

Domenico Matteo

By Unknown

As you sail along the shore of the lake of Como, between the celebrated island Cernia and the delicious Tremezinas, you see, stretching out into the *water*, the promontory of Lovedo, on the side of which, half-way down, stands the village of Campo, on the other that of Lenno.

At the period of the events which we are about to narrate the headland between these villages had been for two years the abode of an outlaw, who, to escape the prison and the cord, deserted his own country, and assuming the garb of a Franciscan and the name of Fra Nicola, had made his way to this retreat. Here, to all external show, his life had been such that he had earned for himself the esteem, nay, the veneration of his rustic neighbours. And who, indeed, would not have deemed him worthy of admiration? Was not his I up over burning before the image of the Holy Virgin that was painted on the wall of his little half-ruined chapel on the crest of the promontory? When the villagers revisited his hermitage, was he not ever found engaged in prayer, or making chaplets or amulets, or certain little cakes that were held in great esteem by the devotees, who, indeed, regarded them as almost sacred, coming from his hands, and as an infallible cure for all sorts of maladies?

Close to the little chapel the worthy Franciscan, with the willing aid of the villagers, had raised a lowly straw-thatched hermitage. A stool, a table, and a truckle-bed constituted its modest furniture the other appurtenances being a crucifix, a human skull, a shepherd's pouch, a hair shirt, and some images stuck up against the walls round a great daub of a picture representing St. Anthony with his pig, terribly tormented by a host of devils. Against the farther corner of the room, more out of sight, negligently leant a long-barrelled gun, a somewhat incongruous addition it may seem, but one which was even too necessary in those days in the most peaceful dwelling.

It was really edifying to hear the holy father expatiate upon the joys and beauty of faith and piety; to listen to the tales he had ever ready for each man's case, of miraculous cures that his panaceas had effected; to see him giving forth with profound gravity his cakes and his medicinal herbs for toothaches and headaches, and aches of every sort; to bear him exorcising witches, and sorcerers, and blight, and noxious insects, with one unvarying formula of five or six barbarous Latin words he had picked up; or blessing women in childbed, or new-born infants, or dying men, with the same formula said backwards. These tricks brought him in a plentiful supply of the best wine and the best provisions the country-people could command, though the good man never accepted any of these good gifts without a pious groan at the necessity which his weakened health—poor sufferer!—imposed upon him of breaking the strict fast which he had vowed to blessed St. Anthony.

But when night came on how different a part did Father Nicola assume! The fierce restless eyes, which all day he had kept fixed upon the ground lest they should give the lie to the lowly humility it had been his difficult task to wear the semblance of, now glared around, terrible with ferocious pride and daring. No sooner had the disappearance of the last light in the villages beneath freed him from the risk of observation than the

friar's robe was cast aside, and the bandit, arraying himself, from a secret recess, in a garb more suitable to his taste and to the work in hand, would sally forth to join his band of fellow-marauders.

One night Fra Nicola, with seven associates, all armed to the teeth, descended to the water-side, and embarking in a boat,—the property of one of the band who ostensibly followed the occupation of a fisherman,—pulled lustily in the direction of Como. And now, in the tall, powerful, muscular man who guided the helm who would have recognised Fra Nicola? Here he became himself again; here his comrades knew him for the famous freebooter, Domenico Matteo di Brienzo. The native of a village in Switzerland, he had left his native country to avoid the consequences of his crimes, and taking refuge in this part of Italy, he had collected around him a band of worthies of his own stamp, with whom each night he committed the most horrible excesses. Churches and houses, nay, whole villages burnt; mothers and maidens entrapped; whole families massacred,—deeds such as these everywhere attested the presence of a pitiless band. But the perpetrators, disbanding at early dawn,—Fra Nicola to his hermitage, the rest to their cottages, where they passed as fishermen, foresters, or husbandmen,—had hitherto remained undiscovered.

When the boat arrived opposite Argento the leader, with a deep sigh, exclaimed—“’Tis just here I saw fall at my very feet poor Pelosina da Sala, the best and bravest comrade man over had. The ball that finished him whizzed close past my ear. My curse upon the hand that fired it! Poor Da Sala! He fell into the water just like lead, and we could never hear anything of his body. My uncle, too, old Gianni Brienzo, a fellow that fear never found at home, had his brains dashed out at the same time by those accursed Tornese. The bullet passed as near me as I am to thee, Isidore. It seems only yesterday that he fell back into the boat—’twas the very boat we are in now—gasping out, “I die; be it thy task to avenge me!” and so, by all the saints, I will. Often in my dreams he appears before me pale, ghastly, dying as I then saw him, and demands in a hollow voice, “Revenge, revenge!”

Moved by these recollections, the rough brigand, taking off his broad-brimmed felt hat, began to chant as much as his memory would supply him with of *De Profundis*, in behalf of the souls of the departed worthies whom he had been commemorating, and his comrades joined in with a somewhat imperfect chorus.

At length the party arrived opposite Torno, but although the night was far advanced the little town, from one end to the other, was illuminated with infinite torches, lanterns, and bonfires, whose light shed glittering reflections far over the rippling waters of the lake, presenting a charming contrast with the surrounding darkness. The bells were ringing merrily, and every now and then there arose, above the confusion, shouts of ‘Long live the fair Cecilia de Palanzo! Long live our gallant captain, Gualtiero!’

An expression of hatred and jealous rage came over the face of the bandit chief as these sounds reached his ear, for they told him of the happiness of the rival who had triumphed over him, of the woman who had scorned him. Seeing Cecilia, he had loved her with all the fierce ardour of his nature; loving her, he had dared to seek her and to declare his passion. He had been repulsed, as might have been expected, with contempt and indignation, and the desire for vengeance then took possession of his soul. He had now come to execute it.

The rowers rested from their labours, and a signal having been given by the discharge of a pistol, there appeared gliding over the water an object which, emerging from an inlet on the opposite side of the town, and growing gradually more and more distinct, at length on near approach assumed the form of a skiff guided by a single rower.

‘Who goes there?’ exclaimed Domenico. ‘Is’t thou, Grabelo da Porlezza?’

‘The same,’ replied the new-comer, attaching his skiff to the larger boat. ‘The night is our own; everything is arranged. The fisherman Ambrogio is ready at his post, and the moment the signal is given he and his party will fire several volleys in the way you spoke of.’

The plan of the marauders was to alarm the Tornese by a feigned attack upon that quarter of the town exactly opposite to that in which the festivities were proceeding, so as to divert thence Gualtierio and the other lighting men, and give Domenico an opportunity of executing his project without interruption. The cottage of Ambrogio stood at some two hundred paces out of the town, on the road to Como, so that he and his associates having fired off two or three volleys under the walls, could easily retire undiscovered on the first indication of the approach of the townspeople.

Meantime in the house of the bridegroom all was festive joy and happiness. In the courtyard facing the lake was arranged a long table laden with an abundant banquet, at which were seated forty or fifty guests of the humbler sort. From the centre of the table rose a pyramid of wax torches, which lit up every corner of the place, and threw a long stream of radiance over the lake. In an upper apartment were assembled the visitors of higher rank, comprising all the notables of Torno, and of its neighbour and ally Lario—for in those times of unhappy dissension each little community had its allies and its enemies. The bride, timid as all young brides are, or should be, on their marriage day, sat blushing and confused amongst the glittering throng, conscious that all eyes were ever and anon upon her at the centre of attraction.

But in the very midst of this buoyant and open-hearted felicity treachery was at work. Attired as a domestic of one of the guests, Grabelo had found ready access, and unobserved by any of the happy party, had made himself thoroughly acquainted with interior of the house, the distribution of its apartments, the direction of its passages, its exits and its entrances; and having acquired all the information so necessary to his master’s purpose, he quitted the place as the clock struck twenty-three,¹ and proceeded, as we have seen, to communicate the intelligence he had gained to Domenico.

At midnight the various guests took their leave, and to the confusion which had but just prevailed, succeeded the solemn tranquillity of night. The lights were extinguished, the pyramids of which we have spoken perished in a magnificent display of fireworks, and then darkness assumed her sway.

Upon learning from Grabelo the exact position of affairs, Domenico had ordered his men to pull into a little creek between La Pliniana and the town, where, in profound silence, they watched the departure of the bridal visitors. When all was in repose the bandit chief discharged his carbine, and the signal was immediately obeyed by Ambrogio and his party at the other extremity of the town. As had been anticipated, the alarm of an assault flew in every direction. The Tornese leaped from the beds they had but just sought, and, half dressed, rushed along the streets leading to the Great Square. There

¹ The Italians count the whole of the twenty-four hours throughout. Twenty-three o’clock would thus be the hour preceding midnight.

amidst a confusion of cries—‘The Swiss’—‘The Spaniards’—‘Francesco Morone of Lecco’—‘’tis the Comese’—the stronger and braver among the men rallied round their young leader, who had rushed to the succour of his people at the first alarm; and some armed with swords, others with guns, others with pikes, others with scythes merely, marched towards the Comese Gate, where, according to the prevalent impression, the supposed attack had to be resisted. Grabelo, who had been watching the progress of affairs, no sooner saw his opportunity than he hastened to Domenico, whom he met advancing with his band, altogether free from interruption, or even observation.

Meantime Cecilia, horror-struck at the danger which seemed to threaten him who that day had become her husband, knelt before the image of the Virgin, and in an agony of tears commended him and herself to the Mother of Mercy. Her prayers, however, were soon interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps, and looking up she beheld the figure of a man, enveloped in a cloak, advancing towards her through the gloom of the chamber.

‘Gualtiero, Gualtiero!’ she exclaimed. ‘Is it thou? Art thou safe?’

‘It is I,’ replied a hoarse voice; and as he spoke the intruder threw over the unhappy girl the cloak that had covered him, and catching her up in his powerful grasp, rushed down the staircase with her, heedless of her screams and struggles. When the cloak was removed, Cecilia found herself in a boat, surrounded by a band of ruffians, who were impelling the vessel through the water at its utmost speed. A mist passed suddenly before her eyes, her senses became confused, a cold perspiration bathed her forehead, and she fainted.

In this condition she remained for some time, senseless and motionless as one dead, in spite of all the efforts of Domenico to restore her to consciousness. In her trance she thought she was in her mother’s house at Palanzo, standing in the balcony, and gazing at the distant chamber window of her beloved Gualtiero; then, like the change of scene in a play, the balcony became a richly decorated nuptial chamber, and the air resounded with joyous shouts and acclamations. First, by her side stood two beloved forms, those of her parents; presently these two forms melted into one, that of a young and handsome warrior—her betrothed, her husband. Anon this gentle vision faded away, and in its place there appeared before her the gigantic proportions of a dark-visaged ruffian, his countenance horrible with every fierce passion, his hands bathed in blood. The shriek which terror forced from her restored Cecilia to consciousness, but it was only to find herself supported in the arms of the frightful man whose image had so appalled her. Throwing herself at his feet she implored him, with all the eloquence of despair, to restore her to her parents, or at once to send her to her eternal home.

‘Cruel girl,’ exclaimed Domenico, ‘knowest thou not what torments thou hast caused me I Never before I saw thee had these eyes known what tears were but since that fatal moment—shame upon me for it!—I have wept, wept bitterly, again and again, at the thought of thy scorn. Dost thou recollect when I first saw thee, sitting alone upon the rock of Billagio, watching the ripple of the waves? Dost thou remember how, my fierce nature subdued by thy gentle beauties, I fell at thy feet, imploring thy love, praying for one ray of hope to save me from the abyss which else I saw before me? Dost thou remember thy haughty rejection of my passionate suit? From that moment never has this heart of mine known peace. To me earth became a hell; many a time have I raised my dagger on that life which was so insupportable; but the desire of once more gazing upon thee, a ray of

hope, a yearning for vengeance, stayed my hand. The hour of vengeance is come; but love reigns all-powerful in my breast; and once more, humbly at thy feet, I implore thy pity.'

'This is cruel mockery,' cried the unhappy girl. 'It is I who implore pity at your hands. Let me return to my home, to my husband, to him who but a few hours since received my vows at the altar, and my gratitude shall ever bless you. This I implore at your hands—by the holy Mother of Heaven, by the dead and the living, by the memory of your mother, by all you hold most dear, most sacred—do this, or kill me!'

'Thy husband!' exclaimed Domenico, all his fury once more aroused; 'thy husband! How knowest thou that thy husband lives to receive thee? Dost thou not imagine that his heart would be the first this trusty sword would seek in the midnight assault?'

At these words, so full of terrible import, Cecilia, overpowered with the ghastly image which they presented to her mind, once more lost all consciousness.

Meantime, who shall describe the despair of Gualtiero when, on returning home after a fruitless search for an enemy, he found his home despoiled of his newly-acquired treasure? Rushing forth into the street, his cries soon reassembled his people; but for some time no information could be obtained. At length a fisherman, who had just landed, brought the intelligence that he had seen a large boat, whence issued piercing cries, pulling towards Menaggio, at a rate which would soon carry it to its destination. Upon this intimation a body of young Tornese, headed by their chief, rushed to the boats, and were soon rapidly advancing in the track of the marauders, guided at short intervals by fishermen whose vessels they passed. The pursuit was so close that Domenico and his party, with their captive, still half-unconscious of the external world, had made good their retreat to the hermitage but one short hour when the Tornese reached the promontory. Here, however, the pursuers necessarily came to a pause. All clue seemed to fail them, but Providence unexpectedly favoured them beyond their hopes. On looking up the height before them, attracted by vociferous cries, they saw the hermitage of Fra Nicola surrounded by a crowd of men, shouting and furiously gesticulating, whom they soon recognised as their good friends and allies, the townspeople of Menaggio. They at once hastened onwards to ascertain the cause of this unusual scene, and, to their amazement and delight, found that the crowd were assembled round a party of nine men, bound strongly back to back, among whom they discovered that worthy Franciscan, Fra Nicola, who had hitherto been surrounded by such an odour of sanctity. Near these was seen the rescued Cecilia, safe in the arms of an old man, her uncle. Who can describe the mutual joy of the newly-married pair, thus reunited after so strange and terrible a separation?

This was how it had happened.

The people of Menaggio, having traced many robberies wellnigh home to their neighbour, Grabelo of Porlezza, had been for some time past watching an opportunity to seize him. Having learned that on several occasions he had been seen to enter the hermitage of Fra Nicola at nightfall, it had been determined that a body of townsmen should search in that retreat, some morning ere break of day, undeterred even by the sanctity of Fra Nicola, which indeed had suffered somewhat in popular estimation in consequence of his reported connection with the notorious Grabelo. Accordingly, on the very night of our story, a party of some fifty Menaggese, well armed, arrived at the hermitage by early dawn, almost immediately after Domenico and his band had returned with their captive. Entirely surrounding the building to avoid all chance of escape, some

of the party commenced a violent knocking at the door. Domenico, hastily throwing on his friar's garb, looked out at the little window, and seeing the assembled crowd, hastily drew back, and ran to close the entrance of the secret chamber, which he and his companions had constructed out of the chapel vaults, and whither the latter had now retired. Then drawing his cowl over his brow, with crucifix in hand, he opened the door, and the crowd, con-finned in their suspicions by his delay, rushed in. No Grabelo, however, was to be seen. All at once, however, as, ashamed at their apparently unwarrantable violence, they were about to leave the holy friar to his matins, a stifled scream was heard as it were proceeding from behind the friar's bed. Then there was another. The bed being instantly removed from its position, a small door was discovered behind it, which, when opened, discovered a flight of steps. With a shout of triumph the Menaggese rushed down the descent, and found themselves in a large vault, lighted by a number of lamps suspended from the ceiling. Around it were ranged guns, pistols, pikes, clubs, swords, weapons of every description, with vizards and disguises of infinite variety. In all directions were heaped up gold and silver household plate and sacred utensils; jewellery, tapestry, rich dresses, plunder of all sorts—the produce of many a night of outrage and blood. But the more immediate object of attention was the brigands themselves, who, surprised at the sudden attack and overawed by the numbers, made no attempt to defend themselves, and were immediately seized and bound together. All eyes were now turned upon poor Cecilia, who sat bewildered with the various occurrences of the night. What was her delight when, in one of her deliverers, she recognised her uncle Maniglio. After a thanksgiving to God her next impulse was to ascertain the safety of her husband, but upon this point no one present could satisfy her.

The question now was what was to be done with the prisoners. The first proposition was to throw them all together into the lake, each with a good stone round his neck; but this hasty suggestion was rejected as disrespectful to religion, which demanded that the condemned persons should have time to confess themselves; and accordingly it was arranged that they should be conducted to Menaggio, and thence, after they had received the consolations of the church, to Palezza, where in the very house of Grabelo they should suffer the death their crimes so well merited.

It was at this point of time that the Tornese, as we have seen, arrived, and you need hardly be told that the sentence which had just been passed upon the marauders met with the full concurrence of the new-comers. The whole party then, with the exception of some half-dozen, who were left in charge of the discovered plunder, descended to the lake, where the prisoners were embarked in a vessel under a sufficient escort, and proceeded to Menaggio, followed by the rest of the Menaggese in other boats, while the people of Torno, with their young chief and his bride, returned home.

The brigands, on their arrival at Menaggio, were received by the whole population, who accompanied them, with shouts and execrations, to the church. From the church, after receiving the last offices of their religion, the condemned band were carried, each malefactor bound hand and foot, and stretched upon a sort of litter borne by two men, towards palezza, where they were to receive their doom, still accompanied by a large portion of the enraged population.

All at once the sky, which had hitherto been resplendently clear, became fearfully overcast. Thick black clouds collected together, and formed a dense mass which hid the face of the sun. The broken flashes of lightning alone guided the travellers through the

otherwise total darkness. The thunder pealed louder and louder, the rain fell in torrents, and hail, such as none present had ever known before, wellnigh struck the men to the earth.

Superstition, which in those days was ever ready with its marvellous solution of every unusual circumstance, completed the terror and confusion of the crowd. They were now in the valley of Grona, the place in which, as everybody knew, witches and sorcerers were wont to hold their horrible meetings. It was Thursday, the day on which, as everybody knew, these meetings were held. They were leading to death Domenico Matteo, who, as everybody knew, was the favoured associate of the witches and sorcerers who assembled there. If the inference from all these manifest facts required confirmation, the confirmation was at once furnished.

A herd of goats (the animal whose form, as was well known, it was the favourite pastime of the witches and sorcerers to assume, though in this particular instance the goats were veritable goats, maddened with fear by the storm) rushed down the road along which the party were slowly advancing, and overthrew the two men who were carrying the litter of Domenico. Overcome with panic and fear at this manifest appearance amongst them of the spirits of evil, the Menaggese, casting one look of concentrated horror at Domenico, left him where he fell, and fled onwards, dragging with them their other prisoners. Arrived at Palezza, no time was given for a further interposition of the world of magic in favour of the condemned, who were forthwith strung up on the beam which supported the ceiling of Grabelo's outer room.

A still more horrible fate was reserved for the leader of the band. Left prostrate on the earth by the fugitive Menaggese, the strong cords with which he was bound hand and foot effectually prevented him from seizing the opportunity which seemed to present itself of recovering his liberty. There he lay, utterly helpless, for hour after hour passed away, and no one came even to free him from his misery by slaying him. The terrified Menaggese had returned by a circuitous route, and the tale they spread abroad deterred all persons from approaching the witches' glen for many and many a day. One night drew its veil over the sufferings of the famishing wretch, and another, and another. On the third day the vultures fed upon him ere life had yet departed.

When the Menaggese once more revisited the valley, a skeleton and the fragments of a Franciscan robe were all that remained of the once fierce and terrible Domenico.