

The Sword of Wealth

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CHAPTER I

THE UNEXPECTED MAN

A WEEK before the day set for her wedding, in a bright hour of early April, Hera rode forth from the park of Villa Barbiondi. Following the margin of the river, she trotted her horse to where the shores lay coupled by a bridge of pontoons—an ancient device of small boats and planking little different from the sort Cæsar’s soldiers threw across the same stream. She drew up and watched the strife going on between the bridge and the current—the boats straining at their anchor-chains and the water rioting between them.

Italy has no lovelier valley than the one where flowed the river on which she looked, and in the gentler season there is no water-course more expressive of serene human character. But the river was tipsy to-day. The springtime sun, in its passages of splendour from Alp to Alp, had set free the winter snows, and Old Adda, flushed by his many cups, frolicked ruthlessly to the sea.

Peasant folk in that part of the Brianza had smiled a few days earlier to see the great stream change its sombre green for an earthy hue, because it was a promise of the vernal awakening. Yet their joy was shadowed, as it always is in freshet days, by dread of the havoc so often attending the spree of the waters.

Time and again Hera had ridden over when the river was in such mood, and known only a keen enjoyment in the adventure.

Now she spoke to Nero, and he went forward without distrust in the hand that guided him; still, the pose of his ears and the quivering nostrils betrayed a preference for roads that neither swayed nor billowed. Less than half the crossing had been accomplished when the crackle of Sundering timber startled her; then events confused themselves strangely amid the rustle of the wind and the scream of the water.

A few paces ahead, at the middle of the stream, where the current's play was fiercest, two pontoons tore free from their anchorage, and here the bridge parted. With her consciousness of this rose the blurred vision of a horse and rider flying over the breach. Then she was aware of the beat of swift-moving hoofs, and, in the next instant, it seemed, of a voice at her side:

"Turn back, signora, I beg of you!"

She brought her horse around, but while she did so there was a second rending of woodwork, a snapping, too, of anchor-chains, and the part of the bridge on which they stood—severed by a new breach from the rest of the structure—began to go with the tide.

It was an odd bark on which they found themselves being swept toward the sea. It consisted of six of the pontoons, held together none too securely by the planking that made the deck.

Round and round it swung, tossed like a chip on the racing flood. The temper of Hera's horse was less equal to the swirling, rocking situation than that of her companion's mount. In vain she tried to quiet him. From side to side of the raft the beast

caracoled or rose with fore legs in the air when she drew him up, perilously near the edge.

“Dismount, dismount!” the other called to her.

Before she could heed the warning Nero began to back near the brink, leaving her powerless to prevent him carrying her into the water. But the stranger had swung out of the saddle. A spring forward and he had Nero by the head in a grip not to be shaken off. The animal’s effort to go overboard was checked, but only for the moment, and when Hera had dismounted her deliverer passed his own bridle-reins to her that he might be free to manage her more restive steed.

“There, there, boy!” he said in the way to quiet a nervous horse. “No fear, no fear. We shall be out of this soon. Patience! Steady, steady!”

A minute and he had Nero under such control that he stood with four hoofs on the deck at one time and balked only fitfully at the restraining hand on the bridle.

Silently Hera watched the man at his task, struck by the calmness with which he performed it. By neither look nor word did he betray to her that fear had any place in his emotions. Swifter the river tossed them onward. Louder their crazy vessel creaked and groaned. But his mastery of himself, his superiority to the terrors that bounded them, his disdain for the hazard of events while he did the needful work of the moment, awoke in her a feeling akin to security. It was as if he lifted her with him above the danger in which the maddest whim of fortune had made them partners.

“Do you see any way out of it?” she asked, presently, following his example of coolness.

He seemed not to hear her voice. With feet set sure and a steady grip on the bridle, he peered into the distance ahead—far over the expanse of violent water, now tinted here and there with rose, caught from the glowing west, where the sun hung low over dark, wooded hills. She wondered what it was that he sought so eagerly, but did not ask. She guessed it had to do with some quickly conceived design for breaking their captivity, and when at length he turned to her she saw in his eye the light of a discovered hope.

“Yes,” he said, “we have a good chance. The current bears us toward the point at the bend of the river. We must pass within a few yards of that if I judge rightly.”

“And then?”

“I shall make use of that,” he answered, pointing to a coil of rope that hung on his saddle-bow.

“What I mean to do is——”

The sound of breaking planks signalled a danger with which he had not reckoned. He saw one of the end pontoons wrench itself free. Hera saw it too, as it bore away to drift alone; and they knew it for a warning grimly clear that all the members of their uncertain bark must part company ere long.

In the silence that fell between them she looked toward the Viadetta bank, where peasants awoke the echoes with their hue and cry. He kept his gaze on the spear of land that marked

the river's sharpest turn. Once or twice he measured with his eye the lessening distance between them and the shore.

"We hold to the right course," he said, confidently. "There will be time."

Piece by piece Hera saw the thing that bore them scatter its parts over the river.

"What shall we do?" she asked, a shudder of fear mingling strangely with trust in him.

At first he made her no answer, but continued to watch the shore as if striving to discern some signal. Another pontoon broke loose, carrying off a part of the deck and leaving the rest of the planks it had supported hanging in the water. The sound of the breaking timbers did not make him turn his head. When at last he faced her it was to speak in tones all at odds with their desperate state.

"See the Old Sentinel!" he exclaimed, gleefully. "He shall save us!"

Not far to the south she could see the projecting land, a flat place and bare except for some carved stones lying there in a semblance of order—the bleached ruins, in fact, of a temple raised by one of her ancestors. The wash of ages had brought the river much nearer than it was in the days of that rude conqueror, and one stone, bedded deep in the mould, stood erect at the water's edge. Its base was hidden, but enough remained above ground to tell what part it had played in architecture—a section of a rounded column. Brianza folk knew it by the name of the Old Sentinel. Always it had been

there, they told the stranger. Now the magic of the low sun changed it into a shaft of gold. From childhood Hera had known the ancient landmark, and was the more puzzled to divine how it could serve them now.

“Can I help?” she asked, as he turned toward her again.

“Yes,” he answered, quickly. “Hold my horse. Can you manage both?”

“I will try,” she said, moving closer to him.

“We must not lose the horses,” he warned her. “They will be useful in case I—even after we are connected once more with the land.”

She took the other bridle, which he passed to her, and grasped it firmly. Then she saw him lift from the saddle-bow the rope—a lariat of the plainsman’s sort, fashioned of horsehair, light of weight, but stronger than if made of hemp. He gathered it in an orderly coil and made sure of his footing. Now she knew what he was going to attempt, and the desperate chance of the feat came home to her. In a flash she comprehended that upon the success of it their lives depended even if the dismembering raft held together so long. If his aim proved false, if the lariat missed the mark, a second throw might not avail; before he could make it they must be swept past the column of stone.

Calmly he awaited the right moment, which came when their rickety outfit, in the freak of the current, was moving yet toward the land. He poised a second and raised the coil. Twice he swung it in a circle above his head—the horses were watching him—and with a mighty fling sent it over the water.

Steadily it paid out, ring for ring, straight as an arrow's course, until the noose caught the column fairly, spread around it, and dropped to the ground.

"Bravo, Signor Sentinella!" he cried, pulling the line taut. "A good catch!"

"Bravo, Signor—" she amended, pausing for his name.

"Forza is my name," he said, hauling for the shore, hand over hand.

It was work that had to be done quickly. A few seconds and their craft would swing past the column to which it was moored. To haul it back then would mean a tug against the current. In this he knew that no strength of his could avail even if the lariat did not part. His sole chance was to keep the float moving in a slanting line toward land before it should be carried beyond the Sentinel. The bulk of woodwork and pontoons was of great weight, and the task took all the strength he could muster.

"Let me help you," Hera said, seeing that he strained every muscle.

"No, no! Hold the horses! Now is our time. We are in shallow water."

He looped the rope about his right hand, and with this alone held them to the shore. Kneeling on the half-submerged planks at the edge, he leaned over the water, and, with his left hand, passed the end of the lariat under and around a yet staunch timber of the deck. In his teeth he caught the end and held it;

then clutched it again in his free hand, and, with the quick movement of one sure of his knot, made it fast.

“Now for it,” he said, on his feet once more, as their raft, tugging hard at the line, swung around with the current, and another pontoon broke away.

Before she was aware of his purpose he had lifted her into the saddle and mounted his own horse.

“Come along,” he said, cheerfully. “It is only wet feet at the worst,” and he put spur to his horse.

Their animals sprang into the water together just as the lariat snapped, and the raft, set free, went on with the rushing flood. Side by side they splashed their way to the pebbled beach and up to where the ruins of Alboin’s temple reposed.

Before them was a ride in the growing dusk over open lengths of hillside pass and by sylvan roads to Villa Barbiondi. On high the wind blew swiftly; clouds that had lost their lustre raced away, and the shadows fell long on hills that were dull and bare as yet, but soon to be lightened with passionate blossoming. Before her, in the gloaming distance, were glimpses over the trees of her father’s dark-walled house—a grand old villa, impressive by contrast with its trim white neighbours pointing the perspective. Glad to feel solid ground beneath their hoofs once more, the horses galloped away, and their riders let them go. Not until the partial darkness of a grove enclosed them did they slacken speed; there the road wore upward, and the horses of their will came to a walk. Beyond the black stocks and naked boughs the crimson glow of sunset lingered.

“Now that it is past,” Hera said, as if musing, “I see how great was the danger.”

“I think you were alive to it at the time,” he returned in the manner of one who had observed and judged. “You are brave.”

“It was confidence more than bravery,” she told him frankly.

“But you made it easy for me to do my part,” he insisted.

“That was because—well, as I see it now—because there was no moment when I did not feel that we should come out of it all right.”

“Then I must tell you,” he said, “to whom we are indebted for our escape. Somewhere in the woods, the fields, or the highways on the other side of the river is a Guernsey heifer living just now in the joy or sorrow of newly gained freedom. But for that we might not be here in fairly dry clothes.”

They had emerged from the grove, and he pointed toward the opposite shore, where the white buildings of the Social Dairy were still visible, though the twilight was almost gone.

“The heifer was born and bred in our little colony over there,” he went on, “and until an hour ago her world was bounded by its fences. But she jumped our tallest barrier, and I was after her with the lariat when the bridge broke.”

“I admit our debt to the heifer,” she said, laughing. “To her we owe the rope—but not the throwing. I was unaware that anyone short of the American cowboy could wield a lasso so well.”

“It was in America that I got an inkling of the art,” he explained. “Once the life of a California ranchero seemed to me the one all desirable—a dream which I pursued even to the buying of a ranch.”

“And the awakening?” she asked, a little preoccupied. His reference to the Social Dairy had solved for her the riddle of his identity. She knew him now for the leader of a certain radical group in the Chamber of Deputies.

“The awakening came soon enough,” he said. “At the end of two years the gentleman of whom I bought the dream consented to take it back at a handsome profit to himself.”

“Then you paid dearly, I am afraid, for your lessons in lariat throwing.”

“I thought so until to-day,” he replied, turning to meet her eyes.

They rode on at a smarter gait. She had looked into his clear face, and it seemed boyish for one of whom the world heard so much—for the leader of Italy’s most serious political cause. He was, like her, a noble type of the North’s blue-eyed race; only the blood of some dark-hued genitor told in his hair and color, while her massing tresses had the caprice of gold. They came to a hill and the horses walked again.

“My deliverer, it appears, is Mario Forza, the dangerous man,” she said, with a playful accent of dismay.

“Yes; the title is one with which my friends the enemy have honoured me.”

She leaned forward and patted her horse, saying the while:

"I have it in mind from some writer that to dangerous men the world owes its progress."

"Do you believe that?" he asked, seriously.

"Yes; in the way that I understand it. Perhaps I do not get the true meaning of my author."

"One can never be certain of knowing the thought of another," he said.

"True. For example, I am far from certain that I know the thought of your New Democracy—what you are striving to do for Italy. And yet," she added, reflectively, "I think I know."

"Do you understand that we aim to fill our country with true friends—to teach Italy that it is possible for all her children to live and prosper in their own land?"

"Yes," she answered, positively, gladly.

"Then you know the thought of the New Democracy."

Evincing an interest that he felt was not feigned, she asked him how the cause fared, and he told her that among the people it gained, but in Parliament set-backs, discouragements, were almost the rule.

"But you will fight on!" she exclaimed, out of the conviction he gave her of valour.

"Ah, yes; we shall fight on."

The hush of the night's first moments had fallen upon the scene. What light tarried in the west showed the mountain's contour,

but relieved the darkness no longer. Yellow windows studded the lower plains and the woody heights. They could see above the trees the shadowy towers of Villa Barbiondi, and only a little way before them now, but still invisible, stood the gates of the villa park.

They had reached the foot of a sharp rise in the road when two blazing orbs shot over the crest of the hill, bathing horses and riders in a stream of light. A motor car came to a standstill, and the older of the two occupants, a tall man in the fifties, sprang down nimbly.

“Hera! Hera!” he cried. “Heaven be praised!”

As he approached he snatched a mask from his face, and there was her father, Don Riccardo.

“And to think that you are here, all of you, safe as ever!” he exclaimed, caressing her hand. “Ah, my daughter, this is a joyous moment.”

“Yes; all of me saved, *babbo* dear,” she said. “But indeed it came near being the other way.”

“Again Heaven be praised!” said Don Riccardo.

“Heaven and this gentleman,” Hera amended, turning to Mario. “The Honourable Forza—my father.”

“Your hand, sir!” cried Don Riccardo, going around her horse to where Mario stood. “Believe me, you have saved my life as well. My debt to you is so great that I can never hope to pay.”

Mario told him that it was not such a big debt. "In plain truth," he added, "I was obliged to save Donna Hera in order to save myself. So it was the sort of activity, you see, that comes under the head of self-preservation."

"Ah, is it so?" returned Don Riccardo, genially. "Nevertheless, sir, I shall look further into your report of the affair. To-night I shall sound it. In your presence we shall have the testimony of an eyewitness. At least we shall if you will give us your company at dinner, which, by the way, is waiting."

"I am sorry, but to-night I cannot."

"Then to-morrow, or Wednesday, Thursday, Friday?"

"Wednesday I should be glad."

"Good! On Wednesday, then, we shall tarnish your fame for veracity, and, if I mistake not, brighten it for modesty."

The final tones of the sunset's colours had given way to deepest shadow. At Hera's side, listening to her account of the river episode, stood Don Riccardo's companion of the motor car—a dark, bearded man of middle height, whose face was hard and cruel, and seemed the more so in the grim flare of the machine's lamps.

"Signor Tarsis!" Don Riccardo called to him. "Let me present you. The Honourable Forza. Probably you have met."

Tarsis, drawing nearer, gave Mario no more than a half nod of recognition, while he said, in a manner of one merely observing the civilities:

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