

"Gardana, Gardana, I thought you were dead--they told me you had died, Gardana!"

"No, brother," said Toli. "It might have been better if I had died."

Then after, a short pause:

"But you are in pain, brother; I have hurt you--look, you were within an ace of being killed, brother Manole, and I should have had another man's soul, and another man's blood upon my head. There, you were nearly killed. What brought you, what drew you within range of my gun? Within an ace, brother Manole--another man's soul, another man's blood----"

For the first time for many years he seemed moved with self-pity. He tore a strip from his shirt, bent over Manole, and dressed his wound. The others watched, amazed. The waters were sleeping, the forests were sleeping. From the trees, from the valleys, from the grass, came voices murmuring in the silence of the night, soft, remote, a sort of breath, more like a sigh from the sleeping earth. Manole spoke:

"Do you remember, Gardana? We were on the Baitan mountains, you know--at Piatra-de-Furca--we were together when the bailiffs hemmed us in on all sides--a host of them. We held our own till nightfall. Eh! and then I saw what stuff Gardana was made of! You gave us one call and went straight ahead--we after you, and so we escaped, we cut our way through with our scimitars. Then, when the trumpets gave the alarm, and the guns began to go off, I lost sight of you, Gardana; we were all scattered, I remained alone in the valley under Piatra-de-Furca. Do you remember? It must be five years, more--six years ago. Where are all our comrades now?"

"Our comrades--they have gone away, I let them go. Brother Manole, heavy curses lie on my head--enough to crush me, brother. I was not a bad man. You know how many times I went to Dina. I said: 'Don't drive me too far, bethink yourself.' And I went to the girl's father. But you see Dina was rich, Dina had flocks of sheep. And her father gave her to him without asking whether the girl loved him. And after that, tell me, brother, could I sit patiently by, bite my nails and say nothing? Could I?"

Toli Gardana ceased speaking. After a moment of reflection he added softly:

"But the girl faded away--she died of grief and disappointment. One day the earth will cover me too, our bodies may rot anywhere, and no one will weep--not a tear, they will all rejoice. I don't know, brother, but since that girl died it seems to me I am not the man I was. I wanted to kill myself, I roamed about here, and one day I went to Tega. I was strong--I gave out that I came from Blatza, and that I was a shepherd; who was he that he should know differently! But you, brother, how has the world treated you?"

"Harshly, Gardana. I was shut up in Tricol for three years. Prison cut me off from life. For months I dug--with hands and nails I dug--until one night, during a storm, I broke through the wall and escaped with these two companions. And when I found myself back among these mountains my thoughts turned to you. I had heard you were dead, Gardana; but see what has happened, and how it has come to pass, how fate brings these things about, brother Gardana ... it is not a month since I escaped...."

Before they were aware of it the shadows of the night began to melt away. The brigands ceased to speak as though they feared the signs of the coming day. They remained silent, their heads upon the ground in the face of the glory of the flaming dawn.

Toli Gardana asked: