

Renato!



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FIRST EDITION

The texts revised and assembled into *Renato!* were published in different form previously as *The Goddess in Love with a Horse*, copyright © 2008 Eugene Mirabelli; *Renato, the Painter*, copyright © 2012 Eugene Mirabelli; *Renato After Alba*, copyright © 2016 Eugene Mirabelli.

This is solely and completely a work of fiction.

Printed in the United States of America.

Published by McPherson & Company,

Post Office Box 1126, Kingston, NY 12402

www.mcphersonco.com

BOOK ONE

*The Goddess in Love
with a Horse*

1

THE FIRST TIME AVA SAW ANGELO NAKED WAS ON their wedding night (11 May 1860) when he strode into their bedroom, accidentally revealing to her startled eyes that from the waist down he had the hindquarters of a stallion. Now Angelo was no brute. He was a miller and this was in his house in Carco, Sicily. He had knocked gently and he had thought he heard her whisper Come in, but when he opened the door the room was ablaze with candles and Ava was still on her knees in prayer at the bedside. She lifted her head and saw — Angelo was wearing only the fancy shirt he had married in — saw those supreme flanks, hocks, fetlocks and horny soled feet. The blood drained from her face. For a moment she wavered and flickered, then she murmured the last words of her Hail Mary, blessed herself and stood up. “Amen,” Angelo said, taking her cool hand in his. “I have something to tell you.”

“Your legs —” she began.

“Remember,” Angelo broke in. “God created horses, too. In fact, horses are among the most noble of God’s creatures. Horses aren’t soaked in blood. They don’t have fangs or claws. They don’t kill and they don’t eat other horses. Horses are peaceful, more peaceful than men, not cowardly like sheep or stupid like oxen, but serene and powerful. God created horses just to show us what He could do in the way of power and beauty, and when He finished, He admired His handiwork. He admires horses. Horses have strength and grace and intelligence, horses have courage and endurance, horses have fidelity. Besides, I’m not wholly, not —”

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“Your bottom half —” she began again.

“There’ve been other unions, but they were horrible mismatches and produced mongrel beasts. Harpies, manticores, bull-headed minotaurs. Only Chiron, the centaur, was a scholar and teacher. Besides, as I said —”

“Your thing —” she began once more.

“Don’t let the great size frighten you.” His voice was gentle, almost complacent.

“A horse?” she asked, astounded.

“A stallion,” he said. He was quite frank about it. Sicily was a beautiful land where strange and terrible things happened every day of the week.

“I will not bed down with a horse!” Ava snatched her hand from his and ran around to the far side of the bed and stood there, watching him.

“It’s been a long day and we’re both tired,” Angelo said, keeping quite still so as not to frighten her.

“So?”

“And when we’re tired we should go to sleep.”

“I’m never going to sleep. Certainly not with you,” she said, her voice trembling.

“You look so fierce,” Angelo remarked, simply to make her feel better. He had begun to stroll very slowly down the room on his side of the bed. “You look —”

“Not tonight, not tomorrow night, not ever!”

“Wild” he continued. “Like an animal. I like that, of course. An animal.” He paused at the foot of the bed and smiled at her. “You are a magnificent woman.”

Ava had almost started to say something but now she hesitated, her lips still parted, distracted by what he had just said.

“A splendid woman,” he continued. “It’s hard to believe that when I first saw you your legs were so thin I thought they would snap in two. You were always running after your aunt and everywhere she went you would follow her, trotting after her like a foal.”

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“Because I was ten years old,” she protested.

“And now you are a woman of seventeen with beautiful teeth and strong round arms. And, I imagine, sturdy legs. We will be superb at making love.”

Ava clapped her hands over her ears.

Angelo laughed. He praised her hair — told her it shimmered like a river at midnight — then spoke quietly about her luminous eyes, her gleaming shoulders something, her something breasts, and so on downward, dropping his voice softer and softer, so that Ava who had opened her fingers just a bit to hear him had to open them more and still more until, straining to catch his last words, she forgot herself and said, “What? What flower? — Stop! Don’t come any closer!”

“Calm yourself,” Angelo said. He seated himself on the low chest which stood against the wall by the foot of the bed. “How long do you plan to stand over there?” he asked.

“As long as I want to.”

“Of course. But why not sit on the bed? Filomena scented the sheets with lavender, just for us.”

Ava seated herself guardedly on the edge of the bed, watching him all the time.

“This is a pretty room, isn’t it?” he said, looking around. “I whitewashed it myself a week ago.” In fact, it was a pretty room. In addition to the bed there was a low dresser, a rush-bottomed chair, and in the space between two shuttered windows there was a washstand with an oval mirror hung above it. Angelo said, “The candles look nice, too. I didn’t expect you to light them all at once, but they do look nice. Like a church at High Mass. Maybe that’s why I’m so sleepy. Church always makes me sleepy,” he confessed. “Or maybe it’s my age. I’m no child and at my age —”

“What are you doing?” Ava cried, jumping up.

“I’m unbuttoning my shirt. I’m going to bed.”

“Bed? What bed? Stop!”

But Angelo was already on his feet, rampant, and now he

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threw off his shirt, letting it billow onto the chair, and there he stood naked while a dozen shadows of him reared and plunged on the whitewashed wall at his back. Ava had started to cover her eyes but it was too late. Now she simply looked at him and the candle flames grew calm again and the shadows grew still. His flesh was a rich chestnut color and his hair was black — black on his head, black in his beard, black everywhere. His shoulders gleamed, at the base of his throat there was a little hollow filled with golden shadow and on his chest the pattern of hair spread like the wings of a crow. His navel was deep and dark, his legs — ah, those splendid stallion legs — his flanks so smoothly muscled that as he walked the flesh shimmered, and the short downy hairs on his rump, the curling hairs on his thighs, the tassel-like hairs on his fetlocks, all sparkled like coal, and in the center, of course, as if the darkness of night had taken beastly shape — But Angelo was blowing out the candles one by one and it was becoming harder to see. He stopped when there was only the solitary chamber stick burning on the chest of drawers. Then he leapt into bed, stacked two pillows behind his back and sat with the sheets pulled to his chest. He looked at Ava. "I'm going to sleep," he said.

"I'm not sleepy."

"Would you like to rest on the top of the covers?"

She came and sat on the edge of the bed, her back to him.

"Give me your hand," he said.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, half turning.

"I'm going to sit here like we used to sit on the bench in your aunt's garden. What did we ever do there? Now give me your hand."

"All right," she said. She lay back on the covers against him and got comfortable. "But don't try to reason with me," she added.

"Of course not." He put his arms about her and took her hands. "Now that we're married, there's a secret I can tell you."

"I already know your secret," she said.

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“Now listen. This is what you don’t know. When a man of my kind, a man of my nature — when a man who is part stallion makes love to a woman, she inherits three gifts.”

“Everything I ever inherited is in that ugly chest.”

“These gifts come because he makes love to her. They come with his lovemaking, with his —” Angelo hesitated, hunting for the proper word.

“What three gifts?”

“Her childbirths will be easy, her milk will be sweet, and she will be beautiful forever.”

“Angelo, you liar.” She laughed.

“These talents will be yours by nature,” he continued, undeflected. “And they’ll be passed on to our daughters and their daughters, too, if we make love often enough.”

“And the boys? What would they inherit?”

“My sons will be like me, of course.” His breath was soft behind her ear. He went on talking in a voice gentle and resonant and even dreamy, speaking of his father and mother and the village where they lay, which was deep in the heart of Sicily, and in the hour or so that followed he told about those spirits hidden in the hills and fields around the village, told about the patron saints and beasts and, while his voice grew even sleepier, he talked about his relatives, not all of whom were horse, for one was a famous tree and another was a rock and there was an aunt —”

“Yes?” Ava said, turning to him. “Go on. I’m listening.”

But Angelo was asleep. She turned all the way around and crept cautiously over the covers to study his face: his beard, his lips, the hard wrinkles at the corner of his eyes. A handsome man, she thought. His breathing was deep and slow, for he was fast asleep, but the guttering candle made the shadows on his face waver as if he were stirring and about to wake up. So Ava lay on the covers and listened to his soft, slow breathing and watched the candle flicker out and strove to keep awake.

Angelo awoke early and found Ava sleeping like a statue at

his side atop the bed covers. He gazed at her in the milky light, at her flushed cheeks and parted lips — how young she was! — cautiously lifted his hand to caress her, but changed his mind and slipped softly out of bed. In the dim hall he pulled on his work pants and boots, then groped his way down the dark stairs to wash in the courtyard. He hoped that a brisk walk on the hills would relieve the painful energy compressed in his legs, his thighs. He pulled on his shirt and flung open the gate and abruptly a horse and rider materialized out of the gray air. “He has landed,” the rider told him.

“Ah!” Angelo said.

“Yesterday at Marsala.”

Angelo wheeled and ran back into the courtyard, pounded once on the stable door, once on the kitchen door, then clattered up the stairway to his bedroom. “Garibaldi has landed at Marsala and I’m going to join him!” he cried, throwing off his shirt. Ava reached for the latch on the window shutters, staring at him. Angelo sat on the bed to pull off his boots and pants, then flung on his wedding shirt and strode out to the hall. He returned clothed in the fancy shirt and his best pair of velveteen pants. “I have waited all my life for this,” he said, pulling on his boots. He crossed the room to Ava who stood by the open window, still staring at him. “You’re crazy,” she said soberly. Angelo took both her hands in his and kissed her lips. “Remember that I love you,” he told her.

“Garibaldi is an animal, a beast,” she said, her voice rising.

He laughed. “Then he has come to the right place.”

“We will die,” she wailed.

“We have always died. But today you should be singing.”

Ava wrenched her hands from his and began to beat her fists on his chest, shouting “Go, go, go, go, go —” She had broken into sobs.

“I have never been so happy,” he said, putting his arms around this sturdy young woman who wept for him.

Angelo kissed the crown of her head and rushed down the

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stairway to the dining room. There he tossed back the lid of a black oak chest, peeled away the linens and flannels and came up with an antique bird gun, then he strode into the yard, pulling a heavy pistol from under the big flower pot by the door, and was shouting *Filomena* as he crossed to the stable where the boy had saddled the gelding. He mounted, took the bundle of food which *Filomena* handed up to him — leftovers from the wedding wrapped in oilcloth — and went out through the gate at a canter, leaving the boy at the stable door, *Filomena* in the middle of the yard, his uncles and half-brothers asleep indoors, and his virgin bride face down on her bed, beating her pillow.



Garibaldi had landed on the western shore of Sicily and everyone knew what he had come to do. He was a simple man with a simple desire. He would drive the King's troops first from that great island and then from the Kingdom of Naples and the forlorn southern peninsula, so that these lands could join with those in the north and become one Italy, a single nation as it had been ages ago. The King had 24,864 well-equipped troops waiting in Sicily. Garibaldi had come ashore with only 1,000 volunteers, some in red shirts and others in street clothes, and for guns they had junk — antique smooth-bore muskets, 100 Enfield rifles and 5 ancient cannons without gun carriages. At dawn the next morning he walked his patched-together army inland through seas of green corn and beans to Rampagallo, and the following day he trudged with them past silvery groves of olive trees up to the sun-baked highlands of Salemi. They spent the night in Salemi, some in houses and others in monasteries and still others under tents in the orchards outside. The next day their numbers increased a bit as volunteer squadre came up from the countryside, armed with flintlocks or pruning hooks, and somewhere among them was Angelo, Angelo Cavallù, *our* Angelo. He was dusty, for his horse had collapsed of exhaustion and Angelo had trotted over the hills and into town on his

own two feet. That afternoon he saw Garibaldi dismount, stroll across a corner of the piazza and pass through a doorway: a pleasant-looking man with a rich honey-color beard, clothed in a loose red shirt — a man who moved with the effortless grace of an animal. Garibaldi was content at that moment, for he had just ridden in from a survey of the ground along the road to Palermo and now he was going to study a big map of Sicily which one of his officers had found. Until then he had not had a good map. That night, when he folded the map and went to bed, rain had begun to fall, but when he awoke at three the next morning the rain had ceased and it was beautiful. He pulled on his pants, drank a cup of coffee, called in his officers, told them what he planned to do and sent them to rouse his little army. He had been walking up and down the room and now he burst into song. Here was a fifty-three-year-old man about to attack an army of vastly superior numbers in a battle in which defeat meant death and he sang like a lover going to meet his mistress, because he was about to have his heart's desire.

That morning Angelo marched with the squadre down the road and through a valley where everyone bought oranges and lemons, then they left the road and trudged up a stony hillside. From the top of their bald hill they looked across a shallow alley to a steeper, terraced hill on top of which brightly uniformed troops were gathered in squares — there and there and there and there and over there. They were too many. Angelo's disheartened squadre, which had never been in a battle before, drifted quietly off to the side to watch how it was done. Over there, General Sforza ordered his trumpets to sound and ranks of identical soldiers began to step down the hill, to wade across the stream at the bottom and mount toward the volunteers, firing as they came. Over here, a bugler blew that fancy musical reveille which Garibaldi loved so much and a handful of his skirmishers began to fire at the oncoming troops. Of their own accord, the rest of Garibaldi's men, who had been sitting on the stony rubbish high on the hill, stood up — men in red

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shirts, men in street jackets, some even in top hats — and now they were running down at the troops in a burst of musketry. Angelo galloped after them. The Garibaldini drove the army back across the stream and part way up the terraced hillside. Then everything slowed. The afternoon grew slack and there was only the irregular clatter of gunfire, or once in a while the top of the enemy hill blossomed into white puffs of smoke and cannonballs shrieked past, and the sun roamed aimlessly overhead. It grew hot, terribly hot. Every so often Garibaldi's red-shirts were driven down, or they climbed further up, but their numbers always diminished and now there were not so many — in fact, there were only a few hundred crouched on the steep hillside, pressed together here and there beneath the ragged terraces. Angelo sat with his shoulder against his own bit of loose stone wall, sucking the juice from his last orange, and he peered higher up the hill to where Garibaldi huddled with his bare sword and a crowd of his outlandish army. The terrace wall they clung to was nearest the summit and royalist troops were firing volley after volley down on them, even throwing rocks. He is a lion, thought Angelo, but I am only part of a horse and maybe not the best part at that. What do we do now? A rock hit Garibaldi on the back and he stood up, his sword flashing. His men stood up beside him. Now Garibaldi was climbing the terrace, his men were climbing the terrace. They were rising up everywhere on the hillside, rising and climbing through the ragged noise, crawling higher and higher, clawing up over the last heap of stones into a hazy white smoke filled with crackling gunfire and screams. Then there was the long hilltop slanting off and royalist troops running away, streaming down and away to the far valley, fleeing.



Angelo marched here and there and elsewhere with Garibaldi for two weeks while the old fox outwitted the King's generals and drove the royal army from Sicily, then Angelo walked

home. He wore a stained slouch hat and such tattered velveteen that when he turned in at the gate only his dog, Micu, recognized who it was, circling him and barking excitedly and leaping while Filomena and the boy stared. His bride cried, "Angelo!" from an upstairs window, "Angelo!" from the doorway, "Angelo!" as she threw her arms around his neck. He kissed her forehead and each cheek and said, "Tell Filomena to start heating water because I am going to take a long, long bath."

In the house they poured pots of steaming water into the copper tub which Angelo had dragged to the side of the bed. Ava laid out the towels, brush and soap on the table between the windows and turned to go, but Angelo took her wrist in one hand and gently closed the door with his other. Without a word he shed his shirt, pulled off his boots and stepped out of his pants. Ava stood at the window, staring out, and heard his gasp as he lowered himself into the scalding water.

"I cannot wash my own back," he said in a reasonable voice.

Ava turned hesitantly, a light flush on her cheeks, and took the soap and brush from the table and knelt behind his back. She lifted a cupped handful of water and let it trickle onto his shoulder, then another handful and another and one more. She dipped the soap into the water and slid it tenderly all the way across his back from the tip of one shoulder to the tip of the other. "Ah, that's good," Angelo murmured. Ava pressed her wet palm to his warm back and rubbed in a circle, making suds. "The first time I saw Garibaldi I was so close I could have reached out and touched him," he told her. "He's an old man, older than I am, but he moves very lightly, like an animal. — Would you like me to tell you what I've been doing for two weeks?" Ava dipped the soap into the water and swept it up and down his marvelous, silken back, enjoying herself. "Yes. Tell me," she said absently.

Later, when he had finished with his stories and his bath, Angelo stepped from the tub, letting the water sluice from him in streams as if he were a mountain, then he toweled himself

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dry and fell asleep in his bed for a day and a night. He dreamed. Maybe the dreams came from his aching muscles or the marrow of his bones or maybe they came from his blood, which was, after all, the mingled blood of men and beasts, of Siculi and Greeks, Romans, Carthaginians, Byzantines, Arabs, Jews, Normans, Spaniards — in other words, pure Sicilian blood. Occasionally his magnificent legs twitched and he gave a deep resonant groan, because he was dreaming not only his own story but the cruel three-thousand-year history of all Sicily. He was having a nightmare. At last he awoke and in the pale blue dawn he found Ava sleeping at his side, on top of the covers, an arm flung over her head and her hair spread loose upon the pillow.

He kissed her lips. Before she could rub the sleep from her eyes, Angelo said, "Come with me. I'll show you the world in the morning." He began to open the shutters. Ava stood there in her white chemise and watched him as the room filled up with light. She wanted to look at those equine hindquarters, those powerful flanks and long shins, wanted to see the dark whorls of hair on his chest, the satin nap on his underbelly, his black pouch and stallion thing. His flesh was the color of bronze and smooth beneath her fingertips as a chestnut fresh from its hull. Suddenly he knelt and scooped up the hem of her chemise, standing and lifting it so rapidly that she barely had time to raise her arms before the garment was unfurling in air, falling into a shadowy corner of the room. He put a warm hand on her haunch and when she lowered her eyes he kissed the nape of her neck. Now he whispered a few words in her ear and she tossed her head back, laughing. Who knows what happened next? Her births were always easy, her milk was always sweet, and she remained beautiful into old age. Their daughters inherited these traits. Their sons had legs like their father.

2

NO ONE HAS BEEN ABLE TO WRITE A COMPLETE HISTORY of Sicily. Every historian who tries, fails — they sink into bewilderment or go mad with rage or collapse in grief, weeping. The agony that is Sicilian history is too terrible to think about. Ages ago Greeks with swords and chains invaded the island paradise and wrote about the locals who had cleared the forests and were farming. That's the last glimpse we get of Sicilians living free. In the next two thousand and six hundred years one greedy army after another came ashore to kill, imprison and brutalize them. After taking over, the new land-owners inscribed laws, contracts, leases and taxes on the flesh of the poor to enrich themselves and to immiserate the landless, so that each impoverished family had to turn against all others to survive. Some of the dispossessed went back to the caves of their ancestors, and others lived in the fields with nothing but the tattered clothes they wore to show they were people, not beasts. By 1860 a handful of idle nobles and their henchmen owned almost the whole island, receiving their legitimacy from the Bourbon King who sat in Naples, across the water in Italy. That was the year Angelo married Ava in May, the same month that Giuseppe Garibaldi landed on Sicily's western shore with a thousand volunteers. Garibaldi swept eastward to the great city of Palermo and from there to the eastern edge of the island, the city of Messina. On the shore at Messina you can look across the water to the city of Reggio Calabria situated on the southernmost tip of Italy. The city lies just above the watery horizon and behind it the brown, sun-dried land rises toward the harsh mountains beyond. In the old city of Reggio, off the main avenue, on one of the narrow side streets, there used to be a house — to speak plainly, a whore house, a bordello — called the Conca d'Oro (the Golden Shell), a well kept house with accommodating women, a friendly place.

3

THE FIRST TIME FRANCO WATCHED STELLA UNDRRESS (20 August 1860) in her room at the bordello Conca d'Oro, her freshness and beauty struck him so hard that he fell to his knees, opened his arms and asked her to marry him. "I've never seen anyone so beautiful and I love you," he said. Stella looked at him, her face as serene as polished marble, and began slowly to unpin her hair. The room was filled with dusky golden light which filtered through the shuttered windows. "Marry me," he whispered. "Marry me," She held the pin in her teeth and calmly watched him while her hands searched in the coiled mass of her hair and when she had found the last one she laid all the pins in a sea shell on the bed table. She had worked a few years and was no longer surprised at the way men behaved in her room. "What do I say?" she asked distantly.

"Say yes."

"Yes," she recited, her loosened hair turning languidly about her breast and arm, unrolling over her wrist, across her thigh.

"Diva," the young man murmured. "Goddess."

"Yes. I am a goddess." She was matter-of-fact about it. Of course, the people of southern Italy never made much of the difference between mortals and gods, and you never knew when a man might become a god, or a goddess become a woman, or vice versa.

Franco knelt slowly forward and kissed her feet, embraced her legs as if gathering an armful of long-stemmed flowers, and plunged his face into her dark—

"But first you must wash," Stella told him, firmly turning his hot cheek aside so that he might see the big white pitcher and bowl on a very low little table. "Over there," she said. Franco staggered to his feet, his head filled with the odor of lemon flowers and brine. He poured the water into the bowl, set the pitcher down with a hollow clink on the marble, and began to

scrub his face. "Not your face! Not in *that!*" Stella cried.

Franco straightened up and turned, water streaming from his bare shoulders and chest onto his trousers.

"What?"

"Not your *face*, caro. Wash—" Stella sighed and took up the towel that lay folded on the table and began to dry his chin. "You're new here?" she asked.

Franco was distracted by her nakedness so near to him, by the way her long hair fell upon her breasts, turned about her arm and uncoiled heavily to her knees. "Yes!" he said, getting his wits together. He told her he came from a village in the Calabrian mountains, but that he had traveled around and picked up an education and, as a matter of fact, in a short time he was going off to teach mathematics. He said he believed in mathematics and he thought he would like teaching it. Just now he was down here in Reggio — "the home of Pythagoras," he noted — merely to stroll around and enjoy the cafés and views of the sea. This Reggio was a city of vistas and he had discovered he was crazy about looking at the sea. Then he unbuckled and, because he was shy, turned his back to her before he stepped out of his pants.

"Maybe you'll see the Fata Morgana," Stella said, coming around to watch him. "The castles float in the air far above the water. It's famous."

"An optical illusion, a mirage," Franco said, hurriedly soap-ing himself.

"Of course it's an illusion. Morgana conjures the castles out of thin air. That's why it's called Fata Morgana, because she's the one who creates it."

"I'm a rationalist," he informed her. "I'm a freethinker and a mathematician and I don't believe in — What are you looking at?" he asked, covering his drenched privates with his hand.

"Don't worry. It won't fly away. Here's a towel." She walked idly to the shuttered window and peered between the slats at the balcony and at the sunny strip of street below. "I don't know

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anything about rationalists or freethinkers, but the Royalists don't like them. Have you seen all the soldiers?"

"They don't frighten me."

"They say Garibaldi has come over from Sicily."

"They've been saying that for weeks."

"How long have you been here in Reggio?" she asked, peeping again through the shutters to the sunny balcony.

"Three days," he said. "How long have you been at the Conca d'Oro?"

For a while she did not answer. "Forever, I think."

"That's not true."

Stella turned to him as if she were weary, the golden light spreading up like a fan behind her. "All my life, this life, I've been here."

Franco studied her face to see what she meant, but in that topaz shadow he could never make it out. She seemed made of honey-colored marble and so remote he felt half afraid of her. "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he whispered.

Stella smiled. "Yes. I'm a goddess. And you are a very young man — a rationalist, a freethinker and a mathematician." And taking Franco's hand she led him to her bed, drew up her long legs and sank back upon the white pillows as if bedded in clouds.

Franco was young and enthusiastic and they made love for a long, long time, but even with a goddess it comes to an end — unless you are a god, which Franco was not. Stella arose and went to the big mirror that stood by the bed and Franco, leaning up on his elbow, watched her draw on her blue silk robe.

"If you were my wife —" he began.

"I wouldn't respect you. How could I respect anyone foolish enough to marry a whore?" She was brushing her hair in long slow strokes.

"I believe in the future, not the past. I don't care what you've done."

"Because you don't know what I've done. If you want to

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marry me you must come back tonight and watch me at work."

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"You can hide on the balcony and watch through the shutters." She took a pin from the fluted sea shell on her bed table and began to coil her hair upon her head.

"And then —"

"Afterward, you must tell me everything you saw," she said.

"Why?"

"So I'll know that you really watched. And then —"

"Then I'll ask you to marry me," said Franco, swinging himself from the bed.

"Then you won't ask," said Stella.

Franco returned early that night. The room looked just the same as it had that afternoon, but now there was an oil lamp burning on the low table beside the wash basin and Stella had her hair up in a large braided knot.

"Did you think I'd come back?" he asked cheerfully.

"Yes," she said.

Stella set a bottle of brandy and two glasses on the low table. She was wearing a white dress which left her golden shoulders and arms bare to the hazy lamplight. She poured out the brandy and they each took up a glass.

"My name is Franco Morelli and I live in our house in the town of Morano in Cosenza," he announced.

Stella looked at him in surprise. "My name is Stella Maria DiMare and I live in the bordello Conca d'Oro in Reggio, Calabria." She smiled.

They touched glasses and drank.

"You're a handsome young man. Did your mother ever tell you that?" she asked.

"I don't know. My mother died when I was a child."

"Oh. I'm sorry. My own mother died when I was born," she added.

"My father is a carpenter and cabinet maker."

"And my father was a fisherman," she said. Stella smiled, re-

membering him. "He used to tell me that he found me at sea. Other children were found under cabbages, but he used to say that he pulled in his nets one morning and there I was, swimming with all the fishes. I loved that story. He used to carry me on his shoulders. He died in 1848. I think it was during the bombardment. He sailed out and never came back."

Stella sat on the foot of her bed, Franco sat in a stiff chair, and they talked and talked, getting to know each other. Actually, Stella did most of the talking, for no one had ever asked her about herself and now she discovered that she liked to converse on that subject with this young man. In fact, she talked so much that she forgot where she was and remembered only at the last minute. "Oh! the time! I've got to tell mother superior you ran down the back stairs," she cried.

Franco jumped up and met himself in the tall mirror that stood by the bed — a flushed young man in a whore's bedroom. How odd that a flat mirror reflects so little of the truth, he thought.

"Hurry!" Stella said, unlatching the shuttered doors to the balcony. "This way. And be careful of the bird cages out there. Whatever you do, don't make any noise. After my last customer leaves I'll open the doors and let you in. Watch out for my doves!"

Stella shut the doors and adjusted the louvers so that Franco, out on the dark balcony, could peer in and see all that went on in the lighted room. Franco crouched among the bamboo bird cages and wondered how he could watch and not watch at the same time, for on the one hand he felt it was dishonorable to spy on the woman he loved and on the other hand he had given her his promise to spy in order to win her. He was turning this round and round in his mind when he heard the bedroom door open. He peeked between the slats and began to watch.

Well, what can I tell you? Stella's first customer was a cranky Neapolitan businessman whose limp thing wouldn't get hard no matter how she handled it, until he gave her an order to do

thus and so with this and this. Next came the elegant son of a local landowner, a youth with a long nose who confused top with bottom, front with back, and one thing with another. And after him there came two Royalist officers, big men who tossed off their uniforms and shoved each other around like playful athletes before they set to work on Stella. It grew to be a very long night.

When her last customer had gone, Stella unlatched the doors to the balcony and whispered to Franco, *Come in*. He arose slowly and unsteadily from the lattice of shadows amid the bamboo bird cages. She poured two brimming glasses of brandy, drank one straight down and handed the other to him. But Franco stood wordless in the balcony doorway, his face white as a sheet of paper, his eyes dead as stones.

"Ah," Stella said gently. "I can see you've had a hard night."

Franco stared straight ahead, as if he were deaf, dumb and blind.

"I like you," she said. She looked at him, then sighed and drank down his brandy. "Actually, I love you and I'm sorry I didn't tell you before," she added.

He walked uncertainly into the room.

"Listen," she told him. "Garibaldi has landed and there's going to be a big battle tonight. You've got to get home."

"That's what I want, a good fight." He seemed to awaken.

"Did you hear me? Garibaldi has landed. When the troops find out they'll be shooting at anything that moves. You've got to get home."

"I'd like to kill a few troops myself," he said. "A few Neapolitans. Some landowners. A couple of officers." He laughed and his eyes brightened.

"Carissimo," she said, putting her hand to his cheek. "Garibaldi is immortal but you are not. Stay out of it. Go someplace safe."

But Franco had already crossed the room and now he threw open the chamber door and vaulted down the stairway, strode

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through a maroon parlor of gilded chairs, torn playing cards and overturned wineglasses, and burst into the street. He ran, turned away from the bordello and ran down whatever avenue opened for him, ran through a city of crumbling masonry and stucco and shuttered windows with no sound anywhere except his own clattering footfall. He ran where the streets themselves led, rushing now down a cobbled alley to a yet narrower passage that hurled him headlong into the Cathedral Square which abruptly swirled into a crackling chaos of gunfire, screams and plunging horses.



Garibaldi had landed. Everyone in Reggio had known he was coming, the only question was when. Italy is separated from Sicily by the Straits of Messina, and the northern end of the Straits is so narrow that anyone on the Italian side could climb a hill and look over the water to Garibaldi's camp and watch his men hammering together supply rafts, or inspect his makeshift flotilla of steamboats, fishing boats, rowboats and barges pulled up on the sand. The desolate King in Naples knew he was coming. He had ordered his warships to patrol the Straits, and he had packed 16,000 handsomely dressed troops into that part of Italy. The old general at the castle in Reggio certainly knew he was coming. He calculated that Garibaldi would cross the Straits and rush up from the shore to the streets of the city. That's why he positioned his colonel and the men of the 14th Line out front, had ordered them to bivouac in the large Square before the Cathedral. He figured that Garibaldi was an ordinary mortal.

On the morning of August 19 Garibaldi did appear, but not on the shore opposite his camp and not at the narrow northern end of the Straits at all, but on an empty stretch of beach thirty miles to the south. The Royal Navy never saw him. He simply appeared, materializing quietly out of the limpid dawn air with his men on a patch of sand that sloped gently up to a wilder-

RENATO!

ness of cactuses and aloes. Eventually Royalist warships came up over the horizon and drew near and since not even Garibaldi could hide a steamboat on an open beach he and his crazy quilt army were discovered. The warships blew apart the grounded steamboat, but by then the entire army on the beach had vanished. Garibaldi had a simple plan. First he would march north to rendezvous with partisans already in the countryside, then he would transform all his men into substanceless shadows. The next night some would slip past the soldiers who guarded the city gates and once inside would glide noiselessly toward the Cathedral Square. He and the others would condense out of the black night air on the hills behind Reggio. When the red-shirts and the Royalists were in blind battle in front of the Cathedral, Garibaldi and the rest of his army would sweep down upon the city and it would be theirs. The plan worked like a miracle. And Franco just happened to rush into the Square the moment the fight began.



The morning after the battle was quiet in the bordello Conca d'Oro. Stella sat in the half-shuttered light of her room with her forgotten sewing in her lap and gazed blankly at the dirty wall. She tried not to think of Franco, because whenever she did her heart felt hollow and heavy at the same time. She sighed and wondered what the next thousand years would bring and she was trying not to think at all when there was a BOOM and one of the shutters burst into splinters above her head. It took her a moment to realize that somebody had fired a shotgun at her balcony doors. "Stella DiMare!" he cried. She jumped up and put her cheek to the margin of the shutter, peering into the narrow street below. "Stella DiMare!" Of course it was Franco standing there, a pistol in his belt and a shotgun in his hand, shouting up at her. She pressed her back against the wall. "Yes!" she cried.

"My name is Franco Morelli from the town of Morano in

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Cosenza!" There was another BOOM as the top of the other door to the balcony exploded, filling the air with wood chips.

"I remember you," Stella shouted, her eyes shut against the soft patter of bird shot and plaster falling from the ceiling.

"Thank you," he cried. "I've come back to tell you what I saw in your room last night."

She opened her eyes. "And what did you see?"

"A jackass, a dog, and two pigs!" he shouted.

"Very clever! You're the cleverest young man I know."

"And you," he called up to her. "I saw you, diva."

Stella opened the shredded balcony shutters and stood there a moment, looking down on him. His necktie was gone, his shirt was open, his jaw was dark with a day's stubble — a handsome young man. She said nothing. Her face was as calm as the sea when night is over and morning about to begin and her eyes shimmered with sadness.

"Oh, yes. Everyone looked at you but I'm the only one who saw you. I know you for what you are. Diva. Goddess. I keep trying but I haven't shot anybody yet," he cried. "Will you marry me!"

Stella looked into Franco's face and smiled, then she turned and unlatched the door to one of the bamboo cages and withdrew one dove and another. She tossed them into the air where they blossomed in a flurry of white wings, then beat their way in a soaring helical sweep skyward, circle upon circle, one following the other like melody in a round. She smiled because she loved Franco. Now she flung open the other cages and as the doves shot up around her like rockets she leaned over the rail to say, "Yes, I will marry you." But by then the street was empty and Franco gone.

Franco had run off before Stella had answered, because he was afraid she might say no. In all other ways he was brave. The next day he hiked out of the city and up the hills northward, climbing to join the Garibaldini camped on the slopes high above the Straits. Franco chose a patch of ground sloven with

broken mud banks, cactuses, tangled vineyards and orchards, chose it because the view was splendid. Below him on the lower terraces of the mountain were the Royalist troops, and way down below the Royalists flowed the blue waters of the Straits, and on the other side stood the lilac headlands of Sicily with smoky Mongibello (Mt. Etna) to the south and the great Tyrrhenian Sea like azure enamel to the north horizon. Franco sat back against a crooked olive tree, his shotgun across his knees, but the call to advance and fire never came. Instead, the men of both armies — the redshirts in the balcony, the Royalists in the lower tiers — watched an artillery duel between the distant cannoneers on the Sicilian point and the warships of the Royal Navy. The following day Garibaldi gave the order to advance without firing. The men stood up, stretched and began to descend, step by step, upon the Royalist troops. Franco couldn't believe what was happening. Now and again cotton puffs of smoke appeared below and cannon-balls shrieked up at them, thudding into the mountainside, and every so often he heard the crack of enemy rifle fire, but everyone continued to step carefully downward with their weapons silent. At one point word was passed along that they were to halt, so they halted. Franco sat on the ground and stared glumly at the town below, knowing that if the fight continued in this fashion he would never get to shoot anybody. Then he saw Garibaldi close at hand on the brown hillside where he stood talking with three of his officers. He had a full golden beard, wore a loose red shirt stained with sweat and he carried a long sword, was using it just now to make a sweeping orchestral gesture toward the gray mountains further north. Two of the men broke off and headed up the hill while Garibaldi and the remaining officer began to walk down toward the enemy. His voice was strange, more like music than speech, and Franco remembered it for the rest of his life. Word came again to advance without firing, so they did, and in a little while the King's soldiers threw down their rifles and surrendered. In a few days Garibaldi was to gallop north to Naples,

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disarming and sending home ten thousand Royalist troops on the way, and when he rode through the mountain provinces of Calabria, Basilicata and Campania, men would come forward to touch his hand, women would hold babies aloft to receive his blessing, and he was greeted as a god.

Now Franco trudged down the last hillock, crossed a dirt road and walked onto the empty shore. He broke open his shotgun, unloaded his pistol and laid them on the dry pebbles. Nearer the water he saw something like a discarded banner lying on the sand and when he looked more closely he saw that it was a forgotten pile of laundry, a woman's white dress and blue robe folded loosely and anchored there by the handful of sea shells heaped upon it. He tried not to think of Stella, but everything reminded him of her. He sighed. He pulled off his shoes, threw off his shirt and waded into the water. He washed his face, his scorched neck, his arms. The scent of brine and lemon blossoms, the swaying of the sea anemones, the convoluted drifting braids of tawny seaweed— everything reminded him of Stella. He gazed at the waves that came forever forward to meet him, waves that still rise and curl and, curling, fall like scalloped shells upon that beach, and as he watched a wave broke into foam and it was Stella who stood before him, wringing the seawater from her hair while she waded ashore. "Franco," she called to him. "You are a rationalist, a freethinker and a mathematician and I am the goddess who says yes." They had many children, each one as beautiful as her mother.

4

WE KNOW THESE THINGS BECAUSE A GRANDSON OF Angelo Cavallù married a granddaughter of Stella DiMare on the dock in Boston in 1904, and the stories were passed down from one generation to another. Angelo, half man