

A Daughter of Vesuvius.

By Pierce Vincent.

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It was a small two edged stiletto that Zabetta Gemella bought at Antonio Mordo's shop in Naples, a very tiny plaything of a stiletto; but, as every Italian knows, the heart lies barely two inches below the surface and a blade that will reach that distance is long enough for all practical purposes.

On the crucifix handle of this particular stiletto Zabetta had sworn that it should drink the blood of either Caesar Pino or of his betrothed, Maria Vincente.

They were a very ancient family, the Gemellas. One ancestor had escaped from the eruption that overwhelmed Pompeii and another had been mummified at Herculaneum. The race had a certain fierce sturdiness inherited from some lava born forefather before Romulus.

They also had an unpleasant medieval habit of keeping their oaths regardless of consequences, as family traditions and court records bore witness. They took life seriously, as many had found to their cost.

So when people heard that Caesar Pino had thrown over Zabetta Gemella for Maria Vincente they shook their heads. Zabetta herself went home, dry lip and fiery eye, and at midnight swore the slyly blood oath, a strange and terrible curse entrusted to her by the muttering old crone, her grandmother.

Zabetta dwelt in the outskirts of Boscotrase on the slopes nearest Vesuvius. Her first view at dawn from her little attic was of the purple plume and mighty shoulders of the great volcano heaved against the sky, and her last glimpse at night was of the same plume streaming wildly across the sunset. She knew the mountain in all its moods and from its nature shaped her own. Its heart of fire was no wilder than that within her breast.

Caesar Pino belonged to the aristocratic

of Boscotrase. His olive trees were the best in the place, and did not the choicest Lachryma Christi come from his grapes grown on the scoriae of Vesuvius? Caesar was dark and



ZABETTA LIFTED THE INSENSIBLE CAESAR IN HER ARMS.

handsome, a fine singer and dancer, a hard worker, a good fellow all round. All the girls in the village were in love with him.

Handsome Caesar fell in love with handsomer Zabetta. True, her family was poor. But what difference did that make? Caesar had enough for both. Their betrothal soon followed. Nobody could deny that they made a fine looking pair. To be sure, some families whose daughters would not have objected to occupying Zabetta's place hinted privately at the record of the Gemellas. But none spoke openly, remembering that same record.

All went well until Maria Vincente came to Boscotrase. Then Caesar's affection for Zabetta cooled. Not that Maria deliberately did anything to tempt the young man away. But it soon became known through the town that Caesar and his sweetheart had quarreled; next, that he was betrothed to Maria.

Then, indeed, people shook their heads and some said, "Poor Zabetta!" But others, who knew her family's record better, said, "Poor Caesar!"

And everybody waited to see what would happen.

It was the next day after the break that Zabetta bought the dagger. The Gemellas always acted promptly. But she found it difficult to decide whose blood the sharp point should drink.

Sometimes she felt it would be Caesar's, sometimes Maria's, and on one black day when the two passed her arm in arm she determined that it should be both and she had hard work to restrain herself from putting the sentence into immediate execution. Then came the great eruption.

For generations Vesuvius, muttering and grumbling, had looked down on the presumptuous vineyards and olive groves, boldly pressing nearer the region where it had decreed no living thing should grow. Unheeded it had given warning after warning, like a cross old man who is continually making threats, but whom no one takes at his word.

At last the giant that dwelt in the mountain's fiery heart decided that it was time to teach the forgetful race of men one lesson more. So puff! He blew off the cone and pouped in streams of lava and sheets of ashes.

Boscotrase was one of the worst

sufferers. For a time its citizens hoped they might escape with a shower of stones and cinders. But one night the scarlet ribbons that had been trickling like rivers of blood down the rough slopes turned toward the village and flight was the only resource.

In a few hours Caesar had seen his vineyard and olive grove damaged beyond hope of reparation in his own lifetime. From a wealthy man he had become poor. Although he did not notice it, Maria's affection had cooled perceptibly from the moment when she realized that her lover was now no richer than his fellows.

Zabetta was gloomily preparing to flee from her home at the coming of the lava. To her whether she escaped or not mattered very little. The cataclysm without found a responsive echo in her heart, fiery, scorched and blasted.

With a small bundle of her belongings she was hurrying along the street amid the ashes and falling stones when a pale faced, shrieking figure rushed past her.

Zabetta's hand involuntarily sought her bosom, whence lurked the stiletto. She was alone with her hated rival. In that fearful semidarkness who would know if she slew Maria?

The other shrank back, seeing her stern face and guessing the import of her bosomed hand.

"Where is Caesar?" grimly questioned Zabetta. Maria covered away.

"I left him at his house a little while ago. The lava was coming. As he entered to get a bundle the walls fell and buried him. I dared not go in. He is dead."

"Coward!" hissed Zabetta. Dropping her load, she gave the shrinking girl a push that hastened her flight, then flew back through the lurid gloom along the well known way that led to Caesar's house. Why she went she did not know. Caesar was dead to her, so her heart whispered. Yet instinct told her to hasten back.

Soon she saw the ruined house. Only a few rods away a red stream was rolling slowly down the street. She entered the tottering walls and beheld a prone figure partly buried under the fallen stones.

It was Caesar! The peril of her former lover made Zabetta forgetful of her own danger and of the fact that he was the betrothed of another woman. Madly she tore with bleeding fingers at the debris that covered him. His heart was beating; he was alive. With strength increased tenfold she tugged at the wreckage until she had cleared away everything but a heavy block that pressed down the little finger of his right hand. This block resisted Zabetta's utmost efforts.

It was growing hotter and hotter. A few minutes more and the lava would engulf the house. Death would be the portion of any living thing therein. Zabetta drew her tiny dagger.

At that instant Caesar returned to consciousness. Seeing her bending over him, knife in hand, he gave a cry of terror and appeal and swooned again just as the blade descended. It severed his crushed finger at the second joint and he was free.

There was not a second to lose. Already the air was scorching. With a man's strength Zabetta lifted the insensible Caesar in her arms and carried him out into the street. Through the showers of ashes she staggered with her burden. She had not got fifty feet from the door when the lava boiled against the walls and the whole house fell in ruins.

But Caesar was saved! So Zabetta kept her vow, sworn on the crucifix of the little dagger, that it should drink the blood of either Caesar or Maria. And it was probably the first instance on record where the fulfillment of a Gemella's blood oath resulted in a marriage.

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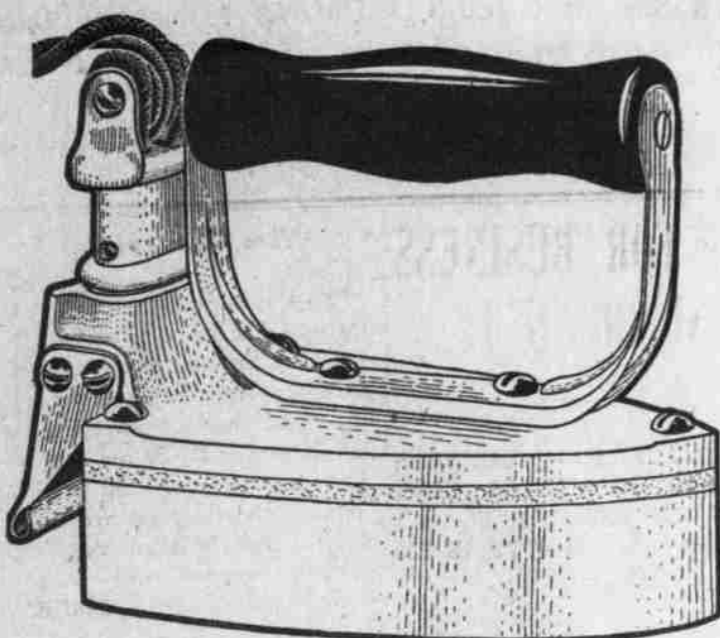
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