

BIANCA MICELE

By ESTHER VANDEVEER

An officer of the carabinieri—the government police of Italy—entered a prison in Naples, was admitted to a corridor and stopped at a cell where he could see a girl through the bars. He stood looking at her with a curious expression on his face, the expression of one who would gaze upon a beautiful leopard in a cage. She was a peasant, but endowed with a beauty that a highborn dame might envy. She returned his gaze as one would look upon a captor—with hate, mingled with the knowledge that she was powerless to gratify it.

"Well," he said, "you see what crime has brought you to. You are a woman, and the government dislikes to inflict on you the punishment of a man. I have told the public prosecutor that if he will spare you, let you go free, you will return to the mountains and lead an orderly life; that you will disband your troop and advise them to live honestly hereafter."

As he proceeded the girl's expression changed to one that he did not understand, for he was infatuated with her. He had been sent to capture a troop of bandits who were pouncing on persons, whom they held for ransom, and had found a girl in command. He had succeeded in trapping her and a few of her band and brought them to Rome.

"I will not trouble the police again and will advise my men not to do so. It is not the prosecutor that pardons me of his own accord. You have saved my life," she said.

"The only recompense I wish is to see you a good girl."

Lieutenant Morini the next day came again to the jail with a pardon for Bianca Micele, took her out of prison and proceeded with her by rail to Castellammare, thence up the steep heights behind it till he reached the summit. On reaching a certain point she gave a "too-hoo" and a couple of men sprang from behind rocks and advanced toward her and her conductor.

"Take this man," she said, "into the ravine and give him the stiletto."

The two men drew back. Morini was in uniform, and they hesitated at murdering one of the carabinieri simply to gratify their leader, well knowing that for doing so they would be hunted to the death.

"Signorina," said one of them, "why do you wish to put him out of the way?"

"Well, since you don't wish it, send

him down again. But you are wrong. He will return with a force strong enough to take us, and our lives will pay for such folly."

The two bandits consulted in an undertone. Then the one who had spoken said:

"We will obey you if you command us to do this, but we do not advise it."

"Send him away," said Bianca.

Morini, who had expected death, lost no time in descending from the heights. But no sooner had he reached a safe distance than he proved the truth of the girl's words by resolving that he would never rest till he had got her again in his power and punished her for her treachery and more especially for her ingratitude. This she divined when she consented that he should go free.

The police soon heard of more depredations on the part of the band whom Bianca was to advise to change their occupation, and it was reported that she was still at their head. Morini was laughed at by his companions and was impatient to get revenge on the woman who had not only spurned but ridiculed him. He went himself in disguise to reconnoiter the position occupied by the band, then took a sufficient number of carabinieri to surround their camp. But he failed to surprise them and was obliged to fight in order to get them into his possession.

Morini was with a party of his men who attacked a rude fort the bandits had thrown up across the mouth of a pocket. Failing to pick off his enemies in sufficient numbers, he determined to carry the work by assault. As he stood on it, about to leap down into it, a man put the muzzle of his gun to the lieutenant's breast. But the ball went over his shoulder, for Bianca, who was there, knocked the gun up with her own piece.

That was the end of the matter, every person belonging to the band being captured, with their girl leader, and all being taken to Naples.

"Well, lieutenant," said his commander, "so you have captured that little devil. I presume that now you are satisfied to let justice take its course."

"As to that I am in a worse fix than before."

"Why?"

"Had it not been for the little devil I would not now be here. One of her men fired at me with the muzzle of his gun close against my breast. She knocked his gun up, and the bullet, instead of going into my heart, grazed my ear."

The officer laughed, but secretly he was pleased. He had no stomach for shooting a woman, and this afforded him an excuse. The band were kept for months without any definite action of the government; then they were released on condition that they leave Italy.

As to Bianca, she is now Signora Morini.

But stranger things than that have happened in love.

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