

The Gold Key 1884

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In the parish priest's country house in Santa Margherita, they were reciting the holy rosary after dinner when they heard a gunshot in the night.

The priest turned pale, the rosary still in his hand, and the women made the sign of the cross, pricking up their ears, while the dogs in the courtyard barked furiously. Almost immediately another gunshot returning fire thundered through the glen below Rocca.

'Jesus and Mary! What on earth could it be?' blurted the servant girl in the kitchen doorway.

'Quiet everyone!' exclaimed the priest, white as his nightcap. 'Let me hear.'

He went over behind the window shutter. The dogs had quieted down, and outside you could hear the wind blowing through the glen. All of a sudden the barking started up again, louder than before, broken fitfully by the sound of a rock striking the door.

'Don't open it! Don't open it for anyone!' the priest yelled, running to get his carbine that hung over the head of his bed below the crucifix. His hands were trembling. Then in the midst of the din they heard someone outside the main entrance yell, 'Open up, Father! It's me, Surfareddu!' No sooner had the estate manager living on the ground floor finally gone out to quiet down the dogs and unbolt the main door than the field guard Surfareddu came in, his face grim and the shotgun still warm in his hand.

'What's wrong, Grippino? What happened?' the frightened priest asked.

'What's wrong, Your Lordship, is that while you are sleeping and resting, I'm risking life and limb guarding all your stuff,' answered Surfareddu.

And he told them what had happened, standing in the doorway and swaying back and forth in his usual way. He couldn't fall asleep because of the heat, and had gone to stand in the doorway of the hut for a moment, over there on the little terrace, when he heard a sound in the glen where the orchard was, a sound his ears alone knew, and Bellina's, a mangy mongrel of skin and bones that stuck by his heels. They were knocking down oranges and other fruit in the orchard. A rustling sound the wind doesn't make, then silent spells while they filled up their sacks. So he got the gun standing beside the hut door, that old flintlock shotgun with a long barrel and brass fittings that he had in his hand.

Talk about destiny! Because that was the last night he was supposed to stay at Santa Margherita. He had given his notice to the parish priest at Easter, both of them in complete agreement. And on the first of September he was supposed to go to his new boss's estate, the one in Vizzini. Just the day before he had turned in each and every thing to the priest. It was the last day in August, a pitch dark night without any stars. Bellina went ahead of him, her nose to the wind, silently, the way he had taught her. He walked along very slowly, picking his feet up high in the hay so you couldn't hear it rustle. Every ten steps the dog turned to see if he was following her. When they got to the glen he softly said to Bellina, 'Back!' He took cover behind a large walnut tree. Then he let out a bellow, 'Hey there! ...'

A bellow, God help us! – the priest was saying – that gave you goose-bumps when you heard it come from Surfareddu, a man who had committed more than one murder in his profession as field guard. 'Then,' replied Surfareddu, 'then they shot at me point-blank – boom! Luckily I fired back at the flash of the rifle shot. There were three of them, and I heard screaming. Go look in the orchard, because the man I got must still be there.'

'Oh! What've you done, you scoundrel!' exclaimed the priest, while the women screamed among themselves. 'Now the judge and the rotten lawmen are going to come, and you're leaving me in a mess!'

'This is the thanks I get, Your Lordship?' Surfareddu snapped. 'If they'd waited to steal from you after I'd left your service it was better for me too. I wouldn't have had this other quarrel with the law.'

'Get off to the Grilli's right now, and tell the estate manager I sent you. Then tomorrow you'll get what you need. But don't let anyone see you, for the love of God! Now that it's prickly pear season, people

are all over the hills. Who knows how much this thing is going to cost me. It would've been better if you'd turned a blind eye.'

'Oh no, Father! As long as I'm in your service, Surfareddu won't suffer any dishonour of this sort! They knew that until August 31st I was the one taking care of your farm. So much the worse for them! I don't waste my gunpowder for sure!'

And off he went with his rifle over his shoulder and Bellina following behind while it was still dark. No one slept a wink that night in the country house of Santa Margherita, for fear of the thieves and the thought of that man lying on the ground there in the orchard. At daylight, when wayfarers started to appear on the path across the way, at Rocca the parish priest, armed to the teeth and with all the peasants following behind, ventured to go and see what had happened. The women were yelling, 'Don't go, Your Lordship!'

But just outside the courtyard, they ran into Luigino, who had slipped in among all the people, getting underfoot.

'Take this boy away,' yelled his uncle the priest.

'No! I want to go see too!' the boy screamed. Afterwards, for as long as he lived, the spectacle that he had seen right before his eyes when he was so little stuck in his mind.

He was just a few steps into the orchard, under an old, sick olive tree, lying on the ground, his nose the sooty colour of the dying. He had dragged himself on his hands and knees onto a heap of empty sacks, and stayed there the whole night. His companions had run away, taking the full sacks with them. There nearby was a stretch of dirt, gouged by fingernails and all black with blood.

'Ah! Your Reverence,' mumbled the dying man. 'They killed me over a couple of olives!'

The parish priest gave absolution. Then toward noon, the judge arrived with the lawmen and was bent on taking it out on the parish priest and tying him up like a scoundrel. Luckily all the peasants were there and the estate manager with his family as witnesses. Nevertheless, the judge vented his anger on that servant of God who was a sort of old-fashioned baron with his overbearing ways, and he had men like Surfareddu working for him as field guards, and had people killed over a couple of olives. He wanted the murderer handed over dead or alive, and the parish priest swore up and down that he didn't know anything about it. So much that just a bit more and the judge would declare him an accomplice and the one who gave the order, and have the rotten lawmen tie him up all the same. So they were yelling and

coming and going under the orange trees in the orchard, while the doctor and the town registrar went about their tasks in front of the dead man laying on the empty sacks. Then they put the dining table in the shade of the orchard, because it was so hot, and the women coaxed the judge into eating a little something because it was getting late. The servant girl rolled up her sleeves: macaroni, tasty dishes of all sorts, and the women went out of their way so that the table wouldn't make a bad impression on that occasion. The judge licked his fingers. Then the registrar pulled the tablecloth back a bit from a corner and quickly drew up ten lines for the statement, with the witnesses' signatures and everything, while the judge had a cup of coffee made specially with the coffee machine, and the peasants watched from afar, half hidden among the orange trees. Finally, the parish priest went personally to get a bottle of aged Moscardello that would have made a dead man rise. Meanwhile, they had buried the other one as best they could under the old, sick olive tree. As he left, the judge accepted a bunch of flowers from the women, who had two beautiful baskets of chosen fruit put in the saddlebags on the registrar's mule. And the parish priest accompanied them all the way to the end of the farm's property.

The following day a District messenger came to say that the judge had lost his watch-key in the orchard, and they should look for it carefully because it certainly had to be there.

'Let me have two days' time, and we'll find it,' the parish priest had him reply. Right away he wrote to a friend in Caltagirone to have him buy a watch-key – a beautiful gold key that cost him two *onze*,¹ and he sent it to the judge, saying, 'Is this the watch-key that you lost, Judge?'

'This is it, yes, sir,' he replied. The trial smoothly went its way, so smoothly that 1860² suddenly came about, and Surfareddu returned to work as a field guard after Garibaldi was pardoned, until he got himself killed, struck with stones in a scuffle with some other field guards about a certain matter concerning grazing pastures. And the parish priest, whenever he would bring up the subject of all the things that happened that night and gave him so much to take care of, would say about the judge, back then, 'He was an honest man! Because instead of losing just the watch-key, he could have had me look for the watch and chain too.'

In the orchard, under the old tree where the olive thief is buried, grow cabbages as big as the heads of babes.

NOTES

- 1 The *onza* was a form of Sicilian currency, valued at 12.75 lire, a large sum in the mid-1800s.
- 2 Performing the first in the chain of actions to accomplish the Unification of Italy, Garibaldi and his thousand volunteers landed in Marsala in May of 1860, and launched a revolution against the ruling Bourbons, who ultimately abandoned Sicily. In October of the same year, following a plebiscite, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies became part of the Kingdom of Italy.