

The Way of a MAID with a MAN

By RAFAEL SABATINI
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THE STORY

CHAPTER I.—His task of putting down insubordination among the captains of his mercenaries, and the crushing of powerful rivals, being finished with the ruthlessness which characterized him, Cesare Borgia, duke of Valentinois, is uneasy over the escape of one of his enemies, Matteo Orsini. It is believed Matteo is in hiding with his reclusive kinsman, Almerico, at Plevano. Cesare dispatches one of his followers, Pantaleone degli Uberti, with a small troop, to Plevano to spy out the situation, and if Orsini is found, to capture him.

CHAPTER II.—In the character of a wounded enemy of Valentinois, fleeing from his vengeance, Pantaleone, his followers concealed, gains entrance into Plevano and is made welcome by Almerico and his daughter, Madonna Fulvia, Matteo's affianced wife. They live practically alone. Pantaleone is convinced at once that Matteo is in the vicinity if not in the castle. Mario, castellan of Plevano, gives Pantaleone medical attention, and the spy is carried to bed.

CHAPTER III.—From a garrulous young page, Raffaele, Pantaleone learns enough to make him sure he is on the right track. The kindness of his aged host and the beautiful Madonna have no effect in turning him from his errand of treachery. The girl becomes his companion, and from her the spy learns of the existence of a lazaret-house (place of isolation for smallpox victims) in the castle grounds. There are no victims of the pest, so dreaded in the Middle Ages, in it now, she informs him, but he is certain the building is Matteo's hiding place.

CHAPTER IV.—Determined to wait until he is sure of Matteo's whereabouts, Pantaleone continues his work of spying. From a hiding place he sees Mario take food to the lazaret-house, and all doubt is ended. Pantaleone determines to collect his followers next day and demand Matteo.

CHAPTER V.—With his followers at hand Pantaleone confronts Almerico and Madonna with the demand that Matteo be produced at once for conveyance to Valentinois, threatening to drag him from the lazaret-house if he does not appear. To their reproaches he is indifferent. Madonna pleads with him for a short delay, hinting the proffering of a bribe. Pantaleone's cupidly aroused, he grants the request. Madonna makes the spy an offer. She has a dowry of 10,000 ducats, and she promises to marry him and make over the dowry, to him if he will conceal Matteo's presence. Almost unable to believe his good fortune, Pantaleone accepts the offer. It is arranged that they ride to the town of Castel della Pleva next day, where the marriage ceremony will take place, while Matteo escapes.

CHAPTER VI.—Madonna has learned that Valentinois is at Castel della Pleva, and to him she writes, notifying him of Pantaleone's duplicity. Unknown to the spy, there is a smallpox patient in the lazaret-house. Madonna wins Mario to acquiescence in a project which horrifies him, but is not divulged. According to arrangement, Madonna and Pantaleone ride to Castel della Pleva.

CHAPTER VII

The duke's army was encamped upon the eastern side of the city, so that Pantaleone had no inkling of his master's presence there until they had entered the main street and saw the abundant evidences of it in the soldiers that thronged everywhere chattering in all the dialects of Middle Italy. The part he had played at Plevano had so isolated Pantaleone from the outside world, that he had remained without precise knowledge of Cesare Borgia's whereabouts. His sudden realization that he had ridden almost into the very presence of the duke was as a shower of cold water upon his heated body. For you will understand that engaged as he was he had every reason to avoid the duke as he would avoid the devil.

He reined in sharply, and his eyes glared mistrustfully at Madonna, instinctively feeling that there was some trap into which like a fool he had been lured by this white-faced girl. It flashed across his mind that it had been his lifelong practice to mistrust lean women. Their very leanness was in his eyes an outward sign of their lack of femininity, and a woman that lacks femininity—as all the world knows—is as often as not a very devil.

"By your leave, Madonna," said he grimly, "we will seek a priest elsewhere."

"Why so?" she asked.

"Because it is my will," he snarled back.

She smiled a crooked little smile. She was calm and mistress of herself.

"It is early to impose your will upon me, and if you are over-insistent now, perhaps you never shall—for I marry you at Castel della Pleva or I do not marry you at all."

He looked at her, blenching with anger. "God's Blood!" he swore, and gave tongue to that thought of his. "I never yet knew a lean woman that was not sly and a very bag of devil's tricks. What is in that mind of yours?"

And then suddenly a hoarse voice hailed him, and from among the passers-by there rolled forward a grizzled veteran upon sturdy bowed legs, a swarthy, one-eyed fellow, who creaked and clanked as he walked, being all mail and leather. It was Valentinois' captain, Taddeo della Volpe.

"Well returned, my Pantaleone!" he cried. "The duke named you but yesterday, wondering how you fared."

"Did he so?" said Pantaleone, since he must say something, raging inwardly to find his retreat cut off by this most inopportune encounter.

The veteran rolled his single eye in the direction of Madonna Fulvia. "Is this the prisoner you were sent to capture?" quoth he, and Pantaleone could not be sure that he was not being mocked. "But I delay you. You'll be for the duke. I'll go with you."

Now here was Pantaleone in desperate straits. Mechanically he moved forward with Taddeo, since to obey his very natural impulse and turn about to retreat by the way he had come was now utterly impossible.

Nor could he question Madonna as he desired to do, whilst Taddeo stalked there beside him.

A dozen paces brought them to the open space before the Duomo, and there Pantaleone grew cold with fear to find himself almost face to face with Cesare Borgia himself.

As he checked his horse, mechanically in his dismay, Madonna Fulvia dealt her own cut across the hams that launched it forward as from a catapult.

"Justice!" she cried, brandishing above her head what looked like a short truncheon. "Lord duke of Valentinois, justice!"

There was a commotion in the magnificent group about his highness. The wild bound of her horse had brought her almost into the midst of it.

The duke raised his hand, and the cavalcade came to a sudden halt. His splendid eyes swept over her, and there was something in his glance that seemed to scorch her.

She beheld for the first time this man, the enemy of her house, one whom she had come to consider a very monster. He was dressed in black, in the Spanish fashion, his doublet scollored with golden arabesques, his velvet cap laced with a string of smoldering rubies large as sparrows' eggs. From under this the wave of his bronze-colored hair fell to his shoulders. The delicate yet essentially male beauty of his young face was such that for a moment it checked her cruel purpose.

A smile, gentle, almost wistful, broke upon that noble countenance, and he spoke in a voice that was soft and full of melody.

"What justice do you seek," Madonna?"

To combat the sweet seduction of his face and voice she had need in that hour to bethink her of her cousins strangled at Assisi, of those other kinsmen jailed in Rome and like to die, and of her own lover, Matteo, in peril of capture and death. What, then, if this man were a very miracle of male beauty? Was he not the enemy of her race? Did he not seek Matteo's life? Had he not set that fowl hound of his to track Matteo down?

Upon the muttered answer to those unuttered questions she braced herself, steeled her resolve and held out the tube she carried.

"It is all set down here, magnificent, in this petition."

He moved his horse forward some paces from amid his attendant courtiers, and without haste put forth his gauntleted hand to receive the thing she proffered. He balanced it in his palm a moment, as if weighing it, considering it. It was a hollow cane, sealed at both ends. A faint smile moved his lips under cover of his auburn beard.

"Here are great precautions," was his gentle comment, and his eyes stabbed her with questions.

"I would not have it polluted on its way to your august hands," she explained.

His smile broadened. He inclined his head as if to acknowledge the courtliness of her speech. Then his glance went beyond her and rested on the scared and savage Pantaleone.

Cesare's brows were faintly raised. "Why, Messer Pantaleone?" he cried. "You are well returned, and most opportunely. Here, break me these seals and read me the parchment this tube contains."

There was a sudden stir of interest in the gay flock of attendants, a movement of horses and a craning of necks, which quickened when Madonna Fulvia intervened.

"No, no, magnificent!" Her voice was sharp with a sudden anxiety. "It is for your eyes alone."

He pondered her white face until she felt as she would faint under his

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He Seized It to Pull Forth the Parchment.

regard, such was the terror with which it was beginning to inspire her. He smiled with a sweetness as ineffable as it was terrible and he addressed her in his softest accents.

"Since beholding you, Madonna, my eyes are something dazzled. I must borrow Ser Pantaleone's, there, and be content to employ my ears." Then to Pantaleone on a sudden note of sharp command: "Come, sir," he said "we wait."

Pantaleone, a little dazed by his terror, took the thing in his shaking hands, and not daring to demur or show hesitation, broke one of the seals with clumsy, fumbling fingers. A silken cord protruded from the tube.

He seized it to pull forth the parchment, then with a sharp exclamation he drew back his hand as if he had been stung—as indeed he had been. There was a speck of blood on his thumb and another on his forefinger.

Madonna Fulvia shot a fearful glance at Valentinois. She saw here the miscarriage of her crafty plan, through the one factor which she had left out of consideration—the circumstance that Cesare Borgia, living and moving in an environment of treachery, amid foes both secret and avowed, took no chances of falling a victim either to their force or their guile. She had not reckoned that he would appoint Pantaleone in this matter to an office akin to that filled at his table by the venom-taster.

"Come, come," the duke was admonishing the hesitating Pantaleone, more sharply now. "Are we to wait here in the cold all day? The petition, man!"

Desperately Pantaleone now grasped the cord, taking care this time to avoid the thorn that accident or design—and he did not greatly care which, since he counted himself lost in any case—had lodged in the strands of the silk. He drew forth a cylinder of parchment, let fall the cane that had contained it, unrolled the petition with shaking hands, and studied it awhile, his brow wrinkled by the effort, for he was an indifferent scholar.

"Well, sir? Will you read?"

Precipitately he responded to that command, and fell to reading aloud, his voice hoarse:

"Magnificent—By these presents I make appeal to you for justice against one who has proved as treacherous to you in the performance of the task to which you set him as was treacherous that task itself—"

"He broke off, looking up with the wild eyes of a hunted thing.

"It—it is not true!" he protested, faltering. "I—"

"Who bade you judge?" Cesare asked. "I bade you read; no more. Read on, then. Should it prove to concern you your answer to it can follow."

Under the stasion of that imperious will, Pantaleone bent his eyes to the parchment again, and pursued his reading.

"Believing that Matteo Orsini, whom he was bidden to arrest, is in hiding at Plevano, he has consented to connive at his escape and thus betray your trust in him upon the condition that I become his wife and my dowry, his possession."

Again he broke off. "By the Eyes of God, it is false! As false as hell!" he cried, a sob of agony breaking his voice.

"Read on!" The duke's voice and mien were alike terrible.

Dominated once more, Pantaleone returned yet again to the parchment.

"Escape may or may not be for Matteo, but at least there can be no escape for you who read, by the time you have read thus far. We have another guest at Plevano in our lazaret-house there—the smallpox. And these presents have lain an hour upon the breast of one who is dying of it, and—"

On a sudden outcry of terror Pantaleone brought his reading abruptly to an end. The plague-laden parchment floated from his hands that were suddenly turned limp. It reached the ground, and there was a sudden alarmed movement on all sides to back away beyond the radius of its venom, beyond the danger of the dread scourge that it exuded.

Dully through Pantaleone's benumbed wits the realization thrust itself that the thorn in the silk had been no accident. It had been set there of intent, so that it might open a way by which the terrible infection should travel the more swiftly and surely into the reader's veins. He knew himself for a doomed man, one

who might count himself under sentence of death, since the chances of winning alive through an attack of that pestilence were so slight as to be almost negligible. Ashen-faced he stared straight before him, what time indignation and horror found voice on every side, and continued clamant until the duke raised an imperious hand to demand silence.

He alone remained unmoved, or at least showed no outward sign of such anger as he may have felt. When next he addressed the white-faced lady, who had made this desperate attempt upon his life, his voice was as smooth and silken as it had been before, his returning smile as sweet. And perhaps because of that the doom he pronounced was the more awful.

"Of course," he said, "since Ser Pantaleone has fulfilled his part of the bargain, you, Madonna, will now fulfill yours. You will wed him as you undertook."

Wide-eyed, she stared, and it was a long moment ere she understood the poetic justice that he meted out to her. When at last her voice came, it came in a hoarse cry of horror.

"Wed him? Wed him! He is infected—"

"With your venom," Cesare cut in crisply. And he continued calmly as one reasoning with a wayward child: "It is your duty to yourself and him. You are, in honor bound by your compact. The poor fellow could not foresee all this. You had not made him privy to your plans. You called to me for justice, Madonna," he reminded her. "Thus you receive it. It is complete, I think. I hope it satisfies you."

Her anger shivered itself unuttered against that iron dominance of his. Before it her spirit left her utterly, her high courage ebbed like water, and she became again the prey of fear and horror.

"Oh, not that! Not that!" she cried to him. "Mercy! Mercy! As you would hope for mercy in your need, have mercy on me now." He looked sardonically at Ser Pantaleone, who sat his horse, benumbed in body and in brain.

"Madonna Fulvia does not flatter you, Pantaleone," said he. "She has little fancy for you as a bridegroom. It appears. Yet, fool, you believed her when she promised to take you to husband. You believed her! Ha! What was it Fra Serafino said of you?" He fell thoughtful. "I remember! He found you too full in the lips to be trusted with a woman. He knows his world, Fra Serafino. So you succumbed to her promises! But be comforted. She shall fulfill them, where she thought to cheat you. She shall take you to that white breast of hers—you and the plague you carry with you."

"Oh God!" she panted. "Will you wed me to death?"

"Is it possible," he wondered, "that you can find death more repulsive than Pantaleone? Yet—consider," he begged her, reasoning dispassionately, "that I do naught by you that you would not have done by me." He began with infinite caution to peel off the heavy gauntlet of buffalo hide with which he had handled that death-dealing tube. "After all," he resumed, "if to keep your word is beyond measure odious to you—a family trait with you, Madonna, as I have cause to know—I may show you the way to escape its consequences. There is a way that some would account to be consistent with honor. Cancel the bargain that you made with him, and thus cancel the obligation to fulfill your part and to submit to his embrace."

"Cancel it? How cancel it?" she asked.

"Is it not plain? By surrendering Matteo Orsini to me. Deliver him up to me this day, and the night shall be free from nuptials that are distasteful to you."

She understood at once the satanic subtlety of this man; she saw how far removed he was from any petty vengeance such as she had suspected him to be gratifying; she was but an insignificant pawn in the deep game he played; her feelings were to him no more than the means to the one end of which never for an instant had he lost sight—the capture of Matteo Orsini. That was all that mattered to him, and he was not to be turned aside by any considerations of anger toward herself. He had terrified her with the threat of this unutterable marriage, simply that he might render her pliant to his will, ready to pay any price of treachery to escape that ghastly fate.

"Deliver him up to you?" she said, and it was her turn to smile at last, but with infinitely bitter scorn.

"Could aught be easier?" he asked. "There is no need to tell me even where he lurks. I do not ask you to betray him, or do aught that would hurt your tender Orsini sensibilities." His sarcasm was as a sword of fire. "You need but to send him word of the plight into which your essay, in poisoning has landed you. That is all. As he is a man, he must come hither to ransom you from the consequences of your deed. Let him come before nightfall, or else"—he shrugged, flung his gauntlets down into the mud, and nodded his head toward the stricken Pantaleone—"you keep your bargain; you pay the price agreed upon for his escape, and myself I shall provide the nuptial banquet."

She looked at him with a deep malignity aroused by his own relentlessness and by the hateful suavity in which he cloaked it. And then her wits roused themselves to do battle with his own. She saw how subtlety might yet defeat subtlety. And as the idea crept into her fevered mind, the blood came slowly back into her livid cheeks, her glance grew bold and

resolute as it met his own.

"Be it so," she said. "You leave me no choice, magnificent." Her voice came harsh and something mocking. "It shall be as you desire. I will send my servant to him, now."

He gave her a long, searching glance which at first was grave and doubting, and ended by becoming almost contemptuous. He made a sign to his cavaliers.

"Let us on, sirs. Here is no more to do." But he stooped from his saddle to issue an order in an undertone to Della Volpe who throughout had stood beside him. Then, flicking his horse with the slight whip which he carried, he moved on across the square, his fluttering attendants with him. He rode away with contempt in his heart. He knew this Orsini brood. They were all the same. Bold to devise, but craven to execute; their brains were stouter than their hearts. Their stiffness crumpled at the touch.

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.)

Scott's First Novel

"Waverley" was the first of the series of famous novels written by Sir Walter Scott, produced in 1814. The secret of the authorship was well kept for years. The book gives a fine picture of the hopes and fears that animated political parties in Great Britain in 1745, the year of the uprising led by Charles Stuart, the Young Pretender. Its name is taken from Waverley, near Hindhead, in Surrey, England.

Ozark Mountains

The upland area commonly spoken of as the Ozark mountains or the Ozarks lies mainly in southern Missouri and is separated from the Appalachians by the lowlands of the Mississippi basin and from the Rocky mountains by the Great plains. The United States geological survey says that the Ozarks are not regarded by geologists as a part of either system, but as a distinct unit.

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