

## THE RAPE OF THE SABINES.

A flame of blood-red light streamed, a flying banner, from Monte Catillo, over the olive heights of Tivoli, to Frascati and the flanks of the Albans. Westward, the Campagna was shrouded in violet gloom. The tallest of the pines and cypresses in Hadrian's Villa, catching the last of the sunset-glow, burned slowly to their summits, like torches extinguished by currents of air from below. Between Castel Arcione and the base of the Sabines, where the intermingling summits sweep upward from the Montecelli to Palombara, and thence by giant Subiaco to the innumerable peaks and ranges of the mountain-land beyond, lay a white mist, wan as the sheen of a new moon on burnt grass—save in the direction of the ancient Lago de' Tartari, where it hung heavy and darkly grey, dense as it was with the sulphur-fumes of the *Acquae Albulae*.

On the flat, before the upward swell to Tivoli begins, the hill-road curves to the left, the *via Palombara-Marcellina*. To the right there is a rough path, striking off waveringly betwixt the Palombara road and the highway from Rome to Tivoli: at first like a bridle-way, then but a sheep-path or dried-up course of a hill-torrent. Following this, one enters the wild and lonely Glen of the Shepherds, though seldom does any shepherd wander there, and even the solitary goatherd rarely descends from the steep heights of Sterpara that overhang it from the west.

The nightingales were in full song. One after another had called through the dusk with clear, thrilling notes: one after another had swung a sudden lilt of music across the myrtles, through the thickets of wild rose and honeysuckles, over the clustered arbutus, and down by the birch-hollows, where the narrow stream crawled suffocatingly through fern-clumps and tufted grasses. Close to where some stunted, decrepit olives clung

despairingly to a bank of fissured soil rose a wild magnolia, whose white blooms gleamed in the twilight like ivory discs. Suddenly, from where its topmost sprays still retained a dusky green hue, a thrush sprang violently into the air and darted westward against the crimson light, clattering loudly and shrilly like a heavily-feathered arrow whistling towards the already blood-strewn flanks of a beast of prey. A nightingale among the myrtles near flew earthward, dipping his breast against the dewy anemones that clustered in the shadow; but ere the spray whence he had slipt like a rain-drop had ceased its last tremulous vibration he was swinging, with outspread wings, upon a branch of the deserted magnolia. Then came a loud summoning cry, a few low calls, and all at once a burst of ecstatic song. In a few moments all was still around, save for the shrilling of the locusts and the distant croaking of frogs. But suddenly, and in the midst of his love-song, the nightingale ceased, gave a broken, dissonant cry, and with a rapid tilt and poise of his wings was lost in the under-dark like a blown leaf.

Something stirred under the lower boughs of the magnolia. A small, dark figure crept out, and then a boy of some ten or twelve years rose to his feet, stretched himself warily, ran his hands through his shaggy black hair, and began to mutter to himself. All at once he inclined his head and listened intently. Before he could sink back to his shelter, two young men stepped noiselessly from behind the higher olives, the taller of the two coming rapidly forward.

"Do not be afraid, Guido," he exclaimed, as he saw the boy alert for flight; "it is I— Andrea Falcone."

"And he?"

"Marco Vaccaro, of course. Who other, *per Bacco*?"

"You are late, elder-brothers."

"We could not get here earlier, unobserved. There is time enough. What is the message?"

While he was speaking his companion drew near. Both young men were singularly handsome, with clear-cut features, dark, eloquent eyes, and faces pale as blanched ivory. Lithe and vigorous mountaineers, they had all the grace and dignity of the Roman peasant;

and though they had the Campagna melancholy in their faces, each had that alert look common to all the Sabine muleteers. Every one in the Montecelli knew the cousins Andrea Falcone and Marco Vaccaro; and in the hill-town of S. Angelo in Capoccia itself, there was no question as to their pre-eminence in all things that, locally, constituted good fortune. Not only was the story of their deep friendship well known—a friendship so close that one would never go far without the other, to the extent that if a rich *forestiero* wanted one of them as a guide up Subiaco, he would perforce have to engage both—but the gossips of the hill-villages were each and all aware of the love Andrea and Marco bore for Vittoria and Anita, the daughters of Giovan' Antonio Della Porta, the vintner and ex-brigand of that remote and highest hill-town of the Sabines, San Polo de' Cavalieri. Naturally, it was delightful food for these gossips when a feud broke out between the muleteers of San Polo and of Palombara and San Angelo, in consequence of which neither Andrea nor Marco dare set foot in the vicinage of the town—not only because old Della Porta swore that, whether they willed or no, his daughters should marry none but men of pure Sabine blood, and certainly no accurst Roman contadini (for all their hill-folk talk!), but also because a league of San Polo youths and men, headed by Simone Gaetano and Gregorio da Forma, had sworn to poniard any "Angelinis" they found within the village boundaries. It was quite natural that Gregorio da Forma and Gaetano should be the active ministers in this league of hate, for the former was desirous of Anita Della Porta and Simone lusted after the beautiful Vittoria. But both girls were closely watched, and though they had several times managed to meet their lovers in the woods, or amid the copses of the Glen of the Shepherds, such encounters were no longer possible. The girls had, indeed, but one ally, but one emissary—their young half-brother, Guido. Guido loved his sisters; but he had another bond of fellowship—hatred of their morose and tyrannical father. Twice had Vittoria and Anita tried to evade those who kept an eye on them: once by attempted flight to Vicovara and once across Ponte Rotto to Castel Madama—for they had imagined success impossible by

way of Palombara. It was after the last occasion that old Della Porta had publicly proclaimed the approaching marriage of his daughters with Simone Gaetano and Gregorio da Forma.

The Sabine women can be as quick with their long, thin hair-daggers as the Sabine men with their poniards. A girl of the Sabines, moreover, does not hesitate to use her dagger in offence as well as in self-defence; and, when the blood-vow is once sworn, the steel, as the saying is, sweats with thirst.

It was at the risk of their lives, then, that Andrea Falcone and his friend and kinsman, Marco, were met in the Glen of the Shepherds, within an easy eagle's-flight of San Polo. If any muleteer on Sterpara or goatherd on the slopes should see them, the cry would go from coign to coign, and find a score of fierce echoes in the dark narrow streets of the mountain village. As for Guido, he ran the chance of a flaying from his father, or even a knifing from cruel, treacherous Simone or from sullen Gregorio.

"What is the message?" repeated Andrea, impatiently, while Marco eyed the neighbourhood like a hawk, and Guido stood as taut and eager as a goat about to leap.

"There is none, elder-brother. I could not see either Vittoria or Anita. But this is their last night."

"Their last night? How?" interjected Marco, in a startled but suppressed voice.

"The last night of their virginity," said Guido, simply. "To-morrow Vittoria will be wed to Simone and Anita to Gregorio."

A silence fell upon the men: a frost of passion, rather, that seemed to paralyse even gesture or glance.

"Have they been true women?" said Andrea, at last, in a thick, husky voice.

"True women?" repeated Guido, interrogatively, his great black eyes flashing half-inquiringly, half-suspiciously.

"Ay, true women. Have they sworn the virgin-vow?"

"Yes: they swore it last night, and before me as witness. It was in the moonlight, by the old fountain beyond the church."

"Upon both the blade and the hilt?"

"*Si, si, si*: and upon their crucifixes also."

Andrea turned and looked at Marco with a meaning smile.

"*Ecco*, Marco: it will be a wet wedding."

"It will be—and the wet as red as to-night's sunset. But—*per Cristo*, *Andrea mio*, you know the hill-saying: When 'tis wet, who can say there shall be no flood?"

"Ay: so. Their kinsfolk would not hold Vittoria and Anita free of their blood-ban if once they be wedded."

"Giovan' Antonio—Holy Virgin, he would kill them himself for it!"

Suddenly the boy Guido, slipping a rough wooden cross from his neck, stepped close to the young men.

"Will you swear upon it, Andrea Falcone and Marco Vaccaro, that henceforth I am your younger brother: and that your home in San Angelo in Capoccia shall be my home: and your kin my kin: and we be one evermore in the curse and in the blessing? Already you are my elder-brothers, but you have not sworn. Will you swear now?"

"Why, Guido, my brother?"

"For I have that to say which being said makes me no more of my father's household or even of San Polo."

"Thou art my brother for evermore, Guido Della Porta," said Andrea, solemnly, kissing the cross and making the sacred sign upon his forehead and upon his breast.

When Marco had done likewise, Guido looked fearfully around, and then with downcast eyes and trembling hands whispered that he was breaking a solemn vow which he had perforce taken that very day.

"Speak, boy," muttered Marco, hoarsely.

"Fear not," said Andrea, more gently: "Father Gianpietro will absolve thee to-morrow, or as soon as you can come to San Angelo."

"I heard—I heard—my father laughing with Simone Gaetano. When I looked through the chink in the great barn, I saw that Gregorio da Forma was also there, with his hand at his mouth half-covering his black beard. Simone's smooth, fat face was agleam with sweat, and he rubbed his bald forehead again and again, though his eyes narrowed and widened like a cat's in

the twilight. All the time I watched, Simone never ceased to wipe his brows, and never once did Gregorio take away his hand from his mouth."

"The cursed traitor knows his weak member," muttered Marco, savagely. "Aha! Signore Gregorio da Forma. I know that which would bring you to the hangman in Rome, or the knife anywhere where men say *Garibaldi* and *Italia* in one breath!"

"Hush, Marco; don't be a fool! The traitors' death is already arranged by God. The ink which was black is turning red, and the hour is at hand. Guido, say what you have to say."

"*Ecco*, my elder-brothers: I heard this thing. My father at first would have nought to say to comfort Simone and Gregorio when they told him of the rumour that Vittoria and Anita had sworn the virgin-vow against them. But at last Simone, miserly though he be, won him over. He promised him"—

"*Corpo di Cristo*, Guido," broke in Andrea; "never mind *that*. Tell us, quick, what your father agreed to."

"He said that, if he got what he wished, Simone and Gregorio might laugh at the girls' vows, *for he would see that his good friends did not marry virgins.*"

Both Andrea and Marco started, and each instinctively clasped his knife.

"Yes, I swear it. My father, may God forgive him, said that no one should be in the house to-night, after the feast which he is to give is over; and that Simone and Gregorio might take that which would be theirs by law on the morrow. The virgin-vow would thus be made useless as old straw, as void as yesterday's wind. There would be none to interfere. If the girls screamed"—

"*Basto!* Enough!" shouted Andrea, recklessly; while Marco made a low, hissing noise like a wind-eddy upon ice. "Is this thing to be done to-night? Ay, so: I believe you. No, no: I want to hear no more. What does anything else matter. We must be there, too, Marco—if we have to go to our death at the same time!"

"Come: there is no time to lose," was all that Marco replied; though, after a moment's hesitation, he stooped

and whispered in his cousin's ear. Andrea smiled grimly.

"What time was the supper to be, Guido?" he asked.

"As soon as the sun had set. And all are to go to their homes by nine at latest. There is to be a sunrise-Sacrament to-morrow, and every one will be abed early. Vittoria and Anita will not sit long with the men; but go to their room, where my father will doubtless lock them in."

"But you can get into the room by your attic?"

"Ay: and out easily enough by the window overlooking the Vicolo da Pozzo."

"Do your sisters know anything of this?"

"No. Not yet."

"Then, Guido, make your way back as quickly and secretly as you can. Tell Vittoria and Anita all you know. Tell them we are here"——

"And that they are to escape with me by the window and join you in the wood," broke in Guido, with eager anticipation.

"No," said Andrea, quietly; while Marco gave a low laugh. "Tell them to wait in their room till we come. Now, go. And see: make us a sign when we can slip in unperceived by the hole in the wall at the old Piazza del Giove. We can get into your house by the empty palazzo next it. Then you will take us to your sisters' room."

"It may be death for all of us, Andrea."

"Even so. Now go, Guido; and the saints be with you."

The boy hesitated a moment, and then, stooping, leapt from thicket till he was out of sight in the undergrowth.

Andrea and Marco followed slowly, keeping in the shadow as much as possible. They interchanged few words, and then only in whispers. An hour passed thus; during which they reached the upper end of the Glen of the Shepherds and ascended the steep, wooded heights of Monte di San Polo. From where they crouched they could see clearly the black mass of the western side of the village rising sheer, like a smooth cliff of basalt, and without apparent inlet. But they knew where the hole in the ruinous wall was, close by the deserted

Piazza del Giove; and they kept their gaze upon the spot, passionately intent for the signal from Guido.

The great clock in the tower struck the second quarter after eight. The cousins looked at each other, but said nothing for some minutes.

"If Guido should play us false—no, St. Mark forgive me, he won't do that"—muttered Marco, at last—"but if he should have been caught, or even unable to get away alone"—

"*Sst*: look there!"

"Where? What?"

"There. See, it is the second time."

As Andrea spoke, a small circle of flame again swept round the disc of the hole in the wall.

"That is the third time, Marco. It is Guido. Let us go. Remember—everything—our lives—depend upon our discretion. I know the way best. Follow me."

As silently as foxes the twain crept from the last skirt of undergrowth, and up the short stony ascent that led apparently against a blank precipice of stone wall. For a moment, when close, Andrea hesitated, but a low whistle guided him aright; and in a few minutes he and Marco were in San Polo. A few seconds more, and they were in the old deserted house that adjoined the Casa Della Porta.

Again and again the door of Della Porta's house opened, and soon nearly all the guests were gone. At last all had bidden good-night except Simone Gaetano and his friend Gregorio. With a sullen curse, as though half-ashamed of himself, Giovan' Antonio threw a key on the table.

"There, take it, my merry *sposi*. What's the odds! 'Tis but a night here or a night there! But, look you—no undue violence, you know! For myself, I am dead beat with sleep, and don't expect to hear a sound till cock-crow."

With that, and another malediction by way of good-night, the beetle-browed vintner flung himself into a huge rush-chair by the hearth-place. He had begun to snore lustily, when, just as his companions were moving from the room, he called angrily:



"Don't forget to lock and bar the door, you fools! Do you want all San Polo to keep you company?"

Simone stepped forward, and saw to the fastenings. Gregorio filled two tankards with wine, one with white, one with red.

"Here, camerado mio," he whispered, as Simone rejoined him; "here's *vino bianco* for you to drink your Vittoria's health, lovely blonde that she is; and here's my bumper of dark marino to the black hair and black eyes of my beautiful Anita!"

Then, softly and cautiously, like the cowards and marauders they were, they stole upstairs. Each started violently when the silence was suddenly broken by the tower-clock striking the first quarter after nine.

"Aha! the little birds, they will think it is their father," whispered Simone, as Gregorio gently inserted the key in the lock, and noiselessly turned it.

When the door opened, they saw the two beds, as white amidst the gloom as innocent childhood. A new fear came upon them. If one of the girls had laughed, or even screamed, it would have been a relief. Each vaguely realised that he was doubly a coward, for now each was appalled by his own cowardice. When a wavering shaft of moonlight, that had been gilding the stone-carving above the window, stole into the room, a dread came upon them that the girls slept, and had prayed, and that God watched them.

But just then something happened that made Simone's heart leap within him.

The moonbeam, wavering across the bed in the left corner of the room, passed across the face of Vittoria, making her mass of blonde hair like a drift of melted amber. But her eyes were open, and looking straight at him.

"*Vittoria!* It is I—your loving Simone—your husband. Do not be afraid, my little one! I want to kiss you only—for the sake of good luck to-morrow."

Silence, save for a quick breathing that pulsed through the room.

"*Vittoria!*"

"*Anita!*"

Two dark figures moved swiftly forward, Simone to the left, Gregorio to the right.

There was a strange shuffling sound for a moment. Both men stopped abruptly, glanced towards each other, took courage, and moved on again.

"*Vittoria!*"

"*Anita!*"

Then all at once two hoarse screams rang through the room, as Simone and Gregorio simultaneously felt themselves seized in a savage, relentless grip and dragged on to the bed.

"What would'st thou with my wife-to-be, Simone Gaetano?" cried Andrea, as with one arm he pinioned his shivering rival, and with the other pressed a knife against his breast.

"What would'st thou with my bride-elect, Gregorio da Forma?" snarled Marco savagely, as with his left hand he pulled back his foe's head till he could look into the staring eyes, and with his right hand pressed his poniard against his heaving side.

The next moment a suppressed scream, and, almost at the same time, a hoarse choking sob sounded horribly through the room.

It took Andrea and Marco a few minutes only to prop the dead men, one in one bed, one in the other, with their dusky-white faces visible in the gloom, pillowed behind, and as though ready to greet expected incomers.

Egidio Gaetano, riding on his mule down the steep bridle-path of La Scarpellata, from his tavern at high-set San Filippo, with intent to breakfast with his kinsman Simone on the morrow of his marriage, thought he had never seen a lovelier night, a more glorious dawn. Far away, above the Campagna, hung the moon like a vast yellow flower slowly sinking into blue depths. Eastward, beyond Soracte and above the Ciminian Forest, the stars grew paler, with more languid pulsations, or icy steadfastness. In the woodlands straight below the nightingales sang bewilderingly, and in the nearer thickets a maze of fireflies made the dusk starred like a great city by night.

When the sudden fires of day flamed up behind the shoulder of Subiaco, and fell upon the landscape before

him in flowing amber and marvellous flushes, he was so rapt by the great beauty that he did not note, in an ilex grove to his left, four sleeping figures, two here, and two there; Vittoria, white as a windflower, in the arms of Andrea; Anita, dark as a violet, pillowed against the breast of Marco.

A hundred yards further, at the joining of the hill-path from San Polo de' Cavalieri, he came upon a boy, so steadfastly intent in his gaze southward that he heard nothing.

"What news from San Polo, Guido mio?" cried the good Egidio genially. But to his surprise the boy gave him nought save a flash from his dark eyes, and the next moment was up and away, leaping and running like a young goat.

"What takes the young rascal! He's on the way to San Angelo! Ha! Ha! What an idea. Some marriage prank he's up to, I'll be bound. Ah, *Dio mio*, that I was twenty years younger, and in Simone's place! I would'nt even mind being in worthy Signor Gregorio's for that matter! *Cristo*, these lovely Sabine women of ours! No wonder the men came out of Rome and stole them long ago before the good Popes heard about it! Aha, Signori Andrea and Marco, good cousins, brave cavaliers, dauntless knights-errant, where are you now? You may whistle, my lads! No carrying off the Sabine women nowadays, ha, ha!"

The wind, rising from the ferns and leaping through the long grass, blew a foam of white blossoms upon the rider and his mule. High up in the golden sunlight the sweet penetrating flute-notes of the boy-shepherds called blithely from steep to steep.

"God be thanked," exclaimed Egidio as he came in sight of San Polo, still coldly white, like an unopened flower; "God be thanked, though I be old and fat, love is a good thing. Ah, Simone, you rogue! Eh? what, Gregorio?"

JAMES MARAZION.