

THE MADONNA'S NECKLACE

BY OLIVE M. BRIGGS

WITH A DRAWING BY GEORGE WRIGHT

THEY had just been married—the *capitano* and the youngest daughter of the duchess.

He stood six feet in his cavalry boots, he was about forty, and he had a saber-cut across his left cheek, which gave him a sinister look. For the rest, he was swarthy of complexion, which is common enough in Italy, and a giant all over, which is very uncommon. A man to look twice at; perhaps a man to run away from—who knows?

The youngest daughter of the duchess was just out of the convent. Her experience was bounded by the roses that climbed over the convent wall and the rosary that the nuns had taught her to count every morning and evening, with a prayer for each bead. She knew a little French, she could say her catechism backward, and she could, if she tried, embroider altar-cloths that would put even those in Santa Maria Maggiore to shame; and they are gorgeous, as every one knows. For the rest, she was small, slender, and quite pretty. A girl to look twice at; perhaps a girl to run after—who knows?

They were married. It is strange to be married and not to know your wife. It is stranger still to be married and not to know your husband. The bells had hardly stopped their pealing, the guests were still lingering around the wedding-feast, the priests had barely laid aside their vestments, the candles were still sputtering. Up to the moment before the altar, these two had seen each other just once in all their lives. She belonged to him, so why should he run after her? He belonged to her, so how could she run away from him?

They were married, and they were driving together in his ancestral carriage,

behind his ancestral horses, to his ancestral castle near Frascati, where they were to spend the honeymoon. It was growing dark fast, and the chill came creeping in at the carriage windows, so that the *capitano* gathered his cloak around him; and the youngest daughter of the duchess shivered under her furs. She sat in the right-hand corner and he sat in the left; each as far from the other as the ancestral carriage would permit. They were both thinking, strangely enough, of the same thing—their one and only meeting; only it was not of the same meeting that they were thinking.

The brother of the duchess was also an officer of the Royal Guards, a messmate of the *capitano's*. It happened at the opera. They had been standing together below in the stalls, examining the inmates of each box in turn as they came in; the brother eagerly, the *capitano* indifferently.

"Eccola, at last! Here she comes! Look, Guido—the one to the left."

The *capitano* leveled his opera-glass with the same indifference:

"H'm—where?" he said. "The one in pink—the tall one?"

"No—the *piccola*, the little one in white."

The *piccola* in white—a slip of a thing with a red rose pinned in her girdle, with big, dark eyes, and a baby face. Bah! The *capitano* detested babies. The tall one in pink suited him better. He shrugged his giant shoulders and lowered his opera-glass.

"Well, Guido! How about it?"

"Honored," he said. "Charmed."

What did it matter, after all, pink or white, little or big? He had had forty years of life; now it was his family's



SHE FELL BACKWARD—BACKWARD INTO THE ARMS OF THE ASTONISHED CAPITANO

turn. They were arranging it; they were doing everything. He did not have to lift his little finger. A nod to say that she would do—that was all. He laughed harshly to himself.

"Honored—charmed!"

The thing was done now. The honeymoon was the worst; but the ancestral castle was big, the girl was small. He would kill time shooting. After that, Rome. The ancestral palace on the Corso would hold a regiment, and a *bambina* like that could be tucked away in it and be lost—forgotten. He had almost forgotten already.

The *capitano* opened his eyes for a moment and examined the *piccola* in white in the opposite corner. She seemed to grow smaller as he looked. She seemed to be fairly shrinking out of the carriage. Bah! What a *bambina*!

The ride was interminable. If those louts up at the castle neglected to have dinner ready, hot and smoking, and everything in place, they would hear from him. The *capitano* crossed one leg over the other, and smiled grimly to himself. He was used to having people spring at his word and run at his bidding. If they didn't they always heard from him.

The thoughts of the little *duchessa* were on that other meeting, also the only one. She had never heard about the *capitano* at the opera. She had never noticed the opera-glasses. She was ignorant of the nod. She was thinking of that afternoon out on the Campagna, when, just as the carriage approached the Ponte Molle, there came a scramble of hoofs, a cloud of dust, and two officers had galloped by.

"Look quick, Elena—the *capitano*!"

"Oh, which—the right?"

"No, the left, the one on the black horse."

"What does he look like, *mamma mia*?"

Then they had wheeled their horses sharply at the bridge; she had caught a glimpse of a saber-cut and a scowling, dark face.

"Oh, Madonna!"

"Hush, Elena! They will hear you! Child, for shame! He is quite handsome, they say. Your brother—"

"Oh, Madonna!"

"Coachman, home!" The duchess had drawn herself up in displeasure. "Unless you can control yourself, Elena, you had better return at once to the nuns. I shall speak to the *padre*."

"Oh, Madonna!"

"I shall speak to the *padre* to-night."

II

THE *piccola* in white glanced timidly across the carriage. The light was dim. The *capitano's* gigantic bulk loomed menacingly out of the depths of blackness. Reflections from the carriage-lamps flung alternate light and shadow across his face, with the saber-cut, the strong, square jaw, the heavy brows. She held her breath lest she should scream again. How terrible if she should scream! It was night and she was alone—she was afraid of that black bulk—she was afraid—oh, Madonna!

It was then that the little *duchessa* remembered about the necklace. The Madonna would help her, she knew; and in return she would give her the ruby necklace. The Madonna had many grand necklaces, but nothing half so grand as this. Oh, for her help in this hour of need!

"Our blessed Lady," the *piccola* prayed, "save me from what I fear! I don't know what I fear—but save me! Thou rememberest the ruby necklace which has not its equal in Rome? I vow it to thee, beautiful, divinest Mother of Pity! The next time I go to Rome I will clasp it about thy neck in the Church of the Gesu—I will burn ten francs' worth of candles at all thy altars in Rome! Blessed Virgin, have pity on me—have mercy on me!"

The tears were streaming down the little *duchessa's* face. She was clenching her fingers in the darkness, and clutching at her throat to keep the sobs back—the sobs that would come. Suddenly the carriage gave a lurch and flung her little white form up against the *capitano's* arm. He woke and swore softly to himself.

"What in the name of seven devils? Oh, the *bambina*!" He had forgotten all about the *piccola* in white. "Well, well," he said, "the road is rough. We must be soon there now—I hope it did not hurt you, *duchessa*?"

The *piccola* opened her lips. Not a sound came.

"Ecco!" said the *capitano*. "I thought so. We are here; there are the men. Look out for the torches, Matteo! You, Giovanni, heed the horses! The boxes are on behind. Curse those leaders! Can't they stand still? Go to their bits, some of you fellows! Now, are you ready, *duchessa*? Be careful of the step—allow me!"

In this manner the *capitano* and his lady entered the ancestral castle near Frascati; the torches flickering weird shadows as they walked between them; the stamping of the horses' hoofs making grim music in the courtyard below them.

The castle was a huge, bare, ponderous pile; the hugest, the barest, the most ponderous that the *piccola* had ever seen. The door slammed to behind them—

She belonged to him, so why should he run after her? He belonged to her, so how could she run away from him?

They took dinner in the grand *salle*. In the center was a large square table, covered with ancestral china, and lighted by ancestral candelabra. Ancestral portraits gazed down at them from the fifteenth-century tapestries. A stiff, frock-coated lackey stood behind each chair. In the rest of the enormous space were shadows—nothing but shadows. He was at one end of the table; she at the other end.

Course after course was served, with interminable waits in between. The *piccola* in white clasped and unclasped her hands under the damask napkin. At the convent the girls and the nuns had talked pleasantly together. It was so sweet at the convent! The lip of the little *duchessa* trembled.

"I trust you are not too tired, *duchessa*?"

"Oh, no—no, thanks!"

"You found your maid satisfactory? I gave orders from Rome."

"Yes, yes—everything pleases me—everything!"

"Anything that does not suit you, *duchessa*—"

"So many thanks, *signor capitano*."

Were all the meals to be like this? The *capitano* ate a great deal; the *piccola* in white ate nothing. She toyed with her fork; she took up her spoon and put

it down again; she clasped and unclasped her fingers under the damask.

"Oh, *Madonna mia*—the ruby necklace shall be thine if thou wilt help me!"

The *capitano* escorted his bride through several miles of halls and corridors to the center of the great ancestral salon, which was lighted by a few candles at the far end.

"You will excuse me, *duchessa*?"

"Surely, *signore*."

The *capitano* put his heels together with a click, and bowed from the waist. It was a superb bow. Then he kissed the tips of her cold little fingers—a formal kiss, as he might have kissed the queen herself, or the ring of a cardinal. The curtain fell behind him, and the *piccola* was alone in the dark, lighted by the few candles.

How big it was, and damp, and ghostly! She sank into the depths of a damask chair, a little white blot against the red and the gold. Bah! How musty the red and gold smelled! She sprang up, gazing over her shoulder apprehensively. Had the curtain moved?

What was that dark thing crawling there? She fled, terrified and panting, through the vast halls, down the dim corridors.

"Oh, Sabina, is it you? I was looking for—for my room. Where is my room? I am tired—tired—oh, how tired!"

The *capitano* sat in his fifteenth-century library on the other side of the castle court, and smoked and smoked. It was cheerless in the library. In a corner stood a big desk, littered with papers; on the table were a bottle of Chianti and two photographs, one of Cavour, the other of Garibaldi.

After a while the *capitano* leaned over the table and poured out for himself a glass of the ruddy Chianti. Then he threw his cigar end on the ground, and buried himself over the papers. The clock chimed out twelve—one—two.

He had forgotten all about the *duchessa*.

III

THE days of the honeymoon passed. The *capitano* shot everything there was to shoot in the neighboring wood. The *duchessa* wandered in and out among the stone-pines and the ilex-trees, and fled

through the halls and the corridors, a poor little white *piccola*, frightened at her own shadow. They only met at dinner in the *salle*.

"I trust everything is to your taste, *duchessa*?"

"Yes, yes. I am quite content."

"If there is anything you would like—"

"Nothing, *signor capitano*—nothing at all."

One day the *duchessa* did a wicked thing. She reproached the Madonna.

"*Madre mia*, hast thou no heart? I am dying, I am going mad! Send me back to the convent and the nuns! O blessed one, divine one, the necklace shall be thine if thou wilt help me!"

Then one day she threatened. That is more wicked still.

"I will not give the necklace—no! I will give thee nothing—nothing!"

The *piccola* was fast getting to be a *piccolina*—so little, so white, such great black eyes, such deep, dark shadows!

One day the *capitano* had shot everything there was to be shot; the wood was empty—not a rabbit, not a squirrel, not a bird, not even a field-mouse. Everything was dead. *Diavolo!* What was there to do now? He came back to his ancestral castle, dragging his gun petulantly on the ground behind him, like a boy in a pet. There was a deep frown, like a furrow, down the middle of his forehead.

"*Diavolo! Diavolo!* May the seven devils run away with all honeymoons!"

The *piccola* was in the castle garden, trying to pluck the yellow roses that came creeping from the other side of the wall like the roses in the convent. It was a pity that she was such a *piccolina*. She could have picked them if she had been an inch taller. She stood on her tiptoes; she reached up with her slender arms high above her little upturned head—they were just one inch too high. Oh, how stupid! She wanted them so—the beautiful yellow roses!

She reached again, she stood on tiptoe. Then, suddenly, she lost her balance, she fell backward—backward into the arms of the astonished *capitano*.

The *piccola* looked up at the dark, scarred, frowning, strong-jawed face. The *capitano* looked down at the white

cheeks, the panting mouth, the big, frightened eyes, the dark hair that fell disheveled over the breast of his hunting jacket. He held her; she could not move, or struggle, or call out. He held her fast. He was strong—terribly strong; and she was weak—terribly weak.

"Madonna!"

Then a strange thing happened. It happened before either of them realized it was happening. The *capitano* bent his scowling face and kissed the *piccola* on her panting mouth.

IV

THAT evening the *duchessa* wandered through the halls and the corridors of the ancestral castle as usual, and yet not as usual. She was not trying to find her way; she was trying to find—who knows what? Perhaps she didn't know herself what she was trying to find.

The *capitano* had bowed and left her as usual, bowed from the waist down, with his heels clicked together. The curtain had fallen between them. She had fled, as usual, to the few candles, the red and gold brocaded chair. Bah, how musty it smelled!

Then she had fled away again, up and down the corridors, up a flight of stone stairs, down another flight of stone stairs. She gazed into the dim recesses of an open door; she paused on tiptoe, like a startled fawn; she snatched aside curtains to look behind in the darkness. Always darkness—everywhere darkness.

Where was he? Where could he be?

The *duchessa* was hopelessly lost. She had never been in that part of the castle before, and she was frightened. Her little feet went tip-tap, tip-tap, on the marble floors. She looked like a ghost, so little, so white, so trembling, so elusive and shadowy.

The *capitano* sat at his table all littered with papers, writing busily. Scratch, scratch, went the pen; the papers rustled. Once in a while he uncrossed one leg and crossed the other. There was a frown on his face, and the scar looked deeper than ever.

"*Diavolo*, those papers!"

Suddenly—what was that? *Santa Maria!* What was that?

The little white face of the *duchessa* framed in the curtain stared back at

him. She was clutching her throat with one hand and the curtain with the other. The *capitano* started to his feet. The *duchessa* disappeared.

She belonged to him, so why should he run after her? Yet he ran. He belonged to her, so how could she run away from him? Yet she ran—she ran! Through the halls, along the corridors, up a flight of stone stairs, down another flight of stone stairs, tip-tap went her little feet, and click-clack, bumpety-bump came the sword behind her, close behind her—close!

Suddenly it happened. They hardly knew how it happened. She screamed faintly, and stumbled. "Madonna!" she cried. "Madonna! Madonna!" He was holding her in his arms, on his breast.

"*Piccolina*—little one! *Cara*—dear one! Why did you run?"

"Guido!"

"*Carissima*—dearest one! How you tremble like a little bird!"

"*Guido mio!*"

"Dearest, I love thee! How I love thee!"

"And I love thee!"

The *capitano* bent his head. The *piccola* lifted hers.

"Guido!"

"Elena!"

If you go to the church of the Gesu, to the little chapel of the Madonna, you will see the ruby necklace. It hangs about her neck with all the other necklaces, but it is the most beautiful of all. It has not its equal in all Rome, just as the *piccola* said.

If it hadn't been for the necklace—at least, so said the little wife of the *capitano*; but who knows?

DIVINATION

I HAVE looked into a stream
And have watched a woodland Dream
Slip from out a pebbly cave,
Silently her white limbs lave,
To the surface rise, and float
In a fragile, leaf-sailed boat
Quickly down the tide afar
Toward the sea where sets the star.
Tell me, dweller by the sea,
Did my Dream moor close by thee?

I have looked into a wood
Where an elfin Fancy stood
For a moment, then has flown
Down a path with wild rose blown;
On she went, and on I ran,
Through the fairy haunts of Pan,
Till I met a steep hillside
Where my feet dared not abide.
Tell me, dweller on the crest,
Where do fleeting Fancies rest?

I have looked into the sky
When a Vision wandered by,
Sailing close—so close to earth,
Then afar with mocking mirth;
Darting to the purple clime
Set with lights of vesper-time,
While I followed—followed still
Up the moon-enchanted hill.
Tell me, dweller in a star,
Where the ports of Dreamland are!

Clarence Urmy

CHRISTMAS BEFORE CHRIST

BY HENRY J. MARKLAND

THE ANCIENT WINTER FESTIVALS OF THE JEWS, THE ROMANS,
THE CELTS, AND OTHER RACES, FROM WHOSE RITES AND CUS-
TOMS MOST OF OUR CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS ARE DERIVED

AGES and ages ago, perhaps a hundred centuries or more, when human beings began to record the facts of the physical world, they noted that there was a definite season at which the short days of winter began to lengthen, and the long, grim nights to grow more brief. This was the time of the winter solstice, in December, when the sun turns in its apparent course among the stars, and seems slowly to return, with its radiant light and vivifying heat. And although, as the old weather maxim has it, "When the days begin to lengthen, the cold begins to strengthen," men knew that the power of stern winter had been broken, and that soon would come the springtime, thrilling the earth with new life, causing the seed to swell and the buds to burgeon, and suffusing all created things with the fresh joy of vigorous youth.

All over the world, then, this moment of transition was watched for eagerly; and when it came it was welcomed with merrymaking and with a sort of symbolism which belonged to the nature-worship of the primitive peoples—east, west, north, and south alike. These peoples had, in most instances, no knowledge of one another, yet they all had marked the time when the life of the world was about to be renewed.

Thus the Jews, on what is now December 25, held their great feast of Hanukkah, the Festival of the Lights, every house or hut or tent blazing with rude torches or clustered lamps. These were meant to welcome the renewal of light and heat from the returning sun, and the custom goes back farther than

recorded history. Its early significance became in part forgotten, so that in the second century before Christ it was revived and made to have a new significance; yet it is in reality the infinitely ancient greeting to the sun.

In much the same way the Egyptians celebrated the same season, and it is a curious and interesting fact that they chose for its symbol a new-born child, since at that time another year was born, and it was the period when Nature began to give birth to the new plants and grain and blossoms.

IN THE NORTHERN FORESTS

In the remote north and west, where the winter was far more terrible and stern, the first token of its decline was hailed with wilder joy. In the black Scandinavian forests great fires were kindled, fed with mighty trunks of pine and spruce, until the flames shot far up into the heavens, defying the Frost King and hailing his approaching downfall. Around these roaring seas of billowy flame gathered the savage, bearded Northmen, basking in the ruddy warmth, quaffing great horns of mead and ale, calling with hoarse voices on their barbaric gods, and clashing their rude weapons; for the time was coming when the ice in the fjords would melt, when the serpent-shaped boats could again be launched, and when the vikings could glide out to slay the monsters of the sea, or to fight and to plunder and ravage the abodes of other men.

But on the night that was longest, just before the great flaming wheel of the sun turned backward once again, and