

Saint Mary's Beacon.

The Story of a Duel.

"Comrades! have ye heard the news? A man hath come forward to answer the challenge of Jacopo, the Swordsman!"

This announcement, made in one of the principal streets of Florence on a fine Summer morning in the latter part of the sixteenth century was quite sufficient to gather an excited crowd around the speaker the instant he uttered it; for Jacopo Belloni [popularly known as Jacopo the Swordsman,] from his deadly skill in fencing was widely renowned as the most formidable prize-fighter in all Italy, although (according to the custom of the times) he fought not with his fist but with his sword.

The redoubtable Jacopo had already killed three or four fencers of renown who had ventured to encounter him, and then, finding that people seemed to be getting rather shy of testing his prowess, he had lately issued a formal challenge to all comers, and had offered to stake a pretty large sum upon the result.

This challenge, however, had already been thrice repeated without anyone appearing particularly anxious to accept it; and therefore, it was no great wonder that the announcement quoted above should have been received with looks and exclamations of doubt, and even of flat disbelief.

"It is impossible Mas! [Tom]. No man living would be so mad!"

"It must be a jest—and a sorry one, too."

"Or else Maso is lying. Confess that thou art lying, according to thy custom, brother Maso, and we will forgive the!"

"Laugh if ye will my friends," said Maso slightly affronted, "but I lie not. It stands writ out in the Market Place, full fair to see, that there is a man ready to meet Jacopo on the seventh morning from today."

"Then there is one more fool in town than I thought," grunted a stout armorer, "and there will be one less soon."

"Who is the man?" He must be a stranger here, or he would know better."

"I can not tell, said Maso; for although his challenge is fairly writ, there is no name signed to it."

"It must needs be a jest," said a sturdy butcher, beside July

"April's faith," cried Maso; "I hath staked one thousand hundred pistoles on the event."

Possible as Maso's news appeared, however, it was speedily and surely confirmed, and the tidings of the expected combat flew abroad like wildfire, kindling a universal excitement. When the day appointed for the fight came, not only all Florence, but all the country round seemed to have gathered to watch the sport, and in the ranks of the spectators were to be seen young nobles from all the greatest families in Northern Italy.

The stage upon which the two champions were to meet was a large platform of smooth planking (thickly strewn with sawdust to keep their feet from slipping) which being full thirty feet in length by at least twenty in breadth, gave ample space for all their movements. At either end of the stage was a smaller platform on which stood a tent of white canvas, and upon these tents all eyes were fixed in eager expectation, for they hid from sight the heroes.

Presently one of the tents was seen to open, and forth stepped the famous Jacopo Belloni himself, bowing condescendingly in acknowledgment of the thundering cheers that greeted his appearance.

The renowned swordsman's tall, active sinewy figure was a perfect model of well-trained agility and strength; but his dark, lean, wolfish face, with its hooked nose, sloping forehead, bristly, black moustache, white teeth and fierce, restless, gray eyes which were turned hungrily upon the opposite tent were unpleasantly suggestive of some ferocious beast of prey.

And now the other tent opened in its turn, and a long cry of astonishment broke from every lip. The man who was about to encounter the dreaded Belloni was seen to be slim, handsome youth, barely twenty years old, so slender in frame, and so smooth and delicate in face, that but for his lofty stature and the silky moustache on his upper lip, he might have been mistaken for a girl.

The bravo shrugged his broad shoulders with a disdainful laugh, and muttered some coarse jest about "whipping the child back to its mother;" but the young man took no heed of him.

Then up rose a fine-looking old man in a richly-embroidered suit of crimson velvet, the Marquis di Scala, who, as warden of the market place, had charge of the day's proceedings. He announced that this young man staked one thousand five hundred pistoles (nearly one thousand three hundred pounds) against one thousand wagered by Jacopo, adding that, as there was no personal enmity between the two combatants, the first wound received by either might fairly end the fight.

But here the young stranger interposed: "Let me entreat your worship," said he with stern emphasis, "not to defeat the sole purpose which could have made me stoop to encounter you cut-throat. It is full time that his murderous hand were stayed from shedding more blood; and, with the help of Heaven, mine shall be the arm to stay it. Ere I leave this spot, he or I shall lie dead."

In the dead hush of universal amazement those clear, stern, menacing tones rang out like the summons of a destroying angel. The spectators stood aghast, and looked at each other in silence; and even the savage Belloni seemed cowed, and the scornful smile faded from his lips, and a faint uneasiness made itself visible for the first time through the swaggering impudence of his look. These signs of wavering did not pass unnoticed by the watching crowd, some of whom taunted him with his changed look; on which, stung to the quick, the bully fiercely shook off his momentary hesitation, and advanced upon his foe with uplifted sword. The latter met him with equal readiness and a deep and solemn hush settled down upon that great multitude as the shining blades were seen to cross.

Belloni pressed furiously forward, his sword flickering like lightning as he dealt thrust after thrust, with a quickness which no eye could follow. He appeared bent upon bearing down his young opponent by sheer strength; but to his own surprise, and that of every one else, he seemed to have met his match at last. Lunge after lunge did he make, with seemingly irresistible force, and again and again did the bystanders draw in their breath as they watched to see the stranger fall; but the thirsty point was always turned aside just as it seemed about to pierce him. Nor did he once break ground, but kept circling round and round his foe, watching for a chance of attacking in turn.

That chance came at last. Jacopo, spent with his own violent exertions, could no longer maintain this exhausting attack. His breath began to fail and his hand to tremble. Then the stranger came forward, and attacked Belloni in his turn, with a light of a sudden and terrible gladness upon his beautiful face, which made the hardiest spectator sadder as they saw it.

Twice Belloni dashed aside the point just as it reached him, but the third time an ominous stain of crimson on his white vest showed that the parry had come all but too late. They closed a third time—there was a quick trampling of feet, a clash of steel, a hoarse choking curse—and the destroyer of so many lives lay dead at the stranger's feet, pierced through the heart.

The momentary pause of silent stupefaction was followed by long continued thunders of applause, while the Marquis di Scala, seemingly much pleased, held out to the conqueror the heavy purse containing the stakes; but the latter, to every one's surprise, waved it haughtily away.

"Money that is stained with blood shall never be touched by my hands," he said, in a tone of such commanding dignity as to impress even the proud old noble to whom he spoke. "Give it to the widows and the orphan children of the mer whom this wretch hath slain."

"And who art thou, fair sir, I pray thee?" asked the marquis, looking at him wonderingly. "I am from Scotland," answered the victorious youth, "and my name is—James Crichton!" "The Admirable Crichton!" shouted the throng, with one voice, hailing the renowned Scot by the title which he had already made famous throughout all Europe.

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