

## *Leaf The Fourteenth*

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### *An Adventure With Italian Brigands*

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by John Williams

The reader must not suppose that a detective's life is made up only of adventures and hunting after criminals. We, as well as the rest of mankind, have our social hours, and I verily believe it has been my lot to meet with as many friends as anyone in a similar position in society. I had not resided long in New York before I became acquainted with some capital fellows. We formed a little social circle, and used to meet weekly at each others' houses, where we passed the time most agreeably, relating adventures, telling stories, and playing chess. In the present number it is my intention to give to the reader an adventure which happened to one of my friends.

On the evening that he related it to us there were six of us met together. It was Henry Seldon's turn to tell some event in his life. The night was drawing on apace, and the cozy appearance of our friend Melville's study seemed to invite mutual confidence. It was a December evening, and an unusual silence reigned, broken only by the rumbling of an occasional omnibus as it rolled down the street. The air was chilly and cold outside; but inside a delightful warmth pervaded the whole apartment.

"Well, gentlemen," said Seldon, "to tell the truth, I do not know what to relate."

"Nonsense," cried our host Melville. "You who have traveled so much have met with plenty of adventures, I have heard you say you lived some time in Rome, surely something happened to you in that land of bandits and robbers!"

"True, I had for the moment forgotten that. I did meet with an adventure while living in Italy—a terrible one too."

We each of us lighted a fresh cigar, drew more chairs more closely round the fire and placed ourselves in a listening attitude. Our friend Seldon spoke as follows:

"Most of you know that my father was a good, substantial farmer, who resided near Hudson in the State of New York. He was an eccentric man, and one of his hobbies, was that everybody, ought to follow the bent of his inclination in choosing a profession. I was naturally very fond of drawing and even when quite a child amused myself with scrawling uncouth figures on every piece of blank paper I could find. This was construed by my father into a love of Art, and forthwith I was destined to become an artist. My taste was fostered, so that by the time I was twenty years of age, I really possessed some talent in drawing. I devoted my time more especially to oil painting, and to perfect my education, I was sent to Rome. This was in the year 1825. Traveling was not so expeditious in those days as now; but after sundry delays I reached my destination. I installed myself in comfortable lodgings, and was soon employed in copying the old masters. My life soon became a very monotonous one, and I began to want a change. The

solitude of my position began to prey upon my spirits, and my heart yearned for my home again, the banks of the Hudson. I remembered the delightful evenings I had passed there watching the moonbeams play upon the waters—and all the beauties of the Italian sky could not compensate me for my absence from my American home. One night I was pensively walking down a street, when I saw before me an old man who appeared to stagger. I immediately ran towards him.

‘Signor,’ I exclaimed, ‘you are ill,’ and I supported him in my arms.

‘It is only an attack of vertigo, to which I am subject,’ he replied.

I conducted him into a tavern, where, after he had partaken of a little wine, he soon recovered. He was a hale looking man, about sixty years of age, I supposed. His hair was quite gray, and he had a fine open countenance, which instinctively commanded respect.

‘Thanks, Signor, for your great kindness,’ said the stranger, after the attack had passed off. ‘If I judge correctly, you are not an Italian.’

‘No, I am an American,’ I replied.

This conversation had been carried on in Italian, but the moment I informed him to what country I belonged, a gleam of satisfaction shot across his face—he rose hurriedly from his seat and clasping my hands in his, exclaimed in English:—

‘My dear sir, I am delighted to see you. You cannot imagine how much I love your country. I have fought and bled for it.’

‘Indeed!’ I replied.

‘Yes, I was all through the war of Independence, and had the pleasure of seeing the enemy finally surrender to the immortal Washington. But come, we will not stay here any longer. I must insist upon your coming home with me. I want to introduce you to my family. They will be so delighted to see an American. They have so often heard me speak of that noble people.’

I stammered out some excuses about not being dressed, but it was of no avail, the old gentleman insisted upon my company, and I was obliged to go.

Signor Morelli, for such was the name of my new-found friend, lived about twelve miles from Rome, on a lonely country road. The old gentleman had his own conveyance, however, and we soon reached his villa.

It was a magnificent mansion, replete with every luxury. I found his family delightful, and passed one of the most agreeable days I have ever spent in my life. All the inmates of his house were exceedingly friendly towards me, and insisted that I should make a weekly visit to their house. This, after some persuasion, I agreed to do.

This visit was an agreeable change from my previous solitary life. I found Signor Morelli a most intelligent man. He had been, during our whole struggle for Independence, in daily communication with Washington, and he told me many anecdotes of that great and glorious man. I looked forward to my next visit with extreme gratification.

During the week strange reports were circulated about Rome. A band of robbers had committed depredations on all the roads leading to the city—nay, they had even the audacity to penetrate into the suburbs. Their leader, Velesco, it was stated, was a, bloodthirsty wretch, who hesitated at no crime. I do not know how it was, but I was very much attracted by these details, and read all the accounts which I appeared in the public prints with avidity. I soon conjured up in my own imagination the exact personal appearance of this renowned bandit. I fancied I saw him in his picturesque costume. In fact, his image was scarcely ever out of my mind. This grew so much upon me that I became nervous, and gave a start at every strange sound; especially was this the case at night.

On the Saturday of that week, I procured a horse and set off on my journey to Signor Morelli's. I had promised to spend the day with him. I reached his house without any accident, and was surprised to find a large number of gentlemen had already assembled there. It appears he had invited these guests in honor of myself. We sat down to a sumptuous repast and the wine flowed in abundance. Suddenly there was a pause in the conversation, and one of the guests said:

‘By-the-by, there was a horrible murder committed last night in my neighborhood.’

‘Indeed!’ we all cried. ‘What are the particulars?’

‘Why you know, Velesco is on the road again with a band more numerous than ever. His audacity has increased tenfold since his last visit. It has become a scandal to the government. Signor Algero, a magistrate living near me, particularly signalized himself by making great efforts to arrest the bandit. He scoured the whole country with a troop of soldiers at his heels. But it was all to no purpose, Velesco and his band were securely concealed. But would you believe it, last night Algero and his whole family were murdered—they were all stabbed to the heart. In the magistrate's body the poignard was left, pinning a piece of paper to it, on which was written: *‘This is how Velesco avenges himself!’*

A shudder of horror ran through all the guests, and it was sometime before we recovered from the effects of this recital. A long conversation ensued in which various exploits of this fearful assassin were related. These only served to increase my curiosity, and I longed to see the redoubtable bandit.

Signor Morelli saw the gleam that the history of the horrid murder had cast on all his guests.

‘Come, gentlemen,’ said he, ‘let us have some champagne. We must not dishonor our guest by these gloomy faces.’

The champagne was brought, and we all of us indulged pretty freely. We soon forgot all about Velesco and his companions. An animated conversation followed, and time flew rapidly away; until I was surprised to find it already night.

I had an important engagement the following day which I was compelled to fulfill, so it became necessary that I should depart for home that night. My host pressed me very much to stay, but I was obliged to refuse. Seeing that I was determined to go he insisted on me taking two of his pistols. I mounted my horse and started on my journey. I had not ridden twenty paces before I discovered that I had drunk quite enough. My head was a little giddy and I had some difficulty in holding myself straight on my horse. It was a cold November night, and the wind blew in gusts presaging a coming storm. I could even then hear the murmurings of the thunder in the distance, and an occasional flood of lightning forewarned me to make as much haste as I could. I had not proceeded more than a mile when the effects of the wine I had taken began to leave me, and I realized the loneliness of my situation. All the stories that had been told of Velesco returned vividly to my mind, and I began anxiously to look around me, transforming every bush into a bandit. The thunder roared and the lightning flashed, lighting up the road at some distance before me. The rain fell in torrents, and I was soon drenched to the skin. I had great difficulty in making my way on the now muddy roads. Every step my horse took seemed to plunge him deeper in the mire. It was only with the greatest care that I kept my seat. Excepting when it lightened it was intensely dark. I continued to ride on but soon lost all landmarks. I then discovered that I had mistaken my road. I did not know what to do, the storm was every moment increasing in violence, and both my animal and myself were in a pitiable condition. I saw it was useless to attempt to proceed further. I determined to look out for some place of security. Fortune aided me, for in the distance I saw an old tower, made visible by an extra vivid flash of lightning.

I made the best of my way to this building, glad enough to procure any shelter from the terrific storm. I soon reached the tower. The door was dilapidated, and I had some difficulty in forcing an entrance through the mass of broken stone blocking up the way. When I had effected my purpose I found I was in a stone building which was evidently the ruin of an old castle. The walls were broken and blackened by time. A stone staircase led up to the upper stories. Here and there windows were pierced through the masonry. They were now, however, destitute of glass, and the wind rushed through the apertures with a hollow, moaning sound.

The loneliness of the situation, the howling wind, the terrific storm, all produced a sedative effect on my already depressed feelings. But what was my horror to find embers still glowing on the floor. It was evident the tower had been lately occupied. Perhaps even now some one was in the upper stories. I involuntarily shivered, and listened attentively. Save the warring of the storm, no sound reached my ears. The thought of Velesco and his band recurred with double force to my mind. After remaining in a listening attitude for at least a quarter of an hour, I began to be a little reassured. I determined I would make a last survey before taking up my quarters for the night.

I made my way out of the ruin and looked about in every direction. The night was so dark that I could see nothing. It was in vain that I listened; the wind howled around the old tower with such violence that it shut out any other sound.

I began to recover myself a little, and walked round the old fortress. I discovered nothing excepting a species of outhouse in which I put my horse.

I was now convinced that I was the only inhabitant of the tower. I felt that I had nothing to fear, and re-entered the room I had just quitted. But I determined that I would prosecute my search still further, and I ascended the broken steps to the next story. I found this chamber to be the counterpart of the one below. There were the same broken discolored walls, and the same stone staircase led to another story.

I examined my pistols, cocked them, stretched myself on the floor, and determined to watch all night. The wine I had taken and the fatigue I had undergone were, however, too much for me, and I felt my eyes close in spite of myself. I was fast relapsing into a deep slumber, when suddenly the sound of footsteps reached my ears. In a moment I was wide awake and on the alert.

I noiselessly crept to the staircase, and by leaning forward I could see into the lower apartment without being myself seen.

Ten persons had just entered the tower. They were men of swarthy complexions, sombre countenances, and robust limbs. They were all of them clothed in brigand costume, and armed to the teeth.

They heaped some wood on the burning embers and seated themselves round the fire. They conversed in a rapid tone, every now and then casting covetous glances on two large chests which they had placed in a corner of the apartment.

The first words they uttered convinced me who they were. They formed part of Velesco's band.

Their features were animated. They frequently carried their hands to their weapons. They began to quarrel about the booty contained in the two chests. Their disputes at length reached a point that I saw the wretches were about to attack each other. They rose up in a tumult, drew their knives, and were about to commence the fight when their chief appeared. In a moment I recognized Velesco, from, the published description of him.

He was a man of about forty years of age, of lofty stature, and strongly built. His large shoulders and muscular arms bespoke extreme vigor. His harsh features ferocious looks and the fantastic reflection of the fire gave a strange expression to his face which was rather increased than otherwise by a cruel smile which played about his lips.

'Quarreling and fighting again,' said he, in a harsh voice. 'Diavolo! it seems impossible for you to live quietly together as honest brigands ought to do.'

One of the bandits attempted to justify himself. Velesco interrupted him.

'Silence!' he exclaimed, 'I won't hear what you have to say. Great God! here you are taking your ease, by the fire, like so many idiots, without any more thought of our safety than if we were the

only people in the world. Fortunately I always keep my eyes open. Where is the man whose horse I found in the stable?

At these words I shuddered, and cursed my unlucky chance for placing me in such a terrible situation. In fact I considered myself as lost. There was no way of escape. I knew I had nothing to hope for from the bandits. Their ferocity was too well known for me to have the slightest doubt as to my lot if I fell into their hands. I determined to sell my life as dearly as possible.

The brigands had seized their carbines, when they heard their chief's words.

'We know nothing of the man you speak about,' said one of the band. 'When we entered the tower was unoccupied.'

'It may be so,' replied Velesco, 'but two of you had better go and search outside, he may be hidden near by.'

Two of them went out; during their absence Velesco walked impatiently up and down the apartment.

In a minute or two they returned.

'Well?' asked the chief.

'We can find no trace of him,' replied the brigand. 'The horse is still in the stable.'

'Indeed!' said the captain, and he continued his promenade.

A dead silence now reigned in this apartment, before so noisy.

I breathed more freely, supposing all immediate danger was passed. I was wrong.

After a moment or two the chief stopped.

'Has anyone examined the interior of the tower?' he asked.

'No!' replied the bandit. 'No one would be fool enough to come in the lion's den in that manner.'

'Who knows?' said Velesco, shaking his head. 'Perhaps he arrived here before you, and has taken refuge in the upper stories. At all events we will go and examine them.'

Velesco began to ascend the staircase, followed by his men.

I immediately ascended to the third story. I soon heard the brigands searching every corner of the chamber I had first left.

'No one here!' exclaimed the chief's voice. 'Let us visit the next floor.'

The tower had only three stories, terminating by a platform, which I reached in a breathless condition, and a prey to profound terror.

I saw I was lost—lost without resource. No human aid could reach me. I ran to and fro on this cursed platform, like a caged wild beast. From the place where I stood I saw a precipice at least a hundred feet deep.

My teeth chattered, a cold perspiration bathed my face, and a convulsive trembling seized all my limbs. I heard the bandits' step on the stairs, and I shudderingly calculated how many moments yet remained to me.

At last, rendered crazy by fear, I resolved to precipitate myself from the top of the tower rather than fall alive into the hands of the wretches, who, I knew were accustomed to inflict unheard of tortures on their victims.

Before accomplishing this desperate act, and I mechanically leaned my head over the top, doubtless for the purpose of measuring the abyss into which I was to fall.

It was then I perceived, about two feet below me, an iron bar three feet long and an inch and a-half thick. It came out horizontally from the tower and appeared to be firmly fastened. A sudden idea entered my head and gave me hope that I might escape the assassins.

Time pressed, and I had not a moment to lose. So, without further reflecting, I climbed the wall, seized the iron bar with both my hands, and dropping down, allowed my body to hang in space.

I had scarcely taken this position when the bandits, tumultuously reached the platform, which they immediately searched in every direction.

The storm still continued, the rain fell in torrents, and the wind blew so violently that I had the greatest difficulty in maintaining my hold.

'You see, captain, there is no one here!' cried one of the brigands.

'So it appears,' replied Velesco, in a disappointed tone.

'Diavolo! it is anything but pleasant up here;' exclaimed one of the bandits.

'Let us descend,' said the Captain. A deep sigh escaped my breast. I believed I was saved. I prepared myself to remount the tower.

The position in which I was placed was anything but agreeable, and now that danger was passed, my arms and wrists felt terribly tired. I did not know whether it was illusion or reality, but it appeared to me; that the iron bar on which I hung, was too weak to support the weight of my body for a long time, and in all probability eaten by rust, began to bend and incline towards the abyss.

It was necessary that I should make as much haste as possible. A deep silence reigned on the platform.

Collecting all my strength, I raised my head in order to calculate the distance from the top of the tower.

‘So, so,’ said he.

‘Devil!’ I exclaimed in a rage. Without making any reply, Velesco leaned forward in order to seize me.

I let go the bar with one hand, and seized one of my pistols, which I had placed conveniently in the breast pocket of my coat.

‘You shall not escape me, my lad,’ said the bandit, sneeringly.

‘I will nail you!’ I murmured covering him with my pistol.

At that moment I felt the bar bending, the single hand I held on with was slipping, my weapon escaped from my grasp, and by a tremendous effort I clung to the now almost perpendicular bar with both my hands.

‘Oh,’ cried I, in despair; ‘anything rather than such a death.’ And raising myself by superhuman strength, I made a spring and gained the top of the wall.

‘No,’ cried the Captain, with a shrill and harsh laugh. ‘You shall die like a dog.’ And he pushed me back again.

At that moment I suffered terrible agony. The bar had become perpendicular, and could no longer sustain me. In spite of my frantic and desperate efforts, I felt my stiffened fingers glide slowly along the iron. I heard an infernal laugh, uttered, no doubt, by the bandit, who enjoyed my torture. Then losing all hope, I shut my eyes, so that I should not see the fearful gulph in which I was about to be precipitated, and—

“And?” we all cried, interested to the last degree, and not understanding why Seldon had stopped in his narrative.

“And I awoke, gentleman,” he continued, “for all this was only a dream. Heated by the wine I had taken, my head full of stories and robbers, I had slept and dreamt all I have told you, while my horse, happily for me, knew the road, and had gently taken me back to Rome. I assure you, no one ever felt more happy than I did when I recovered from that terrible nightmare.”



*Leaves from the Note-Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J. B.* Ed. John B. Williams, M.D. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1865.