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Opening Extract from...

The Fool's Girl

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I

'What country, friends, is this?'

London, 22nd April 1601

VIOLETTA

Have you seen a city under sack? Have you seen what happens there? Have you seen the blood, heard the screaming, smelt the smoke on the wind?

I stood on the battlements and watched them coming. Venetians and Uskok pirates, the scum of the sea, combined together to attack our fair city. I saw the red flash of the guns, the white smoke, felt walls shudder. I saw ships rammed; blown to splinters. I saw tall galleys spew fire that spread over the decks in a blazing carpet, turning men into torches and sails into ragged flags of flame. The burning ships ran on, setting fire to others until our fleet was nothing but smoking hulks set to spin in the powerful current like blackened walnut shells.

Still they came on. Platforms built on towers above the prows of the leading galleys brought the invaders level with us on the battlements. We kept up a hail of stones and arrows but the big ships came in a long line, each platform linked with its neighbour. You could run from one end of the fleet to the other. Those Venetians are clever. The ships rammed against the walls, grounding themselves on the rocks, bringing

their forces eye to eye with ours. Men leaped off the platforms and on to the battlements, letting rope ladders down to be caught by those below. Soon men were crawling up the walls in black swarms.

From the landward side, balls of fire rained down on the city, destroying houses and churches. The roofs were obscured by rolling smoke; flames shot upwards and tiles fell in a dreadful scurrying clatter, muffling the screams of those caught inside to burn alive.

The city's walls were breached. The gates lay open. Enemy forces poured in, driving the people up the Stradun. The wide central thoroughfare was already jammed with all those trying to escape the ring of trampling booted feet, the swing and slash of the sword blade. The crowds were forced into the main piazza, caught like fish pursed up in a net. They would find no sanctuary in the cathedral. The great west door lay in splinters. Vestments were strewn about, defiled and discarded. Pages of sacred texts blew around and stuck in the crooked streams of blood that were trickling down the steps to pool on the white marble pavement. Once the piazza was full, the killing began. The separate wails of grief, sobbing and pleading became one constant scream.

FESTE

I took her. I dragged her from the battlements. She wanted to stay, to fight to the end, but her father the Duke ordered her away. He knew that there would be no mercy. He did not want to see his daughter raped in front of him until they put out his eyes. He sent his page, young Guido, with us, not wanting to see the same thing happen to him.

We went down into the cellars. From there I hoped to take one of the tunnels that led out to the ramparts, but from the direction of the walls came the rumble of rolling barrels. The vermin were already down there. Sappers, busy with gunpowder, getting ready to blast their way up into the tower.

I led them up into air thick with the smell of burning flesh and ash falling like snow. The fight had moved on, the streets were deserted, but they were not empty, if you get my meaning, and there was no way for me to shield her. She's seen sights that no girl of her age should ever have to see. There's a madness takes men over. No one had been spared. Men cut down where they stood, women raped and left for dead, children and babies chopped and butchered. Only the animals were still roaming about, and the less said about that . . .

We couldn't get out of the city. We were trapped like rats in a granary. Ever seen terriers sent in to clear them? They kill until they are staggering, then they kill some more.

In the east, a woman's high keening stopped abruptly. In the west, the sky glowed with more than the sunset. The Duke's palace on fire. There were still shouts and screams, but they were becoming scattered and sounded distant. There was a lull while the Venetians and pirates got busy looting or broke open barrels in the inns and taverns, but the looting would finish when there was nothing left to steal, and then they would be out on the street again, this time drunk, and the slaughter would go on until there was nothing left to kill.

We went through the narrow twists of the streets

and up crooked flights of steps slippery with blood. We went to find Marijita, but she was dead with all her birds about her. She had been weaving her own shroud.

VIOLETTA
How did this come about? To understand that, I have to take you back to the very beginning . . .