

The Shadowed Vale

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The setting sun was reddening with its last fiery glow the walls of the great castle at Blois where it stood on a rising slope above the skirts of the town. It tipped the carved and traceried windows of the roof and gleamed vermilion on hilts of swords and pour-points and slashed trunk-hose as officers and men-at-arms bustled to and fro in the yard.

But though their faces were long and they bustled nervously, often they stopped in excited knots to whisper and cast curious glances at the windows of the royal suite. For the Dowager Queen lay dying in a heavy-curtained room and in the next, King Henri de Valois gnawed at his nails and waited. And everyone waited the slowness of fate and Henri de Guise went to console his King.

"Henri's jealous of Henri . . . Like mother, like son," they said. "When will she die . . . It's time to bury that carion . . . Old Italian bitch . . . Not since the days of old Louis has there been such a reign . . . The devil will have her any minute . . . He'll be out of a home, the devil . . . Murderer, tyrant, bourgeois, daughter of Merchants . . . Catherine de' Medici-Jezebel!" they whispered. She was dying.

But in the room above them an old, tired woman dismissed her son and lay in the great soft bed and watched the play of fire-light in the shrouded room. It was stiff and musty and thick with the odour of death. She was weary and heavy with sorrow and with life, and she knew she would die and was glad. The gilding in the hollows of the carved furniture and in the leather-tooled wall-panels sparkled here and there like eyes watching her in the dark, but they weren't unfriendly eyes.

For a long time she lay still, listening to the gentle crackle of the fire and the silken rasp of the needle of the woman who sat beside her, sewing. Then, "Draw the curtain," she whispered.

The woman went softly to the window and drew back the curtains, disclosing the last blue glow of the twilight over the garden and making her face a pale and soulless blur. The Queen turned her head painfully on the pillow to look with long vision out the window. Pictures turned slowly and formlessly in her, pictures of no definite shape but felt there, and of substance . . .

The trees are black against the sky tonight. The trees are black shadows on the sky. So many times I've seen them thus, black winterlace and solid leafy form. Shadows on the sky . . .

It's strange that I should lie here ill, I who am never ill, here in this room at Blois . . .

At Murate, long ago — so strangely long ago—when I was Florence' hostage, the close and friendly line of trees was comfort, safety in the walls; safety from the hate of men, the hate of Florence' men . . . And they were right to hate so, the name of Medici, with Pope Clement's sneering traitors digging in about their walls . . .

The trees looked so, I think me, dark silhouettes against the Tuscan Hills and the coldly moonlit sky, that strange and awful night I waited for the senators to seize me with the dawn. And all that night the sound, the cries of bloody, battle-desperate men came, distant, through the trees; for Florence' death was nigh.

I sat upon the cold stone floor with my cheek against the sill, and with a dumb

and stone-like fear, I watched the friendly trees . . . I think they told me what to do, to cut my hair and don the robe, to leave as a ravished nun. I thought they'd dare not seize me. But they were bold and took me still — though not to my death as I'd feared.

But my happiness was past. The days of quiet treading nuns, their robes a soft rustle of self-sacrifice, their beads a click of blessing. The days of books by the fire-side, while the rare and snow-filled winds whistled about the room, and the firelight cast us huge pictures on the tapestry lining the walls. And the heat of the fire was a rose-warm caress on my skin. The days of bare feet on the dew-damp grass, and lullaby songs in the night . . . They were as lost as the tresses I cut and left on the cold stone floor.

So many windows I've looked through and seen the shadowed trees, and their green whisper has comforted me with its gentle impersonality. And I choked with terror the night, in a purple-sailed ship, we left the land and the tree-lined shore behind, to sail for the shores of France. The night we sailed to Henri . . . And they were friendly things my frightened wedding night, as white-gowned I lay and shaking, with a strange and sullen man.

But I learned to love that man. And I lived for him — and he for my lady Diane! . . .

Men call me beast; icy and merciless monster. They say I killed my sons, and those hundreds of souls that cursed Bartholomew's Eve. But don't they remember I bore those sons, and I loved those sons and the man who gave them me? I loved Henri with a passion that burned and choked me, hating Diane. But I had my sons, my sweet small sons, my pink soft sons, and my dark eyed daughters as well. And I loved them too. The bite of their hungry sucking gums flamed with pain

to my love. And if I were harsh and if I were cold, 'twas simply that King's sons must be strong . . .

And Henri died with a thrust to his brain, and I died too that night, his death-blow through my heart . . .

And yet at times I wish that I had never borne those babes, those sons of great destiny, for they were weak and needed my hand to guide them on their way. And I was young and proud, glad of the active chance. But ruling's not for women. They've not the strength to support defeat, nor to live in the hate of men. 'Tis wearisome, heartrending work. Nay, I'm but tired. I lie, for I loved it. Diplomacy's Medici's life . . .

'Tis strange that I who ever wanted peace, should live all my life in war . . .

They say I've been traitor and fool and double-minded. But I did what had to be done. I could take no side in religious war lest I tear the country to shreds . . .

My poor Francois, so handsome and pale; my poor foolish pigeon who died so young . . . I remember the vision I had at Chaumont when the Kings turned about in the glass. So often they turned, so long would they rule, said the seer in a whispered tone. Once went my Francois, and one year he lived — but perhaps it was best for France. They say that I killed him, refused him a doctor. But they lie. Ah, God, how they lie! For there was naught that could save my son . . .

Poor, poor little Francois, always so frail. He loved the little things I loved and cried for the trees when he died. And whispered, *Ma mere*, when he died. But as I saw his wasted face, so small and young on the silk, I was empty inside like a dry-wrung cloth, and I had no tears to shed. If you refuse too long to be humanly weak you set a key to your soul . . .

The trees are constant, gentle things. Men may laugh and shed tears and die, but

they, in renewal and plan, live through the chase of springs. They soothed me then in softened tongues, and drank my difficult tears with the moss, and helped me accept my fate Peace, we'll have now, I thought at last, and sat on the grass and planned . . . And I banished the Guises from the back of the throne. But like fate, they ever return, and the peace that I've built is destroyed . . .

Oh, why should religion bring political war? It's a matter of conscience, not state. I tried to be fair. I allowed the Huguenots worship and made them an Edict for faith. But they wanted more, the Catholics less, and both named me Jezebel . . . How right was the old King to warn, *Gardez-vous des Guise!* It was they, not I, who lit the fire that burned Bartholomew's Eve. . .

They'd gathered in friendship, with laughter and reconciled smiles. The factions were joined with Margaret and Henri, with Margaret as Queen of Navarre. Ah, God, how unhappy each made the other. But such is Royalty's fate . . . Then, Guise in his hatred, shot at Coligny, and the huguenots plotted revenge. 'Twould have been they or us. One must be first, and they'd plotted mass death before. But we meant but a few, and Paris went mad and lapped at the blood in the streets. But it was Guise who arranged it. He rang the bell and shouted the mob to the kill and the black sky went orange with fire . . . And I watched the shadowed line of trees and I heard the bestial cries and I wept there in my silent room with horror in my heart.

Oh why did they say that I'd done it when I'd struggled so hard for a peace and I had the thing under my hand? Perhaps they didn't see me weep and show craven

remorse for the deed. But I'm Catherine de' Medici, Queen of France, and I must cover my heart . . .

So three more wars were fought, and my second son lay dead . . .

Henri, dear silly Henri, always so brave and so gay. I fear I always loved him best and spoiled him, encouraged his whims. He was so clever and charming, I shut my eyes and didn't see the cruelty and smallness beneath.

I've laboured so hard for Henri. For Henri and for France and for peace. I've traveled through France, I've ridden a horse, my great bulk a trial for his back, though my flesh was torn with pain. I've pled with our enemies, reasoned our leaders and stayed blood again and again. Sometimes in fatigue I've despaired — and I've looked at the trees and gained strength. The trees of Dauphine, of Provence and Languedoc. They're different in shape, but they're friendly and green, and they witness God's hand in kindness.

Now Henri, my loved one, my dear, with one foolish blow of a jealous, jeweled knife, has ruined again what I've built. For Henri de Guise lies whitely dead beneath a velvet shroud next to my room this night. He came to me, my son, and said, "Now I alone am King." But he's wrong, my fool, for the League is strong and hot with hate, and his years in my vision nigh gone . . .

Oh, the trees through my window, are distant and dark, and my weariness weighs on my chest . . .

The trees are black against the sky tonight. The trees are black shadows on the sky. So many times I've seen them thus, but soon shall see no more. Black winter lace and solid leafy form. Shadows on the sky . . .