

The Diamond Cross;
or,
The Female Assassin

— — — —
by Oliver Sinclair
— — — —

During the first few months of my sojourn at Rome, I witnessed one of those heart-rending dramas, replete with thrilling interest, of which the imperial city is, but too often, the melancholy theater.

A Neapolitan cavalier, named Luzzi, had fixed upon Rome as his place of residence from the year 1820. His birth, his intelligence, his refined, polished, and fascinating address, and above all, the exquisite manly beauty of his face, and the elegant symmetry of his figure, had, immediately upon his arrival, facilitated his entry into all the most ancient and distinguished houses of Rome. Among those in which he was welcomed with the most cordial favor, was cited the palace of the Marquis of Caraglio, a man of brilliant fortune and an indefatigable votary of pleasure.

The Marquis had been married from his twentieth year (he was then thirty-six) to Giulia de Staroli, a descendant of one of the noblest families of Ravenna. This union, however, was productive of the most uninterrupted happiness, in spite of the boundless difference which existed between the characters of the amiable couple. Indeed, in proportion as the Marquis was an impassioned devotee to the fascinations and excesses of gay society, and found his chief delight in mingling with the giddy throng of midnight revelers around the jovial board, so much did Giulia, on the contrary, appear to love the purer sweets of solitude, and to cherish a devoted attachment to the more simple, though more lasting pleasures of domestic peace and contentment. The sprightly and highly cultivated mind, and the incomparable beauty of the marchioness, might have entitled her to the most elevated rank among the most beautiful, fashionable and accomplished women of Rome; but she preferred the quiet charms of retirement, the calm and peace of the green fields to the vain and empty pomp of the world. She withdrew from the city, and retired to her beautiful countryseat at Albano, distant a few leagues from Rome, with her children and a few faithful domestics.

“Signor,” said she to the Marquis, “you are fond of the excitement and pleasures of a life in the city; but to me the country alone can afford those more permanent joys and comforts which leave no trace of regret behind them. When you are fatigued with the world, and surfeited with its false and deceitful allurements, you will come to Albano, where you will always be certain of finding hearts overflowing with love and respect, for the kind husband and the indulgent father.”

The Marquis, although the love and esteem he had ever cherished for his Giulia had not undergone the slightest diminution, opposed but feebly her departure for the villa of Albano. The austerity of the morals of the Marchioness, her unconquerable antipathy to anything which bore a resemblance to a *fete*, a rout or an orgie, her devotion to the education of her children, and her love of quietude and retirement, induced him rather to receive with approbation her voluntary

exile, as affording her more liberty, away from the allurements of the world, to exercise those noble and praiseworthy maternal duties, which are so essential and yet so rare, in the thoughtless mazes of fashionable society.

“I shall not fail to visit you often, Signora,” replied the Marquis, “not, as you appear to think, in order to escape from the whirlwind of the world’s dissipation, which at times is so necessary to my happiness, but rather to enjoy the charm of listening to those delightful thoughts, which, falling from your lips, refresh the soul after unsubstantial pleasure, and lead it insensibly again into the forsaken path of virtue.”

Giulia retired to Albano, and the Marquis continued to reside in his palace at Rome, yielding himself, with more impetuosity than ever, to the ungovernable sway of his passions.

One evening the Marquis arrived suddenly at the villa of Albano, and he immediately sought the presence of his wife.

“Signora,” said he, “the importance of the event which brings me so unexpectedly to Albano, I hope you will consider a sufficient apology for the hasty and unannounced intrusion upon your privacy. I have come to communicate a startling piece of intelligence, and I hesitate less to give you the information, because I am sure you will be as deeply interested as myself, in endeavoring to solve the inexplicable mystery.”

“Speak Signor, speak,” replied the astonished Marchioness.

“You have undoubtedly heard of the brilliant talent and remarkable beauty of the Signora Broggia?”

“The cantatrice, who has recently created such a sensation at the theatres of San Carlos and La Scala,” replied the Marchioness.

“Precisely. For six weeks past this charming person has been at Rome, and in company with some of my friends, with Luzzi, with Colonna, with Chigi and Borghese, I have not been able to resist attaching myself to her triumphal car, and swelling the host of her admirers. Without vanity, of all my rivals, I seem to be received with the most favor—”

“Signor,” interrupted Giulia, with dignity, “spare me such unpleasant details, which drive a blush of shame to the cheek of the mother of your children.”

“Ah! I beg pardon, a thousand pardons, Signora,” replied the Marquis. “I have not, I could not have had any intention of afflicting you for an instant. I will suppress, then, all unnecessary preamble, and inform you, without digression, that last night after the termination of the performances at the opera, I joined a select party of friends at a *petit souper*, given by the accomplished cantatrice, at her beautiful apartments on the Piazza de Spagna. Imagine my surprise and astonishment, as the Signora Broggia entered the saloon, to behold glittering upon her neck this brilliant cross of diamonds, which I am sure is the same I had the happiness of presenting to you sixteen years ago, in commemoration of the joyful day of our nuptials.” And the Marquis drew from his pocket the dazzling crucifix of brilliants, which sparkled in the light

of the chandeliers like the imperial standard of Constantine.

A death-like pallor swept suddenly across the features of the Marchioness, who cast her eyes confusedly to the floor, and trembled violently in every limb. This terrible emotion, however, lasted but for an instant. Giulia seized with eager, though tremulous hands, the glittering jewel, and said, in striving to impress upon her parched and discolored lips a smile of joy and satisfaction:

“Oh, yes indeed! It is my bridal cross. Yes! it is surely mine. Oh, how rejoiced I am once more. But you must now, in turn, pardon me, Signor, for having so long concealed from you what I supposed to be an irreparable loss. This cherished pledge of our union disappeared suddenly from my casket a few days before my arrival at Albano. The author of this larceny has thus far escaped my most indefatigable researches.”

“And have your suspicions rested upon any one of your servants, Signora?” demanded the Marquis.

“Upon no one, Signor. Upon no one to the present moment; but now—I think—”

“You know the criminal?” inquired eagerly the Marquis.

“No, no; but I think our investigations could be pursued with more certainty of success in the city. I will accompany you to Rome, and our united efforts may succeed in detecting the thief, and placing him in the hands of justice.”

“Let us avoid the scandal of a public prosecution, Signora,” replied the Marquis, “This cross, again placed in your possession, will never leave it. I have agreed with the Signora. Broggia, on condition of surrendering me this, to present her with another precisely like it. It is only a loss of a few thousands, more or less; but what of that? Is it not better to make this sacrifice, than to embark in a troublesome legal prosecution, which may result in nothing but condemnation of the wretched criminal to the scaffold? Permit me, on the contrary, to congratulate myself upon an event which places it in my power to offer you, a second time, this emblem of purity and conjugal fidelity. Helas!” added the Marquis, laughing, and passing around the graceful neck of the Marchioness the precious jewel, “it is a demon in person who is decorating an angel of light, with the sacred emblem of the holy redemption.”

The countenance of Giulia was no longer pallid. Her eyes sparkled with unusual fire, and her whole visage beamed with an expression which betrayed a violent and unnatural excitement.

“Did you succeed in learning from the Signora Broggia in what manner the cross came into her possession?” demanded the Marchioness.

“It was a new year’s gift, but she was unwilling to tell me the name of the donor. I shall find out, however, at our next interview.”

“And do you think she would tell you?” demanded Giulia, with emotion.

“She will tell me!” replied the Marquis, with an air of triumph.

“Signor,” rejoined the Marchioness, “I shall accompany you to Rome. Upon that point I am decided; I do not desire the scandal of a public investigation, far from it; but curiosity, you understand, the piqued curiosity of a woman, cannot easily be brought to relinquish the gratification of such a temptation. I beg you will permit me to accompany you to the city.”

The Marquis could no longer resist the earnest entreaties of his wife. He brought her with him to Rome. The next day, after their arrival in the city, the corpse of the Cavalier di Luzzi was found on the banks of the Tiber, a short distance from the gardens of the Palace of Caraglio.

The murder created a profound sensation throughout the entire capital. The Commissaries of Police instituted immediately the strictest search for the assassin, and were almost upon the point of relinquishing their pursuit, when a fisherman, having made some revelations to justice, they arrested, in the very Palace of Caraglio, a young Moorish girl, who had been in the service of the Marchioness from her infancy.

Mika (for that was her name) confessed to the crime of which she was accused, and gave a full and unreserved detail of all the circumstances which had preceded and followed it. “I loved,” said she, during her examination, “the Chevalier di Luzzi, and believed my love returned. For him I had stolen from my mistress, my benefactress, a cross of diamonds of great value. When I discovered that he had given this jewel to the Signora Broggia—this jewel, which had already occasioned me so much poignant remorse—when I discovered, above all, that the Chevalier was faithless to me, I thought only of revenge. The day after my arrival at Rome with my mistress, the Marchioness, I gave him a rendezvous at midnight in one of the most retired pavilions of the garden, and there, after having reproached him with his infidelity and breach of trust, I plunged a stiletto into his heart. I then dragged the corpse to the banks of the Tiber, where I had hoped it would have been forever buried; but God, in his infinite wisdom, has not seen fit that this new crime should go unpunished. I am prepared to die.”

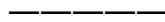
This thrilling recital, confirmed by the most irrefragable proofs, appeared to all to bear upon its front the stamp of truth. The officers had found, in one of the pockets of the victim, a note, which indicated the place and hour of the fatal rendezvous. It was in the handwriting of Mika, and signed by herself. The fisherman recognized also the Moorish girl as the person whom he had seen dragging the dead body of the Chevalier di Luzzi to the banks of the river.

The Judges condemned the young girl to death, and she listened to her sentence with the most extraordinary resignation and composure.

His holiness, the Pope, was earnestly solicited, by many of the most distinguished personages in Rome, to grant his pardon to the unfortunate girl, but all efforts in her behalf proved unavailing. “The act,” said the pontiff, “is too flagrant and premeditated, to hope that the wretched perpetrator should be pardoned. I hope, however, that God will soften the hearts of the real criminals, that they may confess their crime, and the young girl thus be saved. For,” continued his holiness, “it appears to me, that the whole affair is enveloped in a profound mystery, which

the justice of men alone cannot fathom. Let us leave the rest to Providence; He will not desert us in the hour of need.”

The hopes of the pontiff were realized. The very day on which the unhappy girl was conducted to the scaffold, and at the very moment she was ascending the fatal steps of the instrument of death, a number of constables were seen in the distance hurrying rapidly, and with outstretched arms, towards the spot, crying—Pardon! pardon! pardon! These cries, caught up and re-echoed by the dense multitude, terminated in one deafening shout of joy; and the executioner dropped, from his nerveless grasp, the fatal axe which was suspended over the kneeling form of the unfortunate Mika.



Let us now return to the Palace of Caraglio, and attempt to portray the heart-rending scenes which have just transpired within its gloomy walls. The Marchioness, having failed in all the attempts which she had made to save the life of the affectionate Mika, could not endure the thought of abandoning, to the infamy of a public execution, the generous creature who had exhibited in her behalf such incredible proofs of devotion. With a courage and a *sang froid* worthy of a Roman matron, she made her preparations for death, and summoned to her bedside two apostolical prothonotaries, her confessor, and her husband.

“Signor,” said she to the latter, “in a few moments I shall be ushered into the presence of my God, the searcher of hearts. He will judge me, and I trust will grant me his pardon. You will not be more inflexible than God, and will not refuse me the absolution which the Holy Church has already accorded to my prayers, to my remorse, and to my tears.”

The Marquis pressed the almost lifeless hand of his wife in acquiescence.

“Signor,” continued Julia, “for fifteen years I have remained faithful to those sacred vows which we plighted before God and the world. For fifteen years—But enough. The day on which you introduced the Chevalier di Luzzi into this place, I ceased to be innocent—That man fascinated my eyes, took possession of my heart, overpowered my understanding, my whole being, and rendered me the guiltiest and most wretched of women. He was poor, possessed of nothing but a name, perhaps without eclat. I wished to assure him an existence worthy of my love. I became a thief—yes, a thief—for him. The cross of diamonds, which you have so nobly restored to me, is but a small portion of the immense expenditures I have lavished upon him. This foolish and culpable attachment explains to you, Signor, the object of my retirement to Albano. Borne insensibly along by the resistless current of iniquity, I did not wish to abdicate the outward appearances of virtue; I wished to continue to appear austere, pure, economical. I was less pure, less austere than you, Signor, in my morals; more lavish than you in my expenditures. That man had rendered me the vilest of hypocrites, and I should for that reason have doubted whether he was other than a miserable wretch; for a lover cannot avoid reflecting upon the soul of a woman, whom he has rendered culpable, his faults as well as the better qualities of his heart. But oh! my blindness has been so great!

“Your arrival the other evening at Albano tore away the veil with which my eyes have so long been shrouded. I learned then, for the first time, that I had a rival. I resolved to seek vengeance,

and I have been revenged. Luzzi was poinarded by my own hand! This hand, which you now feel so cold and heavy, alone plunged the avenging steel into his traitorous heart. Mika, my affectionate Mika, acted by a devotion without parallel, is accused of a crime of which I alone am guilty, was ignorant of all until the deed was perpetrated—until I called her to my assistance to aid in the concealment of the lifeless corpse. It was my suggestion that she assumed upon herself the terrible responsibility. I had hoped by intercession of his holiness, to obtain her pardon, and consequently to save my own life. My efforts have proved unavailing; and since she is doomed to undergo the penalty attached to so great a crime, I am resolved she shall not suffer for my iniquities. Save her then, Signor, save her; and let this declaration suffice to break the chains with which she has been so unjustly loaded. As to myself, the arm of the law cannot reach me. I am already beyond the jurisdiction of men. Dearest husband, I crave your pardon. Padre Eugenio, I—crave—your benedic—”

The Marquis was in the act of deposing a kiss of pardon upon the forehead of Giulia when the priest, taking him by the arm, drew him gently back;

“Signor,” said he, “the Marchioness of Caraglio is no more! Her spirit has returned to the God who gave it. Pray for the soul of your wife, and forget not your own eternal welfare.”

“What! my Giulia!” exclaimed the heartbroken Marquis.

“Is dead!” muttered the priest. “She has poisoned herself! The will of God be done.”

The Marquis of Caraglio was so terribly affected by this heart-rending scene that he retired into the Convent of the Camaldoli, and soon after followed his unfortunate Giulia to the tomb.

New York Ledger, August 2, 1856