

THE PRIZE

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THE PRIZE.

CHAPTER I.

DANAË PLAYS THE EAVESDROPPER.

THE scene was a picture in itself. Sea and sky vied with one another in the depth of their unruffled blue, and in the glorious sunshine and clear air the cliffs were vividly, even startlingly, white. All round the island they presented an inhospitable front to the voyager save at one point, where advantage had been taken of a steep ravine running down to the sea to find room for a number of white-walled, red-roofed houses, which seemed to cling precariously to successive steps in the rock, from the primitive harbour at its foot to the rude fortress at the summit. On the land side, grey olive-trees came so close to the fortress walls that either of the girls lounging in a shady spot on the ramparts and lazily nibbling sunflower seeds could have touched the upper branches with her hand by leaning over the parapet. In the palmy days of Strio, when her pirates were the terror of the surrounding waters, the rulers of the isle would have seen in the olive-grove so near their walls merely a cover for probable enemies, and would have swept it ruthlessly away. But these were peaceful times, and the head of the Christodoridi was more concerned to wring the last drachma from his rocky acres than from the reluctant hands of seafarers.

The Despot of Strio (both Prince Christodoridi and his subjects clung proudly to the ancient title) was a very great person—in Strio—and was wont to talk familiarly of his sovereign, the King of Morea, as of an equal whose state was bound to his by ancestral treaties. On the mainland, however, and still more in

what both Striotes and Moreans called respectfully "Europe," people were apt to laugh at the pretensions of the island potentate, when they were not irritated by them. Very wisely, therefore, Prince Christodoridi preferred to remain where his authority was undisputed, and bestrode his rock, glorying in the fact that not a woman within its confines could read or write. Five years ago, his elder daughter Danaë, visiting her mother's relatives in a neighbouring island, had been swept with her cousins into the "vacation school," established in her holidays by an energetic American lady teacher from the mainland, aghast at the ignorance which surrounded her. But before the school had been a week in session, Prince Christodoridi stalked grimly into the awed circle and carried off his daughter, favouring the foreigner with his opinion of her proceedings in language so exceedingly plain that it was well she did not understand it. In that week Danaë had earned the reputation of a terror with her schoolmistress, and a cause of awful joy to her schoolfellows, but she resented bitterly the dramatic close of her education. In a day or two more she would have possessed a Frank dress—she was learning to make it—which she could have flaunted proudly before the eyes of her mother and the other Striote ladies, who still wore the embroidered skirt and apron and voluminous girdle, the long coat and loose vest, of the days before Independence, the poorer women replacing the skirt by wide trousers. Prince Christodoridi was, supreme in sumptuary matters, as in all else, and "Frank clothes" were anathema in his eyes.

Stretched upon the sun-warmed stones of the rampart, the parapet just shielding them from the rays of the declining sun, Danaë and her sister Angeliké squabbled noisily over the heap

of sunflower seeds between them. Danaë ate fair, taking one seed at a time, but Angeliké had a greedy habit of selecting four or five of the plumpest at once, and keeping them in her hand till they were wanted. She always did it, and it always led to bickering, but this never occurred to her as a reason for leaving it off. The handsome childish faces of both girls were flushed with resentment, for as usual on these occasions, grudges in no way connected with the matter in hand had been brought up on either side. Their household tasks were finished, and what had they to do but quarrel, until the happy hour should come when Prince Christodoridi, having duly locked his family in, would swagger down to the coffee-house to ruffle it among his subjects, and his daughters would slip out, by ways best known to themselves, to join the other girls of the place, who, shrouded in their dark shawls, flitted ghostlike down back alleys and over roofs, to visit one another and exchange the gossip of the day?

The heap of sunflower seeds was finished, though a remnant was still left within the shelter of Angeliké's fingers, when footsteps below caused Danaë to look down into the courtyard. She withdrew her head hurriedly. "It is our father and Petros!" she whispered, with repressed excitement.

"There is nothing interesting about Petros," said Angeliké, yawning with disappointing indifference.

"Owl! does he not come from Therma?" demanded Danaë. "If our brother has sent any message, he will give it now."

"Owl yourself! There will be no message. My lord Romanos cares nothing about us. When he was made Prince, you said he

would send for us to his court and give us kings for husbands, but he has never taken the slightest notice. He cares no more about establishing us than he did about our fighting for him.” Angeliké sneered unpleasantly.

Danaë flushed. “You never wanted to fight for him,” she said.

“I should think not! What good is it to us that he was chosen Prince? And even if he had sent for us to Therma,” with a sudden change of ground, “would there have been any pleasure in it? We don’t know European ways, we can’t even speak French. People would have laughed at us. If I can once get a husband and escape from Strio, that is all I want, and you may be quite sure our father would never let us marry Europeans.”

“I suppose a husband like Narkissos Smaragdopoulos would satisfy you?” sneered Danaë in her turn.

“Of course he would. You can be nasty about him if you like. Everyone knows that he never speaks to you since you upset the coffee over his kilt in handing it to him.”

“And do they know who told him that I did it on purpose?”

“If they don’t, they probably think you told him yourself. It would be just like you. What are you going to do?” as Danaë began to crawl along the rampart in the direction taken by her father and the handsome ruffianly fellow, half guard, half servant, who swaggered after him.

“Hush!” said Danaë angrily. “I am going to hear what they are saying, of course.”

“Then I shall tell our father that you listened.” The offensive and defensive alliance against those in authority on the part of the two girls was always liable to an interruption of this sort, when one of the malcontents deserted temporarily to the side of power and brought punishment upon the other.

“Then I shall tell our mother of the sweets that made you ill on the vigil of Hagios Jakōbos, when she thought the fasting had been too much for you,” Danaë flung back, and saw, as she expected, that Angeliké had no answer ready. Satisfied with having thus protected herself, she crawled on, until she found herself exactly above the two men as they sat on one of the rude flights of steps that ran up to the ramparts. Just here there was no parapet in whose shadow she might shelter herself, but they had their backs to her, and were far enough below not to see her, even if they turned round, when she was lying flat on the wall. Listening anxiously to discover whether any interesting topics had already been discussed, she was relieved to find that her father was apparently still leading up to some important point on which Petros seemed to be in no hurry to afford him information.

“My son is too young to know his own best interests,” said Prince Christodoridi, with dignity.

“His Highness is not exactly a boy,” growled Petros.

“And therefore his elders must do their best to save him from the consequences of his youthful mistakes,” went on the Prince, as though his sentence had not been interrupted.

“Then let his elders do their own work themselves, so that his Highness may know to whom his gratitude is due,” was the surly response.

“Miserable dog!” cried Prince Christodoridi in a fury. “Is it for this I have maintained you close to my son’s person, charging you to keep me acquainted with all that touches one so dear to me, from whose side I am kept by my responsibilities here?”

“Some folks say it is his Highness’s own wish that keeps you here, O my Prince—that since you refused to aid him with a single drachma in gaining his position, he does not see why you should expect to derive any benefit from it.”

“Thickhead! why should I spend money in championing the cause of God and the saints? Is their power not sufficient? Has the cause not triumphed? Yet my son, who derives from me the rights which are now fully recognised, expresses no desire for my presence at his side.”

“Perhaps his Highness thinks less of his rights than you do, my Prince.” Petros was keenly enjoying the inconsistency of his lord’s last two utterances. “I have heard him say that he owed his success to the intrigues of the Powers, and that right was altogether on the side of the Englishman, him of Klaustra.”

“And after that you still think my son is able to take care of himself?” asked the Prince pathetically. “I tell you, Petraki, he will be his own ruin. Come, earn your wages, and let us save the misguided one from the destruction that threatens him.”

“I take his Highness’s wages too, and I don’t know what he will think about my earning them,” grumbled Petros. “If the Lady

had not distrusted me and tried to turn the Lord Romanos against me——”

Danaë raised her head a little, and bent forward, so as to make sure of not missing a word. There was nothing revolting to her in the idea that her father should employ her brother's confidential servant as a spy upon him, for it was of a piece with the methods which she saw in operation around her every day, and it was only natural that he should wish to participate in the good fortune of the son he had banished and wished to disinherit. Romanos Christodoridi, elected Prince of Emathia by the free vote of the inhabitants, under the auspices of the Powers of Europe, ought to have been a gold mine to his relatives, and Danaë felt no reluctance to subject the brother whose indifference had so deeply disappointed her to a little interference with his plans. Besides, “the Lady” sounded interesting.

“I did not ask for your reasons, friend Petros,” said Prince Christodoridi, disposing, with a snap of his fingers, of the belated scruples of conscience which were troubling his instrument. “I ask for obedience and truth. What of this woman, then? Who is she?”

“They call her ‘the Lady’ in Therma, O my Prince,” Petros spoke doggedly. “She lives in a retired house outside the city, and never goes out, and receives no one but his Highness.”

“She is perhaps old enough to be his mother?” asked the Prince sarcastically.

“Nay, my Prince, she is young and very beautiful. Also she is a Latin, and she calls his Highness her husband.”

Prince Christodoridi laughed ferociously. “Husband, indeed! and she a Latin! How do you know these things, Petros?”

“His Highness takes me to guard him when he visits the house, my Prince, and I alone have been permitted to pass within the gates.”

“Then if you are able to enter, you must do what has to be done.” The words came with lightning swiftness.

“Nay, my Prince, the gate can only be opened from within. His Highness says some word which I have not heard to the old woman who keeps the door.”

“And you are too feeble to climb a wall, my poor Petraki?”

“O my Prince, the wall is guarded on the outside. It is through the sentries that the common people have learnt to laugh and jest about the Lady.”

“Then this disgrace is a matter of common talk—at a moment when the Emperor of Scythia is offering his daughter as a bride to my son?”

“I think it is his cousin, my Prince. The Emperor’s daughters are all very young, they say.”

“His daughter,” repeated Prince Christodoridi firmly. “Anything else would be an insult only to be washed out in blood. And is this fair prospect for Emathia and our ancient house to be destroyed for the sake of a Latin woman?”

“That is for you to say, my Prince. I have no love for the Lady. Why should I, when the Lord Romanos desired to leave me to guard her, and she refused, saying that she disliked my looks and did not trust me? Had she accepted my services, I must have defended her to the death, but now I should not be sorry to see her dealt with as she deserves.”

“Then who was left to guard her in your place?”

“No one, my Prince. The Lady refused to have anyone with her but her women-servants, saying that the guards outside were sufficient.”

“I think the Lady has consulted our convenience rather than her own,” smiled Prince Christodoridi. “Come, friend Petros, will you venture to tell me now that it is impossible to reach her?”

“Impossible unless one had a confederate inside the gates, my Prince. The door must be opened, as you see.”

“Then introduce a confederate, by all means. Holy Michael! does this fellow call himself a Striote?”

“And who is the confederate to be, my Prince? For I have no wish to put my neck in jeopardy over this—removal, nor do I think that you have. *Kyrie Eleēson!* look at that, lord!”

Crossing himself hastily, he clutched at the Prince’s wrist with a trembling hand, and pointed to the shadow of the rampart on the ground in front of them. Fully evident in the treacherous beams of the sinking sun was the outline of a human figure on

the summit of the wall, with head raised to listen greedily to what was said.

“Thickhead! why speak of it?” Prince Christodoridi was up the stairs in a moment, with an agility highly creditable to his sixty years, and had Danaë’s wrists in an iron grasp and a hand over her mouth, before she could even move. “Take her feet, fool! and bring her here.” They were inside one of the deserted towers in an instant, and before Danaë realised fully what had happened, she was bound hand and foot with the sash which Petros stripped off at his lord’s sharp command. Prince Christodoridi chose out deliberately a long thin dagger from the armoury in his belt, and dangled it before his daughter’s horrified eyes.

“How much have you heard, wicked one?” he demanded.

“Everything, lord.” The words would hardly make themselves audible.

“What were we talking about?”

“About my brother Romanos—how he has given himself over to an evil witch of a Latin woman, who has made him forget his own house and his duty to it.”

“But what affair is it of yours?” Prince Christodoridi was puzzled by the warmth of personal feeling in the answer.

“Is it not the affair of all when one of us disgraces himself, lord?” Danaë was regaining her courage now that discovery had not been followed by instant death.

“No, insolent one! Has your mother not taught you yet that it is no affair of a woman what any of her men choose to do? Then you will have time to learn it in solitude here while Petros returns to his master.”

Danaë grew pale, for there were dreadful tales of the dungeons under the tower, but she answered undauntedly, “So be it, lord. If the guilty one is punished, I shall but rejoice.”

“And what would you do to the guilty one?” asked her father curiously.

Her eyes flashed. “Lord, I would tear her from that fair house whither she draws my brother to his destruction, and she should never see it again.”

“So the woman is the guilty one!” said Prince Christodoridi with grim amusement. “And what then, my lady?”

“I would bring her here, lord, and cast her into a dungeon from which she should never escape. But when her beauty was gone, and her face as evil and ugly as herself, I would summon my brother and bid him behold her, that he might laugh at his own foolishness, and go his way.”

“And that you would account sufficient punishment?”

“Surely, lord, for her it would be worse than death, and she deserves it. But my brother has been led away.”

“Worse than death?” said Prince Christodoridi meditatively. “But not so safe, daughter—not so safe. Still,” he stopped and cut the knots in the sash with his dagger, and allowed Danaë to rise from her cramped position on the floor, “you are a worthy

child of the Christodoridi, I believe. Would you help in carrying out this vengeance, little one?"

"Try me, lord! This fellow needs a confederate, does he? Let me go. I will enter the woman's household as the meanest of her servants, and wait patiently until I can deliver her bound into his hands to be brought hither. Then I will dance for joy above her dungeon."

"But what has she done to you?" asked Prince Christodoridi, still moved entirely by curiosity, and not by any disapproval of his daughter's sentiments.

"She has bewitched my brother, lord. Is it not enough for you that she has bewitched your son?"

"Lady Danaë knows nothing of the matter. She is too young to do what has to be done, and I will not risk discovery by taking her with me," growled Petros.

"Friend Petros, the women of the Christodoridi are never too young to do what the head of their house commands," said the Prince.

"And you know, lord, whether any weakness of mine would lead to discovery," cried Danaë eagerly. "I have risked much for my brother already—even your displeasure."

This reminder was a bold stroke, for Danaë had suffered severely at her father's hands when, warned secretly by Angeliké, he had instituted a search of the fishing-boat in which a band of volunteers from Strio were going to the help of Prince Romanos and his insurgent companions in Hagiavamra,

and had discovered among them his elder daughter dressed in boy's clothes. She had been brought back with ignominy, and cruelly beaten, but the incident had given Prince Christodoridi a certain reluctant respect for her. Moreover, she had promptly repaid the faithless Angeliké by revealing her gratified acceptance of the serenades addressed to her by a young Striote who had travelled as far as Alexandria, and in so doing had rubbed off some of the awe with which his lord and his lord's family should properly be regarded. Prince Christodoridi was nothing if not impartial, and Angeliké's shoulders vied with Danaë's in the bruises they exhibited for many weeks, while she had the added sting of knowing that her father considered Danaë had far the best of the fray.

"There is no question of displeasure here," said Prince Christodoridi pointedly. "Successful, you may return. Unsuccessful, no one must know that you belonged to the Christodoridi."

"Be it so, lord. I go under a false name to deliver my brother from his enchantment. If I succeed, the girls will sing of me in the dance; if I fail, I disappear. What is a woman more or less when the hope of the house is concerned?"

"All-Holy Mother of God! I could wish you had been my son, Danaë," cried the Prince, with unwonted enthusiasm, "instead of that popinjay Romanos! But make no mistake," he added repressively, "I send you merely because I would not reveal to any other the disgrace that threatens us. You will swear to obey the worthy Petros as if he were myself, since he will answer to me for your failure or success."

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