

Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The Avenging Shadow

By ARLTON EADIE

Practising forbidden arts in mediaeval Naples, Taso Vitelli sought to outwit the Prince of Darkness, but "He who sups with the Devil must have a long spoon"

IN SPITE of its imposing title, the *Locanda del Leone d'Oro* was but a mean, single-storied wine-shop half hidden away in one of the reeking alleys within a stone's throw of the *Molo* of Naples, and its landlord, through long years of residence amongst the lawless *lazzaroni* of that waterside district, had developed a wise and prudent indifference as to the character and occupation of the queer customers who patronized his house. Yet even he could not help casting more than one curious glance at the tall, black-browed stranger who for the past two hours had been slowly and thoughtfully sipping his wine in the darkest corner of the dimly illuminated room.

At first sight he had appeared to be one of the mercenary soldiers who at that period roamed the country, selling their services to any leader who was able and willing to give gold for steel; and this impression was heightened by the shirt of pliant chain-mail which covered the upper portion of the stranger's body, no less than by the very serviceable rapier and dagger that hung, within convenient reach, from his belt.

But the landlord's sharp eyes noted that the plume drooping from the wide brim of his slouched hat was too brilliant and many-colored to have been plucked from any bird native to Italy; that the roughly dressed leather of the high boots was still harsh with sea water; while the crimson hue of the wide, voluminous cloak had been bleached to a dingy brown, on its more exposed parts,

by a sunshine ever more vivid than that which beats on the Tyrrhenian shore.

The man might be one of those daring adventurers who had sought to carve their fortunes with their swords from the *El Dorado* of the newly discovered continents beyond the Western Ocean. He might be one of the ruffians who provided the fighting material of the slave-driven galleys of Genoa, then recently enlisted under the white and gold banner of His Most Catholic Majesty of Spain. He might be one of the officers of the swift, heavily-armed corvettes, flying any flag, or no flag at all, which lay in wait for the lumbering, deep-laden treasure-galleons bringing the spoils of the New World to fill the depleted coffers of the Old. He might be—

The landlord's sidelong glance encountered the gaze of two frowning eyes which glowed in the shadow of the stranger's low-drawn hat-brim, and something in the intensity of their fixed regard caused a shiver of superstitious fear to run down the beholder's spine. Under cover of the counter, the landlord closed the two middle fingers of his right hand, extending the remaining ones in the direction of the stranger and at the same time muttering a charm beneath his breath. Dread of the Evil Eye was very real and potent in those latter years of the Fifteenth Century.

A few seconds later the first strokes of midnight began to boom from the campanile of the Convent dell' *Annunziata*, and with a promptitude which suggested

that he had been awaiting the signal, the stranger drained his glass, and rose briskly to his feet.

"Your reckoning, Messer Host," he said in a deep, ringing voice, at the same time tossing a silver coin on the counter.

The landlord spat upon the coin and transferred it to the pocket of his greasy apron.

"*Mille grazie, Eccellenze,*" he muttered, bowing his guest to the door with obvious relief. "*Addio, e buon' viaggio.* May the Blessed Madonna accompany you every step of your journey."

A contemptuous smile twitched the lips of the stranger as he noted that the pious wish was accompanied by the sign to avert the Evil Eye.

"*Addio,*" he answered curtly, and passed out into the night.

A few rapid strides along the alley brought him into the wider Strada di Chiaja, where, passing beneath the lofty rock of Pizzofalcone, he began to mount

the sloping path beyond. As he made his way upward, the huddled roofs of the waterside hovels sank beneath his range of vision, revealing the magnificent sweep of the Bay of Naples, its placid waters spread like a sheet of beaten silver beneath the moonlit sky. Directly before him, the distant Island of Capri appeared like the head of some fabled sea-monster rising from the deep; to his right, its smoke-crowned summit faintly tinged with red, the purple-gray mass of Vesuvius loomed in solitary grandeur.

Late though the hour was, a few signs of life and movement floated up from the streets below—the flash of lanterns and clink of armor as the watch went its prescribed rounds; the tinkle of a mandolin and the sound of a voice trolling forth the inevitable "*Funiculi-Funicula*"; a burst of coarse revelry from a wine-shop; the sweet voices of the nuns as they chanted their midnight orisons in the chapel of the convent near by.



"Stand bo!" he cried, suddenly lowering the point of his weapon.

The latter sound seemed to awaken some dormant memory, for the man instinctively raised his hand to his forehead and began to make the sign of the cross—only to pause abruptly with a snarling curse as he recollected the errand on which he was bent.

"*Diavolo!* The whey-faced fools deem the world well lost for the sake of an empty dream!" he muttered as he turned to resume his way. "But I am wiser than they! Soon the world, with all its pomp, power and riches, will be at my feet!"

As if the thought had invested him with renewed energy, he hastened up the remainder of the slope at a run, and a few minutes later came to a halt before a low door that was deeply recessed in a wall of ancient stone. With a quick glance round to make sure he was unobserved, he thrust forward his sheathed sword and rapped on the panels with its hilt.

He had expected his summons to be answered by a whispered challenge—the grating of bolts—the creak of hinges. Instead, the heavy gate swung open as silently as a dissolving shadow. For a second he hesitated, peering suspiciously into the darkness within in an endeavor to discern the agency responsible for this unspoken invitation to enter. Then he stepped across the threshold, and the door closed behind him as mysteriously as it had opened.

THE house which loomed before him seemed devoid of life; no sound issued from within; no glint of light showed in its many windows. But as he approached, a slender spear of yellow light leapt to meet him. It came from a narrow grated peephole which pierced another door. Inside, illuminated by the flickering beams of a taper, a pair of dark, piercing eyes stared into his from beneath their shaggy gray brows.

"What seek ye, *Signorino?*" came in a hoarse, croaking whisper from the other side of the door.

"That which is forbidden," was the stranger's cryptic reply.

"Of whom do ye seek the thing which is forbidden?"

"Of him whose name must not be spoken."

"And where does he dwell, he whose name must not be spoken?"

"In air and in earth; in water and in fire; and in those unknown elements which boil and seethe beneath the foundations of the earth."

Apparently the whole series of questions and answers formed an elaborate countersign, for the old man immediately unlocked the door and motioned the stranger to enter.

Passing down a dark corridor, he led the way into a long, narrow, yet strangely lofty apartment. A row of slender Gothic arches ran down each side; the corbels which supported the groined roof were sculptured in the forms of angels; the walls were covered with frescoes of a sacred character. The stranger recoiled a pace as he saw the nature of his surroundings.

"A church?" The startled exclamation was accompanied by a quick, hissing intake of his breath.

"Aye, but an unhallowed one!" his guide answered with a reassuring laugh. "Fear not, *Signorino*, the Black Mass has been the only ritual chanted within these walls for many a long year. Time was when this was the private oratory of the noble family to whom this house belonged, but now—behold!"

He kindled a large lamp as he spoke, and by its light the newcomer saw that the carved stonework was chipped and cracked; that the golden halos of the pictured saints were tarnished and blackened; the rich coloring of the figures de-

faced by damp, or quite obliterated in the places where the plaster had peeled from the walls. Rough wooden shelves had been nailed up at a convenient height from the floor, and on these were arranged queer-looking instruments, earthenware jars, glass flasks and retorts. A furnace of blackened brickwork stood on the spot formerly occupied by the altar; before it stood a large table and an oaken press which groaned beneath the weight of the many huge, leather-bound volumes stacked upon it.

Seating himself in a high chair at the head of the table, the old man leisurely settled the folds of his long, fur-trimmed robe, his eyes fixed upon the other's face the while in a prolonged, hawk-like scrutiny.

"You are welcome, Taso Vitelli," he said at last. "As one who comes with the commendation of Ramon Ezaquiel, of Malaga——"

"*Per Bacco!*" The younger man's eyes were filled with an expression deeper than mere astonishment as he rapped out the words. "How know ye my name?—and that of the man who sent me hither? Malaga is in Spain—three hundred leagues, or more, from here. I came direct, yet it would seem as if the news of my coming has outrun me."

A slow and scornful smile showed faintly beneath the old man's beard.

"Think ye that I am but a bungling tyro in the art of necromancy that my only means of gaining knowledge is by written word, or messenger of flesh and blood? Know ye not that I have power to summon at my will aerial couriers more swift than the lightning flash? But marvel not at such a simple thing—ere long thou shalt know that such are but trifles light as wind-blown down, compared with the weighty, world-swaying powers vouchsafed to the masters of our craft. Let it suffice thee, for the present,

to know that such knowledge as ye seek may be thine—at a price!"

An ominous gleam shot from the narrowed eyes of the master magician as he uttered the final words, but Vitelli appeared not to notice it as he eagerly thrust his hand into the bosom of his doublet and drew forth a leathern bag.

"The price is here, Messer Malecalchas!" he cried, opening the bag and pouring a stream of gold pieces on the table. "Will this suffice thee?"

Without answer, the other drew the glittering heap toward him, shuffling the coins with greedy fingers, occasionally taking one up and holding it nearer the lamp the better to observe it. Although all were of gold, the coins varied greatly, not only in size and weight, but also in the devices they bore. There were Dutch guilders, French louis d'or, English nobles, Spanish doubloons—even a few Turkish sequins and a battered disk bearing the half-obliterated chariot of ancient Syracuse.

"Methinks thy gold comes from many different countries, and they are all countries that send deep-laden ships from their ports," Malecalchas observed softly. "A man need not dabble in the Black Art to divine that 'twas on the sea that thy gold was won."

Vitelli's face darkened and he made an impatient movement.

"No matter where 't was won. Is it enough?"

The old man nodded his head slowly, swept the coins into the bag, tied the mouth securely and locked it away in an iron-bound chest.

"It is enough," he said, returning to his chair. "In return for it I agree to make thee proficient in the mystic arts. But"—he paused and stroked his long beard—"I have a—er—a kind of partner in my college, and he, too, must have his fee."

Taso Vitelli shrugged and turned away. "I have no more money."

Malecalchas held up a protesting hand.

"Nor is more needed. The fee demanded by my—er—fellow-instructor—is one that can not be paid in coin."

"How then?"

"Swear that thou wilt not divulge to a living soul what I am about to tell thee. Swear it by——" And he propounded an oath which caused cold beads of sweat to start from his hearer's forehead.

Among Taso Vitelli's late sea-roving companions he had been credited with fearing neither man nor devil; but now his voice was husky and shaking as he repeated the words of that soul-chilling compact.

"It is well," said Malecalchas at the conclusion. "Know then, that on the eve of the Feast of Saint Walpurgis, that is to say, the night between the last day of April and the first of May, all my students assemble in the courtyard of this house. There they compete in a race, starting at a given signal and running completely round the house, the goal being a narrow postern door leading to the vaults beneath this chapel. And then the old proverb becomes literally true, for 'the Devil takes the hindmost' in very sooth!"

The prospective student leapt up from his chair.

"You—mean——?" he faltered.

"That the body and soul of the last man to enter the door becomes forfeit to the Lord of Hell!"

VITELLI stood aghast as the dreadful nature of the bargain rushed upon his mind. Every instinct of his being shouted its horrified warning to shun even the remotest chance of paying such a price. Then his face grew more composed. After all, he was young, muscular, lithe of limb and fleet of foot; in

a fair contest of speed and endurance he would stand as good a chance as any man—a better chance than most.

He turned with a sudden question: "How many of your students will take part in this race?"

"Counting yourself, a round score."

Vitelli's face brightened. Twenty to one!—he had taken more desperate chances than that in his reckless career, and had come through scatheless.

"I agree!" he cried. "Enroll me on your list of students now!"

Malecalchas laid a restraining hand on the other's arm.

"Softly, softly, young *signor*. First the agreement must be ratified in due form by the personage who is the other party to the compact. Follow me."

He began to lead the way toward a narrow flight of steps which led downward into inky darkness, but Vitelli hung back.

"Whither are you taking me?" he demanded.

"Into the presence of your future Lord and Master. Come!"

Half eager, half fearful, Vitelli suffered himself to be led down the winding stairs. Presently he found himself standing in what evidently was the ancient crypt of the chapel. Darkness reigned on every side.

"Here are flint, steel and tinder," said Malecalchas, thrusting the articles into his hand. "Strike fire."

"But the taper upstairs is burning," objected the other. "Will not that——?"

"Question not, but obey!" the old man interrupted harshly. "The fire must be virgin fire, struck by thine own hand from the cold elements of nature, otherwise the spell is of no avail."

Thus enjoined, the neophyte in magic busied himself with the implements, and after one or two attempts a tiny red line of fire began to creep among the tinder.

"Fan it with thy breath; then place it in this brazier," commanded the older man.

Vitelli obeyed, and presently a faint ruddy glow began to pervade the gloom. Taking a piece of white chalk from the pocket of his robe, Malecalchas drew a wide circle on the stone floor, completely enclosing the brazier and the spot on which they stood. At the four cardinal points he described weird cabalistic hieroglyphics, muttering the while words equally unintelligible. Rising to his feet, he again explored the depths of the capacious pockets of his robe, drawing forth four packets, each carefully sealed and bearing on its paper wrapping a number written in ink.

"Thy task will be to cast these into the brazier, one after another, as I shall call the numbers inscribed on them. And I charge thee, as you wish to quit this vault in human shape, to use the packets in their correct order. And on no account allow thy foot to pass beyond the mystic circle I have drawn—nay, not by so much as a hair's breadth! For beyond its protecting boundary there will soon be raging forces so strong and potent that even I have no power to control them. Art thou prepared?"

Taso Vitelli took a long breath before he answered.

"Aye!"

"Then, my fellow-traveler into the realm forbidden to the sons of mortal men, brace up thy courage and make strong thy heart. For anon thou shalt hear the voice that hath echoed through the Courts of Heaven, as well as the deepest depths of Hell; the voice that chanted with the angels of light before the fallen Lucifer raised it in mockery over the torments of the damned. Hast thou the packets set out in their proper order?"

"Aye," Vitelli answered, after assuring himself that it was so.

"Then begin with the packet marked—*one!*"

VITELLI cast the folded paper upon the glowing charcoal in the brazier, and instantly the flames changed to a pale greenish glow. At the same moment Malecalchas drew out a parchment scroll and began to read from it in a loud, sonorous voice.

Years of close association with the scourings of many nations, who had been his late shipmates, had given Taso Vitelli a smattering of many tongues; but Malecalchas' incantation was in a language quite unknown to him. Yet, in spite of their hidden meaning, the sustained roll of the measured periods had a strange wild music of their own. Suddenly Malecalchas paused.

"*Two!*" he commanded sharply, without turning his head.

Vitelli flung in the second packet, and the dying flames within the brazier leapt into renewed life; but now they sent forth a pale blue light which made the face of each man appear like that of a living corpse. Once more the deep-toned voice of the master magician rose in the unholy litany; once more it died away into silence.

"*Three!*"

A deep orange glow suffused the vault as the third package touched the smoldering embers. Vitelli dashed his hand across his forehead to wipe away the great drops which had of a sudden bedewed it. Was it merely the effect of the burning drugs, or was some stifling, heat-laden wind really circling round the vault? Every breath he drew seemed to come direct from a fiery furnace. A dull roaring filled his ears, through which the sound of the incantation came like a voice

heard through the mists of raging delirium.

"Arimanes! . . . Asmodeus! . . . Samael! . . . Sathanus!"

The sorcerer raised his hands above his head as he uttered each dread name, and to Vitelli's reeling senses it seemed as though the flames in the brazier rose and fell in unison, as if fanned by a sudden breath. Beyond the charmed circle in which they stood, the air seemed full of beating wings. Confused sounds—sobs, wails, curses in a thousand different tongues mingled with shouts of demoniacal laughter—assailed his ears. A sultry wind began to stir the hair upon his head, its fiery breath searing deep into the brain beneath.

He fell upon his hands and knees, trembling in every limb, appalled at the coming of the fiend he had invoked. But the voice of Malecalchas, shrill as the scream of some unhallowed night-bird, recalled him to his duties.

"*Four!*"

Taso Vitelli's groping fingers found and closed upon the last package. Almost blindly he cast it into the flames, and saw them change to a dull blood-red; whilst from them issued dense black fumes that in an instant hid everything save that leering red eye. A low rumble of thunder followed, sounding faintly in the distance at first, but rapidly growing louder and nearer, until it burst in deafening crashes and peals about his ears.

Then, out of the sable cloud beyond the circle, a hand emerged and reached toward him.

But *was* it a hand? Vitelli shrank back as he fixed his staring eyeballs on the apparition. Long, slender but muscular; in color as black as soot save only the curved, blood-red claws with which each finger was armed—it was the hand

of the Arch-fiend himself, extended to him to seal his terrible bargain!

Vitelli threw himself prone on the ground and hid his face in his hands. He felt his right hand seized in a vise-like grip—a pain like a red-hot iron pressed to his palm.

Then the din around him ceased abruptly, and when he took courage to open his eyes, it was to see Malecalchas calmly rolling up his scroll while he rubbed out the magic circle with the sole of his shoe. It seemed as if no sign of his diabolical assignation remained except the slender spiral of vapor which still trailed upward from the dying embers in the brazier.

It was not until Taso Vitelli reached the lighted room overhead that he saw on his palm the ineffaceable brand that was the seal of his pact with the Enemy of Mankind.

ONE evening, some ten months later, when the afterglow of the early spring sunset was still lingering in the western sky, a band of students trooped noisily into the Locanda del Leone d'Oro. At their head was the tall figure of Taso Vitelli, and this time the landlord did not eye him askance.

"Bring wine for these my friends—wine in plenty and of the best!" he ordered with a lordly air. "None of your wretched *Chianti* for us!—*Vino d'Asti* or *Lacryma Cristi*—no baser vintage will serve to gladden this night of nights!"

"Anon, anon, *Eccellenze!*"

Mine host disappeared into his cellar with the rapidity of a rabbit diving into its burrow, and returned almost as quickly laden with huge, dusty flagons. Glasses were filled, emptied, and filled again, and as the contents of the flagons fell lower, the noise of revelry rose higher, culminating in a chorus bawled so lustily as to

threaten to bring the crazy rafters tumbling about their heads:

*"Amici, alliegre magnammo e bevimmo
Fin che n' ci stace uoglio e la lucerna:
Chi sa s'a l'autro munno n' ci vedimmo?
Chi sa s'a l'autro munno n' e' e taverna?"*

It was but the common Neapolitan drinking-song, in which the tippler bids his friends eat and drink joyously as long as there is "oil in the lamp"; for who knows if we shall meet again in the next world, or that we shall find a tavern there?

But, in spite of the noisy mirth and wine-whipped excitement, there lay heavy on each heart a haunting dread which the fate-defying words of the song only seemed to accentuate. For it was St. Walpurgis' Eve, and ere many hours the race would be run which would decide which of them was to pay the Devil's debt.

Vitelli's laugh was loudest of any—but it did not extend farther than his lips. His eyes were very watchful as he swept his gaze round the circle of flushed faces, wondering which of them was destined to provide the Devil with his due. Would it be Haller, the heavily built, fleshy Teuton, whose natural scantiness of breath would not be improved by his present potations? Or Rodrigo, the Sicilian? Or Matteo, the gipsy, who had robbed a church to pay his entrance fee? Or Corenzio, who had sprained his knee a few days before?

His gaze remained fixed upon the rather handsome face of the last-named student. Yes, of a surety, Corenzio would be the last man to pass through the fatal door—what chance would a half-lame man stand in a race for such a desperate stake? A feeling of deep satisfaction came over Vitelli at the thought, for the removal of the handsome Corenzio would rid him of his only rival for the favors of the dark eyed Neinissa, the

daughter—and heiress—of the richest banker in Naples. That he himself might prove to be the unlucky loser never for an instant crossed Vitelli's mind.

At eleven o'clock Taso rose to his feet. He had been careful to drink much less than his companions, preferring to keep a clear head and steady feet for the coming race; but he simulated the thickness of speech of a man far gone in liquor as he cried:

"Fill your glasses, comrades! There is time for one last toast before we go to keep our—little appointment."

Corenzio started to his feet with a drunken laugh.

"Let me fill the glasses, Taso—maybe 'tis the last service I'll be able to render to this company."

Secretly elated at the confirmation of his estimation of Corenzio's slender chance in the coming contest, Vitelli nodded indifferently. When each glass was full to the brim, he rose in his turn.

"Let each drink to his own success," he cried as he held the ruby goblet aloft. "And a pleasant damnation to the loser!"

A few minutes later the party were making their way back to the house on the hill, the merriest among them Taso Vitelli. But his laugh would have been less loud and his step less jaunty had he known of the tiny pellet which Corenzio had stealthily dropped into his wine as he had charged his glass for the final toast.

THAT night the coldly glittering stars looked down on a strange scene being enacted in the courtyard of Malecalchas' house. A score of men, stripped to shirt and trunk-hose, stood lined up with their backs against one of the encircling walls, their straining eyes fixed on the lantern held by the aged necromancer.

"The course of the race will be once round the house and through the narrow

door leading to the crypt," Malecalchas was explaining. "I will give the signal to start by blowing out the candle of this lantern. Then you will run in the darkness to the winning—or perhaps I should say the *losing*—post, for it will be from the last man that the penalty will be exacted. The patron of the race being who he is, any trick, any subterfuge, any artifice will be permissible; for the father of all knavery will not forbid his followers to practise his precepts in this momentous contest. It is each man for himself—and the Devil take the hindmost! Are you ready?"

A hoarse chorus of affirmation rose from the tense rank.

"Then watch the candle!"

Twenty pairs of straining eyes were fixed on him as he unfastened the door of the lantern, raising it until the flame of the taper within was but a few inches from his lips. For a full minute he stood motionless, his satyr-like features illuminated by the yellow glow. Each man crouched down for the first forward spring as they saw his lips purse up. Abruptly the light disappeared, and the next moment the darkened courtyard resounded with the noise of madly racing men.

Taso Vitelli, sure of his victory, ran easily at first. He had intentionally taken up his place next to Corenzio, so that he might enjoy to the full the despair of his rival. When the line of men dashed forward, Vitelli allowed the limping man to pass him, then fell in behind him, confident of being able to outstrip him any moment he chose. But it was not from choice that Corenzio ran so slowly; the pain in his sprained knee was getting worse. Unless the drug worked quickly, nothing could save him from being the last to pass the fatal threshold.

By this time they had rounded two of the corners of the house, and half the dis-

tance had been covered. Vitelli put on a little spurt of speed which brought him side by side with his rival; so little had the pace distressed him that he had breath to waste in a mocking laugh.

"How now, friend Corenzio, what ails thee?" he jeered. "Thou art running like a broken-winded mule that wears out its last days staggering round an oil-mill! You used not to be so tardy when hastening to the arms of your beloved Nein-issa!"

A breathless curse broke from the lips of the other man.

"Wait—wait!" he gasped. "I will be lying in her arms when thou art howling in Hell!"

Vitelli's only reply was another laugh. Running abreast, with no sound save the quick patter of their feet and their deep breathing, they rounded the third corner of the house. Then Vitelli began steadily to draw ahead. Once he glanced back as a fragmentary gleam of moonlight through the drifting clouds lit up Corenzio's face, and the look of despair which he saw there told that the man had almost reached the end of his endurance.

"Farewell, Corenzio!" he called back. "In very sooth, thy race is nearly run! Give my respectful salutations to His Satanic Majesty when——"

His voice broke off in a little wondering gasp. What was this deathly lethargy that was stealing over him? A moment since, he had felt fit to run for miles; now his legs felt like lead, while a mist seemed to rise and eddy before his eyes, causing him to stagger like a drunken man. Corenzio saw him falter, and despair gave place to hope. With a painful effort, he increased his own speed until once more they were running level. Neck and neck, they rounded the last corner, Vitelli staggering blindly and only keeping to the track by occasionally stretching out his hand to feel the wall.

Corenzio saw his plight, and a laugh that was little more than a hoarse, gasping croak issued from his lips.

"Ha, Taso!—who is—the—broken-winded mule—now?"

"*Maledizione!*"

Like lightning Vitelli's foot shot out, tripping up the other as he was about to pass him. Both men fell together in a confused, struggling heap. Corenzio threw off Vitelli's weakening grasp and strove to rise. But the other clung desperately to his leg, drew himself up, and, still struggling, the pair staggered toward the door which was the goal of the race.

Gasping, cursing, locked in an embrace which each feared to break lest the other should forestall him, they fought their way onward. The brilliant light from the open door lit up their swaying figures, throwing grotesquely elongated black shadows behind them. Together they reached the door, each striving to enter before the other. The violence of their struggles increased—they knew they fought for something even more precious than life itself.

For a time they remained wedged in the doorway, unable either to advance or retreat. Then with a mighty effort Corenzio dashed the other man's head backward against the stone. With his last remnants of strength he thrust the stunned and helpless form of his rival back, then pitched forward and literally fell through the doorway. To his swimming senses the harsh voice of Malecalchas sounded like the sweetest music as he declared:

"The last in the race is Taso Vitelli—and he must pay the price!"

THE following evening—that of the Feast of St. Walpurgis—a solitary wayfarer was making his way along the coast-road which skirts the southeastern shore of the Bay of Naples. Reaching

the little village of Resina, he turned abruptly to his right and began slowly and painfully to mount the road which wound upward amongst the mounds and hillocks of gray lava. It was Taso Vitelli, on his way to keep his last tryst.

Many were the curious glances cast at his cloaked figure as he passed through the single street of the village, and one or two of the homeward-bound peasants wished him the customary "*buono viaggio.*" But of these he took no heed. He looked neither to the right nor the left, walking for the most part with his eyes bent on the ground; only at rare intervals did he raise them, and then it was to gaze long and fixedly at the distant mass of Vesuvius which loomed ahead.

From a wretched, tumbledown *albergo* at the end of the village there issued, as if in bitter mockery, the chorus of the same drinking-song that he had shouted so defiantly but twenty-four hours before:

"*Chi sa s'a l'autro munno n' ci vedimmo?
Chi sa s'a l'autro munno n' e' e taverna?*"

With a shiver he realized the truth which lay beneath the epicurean sentiment, and he paused, half minded to join the merry company within. But a will other than his own seemed to control his movements. Mechanically he turned his back on the friendly twinkle of the lights and fixed his eyes on the flame-tinted cloud of smoke which crowned the cone of Vesuvius.

Gradually the path grew steeper and more difficult. The firm road gave place to a mere track over masses of loose ashes and blocks of lava which had once poured in a fiery torrent from the crater above. The air began to be tainted with the acrid fumes of sulfur. Thin streams of murky vapor began to sprout from the fissures in the crust of cooled lava on which he trod. The very fabric of the mountain trembled like a giant in the throes of

mortal agony. The heat became greater with every step he took.

But still he struggled upward, now making a detour to avoid some belching pit, now sinking knee-deep in fine black ashes. Panting, sweating in every pore, he gained the summit and threw himself flat on the ground to regain his breath.

When he raised his head and looked about him, he saw that he was standing on the brink of a vast pit, the furthest lip of which was hidden by the rolling clouds of smoke which poured from it. Far below, a lake of white-hot lava heaved and eddied—a restless sea whose billows were tongues of fire, and its spray the deadly fumes of blazing sulfur. Unearthly bellowings, nerve-racking crashes, assailed his ears at intervals, and mingling with them was a bubbling roar like the boiling of a gigantic cauldron.

As he stood, faint and trembling, he became aware of a darker patch amid the whirling smoke. Slowly it took shape before his eyes, advancing toward him the while and forcing him to cringe back step by step to the verge of the fiery pit.

"Hold!" he screamed with a courage born of despair. "The race was not run fairly—I was beaten by a trick. Corenzio drugged my wine—otherwise he himself would have been the last to pass through the door."

A sound of mocking laughter issued from the cloud.

"Were you not warned beforehand that you must meet guile with guile?" said a hollow voice. "What? would you have me—the father of all knavery—discountenance the very tenets I advocate? Then indeed should I be a house divided against myself!"

Vitelli found himself forced back another step. Frenziedly he raised his voice above the roaring of the flames.

"Then, as you love trickery so much, you can not hold me to my bond!" he cried recklessly.

The advancing cloud paused.

"What mean ye?" asked the voice.

"All that the compact gives you is the last thing that passed through the door."

"And thy body, Taso Vitelli, was that last thing," said the voice. "And that I am about to claim for my own!"

"Nay!" Vitelli returned with a triumphant laugh. "*After my body came my shadow!* My shadow is the only thing to which you can lay claim—and that you are welcome to. Take it—and let me go!"

A mighty burst of laughter mingled with the subterranean thunders of the volcano. It seemed as though the Devil were not ill pleased with the artful quibble by which his disciple sought to evade his debt.

"So be it," he announced at length. "We will keep to the strict letter of the bond. From now onward thy shadow belongs to me. But"—the voice dropped to a menacing hiss as it continued—"full well thou knowest that till now no trickster has outwitted the Arch-trickster of all—myself! Thou shalt go forth into the world—a man without a shadow. But for thine own safety take heed that you confine your steps to the shady side of the street; or, better still, stir not out of doors until the sun hath set. For the Holy Inquisition is well served by its spies in Naples, and already they have cast a suspicious eye in your direction. All that, however, must be your affair. For my part thou art free!"

The cloud rolled back and Taso Vitelli staggered away from the crater.

"I thank thee, Sathanus!" he cried. "Farewell!"

"*Arrivederci!*" came the answer, with grim significance.

JOY lent wings to Vitelli's feet as he hurried from the accursed spot. He laughed aloud and sang in his delirious excitement. Had he not gained a new lease of life? Had he not outwitted the Arch-fiend himself?

The sight of the first houses of Resina caused him to moderate his transports, however, and silently as a ghost he stole through the deserted street. The moon peered out through a rift in the veil of clouds as he neared the gates of Naples, but when he glanced behind him, he saw that no familiar black outline showed on the white dust of the road. His shadow was already in the Devil's keeping!

"What of it?" he laughed aloud as he snapped his fingers in the air. "What is a shadow? Nothing—less than nothing! *Corpo di Bacco!* I wish the fiend joy of his bargain!"

Nevertheless, he waited until the moon was hidden before accosting the halberdier who guarded the city gate.

"Buona sera, amico," he said, slipping a coin into the fellow's palm. "Surely you will not refuse entry to a man who has tarried over-long with one of the fair damsels of Resina?"

The sentinel started at the sound of his voice.

"Stand ho!" he cried, suddenly lowering the point of his weapon until it was level with the other's breast. Then he

raised his voice still louder. "Guard ho! Guard! Here is the very man we have been searching for!"

There was a rush of many feet and clashing of hastily caught-up weapons. Armed men emerged from the guard chamber, and an instant later Vitelli found himself surrounded by a ring of steel. Amazement at this unexpected reception gave place to dread as the officer of the watch stepped forward and touched him on the shoulder with his staff of office.

"Taso Vitelli, I arrest thee for breaking into the house of Gian Becchino, the banker, and murdering him!"

Vitelli staggered back with sagging jaw and staring eyes.

"I?" he gasped. "I murder Becchino? Art thou drunk, or moon-struck? Why, I have not set foot within the city walls since nightfall?"

The officer shrugged contemptuously.

"You had better invent a more plausible tale than *that*, when you appear before the judge!" he said grimly. "Know, then, that Neinissa was returning to the house when she heard her father's cries for help. Finding the front door locked, she roused the neighborhood and a crowd gathered. A hundred people are prepared to swear that they saw *your shadow* on the window blind at the very moment Becchino's death shriek rang out!"

