

# “The Wolf of Cison”

By Max Pemberton

## I

Leopardi, the bandit, was to die. Venice heard the news incredulously, on the second day of March, in the year 1704. Throughout the city no other name was on the people's lips. “He dies at sunset.” The very gondoliers took up the cry and repeated it mockingly, as they sent their black boats merrily across the dancing waters of the lagoon. Men gathered together near the Ducal Palace and discussed the story in muted whispers. Women stopped their gondolas beneath the Bridge of Sighs, and showed each other, morbidly, the wall of the dungeon behind which “The Wolf of Cison” lay. For Leopardi had been the handsomest, the most daring bandit that ever ruled the mountains above Vicenza.

Leopardi was to die. Men shook their heads doubtingly; the more knowing among them scoffed openly at the news.

He has ten lives, comrades; I will believe your story when I see his body. There is no rope in Italy which will strangle Leopardi of Cison. Besides, has not the great friar promised him—?”

“Pah, what can our Father Giovanni do when the Three have willed it? They say that Leopardi is to die at sunset, and his body is to be cast into the lagoon. The friar interceded for him, but he was not listened to, my friends. It is a black day for him to take a second place in the Council.”

A girl, who had overheard the boatmen's talk, chimed in with her defending word.

“Believe it not,” she said; “let Mocenigo, who condemned him, look to himself. I would sooner wear the shoes of Leopardi of the mountains than the golden slippers of the Pope. God send such a man to the altar with me.”

She spoke as though “The Wolf of Cison” had been her own lover; and many a woman in Venice uttered a secret prayer that day for the robber upon whom the iron hand of justice at length had fallen. For ten years Leopardi had been the terror of the mountain towns from Iseo to Mestre. In all her lists of bandits, Italy had never known one bolder or more beloved by the common people.

“The Wolf of Cison” they called him in the mountains. “The Devil of the Hills” was the title the police of Venice gave to him. And these police had him caged at last in the dungeons of the Ducal Palace. He had sworn a rash oath that he would steal the gold chain from the neck of Mocenigo, the judge, and he had kept his word. But he had forgotten to reckon with the police.

They arrested him at the house of one of his kinsmen in Torcello, and promised him a short shrift. By some means, none knew how, he had earned the friendship of the priest, Giovanni, who had interceded with the Council for him. But Venice could not pardon a rogue who had robbed one of her senators; and the decree went out that he was to be strangled by the executioner, and his body to be cast into the lagoon. In spite of this, there were plenty in the city to declare that Leopardi would cheat the executioner even yet—aye, would cheat the very devil with a rope in his hand.

“We will believe it when he is dead,” they cried.

But others said,—

“He is to die at sunset.”

## II

Leopardi, the bandit, was sleeping on his bed of straw when Pietro, the gaoler, awoke him. They said in the prison that he had done little but sleep and eat since the Supreme Court condemned him. In his waking hours he sang the strophes of Tasso, or amused his captors with wondrous stories of the great women who had been his patrons—of the villages he had raided, and the treasure he had stored up. A merrier prisoner had never been caged in the dungeons of the palace.

His tuneful voice could quicken his gaolers' steps as they went down to the cells, or up again to the blessed light of day. His laughter was infectious, and not to be resisted. The very guards learnt to love him, and to smuggle in the presents which his friends in the city carried every day to the door of the prison. "A pity, indeed, that such as he must die," was the saying in every mouth.

Pietro, the gaoler, touched his prisoner upon the shoulder, and Leopardi sat up at once. He still wore the suit of grey velvet in which they had arrested him; and his magnificent black cloak, with the trimming of bear-skin, served well for a blanket. Though there was but the pitiful light of a lantern in the cell, it could not hide altogether the superb figure and the pleasing face of the bandit.

There were few handsomer men in all Italy, as the people said; few with such well-shaped limbs, or such a fine carriage, or such irresistible, merry eyes. Peril had not warred with that figure, nor danger put out the light of jest which had showed the ruler of the mountains so good a way to riches and to victory. Standing, as it seemed, on the very threshold of death, he could yet greet as a friend the very man who came to tell him that the end was at hand.

"Behold! it is thou, Pietro. There is news, then."

Pietro hung his head.

"There is very bad news, my friend."

Leopardi rubbed his eyes as though the garish light troubled them; then he dusted the straw from his fine clothes.

"Body of a Canon!" he cried. "I am devoured, Pietro—devoured! You hear that! Then tell his Excellency, your master, that if he would not shake himself here every morning—"

Pietro raised his hands as though against a blasphemy.

"Hush, hush!" he said. "You are speaking of the Serene Prince, Leopardi."

Leopardi laughed lightly.

"The news, the news—what of the news, Pietro?" he exclaimed, as he adjusted the dirty lace about his throat, and felt for the sword which should have been at his side.

Pietro hung his head again.

"The priest is here," he said humbly.

"How, the priest?"

"As I say. He comes to tell you that it is to-day."

"To-day! What is to-day? Would you have it to-morrow, Pietro?"

"Do not jest, I beg of you, comrade. The priest who comes will tell you of the day."

Leopardi looked at the gaoler in a dazed way for a moment. Then he laughed until the cell rang again.

"Ho, ho!" he said; "it needs a priest for that. There is no one else in Venice with the courage. Saint John! When your Doge comes to Cismon, Pietro, I will show him a like courtesy. I will send him a Bishop to say that he shall hang at dawn."

Pietro shrugged his shoulders.

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “When that day comes, Leopardi, there will be horses on the Canallazzo.”

The bandit slapped him on the back with a great hand which shook every bone in old Pietro’s body.

“Barrel of Bacchus!” said he; “what news I shall have for your ear when the sun sets aYain Pietro I Bring in your priest. I would prefer a flask of Armagnac, but, since your master plays the host so scurvily, we will even be content with this flask of divinity—which, I’ll wager, shall be as dry as the lips of a councillor’s wife. The priest, the priest, Pietro! Am I a heretic that you delay so?”

He thrust the other from the cell, and stood for a moment with his hands twitching curiously, and a drooping of the curves of the mouth, which spoke of nerves at high tension and of effort to conceal the emotion he felt. But when, presently, an old friar came shuffling into the place, the smile was on his face again, the laughter in his eyes.

“Your blessing, brother,” he asked, dropping on his knee with an air of great humility.

The priest raised his fingers and blessed him.

“My son,” he said, “open your heart to me, for you are to die in an hour.”

Leopardi sighed, but did not rise from his knees.

“Oh,” he exclaimed, “God give me a good memory, for there is much on my soul, brother.”

The friar seated himself upon the wooden stool, the single ornament of the cell, and bent his ear to listen. Leopardi, meanwhile, curled himself up in the straw and began to pick at the ears of it.

“Brother,” said he, “yours is a mission of charity. If you would do me a service, the last I shall ever ask of you, I beg you remember that there is one in Cisn-ion dear to me beyond all that have been my friends. I speak of little Beatrice, the daughter of Gianotti, the vintner. You will tell her how I died, brother?”

The priest nodded his head.

“I will not forget her,” he said, “yet think rather of your sins, my son, for assuredly—”

Leopardi cut him short.

“It is of my sins I am thinking, brother. Help me to that, I beseech you. There is in the mountain town of Valdagno a young woman whose memory can fill my eyes with tears. I speak of little Marietta, the daughter of Colleoni, the miller.”

The priest raised his hands in a gesture of despair.

“Another!” he exclaimed.

“Ay, as you say, brother, there is another. She is Susanna, the daughter of Villani of Lugo. Hasten to her, I beg of you—”

The friar rose from his seat and turned to the door angrily.

“You shall die with the jest upon your lips,” he exclaimed sternly. “The church has no word for such as you.”

Leopardi made a grimace and ceased to pluck at the straw.

“Ah,” he said, “if you would have listened, I would have told you of the twenty men whose throats we cut at Cittadella. Come again to-morrow, brother, and you shall hear of little Elena—”

“To-morrow,” said the priest, in a low voice, “to-morrow the police will be looking for your body in the lagoon, my son.”

He quitted the cell, covering his ears with his cowl that they might be deaf to such blasphemies. When he was gone, Leopardi stood up and the smile left his face again. The doubt which had troubled him ten minutes ago returned with new intensity. “How if this friar speaks

the truth?" he asked himself. Of all those he had known and served in Venice, but one remained to be his friend. He thought of another friar, of the great Frà Giovanni, who had promised that he should not die.

"Saint John!" he said, "the Capuchin has never lied yet. He will save me even now. It will be time enough to ask myself how when the rope is about my neck."

### III

The death that Leopardi was to die was the death of the rope and the trap. They would strangle him in the corridor of the prison, and afterwards cast his body into the lagoon. Such a sentence had been passed upon "The Wolf of Cison" by Mocenigo, the President of the Criminal Court; and such a sentence the executioner of Venice hastened to carry out so soon as the friar had left the cell of the condemned.

Whatever fear of death troubled Leopardi, at the moment when the gaolers came to him, as they thought for the last time, they found him, as ever, indifferent apparently both to their presence and its meaning. And there was not a single servant of the prison who did not regret the errand, or treasure up a genuine sympathy for this "Devil of the Hills," who had ever been the friend of the poor and the friendless.

"Courage, Leopardi; they will not hurt you. A moment with the rope about your neck, and after that nothing."

So spoke Pietro, the gaoler, as he endeavoured to slip a cord over the hands of the condemned. But Leopardi was too quick for him.

"One moment, good Pietro," cried he. "What! you would truss me like a fowl! Out on you for a scurvy friend! How shall I kiss my hand to the pretty women on the other side of the way if there is a cord upon my wrists?"

Pietro sighed.

"When next you kiss your hand, signorè, it will be in purgatory," said he.

Leopardi pinched his cheek good-humouredly.

"Then I will make a cool place for thee, old Pietro. Come, a cup of wine in charity. Would you send me up yonder with lips of sand? Ho, ho! a thirsty saint would never do. Bring in the wine, rascal, and to the devil with the rest."

The old gaoler shook his head sadly; but he fetched a flask of wine, for this was permitted to the condemned. When the bandit had emptied the cup he professed himself ready.

"Come," he said, "we will go and look at your peep-show, old Pietro."

Pietro flung the door of the cell wide open.

"God have mercy on your soul, Leopardi of Cison," he said devoutly.

There were half-a-dozen soldiers in the corridor of the prison, and they stood with drawn swords while the condemned passed from his cell. Leopardi, playing his role to the last, was singing the old proverb:

"Venetia, Venetia,  
Chi non ti vede non ti pretia,"

when he caught sight of them; but he stopped suddenly as he beheld the shining blades; and a quick eye would have seen him stagger against the wall.

"Courage," whispered the gaoler.

“A true word, old Pietro,” he said, recovering himself by a great effort; “when last I had the pleasure of seeing these gentlemen in the mountains, it was a word their officer addressed to them. ‘Courage,’ he said—and he ran, old Pietro. Holy Virgin, how he ran! Give me but the chance, and I will show thee here and now—”

An officer of the guard, appearing suddenly in the corridor, cried “Silence!” and the troop presented arms. The condemned man ceased to jest, for he saw the open trap through which his body was to be cast into the waters. There came in that instant the thought that Frà Giovanni had betrayed him, after all. He was to die, then, he who had been the king of the mountains and the terror of the cities; he, who had known no other master than his own will; whose word had been a terrible law,—this Venice would not spare him. Young in years, the love of his life surged up for a moment and became an agony. He looked round about him wistfully, as though the priest, who had promised to save him, lurked somewhere in the shadows. He was as brave as any in Italy, but this bitterness of death, after he had told himself that he was not to die, was a torture passing words.

“He must come,” he said to himself; “he has never been known to lie—he will not desert me.”

The hope permitted him to remember his courage, in spite of the place and the scene. And it was a scene grim enough to have affrighted even “The Wolf of Cison.” Death seemed written on every wall, on every face. Light of dim lanterns struck the vaulted ceiling, and shone back from the dark water of the canal without. The soldiers themselves were as figures of stone. The air was hot, and breathed the pestilence of dungeons. When the masked executioner stepped forward and touched the condemned, he started as one aroused from a fitful sleep. The priest had deserted him, he said. There could be no pardon now; no pardon as he stood beneath that rope and looked through the narrow trap-door whereby they would cast out his body presently. He had lived his life. He would never see the mountains again. But, at least, he would die without shame.

“Signorè,” said the executioner, as he slipped a cord lightly over the prisoner’s ankles and another about his wrists, “I ask your forgiveness.”

The robber watched the operation with curious eyes. He stifled the horror which gripped at his heart and remembered that he was Leopardi of Cison.

“You are forgiven, signorè,” he said, with the air of a prince. “Do your work quickly, and my friends shall pay you more money than there is in this cursed city.”

“Silence!” cried the Captain of the Guard. “If you have no prayer to say, hold your tongue, rogue.”

“My prayer, signorè, is for Venice, that she may always find soldiers who can run like your Excellency.”

It was the last word he spoke in the dungeons of the city. Scarcely had it left his lips when the rope tightened about his neck and he was hauled from his feet upward to the roof of the corridor. For long minutes, as it seemed to him, his very heart threatened to burst. Thunderous noises rang in his ears; his eyes showed him a crimson vision of woeful shapes and forms as the blood went leaping to his brain. He struggled madly to touch with his feet any place that should, if it were but for an instant, release the agonising grip of the cord about his throat. Strange voices cried to him as with the greeting of the doomed. He felt himself sinking down, down, to some unfathomed abyss far below the earth. Then there was a rush of water in his ears—

“Was he dead?” asked the Captain of the Guard, as the body of the robber fell heavily into the dark water of the canal. “You were quick to-night, Gerardo.”

The executioner answered evasively.

“When he comes back, Venice will see a miracle, Excellency.”

The Captain turned away, glad to leave that place of pestilent odours and of darkness. And through all the city there went the word that Leopardi of Cismon was dead.

#### IV

There was a rush of water in Leopardi's ears, the sensation as of a cascade pouring over his very brain. He opened his eyes and beheld strange green lights flashing before him; he stretched out his arms, and the half-tied cords fell from them. A mighty effort, instinctive, the effort of one who had been a swimmer since his childhood, brought him to the surface of the canal; but the half of his senses were yet lacking, and he sank again, deep down to the very mud and slime in the bed of the waters.

It was a terrible struggle, a battle with death waged by one whom the finger of death had touched already. Minutes passed, and still the drowning man knew nothing of that which was happening to him; nothing of the circumstances which had sent him down there to the darkness of the river's bed. All that he did was done upon an impulse of habit. His agonising struggles to come up again and breathe the cold air of the night were the dictates of his nature crying out for breath.

When he rose to the surface of the water for the second time, nature gained a little strength and began to befriend him. He saw great buildings above him and lights flashing from those buildings. He heard the voices of men and the splash of oars. Reason returned to him; he cried aloud with the joy of life given back, of death defeated.

"Great God! I live, I live," he said; "the priest has saved me, after all; I shall see my home again. Heaven give me strength."

It was all clear to him now, both the plan of his escape and the end of the plan. He knew that the executioner had but half strangled him that he might fight for his life out there in the darkness of the waters. He understood that he must make one supreme effort to cheat Venice and his enemies. He would rule in the mountains again; would live the old life. Frà Giovanni had been his friend. He vowed that he would repay with an offering such as priest had never dreamed of.

It was almost dark at this hour, and the lamps were beginning to shine as stars in the windows of the palaces. Leopardi lay with his head thrown back, washed like a dead thing by the ebbing water. Though a great pain hurt his lung, and noises were still ringing in his brain, he paid no heed to his own condition, but reflected rather on the peril which still hovered about him. For all that he knew, the police might be already seeking his body. He listened for the splash of oars as a deer listens for the dogs.

Far away, the notes of a guitar rang out musically on the night air. Venice was beginning her watch of pleasure. Here and there upon the great Canalazzo a gondola passed, carrying its owner to some *fête* or carnival. Leopardi said that if he could swim to one of those boats and cast himself upon the mercy of the boatman, he would fear his enemies no more. He took courage of the thought, and striking out with a gentle stroke, he gained the shelter of the prison wall and pulled himself hand over hand by it. A splash, he imagined, would betray him. A new executioner would be found—and then!

The stones of the wall were rough to his hands; green slime, revolting and clammy, marked the line of waters. The bandit might have been some vampire creeping away from the prison as he dragged himself toward the open lagoon and the place of safety. Often he paused with a little tremor of fear as he thought that he heard the dip of an oar or the whisper of a voice behind him.

Then he would snatch a few yards and cast back his head so that the green waves ran almost to his mouth.

"I will cheat them yet," he muttered, as though in self-encouragement. "When next the Wolf of Cison barks, let Venice take care of her judges."

Half-an-hour must have passed in this alternation of hope and fear. When, at last, he had crept the whole length of the prison wall and had turned the corner of it, he beheld the great lagoon, the silent sea above which Venice towers. The spectacle was as of some haven of promise to reward him for his hour of suffering. All the courage of his nature, all his reckless contempt of authority and those who stood for authority, returned to him as he gazed across the limpid waters to the distant islands and the remote sea whose breezes gave him life. The good fight was waged then; the battle was done. He beheld a gondola passing to some house of pleasure, and the figure of the boatman was as the figure of a friend sent by destiny to his aid. No longer would he hesitate, but cast himself from the wall and struck boldly for the ship which should be his haven.

"Signorè, for the love of God help a drowning man!"

The gondolier heard him at the first cry.

"Who is it; who is there?" he cried, ceasing to dip his oar and letting the long black boat float lazily with the current. Leopardi, notwithstanding the failing light, could see that it was a very handsome gondola. It might even belong to one of the nobles of Venice, he thought. And a noble would grant a short shrift to "The Wolf of Cison."

"Signorè," he said, clutching the gunwale of the boat and breathing heavily, "a thousand pardons for the liberty. I am a stranger in this city and have been robbed here. They threw me from the quay yonder. For the love of God, let me find a moment's shelter on your boat."

He thought that the gondolier would answer him; but before the fellow could speak, the door of the cabin was opened, and Leopardi saw a vision surpassing any he had looked upon in all his life. It was the vision of a young girl clad from head to foot in a robe of gold brocade,—a girl whose dress was a blaze of glittering diamonds; whose mask, in her agitation, had been turned aside to show him a face so beautiful that he knew, upon the instant, he would never forget it.

"Oh, signorina," he cried, thanking Heaven for such a turn of fortune, "you will not refuse a drowning man. I am the Count of Vicenza, and I have fallen into the hands of my enemies. Give me passage to Rialto, and I will remember your name until my dying day."

There was a light in the cabin of the gondola, and it stood so that the rays of the lamp fell full upon the upturned face of the bandit. Whether this face appealed to the girl, or the pleasing voice of the man attracted her, Leopardi could but surmise. But certain it is that she stood quite still nor did she protest when he, quick to act upon a resolution, dragged himself out of the water, and sank down exhausted at her feet.

"Signorina," he said, "I kiss the hand of my benefactress. Believe me, the hour will come when you will not regret this night."

He touched her hand with his cold lips, but she drew it back at once, and seated herself again upon the cushions of the cabin. She could see the striking face of the unknown now, with the long fair hair hanging limp over the forehead. Wet and bedraggled and cold as "The Wolf of Cison" was, the strange fascination the man could exercise upon women was not lost to him. He held the girl, as in the grip of his will, almost from the first word he spoke to her.

"I will set you down at Rialto, signorè," she said quietly; "meanwhile, I fear that the cold—"

"Not so, signorina—when I am near you. A man could suffer a great deal of cold to be taken to his home under such circumstances. And I owe you yet another apology for the water I bring into your boat."

She laughed, for this strange creature, risen so strangely from the waters, had begun to amuse her.

“It will save Dominici washing the gondola to-morrow, signorè.”

Leopardi sighed. He was asking himself which was the shortest way to learn the name of his benefactress.

“Do not speak of to-morrow, signorina,” he said; “to-night will be a memory then. I shall have only the name—“The name!” she exclaimed. “Exactly—the name of my benefactress.” She toyed with her fan, watching the bedraggled figure curiously. Her corselet shone with a blaze of precious stones. He could see the pretty white throat tuned to her rapid breathing.

“You do not know my name?” she asked.

“I am a stranger in the city, signorina.”

“And you have not heard of Gabriella, of the opera?”

Leopardi suppressed an exclamation. The name of Gabriella, the singer of Milano, was known from one end of Europe to the other. He could have danced for joy when he heard it.

“Oh! signorina,” he cried, “had you but sung a single note, I would never have asked you the question.”

She was pleased at the compliment, for she believed that some noble uttered it. Neither the straw of the prison nor the water of the canal had ruined altogether the splendid clothes in which Leopardi had been arrested. The gold lace still flashed on his vest; the fine embroidery was still to be seen upon his coat. He would be some noble of Vicenza come to Venice for the pleasures of Carnival, she thought. It pleased her, being a woman, to think that she was helping a man who obviously had succumbed already to her beauty and her fame.

“Lord Count,” she said, “I was on my way to the opera of San Samuele. Nevertheless, if I might set you down at your own lodging.”

The bandit bowed with the grace of a prince.

“Signorina,” he said gaily, “my way is your way. It could not be otherwise. Give me but ten minutes to call at the house of one of my friends where I can make good my misfortunes, and I will even crave leave to follow you to the opera. It is my good luck that Venice has kept this, the greatest of her pleasures, until my last night in the city.”

“You quit Venice to-morrow?” she asked. “At dawn, signorina, I shall be on my way to the mountains.”

He sighed as though to say, “You could turn me from that purpose.” She, on her part, had long practised all the arts which equip the successful coquette. Many a noble in Venice had laid his fortune at her feet, but this man pleased her as no other had done.

“Signorè,” she said, “I will sing to-night as I have never sung before.”

Leopardi answered her by entering the cabin and bending once more to kiss her hand.

Signorina,” said he, “this night will be my dying memory. We are now at Rialto. In an hour I shall hear your voice at the opera of San Samuele.”

The gondola touched the quay as he spoke. Leopardi looked about him for an instant to see if he were followed; but observing no others upon the water, he bowed again to the mistress of the boat and darted into the shadows of the narrow streets by the bridge.

“Gabriella, the singer,” he said to himself, as he went. “Saint John! but my star shines to-night. Let me once get out of this cursed Venice, and she shall sing tomorrow in the camp at Cison.”

The idea pleased him. He ran on quickly down a narrow alley and into a gloomy casino.

“Quick!” he said to the man who challenged him at the door. “A message to Frà Giovanni, the Capuchin monk—and for me the best suit in your wardrobe, old Paolo. It is I, Leopardi.”

The man let the lamp fall from his hand with a loud crash.  
“Great God!” he said; “the dead come to life, then.”

V

“The Wolf of Cison” quitted the gloomy casino when twenty minutes had passed. Those who had seen the wet and bedraggled man as he entered, would not have recognised him when he passed out. For Leopardi wore the smirched grey coat no longer: no longer lacked a cloak for his back, nor a sword for his hand. Rich breeches and stockings of scarlet showed the fine proportions of his limbs. His doublet was of black velvet. The richest lace adorned his throat and wrists. He carried the stola of a Venetian prince over his shoulder; his vest was pinned by a diamond buckle which many a noble might have envied.

He left the casino furtively. He knew that he could not cheat Venice twice: knew that the police patrolled even that haunt of thieves and outcasts. Narrow passages, winding alleys, carried him to the water’s edge. A gondola waited for him; and the boatman who steered it greeted him as a friend.

“Leopardi—as I live! Well met, comrade! I am here to take you to Mestre, as the master commands.”

Leopardi leapt lightly into the boat.

“Well met, indeed, Beppo, my friend. You have a message for me?”

“Who sups with the wolf should breakfast with the birds. That is my message, Leopardi. The master cannot save you a second time.”

Leopardi answered him earnestly.

I will remember the name of Frà Giovanni when I have forgotten that of the mother who bore me,” said he.

Old Beppo began to ply his oar, and to steer the black boat toward the Canalazzo.

“He gave you your life because you have honoured women and fed the poor, Leopardi. Remember that when you think of him in the mountains. He has been your friend, and has not forgotten his promises. You will be at Mestre before midnight,—the city thinks you dead, and the road is open.”

The bandit, squatting on the gunwale at old Beppo’s feet, sighed as one upon whom deep content has come.

“Oh!” he said, “I have something yet to say to this Venice of yours, old Beppo. There is Mocenigo, the judge, too. Give thanks this night that you do not wear his shoes. We go to the opera at San Samuele; there lies a better road than Mestre.”

Beppo ceased to row.

“To San Samuele!” he cried. “But you are mad, Leopardi! The police are there—Mocenigo, the judge.”

Leopardi encouraged him with a merry laugh.

“Barrel of Bacchus!” said he, “is it not Mocenigo who takes me to the opera? As he judged me, so will I judge him, old Beppo. And the girl I am to marry at dawn is even now waiting for me. Would you keep me from her side, rogue?”

Beppo took up his oar.

“You will hang, after all,” he retorted.

## VI

It had been a brilliant night at the opera of San Samuele, for this was the zenith of Carnival, and all the nobles of Venice hurried to the seats of pleasure before the stern hand of Lent should restrain them. In the foyer of the theatre the spectacle was such as even Venice, grown old in pageantry and display, had rarely known.

Princes and nobles in dazzling dresses of velvet and of silk; great dames whose very shoes were powdered with diamonds; cocottes, senators, merchants, the prettiest women in the city,—all these swelled the glittering throng which promenaded the vestibules of the theatre. The wonders of the jewels, the superb gold and silver ornaments of the brocades, the lights of countless diamonds, were such as blinded eyes accustomed to the wealth of Venice and to the extravagance of her aristocrats. Strangers stood to tell themselves that they had come upon some palace of fables. Women hung upon their lovers' arms, and gave themselves up to the witchery of the hour. The babble of tongues was deafening; the laughter unceasing.

A bewildering scene, in truth, it was,—a scene of folly running riot, of love grown hysterical, of that complete abandonment to pleasure which was characteristic of Venice in the first years of the eighteenth century. And this, perhaps, was even more remarkable that, in spite of the spirit of laughter and of jest, one name was ever on the tongue of the masqueraders. It was the name of Leopardi of Cismon.

"He is dead," men said; "we shall remember his name no more when we cross the mountains. 'The Wolf of Cismon' barked at Venice, and she has answered him."

So they spoke, and many paused to congratulate Mocenigo, the judge, who had helped the city to reckon so well with the bandit who had mocked her. On his part, until they told him that Leopardi was no more, Mocenigo neither slept nor ate. Impossible as the bandit's threats had seemed, they frightened this man who had willed his death. Perchance he believed the old women's tales, when they said that the rope had yet to be spun which would strangle Leopardi of the mountains. But when he knew the executioner had done his work, when he knew that the body of the robber had been cast into the lagoon, it was as though a great burden had been lifted from his mind. None laughed louder in that house of laughter. None jested with such relish.

"The Wolf is dead, my friends," he said boastfully; "to-morrow the police will have found his body, and it will hang between the columns of the Piazzetta."

Leopardi, masked closely and moving as a flash of light from place to place in the theatre, heard the words and laughed at them. Never had a reckless adventure appealed to him as this adventure did. His courage rose from minute to minute. He felt that he could look death in the face now and laugh at its menaces. He ventured even to touch the judge upon the shoulder.

"My lord," he said in a low whisper, "have you heard the news?"

Mocenigo turned quickly.

"Signorè," he exclaimed, "the news is that Leopardi of Cismon is dead."

"Not so," answered the robber; "he has fled the prison and is now in the hills. They await you at the palace, my lord, for this man has threatened that you shall not be living at dawn to-morrow."

Mocenigo began to tremble in spite of himself. He stared at the masked man as though the sound of his voice were familiar.

"Who are you that knows the secrets of the palace?" he asked.

"I am one who is under a great obligation to Mocenigo, the judge, my lord."

He bowed at the words, and was lost to view instantly in the press of people. The judge stared after him as though his ears had heard a voice of miracles.

“The man has fled,” he muttered; “impossible. I have the word of the captain.”

He would not believe it, yet doubting, and with curiosity awakened irresistibly, he passed from the theatre and came out upon the quay, whereby the gondolas waited. A boatman, who seemed to be looking for him, sprang up at once, and touched him on the arm.

“My lord,” he said, “I am sent from the palace.”

“You!”

“There was no other near, my lord—and the Council waits.”

Mocenigo hesitated no longer. He stepped into the gondola, and it was steered instantly to the shadows. Leopardi, who watched it go, from a place upon the steps, laughed softly and returned to the theatre.

“One,” he said to himself grimly; and then he thought of pretty Gabriella.

The music had begun again when he re-entered the theatre. He heard the voice of the first singer in all Italy, Gabriella of Milano, and it thrilled him as with an ecstasy of pleasures anticipated. For a little while he listened to it, and then, turning from the corridor, he entered a box, where sat one of the first noblewomen in the city.

The music had swelled out now to a superb crescendo. Every ear was strained, every eye fascinated. Gabriella held the entranced audience as by a power more than human. Yet even as she rose to the supreme moment of her triumph, a terrible scream rang out in the theatre, and being repeated again and again, broke the note upon the lips of the singer, and brought the people leaping to their feet.

“Leopardi of Cismon—he is not dead. He is here, here!”

A woman uttered the words, a woman standing at the front of her box, and stretching out her arms as though for help against the apparition which terrified her. For a long minute she stood swaying there. Then she swooned and fell; and in a moment of her fall, a second cry, loud and terrible, from a box upon the opposite side, drew all eyes toward the place, and sent men’s swords leaping from their scabbards.

“ ‘The Wolf of Cismon’ is in the theatre. He is here, here. There are a hundred with him. Save yourselves.”

A young man, white with excitement and passion, roared the words from the front of his box. Five hundred throats took up the cry. Women began to rush into the corridors. Flight—a flight where the strong trampled down the weak, where fathers forgot their children, a panic uncontrollable seized upon the people.

“Leopardi of Cismon is here. God help us all this night. Leopardi is here. He is not dead.”

Louder and louder grew the cries. The screams of women mingled with them. Doors crashed down and barred the narrow corridors. The knife of the bandit might have been at the throat of those who fled from him. Such of the servants of the house as would have reasoned with the terror-stricken people were impotent, for panic prevailed above their appeals. Ever outward towards the crashing doors the frenzied mob poured. Jewels rained upon the carpets of the vestibule; fine clothes were rent to shreds; the weak fell swooning; the strong shouted as men possessed: “Leopardi—Leopardi is here!” Their voices were hoarse as they cried the warning.

Leopardi watched the scene from a balcony on the second floor. A curious smile played upon his handsome face. Those cries were his answer spoken to Venice which had condemned him. They were sweeter to his ears than the music little Gabriella made. And she—she had swooned

upon the stage. No sooner did he realise the trouble than he climbed down from pillar to pillar; and, taking her in his strong arms, carried her swiftly through the players' door to the quay.

"Signorina," he said, when she opened her eyes, "the police are boking for you because you took Leopardi, the bandit of Cismon, into your gondola and helped him to escape.

"You—you are Leopardi, signorè?"

"I am Leopardi, signorina, who has come here to save you from the police."

She shuddered. He held her more closely in his strong embrace.

"Come," he said; "the gondola of Giovanni, the monk, is waiting for me. There will be none to stop that, signorina."

She left the city with him and was in his camp at Cismon on the dawn of the next day.

## VII

The story of the escape of Leopardi, the bandit, was believed by none of the common people of Venice, who went next morning to look for his body, hanging, as it should have been, between the columns of the Piazzetta. But when they came to the place a great cry of wonder escaped them.

"God save us!" they said; "there hangs Mocenigo, the judge!"

It was a true word. The body of the judge swung there, limp and cold, in the wind of morning. And to it was pinned a paper with the words,—“The answer of Leopardi to the city of Venice.”