

The Road to Damietta

Scott O'Dell

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Summary: Deeply attached to the charming and carefree Francis Bernardone, Cecilia, a young noblewoman of Assisi, watches as he turns from his life of wealth and privilege, takes vows of poverty, and devotes himself to serving God by helping all those around him.

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To Elizabeth

Author's Note

Of the thousands upon thousands of books about Saint Francis, perhaps the best is *Francis of Assisi* by Arnaldo Fortini. A lawyer and native of Assisi, Fortini spent thirty years on this biography. It first appeared in four volumes. It is now in one volume, brilliantly translated by Helen Moak, with valuable notes of her own and a bibliography of some seven hundred and fifty items. My book leans heavily upon their portrait of the many-sided saint and his times.

For the Sufi anecdotes and parables, I have relied upon collections by Idries Shah from the Persian, Afghan, Turkish, and Arabic cultures. The scenes between Saint Francis and the Sultan of Egypt are taken from the chronicles of the Moslem mystic Fakr-al-Farasi and the Arab chroniclers Al-Zaiyat and Al-Sakhari.

The story was suggested by the life of Angelica di Rimini, a distant cousin of Perugino, the Italian painter.

We heard the leper's bell long, before we saw the leper.

The sun was up, yet frost still clung to the trees by the river. Behind us the castles of Monte Rosso, their battlements and enclosures, caught the sun. The towers rose like spears from the dark ravines and every hilltop.

The lords were at breakfast, planning their next swoop into the lowlands or against each other, which would not occur on the morrow because it was the Wednesday before Easter and all hostilities—whether close or far, whether of repayment for a death or a slight, fancied or real—were forbidden by law. By the *Treuga Dei*, the "truce of God," fighting was forbidden until dawn of the next Sunday morning, from the Passion to the Resurrection. Only a few days to plan how they would burn and destroy, maim and kill, during the next year. Yet in that brief time what these rapacious men could do

We were moving along the road from our farm at the foot of Monte Rosso to our home in Assisi. Usually we spent part of the winter and the whole spring in the country, but my father was the *podestà*, the leader, and a member of the commune that governed Assisi, and lately, within the past month, he had been harshly criticized for living outside the city more than he lived in it, which had disturbed his sleep and didn't please him at all.

There were only four in our family now that my brother Lorenzo had been slain in the battle with Perugia—my father, Davino di Montanaro; my mother, Giacomina; my brother, Rinaldo; and myself, Cecilia Graziella Beatrice Angelica Rosanna, called Ricca, a contraction of some sort.

It was a small family, yet our caravan stretched out for nearly a league on the winding lane by the river. My father rode in front with Rinaldo. My mother sat uncomfortably in a dainty, high-wheeled wagon, sheltered from the sun by a canopy painted with scrolls and fat cupids. I came next on my white Arabian, and Raul de los Santos, the librarian and master of our scriptorium, who also tutored me in astronomy, numbers, and languages of the world, rode beside me on another Arabian.

The rest of the caravan, mostly on foot, followed after—tillers of the earth, herders of pigs, goats and cattle, the vintner, the miller and his two assistants, the notary, a squadron of servants. Bringing up the rear were Ruffo, captain of the guards, and his men, all in full armor, riding white horses, and displaying the Montanaro pennon of crossed swords on a background of stars.

The leper's bell drew closer. When first I heard it the sound seemed to come from the far side of the river. Now it was right in front of us, on the road we were traveling, between us and the city.

My father pulled up his mount and called to one of the oxboys. "Run down until you find the creature," he said. "Get him off the road and into the bushes, where we'll not have to look at him. Do not dally with him. Use your goad freely."

My father had a great distaste for leprosy, that dread disease where noses rotted away, eyes melted in their sockets, and fingers sloughed off, one by one. As a member of the commune, it was his duty who had strengthened the laws against lepers.

Each new *podestà*, a month before taking office in Assisi, must now make a scrupulous search for

these people. If any is living in the city or the region around, he is to be hunted out. Syndics of all villages and lords of all the castles must take care to see to this. No leper dare enter the city or walk about in it. If any does so, citizens may strike him down with impunity. No leper might eat from anything except the leper's bowl, or drink from springs, wells, or rivers, or touch the young, or go without gloves on his bare hands. In the old days they were given wooden clappers to ■ announce the presence. My father had changed this. Now they carried bells, which could be heard for the better part of a league.

As we waited, the oxboy ran forward, brandishing his goad. After a short time he returned to announce that the leper had been driven into the bushes. My father raised his hand and motioned the caravan to continue.

The road was deserted but the bell still rang. I then saw the leper standing a short way off, warily peering out at us from a hedge. At the distance, I couldn't tell whether he was tall or short, young or old. My father let down the visor of his helmet and I turned my head away, for the sight of people falling apart truly made me ill.

At this time a lone horseman appeared in the distance. He had heard the bell and was riding cautiously. As we came upon him he stopped and greeted us with a wave of a jeweled hand. His name was Francis Bernardone and he was the son of Pietro Bernardone, the second richest merchant in the city of Assisi, my father being the first.

"Have you seen the leper?" he asked my father. "I smell him but I do not see him anywhere."

"There he is," my father said, pointing. "We chased him off the road. Proceed in safety; he'll not disturb you."

"Thank you, sir," Francis Bernardone said, speaking through a lace handkerchief he held to his mouth. "Thank you most kindly, but I think I'll take the long road. The odor burrows into my skin and stays with me for days. Nothing washes it away."

A bridge spanned the river a short distance in front of us. Touching his feathered cap to my father but smiling at me, he spurred his horse across the bridge and rode away at a fast canter.

"Poor boy," my mother said. To her any man younger than twenty years was a boy. "He's so sensitive."

"Yes, brought up by a doting mother," my father said. "She clothed him in dresses until he was five, I hear."

"True," said Rinaldo, who disliked Francis Bernardone intensely. "Sensitivity has come into fashion, so he's become quite sensitive these days."

"A result of the foolish war," Raul observed as he looked up from the scroll he was reading and turned his long, bony face in the direction of the fleeing horseman. "It was the fashion during the war to be brutal, to talk through the front teeth. Of late, like Bernardone, the young talk little, never to their elders, and when they talk to each other, they must be what we from Granada call *sensitivo*, which is the opposite of *macho*, which was stylish during the war, and which means he-goat or a spur

a square anvil, a hammer, and also, quite often, a very ignorant fellow. It's one of the small horrors of the war."

Raul was referring to the bloody struggle between the town of Perugia and the city of Assisi. It was a terrible war; we pridefully had started it over nothing much, thinking that Perugia was weak and ripe for the gathering. The war had lasted for two years and Assisi had lost its pride and thousands of its young men.

"He has a fly in his head," Rinaldo said, loath to relinquish the subject of Francis Bernardone.

"Many," my father said.

"He's a very sensitive boy," my mother called out from the carriage.

He's not a boy, I wanted to say—but I didn't. I glanced across the river and saw him raise his hand and wave. He was waving to me but I didn't dare wave back.

"Also he's very brave," Mother added, for she, like most of the Assisi women—but none of the men—adored Francis Bernardone. "He's truly the bravest of all!"

I silently agreed with her, remembering when the bulls ran on the feast day of Saint Luke the Evangelist. One of the beasts had found refuge in our courtyard, and I watched from the balcony as Francis pursued it. The problem was not simple. With his wooden sword he had to goad the bull out of the courtyard and into the street where the other bulls were running, and meanwhile he had to keep himself from getting gored.

Though the sword was made of wood, he didn't pretend that it was steel. He waved it gaily like a flag. He invited the bull to leave the courtyard, saying in a firm voice, "This is a festive game, sir, in which you play the villain. Yet we play without anger, in fun, with respect for each other, because we are friends."

The bull pawed the stones, but in a moment, to my surprise, it began to walk toward the open gate. As it passed him, Francis reached out and gave it a friendly prod with his sword. The bull paused at the gate and glanced back at him, then, as if it were glad to be under his spell no longer, lifted its tail and leaped off into the street.

That was the day I fell in love with Francis Bernardone. The very day and hour. And not because he was braver than the rest or more handsome. It was the way he spoke to the bull that pierced my heart.

We came to the river without further incident, but there we had to stop for toll. On this morning however, Count Giuseppe di Luzzaro, having heard that we were moving from our farm in the country to our palace in the city, was at the crossing to welcome us and let us pass without paying the toll his varlets usually demanded.

The dashing count of Monte Verde was there for a reason. It was more than a rumor that he was deciding whether to marry me or not, once I had reached a reasonable age, which would be, since I was barely thirteen, at least one year from the moment. He had talked to my father on two occasions

knew about.

I had already made a quiet decision about the count and his square beard and his small, pouting ruby-red lips. I had decided that I would get myself to a nunnery rather than be his bride.

"It's been scarcely a year since I've seen you," he said, running his eyes over me. "It was on this road, I remember. You were riding on a pallet then. Now you ride like a lady. My, how you've grown. And how in the mode you are, with the little peregrine perched on your wrist. The bird is called...?"

"Simonetta."

"A lithesome name, but can she fly the heavens?" he asked. "She looks somewhat fragile and small of wing, but free her and let's see."

"She's not yet trained to hunt, sir."

"An apt time to train her. The skies are clear and larks are flying."

"As you can observe, we are hastening to the city," I said, determined not to unloose Simonetta and risk never seeing her again. "Besides, Father is in a hurry. He's been hurrying for a week."

The count of Monte Verde glanced at my father, who was prompt to say that he was not in a hurry and that his time belonged to the count. Like all the rich merchants in the province of Umbria, Father had set his mind upon working his way out of the merchant class and into the nobility.

The count glanced at Simonetta, alert now that she had heard her name spoken, then at me, his black beard set and challenging. I, as well as the hawk, needed training, a firm but gentle hand.

He smiled; his lips glistened. "Someday soon," he said, "I'll show you how best to handle her. We'll bring Simonetta here to the river and unloose her."

He came close and examined the hawk, running a hand over her sleek feathers and at the same time over my gloved wrist. "She has good talons, sharp and well shaped, if a trifle long, and an excellent beak. I can't see her eyes, hidden as they are by the pretty hood. What color might they be—golden?"

"Gold and black."

"Sharp, like yours?"

"Sharp," I said, "as bodkins. She can see in all directions."

"At once?"

"If she chooses."

"What a truly marvelous bird. I am anxious to train her," he said with a smile, turning his horse in a circle and making a bow.

The river ran low, so we lost nothing in the crossing and began the long climb to Assisi. I thought about Francis Bernardone. I wondered about him and the leper. Why had he covered his face and fled in terror? He had fought in the war, been wounded and imprisoned. He had run with the bulls. Yet the mere sight of the leper had made him tremble.

Our musicians struck up a marching tune as we passed through the Roman gate. Windows opened. People stared out at us. We made a good show with our league-long caravan and it served my father well. Now everyone would know that, forsaking the country, he had returned to live in Assisi.

It didn't matter that at dawn, before anyone was around, half of our retinue—the vintner and his assistant, the goatherds, half of our guards, and all of our farmers—would return to the country.

Weeks went by before I saw Francis Bernardone again. It was on the night Raul and I stood on the balcony above San Rufino Square, watching the skies for the serpent star.

Raul had brought a chart of the heavens when he came from Granada. Father had engaged him to teach me the history of the world and some of its languages, but Raul had a liking for astronomy, and although my father thought it pointless for females of my age or of any age, he didn't object to my spending an hour now and again gazing at the stars.

The Arabian seer who made the chart had noted that for the past three centuries a fiery apparition had appeared at regular intervals of one hundred and seven years. Raul unrolled the chart, laid it out on the balcony rail, and set a lantern beside it, and I read the Arab's notes describing the apparition as a "glowing serpent with a fiery tail, which flees across the western sky at dusk."

"We should go and tell everyone," I said, "so they can come and watch."

"Assisi, my friend, is a nervous place. If the serpent does not appear, they'll laugh at us. If it does appear then there'll be an awful scene—the populace running this way and that. Hiding under beds, in the cathedral, in the forest, in caves. As it is, if the serpent does come, few will know because few ever raise their eyes to look at the heavens. But I wish that Marsilio was with us. I sent him a letter weeks ago and invited him here to witness the event, but he wrote back and called me a fool for believing in such maunderings."

The two men had exchanged letters for a long time, mostly about the shape of the earth. Marsilio, who lived in Perugia where they believed many strange things, thought that it was shaped like a pear, and Raul thought that it was more like a wheel, the various countries, islands, and oceans being the spokes in the wheel. Everyone knew the earth never moved, but both men were wrong about its shape. It was the heart of the universe, and everything else—the sun and moon and stars—moved around it in an obedient procession, like slaves. Besides, the earth was most certainly flat and hung suspended from a golden cord, like a feast-day platter, only larger.

We stood on the balcony with the map spread before us, and the serpent came soon after vespers. But somehow it lacked the tail the seer had described. In truth, it wasn't much of a serpent.

"It looks like somebody's footprint," I said.

"The street lanterns and the bonfire burning there below us hinder our view," Raul said. "On a better night, it would look much different."

"Like two footprints."

"Remember, that seer Yakub made his prediction more than a hundred years ago."

"Perhaps the serpent is worn down from all its travels. But Yakub says here in his notes that it is a good omen to wish upon."

"A voice," Raul said, "whispered to me just now, saying, 'There is no such thing as an omen for

lovers to be found in the sky. Nor a voice whispering in the night."

From below us in San Rufino Square came a clash of cymbals and the braying of horns. A band of musicians surrounded by a motley crowd had gathered at a bonfire. One of the musicians, a youth dressed in an embroidered tunic, wearing a velvet cap with a cock's feather and a broad belt set with shimmering studs and clasps, I recognized at once.

It was impossible to hear me above the clamor, but I took a long breath and shouted down to him, inviting him to watch the fiery serpent.

"Who is it you shout at?" Raul asked.

"The one in the velvet cap and the cock's feather—Francis Bernardone."

Raul said nothing, groaning instead.

The sound of lutes and violins drifted up on the windless air. A hush fell upon the crowd. Then Francis Bernardone was singing, softly and clearly:

*"Put out my searching eyes!
Blind me!
Let me never again see thy beauty,
For my heart it crucifies."*

The fire shone on his upturned face. I wondered if he saw me in my white gown with the ribbons and rosebuds, leaning above him on the balcony.

A sigh must have escaped my lips, for Raul said: "You are very prideful. He's not singing to you. Other girls also inhabit Piazza San Rufino. There's the pretty Fabrissa Filippi directly across the square. Next to her are the Barbarossas, Beatrice and Aspasia, equally favored. And let's not forget Clare di Scifi, of the noblest of all Assisi families, a girl famed for her beauty and winning disposition. If you believe that Francis Bernardone sings only to you, then, my dear, you are the possessor of an immense conceit."

Francis was singing another ballad; his words drifted up, soft as rose petals:

*"You are mine.
I am thine.
In my heart
You are locked forever
And the golden key is lost."*

The song faded away. Silent and breathless, I leaned over the balcony.

Raul said, "You may be surprised by the question and you may not wish to answer. But if you do answer me with the truth."

I knew the question before he had a chance to ask it. Calmly I said, as though I had said it many times before, "Francis Bernardone is my dearest love."

Raul's face was hidden, but silence betrayed his concern.

"I've loved him always," I said. "And I love him now and will forever."

"I understand, oh, how I understand," he said. "Bernardone is a charming minstrel, a singer of tender songs, a teller of fantastic tales, an acrobat whose feet never touch the ground, with whom every girl in Assisi thinks she's in love. And now it's you that joins the many. You've never met Bernardone. Never so much as spoken a word to him and yet you claim to be in love. What nonsense!"

"Must I speak to him? Isn't it enough that I have seen him in the streets, on the roads, here in our courtyard, and now below us singing in Piazza San Rufino? I have two eyes and two ears. I can see and hear."

Yet as I spoke these bold words, I was aware that eyes and ears had little to do with my love for Francis Bernardone. If I were without sight and hearing, still would I love him.

The bonfire blazed high and in the light I caught a glimpse of Raul's face. He was deciding that such an impossible thing was possible.

"Feeling as you do," he said, "I must bring you twain together. We can't invite him here because your father, to state it modestly, would not approve. But an idea hovers in my head. Bernardone is a clerk at his father's cloth shop, not far from here. I require a length of wool for a cloak and serge for a pair of breeches. So we'll visit the shop one of these days, and while I make a purchase you can observe him close at hand."

"I don't wish to observe him," I said testily. "I've observed him many times before and I have observed him tonight."

"Yes, but you haven't met him. He isn't what you judge him to be from the glimpses. A plain countenance, somewhat severe, for one thing. An unusual pair of ears—not ugly, mind you, not big, very small in fact, yet they do stand out. Not up like a rabbit's ears but straight out like those of some woodland creature. Quite charming!"

"It isn't necessary that I meet him at all. Tomorrow or ever."

"Now Princess Ricca is being wildly romantic. To her this Bernardone is a gallant knight astride a snow-white horse cantering through fields of asphodel on an April morn. Princess Ricca is afraid to meet him. She would rather dream. Which is very wise of Ricca."

Worn out with talking, we were silent for a while. Then in the silence the apparition appeared. It was a burst of blue and silver light that lasted only a breath, so brief that Raul didn't see it and no one opened a window on San Rufino Square.

"An omen," prayerfully I said to myself. "An omen of wonderful luck to come."

But nine days later the fiery omen brought heartbreak instead.

In June every year Assisi celebrated the feast of Saint Victorinus. From balconies and windows hung tapestries and pennons. Laurel wreaths adorned the doors, and everyone, save children and young

girls, watched the solemn festivities and afterward frolicked through the streets to the songs and anti of the *tripudianti*, a company of dancers.

This year the leader of the *tripudianti*, as for two years past, was Francis Bernardone. The day came misty and cold, but when the church bells rang for midday he was in Piazza San Rufino with his companions, rousing the city with the call of trumpets, summoning all those who were not too old or too young to come and join him at the feast.

From my balcony, scarcely breathing, I saw him stride forth with a jaunty swing, dressed in a tunic of the finest silk and a yellow-feathered cap, holding the hand of the youth who had been chosen to play the part of Saint Victorinus. I watched as he led Victorinus to the center of the square and then disappeared in the crowd. I looked everywhere through the chanting throng for the red tunic and yellow-feathered cap.

I had seen the miracle of Saint Victorinus four times before, since I was nine years old, so I kept looking for Francis all during the play, which was no different from the other times. First, the bishop by reason of his miraculous powers causes a mute boy to speak and also brings sight to a man who is blind. Then he is brought before a magistrate, just as in the days of ancient Rome, and asked to make sacrifice to Vulcan, the pagan god, which he calmly refuses to do.

The mob—played by those now assembled in the square—turns violently against him and demands his death, whereupon the angry magistrate commands him to place his head upon a block. The executioner wields a sword and blood gushes out—the red, red wine from Santa Lucia. Women wrap him in winding cloths and bear him away while the throng laments.

Only then did Francis Bernardone appear, striding forth in shiny black boots that reached above his knees and a sendal cloak of many colors. He cleared a place to dance and dancers formed circles, held hands, and went round and round singing, my father and brother Rinaldo among them. (Mother, who thought that dancing was a pagan sin, had left the square.)

As I watched Francis Bernardone flashing around, the wind whipping his cloak, revealing stripes of green and yellow, as I sulkily counted the days and weeks, realizing that another year would pass, another June would come, before I could dance in Piazza San Rufino, I was shocked to see him dancing in the same small circle with my closest friend, Clare di Scifi. Clare was only two years older than I, scarcely that, and yet there she was below me in her white dress trimmed with lace, floating about like a snowflake.

I fled the balcony. I closed the door tight and flung myself on the bed and stopped my ears with pillows against the sound of the brazen drums and the wild songs of the *tripudianti*.

For weeks for weeks, I closed my mind to every thought of Francis Bernardone.

Even when Raul brought his name up or his latest escapade was mentioned at table and no one defended him except my mother, I remained silent. If he appeared in my dreams, as he often did, sometimes as a horseman fleeing from me as he had fled from the leper, other times as a troubadour beneath my window, praising the charms of Clare di Scifi, not me, or as a clown in a parti-colored cloak leading a rout of revelers, it was not my fault.

Like lightning in a cloudless sky, these peaceful days came to an end on the first day of the feast of San Niccolò. On that day the youth of Assisi elected from their ranks a *podestà*, five judges, five counselors, and a bishop. These mock officials took over the management of Assisi and thus, by raising the lowest to the highest, the powerless to seats of power, they gave the mighty a taste of how it felt to serve and not be served and above all to learn the art of humility.

Francis Bernardone, chosen as the youthful bishop, was to take the place of Bishop Guido. Served by his companions, who were posing as acolytes, he would celebrate the evening Mass.

I never had gone to the *fešta*, but on this occasion Clare di Scifi and some of the other girls who lived in Piazza San Rufino banded together against our parents and wrung from them permission to attend the Mass, provided we were accompanied by five watchful servants.

It was a cold night when we hurried through the streets to the cathedral, wrapped in our heavy cloaks, everyone twittering like birds, except me. The thought of Francis clad in a bishop's fine vestments, of possibly touching the hem of his robe, awakened all the old dreams. Most of the girls wished to remain in the back, where small fires in iron buckets fought the cold, but I prevailed upon them to press on until we came to the altar.

Francis appeared to the sounds of lutes, a wide smile on his face, dressed in a violet-colored robe that didn't fit, since Bishop Guido was much smaller than he was. His hair curled out from under the rim of a purple miter cocked sidewise, and in his pleasant baritone he sang the hymns and antiphons and jauntily celebrated Mass.

I watched and listened, so enthralled by every word he uttered, every movement he made, that Clare, thinking I was asleep, kept nudging my arm. And after Mass ended and Francis went tripping through the crowd, I followed him.

Before we reached the door he had disappeared, and when I saw him again, outside on the cathedral steps, he had shed his bishop's garb and was dressed in an outlandish costume, one half of which was red silk from head to toe and the other half a coarse green fabric used in the making of horse blankets.

The cathedral square was flooded with citizenry. The flood spilled over into courtyards and arcades, ran off toward other piazzas. It seemed that everyone in Assisi and the whole countryside had come to celebrate the feast of San Niccolò. Those who attended Mass were there to watch Bishop Guido squirm in his velvet chair, uncomfortable at the sight of Bishop Bernardone gaily mocking him.

The thousands who remained outside were interested not in this topsy-turvy scene, but only in celebrating what was called the December Liberties, a saturnalia that had come down to us over the centuries.

Our band of five and the five watchful servants were huddled on the cathedral steps, trying to decide how best to find our way back to San Rufino, when Francis with a leap was suddenly in our midst.

"Come, young ladies," he shouted above the sounds of the swarming crowd, "and let us dance the rites of our wild forefathers—a goatly crew, I must say."

With that he seized upon fragile Amata di Renaro, flung her into the air, and caught her as she was about to strike her head on the steps. Next came crippled little Benedetta, countess of Spoleto, for whom he did a squatting dance step and whom he kissed upon the brow. Then Damiella di Malispini, whose hair he clasped in both hands and gently shook until it hung to her shoulders. He paused to glance at the crowd that had pressed around to gawk at him. With a cry he grasped Giacoma, one of the servants, and twirled her about. Then he did the same to Leonarda, Consolata, Patrizia, and blind Lucia Barbrero.

Only Clare and I were left. It was she whom he chose. Taking her hands and gazing mournfully, like a rejected lover, into her beautiful eyes, he moved her about in a circle, muttering words I didn't catch.

The crowd pressed in, leaving him little room to dance. He was out of breath. He looked at me, the very last, and with outstretched hands he silently begged me to let him rest. I smiled and turned away with a sinking heart, only to feel his hands grasp mine.

There was no place to dance. He begged the crowd for a yard of room, no more. Laughing, it took no heed. But to my delight I was suddenly moving down the step, dragged by the hand, to be gathered up by a swirl of revelers and swept round and round in dizzy circles, while I clung tight, like someone who, drowning, is about to be saved.

The piazza was a stormy sea breaking against a rocky shore. Above the roar I thought I heard Francis say words I had heard before. Yes, the ballad he had sung in San Rufino. The last words of the ballad that had drifted up to me in the night.

*"In my heart
You are locked forever
And the golden key is lost."*

I tried to think of a word to say in reply. If a word had come to me, I could not have said it, yet I did not faint. I held my breath and clung with both my hands to his, moving lightly in a dream I had dreamed before.

At last the flood swept us ashore on the cathedral steps, at the feet of my four companions and the five watchful servants. I turned to thank Francis for the dance. He had disappeared, borne away by the tide of revelers.

Our little band, desperately clinging together, got back to San Rufino before the bells tolled the hour of midnight, but in a frenzy of excitement the revels went on, with only a brief pause at dawn, though the pope had issued an edict against reveling—on and on for days and ending in a pagan rout.

Drunken men, tipsy priests, women in flimsy dresses, the rich and the poor, artisans and nobles, the curds and the cream, joined hands with disorderly youth and danced in the cathedral, ate food and drank wine from its altar, which served them as a table. To the sound of castanets, horns, and cymbal carts rumbled about the city streets, filled with half-naked women bound with leather thongs who were sold by an auctioneer.

Francis's role as the mock bishop lasted for days and ended with his riding on horseback to the bishop's palace. There he summoned Guido to the door and in a leering speech accused him of dancing drunken in the piazza, of joining the crowd eating and guzzling at the altar, and of other outrageous acts. This attended to, Francis raised his hands in a supercilious benediction; everyone had a hearty drink of wine, then all trooped off to pray.

I saw none of the orgy, it being described by my brother one night at supper, though I did hear the horrendous noise and the bacchic songs. I could easily imagine how Francis looked when he stood at the bishop's door, his black brows drawn down, a clown's smile on his face.

I didn't see Francis again until a month, a month and three long weeks, had passed. Raul fell ill and forgot about him. The Bernardone shop was not far away. I thought of going there by myself. I thought of going with my mother, but I was sure that she would talk Francis to death while I stood around in silence. I also thought of asking Clare to go with me. This would be quite silly, I decided, since she was the most beautiful girl in the city of Assisi and the province of Umbria as well. Then I decided not to go at all, thinking it much too bold if I went by myself.

Truthfully, I never decided. The decision was made for me. One night an unheard voice spoke. An unseen hand reached out in the dark and quietly took mine.

At dawn I sent a servant into the courtyard to sample the day. She came back to report an overcast sky and a north wind, so I dressed to suit the weather in what I thought might catch his eye—a blue surcoat trimmed at the cuffs and hem with gray squirrel.

The falconer brought Simonetta, my trim saker hawk, hatched in Venice and given to me by my father months ago on my birthday. I wore a blue gauntlet threaded with yellow stones on my left wrist to protect me from her talons. Simonetta wore a golden hood to protect her from the weather and from any temptations to fly away that she might encounter. White hawks were fashionable at the moment, and I had three of them, but Simonetta, jet-black with yellow legs, was my favorite.

Remembering that Francis was said to sleep late, I started off at noon, but no sooner had I reached the square than Raul, still suffering from a cold and wrapped to the eyes in a woolen surcoat, came riding up.

"You're quite bold," he croaked.

"Bold?" I asked innocently.

"You're on your way to meet Francis Bernardone, alone."

"How do you know where I am going?"

"By your favorite hawk and your pearl-encrusted shoes. Also from the look in your eye. By chance, have you told your father about all this?"

"Yes, I told him that I wished to shop for cloth and he asked where. 'At Bernardone's,' was my reply.

"'There's no other place to buy cloth in the city of Assisi, except the place owned by the scoundrel Bernardone?' Father asked.

"Yes,' I told him."

In all of the provinces of Umbria and Tuscany, there was no place that had finer cloth in the late weaving and colors than Bernardone's.

"'Your mother will go with you.'

"'Mother likes things that I don't like. She's a little backward in her ideas about cloth.'

"'Then you will go with a maid and a proper number of serving women. Also with guards.'"

Raul grumbled but fell in beside me. As we crossed San Rufino Square he said, though it seemed very painful for him to talk, "I heard that your idol, Francis Bernardone, stole a length of expensive cloth and some money from his father. The cloth he gave to a beggar, and the money he spent on a drunken party."

"The city of Assisi hatches rumors like summer flies," I said. "Where did you hear this one?"

"Yesterday, from your father."

"I don't believe it."

"It does sound odd. A son stealing from his own father. But Francis Bernardone is an odd one. You can expect most anything from him. And not only this. His father is angry. He's even threatened to summon Francis before the authorities."

"I still don't believe it." And I didn't believe so much as a single word of the story.

Flanked by servants and guards carrying the pennons of the House of Montanaro, we set off at a leisurely canter for the Bernardone establishment on Via Portico, which is reached by a lane lined with unpleasant stalls where animals are slaughtered. As we rode down the lane our horses trod in pools of blood.

The Via Portico itself is crowded with shops and large signs—the apothecary's cluster of gilded pills, the striped arm of the barber-surgeon, the goldsmith's unicorn. Bernardone's shop was at the far end of the street, an unlikely place for a merchant dealing in expensive cloth.

By placing trestles stacked with merchandise in front of his store from one side of the street to the other, Bernardone had made a dead end of it. This was against the law, a law my father had helped to write, which required merchants to pile their goods no closer to the center of the street than one inch, and on one side of the street only. Thus we had to dismount halfway down Via Portico and give the horses to our guards, which annoyed Raul.

"Bernardone has been fined a dozen times," he said as we threaded our way through row after row of bulging trestles. "But the fines are small; he pays them and goes right on littering the street. Like his son, Bernardone thinks himself a noble cavalier, scornful of the law."

He sent one of our guards to announce that the daughter of Davino di Montanaro was waiting, and at once boys came running out to make a path for us. A stout gentleman with a scraggly beard, wearing a shabby robe, appeared in the doorway.

"I am honored," he said, after introducing himself with a courtly bow, "to welcome a member of the Montanaro family. And please excuse the confusion. Only yesterday I received a shipment of cloths from Flanders—seven carts and seven donkeys loaded down with treasures, which we haven't had a chance to arrange on the shelves."

I made out the slim figure of his son. He was looking at me, his head cocked to one side, as I walked sedately toward him over the cobbles, my heart beating.

Raul introduced himself and me to Bernardone, who got my name wrong—Pica instead of Ricca—which was not a good beginning. Then to his son.

"I have seen you before," Francis said, smiling, "on the way to San Subasio."

"And other places," I said. "In our courtyard with the bull. And months ago when you sang in the square."

"Oh, yes, you were on the balcony, dressed in a white gown. I saw you while I was singing."

Singing to me, I desperately wanted to say, not to Clare di Scifi. Not to anyone but me. Instead, he reminded him that we had danced in the square on the night of the December Liberties.

He frowned at this and fell silent. He had changed. From the glimpses I'd had of him in the cathedral, filled as it was with candle smoke, and in the square, dense with the oily smoke of torches, I didn't have a true idea of how he looked. But now as I saw him in the daylight, I was certain that he had changed. He was no longer the smiling young man I had seen before.

He was thinner than I remembered. And his eyes, deep-set beneath their black brows, had changed. They seemed troubled. Could Raul's story be true? Was he worried about the angry threats his father had made against him? To belie this troubled mood, he was dressed in the gayest and most charming of costumes—one leg of black silk, one leg of red silk, and a tunic of three or four different colors cinched tight by a rainbow belt.

"Don't just stand there gawking," Signor Bernardone said. "Show the young lady the new damask that arrived only yesterday from Flanders. And the precious Venetian sendal, which is in short

supply."

I hadn't come to buy sendal or damask, but since I couldn't say why I had come, I said nothing.

Francis disappeared into the shop, a long, narrow arcade lined with shelves, gloomy as a tomb save for the feeble glow of lanterns. He came back with two bolts of cloth, slipped into the street, and spread them out on a trestle. Draping a corner of the sendal over his arm, he held it up to catch the sunlight.

"Notice, if you will," he said, trying hard to be friendly, "the enchanted glow."

I ran my hand over the silk.

"Doesn't it remind you of a spring day," he said, "when the meadows are green and the wind blows her sweetest and God's flowers bloom?"

I nodded and strove to follow his flight of fancy.

The three bells of San Niccolo broke forth, calling workers to their churchly tasks. The sound of the bells echoed in the narrow street. Raul, who had bought a parcel of serge, stood in the doorway watching. Signor Bernardone was also watching. He darted forth, took up the bolt of sendal, pushed his son aside none too gently, and said how well the silk matched my coloring. Without a word Francis quietly slipped away.

"I'll take a piece of sendal," I said. "And my father will pay you."

"That's not necessary," Bernardone explained. "Pay when you visit us again. I'll have Moorish cloth quite soon. This coming week, perhaps, depending upon the thieves that guard the way and the cloth thieves themselves."

The sky had darkened, and as we left the shelter of Via Portico the wind swooped down upon us. Simonetta ruffled her feathers and took a firmer grip on my wrist.

"You're very silent," Raul said. "You seem somewhat chastened. What goes on in your head?"

"Lengths of lovely cloth," I said, "that Signor Bernardone has collected from over the world. The velvets from Paris and the sendal from Venice and—"

"No," Raul said, "not the cloth, of course not. Something else. What is it?"

I spurred the horse to a canter and left him behind, but I had not gone far when I felt a sharp tug at the saddle cloth. Francis Bernardone was running along beside me. With all sorts of wild thoughts racing through my head, I reined in and waited for him to speak.

"What do you call your little hawk?" he asked, out of breath, his face clouded.

"Simonetta," I said.

"A very pretty name for a very pretty bird. But tell me, why do you keep her chained on such a wonderful day? The wind blows and there's music in the sky. Please, friend, take off the hood and let her loose to share this wondrous hour."

I looked down upon him in dismay. His dour expression had not changed. Was he mad? Raul had ridden on and was beckoning to me from the far side of the square. I was tempted to follow him and leave Francis Bernardone standing there in the bitter wind.

"You carry the falcon on your wrist because all the other rich girls do so," he said. "It's the fashion these days. But the falcon wishes to visit heaven, which is her home."

"How do you know what she wishes to do?" I asked, turning the horse round him in a circle.

"I know because I see it in her eyes."

"How can you see her eyes? You can't, because she's wearing a hood."

There was a somber tone in his voice that I had never heard before. It made me think he was speaking the truth, that he did see the falcon's eyes beneath the hood.

"Simonetta," I said, "is young. She hasn't been trained. If I free her, she will never come back. She'll starve or be hunted down."

"God will care for her, as He cares for all His creatures, even for you and me."

He looked up from under the peak of his feathered cap, fixing me with a steady glance. It was meant to make me quaver, lose my senses, free Simonetta—my father's generous gift, bought from the falconry of Filippo dei Casini, doge of Venice.

I looked at Raul, waiting impatiently on the far side of the square. I thought of a way to break the spell.

"I've heard an awful tale. It's ... well, people are saying that you stole a piece of cloth that belonged to your father. Such terrible things. They can't possibly be true."

"But they are," he said eagerly, taking pride in the theft. "A handsome length of damask fit for a cardinal's cape. Also a fat handful of money."

"You're just dreaming up a wild story," I said, though by now I didn't know what to believe.

"I'd have taken more, two lengths of his best brocade and two handfuls of money, if I hadn't decided that this would be a sin. Here I was stealing from my father because he was greedy, and here I was, being greedy myself. But you haven't mentioned the horse. I stole a horse, too, a fine Arabian."

"You're making this up," I said, but as the words left my lips I realized that it made no difference to me whether he was a thief or not, whether he had stolen every bolt of cloth, every *soldo*, and every horse his father owned.

He began to pet Simonetta, running a hand over her shining feathers, not listening to me at all.

"When she is trained and can fend for herself," I said, "I'll think about setting her free."

Now he was talking to Simonetta, at least making sounds that caused the hawk to turn her head one way and the other.

"If you take off the hood then I can talk to her better," he said. "It is with the eyes that we talk to each other."

With misgivings, I placed Simonetta on his arm and removed the golden hood, but kept a firm grip on the chain that held her.

"She has the eyes of an odalisque," I said, to appear well read and scholarly.

He didn't know the word. "Odalisque?" he said, shaking his head.

"I mean that her eyes remind me of the melting eyes of a slave girl in a sultan's harem."

"You're familiar with harems?"

"Only through my reading," I said, embarrassed.

He held the bird at arm's length and the two gazed at each other.

"Her eyes don't melt," he said. "I am climbing a mountain in a winter storm. It is dusk as I near the top. Before me stands an icy cliff. In the face of the cliff is a small crevice and deep inside the crevice I see a fire. Her eyes are like that—fire and burning ice."

He began to talk to Simonetta, strange sounds unlike any that I had ever heard before. Then he

broke off the talk and said to me, "You must have many of these pretty birds, ones to match the color of your cloaks and gowns," he said. "You'll never miss Simonetta."

Deep within his own eyes I saw the fire and burning ice. Silently, holding my breath, I watched him unloose the chain from the falcon's leg. I watched her while she fluttered awkwardly away from us, then, gathering herself, disappeared in the stormy sky.

"She's gone," I cried.

"No longer an ornament on your wrist, but not gone," he said, pausing to gather his cloak about him. "She's in God's care. Now that you know this, you will free the others in your falconry."

Through falling snow, I saw Raul beckoning to me. My senses returned. Without a word I spurred my horse and crossed the square.

"I see that you didn't fare too badly with Bernardone," Raul said. "You only lost your favorite hawk. You're fortunate; you might have lost your purse as well as your horse and your nice silk surcoat. You might be walking homeward in your bare feet, freezing to death in your underclothes."

I didn't answer him. My eyes were upon Francis Bernardone. He was still where I had left him. Now it was snowing big flakes and he was on his knees, his hands outstretched, catching them as they fell.

The kneeling figure grew dim and disappeared in the driving snow. In all my life, I had never loved Francis Bernardone so much, so desperately.

Snow hid the walls of San Rufino. As we came to the Scifi palace, the watchman called out, inviting us to take shelter.

The bells of Santa Maria Maggiore had rung. Within the hour, my father would be sitting down to dinner. I was not anxious to explain how I had lost Simonetta. Not that he would know about it so soon—days might pass before he heard. But as a dutiful daughter, trained in the importance of truth, if challenged I must confess to an act that he would deem much more than foolish.

"It's warmer within than without," the watchman said, opening the gate. "This is an apt time to get frozen. Come, I pray you."

I asked if Signorina Clare was about. Told that she was in bed, suffering a fever, I handed over my horse and Raul rode on with the servants. Since Clare and I were good friends and often visited each other, I went by way of the back entrance, unannounced.

She lay under a blanket of fox skins, pale but beautiful in spite of her illness. "Where were you to get such a reddish nose?" she asked me.

"At Signor Bernardone's."

"What's under your arm? You're always buying something. Either that or someone is buying it for you."

I opened the package and spread the cloth on the coverlet.

"How lovely," she said. "It matches your coloring."

"Signor Bernardone told me the same thing."

"What did Francis say?"

"Nothing."

Clare and I always talked frankly to each other. But how I felt about Francis Bernardone I had kept from her, thinking that she would belittle him as so many others did.

Clare was not ill from a fever. I learned this before I ever finished the cup of broth her serving woman brought for me. She was ill from fear and anger.

"Have you heard of Rosso di Battero?" she asked me.

"He owns a castle beyond Porta di Murocuplo, in the hills," I said. "He's thin and tall and hollow in the middle, has a gray beard curled to a point, rides a gray horse, and he's always protected by six guards also riding gray horses."

She smiled wanly. "You know him better than I do. I've seen him only once. Last Easter in the

cathedral, from a distance. I just found out that my family intends that I marry him."

Clare's father was a stubborn man, strict and fanatically religious. Her mother was an iron-willed woman. Her brothers were famous for their use of the sword, quick to take offense, vindictive, and cruel. I could imagine what a family command would mean to her, especially since people asked why a girl of such beauty remained unwed. Was her life doomed by some terrible disease? Had she made a pact with the Evil One, with the Devil himself? I had heard these questions and others, asked in my own home.

She was not drinking her barley broth. She lay with her hands folded tight on the coverlet, her gaze upon the window and the falling snow, a figure as remote as the cold white statue in the niche above her head. I asked her if she would marry Rosso di Batteredo. She picked up a heart-shaped fan and covered her face in disgust.

"No," she said, fanning herself. "No."

"If your family commands you to, you wouldn't dare refuse them."

"You'll see. At the very moment I am threatened."

"What will you do?" I asked, thinking of Count Luzzaro.

"I'll flee."

"Where to?"

"To Perugia. Anywhere. To Venice. I have cousins in Venice and also in Padua."

"Your brothers are fast riders. They'll come for you and bring you back," I said. Then, struck by thought, I added, "You can hide with me. There's a big room off my tower. It was used once for weapons, a storage place. It's closed now and nobody ever goes there. You'll be safe for days."

"What a cunning thought," she said.

She tossed the coverlet aside, sat up, and glanced at me over the top of her fan. "How did Francis look?"

"Like a harlequin. Dressed up with one leg in black silk, the other in red silk, and a tunic of four or five colors."

"I mean, how did he act?"

"Sober," I said, deciding not to say a word about our meeting in San Rufino Square or about Simonetta. "Quiet."

"From the stories going around, he may have good reasons for being quiet. It's said he stole from his father, things like cloth and money, and gave them away. I don't believe it for a moment," Clare said.

She sat down at the mirror, and a woman came to dress her hair. Long and heavy and very blond in the lamplight it looked like melting silver.

"Francis would never steal from his father," she said, "or from anyone else. It's an awful lie."

I agreed with her and we talked on until the bells rang for vespers, but nothing more was said about him.

As I hurried home I tried to think of a likely reason for freeing Simonetta. Father met me as I entered the Great Hall. He glanced at my wrist and empty glove before I had brushed the snow from my face.

"Simonetta?" he said.

I made a motion of a hawk flying away, hunting the heavens.

Father was a medium-tall man who made himself look taller and more imposing by wearing thick-soled, high-heeled boots, by standing very erect with his thin shoulders thrown back, and by wearing tight collars on his cloaks and tunics.

"An untamed hawk hunts in a snowstorm?" he asked. He carried a lamp and the amber light glittered in his eyes. "Simonetta comes from a family of hawks that's centuries old, from the days of the ancient pharaohs. My falconer has sat up days and nights with this rare bird, never sleeping, walking leagues with her fastened to his fist, keeping her awake hour after hour until she no longer wishes to be free. And though her spirit remains unbroken, she's been lulled into submission. Simonetta has gone through all these stages, but she's not ready to hunt. Why did you ask for Simonetta?"

"Because she is more beautiful than the pigeon hawk or the kestrel."

"Why did the falconer give her to you?"

I shrugged, not daring to say that I had threatened the man a little when he wanted to give me the kestrel hawk. Step by step Father was leading me into a lie. Defiantly, not caring that I stumbled over the words, I blurted the truth.

"You wished to impress Francis Bernardone?"

I nodded.

"Then Bernardone is the cause of your unloosing the hawk." Father's tongue curled around the name. "A clown dancing in the street now dances his way into the household of Davino di Montanaro. He glanced at the massive door set in walls of hardest stone. "No door, no wall however strong, can keep frivolity at bay, it seems. Shall we deal with this foolishness in a different way? We shall, we shall! Come!"

I followed him through the Great Hall and into the vaulted room of the scriptorium. Two earnest young men sat at benches, pens in hand, diligently at work. Raul de los Santos watched over them.

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