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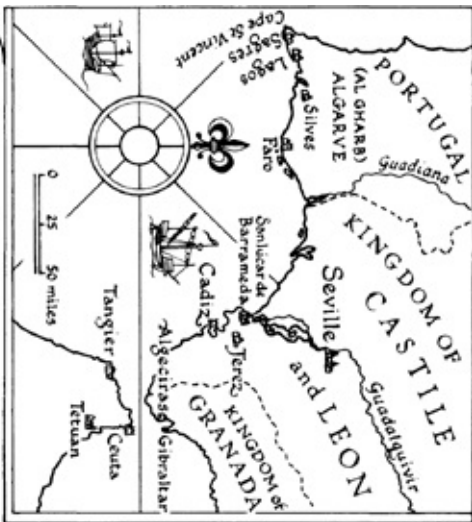
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Scales of Gold

THE HOUSE OF NÍCCOLÒ

DOROTHY DUNNETT

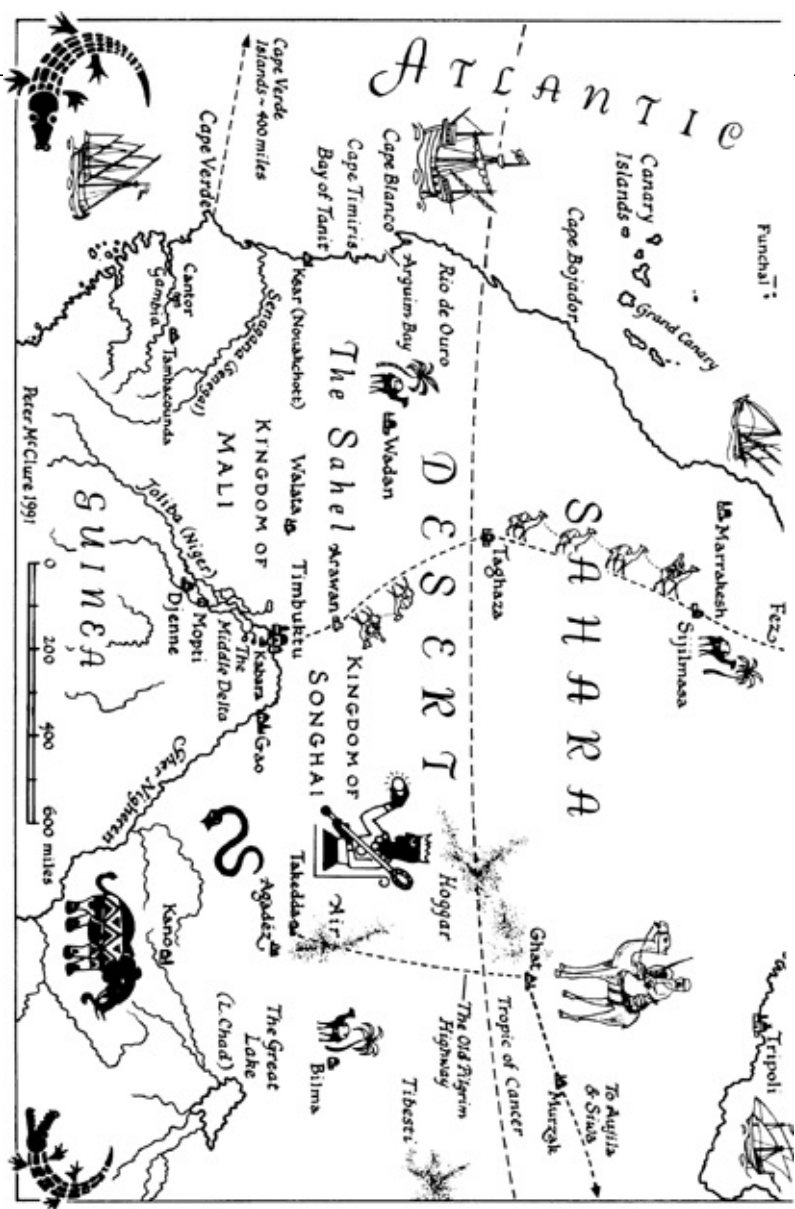


WESTERN
EUROPE
—*—
& NORTH~WEST
AFRICA

1464 ~ 1468

Ocean
(Sea of Obscurity)





The House of Niccolò
Scales of
Gold

Dorothy Dunnett



Vintage Books

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NEW YORK

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The House of Niccolò

PREFACE

When my chronicle of Francis Crawford of Lymond ended, it seemed to me that there was something still to be told of his heritage: about the genetic lottery, as well as the turmoil of trials and experience which, put together, could bring such a man into being.

The House of Niccolò, in all its volumes, deals with the forerunner without whom Lymond would not have existed: the unknown who fought his way to the high ground that Francis Crawford would occupy, and held it for him. It is fiction, but the setting at least is very real.

The man I have called Nicholas de Fleury lived in the mid-fifteenth century, three generations before Francis Crawford, and was reared as an artisan, his gifts and his burdens concealed beneath an artless manner and a joyous, sensuous personality. But he was also born at the cutting edge of the European Renaissance, which Lymond was to exploit at its zenith—the explosion of exploration and trade, high art and political duplicity, personal chivalry and violent warfare in which a young man with a genius for organization and numbers might find himself trusted by princes, loved by kings, and sought in marriage and out of it by clever women bent on power, or wealth, or revenge—or sometimes simply from fondness.

There are, of course, echoes of the present time. Trade and war don't change much down through the centuries: today's new multimillionaires had their counterparts in the entrepreneurs of few antecedents who evolved the first banking systems for the Medici; who developed the ruthless network of trade that ran from Scotland, Flanders, and Italy to the furthest reaches of the Mediterranean and the Baltic, and ventured from Iceland to Persia and from Muscovy to the deserts of Africa.

Scotland is important to this chronicle, as it was to Francis Crawford. Here, the young Queen of Scots is a thirteen-year-old Scandinavian, and her husband's family are virtual children. This, framed in glorious times, is the story of the difficult, hesitant progress of a small nation, as well as that of a singular man.

Dorothy Dunne
Edinburgh, 1995

Characters

May, 1464 – July, 1468
(Those marked * are recorded in history)

Rulers

- * Flanders: Duke Philip of Burgundy; Duke Charles, his son
- * Venice: Doge Cristoforo Moro
- * England: King Edward IV, House of York (Henry VI, House of Lancaster, imprisoned)
- * Scotland: King James III
- * France: King Louis XI
- * Popes: Pius II, Paul II
- * Milan: Duke Francesco Sforza; Galeazzo Sforza, his son
- * Cyprus: King James de Lusignan (Zacco)
- * Portugal: King Alfonso V, nephew of Henry the Navigator
- * Ottoman Empire: Sultan Mehmet II
- * Aragon, Spain: King John II, uncle of Ferrante of Naples
- * Castile, Spain: King Henry
- * Ethiopia: Emperor Zara Ya'qob

House of Niccolò:

IN VENICE AND BRUGES:

Nicholas vander Poele (Niccolò), son of the first wife of Simon de St Pol
Gregorio of Asti, lawyer
Margot, Gregorio's mistress
Father Godscalc of Cologne, chaplain and apothecary
Loppe (Lopez), former Guinea slave
Julius of Bologna, notary
Cristoffels, manager, seconded to the Charetty company
John (Jannekin) Bonkle, bastard of Edward Bonkle of Edinburgh

UNDER CONTRACT ABROAD:

Tobias Beventini of Grado, physician
Astorre (Syrus de Astariis), mercenary commander
Thomas, English captain, in Cyprus
John le Grant, engineer and shipmaster, in Cyprus

SEAMEN, THE GUINEA VOYAGES:

Jorge da Silves, Portuguese master of the *San Niccolò*

Vicente, first mate of the *San Niccolò*

Melchiorre Cataneo, ex *Ciaretti*, second mate of the *San Niccolò*

Estêvão, helmsman of the *San Niccolò*

Fernão, helmsman of the *San Niccolò*

Luis, seaman on the *San Niccolò*

Filipe, boy on the *San Niccolò*

Lázaro, boy on the *San Niccolò*

Vito, ex *Ciaretti*, seaman-carpenter on the *San Niccolò*

Manoli, ex *Ciaretti*, seaman on the *San Niccolò*

Triadano of Ragusa, master of the *Ciaretti*

Ochoa de Marchena, Spanish master of the *Ghost/Doria*

Flanders and the Duchy of Burgundy:

THE CHARETTY COMPANY:

Mathilde (Tilde) de Charetty, daughter of Marian, late first wife of Nicholas

Catherine, her younger sister

Henninc, dyeworks manager in Bruges

OTHER FAMILIES IN FLANDERS AND BURGUNDY:

* Henry van Borselen, seigneur of Veere

Florence van Borselen, half-brother of Henry

Gelis van Borselen, younger daughter of Florence

Henry (Arigho) de St Pol, child of the late Katelina, sister of Gelis

* Wolfaert van Borselen, son of Henry van Borselen

* Mary his wife, aunt of James III of Scotland

* Alexander, Duke of Albany, her nephew, brother of James III

* Paul van Borselen, bastard son of Wolfaert

* Louis de Gruuthuse, merchant nobleman

* Marguerite van Borselen, his wife

* Tommaso Portinari, manager, Medici company in Bruges

* Benedetto Dei, Medici agent and merchant

* Antony of Bourbon, bastard of Duke Philip

* Baudouin, his half-brother

* Sir Simon de Lalaing, seigneur of Santes

* Ernoul de Lalaing, his son

* Anselm Adorne of the Hôtel Jerusalem

* Margriet van der Banck, his wife

* Anselm Sersanders, his nephew

* Jehan Metteneye, host to the Scots merchants

* Colard Mansion, scribe and illustrator

* Bartolomeo Giorgio (Zorzi), merchant of Pera and Cyprus

Republic of Venice:

* Marietta Barovier, glassmaker of Murano

* Alvise da Ca' da Mosto, merchant explorer

* Antonio da Ca' da Mosto, his brother

* Marco Corner, merchant, sugar-grower in Cyprus

* Fiorenza of Naxos, his wife

* Catherine, his daughter

* Giovanni (Vanni) Loredano, deputy Bailie in Cyprus

* Valenza of Naxos, his wife

* Caterino Zeno, merchant

* Violante of Naxos, his wife

* Paul Erizzo, Venetian Bailie in Cyprus

* Anne, his daughter

* Piero Bembo, merchant

* Bessarion (John) of Trebizond, Cardinal Patriarch of Constantinople

* Alessandro di Niccolò Martelli, Medici company

* Alvise Duodo, galley commander and merchant

The families of St Pol (Scots) and Vasquez (Portuguese):

Jordan de St Pol, vicomte de Ribérac

Simon de St Pol of Kilmirren, his son

Lucia, sister of Simon and widow of Tristão Vasquez

Matten, her maid

Isobella (Bel) of Cuthilgurdy, her Scots companion

Diniz, son of Lucia and the late Tristão Vasquez

* Sir João Vasquez, secretary to the Duchess of Burgundy and "uncle" to Diniz

Jaime, factor of the St Pol estate at Ponta do Sol

Inez, his wife

Republic of Florence:

* Cosimo di Giovanni de' Medici

* Piero de' Medici, his son and successor

* Alessandra Macinghi negli Strozzi, widow

* Lorenzo di Matteo Strozzi of Naples, her son

The Vatachino Company and Associates (Genoese):

* David de Salmeton, broker, merchant and agent

Martin, broker, merchant and agent

Raffaello Doria, commander of the *Fortado*

Tati, his servant girl

Michael Crackbene, ex *Doria*, sailing-master of the *Fortado*

- * Urbano Lomellini, Genoese plantation owner, Madeira
- * Baptista Lomellini, his brother
- * Gilles Lomellini, host to Genoese merchants in Bruges
- * Prosper Schiaffino de Camulio de' Medici, former envoy of Milan

Kingdom of Portugal:

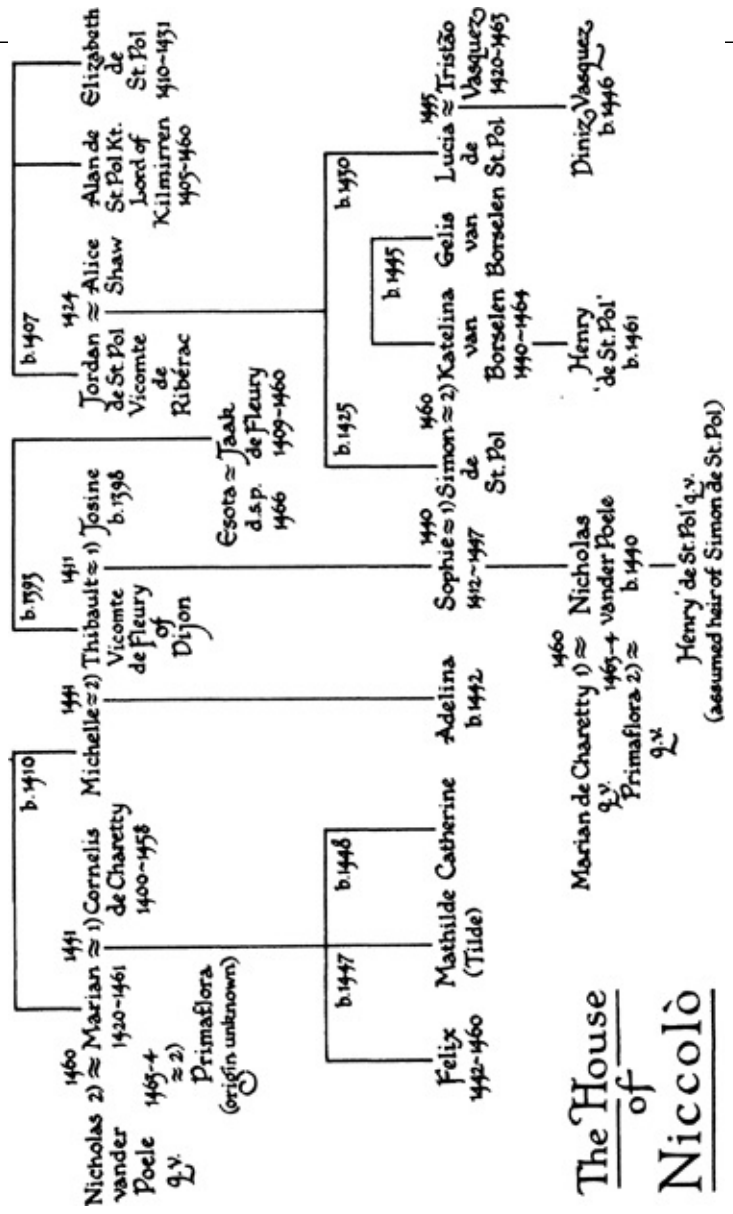
- * Diogo Gomes, former sea captain, Treasurer of Palace of Sintra
- * Zarco, Captain of the Funchal region of Madeira

Princes of Guinea:

- * Zughalin, Jalofu King of the Senagana
- * Gnumi Mansa, under-King in the Gambia
- * Bati Mansa, under-King in the Gambia

Muslims of Guinea:

- * Saloum ibn Hani, marabout, freed Mandingua interpreter
- * Ahmad al-Qali, freed captive and guide
- * Muhammed ben Idir, prince and Timbuktu-Koy
- * Umar, his son and successor
- * Akil ag Malwal, Maghsharen Tuareg commander
- * And-Agh-Muhammed al-Kabir, Qadi and scholar
- * al-Mukhtar, Muhammed and Ahmed, scholars, his sons
- * Muhammed Aqit, judge and scholar
- * Katib Musa, of the imamate of Sankore
- Abderrahman ibn Said, merchant of Timbuktu
- Jilali and Mustapha, his brothers
- (Umar ibn Muhammad al-Kaburi)
- Zuhra, his wife



The House
of
Niccolò

THE ELEGANT WORKING out of designs historical and romantic, political and commercial, psychological and moral, over a multivolume novel is a Dorothy Dunnett specialty. In her first work in this genre, the six-volume “Lymond Chronicles,” suspense was created and relieved in each volume, and over the whole set of volumes; the final, beautifully inevitable, romantic secret was disclosed on the very last page of the last volume. “The House of Niccolò” does the same.

The reader of *Scales of Gold*, then, may wish to move directly to the narrative for a first experience of that pattern, with a reader’s faith in an experienced author’s caretaking; the novel itself briefly supplies the information you need to know from past novels, telling its own tale while completing and inaugurating others. What follows, as a sketch of the geopolitical and dramatic terrain unfolding in the volumes which precede *Scales of Gold*, may be useful to read now, or at any point along the narrative, or after reading, as an indication of which stories of interest to this volume may be found most fully elaborated in which previous volume.

VOLUME I: *Niccolò Rising*

“From Venice to Cathay, from Seville to the Gold Coast of Africa, men anchored their ships and opened their ledgers and weighed one thing against another as if nothing would ever change.” This first sentence of the first volume indicates the scope of this series, and the cultural and psychological dynamic of the story and its hero, whose private motto is “Change and adapt.” It is the motto, too, of fifteenth-century Bruges, center of commerce and conduit of new ideas and technologies between the Islamic East and the Christian West, between the Latin South and the Celtic-Saxon North, haven of political refugees from the English Wars of the Roses, a site of muted conflict between trading giants Venice and Genoa, and states in the making and on the take all around. Mrs. Dunnett has set her story in the fifteenth century, between Gutenberg and Columbus, between Donatello and Martin Luther, between the rise of mercantile culture and the fall of chivalry, as that age of receptivity to—addiction to—change called “the Renaissance” gathers its powers.

Her hero is a deceptively silly-looking, disastrously tactless eighteen-year-old dyeworker-artisan named “Claes,” a caterpillar who emerges by the end of the novel as the merchant-mathematician Nicholas vander Poele. Prodigiously gifted at numbers, and the material and social “engineering” skills that go with it, Nicholas has until now resisted the responsibility of his powers, his identity fractured by the enmity of both his mother’s husband’s family, the Scottish St Pols, who refuse to own him legitimate, and his maternal family, the Burgundian de Fleury, who failed his mother and abused him and reduced him to serfdom as a child. He found refuge at age ten with his grandfather’s in-laws, especially the Bruges widow Marian de Charety, whose dyeing and broking business becomes the tool of Nicholas’ desperate self-fashioning apart from the malice of his blood relatives.

Soon even public Bruges and the states beyond come to see the engineer under the artisan.

The Charetty business expands to include a courier and intelligence service between Italy and Northern states, its bodyguard sharpened into a skilled mercenary force, its pawn-broking consolidated toward banking and commodities trading. And as the chameleon artificer of all this, Nicholas incurs the ambiguous interest of the Bruges patrician Anselm Adorne and the Greco-Florentine prince Nicholai Giorgio de' Acciajuoli, both of whom steer him toward a role in the rivalry between Venice, in whose interest Acciajuoli labors, and Genoa, originally home of the Adorne family. This trading rivalry will erupt in different novels around the different, always highly symbolic commodities: silk, sugar, glass, gold, and human beings. In this first novel the contested product is alum, the mineral that binds dyes to cloth, blood to the body, conspirators to a conspiracy—in this case, to keep secret the news of a newly found deposit of the mineral in the Papal States while Venice and her allies monopolize the current supply.

Acciajuoli and Adorne are father-mentor figures Nicholas can respect, resist, or join on roughly equal intellectual terms—whereas the powerful elder males of his blood, his mother's uncle, Jaak de Fleury, and his father's father, Jordan de Ribérac, steadily rip open wounds first inflicted in childhood. In direct conflict he is emotionally helpless before them. What he possesses superbly, however, are the indirect defenses of an “engineer.” The Charetty business partners and others who hitch their wagons to his star—Astorre the mercenary leader, Julius the notary, Gregorio the lawyer, Tobias Beventini the physician, the Guinean slave Lopez—watch as a complex series of commodity and currency maneuvers by the apparently innocent Nicholas brings about the financial and political ruin of de Fleury and de Ribérac; and they nearly desert him for the conscienceless avenger he appears to become, especially after de Fleury dies in a fight with, though not directly at the hands of, his nephew.

The faith and love of Marian de Charetty make them rethink their view of this complicated personality. Marian, whose son was killed beside Nicholas in the Italian wars, and whose sister married into his family, is moved towards the end of the novel to suggest that Nicholas take her in marriage. It is to be platonic: her way of giving him standing, of displaying her trust in him and his management of the business, and of solacing him in his anguish. Once married, however, she longs despite herself for physical love, and Nicholas, who owes her everything, finds happiness also in making the marriage complete.

That marriage, however, sows the seeds of tragedy. The royally connected Katelina van Borselen, “characterful,” intelligent, and hungry for experiences usually denied a genteel lady, has refused the vicious or vacuous suitors considered eligible, and seeks sexual initiation at the hands of the merry young artisan so popular with the kitchen wenches of Bruges. Against his better judgment, Nicholas is led to comply, for, however brusque her demands, she has just saved his life in one of the several episodes in which the St Pols try to destroy him. Two nights of genuine intimacy undermined by mismatched desires and miscommunicated intentions culminate in Katelina's solitary pregnancy. Unaware of this, Nicholas enters his marriage with Marian, and Katelina, alone, fatalistically marries the man in pursuit of her, the handsome, shrewd, and fatally self-centered Simon de St Pol, the man Nicholas claims is his father. Sickened at what she believes is Nicholas' ultimate revenge on his family—to illegitimately father its heir—Katelina becomes Nicholas' most determined enemy.

Simon de St Pol, the overshadowed son of Jordan de Ribérac, husband of the bitter Katelin, father of the secretly illegitimate Henry, has clearly had his spirit poisoned long since by the powerful and malignant de Ribérac, and is as much pitied as loathed by Nicholas vander Poele, who sees in Simon something of his own deracinated brilliance. Looking to find a sphere of activity where Simon and Nicholas can no longer injure each other, Marian de Charetty, now the wife of Nicholas, persuades her husband to take up an exciting and dangerous project: to trade in Trebizond, last outpost of the ancient empire of Byzantium.

It is less than a decade since Sultan Mehmet took Constantinople, and the several forces of Islam—Mehmet's Ottomans, Uzum Hassan's Turcomans, Kushcadam's Egyptian Mamelukes—were besieging the Christian outpost while delegates from the Greek Orthodox East, led by the very earthy and autocratic Franciscan friar Ludovico de Severi da Bologna, scour the Latin West for money and troops to mount still another crusade. With Medici backing and Church approval, Nicholas sets out for Trebizond to trade as Florentine consul, bringing his skills and mercenaries as a show of support from the West—a show that will soon turn real as the Sultan moves against the city more quickly than anyone had anticipated.

Nicholas' rival, and in some ways alter ego, is the gifted, charming, and amoral Pagano Doria, trading for Genoa, gaming with Venice's Nicholas in a series of brilliant pranks and tricks which include, terribly, the seduction of the thirteen-year-old Catherine de Charetty, one of Nicholas' two rebellious stepdaughters. Pagano, who is secretly financed by Nicholas' enemy Simon de St Pol, has invited the adolescent Catherine to challenge her stepfather, and no pleas or arguments from Nicholas, her mother's officers, or the new figures joining the Company—the priest Godscalc and the engineer John le Grant—can sway her.

In Trebizond, Nicholas deploys his trading skills while he assesses Byzantine culture, one spiritually and politically supreme, now calcified in routine, crumbling in self-indulgence. Nicholas must resist the Emperor David's languidly amorous overtures while he takes the lead in preparing the city for, and then withstanding, the siege of the Sultan. The city, however, is betrayed by its Emperor and his scheming Chancellor, and Pagano Doria suffers his own fall, killed by a black page whom he carelessly loved and then sold to the Sultan. Nicholas has willed neither fall, yet has set in motion some of the psychopolitical "engineering" which has triggered these disasters, and he carries, with Father Godscalc's reflective help and the more robust assistance of Tobie and le Grant, part of the moral burden of them.

The burden weighs even during the triumphant trip back to Venice with a rescued if still recalcitrant Catherine and a fortune in silk, gold, alum, and Eastern manuscripts, the "golden fleece" which this Jason looks to lay at the feet of his beloved wife. A final skirmish with Simon, angry at the failure of his agent Doria, ends the novel abruptly, with news which destroys all the remaining dream of homecoming: Marian de Charetty, traveling through Burgundy in her husband's absence, has died.

VOLUME III: *Race of Scorpions*

Rich and courted, yet emotionally drained and subconsciously enraged, Nicholas seeks a new shape for his life after visiting his wife's grave, establishing his still-resentful stepdaughters

business themselves, and allowing his associates to form the Trading Company and Bank of Niccolò in Venice. Determined to avoid the long arm of Venetian policy, attracted to the military life not precisely for its sanction of killing but for the “sensation of living through danger” it offers, Nicholas returns from Bruges to the war over Naples in which he had, years before, lost Marian’s son Felix and contracted a marsh fever which revisits him in moments of stress. When he is kidnapped in mid-battle, he at first supposes it to be by order of his personal enemies, Simon and Katelina; but in fact it is Venice which wants him and his mercantile and military skills in another theater of war, Cyprus.

The brilliant and charismatic but erratic James de Lusignan and his Egyptian Mameluke allies have taken two-thirds of the sugar-rich island of Cyprus from his legitimate Lusignan sister, the clever and energetic Carlotta, and her allies, the Christian Knights of St. John and the Genoese, who hold the great commercial port of Famagusta. Sensing that, of the two Lusignan “scorpions,” James holds the winning edge, Nicholas agrees to enter his service. He intends to design the game this time, not be its pawn, but he doesn’t reckon with the enmity of Katelina, who comes to Rhodes to warn Carlotta against him, or the sudden presence of Simon’s Portuguese brother-in-law Tristão Vasquez and Vasquez’s naïve sixteen-year-old son Diniz, all three of whom do become pawns.

Nicholas is now the lover of Carlotta’s courtesan, the beautiful Primaflora, whose games he also thinks he can control, and he recognizes a crisis of countermanipulations brewing between Katelina and Primaflora. Only at the end of the novel, after Katelina’s love/hate for Nicholas has been manipulated to bring Tristão to his death and Diniz to captivity under James, after Nicholas and Katelina rediscover intimacy and establish the truth of their relationship, after a brilliant and deadly campaign waged by Nicholas for James has brought him to ultimate tragedy—the siege of Famagusta which he planned and executed has resulted without his knowledge, in the death of Katelina and the near-death of Diniz, trapped in the starving city—only at the end does Nicholas fully admit even to himself that much of this has been planned or sanctioned by Primaflora, intent on securing her own future.

In the end, too, the determinedly rational Nicholas gives vent to his rage. Punishment for the pain of the complex desires and denials in his private and public history cannot be visited upon the complex and only half-guilty figures of his family or his trading and political rivals and clients. But in this novel, for the first time, he finds a person he can gladly kill, the unspeakably cruel Mameluke Emir Tzani-bey al-Ablak, whom he fatally mutilates in single combat while James, unknown to him, has the Emir’s four-hundred-man army massacred in a preemptive strike carrying all the glory and damnation of Renaissance kingship.

Like Pagano Doria, like Nicholas himself, Primaflora is a “modern” type, a talented and alienated “self-made” person. Unlike the other two, Nicholas has the memory of family which to ground a wary, half-reluctant, but genuine adult existence in the community. At the same time, however, he avoids close relationships: he has established the Bank of Niccolò as a company, not a family. But, resisting and insisting, the members of the company form bonds of varying intimacy with Nicholas, especially the priest Godscalc and the physician Tobie, who alone at this point know the secret of Katelina’s baby and carry the dying woman’s written affirmation of Nicholas’ paternity.

Nicholas’ only true intimate, however, is a man of a different race entirely, the African who came to Bruges as a slave and was befriended by the servant Claes, who first

communicated the secret of the alum deposit, who traveled with him to Trebizond to run the trading household, and to Cyprus to organize and under Nicholas reinvent the sugar industry there. His African name is as yet unknown, his Portuguese name is Lopez, his company name Loppe. Now a major figure in the company, and the family, he listens at the end of the novel as both Nicholas and his new rival, the broker of the mysterious Vatachino company, look to the Gold Coast of Africa as the next place of questing and testing.

Judith W

Chapter 1

TO THOSE WHO remembered him, it was typical that Nicholas should sail into Venice just as the latest news reached the Rialto, causing the ducat to fall below fifty groats and drop against the écu. Instead of leading the welcome party, Gregorio sent Cristoffels to St Mark's Basin instead, with a group of senior officials who didn't know Nicholas. He hoped Cristoffels remembered what his employer looked like.

The word, of course, had spread to the Exchange that vander Poele's ship had passed the bar and was on its way to the anchorage. In the midst of the flurry – affirming deals, sending off couriers with drafts and remittances – Gregorio suffered snatches of good-humoured banter. For more than two years he had run the Bank of Niccolò in place of its founder, and his fellow lawyers and brokers liked to claim he lived in dread of the coming accounting. It might have been funnier if it hadn't, in its way, been correct.

He had posted a couple of runners between St Mark's and the Rialto. When the cry came from the Bridge, he was reasonably ready to leave. It meant only that the ship's boat from the *Adorno* had reached the Foscari bend, and he could still achieve the Bank building before it. The Grand Canal was a long, busy waterway lined with palaces; and the roundship's crew, long at sea, would scarcely speed with a heavy craft laden with luggage.

Nevertheless, Gregorio went immediately to the Bridge, throwing instructions to a scurrying junior. It was too hot for his doublet and gown, even considering the occasion; even considering what Margot thought about it. He let his servant, trotting, button him into his pourpoint and shed his clerk at the steps, although he turned to call after him: '*And remember purchase at usance!*' Then he fought to the rail at the top of the drawbridge and paused for a moment's sight of the Grand Canal stretching before him.

The sun, admitted tax-free between the palaces of two of his clients, struck the water and blinded him. He pulled down the brim of his hat until it met his unhandsome nose, and strained his middle-aged eyes, which were thirty-two like the rest of him, on the confusion of intermeshed oars belonging to passenger skiffs, heavy barges and lighters, vessels laden with fish and with vegetables passing up and down and across on their daily purposes. A two-poled gondola came towards him, gilded and tasselled and managed by liveried Negroes wearing the badge of the family Loredano. It slid under the Bridge, making way for a jolting boatful of overnight revellers in carnival mantles and masks. They passed, screaming into the dazzle.

Beyond them stood his Bank, a third of the way between the Bridge and the bend. Here was his Bank, his office, his warehouse, his home. The Casa di Niccolò, all now to reside in the hands of a man whose script on the outside of a letter-packet made him feel faint.

He should hurry. Clattering down the far side of the Bridge, Gregorio turned right and sped off quickly along his own bank, striding up and down bridges and passing between the rocking gondolas and noble façades of the richest side of the richest highway in Venice. Glancing from time to time at the canal, he saw some altercation had jammed it. He had seldom seen its traffic so thick or so sluggish. He slackened his pace. Nothing was going to row very fast at this rate.

Now he could see the jutting edge of his Bank, its red and white patterned wall washed

over with light from the side-canal and a crowd grouped on the Grand Canal frontage before it. His household and clerks, out to catch a first glimpse of their master.

Margot wouldn't be there, she would be watching upstairs on the balcony. Margot, whom he was not married and whom he would trust before anyone, had read the last report written by Nicholas before sailing to Venice from Cyprus. In these Nicholas had set down, for the eye of his lawyer alone, his private reasons for leaving the island. They had been brief and contained neither excuse nor apology. Nor had he indicated what he intended to do once he reached Venice. Gregorio, much disturbed, didn't know what to expect of this meeting.

He did intend, however, to arrive first at the Bank. It looked as if he would. The mooring posts before the double doors of the Ca' Niccolò were still empty; he had had his freight vessels moved round to the side. He had also sent a few extra men to the Basin. Robberies were not very likely, but Nicholas had achieved notorious success for himself and his Bank while in Cyprus. In business, Nicholas was unerring, and merciless, if not caught in time.

And now he was here. The great boat from the roundship was suddenly visible: an ugly, well-painted vessel, low in the water with coffers and men, and lying athwart the crowded canal as it waited to cross to its mooring. The rowers were the *Adorno's* own marines, dressed in caps and clean tunics. Packed among them were the Bank's envoys, and servants.

Distinguishable from them all were the two principal passengers, seated aft and robed for the elaborate charade of their landing. One he knew at once by his colour and size: *Lopez* by God! Lopez, the gifted African who managed what could be managed in Nicholas's aberrant life, including his sugar estates.

And the other, his equal in towering brawn, was Nicholas vander Poele, Flemish merchant, shading his eyes as he scanned the congestion. The sun flashed on a ring at his knuckle.

He had made some concessions to heat: his short coat was of silk, and his twisted headgear concealing all but some tufts of brown hair, was stitched from the thinnest of linen. His face below it was baked brown and smooth as a biscuit and his eyes, grossly large, gave his concentrated gaze an aspect of innocence which the curve of his lips contradicted. Gregorio, standing in shade, thought to call and then didn't. Lopez sat, looking about him and once Gregorio noticed, leaned to murmur to Nicholas, who glanced briefly upwards.

The oars idled, unable to progress. Watermen shouted. The cause of the blockage, abruptly revealed, proved to be a single craft ineptly managed upstream, its passage marked by the drumming of timber and a chorus of curses accompanied by outbursts of bibulous laughter. The boatload, it appeared, of shouting, carolling revellers, its sides furrowed and scraped, its oars scarred, its bow and blades gouging for it a battering passage. As it rampaged through the water, the sun glinted on a handful of fur and a mask.

It was the carnival boat he had noticed. The situation of the ducat in relation to the groat and the mark abandoned its place in Gregorio's consciousness.

The *Adorno's* boat, in midstream, waited with whatever patience men had, within sight of the end of a voyage. Nicholas looked about him, listening to Lopez, and stooping to grope for some possession or other beneath him. The festive boat blundered closer, and those endangered hastened, with shouts, to move further off. With professional competence, the *Adorno's* rowers dug in their oars and swung their great boat aside from its passage.

Now the party-goers were plain: the wide-brimmed black hats of the oarsmen, the painted chins and lurid masks of the twelve burly men they were carrying. The leader stood cloaked

in the prow, one foot on the gunwale, one flamboyant fist cocked on its knee. On his head was the mask of a goose and below the cloak his other hand, like those of his comrades, was hidden.

It could not have been by chance that, this time, the carnival craft suddenly found the application and skill to avoid every boat in its path. It was not by chance that, instead of stumbling from vessel to vessel, it adroitly slipped through each watery space until, conducted smoothly and well, it came shooting suddenly forward, the ramming prow aimed straight for the laden ship's boat from Cyprus.

Gregorio's shout was one of a chorus of warning. The mariners dug in their oars, changing angle to lessen the impact. The expected crash didn't come. Just before the two boats collided, the pursuing oarsmen feathered their blades. The masked figure bent down, and lifting something heavy and small, threw it hard. It fell within the ship's boat, clicked and was held. It was a grappling iron. As the two boats whipped together, the man in the goose mask threw himself from his own boat to the other, and his companions followed.

Gregorio saw the mariners half rise and stagger; saw Cristoffels and the rest use their fists; saw the flood of revellers pour down the big vessel, fending off blows, to where the coffers were piled. The boat rocked. At the farthest end, Lopez sprang to his feet. Nicholas gathered what he was holding and rose, his right arm drawing painfully back. In his grasp was a bow short and ornate and powerful, its arrow trained on the leader.

He said, 'Turn back your cloaks, and drop your weapons into the water.'

The man in the goose mask cried out. He screamed, 'Monseigneur, don't shoot! Wait! Have mercy! My lords, we beg for our lives!' With frantic hands he unfastened his cloak, his garment piteous. Hastily he cast off the garment and lifting the object he bore, extended it trembling to Nicholas. Then, with a whistle of devilish laughter, he tossed it aloft.

It hung, with the eyes of everyone on it: a carnival wand made of paper, with a grotesque gilded head at one end. Then it began to descend in a spiral of unravelling ribbon. Someone started to laugh. Squealing, cackling and booing, the men in motley joined in the hilarity and thrusting their hands from their cloaks, each produced an identical baton, brightly ribboned with fantastic knobs of goblins and dragons with which they set about slapping their victims. They carried no weapons at all.

Around the two boats, a chuckle arose. On the other side of the canal, people thronged forward to see what was happening, and faces appeared at grand windows. On the open gallery of the Palazzo Barzizza, directly opposite, there was a sudden, short movement.

Lopez said, 'Ser Niccolò.'

It was so brief and so quiet that Gregorio wouldn't have caught it except that all his attention was on them. The revellers continued to caper. Nicholas turned, the strung bow swinging through ninety degrees with him. The man in the goose mask had let down his bow points and was preparing a final, copious gesture.

The Negro stretched across Nicholas, and, seizing the man like a dribbling sack, lifted and set him down standing before them. The man, surprised, gave a howl. The floating audience now on its feet, grasped one another and laughed, even when the man howled again. Then the laughter started to die as those closest saw his falling arms swing at the elbows, and a blood cascade frothing and red from the slackening mouth under the mask. Driven hard through his chest was an arrow.

Lopez dropped to one knee, holding the body and pulling it free of Nicholas. The boarder stopped. In the moment's silence that followed the shock, Nicholas adjusted his aim, his gaze never leaving the highest, splendid tiered gallery of the merchant's house opposite. Then he released his fingers and shot.

Far across the canal someone screamed, the sound speaking from wall to wall of the palaces. The man who had been on the balcony opposite was there no longer, but his body jerking forwards, was hurtling into the canal. There it sank, the shards of a bow floating upwards.

Then the air was filled with cries, from men and women and seagulls.

On the boat, the revellers dumbly recoiled and turning, scrambled back to the craft they had come from. The grapple jerked free and, seizing their looms, the oarsmen threw the boat sideways and into reverse, setting course for the basin and the wider waters of the lagoon, and leaving their leader behind them.

The boats which half-heartedly started to follow fell back. A ring of craft formed about Nicholas and, across the canal, a group of watermen sought about to retrieve the dead bowman. As the *Adorno's* boat came to the bank, Gregorio saw the face of the unarmed reveller, bare of its mask. It was no one he knew. Nor, if they caught them, would the drunken boatload of boarders admit to anything, he supposed. They had carried no weapons. They had been decoys, that was all.

Something was bruising Gregorio's arm: Margot's fingers. 'I saw it,' she said. 'The man on the gallery was aiming at Nicholas.'

'I think so,' he said. 'Lopez had noticed him. Nicholas and he were both on guard; they expected it. But for that, no one would have known where, in the confusion, the arrow had come from.'

'Expected it?' Margot said. She was pale, from shock and from running. 'Expected an attack on his life? On his homecoming?'

Gregorio didn't answer. She had read that letter from Cyprus, as he had. They should have realised what it meant. He watched the big boat coming near and said, 'Lopez. He will stay here. It must be made perfectly clear to the household -'

'It will be,' Margot said.

The boat berthed. Nicholas stepped ashore and smiled at them all. He said, 'Welcome home. I thought I should perhaps say it for you. Gentlemen, I do beg your pardon. If you give me leave to settle affairs with the Magistrate - Goro, will you come with me? - then I shall be delighted to come back at leisure and meet you. Don't, on any account, delay your dinner.'

The water was still full of boats, and people exclaiming. Across the canal, men and vessels were clustered beneath the Palazzo Barzizza. A dead man lay in the boat at his feet. Gregorio could see the official craft approaching between them. He said, 'Your clothes ...'

'Blood, I know,' Nicholas said. 'I paid a lot for this coat. I wanted to make an impression.'

A cursory dent appeared in one cheek and then vanished. It was meant perhaps to signify distress, masked by a kind of grim humour. Without an accompanying glance, it looked merely indifferent.

Under the coat, his doublet turned out to be clean. He threw the stained garment to his servant and turned, adjusting his expression, to deal with the Magistrate. Gregorio said, 'D'

you know who it was?’

‘Oh, I should think so,’ Nicholas said. ‘But I shan’t say if you don’t.’

Later, returning with Nicholas to the Bank, Gregorio thought to count his blessings, which amounted after consideration to one. There would be no prosecution.

Nicholas, who could always act, had acted with awful aplomb. Who wished for his death? He feared – the enemies of the Venetian Republic. There were those who, whatever the oaths, hesitated to join the Serenissima in her crusade against the infidel Turk. He laid no personal blame on the Duke of Burgundy or on France, although today’s news must shake the credit of every bank, and not only his own. Neither would he point to the city of Genoa which might resent a soldier and merchant whose deeds served the nobler Republic. Indeed he saw here no Christian crime. The name of Niccolò vander Poele was well known to be cursed by the Infidel.

Gregorio, at this point, had swallowed. The Magistrate, on the other hand, had exclaimed ‘He used a Mameluke bow, the assassin!’

‘Even here!’ Nicholas said. He said it after a moment.

‘... But of course he is unknown. He entered the Palazzo unseen. Nevertheless, you are right. Whatever his colour, the Egyptians have paid him. Didn’t your army in Cyprus annihilate the entire Mameluke force in that island?’

‘They died, certainly,’ Nicholas said.

‘And their leader, in single combat with yourself?’

‘I did fight the Mameluke emir, it is true. I have his rather fine bow.’

‘And you killed him?’ The Magistrate was entranced.

‘The King killed him. I cut off his arm. He had no further need of his bow as a consequence,’ said Nicholas helpfully.

At this point, the Magistrate got up and insisted on shaking his hand. So did his secretary and one or two clerks. Something kindly was said about permits for weapons, and Nicholas was full of contrition. He had hesitated to apply. The Signory might consider he overvalued his services, to think himself endangered because of them. The Magistrate shook both hands, reassuring him.

Gregorio, who was feeling queasy, sat mute. He hardly opened his mouth for the rest of the interview. He might have found himself pointing out that nothing Nicholas had ever done had been intended for the profit of Venice. Venice had simply been lucky.

Returning in the official boat, Nicholas broke without hesitation into Flemish. ‘You’re a right? I can see Margot is. And the soul of discretion as usual. I thought you were about to explode.’

‘Two deaths were enough,’ Gregorio said. ‘So what was really behind it? Not that farrago about the Genoese or the Burgundians or the French? Anyway, what do you know about the news from Burgundy?’

Escorting Nicholas were two armed men with the Lion of St Mark on their breastplates. The Magistrate had decided that Nicholas ought to be protected. He said, ‘Come on, the dockyard always knows more than the Loggia. I heard as soon as I landed that the Duke had sent to beg off the papal crusade, and so the groat was bound to improve. Trading must have been at its wildest: I’m sorry.’

‘It rose three on the ducat,’ Gregorio said. ‘I sent a courier to your newest office in Bruges. It’s been quite inconvenient, your arrival. So who paid your assassin? Not the Sultan of Cairo for God’s sake?’

‘Well, not for God’s sake,’ Nicholas said. ‘I might be on his list, but Mamelukes prefer quieter quieti; it would be a stab or some poison. I rather favour a madman from Bruges although I hear Simon isn’t in Venice. Still, one of them could always have bribed some of our loyal retainers. And of course, there are rival brokers. Has anyone tried to kill you of late?’

‘I suffer from overwork and neglect,’ Gregorio said, ‘but apart from that, no. Our most vicious rival is presently confining itself to killing the business, or trying to. You had a taste of the Vatachino in Cyprus. Would they murder?’

‘Their man in Cyprus wouldn’t,’ Nicholas said. ‘Or not yet. They don’t just want to get rid of us; they want to run rings round us beforehand. I’m not asking you what I want to do to you.’

‘I noticed,’ Gregorio said. ‘I propose to make you wait until we are private. My – your staff are good men. They saw you. What are you going to tell them?’

‘What do you think? Goro, they’ve been aching to have your life threatened. They long to be menaced. They want nothing more than to be the most hated Bank in Western Europe. I shall tell them that such is their power, the Signory’s own men have been sent to protect them. To make their wills, and pray, and prepare to become a legend in their own lifetimes. I think we have arrived.’

They had. Gregorio disembarked, and slipped the boatmen some coins, and turned to check something about the Signory’s bodyguard, such as send them down to the kitchens. He realized he was happy, and ravenous. He turned and found Nicholas on the wharf, gazing up at the face of his Bank, with its handsome balcony and tall Gothic windows.

It was the briefest of surveys, but it called to mind that Nicholas had barely seen the mansion before, and never in occupation. He had created the business and left. Whatever his homecoming had spoiled, it hadn’t been the return to a home. He had none that Gregorio knew of, unless you counted an estate office in Cyprus. This building belonged to the Signory. And the house he had called home in Bruges had belonged to his wife, who was dead. It meant, as it turned out, that he could make himself at home instantly, anywhere.

It took him an hour to assimilate the Bank, from the entrance hall where Margot and Cristoffels received him to the third storey, where all the seniors but himself had their lodgings. Along with the geography of the Bank, he absorbed the people, from the clerks in the mezzanine counting-house to the men in the storerooms and warehouses, the boatmen on the wharves; the household servants indoors and out in the courtyard. He greeted many by name, and most with some obvious grasp of their duties.

It was not the magic it seemed: by every packet from Cyprus he had commanded them in detail. The result, as he had foreseen, was to transform him at once from a symbol into a person. They were not going to like or respect him immediately, but the seeds had been sown; the easy manner barely touched with authority was perfectly judged. And, as he had divined, the events of the morning had done nothing to diminish his stature. He made light of his share, but hinted at the burdens borne by great institutions, whose success could shape kingdoms. They liked that.

It was the same in the counting-house after dinner when, alone with Cristoffels and Lope

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