

Disvola

By Edward Lucas White

As he penetrated more deeply into the wood, continually scrambling up hill, hampered by his armor and hindered by low boughs and undergrowth, it appeared to him that, slowly as he seemed to advance, he was drawing away from his pursuers. Instead of shouts and widespread cracklings in the underbrush he heard only occasional snappings of branches and the footsteps of but one man. He stopped, listened attentively, made up his mind and turned like a wolf at bay. The fight was brief. In a moment he tugged his dagger out of his pursuer's ribs, drove it three times through his throat to make sure, and plunged it repeatedly into the cleansing earth. Sheathing it he stood up and hearkened. He heard only the woodland noises. Rapidly he divested himself of his armor. Settling his sword-belt anew he continued his flight, bareheaded and still panting, until he gained the lonely recesses of the mountain forests.

There he sat down to consider his situation.

He was of a buoyant disposition and the mere fact that he, unhorsed and encumbered by his mail, had hacked his way through a press of eager foes, had eluded and outdistanced a hue and cry of victorious and triumphant enemies, appeared so notable an exploit that the thought of it seemed to give him confidence and to cheer him up.

He needed cheering.

At sunrise he had known himself the most formidable, the most dreaded, the most renowned condottiere in Italy; before sunset he found himself a solitary fugitive. He had ridden out at dawn the leader of eight hundred reckless and obedient spearmen; in the dusk he crouched alone, destitute of food, water, friends, shelter or refuge.

He tried to review his chances of life and rehabilitation.

At first he could think of no chances of either. In any city where he was a stranger he would either be killed at sight as a dangerous alien, or clapped into a dungeon as a suspicious outlander and later handed over, as a peace-offering, to some one of his implacable enemies.

Implacable enemies he had by thousands.

Scores of the cities where he was known had always been his implacable enemies. He had been among their foemen from his childhood. Some he had sacked, some he had helped to sack, others remembered citizens who had died by his sword in fair fight, had been slain by his men-at-arms, had been butchered by his orders.

Most of the cities where he would be recognized were still more envenomed against him as a perfidious ally who had betrayed them to their ruin or deserted them in their bitter need.

He could not think of any walled-town in all Italy where he could find safety, protection or even mercy.

Merciless to all men, he knew that to him all men would be merciless.

As a lonely wanderer, without money or armor, but girt with a sword and poignard, any village would greet him with volleys of stones and curses; any country-side would band to hunt him like a stray wolf; any farmstead would loose its dogs on him; any laborer, goat-herd or wayfarer would raise the hue and cry against him.

For a while he raged at his luck.

This day was to have set him, secure and above the caprices of fortune, upon the pinnacle of prestige and fame. It had all been arranged. In the crisis of the battle, just in the nick of time, he and his men were to have changed sides, annihilating their frigid associates and winning both the everlasting gratitude of their admiring adversaries and undying glory for himself as a lightning strategist and wily diplomat.

But everything had gone wrong. His employers had suspected his perfidy, had come to an understanding with their antagonists, the battle had been a sham, a parade, an elaborate snare laid to trap him and his company into shame and massacre. At the crisis of the day both leagues had laid aside their age-long enmities and feuds and had joyously united in the pleasant pastime of butchering his men. Many of them had been slaughtered. But some, taught by long service with a leader who had changed sides whenever it suited his advantage, had won honor in a new service by joining in the carnage and helping to exterminate their less facile comrades. Most of his mercenaries were dead, not one of the survivors would ever again own Melozzo Carpineti for his master.

He could hardly believe that he was Melozzo Carpineti.

He resolved that no man should take him alive, that he would never be a prisoner to be taunted, insulted, tortured, shamed.

He thought of falling on his rapier-point, he fingered his throat and half drew his poignard.

Then he remembered Fabrizia.

He had not thought of Fabrizia for years, for ten years at least; at least fourteen years had passed since he had seen her.

He recalled their parting, she leaning out of the window, he clinging to the face of the castle-wall, his elbows on the window-sill, his toes on his familiar scant footholds in the inequalities of the stonework. He recalled her last kiss, her parting words.

"Melozzo," she had said, "I shall never cease to love you. No power on earth, no wheedling, no threats, will ever make me marry any other man, or enter a convent. I shall be yours until I die or until you return to claim me. Every night, while I live, my lamp shall burn at this window as to-night, so that you can see it across the valley. Every day I shall wish for you, every night I shall expect you. I shall never change or forget."

Melozzo Carpineti stood up, made sure of his direction and began to work his way southward. His first care was to find a rivulet, to make sure he was the only man in that solitude, and to drink his fill; then, all night he made his way along the mountain-side keeping well down from the crests of the ridges, but following their general direction. The night was clear and he guided himself by the stars. Towards dawn he found a well-hidden nook and curled himself up to sleep.

He wakened near sunset, famished, but not yet weakened by fasting. He was well pleased. Another night of thridding the hillsides ought to put him well beyond peril from any organized pursuit. He had escaped his relentless enemies and infuriated allies.

The next morning he had luck. From his hiding place he overlooked a hut and saw its occupants go off about their daily tasks, goat-herding and such like. Venturing near he found the hut indeed untenanted and stayed his hunger on cheese and rock-hard bread. Likewise he took with him a supply of both.

Steadily then, without hurry, sleeping by day and slinking by night, he made for Vola. Good fortune attended him. The weather was dry and warm; he thrived on the food he was

able to steal; twice only did he have to fight for his life, and then he left no adversary alive to betray him; he slept soundly; he was a ragged scarecrow, but strong and lithe as a panther.

During the twenty days of his journey, he had plenty of time to think. His thoughts at first surprised him, then absorbed him so that they seemed merely natural. He did not plan or fear for his future; he did not brood over his past; he forgot his treacheries and crimes, his feats and triumphs, his disappointments and failures, his hatreds and ambitions. He thought only of Fabrizio. It seemed to him that, somehow, deep inside of himself somewhere, he had always loved Fabrizio. Certainly there could be no doubt that he loved her now, loved her consumingly, loved her more every day. His flight ceased to appear to him an escape from doom and a quest for security. He forgot both the imminence of danger and the prospect of safety. His advance seemed a pilgrimage towards Fabrizio. She appeared the only prize in the world really worth striving for. The goals towards which he had striven so eagerly for so many years all of a sudden seemed to him the veriest trifles, matters of no importance.

His one aim in life was Fabrizio. To find her, to possess her, to make her happy, to atone to her for the long years of his neglect. He was indifferent to peril or dominion. He desired only Fabrizio. He longed for her hungrily, frantically.

Before dawn of the twentieth day of his skulkings he descried, far ahead to his left, the unmistakable, familiar, well remembered outline of the great castle of Vola. That was only a glimpse. It required a long night of his utmost effort to bring him near enough to behold at the next dawn the bold grim shape of Vola, dominating the landscape from its magnificent location on the end of a sheer mountain-spur. Then he was on the wrong side of it and had to work round it in a long circuit before he found himself in line with Fabrizio's window. There he slept.

In fact, he overslept.

He woke in the pitch dark, under a moonless, starless, cloud-obscured firmament. Everything about him was inky black, except, far across the valley, a pin-point of radiance.

Fabrizio's light!

The instant he recognized it every conceivable and inconceivable misgiving began to torment him. Like a swarm of impish gadflies they buzzed inside his brain, like virulent gnats they tortured him. Never once did he doubt Fabrizio. If she were in fact alive he was certain that she was expecting him, love in her heart, eager to do all she could to welcome, to succor, to protect, to relieve him. But all the other Disvols had hated him consumedly and they were the most unrelenting, the most pertinacious, the most rancorous family in all Italy. For tenacity of purpose, for subtle craftiness in revenge they surpassed any stock on earth. He feared them, frankly he feared them. He shuddered, shuddered undisguisedly as he thought of them.

Grim old Zenone Disvola, Fabrizio's father, was dead, he was sure. He had heard of his death too circumstantially to be in any doubt as to that. Also, he would now be of an incredible age: he had been a very old man fourteen years before. Melozzo knew he would not have to reckon with old Zenone's icy malignity. Also he seemed to have heard of the deaths of Vincenzo and Romualdo, Fabrizio's two brothers. He could not make up his mind whether he had heard that they were dead, or had heard some ephemeral rumor, soon contradicted. He ruminated, inclined first to the notion that they were out of the

way, then to the opinion that he had no grounds for supposing them dead. There was little comfort for him in either supposition. If they were alive, if either were alive, he had to expect hatred only a shade less malign, less ingenious than their father's, and if they were gone, there remained Bauro, Bauro the Bastard, brawny, sinister and ferocious. He shivered at the thought of Bauro.

Bauro or Romualdo or Vincenzo, it was all one to him. He stood up, his purpose indomitable. He would go straight to Fabrizia's light. If she was alive and waiting for him, he would reward her as far as lay in his power for her loving fidelity. If she was in duress and the light a lure, at least she might have the poor satisfaction of knowing that he had remembered, that he had returned, had tried to reach her. If she was dead, and the light indeed a decoy, he would at any rate find out the truth. His life was little to pay for that, now. If she was not in the world the world meant nothing to him. As well one death as another. In his days of brooding in the forests Fabrizia had revealed herself as all the world to him. If she was not in it the world mattered nothing. Nothing mattered but Fabrizia.

In this exalted mood he started down into the valley. Within an hour his feet were on the old familiar path, the path his feet had trod so many nights in his golden youth to reach the stolen kisses of his unattainable darling. To-night he found the path unaltered. He crossed the Latte at the old ford, and not a stone seemed a finger breadth out of place. He breasted the ascent.

At the cleft rock, where he used to hide love-letters for Epifania Varese to find and carry to her mistress, where Epifania used to leave missives for him to find with tokens warning him that he must not venture further that night, or other tokens, assuring him that the coast was clear, at that cleft rock he halted.

He felt in the cleft. It was empty, of course. He unbuckled his belt and bestowed it in the hiding place. One might enter Vola sword in hand, clad in mail, at the head of six hundred men-at-arms. One might enter Vola weapon-less; either was rational, though venturesome. But to enter Vola, unarmored, yet with a sword and poignard, was to seem ridiculous. Melozzo had committed crimes and blunders, but he had never made himself ridiculous. Bareheaded and weaponless he climbed the steep rock path, the path that he alone had ever trod, a path that a goat could hardly have followed. His feet knew every inch of it.

Above him the brute bulk of Vola, haughty and menacing, loomed huge against the darkness.

When he stood on the narrow ledge below the castle wall, he leaned against the stone until his breathing quieted. Staring up he saw the battlements, a solid blackness against the sable firmament of cloud. Also he made out above him to the right the faint outline of that great iron bar, projecting from the coping, from which the lords of Vola were in the habit of hanging whomsoever it seemed good to them to hang.

He smiled to himself in the dark.

When he felt rested he began the last stage of his ascent. His fingers found at once the familiar handholds and his toes the inch-wide footholds in the masonry. He clutched the sill at last, drew himself up and looked into the room.

It was unaltered in fourteen years, the vaulted ceiling painted in arabesques, the rich tapestries hiding the walls, the stone floor bare, the whole empty save for two chests against the arras and the big table midway of the floor, and two armchairs. On the table

stood two lamps; one at its nearer edge, a lamp with a tall standard, the lamp that sent its rays across the valley; the other stood at the further corner to the right, a lamp with a short foot, its flame near the table-top. By the shorter lamp sat a woman embroidering.

It was not Fabrizia!

At first he did not recognize her. Then, just as he knew her, fourteen years older and stouter, for Epifania Varese, she turned and saw him.

“Ecco!”, she said. “Il Signor Melozzo! Entra, Messer Melozzo.”

She stood up.

Melozzo put a leg over the sill, pulled himself up and vaulted to the floor.

“My lady will be overjoyed to see you, Messer Melozzo,” spoke Epifania.

The tattered, grimy specter of Melozzo Carpineti before her eyes had appeared to crouch and shrink away. At her words he flushed a hot brown-red under his month-old scrub of beard and seemed to swell and grow as she watched him. His chest expanded. Fabrizia was alive and free!

Epifania clapped her hands. Presently two pages, rubbing sleepy eyes, entered the room. Epifania gave them succinct orders. At once, deferentially, they conducted Melozzo into an adjoining apartment of three rooms. In one they bathed him, shaved him and combed his long hair. In the largest they set him, clad only in a bath-robe, before a table spread sumptuously with viands: cold pigeon pie, cold roast wildfowl, cold ham, bread and olives, a variety of sweetmeats, and two great flagons of wine, one white, one red. There by the light of six lamps he ate his fill. Then in the third room his attendants composed him in a big, soft bed.

He slept soundly.

When he woke it was broad day and the two servitors were watching him. Obsequiously they inquired whether it would please Messer Melozzo to rise. Deftly they habited him in luxurious garments, fit for a great lord, but without belt, dagger or sword. Respectfully they led him in the large room where he had supped the night before. There was no crumb of food there, this time. There they left him, closing the door behind them.

A moment later the door opened again. Melozzo looked up. In the doorway stood Bauro Disvola, swart, vast and truculent, hand on hilt.

Melozzo stood up.

They eyed each other.

Bauro spoke, suave as a troubadour.

“Greeting, Messer Melozzo.”

“Greeting, Messer Bauro,” Melozzo replied.

“May I come in?” Bauro asked, urbanely.

“Enter, Messer Bauro,” said Melozzo.

Bauro closed the door, swept the room with a swift glance and said:

“Let us be seated, Messer Melozzo.”

They took chairs. Bauro pulled his close up.

“Messer Melozzo,” he said, “my father and brothers detested you more than any other living being. They foresaw the eventuality of your return here. They laid their plans accordingly. They gave explicit directions. You know the family history. The Disvole have always been vengeful, but they have never been satisfied with any brutal and obvious revenge; they have had a pretty taste in retaliation and their vengeance have been delicate, fantastic, recondite.

"I must now tell you, Messer Melozzo, what I have never told any man, what I shall never tell any man but you.

"After our father's death Vincenzo neglected me, ill-treated me, insulted me. I had no reason to expect any better treatment from Romualdo. Vola, you should know, is not a fief held from the Emperor, from the Pope, from any overlord. Under God the lord of Vola owns no master. Vola belongs to its possessor, absolutely, without qualification. Its owners may sell Vola, may give it to anyone whom suggests, may bequeath it as caprice prompts, being accountable to no higher authority. When its holder dies Vola passes to the next heir, who for it does homage to no suzerain.

"With Vincenzo and Romualdo out of the way Vola must pass to me or to Fabrizia. I was exceedingly popular with the garrison and vassals. Fabrizia was as docile to me as to Romualdo or Vincenzo. Considering all that I sounded a medico. He declared himself my man, promised a sure and swift poison, and gave me what he prepared, with instructions. Vincenzo died at once and painlessly, without any suspicion. But the poison worked on Romualdo differently; curse him, he was tougher or protected by magic. It worked, but it worked slowly. He knew himself a dying man, but he did not die at once. He suffered and he suspected. The medico was tortured, he confessed. I was pounced upon and haled to the upper room where the high door opens out over the cliff beneath the iron bar. The door was wide and across its sill I saw the Latte a ribbon of blue-green water a thousand feet below at the bottom of the valley. The rope was ready, rove through the pulley at the end of the bar, the executioner held the noose in his hands. Romualdo was there, writhing in his litter, groaning and gasping, his face contorted with agony.

" 'Bauro,' he said, 'you are meat for the crows. You should have swung beside your apothecary leech. You shall, if I give the word. You are a murderer. You killed Vincenzo, you have killed me. I am a dying man. I shall not live to accomplish what I most desire. But I should like to die knowing that what I most desire will be brought to pass after I am dead. If you will swear to carry out my instructions you shall not hang to-day. You shall have a respite until such time as you hand Vola over to your successor. You shall have a chance, a small chance, one chance in a million, but still a chance, of living after you hand over Vola to your Successor. Meantime, be it days or years, you will be Bauro Disvola, living and lord of Vola. Will you swear to carry out my instructions?'

"I looked round the room, I looked out of the open door in the wall, down at the valley of the Latte, up at the blue sky.

" 'I will swear,' I said, 'and I will carry out your instructions.'

"Then, grunting and wheezing, he gave me his instructions, his tortured head on one side, his wry face leering at me.

"I was dumbfounded at his instructions as you will be astounded when they are carried out. I swore to carry them out.

" 'Yea,' said Romualdo. 'You swear and you shall swear a very different oath, a very different oath.'

"Then they carried him in his litter all the way to the shrine of the Madonna of Lattemaggio they haled me all that road. Before the statue of the Madonna they set me, he in his litter behind me. There he made me repeat his instructions, word by word, my hand on the knee of the Madonna, on the worn shiny spot on her knee, where the blue robe has been rubbed smooth by the hands that have been laid on it by men taking solemn oaths,

making solemn vows. So standing, my hand on the blue robe at the Madonna's knee, I rehearsed his instructions and I swore.

"Romualdo grinned, a twisted grin.

" 'Let him loose,' he said. 'Give him his sword and poignard.'

"They girt my belt on me.

" 'Men,' said Romualdo to the guard, 'the moment I am dead you are to take orders from Messer Bauro as you take them from me, as you took them from Vincenzo, from Ser Zenone. The moment I am dead Messer Bauro is lord of Vola.'

"Back to the castle we fared. In the courtyard Romualdo repeated to all the garrison what he had said to the guard in the church at Lattemaggio. Before sunset he died. For six years I have been lord of Vola.

"Now the time has come for me to carry out his instructions, instructions very little to my taste, wholly contrary to my taste. But you comprehend, I swore with my hand on the knee of the Madonna of Lattemaggio."

Bauro was mottled as he spoke the last words.

Melozzo nodded, sympathetically. He had broken oaths without number, but he knew that, had he sworn an oath by the Madonna of Lattemaggio, his hand on her knee, that oath he would keep to the last particular.

Bauro stood up.

"You are hungry, Messer Melozzo," he said, "I also am hungry. Let us proceed with the first part of my instructions, which are likely to please you well. You are to be shriven, houseled and married. Then we are to have breakfast."

"Married!" Melozzo's mind leapt at that word. It would be like the sly indirection of the Disvole to plan to marry him to some horrible creature and afterwards to parade Fabrizia before him. He resolved that no threats, no tortures would force him to marry anyone but her. To meet the utmost test he steeled his fortitude.

He had no need of it.

In the courtyard he beheld Fabrizia, arrayed as a bride, accompanied by four bridesmaids; Fabrizia looking not a day older to him than she had looked fourteen years before; Fabrizia, looking so girlish and so lovely that he could not believe her thirty years old, that he could not credit what he saw.

Across the courtyard she smiled at him and he smiled at her. Separately they entered the chapel, separately they were confessed and absolved. Melozzo felt the load of his crimes fall from his shoulders, felt himself a new man, made clean for Fabrizia. Together they knelt or stood through the long ordeal of a nuptial mass; side by side on their knees, they received the host. Side by side, her hand on his arm, they left the church.

Except that he was without sword, poignard and belt there was nothing to remind him that he was anything else than a chosen bridegroom, a beloved brother-law, a welcome guest. The breakfast was lavish and savory; Bauro, at the head of the board, beamed at the guests, the great hall was bright with flowers and gay with banners.

After the breakfast they were conducted to Fabrizia's apartments and there left alone, Epifania and one of the pages within call. Undisturbed they passed the day together as they pleased. Alone together they dined and supped.

They told each other all their lives during those long fourteen years, he recounting numerous exploits and adventures; she telling of the slow monotonous life at Vola.

Again and again she clasped him crying:

“Oh, my love, I am so frightfully afraid Romualdo has planned some hideous pang for us, some unforeseeable ingenuity of devilry!”

But when he strove to conjecture what might impend over them, she stopped his mouth with kisses.

“At least,” she said, “we have this day, this hour, this moment. Let us not waste an instant of what we have, let us make the most of every minute.”

Next morning they slept late, when they were dressed they were summoned to breakfast in the great hall.

Again everything was as friendly and pleasant as possible. When the breakfast was over two pages brought in a huge tray filled and heaped with magnificent jewelry. By Melozzo they halted.

“Messer Melozzo,” spoke Bauro from the head of the table, “it is known to you that it is customary for a bridegroom, if he is well-content with his bride, to make her a present on the morning after their bridal night.”

Melozzo, eyeing Bauro, eyeing the jewels, said nothing.

“Messer Melozzo,” Bauro continued, “are you well satisfied with your wife? Is she all you anticipated? Did you find her as you expected find her?”

“Yea,” Melozzo exploded, “I found her faultless, body and soul; I found her all any bridegroom could wish for, more than any bridegroom could hope for.”

“Such being the case,” Bauro went on, “it is fitting that you present her with a morning-gift. Choose then from the treasures on the tray. You may take what pleases you, but only so much as you yourself can here and now place upon your bride, only so much as she herself can wear becomingly at one time.”

Suspicious, darkly pondering, puzzled, wholly perplexed, Melozzo examined the gems and gold, conning them, lifting them, rummaging among them.

So overhauling them he considered Fabrizia. She wore not one single jewel. The neck of her gown was cut low and round and the brilliant light blue of the silk emphasized the whiteness of her neck. Her small ears were exquisitely shaped and placed.

After he had delved all over the tray Melozzo spoke to Bauro.

“Messer Bauro, I should like to adorn my bride with a necklace and ear-rings. I find none.”

“There are no ear-rings among those ornaments,” Bauro answered. “There is no necklace among them. Be content with what you find, Messer Melozzo. There is a duke’s ransom on that tray.”

Melozzo chose a high filigree comb set with rubies and emeralds, a sort of diadem that matched it, bracelets the gold of which was almost hidden among the sapphires they carried, and a belt on which turquoises and sapphires cut flat and set deep, alternated, close together, with little gold showing between and around them.

When he had loaded Fabrizia with all she could wear at once he said:

“I have chosen, Messer Bauro.”

Bauro dismissed the pages.

When they were gone he said:

“Ask your wife to stand up, that we may judge of the effect.”

When Fabrizia had turned round he asked:

“Are you proud of her, Messer Melozzo?”

"The archangels in heaven," Melozzo replied, vehemently, "are not so proud of the Madonna."

"Are you tired of her yet, Messer Melozzo?" Bauro went on. "Do you find matrimony tedious? Have you been married too long?"

Melozzo swore aloud, a solemn oath.

"By all that and more," he said, "no man would ever weary of Fabrizia. A thousand years would be too short a time in which to enjoy Fabrizia."

"Let us go outside into the courtyard," spoke Bauro.

Hand in hand Melozzo and Fabrizia walked, Bauro beside them. At the door he said:

"Look behind you, Messer Melozzo." Melozzo looked. Half way down the hall, between them and the tables, a double line of men in mail, standing shoulder to shoulder, extended from wall to wall. The rear rank advanced with arms locked, a human chain; the front rank carried their daggers bare.

"What is this, Messer Bauro?" Melozzo queried, his eyes on Bauro's, his voice steady.

"Merely a reminder, Messer Melozzo," Bauro answered, "that we go forward into the courtyard, that there is to be no retreating."

Melozzo turned his back on the armed men and paced sedately towards the door, his hand in Fabrizia's.

Outside he beheld the courtyard lined with a similar double row of men-at-arms, rear rank elbows interlaced, front rank with naked poignards.

Also, he saw midway of the pavement, the block, and beside it the headsman leaning on his ax.

Melozzo, all an Italian and therefore half a mystic, was capable of quaking endlessly at peril barely guessed and wholly indefinable. Before the face of unescapable doom he became valiant, almost elated. He drew himself up to his full height, stiffened his shoulders, threw out his chest, held his head high, and trod straight towards the block. A pace further he felt his shoulders seized by two heavy hands and knew that two big ruffians had approached him from behind.

He pressed Fabrizia's fingers, loosed his hold on them, dropped his arms to his sides.

"Addio, Fabrizia," he breathed, his eyes on her face. She was regarding him strangely. Somehow not her blue-clad shape, not her jeweled hair, not her inscrutable face made most impression on his vision. He seemed to see only her slender white throat.

Then, to his disdainful, insulted amazement, two more burly varlets caught him by each wrist, two hulking bullies flung themselves flat on the pavement and seized each of his ankles, and the giant of the garrison caught him round the waist from behind, locking his hands before him.

"What?" he thought, indignantly, "eleven rascals all at once to hold one prisoner? Do they expect me to struggle like a child?"

Clamped to the pavement he looked at Fabrizia. She was a pace or two before him, gazing back at him over her shoulder, gazing wistfully. Her bare white neck shone.

"Addio, Melozzo," she said.

She took another pace.

A man at arms on either side seized her by the elbows.

She took another pace.

Then, all at once, Melozzo realized that he was held stationary to watch her being led to the block.

It took every thew of his eleven guards to hold him fast. Like a wild beast he strained and strove.

In vain!

His fury of effort had blinded him. In his relaxed helplessness his sight cleared.

He saw Fabrizia kneel.

He shut his eyes, he could not look.

He kept his eyes closed until the gripping hands loosened and he stood free.

Then he gazed, he saw the huddle of silk that had been her body, the spout of blood across the stones, the head, the head, red neck up!

He looked away, looked about him. Beside him stood Bauro, no longer florid and ruddy, but lead-gray all over his huge face.

Then he was aware of a page offering him a sword-belt. The belt was new, but he recognized his own dagger and sword which he had hidden in the cleft-rock.

"Gird yourself, Messer Melozzo," spoke Bauro.

Mechanically he fastened the belt about him.

The feel of the sword at his thigh half restored him to sentience. He heard Bauro speak aloud:

"Hearken all men. Here before you stands Messer Melozzo Carpineti, lord of Vola. He has been lord of Vola since the death of Ser Romualdo. For six years I have been his deputy holding his castle for him, awaiting his return that I might deliver to him his own. From this moment you are to take orders from him as you took orders from Ser Romualdo, from Ser Vincenzo, from Ser Zenone. Salute the lord of Vola!"

The salute crashed out from every throat.

Bauro mute bowed low before Melozzo.

"Messer Melozzo," he said, "you are now lord of Vola. These men will obey your orders, your orders alone, any orders of yours."

"Any order of mine?" Melozzo queried.

Bauro, his face ashen gray, echoed:

"Any order of yours."

"Messer Bauro," said Melozzo, "you Disvole have a pretty taste in vengeance."

"A pretty taste," Bauro echoed, even grayer.

"You Disvole," Melozzo continued, "will give much for vengeance."

"We will give much," Bauro echoed.

"Even sometimes your lives?"

Again Bauro echoed.

"Even sometimes our lives."