

MATHYE:

The Life and Times of Mathye Caboto and Her Husband Giovanni - A Novel

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INTRODUCTION

The letter was the only means of written communication in the fifteenth century. Heads of States had their emissaries; merchants and those of the population who could read, used one of the many private postal services. Seals were used, but the art of breaking them was a sub-trade of the letter carrying business.

A traveller might carry a private letter, which generally went unsealed, and often passed from hand to hand before it reached the person for whom it was destined. It was the expectation of the times that a letter would be shared, not only with the correspondent but with family, relatives, and friends. Letters were written with that knowledge in mind.

A night of entertainment in a private home often consisted of reading or re-reading a lengthy correspondence carried on with a relative, friend, or on a rare occasion - an enemy.

The last decade of the fifteenth century, Venice was the Queen city of Europe. For two hundred years her nobles ran the government, and controlled the trade from the East on which the city flourished. Their galleys brought the wealth up the Grand Canal and transhipped it to all the countries of Europe. They schooled their sons in the ways of the sea, and trade remained in the grip of their capable hands.

Into one of those noble families was born the woman Mathye, who married, though against the will of her kinsman, the greatest seaman of them all - Giovanni Caboto. Caboto was a man who dared greatly, and the intent of his daring was aimed at the heart of Venice.

This is their story.

April 13, 1492

My darling husband,

Amerigo Vespucci's little servant came swimming up to our door yesterday morning with a note in his teeth. He was followed this afternoon by the man himself.

Amerigo intends to leave his position with the Medici business at Seville and begin the life of a navigator.

I was unkind enough to ask what experience he had which would allow him to take up such an adventure so late in life. He hinted at an education in cosmography, and offered a pilgrimage to Jerusalem when he

was a young man, and his recent voyages from Florence to Seville.

Lewis, Sebastian, and Sancio were quietly looking at charts at a side-table. Sebastian turned his incredulous eyes on Amerigo and suggested, innocently, that maybe Messer Amerigo would have to go back to school.

Not at all abashed that a child hit so close to the mark; Amerigo agreed, and said he was starting in this very house, and would I lend him my father's copy of *Marco Polo*. I do know how you feel about lending a manuscript that might give an edge, but poor old Amerigo has so much to learn, I thought it a sin against knowledge not to let him have it.

He is going back to Florence in a week and will return it before he leaves. I don't think you need worry about a rival in Amerigo.

Have you convinced King Ferdinand he needs harbour installations at Valencia?

What of your chance of a visit home? Our sons have grown inches since you last saw them.

May Our Lord and the Blessed Mother have you in their holy care.

Your own true wife.

Mathye.

Written at Venice, Monday in Holy Week, under seal.

DIARII

April 14, 1492

Amerigo bragging of the leisurely meal he shared with my husband; cheering his plans for exploration. I wanted to tell him to stay out of my husband's life. (I bit my tongue). I don't want Giovanni persuaded in that direction any further than his own determination will take him.

Eventually encouraged him to the door.

Went back to my desk. Re-worked the music for Psalm 51. Have sent it off to those discerning nuns at Santa Maria della Vergini.

Tomorrow - Spy Wednesday - five straight days of choir. We are ready for it.

Venice, Feast of Saint Justin.

DIARII

April 16, 1492

Week after week I train my choir, I train my assistant, I train the deacon. Then something happens for which there is no accounting.

Cannon Leonardo asked me to prepare music for the rite of Washing of the Feet for the Holy Thursday Service.

I met with Anna and Deacon Garofoli. We worked out a simple program of music.

I wrote an Antiphon based on Saint John's gospel:

Jesus rose from His supper
Girded himself with the towel
Washed the feet of his disciples
Saying: Do you know what I have done for you

I set it to plain chant.

We selected Chapter 13 and 14 of The Passion of Our Lord for the deacon to read - three verses at a time.

The Service began, the choir sang the Antiphon, followed by the Deacon reading the verses from the Passion; my hands, as I directed the choir in humming the four-part harmony underneath his reading, seemed to take on a life of their own: became the music, my mind became liquid with music. I wasn't sure I was in the body. The choir felt it too; their faces gleamed; their voices rose and fell in perfect harmony. The deacon, who has an indifferent voice, found one of ringing clarity, and read each three verses as if he were hearing the Passion for the first time.

We continued singing, humming and reading until the Canon had washed the feet of the twelve old men who were sitting on the bench in the sanctuary.

The feeling of liquidity stayed with me throughout Mass. Only when we went in procession, the priest carrying the Eucharist to the Alter of Repose, did the feeling fade.

After Mass, I asked Anna what happened back there. She said she didn't know, but could we do it again at the next Mass.

Venice, Holy Thursday evening.

DIARII

April 30, 1492

Gentile Bellini told me today he needs two more months to finish our portraits. He's been working on

them six. I'm tired of his plodding up the stairs every day.

I want them finished before Giovanni returns. He assures me - yes.

Thanks be to God.

Venice, Feast of Saint Catherine of Siena

VALENCIA

May 25, 1492

My darling wife,

The Feast of Saint Gregory, Amerigo passed through Valencia on his way to Cadiz. We spent the morning together. He gave me your letter and I have since received the one you sent under seal.

He is not, my dear Mathye, as unprepared for exploring as it appears at first glance: he was educated by his uncle, Friar Giorgio Antonio at the Dominican Monastery at Florence, and by his uncle's friend the learned Doctor Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli who, though a medical doctor, had a reputation, of being a fine cosmographer.

Amerigo is a collector of charts and has many of the best. He knows as much about cosmography and geography as anyone who studied with me at Sagres. I am always eager for his company.

He, of course, has no deep sea experience, and that's a great disadvantage. I suggested, as he was starting late, he should consider attaching himself to me. He didn't respond to my offer which surprised me. I am beginning to suspect he has plans he isn't interested in sharing.

But I don't worry about Amerigo.

And now to King Ferdinand: I have had a second meeting with him. I brought with me, Gaspar Rull, who is a merchant of vast means and is interested in supporting harbour installations at Valencia as he can see how it will redound to his benefit. The King showed considerable interest in what I proposed and was not unimpressed with Rull's wealth. He asked practical questions about my drawings and charts. He is sending my documents to the Governor-General of this place for his advice, and will meet with me again before the Feast of Pentecost.

If the harbour installations go ahead, this city will be able to capture more of the Mediterranean trade, and money will begin to pour into the King's pockets. I will use my success with these installations to get from this King a charter to explore the oceans to the west. That, of course, will force me to stay here at least another year. The prospect of a visit home at this time seems bleak. But if there is opportunity you can be sure I will take it.

May the Holy Trinity bless you and our sons; this is the prayer of your husband who loves you better than life.

Giovanni.

Written at Valencia, Monday of Rogation Day.

DIARII

June 23, 1492

Seven months since I've seen my husband. How can he stand it! How can I stand it!

Venice, Feast of Saint John the Baptist.

DIARII

June 21, 1492

Gentile has finally packed up his brushes and paints and is out of the house. I thought we had him for the duration. He has done a splendid piece of work on Lewis and Sebastian, but Sancio's portrait shows a boy with a certain weakness of character. I now haunt my young son's face to discover what is veiled there.

Gentile has made me look younger than I am. Does he not think I look in the mirror?

Venice, Second Sunday after Pentecost.

June 28, 1492

My darling husband,

You won't be home for another year! No! No!.

To cloud the disappointment, Isabetta and I went to Murano. I paid a queen's ransom for those two vases I admired the last time you and I were there. I've put them in my music room; they give me pleasure and inspiration each time I raise my head. I spent your money, not mine, so don't put that fierce look on your face.

You'll miss your birthday party. You'll miss mine. I'll be thirty-three, a momentous birthday. A loving couple should be together on their birthdays.

I didn't tell our sons you will be away another year, since you might manage to surprise us.

When next you see Lewis you are in for a treat - he is taller, has put on weight.

To catch this phase of his maturity, which is lovely beyond words, I called in Gentile Bellini and had him paint his portrait. I planned to keep them - yes, there are more - as a surprise, but it will be such old news by the time you do get home, I will forget to be enthusiastic.

Lewis wasn't excited about sitting for long hours, but the painter allowed him to read, and our son put up with it.

In the portrait, he is looking straight at the viewer. His neck, which used to be so thin, is now solid and holds his head erect on a very straight back. Gentile has painted the canon lawyer that Lewis says he will become. I was so pleased with the portrait, I asked him to paint the rest of the family. This was a little more difficult; Sebastian complained that his face has too many blemishes; it hasn't.

The painter has caught the smile that plays around Sebastian's mouth, the Byzantine eyes that are amused rather than grave, his yellow Caboto hair that flies from underneath his cap. This Sebastian has all the answers and all the fun.

I was surprised at Sancio's portrait; he looks older than he is; when I pointed this out, Gentile said he would grow into it. Where he painted the other boys in their school clothes, Sancio is wearing a shirt with a frill at the neck; he is wearing a chain and signet ring. His top lip has a very light moustache, not yet visible on our son; next year it will be. Gentile has caught the delicateness of his still frail body.

As for my portrait, it is three-quarter length, I am wearing the green brocade dress, the one with the wine oversleeves; the one I complained was cut too low. I have on the chain you brought from Constantinople and am wearing the emerald earrings.

At the last minute, I wrapped a gold braid of artificial hair around my head; Gentile liked it and I wore it at each sitting. He has made something attractive of it. I had to sit, or rather stand, for ten hours altogether, and at the end I was getting bored. Close to the portrait you see, just around the outer corners of my eyes, he has captured that flick of boredom.

Although Gentile is now working on the albergo of the recently rebuilt Scuola di San Marco, he has agreed to paint you to complete the set.

When you see what he has created I know you will fall in with my wishes. Now that the paintings are hung, and a number of our relatives and friends have seen and admired them, even our sons approve.

You are missing all the fun.

I am off to meet the cousins.

May the great Archangel Gabriel go before you, even when you stay away longer than you should.
Mathye.

Written at Venice, third Sunday after Pentecost.

DIARII

June 30, 1492

Money from the Flanders trade is raining into the Fraterna. Have agreed to put aside 300 ducats for

repairs to the six properties at San Jacomo de Lorio. Will order a galley for the Constantinople trade. Piero is sure the Senate will approve. Andrea will take charge of it. We have raised our monthly stipends by ten ducats each.

I don't want to know that Piero spent five grotes for a tankard of sack while the galley was unloading at Southhampton; he insists on bring those records home to the amanuenses and demands the same minute accounting from Andre and me. What is it about money that Venetians must put on paper every picolli spent. This constant adding up of sums!!.

Giovanni religiously presents me with two hundred ducats a year and wants an exact accounting of it.

Every man on both sides of the family spends more time talking about money then he spends in his bed. It's sinful.

Lewis, thank God, shows no sign of this Venetian fever. But then none of my sons will inherit - my money being entailed on my male cousins. If I could leave what I have to our sons, maybe my husband would not feel compelled to follow this unbridled search for wealth.

Venice, Tuesday, Commemoration of Saint Paul, the Apostle.

DIARII

September 30, 1492

For a turn around the Piazza with Isabetta. There were more foreigners than usual; noticeably more Muslim women, veiled, dignified, moving silently in their sixes and sevens. Only Venice, of all the Christian countries, is clever enough to trade with the Turk, rather than fight him.

A travelling band of musicians was sawing away near the south door of San Marco's.

Along the west facade fools were getting on with their tom-foolery: turning somersaults, standing on each other's shoulders, demanding money from the crowd.

Near the Doge's Palace loud and urgent music. We walked that way. Stopped, moved in to get a better look, and who should be in a cockfighting stance with Gabriel Soranzo? Sebastian! Lute to his shoulder, yellow hair bouncing, he was challenging Gabriel note for note. Loud, funny, cock of the walk, Sebastian. We stayed to the end. On the last note he swung his lute over his head, let out a loud whoop, turned, winked at a girl who was holding his cap, noticed me in the crowd, jumped through and kissed my cheek.

Mother I'm having a lovely time.

Of course you are, my son.

He was off again challenging another young man. Sebastian is only twelve. I didn't know he came to the Piazza in the evenings.

What is a mother to do.

But what is a mother to do.

Venice, Wednesday of the September Ember Week.

November 29, 1492

My darling wife,

That man Columbus I wrote you about, who went in search of riches to westward, has returned with evidence he has reached new land. He passed through Valencia yesterday, a triumphant navigator, dressed in parti-coloured silks, a parrot on his shoulder, followed by two men from that land, and attended by servants and mariners.

He is on his way to present himself to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, who are now at Barcelona.

Before he left Valencia, I had an opportunity to speak with him. He has found land, that is sure; I'm convinced he has not found India as he claims. The men he brought back from that place were naked, except for loin cloths, their bodies were burnished a red hue; they had none of the bearing or arrogance I saw in the caravan leaders at Mecca.

He may convince Queen Isabella of Castile. I think he knows he hasn't convinced me. After I left him, I thought I must have been the last person he wanted to meet on this great day of his supposed triumph.

The harbour installations for Valencia, on which I have spent two years of my life, and the drawings and financial details which I presented on two occasions to King Ferdinand, in which he showed considerable interest, have been laid aside.

I must leave this place.

I have decided to go to England.

Bravest of wives, you must not grieve that I am going back to that north land. I will be as near you, in my heart, when I am in that country, as when we watch the firelight flicker on the ceiling-tiles of our bedroom. Be with me now.

Columbus told me that during the period when he was waiting for Queen Isabella to decide whether she would back his voyage - so that he would not waste time - he sent his brother to present his proposal to the King of England.

On the way, his brother was seized by pirates. Christopher had already left on his adventure by the time he returned. But, this brother of his did meet with the English King, did explain the voyage Christopher wanted to make, and did show him charts, and the King was interested.

If I go to the English King, now, while the news of Columbus's discoveries are still fresh, I may get the support I need to do the one thing I have spent my life preparing for.

Columbus's voyage will help me: he has gone across the ocean. He has found land. He has found people. He has come back. What he has not found is a short route to the fabulous spice countries of the East, nor has he found the East. I am sure of it.

You see how the time is ripe: Henry of England will have some familiarity with the concept of sailing west to reach the east. I must get to that country before anyone else.

I need your help.

The charts I have been using here have become worn. I need a clean mappamundi.

I am sure you will understand how crucial this is.

Should you agree to make a start on this work, please buy new leather. Use the cartoon I made for the chart I took to Valencia. You might want to study again the Bianco and Este maps before you start.

Would you again read Carpini's *Relations of the Mongols or Tartars* which you will find wrapped in a silk cloth and stored on the bottom shelf of the cupboard in the map room.

You can leave out the many references to Africa as it has no purpose for this map, but please add as many place-names that speak of the land of the Great Khan.

You will find with the Carpini document a list I made setting out some of the places and people those monks visited. You can see how important this information is, since I want to convince the English King that where Caprini and his companion went, by going overland, I will go by sailing westward.

The sphere I brought with me is still in good shape; I will bring it to England.

I do realize the hours I am asking you to work at this season of the Church year. I only hope, for my sake, if not for the Good God's, that you have not undertaken new music for the Nativity.

Would you think about coming to me in England when I am ready to make the presentation to the King; it is a pretty land in the Spring and Summer.

Tell Sancio that the bridge he has drawn is first rate but he needs more rock ballast between the stanchions.

Giovanni

Written outside Valencia, First Sunday of Advent, under seal.

DIARII

December 10, 1492

My comfort was knowing in what country my husband lay his head. Now this Columbus has found land

on the other side of the earth, Giovanni will not rest; he will go there; should he find the wealth of the East over that western ocean, I see clearly what will become of us.

How can I live without Venice?

In three years Sebastian will be fifteen. I will not be able to stop him!

England? England is on the outer rim of civilization, nearer Ultima Thule than Venice. I will not live in a sea of ice. I will not drag our sons all over God's earth. I will not.

Someone has removed the walls from my home.

No? Then they have blown out my lamps.

Venice, Feast of the Holy Innocents, third hour of the night.

December 2, 1492

My darling wife,

I am giving you information I shuddered to give in my last letter, since I was not satisfied I was sending it by secure hands. I am sending this by my brother, under seal, and have not shared the burden of it with him.

It is more than my life is worth to whisper what I have discovered, given the race between Portugal and Spain for a sea route to the wealth of the East.

In case you have not yet received my last letter, I told you I saw Columbus make his triumphant march through Valencia. But what I did not tell you is that this man Columbus, this so called discoverer of the short route to the East, is not an Italian from Genoa, as he has let it be known in this country, but a PORTUGUESE from BEJA and a PORTUGUESE of the BLOOD ROYAL.

When I studied at Sagres, there were also there two legitimate sons of Prince Fernando: Dom Joao and Dom Diogo. Also studying there was his natural son, named Salvador Zarco, this Zarco is the man who now calls himself Christopher Columbus.

To see Dom Joao, Dom Diogo and Salvador Zarco together, as young men, there was no doubt they shared the same parent: they had the same light colouring, the large nose, the chiselled lips, the freckles. I am sure of what I say.

I spent two years in the company of this man. He has not changed so much since that time. He is a prince, with the education and bearing of a prince, and a Portuguese prince at that. From Mina, in Guinea, to Iceland in the north, there is no one who knows more about the open sea and the Portuguese discoveries than he does.

But why has Zarco changed his name to Columbus, and more particularly, why has the King of Portugal allowed a nephew of his to serve the monarchs of Spain in the area of discovery, an area so sacred to

the Portuguese that everyone who studies at Sagres must join the Order of Christ and take an oath of secrecy about Portuguese discoveries.

When I tried to winkle this mystery from Zarco/ Columbus, he looked at me as if I had broken my sacred oath. But you know when a man would prefer you out of his sight or dead. My dear wife, I had intended to follow him to Barcelona to speak further with him about what he found in his new world, but when he asked, with that certain glint in his eye, where I was living in Valencia, I thought it in my best interest to leave that place that very night, in the dark, with a swift horse under me.

As I rode along, I pondered this mystery of a Prince of the Portuguese Court and his reincarnation as a servant at the Court of Isabella. The only conclusion I could come to is that he must be a SPY for the King of Portugal.

And why would the King of Portugal want a spy at the court of Isabella. My answer to that, and I believe it to be the correct one, is, if the navigator hired by your rival, and there is no doubt that Spain is Portugal's rival, is not only in your employ but also one of your relatives, you control what your rival discovers, or doesn't discover, which is more to the point: so we have Columbus the SPY, as well as Columbus the Navigator.

It is known here that Columbus claimed he was ship-wrecked off Portugal on his way back from his voyage, and was received by the Portuguese king. I believe this ship-wreck was a ploy, and his visit to the king of Portugal was to report what he found, or did not find in the West, as any good spy must do.

My faithful wife, I know too much now to stay in Spain. But I also know that Columbus was gone too few days to reach the spice rich East; he has reached land and has brought back proof, but it is not India as he has claimed, and Columbus knows it, and the King of Portugal knows it, and Columbus knows I know it. The only people who don't know it are Isabella and Ferdinand.

With this knowledge, and I'm sure I am right in this, Portugal and Spain are now closed to me. The work on the harbour at Valencia I looked forward to, I have had to abandon.

I am disappointed on all counts but a navigator's life is full of such disappointments.

I will now turn my attention to England. I need the protection of a powerful Monarch and I believe Henry VII is the one. I will go to Bristol. When I was last there I met mariners who often talked of land to westward.

I have a contract to take a caravel to Palermo within the week; I will leave it there and if I can get a connecting passage to Pisa I will be home for the Nativity. I will spend a month with you and our sons; we will walk at dusk in the Piazza and admire the Quadriga one more time. I will accompany you to San Zon de Decollato and listen to your choir sing the great Mass of the birth of Christ. We will go to Montecaluna and be a happy family together. We will give a fine supper for our friends; I am bringing Castilian wine.

I have rarely failed to keep my promises to you, so count on it.

Then I am off to the north where they keep the English King.

Tell Sebastian I hope he is doing well in his studies as I have already written to Sagres to enrol him. I am bringing him a chart of Valencia harbour. I have found a Hebrew scroll for Lewis, and sketches of some little known mosques for Sancio. Your present will be a surprise.

May the Divine Light surround you and our sons.

Giovanni

Written outside Valencia, Feast of Saint Bibiana.

DIARII

December 30, 1492

If Columbus really is a spy, what kind of danger is Giovanni in because of what he knows, or thinks he knows.

There is no evidence the seals of his letters were tampered with, who can tell, when so many tools are available to remove even leaden ones.

It must have been galling to see Columbus return in triumph.

If Giovanni goes to England and gets the backing of the English King, will that King protect us from Venetian wrath should he find a short route to the wealth of the east, and that wealth flows into the coffers of another nation?

How can I stop this!

Venice, sixth day of the Octave of the Nativity.

DIARII

January 8, 1493

Giovanni arrived the Feast of the Epiphany.

There will be fifes and drums until we leave for Montecaluna, which I am determined will happen the end of the week.

Might as well be living on the Piazza; half Venice has passed through our doors this morning. Giovanni has now moved to the meadow. He tells a shortened version of Columbus's voyage without the spies and royalty. People go away shaking their heads. Canon Leonardo, who stayed for an hour, listened to the tale twice, told me he has read historical documents and believes the voyage is possible.

All the relatives have visited. Cousin Piero has again hinted Giovanni take over the Flanders galley, as

he, Piero, wants to allow his name to stand for the office of Provveditori in Campo.

Piero hints. Giovanni changes the subject.

Giovanni has never divulged even to our sons he is looking for the short route to the wealth of the East. I can't believe those wily cousins still think all his travels are for the purpose of finding backers to support him in search for new land. When I mention this to my husband he says Venetian traders regard himself and Columbus as dreamers, and he wants it to stay that way.

Now a messenger has come from the Doge; Giovanni must present himself to the Collegio on January 13th., at noon, and tell what he knows of Columbus. I am invited. There will be a dinner. When the Collegio lays out a dinner they want something in return.

Giovanni brought me a bolt of blue silk, enough for two dresses.

Venice, Feast of the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan.

DIARII

January 13, 1493

Gemma spent an hour on my hair.

Occasionally, Giovanni looked in, smiled, went away.

I selected a strip of yellow silk, bound it around my head, anchored it with a circle of gold. Put on diamond earrings that reached down my neck. Draped my too low-cut Venetian red dress with netting, held it in place with a diamond collar. Put on my blue cape.

Giovanni, on the other hand, wore the simple black gown and cap of any chancery worker. He carried a mappamundi.

The Cabotos are ready to confront their Doge.

Giovanni returned my grim smile. I am a reluctant participant in what I see as my husband's schemes, but Venice will know he has a wife.

We left our house, stepped into the gondola. Guido polled us to the Piazzetta. The merciers had paused in their selling - moving up the Piazza was a procession of foreign Scuole: the Albanians, the Armenians, the Germans, the Dalmatians and four others behind them. Each group with a hundred or more members, white robed, carrying banners, dopiere, relics.

We forced a fast paced trot across the top of the Piazza. The Procession was at our heels as we turned into the Doge's Palace.

We were met and escorted to the Doge's private dining room. The Council of Ten were dazzling in their

robes of scarlets, purples, blues. They were standing waiting for us. The Doge had on his cap. The meal was already being brought to the table.

Only Doge Barbarigo, who hadn't seen Giovanni since his return, came forward and had a short word with us.

We were placed on either side of His Serenity. On my left was Zorzi Cornaro. We talked about the sermon given at San Marco's by the English Bishop, here on his way to Jerusalem. We wondered if he were as rich as he appeared: he had brought twenty-five horses and a retinue of twelve servants. Neither of us knew why he had come so early, when the galley for Jerusalem doesn't leave until June.

The Doge turned to me:

And are you, too, interested in finding new land, Donna Caboto?

I make the charts!

I saw the lines that form trenches, deepen, down each side of his nose and mouth. As quickly, his grey eyes modified their blankness to something resembling a smile. I watched him compose himself and reach for the appropriate response. It didn't come, he fell back on:

I am an old man.

I wanted to say: You are a nasty old man. I let it pass. He turned back to Giovanni where the conversation, since the meal began, was of the Arsenal and the assembly-line method of making galleys.

The food was simple: a mixed fruit, followed by succulent trout, and a salad. The wine was passable.

The Doge crossed his cutlery on his plate. Zorzi rose and gave a pleasant, if short, speech of welcome.

My husband unrolled his mappamundi. Two servants appeared, as if part of a stage play; each took an edge of the chart.

Giovanni gave the facts of the voyage: the latitude Columbus followed, the number of days it took, the leagues covered. He pointed out the empty spaces on the chart where he would have landed.

Here and there I saw an eyebrow raise, an eyelash flicker. These men had all, at one time or another, taken galleys north to London, into the Mediterranean, along the African coast, and through the Sea of Marmara to Tana, hugging the coast all the way. But the open sea was a mystery to them.

Giovanni's story was simple. When he finished, the Doge asked the one question my husband was waiting for:

And you, will you go in search of new lands too, Messer Caboto?

I have not been as fortunate as Messer Columbus, Serenity. He has found a Queen who believes in him.

The meeting was over. Everybody had what they had come to hear

Venice, Commemoration of the Baptism of Our Lord.

DIARII

January 15, 1493

My heart never fails to gladden when we take the road to Montecaluna. Our sons galloped their horses and were in the pasture when we arrived.

The first evening Giovanni said:

I feel in the state of supernatural grace when I am with my family.

The retort: 'You should, you are so seldom here', died on my lips.

Each day we walk in the fields and sometimes startle the servants by helping gather in the grain.

We go riding over the countryside; take our dinner in a basket, eat among the insects.

We sit for hours in the lowering night telling family stories.

Last evening, Sancio asked:

Why are there no stories about me?

Our four heads swivelled in his direction. The usually silent Sancio had asked a question.

Yes, Sancio, I have a story about you:

You were three. Someone had given you one picolli. You could buy a sugar-mouse with one picolli. You went down to the kitchen, found Gemma. She and Gobbio had married that month and were looking for a house. You gave her the picolli and asked her to go to Codussi's and buy you a sugar-mouse.

You told her:

Keep the change and buy a house for yourself.

Sancio laughed. We all laughed, but Sebastian almost fell off his chair. I wondered if he remembered that it was his story I was telling.

Montecaluna, Feast of Saint Maur, Abbot.

DAIRII

January 31, 1493

Lewis is too polite with his father. A studied politeness. If Giovanni speaks to him he sits bolt upright. His "Sir" is clipped.

Giovanni doesn't help. I've asked him to be more relaxed with the boy. He doesn't seem to understand what I am talking about.

Lewis never quite got used to Giovanni coming and going in our lives. As a child, each time his father returned from the sea he stayed surprised for a week. Surprised to find him still here in the morning. Some residue of the unforeseen has stayed with him.

Montecaluna, fourth Sunday after the Epiphany.

DIARII

February 18, 1493

Tomorrow is Giovanni's birthday. I ordered a very fine English jerkin and hose; gave it to him this afternoon with the thought, if it doesn't fit, there will be time to have it adjusted. He will be in full fig at his supper-party tomorrow evening.

It fitted splendidly. I was charmed by his pleasure, about to say:
Shall we dance?

I saw that look appear on his face.

Whose money did you use?

Mine, of course. Should I give my husband a gift using his own money?

But you know I want you to use my money.

I lost control:

I won't account to you for every scudi I put in the collection box! You spoil everything with your infernal need for me to spend your money! I wish you never had a piccolli to put in your pocket! I will spend my money how I want - and on whom I want.

Giovanni just stood there. If I were a child I would have spit; it was great temptation. I turned and marched into the meadow. Banged the door.

I thought: if you follow, I shall go to Monticaluna and not return for a week. You can host your own birthday party.

I sat outside for an hour, wondering why it is, I still allow Giovanni to put me in this state about money.

When I accuse him of being jealous of my money he says only that a man has to care for his family.

I've had enough of it. There will be a truce on this subject!

Venice, Feast of St. Simeon.

DIARII

February 18, 1493

Giovanni: But of course, every Priuli son is sent out 'hunting birds'.

Me: Pardon?

Giovanni: Every Priuli son is sent out 'hunting birds'?

Me: Explain.

Giovanni: You never heard that expression?

Me: Never.

Giovanni: Noble families, who have fallen to the ranks of the shame-faced poor, will try to add to their coffers by marrying off their sons to daughters of rich nobles, or rich cittadini, or even to members of the popolari, as long as the family has money.

Me: Did your uncle send you 'hunting birds'?

Giovanni: No, after my cousin took over the business, my uncle lost interest in my future. But he would not have been above sending his son to see what he could snare. And besides you snared me.

I pull his woolly hair.

Me: I'm ashamed to be a member of this grasping nobility. We won't send our sons 'hunting birds'!

Giovanni: That's why I am going to see the English King.

Me: Even if you don't see the English King.

We change the subject. But what a tattered system of money grubbing.

We have finally agreed - or rather Giovanni has said: IN THE NAME OF THE GOOD GOD, which

is usually my line, I WILL NEVER AGAIN ASK WHO OWNS THE MONEY YOU ARE SPENDING, BUT I WILL LOOK AT THE BOOKS.

We have another truce.

Venice, Feast of Saint Leo the Great.

DIARII

February 20, 1493

Whenever I dance 'til dawn, I sleep two hours and am ready to plough a field, or write a Jubilation Mass.

Giovanni has turned over and is dead to the world.

If I listen closely I hear the distant rattle of a cart in the Piazza. The day has begun, just.

We were half through Giovanni's birthday supper before he realized our thirty-seven guests numbered his age. His uncle never celebrated his birthday. I put in all the childish tricks. It never fails to please him.

After supper, four of our Guild of Singers gave us the Petrarch madrigal I put to music. They out-sang themselves.

We had a contest among the tables to see who would sing the funniest songs, the servants were the judges. As usual, they awarded all the prizes to the children's tables. We accused them of taking bribes.

The dancing master arrived with his drummers and fife players, prepared to teach us the newest dance from Greece. He wore his local costume: white dress and leggings. His body thin, wiry; his face like an arrow. He put us in two rows and walked us through the steps.

The fifes were high pitched, the drums loud and insistent. We stamped our feet, slapped our thighs, swung in circles, bolted up the middle of the line. It went on for an hour, when it was over we crowded onto the balcony. The dozen or so gondolas lined up outside the window watching our frolic, moved off into the dark.

About the third hour of the evening the children were sent to bed or taken home. Adriana used the general stir to take Alvis home. His legs had long since stopped taking direction from his head. Alvis drinks no more wine any of us; what makes us happy, puts him under.

We did the new dance at least three more times, and dragged out all the old ones we knew, and some we didn't.

Giovanni and Isabetta danced the wild chacota they both learned in Portugal, in their youth. Giovanni performing his party trick of swinging her off her feet, which is no mean stunt, as she is almost as

heavy as he. It amuses me to watch Paolo during this performance. His eyes always narrow and he makes his way to me for assurance.

When we finally closed the door behind Paula and Piero, (who always stay for the last glass, and tell, or listen to, the last story, which no one remembers the next day), we heard the crier in the Piazza:

It's a fine cool morning. The galley has returned from Tana.

Giovanni assured me this was the best of birthdays. We rolled up to bed.

I'm off to add verve to the Sanctus I plan for Easter Sunday Mass.

Venice, Saturday after Sexagesima Sunday.

DIARII

February 21, 1493

Giovanni has taken our three sons to hear Friar Girolamo Savonarola preach a Lenten sermon on Grace. This Dominican from Florence, in the few weeks he has been here has gained a reputation for hell's fire and damnation sermons. Tonight is supposed to be mild one.

Sanccio was delighted to be taken out with Lewis and Sebastian, and at night; he was shivering in anticipation.

Venice, Quinquagesima Sunday.

DIARII

February 24, 1493

My husband's mind is already on the road to England.

He is back at his map-making.

I refuse to recognise his spiralling away from us.

I insisted he sit for his portrait. He compromised: Guido dressed in Giovanni's clothes will sit while Gentile paints the body.

Giovanni will sit for the head and hands.

Venice, Ash Wednesday.

DIARII

February 27, 1493

At Mass today, Giovanni bent over me just before the consecration, and whispered:

I swear before the Living God I will leave the sea in 1500.

No, no. don't swear it.

It is not that I want him to leave the sea, it is that I don't want him to be the one to divert our trade with the East to another country.

After Mass he said he swore it as much for himself.

He is convinced he will have found the short route across the Western ocean in seven years or less.

He prays for a wealth we don't need; if he gets it we lose Venice.
Why won't he see this.

Saturday, after Ash Wednesday.

DIARII

April 25, 1493

For twenty-four hours after Giovanni leaves I am distracted.

The twenty-four hours are up.

To work!

Venice, Monday after the Second Sunday of Easter.