

**THE
CONSCRIPT MOTHER**

BY
Robert Herrick



“Five minutes at the most I had with him there by the side of the highroad....”

**THE
CONSCRIPT MOTHER**

I

WHEN I met the signora at the tram station that May morning she was evidently troubled about something which was only partly explained by her murmured excuse, "a sleepless night." We were to cross the Campagna to one of the little towns in the Albanian hills, where young Maironi was temporarily stationed with his regiment. If we had good luck and happened upon an indulgent officer, the mother might get sight of her boy for a few minutes. All the way over [Pg 2]the flowering Campagna, with the blue hills swimming on the horizon before us, the signora was unusually taciturn, seemingly indifferent to the beauty of the day, and the wonderful charm of the Italian spring, to which she was always so lyrically responsive on our excursions. When a great dirigible rose into the blue air above our heads, like a huge silver fish, my companion gave a slight start, and I divined what was in her mind—the imminence of war, which had been threatening to engulf Italy for many months. It was that fear which had destroyed her customary gayety, the indomitable cheerfulness of the true Latin mother that she was.

"It is coming," she sighed, glancing up at the dirigible. "It will not be long now before we shall know—only a few days."

And to the ignorant optimism of my protest she smiled sadly, with the fatalism that women acquire in countries of conscription. It was futile to combat with mere theory and logic this conviction of a mother's heart. Probably the signora had

overheard some significant word which to her sensitive intelligence was more real, more positive than all the subtle reasonings at the Consulta. The sphinx-like silence of ministers and diplomats had not been broken: there was nothing new in the "situation." The newspapers were as wordily empty of fact as ever. And yet this morning for the first time Signora Maironi seemed convinced against her will that war was inevitable.

These last days there had been a similar change in the mood of the Italian public, not to be fully explained by any of the rumors flying about Rome, by the sudden exodus of Germans and Austrians, by anything other than that mysterious sixth sense which enables humanity, like wild animals, to apprehend unknown dangers. Those whose lives and happiness are at stake seem to divine before the blow falls what is about to happen.... For the first time I began to believe that Italy might really plunge into the deep gulf at which her people had so long gazed in fascinated suspense. There are secret signs in a country like Italy, where much is hidden from the stranger. Signora Maironi knew. She pointed to some soldiers waiting at a station and observed: "They have their marching-kit, and they are going north!"

We talked of other things while the tram crept far up above the Campagna and slowly circled the green hillsides, until we got down at the dirty little gray town of Genzano, where Enrico Maironi's regiment had been sent. There were no barracks. The soldiers were quartered here and there in old stone buildings. We could see their boyish faces at the windows and the gray uniform of the *granatieri* in the courtyards. It seemed a hopeless task to find the signora's boy, until a young lieutenant

to whom the mother appealed offered to accompany us in our search. He explained that the soldiers had to be kept shut up in their quarters because they were stoned by the inhabitants when they appeared on the streets. They were a tough lot up here in the hills, he said, and they were against the war. That was why, I gathered, the grenadiers had been sent thither from Rome, to suppress all “demonstrations” that might embarrass the government at this moment.

The citizens of Genzano certainly looked ugly. They were dirty and poor, and scowled at the young officer. The little town, for all its heavenly situation, seemed dreary and sad. The word “*socialismo*” scrawled on the stone walls had been half erased by the hand of authority. War meant to these people more taxes and fewer men to work the fields.... The young lieutenant liked to air his French; smoking one of the few good cigars I had left, he talked freely while we waited for Enrico to emerge from the monastery where we finally located him. It would be war, of course, he said. There was no other way. Before it might have been doubtful, but now that the Germans had been found over in Tripoli and German guns, too, what could one do? Evidently the lieutenant welcomed almost anything that would take the grenadiers from Genzano!

Then Enrico came running out of the great gate, as nice a looking lad of nineteen as one could find anywhere, even in his soiled and mussed uniform, and Enrico had no false shame about embracing his mother in the presence of his officer and of the comrades who were looking down on us enviously from the windows of the old monastery. The lieutenant gave the boy

three hours' liberty to spend with us and, saluting politely, went back to the post.

With Enrico between us we wandered up the hill toward the green lake in the bowl of the ancient crater. Signora Maironi kept tight hold of her lad, purring over him in French and Italian—the more intimate things in Italian—turning as mothers will from endearment to gentle scolding. Why did he not keep himself tidier? Surely he had the needles and thread his sister Bianca had given him the last time he was at home. And how was the ear? Had he carried out the doctor's directions? Which it is needless to say Enrico had not. The signora explained to me that the boy was in danger of losing the hearing of one ear because of the careless treatment the regimental doctor had given him when he had a cold. She did not like to complain of the military authorities: of course they could not bother with every little trouble a soldier had in a time like this, but the loss of his hearing would be a serious handicap to the boy in earning his living....

It seemed that Enrico had not yet breakfasted, and, although it was only eleven, I insisted on putting forward the movable feast of continental breakfast, and we ordered our *colazione* served in the empty garden of the little inn above the lake. While Enrico ate and discussed with me the prospects of war, the signora looked the boy all over again, feeling his shoulders beneath the loose uniform to see whether he had lost flesh after the thirty-mile march from Rome under a hot sun. It was much as an American mother might examine her offspring after his first week at boarding-school, only more intense. And Enrico was very much like a clean, hearty, lovable schoolboy,

delighted to be let out from authority and to talk like a man with another man. He was confident Italy would be in the war—oh, very sure! And he nodded his head at me importantly. His captain was a capital fellow, really like a father to the men, and the captain had told them—but he pulled himself up suddenly. After all, I was a foreigner, and must not hear what the captain had said. But he let me know proudly that his regiment the *granatieri* of Sardinia, had received the promise that they would be among the first to go to the front. The mother's fond eyes contracted slightly with pain.

After our breakfast Enrico took me into the garden of the old monastery where other youthful grenadiers were loafing on the grass under the trees or writing letters on the rough table among the remains of food. Some of the squad had gone to the lake for a swim; I could hear their shouts and laughter far below. Presently the signora, who had been barred at the gate by the old Franciscan, hurried down the shady path.

"I told him," she explained, "that he could just look the other way and avoid sin. Then I slipped through the door!"

So with her hand on her recaptured boy we strolled through the old gardens as far as the stable where the soldiers slept. The floor was littered with straw, which, with an overcoat, Enrico assured me, made a capital bed. The food was good enough. They got four cents a day, which did not go far to buy cigarettes and postage-stamps, but they would be paid ten cents a day when they were at war!...

At last we turned into the highroad arched with old trees that led down to the tramway. Enrico's leave was nearly over. All

the glory of the spring day poured forth from the flowering hedges, where bees hummed and birds sang. Enrico gathered a great bunch of yellow heather, which his mother wanted to take home. "Little Bianca will like it so much when she hears her brother picked it," she explained. "Bianca thinks he is a hero already, the dear!"

When we reached the car-tracks we sat on a mossy wall and chatted. In a field across the road an old gray mare stood looking steadfastly at her small foal, which was asleep in the high grass at her feet. The old mare stood patiently for many minutes without once cropping a bit of grass, lowering her head occasionally to sniff at the little colt. Her attitude of absorbed contemplation, of perfect satisfaction in her ungainly offspring made me laugh—it was so exactly like the signora's. At last the little fellow woke, got somehow on his long legs, and shaking a scrubby tail went gambolling off down the pasture, enjoying his coltish world. The old mare followed close behind with eyes only for him.

"Look at him!" the signora exclaimed pointing to the ridiculous foal. "How nice he is! Oh, how beautiful youth always is!"

She looked up admiringly at her tall, handsome Enrico, who had just brought her another bunch of heather. The birds were singing like mad in the fields; some peasants passed with their laden donkeys; I smoked contemplatively, while mother and son talked family gossip and the signora went all over her boy again for the fourth time.... Yes, youth is beautiful, surely, but there seemed something horribly pathetic about it all in spite of the loveliness of the May morning.

The three hours came to an end. Enrico rose and saluted me formally. He was so glad to have seen me; I was very good to bring his mother all the way from Rome; and he and the comrades would much enjoy my excellent cigarettes. “*A riverderci!*” Then he turned to his mother and without any self-consciousness bent to her open arms....

When the signora joined me farther down the road she was clear-eyed but sombre.

“Can you understand,” she said softly, “how when I have him in my arms and think of all I have done for him, his education, his long sickness, all, all—and what he means to me and his father and little Bianca—and then I think how in one moment it may all be over for always, all that precious life—O God what are women made for!... We shall have to hurry, my friend, to get to the station.”

I glanced back once more at the slim figure just going around the bend of the road at a run, so as not to exceed his leave—a mere boy and such a nice boy, with his brilliant, eager eyes, so healthy and clean and joyous, so affectionate, so completely what any mother would adore. And he might be going “up north” any day now to fight the Austrians.

“Signora,” I asked, “do you believe in war?”

“They all say this war has to be,” she said dully. “Oh, I don’t know!... It is a hard world to understand!... I try to remember that I am only one of hundreds of thousands of Italian women.... I hope I shall see him once more before they take him away. My God!”

That afternoon the expert who had been sent to Rome by a foreign newspaper to watch the critical situation carefully put down his empty teacup and pronounced his verdict:

“Yes, this time it looks to me really like war. They have gone too far to draw back. Some of them think they are likely to get a good deal out of the war with a small sacrifice—everybody likes a bargain, you know!... Then General Cadorna, they say, is a very ambitious man, and this is his chance. A successful campaign would make him.... But I don’t know. It would be quite a risk, quite a risk.”

Yes, I thought, quite a risk for the conscript mothers!

II

The politician came to Rome and delivered his prudent advice, and the quiescent people began to growl. The ministers resigned: the public growled more loudly.... During the turbulent week that followed, while Italy still hesitated, I saw Enrico Maironi a number of times. Indeed, his frank young face with the sparkling black eyes is mingled with all my memories of those tense days when the streets of Rome were vocal with passionate crowds, when soldiers barred the thoroughfares, and no one knew whether there would be war with Austria or revolution.

One night, having been turned out of the Café Nazionale when the troops cleared the Corso of the mob that threatened the Austrian embassy, I wandered through the agitated city until I found myself in the quarter where the Maironis lived, and called at their little home to hear if they had had news of the boy. There was light in the dining-room, though it was long past the hour when even the irresponsible Maironis took their irregular dinner. As I entered I could see in the light of the single candle three faces intently focused on a fourth—Enrico's, with a preoccupation that my arrival scarcely disturbed. They made me sit down and hospitably opened a fresh bottle of wine. The boy had just arrived unexpectedly, his regiment having been recalled to Rome that afternoon. He was travel-stained, with a button off his military coat which his sister was sewing on while he ate. He looked tired but excited, and his brilliant

eyes lighted with welcome as he accepted one of my Turkish cigarettes with the air of a young worldling and observed:

“You see, it *is* coming—sooner than we expected!”

There was a note of boyish triumph in his voice as he went on to explain again for my benefit how his captain—a really good fellow though a bit severe in little things—had let him off for the evening to see his family. He spoke of his officer exactly as my own boy might speak of some approved schoolmaster. Signor Maironi, who in his post at the war office heard things before they got into the street, looked very grave and said little.

“You are glad to have him back in Rome, at any rate!” I said to the signora.

She shrugged her shoulders expressively.

“Rome is the first step on a long journey,” she replied sombrely.

The silent tensivity of the father’s gaze, fastened on his boy, became unbearable. I followed the signora, who had strolled through the open door to the little terrace and stood looking blankly into the night. Far away, somewhere in the city, rose a clamor of shouting people, and swift footsteps hurried past in the street.

“It will kill his father, if anything happens to him!” she said slowly, as if she knew herself to be the stronger. “You see he chose the grenadiers for Enrico because that regiment almost never leaves Rome: it stays with the King. And now the King is going to the front, they say—it will be the first of all!”

“I see!”

“To-night may be his last time at home.”

“Perhaps,” I said, seeking for the futile crumb of comfort, “they will take Giolitti’s advice, and there will be no war.”

Enrico, who had followed us from the dining-room, caught the remark and cried with youthful conviction: “That Giolitti is a traitor—he has been bought by the Germans!”

“Giolitti!” little Bianca echoed scornfully, arching her black brows. Evidently the politician had lost his popularity among the youth of Italy. Within the dining-room I could see the father sitting alone beside the candle, his face buried in his hands. Bianca caressed her brother’s shoulder with her cheeks.

“I am going, too!” she said to me with a little smile. “I shall join the Red Cross—I begin my training to-morrow, eh, *mamma mia?*” And she threw a glance of childish defiance at the signora.

“Little Bianca is growing up fast!” I laughed.

“They take them all except the cripples,” the signora commented bitterly, “even the girls!”

“But I am a woman,” Bianca protested, drawing away from Enrico and raising her pretty head. “I shall get the hospital training and go up north, too—to be near ’Rico.”

Something surely had come to the youth of this country when girls like Bianca Maironi spoke with such assurance of going forth from the home into the unknown.

“*Sicuro!*” She nodded her head to emphasize what I suspected had been a moot point between mother and daughter. The signora looked inscrutably at the girl for a little while, then said quietly: “It’s ’most ten, Enrico.”

The boy unclasped Bianca’s tight little hands, kissed his mother and father, gave me the military salute ... and we could hear him running fast down the street. The signora blew out the sputtering candle and closed the door.

“I am going, too!” Bianca exclaimed.

The poet was coming to Rome. After the politician, close on his heels, the poet, fresh from his triumph at the celebration of Quarto, where with his flaming allegory he had stirred the youth of Italy to their depths! A few henchmen, waiting for the leader’s word, had met Giolitti; all Rome, it seemed to me, was turning out to greet the poet. They had poured into the great square before the terminus station from every quarter. The packed throng reached from the dark walls of the ancient baths around the splashing fountain, into the radiating avenues, and up to the portico of the station itself, which was black with human figures. It was a quiet, orderly, well-dressed crowd that swayed back and forth, waiting patiently hour after hour—the train was very late—to see the poet’s face, to hear, perhaps, his word of courage for which it thirsted.

There were soldiers everywhere, as usual. I looked in vain for the familiar uniform of the *granatieri*, but the gray-coated boyish figures seemed all alike. In the midst of the press I saw the signora and Bianca, whose eyes were also wandering after the soldiers.

“You came to welcome D’Annunzio?” I queried, knowing the good woman’s prejudices.

“Him!” the signora retorted with curling lip. “Bianca brought me.”

“Yes, we have been to the Red Cross,” the girl flashed.

“Rome welcomes the poet as though he were royalty,” I remarked, standing on tiptoe to sweep with a glance the immense crowd.

“*He* will not go to the front—he will just talk!”

“Enrico is here somewhere,” Bianca explained. “They told us so at the barracks. We have looked all about and mamma has asked so many officers. We haven’t seen him since that first night. He has been on duty all day in the streets, doing *pichett ’armato*, ... I wish Giolitti would go back home. If he doesn’t go soon, he’ll find out!”

Her white teeth came together grimly, and she made a significant little gesture with her hand.

“Where’s mamma?”

The signora had caught sight of another promising uniform and was talking with the kindly officer who wore it.

“His company is inside the station,” she explained when she rejoined us, “and we can never get in there!”

She would have left if Bianca had not restrained her. The girl wanted to see the poet. Presently the night began to fall, the still odorous May night of Rome. The big arc-lamps shone

down upon the crowded faces. Suddenly there was a forward swaying, shouts and cheers from the station. A little man's figure was being carried above the eager crowd. Then a motor bellowed for free passage through the human mass. A wave of song burst from thousands of throats, Mameli's "L'Inno." A little gray face passed swiftly. The poet had come and gone.

"Come!" Bianca exclaimed, taking my hand firmly and pulling the signora on the other side. And she hurried us on with the streaming crowd through lighted streets toward the Pincian hill, in the wake of the poet's car. The crowd had melted from about the station and was pouring into the Via Veneto. About the little fountain of the Tritone it had massed again, but persistent Bianca squirmed through the yielding figures, dragging us with her until we were wedged tight in the mass nearly opposite the Queen Mother's palace.

The vast multitude that reached into the shadow of the night were cheering and singing. Their shouts and songs must have reached even the ears of the German ambassador at the Villa Malta a few blocks away. The signora had forgotten her grenadier, her dislike of the poet, and for the moment was caught up in the emotion of the crowd. Bianca was singing the familiar hymn.... Suddenly there was a hush; light fell upon the upturned faces from an opened window on a balcony in the Hotel Regina. The poet stood forth in the band of yellow light and looked down upon the dense throng beneath. In the stillness his words began to fall, very slowly, very clearly, as if each was a graven message for his people. And the Roman youth all about me swayed and sighed, seizing each colored

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

