









## THE WATERS OF EDERA

### I

It was a country of wide pastures, of moors covered with heath, of rock-born streams and rivulets, of forest and hill and dale, sparsely inhabited, with the sea to the eastward of it, unseen, and the mountains everywhere visible always, and endlessly changing in aspect.

Herdsmen and shepherds wandered over it, and along its almost disused roads pedlars and pack mules passed at times but rarely. Minerals and marbles were under its turf, but none sought for them; pools and lakes slept in it, undisturbed save by millions of water fowl and their pursuers. The ruins of temples and palaces were overgrown by its wild berries and wild flowers. The buffalo browsed where emperors had feasted, and the bittern winged its slow flight over the fields of forgotten battles.

It was the season when the flocks are brought through this lonely land, coming from the plains to the hills. Many of them passed on their way thus along the course of the Edera water. The shepherds, clothed in goatskin, with the hair worn outward, bearded, brown, hirsute men, looking like savage satyrs, the flocks they drove before them travel-worn, lame, heart-broken, the lambs and kids bleating painfully. They cannot keep up with the pace of the flock, and, when they fall behind, the shepherds slit their throats, roast their bodies over an evening fire, or bake them under its ashes, and eat them; if a town or village be near, the little corpses are sold in it. Often a sheep dog or a puppy drops down in the same way, foot-sore and worn out; then the shepherds do not tarry, but leave the creatures to their fate, to die slowly of thirst and hunger.

The good shepherd is a false phrase. No one is more brutal than a shepherd. If he were not so he could not bear his life for a day.

All that he does is brutal. He stones the flock where it would tarry against his will. He mutilates the males, and drags the females away from their sucking babes. He shears their fleeces every spring, un-

heeding how the raw skin drops blood. He drives the halting, foot-sore, crippled animals on by force over flint and slate and parching dust. Sometimes he makes them travel twenty miles a day.

For his pastime he sets the finest of his beasts to fight. This is the feast day and holiday sport of all the shepherds; and they bet on it, until all they have, which is but little, goes on the heads of the rams; and one will wager his breeches, and another his skin jacket, and another his comely wife, and the ram which is beaten, if he have any life left in him, will be stabbed in the throat by his owner: for he is considered to have disgraced the *branca*.

This Sunday and Saints' day sport was going on a piece of grass land in the district known as the Vale of Edera.

On the turf, cleared of its heaths and ferns, there was a ring of men, three of them shepherds, the rest peasants. In the midst of them were the rams, two chosen beasts pitted against each other like two pugilists. They advanced slowly at first, then more quickly, and yet more quickly, till they met with a crash, their two foreheads, hard as though carved in stone, coming in collision with a terrible force; then each, staggered by the encounter, drew back, dizzy and bruised, to recoil, and take breath, and gather fresh force, and so charge one on the other in successive rounds until the weaker should succumb, and, mangled and senseless, should arise no more.

One of the rams was old, and one was young; some of the shepherds said that the old one was more wary and more experienced, and would have the advantage; in strength and height they were nearly equal, but the old one had been in such duels before and the young one never. The young one thought he had but to rush in, head downward, to conquer; the old one knew that this was not enough to secure victory. The young one was blind with ardour and impatience for the fray; the old one was cool and shrewd and could parry and wait.

After three rounds, the two combatants met in a final shock; the elder ram butted furiously, the younger staggered and failed to return the blow, his frontal bone was split, and he fell to the ground; the elder struck him once, twice, thrice, amidst the uproarious applause of his backers; a stream of blood poured from his skull,

which was pounded to splinters; a terrible convulsion shook his body and his limbs; he stretched his tongue out as if he tried to lap water; the men who had their money on him cursed him with every curse they knew; they did not cut his throat, for they knew he was as good as dead.

"This is a vile thing you have done," said a little beggar girl who had been passing, and had been arrested by the horrible fascination of the combat, and forced against her will to stand and watch its issue. The shepherds jeered; those who had backed the victor were sponging his wounds beside a runlet of water which was close at hand; those who had lost were flinging stones on the vanquished. The girl knelt down by the dying ram to save him from the shower of stones; she lifted his head gently upward, and tried to pour water through his jaws from a little wooden cup which she had on her, and which she had filled at the river. But he could not swallow; his beautiful opaline eyes were covered with film, he gasped painfully, a foam of blood on his lips and a stream of blood coursing down his face; a quiver passed over him again; then his head rested lifeless on his knees. She touched his shattered horns, his clotted wool, tenderly.

"Why did you set him to fight?" she said with an indignation which choked her voice. "It was vile. He was younger than the other, and knew less."

Those who had won laughed. Those who had lost cursed him again; he had disgraced his *branca*. They would flay him, and put him in the cauldron over the wood fire, and would curse him even whilst they picked his bones for a white-livered spawn of cowards; a son of a thrice-damned ewe.

The girl knew that was what they do. She laid his battered head gently down upon the turf, and poured the water out of her cup; her eyes were blind with tears; she could not give him back his young life, his zest in his pastoral pleasures, his joy in cropping the herbage, his rude loves, his merry gambols, his sound sleep, his odorous breath.

He had died to amuse and excite the ugly passions of men, as, if he had lived longer, he would, in the end, have died to satisfy their ugly appetites.

She looked at his corpse with compassion, the tears standing in her eyes; then she turned away, and as she went saw that her poor ragged clothes were splashed here and there with blood, and that her arms and hands were red with blood: she had not thought of that before; she had thought only of him. The shepherds did not notice her; they were quarrelling violently in dispute over what had been lost and won, thrusting their fingers in each other's faces, and defiling the fair calm of the day with filthy oaths.

The girl shrank away into the heather with the silent swiftness of a hare; now that she had lost the stimulus of indignant pity she was afraid of these brutes; if the whim entered into them they would be as brutal to her as to their flock.

Out of fear of them she did not descend at once to the river, but pushed her way through the sweet-smelling, bee-haunted, cross-leaved heaths; she could hear the sound of the water on her right all the time as she went. She knew little of this country, but she had seen the Edera, and had crossed it farther up its course on one of its rough tree-bridges.

When, as well as she could judge, she had got half a mile away from the scene of the rams' combat, she changed her course and went to the right, directed by the murmur of the river. It was slow walking through the heath and gorse which grew above her head, and were closely woven together, but in time she reached shelving ground, and heard the song of the river louder on her ear. The heath ceased to grow within a few yards of the stream and was replaced by various water plants and acacia thickets; she slid down the banks between the stems and alighted on her bare feet where the sand was soft and the water-dock grew thick. She looked up and down the water; there was no one in sight, nothing but the banks rosehued with the bloom of the heather, and, beyond the opposite shore, in the distance, the tender amethystine hues of the mountains. The water was generally low, leaving the stretches of sand and of shingle visible, but it was still deep in many parts.

She stripped herself and went down into it, and washed the blood which had by this time caked upon her flesh. It seemed a pity, she thought, to sully with that dusky stain this pure, bright, shining

stream; but she had no other way to rid herself of it, and she had in all the world no other clothes than these poor woollen rags.

Her heart was still sore for the fate of the conquered ram; and her eyes filled again with tears as she washed his blood off her in the gay running current. But the water was soothing and fresh, the sun shone on its bright surface; the comfrey and fig-wart blew in the breeze, the heather smell filled the atmosphere.

She was only a child, and her spirits rose, and she capered about in the shallows, and flung the water over her head, and danced to her own reflection in it, and forgot her sorrow. Then she washed her petticoats as well as she could, having nothing but water alone, and all the while she was as naked as a Naiad, and the sun smiled on her brown, thin, childish body as it smiled on a stem of plaintain or on the plumage of a coot.

Then when she had washed her skirt she spread it out on the sand to dry, and sat down beside it, for the heat to bake her limbs after her long bath. There was no one, and there was nothing, in sight; if any came near she could hide under the great dock leaves until such should have passed. It was high noon, and the skirt of wool and the skirt of hemp grew hot and steamed under the vertical rays; she was soon as dry as the shingles from which the water had receded for months. She sat with her hands clasped round her up-drawn knees, and her head grew heavy with the want of slumber, but she would not sleep, though it was the hour of sleep. Some one might pass by and steal her clothes, she thought, and how or when would she ever get others?

When the skirt was quite dried, the blood stains still showed on it; they were no longer red, but looked like the marks from the sand. She tied it on round her waist and her shirt over it, and wound an old crimson sash round both. Then she took up her little bundle in which were the wooden cup and a broken comb, and some pieces of hempen cloth and a small loaf of maize bread, and went on along the water, wading and hopping in it, as the water-wagtails did, jumping from stone to stone, and sometimes sinking up to her knees in a hole.

She had no idea where she would rest at night, or where she would get anything to eat; but that reflection scarcely weighed on

her; she slept well enough under stacks or in outhouses, and she was used to hunger. So long as no one meddled with her she was content. The weather was fine and the country was quiet. Only she was sorry for the dead ram. By this time they would have hung him up by his heels to a tree, and have pulled the skin off his body.

She was sorry; but she jumped along merrily in the water, as a kingfisher does, and scarcely even wondered where its course would lead her.

At a bend in it she came to a spot where a young man was seated amongst the bulrushes, watching his fishing net.

"Aie!" she cried with a shrill cry of alarm, like a bird who sees a fowler. She stopped short in her progress; the water at that moment was up to her knees. With both hands she held up her petticoat to save it from another wetting; her little bundle was balanced on her head, the light shone in her great brown eyes. The youth turned and saw her.

She was a very young girl, thirteen at most; her small flat breasts were those of a child, her narrow shoulders and her narrow loin spoke of scanty food and privation of all kinds, and her arms and legs were brown from the play of the sun on their nakedness; they were little else than skin and bone, nerves and sinew, and looked like stakes of wood. All the veins and muscles stood revealed as in anatomy, and her face, which would have been a child's face, a nymph's face, with level brows, a pure straight profile, and small close ears like shells, was so fleshless and sunburnt that she looked almost like a mummy. Her eyes had in them the surprise and sadness of those of a weaning calf; and her hair, too abundant for such a small head, would, had it not been so dusty and entangled, have been of a read golden bronze, the hue of a chestnut which has just burst open its green husk.

"Who are you?" said the young man, looking at her in surprise.

"I am Nerina," answered the child.

"Where do you come from? What is your country?"

She pointed vaguely to the south-west mountains, where the snow on the upper ranges was still lying with bands of cloud resting on it.

"From the Abruzzo?"

She was silent. She did not know the mountains of her birthplace by their names.

"Who was your father?" he asked, with some impatience.

"He was Black Fausto."

"What did he do for a living?"

"He went down with the fair season to the Roman plain."

He understood: the man had no doubt been a labourer, one of those who descend in bands from the villages of the Abruzzo heights to plough, and mow, and sow, and reap, on the lands of the Castelli Romani; men who work in droves, and are fed and stalled in droves, as cattle are, who work all through the longest and hottest days in summer, and in the worst storms of winter; men who are black by the sun, are half naked, are lean and hairy and drip with continual sweat, but who take faithfully back the small wage they receive to where their women and children dwell in their mountain-villages.

"He went, you say? Is he ill? Does he work no longer?"

"He died last year."

"Of what?"

She gave a hopeless gesture. "Who knows? He came back with a wolf in his belly, he said, always gnawing and griping, and he drank water all day and all night, and his face burned, and his legs were cold, and all of a sudden his jaw fell, and he spoke no more to us. There are many of them who die like that after a hot season down in the plains."

He understood; hunger and heat, foul air in their sleeping places, infusoria in the ditch and rain water, and excessive toil in the extremes of heat and cold, make gaps in the ranks of these hired bands every year as if a cannon had been fired into them.

"Who takes care of you now?" he asked with pity, as for a homeless bitch.

"Nobody. There is nobody. They are all gone down into the earth."

"But how do you live?"

"I work when I can. I beg when I cannot. People let me sleep in the stalls, or the barns, and give me bread."

"That is a bad life for a girl."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I did not make it."

"And where are you going?"

She opened her arms wide and swept the air with them.

"Anywhere. Along the water, until I find something to do."

"I cannot do much," she added, after a pause. "I am little, and no one has taught me. But I can cut grass and card wool."

"The grass season is short, and the wool season is far off. Why did you not stay in your village?"

She was mute. She did not know why she had left it, she had come away down the mountainside on a wandering instinct, with a vague idea of finding something better the farther she went: her father had always come back with silver pieces in his pocket after his stay down there in those lands which she had never seen, lying as they did down far below under the golden haze of what seemed an immeasurable distance.

"Are you not hungry?" said the fisher.

"I am always hungry," she said, with some astonishment at so simple a question. "I have been hungry ever since I can remember. We all were up there. Sometimes even the grass was too dried up to eat. Father used to bring home with him a sack of maize; it was better so long as that lasted."

"Are you hungry now?"

"Of course."

"Come to my house with me. We will feed you. Come. Have no fear. I am Adone Alba, of the Terra Vergine, and my mother is a kind woman. She will not grudge you a meal."

The child laughed all over her thin, brown face.

"That will be good," she said, and leapt up out of the water.

"Poor soul! Poor soul!" thought the young man, with a profound sense of pity.

As the child sprang up out of the river, shaking the water off her as a little terrier does, he saw that she must have been in great want of food for a long time; her bones were almost through her skin. He set his fishing pole more firmly in the ground, and left the net sunk some half a yard below the surface; then he said to the little girl:

"Come, come and break your fast. It has lasted long, I fear."

Nerina only understood that she was to be fed; that was enough for her. She trotted like a stray cur, beckoned by a benevolent hand, behind him as he went, first through some heather and broom, then over some grass, where huge olive trees grew, and then through corn and vine lands, to an old farmhouse, made of timber and stone; large, long, solid; built to resist robbers in days when robbers came in armed gangs. There was a wild garden in front of it, full of cabbage roses, lavender, myrtle, stocks and wallflowers. Over the arched door a four-season rose-tree clambered.

The house, ancient and spacious, with its high-pitched roof of ruddy tiles, impressed Nerina with a sense of awe, almost of terror. She remained hesitating on the garden path, where white and red stocks were blossoming.

"Mother," said Adone, "here is a hungry child. Give her, in your kindness, some broth and bread."

Clelia Alba came out into the entrance, and saw the little girl with some displeasure. She was kind and charitable, but she did not love beggars and vagabonds, and this half-naked female tatterdemalion offended her sense of decency and probity, and her pride of sex. She was herself a stately and handsome woman.

"The child is famished," said Adone, seeing his mother's displeasure.

"She shall eat then, but let her eat outside," said Clelia Alba, and went back into the kitchen.

Nerina waited by the threshold, timid and mute and humble, like a lost dog; her eyes alone expressed overwhelming emotions: fear and hope and one ungovernable appetite, hunger.

Clelia Alba came out in a few minutes with a bowl of hot broth made of herbs, and a large piece of maize-flour bread.

"Take them," she said to her son.

Adone took them from her, and gave them to the child.

"Sit and eat here," he said, pointing to a stone settle by the wall under the rose of four seasons.

The hands of Nerina trembled with excitement, her eyes looked on fire, her lips shook, her breath came feverishly and fast. The smell of the soup made her feel beside herself. She said nothing, but seized the food and began to drink the good herb-broth with thirsty eagerness though the steam of it scorched her.

Adone, with an instinct of compassion and delicacy, left her unwatched and went within.

"Where did you find that scarecrow?" asked his mother.

"Down by the river. She has nobody and nothing. She comes from the mountains."

"There are poor folks enough in Ruscino without adding to them from without," said Clelia Alba impatiently. "Mind she does not rob the fowl-house before she slips sway."

"She has honest eyes," said Adone. "I am sure she will do us no harm."

When he thought that she had been given time enough to finish her food he went out; the child was stretched at full length on the stone seat, and was already sound asleep, lying on her back; the empty bowl was on the ground, of the bread there was no longer a crumb; she was sleeping peacefully, profoundly, her thin hands crossed on her naked brown bosom, on which some rose leaves had fallen from the rose on the wall above.

He looked at her in silence for a little while, then returned to his mother.

"She is tired. She sleeps. Let her rest."

"It is unsafe."

"How unsafe, mother? She is only a child."

"She may have men behind her."

"It is not likely."

Adone could not say (for he had no idea himself) why he felt sure that this miserable little waif would not abuse hospitality: "She is a child," he answered rather stupidly, for children are often treacherous and wicked, and he knew nothing of this one except what she had chosen to tell of herself.

"She may have men behind her," repeated his mother.

"Such men as you are thinking of, mother, do not come to this valley nowadays. Ulisse Ferrero was the last of them. Indeed, I think this poor little creature is all alone in the world. Go and look at her. You will see how forlorn and small she is."

She went to the doorway and looked at the sleeping beggar; her eyes softened as she gazed, the whole attitude and appearance of the child were so miserable and so innocent, so helpless, and yet so tranquil, that her maternal heart was touched; the waif slept on the stone bench beside the door of strangers as though she were in some safe and happy home.

Clelia Alba looked down on her a few moments, then took the kerchief off her hair, and laid it gently, without awakening the sleeper, over the breast and the face of the child, on which flies were settling and the sun was shining.

Then she picked up the empty earthenware bowl, and went indoors again.

"I will go back to the river," said Adone. "I have left the net there."

His mother nodded assent.

"You will not send this little foreigner away till I return?" he asked. Every one was a foreigner who had not been born in the vale of Edera.

"No; not till you return."

He went away through the sunshine and shadow of the olive-trees. He knew that his mother never broke her word. But she thought as she washed the bowl: "A little stray mongrel bitch like that may bite badly some day. She must go. She is nothing now; but by and by she may bite."

Clelia Alba knew human nature, though she had never been out of sight of the river Edera. She took her spinning-wheel and sat down by the door. There was nothing urgent to do, and she could from the threshold keep a watch on the little vagabond, and would be aware if she awoke. All around was quiet. She could see up and down the valley, beyond the thin, silvery foliage of the great olive-trees, and across it to where the ruins of a great fortress towered in their tragic helplessness. The sun shone upon her fields of young wheat, her slopes of pasture. The cherry-trees and the pear-trees were in bloom, her trellised vines running from tree to tree. Ragged-robin, yellow crowsfoot, purple orchis, filled the grass, intermixed with the blue of borage and the white and gold of the oxeye. She did not note these things. Those fancies were for her son. Herself, she would have preferred that there should be no flower in the grasses, for before the cow was fed the flowers had to be picked out of the cut grass, and had served no good end that she could perceive, for she knew of no bees except the wild ones, whose honey no one ever tasted, hidden from sight in hollow trees as it was.

Nerina slept on in peace and without dreams. Now and then another rose let fall some petals on her, or a bee buzzed above her, but her repose remained undisturbed.

The good food filled her, even in her sleep, with deep contentment, and the brain, well nourished by the blood, was still.

Clelia Alba felt her heart soften despite herself for this lonely creature; though she was always suspicious of her, for she had never known any good thing come down from the high mountains, but only theft and arson and murder, and men banded together to sol-

ace their poverty with crime. In her youth the great brigands of the Upper Abruzzo had been names of terror in Ruscino, and in the hamlets lying along the course of the Edera, and many a time a letter written in blood had been fastened with a dagger to the door of church or cottage, intimating the will of the unseen chief to the subjugated population. Of late years less had been heard and seen of such men; but they or their like were still heard and felt sometimes, up above in lonely forests, or down where the moorland and macchia met, and the water of Edera ran deep and lonely. In her girlhood, a father, a son, and a grandson had been all killed on a lonely part of the higher valley because they had dared to occupy a farm and a water-mill after one of these hillmen had laid down the law that no one was to live on the land or to set the waterwheel moving.

That had been a good way off, indeed, and for many a year the Edera had not seen the masked men, with their belts, crammed with arms and gold, round their loins; but still, one never knew, she thought; unbidden guests were oftener devils than angels.

And it seemed to her that the child could not really be asleep all this time in a strange place and the open air. At last she got up, went again to the bench and drew her handkerchief aside, and looked down on the sleeper; on the thin, narrow chest, the small, bony hands, the tiny virginal nipples like wood strawberries.

She saw that the slumber was real, the girl very young and more than half-starved. "Let her forget while she can," she thought, and covered her face again. "It is still early in the day."

The bees hummed on; a low wind swept over a full-blown rose and shook its loose leaves to the ground. The shadow from the ruined tower began to touch the field which lay nearest the river, a sign that it was two hours after noon.



## II

The large square fresh-water fishing-net had sunk under the surface, the canes which framed it were out of sight; only the great central pole, which sustained the whole, and was planted in the ground of the river-bank, remained visible as it bent and swayed but did not yield or break. Such nets as this had been washed by the clear green waters of the pools and torrents of the Edera ever since the days of Etruscan gods and Latin augurs; religions had changed, but the river, and the ways of the men of the river, had not altered.

Adone did not touch it, for it was well where it was; he seated himself on the bank ready to seize and hold it if its pole showed any sign of yielding and giving way and heeling over into the stream. He sat thus amongst the bulrushes for many an hour, on many a spring day and summer night. Although fish were not numerous he never tired of his vigil, lulled by the sound of the current as it splashed among the stones and rippled through the rushes; a deeper music coming from its higher reaches, where it fell over a ledge of rock and leapt like a live thing into the air. And, indeed, what thing could be more living than this fresh, pure, untroubled water, glad as a child, swift as a swallow, singing for sport, as a happy boy sings, as it ran down on its way from the hills?

To the young man sitting now on its bank amidst the bulrushes it was as living as himself, his playmate, friend, and master, all in one. First of all things which he could remember were the brightness and the coolness of it as it had laved his limbs in his childhood on mid-summer noons, his mother's hands holding him safely as he waded with rosy feet and uncertain steps along its pebbly bottom! How many mornings, when he had grown to boyhood and to manhood, had he escaped from the rays of the vertical sun into its acacia-shadowed pools; how many moonlit, balmy nights had he bathed in its still reaches, the liquid silver of its surface breaking up like molten metal as he dived! How many hours of peace had he passed, as he was spending this, waiting for the fish to float into his great net, whilst the air and the water were alike so still that he could hear the little voles stealing in and out amongst the reeds, and the water-thrush pushing the pebbles on its sands in search for insects, though

beast and bird were both unseen by him! How many a time upon the dawn of a holy-day had he washed and swam in its waters whilst the bells of the old church in the village above had tolled in the softness of dusk!

He thought of none of these memories distinctly, for he was young and contented, and those who are satisfied with their lot live in their present; but they all drifted vaguely through his mind as he sat by the side of the river, as the memories of friends dear from infancy drift through our waking dreams.

He was in every way a son of the Edera, for he had been born almost in the water itself; his mother had been washing linen with other women at the ford when she had been taken with the pains of labour two months before her time. Her companions had had no time or thought to do more than to stretch her on the wet sand, with some hempen sheets, which had not yet been thrown in the water, between her and the ground; and the cries of her in her travail had echoed over the stream and had startled the kingfishers in the osiers, and the wild ducks in the marshes, and the tawny owls asleep in the belfry tower of the village. But her pains had been brief though sharp, and her son had first seen the light beside the water; a strong and healthy child, none the worse for his too early advent, and the rough river-women had dipped him in the shallows, where their linen and their wooden beaters were, and had wrapped him up in a soiled woollen shirt, and had laid him down with his face on his mother's young breast, opening his shut unconscious mouth with their rough fingers, and crying in his deaf ear, "Suck! and grow to be a man!"

Clelia Alba was now a woman of forty-one years old, and he, her only son, was twenty-four; they had named him Adone; the beautiful Greek Adonais having passed into the number of the saints of the Latin Church, by a transition so frequent in hagiology that its strangeness is not remembered save by a scholar here and there. When he had been born she had been a young creature of seventeen, with the wild grace of a forest doe; with that nobility of beauty, that purity of outline, and that harmony of structure, which still exist in those Italians in whom the pure Italiote blood is undefiled by Jew or Gentile. Now her abundant hair was white, and her fea-