

ESPIRITU SANTO

By Henrietta Dana Skinner. CHAPTER XXVIII.

"Oh, widowed easement, and oh, darkened room! Where sunshine was, are shadow, pain and gloom. There was the radiant face and laughing eye. And now the very spaces wept silently. Shadowed and still are chamber, stair and floor. The lonely window and darkened door." —Tuscan Love Songs.

The night was starlit and cloudless, but there was no moon, and the shadow of the neighboring mountains made all things black and impenetrable. The lanterns threw weird lights across the road and flickered among the bordering trees. The solidly constructed and well-kept road wound through a region of chestnut and oak groves and mountain streams at the base of the bold and picturesque hills of the Pistoiese heights, but of the beauty about them the travellers discerned nothing. They listened intently for the sound of approaching wheels, but they passed on one on the road, either mounted or on foot. The first streaks of dawn were lighting the sky above the dark chain of the Apennines as they drew in at Cutigliano to the accompaniment of rattling stones and cracking whip.

They stopped at the inn to rest, the horses and make inquiries of the Alpine Club which patronized largely the inns at San Marcello and Cutigliano, the Commandatore Mannsfield and his brothers were well known. "His Excellency arrived at San Marcello late last evening, and has passed on during the night to Boscungo. A peasant had brought a message not an hour since that the young count had been delayed and would not reach here till noon to-day, and that we were to have fresh horses ready to drive him with all speed to Præchia."

"I will drive on to Boscungo at once and meet him there," said Darretti. "God grant that he may not fall! This delay may cost him dear. There is not a moment to be lost."

"Poor young man!" murmured the host. His wife who had been roused by the noisy advent of the victoria, joined in sympathizingly. "Poor young man!" The extra horse had now been attached to the carriage, and large bonnets of coarse straw tied over each of the animals' heads to protect them from the summer sun. The road, a magnificent specimen of mountain engineering, wound upward in lengthy zigzags, clinging to the hill-side on the left of the deep, green valley. They could trace the road through the openings of the forest. They gradually left behind them the region of oaks and chestnuts, and entered that belt of giant first from which the mountain-pass derives its name, Passo-dell' Abetone. The air was crisp and invigorating, the full June sunshine was welcome to mitigate its almost frosty sparkle.

They arrived in advance of the wanderer at the Hotel Abetone, the ancient custom-house of the frontier, but now a favorite resort of Italian aristocracy escaping from the heat of July and August. Noon had come and brought no Teodoro. Bindo and Adriano embraced in infinite sadness; they could not conceal their anxiety. "There is no other road through the pass, he could not escape us," said Bindo, and they waited and watched. Bindo brought out his spy-glass and turned it towards all the openings on the surrounding hills. The setting sun found them alarmed to the highest degree.

"Some accident may have happened, we had better send out a relief party," suggested Bindo. Three sturdy mountaineers were engaged, and started off with torches to explore the most likely paths that the wanderer would take. Adriano insisted upon going with them. Of course that meant Orreste also.

"I cannot stay still; this anxiety will drive me wild," said Adriano. "You, Bindo, must wait here to stop him, if he should miss his road. Simone will attend you."

"You had better let me go with you, sir," said Simone. The duke, my late master, has often climbed about these hills, and I am well used to the emergencies of mountain-life. "So the little party of six men started off through the mountain-roads in the ever-increasing darkness. Bindo restlessly paced the road in front of the hotel, watching every shadow, and relieving his anxiety by directing the landlady in various preparations to meet every accident that he could foresee.

And the watchers in the far-off city by the sea had also their anxieties. The gentle sufferer lay in a sort of stupor most of the day, but toward night she grew restless and slightly delirious, calling for Teodoro—and her mind wandering back to their childhood. She seemed to think that it was he dying, and that she was strewing flowers of the Holy Ghost on his bier and begging him to sing to her. Saturday morning brought a telegram from Bindo at San Marcello, saying that they had not yet met Teodoro, but hoped to reach him by noon. But noon passed, and there was no further message. At last Espiritu's weakness became so alarming that they sent for the parish priest. When he came out of the humble suburban church, bearing the Sacred Host, preceded by acolytes holding candles and tinkling the little bell of warning, the people knelt by the roadside and bared their heads, praying for the lovely foreign maiden who lay dying when all was prepared for her burial. After the pious custom of Catholic countries, many joined the little procession and followed reverently, reciting prayers and chanting psalms alternately with the priest, until he entered the door of the modest cottage by the sea.

Espiritu rallied somewhat and seemed peaceful and happy after receiving the last sacraments, but as the afternoon wore on the restlessness returned, accompanied by severe suffering. Towards sunset the cool breezes from the sea brought some relief, but great ex-

haustion took its place and nervous spasms shook her slender frame. All was done that skill and tenderness could devise to relieve, her arms and legs sank towards the horizon as she grew very still and white. "Teodoro!" she whispered. "Teodoro, sing me to sleep!" The watchers by the bed looked at each other heart-brokenly. Why was he not there to grant her last request? From the convent on the opposite height came the sound of voices singing, for it was the eve of Pentecost, the monks were chanting the first Vespers of the feast, and the bells rung out with sweet and joyful clangor. Espiritu Santo opened her eyes a last time and smiled at them all. The sun was just sinking into the sparkling sea, the rosy sunset light touched the face that lay on the pillow; she stretched her hands towards it. "O Lux beatissima!" she murmured, and with a soft glad cry the gentle spirit breathed itself out.

And he, where was he who should have been by her side, and for whom she called in infinite longing from her couch of pain? Gladly hurrying towards her, eager to reach her on her last day, the eve of her burial, Teodoro strode along the mountain-paths. The first day of his walking-tour he had not accomplished the distance expected for he had fallen sadly out of training in a year and a half of city life. The second day he was in better trim, and on Friday sent word by a woodman passing him on horseback that he should reach Boscungo in the afternoon. He came across two apartments, one of whom had just sustained a terrible injury from the explosion of his gun. The other begged Teodoro to stay by his companion while he ran to the nearest village for help. As Teodoro bent over the sufferer a flash of lightning struck the sky, and a sudden feature of his soul. His brother's enemy was in his hands. What vengeance should he take?

The wounded man clung to him agonizingly. He did not recognize Teodoro, he only knew that it was his brother that he could turn to in his despair. "Oh, for the love of God!" he gasped, "hear my confession. Hear the confession of a poor, dying wretch!" "But how can I? I am not a priest, I cannot give you absolution, I cannot do you any good."

"Listen to me, as you hope for the sacrament of your death-bed," he screamed the dying man. "I cannot live without a priest. I have murdered on my soul and you must hear me. I have been an atheist. I have jeered at the teachings of my childhood. I have railled at priests and sacraments, and now my hour has come and God has forsaken me. But, oh, if you have any compassion in your soul, give me a chance for mercy, hear my confession!"

And Teodoro bent tenderly and reverently over the dying wretch and listened to the long story of sin and shame and crime that poured from those lips. For the first time he heard in all his life the tale of persecution of Catalina and Adriano. He knew that it was in his power to leave their treacherous foe in his anguish to die alone and unforgiven. But Teodoro, murmuring a prayer, uncovered his head, and with a certain solemnity laid his hand on the repentant sinner's forehead. "I cannot bring you the solace of the sacrament of penance," he said, gently, "but God has sent me to give you hope and consolation. In the name of my beloved brother, Adria Darretti, in the name of him whose life you tried to take, I forgive you even as he would forgive you were he here in my place!"

"Gladly gave a gasp of terror, but as he looked up cringing into the angelic face above him this terror wore away. He closed his eyes as if unable to bear the merciful glance of those clear orbs. "Tell your brother," he murmured, "it has indeed been due to the death, and the victory—is his!" Many hours had passed before help arrived and the dead man was borne to the nearest hospital. It was Teodoro's first encounter alone with crime and death, and for some time he could hardly shake off the weight of sorrow and gloom, but, as he resumed the dusty road, and exercise soon restored his ardent young spirit. He had many lost hours to make up, and there was no time to spare. It was now nearing sunset of Saturday, and he must make his best speed if he would reach his bride before the Whitsun Feast was over. Teodoro wandered on among the mountain-peaks above Abetone, passing the huts of the charcoal-burners with a friendly greeting, which the occupants returned with the graceful civility of the Pistoiese peasant. With swinging strides he descended into the magnificent pine zone from the fir-crowned ridges above. The sun was on the point of setting, the husbandmen were preparing to leave the fields below and seek their mountain homes. How small they looked, a thousand feet below him, moving busily about! A group of charcoal-burners were working in a clearing among the chestnuts and oaks. Teodoro sprang upon a rock and waved his hat towards them. They swung their caps, and a faint cheer rose to him. How friendly and pleasant these good people were! But who would not have a friendly feeling for that vision of young strength and health, standing in manly beauty in the glow of an Italian sunset, against the purple background of the hills, a ray of sunlight touching the bronze rings of hair that curled over the white brow, the proud, clear eyes gazing half defiantly across the broad horizon as if ready to battle with all that fate might send him and a radiant smile of hope, the consciousness of youth, joy, and vigor, parting the perfect lips? Shaped as a Greek athlete, he had unconsciously struck a most picturesque attitude, fearless and graceful, full of curb-energy. Warm with exercise he loosened the collar of his shirt, and bared throat and chest to the invigorating mountain breeze. The sun sank slowly behind the dark chain of the Pistoiese hills, leaving the exquisitely tinted,

cloudless sky bright with the delicacy of mother-of-pearl. The sound of the Compline bells from convent towers dotting the hill-sides was faintly wafted across the valley. The peasants lifted their caps, and, crossing themselves, devoutly recited the evening prayer. Reverently Teodoro joined them in spirit, then, standing there in the elevation and solitude, the thought came to him to sing, and lifting up his glorious, soaring voice, he sang in the majestic, ecclesiastical chant the Compline hymn:

"Te lucis ante terminum rerum Creator poscimus, Ut proteas dominis suis praesent et custodias; Proci resedant somnia et nocturn phantasmarum Haecum nostrum comprime no pollutantur corporum."

Then remembering that in a fair city by the sea the eyes he loved would be watching the same sunset over the wild waters, he sang in beautiful melody the sweet hymn to our Lady, Star-mater alma! holding out his hand instinctively as if to clasp that of the sweet young maiden who was soon to begin life's journey at his side. The shadows were beginning to gather, the peasants were now leaving the valleys below. A party of them turned to wave him a farewell salute. "Oh, good people!" he cried, joyously, "if you only know! This is the last evening you will see me here. One more sunset and I shall be standing by my angel bride, far beyond your beloved hills and over the wide seas! Dear, courteous people, listen while I show you my farewell song." "God's grace! Sing us your farewell song," he cried, joyously, "if you only know! This is the last evening you will see me here. One more sunset and I shall be standing by my angel bride, far beyond your beloved hills and over the wide seas! 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