

At Old Italian Casements

By Dora Greenwell McChesney

From a Tuscan Window

A HIGH dark Florentine palace with frowning cornice and barred windows, rich torch-holders of wrought iron set beside the deep-arched doorway. In one of the casements stands a young girl ; it is early morning and the fresh light shines over her. She has been, perhaps, at a banquet, for she is in gala dress—soft green worked with threads of silver ; about her slim long throat is a chain with an ornament of enamel bright with shifting colours. She grasps the heavy iron with a small white hand and leans forward ; the shadow of one bar lies like a dark band across the bright hair drawn smoothly back from her forehead. She is watching for her lover to pass in the dusky street ; her lips are grave, but there is a smile in the brown eyes under the fine curved brows. She looks out through the sunrise and waits. Underneath the window, so close to the wall that he cannot be seen from above, lies a youth wrapped in a dark mantle—dead—he has been stabbed there in the night and fallen quite silently. His loose dark hair brushes the ground where he lies ; his blood has made a stain on the grey stones. His white face is turned up ; his eyes are open, looking towards the casement—the case-
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ment where the maiden leans, watching for her lover to pass in the sunrise.

In the Palace of the Duke

THE window is wreathed about with strange carvings, where mocking faces look from among the vines. Against the broad sill a youth is leaning, looking into the court below where his horse is being led out and his falconer is waiting. The lad is dressed with great richness, his close crimson doublet and hose curiously slashed and his short cloak thick with golden embroidery. His dark hair makes a cloud about a delicate wilful face. In one hand he holds a casket of amber wrought with the loves of the gods, and before him on the ledge lie papers newly signed. Close by him are two figures; a man still young and a stately woman whose hair is grey beneath her jewelled head-dress and veil. They are mother and son, for their features are alike, and wasted alike before the time by some long hunger of desire. She has her left hand on her bosom, pressed hard, almost as though on something hidden there; with her right she holds a goblet of silver to the youth, who reaches backwards for it, not turning, with an indolent gesture. He glances carelessly to the court below, but the eyes of mother and son have met, unflinchingly, in a slow smile of terrible understanding.

A Venetian Balcony

NIGHT on the waters, yet no darkness. On the still lagoons broad sheen of moonlight; in the canals and squares of Venice shifting and clashing lights of many lamps and torches,
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for it is a night of festival. From a balcony set with discs of alabaster, purple and white, a woman is bending to look across the water. She is full in the mingling of lights, white of the moonbeams, gold of the wide-flaring torches; they shine on the warm whiteness of brow and throat and bosom and the gold of her hair which she wears coiled high, like a crown, about a jewelled dagger. She holds her mask in her left hand on which is no ring. There is a smile on her proud lips, but the great fire of her eyes is dying; into the triumph is stealing a touch of fear and the sense of a woman's first surrender. The night is all but gone, the revelry at its close. She looks across the water where the moon has made a silver track, but her eyes seek only the track of a gondola which has passed—slipped from her sight. Back in the dusk rich room a single silver lamp is burning; it throws a gleam on her own picture. A master hand has set her there as the holy Saint Catherine, robed like a queen, as indeed she is this night, but kneeling humbly before the Blessed Babe and holding a spousal ring.

A Brother of St. Francis

Low and narrow, the window of a convent cell, but it commands the width of Umbrian plain, above which the sun is scarcely risen. A great band of saffron light outlines the far horizon, but the full day has not come. Close to the walls of the cloister rise slender trees, shooting up as if athirst for the sun, their tall stems bare and straight, only breaking at the top into leafage. These lift a delicate tracery of green against the rose-grey of the sky, but, beyond, the lower slopes are dim with the ashen mist of the olives. And still beyond the plain sweeps out, showing no wood

or stream, making ready wide barren spaces to be touched into beauty by the changing sky. The sun has hardly given full life to the colours beneath; the green and yellow and grey merge tremulously. The virginal air of early dawn is not yet brushed away. The plain lies dream-like—rapt in a great expectancy. From the casement a young monk looks out. He wears the brown habit of a Franciscan. His eyes are wide and fixed and he looks into the sunrise and beyond it. His face is worn and very pale, so that the early light seems to shine through it, meeting a light from within; his lips are parted, not in prayer but in some breathless rapture of contemplation. The morning brightness searches his barren cell, touches his coarse garments and his clasped hands. The marks of fast and vigil are upon him. In his face is the fulness of utter renunciation—and the peace of a great promise. Outside, above the narrow window of his cell, the mated birds are building.

The Cardinal's Outlook

WIDE splendour of the sunset beating down upon Rome; the statutes on column and church front stand aloof, and uplifted in the red glow the dark shafts of the cypresses are kindled by it into dusky gold. It shines in at the window where the Cardinal is sitting and dwells on his rich robes—then is subdued and lost in the room behind. Yet even there fugitive gleams respond to it, from rare enamel and wrought metal; most of all from the statuette of a Bacchante, the golden bronze of which seems to hold the sun-rays. The ivory crucifix looks wan beside it. The Cardinal does not see the sunset, though a bar of brightness lies across the book open before him on which his left hand

hand is pressed. The window is not all in light ; outside, against the pageant of the sky rises a mighty bulk of darkness. It is the dome of St. Peter's. Its shadow lies across the Cardinal's dwelling and across the world of his thought. And there—close to the base of that dome, there in the heart of the Vatican, the Pope is dying. The Cardinal, new come from his bedside, sits waiting : soon the last mystic sacraments must be bestowed, soon the last throb of life must pass. He waits. He does not see the sunset ; he sees instead the kneeling forms round the death-bed ; he sees the shrouded halls and solemn gatherings of the Conclave. He sees—beyond—a mystery of ever widening domination, at the centre of which is enthroned—not the old man who is dying yonder. Whose will it be—the solitary sovereign figure, soon to stand there where the dome rises and the great shadow lies ? The Cardinal's face has grown sharp and sunken in these hours ; it is of a pallor like the ivory crucifix behind him. Round his lips lingers the unchanging inward smile of priesthood. His eyes beneath their drooping lids are intent—patient—menacing. His right hand is a little lifted with an unconscious movement of benediction : with such a gesture it is that the Pope—from above the portico of the Lateran—blesses the kneeling multitudes.