

# **Joan of Naples**

**by**

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# Chapter 1

In the night of the 15th of January 1343, while the inhabitants of Naples lay wrapped in peaceful slumber, they were suddenly awakened by the bells of the three hundred churches that this thrice blessed capital contains. In the midst of the disturbance caused by so rude a call the first thought in the mind of all was that the town was on fire, or that the army of some enemy had mysteriously landed under cover of night and could put the citizens to the edge of the sword. But the doleful, intermittent sounds of all these bells, which disturbed the silence at regular and distant intervals, were an invitation to the faithful pray for a passing soul, and it was soon evident that no disaster threatened the town, but that the king alone was in danger.

Indeed, it had been plain for several days past that the greatest uneasiness prevailed in Castel Nuovo; the officers of the crown were assembled regularly twice a day, and persons of importance, whose right it was to make their way into the king's apartments, came out evidently bowed down with grief. But although the king's death was regarded as a misfortune that nothing could avert, yet the whole town, on learning for certain of the approach of his last hour, was affected with a sincere grief, easily understood when one learns that the man about to die, after a reign of thirty-three years, eight months, and a few days, was Robert of Anjou, the most wise, just, and glorious king who had ever sat on the throne of Sicily. And so he carried with him to the tomb the eulogies and regrets of all his subjects.

Soldiers would speak with enthusiasm of the long wars he had waged with Frederic and Peter of Aragon, against Henry VII and Louis of Bavaria; and felt their hearts beat high, remembering the glories of campaigns in Lombardy and Tuscany; priests would gratefully extol his constant defence of the papacy against Ghibelline attacks, and the founding of convents, hospitals, and churches throughout his kingdom; in the world of letters he was regarded as the most learned king in Christendom; Petrarch, indeed, would receive the poet's crown from no other hand, and had spent three consecutive days answering all the questions that Robert had deigned to ask him on every topic of human knowledge. The men of law, astonished by the wisdom of those laws which now enriched the Neapolitan code, had dubbed him the Solomon of their day; the nobles applauded him for protecting their ancient privileges, and the people were eloquent of his clemency, piety, and mildness. In a word, priests and soldiers, philosophers and poets, nobles and peasants, trembled when they thought that the government was to fall into the hands of a foreigner and of a young girl, recalling those words of Robert, who, as he followed in the funeral train of Charles, his only son, turned as he reached the threshold of the church and sobbingly exclaimed to his barons about him, "This day the crown has fallen from my head: alas for me! alas for you!"

Now that the bells were ringing for the dying moments of the good king, every mind was full of these prophetic words: women prayed fervently to God; men from all parts of the town bent their steps towards the royal palace to get the earliest and most authentic

news, and after waiting some moments, passed in exchanging sad reflections, were obliged to return as they had come, since nothing that went on in the privacy of the family found its way outside--the castle was plunged in complete darkness, the drawbridge was raised as usual, and the guards were at their post.

Yet if our readers care to be present at the death of the nephew of Saint Louis and the grandson of Charles of Anjou, we may conduct them into the chamber of the dying man. An alabaster lamp suspended from the ceiling serves to light the vast and sombre room, with walls draped in black velvet sewn with golden fleur-de-lys. Near the wall which faces the two entrance doors that at this moment are both shut close, there stands beneath a brocaded canopy an ebony bed, supported on four twisted columns carved with symbolic figures. The king, after a struggle with a violent paroxysm, has fallen swooning in the arms of his confessor and his doctor, who each hold one of his dying hands, feeling his pulse anxiously and exchanging looks of intelligence. At the foot of the bed stands a woman about fifty years of age, her hands clasped, her eyes raised to heaven, in an attitude of resigned grief: this woman is the queen, No tears dim her eyes: her sunken cheek has that waxen yellow tinge that one sees on the bodies of saints preserved by miracle. In her look is that mingling of calm and suffering that points to a soul at once tried by sorrow and imbued with religion. After the lapse of an hour, while no movement had disturbed the profound silence which reigned about the bed of death, the king trembled slightly; opened his eyes, and endeavoured feebly to raise his head. They thanking the physician and priest with a smile, who had both hastened to arrange his pillows, he begged the queen to come near, and told her in a low voice that he would speak with her a moment alone. The doctor and confessor retired, deeply bowing, and the king followed them with his eyes up to the moment when one of the doors closed behind them. He passed his hand across his brow, as though seeking to collect his thoughts, and rallying all his forces for the supreme effort, pronounced these words:

"What I must say to you, Sancha, has no concern with those two good persons who were here a moment ago: their task is ended. One has done all for my body that human science could teach him, and all that has come of it is that my death is yet a little deferred; the other has now absolved me of all my sins, and assured me of God's forgiveness, yet cannot keep from me those dread apparitions which in this terrible hour arise before me. Twice have you seen me battling with a superhuman horror. My brow has been bathed in sweat, my limbs rigid, my cries have been stifled by a hand of iron. Has God permitted the Evil Spirit to tempt me? Is this remorse in phantom shape? These two conflicts I have suffered have so subdued my strength that I can never endure a third. Listen then, my Sandra, for I have instructions to give you on which perhaps the safety of my soul depends."

"My lord and my master," said the queen in the most gentle accents of submission, "I am ready to listen to your orders; and should it be that God, in the hidden designs of His providence, has willed to call you to His glory while we are plunged in grief, your last wishes shall be fulfilled here on earth most scrupulously and exactly. But," she added, with all the solicitude of a timid soul, "pray suffer me to sprinkle drops of holy water and

banish the accursed one from this chamber, and let me offer up some part of that service of prayer that you composed in honour of your sainted brother to implore God's protection in this hour when we can ill afford to lose it."

Then opening a richly bound book, she read with fervent devotion certain verses of the office that Robert had written in a very pure Latin for his brother Louis, Bishop of Toulouse, which was, in use in the Church as late as the time of the Council of Trent.

Soothed by the charm of the prayers he had himself composed, the king was near forgetting the object of the interview he had so solemnly and eagerly demanded and letting himself lapse into a state of vague melancholy, he murmured in a subdued voice, "Yes, yes, you are right; pray for me, for you too are a saint, and I am but a poor sinful man."

"Say not so, my lord," interrupted Dona Sancha; "you are the greatest, wisest, and most just king who has ever sat upon the throne of Naples."

"But the throne is usurped," replied Robert in a voice of gloom; "you know that the kingdom belonged to my elder brother, Charles Martel; and since Charles was on the throne of Hungary, which he inherited from his mother, the kingdom of Naples devolved by right upon his eldest son, Carobert, and not on me, who am the third in rank of the family. And I have suffered myself to be crowned in my nephew's stead, though he was the only lawful-king; I have put the younger branch in the place of the elder, and for thirty-three years I have stifled the reproaches of my conscience. True, I have won battles, made laws, founded churches; but a single word serves to give the lie to all the pompous titles showered upon me by the people's admiration, and this one word rings out clearer in my ears than all the, flattery of courtiers, all the songs of poets, all the orations of the crowd:--I am an usurper!"

"Be not unjust towards yourself, my lord, and bear in mind that if you did not abdicate in favour of the rightful heir, it was because you wished to save the people from the worst misfortunes. Moreover," continued the queen, with that air of profound conviction that an unanswerable argument inspires, "you have remained king by the consent and authority of our Holy Father the sovereign pontiff, who disposes of the throne as a fief belonging to the Church."

"I have long quieted my scruples thus," replied the dying man, "and the pope's authority has kept me silent; but whatever security one may pretend to feel in one's lifetime, there yet comes a dreadful solemn hour when all illusions needs must vanish: this hour for me has come, and now I must appear before God, the one unfailing judge."

"If His justice cannot fail, is not His mercy infinite?" pursued the queen, with the glow of sacred inspiration. "Even if there were good reason for the fear that has shaken your soul, what fault could not be effaced by a repentance so noble? Have you not repaired the wrong you may have done your nephew Carobert, by bringing his younger son

Andre to your kingdom and marrying him to Joan, your poor Charles's elder daughter? Will not they inherit your crown?"

"Alas!" cried Robert, with a deep sigh, "God is punishing me perhaps for thinking too late of this just reparation. O my good and noble Sandra, you touch a chord which vibrates sadly in my heart, and you anticipate the unhappy confidence I was about to make. I feel a gloomy presentiment--and in the hour of death presentiment is prophecy--that the two sons of my nephew, Louis, who has been King of Hungary since his father died, and Andre, whom I desired to make King of Naples, will prove the scourge of my family. Ever since Andre set foot in our castle, a strange fatality has pursued and overturned my projects. I had hoped that if Andre and Joan were brought up together a tender intimacy would arise between the two children; and that the beauty of our skies, our civilisation, and the attractions of our court would end by softening whatever rudeness there might be in the young Hungarian's character; but in spite of my efforts all has tended to cause coldness, and even aversion, between the bridal pair. Joan, scarcely fifteen, is far ahead of her age. Gifted with a brilliant and mobile mind, a noble and lofty character, a lively and glowing fancy, now free and frolicsome as a child, now grave and proud as a queen, trustful and simple as a young girl, passionate and sensitive as a woman, she presents the most striking contrast to Andre, who, after a stay of ten years at our court, is wilder, more gloomy, more intractable than ever. His cold, regular features, impassive countenance, and indifference to every pleasure that his wife appears to love, all this has raised between him and Joan a barrier of indifference, even of antipathy. To the tenderest effusion his reply is no more than a scornful smile or a frown, and he never seems happier than when on a pretext of the chase he can escape from the court. These, then, are the two, man and wife, on whose heads my crown shall rest, who in a short space will find themselves exposed to every passion whose dull growl is now heard below a deceptive calm, but which only awaits the moment when I breathe my last, to burst forth upon them."

"O my God, my God!" the queen kept repeating in her grief: her arms fell by her side, like the arms of a statue weeping by a tomb.

"Listen, Dona Sandra. I know that your heart has never clung to earthly vanities, and that you only wait till God has called me to Himself to withdraw to the convent of Santa Maria delta Croce, founded by yourself in the hope that you might there end your days. Far be it from me to dissuade you from your sacred vocation, when I am myself descending into the tomb and am conscious of the nothingness of all human greatness. Only grant me one year of widowhood before you pass on to your bridal with the Lord, one year in which you will watch over Joan and her husband, to keep from them all the dangers that threaten. Already the woman who was the seneschal's wife and her son have too much influence over our grand-daughter; be specially careful, and amid the many interests, intrigues, and temptations that will surround the young queen, distrust particularly the affection of Bertrand d'Artois, the beauty of Louis of Tarentum; and the ambition of Charles of Durazzo."

The king paused, exhausted by the effort of speaking; then turning on his wife a supplicating glance and extending his thin wasted hand, he added in a scarcely audible voice:

"Once again I entreat you, leave not the court before a year has passed. Do you promise me?"

"I promise, my lord."

"And now," said Robert, whose face at these words took on a new animation, "call my confessor and the physician and summon the family, for the hour is at hand, and soon I shall not have the strength to speak my last words."

A few moments later the priest and the doctor re-entered the room, their faces bathed, in tears. The king thanked them warmly for their care of him in his last illness, and begged them help to dress him in the coarse garb of a Franciscan monk, that God, as he said, seeing him die in poverty, humility, and penitence, might the more easily grant him pardon. The confessor and doctor placed upon his naked feet the sandals worn by mendicant friars, robed him in a Franciscan frock, and tied the rope about his waist. Stretched thus upon his bed, his brow surmounted by his scanty locks, with his long white beard, and his hands crossed upon his breast, the King of Naples looked like one of those aged anchorites who spend their lives in mortifying the flesh, and whose souls, absorbed in heavenly contemplation, glide insensibly from out their last ecstasy into eternal bliss. Some time he lay thus with closed eyes, putting up a silent prayer to God; then he bade them light the spacious room as for a great solemnity, and gave a sign to the two persons who stood, one at the head, the other at the foot of the bed. The two folding doors opened, and the whole of the royal family, with the queen at their head and the chief barons following, took their places in silence around the dying king to hear his last wishes.

His eyes turned toward Joan, who stood next him on his right hand, with an indescribable look of tenderness and grief. She was of a beauty so unusual and so marvellous, that her grandfather was fascinated by the dazzling sight, and mistook her for an angel that God had sent to console him on his deathbed. The pure lines of her fine profile, her great black liquid eyes, her noble brow uncovered, her hair shining like the raven's wing, her delicate mouth, the whole effect of this beautiful face on the mind of those who beheld her was that of a deep melancholy and sweetness, impressing itself once and for ever. Tall and slender, but without the excessive thinness of some young girls, her movements had that careless supple grace that recall the waving of a flower stalk in the breeze. But in spite of all these smiling and innocent graces one could yet discern in Robert's heiress a will firm and resolute to brave every obstacle, and the dark rings that circled her fine eyes plainly showed that her heart was already agitated by passions beyond her years.

Beside Joan stood her younger sister, Marie, who was twelve or thirteen years of age, the second daughter of Charles, Duke of Calabria, who had died before her birth, and

whose mother, Marie of Valois, had unhappily been lost to her from her cradle. Exceedingly pretty and shy, she seemed distressed by such an assembly of great personages, and quietly drew near to the widow of the grand seneschal, Philippa, surnamed the Catanese, the princesses' governess, whom they honoured as a mother. Behind the princesses and beside this lady stood her son, Robert of Cabane, a handsome young man, proud and upright, who with his left hand played with his slight moustache while he secretly cast on Joan a glance of audacious boldness. The group was completed by Dona Cancha, the young chamberwoman to the princesses, and by the Count of Terlizzi, who exchanged with her many a furtive look and many an open smile. The second group was composed of Andre, Joan's husband, and Friar Robert, tutor to the young prince, who had come with him from Budapesth, and never left him for a minute. Andre was at this time perhaps eighteen years old: at first sight one was struck by the extreme regularity of his features, his handsome, noble face, and abundant fair hair; but among all these Italian faces, with their vivid animation, his countenance lacked expression, his eyes seemed dull, and something hard and icy in his looks revealed his wild character and foreign extraction. His tutor's portrait Petrarch has drawn for us: crimson face, hair and beard red, figure short and crooked; proud in poverty, rich and miserly; like a second Diogenes, with hideous and deformed limbs barely concealed beneath his friar's frock.

In the third group stood the widow of Philip, Prince of Tarentum, the king's brother, honoured at the court of Naples with the title of Empress of Constantinople, a style inherited by her as the granddaughter of Baldwin II. Anyone accustomed to sound the depths of the human heart would at one glance have perceived that this woman under her ghastly pallor concealed an implacable hatred, a venomous jealousy, and an all-devouring ambition. She had her three sons about her--Robert, Philip and Louis, the youngest. Had the king chosen out from among his nephews the handsomest, bravest, and most generous, there can be no doubt that Louis of Tarentum would have obtained the crown. At the age of twenty-three he had already excelled the cavaliers of most renown in feats of arms; honest, loyal, and brave, he no sooner conceived a project than he promptly carried it out. His brow shone in that clear light which seems to, serve as a halo of success to natures so privileged as his; his fine eyes, of a soft and velvety black, subdued the hearts of men who could not resist their charm, and his caressing smile made conquest sweet. A child of destiny, he had but to use his will; some power unknown, some beneficent fairy had watched over his birth, and undertaken to smooth away all obstacles, gratify all desires.

Near to him, but in the fourth group, his cousin Charles of Duras stood and scowled. His mother, Agnes, the widow of the Duke of Durazzo and Albania, another of the king's brothers, looked upon him affrighted, clutching to her breast her two younger sons, Ludovico, Count of Gravina, and Robert, Prince of Morea. Charles, pale-faced, with short hair and thick beard, was glancing with suspicion first at his dying uncle and then at Joan and the little Marie, then again at his cousins, apparently so excited by tumultuous thoughts that he could not stand still. His feverish uneasiness presented a marked contrast with the calm, dreamy face of Bertrand d'Artois, who, giving precedence to his father Charles, approached the queen at the foot of the bed, and so



found himself face to face with Joan. The young man was so absorbed by the beauty of the princess that he seemed to see nothing else in the room.

As soon as Joan and Andre; the Princes of Tarentum and Durazzo, the Counts of Artois, and Queen Sancha had taken their places round the bed of death, forming a semicircle, as we have just described, the vice-chancellor passed through the rows of barons, who according to their rangy were following closely after the princes of the blood; and bowing low before the king, unfolded a parchment sealed with the royal seal, and read in a solemn voice, amid a profound silence:

"Robert, by the grace of God King of Sicily and Jerusalem, Count of Provence, Forcalquier, and Piedmont, Vicar of the Holy Roman Church, hereby nominates and declares his sole heiress in the kingdom of Sicily on this side and the other side of the strait, as also in the counties of Provence, Forcalquier, and Piedmont, and in all his other territories, Joan, Duchess of Calabria, elder daughter of the excellent lord Charles, Duke of Calabria, of illustrious memory.

"Moreover, he nominates and declares the honourable lady Marie, younger daughter of the late Duke of Calabria, his heiress in the county of Alba and in the jurisdiction of the valley of Grati and the territory of Giordano, with all their castles and dependencies; and orders that the lady thus named receive them in fief direct from the aforesaid duchess and her heirs; on this condition, however, that if the duchess give and grant to her illustrious sister or to her assigns the sum of 10,000 ounces of gold by way of compensation, the county and jurisdiction aforesaid--shall remain in the possession of the duchess and her heirs.

"Moreover, he wills and commands, for private and secret reasons, that the aforesaid lady Marie shall contract a marriage with the very illustrious prince, Louis, reigning King of Hungary. And in case any impediment should appear to this marriage by reason of--the union said to be already arranged and signed between the King of Hungary and the King of Bohemia and his daughter, our lord the king commands that the illustrious lady Marie shall contract a marriage with the elder son of the mighty lord Don Juan, Duke of Normandy, himself the elder son of the reigning King of France."

At this point Charles of Durazzo gave Marie a singularly meaning look, which escaped the notice of all present, their attention being absorbed by the reading of Robert's will. The young girl herself, from the moment when she first heard her own name, had stood confused and thunderstruck, with scarlet cheeks, not daring to raise her eyes.

The vice-chancellor continued:

"Moreover, he has willed and commanded that the counties of Forcalquier and Provence shall in all perpetuity be united to his kingdom, and shall form one sole and inseparable dominion, whether or not there be several sons or daughters or any other reason of any kind for its partition, seeing that this union is of the utmost importance for the security and common prosperity of the kingdom and counties aforesaid.

"Moreover, he has decided and commanded that in case of the death of the Duchess Joan--which God avert!--without lawful issue of her body, the most illustrious lord Andre, Duke of Calabria, her husband, shall have the principality of Salerno, with the title fruits, revenues, and all the rights thereof, together with the revenue of 2000 ounces of gold for maintenance.

"Moreover, he has decided and ordered that the Queen above all, and also the venerable father Don Philip of Cabassole, Bishop of Cavaillon, vice-chancellor of the kingdom of Sicily, and the magnificent lords Philip of Sanguineto, seneschal of Provence, Godfrey of Marsan, Count of Squillace, admiral of the kingdom, and Charles of Artois, Count of Aire, shall be governors, regents, and administrators of the aforesaid lord Andre and the aforesaid ladies Joan and Marie, until such time as the duke, the duchess, and the very illustrious lady Marie shall have attained their twenty-fifth year," etc. etc.

When the vice-chancellor had finished reading, the king sat up, and glancing round upon his fair and numerous family, thus spoke:

"My children, you have heard my last wishes. I have bidden you all to my deathbed, that you may see how the glory of the world passes away. Those whom men name the great ones of the earth have more duties to perform, and after death more accounts to render: it is in this that their greatness lies. I have reigned thirty-three years, and God before whom I am about to appear, God to whom my sighs have often arisen during my long and painful life, God alone knows the thoughts that rend my heart in the hour of death. Soon shall I be lying in the tomb, and all that remains of me in this world will live in the memory of those who pray for me. But before I leave you for ever, you, oh, you who are twice my daughters, whom I have loved with a double love, and you my nephews who have had from me all the care and affection of a father, promise me to be ever united in heart and in wish, as indeed you are in my love. I have lived longer than your fathers, I the eldest of all, and thus no doubt God has wished to tighten the bonds of your affection, to accustom you to live in one family and to pay honour to one head. I have loved you all alike, as a father should, without exception or preference. I have disposed of my throne according to the law of nature and the inspiration of my conscience: Here are the heirs of the crown of Naples; you, Joan, and you, Andre, will never forget the love and respect that are due between husband and wife, and mutually sworn by you at the foot of the altar; and you, my nephews all; my barons, my officers, render homage to your lawful sovereigns; Andre of Hungary, Louis of Tarentum, Charles of Durazzo, remember that you are brothers; woe to him who shall imitate the perfidy of Cain! May his blood fall upon his own head, and may he be accursed by Heaven as he is by the mouth of a dying man; and may the blessing of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit descend upon that man whose heart is good, when the Lord of mercy shall call to my soul Himself!"

The king remained motionless, his arms raised, his eyes fixed on heaven, his cheeks extraordinarily bright, while the princes, barons, and officers of the court proffered to Joan and her husband the oath of fidelity and allegiance. When it was the turn of the

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