

BEL DEMONIO

PROLOGUE

I.

Spoletto, an ancient and noble city, is located several leagues from the Apennines and the northern Abruzzo. A branch of the Nera, a small river which has its source in the mountain, enlivens it with the peaceful beauty of its tree-shaded banks, and affords it that freshness which is so important in southern climates.

Towards the middle of the seventeenth century, a period of wars, conspiracies, and gallant adventures, Spoleto had quite a different atmosphere from what it has now. Some days, it was filled with soldiers and mercenaries reminiscent of the black bands of the Medici and Suffolk.¹ At other times, jugglers and their ilk, great nobles, and artists of all sorts, filled its streets,— when the feudal Count, a man of ripe age, whose character was a mixture of the somber and the fantastic, felt an inclination to be joyous, and gave *fêtes* at his little court.

The Count was a Vitelli from the Neapolitan branch, and the Vitellis were, at that time, powerful lords. They were related to the Princes of Mantua, and were cousins of the Mocade d'Avalo, with whom Urban Vitelli had disputed the Marquisate of Peschiera. It well known that, twice in that century, the Avalos possessed the vice-royalty of Naples.

Ercole Vitelli, Count of Spoleto, called himself, in public documents, Prince of Monteleone and Lord of Ascoli, and was one of the richest nobles in Italy.

He dwelt in Umbria, far from his twenty palaces in the Abruzzi, and his rich estates in Naples. This was because a family *vendetta* had pursued him unrelentingly for years, and never allowed him a moment's peace.

Andrea Vitelli, his cousin, was, it was rumored, at the head of a powerful band of loyalists in the mountains, and had sworn an undying *vendetta* against Count Ercole.

In those troubled times, private vengeance was more readily satisfied than it is today.

Our story begins at the close of a spring day in 1640, when the pretty town of Spoleto enjoyed one of those rare days of perfect repose, in which it was agitated neither by the sounds of war nor festival. It was, perhaps, a moment of calm which precedes the storm; for there had been vague rumors of a conspiracy formed by the monk Campanella, the greatest conspiracy artist in Italy during the seventeenth century.²

¹ Ruthless German mercenaries known as *landsknechts*. Henry VIII paid for up to 10,000 landsknechts to take the field in his cause, but few Englishmen joined these companies. Ironically, one Britton who did was Henry's most implacable enemy, the exiled Duke of Suffolk Richard de la Pole, who called himself the "White Rose" and commanded 6,000 renegade landsknechts known as the Black Band who fought for France in the Navarrese War as well as at the Battle of the Spurs (1513) and the Battle of Pavia (1525), where they were annihilated.

² Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639), was a Dominican friar, Italian philosopher, theologian, astrologer, and poet. Early on, he became disenchanted with the Aristotelian orthodoxy. In 1590 he was in Naples where he was initiated in astrology. His heterodox views brought him into conflict with the ecclesiastical authorities. Denounced to the Inquisition, he was arrested in Padua in 1594 and confined in a convent until 1597. After his liberation, Campanella returned to Calabria, where he was accused of leading a conspiracy against the Spanish. Betrayed by two of his fellow conspirators, he was captured and incarcerated in Naples, where he was tortured. He would have been put to death if he had not feigned madness. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and spent twenty-seven years imprisoned in Naples. During his detention, he wrote his most important works, including *The City of the Sun*

That a considerable band of mountain brigands, under the orders of a celebrated chief named Demonio, had traversed the region, was well known; but their reason for establishing their camp in the gorges of the Apennines nearest to Spoleto was unknown. It was by no means rare, in those days of chaos, revenge and violence of every kind, for bandits to hold a social and political position very similar to that possessed by the corsairs who has been granted letters of marque in the time of the Empire. They sometimes fought for, and sometimes against, the Empire, one day for a viceroy or a commander, another for a feudal lord, but always for the party which paid the best.

These bandits were recruited from all the steps of the social ladder, being made up of men condemned to death, criminals who had escaped from prison, men of family who had been exiled, and great nobles who had either ruined themselves, or were discontented with the existing state of affairs.

They were the scourge of taverns, but the flower of fencing halls; they were also the elite of those who had escaped from the galleys.

These roving hordes of mercenaries were, on some days, cherished by the states, and on others, hunted like vermin, their leaders hung at the gallows.

It was all part of the hazards of war!

On the above mentioned day, Spoleto was in a state of the most profound calm—a calm so great that there was not a single person even in the most frequented part of the town, which was a small open space formed by the junction of three almost straight streets, a circumstance rare enough to be mentioned at a time where property lines were rarely straight

Dinner hour had already arrived, and this, together with other reasons it would take too long to explain, and which were connected with the vague terrors often experienced by the populace during those political crises, of which they were always ultimately the victims, kept the inhabitants of Spoleto at home.

The clock of Santa Maria della Piaggia sounded eight.

A window blind on one of the houses on the Place slightly agitated, and a small object, rebounding from the sculptures of the facade, fell upon the pavement with a metallic sound.

Very good eyes, attentively directed towards the house, would have been able to distinguish a white hand stretched though the slats of the Venetian blind.

The little object that had fallen to the ground was a key. A handsome young man, of between twenty to twenty-two years, with long curling hair, emerging from the corner of a neighboring palace, seized the key, and covered it with passionate kisses.

Then he introduced it into the lock of a low door, and disappeared inside.

At the same moment, or very nearly, three persons appeared from the bottom of one of the straight streets of which we have already spoken.

They advanced almost in a line, balancing themselves first on one hip, and then on another, in the fashion of the dandies of the time, and reached the crossroads almost together.

They were three gentlemen of good appearance, and magnificently dressed; and it was easy to perceive that the elegance of their costume was too great not to have been adopted for some special purpose; for persons of the best breeding were at no time, except when taking part in public ceremonies, accustomed to displaying the richest garments in the public streets. It was only tradespeople and *parvenus* who committed such solecisms against good taste.

The three gentlemen, doubtless absorbed in serious thoughts, seemed neither to see nor to hear anything going on around them. None of them were even at first conscious of the presence of his companions. It must be noted, however, that it was a very dark night, and civilization had not as yet invented gas lamps. Our three gentlemen advanced in a direct line towards the house with the closed

(1602). He was finally released in 1626, through Pope Urban VIII, who personally interceded on his behalf with Philip IV of Spain. He then lived for five years in Rome, where he became Urban's astrologer. In 1634, however, a new conspiracy in Calabria, led by one of his followers, threatened fresh troubles. With the aid of Cardinal Barberini and the French Ambassador de Noailles, he fled to France, where he was received at the court of Louis XIII. Protected by Cardinal Richelieu and granted a liberal pension, he spent the rest of his days in the convent of Saint-Honoré in Paris.

blinds, and stopped at an equal distance from each other, directly opposite the window from which had fallen the key.

The house that seemed to interest them so greatly was certainly worthy of the attention of an artist. It was a small Italian palace with a flat roof. The facade, which was covered with sculptures, in the style of the Castle de Gaillon,³ was moreover ornamented with a large balcony, supported by gorgons' heads. Their monstrous heads stretched forth here and there from a charming sculptured entanglement of foliage, flowers, and animals. Some evergreen plants grew from the moldings, and resembled a bouquet of flowers in the head dress of a coquette, and gave to the attractive house that negligent grace which is as suitable to pretty things as to pretty creatures.

A green blind, carefully closed, fell upon the balcony.

Most of the Italian palaces, at the commencement of the seventeenth century, were disfigured by fortified works, which were rendered almost necessary by the manners of the times; and the absence of them, therefore, gave to the charming house of which we speak a very distinctive appearance. It seemed as though, in the presence of this delightful asylum, the scourge of war and devastation had fallen harmless, and that for its sole defense, it required but the charm of its appearance, as the perfect beauty of some virgins is sufficient of itself to protect them from the assaults of debauchery.

Our three gentlemen were certainly not artists, for they appeared little sensible of the architectural graces of the small palace, and evidently had eyes only for the blind which fell upon the balcony. There could be little doubt that some intriguing mystery was concealed behind that impenetrable blind.

The curiosity of the three persons was speedily explained. Suddenly the blind was raised to the height of the balustrade of the balcony, and a lovely head, one of those female heads, the golden-brown tints of which Giorgione⁴ painted so exquisitely, was visible between the iron arabesques of the balcony.

The beautiful creature was doubtless frightened at perceiving so numerous a company beneath her window, for she immediately allowed the blind to drop.

The three gentlemen, evidently disappointed, half turned upon their heels, in the manner of men who have had the door slammed in their faces at a place where they had expected a favorable reception.

The result of this movement was that they suddenly perceived each other, and, as they were mutual acquaintances, they simultaneously uttered expressions of surprise at finding each other under the same window in such bright array.

"Why!" said one of them, "that is Signor Pasquale Contarini, if I am not mistaken."

"And how are my dear Cavalier Tiberio Fanferluizzi and the Signor Capitan?" cried Pasquale Contarini.

"Perfectly well," replied the two gentlemen thus addressed; "and you?"

"Tolerable, thank you, tolerable; but may the Devil fly away with me if this is not a very curious meeting."

"Well, it is rather droll."

"Very funny indeed," added Capitan, trying to laugh, but only succeeding in making disagreeable a grimace.

The fact was that the three gentlemen would rather have met in any other place, and under any other circumstances. As it was, they silently wished each other to the Devil.

The Signor Pasquale Contarini was a gentleman of some thirty-five or thirty-six years, somewhat damaged by a too assiduous worship of Venus and Bacchus. But, although he had lost the flower and down of youth, he was still sufficiently well-looking; although his nose had been colored by the god of

³ Renaissance castle located in Normandy, the face of which was designed in 1500 by the renowned Italian architect Fra Giocondo. It was removed in the early nineteenth century for and preserved at the Museum of French Monuments in Paris.

⁴ Giorgio Barbarelli da Castelfranco (c.1477/8–1510), an Italian painter of the Venetian school in the High Renaissance, whose career was ended by his death at a little over 30. Giorgione is known for the elusive poetic quality of his work, though only about six surviving paintings are affirmatively acknowledged to be his.

grapes so bright a vermilion that his whole figure seemed illumined by it. The presence of that nose gave Signor Pasquale Contarini a special verve, a *brio*, that was altogether quite unique.

The Cavalier Tiberio Fanferluizzi was not possessed of a similar advantage, but had red and frizzled locks, and a false air of Apollo, of which he was justly vain. Nothing could be gayer or more magnificent than the appearance of Fanferluizzi, covered as he was with knots, bows, and lace, from the shoes to the chin. The most recent fashions of Spain, France, and Italy were mingled in his tawdry colored garments, from which exhaled an odor of civet, amber, and tuberose, which equally affected the nose and the heart. His whole person was, in fact, such a dandy, that his very sword seemed to be a jewel rather than a weapon.

Such not the case, however, with the rapier of the Signor Capitan, which was sufficient to make one tremble at the mere sight its handle, which contained as many complicated bars as the grate of a prison, Its enormous length, and the iron clamor which it gave forth as the Signor Capitan marched majestically in the middle of the pavement, were quite enough of themselves to make many persons die of fright. It was not gold, diamonds, nor silk, which glittered on the person of Capitan, but leather and iron; although on this occasion he had thought fit to temper the ordinary severity of his costume by certain unusual ornaments, which seemed as much in place as garlands of roses on the gate of a dungeon. We must not forget to add that Capitan also sported a most impressive mustache, which was used in Spoleto as a boggy to frighten naughty little children, and which sometimes prevented them from sleeping quietly tor week.

Capitan occupied a post of confidence with the Count Ercole Vitelli; Pasquale Contarini was the son of a Venetian merchant, who had been exiled by the Secret Council; Tiberio Fanferluizzi possessed a dozen castles, and wrote sonnets to the Moon.

Such were the three persons whom chance had brought together at the same hour under the window of Lucrezia Mammone, one of the most celebrated women of the seventeenth century, a century fertile in famous Aspasia.⁵ Lucrezia had been, it was said, the mistress of Count Ercole Vitelli, and this reputation rendered her doubly precious in the eyes of such second-rate dandies as Pasquale and Fanferluizzi.

After having exchanged the few words above mentioned, the three gentlemen saluted each other in the manner of persons who take leave with the intention of pursuing each his separate road.

They took, in fact, a few steps, and then returned to the same place, and saluted each other anew, with a fresh appearance of being about to depart.

Some evil genius, some malicious fairy, seemed to be at work amongst them, for a third time they returned to the same place; and this time Pasquale Contarini knit his brows, whilst Tiberio Fanferluizzi tapped lightly on the ground with his foot, and Capitan twisted his moustache.

After a moment's hesitation, Tiberio Fanferluizzi approached Pasquale Contarini and whispered to him with an air of astonishment:

“Are you not aware, Signor Pasquale, that there is a supper party at Salvator's tavern tonight, at which there are plenty of gentlemen and charming girls? Exquisite wines! But you know very well how his cellar is furnished. You had better make haste, for a place is kept for you, and it is seldom indeed that a merry party commences without you.”

“My dear Signor Tiberio,” replied Pasquale Contarini, “do me the favor, I beg of you, of taking my place. The guests will certainly have no reason to regret the substitution. Hasten, then, or the supper will have commenced without you.”

Fanferluizzi turned his back on Contarini, and scratched his ear. The latter reflected a moment, and then, approaching Capitan, said to him:

“Have you not heard, then, of the duel between Jacopo Maffei and the brave Santañor?”

“Certainly,” replied Capitan. “I knew about it long before you, Signor Contarini. When there is an affair of honor afoot in the neighborhood of Spoleto, I am certain to be the first to be informed of it.”

⁵ Aspasia (c.470 BC-c.400 BC). Pericles' lover and partner. According to Plutarch, their house became an intellectual center in Athens, attracting the most prominent writers and thinkers, including Socrates. Aspasia is mentioned in the writings of Plato, Aristophanes, Xenophon, and others. Though she spent most of her adult life in Greece, few details of her life are fully known. Some scholars suggest that she was a brothel keeper and a prostitute.

“In that case,” rejoined Contarini, “you must be aware that it is to take place at this very hour, on the bank of the Nera; is it possible that you are not to be one of the seconds?”

Capitan bit his lip, but speedily recovered his self-possession, and replied with much *sang-froid*:

“If you would like to have the latest news about the matter, by the blood of Christ, I can furnish you with it. The meeting took place this evening at seven o’clock, by torch light, with swords which would not enter that baby scabbard which you carry by your side; and Jacopo Maffei, your good friend, has, unfortunately, had his head slit open to the teeth, may God save you!”

Contarini turned his back upon Capitan, and scratched his nose.

Capitan, seeing Fanferluizzi drawing near to him with the evident intention of making some remark, anticipated him:

“Signor Fanferluizzi,” he whispered to him, “there is a *fête* this evening at the palace of our lord, Count Ercole Vitelli.”

“I know this.”

“But do you know that the noble Maria des Amalfi is to be there?”

“Well? What of that?” replied the handsome Fanferluizzi, at the same time passing his long fingers through the curls of his red hair.

“Signor Tiberio,” said Capitan, with a still more mysterious air, “the ladies are more cruel to me than to you, and I have not your marvelous power of taking them in the pleasant nets of love; but if they disregard my sighs, at any rate they are quite willing to accept me as a confidant.”

“Poor fellow!” murmured Tiberio.

“Yes; but although it is a part which you would not like to play, I am contented with it; and it is a fact that the noble Maria has recently confided to me, with tears, that she is pining away and dying of love for your lordship.”

“Ho, ho!” cried Fanferluizzi, “why should I care? Are there not plenty of other gentlemen?”

“Have some compassion, my dear friend,” rejoined Capitan, “and remember Maria des Amalfi is very pretty.”

“Pretty enough, I suppose.”

“Very beautiful, indeed, and only twenty years-old.”

“Twenty-two.”

“Good God! Do you mean to give me the lie?”

“Heaven forbid! Let her be twenty, by all means. It’s all the same to me.”

“By the blood of Christ! You must have a heart of stone! Maria awaits you this evening at the Count’s *fête*.”

“Very well,” replied Tiberio, coldly.

“And you won’t go?”

“Perhaps I may; but at any rate, it is not yet time; you can see that the chandeliers are not yet lit in the palace of the noble Ercole Vitelli.”

As he spoke, Tiberio pointed to a large building situated at the end of the principal street, and in the windows of which appeared no lights.

Capitan pulled his moustache and made no answer.

However, at the end of a few minutes the blind was again raised, and the charming head of Lucrezia Mammone appeared a second time at the balcony. The fair creature seemed displeased when she perceived the three gentlemen still in the same place, for she made a small grimace, and a second time let the blind fall.

The three gentlemen looked at each other as at first, but without taking the slightest trouble to conceal their ill-humor.

“It is done to annoy me!” murmured Contarini.

“It is an impertinence!” added Fanferluizzi.

“As it is very plain,” said Capitan, “that none of us is willing to be the first to leave, I will propose a means of avoiding any quarrel about it.”

“What then?”

“Let us draw lots.”

“Oh, confound your means,” cried Contarini and Fanferluizzi, together.

Whilst the conversation was taking this quarrelsome turn, the situation was becoming critical. A fourth personage, mounted on a black horse, and wrapped in a great brown cloak, arrived at the spot by the middle of the three streets. As the newcomer had excellent eyes, it was not difficult for him to perceive, at the moment when the blind was raised, the charming figure of Lucrezia Mammone; and his countenance gleamed with one of those rays of unvirtuous delight which are apt to lighten up the faces of gallants when they see a pretty woman.

He spurred his horse on, and leaped to the ground as soon as he had arrived at the corner of the place.

When he had fastened his horse to the iron ring placed for this purpose at the corners of all the streets, he advanced with a rapid step towards the palace.

“It seems that there is a large company here,” he said on reaching it.

The newcomer was not received by the three gentlemen with much cordiality. Fanferluizzi and Contarini turned their backs upon him; whilst Capitan, with his left hand on the hilt of his sword, and his right on his moustache, measured him with a glance, from the sole of his riding boots to the top of the black feather in his hat.

The stranger did not seem, however, inclined to take offence at this; for he smiled.

He was a young man of some twenty-five years; handsome, well made, and of a wiry form, which betokened muscles of iron. The sun had bronzed his complexion, which was naturally swarthy. He wore a moustache slightly turned up at the end; and when he smiled, he showed between his dark coral lips a set of teeth of the most brilliant whiteness. His expression was at once animated and firm, and betokened frankness, pride, and audacity. At first glance, he might have readily been taken for one of those seekers of adventure who are always ready to risk their lives for an instant's pleasure, and whose audacity is abashed at no peril.

On seeing the three gentlemen turn their backs on him, the newcomer fancied that they were about to quit the spot; and, indeed, he accustomed to seeing people yield to him; so that when he found that the three still remained, he was profoundly astonished, like a man to whom any resistance is inconceivable.

“It seems, gentlemen,” he said, with mock politeness, “that we are all of us resolved to act the sentinel here. Will it please you, for the sake of making the time shorter, to have a little conversation? It is customary, for instance, in a case like this, for each to recount by what singular chance he happened to come to the place of meeting at the same time as the others.”

Our three gallants seemed far from inclined to take this pleasantry in good part.

The stranger, however, went on in the same tone of raillery.

“As far as I am concerned, the story will not be a very long one. A matter of business brought me this morning to Spoleto; in a lonely street, I saw a woman who passed before me as a lovely vision. I followed her, and, when I found where she lived, resolved to return this evening. Of course, one always adheres to such resolutions. The evening has arrived, here I am, and I have just caught a glance of my charming vision behind the blind there.”

“Sir,” broke in Contarini, turning himself suddenly around, “we are in no humor to laugh, and you would much oblige us by going to dream somewhere else.”

“There are some persons,” added Fanferluizzi, also turning around, “who have no notion of politeness.”

Capitan contented himself with giving a prodigious *ahem* while he twisted his moustache, and rolled his eyes in a manner terrible to behold.

“Oh, Oh!” said the stranger, “that is it, is it? Well, I am quite contented that we should argue the matter in this spirit, if it pleases you. Let us draw, two against two, and the affair will soon be settled.”

This proposition was not received with all the enthusiasm that it deserved. Pasquale Contarini and the Signor Fanferluizzi turned towards Capitan, as though to ask his advice; but the latter had taken a martial attitude, which was quite suitable to the circumstances of the moment; however, impatience for combat doubtless had rendered him paler than usual.

“Let us draw! Let us draw! By all means!” he cried, while he made his formidable rapier rattle in its sheath, and gave a terrible glance at the stranger, whom it did not seem to frighten in the least.

“By my faith,” said Contarini, “a little exercise with the sword is a trifling enough matter; but...”

“But... for the sake of a woman...” added Tiberio.

“And a woman such as her...” continued Contarini.

“For Lucrezia Mammone, forsooth!” muttered Fanferluizzi, with disdain.

The utterance of this name appeared to have the most extraordinary effect on the stranger...