he never left her bed, and watched over her beloved existence as though he would scare away the monster who would rob him of it. His care was crowned with success. The ferocity of death was subdued by such affection, and while Daponte and himself miraculously avoided all infection, Giovanna slowly recovered.

The assassination of the Doge had thrown all well-minded people into the deepest affliction. The violent death of their chiefs had already several times nearly effected the ruin and destruction of their republic; and the dangerous custom of rising against their princes on the least pretext, and requiring justification of their conduct, by the voice of sedition, was found so pernicious, that they began to think of powerful means to quell such occurrences. At length, the only existing power, the Guarantia, instituted a grand council of 740 members, who elected from themselves sixty of their most approved men, called Pregadi, in whose hands the business of the State was placed, and out of which body was formed in later times the Venetian senate. The election of the Doge was given up to eleven of these. The people cheerfully submitted to this new regulation, and the plurality of voices decided for Orio Malapiero; as it was principally to the activity and prudence of his measures, whereby he exposed his life a thousand times to danger, that the cessation of the plague was finally to be attributed.

But Malapiero was totally free from pride and ambition; his country was more to him than glory or renown, and his penetrating glance quickly perceived that it required a greater mind than his own, to hold the reins of government at this important moment. With noble frankness, he presented himself before the electors, and modestly declined the honor done him. He convinced them by the force of his eloquence, that the difficult situation of the republic required a man, who should not only inspire all parties with respect for his superior courage and strength of mind, but who should draw the eyes of the people on him by his riches and distinguished name, and concluded by intreating them to transfer the honor they had intended him to his friend, Sebastiano Ziani, in whom was combined all these qualities, and who alone could fulfil all these expectations. The electors, struck with admiration at the noble-minded Malapiero, and convinced of the truth of his reasoning, elected Sebastiano Ziani, without one dissenting voice, but on the express condition that his connexion with Daponte's daughter, which was now universally known, should be immediately broken off; for the vacillating populace, which had at first called out loudly for the death of the Doge, now mourned him, and execrated his assassin. It was therefore justly conceived that a Doge could never be loved and respected who should unite himself to the daughter of a murderer. Malapiero hastened, overjoyed, to his friend. "The election is over!" he cried, on seeing him, while his eyes sparkled with the consciousness of having subdued himself.

Ziani looked at him, and his countenance beamed with pleasure as he took his hand—"Heaven has directed the electors!" said he, "for if I can read in your eyes, I think I may venture to welcome you as Doge!"

"Not I!" replied Malapiero: "Heaven protect the electors and my country! You are the Doge!"

Ziani's countenance was instantly lighted up with ardor and enthusiasm: he raised his hand, as though taking an oath, and said—"Since my people have placed their confidence in me, may God grant me energy and wisdom in ruling them! I swear that I will never render myself unworthy of the throne?"

The enthusiastic friends sunk in each others arms. "I am a witness of your present oath to Heaven," said Malapiero, "and have a sacred right to remind you of its fulfilment!"

The deputies from the senate came to salute the newly-chosen Regent, and to invite him to appear before the electors. Ziani went, accompanied by his friend, amid the loud rejoicing of the populace, where the election had taken place, and which was now to be confirmed. He was occupied with the delightful sensation of possessing the love of the people, and of rendering himself worthy of it: but Giovanna's lovely image filled up the back-ground of the picture; and the sweet thought frequently darted across his mind, of seeing this angel of innocence sharing the sovereignty with him. Agitated with these pleasing reflections, he entered the hall of the electors: but a cold shivering seized him when he heard the conditions.—He stood trembling and silent, incapable of comprehending it. At length he said—"No! you have calculated falsely! Keep your crown, if you wish to purchase it with the happiness of my mind! I do not understand governing a people who would wish to tear such a deep-rooted affection from the breast of their prince: they require a tyrant!"

On saying which, he quitted the astonished electors, with pride and coldness, and returned to his place. He hastened to the room inhabited by Giovanna and her father, and, embracing her with ardour, said: "You are now perfectly recovered, my Giovanna, will you still delay becoming my wife?"

"No!" she answered softly, and clung to his breast, "but I cannot comprehend how I can render myself worthy of you, for I never suspected that it was the great Ziani I loved; but I feel that I belong to you alone!"

Ziana now pressed old Daponte to allow his union with his daughter to take place in the evening. He would avoid all parade, and would take no farther excuse, as he thought he should be able to act much more freely when once Giovanna was his wife. In the meantime, the people had become acquainted with the motive of Ziani's open refusal to accept the throne; and the stronger the general wish became to confide the government to his hands, the more did their hatred increase against the assassin of the Doge, Vitali Micheli, who now appeared to attach himself with his guilt to Ziani's fate. A deep murmur passed from mouth to mouth, like the hollow, portentous noise before the eruption of a volcano. The people sent deputies to the electors, requiring that the crown should be again offered to Ziani, and insisting on the imprisonment and punishment of Daponte and his daughter. Fresh deputies came from the senate: he would not see them, but sent word, that on the morrow he would make the electors acquainted with his decision.

In the meantime, Malapiero called on his friend, and used every argument to dissuade him from his purpose: he reminded him of his oath, and of the time, when he once told him in Constantinople, that love should be sacrificed for one's country! But all his eloquence was vain.

"You do not know what you require," cried Ziani, much agitated: "you will tear from me the tutelary genius which would make me a father to the people! What has Giovanna to do with the crime of her unhappy parent? She is an angel sent from Heaven, and it is only by her side that I can fulfil my vow!

Malapiero soon perceived that he should lose the confidence of his friend, if he urged the subject any farther. He therefore inquired kindly after Giovanna's health. Ziani's heart now opened, and he disclosed to him how near he was to the happiest moment of his life, as that very night she would become his forever. Malapiero was startled, as he saw but too well, that by his rash act, the best hopes of his country would be destroyed, and the throne forever lost to Ziani. He was silent, but quickly formed his resolution.

Scarcely had Ziani left his palace to make the secret arrangements for his marriage, when Malapiero went to old Daponte and his daughter. He found Giovanna, her countenance lighted up with a heavenly smile, forming her bridal wreath, while her father was sitting in a corner of the room, absorbed in deep thought, his eyes seemingly fixed on vacancy. She went cheerfully up to him, gave him her hand, and asked:

"Are you coming to my wedding? Will you now be *my* friend, as you have ever been my Ziani's?"

"Yes, that will I ever be! Lovely creature," said he, much affected, "I am come hither to prove to you and Ziani the sincerity of my regard. But what is the matter with your father? Does your marriage not please him?

"No!" said the old man: "No! I shudder at the wedding. In my breast, there is no longer place for joy, loaded as it is with the consciousness of murder!"

"Oh, my unhappy father!" cried Giovanna, embracing him; "willingly would I sacrifice my existence, could I restore you to your former peace of mind!"

"Could you also sacrifice the wreath you have made yonder?" asked Malapiero significantly.

Giovanna looked at it long, while her eyes filled with tears, and then said: "Yes, I would also sacrifice that!"

Malapiero now threw off all restraint, and candidly related to her what had happened. He pointed out to her with enthusiasm, that Ziani alone was capable of saving the Republic from destruction, and that the country had the sacred right of requiring from him the sacrifice of his love for Giovanna.

"Has, then, his great heart not space sufficient for his country and for me?" asked Giovanna, trembling.

"No!" cried Daponte, his eyes sparkling with unwonted animation. "No! you must not be his wife! The people are right; the daughter of a murderer must not ascend the sacred steps of the throne. In the frenzy of despair, I plunged a dagger in the heart of the Doge—Will you now, Giovanna, in the frenzy of love, destroy the still greater hopes of your country?"

Malapiero took advantage of the disposition of the old man: he seized Giovanna by the hand, saying: "You would have sacrificed your bridial wreath to the peace of your father; the peace of your country is now laid in your hands: here stands the friend of yourself and Ziani, but likewise a true citizen, who asks you what you will do?"

Giovanna stood pale and trembling before him, looking fixedly at the wild, rolling eyes of her father. She then walked slowly up to the table, took up the wreath, held it to Malapiero, and said, in a low voice, while scarcely able to support herself; "Here is my sacrifice! Heaven protect my country!"

The old man caught his fainting daughter, and laid her on a couch. In great agitation he seized Malapiero, drew him towards Giovanna, and proudly said, "See, that is my daughter!"

Giovanna at length recovered. Her strength of mind gave her courage to consent to the plan formed by Malapiero, which was, before night to leave the palace secretly with her father, get on board a vessel, and flee to some distant country. Malapiero promised to induce his friend to accept the crown.

It was scarely night when Ziani, his heart overflowing with affection and joy, returned to his palace with a priest, who was to unite him to his beloved Giovanna. But he found her apartment deserted: a piece of paper, containing the following words, lay on the table besides her bridal wreath:—

"Ziani! you stand between the throne and my bridal garland. The country is right; you can only choose one of them. The crown is offered you by thousands of our poor unprotected citizens: the bridal wreath is presented you by the hand of an insignificant girl. Your great mind will easily distinguish which you ought to accept; but to spare you the trouble, I flee hence. If you really love me, do not endeavor to discover my retreat, but render my country happy!"

Who can describe Ziani's feelings!—So near the moment of fulfilling his most ardent wishes, he saw every thing vanish before him, like the visions of fancy. "Giovanna!" he cried: "Giovanna! you have not left me voluntarily! But they shall not wrest you from my bosom! Your bridal wreath is worth more to me than all the crowns in the world!"

He called all his domestics together—offered a large reward to any who might discover traces of Giovanna; and rushed out himself in pursuit of her.

During this time, Malapiero had accompanied the fugitives to the harbour, and procured them a vessel, in which they instantly set sail, by the clear light of the moon. He then hastened back to Ziani's palace, feeling that he might be of service to his friend. But not finding him there, and having long sought him in vain in every part of the city, he returned again to the harbour; and was alarmed and confounded, when he here saw Ziani on board his galley, which was just pushing off, in pursuit of Daponte and his daughter, whose track he had been successful in discovering. To detain him, was not now to be thought of: he had scarcely time to jump on board, and accompany his despairing friend. Ziani was determined to sacrifice every thing to his affection: he was deaf to every other feeling, and stood immoveable on the bow of the vessel; his eyes fixed on the dark waters, as though he would discover the traces of Giovanna's flight on the bosom of the waves, on which the moonbeams were lightly playing.

At length, when the first rays of morn clouded the ocean, a vessel was discovered at a distance. Ziani was the first to discern it. "Row on! row on!" he cried: "yonder is my Giovanna." The oars struck deeper into the waves—the galley cut quicker through the waters, and brought them shortly near the vessel. Ziani soon recognized Giovanna. She stood at the bow of the vessel, as on the morning when she sang to him in the fishing boat, clad in a white dress, glowing with the crimson rays of the morning dawn; but she made a sign to him to return back; and when he extended his arms towards her, and called on her loved name, she cried to him in a voice of earnest entreaty, "Desist, Ziana, and listen to the voice of your country, which calls you!"

[But Ziani heeded not her entreaties, and prepared to board the vessel, when the patriotic maiden plunged into the sea, and sank to rise no more.]

Ziani would have plunged into the waves, to attempt her rescue, had not Malapiero powerfully held him back. The sailors also wished to save her, but Daponte opposed them. "Leave my child in peace," he cried; "she has chosen her path."

Ziani lay senseless in the arms of his friend; Giovanna remained firmly anchored at the bottom of the sea, and the two vessels returned slowly back to Venice.

The populace were informed, by Ziani's domestics, of the reason of his hasty departure. They had placed all their hopes on this man; and more furious than ever against Daponte and his daughter, they ran in crowds to the harbour, and had already seized several vessels, to go in pursuit of Ziani, and bring him back, when they saw his galley returning, and hailed its approach with an universal shout of joy.

Ziani awakened as out of a dream, and looked with surprise around him. "Do you hear your people call you?" asked Malapiero. "Do not you hear them requiring peace and happiness of you?"

But Ziani was silent—his eyes fixed on vacancy. Daponte then seized his hand, saying, "Have you forgotten Giovanna's last words? Shall she have sacrificed her life in vain?"

Ziani did not answer. He looked fervently up to Heaven, while the big tears rolled down his manly cheeks, and stepped silently into the boat which was to take him on shore.

The people pressed round him when he landed, crying out, "Accept the crown, Ziani!—take the crown—you must be our Doge!" They kissed his dress and hands—threw themselves down before him: mothers with their children, clasped his knees—the tumult was excessive. No sooner did they perceive old Daponte, than several voices cried out, "There is Vitali's murderer! Down with him and his daughter! They will also tear Ziani from us!" A number rushed forward to seize him. Ziani then proudly raised his head, and demanded silence—

"Whoever dares to lay hand on Daponte," he said, with dignified firmness, "is a dead man! I am now your Doge, and will judge him myself. You have chosen me to be your chief, I acquiesce in your wish, but be on your guard, for I ascend the throne with a heart dead to the tender feelings of humanity!"

He was now conducted in triumph, amid the shouts and acclamations of the populace to the Palace of the Senate, where he informed the electors that he was ready to accept the crown. Thus did Ziani ascend the throne—but his heart remained desolate!

Daponte gave himself willingly up to justice. Ziani submitted his case to the Senate, and Malapiero defended the old man so successfully, that he was acquitted by this august assembly, in consideration of his daughter's noble sacrifice. Daponte then became Ziani's most faithful attendant.

By the firm and wise measures of the new Doge, the republic was soon restored to peace and tranquility, and again attained its former pitch of glory. The people who idolized their present sovereign, but ever considered his murdered predecessor as a martyr to intemperate fury, now loudly expressed their wishes that Ziani should unite himself to the beautiful Bianca, Vitali's daughter, and thus endeavour to obliterate from her mind the melancholy fate of her father. His friends also pressed him to marry, hoping that the deep grief which constantly preyed on his mind might be soothed by female tenderness. But Ziani, who lived like a hermit in his own palace remained inattentive to the wishes of his friends and the people, and gave Bianca's hand to Malapiero, who already possessed her affections.

During this time, the emperor Frederick had never ceased pursecuting the pope Alexander the third, who, finding himself every where insecure from the implacable hatred of his rival, and trusting on the friendship and patriotism of the republic, at length took refuge in a monastery at Vienna, where his wish appeared to be to live retired. But the republic was proud of having the head of the church under its protection; and the Doge, accompanied by the nobles, brought the pope with great pomp out of solitude, into a magnificent palace prepared for his reception. They offered to mediate between him and the emperor, and sent a splendid embassy for that purpose to Frederick, who dismissed it, however, with contempt, and insisted on Alexander's being given up to him. But Ziani, who knew the strength of his country, answered firmly in the negative to this insulting proposition, and preparations were accordingly made for re-commencing the war.

Pope Alexander felt that his fate was now entirely in the hands of Ziani, and thought it politic to use every means in his power to unite the Doge's interest to his own. He had a niece, the Duchess Valdrada, whose excessive beauty, being in as great renown as her immense possessions, the richest and most distinguished nobles of the country became her suitors.

Alexander had reserved to himself the disposal of her hand, as he had already rejected several powerful aspirants, he now ardently hoped through her means to attach the Doge forever to his cause. He therefore invited her to Venice, where her beauty and charms far exceeded the renown which had preceded her, and being also a charm of every feminine virtue, each was eager to render her homage. Even Ziani acknowledged that he had never seen a more perfect woman, and paid her the most distinguished marks of respect. As the pope discovered that Ziani's noble figure had made a deep impression on his niece, he considered his plan of the union to have succeeded, and thought it was now incumbent on him to speak with the Doge on the subject. News arriving at this time that the emperor Frederick was preparing a powerful fleet to send against Venice, under the command of his own son Otto, the republic, inflamed by the exhortations of the pope, and the glory of protecting his sacred rights, did not hesitate going out to meet him with only thirty galleys. When Ziani went to take leave of the pope, and ask his blessing, the latter said, "Go courageously to battle, my son! my blessing is stronger than a thousand swords. I have destined an incomparable jewel for the victor, the hand of the Duchess Valdrada."

Ziani went out with his squadron to meet the enemy, and found Frederick's fleet on the coast of Istria, where a dreadful battle ensued. Ziani fought like a lion, with Malapiero and Daponte by his side. The latter fell. The superiority of the enemy was great, but they could make no stand against the bravery and warlike skill of the Venetians. Many of the ships were overpowered, several were set on fire, and when at last Ziani and Malapiero boarded the Admiral's vessel and made prince Otto prisoner with their own hands, the contest was decided, and the remainder of the fleet escaped.

The conquerors returned triumphantly to their harbor laden with booty. Never had the republic gained a more splendid or important victory. The news of it had reached Venice before them. The pope was overjoyed, for he plainly saw, that after this mighty blow, which had thrown the imperial prince into their hands, the emperor must now humiliate himself before him: in order therefore to celebrate the return of the victor, he manned a number of vessels and sailed from the harbor, accompanied by the senate and the higher order of the clergy, to meet the Doge.

Whilst the warriors of Ziani's fleet were rejoicing and shouting, he stood thoughtful and melancholy on the deck of his vessel, looking down silently on the sea! Malapiero drew near him, and seizing his hand, said—"My Ziani, are you now satisfied with your fate?"

Ziani looked at him mournfully; "I am," he answered, "but do you know what day this is?"

It was the feast of the assumption—the same day on which, two years before, Giovanna had buried herself in the waves. 'See,' continued Ziani, "we shall reach the sacred spot where the angelic girl sought refuge in the arms of death, from the frenzy of my passion; and now, without any bridal wreath, adorned only with the cold laurel, I am passing like a stormy cloud over the watery couch of my beloved Giovanna, who lies slumbering there, the sleep of eternal rest!"

Malapiero endeavored to divert his mind by conversing with him on the important advantages of the victory, and ventured to mention the name of the beautiful Duchess Valdrada. But Ziani shook his head calmly, and said, "I plainly see that you are all calculating falsely! My heart, filled with the eternally beloved and sacred image of my Giovanna, and love for my country, finds no place for any other feeling."

They now perceived at a distance the splendidly adorned vessels, which were conducting the pope and his magnificent suite to meet the conquerors. The mariners mutually saluted each other with shouts of joy, and as the vessels drew up together, the pope went on board the Doge's galley, where he embraced him before all the people.

"You are the greatest hero of your time," said Alexander, "the pride of your country, and the support of your church! I come to bring you blessings and thanks!"

Ziani sunk on his knee before him, but the pope, after placing his hands upon him, raised him up, and continued—"But I bring you also, my son, the promised reward; receive from my hand Valdrada's betrothing ring; she will salute the victor as her bridegroom!" On saying which he presented an elegant gold ring to the Doge.

Ziani took it, but his hand trembled, and his eyes, which were raised towards heaven, filled with tears. "Do you know this spot in the sea?" he asked his friend in a whisper. Malapiero answered by a mournful inclination of the head, for the ships were now stationary, exactly on that part where the waves had closed over the lovely form of Giovanna. Ziani at length recovered himself, and turning to the pope, said—"The reward you offer me, Holy Father, is far greater than I merit; but I am already betrothed!—here lies my bride!—permit me, in your presence, to affiance myself once more to her!" And, so saying, he dropped the ring into the sea, and looked anxiously after it as it disappeared amid the lightly curling waves, and sunk beneath to his bride, who had found a nuptial couch in the vast depths of the ocean.

But the pope, who put a different construction on Ziani words, replied—"Well said, noble duke! The sea shall henceforth be your bride; you have gained her by force of arms. In remembrance of this great day, I command that you and your successors shall