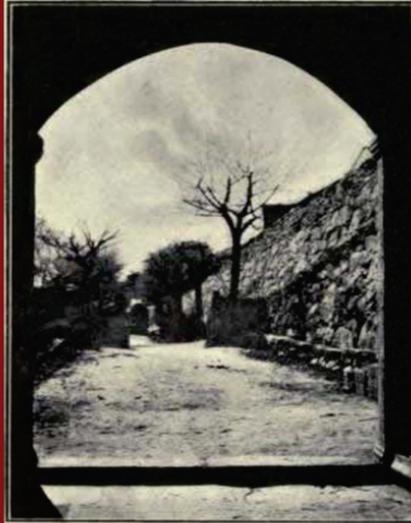


# The Complete Crockett

*The Galloway Raiders*

*digital edition*

European/World fiction



THE SILVER SKULL

S.R.CROCKETT

# Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

First published in book form by Smith, Elder & Co in 1901.

This Galloway Raiders digital edition published in 2021 is part of a decade long project (2012-2022) to bring the works of Samuel Rutherford Crockett (1859-1914) together in one place. The Complete Crockett comprises 66 published works, re-edited and re-formatted by volunteer labour to the highest standard.

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# THE SILVER SKULL

## INTRODUCTION

A lot of the work of the Introduction to *The Silver Skull* is done by Crockett himself in his Preface which lays out both the research material and a lot of background information regarding this story. It stems from his time spent in Italy as a youth (1880s) where he met some of those who had fought the real life Gaetano Vardarelli. Crockett adds to this archive material of General Richard Church gleaned from a relative to flesh out the bones of his work.

The story, based on truth, is set in Southern Italy in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Crockett takes historic characters and fictionalises them. *‘There is no truer and no stranger tale in all the long history of Italy than that of ‘The Silver Skull’ which was the badge of as bloodthirsty and ruthless a band of murderers as the world has ever seen.’*

The historic General Richard Church is better known for his activities in Greece which came after the time of *The Silver Skull*. However in 1817 Church became lieutenant-general to King Ferdinand of Naples and was commissioned to suppress the brigandage then rampant in Apulia. He was fairly successful and in 1820 was appointed governor of Palermo and made commander-in-chief of the troops in Sicily. However, that year, a revolution broke out. He escaped from violence in Sicily and was imprisoned in Naples, where he was put on trial by the government, but was acquitted and released in January 1821.

The villain is also an historic figure. The Priest Ciro Annunziarico murdered Giovanni Montolesi and became a kind of gang/cult leader. After

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thirteen years on the run in late 1816 and 1817 he organised a confederation of robbers with a strength of some twenty thousand. The name they used for themselves was Decisi, *The Decided Ones of Jupiter the Thunderer*. Annunziarico himself claimed to be the earthly avatar of the ancient Roman god Jupiter. They laid claim to an area they called the Salentinian Republic. In reality this 'Man of Seventeen Murders' was executed by General Church.

Crockett's story is told from the perspective of first person narrator, and unusually perhaps, a female – La Bella. From the very start, the story is unashamedly bloodthirsty and shocking. In a land of brigands it can be difficult to tell who the heroes are and the secret societies of The Silver Skull and the Decisi are like early versions of the Mafia wars.

Through force of circumstance La Bella is brought up as a boy among the Varadelli and the story follows the path of revenge, mitigated slightly by the encroaching romance as La Bella comes of age. The plot has many twists and turns and a fair share of humour amidst the sensation. Colonel Cameron, the Scots 'observer' to the piece is a good foil to La Bella and Crockett cannot resist offering a Scots perspective: *'We will all do our best. But do not mistake us Scots. We love fighting for its own sake. And when we have no quarrels of our own – why, we are thankful to be permitted to take a hang in a friend's.'*

*The Silver Skull* followed several other Italian stories written by Crockett. An earlier Italian story was published in the *Cosmopolis* magazine in 1897 and reviewed as follows by *The Spectator* in Jan 1897:

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*Mr. S. R. Crockett's story-sketch bearing the startling title of "Maria Perrone, Murderess and Saint."*

*'Mr. Crockett's Italian story is full of a power that is yet kept well in hand, and has absolutely nothing of what is vulgarly known as the "Kailyard" about it. The passionate love of a woman for her husband is admirably brought out, though Maria seems in the long-run to be guilty of perjury— not of murder—for the sake of that husband. '*

And 'St Lucy of the Eyes', a long short story set in Lombardy in Northern Italy, was published in *Bog Myrtle and Peat* in 1895. Thus while *The Silver Skull* is Crockett's only novel set entirely in Italy, he puts his knowledge and youthful adventures into context with his versioning of stories that attracted him to the country in his youth. These stories are delivered with skill and style and show that Crockett had more than one string to his fiction writing bow.

*Cally Phillips*

2021

## PREFACE

'The Silver Skull' is the result of two circumstances, both happy in themselves.

It was my good fortune in youth to spend a good deal of time in Italy. For many years it was the only foreign land I knew well. Its little wayside inns, its hill-set towns tower-crowned and battlemented, the white farmhouses, the brown shepherds' shelters, the swarthy fisherfolk of Adria, the red-lipped saucy-eyed maidens by the fountains, were to me not merely the matter of romance, but romance itself. In those days it was my fortune to meet with the sons of the men who had fought the Governmental forces under Gaetano Vardarelli and taken the author of 'Italian Brigands' captive among the ruins of Paestum.

Still in those days, as one rode from Agropoli southward, armed men would suddenly step out upon the road with a demand for a password, and once a pistol was pointed at my breast in open daylight upon the street of Monreale.

It was in Brindisi that I heard for the first time of *Ciro the Priest with the red eyes*, the *Man of Seventeen Murders* — of the Vardarelli also, the heroes of the people, Robin Hoods of the South, of Gaetano without fear and without reproach, and of the death of young Don Giovanni. But it was not till many years afterwards that certain admirable articles in 'Blackwood's Magazine' put me on the track of better material than any popular tradition. With some difficulty I traced out the author of these papers, and found that they were written by a lady, Mrs. E. M. Church, the wife of Canon Church of Wells, whose uncle, General Richard Church, was

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the man who put down and brought to an end the famous Red Terror in Apulia.

I was fortunate enough to be able to induce Mrs. Church to allow me the use of the whole of her material for the present book, which indeed in its main features can hardly be called a romance, so close has the story been kept to the material facts of history.

Further, Mrs. Church generously allowed me access to all the extracts from the General's journals in her possession. These are remarkably full and copious; also upon occasion strikingly dramatic, supplementing in the most satisfactory manner possible her volume, 'The Memoirs of an Adventurous Life.'

In this way sketches of places, pen-portraits of the actors in the drama, descriptions of costume, contemporary drawings and modern photographs, accumulated till I had in my hands the fullest justificative material from which it has ever been my fortune to write a romance. I desire in this place to express my appreciation of the invaluable assistance I have received from Mrs. Church and her husband, without which this tale could not have been written.

The book has also gained greatly in accuracy from the generous help given me by Mr. C. C. Lacaita, whose knowledge of Apulia and the 'Heel of the Boot' generally is unrivalled. I am aware that the mountain fastness held by the Vardarelli lies somewhat too near the seaward Apulian plain which was the scene of Don Ciro's misdeeds, but perhaps the heroes of romance rode somewhat more rapidly than in these degenerate times the post-horses of commerce.

For the rest — this tale of Ciro the Priest is still

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the popular epic of southern Italy. I have since visited the chief scenes of the drama on several occasions, and can bear witness that you have it told you as you put your fingers into the bullet pits on that gateway at Scaserba where the Man of Seventeen Murders made his last stand.

You can listen to the version of it retailed by the concierge of the little Cathedral as you look down upon the sunlit square, at one side of which *Ciro* stepped over his dead comrades to his death, and died, as every Apulian loves to remember, with a cigarette between his fingers, and a mock, blessing on his lips.

Howsoever I may have succeeded in telling it, there is no truer and no stranger tale in all the long history of Italy than that of 'The Silver Skull,' which was the badge of as blood-thirsty and ruthless a band of murderers as the world has ever seen.

It is not one of the least interesting reminiscences connected with the story that a little boy, riding at his uncle's side on his first visit to Italy, carried with him through life the picture of the Skull in the iron cage which he saw bleaching over the gateway of Grottaglie. This little boy was the late Dean Church of St. Paul's.

*J. R. Crockett*

# THE SILVER SKULL

## CHAPTER ONE

### PUNCHINELLO! PUNCHINELLO!

I am that Isabella, the girl of the Vardarelli, who, forgetting her maidenhood, rode with the first and fought with the best; on me it is laid to tell this tale — yes, tell the tale from the beginning, summer shine and winter rain, grey-weather and black thunder-cloud, all the tale of the gay Vardarelli riders, and of the sharp knives and black hearts who did the bidding of the Silver Skull.

And I will begin from the beginning, even as I am bidden. There is time enough to write it, for the rains have come and the straws are floating yellow upon every streamlet. Also I am at peace and well. There is no ache in my body anywhere, while over the gate of Grottaglie there is an iron cage, and in the cage ... But wait: all that comes into the story in its own place. Yet some there are who will doubtless say: 'Why should a girl of the Vardarelli tell the secrets of the band? Why should she write of that comradeship gay and gallant, of Don Gaetano, whose glance flashed from under his brows straight as a lance-thrust is straight, of Vittorio Dini the Hunchback, of Geronimo, and of young Don Giovanni, with the hair like the first tendrils of the vine-leaves leaning against the house?' Why, say you? Because one that is more to me than you all bids me. That is why; and though I have come to the end of these great days, and though the bridle-reins of the *comitiva* no longer tinkle up through the pine woods as the twilight comes over the sea, nor jingle across the plain when the night winds are still, nor die away into the dawn among the mountain

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fastnesses, think not that they are silent in the heart of Isabella, once called 'of the Vardarelli;' or dream that even now she regrets having cast a leg across saddle-leather, and ridden forth with the bravest — ruffled lace, sweeping feather, high-crowned hat, jingling buttons of silver filigree, carbine on thigh, sword in hand, as gay a cavalier as any! Ay, and could do it over again, for all Some One's sober looks as I write the confession.

\* \* \* \* \*

The 20th of February, 18 — : that, I am told, is the date. So be it. It matters not. At any rate, it is a night not to be forgotten by me till the grey walls and broad-shouldered towers of Monte Leone crumble into dust. In Apulia and all down the 'Heel of the Boot' it was the time of betwixt-and-between. The gay French uniforms of Murat had done their chasing from Bari even to Cape Leuca. The girls plucked the grapes unknissed; the men ... But stay, I am no historian. At any rate, the French had gone, the time of the Austrian was not yet. The Englishman, Richard Church, had not been heard of. The whole country was in the hands of the Societies, and every man did that which was right or wrong in his own eyes. The bolt kept the treasure, the bar kept the castle; and it was 'God and the Saints be good to those who fall under the ban of the Silver Skull!'

I was but a little girl then, when the wild deed was done which made the name of the Decisi infamous over the world.

You know the Castle of Monte Leone? Well, at any rate, every one in Apulia and as far as Trani knows

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all about the famous place of Monte Leone: how it was built by the great king, the father of our own Manfred; how it has seen more sieges, *fêtes*, burnings, tarantellas, pageants, funerals, than any other fortress or tower in all Puglia — Monte Leone, the lion couchant on the hills, looking out to sea across the tributary plain.

I was, as I say, but a little girl then, yet I remember those that dwelt therein. They were all dear to me, and my heart greets them even now across the years with a smile and a tear. There was the Duke — grave mostly, his Excellency always — a pleasant, jesting way with him when my nurse brought me in with the third flask of wine. What I came for I know not, but at all events I was permitted to stand on tiptoe by the table rim and peck like the robins at each plate — the Duke being ever kindest. And so till I reached the Mother Duchess, who would pretend to scold and shake her head under the lace of her mantilla — for the family had been a Spanish one. Very sternly she would bid me begone. Then, when I had had enough, a tall dark man, the major-domo of the castle, as I think, would take me to my nurse, Brigida, who waited at the door, balanced between pride and a palpitating tremulous fear — happy to see me trot to and fro among the great folk (for was I not one of them?); but devoutly thankful, all the same, to have me again in her arms safe and sound.

In February, 18 — , then, it was barred doors and close quarters at Monte Leone. The Sectaries were out. The Vardarelli were up, the best of the Free Companions. Most dreadful of all, the Decisi, the new society to be mentioned only with bated breath, were afoot, and were said to have sworn vengeance

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against the wealthy Duke of Monte Leone, and to covet the treasure hidden in his great chests, iron-bound, bolted to the hall floor, with the crossed muskets hanging loaded on the wall above them.

But a little girl with a Spanish name knew nothing of that: Isabella — ‘La Bella,’ they called me then, and, I know not why, the name stuck to me — yes, and sticks even now, when I am well into the thirties, and an old married woman.

Monte Leone, therefore, was bolted and barred — portcullis down, bridge up, lattices closed every night at sunset. Such was always the Duke’s custom when he was at home, save only on certain festal nights, upon which the peasantry had been wont, perhaps for a thousand years or so, to make a bonfire in the courtyard, and dance about it, with much snapping of fingers and circling of plump waists, while the wine ran gurgling from the ducal goatskins and smiling cooks brought forth the broad brown loaves of bread, round as the moon sailing in the soft Apulian sky.

The winter had been a dull time at Monte Leone, so that by February Donna Brigida waxed cross and combed my hair out every night with tugs and wrenches which hurt till I cried. Whereat she slapped me, and then, waxing suddenly contrite, kissed and comforted me equally without reason.

‘A dull time, by the Saints,’ she would mutter to herself — ‘never an open door for Giovanni and Vito to come in with their pipes and nonsense. Carnival indeed! There is no joy, no dancing, no flowing wine, no mirth in this old echoing nutshell without a kernel. Out upon such a place and such a master!’

It was the last night of the Carnival, and from our barred window we could hear the ‘Ta-ran-ta-ra! Ta-

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ran-ta-ra!' strummed and whistled in the village, and then I got more than my share of tugs and pinches from Donna Brigida.

Twangling chords and lusty shouts indicated the dancers in the hamlet. But up in Monte Leone there was a light only in the dining-hall, where the Duke and his mother supped in state. As for me, I was of course too young to be with them; but I was being dressed to go in with the dessert, and, as I say, peck like a bird at the platters of fruit.

The night fell quickly, gloomy and ominous. The mists crept over the plain from the Adriatic. But I loved when they shut us in all about; for, to the eyes of a little girl, that only made the logs burn better on the great iron dogs of the fireplace and the silver on the board glitter brighter.

'Pulcinella! Pulcinella! Policinello! 'Nello! 'Nello!'

Thus sounded the dancing strain somewhere without, and within the Castle all the maidservants jiggered wistfully to it as the sigh of the night wind brought the sound yet clearer.

'Pulcinella! Pulcinella!'

The Duke of Monte Leone was warm and mellow with good wine. He drank only his own vintages, heavy and resinous when new, but refining with the years into a balmy and lingering cleanness upon the palate, as the spiders webbed them ever thicker and thicker in the great arched cellars of Monte Leone.

The Duke lingered over his dinner. He had turned his chair about so that he could sit angle-wise to the table and watch his mother at her lacework. He had carefully laid aside a little plate of pickings for me when I should be brought in.

'Pulcinella! Pulcinella!'

He's a rare good fellow,

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With his flouts and jeers,  
With his nose and his ears,  
Policinella! Policinella—ella—ella!  
A rare good fellow he!

The Duke crossed his legs and smiled. The wine spread kindly and liberally through his veins till his feet beat the measure and his head nodded involuntarily to the lilt of it.

‘Ha, mother,’ he cried, at last, ‘this is like old times. Here comes Signore Pulcinella! We will have the courtyard lit. The beacon is all ready set. Bring up the wine from the cellar and open the gates. Is it not the last night of Carnival?’

‘Philip,’ said the Lady Mother, gently, looking up from her work, ‘is it safe, think you? The Societies — are there not many evil men about?’

‘None who would dare to harm us. Monte Leone is still a lion couchant. There are yet paladins in the hall. Look at Diego there: who dare meddle with us while he carries the keys?’ laughed the Duke, and turning sharply to his fat major-domo, he gave his orders.

‘Light the beacon. Get out the wineskins! Bid the cooks bring up the pasties and all that is ready below. It is the last night of Carnival, and shall we be less jovial here in ducal Monte Leone than the farm folk and the village *contadini*?’

‘With respect, Excellency,’ ventured Diego, who was frightened for his own throat, ‘is it not the case that the Decisi have sworn your death?’

The Duke threw up his hands.

‘Time to die indeed,’ he cried, ‘when I am not obeyed in my own house! It is the night of mirth, I tell you. Bid the youths and maidens dance the “Pizzica-pizzica” — the Donna and I will watch from

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the balcony.'

'Ah, little snipe,' he cried, catching sight of me standing breathless in the doorway, with Brigida, eyeing the sudden bustle of preparation, 'behold, little snipelet! Come, you shall see the loveliest blazing fire, and you shall have sweets and raisins, as many as you like — yes, mother, and a sip of wine as well.' So with one hand he caught me up to his shoulder, being by nature a great jovial man and merry of heart, while with the other he poured some water over the spoonful of red wine left in the bottom of his glass.

'Drink,' he said, 'drink to Signore Punchinello! Lo, here he comes, with his hooked nose and long ears.'

And at the words I screamed aloud and gripped the Duke about the neck. For up the stairs there came the queerest squeaking voice, like a *squillo* trumpet with a pea in it, whereat the Duke and all laughed as at a huge joke. Even the Lady Mother smiled, forgetting her forebodings; and all looked with bright eyes and a happy expression towards the doorway of the dining chamber.

The sound of drawn bolts came from beneath. The hinges creaked and whined. A gust of cool wet wind rushed up the stairs, rioted with the tablecloth, and flapped the heavy arras on the walls. I shuddered involuntarily and clutched the Duke yet tighter about the neck — so tightly, indeed, that he unclasped my hands and set me down, without taking his eyes from the doorway. For though a great jovial man and kindly, he loved not to be discomposed by any. Immediately I was set down I ran and hid under the table. The cloth had not been removed, and, as was the custom at Monte Leone, it was of silk and lace — old and priceless. The

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embroidered edge hung down over the knees of the guests, but where the chairs were thrust back I could easily see from underneath it all that went on in the room.

The sound of a quick merry pipe came jiggling up the stairs, and then again the strange squeaky voice which set every one laughing and crying, 'Haste thee — come quick, dear Signore Punchinello!'

Then the door, which the major-domo had shut against the draught, was cautiously opened an inch or two, and my little heart almost stopped beating when I saw a long nose peep round the corner and a red eye glance inquiringly about the great diningroom. There came a chorus of welcome, loudest of all being the Duke's jovial 'Ha! ha! ha! Signore Pulcinella! Welcome, most respected sir. Drink! Sir Punchinello!' And with his own hand he poured him out a full goblet of wine.

'Your permission, noble Duke!' squeaked the high voice, the sound of which had terrified me, as Punchinello wriggled on his toes, bowed nearly to the ground, comically wagged his head amid shouts of laughter, and finally set the wine down untasted.

So the mirth began, and the house-maidens, glad of the infectious merriment, ran hither and thither, singing snatches of song and dancing in corners, with sudden carnations upon their cheeks and their lips red as the geraniums of the sea-board.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THE MASQUE OF DEATH

It was as good as having one bitten by the Great Spider in the house. Men and women, gentle and simple, they took their cue from the Duke; and lo! with a backward fling of wooden doors, studded with iron, the men-servants came staggering forth from the vaults into the courtyard, hauling after them the car with the creaking block wheels, and astride of it Peppino the cellarer with his broad belt and jolly paunch. His head was crowned with flowers like the image of the heathen god done in silver, and there were ribbons on the cask. And ever this new god Bacchus leaned over and drew great flagonfuls of red wine as the men pulled him about the courtyard.

Most of this I could see in the faces of the maids that served in the great room; and indeed the Duke cried it aloud from the window-seat, where he watched the merry rout, happy as a boy escaped from school.

The white comfits began to rain into the room wherever there was an open casement. They rattled like hail against the panes where the windows were shut. Signore Policinello laughed, waved his arms as if he had been a magician, and took credit for all the mirth. Everybody laughed, and even the Duke's mother, whom I, a lonely child, had been taught to call grandmother, laughed also. But, nevertheless, I hid me more secretly and securely under the shadowy network of the lace-edged table-cloth. And ever the Duke called for better wine and still better, and quaffed till his face grew red and jovial, and the mother watched him with anxious eyes.

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I saw Luigi Pavone, the tall servitor, stand ready with yet another flask, one of those pointed bottomless jars which wait, sun-dried and dusty, in the cellar. And as the Duke's hand shook, he filled and filled again.

Amid a rain of the white pellets of chalk Signore Pulcinella lurched this way and that. A moment ago his arm had been about the waist of a serving-maid. The pair had skipped into a gay little dance, and the Duke had laughed at the antics of his jestership of the nose, that most famous child of Italy whose advent tells men and women all over the world that Carnival is really with them. But at the table's end the girl's waist had been dropped. She danced on alone, and as she came opposite the Duke, where he sat in the window-seat nodding his head and drinking, she looked back for her partner. Then all suddenly meeting her master's eye instead, she crimsoned to the brow, snatched up her apron with a quick, nervous laugh, and ran to the end of the room.

But Signore Pulcinella, where was he? He was speaking low to Luigi Pavone. They stood quite beside me. Luigi was resting his wine-jar on the floor, with one corner of it leaning against the calf of his leg, keeping a single finger on the amphora's lid to show his dexterity, when Policinello spoke to him.

'Soon?' said he, with a curl of his eyebrow upwards.

'To-night!' said Pulcinella, and passed him with a glint of red light out of eyes that glowed deep within the mask. He extended a hand to Luigi as if to take his waist in a gay swirl of the trodden measure. Mechanically the fingers of Luigi went out to meet those of the jester. They touched, in a curious

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clinging fashion. The servitor's palm closed as if upon money, and he of the long nose danced on.

'Pretty Teresina — O prettiest one!' he said; and his arm went about another girl's waist. For it is a pleasant thing to be Sir Punchinello at Carnival time. He has rights that none dare dispute. And pretty Teresina waxed prettier than ever to know that the Duke's eyes were on her, and they danced a measure down the floor of the great room. For so the Duke desired, sitting and nodding a sleepy approval; and the Great Lady, his mother, smiled too, because her son smiled, and it was many days since he had done so much. While all the more freely that they were thus jovial in hall, the shouts of merriment came up from the courtyard beneath, where the house lads and the scullery wenches made jocund mirth.

Such unbound jollity, so merry a Carnival, had there not been seen for years at Monte Leone. No, nor such a Punchinello as the great merry fellow who went from maid to maid, making each blush and bridle at the things — such things too — as he whispered in her ears.

But I, a little lass, hiding all alone and forgotten by Duke and nurse alike, under the fine lace of the table-cover, somehow trembled, as if there had been a wind blowing from the mountains upon me, and my body thinly clad.

For beside me, leaning his thigh on the table, stood Luigi Pavone, pale as death. After speaking with the jester he had let the wine-jar slip from his hand to the floor, where now it lay slowly gurgling forth its rich contents — wine resinous, scented like rosemary and red as blood, while Luigi with chalk-white cheeks and injected eyes stared at something

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which lay in the palm of his hand. I stole a little nearer, that I might see what it could be that had so frightened him. He held it hidden by his stiff fingers from the roomful of revellers. But I, standing all unseen behind him, saw plainly enough through the interstices of the fine silk and lace.

It was a little silver skull, with a thong of human hair strung through the empty eye-sockets and caught behind the head into a loop!

\* \* \* \* \*

It had grown dark, and out in the courtyard they lighted the torches. I was over young to know that the darkness came too early to be natural. I saw the Duke in the window suddenly grow black against a great sheet of pale blue flame. Then the thunder burst upon the plain of Apulia, stunning us with a sharp explosion of sound.

In a moment the room was very dark again, blue-black this time, the dim square of the window and the Duke silhouetted against it being all that remained evident to my sight. Silence ensued for a long breathing — all were stricken still, turned to marble. Then, as the echoes died away on the hills behind Monte Leone, there came another flash, a little one, and again all the company stood petrified, saving that at the farther end of the room I saw a man stare suddenly white and aghast at something in the palm of his hand, and Punchinello, with his mask half off his face, leaning towards him. And though I was but a little maid, in my heart I knew what the man stared at, and dimly also why the Merryman's red eyes gleamed redder than before. So I crept farther under the table, and shivered and

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waited for that which was to be.

Now the blessed saints strengthen me to tell of that which followed! I have ridden, I have fought in such fashion as few maidens can boast of; but never have I seen aught half so terrible as that night.

The blue lightning flame blazed broadly forth again, filling all the banqueting-hall of Monte Leone with light. I saw Pulcinella stand erect with a dagger in each hand. *Flicker-flicker* came the continuous lightning flashes at the windows. Quick as the waving of an aspen leaf in a light wind, I saw the blue gleam on one broad steel blade. I saw it strike the Duke. I saw it, no longer blue, strike the Great Lady the Mother Duchess. Then, thrusting the poor murdered body to the floor, among the legs of the chairs and the scattered crusts, I saw Punchinello disengage the steel from the wound and, with a horrid laugh, drive fiercely into the packed mass of the servitors.

There came a great knocking at the outer gates; and I must have fainted away, for the next thing that I remember returns like part of a bad dream. I seem to see Pulcinella grown into twenty, each with a bloody dagger, and they are all dancing round a silver skull which rests on the breast of the dead Duke. They bow their heads and flap their ears as they dance, now joining hands and now solemnly reversing. And all the while I lay looking through the lace of the table-cover, seeing things that were strange for a little child to see with unturned brain.

Then the great chests were broken open, some of the grim jesters laying aside their carnival masks that they might see the better. And the contents were heaped, with tinkle of coin and clatter of plate, on the table above my head; while I quaked as I

heard the glass jingle and shiver and the fragments fly over the edge among their feet.

'Little La Bella is as good as dead now,' I thought, 'for they will be sure to look below the table.' And something moved and thrust a wet cold nose into my hand. My heart deadened and stopped. But it was only Carlo, the Duchess's spaniel, who wagged his tail at me. But as soon as Punchinello came near he growled and sprang forward to seize him by the calf. Then, with an oath, the jester stooped to knife poor Carlo with the same weapon that had killed his mistress, and cast him twitching like a dead rabbit upon the poor murdered body, whose fate he had so vainly sought to avenge.

After that I must have fainted away again, for when I came to myself all was dark in the great hall of Monte Leone. The night was blue-black outside, and the storm had passed, only growling and flickering somewhere at a great distance among the hills, not enough to see clearly by. Yet I could discern lumps and heaps, shadowy and undefined upon the floor, and one larger than the rest in the window, from which, if my ears reported aright, there came at intervals a little whining whimper.

I was alone, a maid-child in the place of so many horrid murders. The servitors were either killed or sworn accomplices, the women dead or carried off — none left to tell the tale, save one little babe.

Nevertheless there in that place of fear I abode all through the night, grasping a great post of Spanish mahogany, the main support of the dining-table. Now I trembled lest the dead things were moving towards me, slowly and painfully dragging themselves over the floor. Again I dared not put my hand down, lest I should touch a hidden murderer.

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Living terror stirred in my hair and chilled my bones. I had cut my face on the broken glass when I fell the second time, and my hand was wet with something cold and gluey — like spilt wine. But the Saints kept reason on her seat within my brain, perhaps because I was too young to know all that these things meant. Such was my first knowledge of the vengeance of the Decisi and of the dread Sign of the Silver Skull!

\* \* \* \* \*

The morning came slowly. Leaden-footed and tardy it sifted up through the open windows, seeking a way from the underworld. The little square panes became flooded with pale lemon colour, which somehow did not make those dead things on the floor any clearer or less dreadful. Indeed, the reflection from the painted ceiling gave the shapeless mounds a ghastly look of life, as if they were trying to rise and walk in their sleep but could not succeed.

I was but a child, but after all a child of Apulia. And I did not go mad; for within my young heart I vowed that if God spared me I should wait and find out and have vengeance. I should discover who had killed the dear Duke, he who had been my only father, and slain my own Great Lady, that had been so kind, so distantly kind, to me. And so in the slow-coming morning I waited.

For this is not the end.

It was, I think, about eight of the clock, and I could see all too clearly, when, after listening hour by hour that no lurking murderer remained, with infinite fear I came forth from my hiding-place, and

praying tremulously to the Madonna that PUNCHINELLO might indeed be gone, I crept downstairs, shutting my eyes as I passed those shrouded mounds and stagnant pools of blackness. The whole house was still, save now and then for the moaning whimper from the oriel where the murderer had thrown poor Carlo. But I got down safely at last, and ran across the courtyard, where in a corner I came upon more dead men, with their boot-soles all pointing towards me and their heads turned away.

I arrived at the outer gate. The sun was just rising over the sea, red and broad as a shield hung on a peg in the hall. There was a smell of frost in the air.

The storm had passed suddenly as it had come. Before the gate five young men were dismounting. They had cloaks of grey, and wore feathers in their hats; gallant to look upon they were, all fair and noble as gods. And their horses were well fitting to carry such men as they. But I was distracted with great fear, as indeed was small wonder, considering that which I had left above and behind me.

‘Spare me — do not kill a little child,’ I cried out, or words like these, ‘and I will never tell what I have seen, kind gentlemen!’

Then the chief of them, a grave black-bearded man, swung me up in his arms, but as quickly set me down again.

‘Blood!’ he cried, dusting his sleeve: ‘what means this? Who hath harmed the little maid?’

And his brow grew dark. Then, as I pointed behind me into the quiet courtyard now smiling in the sun, he gave me in charge to a boy and strode within. His friends followed him. The whining whimper waxed louder and more shrill till it became almost a shriek; then, all suddenly, with a final yelp

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of agony, ceased.

When the man came forth again, it was with an ashen face marvellously pale. His lips were drawn and chalky under his beard, and his hand twitched as it rested upon the sword-handle. He swung himself into his saddle without a word.

'Give me the little maid!' he said gruffly, as soon as he was settled.

'It is the Silver Skull!' he said presently. 'From this day forth let none of the Decisi cast their shadows between the sun and the knife of Gaetano Vardarelli.'

So in the rose-tinted light of a young spring morning, these five fair young men and I, a little desolate maid, rode away and left the murder-accursed house of Monte Leone. A fresh fanning wind was breathing through the open doors as we went, and the frugal sun of February glinted coldly in upon the black pools in the quadrangle and on the shrouded mounds up there in the banqueting-hall.

CHAPTER THREE

THE YOUNG PRIEST OF GROTTAGLIE

‘What do they call you, little one?’ asked my deliverer presently.

‘They call me “La Bella,”’ said I, ‘but the Great Lady — she says, “Come hither, Isabella,” when she kisses my cheek. Then when she looks away I wipe it off!’

“La Bella” you shall be, then, littlest,’ he said; ‘and we will be your brothers, we five. By-and-by you shall be not “La Bella” but “La Bellissima,” the Fairest Flower of the Vardarelli. And he will be a bold man who would pluck you without our permission.’

So, in this wise I, Isabella of the house of Monte Leone, became one of the brigand race of the Vardarelli; and though death hath sadly broken the ranks, these five fair brave young men are my brothers still — aye, and all the *comitiva* also, though some have died in battle, and one on the scaffold, and the rest are in exile where the Albanian mountains show in clear weather over the purple of Adria.

Now it may be wondered at, how I, who till this moment had known no other will than mine own, should go so quietly with these five strangers — yes, and talk with them by the way of the horror I had witnessed. Yet at times I would fall into a transport of anger and excitement, crying out that the terrible PUNCHINELLO was coming with his long nose and bloody knife, and struggling impotently in the big kindly arms that held me so securely.

But as we rode farther from the shambles at

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Monte Leone, and the February morning shone full and fair over the distant plain of the Adriatic, we came on a sight that in a moment shamed my distempered childish anger. Though it is now many years ago, and though I have experienced a world of famous sights since that day, I can still see the white towns and townlets, the brown-beamed loopholed *masserie* we passed on our way across the green plain.

Now, it is well known to all on the seaboard of Puglia, that our weather in February is often as warm and sunny as the May of the North. Just as our women ripen early, and for their smiles, even at fourteen, stilettoes flash and redden, so these chill February morns of ours often lift upon days of mistily silver sunshine and a sea glimmering with an inner light, while in the long herbage the grasshopper whirrs his steely song as though it were already the heats of midmost June. Then the leaves creep out on the trees over all the plain, though doubtless up on the Abruzzi there are still white long-clinging patches, and the slopes of Monte Volture are white with rime.

Oh, I could sing a song of springtime in my dear country. But this is not the place for it. I had come, a little heart-sick maid, from the castle wherein my life had been passed; all alone with five riders I had come, brigands every one. Might not these very men have wrought the terrible deeds of the night? No, it was written on their open countenances that such creeping murder was not in their natures, and the instinct of the child does not err. So, ere we had gone twenty miles from the dark pile of Monte Leone, I was already beginning to rejoice like a babe in the motion of the horse, and the strength of the

strong arm about me. The warmth of the morning sun entered into me, and I began almost cheerfully to question of whither they were taking me and whom I should find at the end of the journey.

'You shall see our mother, and she shall be yours as well, little one!' said Gaetano. And at the name of their mother the five strong young men saluted as at the appearing of a superior officer. It was a gracious gesture; and, though I knew not why, it reassured me wondrously.

So we rode joyously through bushes of white cistus, not yet broken into flower. We trod underfoot violets white and purple. We clattered through the brooks which prattled gaily down from the heights, yet red with the rain of the night. And, forgetting for a moment that which lay behind me, I shouted as the horse's hoofs dashed the spray higher than my head. The full day had come long ere we reached a little wayside church which had a presbytery built hard by. Even Sirius had gone out before the fierce sunlight, like a willow-shaped tongue of flame tossed upward from a bonfire. But, as memory returned to me, I was ready to weep again for very loneliness, when under the caroub avenue, among beds of pure white bloom, we saw a young priest walking with a book in his hand from which he conned his morning lesson. He did not see us approach, being absorbed in his devotion. And above him, as we came riding up, the bell of the little church began to ring.

'Bless me!' cried Don Giovanni, the youngest and handsomest of the brothers, crossing himself, 'it is a saint's day. I declare I have not confessed since Easter. Let us go in and pray.'

'It will do you but little good,' said his brother, before whom I was riding; 'but as you will. It will rest

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the horses.'

But I think the sight of the tall young priest, so quiet and still at his meditation, shamed him. So, fastening their horses to the wall-rings outside, the Vardarelli alighted, and with bared heads reverently awaited the coming of the holy father.

He paced slowly towards us, never raising his eyes from his book. A quiet serenity breathed about him. Even that terrible place from which we had come seemed somehow sanctified by the presence of true religion. As he went by the five brothers kneeled on the sod, and Don Gaetano humbly besought his blessing. As for me, I stood looking up at him, with, I doubt not, the large wonderment of a child.

The young man raised his eyes and let them rest upon us with a grave contemplative silence. He was not tall, but his dress being that of an *abate*, it made him appear more so than he was. He possessed a lithe and manly frame, accurately proportioned. His forehead was broad but low, the face of a notable squareness, the lips thin, compressed, and cutting a straight line across his face. His eyes were grey, cavernous, and piercing, having in them, as he turned away, a certain red glint such as I have seen in those of a wild thing of the woods. An awe fell upon me as he stood gazing at us, and when he set his hand upon my head I had almost cried out with fear.

'Your blessing, most reverend father *Abate!*' said Don Gaetano, bowing his head yet lower.

The young man was silent while his eyes ran over us, and in one long cool regard took in all the details of our equipage and equipment. Then he looked a little reproachfully at the tethered horses, with their harnessment of steel, as one that examines

curiously the gauds and vanities of another world.

'You are good Christians?' he said at last, in a full bell-like voice, casting his eye along the little line of kneeling figures. As for me, I thought I had never seen a man so reverend and holy. The evil of the night seemed to fall from my soul, and I felt composed and thankful before the man of God as one whose sins had been forgiven.

'We are indeed good Catholics,' said Don Gaetano, without looking up.

'When were you last at confession?' the young *Abate* went on.

'Truly we were all shriven last Easter, as the custom is,' said Gaetano; 'we are men of the hills, and cannot so frequently come to our duty as women are wont to do.'

The young man continued to look at us severely, almost reprovingly.

'Religion and humiliation are ever as fitting for men as for women,' he said. 'And this little girl, is she your sister?'

'From this day she shall be, if God will,' said Gaetano Vardarelli. And he told of the deed of blood that had been wrought in the darkness of the night at the ducal house of Monte Leone. The young priest lifted up his hands in horror. His lips moved, and he seemed to commune with God, asking mayhap that the world might not be destroyed by fire on account of the wickedness of men.

'The Duke and all his household, say you? God rest his soul! And with none to anoint with holy oil or shrive the poor passing spirits hurried quick to death, each with his imperfection on his head!'

And he stood looking up into heaven with such an expression of holy calm on his face that it seemed

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almost like a benediction.

Then, with his hand held out, he gave us each his blessing.

'Now,' said he, when we had risen and the Vardarelli stood still with uncovered heads before him, 'it is the day of my patron saint, and I celebrate mass. I fear ye are Free Companions by your appearance, yet God is merciful: come in, confess, and partake — that is, if ye have not on your souls the guilt of blood spilt innocently.'

And he looked sternly at Don Gaetano, who, as ever, was our spokesman.

'I have indeed killed men,' he said, 'but always in equal fight, never with the hidden dagger, never by private assassination. I am a known man, even Gaetano of the Vardarelli, and no man can say that I have slain any unfairly. And for the rest, I have confessed and been shriven.'

'It is well,' said the young priest: 'follow me. But remember how it is written that men of violence shall perish by the sword.'

He turned and walked before us up the avenue of dwarf caroubs, his black robe with its underfringe of lace sweeping the daisies, and his whole figure breathing a peace which was not of this world. But as he turned I caught the pink glimmer in his eyes, as I had seen it when the Duke's huntsmen had shown me a wild-cat taken in a trap. And though I was but a child I remember being suddenly stricken cold from head to foot.

As we passed the door of the presbytery a dark-haired woman, with a stern set countenance, came to the door and eyed us with suspicion. The young priest bent his thick brows upon her.

'You are coming to mass, Bettina?' he asked

softly.

But she heeded him not; perusing the faces of our company one by one, and especially that of Don Gaetano, whose air of command marked him everywhere as a natural leader.

I have since seen the look on the face of one that stands for trial in the place of accusation, and scans the countenance of his judge to forecast his sentence. At the time I only wondered how a man so holy should have in his house a woman with the ill conscience of the evil-doer so plainly stamped upon her. But when I spoke of the matter to Don Gaetano he replied that such burdens are sometimes sent to devout priests to chasten their spiritual pride and keep them humble like other men.

'Bettina, you will come to mass,' said the priest again, still in the same low tone, but this time with a sudden metallic note in his voice like the whetting of a knife upon a butcher's steel.

The woman looked at him with a quick inquiry in her eyes, and nodded.

'I will come, holy father,' she said; 'but who are these gentlemen?'

'I know not,' he made answer. 'What matters that to you? They are God's children. Let meat be prepared for them, and wine, that they may eat and be refreshed, before riding on their way and giving God the glory.'

With that he passed within the little church, dropped momentarily upon one knee before the altar, and then disappeared into the sacristy.

Never shall I forget that morning's service, there in that little church under the caroubs. The *Abate* had a voice that now rang like a trumpet, now pled like a woman; and to me the holy words were like a

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song, touching my heart and breaking down the barrier of fear. I sobbed with my forehead upon a bench, while young Don Giovanni petted me when no one saw, and whispered how that now I was safe and that the Vardarelli would take care of me. I would be their sister, the daughter of their mother. So he did till my sobbing was hushed and the bell tinkling caused us to prostrate ourselves before that wondrous solemn thing of which none but priests know the meaning.

Presently, with chastened demeanour and awed faces, we found ourselves sitting in the wide cool house-place of the presbytery, where there was nothing but a great slab of stone in one corner, on which was a piece of wood shaped like a pillow and worn smooth in the centre, an image of the Holy Virgin, a reading-desk with an open illuminated volume, a crucifix on the wall, and underneath, also on a pedestal, but in a place by itself, a white and grinning skull.

The *Abate* came in, and bowing to the crucifix, he laid his hand upon the skull, and looking upon us with piercing eyes, he said, 'Hew down the tree and cut off his branches, shake off his leaves and scatter his fruits. Let his heart be changed from a man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him.'

And though the five brothers of the Vardarelli understood no more than I, that was but a little child, we came forth from the presbytery awed and shaken in our hearts, because the holiness and the solemnity of the young *Abate* abashed us. Then we mounted, Don Gaetano once more swinging me into the saddle before him.

And the young priest with the square face and the straight lips followed us to the door, and watched us

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ride away, silent himself and stern, with a face like the justice of God looking upon the sinful children of men. And we were every one humbled before him.

Nevertheless I wished that his eyes had not shone red like those of the trapped wild-cat when the sunlight played crosswise upon them.

# THE SILVER SKULL

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE HOUSE OF THE VARDARELLI

The road we went that day I know now, for often and often I have ridden that way since, and that with such a train of gay riders as never since Manfred's day hath followed any through Apulia save Gaetano Vardarelli alone. But then, as we left the plain and fared north towards the hills, a constant succession of new experiences awaited me. The child, who had scarcely ever passed the great gates of Monte Leone, clattered through the crooked streets of little white towns just shaking themselves awake. Women were sweeping in doorways, or, broom in hand, stood shrilly denunciatory on the uneven pavement. But as we went on I noted that, whereas at first few or none had known my conductors, now at sight of Don Gaetano every face grew suddenly respectful, while at the coming of Don Giovanni every woman smiled and the well-grown maidens set their fingers to their cheeks and posed becomingly at the fountains of the villages as we passed through.

And if Giovanni thought that his elder brother were sufficiently far in front not to notice, he would slip from his horse and with hat in hand approach to pay his homage to them, or turn the handle of the well-wheel on the chance of the brief and perilous joy of a stolen kiss. But not so if the keen eye of Gaetano flashed round upon him. Then would Giovanni pretend that he had dropped a glove or desired to cut a riding switch, and so leap on horseback again, waving his hand to the maiden left standing wistful and alone, most like a truant boy unsatisfied with his adventure and yet glad to have

escaped punishment.

But I was pleased and proud too as I went, pleased with the free swing of the noble beast underneath me and the gloved hand of tall Don Gaetano about me. For at the clatter of his horse's hoofs bronzed men would come forth to the doors of wide-arched shadowy smithies, great dusky fellows with shoulders bent a little with the swing of the forge-hammer. Then in a moment they too would toss their hats in the air and shout for the honour of the 'Capitano!'

Idlers on threshing floors set anglewise to the slope, millers by the rushing rivulets, shepherds nonchalantly watching their flocks or tending the young tail-wagging lambs, would spring to their feet and come running to us. Even the great fierce Apulian dogs, rough-coated and white-toothed, would all unbidden cease their yelping chorus, and follow briskly with bright eyes and arched bushy tails, as though proud to be also of the *comitiva*.

'The Vardarelli! The good Brothers! — The Vardarelli!' So the report spread before us as we went hillward.

And the peasants would heave their arms into the air with a peculiar gesture, a sort of backhanded episcopal blessing, which the brothers as readily responded to. This, though I understood it not then, I pleased Gaetano much by copying. Afterwards I found it to be the greeting of the mighty secret society of the Carbonari, of which (among other things) Gaetano Vardarelli was a notable leader. But, as I say, I was only a little maid, knowing nothing save that I sat beside the man to whom all did homage — a thing which is ever pleasing to a woman — and that the dark past had dissolved like

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a cloud which the sun has drunk up.

Presently before us there opened up a deep defile, into which the horses, with the quickened pace which tells of home near by, turned their well-accustomed steps. Gaetano, as ever, rode first, and the four brothers followed two by two behind. At a little wayside house, a mile or so up the defile, we halted, and a pair of the young men, dismounting, drew over the horses' shod feet a sort of boot of woven straw. Then we rode on again deeper and deeper into the heart of the hills. The mountains hung imminent above us, and it would have been small wonder if a little maid of the plains had lost heart as she saw the purple slopes grow steeper about her and finally shoot up into precipices, while the path grew steadily more and more perilous.

After a little, indeed, I could only shut my eyes and turn my head inward upon the coat of my conductor, for we seemed plastered like flies upon the face of the great wall of rock. Don Gaetano patted me gently on the cheek.

'Yet a little while, *Bella mia*,' he said, 'and we shall be at home.' Then, just when the path seemed about to end in utter destruction, we passed into a rock-hewn tunnel, cool and dark, with fern and flax growing in the clefts. The horses' feet, still strawshod, sounded suddenly dull and hollow. I clutched Don Gaetano's sleeve in quick fear of the dark and of falling into some unseen danger. The light came again, the tunnel shot up into a magnificent archway, the hills swept round about us like a wave, in an amphitheatre of inaccessible cliffs — and lo, there beneath me lay the eagle's nest of the Vardarelli, the home that was to be mine for many and many a day.

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Val Demone, the fortress of the Vardarelli, is a league-wide cirque among the hills, of which few know the secret, and is almost impervious to attack from any side. The path to it at that time was little known, and kept purposely perilous. The strengths were easily defended, and the provision of food and water within was sufficient for an army. In the time of Joseph Buonaparte and Murat it had been the headquarters of disaffection; and now, when the Bourbons were again settling upon the two Sicilies like unclean vultures, under the protection of the white-coated Austrians, these five bold young men had made of the Val Demone the impregnable fortress whence Apulia and the Abruzzi were held in fear, and which commandant after commandant had assaulted in vain.

White walls ran four-square along the top of a little hill which looked towards the great natural archway through which we had passed. These were pierced by small dark holes. Towers stood at each corner and a dwelling-house with porches and blinds was in the centre, looking strange enough in its fortress-like square. We rode into the great courtyard littered with last year's olive-prunings, and at the sound of the horses and the crying of Don Giovanni, many swarthy lads swarmed out from the open doors of the granaries and cattle-sheds. The Vardarelli threw their reins carelessly to these underlings, and leaped from their horses. My conductor handed me tenderly down, and I found myself looking about me in this strange place, where over the flat roofs of the fortress home of the Vardarelli the dark precipices showed their impregnable fronts, and the blue sky overarched the narrow valley like the roof of some gigantic

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cathedral.

Upon the doorstep of the house stood a lady, grey-haired indeed, but erect and tall as any of her sons. Don Gaetano went forward to her, doffed his hat, and respectfully kissed her hand. In this he was followed by all his brothers. But the lady did not return the attention in any way, nor indeed did she appear to take the slightest notice of it. She kept her eyes fixed upon me with a cold and threatening expression.

'Which of you has fetched this woman-child home to the house of Pietro Vardarelli?' she said, in a high stern voice.

'Mother,' said Gaetano, 'I and my brothers have brought you this child.'

'And whose child may she be? Answer me, Gaetano Vardarelli.'

Don Gaetano, still with his hat in his hand, went up to his mother and whispered something to her, of which I only heard the words 'Silver Skull' and 'Monte Leone.'

At that, as was natural, my grief came again upon me, and, though I do not remember it, I must have cast myself in a torrent of tears upon the litter of the yard. For the next thing I can recall is being carried up into a wide room, with windows pleasantly open to the green whispering leaves without and a cool floor of limestone. The courtyard upon which it looked was open to the sky at the top, and in the midst a fountain plashed. The tall woman sat by me, the severity somehow all gone out of her face. She kissed my brow and smoothed the white lace-edged linen, for I had been laid down on a pillow.

'Little daughter,' she was murmuring soothingly in my ear, 'they tell me you have never known a

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mother. I, on my part, have five sons, but no daughter. Let me love you with the love of a mother, and the Fratelli Vardarelli shall stand about you to avenge your wrongs.'

In this manner I became an inmate of the famous house of the Vardarelli, whom the ignorant now call brigands, forgetting all the good they did and the blood they shed for their country and her liberties.

# THE SILVER SKULL

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A MAID AMONGST MEN

So the time passed on, and I had grown tall — still, however, remaining slight and lithe as the reeds by the water edges. During all this time I had dwelt with men, no woman being near me save the mother Vardarelli (who, in many things, was even as a man), and her maid Bettina, an innocent chattering giddy-pate, who taught me nothing. I had learned sword and pistol, and had some skill of carbine also. I had ridden to battle with the troop — aye, and seen the generals of the Frenchman and of the Austrian broken and foiled by the quickness of the Vardarelli. I had seen convoys taken and heard the music of the whistling balls. I had waited all night behind the ambush, till, in the morning light, the men of the White Coat came jesting and tramping to their destruction. I had worn the yellow, and blue, and red of the Carbonari. Almost, but not quite, had I forgotten the dead Duke, yet unavenged. Only when I glimpsed Monte Leone on our moonlight rides, towering above the valley mists, I was glad to turn my eyes away and talk to the nearest fine young fellow, who blushed and trembled — glad, doubtless, to be so distinguished by the sister of the Vardarelli.

The troop grew to four hundred — ay, and upon occasion I have seen Gaetano ride out at the head of a thousand horsemen, all well mounted and creditably armed. In those days there was no power in Apulia or in all the Abruzzi like our Gaetano Vardarelli. We acknowledged neither Emperor in Vienna nor Bourbon in Naples. We were the Vardarelli.

And as for love or marriage — why, I never thought of these things. For it was not with me as with other girls, who may have but one well-looking lad or two to pay them court in a village or countryside. Every handsome youth and gallant throughout three provinces rode in turn with the Vardarelli — truly brave men too, no extortioners or private murderers among them. Every penny paid for protection was duly added to the common good, and divided with equal hand to all alike, fair day or foul day. And I, little Isabel, even I had my share with the rest. But of love, not one had ventured to speak plainly to me — no, not so much as to say that which would cause a maid to blush. For, more than God or the devil, these men feared Gaetano Vardarelli, who for a light loose word, spoken in jest, had once stricken down even his favourite brother Giovanni, that was to our captain as the apple of his eye. Of service and courtliness, indeed, I had plenty; but I rode with that whole *comitiva* of men as though I had been a curl-pated boy, and not a grown and marriageable girl of sixteen, as in truth I was.

Ah! by Mary and the saints, these were good days, before any one dreamed of the coming of the Englishman and the breaking up of the worthiest comity that Italy of the South has known. Yet the end came from within. For throughout Apulia there were evil men scheming to do worse things, and our moderate societies were not sufficient to satisfy their greed. Men of the towns they were mostly, who, sitting in their offices and upholstered salons, and writing proclamations and threatening letters, killed and plundered by the vilest and bloodiest means, bringing disgrace upon our cause and even smirching for a time the fair fame of the Brothers

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Vardarelli. That is, in the eyes of those who knew us not.

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So I grew up to be a great maid, seeing naught but men. For the Lady of the Casa was also almost a man, stern and just, sending her sons forth to fight the tyrant, whether French cavalryman or this last belated Spanish Bourbon, hedged about in Naples with Austrian bayonets and paper constitutions.

Jests in plenty there were among the *comitiva*. But not in sight or hearing of Gaetano and his mother. And this will I add. Since for my sins and another's necessities I have been compelled to frequent the society of the great of Naples, and have eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, now I declare it plainly: I have heard more ill talk and evil suggestion in one afternoon assembly of dames of fashion than in ten years spent among a whole *comitiva* of men with a price on their heads.

So, about the camp-fire and on the great threshing-floors of the *masserie*, the jest and laughter ran clean and free. The younger brothers of the Vardarelli, indeed, made love to gentle and simple as they went. Yea, in all Apulia and to the utmost Pontine marches there was said to be no maid that could resist handsome Don Giovanni. Yet there I dwelt for ten years, knowing nothing and learning nothing, freer from evil communication and insult than if I had been in a convent or in a college for young donnas taught by white-swathed nuns.

Yet, without harm done or occasion taken, I could be merry too; and often, when bound on some distant foray, I would clip my dark curls close to my

pate, and with a burnt willow-stick tip the well-nigh invisible down at either side of my upper lip with black, abetted thereto by Don Giovanni, who would even assist me to give it the least saucy upward twirl at the corners.

Also Giovanni taught me to fence, and the stiletto play, and how to throw the knife so that it will strike point foremost. But Don Gaetano himself it was who taught me to shoot with the pistol at a card at ten, twenty, and even thirty paces. Till for sauciness and pride I would match me against any of the *comitiva* for the price of a sheep, knowing that Don Gaetano would readily give me the wherewithal to pay if I lost. But the good lads would seldom let me lose, purposely shooting wide — because it was my custom to cry when I lost.

Even thus was I, Isabella of the Vardarelli, at sixteen years of my age or thereby, knowing little save to read my Lives of the Saints, or what I loved better (oh, shame to me!) the voyages of Ramusio, or even the ingenious tales of Boccaccio the Tuscan, in which I had great pleasure.

But now I must tell of what befell one day about this time, from which relation a juster and livelier impression of the manner of my life may be gained than from much writing about it and about.

It chanced that certain of our company had been captured by one General Corre while visiting their friends in the town of Lecce, where, at that time, was his headquarters. Though men of inferior position, they were held responsible for all the deeds of the Vardarelli, and were sent as convicts to the castle of Brindisi. We were forthwith to ride to their rescue, even as (when he heard of the matter) Gaetano had sworn to do; and so the summons had been sent

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forth to the band to meet us at the Masseria of the Three Crosses, in order to teach the Neapolitan and the Austrian alike who was King in Apulia, by the right divine of the strong hand.

'Isabella,' said our mother, 'it will be a hot day and an evil night. The way is long and the mission perilous. It were better to abide with me here in the house.'

And she looked at Gaetano that he should support her. For with her, as with the rest of us, the desires of the stern and silent man were ultimate law.

But, knowing well that she would make such an appeal, I had first spoken to Don Gaetano, who, if I chose to coax him, would deny me nothing — at least nothing that would keep us two together.

So I had pled with him as he came from the stables where he had been seeing to it that the lads did their work, and that the horses were fit for their journeying. And this was the fashion of my pleading. I set my hands clasped upon his shoulder, and asked him not to send me away, but to let me ride with him this day also, as on all the others. Whereat he said nothing on that occasion; but I knew well enough by that very mark that my case was won.

So, when his mother spoke, he said, 'I think Isabella may safely enough ride with us. I will keep her near me.'

'There is not the less but the more peril of that,' said the Signora, 'for where the Chief of the Vardarelli is, there is the front of battle.'

'Then,' said I, somewhat saucily, 'there is the greater reason that a daughter of the Vardarelli should share it. Besides, 'tis not Isabella, but your youngest son, Pietro, who would mount and ride

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with his brothers.’

So, as was not uncommon, I got my way.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### THE MAILED PRIEST

It was a chillish morning for June when we mounted to ride. Over the precipices an unseasonable and fretful *tramontana* was blowing out the clouds in tatters and fleecy wisps. The tall pines stood out solemn and black against the glimmer of the sea as we emerged from the dark of the Stone Gateway. The rough upland pastures were grey and dew-drenched under hoof, and the horses' feet swished when the bent and withy sedges clung to them, as in the early unsunned morning they do about the scythe of the mower.

The sea also was grey when we first saw it far in front of us, but speedily to the east we marked it grow rosy red, then flush to a darker hue, anon glimmer with inner light, and lastly wink and thrill wine-hearted and amethystine from Manfredonia to Cape Leuca, glowing broad and equal under the risen sun from horizon to horizon verge. The *comitiva* jested and laughed low and heedless behind us.

Only Don Gaetano on his black horse noted that which was around us, and lifting with his hand the bridle-rein he indicated silently the marvel of the sea and sky.

We halted at the town of Anduria for the forenoon meal, as also to escape for an hour or two from the great heat. There, as elsewhere, we found many willing to entertain us for love or fear; and in the courtyard of the deserted palace of the Prince of Francavilla we stabled and watered our horses, while the maidens made needless visits to the famous well which neither shrinks nor increases (as

saith one Pliny), and the matrons clattered and hasted, boiling and roasting, or stirring up and combing out the pans of macaroni for us. But meantime I, who seldom saw even the outside of a Christian town, wandered away through the streets, that I might see what there was to be seen. I had on me a lad's velvet suit with frogs and silver buttons, a belt of silver too in which were pistols, a sword by my side and a stiletto ready to my hand. I was Pietro of the Vardarelli to all that had not the freedom of the troop, and knew not also Isabella the maid. So I returned boldly and with interest the shy glances of the girls, and pretended to twirl my moustache, with which, truth to tell, Giovanni that morning had done rather better than his most convincing best.

The doors of the church stood open. The day, though we had forgotten it, was Sunday, and within there was gathered a congregation of old women, respectable citizens, and such young persons as had not yet heard of the arrival of the Vardarelli.

A priest was officiating at the altar, and, as I entered, something familiar struck me. I had seen the man before. But where? I went as near as I could, and, leaning against a pillar, watched him closely. Not till he elevated the host could I be sure of him. It was the young priest who had officiated at the little church on the morning when the Vardarelli carried me home from the fatal halls of Monte Leone.

But there was a strange constraint about him, which, at first, I could not understand. He moved with a certain curious stiffness of gait, like one that has a concealed wound. Yet he was in the prime of life, and appeared to be in the most vigorous health. His face had grown heavier and more massive, his eyes were deeper set, and the straight line of his

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mouth was more cruel than before. But I could not be mistaken. The smallest thing I had seen that night and morning could never be washed from my memory. It was the same man without doubt.

As he lifted the host, I observed that which struck me to the heart with astonishment.

This officiating priest, in the midst of the most solemn mysteries of the holy faith, wore a coat of mail under his stole. Heavy iron rings were upon his legs, and doubtless that projecting point underneath the gold-bossed cloth of the sacred garment meant either the hilt of a pistol or a stiletto stuck in his belt.

Now, what could a priest be doing with such an equipment? Francavilla was quiet. The Carbonari held every office. Each dignitary of weight or importance was a sworn Good Cousin. The priesthood was known to be with us to a man. What could the man fear in Anduria? Not the Vardarelli, for none had expected us there, nor even then did he know of our presence.

But as I knelt on the cold flagstones, the extraordinary solemnity of his voice, clear and sonorous as a silver trumpet, arrested me. Do what I would, I could not leave the church till the end of the service; and might not then, had not Don Giovanni come seeking me, and beseeching me to follow him, saying that Gaetano was growing restless and angry because of my absence, and would neither eat himself nor yet let any of the others partake till my safe return.

As soon as I had gone into the room where Don Gaetano was, he looked upon me severely, and said a single curt word to me, forbidding me to leave his side again without permission.

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'I am responsible to my mother for the safety of her daughter,' he said.

Even as he spoke the word, a shadow fell across the floor, and there in the doorway stood the tall priest who had been officiating at the church. He had doubtless seen me stand by the pillar, and had followed Giovanni and my-self. He must have heard Gaetano call me 'daughter,' for he looked at me with a quick and searching glance, whereat, giving him back glance for glance, as he stood in the cross light of the door and window, I saw very clear the pink look in his eyes which I had seen on the morning of the first dread home-coming from Monte Leone.

Don Gaetano rose haughtily to his feet.

'Reverend father,' he said, 'to what do I owe the honour of this visit?'

The priest made no reply in words, but held up two fingers to his chin in a peculiar way — the sign, doubtless, of some secret society of which I was not an initiate.

The sternness in Don Gaetano's eyes did not diminish. It rather became more set and determinate.

'You come to me with that sign, and you call yourself a priest!' he said.

The tall square-built man, with the eyes like shot silk, and the straight-lipped cruel mouth, merely nodded.

'Also I have come directly from the altar, where I have been celebrating, as the day requires. This youth knows it,' he said, bending his brows upon me, and letting his eyes dwell upon mine so long that a cold thrill passed all down my body to my feet.

'You accost me in broad daylight, with the

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garments of a sacred profession upon you. You boast that you come from celebrating Mass. And you make me the sign of a Society whose aim and end, whose beginning and sole condition is murder — cold and calculating murder!’

‘Say not murder — necessary removal of tyrants and traitors rather!’ smiled the priest, suavely.

‘I have nothing to do with you or the dogs of the —’ began Don Gaetano, in a loud voice.

‘Ah, your pardon!’ interjected the priest, in the high trumpet tone he had used at mass, ‘name not that name. If you are not of the Brotherhood, how came you to recognise the sign?’

‘I am the captain of the Vardarelli. It is my business to know everything, evil and good. I did not reply to your precious sign.’

‘I, also,’ said the priest, ‘I know somewhat. For instance, you ride to Brindisi to take Lippo Nocelli and his brother out of prison?’

‘It requires neither a prophet nor yet a priest to guess so much. The Vardarelli do not permit any of their company to be Ferdinand’s galley slaves.’

‘If the Vardarelli had punished traitors and aroused wholesome fear in tyrants by the methods of the Society whose name I beg of you not to mention aloud, Lippo Nocelli would now have been eating macaroni and drinking wine with the rest of the *comitiva*.’

‘Enough,’ said Don Gaetano, impatiently: ‘for what purpose do you seek me?’

The priest drew from his breast a little silver skull and offered it to Don Gaetano. The Captain of the Vardarelli put it aside with a gesture of disdain, whereupon the father shrugged his shoulders and returned it to his own breast.

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‘As you will,’ he said; ‘you will not succeed in your mission without us, and if you do not succeed now, you will regret it. There comes a new English officer from Naples — an Englishman, fierce and relentless, not like Corre and those that have gone before him. He brings Albanian troops and Swiss and Austrian officers, who, being well paid, are proof against the itch of the palm. Unless you unite with us, you of the Vardarelli must fall. But, backed by the secret power of the Silver Skull, you are invincible. That in which you fail by day and at the sword’s point, we can effect at night, and with the little blade of steel.’

‘I am Gaetano Vardarelli, and need assistance of neither man nor devil.’

And as he spoke he bowed a little ironically to the priest.

‘Still you may — there is none invincible. The spirit of man oft escapes through a very small hole. The Council of Twelve meets to-night. Take an equal number and meet us. We have all the Terra di Otranto at our feet — the province of Oria is under our thumb. They will rise whenever the Silver Skull gives the word.’

‘Sir,’ said Gaetano, ‘I will meet you where you will, if so be that our attack fails.’

‘It will fail,’ interrupted the priest, confidently.

‘In that case I will meet you where you will, and that not with any equal number. I will meet you alone, or with but one companion. Gaetano Vardarelli fears neither the Silver Skull nor yet the hempen cord.’

‘Bring this fair “daughter” with you,’ sneered the priest, who chafed obviously under our Gaetano’s contempt, ‘and you may be the more welcome.’

My brother looked him squarely in the face for a

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long moment, and then nodded grimly.

'I will,' he said — 'I will bring this youth. And if tongue or hand or eye offend — by Saint Christopher, not Silver Skulls shall ye be, but bleached skulls of rotten bone whose eyeballs the vultures have picked out. The meeting-place, sir?'

'Within the enclosure of Castello Rotondo — the password, "The Blood of Tyrants."'

And, turning on his heel without salutation, the mail-clad priest clanked out and left us alone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A BLOODLESS LEAGUER

We rode on to Brindisi, where in the castle the Nocelli were interned. Into the great plain of Apulia we descended. The distant hills from which we had come fell far behind in every hue and tone of indigo. Beneath, betwixt us and the sea, was the green garden of fair Puglia, dotted with smiling white farms, wimpled across to seaward by sluggish watercourses; and there beyond, with the castle of Brindisi making a purple blotch upon it, spread the perfect sapphire of the sea. It went to my heart to look upon it, for even thus in the days of my unforgotten childhood had appeared the nearer vivid green of the plain, and that distant cerulean bowstring from the castle of Monte Leone.

Here and there, as we descended to the plain, we saw the little cone-shaped summer-houses of the townspeople of Brindisi, so built to diminish the buffeting of the wind; and as the sun flashed on the gun-barrels of the Vardarelli, and the light breeze bore far the jingle of their bits and stirrup-irons, we laughed to see figures in lightest attire running into the vineyards and olive plantations in order to escape from the terrible *comitiva*.

We rode into Brindisi and boldly up to the castle gate. Gaetano was first, and I close beside him. At the drawbridge we saw red and green uniforms, instead of the white for which we had been on the watch. Instantly our captain leaned forward, with a calm expression of triumph on his face.

'Neapolitan militia!' he said; 'our brothers are safe this time.' For we had all feared that the veterans of

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Austria might be in garrison.

Then Gaetano called his trumpeter and bade him ride nearer and summon the castle to surrender.

'We ask but two prisoners from your hand,' so ran the message, 'but if you give them not up to us, we will take them — and your lives as well.'

The trumpeter was a fine young fellow, with a scarf of red and blue and yellow (being the colours of the Charcoal-burners) wound about his waist. He seemed to think but little of his hazardous mission.

'Let me go with him,' said I to Gaetano, impulsively; whereat the youth smiled well-pleased, and offered me the white flag of truce to carry. But Don Gaetano looked at me with a quick glance of suspicion.

'Abide here by me,' he said gruffly; 'you know not what you ask!'

Whereat I sulked, like the silly spoilt child I was.

'Certainly I will obey you,' said I: 'you are the chief. But do not presume on passive obedience. You are not a lazy Bourbon Ferdinand, and if you try me too far, I will even leave the Vardarelli and set up a *comitiva* of mine own.'

At that he laughed, and reaching across he pinched my ear and pulled certain little curls I had not had the heart to crop which still clustered behind them.

'Would you then leave me,' he said, turning to young Giovanni of Salerno, the trumpeter, 'if this empty pate set up a *comitiva*?'

'Ay, that would I!' said the lad heartily, with such instant conviction that he set us all laughing, 'and so would every young fellow in your band, Don Gaetano — that is, if Don Pietro were to set up his banner.'

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Don Gaetano smiled grimly, as if inwardly enjoying the jest. Then he said gravely, 'Signore Pietro, I must e'en make you a lieutenant, that you be not driven to extremes and desert me, riding away with all the life of the band at your tail.'

The herald trotted forward with the white standard in his hand. The sun shone hotly upon him; but he rode gallantly enough, for I think he knew, this vain Giovanni, that other eyes than those of Don Gaetano were upon him as he went.

We saw the sentinels turn inward and the iron gates shut as he approached. Green coats red-belted and feather-crowned swarmed along the battlements as he went nearer. Certainly it was a brave man's service the young fellow was rendering, for we could see the musket-barrels levelled at him as he rode, and hear the short words of command. But he was within a hundred yards of the tower ere he stayed his advance. Then, standing alone in the middle of the way, he blew the trumpet and waved the white banner. We could not hear what he said, but there ensued a great pother upon the towers, and a running to and fro as of stampeded horses.

Presently came Giovanni of Salerno back laughing, but for all that sitting alert and gay as if he had been only showing his steed's paces at the fair of Bari.

The commandant says that he will gladly give up his prisoners, on condition that we will shoot a hundred or two bullets into the doors and casements, in order to show to the Englishman when he comes. For that all Englishmen dwell upon the sea, and are easily deceived concerning matters upon the land.'

'Content,' smiled Gaetano: 'he is a wise and

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gallant commandant. We will e'en humour him. But bid him put outside such a store of powder and ball as may recoup us for the expense of fusillade. Powder and lead is scarcer among the mountains than here in the port of Brindisi.'

Then he turned to the troop, and in quick, brusque sentences told them what was desired of them, whereat many laughed, rocking in their saddles. But he ordered us to dismount, and leaving our horses in safety, we skirmished about the land face of the castle. The guns began to crack merrily, and the white smoke of the return fire to rise. It was a noble engagement, but not so much as a fly was wounded, for the only bullets fired that day imbedded themselves in the great doors of the castle or 'spatted' harmlessly against the walls.

'Tis dry work in the June sun,' quoth one, Big Antonio by name: 'I would rather besiege a wine-shop and its jolly Hebe than the terrible defences of the castle of Brindisi. See how the blood drips from me!' And the rogue wrung the sweat from his brow with a quick twirl of his fingers.

Just then another white flag rose from the tower above the gateway. Don Gaetano waved our herald forward. A green-coated militiaman stood without the gate waving the flag in one hand and holding a tricoloured scarf of Carbonari colours in the other.

'Good Cousins without,' he cried, with a voice in which fear of the terrible Vardarelli fought with mirth at his message, 'we also are all good cousins within. The Commandant greets you well, and is sending out wine and bread for his friends, and with it Lippo Nocelli and his brother, that the Signori Vardarelli may know in what respect they are ever held in the castle of Brindisi.'

When this was repeated to the *comitiva* there was an answering shout, and save for the restraining influence of Gaetano they would have ridden forward immediately. But the Chief, having returned his thanks and compliments to the gallant commandant, directed that the viands should be carried to the open balcony of an unused palace which looked towards the castle, so that we might be assured that no treachery was intended by this very complaisant general of militia.

Presently we could discern the great pear-shaped amphorae being stacked in the cool of the fountain behind, where the spray played upon them, while the loaves of bread were bestowed under the swinging creepers of the balcony itself.

Then Don Gaetano made the porters taste each jar of wine and each batch of loaves — for poison had not been unknown in the annals of Bourbon hospitality. But there was little evil to be feared when four hundred Vardarelli were in Brindisi with their horses ready and their swords by their sides. So there we rested merrily enough, and ate and drank to the content of our hearts. Don Gaetano questioned Lippo as to his treatment and the strength of the garrison. Lippo admitted that he had been very comfortably off, and that the militia were as little in love with their duty as it was possible for men to be. They were ready to be Ferdinand's men, or Murat's men, or Good Cousins of the Charcoal-burners, just as it suited them. 'Good money and good wine have no politics!' they said, leering openly at each other. Well might the Vardarelli stick eagles' feathers in their hats and call themselves Kings of Apulia. For they at least knew what they wanted, and if it was not given to them, why then they took

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it.

So when the heat was somewhat abated we set out to ride back.

'But this Englishman — Giorgio,' I asked of Don Gaetano: 'what of him? Giovanni says that all English live on the sea, and that England is only a great black stone with rings in it, to which they tie up their ships at night. Have the English truly fins along their sides, and are their fingers webbed like ducks' feet?'

'Giovanni is a young fool — he speaks wind,' said Don Gaetano. 'The English are indeed great on the sea, but they are also great on the land; and in Spain and on the verges of the Low Countries, have you not heard how they put down the Great Emperor?'

'But this Englishman Giorgio, what of him? Will he destroy us?'

The Captain shrugged his shoulders.

'He will do even as the others,' he said. 'He will sweep a little while with his new broom, like a child with a toy. He will make very clean several places that were not very dirty. He will keep far off from the Vardarelli. He will write reports in fine ink on great rough-edged blue paper, which will go to Naples and be put into pigeon-holes till the judgment day. Then one fine day his friend Nugent the Austrian will be disgraced, and, poof! this Englishman will vanish and Apulia again be as though he had never been!'

'Yes,' said I, 'even thus it was with Corre and the others — so you have ever said, and it has come true. But may not this Englishman be different? Is there no fear for the home of the Vardarelli beyond the Stone Gate, for the end of the free riding and all that makes our greatness?'

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Gaetano reached a hand across to pinch my cheek, as was his fashion, smiling grimly the while.

'The Vardarelli are not captains of militia — nor I the commandant of the castle of Brindisi,' he said. 'We are five hundred men, sworn to live and die together. The home of the Vardarelli shall not be violate either by Englishmen from the sea or yet by White Croat from the North. Have no fear! Even as the sun sets after it rises, so will the Englishman come and go. Then another sun will arise, and another, and another. And after them all the mountains shall still stand about and abide the same.'

Nevertheless the Englishman was nearer than we knew. And we who had brought down the castle of Brindisi by the simple stamping of the hoofs of our horses were now to be taken in hand like children, and that by the outlander Church, or as we of Apulia called him 'Giorgio' — the Northern insularisms being markedly unwholesome to Italian tongues.

It was dark when we reached the town of Cerniola, and halted for an hour to rest the horses. We had yet far to go, and a storm was brewing. For hours we had heard the hoofs of the steeds which drew the thunder car stamping abroad over Adria. The lift above us grew blue-black, the faint flicker of lightning wavered here and there across it, and glinted on the scabbards and musket-barrels of the *comitiva*. Aloft the wind hooted down the promise of a wild night.

'You have your cloak?' questioned Don Gaetano presently, flinging his words over his shoulder after a long pause of steady riding.

'No,' I answered; 'it was left behind at our first

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halting-place this morning.'

He said not a word of complaint or disapproval, but for all that he punished me.

'Then take mine!' he said shortly, and denuded himself of his great rough coat of faded Apulian blue.

'I cannot, Don Gaetano,' I said: 'you will need it yourself.'

'Take it and put it about your shoulders: do as I bid you,' he commanded; 'here come the first drops of the thunderstorm.'

'Indeed, then, I will not!' I made reply. And I dare say I tossed my head in the way that was usually so effective with Don Giovanni and the rest of the *comitiva*, whenever I, a spoilt child, had resolved to have my own way.

But Don Gaetano looked at me with that direct gaze before which no eyes could stand.

'I am your captain,' he said: 'I order you to put it on.'

Then I could not resist saying that which only a spiteful girl would say.

'Oh, I hate you,' — I blurted it out so that those nearest could hear — 'I hate you for a cruel tyrant, Don Gaetano!'

'So?' he said coolly; 'only do as I bid you.'

I had perforce to ride on, with the hateful cloak about my shoulders, but the tears rose to my eyes, and fell down my cheeks. And I took care that Don Gaetano should see them too. I hoped that his heart would smite him that he should thus tyrannise over a girl. Yet I think that secretly I liked his masterful way.

But whether or no, certainly his stern equal face showed no trace of emotion. The rain fell and

drenched him through and through. The lightning illuminated his stalwart figure, but never did he deign me a single glance, nor did a word of pity for my misery escape him. And this though he could not have helped noticing my tears. Now on the other hand Don Giovanni touched my arm often in sympathy as we rode — but secretly; and once he offered me a scented kerchief. Yet Gaetano, though I glanced at him often, would not so much as look; but rode forward with the rain beating down upon him, and his face set like iron into the darkness. Only once he put his hand back and twitched the cape of his cloak over my bridle arm, but without even looking at me.

And I hated him more for that than for all the rest.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE COMING OF THE ENGLISHMAN

It was at the cross-roads beyond the Casa Palumbo that one of our district scouts, who knew that we should be riding home that way, brought us word how the Englishman Giorgio, who had come to rule Apulia for Ferdinand, was sheltering at the Albergo Raimondo in the town of Cerniola. The town lay beneath us in a little cup; and by the gathering and scattering of the lights we could see that there was some unusual excitement there. Presently, with a pale-faced follower or two, the fat Syndic of the place dashed up upon his mule. As soon as he found himself in the presence of the full muster of the *comitiva*, his hat was in his hand and his eyes fairly goggled out with fear. His breathing came in stertorous pants, and his whole complexion grew mottled and unpleasing as he stood within the circle of the lighted lantern with which Don Giovanni had hurried forward.

'Great and famous chief of the Vardarelli,' he wheezed, 'if it please you, there is come to our town General Giorgio, which is to say Church, the Englishman; and, hearing that you are to pass this way with the *comitiva*, he hath sent to command — I mean, of course, to invite you to come and see him.'

Don Gaetano laughed a short hoarse laugh.

'Did he say "invite" or "command," Signore Syndic?'

'I think — I am very much afraid that the mad Englishman, not having the fear of death before him, said "command"!'

The smile sprang again to the face of the Chief.

'Well said!' he cried. 'I will go and see this

Englishman. I desire to look upon the face of the first man who ever dared to say "I command" to Don Gaetano Vardarelli, riding in full *comitiva* through his own country of Apulia!

The Syndic bowed low, and his attendants fell in behind him. The wind blattered in their faces and the lightning revealed that they were well-nigh as pale as their master — whether from fear of Giorgio the Englishman, or of the Vardarelli, I know not.

'Tell me, Sir Syndic,' said Gaetano, as we rode on underneath the beating of the tempest, 'what force hath this Englishman with him in Cerniola?'

'My lord,' quoth the Syndic, 'I am a poor man, but true of heart. He seemeth to be alone, save for an attendant or two. But since no man that is not mad would trust himself in the path of the Vardarelli unsupported, or would send such a message to the great Captain, I opine that he must have a large army within call, but hidden we know not where by the darkness of the night, the sudden storm, and the difficulties of the country.'

'I thank you,' said Gaetano; 'you are a worthy chief magistrate. But you know not the disposition of the mad English, nor indeed of any brave man. He may well enough be all alone, and yet call for Don Gaetano; or he may have fifty thousand soldiers within call, and yet mean no treachery. In either case I would go and see the first man that hath dared to impose his commands upon the Vardarelli.'

The Syndic of Cerniola bowed his acknowledgments as well as he could, for the wind was undermining his hat-brim and playing briskly at revolution with his flapping cloak. He was wise and fat chief magistrate, and kept on as good terms as he could with outlaw and inlaw alike. But for all

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that his mottled complexion told what this night's work had cost him, ere he could bring himself to put his head in the lion's mouth and set forth to intercept the dread chief of the Vardarelli, riding there with all his troop behind him.

'We go to call upon the Englishman who is come to teach us to obey Ferdinand, the Bourbon of Naples!' cried Don Gaetano to his nearest followers; and though upon that night of storm even his great voice could not reach one-third of the force that followed him, the news spread from man to man till every rider knew that the *comitiva* must be riding full into the heart of the hostile army of 'Albanesi' with which (so the tale rolled) the English General had come from Naples in order to subdue the province of Apulia.

We all thought our chief must be mad to risk such a contest with unequal numbers. For, as I could hear Don Giovanni muttering on my right flank to the wind-clacking darkness of the night, 'What soldier of King Ferdinand would send such a message who had not a force of a hundred to one? And though the Vardarelli are brave men and ready to die for their leader and their cause of liberty, there is little service to either in their committing suicide!'

And I could catch the grumble as it spread like contagion among the long wavering *comitiva* that stretched back underneath the wind-blown city lamps and the blue flicker of the storm.

But we passed the wall without a sight of any Neapolitan soldier. We rode through the narrow streets of Cerniola. Not a dog wagged his tail.

'It hath all the marks of an ambush!' quoth Don

Giovanni behind me, in so loud a voice that his elder brother turned angrily upon him.

‘Don Giovanni, to-night you have all the marks of a coward; and if you cannot keep your tongue still, from this day forth you shall stay at home with the women — yes, with the women and children!’ And then, remembering me, he added: ‘As it is, my Pietro here is worth a dozen of you, with your fears and croakings.’

After that there was no more muttering.

Presently we came to the Albergo Raimondi, which fairly blazed with lights. It seemed as if the *padrone* had lighted every lamp and candle within the walls. Yet not a soldier, so far as I could see, was on guard. The stone steps of the old palace were vague, untenanted, in the great light. The landlord, whether in fear of the Vardarelli or of his guest, had conveyed himself away to a place of safety. So there in the rain-beaten street we formed up, and I would have remained with the *comitiva* had not Don Gaetano called me to accompany him into the presence of the General, as also his brothers Girolamo and Giovanni.

We went up the broad white marble steps of the albergo with our hands ready upon the sword-hilt, glancing this way and that for any sign of an ambush. At least all of us save Don Gaetano, who, merely dusting the rain-drops from his coat and swinging his hat to clear the dripping brim, strode upward as if he were going upstairs to the Lady Mother in our own Casa beyond the Stone Gate. For such is the nature of one great man when he goes to meet another.

At the landing we came for the first time upon a soldier in uniform. He stood stiffly on guard, with

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his musket and bayonet at the shoulder.

Don Gaetano halted to answer his challenge.

'I am Don Gaetano Vardarelli, and I have come to pay my respects to the distinguished General Church, at his own request.'

The soldier saluted like a wooden image worked by wires.

'I will inform Captain Cameron, who will approach his Excellency,' he said.

So with the most admirable patience our Gaetano stood waiting on the stairs till the soldier had brought a young officer of quick and alert mien, who by his appearance seemed to have been drying his steaming garments in front of the fire.

'Don Gaetano Vardarelli?' said he, bowing courteously

'The same,' responded our Chief. 'I am come to obey the commands of the great General!'

Again the officer bowed with the air of one who has distinctions of his own if he cared to reveal them. He was a tall lad, fair-haired and fair-skinned, with a strong clear-cut face — not handsome, perhaps, but yet with something wondrously boyish and taking about the eyes.

'I will at once announce you to the General,' he said.

He stepped across the ante-room to an inner door. At this he knocked, and inclined his ear for the answer.

'Who is there?' cried a voice from within, amazingly rich and clear.

'It is I, Cameron.'

'Ah, Cameron — well, what is it?'

'Don Gaetano Vardarelli, whom your Excellency desired to see, has come to pay his respects to you.'

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'Bring him in at once!' the rich voice said.

Captain Cameron smiled encouragingly upon us, and motioned our Chief forward.

'I will take this youth with me,' he said to Cameron, indicating me with his hand. The soldier youth bowed again, like one who dismisses a matter too slight to be disputed about. And in another moment we were in the presence of the most remarkable man it has ever been my hap to see — General Richard Church, the Englishman who had come to win Apulia for the King.

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## CHAPTER NINE

### THREE BRAVE MEN

He stood behind an oaken table, upon which at our entrance he had cast a sheaf of papers. His unbuckled sword lay across it, together with a pair of pistols.

His hair was already growing grey at the temples — the early frost which comes to men of quick and strenuous build; yet his age could not have been more than forty — a young man I thought him to be in so great a position, Commander-in-chief of all Magna Græcia and alter ego of the King himself.

Don Gaetano bowed low — a gesture which, though not natural to me, I strove to imitate as best I could. The Englishman responded with a short military salutation. Yet his blue eye looked upon us with a not unkindly light, and I think that he could not but admire the noble figure of Don Gaetano, who, tall and erect, with limbs and body firmed by a lifetime of the manliest exercises, stood regarding him with a calm face, and over whose broad brow the hair fell darkly, black as cooling lava when Ætna is white with snow.

The two men fronted each other level-eyed in a kind of curious silence, then by a quick instinct I knew that neither was disappointed in the other.

'Your son, Don Gaetano?' queried the General, indicating me with his nearer eyebrow.

'My nephew!' returned the Chief, as succinctly.

'A most graceful cavalier! I make him my compliments!' said the Englishman, in perfect Italian and with a gesture of fine courtesy. I could feel the blushes rising to my face under the pressure of that steady eye.

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He passed on, his eyes dwelling no longer upon me as soon as he discovered my embarrassment.

'I am glad to meet you thus, as a man ought to meet his fellow, eye to eye and face to face. Ever since I came to the confines of this your country of Apulia, I have heard only of Don Gaetano Vardarelli as the bravest and most humane of men. And tonight when I found myself unexpectedly so near you, I could not resist sending the Syndic of this little town to ask you to visit me. By the way, what has become of our noble Syndic?'

Don Gaetano laughed a short pleasant laugh.

'I suspect,' he said, 'that that brave chief of the municipality will be safe in some recess of the wall of his house by this time, with a heavy piece of furniture between him and danger. He did not appear to relish his office when I last saw him!'

The General Church smiled responsively.

'Indeed, I noticed something of the same hesitation. I dare say he feared being ground between the upper and nether millstone. But have you your troop with you on this occasion?'

The Chief of the Free Companions nodded, with that calmness which in a nature like his takes the place of pride.

'I would give half my year's pay if you were a King's man,' said the General, letting his eye take in his visitor from head to foot.

'I am more,' said Gaetano: 'I myself am King. In Apulia there is no royal house save that of the Vardarelli — no King but their chieftain.'

The General appeared not to hear that plain statement of fact, in which there was yet neither boasting nor false modesty.

'I come,' he continued, 'direct from Naples with

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powers from the King himself. What must I say to him when I return thither concerning the Vardarelli? That you are no man-slayers and midnight assassins, like certain others?’

Don Gaetano nodded quickly.

‘You may indeed say that with truth. We of the Vardarelli have no blood on our hands save that which has been spilt in fair fight. We have nothing to ask from the King. What matters it to us whether Buonaparte or Murat or Ferdinand bear rule in Naples? The Vardarelli are kings in Apulia.’

‘As to that we shall see,’ replied the Englishman, smiling. ‘You have had generals sent out against you time and again; but never before have I set foot in Apulia myself. And now I would come in peace and have Don Gaetano Vardarelli as my friend, and not as my foe.’

‘I should indeed be proud to be called the friend of so noble a General,’ said the Vardarelli — ‘or even if he were compelled to take the field against me, that in itself would be an honour.’

The General drummed with his fingers a little impatiently.

‘Don Gaetano,’ he said, ‘why do you, if indeed you are King of Apulia, allow such murderous ruffians as the Decisi to remain among you?’

Don Gaetano for the first time seemed somewhat put out, perhaps remembering his too wide boast of power.

‘They do not flourish in my neighbourhood,’ he said hastily; ‘they keep to their own country — the mountains are free of them. They abide only in the villages of the Tarentine plain.’

‘But why do you not hunt them down, lest men say that you are even as they?’

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‘It matters little what men say of the Vardarelli,’ returned our Chief haughtily; ‘I am not a Bourbon policeman!’

The Englishman laughed heartily. ‘You mean that I am?’ he said, with a certain quick high humour which became him.

‘On the contrary,’ returned Don Gaetano, ‘your Excellency is a most noble soldier. I have heard of Capri and San Germano.’

It was courteously said, and it was the General’s turn to stammer and change the subject. Indeed, I never felt so strongly what a lesson in high courtesy it was to be present at the meeting of two such men.

The General went to the window and looked out. As he did so his face was lit up by a lightning flash.

‘It is, I fear, a wild night without,’ he said, ‘and I must not keep your brave lads. I can see them sitting their horses down there steady as veterans. May I be permitted to review them as they pass?’

Don Gaetano bowed. ‘Certainly, your Excellency,’ he said: ‘but it is dark, and the storm is fiercer than ever.’

‘We are neither salt nor sugar, that a drop of rain should hurt us,’ said the Englishman: ‘but you have some distance to ride, I doubt not. I must not detain you. But I shall tell the King that there is one noble man in Apulia of whom I would advise him to make a friend. And to you, Don Gaetano dei Vardarelli, I would say — hasten to make your submission and wear the King’s colours.’

‘There is no man in Apulia whom I could be proud to serve but yourself,’ returned Don Gaetano.

‘That also I shall be ready to arrange,’ said General Church: ‘together you and I could make Apulia quiet as a millpond. Apart, — well, that

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would be so grievous, we need not consider it.'

'I will consider your proposal,' said Don Gaetano; 'meanwhile believe that I and the Vardarelli are neither murderers nor highway robbers. No maid owes insult or scaith to them. No woman needs blush for the *comitiva* of the hill-men, and if they have taken aught from the rich, it has been to feed the poor.'

General Church smiled, as if he cared not to enter into that part of the argument.

'May I introduce my officers?' continued Don Gaetano. The General made a gesture of permission. The Chief blew a note on his whistle, and immediately from the ante-room strode in upon us his brother Don Girolamo, followed hastily by the fair-haired young officer who had introduced us to the General.

'Go back, Cameron,' said the General, speaking rapidly in French: 'this tall gentleman does not know that it is customary to wait to be announced before entering.'

Don Gaetano understood him, and I could see annoyance rise in his swarthy cheeks.

'Your pardon, General,' he said instantly, in the same language: 'the fault was mine. I but made my ordinary signal to call in the brother who is my senior lieutenant. I beg a thousand pardons.'

The Englishman waved the matter aside with his hand.

'Introduce him,' he said. And the Chief of the Vardarelli introduced his brothers one by one, and to each of them the Englishman said a pleasant and courteous word.

'Now, Cameron, bring torches and attend me to the door of the courtyard!' he said, turning swiftly to

his *aide*.

'Tell the troop that they are to be reviewed by his Excellency the General,' said our Chief.

I took the command upon myself, as it was spoken at large. So it chanced that the tall young man whom his General had called Cameron walked down the stairs with me.

'I think we would be friends if we knew one another better,' he said, in broken Italian.

'I know it,' I replied, resolving not to be outdone; 'I am sure you are as gallant a soldier as your General.'

The young man shook his fair close-cropped head. 'No,' he said, 'there is no one in the world in the least like our General. But I should be glad to know more of you. Will you tell me your name, that I may remember it?'

'I am called Pietro of the Vardarelli,' I said, holding my head down so that he could not look at my confusion.

'Mine is Walter Cameron,' he said. 'I come from a far Northern country where men wear short skirts like women. Here, on the contrary, the men are fair as women and wear uniform.'

I dared not glance up at him, even to find out whether or no he had pierced my disguise and was laughing at me. But I was relieved when at that moment we came out into the courtyard, and he was compelled to leave me in order to find torches, while I gave my message to the officer who had been left in charge.

The *comitiva* had been waiting impatiently enough in the rain, and they received the news with delight. They believed that the town was held in force by the King's troops, but that out of respect for their

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chieftain the Englishman had avoided making a show of them. At the news that the great soldier from Naples would review them, a cheer swept along the line.

Scarcely was I again back within the courtyard of the Albergo Raimondi when I saw Cameron with the trembling old major-domo busily lighting the torches. I hastened to assist them. The young officer smiled as I showed him how the matter was managed. When all was ready, he poured some wine into two glasses that stood ready, and pushing one towards me, he said, 'Drink with me to our better acquaintance, Don Pietro Vardarelli.'

I could do no less than drink to him, and his eyes met mine with the straight Northern look in them which I had grown to like so well. I felt that this Captain Cameron was a man to be counted upon.

'I drink to you heartily, Signore Capitano!' I replied.

'Have you already forgotten my name?' He smiled.

'Nay,' I made answer; 'but it is not an easy name to say as you say it.'

'I have never found any difficulty: listen and remember,' and he said it again, with that peculiar sound which comes as easily to the English as smacking their lips after good wine.

I shook, my head, smiling also.

'Sir,' I said, 'we will turn it into the speech of the South. I drink to you again the second time, Don Gualtierio!'

Then setting down our glasses we shook hands without words.

\* \* \* \* \*

Long after I heard great artists who sell what they paint, poets and storytellers who write that which people buy, say that other lands are lands of black-and-white like drawings in books, but that our Italy is the one land of colour.

And remembering that night, I know that it is a true word. Let me think. In Cerniola there was an albergo — a common enough house — one that, like most of the inns in our part of the country, had once been a noble palace. Its lintels and corbels were all four or five hundred years old; carved devils leaned over its roof and spouted full-lipped. Beneath were stone arches, iron-grated lattices, galleried streets: all were seen under the red glare of the torches.

And then the horses and the men! Such horses and such men! There on the steps stood our Don Gaetano — never prouder, I give you my word, than when all his five hundred thus defiled before him. On either side of the gateway stood one of the Vardarelli and the soldier escort holding a torch, the light shining upon their accoutrements. Behind were the major-domo, and the Capitano Cameron with other two. A little in front, by the side of Don Gaetano, stood the English General, slight and eager of face, the rain beating upon his head and upon the uniform on which decorations glittered in the red light.

‘Forward the Vardarelli!’ came the order; and with Don Giacomo leading the *comitiva* began its advance. I stood a little back behind a pillar, where I could see without being seen. Only the young captain seemed conscious that I was there, for more than once he smiled across at me. Even Don Gaetano had forgotten me in the pride of his heart. And indeed it was small wonder.

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The lightning flickered in wispy tangles, like the swift play of damascened sword-blades, and the thunder rattled and growled overhead like wheels on a wooden bridge. As each pair of Vardarelli came in front of the stone stairs on which stood the chiefs and the torches, their swords flashed to a wild salute. And I saw the hand of the General move in response, with the stern mechanism that comes only to the English in matters military.

'Tramp! tramp!' The horses clattered over the stones of the street. The windows opposite were blank and dead, though doubtless many a shivering rabbit-hearted burgher peeped from behind them; for when Vardarelli were passing, it was time for the men of Cerniola to hold their breaths.

Five hundred men, each with musket and sabre! Murat himself might have been proud to lead such a troop, and if he had — faith, then he need never have given that last famous command of his ere he fell forward in the sunshine.

I tell you Don Gaetano Vardarelli held his head high as these men passed by, and indeed small blame to him! The trumpeters in the van blew a warlike blast. The horses tossed their bridle reins. The thunder roared above and the lightning glinted down on steel caparison and the blades of drawn swords. Beneath were our Chief's horse and those of his brothers held ready. The *comitiva* still passed and the arm of the General unweariedly rose and fell in the salute.

'I bid you farewell, Excellency!' said Don Gaetano, bowing his head.

The General held out his hand with the hearty gesture of the English. The Chief grasped it.

'May this hand never meet mine save in

friendship!' he said, bending to kiss it.

'Amen to so good a prayer!' cried the General. 'I will tell the King that he must make the Vardarelli the pillars of his throne in Apulia. They are fine fellows all!'

The torches flickered and blew the smoke in our faces as the fierce Adriatic gusts swept up the narrow street.

In a moment more we were in the saddle.

'Forward!' cried our leader, and we two dashed quickly along the ranks to the front; and as we looked back we could still see the slim figure of the Englishman saluting the files as they passed in review before him.

Don Gaetano raised his arm as the lightning flashes came so swiftly together that they were almost continuous. His voice rang out above the growl of the thunder: 'Viva il generale Giorgio!'

Then all the *comitiva* raised their swords into the night, and a great shout of 'Viva!' went up from every hardy rider. Such honour had never been paid to any before in all the history of the troop.

The next moment we were out into the black night, clear of the town. The chief rode by my shoulder.

He spoke carefully to me, glancing first about him to see that none of his riders were near.

'Yonder Englishman was a brave man — a man indeed!' he said: 'I love such men. In all that town, saving only the young white-headed officer and the frightened sentinel, he had no supporter nor friend. I found out as much from the postillions who brought him hither. He travelled alone. He was wholly in my power, and knew it. You have looked on a very brave man to-night, little La Bella!'

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'On three very brave men!' I corrected.

'On three?' he queried, turning quickly.

'Yes,' I said, laying my hand on his: 'on the English General, the young fair-haired officer, and on the noblest of all, the man who would not take advantage of another brave man's weakness — my brother Don Gaetano Vardarelli.'

And in this wise came General Richard Church to Apulia.

CHAPTER TEN

THE RIDING OF THE COMITIVA

It was the next night that our chieftain, in spite of the deliverance of the Nocelli, fulfilled his promise to hold converse with the heads of the dread secret society of the Decisi. His brothers endeavoured to persuade him that by doing so he would risk his person. They even came to me, beseeching me to use the influence which they supposed I had with Don Gaetano, that he should not part himself from the *comitiva*. But I told them plumply to carry their own messages, because that none save Don Gaetano intermeddled with Don Gaetano's business.

Don Giovanni particularly besought his mother to interfere.

'It is for the sake of our own good name,' he said: 'we of the Vardarelli, though we have indeed levied contributions in the name of the Carbonari and the Friends of Freedom, have never had in the popular estimation any connection with the midnight assassins of the Decisi, nor yet with their bloody leader.'

But the Signora kept her face set and hard. She shook her head in refusal. The Captain of the Vardarelli was fortunate in his womankind.

'If it is the will of the leader, go he will. And I were no true Vardarelli if I gave advice where it was not asked.'

I think that after this double rebuff they approached Don Gaetano himself, though perhaps not so directly. The four brothers sat with him on the balcony. I could hear their side of the argument, earnest and low-spoken, and though I could not

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follow the exact words, I knew its purport. But I heard also Gaetano's reply clearly enough.

'I have passed my word to go into the den of the wolf, and to the den of the wolf I will go! But — I will take some few wolf-hunters with me.'

It was five of the clock when Don Gaetano awoke me from a light sleep. The heat of the afternoon sun was cooling. We looked down from the hillside upon the green plain of Apulia, with the white farmhouses and clustered villages dotted here and there upon it. It ran right and left as far as the eye could reach; and along the utmost verge, where the sky reached down to hook itself on to the horizon, was stretched the dark purple bow-string of the sea. I knew well that down there the dust would choke and the white roads cut wearily across the monotonous plain. But from our eagle's eyrie all appeared green and fair. The summer's drought had left no stain upon the landscape, nor had the autumn redness yet come to burn up the vine leaves and parch yet more the grey olives, turning their leaves edgewise.

Don Gaetano dismounted on the pleasant hill-slope, and stood meditatively with the reins of his favourite black charger on his arm. He looked down upon the land into which the new power of the Ferdinand's Englishman had come to contest the sway of the Vardarelli. But it was not of General Giorgio that our Captain was thinking just then.

'La Bella,' he said presently, yet without looking at me, 'you are not afraid to trust yourself with me in the den of the wolf?'

'I am not afraid to go anywhere with you, Gaetano mine!' I made reply.

He seemed to sigh a little at my answer, as if he desired some other — yet what I could not judge.

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'Then I will take you with me, and leave these fretful brothers and officers of mine below. I would rather have my own little Don Pietro, who comes with me willingly, than a hundred pressed men armed to the teeth.'

And he cast his eyes haughtily behind him where his escort was grouped, whispering apart, well knowing his fierce temper when crossed, and not one of them willing that the brunt of it should fall upon him.

'We shall rest at yonder Masseria,' Gaetano went on, 'there where the white tower looks over the grey wall. We can shut the gate and set sentries, so that these faint hearts may sleep safely wrapped in their cloaks. Then you and I, little Pietro, will take our lives in our hands and venture forth to confront the Man of Seventeen Murders.'

'The Man of Seventeen Murders!' cried I, aghast that any one should possess such a terrible appellation.

Don Gaetano smiled.

'That is but one of the many names of the Head of the Decisi, whom we go to meet to-night. He has cognomens even more terrible.'

'Then why, Don Gaetano, do you place yourself in his power?'

Our Chief shrugged his shoulders and moved his foot impatiently.

'Now you speak not like my little paladin Don Pietro, but like one of these others. But I will tell you, because you are you. I go because I am Don Gaetano Vardarelli — because I do not choose that there shall be a man I am afraid to face in all the provinces of the Eastern Sea, from Bari even to Taranto — because I would see this man and sound

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him with my eyes. And if he be wholly evil, and a man of blood, then after that will I make an end of him — or he of me. But if, on the other hand, he be eager for true liberty and striving in his way to curb the proud and help the poor — then I, Gaetano, will teach him to put by the assassin's knife and to live cleanly.'

'And will you, my Chief, who have kept yourself from blood, save that which is shed in fair fight, join your hand with that of the Man of Seventeen Murders?'

But he answered me not — the dark look gathering ominously about his eyes.

'Enough: it is my will! If you like it not, you can bide with the others!' he said shortly.

I took his hand, and, lifting it to my lips, I kissed it.

'I will go with you anywhere,' I made answer; 'I am ever safe and happy where you are.'

At this he seemed to withdraw his fingers from mine with a little shudder, and I thought he was still angry. So that I suppose I stood before him with the tears ready to overflow and my eyes cast on the ground. Indeed, I do not remember how I stood. At any rate, Don Gaetano looked at me, and let his hand drop on my shoulder as if unconsciously.

'Little one,' he said, 'bear with me. Fate presses me hard to-night. I must do this thing. But I know how safe it is. The Decisi may assassinate the King or cross swords with the Englishman, but they will think twice before daring to lay a finger on a chief of the Vardarelli. The proof of this is that I ask you to come with me.'

He turned him about and signalled to his men. Then he leaped to the saddle himself.

‘Yonder is the Masseria del Duca,’ he said; ‘there is good cheer awaiting us there. Often before have we tasted it. Whose appetite among you is ready for oysters from the Lesser Sea of Taranto? Whose mouth waters for lapped cream colder than the fountains of Monte Volture, together with cured goat’s ham garnished with the pick of the Duke’s vegetable garden?’

So, much cheered by his words, the *comitiva* descended a path, narrow and rocky. It was just at the edge of dark. A few stars were struggling fitfully out and going in again. The Adriatic was turning to a darker colour like spilled wine. Forests crowned the nearer heights, and fleecy olive trees mounted the sides of the hill like small escalading parties, as if desirous of ousting the green Aleppo-pines from the supremacy of the upper air. Presently we came to the zone of oak trees, their roots writhing and twisting through the steep banks like a nest of snakes, and their branches gnarled with age and split by the lightnings of heaven. Indian corn was patched here and there among the vineyards, black under their roofing of broad leaves. In the more open country wild horses galloped out of the cane brakes where they had been lying down to cool with dew their dust-caked, fly-galled sides.

Since in these latter days I have travelled more widely and seen other lands, I wonder within me that the poets and writers of all times have spoken so much of the beauty, richness, and fertility of Italy. In the spring, the time of colour, I grant you they are right: in certain favoured vales, yes — the Lombard plain, the Venetian seaboard, the fat fields that cincture Bologna. But mostly it is rather grey Italy, barren Italy, rocky and parched Italy, dust-

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covered grim Italy, miasma-stricken Italy. Look you how the naked scarp grins through, how the hill torrent sinks into the rock-crevice and is lost, or spreads out at the first sluggish touch of the plain, making a swamp from which at eve and morn rise the pale and hectic spirits of fever and death. Dig a spadeful of earth anywhere and smell it. Pah! It carries with it the scent of dead men's bones. Death lurks in the white mists belting the seaboard pines. He stalks thin and wire-drawn in the winds that blow acridly from the northern mountains.

'See Naples and die' is often a true word, spoken with a cackle of laughter. They tell me that it was not always so — that it need not be so any more — that men have undone that which God had made. I know not, but I do know that this Italy, the fair woman among countries, waiting indolently to be loved, secure in the eternity of her charms, is chiefly beautiful in that which man can neither alter nor mar — in the blue arch of her sky, in her circumscribing sea, wine-hearted and amethystine like the purple vintage of the Balkans, in the air which (but for the death in it) tastes like a draught of nectar, cold as the snow and light as blown sea-foam. Above all, she is rich in the flooding sunshine which draws equally from a spadeful of scanty earth beset in the cleft of a rock and from the late-drained sodden swamp the luxury of the vintage, the rosy irradiance of peach-blossom, and the ripening fruitage of autumn.

But I forget — the words flood upon me when I think of this country of mine, when I recall how she has been flattered like a woman, covered in a garmentry of lying words like a woman, deceived like a woman, left forsaken and desolate — like a

woman. Yet now as ever she is willing to be cozened by the same old tale, and still she lays the unction to her soul that she is the most favoured of lands and the desired of the nations, having all the while her nakedness laid bare to every passer-by, and being but the cat's-paw of nations, a bankrupt in wealth and a beggar in reputation.

But I did not think these things then — when I was a slim lad, riding (as it seemed) with my father or elder brother, mirthful of visage, crisp of closely cropped curl, and sitting my horse like some spare and adolescent centaur. Yet even then I thought many things, and I shall never be sorry that the clatter of hoofs and the ring of spurs still echo in my dreams, and that thoughts of a gay life, when I called no man master, shine yet before my waking eyes. I smile as I look upon the maidens who are growing up in the shut cloister of the commonplace, and think of that night when the Vardarelli rode by, between the red glare of the torches and the white pulse of the lightning, of the slender upright figure of the lonely Englishman reviewing us, calm as Napoleon at the head of his Old Guard; and, perhaps most of all, I think of the night when I accompanied Don Gaetano, to beard in his den the Man of Seventeen Murders, the chief of the dread Decisi, within the strange walled village called Castel Rotondo.

Ere I go further I must tell the fashion of this place.

Castel Rotondo sits aloft upon a hill; truly it cannot be hid. Who founded it, I do not know. In outward fashion it is built like the Coliseum, or the Cirque of Verona. The walls rise sheer and windowless a hundred feet into the air. The path to

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it winds perilously up one of those limestone mounds which, like Titanic molehills, diversify the plain of Apulia. Within there is a warren of passages and tumbled masonry, where a wild race are reputed to live and breed; hardly men of the soil, but outcasts and broken folk of half a dozen provinces. Till now I had never seen their houses, but I often watched and wondered at the grey circle lying like the crater of an extinct volcano beneath me as we looked from the mountains behind, or rising like some fortress built by giants black against the moonlight as we rode seaward across the plains.

But to-night I was to penetrate its mysteries; and when we saw it first, the place seemed to have assumed a more sinister aspect, since I now knew that it was the haunt of murderers and ruffians, the deadliest and most bloody upon earth.

Beneath, three miles across the plain, the battlements of Castel Rotondo cut a blank in the vault of stars. That was all we could see of it from the Masseria del Duca, where the *comitiva* was to abide and wait our return.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE PLACE OF A SKULL

The Chief called together the Council of the Vardarelli. Four brothers there were besides himself; and I, Pietro of the Vardarelli, who by favour enjoyed upon this occasion the place of a listener. For I never spoke, nor ventured an opinion unless I was asked — a hard thing for a woman hearkening to the discussion of affairs. But the *comitiva* of the Vardarelli was a strange school of manners, and many things came natural to me there which would not be taught by the good sisters of the Convent of St. Catherine of Siena.

The four sat silently watching the eyes of Don Gaetano. These were stern and cold, and had that arbitrary look in them which intimated that he had made up his mind. The four Vardarelli knew well that they were there not to offer advice nor adventure counsel, but to receive orders.

‘To-night,’ said Don Gaetano abruptly, ‘I go to meet the Council of Twelve, the heads of the Society of Death. I must needs unmask them. I must — if I am to be any more King in Apulia, and if the Vardarelli are still to be the Vardarelli. I will measure myself against their leader, the unknown one, the Man of Seventeen Murders. I must find out who he is, and in what daily guise he goes about in this land. Till then there is no safety for any of us. Our death may be already decreed by that secret assembly.’

At this Don Girolamo laughed contemptuously in his beard. The Chief looked at him sternly.

‘What is the matter of laughter?’ he asked

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sharply.

'Who would touch the Vardarelli,' said Don Girolamo, 'this great company of stalwart fellows — that is, so long as they keep together?'

But the Chief had his answer ready.

'What is to hinder one of the Decisi from joining us, and at midnight or in the skirmish stabbing swiftly and secretly, or sending the musket-ball a little astray? At all events, I am going to Castel Rotondo, the Hill of the Wolf. I bid you, Don Girolamo, follow me with a hundred chosen men. You will abide till daybreak at the foot of the hill. If so be that our Pietro here and I do not rejoin you by the light of morn, storm the place. Let not one man escape. If the chief of the *comitiva* must die, let him be remembered in the vengeance of the Vardarelli.'

'Your will is your will!' said the brothers: 'trust us. We will do the vengeance of the Vardarelli!' They spoke all together, as if repeating a set phrase. Yet withal I could see they were far from approving the venture.

So we who were to accompany our Chief left our horses at the Masseria del Duca and stole out into the night. A late moon was rising, a pallid sickle to the east, but being in her last quarter, she gave little more light than the stars. Don Gaetano went first, with the quick stealthy step of one whose life depended upon the silence of his foot, I followed him as best I could, keeping my eyes upon the towering height of his shoulders, which loomed black and massive before me.

Behind me strode Don Girolamo, revolving what angry thoughts I know not, for in the silence I could hear him grind his teeth, as I had heard him often do in the troublous dreams of the night, when we

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rested among the straw of some barn, waiting for the day and the adventure which should befall us.

Behind him struggled painfully a full hundred men of the *comitiva*, mere flitting shadows with their cloaks black about them, only the pale gleam of stars or the pallid reflection of the white rocks glinting occasionally from a silver button or the shining steel butt of a pistol.

As we drew nearer to Castel Rotondo, its bulk loomed ever larger and blacker above us. At last we were at the foot of the hill. The hundred Vardarelli were left behind with Don Girolamo, while without word spoken Gaetano and I parted from them and took the breast of the hill, save for each other's company, alone.

Not a word we spoke till the gigantic lower tiers of masonry rose immediately before us. Then we stood a moment to breathe ourselves, behind a fallen mass of stone and lime. Don Gaetano put his hand on my shoulder with an affectionate pressure strange to him.

'Be brave, little one,' he whispered; 'have your weapons concealed but ready. Remember the art of them which I have taught you. Follow me and keep cool.'

He strode on again till he came to the low gateway, which we saw as a black arch before us. Suddenly in the shadow iron bars met and stayed us: a portcullis or iron grating shut off all entrance, and I could not help thinking that, once we were on the farther side, it would in like manner shut off all egress.

Don Gaetano drew the butt of his pistol across the bars, and produced a grating noise loud enough to wake the dead.

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'Who goes there?' cried a stern deep voice very near to us, the sound being more startling than the speaker, drowned in the blackness of the arch, was completely unseen.

'A friend of the Silver Skull!' said Don Gaetano, in a voice as loud and fearless. Instinctively I drew nearer to him, and put out my hand furtively to touch his cloak. Almost I uttered a little cry, for all unexpectedly my hand encountered his, as if it had been searching for mine through the mirk midnight.

'What come ye to seek?' the deep voice came again from the unseen.

'The Blood of Tyrants!' responded Don Gaetano, with a tone of contempt in his voice, as if he were tired of taking part in a tedious play. The iron of the gate receded creakingly, scraping and squealing over grooved and rusty courses.

'Enter, Enemies of Tyrants, enter friends of the Silver Skull!' the voice went on.

We entered. The iron creaked, gritting intolerably, and finally shut behind us with a hoarse and startling clang. We heard the bolts shoot home, and we stood in the Mouth of the Wolf. 'Follow me!' again came the deep voice. And through the dense gutter of blackness which led directly into the solid cliff-like masonry of the walls, we issued presently into the strangest place.

The moon was too low in the sky to cast her light over the high round of the mighty walls above and about us. But the stars glittered and swung westward through the limpid air. We seemed somehow to breathe easier, and I stood close by Don Gaetano, touching his cloak at intervals and experiencing a certain sense of security from the contact. I seemed somehow out of breath, as after a

race, yet I had not felt fatigued coming up the hill.

We stood on a little green place, with grass underfoot; and on all sides of us masses of masonry, arches, and columns rose to the bounding heights of the exterior walls. The eye could not take in at once all the innumerable clefts and openings that yawned on every side, the confused mounds of stones, the black blank orifices, the holes from which smoke and a faint glimmer of light proceeded. A great silence seemed to overspread us, a silence which had been deepening ever since we left the *comitiva* beneath; and Don Girolamo and his hundred men, though within five hundred yards of us, seemed somehow infinitely remote and of another world altogether.

But on the other hand, though the ear could not distinguish any particular and recognisable sounds, yet a low persistent hum dwelt in the air, which told that the place was aswarm with densely packed life. I have heard the same muffled buzzing proceed from a hive of bees before the exodus of the new nation. I have heard it in a crowded church; in the great square of St. Peter's on Pilgrims' Day, and, indeed, wherever masses of beings are gathered together. It is the hum of Living Silence. I cannot describe it otherwise, but whoever has heard it, will not need to have it described. I could hear, as it were, the sound of many people listening and waiting — that was all.

From the sonorous voice which had greeted us out of the darkness, I had expected a giant to issue forth; and lo! when we emerged from the gloom of the archway, our guide was less of stature than myself. But yet there was something about the curious peaked cap he wore, and the small-clothes which clung close to his spindling shanks, which

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took me by the heart. I had not been much afraid before, but I was definitely afraid now.

Not till we had crossed the short turf of the central space, and penetrated some way into the blank blackness of an opposite cavern, did our guide stay his progress or deign a word.

Even then it was Don Gaetano who spoke.

'We are in safety now. Light us a torch, whoever you are.'

The deep voice replied, as it seemed from somewhere near the ground, with a cackling rattle of laughter:

'Friends of the Silver Skull ought to know the way to the Place of Skulls!'

My companion stamped his toot.

'Hearken, fellow!' he said. 'I am Don Gaetano Vardarelli. I come here by invitation of the Council of Twelve; and if you do not as I bid you, and that instantly — by the saints I will throttle you and leave one skull more in your precious Place of Skulls.'

A chuckle came from somewhere above us this time.

'Aha!' the voice said, 'first catch your hare, then cook your hare — that is the order of events, great chief of the Vardarelli. The walls of Castel Rotondo are good against even your thousand riders. You cannot catch me, therefore lay aside your threats and wait for that which shall appear!'

Yet after a little we heard the welcome sound of steel striking upon flint. A worm of faint illumination crawled along the blank wall. A light sputtered, a torch flickered, then it went low till blackness again quivered imminent, ready to spring upon us, but finally it decided to remain alight. Very gradually the

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fire waxed and brightened. The black resinous smoke rose lazily, and we saw before us a little old man with the face of a cherub, the oddest peaked cap, and the frilled and pointed dress of Punchinello.

Then it came to me what was the remembrance which had so daunted me at my first entering, when I saw the dark shadow of our guide going before us across the pleached grass of the courtyard. It was the entrance of the tragic jesters and the welcome the Duke had given them. And very strange it was to think that of all the inhabitants of Monte Leone that night, the only survivor was the little maid who had grown up among such strange surroundings to be Isabella of the Vardarelli.

When he had done lighting his torch, the little man looked quaintly down upon us from the niche of the wall in which he had his material concealed.

'I am no murderer, that I would have you know,' he said. 'But I have to earn my bread and ask no questions. I can but take you to the inner door of the Decisi, and then say, "God help you!" I am only poor Vittorio Dini the hunchback, watchman of this accursed village of Castel Rotondo. You are not in need of a good watchman in your town, great chief of the Vardarelli? No? Then when you are, think of Vittorio, for he is a first-rate one. Heard you ever a voice like this for crying the hours? There is not the like of it in the Peninsula.'

And the little man lifted up his head and cried aloud: *'Twelve o' the clock, and a fine wholesome midnight!'*

Then he wagged his head at us and held up his hand deprecatingly, as from all about came voices blaspheming him for interrupting their slumbers

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with his noise. He shrugged his shoulders and rolled his eyes at us.

‘And they call it “noise” — that fine roll of the R’s, that glorious mouthing of the vowels! Why, had I been a priest they would straightway have made me pope for the way I can say “*Orate fratres.*” But here it is but “noise” and I, “Pig of Pigs — Accursed beast.” Well, it will be all one, some fine day. Meantime I can take you where it will be all one with you this blessed midnight if the Council of Twelve have aught against you. Ah, many is the blooming lad I have conducted to the inner door and seen vanish within, but never a one has come back to tell the tale of what he found there. Only the Decisi know — only the Twelve — ’

He broke off sharply, as if in fear of a hidden listener.

We had come to a doorway, at either side of which stood two masked Punchinellos, with the mask of a skull drawn over their heads and naked swords in their hands.

At the sight our little guide instantly lost all his communicativeness, and bowed low before them. ‘I have brought you,’ he said, ‘two Friends of the Silver Skull. They know the password.’

‘Tell it us!’ said one of the masked figures, without moving a muscle.

‘The Blood of Tyrants!’ was Gaetano’s answer, as before.

‘That is the outer word,’ said the masked figure: ‘give us the inner — if you be indeed a friend of the Silver Skull.’

‘I am Don Gaetano Vardarelli, come to meet your Council of Twelve: let that be inner passport and countersign sufficient!’ cried my chieftain, with stern

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impatience in his voice.

The masked jester on the right bowed low at the name, and withdrew.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### THE COUNCIL OF TWELVE

The firmness of Don Gaetano was not without its effect. During the absence of his companion the remaining Punchinello stood motionless in the middle of the way, with his sword drawn and the point lowered. Presently the messenger returned, and, with a whispered word to his companion, we were permitted to follow him. We threaded our way through so many long and intricate passages, that I had almost begun to think we were either being led to our doom, or else that we were being purposely carried this way and that in order that we might not be able to find the way back without assistance.

After a time we halted at a part of the vast warren of passages, which, in the worn condition of the stonework and the glow of an occasional polished surface of old oak, showed more of the ordinary signs of human habitation. With a word of caution to wait where we were, our guide went on through a door from the chinks of which a taint light straggled.

Now, I have always denied that there is more curiosity in women than in men. And also — perhaps because I had been brought up entirely among the latter, perhaps because the ordinary affairs of gossip and the petty politics of domesticity do not appeal to me — I have less curiosity than most women. Nevertheless, in aught that has a taste of adventure, I confess I am as curious as a village matron when strangers are being entertained over the way. On this occasion I took a couple of steps after our guide, and bending forward glanced round the edge of the door into a long low apartment hung with black. A large number of men sat round an

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oaken table. With one exception, they were not terrible to look upon. They were just such men as one sees in the shops and lawyers' offices of a little country town anywhere in Italy. Gross men mostly, jovial-faced men, with the stamp of long afternoon sleeps, good living, and red wine at discretion, upon their faces. I was sure that I had seen more than one of them before. They were all looking towards the door at which our guide stood making his report, but the outer passage was so dark that they could not see me in the gloom. At the head of the table, however, appeared a figure which made me tremble and shrink away appalled. A tonsured priest, tall and broad-shouldered, sat there, his pale ascetic face turned full upon me. The thin cruel lips were compressed to a grim line, like a half-healed wound, and there was a red glint in the deep-set eyes which struck me to the soul. I shrank back to Don Gaetano's side quivering like a leaf. It was the same priest whom I had heard say mass on the morning after the murder at Monte Leone.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Enter! Don Gaetano dei Vardarelli!' a stern voice suddenly spoke from within. And at the summons, freely and largely, like a monarch who advances into an audience chamber, our chieftain strode into the room. His hat was on his head, and his hand on his sword-hilt as I followed him closely, expecting that we would confront that array of commonplace visages dominated by the terrible priest at the head of the table. But a new surprise awaited me.

In the interval between my stolen glimpse of them from the darkness of the passage, and the voice

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which summoned us to enter, every man had donned his dress of masquerade. I stood in presence of a company of jesters. Twelve Punchinellos sat about the table, and I could scarce avoid giving vent to a little cry of terror, for I knew that I stood among a company of professed murderers. I could not even repeat a prayer. My tongue clave parchedly to the roof of my mouth.

But none of them so much as looked at me. Every eye was upon my Chief, and never had I reason to be prouder of him than at that moment.

He stood before the Twelve, giving back glance for glance. Upon the table before each man lay the sign of the Silver Skull; beyond that was laid a black dagger. The man at the foot of the table, opposite the priest, had a trumpet in his hand. Behind the leader, now masked like the rest, the black banner of the Decisi was unrolled. 'Agony! Death! Terror! Slaughter!' ran the legend across it; above, the skull and crossbones were wrought in massive silver. These were the words with which the Decisione had signed away many a good man's life.

Don Gaetano cast his eye over the sombre trappings of the council chamber, over the gay fools' dresses, and upon the black banner with its nerve-shaking legend. But they finally rested upon the masked face of the priest with a kind of grim amusement. Yet there seemed small reason for mirth, for assuredly these men were in earnest after their kind. Each of them had countersigned his application for membership of the Decisi by two murders committed in cold blood. This was a rule of the Society not to be set aside in any case.

It was Don Gaetano who spoke first.

'I greet you,' he said, 'gentlemen of the Decisione.'

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I have come at the invitation of your leader to confer with you as to the future. I am Don Gaetano Vardarelli. I pray you drop this masquerade and let us speak face to face and man to man. I am, as you well know, neither a novice to be terrified, nor yet a victim to be executed.'

The man at the table head put his hands to his throat, loosened some slight fastening, and threw his costume over the back of a chair with a jerk.

'For me,' he said, 'I will do even as you ask, Captain of the Vardarelli!' His pale chiselled face turned towards us as he spoke. 'But you must pardon my comrades,' he went on: 'we of the Decisione work in secret, and spread our power by ways that do not appear on the surface. And though we have every confidence in the discretion of the noble Captain of the Vardarelli — well, he is not alone!'

And for the first time the tonsured priest cast his terrible eyes upon me, till the very marrow chilled itself to ice in my bones.

'With your permission I will sit down,' said Don Gaetano, drawing a chair without ceremony from the wall of the room, and seating himself as calmly as he would have done in the house of the Vardarelli. He had removed his feathered hat at the same moment as the leader had dropped his mask. As for me, I retired to the door, and setting my heel to it I placed my hand upon the handle, to make sure that none should enter for purposes of treachery without my knowledge.

For Don Gaetano sat there in the chamber of his foes with the greatest indifference and the most complete serenity. Yet — being after all but a girl — I could not help thinking on the maze of passages, the

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sentinels, the walled town, and all that lay between us and the hundred trusted fellows keeping their vigil at the foot of the hill.

I cannot profess to give any detailed account of the interview. The past held me too strongly. As I looked at the priest I remembered vividly the room in Monte Leone in which a frightened little child had crouched under the fine lace of the table-cover. Who of the tragic and terrible jesters now before me had dealt those blows and done that deed? Almost of a certainty he at the head of the table. Even as he talked to Don Gaetano, I could see his red eyes trying to read my soul.

Briefly, however, Don Gaetano offered to co-operate with the Decisi if they would renounce their propaganda of murder and terrorism.

'The Vardarelli are not murderers!' he declared again and again. 'You say that you war only with tyrants. Well, mount and ride! Leave your desks and counters and come out with me into the open field. That is fair enough warfare, in God's sooth! If Ferdinand is beaten, — well, the land is ours from Bari to Cape Leuca or further. If Ferdinand wins, — well again: there is the less trouble about providing for our old age.'

'That is truly said, Don Gaetano,' replied the priest, steadily keeping his impassive face straight before him, 'but there are many ways of striking for liberty. My own profession for instance,' — here he smiled a terrible smile as he glanced at his *abate's* dress, — 'sufficiently prevents me from riding at the head of a *comitiva* such as follows the noble Chief of the Vardarelli, whose captain we poor men of the Decisi have the honour presently to entertain.'

'And who may you be, Sir Churchman, who speak

so boldly of liberty and rebellion and death, yet sit serenely all the while in your armchair? You blow hot and cold in a breath.'

'I am the Abate Ciro of Grottaglie,' answered the priest simply, yet not without a curious dignity; 'I give you my name. Don Ciro I am called, with other names which do not matter. I am a loyal son of the Church' (he crossed himself devoutly). 'Though I have been much spoken against, these poor lads of the Decisi have chosen me their leader.'

Gaetano looked at him very straight.

'I think I once heard you say mass, reverend father,' he said.

The Abate smiled.

'Yes, I say it well,' he replied; 'but when might that be?'

'On the morning of the murder of the Duke and his folk in the castle at Monte Leone.'

The priest smiled like one well pleased.

'Ah!' he said, 'that was in the first days. We of the Silver Skull were young and reckless then. It was a fine piece of business — but ill-timed — in fact, a blunder. We were over-enthusiastic, and the deed brought us too much into notice. We do our work with greater finish in these later times. The dead branches are lopped off the tree and fall to the ground without a sound.'

Don Gaetano rose to his feet. He looked about at the eleven silent figures wrapped in their grotesque habits.

'And these gentlemen,' he said quietly, 'are they also all of the holy calling?'

The Abate shook his head.

'Nay,' he said, 'they are but true patriots — haters of tyrants. We are united in mind and heart. Save

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the Vicar Vergine, I am the only one of the sacred profession among the Twelve.'

Don Gaetano nodded.

'So,' he said, 'I understand. Now it is my turn to speak. I will tell you plainly, Sir Priest, what I think of you and your Society of the Decisi. I heard the Englishman whom you despise, call you the Decided Ruffians. I am of the Englishman's faction. You ask me, Don Gaetano Vardarelli, to join a company of sneaking underhand assassins, to work for one cause with the butchers of Monte Leone. Sirs, I am honoured indeed. Here is my answer. I am not of Ferdinand's police. I am no gendarme of the Bourbon. I will not hunt you down — I have other work to do. But be warned: abide in your own province, keep within your own borders, gentlemen of the Silver Skull. Meddle not with my country. Lay no hand upon my people; or beware of the vengeance of the Vardarelli. I have spoken.'

He rose, turned, and would have marched out and left them. But, quick as the falling of a star, I saw the flash of something which came from above. A noose descended from the ceiling, caught Don Gaetano about the neck, and pulled him off the ground. At the same instant a dozen masked figures, who had been waiting in some secret place for the signal, flung themselves upon my Captain. His hands were instantly pinioned to his sides. Yet nevertheless, such was the strength which abode in his fine frame that he flung them off him for a moment, drew a pistol, and fired. One of the foremost Decisi cast up his arms, clutched at the air with fingers like claws, and fell backwards. At the same instant I felt myself seized and held firmly to the wall. In a moment more we were both

overpowered and in the hands of the murderers of Monte Leone.

All the while the terrible priest stood motionless in his place at the table-head, with folded arms regarding us. He had taken no part in the struggle.

The Decisi bound our hands behind our backs and threw us into the corner like logs.

The wounded Punchinello lay groaning on the floor. One or two others were kneeling, trying to find his wound. And I remember thinking how curious it was that they spent most of the time adjusting their hooded masks so that they could see out of the eyeholes.

‘Abate,’ said one, ‘our brother Number Two would confess. He seeks a priest.’

A change passed over the face of the Abate Ciro. He advanced, kneeled reverently by the side of the dying man, drew a cross from his bosom, and held it to the place where, under the mask, the lips of the wounded man should have come. Then he set his ear close to his mouth, while two of the Decisi supported him in their arms. We could distinguish only the murmur of low speech and the Abate nodding with grave impassive face, as all priests do when they listen to confession.

Then it was the priest’s turn to speak. We heard distinctly the solemn words of absolution. He gave the dying man his blessing, and at the same moment his body seemed to stiffen, and we saw the jester’s motley agitated first by the rigors of the extreme agony, and then anon subsiding into the more terrible slackness of death.

The priest rose to his feet. He thrust the crucifix he had used into his bosom.

‘And now, gentlemen, we will attend to your

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affair!' he said, in his ordinary tones, as if he bade us good-day.

He called aloud, in a high commanding voice, and a dozen men entered one after another. They were all dressed alike, in the habit of the jester of Carnival.

'Take these two up and place them in the garotte!' cried Don Ciro, pointing at us. So with that half a dozen raised Don Gaetano and two caught hold of me. As I felt myself lifted I heard a voice whisper in my ear:

'Be silent. Do not resist. All will yet be well.'

And this indeed was very far from my expectation. For, though no terrors such as would now flood my heart in such a situation took hold of me, from the moment when I saw the red eyes of the priest I had given myself up for lost; so I only marvelled at the voice, and was silent. They carried us into a long low-ceilinged room, irregularly arched. It had once been painted white, and the dim shadowy forms of wheels and pinions were silhouetted against the walls by the light of the torches.

The men placed Don Gaetano and myself with our backs to a frame composed of solid beams of wood. One of them noisily loosened a screw, and the next moment I felt a strong band of cold iron clasp my neck.

The Abate had followed us, pacing calmly along in his black gown, as quietly as he had done that morning in the garden when we found him reading his breviary. He held his head a little before him, as if in reverent meditation.

Pausing at the end of the framework, he stood looking down on us.

'Don Gaetano Vardarelli,' he began, after a long

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pause, you were pleased a little while ago to speak slightly of the Decisi. It was somewhat unwise, considering where you stood, alone save for this lad, in the hall of judgment. Know, then, that your death was decided upon before ever you were invited to this conference. With four blasts of the Trump of the Decisione you had been condemned as a traitor. Yet, like the silly fly, you came fluttering to your own doom. You are here in the place of the ancient Spanish Inquisition, so usefully brought hither and so conscientiously worked by his Highness the Cardinal Bibbiena. Your neck is in the grip of the garotte. Behind you stands a man with his hand on the wheel. Each half-hour he will give the crank half a turn. God forbid that I should destroy a soul hastily! You will have plenty of time: if you have anything to confess, I will hear your confession and give you my best ghostly advice and absolution. Now you know that which is before you. The Registrar of Deaths will see to it that all is done decorously. I bid you good evening, gentlemen both. Let us return to the council table. We have wasted too long over this matter.'

So saying, he paced out, with his hands still clasped behind him, and the Twelve meekly following.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### TREACHERY

Don Gaetano had not spoken a word since he had been taken, and he uttered no sound till the priest had disappeared and taken the masked figures with him. Then I heard his voice, which, whether with the constraint of the iron band or the dank and confined place in which we lay, sounded hollow and strange.

'Little Pietro,' he said, 'this is my fault. For me to die is nothing, but I am heart-angry to have brought you here.'

'Do not trouble, dear Gaetano,' I made answer; 'you are with me, and that is enough.'

I heard the creak of the wheel over my shoulder, the whirr of the spokes, and the panting of the man who had been appointed to work our doom in the dark. Straining myself to meet the dread compression, I waited.

'Surely,' thought I, 'not half an hour has gone by! Yet, what matter? The sooner it is over, the better for us both.'

No thought of mercy from such remorseless murderers as those in whose power we had placed ourselves so much as entered my mind. But instead of the expected pressure at my throat, strange to tell the grip of the iron slackened, and I felt that I could move my chin downwards within the spiked collar which had been pressing against my neck. At the same moment I felt fingers busy with the fastenings of my wrists, and there was a voice in my ear.

'Hush! — no noise, for God's dear sake! I am Vittorio Dini, the watchman of Castel Rotondo, and I look to be paid for this night's work by the Vardarelli. I know that there are a hundred of you

outside and more in the valley. I know that tomorrow they will leave not a man of us alive in Castel Rotondo, if you two be dead. I cannot go and warn them to come at once and blow up the gate with powder. But you, young sir, being slight, must make your way through the window there. You will find a ladder of rope. I will give you the key of the outer gate, and the pith and powder of the Vardarelli must do the rest. But Don Gaetano must not forget me for this.'

'Half an hour is passed!' cried a voice from the doorway.

'Aye, aye!' responded antiphonally the little hunchback watchman of Castel Rotondo. And from behind us came again the clack of the cogs and the complaining of the wheel.

'Half a turn!' he soliloquised aloud: 'one more will surely finish them.'

The head of a Punchinello looked within, paused a moment, and then vanished, evidently satisfied with the zeal of our executioner.

'Haste you!' he whispered; 'remember there is but half an hour, and by that time you must bring up the Vardarelli in full *comitiva!*'

The little man who had called himself Vittorio Dini raised me in his arms. My ankles felt numb and tottery beneath me, and my head swam. The next moment he had attached the great key of the outer gate to my belt and bade me get outside a window to which he led me.

'Remember,' he said, 'this is death both to Don Gaetano and myself if they come before you arrive at the gates with the Vardarelli. Therefore make haste! But leave your cloak behind you.'

The next moment I had wriggled through the

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narrow slit of the glassless window. I felt on either side for a rope, and lo! there from the window-sill a ladder swayed and turned. It was precarious, but I was light, and so I merely clung a moment till the motion steadied itself. Then I began cautiously to descend. The window rose above me as if soaring slowly into the air like a kite. Before I knew it my feet touched ground. Then, though I could not see, I felt that my hands were wet. The rope had taken the tender skin off as I descended. Yet at the time I felt it no more than dipping them in running water. It was rather pleasant than otherwise.

The stars glinted clear-shining, cold and passionless above. They knew no change, even in the hour of my terrible distress.

I stumbled blindly down the slope, tripping over fallen corner stones massy with lime, fallen doubtlessly from the bulk of Castel Rotondo, which loomed a dense black above me. It seemed a thousand years since we had left Don Girolamo, and quite impossible that it could be the same night, and that I would find my brothers of the Vardarelli on the watch beneath. Yet as it seemed I had not gone twenty yards when I plumped into strong arms that closed about me tighter than the garotte.

‘A dark lantern — quick, Pozzi! — whom have we here?’ whispered the voice of Don Girolamo himself. ‘Aha — our little Pietro! Where is the Captain? Where is my brother? Tell us!’

In a word I told him, and I could hear the whisper of ‘Treachery’ run along the hundred brave men crouching among the scattered boulders.

Don Girolamo said not a word, but I could hear him order a swift-footed lad back for the rest of the five hundred. Then, with a sudden unanimous

movement, the whole hundred men stood up, and I could see their forms blacker than blackness against the dense vault of heaven.

The most of us must take the key and force a passage if any stand in our way. But the rope ladder by which Pietro descended still hangs. The window (he says) is narrow, but the more slender of us may enter. They can at least defend the Captain with their lives till we others arrange.'

I added to myself as Don Girolamo ended, 'Yes, or die with him if you are long a-coming!' And indeed this last appeared to me much more probable, when I thought of the narrow and intricate ways by which Gaetano and I had been led to the secret haunt of the Decisi, in the vast tumble-down warren of Castel Rotondo.

But at the word, seven or eight slender lads drew readily out of the hundred, and stood prepared to make the adventure with me; while Don Girolamo, the key ready in his hand but making sure also of the powder and the quickmatch, moved off up the path which led to the main gate of Castel Rotondo.

The ladder was still a-swing from the window bars. And though my wounded fingers now stung upon the strands as if they had touched hot metal, I set my feet upon the cross loops first of them all, and went upwards. It seemed a long time before I arrived at the window. I gripped the lintel and leaped on the sill. All was quiet within, but, as it seemed to me, the grim whitewashed torture-chamber was filled with light. I could see Don Gaetano reclining as I had left him, apparently limp and inert. Edgewise I sidled through the narrow aperture till I was wholly within. Then, as I dropped lightly on the floor, I found Vittorio Dini at my side.

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'How many are there with you?' he whispered anxiously.

'Seven,' said I — 'all that could crawl through the window-bars.'

He threw up his hands in consternation.

'Lord of the Seventh Heaven!' he said, 'our throats are as good as cut, if seven be all.'

'But there are ninety more at the gates, and four hundred coming as fast as they can!' I whispered.

'Ah,' he said, brightening, 'that is better — so be they come in time!'

He motioned the brisk lads, who had meantime been dropping one by one from the inner sill of the window, to take up their position behind the wooden barricade on which our backs had leaned.

'You have been away well nigh an hour, and they will be coming in a moment more to see the end. Get back into your collar. At the last visitation I made a rattling at the wheel and then scudded round and putting my own head into the iron, I drew your cloak about me! But that may not serve us again. For then Punchinello only looked in, rubbed his hands quietly and chuckled. "All over!" he said to himself, I doubt not, and went to make his report accordingly. But next time it will be Papa Ciro who will come, and he will not be put off with child's play!'

So right unwillingly (as at this distance of time I may confess) I set my head again within the collar; and mightily unkindly it tasted after the caressing of the night air and the smell of the dew. I never knew before how strong and unpleasant the smell of rusty iron is, especially when it is about your neck and there are spikes in it.

Ten seconds after the door opened, and the square shoulders of the false priest showed between

the doorposts. Papa Ciro came in. He held his hands still clasped behind him, but now the meditative look was gone, and his head was carried chin forward with a kind of ominous truculence.

‘So, gentlemen of the Vardarelli, you have defied the Decisi. Verily I have known some things better timed, Don Gaetano. After learning the secret of Don Ciro Annicharico, to flounce up “I will have nothing to do with you — get hence, I am holier, better — no murderer I!” Aha, we shall see! It was, as I say, at least ill-timed. But in this the Vardarelli are like women — such brave men, such long curling moustachios, such accoutrements of jingling silver, such fine curvetting horses! — But in their silly mouths they carry tongues that must perforce wag and wag and wag. Now, the Decisi — they ride not abroad in clattering *comitiva*; they take not the eyes of the maids. Their pates, mayhap, are shorn like mine. Only they strike. Is not that the difference, Sir Capitano?’

He looked down upon us, his red eyes glowing ferociously. Then he seemed suddenly to miss something. He looked at his watch.

‘Where is that rascal Vittorio Dini? Give another half-turn to the garotte, fellow. His most virtuous highness is chill. He shall have a comforter about his throat, so that he take not cold.’

But at this moment up through the swarming warren of the place there came a vague uncertain sound, the stir and hum of a disturbed and angry hive. It caught the quick ears of the priest. Suspicion rose instant in his breast. He paused with his head cast back in act to listen. The noise increased. Sharp explosions began to rend the air.

‘Treachery!’ cried the priest. ‘You are clever, Don

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Gaetano — but you are not clever enough for this! And from underneath his black soutane he flashed a long and dangerous knife. He bent to where our Captain sat helpless. But before he could strike I had twisted myself free of the garotte and laid hold of his arm.

'To me, Vardarelli!' I cried. And at the word the seven bold lads leaped from the shelter of the barricade. I never knew before what it was to have to do with a strong man. I was battered this way and that. The odds were eight to one, yet it was all that we could do to hold him. His knife had dropped from his hand at the first alarm, or I declare the priest would have beaten us all. As it was he kept us at bay, warding the knives with a spoke of the garotte crank which had fallen upon the floor from the hand of Vittorio Dini.

Time and again he would have forced his way through us to get at Don Gaetano, who still remained helpless, his hands tied and his neck in the grip of the iron; but one and another of us received the brunt of his attack. Two of the Vardarelli already lay senseless upon the floor, and indeed I was little better, when from the passage outside we heard the near shouting of the *comitiva*.

Ciro Annicharico was pent in a corner, with the six of us striking at him with sword and knife. But the armour that was under his gown turned every blow as a roof turns rain. He heard the shouts — 'Vardarelli! Vardarelli! Forward the Vardarelli!' ring up the stairways. I saw him twist his head this way and that, seeking for a method of escape. There was but one door, and outside that his enemies would be a hundred to one. We counted confidently upon his capture. But with a swirl of his wooden bar he

cleared us from before him, and sprang upon the top of the great beam to which in times of the Holy Office prisoners had been suspended by the thumbs to purge them of black heresy. The roof was close over his head, coming down on either side in the steep slant of a gable. Ciro Annicharico set his hands to the tiles, and with the easy gesture of one who tears paper he rent them asunder, casting the fragments fiercely down amongst us.

Then up through the tangle of passages, led by the little hunchback Vittorio, came storming the whole *comitiva*, with Don Girolamo at their head. The priest stood one moment poised upon the topmost beam, looking down.

'Fire at him!' I cried: 'do not let him escape. It is the murderer of Monte Leone.'

Don Girolamo raised his pistol and fired. The bullet clinked upon iron and spatted off harmlessly against the tiles. The priest swung himself out. One moment his terrible face and tonsured head appeared at the opening.

'For this will I reckon with Vittorio Dini!' he cried, and the next moment vanished. Don Girolamo and half a dozen climbers sprang after him; but though they reached the summit of the tower scarcely a moment after he had spoken, they saw nothing of the chief of the Decisi. He had completely disappeared.

'Truly he is the devil himself!' quoth Don Girolamo, devoutly crossing himself. But the Vardarelli were so happy to find their Captain unhurt that they cared but little for the escape of Ciro Annicharico.

But, as the event proved, in that they were wrong.

# THE SILVER SKULL

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### THE VENGEANCE OF THE SILVER SKULL

Thus was a well-kept secret revealed. The Society of the Decisi, indeed, all men knew. Its decrees had terrorised Apulia for many years. Whenever a man had the name of money, he was compelled to pay, or upon a day there came to him some warning letter, signed with four dots on behalf of the Decisi. Then, if the man had no money or no will to part with it, at night there came a knocking at his door. It was burst open, and riot and outrage and death stalked through the house, even as at Monte Leone, sparing neither sex nor age. Or sometimes the master would be found lying quietly in his bed even as he had fallen asleep, the notice of the Decisi pinned to his breast with one strong stiletto stroke.

Had a poor man a vineyard or a parcel of ground which one of the chiefs desired, he would be notified to sell it for such a price — often one quite nominal; and if he hesitated, he too received the notice with four red dots at the bottom, which meant, ‘Deliver or die!’

This much had long been known, but till now their dread leader had masked himself. From this day forth all men knew him for the Abate Ciro Annicharico of the town of Grottaglie. The Chief of the Decisi had been a legend and a secret terror before. Men spoke of him with bated breath, as stronger than Samson, more full of craft than Machiavelli, more daring even than Don Gaetano. Yet not for a moment had any ever suspected that in the parish priest of Grottaglie, daily to be seen reading his breviary in the quiet of his garden, carrying the holy bread to the dying, or ministering

peacefully to his parishioners, there was concealed the daring horseman who had outwitted generals, both French and Neapolitan, the thrice-banded 'Wasp,' whose sting was a stiletto point dealt in the dark, the man whose cruel decrees, invariably carried out to the letter, had for eleven years filled Apulia with terror.

But the news that the Abate Ciro of Grottaglie was in verity the chief of the terrible Decisi spread through the province with inconceivable rapidity. I doubt not but that the Englishman, who, as they said, knew everything, heard it the next day. The air was full of Papa Ciro and his doings. Men gossiped at the corners of the streets, women at the wells: Ciro — Ciro, the terrible Don Ciro was all the burden of their discourse. And they looked over their shoulders as they talked.

It was told how he had dealt with those who had been sent against him in time past. They detailed his multitudinous disguises — soldier, gendarme, lawyer, Punchinello, countrywoman, nun. He had deceived the Neapolitan. Could a man from Naples hope to get the better of a man of Apulia — even one from such a despised and truly despicable potters' village as Grottaglie of Taranto? Have you heard how he cheated the Corsican Ottavio? A Corsican, indeed! — Why, Ciro Annicharico could have bested the Little Corsican himself — for after all was he not a true Apulian, this Don Ciro of Grottaglie?

A tale with spice in it that one was indeed — macaroni and cheese, high cheese and garlic thereto! This Corsican general came in Murat's time to make an end (as all the others had done), and he set about it by offering gifts and securities to Don Ciro if he would abide in Bari, reform himself, and

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live peaceably. How did he know him, say you? He knew him only as the chief of the Wasps of Taranto, not as the priest: you see clearly his disguises were infinite and wonderful. To Ottavio he was only known as the brigand. He braved it out in false hair, false moustache, velveteen costume, rows of silver buttons, belts stuck full as a pin-cushion with knives and pistols. And such a rider of horses as he was!

Now the General Ottavio, who was of the pot-house order of nobility, loved horses and those who could ride them. He had also a famous imported English mare. But of this anon.

At Bari, then, where the brigand went into quarantine, General Ottavio had his headquarters. General Ottavio kept many horses. He was well content, for he had discovered a quick and easy way with the Society of the Silver Death's Head. He would pension the leaders, and the rest would remain quiet so long as their chiefs sipped the honey of governmental favour.

So Don Ciro became a great friend of the General Ottavio. He was not known as the Abate then, but no matter. They two rode together, they chatted together; wine, women, and song, they tried them all. But as often as they wearied, they fell back upon the beauty and strength of horses — specially of the General's recent acquisitions. One day, when he had well drunken, nothing would suit Ottavio the Corsican but that the Brigand Chief must try the best in his stable — the fleet steeds that no one in ignorant Apulia could bestride. The Banded Wasp must positively try them. The General would take no refusal. The cavalier pleaded that he was growing old; he was out of practice; he had a great stiffness

in his joints. His hand had lost its cunning.

He was persuaded, and over-persuaded, till at last he gave way, and mounted as it had been against his will. (So the gossips told the tale at every wine-shop.) One horse after another was tried, and of all the Apulian was the best. This, however, General Ottavio, as a Corsican, could not allow. 'Il Guappo' (the Wasp) was jealous — the Tuscan, the Andalusian, these were better. They might be a little lazy, perhaps, but so famous a rider should have plied the whip and set the rowels deep in their flanks. 'The whip — the spurs!' cried the brigand: 'nay, it was a wrist of steel I needed. That last brute nearly pulled my arms out of their sockets.'

'I have yet one finer than all,' the General said at last; 'an English mare, for which I paid two hundred gold pieces.'

'She is naught,' quoth the brigand. 'Nothing English can touch our breed in Apulia.'

'Try her.'

'Nay, if it please your Excellency, I am no longer the man I was. Let me be excused!' So the chief answered.

'Just this once, to please me!' smiled General Ottavio.

And the 'Wasp' reluctantly mounted. He went slowly at first, turning, and passing this way and that.

'Try her at the gallop,' said the General.

'I am afraid I have lost my nerve — the confounded islandress pulls too strongly.'

'A gallop — a little gallop — to please me!'

The reformed chieftain pulled his hat off his head, and bowed his dark curled wig upon his saddle-bow.

'At your Excellency's command!' he said, and

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went at a tearing gallop down the road to Brindisi. But he never came back, and so the General lost his famous English mare.

‘Served him right, did it not?’ So the tale was always ended. The brigands — they may do a little wrong at times, and they are certainly over free with the little willow-leaf of the stiletto. But after all they are Apulian bred and born, and how should a Corsican wild boar think to measure wits with a Tarantine? Look you, signorini, was the foreigner not well served?

‘And now they have sent another outlander to hunt our Abate? Bagatella! He will make a barn-yard sucking calf of him. He will drive him as with dogs — an Englishman, forsooth! Did you not hear how *Ciro* first took captive Don Gaetano Vardarelli, and then, when driven into a corner, escaped from the whole *comitiva* of the Vardarelli by tearing a hole in the roof and leaping down a hundred feet into the ditch all unhurt?’

So, by well and grinding quern, went the clack of gossip.

It was Don *Ciro* — Don *Ciro* — Don *Giro*, over all the land — nothing but Don *Ciro*! But of the man himself no sign or trace. He ministered no more in the little church at Grottaglie. He walked no more with his cross swinging at his breast, to and fro, back and forth and turn again, in the little garden of the presbytery. He had vanished from the land. It was thought that he had gone to seek a sanctuary among the mountains of Albania, which from the hills of Martina you can see of a very fine winter’s morning white across the sapphire of Adria.

He had been heard of in Zante. A trading sloop had taken him up at Cape Leuca. His power was

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over, and he would return to Apulia no more. I think we all believed this, mostly perhaps because we hoped it.

That is, all except Don Gaetano and Vittorio Dini.

This last had obtained his desires. He was watchman in the town of Conversano, which root and branch belonged to the Vardarelli. His fine bass voice was heard at nights so long as there were any loungers or passers-by, proclaiming the hour and the weather.

But as soon as the streets were quiet Vittorio Dini withdrew himself. For he remembered the words of the Abate as he escaped through the roof, and was sore afraid as he lay in his bed. He had reason.

\* \* \* \* \*

In mid August the dog-star still rages in Apulia. The heaven is brass, the earth iron. But that makes it all the more grateful to steal forth in the twilight, when the night cools the earth and damps the white dust among the parched vineyards, and listen to the grey olives crackling like broom-pods with the heat.

Abrupt as a stone thrown into a tarn among the Apennines, the sun descends below the horizon. The high clouds overhead are still rosy at the fringes, while upon the surface of the bounding sea there is reflected a faint and pink iridescence, changeful and delicate as the pearl-grey sheen upon a dove's breast.

It is a good time, and Don Gaetano and I oftentimes walked together in the cool of the day, glad to escape from our oven of a valley, to look out upon the great plain jewelled with houses, or we would try to spy out the serrated cloud to the east, which was the

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Albanian range suspended over utmost Adrin.

Don Gaetano and I had become inseparable comrades. He was to me as an elder brother. He was indeed my only true friend, to whom I spoke without thought as to what I ought to say. And as I prattled on his grave Spanish face would relax, and a younger, brighter expression would come into it. Sometimes when alone with me he would grow almost boyish; and once, when we wished to see the moon rise, we joined our hands and ran to the top of a crag like a couple of children at their play. Then, when we went back, the mother of the Vardarelli would watch us carefully, even wistfully. And, always when Gaetano and I came in, she would search our faces for I knew not what. But when she found not that which she sought, she would sigh a sigh that was half sad and half thankful.

Yet, though we walked constantly together, not a smile passed the lips of the most reckless of the *comitiva* as we went by. Not a word was said. The guards did not exchange covert looks. Such was the respect in which Don Gaetano was held, and such (I think also) was the jealous regard with which the whole company regarded their little sister.

On just such a night — I remember it keenly — we two were walking out. With us there went three of the great Apulian wolf-dogs, bristly and fierce at the footstep of a stranger, but playful as puppies with us whom they knew. Don Gaetano had reared them, and given them to me as a body-guard. Their names were Manfred, Duchessa, and Contessa.

Suddenly, at the turning of a path on the hillside, out of the grey dark beneath us there sprang a woman. She came rushing upward, seeking (as it might be) the way into the valley of the Vardarelli.

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She was tall and gaunt, with grey locks hanging loose about her head, and such an expression of madness in her eyes as I had never seen before on any face.

As soon as she saw Don Gaetano she cast herself prone at his feet.

‘Vengeance, great chief!’ she cried; ‘for God’s sake give me vengeance. They have murdered my husband — my husband, that was my all. Childless and a widow they have made me. Let the Vardarelli strike, for what was done, was done for their sakes. Strike — strike, and spare not.’

Don Gaetano reached a hand and tried to lift her up. But she would not rise from her knees, and only clasped her arms about him as if she would not let go till she had his promise.

‘Tell me what is the matter, good woman,’ he said kindly. ‘Who is your husband?’

‘The kindest and most innocent of men — Vittorio Dini,’ she cried; ‘he that was keeper of the watch at Castel Rotondo, the man who, at the risk of his own, saved your honourable life. And now he has been murdered for it by Ciro and his accursed band. Vengeance be upon those who have done this thing, and slain a man so true and loving, my husband and my all!’

And she grovelled in the dust at Don Gaetano’s feet,

Never had I seen the face of our Captain take on a sterner or a graver aspect.

He bent and laid his hand upon her head.

‘Tell me all from the beginning, omitting nothing,’ he said gently.

The woman rose, and standing before us with her hands clasped tightly palm to palm to give her some

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command over herself, she told her tale.

'Excellency,' she said, 'thus it was. When my Vittorio came to be watchman at Conversano and put behind him the evil life and the brigand town of Castel Rotondo, I thought that I had no more to live for. The old bad life was left behind. Peace nestled about my heart like a dove in its nest. Never since we were married had my husband and I been so altogether happy. Yet a shadow dwelt night and day upon his countenance, and when I came upon him suddenly, having perchance gone to the well for water wherewith to cook the beans, I would find him with his face between his palms, and when he looked up again, his countenance would be like death.

'Ah, my Vittorio! he was not beautiful of body, but spite of his misfortunes and the life he had been compelled to lead, the soul of him was all beautiful within. Never an ill word, never a blow these twenty years. Such was my man — and is there a woman 'twixt Naples and Taranto who can say as much?'

It was all exceedingly pitiful, for as she said this the tall gaunt woman suddenly lifted up her coarse gown as a barefooted child does by the wayside when it has hurt its foot, and wiped away the tears that trickled steadily down from her eyes.

Don Gaetano patted her on the shoulder.

'Courage,' he said; 'tell me all the tale, and fear not but that I will have vengeance on the murderers.'

At his words the woman seemed transfigured. She knelt and kissed his hand again and again.

'Ah, you will indeed?' she said; 'you will kill Don Ciro the murderer? You will do vengeance upon Occhio Lupo the traitor? You will have no pity upon

Bernardis the lawyer. Oh, I know them every one. Often have I listened to their secrets. I will guide you to their dens. Great and small, I know them. They shall taste the blood they have shed — taste it, sweet as syrup it was in their mouths; but in their bellies it shall be bitter as gall. And you, great captain, shall set the full cup to their lips.'

'I am no gendarme,' said Don Gaetano; 'but if your husband hath died for the cause of my release, I will certainly have vengeance upon those who have killed him. I will swear the vendetta against Don Ciro and all his band!'

The woman rose composedly up like one much relieved, so strong is revenge among the folk of our Italy.

'It was last night, just as the sun went down, that my Vittorio came in and sat down. It was his night at home with me, and Luigi Del Serio was to take his place — such being my Vittorio's agreement with the Syndic of Conversano. My man was more than usually merry, and I blamed him for it, saying it was well seen that the first of the new wine had come into the town. My Vittorio has ever been a sober man. But at vintage time — well, your Excellency knows. And Vittorio was such a good man to me, his wife, that once in a way what right had I to complain? Specially since, in his modest cups, Vittorio was ever kind and jovial.

'He had brought with him a skinful of the must and set it on the board, and nothing would serve but I must sit with him and partake. Then, as we sat thus, to the door there came one man and then another, men whom I knew — not men from Conversano, but men from Francavilla Fontana, Lecce, and the towns of the plain — respectable

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men, citizens and keepers of shops and hostelrys.

“Hola, Vittorio Dini! what — are you here?” the first of them called out, looking in upon us. “Well, this is good seeing! We are in Conversano for the buying of the new wine. Come with us, that we may taste it together.”

Then my husband, fearing no evil, and being merry of heart with the must that he had drunk already, cried out, “The saints forbid, that such gentlemen as Bernardis, Occhio Lupo, and the Vicar Vergine should stand on my doorstep and refuse to partake of my good cheer! Come in, gentlemen all. I am now in a good place, and can afford it. There shall be no stinting here. I am watchman of Conversano by appointment, and this is my night of freedom. Here is new wine of the best. From Monte Volture it comes, rarer than Vesuvio, richer than Crapi, true *lacrima Christi* every drop of it. Taste, gentlemen. Do me this honour in mine own house!”

‘And so, with great embracing and friendship, four men came in — all men of wealth and position they were.

“Wife,” cried my Vittorio, “this is indeed an honour to our poor house. Run to the house of Signor Cotrone. He will, I know, send a loaf of white bread for the love of me. Tell him the quality of my guests.”

‘But the gentlemen forbade. They but called to see their old friend, being on business in the town. Nevertheless they would drink of the good wine — the new wine of Monte Volture.

The men were polite. They had come far to see my husband, to do him honour. But they had a message to deliver. It was the business of men. “I understand, Signorini,” said I, and withdrew myself,

though not very willingly, to the outer room, where was the fire of charcoal. But I contented me, knowing that I could make Vittorio tell me all at night. So I abode in peace while they spoke together.

‘But I watched. Yes, of course. For wherefore otherwise are doors made with keyholes? De Bernardis looked out once. I was at the fireplace raking ashes. He went back, and my eye was at the keyhole. I saw the four men gather about my husband. They pledged him in full goblets.

“Vittorio Dini,” said one, “we pledge you in your own blood, — you are a false traitor to the Silver Skull.”

‘And with that he flashed a dagger and struck my husband to the heart. The others struck at the same time, and my Vittorio sank to the earth with a toast on his lips, but with the four stilettoes in his heart. Scarcely, I believe, did he know that he was stricken.

“Did I rush in?” you ask me. It was my first thought. But even as my fingers were on the hasp of the door, I thought, “What use? They are four of them — and all strong men. They will slay me out of hand, and there will be no vengeance, which would be a sin. I will abide.”

‘So I threw me down on my bed with a hand behind my head, as if I had been weary. At that moment the door opened and the first of the murderers came out, walking cautiously on tiptoe. I could see him from under my eyelashes. Yes, they are long and black though my hair is whitening. Vittorio loved them. I saw the man: he was De Bernardis, the lawyer. I have not yet done with him. He shall die if I live till I meet him alone.

‘And the others followed him. My back was

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towards them, nevertheless I saw. How so? Because there was a candle in the room in which they had slain my husband; and, shining through the open door, it cast the shadows of the men on the wall above my bed. I saw Lupo sign to Bernardis that he should go near and kill me. But I lay still. Then Bernardis shook his head and passed on: as one who would say "Please yourself, — there is enough of blood in this place for my taste." So I saw in the shadow above me the head of Lupo the Wolf grow larger. He had taken two steps nearer to me, and stood listening whether I was really asleep. The shadow of his stiletto was broad as a sickle on the plaster. But I breathed hard — for, you see, I did not wish to die in that hour. Where had my vengeance been then? "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." So I heard the priest say out of the Holy Book. Well, it is likely. One must believe the holy father. But I would rather attend to mine own vengeance myself — yes, even I, poor Palma, widow of Vittorio Dini, watchman of the town of Conversano.

'So I breathed hard and steady till the murderers passed on. The room was empty. Only in the next chamber the candle flickered. And I knew that there was a heap upon the floor. So I lay all the night, not daring to move. For I thought within me, "They will surely leave a sentry to kill me if I rise and follow them." And I said also, "I will not die till these four who killed the husband of my youth sup sorrow and drink death from a full bowl. Then I also shall be ready to die."

That is all. To the justice, sitting on his chair scratching his head in dull perplexity, I denied all. I knew naught. I had been asleep, I said. What use was it? But now I come to you, great captain. It was

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for you that Vittorio Dim died. Now avenge me upon mine enemy. I claim the blood right. I proclaim the vendetta, and I charge you to take it up. You cannot deny it. Take up the oath of slaying, Gaetano of the Vardarelli.'

And Don Gaetano softly took her brown withered hand, the hand of a labouring woman, and kissed it, saying softly, 'I swear!'

# THE SILVER SKULL

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### THE TURNING OF THE NEW LEAF

Yet, notwithstanding all my valorous intent, somehow the fair-haired Englishman's look troubled me. It abode in my heart of hearts and rankled there. Why, I knew not, but I could not forget it nor put it from me. It spoke wonderment, and I thought doubt, merging into contempt. Surely he must have known that I was a girl, masquerading it there with the *comitiva*, dressed like a boy. I had never considered the matter in that way before, but now I resolved to put away such escapades for ever.

Yet again, who was this Cameron, this Don Walter? — An English captain of gendarmes serving for hire a Bourbon master! And was not I Isabella of the Vardarelli, and the trusted companion of the chief, Don Gaetano, who loved me even as an elder brother?

Nevertheless I remembered that look at the foot of the albergo stairs; and when Don Gaetano came in and bade me be ready to ride to Ostuni with him, I answered him right shortly that I was a girl, and that for the future I was going to abide and help the mother in the Casa Vardarelli.

Don Gaetano first whistled, a low and incredulous whistle it was, and then sat him down carelessly with his leg swinging on the edge of a table, swaying his plumed hat in one hand and watching me.

'You are diligent to-day, little La Bella?' he said. 'Yet you have neglected to feed Salvatore, and you have missed the match with pistols between Michele and our Giovanni. Michele beat him hollow after ten trials, which caused Giovanni to ruffle his curls, I can tell you. But you will surely ride with us to

Ostuni, will you not? There is a garrison there of Ferdinand's which has been lately revictualled — militia and provincials — and it is right that they should pay toll dues to the Vardarelli of their warlike stores.'

But I kept on sweeping the floor and throwing back the curtains of the Casa Vardarelli, as though I had not heard. I had skirts down to my feet, and I was resolved like iron to ride no more with the *comitiva*. But I did not tell Don Gaetano this, for he would not have understood, but made a jest of it, being accustomed to think me petulant and desirous of having my own way and to be made much of, which was false.

Then came the mother in. She sniffed at the dust I was raising and looked from Gaetano to me with a curious look.

'Who is making all this pother?' she began, thinking I had some wager with Gaetano as to sweeping the rooms.

Whereat I ran to her, and without any reason at all fell to weeping on her shoulder. Then Gaetano rose in astonishment and came towards us.

'What have you been saying to the girl?' asked his mother of the Captain sternly. For though he was Captain of the Vardarelli, to the Signora he was at such times only the eldest of her boys.

'Nothing,' he answered, rubbing his forehead in perplexity. 'I but asked La Bella to ride with us to Ostuni to-night.'

'Mother,' I hastened to say, 'I will stay with you; I will ride no more with the *comitiva*!'

And at the time I meant it.

'Do not send me away. After this I will be a true maid of the Casa Vardarelli. I will learn household

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work, and to sit still with sewing in my lap — I will be your very own daughter. I do not care for riding with the *comitiva* any more. I wish to be as other girls. I will learn to play upon the harpsichord!’

‘God forbid!’ said Gaetano, and there was quick mirth in his voice. I think my new resolve appeared to him but a whim of girlish petulance.

‘Gaetano,’ said his mother, ‘if you have nothing more to do than thus to tease a girl, it were better for you to be with the others at the stables, or out on the hills with Dionisio seeing that the lazy shepherds do their work among the lambs.’

Don Gaetano went to the door with a head that hung down like a child’s that has been chidden. He seemed always to leave his sternness outside the Stone Gate of the Valley of the Vardarelli.

When he was gone the mother sat on the window-seat and drew me down near to her, as if I were once more the little girl who had ridden home on Don Gaetano’s saddle-bow. And I was comforted to feel her hand upon my hair. She had a caressing way of passing her fingers through it as I sat at her knee, as light and cool as thistle-down. I could have let her go on for ever and ever.

‘You are like a kitten, little one,’ she said, smiling in her gracious way, for upon occasion she could be tender as any. ‘You are like a kitten, that loves to be caressed. In a little while we shall hear you purr.’

‘I want to be a girl like other girls,’ I said to her, leaning my head against her hand for the comfort of it. ‘I am tired of men and men, and only men. Tell me about your own girlhood, dear mother, and let me be a girl like you. Hitherto I have been so unmaidenly; but now I am nineteen and a woman. I saw the daughter of the Intendant walking through

the streets of Lecce. She wore a long white dress that clung about her and fitted to the shape of her body as she walked. She had a silken shawl draped from the left shoulder and falling over her right arm. Her hat of yellow straw was wide in front, and bent prettily down about her ears. I am going to learn how to plait my hair thus after it has grown long enough — yes, mother mine — and tie my hat with bows of ribbon of pale blue like the Intendant's daughter at Lecce. Then Don Gaetano will not laugh at me any more, and think me no better than a wild colt from the hills.'

'Your own hair, Isabella,' said the Signora, gravely, 'is more beautiful and more becoming than covered with a thousand bonnets of straw of all the French fashions. A bold madam she must have been indeed, that Intendant's daughter, thus to be walking before the eyes of men, alone and unashamed!'

'And she carried a parasol, mother, dangling from her wrist, with a handle all of gold. And she looked at me. I think that she knew I was a girl, and despised me.'

But for all that I told her so much, I revealed not the true reason why I desired no more to ride with the *comitiva* — which was that I had been so unhappy when, on the night of the Englishman's reviewing the troop in the street of Cerniola, the fair-haired lad had looked at me from head to foot with doubt and wonder in his eyes.

So the mother patted me on the cheek and bade me go and do even as I liked — which indeed I should have done in any case, yet her saying so comforted me.

So I drove in the cows from among the woods up

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on the hillside where the pastures are. I brought down a great back burden of pine-cones and dead branches. They made quite a little hillock by the side of the old chipped axe-log, but really they were light. I went out to weed in the vegetable garden, where were the cabbages and the tomatoes and the garlic. I knew these three apart — the garlic by the smell, the others by their size and colour. It was a fine thing to be a gardener.

'Now,' I said to myself, 'I am a real girl at last. And I am so happy. I will be wild no more.'

I could see the lads of the farm watching me covertly, even coming near and offering to help me shyly enough, but oftener disappearing out of my sight with something which might have been a sudden seizure of pain — or again might not.

Well, I do not blame them. For I own that the cows broke away in all directions, instead of keeping the path, as they would with little eight-year-old Matteo; and when I had them in the angle of the farmyard by the tower steps at which they had been milked throughout all their generations I essayed to milk them. It looked so easy; and having acquired the art of sword-play, and how to throw a stone like a boy, I judged there would be no difficulty in learning in what manner to milk a cow. So I had learned it by watching Beppo, who would milk and milk, leaning his forehead against the cow's side and sleeping soundly while the beast chewed the cud and flicked the flies from Beppo and herself. For Beppo could do all this; and what is more, he could always wake up at the exact moment when the milk was within three inches of the top of the pail. It looked so easy when Beppo did it. But when I tried my hand on Empress, our quietest cow, exactly in

the same way, she kicked over the pail, twirling her tail in the air, and ran like mad all about the enclosure of the masseria — to my shame, and doubtless to the secret delight of the boys, whose watching heads disappeared from the top of the wall, like rabbits at a warren when the dogs come over the hill.

Then I came in and warmed me at the cheerful fire in the house-place, thinking it was made of the pine-cones and branches I had brought. But, alas! these had all been thrown out: they would not burn, not being, as it were, of the right vintage and selection.

Then came my horse Salvatore nosing to the door, seeking sugar and caresses. Now it was not in the human heart to resist his eyes and the way he had of thrusting his nose up and nuzzling it on your shoulder, blowing his breath upon you from pure affection. It was a gracious afternoon, late enough to be cool, and there had risen a fanning wind from off the Sea of Adria.

‘Beppo, quick, Beppo! Saddle me Salvatore!’ I cried before I thought. Then I went in and changed into my Greek blouse and kirtle, swung into the saddle, and set off at a gallop towards the Stone Gate. The Signora came to the door, hearing the clatter of Salvatore’s feet; and though she waved a hand kindly I knew there was sorrow in her heart.

But in a moment, with the air singing fresh in my ears and stirring my hair, the restless spirit in my heart woke, and I rode through the Stone Gate and out upon the little plateau whence I could look down on the broad plain of Apulia, with the pearly mist of heat still upon it, scarce touched as yet by the sea breeze which passed overhead between the hills and

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the sea, bringing us coolness even in our mountain fastnesses.

Beneath me I saw the *comitiva*, the low sun glinting on bright scabbard and swinging carbine-barrel, on clinking stirrup and steel accoutrement. They had reached a wider track, and were riding two by two, so that the sparkles came glinting up and danced in my eyes and in my brain. The tears also rose unbidden, forcing up the lids.

'Why did they leave me? Why did Don Gaetano go without taking me? He might have known. It is too late to ride after them now. Besides, I have put aside all these unwomanly things. I will go back and help the lady mother at the beadwork and to feed the chickens.'

But for all that I could not go back, but stood and watched the dancing glitter of the long serpentine array of the gay riders, till they melted into the plains and the night fell and the stars came out.

Then, if the truth be told, I wept again — why I cannot tell even now, much less at that time. There were strange things stirring in my heart, and I, Isabella of the Vardarelli, who a week ago had cared for nothing save to outride, outrun, and outwit every reckless lad of the *comitiva*, now cried for nothing — wanting something, and not knowing what I wanted.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GIOVANNI'S WAY

And, indeed, I went no more abroad on any adventure till that sad day on which I saw the pride of the Vardarelli broken, and the gallantest riders that ever were, scattered to the four winds.

The leaders of the Good Cousins, as the Carbonari were called among themselves, had sent out the signal to rise to all the sections. Ferdinand had fled to the Austrians for refuge. All Apulia was instantly in flames. In the north also there was turmoil; but the Carbonari were there in force. Trani was held by a republican government. General Church had taken off his newly raised police and the cavalry he had drilled at Bari, no man knew whither. It was guessed to Naples, where Nugent was in peril.

As for the south of the province, it was quiet in our hands. Only Potenza, among the hills of Basilicata, held out for the Bourbon. There was news that the west also was tranquil, in Good Cousinly keeping, and that Sicily the Island was afire in the triangle betwixt the three capes.

'The time has come for Italy to be free,' said the Mother of the Vardarelli. 'Go, my sons, let Potenza of Basilicata also have the light, or at least perish with the torch flaming at her doors.'

So in the mild Christmas weather we left the Casa Vardarelli. We passed without a forewarning of disaster through the Stone Gate at the entrance of the Valley. For Fate and the gods must have their sacrifice, and that which is written be wrought out. To me the Signora spoke in the morning.

'Go, Isabella, go, since I see it in your eyes. I will

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keep the house. This once go — that you may see the deed done that shall free all the south from sea to sea. Go, I bid you. Fear not, for you too are Carbonaro.'

And right gladly I went; for such an array had never left the hill country; six hundred men, all armed and mounted, all leal men, eating the Vardarelli salt and owning Don Gaetano as their captain. But it was my place to ride beside him. How could we know, as at the turning of the road we looked back and heard the bugles play in the van and those in the rear answer, what should befall that array of noble men long ere midnight of the morrow?

At the cross-roads of Montrese we were joined by the Vicar Vergine with eight hundred men. They came, he said, to aid us in our invasion of Basilicata. Cut-throat-looking bandits they were — galley-slave ruffians — the scourgings of half a dozen provinces; I trembled when one of them so much as looked upon me. The prisons of Gallipoli, the galleys of Brindisi must have been ransacked from end to end to produce such a set of scoundrels. But they wore the Carbonaro colours, and when every sword had a value Don Gaetano could not well turn them back.

But he ordered me to ride closer to him, and never on any pretext to stray or leave his side. 'When one makes war I know it cannot be done with rose-water,' he said, 'yet it turns my stomach that such fellows as these should ride with the Vardarelli. Pah! but when the Bourbon is down and the work done, then I, Gaetano Vardarelli, will know how to deal with such rascals.'

I need not be long atelling how we fell into the trap. It is not good hearing for any that have wished

well to the famous *comitiva*, the band of brave men who, to do a great good, had mayhap often ridden over-close to the frontiers of ill. Suffice it that we came to the fords of the Basento. It was, as I say, the Christmas time, and the rainy province. At dusk we prepared us to cross, but when the first steeds dipped their hoofs in the water, suddenly from all sides a volley was poured in upon our company. The banks of the river were already lined with white-coated Austrians. Artillery played upon us from the little wooded hills where the guns had been cunningly sheltered by barricades of brushwood. For well nigh an hour the Vardarelli stood their ground, dismounting and sending back their horses, those of us who were not shot at the first fire seeking cover where we could find it.

As for me, even as in the first turmoil and confusion I turned me about to find Don Gaetano, I felt a sharp intolerable pain of burning in my shoulder. I put my hand to it, and brought it away wet. Then I grew suddenly faint, for I knew that I was wounded.

At the same moment the Vicar Vergine drew off his eight hundred cut-throats, and, knowing where exactly we were posted, from the hillside above us poured in a far more deadly volley. So they tell me now, but indeed I knew nothing of it, seeing only the sky reel earthward and the yellow bent rise up to smite me on the face.

Thus the *comitiva* was held between two fires, and the true men were mown down by the hundred. 'Death to the Vardarelli!' shouted the traitors on the hillside, while the Austrians said nothing, but served the grape into the deadly muzzles of their guns.

'Fall back, men! Back to the horses! Retreat

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fighting! Take what cover you can find!

It was the voice of Don Gaetano, and it seemed to dominate even that last stricken field. The whistle and shriek of the grape, the tearing sound of the heavier metal, the thuds and spouts of sand and soil as the storm of lead and iron struck the banks of the river, the gasps of the smitten men who threw up their arms and fell, — that is all that I can remember of the fray.

But they tell me now, those who saw the deed done, how the Vardarelli gave back slowly and reluctantly even under the fiercest fire of the traitors on the slopes of the hills, and the inevitable advance of the white-coated veterans of the north. Sullenly the torn shreds of the *comitiva* contested every inch of advance. With set teeth, smoke-grimed to the eyes, they fell back, leaving only their dead behind them.

And of this last I saw one incident; yet that one remains in my mind till this day, clear as the sun which shines through the lattice upon this written page.

I awoke to find myself swung up in strong arms: and lo, there was Don Gaetano! I saw his face close to mine as he raised me over his shoulder.

‘Little one,’ he whispered, ‘I fear I must hurt you. The wound is painful, but not serious. We shall win through yet.’ His face was set and terrible, yet he found time to let his eyes dwell softly upon me. And above, and all around us the bullets sang. God help me — how shall I tell that which I saw next? We were falling back, rallying behind every tuft of boskage, making a fortress of each vine platform. The *comitiva*, or rather what was left of it, faced both ways as it retreated along the valley — firing back

upon the soldiers behind, and up into the ranks of the murderers and galley-slaves of the Vicar Vergine, who skirmished and sniped among the boulders of the hillside.

Don Gaetano had thrown away his carbine. His sword was useless in such warfare. But he held his pistol in his hand even when he carried me, wounded and helpless as I was. I begged him to put me down and so save himself: he was the soul of the *comitiva*, — without him to lead and hearten we were all as nothing, motes that float in the sunshine.

But he only shook his head, and pressed on like a man of iron.

Then we saw that which remains to tell.

There at our feet across the path lay young Don Giovanni, his boyish face pale as death — his lips, the desire of maidens, with a yellowish gloss on them like monkish parchment — a great welling wound in his side where he had torn his sash away that he might the better see it.

‘Gaetano — brother of mine,’ he said, speaking low and hoarse, ‘leave me not to that hellish crew! For God’s sake — for our mother’s sake — lend me your pistol!’

His face looked eager, like that of a lover who pleads for the favour of his mistress, and he held up a shaking hand.

Don Gaetano looked at him, — how, I could only guess from the tremulous throb in his voice. ‘Giovannino,’ he said, pausing a moment, yet without ever letting me touch the ground, ‘is the wound unto death? Is it beyond remedy?’

The lad opened his breast wide, and laid bare a rent whence welled the life-blood fast as from a roof-

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spout in the rains.

‘It is unto death, dear Gaetano: I cannot move. For our love’s sake lend me your pistol. I cannot fall into their hands!’

Don Gaetano’s strong muscles twitched; I could feel the drag and quiver of them strain him from head to foot. Without a word he handed his younger brother the pistol.

A kind of divine joy overspread Giovanni’s beautiful face.

‘Ah!’ he said, with a smile and a long sigh of relief, ‘this will open to me more than monks know. This will baffle the traitors. Tell Nita Caccarello of Cassano, the tanner’s daughter, that I loved her true. She will not forget me. If you live befriend her for my sake. Wish me a fair voyage, my dear. Do not let La Bella, the little one there, fall into their devils’ hands. Buonviaggio, brother of mine!’

And with a smile he set the shining muzzle to his forehead.

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Carefully Don Gaetano stooped and disengaged the smoking pistol, thrusting it into his belt. I saw and knew all this, for the words of Don Giovanni had awakened my senses to a state of intense acuteness; wounded as I was, I heard and felt with a threefold keenness. The fragment of the dismounted *comitiva* still held grimly on. They fired more seldom, for the ammunition ran low. They answered no sound to the triumphant shouts of their foes, above and behind. As each man was wounded he rose and shook himself to discover if it were unto death; then, according as he found the matter, he limped back to

the next shelter or handed his powder save one charge only to his nearest comrade. Thus did they all, for the spirit of the Vardarelli was even as the spirit of young Don Giovanni.

And whenever there was a longer stand, Don Gaetano would lay me down behind a tree, under shelter of a rock, or behind the wall of a hill-set masseria for a while, and move here and there among his men, encouraging them.

But as the dusk came on, his face grew ever sterner and more set. It was the deeper depths of the gloaming when we halted at the foot of a little hill.

'It is useless,' he cried at last: 'let each escape as swiftly as he may. Let every man save himself. There is no longer any hope or gain in abiding to be killed one by one between the Austrians and the devils up aloft there. Let every man return as he may to the Casa Vardarelli, and protect the Signora to the death.'

'And you, brother?' questioned Don Girolamo, the last left of the five, saving the Chief alone.

'For me, I bide here by Isabella. Tell the lady mother I will keep her daughter with my life!'

Don Girolamo saluted his captain without a word. The path through the valley wound along a hundred yards lower down than the little copsewood where we rested. Don Gaetano said nothing, but primed his pistols and set them in his belt. Then he took my hand. The straggling shots from the *comitiva* waxed fewer and ceased. The cries of the triumphant enemy came nearer. We heard voices immediately above us.

Don Gaetano turned to me with a mighty tenderness on his face. The sternness had passed quite out of it.

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'La Bella,' he said, 'it has come to this. There is no other way, little one. You are my mother's one girl. You are the little maid that I carried in my arms out of the house of Monte Leone. You are precious to me — yes, far more precious than mine own life. You are the only sister of the Vardarelli, their flower and pride. I had dreamed — I had hoped ... God wot, I need not now tell you what. It is perhaps as well. I cannot leave my sister to fall into the hands of these devils. There is but one way —'

'One way?' said I, faltering in my speech, as he paused, so that I scarce knew the voice for my own.

'Giovanni's way!' said Don Gaetano. 'Are you afraid, little one?'

I know not what I said, the perturbation of my mind being so great — as also the pain of my wound. But I think I can remember telling him that I was not afraid to die.

'Will it hurt much, or be for long?' I asked, for that thought was most in my mind.

'You will never feel it, little La Bella — *carissima mia*,' he said. 'You have never known the evil. For this I have slain men, and you knew it not. For this I have purged the troop. And I cannot let you fall into the hands of the yellow-eyed wolves of Ciro's pack, of the galley-slaves of the Vicar Vergine, nor yet into those of the lustful white-coated Croats from the north.'

'Do it quick, dear Gaetano,' I said, — 'dear brother mine, do it quickly. And do not be very sorry. My wound pains me, and I must die. But when the troop rides, by moonlight or sunlight, think, as you mount, of the little La Bella, the sister of the Vardarelli, who loved to be by your side. Do not forget me, Gaetano!'

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'The troop will never ride again!' said Don Gaetano gloomily, and held his head aside in act to listen. We heard an inhuman howling over the hill, and shots came whisking and scattering through the underbrush. 'Hark to them,' he said bitterly; 'hear the traitors shout. They came out of their holes but for this, to make an end of the Vardarelli; and, not daring to do it openly, led us into an ambush. God keep my arm steady! Farewell: it takes an infinity of love to do this. I have never caressed you, La Bella, but I will hold you in mine arm now. Dearest, the Mother of God smiles upon your purity, which we of the Vardarelli, rough dogs that we were, have yet kept so sacred. And in the book of God let it be written to our credit that you have lived among sinful men, yet left the world knowing nothing of the sin of men.'

'You have ever been kind to me indeed, Don Gaetano,' I said, — 'so kind and dear. But make haste: I shall not fear if you hold me close. And be sure that I am dead before you go.'

I caught the glint of uniforms through the wood — I saw Don Gaetano raise his pistol, and his eyes looked into mine. Then a loud withering volley crashed through the boughs and threshed among the grass. Don Gaetano fell back: I thought he was dead. There beyond him lay the pistol that had fallen from his hand. I must reach it — and the Virgin would help me. I would do as Giovanni had done; but I was desperately afraid. The galley-slaves would be upon us in a moment. I tried to crawl, but after a little way the pain of my wound mastered me. Don Gaetano's body lay between me and the weapon. God help me! they were upon me. I could hear the horses trampling; I could discern the

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breathing of men panting up the steep ascent. My fingers touched the roughened horn of the grip. Ah! — at last I had it. Now the saints help me!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE FOREIGN OFFICER

A strong hand snatched the pistol from mine. I felt myself seized from behind. There was a warm breath upon my neck. Too late — I knew I was helpless in the hands of the devils of *Ciro the Priest!*

When I opened my eyes I saw a face looking down into mine — one that was somehow familiar, one that I had seen in dreams. The moon was shining clearly above the tangle, and one ray fell on the man's face. It was not, as I had feared, that of *Ciro the Devil*, nor yet the wolf's visage of *Lupo*, nor the splotched purple brutality of the *Vicar Vergine*, which I had seen that day lowering at me as I rode by *Gaetano's* side. Rather it was a face young and fair, with little curls about the temples — crisp as birchen tassels. It looked strangely like the face of *John the Evangelist* in the picture at the *Casa Vardarelli*.

'Little *Don Pietro*,' he was murmuring in the broken speech of the foreigner, harsh and curious — 'I would have saved him if I could.'

Then I remembered and looked up.

'You are surely the *Captain Cameron* — the *English General's* aide?' I said. 'What do you here?'

'I am indeed *Captain Cameron*. But tell me, why did you try to kill yourself?'

'That I might not fall into the hands of the *Decisi* — of the *Vicar Vergine* — of these your gallant allies!' I answered with some bitterness.

'They are no allies of mine, nor yet of my *General's*, — that we shall show them when we have *Apulia* again to ourselves. Though we fight, we are

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Christians — we are not devils.'

Then I looked at my Greek dress, wishing — I knew not what, so strange is woman's heart.

'I am not Don Pietro,' I said; 'I am Isabella, the sister of the Vardarelli.'

For a moment he sat silent, stricken dumb. Then he laid me gently on the grass and stood up. He looked all about.

'I wish to heaven I had not sent on my men,' he muttered; 'I feared that they might have slain you in the heat of the fray. And — well, something in your face haunted me. I remembered our loving cup drunk at Cerniola that night when my General reviewed the Vardarelli.'

He looked at Don Gaetano. He bent over him, and opening his coat placed his hand upon his heart.

'Come,' he said, 'this is better. He is not dead. We may bring him to, if only we can get him to a place of safety.'

For we could hear his men crashing through the woods like bullocks, and crying fitfully each to the other. The rattle of musketry waxed fainter and less continuous as the pursuit rolled away across the foot-hills of the Basento.

We had halted not far from the crest of the hill. A dim shape like a broken-down out-house was outlined against the sky as the moon swam through fleecy clouds.

'Are you afraid to bide alone while I go up yonder?' Captain Cameron asked of me.

I shook my head. Somehow I felt strangely safe, like one that has already reached heaven, and looks back to the weary struggles and pains of earth. I saw him spring up the hillside and disappear. Then in a moment or two he was back again, holding a bottle

in his hand.

'It is no more than a deserted shelter-house; but I have found this,' he said, speaking low and carefully. He bent down and set it to my lips. A fiery liquid, such as I had never tasted, ran through my veins. Then he went over to the place where Don Gaetano lay.

'He has only fainted,' he said; 'his heart beats strongly.' And he poured a draught from the bottle down Gaetano's throat. I heard him choke and gasp, and then with a long sigh stir as if to raise himself upon his elbow.

'La Bella — where is La Bella?' were his first words when he came to himself.

'Hush!' said the young English officer: 'we are not yet out of danger.'

Don Gaetano half started, and glared angrily at him.

'Who are you?' he said in his old tone of command, and put his hand instinctively to his belt.

'I am the English General's aide-de-camp. I was with him at Cerniola. I have fought against you, but now I would help you if I could.'

'Is La Bella dead?' he asked, not appearing to hear the Englishman.

'Nay, not dead, dear Gaetano,' I said quietly; 'but you and I are both wounded, and owe our lives to this gentleman.'

The moon had by this time swept round so that her beams fell clear upon the little downward-sloping glade where we were. We could hear the hoarse shouting as the eager searchers came nearer. Captain Cameron drew a whistle from his pocket and sounded three clear and mellow notes. Then he listened anxiously.

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There was no response, only a renewed shouting and thrashing of the bushes near us.

'We must get to cover,' he said; 'these are not my fellows, or they would have answered that signal.'

Something tall and dark moved towards us through the gloom of the lower wood. Captain Cameron drew his sword, and stood ready with a pistol in his other hand. But, suddenly, when his left hand was raised to fire, there came a low whinny of recognition and joy, and a beautiful mare dashed through the tangle of the trees into the open moonlight of the glade.

The young officer laughed a little helpless laugh.

'Ah, Morna, that I should have nearly shot you for a brigand of Don Ciro — my pretty one!'

He said the last words caressingly as she came nearer with outstretched neck. 'Hut, you beast!' he added, as Englishmen do, when the mare nuzzled into his neck.

'But this happens not amiss,' he went on, as he lifted me upon the saddle. 'I will be with you again in a moment, Don Gaetano.'

'Put your hand on my shoulder if you can. Gently, Morna, go very gently!' And both the mare and I seemed of instinct to obey him.

He had his hand upon my back, strengthening it just at the part where the wound higher up had made it weak. Almost I had forgotten my hurt. We came, after a hundred paces or so, to a hut, little more than a sort of watch-tower storehouse, built on a kind of platform. The door was open, and the one room a mass of piled confusion. I could dimly see this as Walter Cameron slipped me down from Morna's back, where she stood quiet and steady by the door. There was no light save that of the moon,

and her silver shining made the shadows within loom black as night. The young Northman laid me gently down on a bed of rustling maize. There was a pleasant smell of dry straw all about. In the centre I could see a wooden table, with the silhouettes of bottles and broken loaves of bread upon it.

'I will bring your brother to you in a moment,' he said, and with a touch upon Morna's bridle he was gone.

Then to me lying thus, there came up through the night from the woody fringes of the little hill the hoarse cries of searching men, and in the distance I could still hear the faint rattle of musketry. I lay there without sound or motion, looking at the strings of Spanish onions a-swing from the rafters. I could see the roof and the moonlight thrusting white stilettoes through the chinks. My shoulder did not pain me any more, but I felt strangely weak and young — young and fretful like a child. And I wished that the young fair-haired officer would come back — yes, and Don Gaetano. I wished for Don Gaetano also.

In a little while I heard the boughs parting and whisking back again; and presently a voice sang up through the night, hoarsely, 'Here they are! Halt there, I tell you! Give your names.'

The voice of the Englishman answered, 'I am Captain Walter Cameron, aide-de-camp to his Excellency General Church, in the service of his Majesty Ferdinand, King of Naples and of the Two Sicilies.'

'Ha — so?' came the reply. 'And is that mayhap Ferdinand himself you carry across your beast? Halt, I tell you — or I fire!'

The mare's footsteps sounded nearer. A moving

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darkness blocked up the door. The next moment it was slammed to, and like a shout of anger and contempt came the Northern voice, ending in a strange seldom-used abrupt Northern oath, which carried in it a world of defiance of Ciro and all his men.

‘Fire and be damned!’ it said.

And the next moment Ciro’s answer came in the storm of bullets which spattered on the walls of the hut.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE DEFIANCE

The Englishman hurled his oath at the priest like a missile, yet with a certain gusto and satisfaction, like the Grace-after-Meat which I have heard the friars of the Brown Robe sing on All Saints' Day at the abbey of San Leonardo on the uplands of Manfredonia.

I never heard a man put so much pleasure into an oath, and I trust that the recording angel noted the intent and not the expression. Even so did those that were below — for, though they understood not the meaning of the English words, they took the sense well enough. The mare tramped through the door with her burden on her back. It was an arched door large enough to admit a vintagers' cart, which stood with long straight arms raised to the moon upon the courtyard at the farther side of the storehouse.

Scarcely had Walter discharged himself of his contempt, when a rattle of bullets proclaimed our besiegers near. I heard the quick clip of steel on flint. A fiery worm crawled in the dark, at the level of a man's hand. A light sprang up, and a candle in the mouth of a bottle illuminated the narrow limits of the hut, like the sun in his strength, so great seemed the brightness after the darkness.

Spat! spat! spatter! Faster and faster came the bullets upon the outer walls. One hummed like a great bee through the window, passed close to me, and buried itself, rustling like a rat in the pile of maize in the corner.

I saw the fair-haired officer look quickly about

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with the glance of a soldier.

\*'Thank God,' he said, 'those who dined here had time to take neither their arms nor yet their drink with them when they left. They must have had some reason for their haste. Don Gaetano, can you take a window and fire if I prop you up and load your musket for you?'

Don Gaetano nodded silently. He had seemed never to take his eyes off this energetic Scot. Without hurry Captain Cameron set him by a window on the farther side, overlooking the little green glade up which we had come; then, seeing that he could load for himself, he passed him a flask of powder, a handful of musket-balls, and two of the guns which stood piled in the corner.

'This way, Morna!' he called cheerily, and taking the mare by the bridle, he led her down a little descent to a stall beneath the floor, where, as was evident, a beast had often been sheltered before.

Outside we heard a shouting: 'Shoot them! Kill them — dogs of the Vardarelli!'

Captain Cameron mounted the rude ladder, which led to the flat roof surrounded by a little parapet whereon the onions and figs were wont to be spread out to dry. He looked down upon our assailants from behind his ledge, which, though scarce knee-high, served to shelter him.

'Halt!' he cried: 'are you King's men or no?'

He spoke in Italian, clearly enough, but with a strange mouthing of the harder letters.

'We are Ciro's men — we are Decisi. We know no king but Don Ciro. Deliver to us the Vardarelli, that we may kill them!' cried fifty voices.

You shall suffer for this!' shouted the young officer. I have General Church's authority for what I

do. The Vardarelli are my prisoners, and I am responsible for them. If they have done wrong they shall be judged by his Excellency.'

'Bah!' came the answer: 'we are greater than the Vardarelli and Ferdinand's foreign general — both together. We have fought the Vardarelli and scattered them. We have thrashed the King's men a score of times; and now we will have Gaetano — and the girl too!'

My heart sank within me as I heard them speak of the girl. For I thought the thing was not known outside the *comitiva*. Now I know that it was spoken of everywhere, and that Isabella of the Vardarelli was famous all over Apulia.

'In the King's name I command you to go back! For the last time I warn you!'

A shout of laughter came up from all the woods about. 'We are greater than the King. We care neither for Neapolitan nor yet for Austrian. Your English general is dead — superseded. We will have the Vardarelli or take your life also.'

For a moment the young officer stood silent, thinking. Then he spoke, making a trumpet of his hands that his words might carry the better.

'Come and take the Vardarelli, then. Thank God, there are enough of us here to show a hundred such traitors the way back to hell!'

A score of muskets cracked. I heard the whistle of the bullets over the roof, whisking viciously past and whipping the leaves off the trees with a brisk 'risping' sound. 'Come down — oh, come down!' I cried: 'they will surely kill you!' And, in spite of the pain of my shoulder-wound, I rose to my feet. As I did so, I became conscious that Don Gaetano's eyes were on me, thrilling me to the soul. At the time I

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knew not why he looked at me so, but I was soon to learn.

Up aloft the Englishman heard my words, and prepared to obey them. But first he shouted down to the traitors again, waving his hand to them in a sublime contempt, standing clear between them and the moonlit sky.

'Shoot!' he cried, 'blundering dogs. You cannot even hit a man betwixt you and the moon. Come on, and we will teach you how to shoot and how to kill. Come, as many of you as have vitals, that we may show you where they lie!'

Then he came down, smiling and content with himself, after the manner of Englishmen when they have flouted a foe. I have seen the way of them often since, and it does not serve to make them the most beloved nation on the broad forehead of the world. Yet in this young man — well, I confess that I liked it. Such noble scorn sat not ill upon him, seeing that he was venturing his life to save his enemies. As soon as he had come down I spoke to him.

'Captain Walter, we are fighting for our lives. We have no right to drag you into the matter. Set me to a window and depart: they will not harm you. Let us fight till we die. Don Gaetano and I are not so keen of life, at any rate. We are Vardarelli, and when the play is played out — why, we are ready to pay for our places.'

'Signora,' said the young man gravely, 'I will give you a window and a pair of pistols. We will all do our best. But do not mistake us Scots. We love fighting for its own sake. And when we have no quarrels of our own — why, we are thankful to be permitted to take a hand in a friend's.'

He raised me gently in his arms, and set me to a

narrow slit, whence I could look slantwise down upon the path up which I had come upon the saddle on Morna's back, with my green wound biting into me like a rusty nail.

'I will take the door,' said Captain Cameron. 'It is thick and old, but it will not shut altogether close. And that is as well, for there is room to shoot through the crack! Stand!' He shouted the last word suddenly, in a voice that shook the house.

A tall man stood bareheaded on the pathway. He was within twenty yards of the house. A white kerchief dangled in his hand. He wore a long blouse which came almost to his feet, black like a priest's daily cassock. It was open from the waist, and I caught a glimpse of mail beneath it. It was the priest, Don Ciro himself.

'Englishman,' he cried, 'I bid you depart. We have no quarrel against you. Give us the man to kill and the girl to carry away, and we of the Decisi will neither hurt nor harm you.'

'On my part I offer you three minutes to clear your vile carcass off that path!' the fair-haired officer answered, speaking our speech clearly, but as before with the curious Northern burr, as if he had a pea in his throat.

The priest stamped his foot angrily. 'It is evident that you do not know Ciro Annicharico, chief of the Society of the Decisi, — I am he. Again I warn you. Deliver me the man and the maid, and go your way.'

'I am a soldier,' said the young man, very quietly this time. 'I am accountable solely to my General. I take orders only from him. I have nothing to do with you or your accursed Society.'

'Well,' said the priest, 'I have warned you. Pray remember that you have naught to complain of

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afterwards, whatever happens to you.'

And without any farewell he turned, and in three strides disappeared down the path. In the dusky silence which ensued I could hear the laboured breathing of Don Gaetano, with a fitful gasp in it every time when his wound caught him. I smelt the sweetish odour of the chestnuts on the rafters. I heard the silken crackling of the onion-skins. For at that moment the noises all seemed loud and worthy of attention — more than the pain of my wound, more even than the terrible priest who had disappeared down the path.

Then Captain Cameron took out of his breast pocket a silver flask, and gave me another glassful of the same stinging spirits, which as before burnt my throat as it went, but made me — spite of my wound — feel as strong and well as in the days when I first cozened the Signora to let me ride out with the *comitiva*. To Don Gaetano he proffered a double quantity of the same, keeping his eyes restlessly about him in his quick alert way, lest the enemy should come suddenly up the path or rush across the glade.

The little hill hut had evidently been a place of summer pleasuring to some town-dwelling families before the troubles. Afterwards it had been occupied by peasants, who had stored their produce there; and more recently still soldiers or brigands had partaken of a meal and then tossed the yellow straw about the floor to form a couch for their siesta. As I have already mentioned, it stood high above the fringing woods, clear of them on all sides save one, where a natural spurt of undergrowth straggled upward among the rocks and stray vine patches. I have gone to look at the place more than once since

that night, and each time I wonder more and more at the utter inadequacy of our means of defence.

While we waited I could not help noticing the silence of Don Gaetano, and the curious way his eyes followed the young officer about. He seemed like a man trying to argue something out with himself. It was clear moonlight — the wondrous moonlight of Apulia, when you can see the shadows of your fingers, cast upon the white dust of the highway, as clearly as on the wall at home when one lights a candle at the hour of the children.

We sat at the windows and waited. It seemed a long time to be silent.

‘Here they come!’ suddenly hissed Captain Walter rather than spoke the words: ‘sit tight! Wait till you see the whites of their eyes.’

There were perhaps ten men who came bounding up the path. We could see the smallest details of their costumes in the moonlight, and the feathers in the steeple-crowned hats, which some of them crushed down, as with heads bent low to the ascent they raced up the hill at speed. I think we all waited as calmly as if we had been witnessing an assault-at-arms in an amphitheatre. I know that I for one took my orders from Captain Cameron as if he had been a drill-sergeant.

From Don Gaetano’s window the first pistol cracked, and then another. I could not, of course, see to what effect; but obviously to a good one, for the assault was instantly checked, and a scattering volley came against the little hut, spattering the walls, hopping off the roof like hailstones. One bullet only entered through the door, and cut the string of a thick double band of Spanish onions swinging on a beam, which one by one detached themselves in

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leisurely fashion, and trotted across the like floor marbles in a boy's game.

At that moment something, either a spent bullet, or a fragment knocked from the wall, stung me on the bone of the elbow, hurting me even more than my wound.

I meant to call out to Don Gaetano; but instead, perhaps because Don Gaetano was hurt and could not come to me, the word which escaped, as it had been against my will, was 'Walter,' the strange, uncouth Northern appellation of the young officer. He fired his carbine at a moving shadow far down the glade, and was back through the doorway and at my side in a moment.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A GREAT MAN'S END

'What is it?' he said. 'Are you wounded again?'

'I think not,' I answered: 'I was only-afraid. But go back — go back. I was selfish — I did not mean to cry out. I am quite recovered now.'

He went slowly round the little blockhouse, peering through each window; and at the end smiled pleasantly, saying a strange thing, which then I knew not the meaning of.

'Don Gaetano,' he said, 'I think at least two of these rascals have gotten their nail through the reek.'

The Chief did not answer, and there was silence again as Captain Walter came over to me, and, making me hold up my arm, discovered that a spent bullet had indeed clipped nearly a finger-breadth of skin from my elbow. The darkness of the hut made Don Walter a long time in cutting a strip of plaster from his pocket-case and fixing it upon my arm. And all the while the foes lurking in the woods beneath gave neither of us any concern, nor did the dim wavering forest show any token of their presence. Also Don Gaetano was silent, though I spoke to him often. At last I said to the young officer: 'Pray examine Don Gaetano's wound again. I fear that he is more sorely hurt than we know. He does not speak.'

Then from his window Gaetano spoke in a deep tone.

'Stand to your post, Captain Cameron,' he said; 'and while we keep watch, I, Gaetano Vardarelli, will speak with you. I have something to say as between

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man and man; but as we speak we can be mindful of our duty.'

He paused a moment, like an orator judging how best to begin a difficult speech, or a chess-player deciding his opening.

'Signore,' he said, 'we are here three of us alone on a hill-top, with fierce enemies all about, whose numbers we do not know, but whose deadly and implacable nature we are assured of. Two of us are wounded. One is a girl, though not the less brave a soldier for that. Help we can have none. My company is scattered — your soldiery has long passed by. The Decisi, who have sworn to kill me, know the country, and can call out any number of additional men, and wait any length of time. But they will only wait till the moon sets, and then rush the place. We must therefore decide our purpose, and carry out our plans before that time. Have you thought of any course of action, Captain Cameron?'

The Englishman whistled softly, keeping his eyes on the moonlit glade beneath us, across which our enemies were bound to approach us.

'Well, no,' he said, hesitating; 'save that I think that we can hold this place, poor as it is, at least till the morning, against an army of these dogs. Then surely General Church will miss me, and send a detachment to the place where I was last seen. And at the worst we can die: it is not so bad, after all.'

Don Gaetano kept his stony silence for another long minute. Then he spoke again, and I knew by his voice that he spoke to Walter alone, as one strong man to another. For the moment I was put wholly aside, and could only wait and be silent.

'No, signore, that will not help us. You do not know the Decisi, nor yet Ciro the priest, their leader.

Were we all men, we could wait and die, with our swords in our hands, our faces to the foe, and all our powder spent. But we have with us this maid — and these are the Decisi. — Hark!

He lifted his hand so that I saw it — a dark shape against the window. The blast of a silver trumpet came thrilling up through the wood, — another, and yet another; and the third died away in a sort of whining quiver which affected me strangely.

‘I tell you I know that they will come again with the first darkness, after the moon has set behind the hills.’

‘Gaetano,’ I said, daring to speak at last, ‘do not think otherwise of me than of yourselves. Am I not a Vardarelli? Am I not your sister? If the worst come, I know what to do. Do not fear for me.’

But, as I had supposed, he put me aside. He did not even appear to have heard. He spoke on sternly and without politeness to Captain Cameron, as men are wont to speak to men in times of peril and deadly danger.

‘Now, signore,’ he said, ‘I am a man about to die. I knew it this morning when I rode out. I knew it ere the first shot was fired at the ambush on the Basento. I knew it when I first set my hand to the place of my wound. It is my fate.’

Then I think I cried out inarticulately, fighting against such words from the brother whom I loved. But neither he nor yet the Englishman so much as glanced in my direction. Their eyes were on the several portions of the defence for which they were responsible. Don Gaetano was silent a moment.

‘Signore Capitano,’ he went on, in a restrained and level voice, ‘you love this maid honourably and truly?’

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The young man started and turned about, as if a bullet had struck him.

'By what right - ' he began.

'I have a right,' Don Gaetano went on in the same curiously level voice, but in a higher key; 'to your post, and answer me!'

The young man, as if chidden by a superior for neglect of duty, turned abruptly to the open door, through which showed a strip of moon-blanchèd hillside and the black shadows of the trees lengthening as the moon dropped inch by inch nearer the horizon. 'I do love her, as you say, truly and honourably!' he said.

And so strange is the heart within a woman, that I was happy even though I knew that for my sake one of these men before me must die.

'It is well,' said Don Gaetano. 'Now I will tell you my right to ask the question. I also love this girl, but not as a brother loves. For I am no brother of hers, save in name. It is strange, is it not? You have seen her twice, and yet you tell me that you love her. Many years ago I found this Isabel, a little child alone in a great desolate house, all her kinsfolk slain by the Decisi. Ever since that day I have cherished her more than my nearest kin — more than the mother who even now waits for me, and who must now wait in vain for ever — far more than my own life: for fifteen years — for fifteen years!'

A sob somehow escaped me, and in spite of my wound I rose and went over quickly to where Don Gaetano sat. But he never turned his head from the open window-sill, never altered the level intonation of his voice, though I leaned on his shoulder, being weak, and wept on his neck. Only he reached a hand backwards and touched me on the cheek

coldly, gently, as we touch the dead.

‘Go back, little one,’ he said; ‘go to your post. You also must prove yourself a good soldier.’

He went on again, speaking to Walter, not to me.

‘Yes, I have loved her, I have cherished her. In the midst of our reckless troop my own mother, the mother of the Vardarelli, has not been more sacred. It was who brought her home from the house of murder at Monte Leone, a little child. She has grown up among us like the very flower of joy. She has been our beautiful saint — our La Bella. She has ridden by my side by day; I have watched her slumbers at night, innocent as an angel’s, sound as a tired child’s. I have poured out my love upon her thus — yes, for fifteen years — and now —’

He paused, for the regret and pain in his voice would not suffer him to go on.

‘Dear Gaetano, brother of mine,’ I said, ‘and I have loved you for it all. I love you now.’

He spoke to me this time, and the level voice was infinitely softer in a moment.

‘Little one,’ he said, ‘I am not complaining. You have given me all you could. I am too old — too familiar to your eye and heart — as you say, I was your brother. Yes, you have loved me; and for that good gift when the time comes I will make it up to you.’

Then came the level passionless voice again, and he was speaking, as I felt, not to me, but once more to the man.

‘Fifteen years — fifteen years, night and day, hillside and housetop, riding out under the stars, or in the white raiment and cosy nestling cot, sleepless I have watched her. I have seen her grow beautiful. I have taught her all she knows, and marvelled at her

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spirit. Comes this *forestiero* this man of the cold North. An hour in a lighted hall, a walk together down a tavern stairway, a look into his eyes, a meeting at night after a battle. Then, when this maid, whom I have cherished, is hurt sharp and sudden, it is this stranger's name, and not mine, which leaps to her lips from her heart of hearts!

I was on my feet now; the pain of my wound had mysteriously vanished. I went and kneeled by his knee. The stern voice softened again.

'Nay, Isabella,' he said quietly, 'I am not complaining. All is as it ought to be — the young to the young. You but follow your heart. Go back, dear child, and hear me out. To this man I speak.'

The silver trumpet of the Decisi blew again from the other side of the ravine, and underneath in the little cellar we could hear the mare restlessly clattering her feet on the hard earthen floor.

'And now, signore, thus it stands. It has come to the narrow and bitter pass with us, and words must be few. But one of us two can escape. They will rush the hut an hour after the moon sets — that is, an hour before the dawn. Then we shall not see clearly to shoot. But there is a good horse below. One of us is light and active, and unhurt, one is heavy, and old, and wounded. One is her brother — the other is "Walter." One must go, and one must stay. I, Gaetano Vardarelli, being the brother, will stay.'

Then Captain Cameron spoke, also as a man to a man.

'No,' he said firmly; 'we three will hold the place till help comes, or we will die together. It is indeed a true word which I have spoken: I love this maid — I love her truly. But she owes all to you, nothing to

me. We two will not leave you to certain death.'

'Dear Gaetano, we will both stay,' I also urged upon him, taking his hand.

He answered me not as before, on the contrary speaking harshly and abruptly as when he was angry with the *comitiva*.

'You *shall* go,' he said; 'and at once, even when the moon touches yonder tree-tops, you shall stand ready by your beast. When she sinks behind the hills of Marmora you shall mount and ride for your life. You know not the Decisi. You know not Don Ciro. Only, sir, before you go you must promise me two things — first to be true to this young maid, whose life I place in your hands. And in your charge I also place her death. Rather than that she should be in danger of falling into Ciro the priest's clutches, you will put your pistol to her head and let out her life, even as I, her brother who loved her, would have done by the fords of the Basento.'

Captain Cameron held out his hand. Don Gaetano took it.

'I promise you both promises,' he said. 'As I love her I will perform them.'

'Swear!' said Don Gaetano sternly, keeping the hand in his own.

'It is not our Northern way, but if you wish it, I will swear.' And he waited for Don Gaetano to furnish him with the form of words.

'I swear,' said Don Gaetano, in his deep voice, 'to be true to this maid through life. Also I swear to slay her rather than she should fall into the hands of Ciro Annicharico or any of his gang. By the love I bear her, and by the God in whom I believe, I swear!'

And the voice of Walter Cameron, shamed and constrained, followed the unaccustomed words of

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the oath.

'It is well,' said Don Gaetano. 'Go and make ready the beast.'

The young man hesitated, halted on one foot in act to obey.

'It seems to me that I cut a poor figure in all this,' he said. 'I do not even know if the Signora will accompany me.'

'She will go,' said Gaetano. 'I send her to my mother. She will tell her what more to do, if indeed she knows not of her own heart.'

We were left for a moment together while Walter Cameron went for his horse. I kneeled at Don Gaetano's knee. I seemed to have forgotten all about my wound.

'Dear Gaetano,' I whispered, with my head against his shoulder, 'I will not leave you. I cannot leave you to die alone!'

I think he smiled; at least, his stern face relaxed, and he stroked my hair as he used to do when I was a little spoilt child.

'Nay, Isabella of mine, you will go as I bid you, and tell my mother all. While she lives do not leave her quite alone. Tell her of Giovanni, of the others, of the *comitiva* — and of me. Tell her I loved her with a son's reverence, and thought of her at the last — yes, almost at the very last.' He said these words slowly, and I knew well of whom he would think last of all.

'I have no priest to shrive me — so kiss me for a benediction, little sister. Once only. Because I wished to keep you angel-clean, I have not kissed you since you were a little maid with an apron full of spiked chestnut balls, coming to me that I might open them for you with my knife.'

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I would have set both arms about him, but for very pain my left dropped to my side. Nevertheless I set my lips to his and kissed him, till I tasted the salt tears that ran fast down my own face.

The mare came slipping and straining up the broken causeway from the stall underneath, her master alternately chiding and encouraging. Don Gaetano drew himself slowly to his feet, holding first by the table edge and then by a rafter.

‘See,’ he said, smiling brightly, ‘already you have strengthened me. I can stand erect. I feel no pain from my wound. Give me a sword.’

And the young officer — well, why should I not say ‘Walter’ — gave him his own sword, one his General had given him. Don Gaetano flashed it above his head with a kind of joy.

‘Thank God,’ he said, ‘I am yet strong enough to die as a Vardarelli ought.’

Walter Cameron stood with darkened brow, fumbling with the bit.

‘Don Gaetano,’ he said, ‘I cannot permit — I insist that you go instead of me. I am the youngest and unwounded, and as a soldier it is my duty to stay.’

Gaetano pointed with his hand. ‘The moon is touching the tree tops,’ he said. ‘In a few minutes it will be dark. Make ready.’

And as if to emphasise his warning the trumpet of the Decisi blew below. They were gathering for the assault at the moon-setting, even as our Captain had foretold.

I do not know how Don Gaetano kept himself erect for the pain of his wound; but there with his hand in mine he stood, the mare waiting as patiently as any and as silently, till at last the moon jagged itself behind the peaks of Marmora, sank swiftly,

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and disappeared.

'Now,' said Don Gaetano, 'mount, both of you. Ride straight down the path. Your hand, Captain. Kiss me, little one. My duty to my mother. Go!'

We were in the saddle, and the mare stood ready, trembling a little nervously and sniffing the cold air through the open door.

'Let me go first,' said Don Gaetano: 'it is the only way. God save you both, and bless you unto ten generations!'

These were the last words we heard from him, till down the hillside and away to the left we caught his war-shout, even as I had often heard it leading the *comitiva* to the assault.

'Vardarelli! Vardarelli! To me, Vardarelli!'

And the shots began to go, we heard the rushing of men and the frenzied note of the trumpet summoning all Ciro's men in the direction in which they feared the Vardarelli were attempting a rescue.

The mare was at her stride in a moment. Sure-footed she was, and had need to be, down, that break-neck rocky path. Cameron rode pistol in hand, and I clasped him about the middle with my unwounded arm.

But no man withstood us, nor did we see man or beast, till we came to the plain road at the foot of the hill. Here was a sentinel of the Decisi standing to his musket, eagerly listening to the shots and the babel of sound up the hillside. He had not time to call the halt, and scarcely even to raise his musket to bar our way, when Walter's pistol went off, and the ball struck the gun from his hands. He stared at it uncomprehending, as if a miracle had been wrought. Before he could recover himself we were out on the open plain, and still no man had molested us. But

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upon the hill we could see the flashing of many muskets and hear the deep voices of men.

‘Let us go back,’ I cried, my heart failing me for very agony; ‘let us go back and die with him.’

‘Not so,’ said the young Englishman: ‘I have sworn upon the love I bear you.’

And he set spurs to his beast.

Then, as we rode on and on, peeling down the hillside we heard a great voice: ‘Come forth, Ciro the murderer, and fight with Gaetano Vardarelli. Stand forth, and fight for your life — coward and traitor!’

There came a discharge of multitudinous guns, and we heard the voice of our leader no more, as the white dust of the highway rose behind us and the tears ran down our faces for a great man dead.

# THE SILVER SKULL

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### THE FIGHT ON THE HILLSIDE

The noble Englishman, General Church, sent to recover the body of Don Gaetano. And the soldiers found him — how, I will tell in another place. Then I went under escort, and with Walter Cameron at my side, to tell the tale to the mother of the Vardarelli, in the house which had been my home for fifteen years.

But first, that all may know how these things came to pass, I add in this place the confession of Giuseppe Caffiero, registrar of deaths in the Society of the Decisi, delivered at Francavilla Fontana, the thirtieth of April, when he lay in prison under sentence of death.

With regard to the death of Don Gaetano, Captain of the Vardarelli, this is what I know. We of the Decisi had accompanied the Vardarelli, riding as friends with them, such of us as had horses, or going fast through the marshes and steep stony places to keep up with the cavalry, those of us who were on foot. At the appointed place we turned against them, taking the side of the Austrians, whom may God condemn! This we did because it came as an order from the Twelve.

We pursued the Vardarelli, firing often and killing many, for we had the higher ground. The soldiers pursued with us; and if at odd times there was an accident and one of the white-coats came in a bullet's way — why, what harm done? Besides, he was paid to run risks, and being an Austrian it was probable that he got his pay. So as often as a Croat fell we stopped to examine carefully to see if he had any of it left in his haversack or sewn up in his

pelisse.

Then came Papa Ciro amongst us, and he commanded that we — that is, the company that were with me — should halt. He had work for us to do, so he said. Certain men on whose head was a price, besides being enemies of the Decisione, were defending themselves in a ruined hut at the top of a little rocky hill. It was moonlight, and the men were but two, and there was a girl with them, very beautiful, the sister of the Vardarelli. The men we were to kill, but the girl we were to save alive and bring to Don Ciro. These were the orders; and Papa Ciro made the four crosses in the air which meant that, if we should fail in any part, we must die in full meeting at the blast of the trumpet.

It was poor enough work at the best — at least for men whose forefathers had been soldiers of the free lance and had fought against Murat. I am a man from the northward, joined to the Decisione through the brothers of my wife, who had me made Registrar because I could write well, and they hoped that I might strengthen the hands of the family in the council of the Twelve.

We were a hundred to one, and might easily have rushed the place if these Decisi had had the pluck of so many leverets; but hitherto they had stricken all their blows in the dark, or fallen only upon unarmed men. And these three aloft there in the hut above the woods fought like paladins.

Once, twice, thrice, and yet again we went up the hill; but the bullets of these Vardarelli flew true. Men bunched themselves suddenly, and fell twitching like shot hares. It did not take much to stop us, for in the moonshine we were clear as targets set against a hillside. Besides, the Decisi, as

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I have said, were more at home with the stiletto than with this open warfare of sword and musket.

Then came Don Ciro, and right angrily he spoke. But even he could not bring the men up to their work. So perforce he was compelled to put off the final assault till the darkness would permit us to surround their place of refuge on all sides. Then, by the hundred as it were, we would overwhelm them, as a sudden flood from the mountains submerges a dry-stone in the torrent bed.

The moon sank slowly. The blackness at the roots of the pine trees spread upward till it swallowed the bright spaces on which we had been plain as flies on paper. Almost the time was come, and Don Ciro himself in his cassock and mailed shirt went about, his mouth full of threatenings and promises. The last rays from the sinking rim, slanted in silver across the tree tops, lifted their ends, and were not. But there remained behind a kind of twilight, moist, green-black and luminous. I am a man who sees things — not a man of dull Apulia. Suddenly from above there came the rushing of feet, the crack of pistols, and then a great voice, crying: "To me, Vardarelli! To me, Vardarelli!"

Then it is hard to tell what befell after that. I was away to the left of that last charge; but I had a dim vision of a giant form rushing into the midst of us with a sword that fell and flamed as it fell. I ran to do my part, but in a moment I was cut through the muscles of the shoulder as the blade swept round. The Decisi gave back, bunching like frightened sheep, all but Don Ciro, who withstood the Vardarelli for a moment, but even he for a moment only. The dark shape with the sword drove against the priest, and he went over among the rocks with a ring of iron

and the volleying of oaths.

I could hear the Decisi gathering in to the noise of conflict from all sides. But the single man who had charged a hundred was soon brought to bay; for without knowing it he had run right into the centre of our position, where the main body of the Decisi were encamped for the night. Yet even there he was not conquered. He secured himself with his back to a rock, which shelved behind into a shallow cave of white limestone. From his place he taunted and defied us to take him or kill him.

Then, while Don Ciro raged and incited us to rush in, we heard the galloping of a horse's hoofs growing faint in the distance. And there broke out a cry among the Decisi here and there: "They have escaped. Pursue them — they have escaped."

'And above the noise the shout of Don Ciro rose: "Death to the man who permits them to get away! A thousand ducats to the man who brings me the man dead and the girl alive."

'Away to the south we heard shouts and stray shots, but in spite of that the sound of the horse's feet waxed fainter and thinned out. Then the man who had made the diversion and drawn us from our positions taunted us, saying, "O brave Decisi! Come and kill me! I have drawn you all after one man, while those whom ye sought were escaping. And even now ye cannot kill me, that am a wounded man and alone. Go back to your desks and counters, and leave this work of fighting to the Vardarelli, who are men!"

'So there, in the cave where the rock bends over near by our encampment, the Vardarelli abode, and we were all silent about him till the morning came spewing up grey out of the east.

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‘And with the light the whisper ran round the ring from man to man, “Papa Ciro has killed Brunone Lupo with his own hand for letting the other two escape!”

‘Whereat the ring of the Decisi trembled. There would be no faltering when we went forward for the second time. It was when the sun tipped the hills to the east that Don Ciro gave the final word. More than a hundred men obeyed. We could not fire, being so near one to the other, when the circle closed in on all sides upon the single man in the centre.

‘Then, being in the second line, a little behind Lupo dell’ Occhio, I saw the man who was about to die very clearly. He had risen, and now stood with his back to the rock. It was Don Gaetano Vardarelli. I had often seen him pass through Grottaglie at the head of his *comitiva*. But he looked far prouder now that he was alone and about to die.

‘When I saw him he had fired his pistols and thrown them away as useless. Now he stood up to take his death, a sword in his right hand and in his left a long stiletto. There was a smile on his face, as if in his heart he was well pleased. The first line swept in and engaged him point to point. He seemed to gather their swords and toss them aside like children’s playthings. Then the long steel streaked out, and man after man of the Decisi fell shrieking. But more and more succeeded, for the thought of Brunone Lupo lay heavy upon them. There was no hope for the brave man, for were we not a hundred to one — aye, more if these should fail? But nevertheless there the Vardarelli stood with the fencer’s smile upon his face. There, like a willow-leaf flashing grey as to its under parts, wavered and

flashed and lunged the sword that was in his hand. He used the stiletto after the fashion of a buckler. But he kept his back to the rock and his head up till his sword was broken a foot from the hilt. Then with a quick movement he charged straight upon the hundred blades of his foes, struck Papa Ciro in the face with the broken fragment, and with a score of swords in his heart fell forward without word or groan. Thus died Don Gaetano, of all the Vardarelli the bravest, and the most chivalrous of the free companions of Italy. And though we of the Decisi struck him down, we owned that he was a great man and a gallant. He had seventy-six wounds upon his body when they took him up to deliver him to his mother.'

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### CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

#### HOW THEY BROUGHT THE VARDARELLI HOME

This is the story of the home-coming of Don Gaetano Vardarelli, as it was told to me by Bettina, my maid, who was with the Signora when they brought home her sons. It was towards evening, and the heat had cooled as the light breeze crept up from the sea and the land mist gathered in the hollows where the copses of wild olive are.

The mother of the Vardarelli had fretted more than was usual with her from the time the *comitiva* rode away, and she could no more see the tails of the horses whisk as the blackness of the rocky arch swallowed rider after rider. At this point it was Don Giovanni's custom to rein his horse about and wave his fair white kerchief to his mother — a pretty man's act, and boyish in the doing too.

In all the courts and outliers of the Casa Vardarelli, so Bettina began, there was no man left to speak to. Not that Bettina minded: a bad breed they were, deceitful and vain. But she needed help, and the well-rope was heavy, for it was winter. There were no leaves on the beech trees up on the mountain. All of them were now blowing in the chill winds of the evening this way and that along the paths by which the cattle went and came from their pastures. They swept in after Bettina each time that the door was opened, with a rustle like the Signora's skirts on Saints' days. It made her nervous and terrified, she said, so that she kept looking over her shoulder. They were like ghosts whispering in the dark corners of the stairs.

Speaking of the Signora, she was restless and unsettled all that day. She would come and stand by the door, with her Spanish mantilla over her head, and gaze away towards the black gash of the Stone Gate where she had seen young Don Giovanni, who was as the apple of her eye, kiss his hand to her for the last time in the sunshine.

All the next day and the next after that she would go the round of the barns and store-garrets, and look at the fodder, the drying herbs, and the ripening fruits, without speaking or comprehending. Then again would she go out and look long at the Stone Gate under her hand, though there was now no sun to shine in her eyes.

But to her companion she spoke no word. So at least avers Bettina.

However, towards the evening of the third day she grew more settled. There came in one Sandro, the shepherd from the hills, and Bettina had his dogs to attend to and feed, so that she had not the time given her minutely to observe the Signora. For it was her duty to abide in the kitchen and see that the evening meal was prepared. Also Sandro sat in the chimney corner, the season being Christmas and the straw wrappings of his legs wet with the rains. A good man, and unmarried, was this Sandro.

It was cheerful there by the ingle, Bettina owned, and she lighted a candle that Sandro might see the better. But up aloft in her room the lady sat alone in the dark with the casement open, listening — a dangerous thing to do when the nights of winter fall chill and the mists arise. Sandro and Bettina remembered that, and shut the shutters on the lower windows. Sandro was a brave lad, and, as yet, unmarried.

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So it came about that mayhap these two did not think much concerning the Signora, till without in the darkness of the courtyard they heard all suddenly and unexpectedly the tramp of horses. Then, remembering that there might happen to be a rider or two of the *comitiva* who would not take it well to find her thus with Sandro, and being, as she added, mindful of her duty, Bettina ran upstairs to the great supper-room where the lady was, who, as soon as she set eyes on the girl, began to scold.

'Ah, useless one, good-for-nothing,' — so she said, not knowing what she said — 'have you been out again loitering and toying with the lads, that you have forgotten to help me lay the cloth for the five gentlemen and their sister? Make haste, lazy wench! Here they come. Would you keep the chiefs of the Vardarelli waiting after so great a riding? And I feared — yes, I feared greatly to let them go. Yet here they are! Yes, something seemed to warn me. Destiny plucked at the strings of my heart. But now, thanks to the saints, all is well.'

And then at that moment there entered below the men of the General's escort, whom he had given to Walter that they might bring to the valley the five brethren of the Vardarelli.

'For,' said he, 'it is the right of every man born of woman that at the last he should come home to his mother, in order that she may swathe him in the white linen, and kiss his brow. Besides, they were very brave men, these five!'

That was the word of the Englishman. I, Isabella, heard him speak it, after Walter had told him his tale when the pickets sent us in to him. He rode out in person to view the dead bodies when they were gathered together between the little hill on which we

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had made the defence and the fatal fords of the Basento.

The tear was in the General's clear blue eye when he stood beside young Don Giovanni and I told him how it happened. He sent his own surgeon to care for my wound, and ordered a mule litter to be made ready for me that I might accompany and guide the dismal procession home through the Stone Gate of the Vardarelli. For that was to be no secret any more.

So from this point I tell that which from mine own hearing I know.

So it came to pass, after my Lady had done scolding the giddy-pate Bettina, that she walked to the table-head, where she turned her about, and seeing me in the arms of a stranger, wounded and pale, cried out, 'Isabella, who hath done this?'

And she would have come pitifully towards me, save that the thing she saw behind me changed her instantly into marble white and rigid where she stood. Her arms dropped to her side, her face grew in a moment ghastly and stricken, and her eyes fixed themselves into a stony stare.

For this is what she saw. Six stout Albanians of the Guides, disregarding instructions or not hearing them aright, came pacing slowly in with the dead body of a man on their shoulders. Sadly and with bowed heads they marched with their burden to the table-head, and laid him down crossways upon it, among all that shining of the silver and the sparkling of glass which loving hands had set out. It was Gaetano Vardarelli; and his mother's hand almost touched the fingers which protruded stiff and bloody over the edge of the table, with Walter's broken sword-hilt still clenched in them.

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And as the bearers retired with bent heads, like men crushed with ill news, the tramp of other six was heard on the threshold. And lo! — they also came in bareheaded, carrying Girolamo her second son. Fair and unwounded had been the face of Don Gaetano, in spite of his many wounds, though the leaves had been blood-matted on his breast and on his sword-arm; but the bosom of Don Girolamo gaped, and his mother's eyes had fallen upon it ere the last Albanian with quick instinct twitched the verge of the dead man's tunic across it. But still the mother of the Vardarelli stood like stone, fixed and terrible.

They brought in Giacomo, the blood washed clean from him by the waters of the Basento, for he had fallen at the first fire. And the mother who had borne him stood looking like a statue on the roof of a duomo, stately and marble-pale. They brought in Dionisio, the silent brother, whose care was the herds of cattle and the horses upon the valley pastures. On his brow still darkened the frown with which he had faced the last terror, and his fingers were clasped as if about the throat of an enemy. This is the only mention I have made of Don Dionisio, for he was a silent man, and except when the *comitiva* rode full to the brim, he dwelt apart among his beasts and was little seen. But saving Don Gaetano there was no better man among all the riders of the Vardarelli. So they laid the dark man down, and from under his frowning brows his open eyes seemed to behold his mother. Yet she looked into them and no muscle moved — not a nerve twitched upon the face of her whose breast had suckled these four strong men.

Then, because there were no more bearers, five

men only came in with the last of the Vardarelli, and Walter Cameron passed silently from my side to take the head. So, very gently, as if they too had loved him, they brought in young Don Giovanni to his mother. The love-locks were still hanging fair upon his shoulders. The curls were comely upon his brow, as if he had arranged them carefully to visit Nita Caccarello the tanner's daughter among the vineyards of Cassano. There was a smile still on his lips, the smile with which he used to tease his mother for what he wanted, knowing well that she could not refuse him anything. It was the smile with which he had thanked Gaetano for the pistol.

Then, when the mother saw that and the cruel crimson blotch of ooze upon his right temple, there came a strange breaking cry forth from her heart of hearts, and she fell face downward upon the neck of her youngest-born.

'Giovannino, little son,' she wailed, 'surely, surely they might have left me my little one! Ah, why did I let him go? But yesterday he sported out there among the lambs in the spring. My sons, my four dear sons, they are dead. But for them, I had pledged them. They have but gone the way they walked in — they have died the man's death they prayed for. But the little one — the son of my love, the son of my old age — I cannot spare him. I cannot — I cannot! O God, take them all — but give me back the young lad Giovanni!'

Then through streaming tears I went forward to comfort her, and knelt beside her, striving to take her head on my shoulder. But she cast me off, I think not knowing what she did.

After that she took the fair head of the young man within her hands, half raised him in her arms, and

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as gently laid him back again. Then she rose to her full height, and with a quick upward sweep of her arm she dashed the hair out of her eyes and faced Walter and all of them with the quiet dignity of the lady of a great house.

'Tell me,' she said, almost calmly, 'who hath done this thing?'

Then would Walter Cameron the Scot have spoken, but I would not permit him, knowing that being an enemy the Signora would not listen to him with full belief. So I myself found words, and told what I knew of the ride with the Vicar Vergine, and all the treachery of the Decisi by the fords of the Basento. The lady stood bending her brows and looking over the dead, and as it seemed through me also, at something that lay beyond. And ever as I spoke on and on, she nodded slightly as if she had been marking a score at the card play.

But when I told of the great deed of Gaetano, and how he had caused me to flee with the Englishman to save me from Ciro and the Decisi, all suddenly with a white breaking fury she turned upon me, grappling at her side for the knife that happily was not there.

'God in heaven, what do you dare tell me?' she cried. 'And did you, called a daughter of the Vardarelli, flee with the stranger and the enemy and leave Don Gaetano Vardarelli there to die for you, wounded and helpless and alone?'

'Mother, mother!' I cried in an agony, 'it was his will — not mine!'

'His will!' she cried, with a world of scorn in her voice — 'his will! Would a true Vardarelli have done this, or the bastard daughter of a great house? You are not my daughter. I desire never to look upon you

again. Yet, for the sake of my son who loved you, I will not kill you. But go — go — go! Shame not my sight any more — coward and traitress that you are!’

Then came Walter Cameron forward and bowed before her as she stood looking at me with the eyes of a hunted tigress turned to bay. But not a word did she deign him.

‘It is indeed no fault of the maid, your daughter. Nor yet of mine. For your noble son Don Gaetano would I most readily have laid down my life. Time and again I desired him to permit me to stay in his place, but he was already sore hurt, even to death, and could not support himself in the saddle, much less this wounded maid. So that is the reason why it was my part to go and his to stay.’

The glance of the mother of the Vardarelli swept slowly from Walter to me and back again. Then I could bear no more, the pain of my wound coming upon me and taking me as at first. So, my hand slipping from her shoulder, she let me fall unheeded to the floor. And even then the Signora had no pity.

‘Let her alone,’ she said, when the nearest servitor would have raised me. But without heeding her words Walter Cameron came and carried me in his arms to a couch.

‘Nay, my lady,’ he said, ‘I respect your grief; but if this maid be not your daughter, she is at least a woman and wounded.’

Then there came one with his arm in a sling, who stood forward with confidence, like one with great tidings which all must be willing to hear. ‘Noble lady,’ he said, ‘have I your permission to speak?’

The Signora eyed him, perhaps remembering him as one who had been of the *comitiva*, and gave him leave to speak more by her silence than by any overt

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allowance. He began in a clear and confident tone.

'I was with the young Don Giovanni when he was about to die. I had fallen in a bush with a bullet through the fore arm, but Giovanni was wounded to the death. Yet ere he died he caused Don Gaetano to promise that he would not permit the Donna Isabella to fall into the hands of the devils of Don Ciro. And I heard our Chief promise that ere that should come to pass he would give his life for hers. That is all I have to say.'

There came a slow softening over the face of the lady mother, as she turned to the couch where Walter had laid me down.

'Since that was the last request of Don Giovanni Vardarelli, I will pardon you,' she said. 'But a true daughter would most surely have died with her chief. — Officer of Ferdinand,' she continued, turning to Walter, 'will you take off your soldiers? I thank you for the respect that you have shown to my sons. But now I desire to remain a space alone with those who have eaten the bread and drunk the wine of the Casa Vardarelli.'

So with a unanimous salute the soldiers strode sadly and slowly down the wide staircase, and the lady was left with one or two of the shepherds from the hills and those few house servants who had not ridden with the *comitiva*.

The Signora watched the men file out with a fixed countenance, and then, lifting a white napkin from among the silver, spread it lovingly over the brow and eyes of Don Giovanni. After she had done this she walked slowly to the table-head and stood looking upon those who remained in the room with a certain grave hopeful scrutiny.

'Men who have tasted the salt of the Vardarelli

and lived under their shadow,' she began, speaking low and solemnly, yet so clearly that all might hear, 'I bid you swear the vendetta. I bid you take up the blood feud against those who have betrayed the true and noble — against those who have made us this day desolate, and me a widow and childless. Against Ciro Annicharico and all his band, against the Vicar Vergine and the Council of Twelve, against all that pertain to or acknowledge the Silver Skull, sleeping or waking, man or woman, in the street or kneeling at the altar of asylum, wherever you find them, swear that they shall die by your hands!'

But even as she was speaking, and especially at the dread names of Don Ciro and the Silver Skull, I could see the men edge one behind the other. Some made as if they would go out by the door. At last one bolder than his fellows found heart of grace to utter a few hesitating words.

'We are but shepherds of the valley,' he said. 'It is true that we have lived under the protection of the Vardarelli. But we are only poor peasant men, rude, unlearned, and weak. We are no fighters, and can scarce defend ourselves. We cannot take up the blood feud against Don Ciro and the Decisi.'

Then the eyes of the lady fairly blazed and her face twitched with contempt.

'Cowards and dastard at heart — get hence!' she cried, pointing to the door.

'We would aid you with the corpse-dressing,' said one; 'we would dig the graves and help at the funeral of these your sons. For they were good men and died well.'

'Get hence, quickly, ere I set the dogs on you!' she cried, yet more fiercely; 'leave me with my honourable dead. Pollute not the noble clay with one

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touch of the hands of cravens. I can bury mine own dead. And as for the grave, it is already digged — where ye know not of.'

And with the whips and scorns of her tongue, sharp as scorpion stings, she drove the men from her presence. But ere she turned away, lo! in the doorway of the Casa Vardarelli stood another woman, haggard and gaunt, wild-eyed and fearful of aspect. The Signora paused and looked at her. The gaunt woman opened her arms.

'I also am a woman childless and desolate, sorrowful and without a husband. I am she that was wife to Vittorio Dini. *I will swear the blood feud unto the death of deaths. I will take on me the vendetta against the Silver Skull!*

And with a breaking cry the two women fell into one another's arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

THE HALL OF THE DEAD

I heard the lady go out, treading steadily down the stairs to the outer court, the widow of Vittorio Dini following her. Their footsteps died away in the direction of the cattle sheds. Then for a long space there was a great stillness, with only the spent hushing of the wind through the corridors of the Casa Vardarelli, and the heavy silence of the dead men lying on the table. Then Nita, Don Giovanni's favourite long-haired cat, that he had named after his sweetheart, the tanner's daughter, leaped up, and, treading softly across the others, went and rubbed herself against the cold hand on his breast, mutely praying for the caress which she had never before lacked. At first she arched her back and purred loudly, looking ever round to see what could be the matter with her master. Then, conceiving perhaps that he must be asleep, Nita curled herself upon his breast and went to sleep also.

By-and-by I heard the creak of the ungreased waggon wheels, and rising from the couch where Walter had laid me down, I limped painfully to the window, holding to the wall as I did so. There, immediately beneath me, its high narrow wheels of solid wood crushing into the damp straw of the yard, was a great waggon with two magnificent Apulian cattle in it, the very pair which had been a chief pride to the heart of the herdsman Dionisio.

Then up the stairs came again the women's footsteps; and without a word to me they carried down Giovanni first, Nita following them like a faithful dog. Then they took Dionisio out of my sight.

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Not a syllable did they vouchsafe me; even their glances avoided me. And so the waggon creaked away, till only out of the distance came the complaining shriek of the ungreased axle.

So in like manner after an hour did the women with the bodies of Giacomo and Girolamo, taking them two and two, till there remained but Gaetano alone. Then I went to sit by him, and looked with heavy heart at the man who had given for me his life, lightly and freely, even as in the storm he had cast off his cloak for me. Then tears, little accustomed to my eyes, gushed out. This was a man who had indeed loved me truly, silently, greatly. Yet because love comes not at call, neither goes at bidding, I had not loved him in return.

But to my undoing I had cast my heart at the feet of a stranger, of an enemy of the house to which, when I was an orphan and an outcast, this Chief of the Vardarelli had brought me home.

So when the Signora came again, I begged her to let me accompany them, saying that I was recovered of my hurt and could help to lay the head of the greatest Vardarelli in the grave. But the mother vouchsafed me neither look nor word, bending to the load of the heavy man like a young wrestler at a trial of strength.

So following the two women as they took their painful way, at the door I found Salvatore, my own horse. How he had come back, by what strange method of escape, all the way from the marches of the Basento, across the foot-hills, along the perilous scree of the mountains, up through the Stone Gate, without rider, without saddle, without bridle, I know not and shall never know. At all events, there he stood waiting, with tired bowed head, in the

courtyard. Yet he whinnied when he saw me, even as in happier days, and thrust his nose forward into my hand in quest of sweet cake. Then I put my head down and whispered to him that he must do me one more service. So with a hand upon his mane I managed to guide him to the steps which led up to the granary. And from them I mounted painfully upon his back, and slowly pacing as at a great procession, I followed the cart wherein was the body of Don Gaetano. It was a long way before me, already toiling up the steep slants of rugged pathway which led to the yawning blank of the Stone Gate. But Salvatore, treading gently as if he knew that the least slip of careless foot might hurt his mistress, gained, as a horse always does, upon the tardy-footed slow-plodding oxen.

The two women walked on either side of the cart, both of them looking straight before them, as though their eyes saw through the walls of rock out into the green plain where their beloveds had met their deaths. When the oxen paused at the Stone Gate, I was close to the Signora, my mother. Yet she neither looked nor spoke, and there was that within her eyes which kept me from venturing a word to her. The reverence of a great sorrow fell upon me as I looked, for vengeance dwelt stark naked in them.

So there, in the blue shade of the limestone cavern, upon a shelf whereon the muleteers were wont to rest, the bodies of the four men were laid; Giovanni being farthest within, out of the sun. From the great solid-wheeled wain the two women carried Gaetano, till he rested alongside the others, hand to hand and foot to foot. The mother looked them over, touching them softly, and settling an arm across a breast whence it had fallen down. Then, returning

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for a moment to the cart, she lifted a pick easily as a labouring man does, and strode back within the arch of the Stone Gate.

Midway she paused at a recess which I knew well, for I had often seen the riders of the *comitiva* pause to light their tobacco there when the wind blew shrill through the tunnel itself. And once or twice, riding that way at nightfall to look down upon the glorious prospect of the plains outspread beneath, I had found it tenanted by a lad and lass, anxious to sit together awhile safe from prying eyes.

For, as I have said, there were ways — in such cases there always are ways. At least, so Bettina, my maid, used to tell me. And, indeed, the thing was done, for I saw it, though it was the sin unpardonable for one of the Vardarelli to bring any woman near the fortress of the *comitiva*.

The Signora, with one blow of her pick, brought down the crumbly plaster which in that dim place so perfectly simulated the blue limestone of the mountains. Then, with a little labour easily performed, she revealed a door, narrow but high, which, being opened without a key in some way known to herself, led straight into the heart of the hills. Slipping from Salvatore, I followed the two women as best I could. Well aired the passage was, wide and cool, with a chillish wind blowing in our faces as we penetrated ever deeper into the bowels of the rock. The light must have filtered in somewhere high above our heads, for I never quite lost sight of the two, who stalked before me without turning their heads, till we all came to a wide hall, lighted dimly from unseen crevices. Standing within the dusk of the doorway, so near to the mother of the Vardarelli that I could almost touch her dress, I could see the

upward sweep of the walls, though I could not distinguish the clefts through which the light stole.

Yet the thing which I heard was so much more wonderful than that which I saw, that presently I had become all one great listening ear. You have perchance heard a child sobbing in the dark, it may be after it has been beaten for a fault. Well, that is what I heard, multiplied a million times. In that place there was a mighty hush of slow sobbing — various, too, like distant music or the moaning of the wind. I could distinguish the passion of grief scarcely subdued — the pause, the catch, and then the regular pulsing throb when the tears rise too high in the throat to be wholly restrained. But all so mighty that it seemed as if the earth itself trembled and cried out.

Suddenly the Signora turned round upon me, as if she had known of my presence all the time. ‘Give me your hand, Isabella,’ she said, speaking without anger, and almost with a kind of pride in her voice: ‘I will show you where the Vardarelli bury their dead.’

And with eagerness in her face and impatience in her gesture, she pulled me forward, so that, my shoulder paining me, I could not repress a little cry. For beneath my eyes there sprang into sight a wonderful thing. The grey smooth floor of the hall became smoother as it took a slight downward and circular inclination, like a filler wherewith one pours wine into a narrow-necked jar. I stooped and touched the stone underfoot. It was wet, and glistened like a well-oiled whetstone.

Another step, and lo, it seemed that I could scarce keep my feet upon the grey slope! Immediately before me I saw a vast circular chasm yawning like the pipe of a great volcano (which they

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tell me it had once been). I could see the first yard or two down the smooth throat of it well enough in the sifted gloom. Then it sank plumb into the blackness of darkness, running clear down into the belly of the earth.

It was not built in tiers of masonry like a well; it was not lichened and creviced like a well in the natural rock. But rather it was smooth and polished like a stone on which the children of a village have slid and rolled throughout their generations.

Then I had fallen with weakness or terror had not the mother of the Vardarelli held me with a right hand strong as a man's, and a wrist like woven steel.

'Look, girl,' she cried — 'look well. Here is where we will this day make an end of the great house of the Vardarelli; and here shall we three be joined with the men of our house. Hearken: the dead are calling us! My husband is there. Yes, I come' (she leaned forward as if to look down the shaft), 'I come, Ferdinand my husband! But first I will bring you all the children you gave me. They are dead, indeed, but there were no cowards among them. And then I also will come to you!'

As she spoke, the mighty sobbing rose nearer and clearer and more thrilling beneath us, but with strange halts and variations.

Suddenly my lady pulled me back. 'Not yet,' she cried; 'ah, not yet! I forgot: there is yet much work to be done!'

And we stood again on the rugged and indurated limestone, clear of the smooth basin and the dread blackness of the shaft. I felt the air suck suddenly downwards. A leaf which had somehow blown in from without swirled round and round, and then

plunged into the vortex.

In a moment it appeared again, being thrown out, as it were, by some alteration in the direction of the currents of air. The sobbing grew louder, and a cool wet wind blew in my face. All my body thrilled and trembled with quivering expectant awe that yet was not fear.

‘Look — look!’ cried my lady, pointing downwards. Then up through the darkness of the well-throat I saw something rise grey and almost colourless. It seemed to sway out of sight and back again, rising and falling as though a mighty pulse were beating in some strong heart deep underneath. Something limpid-clear swept up towards us, saying as it came, ‘*Hush!*’ It seemed to whisper pleasantly and dreamily, like a wind off the sea at eventide when the leaves rustle in the orange gardens. Once and twice it failed to reach us, but the third time the whole basin was filled to the brim with water. A greenish glimmer trembled all athwart the walls of the cavern, and our ankles stood cool and wet in the plash of a curling wavelet. I had fallen forward on my face, but the grasp of the Signora never wavered upon my unwounded arm. A long moment the water stood so, boiling up smoothly in the centre like a pot of pitch upon the fire. Then with a roaring sound it fell suddenly away, sucking and gurgling back round the mouth of the funnel, and lo, once again the basin was wet and smooth, and the central shaft black and empty.

‘This is the place of rest — these are the banks of Lethe. Here rest those for whom the upper world has ended!’ said the mother of the Vardarelli. And she laughed a little as if she were glad.

Then we went back through the narrows of the

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cave into the shifting lights of the Stone Gate; and when we came to the shelf whereon the five dead men were laid — lo, there immediately before us was a man standing with folded arms, as it had been musing upon them. He did not hear us. His head was bare, and an officer's plumed hat lay on the ground. I knew the man at a glance. It was the Englishman himself, General Richard Church.

\* \* \* \* \*

Then all suddenly a great anger flashed in the face of the mother of the Vardarelli, seeing him stand there. I saw a stiletto gleam in her hand, and ere I could stop her she had flung herself towards him like a tigress.

Her hand was already uplifted to strike when, without haste or token of surprise, the General turned his eyes upon her. They were blue and cold as the sky seen from the summit of the Gran Sasso. But the power was in them.

As was his custom, the General rode without his sword. His charger cropped the grass a little way down the path into the Valley of the Vardarelli, also, as usual, bridle-free. He was wholly defenceless, for he had dropped his little riding-whip on the ground, where its gold head glittered like a new-minted coin.

It was a noble thing to see: the Englishman, slight and of middle height, with folded arm and broad brow over which the dark hair curled, in appearance little more than a boy; before him the mother vengeant, knife in hand upraised to strike; then near by the widow of Vittorio Dini, leaning forward and showing her white teeth like a hound in leash.

It was a conflict of soul with soul. Don Richard

never so much as unfolded his arms. He only fronted the Signora with the same calm sad aspect with which he had mused over the dead bodies of the slain. So there these three stood like a painted picture for the space of a minute. Then the mother of the Vardarelli found words.

‘Murderer!’ she cried, ‘are you come to gloat over those whom your treachery hath slain?’

The General did not cease to gaze at her with his clear blue eyes, full of wonderful melancholy and tender regard. He shook his head gravely and sadly.

‘Nay,’ he said, ‘not my treachery, Signora, but the treachery of the man with whom I shall reckon.’

The lady laughed aloud, — Mother Mary, what a laugh!

‘Two make a bargain!’ she cried. ‘It was your agreement with Don Ciro. There lie my dead, slain by your deed: what hinders that I should kill you in return?’

The blue eyes grew milder. There was almost a smile in them.

‘Because I also loved the great dead,’ he said, very gently. ‘I have come to mourn for them. I have come to bury them with honour.’

The mother drew herself up proudly. She had let her knife drop to her side, but still held it ready.

‘I can bury mine own dead, I thank you,’ she said scornfully. ‘Go, colleague of traitors, slayer of my children. You brought my dead home to me. For that take your life at my hands.’

The Englishman dropped his head with a certain grave courtesy, unfolding his arms and placing his hand where the hilt of his sword ought to have been.

‘Nay, Signora,’ he said, ‘you mistake me. Richard Church is neither traitor nor traitor’s accomplice. I

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neither make nor keep counsel or compact with the Decisi, save that of the rope and the musket-ball. The Austrians, and not I, dealt in this dastardy. I fought against your sons when they were alive and powerful, even as men that are men love to fight, honouring one another all the more. But of the treachery I had neither knowledge nor part.'

Even then the lady did not relax her stern attitude of hatred and contempt.

'Words are but wind,' she said. 'I care not whose was the traitor's part. There are my dead — nothing can alter that. Leave me!'

'Signora,' said General Church, 'is there not such a thing as justice — such a thing as vengeance? I can give you these things.'

The knife dropped ringing from the hand of the mother of the Vardarelli. She sprang forward, falling upon one knee and clutching the General by his coat. All the haughty anger went out of her face, even as a candle that is blown out by a puff of vagrant wind.

'Will you indeed do this?' she cried: 'as you hope for God's mercy, will you give me satisfaction in the blood of *Ciro Annicharico* the priest? Will you revenge me upon the *Vicar Vergine* and all that carry the cursed emblem of the *Silver Skull*?'

'I will,' he replied firmly; 'I shall take neither sleep nor pleasure, I shall deny myself the taste of wine and of the lips of woman, till I have left not one of that vermin alive on the face of the earth.'

The other woman, who was the widow of *Vittorio Dini*, was now kneeling before him also. 'Swear it,' she cried: 'swear it by the blood of him who died under the traitor's knife.'

'Swear it,' said the mother of the *Vardarelli*,

‘swear it upon these my dead.’

General Richard Church reached a hand to each of the women, and gently raised them, with the courtesy and distinction natural to him, — a greater man he was even than my Walter, but his eyes were colder.

Then he walked to where Gaetano lay, and placing a hand softly upon the broad pale brow he said, ‘Gaetano Vardarelli, bear me witness — thou whose word was honour, whose nod an oath — I swear that I will not halt nor stay till every Decisi hath died the death, till the sole Silver Skull shall be the bleaching head of Ciro the murderer, which I shall set in derision over the gate of his own town of Grottaglie.’

Then the Signora, more like a graceful bashful maiden than the haughty mother of the Vardarelli, took the Englishman’s hand and humbly kissed it.

‘And I,’ she said, ‘will not cease till we have hunted down Ciro Annicharico, who betrayed my sons and left me childless. I had meant that this day we three, I the bereaved mother, this the widow of Vittorio Dini, and my daughter Isabella, should die with the dead, here in the place of the dead. But the time is not yet, and while the murderers live we must live also!’

Then the widow of the watchman of Castel Rotondo took the General’s hand in her turn.

‘I also will swear that I will show you the secret haunts of the Silver Skull — I will deliver the Twelve into your hands — if you promise that no mercy will be shown to any: none to Lupo the wolf, nor to Bernardis the lawyer, nor yet to Ciro the devil.’

‘I promise,’ said the General solemnly, ‘there shall be no mercy. As they have measured to others, even

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thus shall it be meted to them! So help me God!

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

THE LAST COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE

His Excellency General Richard Church was a man of his word. He had looked with profoundest sorrow upon the five dead men, who lay in the shadow of the Stone Gate. Now with bared head he helped the two women to carry them into the Hall of the Dead. They were laid in order round the smooth basin, which I had seen so strangely filled with water. We heard beneath us the sobbing come and go in the throat of the mountain, yet it seemed that we stood a long while before it grew as loud as it had been at first. The widow of Vittorio Dini and I fell on our knees, moved by the fear of that which we were to see, but the Englishman and the mother of the Vardarelli stood erect. Then, with one great lift, the clear water rose again up the throat of the well, and lapped cold about our feet. The dead men seemed by some strange power to be upborne and to rise to their feet as if they had been alive, Gaetano stiffly erect like a soldier on parade. His face was turned to me as if bidding me also swear the oath of vengeance. But the young Giovanni went down with a wave of the hand which recalled his careless and debonnair grace of other days. A moment only they were visible together in the black well-eye. Then they sank for ever out of sight.

For not till the resurrection of the good and the evil does the burying-place of the Vardarelli give up its dead.

The Signora stood fixed and calm, when without priest or blessing or unction of Holy Church her sons disappeared. Then she extended her hand, and

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for all funeral service solemnly pronounced these words: —

‘The God of battles receive and pardon the sinful souls of these men treacherously slain!’

Then came we forth from the door into the peace of the evening light. The General picked up his hat and stood with it in his hand, waiting for the Signora to speak. She looked at him intently out of her keen dark eyes.

‘Go, gather your men,’ she said. ‘So soon as we of the ruined house have again made fast and secret this place where the dead await the judgment, I will follow you to your camp. But remember that *Ciro* the murderer is strong, and that you will need every true man.

A faint smile overspread the calm face of the English soldier.

‘*Ciro* will find,’ he said, nodding his head, ‘that one man is more than even he can reckon with.’

He bowed low before the two women, whistled on his horse, and having swung himself into the saddle he disappeared, holding his hat in his hand till he had turned the corner from which I had so often watched the evening striding eastward across the Apulian plain.

Then without word spoken we went back to the desolate house of the *Casa Vardarelli*, the two women in front walking one on either side of the empty bullock cart, whose patient oxen had stood all the while blinking their eyes and flicking their tails in the shade. And behind them my own *Salvatore* paced slowly and sedately, as if following the muffled drums at a military funeral.

It was the end of the *comitiva* of the *Vardarelli*. And yet not the end.

\* \* \* \* \*

Christmas it had been when the fords of the Basento ran red with Vardarelli blood, and the foothills of Basilicata had been dotted with dead and dying men. Carnival was now in possession of the world, and yet General Church had made no sign. He abode still in Lecce with a few troops, hardly sufficient for a body-guard in case of a determined attack by the Decisi. Ball after ball he attended; reception followed reception, as if the sole object of life were gaiety.

And day and night the mother of the Vardarelli raged at his inaction, but the widow of Vittorio Dini calmed her.

‘Be content,’ she said: ‘in this the Englishman is like God Himself. He waits to strike. It is not our way in Italy. A man is our foe, — we take the knife in hand, and smite him as he passes by, putting our fate at once to the trial to kill or to die. The man that day may be on his guard, or he may wear a shirt of mail upon him. In either case the edge of our steel is turned, and with the return stroke we die. “What matter?” say we: “we have made the attempt. We have vindicated our honour. It was our ill-luck. Some evil eye crossed us.” But to the Englishman a month, two months are as one day, and he will not strike till the enemy is surely in the toils.’

‘But so foolishly to expose himself as he does — with *Ciro Annicharico* in this town, in this disguise or that! What hinders that the priest come behind and strike? Where would our vengeance be then?’

‘That, too, is policy,’ said the woman shrewdly: ‘it throws *Ciro* off his guard more than aught else. For

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it hurts his pride that the General never asks after him, nor so much as mentions his name. "A fool of a general — a copper coin to be played with!" he says publicly, and abides near in this city of the plain in fancied security, instead of seeking his old haunts. But bide you awhile. I have heard from my sister who lives among the mountains that there are very many troops there. The mounted gendarmes patrol every road and daily close in upon the plain. In a little there will be no escape for the Decisi, who till now have fled thither at every danger like rats to their holes. But General Church is stopping the earths! By-and-by he will hunt them in the open. Bide awhile. This Englishman has sworn the vengeance, and he will surely perform it.'

My first wound, which indeed had proved little more than a rude tear in the muscles of the shoulder, had bled freely and weakened me. But now it rapidly healed, and was almost well by the end of Carnival. I also dwelt at Lecce, in the house of Don Francesco Vozzi, a master shoemaker who had been much bound to the Vardarelli, and now was proud to entertain the Signora and myself. The lady spoke but little to me, but would go forth at morn, an hour or so after sunrise, to walk outside the city and look over the plain as if she could indeed see the blue hills among which were hidden the Stone Gate and the Valley of the Vardarelli.

There she would stand, her eyes fixed, her fingers knotting and writhing over each other, and her thin lips moving in what I thought at first to be silent prayers, as of one who tells her rosary — but which afterwards I found to be great curses upon the Decisi, and especially upon *Ciro Annicharico*, the head of the Society of the Silver Skull.

One day, when she had been long absent from the Casa Vozzi, I went to find her, having with me Captain Walter Cameron. And so we took our way, speaking little, yet happy to be walking together through the crowded streets, still full of the outrageous mumming of the last days of the Carnival. As I expected, we found the mother of the Vardarelli at the great gate which looks towards the north. She stood with her lace mantilla over her head, in the Spanish fashion which became her tall figure so well. Her hands were clasped behind her, and her eyes were far away.

We stood quiet awhile ere we spoke to her; and after a space she turned her eyes upon us, and beckoned us to approach as a queen might, with one slight movement of the head.

'You have chosen this man?' she said abruptly, bending her brows upon me.

'Nay, mother,' I said; 'this man hath chosen me.'

And it was true; for though but few words had passed between us, we understood each other altogether.

A bitter smile dawned on the Signora's face, as of a winter's storm with the promise of snow, both angry and chill.

'I do not blame you,' she said; 'how should you think of the dead as I do? The young to love, the old to vengeance! You brought them not into the world. You died not with them, as I died the night this man brought home my five sons. Nevertheless the God of happy folk — who is not my God — bless this young man and you! Isabella of Monte Leone, I wish you well. As for me, the God of vengeance preserve me till I see the head of Ciro the Priest severed from his body and dripping the life-blood drop by drop into

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the dust of the highway. Then will I defile his dog's mouth with filth, and stand ready for the worst that God can lay upon me.'

At that moment there came past us a procession of the Brothers of Pity, their strange cloaked figures and hooded masks horrid with eyeholes like the orbits of a skeleton. And from the midst one taller than the rest swiftly turned a head upon us and then looked away. I caught the red glint in the eyes, the devil's flicker which I had seen so many years ago at Monte Leone. And I put my hand all trembling upon the arm of Walter Cameron, for I knew that once more and not for the last time I had looked upon *Ciro the Priest*.

Walter and I walked back a step or two behind the *Signora*. I would have taken her arm and walked with her, but she motioned me away with an impatient movement of her hand. So with a strange willingness in my heart I walked through the streets of *Lecce* by the side of this soldier and foreigner. Once and for ever he and I had claimed each other; and when a team of wide-horned oxen came shouldering along in a dark part of the way, it seemed natural that Walter's hand should seek mine and draw me into the shelter of a doorway, where very close together and with our hearts beating wildly we stood in the shelter till the blessed wain had lumbered slowly by.

I write little of our loves, for indeed that which has come and gone between us since is better than any oaths and protestations. And at that time, in the press of so many terrible events, I felt that we could only hold to one another and wait. Still the dusk of the doorway even for a moment was doubtless great comfort.

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At last General Church seemed to wake from his dream of pleasure. He spent less of his time in the society of the Intendant's daughter, and if he paid as many compliments as ever to the handsome women of Lecce, he dispatched the business more quickly. He was still to be seen everywhere, but he went now with a guard. Even in the ballroom he was observed to keep his back to the wall, while in the street his hand was ever on his pistol and his chill blue eye glinted warily at all who approached.

At last upon the morn of a day of sudden storm, there came the order for which we had been waiting. We were to be ready to march — I mean Walter was to be ready, and we had arranged it between us that where he went one Don Pietro, once of the *comitiva* of the Vardarelli, whom he did not now despise, was to accompany him.

That night found us once more at the Masseria del Duca, where I had not been since the night of the rescue of Don Gaetano. Above us a tearing and gusty wind blew thin wisps and scarts or cloud athwart the sharp hooks of the crescent moon, while the chill wind piped and whinnied in the chimneys and staircase slits of the masseria.

'It was ever the fashion of the General,' said Walter, smiling upon me as we stood apart, 'to order the most difficult operations on the worst nights. A plaguey uncomfortable trait in a commander!' he continued. 'I wonder where we will land to-night, and if it will be our good fortune to glimpse the red eyes of your Don Ciro.'

We rode from Lecce with two hundred cavalry; but Walter, who knew something of the General's dispositions, whispered to me (doubtless in excess of his duty) that we were but a link in the chain of steel

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which his chief had for months been drawing about the Decisi, and that we should see things done ere the morning which would make men's ears tingle from one end of Apulia to the other.

It was strange to stand once more under the gloomy walls of Castel Rotondo. Our two hundred men all dismounted, and, tying wisps of rag and hose over their boots, crowded on either side of a little low door in the wall. We waited a long time there in the chill buffeting of the blast, hugging our cloaks as well as we could about us, to keep our arms dry and our bodies warm.

It was half-past twelve when the little door opened and a woman's head looked cautiously out. Even in the uncertain glimmer of the midnight I knew her for the widow of Vittorio Dini, who had been the watchman of this same town of Castel Rotondo and had admitted us the night Gaetano and I penetrated into the presence of the dread Twelve.

As she stepped out and stood beside us, a man in a long blue military cloak followed her, and with a gasp of surprise I recognised the General himself.

He glanced about him. 'Is all ready?' he said in a whisper to Walter.

'All is ready, General,' was the answer.

'Do you, then, Cameron, follow me with fifty men, and let the others be prepared to secure the doors and walls, so that none escape.'

Having given this order, General Church turned and motioned to the woman to lead the way. Walter followed, and as we were entering the door he reached a hand back for me to take. And thus, with our heads bowed low, we stole deviously this way and that through the interminable passages, seeing only the back of the one immediately before us in

the pale shine of the dark lantern carried by our guide. Suddenly with a click even that was shut off, and we were left in complete darkness.

In the hush which followed I could hear two men talking together. I wished greatly to look, though mostly I have no curiosity; but for a time, perhaps in fear of my making a noise, Walter held me back. Then as the General advanced a step or two we followed him cautiously, till round the edge of the leathern curtain, dusty and tattered like the door-screen of a church, I could see two men in the Punchinello mask affected by the Decisi, with the Silver Skull of the order swinging round their necks. They had drawn swords in their hands, but they stood together carelessly, half turned away from us, and evidently completely at their ease. Presently some noise within sent them to their posts, where they stood stiffly for a while. Then, as nothing happened and no one came forth, they again relaxed their discipline, dropped the points of their swords, and approached each other to resume their conversation.

As they turned their backs again upon us, what was my surprise to see Walter and the General step out softly, and without a moment's hesitation throw their arms about the men's heads, clasping their mouths with the palms of their hands! Half a dozen men received each of the brigands as they fell. Gags were deftly thrust into their mouths, and without a cry, or so much as the clatter of a sword-point on the flagged floor, the inner sentinels of the Twelve were disarmed.

We stood once more at the door of the terrible tribunal, and even as before I peeped in, setting my head between Walter and the English General. The

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latter, feeling me touch his shoulder, turned half about with a quick high look. But when he saw me he smiled, and made a little more room for me to see better. For, saving my Walter alone, there never was a more gallant gentleman in any land than Richard Church, the Englishman.

I could now distinguish the whole twelve lounging as before in their places, their masks off, and some with their elbows on the table. At that moment the General turned about and shook his head with a disappointed expression at Walter.

In a moment I saw what he meant, for the place at the head table was not filled by the clear-cut monk-pale features of Don Ciro, but by the purple visage of the Vicar Vergine. The Registrar of Deaths was on his feet, and he read from a paper:

‘With three blasts of the trumpet we, the Supreme and Secret Council of the Decisione, have decreed the death of General Church, and have appointed [here followed a string of names, about twenty in number] to carry out this act of justice. We also condemn to the death that is irrevocable Captain Gualtero Cameron, Major Schmerber, and others of his officers. What say the Decisione?’

The Twelve, with one accord, held up their hands, and cried: ‘Let them die.’

But all this while, noiselessly and steadily, the soldiers, with their muffled feet, had been stealing past and taking up their positions about the walls of the great darkened council chamber. The roar of the storm hooting through the passages and moaning without, and their intentness on the matter in hand, kept the men at the table from observing the slight creaking which their uninvited guests made as they moved breathlessly to their places. There was but

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one dim and shaded light on the table, and that was in front of the Registrar of Deaths, so that it might shine upon his papers. But nevertheless I could see the bayonets of the troops glimmer about the room like a swarm of fireflies on a May night.

'Blow the trumpet, in token that the doom of the condemned men has been approved in full council, none dissenting!' So cried the Registrar of Deaths.

And the Vicar Vergine, lifting a long silver trumpet from the table, blew three lusty blasts upon it.

Hardly had the echoes of the last died away, when a stern high voice fell on their ears, in a moment chilling them to stone with the onfall of an intolerable dread.

It was the voice of the General, sterner than that of a judge pronouncing doom

'Sit still in the places where you are! Move not a muscle, dogs and murderers, or ye shall instantly die!'

The light of the lantern in the hands of the widow of Vittorio Dini shone full upon such an array of ghastly countenances as it has never been my lot to witness. I have seen dead men who died in agony before and since; but the worst of them were as sleeping children to these twelve Decisi, when they looked upon the encompassing ring of bayonets.

Their eyes in a moment became fixed and injected. Their ashen lips writhed or became set in a terrible smile. Some of them dropped grovelling on the floor. One fat tradesman rolled about crying for mercy, and seeking to clasp the General's knees. But the widow of the dead watchman of Castel Rotondo spurned the wretch backward with her foot. Only the Vicar Vergine sat still in his president's

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chair, and his countenance did not pale. He made a snatch at a pistol which lay before him, and pointed it at the General. But Walter Cameron with a quick upward cut of his sword sent the weapon flying from his hand.

It exploded with a loud report against the ceiling of the council chamber.

Then there ensued a long silence, broken only by the weird and terrible laughter of the woman who had guided us, as she went the rounds and held her lantern to the faces of the men who had condemned her husband to death and killed him before her eyes in the inner chamber of their home. One by one she counted them, gloating over each as a miser upon his most precious jewels. And round about them the soldiers stood with levelled muskets, while the manacles were being slipped upon the hands that had been so lately uplifted to swear the deaths of General Church and Walter Cameron.

So we went out, with the laughter of the widow of Vittorio Dini pealing in our ears and mingling mockingly with the craven waitings of the wretched prisoners.

At the gate sixty others of the Decisi met us under guard, having been taken by the soldiers after the capture of the Twelve.

When we came back into Lecce and told the mother of the Vardarelli, she said but this one thing:

'So far it is well ... but *Ciro Annicharico* is yet alive!'

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

THE DUCHESS OF MONTE LEONE

The prisoners taken at Castel Rotondo were safe lodged in the prison of Francavilla, waiting their trial and sentence. General Church might have hanged them out of hand, for he had returned to Apulia with the powers of *alter ego* to the King. Most of the prisoners were men who had lived in the pale of respectability, yet who had terrorised and blackmailed the towns in which they dwelt. But by great good fortune the complete papers of the Society of the Decisi had also fallen into the General's hands. They were excellently kept, and in that black record of crime there was evidence to end all that company of murderers and traitors ten times over. First, upon the page devoted to each member's name there were chronicled the two diploma murders, which they must prove that they had committed in cold blood to the satisfaction of the Committee of the Society. Then, following this proof of worthiness, came the record of each man's service from the first day he had been upon the roll of the Silver Skull.

The right to wear that emblem of death signified that the wearer was a member in full standing and with a clean sheet. The privilege was often withdrawn for certain periods and afterwards restored. The papers recorded its restoration to different individuals who had retrieved their characters by specially choice pieces of brutality.

One man only appeared to have been able to override the edicts of the Society, to bend it to his will; and as if to point the moral of who was master

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among the Decisi, across several of the neatly written and clerkly pages were dashed these bold words — 'I, Ciro Annicharico, forbade it!' — or, still more abruptly, 'Cancelled — Ciro Annicharico.'

And Ciro was still at large. Also what of the mother of the Vardarelli?

The great outlaw was heard of here and there throughout the province. Before the seizure of the Twelve at Castel Rotondo he had with great boldness walked the very streets of Lecce in broad daylight, having passed in various disguises through the lines of sentries. He had even attended the theatre, in order, as he said, to have a good look at this General who was so curiously different from Corre and the others whom the Government of Naples had sent against him.

But since the Twelve lay in their triply guarded prison, he had grown more wary. He seldom moved now without a large body of desperate men with him. For all who knew their names to be on the roll of the Society felt that for them there was no hope save in bold defiance or instant flight; because upon each mouthing desperado and sleek gormandising city knave the terror of the cold blue eyes of the Englishman lay like a sentence of death. The province seethed with turmoil and discontent. Deputation after deputation came to General Church, representing this one and that among the Twelve to have been a man honest and irreproachable; but the General only smiled and said, 'He shall have full justice.' So the deputies had perforce to let that content them, and depart.

It seemed strange also that ever since the night of our return from Castel Rotondo the mother of the Vardarelli had vanished, we knew not whither.

Walter himself had ridden with an escort in search of her, even across the plains into the mountains and through the Stone Gate of the Casa Vardarelli. He had found the valley bare and untenanted, save for the little outpost of Albanians which the General had sent there to keep its strong defences out of the hands of Ciro. The Signora had not gone home.

One day, while Walter was away on a mission of inquiry, an orderly came to the house where I abode with a letter from the General, a letter curiously abrupt, lacking most of the compliments usually deemed necessary. The gist of it was that if I could receive the General he would come immediately to pay his respects to me. I replied that it was more fitting that I should wait upon him, for I was no fine city miss to stand on etiquette. So, saddling Salvatore while the astonished orderly waited, I rode at once with him to headquarters. As we turned the corner of the great street, the daughter of the Intendant met us. She came mincing delicately along the pavement, and seeing me riding with a common soldier turned upon me a contumelious shoulder.

In five minutes I was standing by Salvatore's bridle at headquarters while they went to tell the General.

He came out instantly bareheaded, and almost running like a boy in his eagerness. He wore a plain closely fitting military coat of dark blue, without lace or decorations, which had obviously been recently buttoned on in haste. He took my hand in his quick impetuous fashion, and after seeming about to stoop and kiss it, he ended by shaking it vigorously in the manner of the English.

'My dear lady, wherefore did you trouble to come

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thus?’

‘You wished to see me — so I came,’ I replied.

‘But I ought to have come to you, and would have done so as soon as I had your permission,’ said the General, smiling upon me with the blue eyes which could be so warm and friendly upon occasion.

‘You are busy — I am idle,’ I answered; ‘therefore it was my duty to come to you.’

‘Will you enter?’ he said, still smiling. ‘Signora Isabella, I am indeed honoured, but I cannot conceal it from you that you must have shocked the good ladies of Lecce by thus coming to visit me.’

‘I am the sister of the Vardarelli,’ I answered; ‘I am not dependent for my good name upon the gossip of the dames of Lecce.’

‘You are a soldier’s sister. You ought to be a soldier’s wife — that is, if a soldier indeed ought to have any wife save his good sword.’

And he touched the plain hilt of the weapon which, as was usual with him, he had unbuckled as soon as he came in, and which lay on the table half hidden among papers, despatches, and a miscellaneous scribble of notes.

‘It is my intention to be a soldier’s wife,’ I told him plainly, ‘but not till the end has come.’

He had been rustling with his hand among a sheaf of papers, apparently searching for a particular one. But at my words he looked up quickly.

‘What end?’ he said, with the set sternness coming back into his face.

‘When Ciro the Priest has paid the penalty of his crimes and the Vardarelli are avenged!’ I replied.

‘Ah!’ he said, with a smile, ‘then I advise you to get your wedding dress ready.’

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'My wedding dress is always ready,' I answered: 'it is the dress in which I have the honour to stand before your Excellency.'

'And a mighty pretty dress it is!' answered the General, bowing with great gravity. 'And the man whom you will make happy is — my lucky rascal Cameron.'

'Sir,' I said, 'I have promised to marry Captain Cameron!'

He bent his head among the papers with an action which showed that the blue eyes were a trifle short-sighted. At last he found what he was seeking, and turned about to me with a grave deference which carried something of boyish shyness in it, very attractive in such a man.

'You are sure that nothing would change your mind, or cause you to refuse to marry Captain Cameron?'

'Nothing in the world!' I answered bravely.

'Not if he acted dishonourably?' said the General, smiling.

'I know the man I love!' I answered, giving him glance for glance.

'Or loved another?' continued the General.

'I know my man!' I repeated curtly, for the subject wearied me.

The General advanced and held out his hand. 'Will you do me the honour to shake hands with me?' he said, lightly. 'Cameron is a deuced lucky dog. Why was not he the General and I your escort down those stairs at Cerniola?'

Then his face altered and grew very grave.

'I did wrong to jest,' he said, 'because I am going to try you very high. Now I shall know whether there is indeed any faith in woman.'

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'I am not a woman only,' I answered, 'I am also a soldier. All my life I have been the comrade in arms of honourable men. I am of the Vardarelli.'

'Nay,' he said, 'you are not a Vardarelli, and that is just the point. What would you say if this paper I hold in my hand, found among the archives of the Decisi, were to prove you to be the legitimate daughter and rightful heiress of the Duke of Monte Leone?'

'I should say,' I answered, 'that I was sorry for the dukedom, but that it would not make an ant's load of difference in my fate.'

'You would marry my lad Walter even if you were legally established as Duchess of Monte Leone in your own right?'

'Certainly,' said I, 'and also if I were legally Queen of the Two Sicilies!'

'And you would hold to it even if this I have in my hand' — groping for a second paper — 'were a patent of restitution from the King giving back to you all your rights and estates?'

I nodded only, for this iteration wearied me.

The General smiled a little sarcastically.

'It is an easy saying, but it will be different when Monte Leone is yours, and when from the topmost battlement you can look down every way and see from horizon to horizon naught that does not belong to you.'

Then, though I have ever been long-suffering and too forbearing by nature, anger swift and desperate took hold on me.

'Give me the papers!' I cried, and sprang towards the General so quickly that, being taken by surprise, the short-sighted eyes could not follow my movements. I snatched the papers out of his hand,

and running to the fireplace dogs, on which the pine cones were crackling, I thrust them into the hottest of the blaze and held them there.

In a moment General Church followed. He caught me by the wrist with a hand that was like a vice, and with the other rescued the papers, which, being on thick parchment, did not burn easily.

‘Little spitfire!’ he said, smoothing them and examining the browned parts carefully, while continuing to hold me at arm’s length; ‘your husband, be he who he may, will have a stirring time of it. He will not die of *ennui*!’

Then quite suddenly the tears leaped up into my throat, and snatching my wrist out of his grasp I threw myself down on a couch and wept. Yes, for all my bravery and defiance I wept. And no wonder, for what woman can bear to be thwarted and played with, tantalised and made naught of — at least by a man she does not love?

At this the General suddenly grew exceeding serious.

‘Good Lord!’ he muttered; ‘suppose any one should come in! I did not think of this. What on earth shall I do with her? If it were any other woman, I declare I would — ’

And he sat down on the couch beside me. I felt his arm steal round about me till his hand rested on my shoulder.

‘Little girl,’ he said, ‘you are like a daughter to me. You cannot think that I would hurt you or play with your feelings. Forgive me; I am not an old fellow as years go, but I am rough and awkward, and I crave your pardon.’

He took my hand and bent to kiss it, stooping so low that I could see the crisp grey hairs about his

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temples.

'Ahem!' said a stern voice immediately in front of us, which made us both start. The General snatched his arm from about my shoulder, and rose to his feet. I looked up; and there, with his hand raised to the salute, stood Walter Cameron, looking very white and stern, as I had never seen him before.

'I have the honour to report, your Excellency,' he said, speaking in a tone high and hard, 'that I have fulfilled the commission which you entrusted to me, and found no person of the name at the place you designated: I therefore return you the letter.'

The General bowed distantly, and not yet being ready with words, he only slightly cleared his throat and drummed upon the table in front of him, as was his custom.

Walter went on. I could see his fingers busy with his sword.

'And also I desire to resign my commission,' he said. 'I have been recalled to England, and I leave immediately. I congratulate your Excellency.'

He finished unbuckling his sword, and flung it with a clash of steel on the table. Then he saluted sternly the second time, and, turning on his heel as on a pivot, he strode to the door with his head erect and his shoulders squared. I never saw him so handsome and grand. I could not cry out, I admired him so. Yet I declare I could have run after him and knelt down on my knees to beseech him to marry me. I was so proud of him, even though I knew him to be thus grievously in the wrong.

But by this time the General had come to himself. With a swift movement he was first at the door, and stood in front of Walter.

'Cameron, you unspeakable donkey,' he said,

‘stand where you are and listen. I was doing your business, man. You are not in the least worthy of that fine girl there. She is a thousand times nobler and more loyal than you – ’

He had caught Captain Cameron by the wrist as he spoke; but black anger was in my lad’s heart (I was getting my first sight of the quick Scottish temper which afterwards it was my lot to know so well). And being the larger and stronger man, he simply swept General Church out of his way and strode on towards the door. But the General was a man also, and, being an Irishman by birthright, possessed a temper equally quick and high.

‘Ho, guard there!’ he cried at the top of his voice; and the sergeant on duty opened the door from without, even as Walter’s hand was on the latch.

‘Arrest Captain Cameron!’ said General Church, pointing straight at him with his finger.

The sergeant gaped and stood aghast.

‘Soldiers, do your duty!’ cried the chief, with his fingers still outstretched.

The Albanians, who were always on guard at headquarters, wheeled into line, and stood right in Walter’s path, with their bayonets pointed at his breast.

Then I ran to him and clasped him about the neck. He never gave me a look, nor even, as he might have done, an answering pressure. He only put up his hands and gently enough unclasped my fingers.

‘Remove the lady,’ said General Church sternly. And the sergeant gently led me back to the couch, following the direction of his commander’s hand.

‘Now, Captain Cameron, go to the table and take up that sword!’

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There was a battle of eyes and wills. Walter looked at the steady bayonets of the men of his own command as if he would almost have preferred to cast himself upon them; but habits of discipline and long custom prevailed. Perhaps also something else was working in his heart.

He slowly faced about, marched to the table, picked up his sword, buckled it to his belt, and saluted.

'Now, Captain Cameron, will you be good enough to consider yourself under arrest? Deliver your sword to the sergeant of the guard. Sergeant Pappiani, take Captain Cameron's sword.'

The sergeant did so.

'You can retire, Pappiani,' continued the General; 'but hold the men under arms outside there. Guard the door, that none pass out without my permission.'

So we three were again left alone, with Walter standing between immovable as the granite of the hills, his eyes straight before him, apparently seeing neither of us, but gazing into the opposite wall like a seer into futurity. A grim smile played about the General's face as he watched him awhile in silence.

Then he went up, and placing his hand upon the young man's shoulder, he looked steadily into his eyes.

'Walter,' he said, 'I have shown you that I am your superior officer. But I would have you remember that I am something more.'

He paused for the space of the breathing of a breath.

'Walter, lad,' he went on, 'do you remember the night at Subiaco when you and I faced death like two brothers? Have you forgotten when Ferdinand

crossed my will, and I sent him back his power of *alter ego* and his General's commission? Was there not a young man who resigned also, like the young fool he was, swearing that he would go back to England with me and enlist as a private in my troop, rather than part from me? A young fool — something like another of the breed who is this day angry with his friend without cause!

I heard Walter breathe hard and gasp, as if something he could not swallow had stuck midway in his throat. The General went on, without ever taking his eyes off him.

There was a night also when that young man and I faced the Vardarelli, and being all alone in a hostile town braved out the *comitiva*. Has he forgotten that? And another day also, when I was wounded and left for dead on the field when we fought against Murat; and, so they tell me, a young Scottish lad stood across me with his sword in his hand and kept a dozen at bay, taking the points he could not parry on the left arm, which for protection had only a little shoulder-cape wrapped about it.'

He set his hand against the breast of Walter's tunic. My lover's hand twitched upward as if to grasp his superior officer's wrist again.

'Attention!' said the General sternly. 'Captain Cameron, do not forget that you are a prisoner under arrest — remember your duty!'

And with a little sharp twitch he unfastened the neck of Walter's tunic, and on the fair white of the lower curve from which the shoulder spread away, a red scar appeared.

'Tell me,' he said, 'for the sake of whose life do you wear that decoration?'

Walter Cameron was silent.

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'Well, in that case I will tell you myself,' he said. 'It was for your General's sake. Now, this being our record, yours and mine, Walter — do you think that Richard Church is the man to make love to your sweetheart behind your back?'

My lad's eyes dropped from the wall to the ground, avoiding those of the General, who still looked steadily into them. He moved his feet uneasily, like a chidden child.

'I beg your pardon, General,' he muttered: 'I thought —'

'Nay,' cried the General, with sudden gaiety, 'not mine. Beg your sweetheart's there, of whom you are not half worthy. But stay' — he stretched out his hand with a quick change of mood, — 'first let me introduce you!'

Then coming towards me he bowed graciously and said, 'My Lady Duchess of Monte Leone, permit me to present to you one of my most gallant and promising officers, Captain Walter Cameron.'

Walter instantly straightened himself and looked still doubtfully from one to the other of us.

'Is this another jest?' he said, with mighty gravity. He did not love to be trifled with, this boy.

The General put the papers into his hand.

'Read for yourself,' he said. 'Duchess or not, you have a small vixen on your hands, Walter, my lad, and so I warn you. Also you have a prettyish temper of your own. Between you, you will manage to keep your *ménage* lively. See where she tried to burn the Duke's acknowledgment of herself, her mother's marriage certificate, and even the King's recent deed of restitution to all the lands and castles pertaining to the Dukedom of Monte Leone, which I myself was at some pains to obtain for her. You can do as you

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like with the papers. I wash my hands of the pair of you. I declare you are more trouble than Don Ciro himself!

And the General went out smiling, catching up a pile of papers as he went.

Walter turned to me with the parchments in his hand.

'It is true, or at least the General says it is,' I said, replying to his unspoken question.

He knitted his brows with sudden vast thoughtfulness, glooming at me in a boyish way he had — which, however, I liked.

'I must think of this,' he said stiffly

I went straight up to him, and — consider it unmaidenly or not, I care not — kissed him on the mouth.

'Think of it after we are married!' I said.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

### THE CAPTURE OF DON CIRO

'Yes, you were a very bad boy,' I said to him afterwards, when I had forgiven him; 'but do you know, I do not think I ever loved you so much before.'

'My little Pietro is altogether a woman — after all!' was what he said in reply.

'But remember I am to wear my Greek dress and ride with you everywhere just the same,' I added; for it is better always to make sure beforehand, — 'after we are married, I mean.'

'And when will that be?' he said, smiling down upon me.

The thought sobered me, for I was ashamed to recall how little I had thought lately of the Signora who for so long had been as a mother to me.

'When we take *Ciro* the murderer,' I said, 'and when we find our mother!'

Walter bent and kissed my hand. 'I will do both for your sake, and that ere long,' he said bravely. 'Be ready!'

Yet the thing was something more easily said than done.

Easter and the joyous time of the year had come when we heard the next of the matter. It was at *Lecce*, and the bright little town was never gayer — too gay for me, indeed — so, instead of wearying myself by attending balls and receptions for which I felt no inclination, I diverted myself by riding constantly with Walter's troop. Yet for all that there was a pain of remembrance in my heart, and never a stirrup tinkled or a horse's hoof clattered but I thought of the dead that had been dear to me, and

of the happy days and nights with the *comitiva*.

Nevertheless it was sweet and refreshing when the breeze from off the sea fanned my face. I loved also the swift motion of Salvatore, the sense of Walter riding at my bridle-rein, the oft-baffled, ever-recurring quest for *Ciro*, the skirmishes with the broken and desperate bands of the *Decisi* — skirmishes which were always to the death. For, knowing the doom that awaited them, quarter was neither asked nor given. Such things were better than pirouetting in the ballrooms of *Lecce* under fire of the scorns of the Intendant's daughter and of the other fine ladies of whom at this time our General appeared to be so fond.

Yet it was at a ball that we heard our first news of our mother, who for two months had been lost to us. The General, whose energy in social matters put all to shame, had given a ball in order, as he said, 'to repay with one, a thousand courtesies.' All the beauty and fashion of the southern province were there. Much against my will, I also had to go, for the General insisted on it. So I put on me a Spanish dress of black lace, which set my figure well enough. A fold of it over my head and another draped over my shoulder — these served to render me as little conspicuous as possible. And for the time it was pleasant enough for me, who hitherto had been more accustomed to the rattle of the powder-pouch and the muskets crackling like thorns under a pot, to listen to the compliments of the brilliantly dressed officers, and watch Walter passing from this one to that other, as was the duty of the General's aide-de-camp.

General Church had arranged a brilliant Spanish dance in which the whole pageantry of the bull-fight

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was enacted — the ring, the bull, the fighters, the dartmen, and all the rest of it. The spectacle was just at its gayest. The poor bull, in the person of one of his cleverest and handsomest officers, was being baited with confetti and transfixed with ribboned fans held in fair but implacable hands. The whole scene sparkled with flashing wax-lights, polished floors, uniforms of scarlet and pale blue, brilliant dresses of a thousand gay colours.

'Toro! Toro! Brava, Toro!' they shouted after the right Spanish fashion, as the bull, with mimic horns strapped upon his head and his eyes bandaged, cleared his front with a swoop and scattered the laughing crowd of his enemies.

From the steps of the musicians' platform the English General watched with a bright smile, sometimes taking part, apparently as light-hearted and free from care as a boy on a holiday.

Then, suddenly beginning at the outer door, a vague hoarse murmur made its way up the stairs and began to fill the ballroom. The noisy play ceased. The brilliant pageant stood still as if it had been painted on canvas. Every eye was turned towards the door, in which, solitary as a prophet come to announce the doom of the world, stood a woman.

I was at the far end of the room, and at first I did not recognise her. And small wonder it was! For this gaunt Mænad, with her hair bleached white as snow, wind-tossed about her brow, her weather-beaten face, the face of a desperate man rather than that of a great lady, a grenadier's belt from which protruded the butts of a pair of pistols and at which swung an artilleryman's sword, bore small resemblance to the mother of the Vardarelli sitting at home with her

knitting, or passing about the house with gentle step and gracious courtesy.

Yet the mother of the Vardarelli it was. I would have flown to her, but her arm was upraised, and with a kind of fascination I waited for her to speak.

‘Come quickly,’ she cried: ‘Ciro the Priest is surrounded at Scaserba with all his men. He has slain many, but he cannot escape if I take back help to-morrow!’

The General went forward to thank her for her tidings, but she had already vanished from the ballroom. He gave a quick order or two to his officers. Walter passed me, hastening to do his master’s will.

‘Isabella,’ he whispered, ‘meet me at the Taranto gate. You will be in at the death. If they can but hold him, this means life to you and me!’

As I hurried back to my lodging, the day was breaking. The streets of Lecce were full of people. The trumpets of the cavalry blew fitfully. Squadrons of mounted men moved about or rode swiftly in a given direction. In haste I threw off my dress of Spanish lace and flung myself into my old Greek tunic, in which I had ridden so far and so often. I found a sleepy groom, and bade him open the stable and help me to saddle Salvatore.

In half an hour I was waiting for Walter at the Taranto gate. The first rays of the sun were striking upon the lofty white houses of Lecce as the General with his staff came riding out. Beside the General was the mother of the Vardarelli on a black horse. She looked straight before her, with eyes that devoured the plain in front.

Then came Walter, with his Albanian cavalry; and with a gay toss of his bridle-reins Salvatore swung

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once more into his place at the head of the squadron.

It was a hot ride, but away across the straight and dusty road we went without pause, save once to water the horses and dash a handful of water over our heated brows. As we neared Scaserba, the tower in which the wolf had turned to bay, the excitement in the ranks waxed well-nigh unbearable.

At last there before us were the white walls of the masseria, with the square tower crowning all, and the rebellious town of Grottaglie lying sullenly beyond.

The white puffs of smoke rose, and from all about there came the sharp rattle of musketry.

'Hurrah!' shouted the General, waving his hand like a boy; 'we are yet in time.'

And the Albanian horsemen responded with a lusty shout.

The masseria of Scaserba, where Ciro had entrenched himself, had been, like most of the larger farmhouses of the plain, designed as a place of refuge against sudden incursions of pirates from the sea or brigands from the mountains. A strong outer curtain loopholed for musketry, a tall square tower with thick walls excellent for defence, no height near from which it could be overlooked — that was Scaserba, a strong place, well chosen for the last act of a desperate venture.

Ciro had already been besieged for twenty hours when we arrived. He had attempted repeatedly to break through during the night, but the militia of the province, aided by a squad of regular cavalry, had continually met and thwarted him. He had offered money to the officers; but the taking of the Council of Twelve had begun a new regime in Apulia,

and now the officers of the local troops refused with scorn that which a year or two before they would have accepted with thankfulness. Besides, the fear of certain chill blue eyes was upon them.

As our brigade of cavalry swept out upon the wide space in front of the masseria, the beast *Ciro* must have known that he had come almost to the end of his tether. Yet the dog was game. The great gate opened. There was a quick rush of smoke-grimed, desperate men; sword in hand, the besieged did not stop to fire, but threw themselves upon the nearest of the troops, who received them with a steady volley. No more than one or two succeeded in breaking through, only to find themselves in the presence of a thousand horsemen.

But *Ciro* was not among the prisoners.

After a pause the white flag went up from the top of the tower. The Chief of the *Decisi* desired to treat with us.

But the General bade Captain Cameron return answer that there were to be no terms save surrender without condition. It may be guessed that I did not let *Walter* ride on such an errand alone. Four Albanian troopers accompanied us, and as we rode forward *Salvatore's* nose was level with that of the ambassador's charger.

As we came near to the wall we saw a dark figure in priestly cassock standing by the flag-staff. His hand was on the pole. A bloody handkerchief was wrapped about a brow grimed with battle-smoke. Yet withal the man was not without a certain fierce dignity, as he stood there at bay in the midst of an army.

'I desire to see General Church,' he cried out, as we rode near.

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'The General declines to see you!' said Walter curtly.

'Declines to see me, Ciro Annicharico of Grottaglie — me, who have dealt with far greater generals than he, and have held the province of Otranto in my hands for eighteen years!'

'Even so,' repeated Walter: 'he will neither see you nor treat with you.'

A spasm of white anger passed over the priest's face. 'Tell him,' he cried, 'that if he will not treat with me he shall surely die.'

'Death is common to all, as men of your profession ofttimes remind us!' said Walter, with grave irony.

I think the priest had not hitherto observed us much, but at this speech he bent his brows and frowned down upon us.

'You are pleased to be witty, Sir Officer,' he said. 'I have met you before, and this fair lady. My compliments to both of you. I may even yet have the pleasure of better acquaintance. In this world fate has many ups and downs — and who knows? Well, deliver your message, underling. What terms of capitulation does the General offer me?'

'None!' said Walter, yet more briefly.

Again the outlaw glared sudden anger and furies. Black death was in his eye.

'He will offer me no terms? I am to him as a wild beast to be hunted down? Then I will be a wild beast indeed! Ho, below there! Fire upon them!' And, snatching a musket, he pointed it at Walter.

Instantly, with his hand on Salvatore's bridle, Walter wheeled.

'Bend your head down and ride for our lives!' he said.

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And we rode like the wind, while behind us the whole masseria blazed with musketry fire, and the bullets hissed and spat about us.

A horse passed us, saddle-empty; and, glancing behind, I saw that two of our brave Albanians were lying on the ground.

‘O wait!’ cried Walter, in an agonised tone, ‘only wait! For this treachery I will reckon ere the morning light with Master Ciro.’

There was no talk of parley after that. The General wore his fighting look when we went back. Indeed, he seemed almost rude, and, turning to the chief of his staff, he said:

‘Schmerber, are you asleep? Can you not hurry on that gun?’

It was six o’clock when they brought a six-pounder into position, and opened fire. The gates gave way. Even the tower began to crumble. It was a hot evening, the prelude to a lowering thirsty night. The troops suffered and waited. But an enemy more terrible than General Church was fighting for us within the masseria of Scaserba. Since the beginning of the fight the well had been in our hands, and for nigh upon three days Ciro and his men had been without water.

It was at the first ray of the morning light that the white flag was again run up.

‘Take no notice of it: they violated the last!’ cried the General.

Then after a pause the fragments of the gate were drawn back, and a score or two of men appeared. They had guns in their hands, which they threw into a corner.

‘For God’s sake give us water!’ they cried: ‘we surrender.’

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'Where is *Ciro Annicharico*?' cried a voice which had not spoken before — that of the mother of the *Vardarelli*. She had been helping the artillerymen to serve their gun all the night. And in fear of the evil eye they had permitted her.

'Bring out *Ciro the Priest*, or we will fire again,' she cried. The match was in her hand. The gun was loaded this time with grape.

'Do not shoot unarmed men!' cried one from the open gate. 'You want *Don *Ciro**. I am he!'

'Come forward!' cried the General, speaking to the Chief of the *Decisi* for the first time.

So the great outlaw came forward with a firm step, and held out his hands to be manacled.

The steel clicked, the troopers fell in, the others who had fought along with *Ciro* were secured, and in an unspeakable rapture of cheering the army turned to march back to *Francavilla* with their captives.

The tall woman who had served the gun came near to *Don *Ciro**.

'I am the mother of the *Vardarelli*!' she said, with the joy of vengeance beaconing in her eye.

The priest looked at her and smiled. 'Ah!' he said calmly, 'my compliments to those five gallant gentlemen, your sons. I trust you left them in good health!'

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

THE SILVER SKULL OVER THE GATE

That night Francavilla was illuminated from end to end. No man slept, neither in the town nor among the soldiers. There were rumours of a rescue, so the General had ordered that the little city should be kept as bright as day, and that any citizen who refused to contribute his candles should be brought before him in the morning. The Twelve had been brought from prison, and in the hall of justice a military tribunal was trying both them and their chief.

‘What needs such a man with a trial?’ said Walter to his General; ‘has he not been tried and condemned a dozen times?’

‘I know it!’ said General Church.

‘Is he not an outlaw, and ten times a murderer? Nay, does he not boast of it?’

‘I know it!’ repeated the General placidly.

‘Do we not risk a rescue? Are you not the King’s *alter ego*, whom no man can call in question for his acts?’

‘I know. But let him be tried all the same,’ said the impassive Englishman.

‘Well,’ muttered Walter, ‘at least I will see that he is condemned “all the same,” if it were only for the sake of my two poor Albanians!’

So the military tribunal was constituted, and Ciro immediately began to make a speech, thinking that the old major of dragoons who presided must be General Church himself.

When he was undeceived, and told that the General would not see him, and was not even

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present, he only replied, 'I understand!' And from that moment to the end of the trial he spoke neither one thing nor another, neither good nor evil.

Major Schmerber it was who pronounced sentence, first upon the Twelve, and then separately upon their chief.

'Ciro Annicharico, you have been found guilty of many murders clearly proven, and indeed not denied, of treason high and low, of all crimes known to man — and also of violating a flag of truce. You are condemned to be shot to-morrow at daybreak; thereafter to be beheaded, and your head to be set over the gate of your own town of Grottaglie.'

'Well,' said Don Ciro coolly, 'at least I shall be able to keep an eye on my parishioners. Give me a flask of wine. It is dry work, listening to so many speeches.'

The fatal morning came. In Francavilla Fontana nothing was heard but the roll of the drum, the clatter of cavalry, the steady march of foot. In the wide piazza the troops gathered early, long before the east began to redden. Behind them stood the people of the town in dark masses, many with their hands under their cloaks and the hilt of the stiletto in their grasp. But the Englishman had overawed them, and there was to be no overt resistance.

When at last the sun rose, he looked upon the serried lines of troops forming three sides of a square. On the fourth nothing was to be seen but a long line of high grey wall, plain and bare in the morning light. Yet that was the place towards which all eyes were turned. There was still a bite in the morning air when the strains of the sacred chant were heard and the white garments of the priests

were seen approaching, mixed with the blue-and-scarlet of the military. The crucifix was carried aloft in front. Behind came ten men chained two and two. One of the eleven taken at Castel Rotondo had died in prison; so that last of all in solitary dignity *Ciro Annicharico* walked to his death with firm step, clad in his best habit of *Abate*, which his weeping housekeeper had brought him during the night from the presbytery of *Grottaglie*.

The first ten came weeping and cringing, their faces white and mottled with fear, glancing this way and that, some murmuring prayers to the saints, and others asking this one and that in the crowd to forgive them for having murdered a father — a brother. Only *Don *Ciro** walked firmly apart, keeping his head proudly up, and with a little smile of contempt on his face as the rabble shouted at him.

‘Death to *Ciro*!’ they cried.

His smile showed that he had not forgotten how a day or two before they had shouted, ‘Death to *Il Generale*! Death to the soldiers of *Ferdinand*!’ He had seen these same men rushing to the walls and firing a volley in honour of the death decrees of the *Decisi*.

So *Ciro* shrugged his shoulders and waggled the cigarette which he kept alight in his mouth scornfully at them.

When the *cortège* arrived at the wide piazza, *Ciro* looked around him. The ten of the Council were on their knees, muttering fervent prayers and receiving the last sacraments. The great murderer looked over them with a scathing contempt. Then opposite to him he saw, for the first time, *General Church* sitting his horse in the midst of his staff, raised a little above the throng on a platform which had been

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erected in front of the church.

'Am I to be shot along with that *canaille*?' asked  
Ciro Annicharico.

'I do not know,' said the sergeant, with some  
kindness: 'I will ask the General.'

'No,' he said, coming back: 'you are to die last and  
alone.'

Ciro bowed in the direction of General Church,  
and an expression of relief crept over his  
countenance.

'May I be permitted to return my thanks to His  
Excellency for this favour?' he said.

He paused while he continued to look at the man  
who had conquered him.

'He is very young!' he said as calmly as if he had  
been at Communion.

Two of the mission priests, having prepared the  
others for death, came near to offer ghostly  
consolation to the chief of the Decisi.

He waved them haughtily away.

'I am the Abate Giro Annicharico, and your  
superior!' he said. 'Have you read your morning  
office? No! Then to your cells and your breviaries!  
Go, I command you!'

And the priests obediently did as they were  
bidden.

Then even as they went there came a volley, and  
certain black figures pitched forward irregularly like  
a wave breaking against the grey wall — or perhaps  
more like a swathe of grain which bends forward  
and falls over the mower's scythe.

Giro turned his eyes observantly upon the double  
line of soldiers who had fired. He seemed to be  
criticising their formation. Then half of them fell out  
and the remainder busily reloaded.

The sergeant motioned him forward. He obeyed after a pause, leisurely sauntering rather than walking, blandly nodding to this one and that in the crowd. The cigarette in his lips was briskly alight. At the upper end lay the bodies of the ten as they had fallen. Ciro gathered the skirts of his new Abate's gown daintily, and stepped over the one who lay immediately in his path, face upwards.

'Ah, Bernardis!' he said pleasantly, like one who unexpectedly recognises an acquaintance.

When he turned and faced his executioners the low hoarse growl of hatred from the people startled him a little. But, recovering himself, he shrugged his shoulders and bowed courteously right and left. He took his cigarette from his mouth, looked carefully at it, flicked the ash from the end with a dainty movement of his little finger, and set it again in his lips. Then seeing the twelve muskets levelled at his heart and the sword of the officer upraised, he smiled upon the assembled people, crossed himself like a good churchman, and stretched out two fingers in the apostolic benediction.

'I give you my blessing, good people all,' he cried aloud, in the great voice in which I had heard him say mass on the morning after the massacre at Monte Leone.

The volley rang out, and Ciro Annicharico fell slowly forward on his face as if some one had pushed him from behind.

Then a woman ran out of the crowd, and with a sword that flashed once and again, she smote fiercely at the dead body.

A moment after she raised the dripping head in both her hands high in the air before us all, crying, — 'This is the head of Ciro Annicharico, who

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betrayed the Vardarelli to the death!’

We were married, Walter Cameron and I, in the great church of Francavilla. The General and all his staff were present. ‘For,’ said His Excellency, ‘it is not often that two of my officers wed each other.’

We were to ride out early the next morning, because General Church had laid upon Walter the honourable duty of carrying the news of the death of Ciro and the pacification of Apulia to the King.

‘It is your right, Colonel Cameron,’ he said, ‘and besides, it will be a famous marriage jaunt for you. I detail Captain Pietro there to accompany you.’

In spite of the lateness of the season the night after our wedding had fallen chill with a touch of frost in the air. The sun had not yet risen when we rode through the gate of Grottaglie, for, as our duty required, we had been early astir.

As we came near we saw the first red beams top the little hills of Scaserba and strike upon something which shone bright as burnished metal over the gate. A woman was sitting by the wayside steadfastly looking up at the bright object with a kind of holy joy on her countenance. The sun shone on her also, but the face we looked upon was the face of a dead woman.

It was the mother of the Vardarelli, looking with unshut eyes at the frost-whitened and bloodless head of the murderer of her sons, which grinned down upon her from the iron cage over the gate of Grottaglie.

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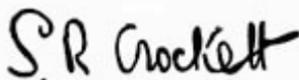
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*'Mayhap that is the best fortune of all – to be loved  
by a few greatly and constantly, rather than to be  
loudly applauded and immediately forgotten by the  
many.'*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. R. Crockett". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.