

Chapter 5

After taking possession of Argyro-Castron, which he had long coveted, Ali led his victorious army against the town of Kardiki, whose inhabitants had formerly joined with those of Kormovo in the outrage inflicted on his mother and sister. The besieged, knowing they had no mercy to hope for, defended themselves bravely, but were obliged to yield to famine. After a month's blockade, the common people, having no food for themselves or their cattle, began to cry for mercy in the open streets, and their chiefs, intimidated by the general misery and unable to stand alone, consented to capitulate. Ali, whose intentions as to the fate of this unhappy town were irrevocably decided, agreed to all that they asked. A treaty was signed by both parties, and solemnly sworn to on the Koran, in virtue of which seventy-two beys, heads of the principal Albanian families, were to go to Janina as free men, and fully armed. They were to be received with the honours due to their rank as free tenants of the sultan, their lives and their families were to be spared, and also their possessions. The other inhabitants of Kardiki, being Mohammedans, and therefore brothers of Ali, were to be treated as friends and retain their lives and property. On these conditions a quarter of the town; was to be occupied by the victorious troops.

One of the principal chiefs, Saleh Bey, and his wife, foreseeing the fate which awaited their friends, committed suicide at the moment when, in pursuance of the treaty, Ali's soldiers took possession of the quarter assigned to them.

Ali received the seventy-two beys with all marks of friendship when they arrived at Janina. He lodged them in a palace on the lake, and treated them magnificently for some days. But soon, having contrived on some pretext to disarm them, he had them conveyed, loaded with chains, to a Greek convent on an island in the lake, which was converted into a prison. The day of vengeance not having fully arrived, he explained this breach of faith by declaring that the hostages had attempted to escape.

The popular credulity was satisfied by this explanation, and no one doubted the good faith of the pacha when he announced that he was going to Kardiki to establish a police and fulfil the promises he had made to the inhabitants.

Even the number of soldiers he took excited no surprise, as Ali was accustomed to travel with a very numerous suite.

After three days' journey, he stopped at Libokhovo, where his sister had resided since the death of Aden Bey, her second son, cut off recently by wickness. What passed in the long interview they had no one knew, but it was observed that Chaintza's tears, which till then had flowed incessantly, stopped as if by magic, and her women, who were wearing mourning, received an order to attire themselves as for a festival. Feasting and dancing, begun in Ali's honour, did not cease after his departure.

He spent the night at Chenderia, a castle built on a rock, whence the town of Kardiki was plainly visible. Next day at daybreak Ali despatched an usher to summon all the male inhabitants of Kardiki to appear before Chenderia, in order to receive assurances of the pacha's pardon and friendship.

The Kardikiotes at once divined that this injunction was the precursor of a terrible vengeance: the whole town echoed with cries and groans, the mosques were filled with people praying for deliverance. The appointed time arrived, they embraced each other as if parting for ever, and then the men, unarmed, in number six hundred and seventy, started for Chenderia. At the gate of the town they encountered a troop of Albanians, who followed as if to escort them, and which increased in number as they proceeded. Soon they arrived in the dread presence of Ali Pacha. Grouped in formidable masses around him stood several thousand of his fierce soldiery.

The unhappy Kardikiotes realised their utter helplessness, and saw that they, their wives and children, were completely at the mercy of their implacable enemy. They fell prostrate before the pacha, and with all the fervour which the utmost terror could inspire, implored him to grant them a generous pardon.

Ali for some time silently enjoyed the pleasure of seeing his ancient enemies lying before him prostrate in the dust. He then desired them to rise, reassured them, called them brothers, sons, friends of his heart. Distinguishing some of his old acquaintances, he called them to him, spoke

familiarly of the days of their youth, of their games, their early friendships, and pointing to the young men, said, with tears in his eyes,

"The discord which has divided us for so many years has allowed children not born at the time of our dissension to grow into men. I have lost the pleasure of watching the development of the off-spring of my neighbours and the early friends of my youth, and of bestowing benefits on them, but I hope shortly to repair the natural results of our melancholy divisions."

He then made them splendid promises, and ordered them to assemble in a neighbouring caravanserai, where he wished to give them a banquet in proof of reconciliation. Passing from the depths of despair to transports of joy, the Kardikiotes repaired gaily to the caravanserai, heaping blessings on the pacha, and blaming each other for having ever doubted his good faith.

Ali was carried down from Chenderia in a litter, attended by his courtiers, who celebrated his clemency in pompous speeches, to which he replied with gracious smiles. At the foot of the steep descent he mounted his horse, and, followed by his troops, rode towards the caravanserai. Alone, and in silence, he rode twice round it, then, returning to the gate, which had just been closed by his order, he pulled up his horse, and, signing to his own bodyguard to attack the building, "Slay them!" he cried in a voice of thunder.

The guards remained motionless in surprise and horror, then as the pacha, with a roar, repeated his order, they indignantly flung down their arms. In vain he harangued, flattered, or threatened them; some preserved a sullen silence, others ventured to demand mercy. Then he ordered them away, and, calling on the Christian Mirdites who served under his banner.

"To you, brave Latins," he cried, "I will now entrust the duty of exterminating the foes of my race. Avenge me, and I will reward you magnificently."

A confused murmur rose from the ranks. Ali imagined they were consulting as to what recompense should be required as the price of such deed.

"Speak," said he; "I am ready to listen to your demands and to satisfy them."

Then the Mirdite leader came forward and threw back the hood of his black cloak.

"O Pacha!" said he, looking Ali boldly in the face, "thy words are an insult; the Mirdites do not slaughter unarmed prisoners in cold blood. Release the Kardikiotes, give them arms, and we will fight them to the death; but we serve thee as soldiers and not as executioners."

At these words; which the black-cloaked battalion received with applause, Ali thought himself betrayed, and looked around with doubt and mistrust. Fear was nearly taking the place of mercy, words of pardon were on his lips, when a certain Athanasius Vaya, a Greek schismatic, and a favourite of the pacha's, whose illegitimate son he was supposed to be, advanced at the head of the scum of the army, and offered to carry out the death sentence. Ali applauded his zeal, gave him full authority to act, and spurred his horse to the top of a neighbouring hill, the better to enjoy the spectacle. The Christian Mirdites and the Mohammedan guards knelt together to pray for the miserable Kardikiotes, whose last hour had come.

The caravanserai where they were shut in was a square enclosure, open to the sky, and intended to shelter herds of buffaloes. The prisoners having heard nothing of what passed outside, were astonished to behold Athanasius Vaya and his troop appearing on the top of the wall. They did not long remain in doubt. Ali gave the signal by a pistol-shot, and a general fusillade followed. Terrible cries echoed from the court; the prisoners, terrified, wounded, crowded one upon another for shelter. Some ran frantically hither and thither in this enclosure with no shelter and no exit, until they fell, struck down by bullets. Some tried to climb the walls, in hope of either escape or vengeance, only to be flung back by either scimitars or muskets. It was a terrible scene of despair and death.

After an hour of firing, a gloomy silence descended on the place, now occupied solely by a heap of corpses. Ali forbade any burial rites on pain of death, and placed over the gate an inscription in letters of gold, informing

posterity that six hundred Kardikiotes had there been sacrificed to the memory of his mother Kamco.

When the shrieks of death ceased in the enclosure, they began to be heard in the town. The assassins spread themselves through it, and having violated the women and children, gathered them into a crowd to be driven to Libokovo. At every halt in this frightful journey fresh marauders fell on the wretched victims, claiming their share in cruelty and debauchery. At length they arrived at their destination, where the triumphant and implacable Chaintza awaited them. As after the taking of Kormovo, she compelled the women to cut off their hair and to stuff with it a mattress on which she lay. She then stripped them, and joyfully narrated to them the massacre of their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons, and when she had sufficiently enjoyed their misery they were again handed over to the insults of the soldiery. Chaintza finally published an edict forbidding either clothes, shelter, or food to be given to the women and children of Kardiki, who were then driven forth into the woods either to die of hunger or to be devoured by wild beasts. As to the seventy-two hostages, Ali put them all to death when he returned to Janina. His vengeance was indeed complete.

But as, filled with a horrible satisfaction, the pacha was enjoying the repose of a satiated tiger, an indignant and threatening voice reached him even in the recesses of his palace. The Sheik Yussuf, governor of the castle of Janina, venerated as a saint by the Mohammedans on account of his piety, and universally beloved and respected for his many virtues, entered Ali's sumptuous dwelling for the first time. The guards on beholding him remained stupefied and motionless, then the most devout prostrated themselves, while others went to inform the pacha; but no one dared hinder the venerable man, who walked calmly and solemnly through the astonished attendants. For him there existed no antechamber, no delay; disdainful of the ordinary forms of etiquette, he paced slowly through the various apartments, until, with no usher to announce him, he reached that of Ali. The latter, whose impiety by no means saved him from superstitious terrors, rose hastily from the divan and advanced to meet the holy sheik, who was followed by a crowd of silent courtiers. Ali addressed him with the utmost respect, and endeavoured even to kiss his right hand. Yussuf hastily withdrew it, covered it with his mantle, and signed to the pacha to seat himself. Ali mechanically obeyed, and waited in solemn silence to hear the reason of this unexpected visit.

Yussuf desired him to listen with all attention, and then reproached him for his injustice and rapine, his treachery and cruelty, with such vivid eloquence that his hearers dissolved in tears. Ali, though much dejected, alone preserved his equanimity, until at length the sheik accused him of having caused the death of Emineh. He then grew pale, and rising, cried with terror:

"Alas! my father, whose name do you now pronounce? Pray for me, or at least do not sink me to Gehenna with your curses!"

"There is no need to curse thee," answered Yussuf. "Thine own crimes bear witness against thee. Allah has heard their cry. He will summon thee, judge thee, and punish thee eternally. Tremble, for the time is at hand! Thine hour is coming--is coming--is coming!"

Casting a terrible glance at the pacha, the holy man turned his back on him, and stalked out of the apartment without another word.

Ali, in terror, demanded a thousand pieces of gold, put them in a white satin purse, and himself hastened with them to overtake the sheik, imploring him to recall his threats. But Yussuf deigned no answer, and arrived at the threshold of the palace, shook off the dust of his feet against it.

Ali returned to his apartment sad and downcast, and many days elapsed before he could shake off the depression caused by this scene. But soon he felt more ashamed of his inaction than of the reproaches which had caused it, and on the first opportunity resumed his usual mode of life.

The occasion was the marriage of Moustai, Pacha of Scodra, with the eldest daughter of Veli Pacha, called the Princess of Aulis, because she had for dowry whole villages in that district. Immediately after the announcement of this marriage Ali set on foot a sort of saturnalia, about the details of which there seemed to be as much mystery as if he had been preparing an assassination.

All at once, as if by a sudden inundation, the very scum of the earth appeared to spread over Janina. The populace, as if trying to drown their misery, plunged into a drunkenness which simulated pleasure. Disorderly bands of mountebanks from the depths of Roumelia traversed the streets, the bazaars and public places; flocks and herds, with fleeces dyed scarlet, and gilded horns, were seen on all the roads driven to the court by peasants under the guidance of their priests. Bishops, abbots, ecclesiastics generally, were compelled to drink, and to take part in ridiculous and indecent dances, Ali apparently thinking to raise himself by degrading his more respectable subjects. Day and night these spectacles succeeded each other with increasing rapidity, the air resounded with firing, songs, cries, music, and the roaring of wild beasts in shows. Enormous spits, loaded with meat, smoked before huge braziers, and wine ran in floods at tables prepared in the palace courts. Troops of brutal soldiers drove workmen from their labour with whips, and compelled them to join in the entertainments; dirty and impudent jugglers invaded private houses, and pretending that they had orders from the pacha to display their skill, carried boldly off whatever they could lay their hands upon. Ali saw the general demoralization with pleasure, especially as it tended to the gratification of his avarice. Every guest was expected to bring to the palace gate a gift in proportion to his means, and foot officers watched to see that no one forgot this obligation. At length, on the nineteenth day, Ali resolved to crown the feast by an orgy worthy of himself. He caused the galleries and halls of his castle by the lake to be decorated with unheard-of splendour, and fifteen hundred guests assembled for a solemn banquet. The pacha appeared in all his glory, surrounded by his noble attendants and courtiers, and seating himself on a dais raised above this base crowd which trembled at his glance, gave the signal to begin. At his voice, vice plunged into its most shameless diversions, and the wine-steeped wings of debauchery outspread themselves over the feast. All tongues were at their freest, all imaginations ran wild, all evil passions were at their height, when suddenly the noise ceased, and the guests clung together in terror. A man stood at the entrance of the hall, pale, disordered, and wild-eyed, clothed in torn and blood-stained garments. As everyone made way at his approach, he easily reached the pacha, and prostrating himself at his feet, presented a letter. Ali opened and rapidly perused it; his lips trembled, his eyebrows met in a terrible frown, the muscles of his forehead contracted alarmingly. He vainly endeavoured to smile and to look as if nothing had happened, his agitation betrayed him, and he was obliged to retire, after desiring a herald to announce that he wished the banquet to continue.

Now for the subject of the message, and the cause of the dismay it produced.