

An Episode of Brigandage 1885

CAROLINA INVERNIZIO

One evening of late, a lively troupe of a few high-spirited women and vivacious young men was gathered in a villa. To break the monotony, they were chatting pleasantly among themselves, one saying this, another that. Suddenly a sprightly young woman jumped up to say:

'Signor Carlo (he was a young engineer, generally admired for his spirit and distinguished manners), come on, tell us one of your stories! Some adventure, for example, you had during your travels. I can't imagine you haven't had any. But be careful not to break into lofty flights and not to digress more than necessary. And above all, try not to exaggerate.'

'Thank you for the compliment, which is as much as to say don't concoct some silly story. Rest assured, I'll heed the advice. I shall simply tell you about what happened to me during my last trip in the Neapolitan provinces. Are you satisfied?'

'Yes, yes! But get on with it ...'

The young man smiled, and seeing how attentive and ready to listen to him everyone was, he began his story:

'Anyone who hasn't spent some time in the Neapolitan area can't imagine the unexpected radiance adorning nature there. The sun, when it rises and sets, bathes the lands with indescribable magnificence. Up above, you see the mountains in such a spectrum of deep red hues that even those with souls less poetic than mine would be carried away. A morning journey through these parts at the end of September has such attractions that its traces leave their mark on the soul for a long time. Since I was in Beneventano, I got the idea of taking an excursion up in the mountains, to admire the enchanting scenery that

greet the eye everywhere you look. It's true that taking trips in the mountains was not very safe, and had kept travellers away from the area. But to tell the truth, I didn't believe in brigands. I had heard a lot of talk about them during my travels, but had never met up with one.

'On the other hand, I would have been very happy to know what a brigand might be, and I somehow felt that I would have experienced a certain satisfaction at being close to a person who was so dangerous. Therefore, I hired two mules and a guide. He was a strong young man of average height, but rather stocky in appearance, a real chatterbox, a poet should the occasion arise. So I expected to have good company. At first we came upon a lot of villas, rustic houses, the sort of rustic houses where herdsmen and shepherds usually live. But then the path became steep and rocky, worn into the bare sandstone. For as far as I could see in every direction, there wasn't a sign of a living creature.

'The further along we went, the more the scene changed appearance. I stopped for a moment on those cliffs, terrified by the grandiosity of the mountainous spectacle that appeared before me. On one side gaped the dark throat of a deep chasm, whose depths were impenetrable to the eye. But it looked to be bristling with intricate masses of thorns and brambles. On the other side, a thick forest stood behind a very sheer mountain, barren of trees or grass. Further off was a valley, with meadows, fields, country homes. Then the view stretched into the distance, the objects becoming smaller until everything finally disappeared in the horizon. In the meantime, we heard the sound of a distant country song, with a chorus of country girls singing along and the mountains echoing the words. A light breeze was gently blowing, invigorating our limbs. It heightened my imagination, and without my bidding I felt my soul transported to that sense of sweetness one experiences at the first smile of chaste love, at the throbbing that moves the first tender friendship. Our mules had little bells hanging from their necks, which made a tinkling sound, the only one that could be heard in those parts. We had gone about four miles when my guide got off his mule and carefully wrapped up its bells, doing likewise to the ones on my mule. In a low voice he said, "Here we have to be careful and stay absolutely quiet. A single word or a sound could alert the brigands. You see those woods, Signore? That's where they hide. No one would dare go through them. They go a little here and a little there, depending on which way the wind blows. Spirits are also in there with them, and at night, on those slopes, you see ghosts, monsters, skeletons, and odd lights."

"I was laughing heartily at his words when my guide suddenly exclaimed, "I think I hear the trampling of footsteps ... Don't you hear something, Signore?"

"I reigned in my mule and strained my ears. It was a rather faint sound in the trees. "It's the wind," I said.

"No, no Signore, it's them. May the Virgin Mary and Saint Gennaro protect us!"

"We spurred our mounts' flanks, but in vain. The mules just trod along. While I kept silent and my guide cursed, the shots of firearms reached our ears and a few bullets whistled over our heads.

"My God!" screamed my guide. He slid off his mule and took off at such a run down the other side of the mountain that I lost sight of him in a few minutes. Still shaken by surprise, I quickly regained my senses when I saw eight men armed to the hilt appear at my sides. Alone, unarmed, with no idea where I was, it would have been folly to try to defend myself. At first I thought they might just want to search me, and I was preparing myself to spare them such an inconvenience when one of them said to me:

"Slow down! Slow down ... We want a lot more than your money bag. When a prize bird happens our way, we don't let it fly away so easily. Whether you want to or not, you have to come with us. If you resist, these will be enough to keep you quiet." Then half a dozen knives were levelled with the tip of their blades pointed right at me. But I fearlessly stood my ground, piercing my lips in such a look of disdain for death that the brigands, won over, slowly lowered their weapons and looked upon me more favorably, since courage is also necessary in crime.

"They made me get off the mule, and tied a rope around my waist. One of the brigands took the ends of the rope, and I was forced to walk in front of them. We went into a forest. I had all the time and leisure to contemplate the nature around me. The giant chestnut trees, oaks, and poplars towering above caught to wondrous effect the sun's rays, which tinged with an almost gloomy hue the plants in the forest, a very carefully chosen theatre for so many misdeeds. Huge masses of foliage, wild grasses, obstructed the deserted paths. It was, in short, quite a sight to behold, and filled my soul with a rush of emotion. At that moment, I felt the conviction of my own impotence. It was a new world meeting my eyes, but an inert world, full of silence, where everything inspired terror.

"Meanwhile, the brigands were talking and laughing among them-

selves. They had big, round, meaty limbs; olive-skinned, calm faces, toughened by the harsh weather; black, gleaming eyes; unkempt hair swaying to-and-fro above their shoulders, their wide foreheads buried beneath very broad-brimmed hats. They wore roomy jackets made of brown frustian, which revealed a glimpse of a black velvet jerkin with big gilded buttons. Their pants were also velvet, held up by a wide red band, from which two pistols hung. They wore leggings.

"We had reached a path that was so narrow we had to pass one at a time. Two men with brutal, ugly faces stood guard at the entrance. After the who-goes-there, we continued along the path, walking between deep purple rocks and cavernous ravines. The rustling of the dry twigs beneath our feet was the only sound breaking the deathly silence of those parts. Some time later, we entered a dense thicket. One of the brigands opened a door, carefully hidden among the plants. We went down just a few steps into a narrow, tortuous passage. At the end of it there was a large, poorly lit room, equipped with just a few pieces of furniture and paved in stone. We stopped here, and one of the brigands, the leader, untied me. He then put me through a sort of interrogation to find out who I was and where I came from. I answered frankly, in fact, with a certain arrogance. Afterwards, I was taken to a room nearby, lit by a weak light. As I walked across the room, I heard the man who had interrogated me say to the others, "He'll have to pay a hefty price for his ransom if he doesn't want to end up like the last ones we've had ..." At the sound of those words, I confess, I felt a chill run through my veins. Nonetheless, I didn't let my face betray a hint of emotion.

"When we went into the room, my guide exclaimed, "Here's another prisoner for you." I turned around to see whom he was talking to, and my eyes fell upon a woman so pretty that a slight expression of surprise escaped me. She was very young. The goodness of an ingenuous, gentle soul, virginal modesty, and maternal love were painted on her snow-white face. Calm and silent, she sat holding a lovely baby boy who did not even wake up with the din of the weapons and rough voices. I was watching that young mother, that smiling victim of love, and her lovely little child, with rosy cheeks and curly hair, when the leader of the brigands came into the room.

"Gillo, my Gillo," said the woman, smiling. "So you're back?"

"Yes, Carmela," the brigand replied, without a shadow of affection. "As you see, I brought a good catch with me. I'll leave him for you to watch over while we have something to eat."

'Turning to me, he said, "After we've finished our meal, you'll have yours. Meanwhile, we'll reckon accounts. But first I have to take care of a simple formality ..." He pulled out a long thin rope.

"So is it necessary for you to tie me up?" I asked, taking a step back and leaning almost instinctively against the wall of the cave.

"Extremely necessary. You might get it into your head to throw some punches. You're strong and brave."

'An ironic smile grazed my lips.

"Don't worry," I replied. "I won't move from this spot."

"And what token of faith will you give me so I could trust you?"

"My promise."

'He said nothing.

"I swear!" I repeated adamantly.

"Now I've nothing left to fear," Gillo said. He left without even a glance at his wife or a word of affection.

'Carmela's eyes followed him anxiously, and she sadly bowed her head. I thought of how deeply the poor woman must suffer, bound forever to the man of crime, forced to share her food with him, and her bed, suffocating her leaping heart, the need to shed tears.

'I let out a sigh, which gave the woman a start. She passed her right hand over her forehead, pushed her black hair off her face. After taking a long look at me she got up, laid the child down gently on two chairs, opened a cupboard, and then brought out a bottle and a glass. She came close to me and in a quiet, touched voice she said, "Please have some of this strong drink. You must need some. It's all I can offer you."

'She insisted in such a charming manner that I couldn't refuse. Then there began between us one of those simple conversations that usually take place between a person in need and a benefactor, and reveal an entire life.

'Carmela loved that man, bound to him by destiny and because he was the father of her innocent little child. But at the same time, she was shocked and horrified at the sight of so many wicked deeds that were committed every day under her very eyes. They wanted her to stay close to the prisoners, and she aimed to be the guardian angel of the hapless. She had foiled the brigands' tricks, thwarted their plots many times. She had just turned twenty, the age of sweet illusions, hopes, and love, and was living there, buried away in that haven of crime. Her whole life was there now, and her future was there too. And yet, in the midst of that life full of sacrifices and privations, she silenced her own sorrows so that she could hear only those of others.

'Meanwhile, the brigands' cheers and drunken bursts of laughter could be heard from the nearby room. They were throwing the empty bottles, which made an unimaginable crash when they hit the ground.

'Carmela went on talking, now and then giving her son a look, a look that by itself revealed all the worry in the mother's heart. It had been a long time since the poor woman had felt the ineffable consolation of unburdening her tormented soul with someone who could accept her, sympathize with her, and give her compassion. She yielded to the impulses of a simple heart, one needing to emanate affection in words. We were both moved. Within me was pure, affectionate compassion; within her, the release of a flood long held back.

'A few moments of silence passed, then Carmela said, "Forgive me Signore, if I have been so bold ... but you seem so good. It's nearly impossible that someone might say a word of affection to me. My husband has no looks to relieve my loneliness, nor my son words. The prisoners they bring here to me are always in such a state of terror that they're horrified at the things I offer too."

'She was silent for a moment, then went on, "You're brave, Signore, and maybe that will avail to save you. Gillo is not a monster. He has a great soul, even in the midst of crimes. He abhors cowards, the weak ... and he loves and respects the valiant. Don't lose heart! I'll do what I can to save you, or at least to ease your captivity."

'In the middle of all the confusion and muffled talk that reigned in the room nearby, all of a sudden, we heard a voice yell, "To the look-out!"

'Gillo came into the room. His face had a brutal look of pride. He said to Carmela, "Our comrades at the look-out point have been attacked ... we're on our way to help them. But those soldiers, the damned bastards, will pay a dear price for our heads! Don't move from here! This hideout is safe."

'Turning to me, he exclaimed, "Stay put if you don't want to get acquainted with our blunderbusses!" Then he ran out.

'We were left alone. Carmela looked up at the heavens. She was thinking of me. "In all this turmoil, you're free to run," she said in a trembling voice, "they won't blame anyone."

"But what about you?"

"Don't worry! He won't dare touch me. Come with me!" She stopped a moment to gaze at her son, who was still sleeping. She was a mother. That was enough to understand what flood of emotions was suddenly welling in her soul. But recapturing at once a wonderful

courage, she said, "Let's go! No one would want to take their rage out on an innocent little child."

'Since I was hesitating, she forcefully exclaimed, "I insist!" Then she gently added, "I beg you."

'Astonished and touched by her incredible steadfastness, I could only respond by squeezing the hand that had taken mine. Carmela opened a small door, which I had not seen before, and after a few steps down a passageway we were out in the open air. From the opposite direction we heard an exchange of shouts, shots, and curses that startled the courageous woman. In spite of it all, she herself insisted on being my guide through the unknown paths, and lead me down them to the edge of the woods. Then, without a word, she pointed the way to go.

"May God bless you," I said, pressing her hand hard against my lips. "You can be sure that I will never forget you."

'Carmela seemed touched. "Pray for me!" she replied with a sad smile.

"Will we see each other again?"

'She turned her eyes to the sky and replied, "Up there, where we are all equal."

'Bidding me one last farewell, she hurried away. My eyes followed her. The moon had risen rather high and penetrated the thick foliage. Its rays illuminated the worthy woman, whose steps were watched over by angels in that moment.

'An hour later I was safe ...'

The End

The Blessed Paulists 1910

LUIGI NATOLI (WILLIAM GALT)

Part I, chapter XI

The Monte di Pietà clock had just struck midnight and the city was unusually alive with activity. That morning, October 10th, the thirty British and Genovese war vessels that were carrying Vittorio Amedeo,¹ his court, and retinue to the capital of the kingdom had arrived. They landed first at Arenella, where they received the archbishop, and shortly thereafter some noblemen and two members of the Senate. Then towards evening the ships cast anchor in the Molo Grande, and the king expressed his wish to go ashore the next day at about twenty-three hours Italian time.

A virtual army of artisans had spent the entire day feverishly attending to decorating the disembarkation bridge at Calla and the four arches in Piazza Villena. They were still busily at it now by the light of torches and candles, trying to finish up the work before daybreak. A coming and going of wagons and carts, the resounding sounds of hammers, yelling, and noisy racket amplified by the night spread through Cassaro and intensified at Quattro Canti, echoing through the entire city and beckoning the curious.

The idea of having a king of their own had infused their hands with the enthusiasm of their souls. There was patriotism in the fervour of those artisans, in the very curiosity of the citizens who, instead of going off to get some sleep, were staying at Quattro Canti or Calla to watch the people at work, as if encouraging them with their presence to get things done fast and well. The people who were sleeping that night had a light, sweetly anxious sleep. Those preparations for the solemn entrance and coronation were not the ones that took the most time and work. But they were enough to enliven and animate the city.

Everyone's attention was so drawn to the two city centres with the most work going on, and so many were walking about that even at that unusual hour no one was surprised to run into other people in the streets.

Two men cloaked unrecognizably in mantles drawn up around them left the Conceria quarter, crossed Strada Nuova, and slipped into Strada dei Candelaï, but only after they had looked all around with the air of people who do not want to be followed. When they thought they had gone far enough so they could not be seen by all the new faces in the beautiful street, they left off walking like people just going about their own business and hastened their steps, like people who fear they will arrive somewhere late.

They turned towards Piazza Monte di Pietà and proceeded through Strada delle Lettighe, up to the Chiesa dei 'Canceddi,' or, rather, the Church of the Carters, commonly known by the name Santa Maruzza among the locals. There they stopped. One of the two men took his hands out from under his mantle, saying, 'Be patient. Let me blindfold you.'

The other man did not resist. The first one tied a scarf over his eyes and took him by the hand, adding, 'Come along. You'll be safe.'

They went along the side of the church, entered a dark, mysterious alley, and stopped after a few steps. 'We're here!' said the guide. He went up to a small, low door, worm-eaten and gashed, and scratched it lightly with his fingernail, like a cat. After a brief interval, another scratch replied from inside. Then the man made a faint whistle. The door opened without a sound. The guide took the blindfolded man by the hand and pulled him up close in the deep, dark space, saying, 'Come along. Mind, there's a step.' The door closed again behind them.

They went through a short passageway. At the end of it, another small door opened in the same mysterious way. They entered a little courtyard, with a crooked tree standing in the middle of it, blackened by the night. The pavement echoed under their steps in the night, as if it were hollow. 'Careful!' the man leading warned, 'Here we go down.'

Indeed, they went down some steps. The blindfolded man felt the air turn damp, and it smelled mouldy. The stairway, in fact, went down a passageway dug out of the tufa, which was incrustated here and there, making the ground slippery. A small oil lamp placed in a little niche carved in the wall shed just enough light for one to guess where

the steps were. At the foot of the stairway they stopped. The guide said, 'Wait here a moment. Someone will come get you.'

He left the blindfolded man in some kind of room, and knocked five times on a door. A voice on the other side whispered some mysterious words, which the guide exchanged. The door opened and he entered a room lit by lanterns attached to the wall. Some voices greeted him.

'Good evening, Zi'² Rosario.'

The small shopkeeper's pockmarked face and lively little eyes appeared in the light of the lanterns. 'He's here,' he said. 'When you wish, Your Lordship ...'

At the end of the room there was a sort of altar made of stone, with a crucifix standing on it between two burning candles. At the foot of the cross was an open book. In front of the altar there was a small table at which three masked men, dressed in some sort of black robe, were sitting. Another six men, also wearing robes and masks, were sitting in high-backed chairs on each side of the room. Their eyes gleamed sinisterly beneath the masks.

Zi' Rosario went over to the wall, stuck his hands in a niche, and pulled out a bundle. A moment later, dressed in a robe and wearing a mask, he was no more recognizable than the others. Then the man who seemed to preside over the meeting made a sign. One of the six men stood up and left, and then returned almost immediately, leading the blindfolded man by his hand. 'Let him see the light,' ordered the leader.

The blindfold was removed and Andrea's astonished, agitated face appeared. The sudden passage from darkness to light prevented him from seeing the room clearly for a minute. Then little by little his eyes became accustomed to the light, and during the moment of silence that reigned in the room, he looked in amazement at the place where he stood, almost unable to bring himself to believe that in the heart of Palermo there could be such caverns, which, not uncommon in the outskirts of the city, the people attributed to the Saracens. The room was dug out of the tufa with a certain artistic criterion. It had a vaulted ceiling, and some niches carved in the walls. Near the altar there were traces of plaster, but the dampness had eaten it away. You could feel that grotto was located in the subsoil.

The leader asked him, 'Is your name Andrea Lo Bianco?'

'Yes, Your Lordship.'

'There are no Lords here. There are only brothers.'

'I beg your forgiveness.'

'Were you the servant of the late Duke of Motta?'

'Right up till the day he died at the hands of the Turks ...'

'Good. It has come to this venerable society's knowledge that you can furnish information about the current Duke of Motta ... Mind, solid information and documents are needed. Words alone won't satisfy us. We are involved in performing a work of justice and vindication, but we haven't been able to take a step because we ran into a closed door, which you can perhaps open.'

The leader was quiet for a minute, then began speaking again, in a solemn voice full of emotion:

'Andrea Lo Bianco, you have entered a place where no profane man has ever set foot. But this commits your life perhaps in a way you can't imagine. Are you certain you will keep your promises? If you aren't, state so now. Someone will take you away the same way you came, and you will be let free. We trust in your silence. But if you state you are certain, mind you, Andrea Lo Bianco, we will never again allow you to leave, and beside you, behind you, in the street, in church, in your very own home, there will always be the invisible and infallible vindictory arm of our justice ...'

Andrea replied:

'I have faith in you. Have faith in me. You are here for justice, and I for vendetta. You saved me, and you are the masters of my life. I put all of my being at your service.'

'Good. Brothers, you may begin.'

The six men rose and encircled Andrea. There was a signal, and then all at the same time they pulled out long, sharp daggers from under the black robes covering them, and flashed the tips of the daggers before his eyes. Then two of them quickly grabbed Andrea, stripped his left arm, and carved a small cross on it with the tip of the dagger. The blood blossomed on his naked arm. Then one of the three men sitting at the small table stood up, took the book from the foot of the crucifix, and placed it on the table. He pulled a pen out of a small box and, after dipping it in the blood, handed it to Andrea.

'Andrea Lo Bianco,' said the leader, speaking again, 'this book contains the evangelical gospels and the letters of Saint Apostle Paul. Make the sign of the cross with your blood on this page, and swear to blindly obey whatever you are ordered to do. Swear it on the saint evangelists, on the Saint Apostle Paul, on your blood, which will be spilled drop by drop. Swear that you will keep the secret of what you

will hear and see, and that neither torture nor temptations will wring even a sound from your lips. Swear that your body and your soul belong now and forever to this venerable society of the Blessed Paulists, in service of justice, in defence of the weak, against all forms of violence and domination committed by the government, the nobles, and the priests.

With a steady hand, Andrea drew a large cross at the foot of the page that the leader showed him, and said, 'I swear. And may this cross drawn with my blood mark my sentence if I fail to fulfil my obligation.'

'May God help you and may the Blessed Apostle Paul arm you with his zeal and give you his sword! Now, answer the questions. Were you in the service of Duke Don Emanuele?'

'Yes, Signore.'

'Until his death, did you say?'

'He died in my arms. But before he died he gave me a medal, so that I would place it around the neck of his sweet little son, whom he never saw. Once I returned to Palermo, after some ups and downs, I carried out the piteous task.'

The comrade sitting to the right of the president asked excitedly, 'And what about the medal?'

'It was a silver medal. It had a relic, a tiny fragment, mounted on one side, and the image of Saint Sebastian, the protector of the ancient Academy of Arms, engraved on the other. It hung on a small, silver chain ...'

'Ah! Good!' exclaimed the Blessed Paulist.

'Continue,' said the leader.

'I intended to watch over the little master, and had found a faithful companion in Maddaleria. But I was sent away by Don Raimondo, and Maddalena was killed, maybe poisoned.'

'What makes you suppose that?'

'Don Raimondo tried to poison the duchess. He went with his trusted servant to get the poison at the home of a witch, who lived in S. Onofrio lane. She was called Peppa la Sarda. I heard what they said, standing behind the door. When they left, I burst into Peppa la Sarda's house and forced her to give me the antidote. For safety's sake, I gagged the witch and took her to my house. But all of my efforts were in vain. The duchess was surely murdered, and the son was murdered too. In order to hide the crime, Don Raimondo feigned that assassins

had kidnapped them. He fastened a rope to the parapet of the balcony to simulate the kidnapping. Then he threw suspicions on me. I was arrested and thrown in prison. He's a murderer, Sirs, a murderer. He killed three innocent people in order to seize a patrimony that he's not entitled to.'

'Who's the servant?'

'I don't know if he still has him in his service. His name was Giuseppico. He was Majorcan, slender, dark-skinned, surly.'

'And what happened to Peppa la Sarda?'

'I don't know. The same night, when I went back home she wasn't there anymore. How'd she escape? I don't know. Where did she find a safe place to hide? We need to track her down. She supplied the poison two times, and one night she went to the palace to prepare it herself, and gave it to the mistress, thinking she was Maddalena. Oh, it's a sad, vile, wicked story! If Don Raimondo had the witch under his power, he would certainly have made her disappear. But if she's alive, she is a witness, in fact, a terrible accuser. She and Giuseppico. Poor Maddalena could have told a lot more ... but she's dead, the victim of her devotion to the mistress. So we must track down Peppa la Sarda and Giuseppico. They can't possibly be dead. Weeds never die. They must be holed up some place. Find them, force them to tell the truth. Then carry out justice. The souls of the victims, of Madam Aloisia, the little Don Emanuele, and Maddalena will bless you and finally have peace.'

Andrea's eyes were shining, while waves of emotion washed over his face, and hate and love ebbed and flowed in his trembling voice. A soft murmur followed, as if commenting upon his final words. The Blessed Paulist who had addressed the question about the medal to Andrea stood up then and exclaimed with feeling, 'God is just! God is great! God sent this man to us so that justice may be full and complete. *Dominus pupillum suscipiet, et vias peccatorum disperdet.*'

Andrea did not understand the Latin words, but he guessed they must have referred to the things he had told them. From the emphasis placed on the words, he gathered that there was something he did not know, but that had to be terrible. The Blessed Paulist who had spoken continued, 'I have some news that may be of interest, to which, indeed, I draw this venerable court's attention. The Duke of Motta has welcomed a guest in his home, a young man called Blasco da Castiglione, or at least he is going by that name. This young man was recommended to him by a friar at the friary of the Chiovari, Father Bonaventura da Licodia. He's a valiant young man, and it seems that the duke

keeps him by his side for protection. My information says that he is truly a force to be feared.'

'It's true,' another man said. 'He gave a thrashing to those scoundrel police agents. He was lodging at the inn of the Messinese.'

'Then the leader said, 'We need to find out who he is and where he comes from.' Turning to Andrea, he added, 'Stay on the ready for your orders, which will be communicated by the brother who led you here. In the meantime, don't let anyone know who you are, and don't let anyone see you! The Duke of Motta has unleashed a dog, who immediately started to beat the bushes. You know him. It's Matteo Lo Vecchio. Be on your guard.'

He made a sign. One of those mysterious men blindfolded Andrea again and lead him out. There he found Zi' Rosario by his side, who took him by the hand and guided him back along the same way they had come before. When he arrived near Monte di Pietà, he took the blindfold off Andrea. 'Come on,' he said, 'let's hurry on home.'

They took the same way, without talking. Andrea was overwhelmed by what he had seen, and asked himself what reason that mysterious, terrible court could have for taking an interest in the Duke of Motta's acts of usurpation. It certainly was not to avenge anyone's death. So what was it then? And who were those men whom everyone talked about and no one knew, yet who inspired so much terror in the city, often making the magistrate hesitant and timid when he was about to deliver a sentence?

The sect that spread terror of its acts of justice in Palermo and also Val di Mazaro in those years had branches reaching far and wide, which were known only to the supreme tribunal that governed it. Those affiliated with the sect did not know how many they numbered. Each of the members only knew the comrade who had mysteriously led him there blindfolded, and saw only masked men in front of him. Then the members were watched by the leaders, without knowing it and without the possibility of being on their guard. That made them silent, cautious, faithful, and ready, even for sacrifice.

To the poor, to the weak, the sect presented itself as a formidable protector, and that earned it sympathies and that oblivious, yet deeply powerful, solidarity which made the members feel as if they were never alone, and could count on the help and protection of the common people and the lower middle class.

The masters of the State were the nobles and the clergy, because they

possessed the wealth. All of the official appointments were in their power; the most delicate offices were awarded only to the nobles, who, naturally, due to caste spirit, helped, supported, and protected each other. Whatever violence they might commit, they were sure of impunity. The most serious sentences were limited to exile or forced residence in some castle belonging to a nobleman or to the royal family, where they were lodged and served with all the comforts, and enjoyed the most complete freedom. But the common people and the lower middle class had only poverty and servitude. The law struck them with the most ferocious punishments that the insane severity of those times placed in its hands, not only to punish real cases of guilt, but also to allow the commission of acts of violence and injustice.

The Blessed Paulists appeared to be and were in fact like a moderating force of reaction. They arose to defend and to protect the weak, and to prevent acts of injustice and violence. They were a State within a State, formidable because hidden, terrible because it judged with no appeals, punished with no mercy, struck without fail. And no one knew who its judges and executors of justice were. They seemed to belong to myth more than reality. They were everywhere, they heard everything, they knew everything, but no one knew exactly where they might be, where they gathered. The discharge of their office as guardians and vindicators was revealed by means of warnings, letters that mysteriously arrived. The man they reached knew he had a death sentence hanging over his head.

How did they arise? Where?

A mystery. They had forefathers – those terrible ‘vindicators,’³ who in the times of Arrigo VI and Federico II were spread over the kingdom. Their leader was a nobleman, Adinolfo di Pontecorvo, their proselytes were in the thousands, and their charge was to vindicate the acts of violence suffered by the weak.

But no one ever discovered who the leader of the Blessed Paulists might be, or could ever say if he belonged to this class or another, this caste or another. No trial could ever, in over a quarter of a century, clear up the mystery. Sometimes a man would climb to the gallows, accused of a bloody murder. People said, people thought for sure, that he was a member. But neither torture nor the sight of the gallows could tear the secret out of him. The law cut off a few branches. But the tree remained and sprouted new shoots.

In 1713 the sect was in full force. It seemed filled with fervour about what it perceived as the work of justice, and it was as if the city was overcome by it. The viceroy government, the high court, and the tribunal of the Holy Offices had united together, putting aside their usual quarrels over pre-eminence and prerogatives, in order to eradicate the sect, but to no avail. At the point when the boldest detectives thought they were on their tracks, they mysteriously died.

This was the secret society that Andrea had run into. This was the tribunal he asked for vendetta. And in his imagination he aggrandized those men through their masks, giving them almost extraordinary appearances. If he had been able to hide and to see the faces of those terrible men who, once he had gone, removed their masks, he would have been astonished by the sight of their plain, common features.

The man who was sitting next to the leader and had asked Andrea some questions was Don Girolamo Ammirata.

[Translator's note: With the customary letter that arrives in a cloud of mystery, Blasco da Castiglione has been summoned to a meeting with the Blessed Paulists, after foiling a crucial part of their plan to perform justice. When he refuses to promise not to interfere again, they quite literally lock him in ‘reflection,’ their name for the dank, dark subterranean cell where he is left to think about his position. The secret society's leader suddenly appears at the door, and the following scene ensues.]

Part III, chapter VII

The leader of the Blessed Paulists smiled with a sense of commiseration and said, ‘You are young, inexperienced in many things, even though you’ve lived through plentiful experiences of life’s misfortunes. The death of the Duke of Motta is not our wish. Indeed, whether he lives or dies is all the same to us. We want the title and patrimony to be returned to their legitimate owner. If first we did not take back from him what he stole by murder, the day he fell beneath the sword of our justice the entire patrimony would pass legally and by full right to his young daughter, Violante, and would not return to Emanuele. Emanuele would remain the victim of a civil death. He would be nothing other than an anonymous nephew of Don Girolamo Ammirata and the theft, the bloodstained robbery, would be sanctioned by

an injustice that would be clad in full legal garb. No, no. We have respected the life of Don Raimondo only so that he himself would recognize Emanuele, and give him back what is his.'

Blasco was thinking about Violante. He could not deny to himself that what the other man wanted was nothing but the most rigorous, exact justice. An orphan has been stripped of everything, and it was necessary to give him back what was his. That was the just, proper thing to do. But Blasco was thinking precisely that this act of restitution meant that another innocent person, Violante, would be stripped of everything and disgraced, which he saw as another injustice. In fact, what fault was it of hers that she was born to that man? What misdeed did she commit to warrant being both deprived of the riches which, from the moment of her birth, she had acquired by right and forced to expiate her father's disgrace? This idea stirred up a smouldering feeling of rebellion. Yet he did not dare deny the justice of the Blessed Paulists.

'For the love of justice, we shouldn't be unjust.'

'Toward whom?'

'Toward a person bearing no guilt.'

'What is a man compared to a right that is violated? What is a human life compared to justice that moves straight along its path? So much the worse for those who put themselves across its path. It must go forward, and will crush those it encounters. An innocent is crying? That person's tears compensate those of other innocent people who have cried before. Justice must not have mercy. It must not consider the consequences. Too many tears have been shed. A beautiful, rich, young woman was struck by an atrocious grief when her husband was stolen from her, while she brought the fruit of his blood into the world. Ensnared in a fatal trap, driven to desperation, she died of terror in a stranger's bed, taken in out of charity. A faithful, devoted maid was murdered. The people who took in the baby, orphaned twice over, who hid him and saved him from death, who performed this admirable act of charity, now live on the run like wolves, hiding, forced to defend their life day by day. Another person moans in prison, suffering the infamy of torture that he does not deserve. Two men, guilty only of gathering the ghastly testimonies about the murder, were sent to the gallows, like two common criminals. What are the tears of one innocent victim compared to the blood of eight victims who were innocent too? Justice must follow its own course. No one will stop it, and you, Blasco da Castiglione, even less than the others!'

Blasco heard those words fall upon his ears one by one, cold, implacable. His sense of reason approved of them, but his heart did not and rebelled. And there was something, even in what he approved of, that bolstered that rebellion.

'Why,' he said, 'why, if you're so convinced of the justice of your cause, do you all hide? Why don't you carry on the fight with your faces out in the open? Do noble causes need to hide in the shadows? Therefore, there is something less than noble that forces you to hide. You don't dare face the light, because you feel the faith in your justice wavering!'

'Oh no!' the leader of the Blessed Paulists sharply interrupted. 'Only our faith in legal justice wavers. Actually, it doesn't waver. We have absolutely no faith in it at all, you should have said. And the shadows? They're necessary. They are our strength and our safety. The king's justice is administered by men who see it not as a duty, but as a source of income. They don't deliberate and recognize each person's right. Instead, they guarantee the right of the strongest people over the weakest. The strong ones are the feudal landholders, the State officials, the nobles, and the clergy. Enveloped in immunity, bristling with privileges, the law in their pockets, they have a right as far as they're concerned, that is not the right of others, of the weak. The magistrates and the laws defend precisely this special, privileged right, which is, on the contrary, an abuse and injustice for the masses of the weak, the majority of the people. A knight who kills someone finds in that right and in those magistrates a compassion and tolerance that would appear unshakable. One of the common people who commits the same crime dies on the gallows with great fanfare! A nobleman can take things from his vassal – his livestock, his weapons, his horse – just because he is a vassal. And the nobleman's right allows him to do it. This same right sends that vassal to the gallows if he dares to steal a stack of his master's wheat or a lamb. And this is called justice!'

'A poor widow owes money. The creditor can take away her home and throw her out in the middle of the street, and justice gives him a strong hand. In contrast, a nobleman can thrash his creditors and even have them put in prison, and he finds magistrates who deem that this is in conformity with the law. And this too is called justice! Don Raimondo can murder, steal, suppress, and still merit encomiums and rewards, and be placed in a position to administer justice. Don Girolamo Ammirata, who is defending one of the weak, must hide instead, according to the law, so he won't lose his life. And this too is called

justice! It is the justice of the State. It is justice according to the laws written for the benefit of the strongest. But this justice is the most monstrous iniquity of all!

'Our justice is not written in any royal constitution, but it is carved in our hearts. We observe it and force others to observe it. We don't have any soldiers, guards, henchmen, corporals. We don't pay judges. We don't search through the legal codes for frivolous arguments to co-create an honest appearance for injustice. We open our ears and hearts to the voices of the weak, of people who don't have the strength to break the tightly woven net of domination in which they struggle in vain, of people who thirst for justice and ask for it in vain, and suffer.

'Who recognizes our authority? No one. Who recognizes our right to administer justice? No one. Well then, we must impose this authority and this right, and we have only one weapon – terror – and one means to make use of it – mystery, shadows. We don't hide out of cowardice, but out of necessity. The shadows multiply our troops and rouse the faith of those who invoke our protection. A person who wouldn't dare appeal to a legal magistrate to defend himself, his home, the honour of his women, because the appeal would expose him to the wrath, retaliation, and vendettas of the baron or the abbot, in the shadows willingly confides his pain and the violence suffered. A man whom he doesn't see, doesn't know, receives his complaint. We see if he's right. A mysterious warning reaches the domineering malefactor in his own mansion, and the colluding magistrate at his court bench. Do they heed it? We seek nothing more. Do they scorn the warning, and commit further acts of domination, repeating the offence? We punish them and vindicate the offence. No one sees the arm of punishment, no one can escape it. This is our justice. It has never punished an innocent person, and has dried many tears.'

Blasco listened to him in ever-growing amazement. The man became more and more inflamed as he spoke. It seemed as if all of the injustices were passing right before his eyes, injustices that were permitted and fomented by an old social constitution in which human will had taken the place of justice, and by feeble jurisprudence, obstructed by prerogatives, privileges, exemptions, and differences between magistrates or courts. He continued, his voice full of emotion, 'Why don't you, valiant, brave, loyal, and generous as you are, enter the thick of life in the city and in the lands of the barons, as I have? Oh, you'd see how many tears, how much blood, how many acts of infamy it's made of. Then you'd think that not just one of these tribunals but

a hundred of them would be necessary to prevent the abuses of power, the violence, and villainous acts of the powerful. I know all of life's miseries. I've penetrated the dens of the peasants, real flocks of slaves bent beneath the blows. I've penetrated the houses of artisans, who barely eke out a living. I've seen the poverty people hide in shame, waiting for nighttime to search through the garbage for a piece of stale bread, a bone, or an apple core. I've seen every kind of human suffering and a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand mouths sobbing and begging for justice! And so I called men of good will together around me, and told them, "We shall defend the weak and the poor!"

'Until the world has changed, while there are still privileged men on one side for whom everything is permitted, with the laws made for their benefit, and men on the other side, condemned to suffer all the wilful acts and all the violent deeds, it is necessary to create a force that opposes, stops, and prevents these wilful acts. It is like a balance of forces. And it's not anything new. Do you perhaps believe that the Blessed Paulists just now came into being? Are you familiar with the history? At the time of Emperor Federico, Adinolfo di Ponte Corvo founded the society of the Vindicators. Its intentions were not different from ours. The Blessed Paulists descend from the *Vindicators*. The Blessed Paulists are centuries old. Sometimes they slumber. Then suddenly, when they've had all they can stand, they awaken. We will die and then others will come after us, because the weak will always need people who protect them, people who defend them. You yourself, Balsco da Castiglione, with all of your courage, with all of your valour, are one of the weak.'

'Me?'

'You're alone, and so you are weak. You're a seed tossed into a field by a baron's caprice and domineering will. Without a name, without a future, you're exposed by your very nature to other domineering men's persecution, forced to hide like a bandit. Perhaps you'd already be dead by now if a hidden, vigilant force hadn't protected you, if we didn't see in you the man who could be the strongest pillar of the sect.'

'Oh no! Never!' yelled Blasco.

'Don't be over hasty!' the leader of the Blessed Paulists coldly replied. 'You've rendered more than one service to our tribunal without even knowing it, though sometimes we were forced to be severe. Even this time, despite your refusal, you've served us.'

'Me?'

'Yes, you. By accepting our invitation.'

'How?'

'But don't you realize that we've eliminated you? Don't you realize you're leaving us an open field?'

He took a watch out of his vest pocket, looked at the time, and added, 'It's already eight o'clock in the evening. At this hour, the Duchess of Motta and Violante are travelling far away.'

'Oh, good Lord!' yelled Blasco, drawing a pistol from his pocket. 'Tell me you're lying!'

'I'm not lying! The duchess and her daughter were put on a boat an hour ago, on my orders.'

'Scoundrel!' yelled Blasco, and he fired the pistol.

The shot thundered in the cavern and smoke filled the air. A laugh replied. Blasco watched in amazement as the leader of the Blessed Paulists yelled loudly towards the door, 'It's nothing! Get away from the door, everyone!' Then he bent down and picked something up off the ground. Holding it out to the young man, he said calmly, 'My good young man, choose some different bullets. These ones, you see, get dented. Farewell!'

He started to leave, but Blasco blocked his way, saying, 'You won't leave this room until I rip off your mask. I want to look you in the face. I want to know that when I tell you you're a coward, my words will strike your skin and not be broken by that artificial face.'

'Is it really so important for you to know who I am?'

'Yes!'

'I could save you the trouble of taking off my mask, but it's useless. You know me.'

'The mask! The mask!'

'Well then, yes. It's better that way. There.' With a quick wave of his hand he removed the black mask from his face.

'Coriolano!' yelled Blasco, 'Coriolano!'

His arms fell to his sides, his voice grew weak, and he felt his knees giving out.

'You! You! You!' he said over and over again despairingly.

'Yes, it is I. What are you so surprised about? You should have suspected it. Me, the person you aimed and shot at!'

Blasco bowed his head, not knowing what to reply. His heart was torn and troubled by two different, conflicting thoughts that could be summed up with two names: Violante and Coriolano.

'What have you done? And what have I done?' he murmured in a

voice of unspeakable pain. Then, changing his tone and holding his other pistol out to Coriolano, he added with feverish exaltation, 'Kill me! I beg you, kill me!'

'Why? What's gotten into you? What you did is, I would say, legitimate, as is what I'm doing. I don't bear you a grudge. In your place, I'd have done the same thing. Shake my hand.'

He was forced to reach out for Blasco's hand, and take it in his. Then Blasco, overcome by emotion, burst into sobs, murmuring, 'Oh Violante! Violante!' There was such deep pain in that wail that Coriolano della Floresta was shaken.

'What are you afraid of?' he said. 'I swear on my honour that she doesn't run any danger. Not a hair on her head will be touched. But we need her. Emanuele must be freed and put somewhere he'll be safe from any possible attempt on his life. We won't achieve this without keeping Don Raimondo della Motta's wife and daughter as hostages.'

'And what if he doesn't give in?' asked Blasco with trepidation.

Coriolano was silent for a while.

'Aren't you going to answer me?'

'It would be very serious,' replied the Chevalier della Floresta.

'Aha! Then you see that your promise is subordinated to ...'

'No. I swore on my honour that neither the young woman nor the duchess will suffer the slightest violence, except for the restrictions on their freedom. They will be shut up inside a castle, but treated with all of the regard due their station.'

Blasco seemed tormented by some thought. After a moment of silence, he said, 'What if I were to guarantee not only Emanuele's freedom, but also the recognition of his station and the restitution of his title and patrimony?'

'You, Blasco?' the Chevalier della Floresta exclaimed, stupefied.

'Yes, me. If I were to guarantee this, would you have any difficulty entrusting me with the two women of the House of Albamonte?'

'Make sure you understand the obligation you're assuming, Blasco!'

'I know what I'm saying.'

'Then do you have the power to do this?' asked Coriolano with a penetrating look.

'I do.'

He spoke the words with such certainty that Coriolano looked at him with growing astonishment. What could make Blasco so sure of it? Had he perhaps become close with Donna Gabriella again, and was thinking of making use of her to succeed? He did not think that could

be enough to give the young man such a sense of certainty, because Don Raimondo had never let his wife lead him along by the nose. So what was there? It was not necessary to refuse Blasco's proposal, but he did not believe he could entirely agree to it either. There was only one course to take.

'Do you want a truce?' he asked.

'We could even have a truce ...'

'For how long?'

'The time it takes to go to Turin and come back.'

'Spare yourself the trip. The Duke of Motta will be coming here instead.'

'He'll be coming here?'

'In fifteen days, twenty at the most, he'll know his family is in our power.'

'And during all this time, what of that poor young creature?'

'She won't suffer the slightest discomfort. I told you.'

Blasco bent his head, thinking about Violante, and a painful sense of dismay wrung his heart. His voice mixed with regret, pain, and anger, he murmured, 'Oh why, why is it you standing in front of me, and not an enemy, or even a stranger?'

Coriolano smiled and put his mask back on, saying seriously, 'Blasco, here inside, just two men have seen my face – you and Don Girolamo Ammirata. No one else. Those twenty brothers who are in the other room know only this mask, even though they are the leading members of the society. For the other members, I'm a myth. Neither in here nor outside of here, not even when we are alone, may the slightest hint of this escape your lips!'

'Do you want me to promise my most scrupulous silence?'

'No, I know you. Now, wait here until I send someone to get you. And most important of all, obey me.'

He went out, leaving the young man overwhelmed by a thousand ideas, a thousand feelings, that churned in his mind and disturbed him to the core of his being. The tribunal of the Blessed Paulists was still assembled. The men had laid down their masks for a moment and were talking among themselves. A few of them standing tightly around Don Girolamo Ammirata were having him tell all the details about how the attempted kidnapping of Violante had ended in vain. He had had a narrow escape. But Andrea had been stabbed. If the sword had struck him an inch lower, it would have sent him to his maker.

'That young man is some devil, I'm telling you ...'

At that moment, Coriolano went back into the crypt and complete silence fell all at once. Everyone put their masks back on and took their places again. The Chevalier della Floresta said, 'We have a new brother. May each one of you help him and protect him if you see he's in danger.'

A moment later, Blasco was taken into the room again. Caught unawares by Coriolano's invitation, he had to swear his loyalty and silence, according to the oath. One by one, each of the brothers went up to him and embraced him, then pierced his own arm and made the sign of a small cross on Blasco's forehead with the drop of blood. They went back to their places, and the report on deeds and complaints that they had gathered began. Misery cried out through the mouths of those men, whose masks made them immobile, and impassible as marble. Most of the complaints were about the collection of the 'donation' deliberated by Parliament, which, as usual, burdened only the common people. One hundred thousand scudi⁴ was the tax burden on milling wheat. The city states had another tax burden of nearly one hundred thousand scudi. Forty thousand was the burden on Palermo, one hundred thirty thousand on the merchants, and twenty thousand on the clerks. In contrast, the barons had a tax burden of only fifty thousand scudi, and the clergy, less than seven thousand. So the taxes paid by the owners of all of the land and all of the wealth in the kingdom, the nobility and the clergy, did not amount to even one-third of what the have-nots were forced to pay. And the owners wrung this light contribution out of the peasants' blood by means of their officials, overseers, and strong-arm henchmen, using every kind of oppression. An entire history of cases of extortion, kidnapping, seizures of collateral, forced property sales that turned the poor people out of house and home, for they could not pay for themselves or the money owed by the baron and the convent for which he was vassal, passed mournfully time after time through the crypt, which seemed shut off from the world. There were also complaints against bloodsucking money-lenders, judges who gave in to friendships or corruption, inhuman and greedy officials, who tried to wring something more out of the victims, for their own profit.

Blasco listened, and out of his dismay he felt an emptiness well up inside him. Life appeared in a very different light and an entire world he had never suspected materialized before his eyes. And Parliament,

which assembled with so much solemn pomp and seemed to be the defence and guarantee of the kingdom and the object of everyone's jealousy, now appeared to be the accomplice in all the plundering.

It was almost morning when the tribunal adjourned its session. The Blessed Paulists went out one at a time, mysteriously vanishing in the shadow of a passageway. When everyone was outside, Coriolano said to Blasco, 'Let's go.'

But instead of following the same path the others had taken, he lead Blasco down a passage with a small, secret door that opened onto a stairway. On the landing, an oil lamp burned in front of a Madonna painted on slate. Blasco noticed that though he had had to go down when he had entered the first time, now, as they left, instead of going back up they were going down again. At the end of the stairway was a wide vestibule, closed off by a main door. Coriolano took a key out of his pocket and opened the small, low wicket. He went out first and then had Blasco follow, and shut the door again.

'You see,' he said smiling, 'we're under the protection of the law. This house we've come out of belongs to a judge.'

In fact, it was Judge Baldi's house, on the street that leads from San Cosmo to Capo.

NOTES

- 1 Vittorio Amedeo di Savoia entered Palermo on 10 October 1713 to take possession of the Kingdom of Sicily, conceded by Filippo V following the Treaty of Utrecht.
- 2 Zi' is an abbreviated form of *zio*, literally meaning uncle, but often used as an informal title of respect in parts of southern Italy.
- 3 The *vindicosi*, or vindicators, are described as a historical sect by Francesco Maria Emanuele e Gaetani Villabianca (1720–1802) in his *Diari palermitani* (Palermo diaries). According to this author, they may date back to 1185.
- 4 A scudo was a large silver or gold coin used at the time. This form of currency varied in appearance and value according to the region of Italy in which it circulated and the historical period.