

THE WITCH OF VENICE

A Story of Weird Adventure

By DOROTHY QUICK

*The Bag of Skin Brought Strange Powers to Those Who Held It In Their Grasp—
and with It Came a Sinister Heritage!*



The woman brought
Isabelle into the room

THE Parker blood, that same strain that made my father, Cyrus I, an aviation tycoon, runs rampant through my veins. If it didn't, I would have sold the bag of skin to Sheila after my first adventure with it.

But because of the spirit of my ancestors I kept the bag, even though it meant constantly wearing it and reliving more horror than I had ever dreamed of. I was fascinated at the thought of delving into the past in such a unique way.

I had found the bag suspended from a jeweled belt in an antique shop in Florence. I had no idea when I took it out of the showcase against the entreaties of the shopkeeper, that the Mancini curse was upon it, or that, once having touched it, not to wear it meant untold agony.

If I had— But I'm not sure even now that I would have behaved differently. Not after that first night. In my dreams I saw Edmund, Lord of Ayour,

battle with the beautiful Beatrice Mancini, witch of Venice, to save Carlo Gianchini, his sister's fiancé, from her toils.

I saw him rip the mask from her face triumphantly, and heard her curse him and his house for all time to come. I was so intrigued that I wouldn't have parted with the bag for half my father's fortune. I wanted to know more of what happened.

The next experience was so terrible that I almost gave in and sold the bag to Sheila, who begged constantly for it. But when I heard we were going to Venice where the Mancini had for so long held sway, and where her palace still existed, I couldn't resist the temptation.

I wanted to see if the Mancini palace really was like the palace I had seen in my dream. And it was a good chance to test the bag's authenticity. Perhaps the old shopkeeper's yarn had inspired my

imagination. Perhaps what I had experienced was only a dream—not know more of what happened.

The Mancini palace would be the real proof, more convincing even than the pain which shivered through me if, for one second, I was out of contact with the bag.

The bag was made of the mask which had covered with beauty the hideous corruption of the Mancini's face.

Later it had eaten away the life of Edmund's son, Guido, when by accident he had allowed his hand to slip into it.

The trip to Venice was hot. We—the girls of Miss Parlon's tour—had two compartments to ourselves. Miss Parlon kept an eagle eye on us, for there were some very good-looking Italian officers on the train. We sat and fanned ourselves while the officers strolled up and down the corridor staring at us with their flashing dark eyes.

I LEANED back against the seat and closed my eyes. Then I heard Miss Parlon's voice announcing that we should get ready to go to the dining car. I murmured something about it being too hot to eat. Evidently the officers had gone for their lunch, for Miss Parlon decided it was safe to leave me.

She hustled the girls out. As they went, I heard Sheila whisper to Blanche:

"Alice has been acting funny ever since we were in Florence—so remote and queer. I ought to know. I room with her."

Was she right, I wondered. Had the two horrible experiences I had had since I owned the bag made more of an impression than I realized? I didn't want anyone to think Alice Parker queer. Perhaps I should sell Sheila the bag. The old manuscript the shopkeeper had read me had said the bag could be sold. I was determined to sell the bag to Sheila!

A hand suddenly pressed hard against my hip. I sat up wide awake. There was no one in the compartment, no one in the corridor, no hand that could possibly have touched me. There was only the bag. I might have known it was the bag!

"I won't sell you," I said aloud just as though I were talking to a person.

The violent pushing stopped then, and it felt as though affectionate fingers patted me in approbation.

I was convinced that the bag was still animated by the spirit of the Mancini, and decided I mustn't

anger it. If I sold the bag to Sheila I would do it quickly, before it had time to protest.

I drifted off into a state of semi-drowsiness then. It was good to sleep, I thought. Presently I heard a voice say:

"Speak on, my son."

I looked up into the piercing eyes of an elderly man with a shock of white hair falling about his shoulders.

The train was gone. Once again I was in the past—the spirit of Alice Parker in a strange body, this time a masculine one. In the shiny brightness of a polished shield that hung upon the wall I could see the body I now inhabited. It was that of a young man in his early twenties with the face of a Michelangelo cherub, matured and saddened.

Then I recognized Lorenzo Ayour, whom I had last seen as a golden-haired boy when he took the bag of skin from his father's dead body at his mother's command. He wore the bag suspended from its jeweled belt now.

He was a true Ayour, tall and handsome, with that hallmark of tragedy that had stamped the family since Edmund brought the Mancini curse on his head and that of his descendants.

Lorenzo began to speak.

"Perhaps, Sire, you can guess what I have to say."

"Perhaps," the elderly one said. "But I would rather your lips framed the words."

"Then I will tell you that I, Lorenzo, ask a gift from you." With a graceful movement Lorenzo sank on one knee.

The old man smiled. He was the king of Naples whom I had seen in my last adventure.

"You come as suitor for my granddaughter?" he said. "Well, I have wondered why you did not come before. In fact, I made you Prince of Barant a year ago, to give you courage to ask for the hand of— By the way, Lorenzo. Whose hand do you ask for, Katherine's or Isabelle's?"

"Madonna Isabelle has all my love, Sire," said Lorenzo.

A SLIGHT shadow passed over the king's face. "Yet, Lorenzo, think a little," he said. Katherine is the heir to the throne. She is no less beautiful than Isabelle, and I think she would not say 'No' to your suit."

"It is Isabelle whom I love," Lorenzo said. "But of a truth I do not know how she regards me."

Through his mind swept a vision of a slender girl with great masses of raven hair and velvet eyes equally as black. Lorenzo rose, the full tragedy of the Ayours staring from his eyes. "Have I your permission to speak to her, Sire?"

"You have it, boy, and God-speed to your wooing!" the king exclaimed. "The only worry I have is Katherine. I fear she loves you, and will not take kindly to your love for Isabelle."

Lorenzo frowned.

"There is another worry, Sire. The curse of the Mancini! I had resolved not to marry, but my love overmastered my wisdom, so I came to you. Counsel me, Sire. Tell me whether I should risk bringing sorrow to Isabelle."

The king motioned Lorenzo to sit near him, and Lorenzo sank into the chair indicated. There was a little silence. Then the king spoke.

"I have heard of the bag you wear," he said gravely.

"Do you know that the curse ate my father's life away, and my mother died after she had seen me take the bag safely?" Lorenzo then asked.

The king nodded.

"We Ayours must wear the bag until it is finally taken from us at death," Lorenzo explained. "Otherwise we cannot rest quietly in our tombs. I have worn the bag, but the Mancini has not visited me in dreams as she did my father. My life has been peaceful enough. Suppose she resents my marrying?"

"Peace, son," the aged king counseled. "No doubt you must wear the bag, but save for some slight inconvenience, I hold that of little account. Give the matter no further thought. Only do not tell your wife about the curse or the witch of Venice. Let the secret be between us. Forget the Mancini. But do not forget my warning as to Katherine, for, though she comes not from Venice, she is a witch."

"She is your granddaughter, Sire," Lorenzo said.

"Ay, but she is more her mother's child, and there is witchcraft in those who hold the province of Tavia. Isabelle was never of that tribe. She is all my son's. Go seek her out, and bring her to me for my blessing."

Lorenzo kissed the veined hand extended toward him, then made his way to where the king had told him he would find the Princess Isabelle.

As he approached the rose garden he heard the sound of girlish laughter. His heart quickening, he hurried along the high hedge of cypress trees that

encircled the garden until he came to an archway from which he could look down into the circular plot of grass with a round pool in the center. Near the pool, Isabelle and Katherine were seated in great luxurious chairs.

Lorenzo remembered the last time he had seen Katherine. It was at a ball. She had said languorously:

"I could be very kind to the one I loved. I could raise him to great heights, but if he should not love me, or prove faithless, then—" Her curved lips had set into an almost straight line. "I could crush him as easily as I do this rose."

SHE had held a crimson rose in her hand and had squeezed it into a shapeless pulp, bits of which ran through her fingers like drops of blood.

Lorenzo had felt a wave of repugnance as he looked, but he had brushed it aside lightly.

"Madonna Katherine," he had told her. "If one loved you he would not look elsewhere." Lorenzo had thought the "if" saved his remark from having any personal quality, thus saving him further embarrassment.

At the time someone had come up to them. It was one of the Princes of Naples, obviously in love with Katherine. He had come to claim a promised dance. Katherine had given him her hand and let him lead her to the ballroom. Looking back at Lorenzo, she had called:

"You have made me happy, Lorenzo, Prince of Barant. I will remember well your saying."

Now Lorenzo was remembering it. And was Katherine remembering it also as she stared into the pool? The cloud of her red-gold hair intensified the whiteness of her skin and made her lips a scarlet slash of beauty in the perfect contours of her face.

Beside her glowing loveliness, Isabelle's charm was like the flame of a small candle. But it was a soft light that one could look at with joy, whereas Katherine's radiance blinded the eyes.

Suddenly Katherine spoke.

"Greetings, Lorenzo," she said. "We have been awaiting you. I told Isabelle that you would come."

Isabelle looked up and her smile and voice was like warm sunshine.

"Of a truth, Katherine did," she murmured. "She also said—" The color rose in her face and she broke off short.

Katherine took her eyes away from the pool and met and held Lorenzo's glance as he approached

them.

"I told Isabelle you would come and ask for the love of one of us," Katherine said. "Who is it to be?"

Suddenly her eyes were soft and languorous. A thrill shivered through Lorenzo. At that moment he felt as though he would gladly die to touch her hand.

As though he were a bird fascinated by a snake he took a step forward—toward Katherine. As he did so a crimson rose fell at his feet, its petals scattered. They looked like blood, and he remembered Katherine's fingers as they had been the night she crushed the rose.

"You know so much, why need you ask?" he said presently.

"There are things that foreseeing cannot tell—things too close to one's heart to know the answer." There was an appeal in Katherine's voice and something else that went to his head.

Lorenzo knew that if he looked at her he would be lost despite his will and yet he felt his head jerking upward. In a minute he would meet her eyes again, and Isabelle would be lost to him forever because of a magic, and a longing for Katherine that was beyond his power to control.

The embroidery on which Isabelle had been working slipped from her fingers and saved him. He caught the linen stuff in his fingers and held it out to Isabelle.

"My heart goes with it," he said. "Will you take it, Isabelle?"

She reached out eager hands.

"Yes—oh, yes, Lorenzo!"

He caught her hands in his and knelt before her.

He did not see hate replacing love in Katherine's eyes.

"I wish you joy in your wooing, Lorenzo," said Katherine. "And to you, my sister, may heaven give its blessings. I will go to Tavia to make ready the bridal chamber, as is the custom of our house."

BEFORE either could reply she had gone. From far up the terrace a shower of laughter drifted downward—Katherine's laughter, and in it was a promise of evil.

Neither Isabelle nor Lorenzo heard it. But I heard it, and the spirit of Alice Parker, imprisoned in Lorenzo's mind, went sick with horror. For mingled with the laughter of Katherine's was another sound—the evil laughter of Beatrice

Manci, the witch of Venice!

When Lorenzo took Isabelle to her grandfather for his promised blessing two hours later, the king gave it at once with a gravity in his face that had not been present before.

"Never, Grandfather," declared Isabelle, "have I been so happy!"

"That is good, my child." The old man looked at Lorenzo.

"Nor I, Sire!" he cried.

"And Katherine?" the king asked Lorenzo.

"Katherine wished us joy, and for me, that heaven might give its blessings," Isabelle replied, sighing faintly. "I think she envied me."

"Her wish can be read two ways." The king sat back in his chair. "Know you both that Katherine left for her castle at Tavia to prepare the bridal chamber according to custom?"

"She spoke something of this," Lorenzo said. "What did she mean?"

"There is a tradition in Tavia that if anyone of the royal family wed and spend not their wedding night in the bridal chamber at Tavia Castle they will be cursed," the king explained.

Lorenzo shivered. For a little while he had almost forgotten there were such things as curses in the world.

"And have they been?" he asked.

"Yes, Lorenzo," Isabelle answered. "There was a Duke long ago who—"

The king held up his hand.

"Peace, child. Your eyes grow too big talking of horrors. I dislike your going to Tavia, but, as Isabelle has said, it is according to tradition. And it would not be well to anger Katherine too much. I grow old and she is heir to Naples' throne. You must live under her rule some day. I do not think Katherine would harm her sister. But for Lorenzo I am not so sure. I will go with you to Tavia. We will have the wedding here in the Cathedral three months from now at high noon and set out for Tavia immediately afterward. That will bring us there in time for the feast Katherine plans."

"So long, Sire?" questioned Lorenzo, and Isabelle's brightness paled.

"Three months is not long for youth," the king said, smiling. "Go now, my children. So much excitement has made me weary." He shut his eyes.

Isabelle kissed his withered cheek, and Lorenzo did likewise. Then they tiptoed away.

Outside in the long corridor, Lorenzo took

Isabelle in his arms.

"Isabelle, Isabelle," he murmured, as his lips touched the velvet of her cheeks, "three months will seem like years—nay, centuries."

"I wish we did not have to wait," she said.

"Why should we? Listen, Isabelle. Your grandfather said three months was nothing for youth, but he was wrong. Youth, when it is budding, can be snapped off the branch of life as quickly as old age that has known its bloom. In three months I might lose you; or you, me. Now we are alive and have each other. The moment is ours. Let us not deny it. In my palace dwells a priest. I would have him wed us secretly!"

"And then be married over again in the Cathedral!" Isabelle clapped her hands. "No one knowing but just us two and the *padre*. Not even grandfather, or Katherine." Her voice fell a little. "But we forget the curse—"

"Think not of it," he bade her. "Please do as I ask, Isabelle."

TWO reasons spurred Lorenzo on—the vague and distant fear of the Mancì curse, and the nearer fear of Katherine. In spite of his love for Isabelle he had almost chosen Katherine. For a minute he had fallen under her sorcery, magic—call it what you will—and only the dropping of Isabelle's embroidery had saved him. Another time he might not be so fortunate. Katherine might return from Tavia and weave her spells anew.

"Will you not come tomorrow with your entourage to view my palace," he pleaded. "We will slip away from the others long enough for the priest to wed us. Then that night I will come to you."

"Yes, Lorenzo," she said. "I will come and the priest shall read the holy word over us. For I do truly love you with all my heart, for now and for all time to come."

Where had I, Alice Parker, heard those words before? It was in the Mancì palace when Beatrice hurled forth her curse.

"For now and for all time to come!" And Beatrice Mancì's laughter had been mingled with that of Katherine. Truly I was afraid. The Mancì curse and the curse of Tavia seemed an ill combination. . . .

Lorenzo was tired. The great wedding ceremony in the cathedral, in which he and Isabelle had played so prominent a part, had been long and

wearisome. Also the reception to the nobles which the king had given afterward in the castle. Then there had been the long ride to Tavia.

Isabelle rode between her grandfather and her husband, and showed no signs of fatigue. She chattered gaily like the child she was, and imitated some of the dignitaries who had been present in the cathedral, bringing a smile to her grandfather's lips. Lorenzo laughed too, but his heart was not in it.

The three months of happiness he and Isabelle had found were over, and the nearer they came to Tavia the more depressed he felt. For the first time he was conscious of the bag hanging at his side as being a living thing. Even through the heavy padded velvet of his riding suit he could feel it touching him as though it were a human hand, and thoughts of the Mancì curse and the curse of Tavia chased themselves through his brain.

But superimposed over all these was the image of Katherine. He dreaded the moment when he would see the living Katherine.

When he actually did see her, he was surprised how easy it was. Katherine stood waiting just behind the portcullis, surrounded by her court.

The portcullis was lifted, and the party from Naples rode through. They dismounted and Katherine made obeisance to her grandfather. Then Katherine kissed Isabelle and Lorenzo. Taking the king's arm she led them into the castle.

At the feast which followed, Katherine sat between the king and Lorenzo. Isabelle was at Lorenzo's left. He was able to talk to her most of the time, for Katherine was busy speaking of Tavia's affairs to her grandfather.

Only once did she address a personal remark to Lorenzo.

"Are you happy, Prince of Barant?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "I have never been so happy."

Katherine said nothing to this, but there was a strangeness in her eyes that hinted of great evil to come. Lorenzo shivered. He had known that Katherine would not take his marriage to Isabelle without retaliating. Again he remembered the curse of the Mancì.

SOON the maids of Katherine's castle took Isabelle from the feast. It was the custom that the bridegroom drink a toast to the nobles of the court out of an immense goblet. And they in turn, one by one, would repeat their toast to the bride. It took some time.

Katherine had left the feast with the other women. Lorenzo felt a presentiment of evil in her absence, but he could do nothing but observe the tradition of the marriage feast at Tavia.

After the ritual was finished Lorenzo took his leave of the nobles and hurried upstairs to Isabelle. He was fearful, not for his own safety, but for hers.

Breathing heavily, he entered the bridal chamber, saw Isabelle standing there. It was dark in the room. He rushed to her. Her eyes were closed as he drew her into his arms.

"My dearest," he murmured, "I thought I'd never see you again."

"Hush, darling," she soothed him. "Have no fear. We have waited these three months for our marriage, and Katherine has done nothing to harm us." She drew him close. "Kiss me!"

Strange this. She had Isabelle's voice, her hair, her face—but she was not Isabelle! For Isabelle and he were married three months ago!

"You can open your eyes, Katherine," Lorenzo said coldly. "Their green glints will no longer betray you."

She opened her eyes, and in them was that same spell that had been there that day in the rose garden. Lorenzo felt his head swim.

"Do not hate me, Lorenzo," Katherine said, now speaking in her own voice, "nor blame me for what I did for love of you. I even dyed my hair to fool you, and I did not succeed for you are wiser than I thought."

"Your hair was red-gold at the feast," Lorenzo said.

"Nay, then I wore a wig. My heart was beating so hard I thought that it would surely tell my secret, as perhaps it did. But know, Lorenzo, the ceremony you went through with Isabelle means nothing. The thing that matters now is that your fate and mine was decided ages ago, back in time when we were declared for each other."

"Where is Isabelle?" Lorenzo asked the question that was paramount in his mind.

"She is quite safe in my bed sleeping off the drug I gave her," Katherine said. "Will you not cease talking of Isabelle? Have I not said that you and I were predestined for each other?"

Against his will Lorenzo found the magic of her spell stealing over him. He fought it with every atom of his being.

"You are wrong, Katherine," he said. "It is Isabelle I love—Isabelle who is my wife."

"I am more your wife than she could ever be, for our bonds were forged deep in the past. Look at me." In her voice was a command that could not be denied. Lorenzo's eyes focused upon her.

Now she was standing there, the Katherine he thought he knew. Her features were altered, her hair red-gold again. But her hair was more colorful than Katherine's had ever been. Her beauty was greater than anything Lorenzo had seen before in his life.

He felt his senses reel as he stared at her. He clung to the thought of Isabelle as a drowning man clings to a spar.

"Katherine," he cried, "cease your spells. I implore you!"

"Not until you are mine," she whispered back. "And you shall be mine, you who wear a part of me upon your thigh!"

The bag of skin!

The Manci! Katherine and the Manci were one and the same! The curse of the Manci and the curse of Tavia were one and the same!

Lorenzo recoiled from the shock as though it had been a physical blow. His blood turned to ice. Beneath that mask of beauty was the corruption of the ages. He knew. He had heard the story.

"So," he said calmly, "you have found another mask."

THE Manci stamped her foot as though she were treading on a serpent's tail.

"Another body, if you will, for Katherine and I are one." And before Lorenzo's astonished gaze the face changed to Katherine's visage, and back to the Manci's. "Come, Lorenzo. Your bride awaits."

On that perfect face was an expression of triumph. There was no doubt in the Manci's mind that her charm was all powerful. Lorenzo laughed.

"Woman, did not my grandfather tell you back in Venice that passion cannot conquer love? I have no dagger here to rip the mask from your face, nor would I hurt the sister of my true bride. But Beatrice Manci or Katherine of Tavia, whichever you be, I tell you there is in my heart nothing for you but contempt and pity."

"And I tell you that unless you become my own you will die more horribly than your father," she warned. "I brook no rivals. For me it must be all or nothing." Her voice hardened. "There is a debt the Ayours owe me. Come Lorenzo, will you pay the debt? I am offering you happiness and freedom

from the curse.”

“You did well to remind me of my father, witch,” he said calmly. “The only debt I owe you is revenge, and I will pay that by abhorrence, since I cannot, for kinship’s sake, do it with blood.”

“But I can!” The glory of the Mancis faded.

It was Katherine who faced him now. She was paler than usual, with heavy shadows about her eyes. She fell on her knees in front of Lorenzo, her hands clutching his.

“I beg you, do not persist in this madness, Lorenzo,” she pleaded. “Surely I am not so ill-looking that you could not bear me for a wife. Marry me and I swear no harm shall come to Isabelle.”

“You but waste your breath,” he said. “Love is not a matter of surface things. It is a spark that dwells within the deepest portion of man’s heart, and it lights only for the flint that brings it to flame. Isabelle is that flint. I cannot and will not betray the purity of the light that love has lit in our two hearts.”

“It will never come to flame,” she said darkly. “There is no love in death!”

“Even there you are wrong, Katherine. Love alone conquers death and makes it bearable. Besides Isabelle and I have been wed secretly these past three months.” Lorenzo spoke the words proudly.

All humanity went from Katherine’s face, as though a sponge had wiped it clear. She laughed—the evil, tinkling laugh of the Mancis.

“So you have cheated me again!” she cried. “The Ayours are a canny lot, yet in the end they pay, as you shall pay!”

“You cannot harm me. The King of Naples is in Tavia with half his army. You dare not do me hurt, and it is known that no Tavian can shed Tavian blood, so Isabelle is safe.”

“You shall see!” she said triumphantly.

Katherine went to a panel in the wall and pressed something. The panel slid back, revealing a flight of stone steps.

Two women came into the room—tall, swarthy and masculine-looking. They caught hold of Lorenzo’s wrists before he knew what they intended. Katherine looked at him strangely.

“Your mind is unchanged?” she asked.

LORENZO nodded.
Rage ravaged Katherine’s face. She spoke

to the women.

“Take him below and chain him. Then return to me.”

As they started to drag him away, Lorenzo felt fear for the first time.

He tried to fight, but the great strapping wenches towered over him and held him with a grasp like iron. Realizing he must be a ridiculous figure in the unequal struggle, knowing his screams would not be heard through the thick walls, Lorenzo went quietly down the stairs between his gaolers.

They descended several levels until at last they came to a corridor hewn out of solid stone. They followed it a little way and turned into a dungeon-like room whose door stood open.

Inside they fastened iron shackles around his wrists and ankles which were linked by chains to rings on the wall. Then, without a word, they left him.

A sense of unreality came over him. This couldn’t actually be happening, or if it were it was only a trick of Katherine’s to frighten him. She would not dare harm him, and yet— The cold of the dungeon penetrated through the silk of his shirt. He shivered involuntarily.

Katherine came through the door then, her green eyes glinting like those of a cat in the dark.

“Do you feel differently now?” she asked in a hard voice.

Lorenzo shook his head.

“You cannot frighten me,” he said.

“I do not play a game, Lorenzo,” she said. “I and another collect a debt. You have chosen not to pay it the easy way, so it will have to be the hard one. When I opened my heart to you the Mancis found entrance. I have sent for Isabelle and when she comes I shall have her take the bag of skin from you.”

“Not that!” The words escaped Lorenzo’s lips before he had the power to call them back.

“Instead of resting in my arms,” she went on, “you will die in agony—a death that will reflect no discredit on me. No one will hear your screams, and when they find you in the morning there will be no mark on you, no poison in your veins. You know the method that will be used.”

The diabolical scheme was clear to Lorenzo. He remembered the searing torment he had known once when, for a brief moment, he had been separated from the bag of skin. His will seemed

like water in his veins.

"Isabelle will have to wear the bag, and when you die its power works for her!" Katherine continued. "She will wear it knowing it brought you to your death, knowing there is no one to take it from her at her death so that not even her body can be at peace within the tomb."

Lorenzo groaned. He remembered his nurse telling him of his grandfather's corpse.

"I am quite sure that Isabelle will go mad," Katherine said, smiling grimly, "but I do not need to worry, for no Tavian blood will be spilled by Tavian. Ah, here comes my sister."

The women brought a pale, frightened Isabelle into the room. She ran to Lorenzo and clung to him.

KATHERINE motioned the women to shut the dungeon's door and stand on either side of it. Then she began to speak.

"Your bridegroom is faithful to you, sister. Not I, nor another, can lure him from you. So by your hand he must die."

"Never!" Isabelle spoke proudly. "Never by my hand!"

"Tell her, Lorenzo—unless she already knows the story of the bag," Katherine said.

"She does not know," Lorenzo said. "But I will tell you, my love." There in the tiny dungeon, with four women and the overpowering shadow of a fifth—the Mancini herself—listening, Lorenzo told the whole story. At the end Isabelle kissed him.

"I will give you up to Katherine, Lorenzo," she said bravely. "I will go to a nunnery so you may live—for surely we will meet in Heaven."

Lorenzo's cheek lingered against hers.

"No," he said. "For in this dark moment I know what Edmund, Lord of Ayour, and my Father both knew—that the Mancini is evil and he who yields to her loses his soul. She almost tricked me a while ago, but our love saved me. To all purposes Katherine and the Mancini are one. If I give in to evil there is no hope for me in life or death, or that we will not meet elsewhere. Still the choice is yours. For you, too, will suffer."

In the flickering light they gazed deep into each others' eyes and read each others' souls. Then Isabelle drew herself up.

"I have no choice but yours, my Lord," she said. "Life is short and eternity is long. Besides we have known much joy. I make no appeal to you, my sister, for I see that you and that evil one are

beyond pleading to. But I say this for your comfort, Lorenzo. I shall not go mad, nor shall my body roam the earth when I am dead. For I shall give birth to your child, Lorenzo. Now, sister, do your worst."

Joy swept through Lorenzo.

"Nothing can touch me now!" he cried. "I am beyond pain."

"We shall see. Isabelle, take the bag from him," Katherine commanded.

Once more Isabelle kissed her husband, then, with shaking fingers, she undid the belt.

Swift and terrible pain shot through Lorenzo. But his spirit soared above it. While the perspiration dotted his forehead he watched Isabelle fasten the belt around her own slim waist, saw the women hold her so she could not give it back to him. He saw Katherine watching, and her features and those of the Mancini intermingled before his glance.

The pain grew more intense. Over and above it he heard a laugh, the triumphant, terrible laugh of the witch of Venice.

He shut his mind to it, and looked at Isabelle, cooling with the love in her eyes the pain that flowed over him like waves of hot lava. He now suffered such excruciating agony that he craved death. Yet, for Isabelle's sake, he made no outcry. His nails dug deep into his flesh and one pain acted as a counter-irritant to the other.

But at last the fire burned its way into his very vitals and became so unbearable he could no longer keep silent. Hoarse cries came from his mouth one after the other.

He heard the Mancini's laugh, saw Katherine's triumphant face. He was conscious that Isabelle, crying out her love, was struggling to come to him. Then a terrible scream tore from his throat, and a merciful blackness descended upon him. . . .

"HUSH—hush." The voice was low with a soft, slurring accent.

I opened my eyes. The dungeon was gone. I was Alice Parker again, back in the compartment of the train en route to Venice. Bending over me was the handsomest of the Italian officers.

"Oh," I exclaimed. "I've been having a nightmare."

"It must have been horrible, judging by your screams." He smiled, revealing flashing, white teeth. "I heard you and woke you up. I thought it

best.”

“I’m most grateful. It was when Lorenzo of Barant—”

“Lorenzo of Barant—you were dreaming of him?” The good-looking man registered surprise.

“Yes,” I said. “I had been reading about the Ayours in my guidebook—”

“That is very strange,” he interrupted. “I have Ayour blood in me.” He bowed slightly. “I am Carlo Gianchini. Years ago one of my ancestors married an Ayour. Fiametta was her name.”

Edmund’s sister! What fate had brought her descendant to me who wore the bag! At my side it moved restlessly. But I ignored its warning.

“Do you know what happened to Lorenzo?” I asked.

“He was found dead the morning after his wedding, his wife, Isabelle, unconscious beside him,” he explained. “She was ill, but lived long enough to carry on the Ayour name. Her son, Giano, inherited the Mancini curse.”

“You know about the curse?” I questioned.

“Yes, though years ago our families were

separated when the Ayour of that time went to England. I’ve often wondered what happened to the bag of skin.”

I MOVED involuntarily. He saw the jeweled belt and its burden hanging at my side.

“You—you are an Ayour?” he asked excitedly.

“No.” I told him how I had found the bag and finished with: “I am going to the Mancini Palace in Venice to see if it is the same place I saw in my dream. I want to be sure I am not crazy.”

“You are very sane.” He sat beside me and held out his hand. “Fate has crossed our paths for some definite reason, perhaps so you would not go to the Mancini Palace alone. You will permit me to accompany you?”

We Parkers have a lot of spirit, but the adventures with the bag had worn the edges of mine a little thin. Besides, I liked the tall, handsome officer. I put my hand in his.

“Of course,” I said. I was only too glad that I wouldn’t have to go to the palace of the Mancini alone!