THE BRIGAND'S BRIDE.

Among the Murderous Banditti of Southern Italy.

By LAURENCE OLIPHANT.

The Italian Peninsula during the years 1859-'60-'61 offered a particularly tempting field for adventure to ardent spirits in search of excitement; and, attracted partly by my sympathy with the popular movement, and partly by that simple desire, which gives so much zest to the life of youth, of risking it on all possible occasions, I had taken an active part, chiefly as an officious spectator, in all the principal events of those stirring years. It was in the Spring of 1862 that I found matters beginning to settle down to a degree that threatened monotony; and with the termination of the Winter gaieties at Naples and the close of the San Carlo, I seriously bethought me of accepting the offer of a naval friend who was about to engage in blockade-running, and offered to land me in the Confederate States, when a recrudescence of activity on the part of the brigand bands in Calabria induced me to turn my attention in that direction. The first question I had to consider was, whether I should enjoy myself most by joining the brigands, or the troops which were engaged in suppressing them. As the former aspired to a political character and called themselves patriotic bands fighting for their Church, their country and their King—the refugee monarch of Naples—one could espouse their cause without exactly laying one's self open to the charge of being a bandit; but it was notorious in point of fact that the bands cared for neither the Pope nor the exiled King nor their annexed country, but committed the most abominable atrocities in the names of all the three, for the simple purpose of filling their pockets. I foresaw not only extreme difficulty in being accepted as a member of the fraternity, more especially as I had hitherto been identified with the Garibaldians; but also the probability of finding myself compromised by acts from which my conscience would revolt, and for which my life would in all likelihood pay the forfeit. On the other hand, I could think of no friend among the officers of the Bersaglieri and cavalry regiments, then engaged in brigand-hunting in the Capitanata and Basilicata, to whom I could apply for an invitation to join them.

Under these circumstances, I determined to trust to the chapter of accidents; and armed with a knap-sack, a sketch-book, and an air-gun, took my seat one morning in the Foggia diligence, with the vague idea of getting as near the scene of operations as possible, and seeing what would turn up. The air-gun was not so much a weapon of offence or defence as a means of introduction to the inhabitants: It had the innocent appearance of rather a thick walking-cane, with a little brass trigger projecting; and in the afternoon I would join the group sitting in front of the chemist's, which, for some reason or other, is generally a sort of open-air club in a small Neapolitan town, or stroll into the single modest cafe of which it might possibly boast, and toy abstractedly with the trigger. This, together with my personal appearance—for do what I would, I could never make myself look like a Neapolitan—would be certain to attract attention, and some one bolder than the rest would make himself the spokesman, and politely ask me whether the cane in my hand was an umbrella or a fishing-rod; on which I would amiably reply that it was a gun, and that I should have much pleasure in exhibiting my skill and the method of its operation to the assembled company. Then the whole party would follow me to an open space, and I would call for a pack of cards, and possibly—for I was a good shot in those days—pink the ace of hearts at 15 paces. At any rate, my performances usually called forth plaudits, and this involved a further interchange of compliments and explanations, and the production of my sketch-book, which soon procured me the acquaintance of some ladies, and an invitation as an English artist to the house of some respectable citizen.

So it happened that, getting out of the diligence before it reached Foggia, I struck south, and wandered for some days from one little town to another, being always hospitably entertained, whether there happened to be an albergo or not, at private houses, seeing in this way more of the manners and customs of the inhabitants than would have been otherwise possible, gaining much information as to the haunts of the brigands, the whereabouts of the troops, and hearing much local gossip generally. The ignorance of the most respectable classes at this period was astounding; it has doubtless all changed since. I have been at a town of 2,000 inhabitants, not one of whom took a newspaper; the whole population, therefore, was in as profound ignorance of what was happening in the rest of the world as if they had been in Novaia Zemlia. I have stayed with a Mayor who did not know that England was an island; I have been the guest of a citizen who had never heard of Scotland, and to whom, therefore, my nationality was an enigma; but I never met any one—I mean of this same class—who had not heard of Palmerston. He was a mysterious personage, execrated by the "blacks" and adored by the "reds." And I shone with a reflected luster as the citizen of a country of which he was the Prime Minister. As a consequence, we had political discussions, which were protracted far into the night, for the principal meal of the 24 hours was a 10 o'clock p. m. supper, at which, after the inevitable macaroni, were many unwholesome dishes, such as salads made of thistles, cows' udders, and other delicacies, which deprived one of all desire for sleep. Notwithstanding which, we rose early, my hostess and the ladies of the establishment appearing in the early part of the day in the most extreme dishabille. Indeed, on one occasion when I was first introduced into the family of a respectable citizen, and shown into my bedroom, I mistook one of two females who were making the bed for the servant, and was surprised to see her hand a little douceur I gave her as an earnest of attention on her part, to the other with a smile. She soon afterwards went to bed; we all did, from 11 a. m. till about 3 p. m., at which hour I was horrified to meet her arrayed in silks and satins, and to find that she was the wife of my host. She kindly took me a drive with her in a carriage and pair, and with a coachman in livery.

It was by this simple means, and by thus imposing myself upon the hospitality of these unsophisticated people, that I worked my way by slow degrees, chiefly on foot, into the part of the country I desired to visit; and I trust that I in a measure repaid them for it by the stores of information which I imparted to them, and of which they stood much in need, and by little sketches of their homes and the surrounding scenery, with which I presented them. I was, indeed, dependent in some measure for hospitality of this description, as I had taken no money with me, partly because, to tell the truth, I had scarcely got any, and partly because I was afraid of being robbed by brigands of the little I had. I therefore eschewed the character of a milordo Inglese; but I never succeeded in dispelling all suspicion that I might not be a nephew of the Queen, or at least a very near relative of "Palmerston" in disguise. It was so natural, seeing what a deep interest both her Majesty and the Prime Minister took in Italy, that they should send some one incognito whom they could trust to tell them all about it.

Meantime, I was not surprised, when I came to know the disposition of the inhabitants, at the success of brigandage. It has never been my fortune before or since to live among such a timid population. One day at a large town a leading landed proprietor received notice that if he did not pay a certain sum in black-mail—I forget at this distance of time the exact amount—his farm or masseria would be robbed. This farm which was in fact a handsome country-house, was distant about 10 miles from the town. He therefore made an appeal to the citizens that they should arm themselves, and help him to defend his property, as he had determined not to pay, and had taken steps to be informed as to the exact date when the attack was to be made in default of payment. More than 300 citizens enrolled themselves as willing to turn out in arms. On the day preceding the attack by the brigands, a rendezvous was given to these 300 on the great square for 5 o'clock in the morning, and thither I accordingly repaired, unable, however, to induce my host to accompany me, although he had signed as a volunteer. On reaching the rendezvous, I found the landed proprietor and a friend who was living with him, and about 10 minutes afterward two other volunteers strolled up. Five was all we could muster out of 300. It was manifestly useless to attempt anything with so small a force, and no arguments could induce any of the others to turn out; so the unhappy gentleman had the satisfaction of knowing that the brigands had punctually pillaged his place, carrying off all his live stock on the very day and at the very hour they said they would. As for the inhabitants venturing any distance from town, except under military escort, such a thing was unknown, and all communication with Naples was for some time virtually intercepted. I was regarded as a sort of monomaniac of recklessness, because I ventured on a solitary walk of a mile or two in search of a sketch, an act of no great audacity on my part, for I had walked through various parts of the country without seeing a brigand, and found it difficult to realize that there was any actual danger in strolling a mile from a moderately large town.

Emboldened by impunity, I was tempted one day to follow up a most romantic glen in search of a sketch, when I came upon a remarkably handsome peasant girl, driving a donkey before her loaded with wood. My sudden appearance on the narrow path made the animal shy against a projecting piece of rock, off which he rebounded to the edge of the path, which, giving way, precipitated him and his load down the ravine. He was brought up unhurt against a bush some 20 feet below, the fagots of wood being scattered in his descent in all directions. For a moment the girl's large, fierce eyes flashed upon me with anger; but the impetuosity with which I went headlong after the donkey, with a view of repairing my error, and the absurd attempts I made to reverse the position of his feet, which were in the air, converted her indignation into a hearty fit of laughter, as, seeing that the animal was apparently uninjured, she scrambled down to my assistance. By our united efforts we at last succeeded in hoisting the donkey up to the path, and then I collected the wood and helped her to load it again—an operation which involved a frequent meeting of hands, and of the eyes, which had now lost the ferocity that had startled me at first, and seemed getting more soft and beaming every time I glanced at them, till at last, producing my sketch-book, I ventured to remark, "Ah, signorina, what a picture you would make! Now that the ass is loaded, let me draw you before we part, that I may carry away the recollection of the loveliest woman I have seen."

"First draw the donkey," she replied, "that I may carry away a recollection of the galantuomo who first upset him over the bank, and then helped me to load him."

Smiling at this ambiguous compliment, I gave her the sketch she desired, and was about to claim my reward, when she abruptly remarked:

"There is not time now; it is getting late, and I must not linger, as I still have an hour to go before reaching home. How is it that you are not afraid to be wandering in this solitary glen by yourself? Do you not know the risks?"

"I have heard of them, but I do not believe in them," I said; "besides I should be poor plunder for robbers."

"But you have friends, who would pay to ransom you, I suppose, if you were captured?"

"My life is not worth a hundred scudi to any of them," I replied, laughing; "but I am willing to forego the pleasure of drawing you now, bellissima, if you will tell me where you live, and let me come there and paint you at my leisure."

"You're a brave one," she said, with a little laugh; "there is not another man in all Ascoli who would dare to pay me a visit without an escort of 20 soldiers. But I am too grateful for your amiability to let you run such a risk. Addio, Signor Inglese. There are many reasons why I can't let you draw my picture, but I am not ungrateful, see!"—and she offered me her cheek, on which I instantly imprinted a chaste and fraternal salute.

"Don't think that you've seen the last of me, carissima," I called out, as she turned away. "I shall live on the memory of that kiss till I have an opportunity of repeating it."

And as I watched her retreating figure with an artist's eye, I was struck with its grace and suppleness, combined, as I had observed while she was helping me to load the donkey, with an unusual degree of muscular strength for a woman.

The spot at which this episode had taken place was so romantic, that I determined to make a sketch of it, and the shades of evening were closing in so fast that they warned me to hurry if I would reach the town before dark. I had just finished it and was stooping to pick up my air-gun, when I heard a sudden rush, and before I had time to look up, I was thrown violently forward on my face, and found myself struggling in the embrace of a powerful grasp, from which I had nearly succeeded in freeing myself, when the arms which were clasping me were reinforced by several more pairs, and I felt a rope being passed round my body.

"All right, signors!" I exclaimed. "I yield to superior numbers. You need not pull so hard; let me get up, and I promise to go with you quietly."

And by this time I had turned sufficiently on my back to see that four men were engaged in tying me up.

"Tie his elbows together, and let him get up," said one; "he is not armed. Here, Guiseppe, carry his stick and paint-box, while I feel his pockets. Corpo di Baccho! twelve bajocchi," he exclaimed, producing these copper coins with an air of profound disgust. "It is to be hoped he is worth more to his friends. Now, young man, trudge, and remember that the first sign you make of attempting to run away, means four bullets through you."

As I did not anticipate any real danger, and as a prolonged detention was a matter of no consequence to a man without an occupation, I stepped forward with a light heart, rather pleased than otherwise with anticipations of the brigand's cave, and turning over in my mind whether or not I should propose to join the band.

We had walked an hour, and it had become dark, when we turned off the road, up a narrow path that led between rocky sides to a glade, at the extremity of which, under an overhanging ledge, was a small cottage, with what seemed to be a patch of garden in front.

"FIRST DRAW THE DONKEY," SHE REPLIED.

"Ho! Anita!" called out the man who appeared to be the leader of the band; "open! We have brought a friend to supper, who will require a night's lodgings."

An old woman with a light appeared, and over her shoulder, to my delight, I saw the face I had asked to be allowed to paint so shortly before. I was about to recognize her with an exclamation, when I saw a hurried motion of her finger to her lip, which looked a natural gesture to the casual observer, but which I construed into a sign of prudence.

"Where did you pick him up, Croppo?" she asked carelessly. "He ought to be worth something."

"Just 12 bajocchi," he answered with a sneering laugh. "Come, amico mio, you will have to give us the names of some of your friends."

"I am tolerably intimate with his Holiness the Pope, and I have a bowing acquaintance with the King of Naples, whom may God speedily restore to his own," I replied in a light and airy fashion, which seemed exceedingly to exasperate the man called Croppo.

"Oh, yes, we know all about that; we never catch a man who does not profess to be a Nero of the deepest dye in order to conciliate our sympathies. It is just as well that you should understand, my friend, that all are fish who come into our net. The money of the Pope's friends is quite as good as the money of Garibaldi's. You need not hope to put us off with your Italian friends of any color; what we want is English gold—good solid English gold, and plenty of it."

"Ah," said I, with a laugh, "if you did but know, my friend, how long I have wanted it, too. If you could only suggest an Englishman who would pay you for my life, I would write to him immediately, and we would go halves in the ransom. Hold!" I said, a bright idea suddenly striking me; "suppose I were to write to my Government—how would that do?"

Croppo was evidently puzzled; my cheerful and unembarrassed manned apparently perplexed him. He had a suspicion that I was even capable of making a fool of him, and yet that proposition about the Government rather staggered him. There might be something in it.

"Don't you think," he remarked grimly, "it would add to the effect of your communication if you were to inclose your own ears in your letter? I can easily supply them; and if you are not a little more guarded in your speech, you may possibly have to add your tongue."

"It would not have the slightest effect," I replied, paying no heed to his threat; "you don't know Palmerston as I do. If you wish to get anything out of him you must be excessively civil. What does he care about my ears?" And I laughed with such scornful contempt that Croppo this time felt that he had made a fool of himself; and I observed the lovely girl behind, while the corners of her mouth twitched with suppressed laughter, make a sign of caution.

"Per Dio!" he exclaimed, jumping up with fury, "understand, Signor Inglese, that Croppo is not to be trifled with. I have a summary way of treating disrespect," and he drew a long and exceedingly sharp-looking two-edged knife.

"So you would kill the goose"—and I certainly am a goose, I reflected—"that may lay a golden egg." But my allusion was lost upon him, and I saw my charmer touch her forehead significantly, as though to imply to Croppo that I was weak in the upper story.

"An imbecile without friends and twelve bajocchi in his pocket," he muttered savagely. "Perhaps the night without food will restore his senses. "Come, fool!" and he roughly pushed me into a dark little chamber adjoining. "Here, Valeria, hold the light."

So Valeria was the name of the heroine of the donkey episode. As she held a small oil-lamp aloft, I perceived that the room in which I was to spend the night had more the appearance of a cellar than a chamber; it had been excavated on two sides from the bank, on the third there was a small hole about six inches square, apparently communicating with another room, and on the fourth was the door by which I had entered, and which opened into the kitchen and general living-room of the inhabitants. There was a heap of onions running to seed, the fagots of firewood which Valeria had brought that afternoon, and with an old cask or two.

"Won't you give him some kind of a bed?" she asked Croppo.

"Bah! he can sleep on the onions," responded that worthy. "If he had been more civil and intelligent he should have had something to eat. You three," he went on, turning to the other men, "sleep in the kitchen, and watch that the prisoner does not escape. The door has a strong bolt besides. Come, Valeria."

And the pair disappeared, leaving me in a dense gloom, strongly pervaded by an odor of fungus and decaying onions. Groping into one of the casks, I found some straw, and spreading it on a piece of plank, I prepared to pass the night sitting with my back to the driest piece of wall I could find, which happened to be immediately under the air-hole, a fortunate circumstance, as the closeness was often stifling. I had probably been dozing for some time in a sitting position, when I felt something tickle the top of my head. The idea that it might be a large spider caused me to start, when stretching up my hand, it came in contact with what seemed to be a rag, which I had not observed. Getting carefully up, I perceived a faint light gleaming through the aperture, and then saw that a hand was protruded through it, apparently waving the rag. As I felt instinctively that the hand was Valeria's, I seized the finger-tips, which was all I could get hold of, and pressed them to my lips. They were quickly drawn away, and then the whisper reached my ears—

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Then eat this," and she passed me a tin pannikin full of cold macaroni, which would just go through the opening.

"Dear Valeria," I said, with my mouth full, "how good and thoughtful you are!"

"Hush! he'll hear."

"Who?"

"Croppo."

"Where is he?"

"Asleep in the bed just behind me."

"How do you come to be in his bedroom?"

"Because I'm his wife."

"Oh!" A long pause, during which I collapsed upon my straw seat, and swallowed macaroni thoughtfully. As the result of my meditations—"Valeria, carissima."

"Hush! Yes."

"Can't you get me out of this infernal den?"

"Perhaps, if they all three sleep in the kitchen; at present one is awake. Watch for my signal, and if they all three sleep, I will manage to slip the bolt. Then you must give me time to get back into bed, and when you hear me snore you may make the attempt. They are all three sleeping on the floor, so be very careful where you tread; I will also leave the front door a little open, so that you can slip through without noise."

"Dearest Valeria!"

"Hush! Yes."

"Hand me that cane—it is my fishing-rod, you know—through this hole; you can leave the sketch-book and paint-box under the tree that the donkey fell against—I will call for them some day soon. And, Valeria, don't you think we could make our lips meet through this beastly hole?"

"Impossible. There's my hand; heavens! Croppo would murder me if he knew. Now keep quiet till I give the signal. Oh, do let go my hand!"

"Remember, Valeria, bellissima, carissima, whatever happens, that I love you."

But I don't think she heard this, and I went and sat on the onions because I could see the hole better, and the smell of them kept me awake.

It was at least two hours after this that the faint light appeared at the hole in the wall, and a hand was pushed through. I rushed at the finger-tips.

"Here's your fishing-rod," she said when I had released them, and she had passed me my air-gun. "Now be very careful how you tread. There is one asleep across the door, but you can open it about two feet. Then step over him; then make for a gleam of moonlight that comes through the crack of the front door, open it very gently and slip out. Addio, caro Inglese; mind you wait till you hear me snoring."

Then she lingered, and I heard a sigh.

"What is it, sweet Valeria?" and I covered her hand with kisses.

"I wish Croppo had blue eyes like you."

This was murmured so softly that I may have been mistaken, but I'm nearly sure that was what she said; then she drew softly away, and two minutes afterwards I heard her snoring. As the first sound issued from her lovely nostrils, I stealthily approached the door, gently pushed it open; stealthily stepped over a space which I trusted cleared the recumbent figure that I could not see; cleared him; stole gently on for the streak of moonlight; trod square on something that seemed like an outstretched hand, for it gave under my pressure and produced a yell; felt that I must now rush for my life; dashed the door open, and down the path with four yelling ruffians at my heels. I was a pretty good runner, but the moon was behind a cloud, and the way was rocky,—moreover, there must have been a short cut I did not know, for one of my pursuers gained upon me with unaccountable rapidity—he appeared suddenly within 10 yards of my heels. The others were at least 100 yards behind. I had nothing for it but to turn round, let him almost run against the muzzle of my air-gun, pull the trigger, and see him fall in his tracks. It was the work of a second, but it checked my pursuers. They had heard no noise, but they found something that they did not bargain for, and lingered a moment, then they took up the chase with redoubled fury. But I had too good a start; and where the path joined the main road, instead of turning down towards the town, as they expected I would, I dodged round in the opposite direction, the uncertain light this time favoring me, and I heard their footsteps and their curses dying away on the wrong track. Nevertheless I ran on at full speed, and it was not till the day was dawning that I began to feel safe and relax my efforts. The sun had been up an hour when I reached a small town, and the little locanda was just opening for the day when I entered it, thankful for a hot cup of coffee, and a dirty little room, with a dirtier bed, where I could sleep off the fatigue and excitement of the night. I was strolling down almost the only street in the afternoon when I met a couple of carabineers riding into it, and shortly after encountered the whole troop, to my great delight, in command of an intimate friend whom I had left a month before in Naples.

"Ah, caro mio!" he exclaimed, when he saw me, "well met. What on earth are you doing here?—looking for those brigands you were so anxious to find when you left Naples? Considering that you are in the heart of their country, you should not have much difficulty in gratifying your curiosity."

"I have had an adventure or two," I replied carelessly. "Indeed that is partly the reason you find me here. I was just thinking how I could get safely back to Ascoli, when your welcome escort appeared; for I suppose you are going there, and will let me take advantage of it."

"Only too delighted; and you can tell me your adventures. Let us dine together tonight, and I will find you a horse to ride on with us in the morning."

I am afraid my account of the episode with which I have acquainted the reader was not strictly accurate in all its details, as I did not wish to bring down my military friends on poor Valeria, so I skipped all allusion to her and my detention in her home; merely saying that I had had a scuffle with brigands, and had been fortunate enough to escape under cover of the night. As we passed it next morning I recognized the path which led up to Valeria's cottage, and shortly after observed that young woman herself coming up the glen.

"Holloa!" I said, with great presence of mind as she drew near, "my lovely model, I declare! Just you ride on, old fellow, while I stop and ask her when she can come and sit to me again."

"You artists are sad rogues—what chances your profession must give you!" remarked my companion, as he cast an admiring glance on Valeria, and rode discreetly on.

"There is nothing to be afraid of, lovely Valeria," I said in a low tone, as I lingered behind; "be sure I will never betray either you or your rascally—hem! I mean your excellent Croppo. By the way, was that man much hurt that I was obliged to trip up?"

"Hurt! Santa Maria, he is dead, with a bullet through his heart. Croppo says it must have been magic; for he had searched you, and he knew you were not armed, and he was within 100 yards of you when poor Pippo fell, and he heard no sound."

"Croppo is not far wrong," I said, glad of the opportunity thus offered of imposing on the ignorance and credulity of the natives. "He seemed surprised that he could not frighten me the other night. Tell him he was much more in my power than I was in his, dear Valeria," I added, looking tenderly into her eyes. "I didn't want to alarm you, that was the reason I let him off so easily; but I may not be so merciful next time. Now, sweetest, that kiss you owe me, and which the wall prevented your giving me the other night." She held up her face with the innocence of a child, as I stooped from my saddle.

"I shall never see you again, Signor Inglese," she said, with a sigh; "for Croppo says it is not safe, after what happened the night before last, to stay another hour. Indeed he went off yesterday, leaving me orders to follow to-day; but I went first to put your sketch-book under the bush where the donkey fell, and where you will find it."

It took us another minute or two to part after this; and when I had ridden away I turned to look back, and there was Valeria gazing after me. "Positively," I reflected, "I am over head and ears in love with the girl, and I believe she is with me. I ought to have nipped my feelings in the bud when she told me she was his wife; but then he is a brigand, who threatened both my ears and my tongue, to say nothing of my life. To what extent is the domestic happiness of such a ruffian to be respected?" and I went on splitting the moral straws suggested by this train of thought, until I had recovered my sketch-book and overtaken my escort, with whom I rode triumphantly back into Ascoli, where my absence had been the cause of much anxiety, and my fate was even then being eagerly discussed. My friends with whom I usually sat around the chemist's door, were much exercised by the reserve which I manifested in reply to the fire of cross-examination to which I was subjected for the next few days; and English eccentricity, which was proverbial even in this secluded town, received a fresh illustration in the light and airy manner with which I treated a capture and escape from brigands, which I regarded with such indifference that I could not be induced even to condescend to details. "It was a mere scuffle; there were only four; and, being an Englishman, I polished them all off with the 'box,'"—and I closed my fist, and struck a scientific attitude of self-defence, branching off into a learned disquisition on the pugilistic art, which filled my hearers with respect and amazement. From this time forward the sentiment with which I regarded my air-gun underwent a change. When a friend had made me a present of it a year before, I regarded it in the light of a toy, and rather resented the gift as too juvenile. I wonder he did not give me a kite or a hoop, I mentally reflected. Then I had found it useful among Italians, who are a trifling people, and like playthings; but now that it had saved my life, and sent a bullet through a man's heart, I no longer entertained the same feeling of contempt for it. Not again would I make light of it—this potent engine of destruction which had procured me the character of being a magician. I would hide it from human gaze, and cherish it as a sort of fetish. So I bought a walking stick and umbrella, and strapped it up with them, wrapped in my plaid; and when shortly after, an unexpected remittance from an aunt supplied me with money enough to buy a horse from one of the officers of my friend's regiment, which soon after arrived, I accepted their invitation to accompany them on their brigand-hunting expeditions; not one of them knew that I had such a weapon as an air-gun in my possession.

Our modus operandi on these occasions was as follows: On receiving information from some proprietor that the brigands were threatening his property—it was impossible to get intelligence from the peasantry, for they were all in league with the brigands; indeed they all took a holiday from regular work, and joined a band for a few weeks from time to time—we proceeded, with a force sufficiently strong to cope with the supposed strength of the band, to the farm in question. The bands were all mounted, and averaged from 200 to 400 men each. It was calculated that upwards of 2,000 men were thus engaged in harrying the country, and this enabled the Neri to talk of the King's forces engaged in legitimate warfare against those of Victor Emmanuel. Riding over the vast plains of the Capitanata, we would discern against the sky-outline the figure of a solitary horseman. This we knew to be a picket. Then there was no time to be lost, and away we would go for him helter-skelter across the plain; he would instantly gallop in on the main body, probably occupying a masseria. If they thought they were strong enough, they would show fight. If not, they would take to their heels in the direction of the mountains, with us in full cry after them. If they were hardly pressed they would scatter, and we were obliged to do the same, and the result would be that the swiftest horsemen might possibly effect a few captures. It was an exciting species of warfare, partaking a good deal more of the character of a hunting-field than of cavalry skirmishing. Sometimes, where the ground was hilly, we had Bersaglieri with us; and as the brigands took to the mountains, the warfare assumed a different character. Sometimes, in default of these active little troops, we took local volunteers, whom we found a very poor substitute. On more than one occasion when we came upon the brigands in a farm, they thought themselves sufficiently strong to hold it against us, and once the cowardice of the volunteers was amusingly illustrated. The band was estimated at about 200, and we had 100 volunteers and a detachment of 50 cavalry. On coming under the fire of the brigands, the cavalry Captain, who was in command, ordered the volunteers to charge, intending when they had dislodged the enemy to ride him down on the open; but the volunteer officer did not repeat the word, and stood stock-still, his men all imitating his example.

"Charge! I say," shouted the cavalry Captain; "why don't you charge? I believe you're afraid!"

"E vero," said the Captain of volunteers, shrugging his shoulders.

"Here, take my horse—you're only fit to be a groom; and you, men, dismount, and let these cowards hold your horses, while you follow me"—and jumping from his horse, the gallant fellow, followed by his men, charged the building, from which a hot fire was playing upon them, sword in hand. In less than a quarter of an hour the brigands were scampering, some on foot and some on horseback, out of the farm-buildings, followed by a few and harmless shots from such of the volunteers as had their hands free. We lost three men killed and five wounded in this little skirmish, and killed six of the brigands, besides making a dozen prisoners. When I say we, I mean my companions; for having no weapon, I had discreetly remained with the volunteers. The scene of this gallant exploit was on the classic battlefield of Cannae. This Captain, who was not the friend I had joined the day after my brigand adventure, was a most plucky and dashing cavalry officer, and was well seconded by his men, who were all Piedmontese, and of very different temperament from the Neapolitans. On one occasion a band of 250 brigands waited for us on the top of a small hill, never dreaming that we should charge up it with the odds five to one against us—but we did; and after firing a volley at us, which emptied a couple of saddles, they broke and fled when we were about 20 yards from them. Then began one of the most exciting scurries across country it was ever my fortune to be engaged in. The brigands scattered—so did we; and I found myself with two troopers in chase of a pair of bandits, one of whom seemed to be the Chief of the band. A small stream wound through the plain, which we dashed across. Just beyond was a tributary ditch, which would have been considered a fair jump in the hunting field; both brigands took it in splendid style. The hindmost was not 10 yards ahead of the leading trooper, who came a cropper, on which the brigand reined up, fired a pistol-shot into the prostrate horse and man and was off; but the delay cost him dear. The other trooper, who was a little ahead of me, got safely over. I followed suit. In another moment he had fired his carbine into the brigand's horse, and down they both came by the run. We instantly reined up, for I saw there was no chance of overtaking the remaining brigand, and the trooper was in the act of cutting down the man as he struggled to his feet, when to my horror I recognized the lovely features of—Valeria.

"Stay, man!" I shouted, throwing myself from my horse; "it's a woman! touch her if you dare!" and then seeing the man's eye gleam with indignation, I added, "Brave soldiers, such as you have proved yourself to be, do not kill women; though your traducers say you do, do not give them cause to speak truth. I will be responsible for this woman's safety. Here, to make it sure, you had better strap us together." I piqued myself exceedingly on this happy inspiration, whereby I secured an arm-in-arm walk, of a peculiar kind, it is true, with Valeria, and indeed my readiness to sacrifice myself seemed rather to astonish the soldier, who hesitated. However, his comrade, whose horse had been shot in the ditch, now came up, and seconded my proposal, as I offered him a mount on mine.

"How on earth am I to let you escape, dear Valeria?" I whispered, giving her a sort of affectionate nudge; the position of our arms prevented my squeezing hers, as I could have wished, and the two troopers kept behind us, watching us, I thought, suspiciously.

"It is quite impossible now—don't attempt it," she answered; "perhaps there may be an opportunity later."

"Was that Croppo who got away?" I asked.

"Yes. He could not get his cowardly men to stand on that hill."

"What a bother those men are behind, dearest! Let me pretend to scratch my nose with this hand that is tied to yours, which I can thus bring to my lips."

I accomplished this manuver rather neatly, but parties now came straggling in from other directions, and I was obliged to give up whispering and become circumspect. They all seemed rather astonished at our group, and the Captain laughed heartily as he rode up and called out, "Who have you got tied to you there, caro mio?"

"Croppo's wife. I had her tied to me for fear she should escape; besides, she is not bad-looking."

"What a prize!" he exclaimed. "We have made a tolerable haul this time—20 prisoners in all—among them the priest of the band. Our Colonel has just arrived, so I am in luck—he will be delighted. See, the prisoners are being brought up to him now; but you had better remount and present yours in a less singular fashion."

When we reached the Colonel we found him examining the priest. His breviary contained various interesting notes, written on some of the fly-leaves. For instance:

"Administered extreme unction to A——, shot by Croppo's orders; my share 10 scudi.

"Ditto, ditto, to R——, hung by Croppo's order; my share two scudi.

"Ditto, ditto, to S——, roasted by Croppo's order, to make him name an agent to bring his ransom; overdone by mistake, and died—so got nothing.

"Ditto, ditto, to P——, executed by the knife by Croppo's order, for disobedience.

"M—— and F——, and D——, three new members, joined today; confessed them, and received the usual fees."

He was a dark, beetle-browed-looking ruffian, this holy man; and the Colonel, when he had finished examining his book of prayer and crime, tossed it to me, saying, "There! that will show your friends in England the kind of politicians we make war against. Ha! what have we here? This is more serious." And he unfolded a piece of paper which had been concealed in the breast of the priest. "This contains a little valuable information," he added, with a grim smile. "Nobody like priests and women for carrying about political secrets, so you may have made a valuable capture," and he turned to where I stood with Valeria; "let her be carefully searched."

Now the Colonel was a very pompous man, and the document he had just discovered on the priest added to his sense of self-importance. When, therefore, a large, carefully-folded paper was produced from the neighborhood of Valeria's lovely bosom, his eyes sparkled with anticipation. "Ho, ho!" he exclaimed, as he clutched it eagerly, "the plot is thickening!" and he spread out triumphantly, before he had himself seen what it was, the exquisitely-drawn portrait of a donkey. There was a suppressed titter, which exploded into a shout when the bystanders looked into the Colonel's indignant face. I only was affected differently, as my gaze fell upon this touching evidence of dear Valeria's love for me, and I glanced at her tenderly. "This has a deeper significance than you think for," said the Colonel, looking round angrily. "Croppo's wife does not carefully secrete a drawing like that on her person for nothing. See, it is done by no common artist. It means something, and must be preserved."

"It may have a Biblical reference to the state of Italy. You remember Issachar was likened to an ass between two burdens. In that case it probably emanated from Rome," I remarked; but nobody seemed to see the point of the allusion, and the observation fell flat.

That night I dined with the Colonel, and after dinner I persuaded him to let me visit Valeria in prison, as I wished to take the portrait of the wife of the celebrated brigand Chief. I thanked my stars that my friend who had seen her when we met in the glen was away on duty with his detachment, and could not testify to our former acquaintance.

My meeting with Valeria on this occasion was too touching and full of tender passages to be of any general interest. Valeria told me that she was still a bride; that she had only been married a few months and that she had been compelled to become Croppo's wife against her choice, as the brigand's will was too powerful to be resisted; but that, though he was jealous and attached to her, he was stern and cruel, and so far from winning her love since her marriage, he had rather estranged it by his fits of passion and ferocity. As may be imagined, the portrait, which was really very successful, took some time in execution, the more especially as we had to discuss the possibilities of Valeria's escape.

"We are going to be transferred tomorrow to the prison at Foggia," she said. "If, while we were passing through the market-place, a disturbance of some sort could be created, as it is market-day, and all the country people know me, and are my friends, a rescue might be attempted. I know how to arrange for that, only they must see some chance of success."

A bright thought suddenly struck me; it was suggested by a trick I had played shortly after my arrival in Italy.

"You know I am something of a magician, Valeria; you have had proof of that. If I create a disturbance by magic tomorrow, when you are passing through the market-place, you won't stay to wonder what is the cause of the confusion, but instantly take advantage of it to escape."

"Trust me for that, caro mio."

"And if you escape, when shall we meet again?"

"I am known too well now to risk another meeting. I shall be in hiding with Croppo, where it will be impossible for you to find me, nor while he lives could I ever dare to think of leaving him; but I shall never forget you"—and she pressed my hands to her lips—"though I shall no longer have the picture of the donkey to remember you by."

"See, here's my photograph; that will be better," said I, feeling a little annoyed—foolishly, I admit. Then we strained each other to our respective hearts, and parted. Now it so happened that my room in the locanda in which I was lodging overlooked the market-place. Here at 10 o'clock in the morning I posted myself—for that was the hour, as I had been careful to ascertain, when the prisoners were to start for Foggia. I opened the window about three inches, and fixed it there; I took out my gun, put eight balls in it, and looked down upon the square. It was crowded with the country people in their bright-colored costumes, chaffering over their produce. I looked above them to the tall campanile of the church which filled one side of the square. I receded a step and adjusted my gun on the ledge of the window to my entire satisfaction. I then looked down the street in which the prison was situated, and which debouched on the square and waited events. At 10 minutes past 10 I saw the soldiers at the door of the prison form up, and then I knew that the 20 prisoners of whom they formed the escort were starting; but the moment they began to move, I fired at the big bell in the campanile, which responded with a loud clang. All the people in the square looked up. As the prisoners entered the square, which they had to cross in its whole breadth, I fired again and again. The bell banged twice, and the people began to buzz about. Now, I thought, I must let the old bell have it. By the time five more balls had struck the bell with a resounding din, the whole square was in commotion. A miracle was evidently in progress, or the campanile was bewitched. People began to run hither and thither; all the soldiers forming the escort gaped open-mouthed at the steeple as the clangor continued. As soon as the last shot had been fired, I looked down into the square and saw all this, and I saw that the prisoners were attempting to escape, and in more than one instance had succeeded, for the soldiers began to scatter in pursuit, and the country people to form themselves into impeding crowds, as though by accident, but nowhere could I see Valeria. When I was quite sure she had escaped, I went down and joined the crowd. I saw three prisoners captured and brought back; and when I asked the officer in command how many had escaped, he said three—Croppo's wife, the priest, and another.

When I met my cavalry friends at dinner that evening, it was amusing to hear them speculate upon the remarkable occurrence which had, in fact, upset the wits of the whole town. Priests and vergers and sacristans had visited the campanile, and one of them had brought away a flattened piece of lead, which looked as if it might have been a bullet; but the suggestion that eight bullets could have hit the bell in succession without anybody hearing a shot, was treated with ridicule. I believe the bell was subsequently exorcised with holy water. I was afraid to remain with the regiment with my air gun after this, lest some one should discover it, and unravel the mystery; besides, I felt a sort of traitor to the brave friends who had so generously offered me their hospitality, so I invented urgent private affairs, which demanded my immediate return to Naples, and on the morning of my departure found myself embraced by all the officers of the regiment, from the Colonel downwards, who, in the fervor of their kisses, thrust 16 waxed moustache-points against my cheeks.

About 18 months after this, I heard of the capture and execution of Croppo, and I knew that Valeria was free; but I had unexpectedly inherited a property, and was engaged to be married. I am now a country gentleman with a large family. My sanctum is stocked with various mementoes of my youthful adventures, but none awakens in me such thrilling memories as are excited by the breviary of the brigand priest, and the portrait of the brigand's bride.

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