

## THE LADY'S HOUSE

**T**HERE WAS NO BUSIER STREET in the entire village. It was impossible not to pass along it if you were making your way to the upper parish or going down to the lower one. A steep stone-flagged road all the way up from Stamatrizaina's house to the church of the Virgin, known as the Salonikia.\* A thousand steps, puffing and blowing at each step. You would get out of breath on the way up, you would slip and slide on the way down.

No sooner had you set off down the flagged roadway, leaving behind Kapsospyros's store, Kaftanis's house, and Old Pagouris's dilapidated cottage with its walled yard, you would find yourself in front of the house of Hatzi-Pantelis, its courtyard fence perched on the edge of the cliff. A vast precipice gaped below, sheer and dizzying, dotted here and there by a few creeping shrubs which in the darkness of that night appeared like villains groping and clambering their way up, or like hobgoblins lying in wait for the right moment to break into the houses down through the chimneys.\* The splashing of waves could be heard faintly at the foot of the cliff, and the north wind, the omnipotent, snow-capped king of winter, which had been blowing tirelessly from the day before yesterday, yet calm that evening, rolled some last remaining waves towards the small southerly harbour.

On the other side of the road, to the left as you went up, next to Old Pagouris's cottage and facing the house of Hatzi-Pantelis, rose a half-finished building. Only the four walls of the ground floor had been built, the timbers of the upper store stood bare and gaping, the roof was falling in, and the plaster was grey and crumbling. In short, desolation, wind and rain had turned it into rack and ruin.

The children, as many as went down from one school at noon or went up from the other in the evening, eager to dump their books at home, grab a piece of bread from the pantry and run at full tilt to play by the shore, would shower it with stones. In this way they would take revenge by day for all the terror it caused them at night whenever they happened to pass by. The priests, when they returned as one body on the eve of Epiphany from the house of the mayor, with their crosses and sprays of basil, blessing homes, roads, and stores, and driving away the hobgoblins, forgot to sprinkle even a drop of holy water also on this unfortunate, abandoned house,\* which had given no joy to its owner, who had built it, and had not been blessed to delight in its mistress. It was to be expected, then, that such a house should end up as the dwelling-place of ghosts, possibly the refuge of vampires, perhaps even the den and haunt of the tyrants of that hour, the hobgoblins.

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It had not been blessed to delight in its mistress. Captain Yiannakos Syrmais, a gallant man of sentiment, a *bon vivant* if ever there was one among his contemporaries, had once fallen in love with Lady Annika at Stavrodromi.<sup>1</sup> She was pretty and tall and had golden hair, a fair complexion, the finest features, and when she looked at you it touched a chord in your heart. The Captain got engaged in Constantinople and sailed back to his native island, where he gave instructions to have that pretty little house built, with an unusually elegant design by the standards of the small town. He had intended on his first voyage to bring furniture from Venice with which to deck the newly-constructed house and make it worthy of the refined Lady whom he planned to fetch from Constantinople. But the house was fated not to be completed, and the Lady was fated not to come. Eight months after their engagement, she died of consumption at Stavrodromi, and the house remained unfinished, desolate and joyless, on the

<sup>1</sup> The neighbourhood Stavrodromi (meaning crossroads), also known as Pera, was in the European quarter of Istanbul.