

Gismondi's Wage

by Rafael Sabatini, 1875-1950

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Benvenuto Gismondi, thief and scoundrel, sat his horse, breathing hard and grinning. Supine and cruciform, with arms flung wide, lay Messer Crespi in the snow, grinning, too, but breathing not at all. Midway between Forli and Rimini, on the long road that, coming from beyond Bologna, runs southeastward to the sea in a line of rare directness, had this murder been committed in the full glare of a brilliant January noontide. And no witness was in sight as far as eye could reach, onward toward the hazy spires of distant Rimini, or backward in the direction of Forli.

So, well content, Ser Benvenuto, grinning under the shadow of his morion, got him down from his horse to reap the profit of his morning's work. What though in falling the dying man had cursed him? It is true that Benvenuto's superstitious soul had quaked under the awful malediction from those writhing lips, but only for an instant. He was as nimble with spiritual as with lethal tools, and to avert his victim's curse he had crossed himself devoutly, and devoutly breathed a prayer to

our Lady of Loreto, whose ardent votary he had ever been. Moreover, he wore armor against such supernal missiles as the moribund had hurled at him: the scapulary of the Confraternity of Saint Anne hung upon his breast and back, beneath his shirt, to turn the edge of any curse, however keenly barbed.

Easy therefore in mind and conscience he got him down into the snow, all trampled and slushy where their horses had circled in the fight, and having tethered his own beast he fetched Messer Crespi's a cruel cut across the hams that sent it off at the gallop in the direction of Forli. Next he applied himself to the garnering of the spoil. The dead gallant was richly arrayed; it was this very richness of his raiment that had caught in passing the eye of Ser Benvenuto and lured him by its promise. But the raiment that had erstwhile tempted, mocked him now; for his prize, it seemed, was gilt, not solid gold. He rose from an unfruitful search cursing the poverty of the dead man's pockets, cursing himself for the risk he had run in so poor a cause, and weighing in his palm a trumpery jewel he had plucked from Crespi's cap and a silken purse containing but some five gold pieces. Then in a frenzy, half disappointed rage, half greed, he returned to his investigations; carefully, piece by piece, he examined his victim's garments, nor paused until he reached his skin, but all in vain. Then he bethought him of the dead man's boots. He dragged them off and, handsome though they were, tore them soles from uppers, in the ardor of his search. He had all but flung them from him in despair when a certain stiffness in the leg of one arrested him.

There came a gleam into his foxy, close-set eyes; thoughtfully he rubbed his lean long nose and leered. His perseverance had been, it seemed, rewarded. To rip the outer leather from its lining was an instant's work. He withdrew a package composed of several sheets of paper. With disappointment rising anew, he spread one of these. Swiftly his eye played over it. It was a letter couched in Latin, and from that letter it was that he learned his victim's name. But more he learned, for Ser Benvenuto had been reared for the Church by a doting mother, and had not yet forgotten the knowledge he had gained of the Latin tongue; he learned sufficient to make his eyes to gleam anew. He had chanced upon something that might be worth a hundred times its weight in gold. But not here, not on the open road and in the glare of light from the sun-drenched snow, would he investigate his prize. He stuffed the papers into the bosom of his doublet, and climbed back into his saddle.

His spurs dripping blood he rode his cruelly-punished horse some three hours later into the town of Rimini, and drew rein at the Osteria del Sole. He had a way of command with him, had Messer Gismondi, despite his sinister face, half wolf, half fox, and though a courtier might have mistaken him for a lackey, a lackey would certainly have mistaken him for a courtier. The host of the Sole received him with all deference, and since the common room was thronged with Borgian soldiery, for the Duke of Valentinois was in the town, he set a room apart for Messer Gismondi's convenience. There for an hour the rascal pored over those documents, mastering the details of a plot aimed at the very life of the Lord Cesare Borgia himself—details that the Lord Cesare should pay for handsomely.

He would not stay to sup, but rising presently he took up his cloak and there and then directed his steps to the Palazzo, where his highness lay. After much questioning—for Duke Cesare had grown cautious since the plot of Sinigaglia

some weeks ago—he was at last admitted to the Borgia's presence, to tell of the discovery upon which he had chanced.

The duke, a slender, shapely man, finely featured, auburn haired and with beautiful restless eyes whose glance smote fear into the rascally soul of Messer Gismondi, listened gravely to his tale and scanned the papers which the masnadiero set before him. But surely his nature had been misrepresented to Gismondi, for he betrayed none of the ferocious satisfaction that the latter had looked see in him. Instead he posed Gismondi a question that almost turned the villain sick with sudden apprehension, so cold, so deadly cold, was Duke Cesare's voice.

"How came you by these papers?"

Gismondi paled; he stammered; he was unprepared for this. He could scarce conceive that he had heard aright. He had brought the duke proof and details of a plot against his life—a plot involving some of the best blood in Italy, a plot so far-reaching that scarce a subjected state of any consequence but was sending its envoy to the assassins' gathering that was to take place that very night in Rimini. Yet the duke could pause coldly to ask him how he came by those papers, as though so small a thing could matter where so great an one was at issue.

Observing his confusion, Cesare smiled, and his smile was the deadliest that Gismondi had ever seen. It turned the scoundrel's soul to water; it froze the marrow in his spine. He felt his skin roughening like a dog's; he sought in vain to dissemble the terror glaring from his eyes; but the duke's smile grew and grew till it ended in a laugh, short and terrible as a note of doom.

"I see," he said, and pushed the papers back across the table to Gismondi. "What is your name?" And under the play of those awful, beautiful eyes Gismondi answered truth, feeling that he dared not lie, that to lie was idle.

Cesare nodded shortly. "Take you these papers of which in the way of your scoundrel's trade you have become possessed. Memorize their contents. Then go at midnight—as the letter appoints—to the Palazzo Mattoli. Play the part of Messer Crespi, and bring me news tomorrow of what these conspirators intend and who their associates are elsewhere."

Gismondi fell back a pace, his cheeks blanching. "My lord," he cried, "my lord, I dare not."

Cesare shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, as you please," said he most sweetly, and raising his voice, "Lorenzo!" he called.

The captain in steel who had stood by the door all ears came sharply to attention. The duke made a sign.

"Wait, magnificent!" cried the masnadiero, startled by this fresh terror. "If I do this thing—" he began and stopped, appalled by the very contemplation of it.

"If you do this thing," said Cesare, answering the uncompleted question, "we will not inquire into the death of Messer Crespi. Our forgetfulness shall be your wage. Fail me or refuse the task and the hoist shall extract confession from you, and the hangman make an end of you. The choice is yours," he ended, his tone most amiable.

Gismondi stared and stared to that beautiful young face, so mockingly impassive. His terror gave way to a dull rage, and but for the presence of that

captain in steel he might not have curbed his impulse to attempt upon the duke to anticipate the work of Messer Crespi's friends. He cursed his folly in setting trust in the gratitude of princes; he mocked his own credulity in thinking that his tale would be received with joy and purchased at more gold than he could carry. In the end he staggered out of the Palazzo pledged to betake himself at midnight to the house of Mattoli at the imminent risk of his life, and assured that he would be watched and that did he fail to perform the task he had undertaken the risk to his life would be more imminent still.

He spent the interval closeted in that room of his at the Osteria del Sole, poring over the papers that had been his ruin, and learning by heart—as Duke Cesare had urged him—the matters they contained that he might be well instructed in his fearful rôle.

Midnight found him at a wicket that opened into the garden of the Palazzo Mattoli. He was muffled in a black cloak, a black vizor on his face; for his papers told him—and he gathered some comfort from the knowledge—that the conspirators were to present themselves in masks. The Palazzo Mattoli, be it known, was at the time untenanted, and had therefore been chosen for this secret meeting. Gismondi boldly thrust the gate open, and went in.

A tall figure, black in the faint luminosity the night gathered from the snow, confronted him. "Good evening, friend," the stranger greeted him, and Gismondi was conscious of a thrill of fear. Nevertheless he answered bravely with the countersign in which he had schooled himself.

"It would be a better evening were it warmer."

"Warmer for whom?" the other catechized him. Yet, following his instructions, Gismondi answered not until the question was repeated: "Warmer for whom? A corpse might find it warm enough."

"A corpse shall find it so ere the winter's done," Gismondi answered, at which the guardian of that place stood aside, and bade him go forward to the house. Already others were advancing from the gate; but Gismondi stayed not to look at them. He pushed on as he had been bidden. He bent his steps to the small doorway that had been indicated in Crespi's papers. He pushed the door, and it fell open. He entered, closed it after him, and groped his way forward through Stygian darkness till, of a sudden, strong hands gripped him and brought him to a halt. Despite himself he was afraid; yet, mastering his growing terror, he answered in a steady voice the questions that were set him, and so won through.

He was led forward, a guiding hand upon his wrist, round a corner and on until at last they came to a halt. There was a creak, and suddenly he was blinking in the blaze of light that smote him through the open door of a vast apartment. His companion thrust him swiftly across the threshold, and he heard the door closed softly again behind him. The sound chilled him, suggesting to his fevered mind the closing of a trap. He heartened himself with the reflection that he had learned his lesson well; he persuaded himself that he had naught to fear, and he went forward into a handsome and lofty chamber, that had been the late Count Mattoli's library. The room was tenanted by seven other plotters masked and muffled as was he, and they sat apart and silent like so many beccamorti. He found himself a chair, sat down and waited, glad enough that the secrecy of these proceedings precluded

intercommunion. And presently others came, as he had come, and like himself each held himself aloof from his fellow plotters.

At last the door was opened to admit one who differed from the rest in that his cloak was red, and red the vizor on his face. He was followed by two figures in black, who had the air of being in attendance, and at his entrance the entire company, now numbering fifteen, rose to its feet as by one accord. Had Gismondi known more of this affair in which an odd irony had forced him to play his part, he might have wondered why this man—who was obviously the head and leader of the congiura—should come masked at all; for while the identity of the plotters was secret from one to another, yet their leader was known, at least by name, to each and all, as all were known, by name at least, to him. But the first words the red mask spoke when, having taken his seat at the head of long table around which all gathered, he had waved the company to their chairs, were in elucidation of this very circumstance.

“You may wonder, my friends,” said he, and his voice was rich and musical, “why, since my name is known to all of you, I should come masked among you.” He paused a moment, and Gismondi wondered half contemptuously what might be the meaning of this mummery. When the president’s next words made clear that meaning Gismondi was nigh to fainting from affright, and he breathed a prayer of thanks to the Virgin of Loreto that he had a mask upon his face to conceal its deathly pallor.

“I have taken this measure of precaution,” the red mask had added, “because among us here there is a traitor, a spy.”

There was a rustle as of a wind through trees, as the muffled company stirred at that fell announcement. Men turned about and scanned one another with eyes that flashed fiercely through their eye-holes, as though their glances would have burned their way through the silk that screened their neighbors’ countenances. It seemed to Gismondi in that moment of panic that the entire company stared at him; then he knew it for a trick of his imaginings, and betide what might he set himself to do as others did and to glare fiercely in his turn at this and that one. Some three or four were upon their feet.

“His name!” they cried. “His name, magnificent!”

But the magnificent shook his head and motioned them to resume their seats. “I know it not,” said he, “nor in whose place he is here.” Whereat Gismondi breathed again more freely. “All that I know is this: a body was brought into Rimini this evening after sunset; it was that of a man who had been found murdered some three leagues from here on the Bologna road His clothes were—disordered, his points untrussed, his pockets empty, from which it was surmised that he had fallen at the hands of some common bandit. But it seemed to me the work had been over-arduous for a thief, and when I came to investigate more closely I found that his boots had been torn to shreds in a frenzied search for something.” The president paused a moment, then continued. “That was enough to waken my suspicions. I contrived to have the handling of one of his boots, one in which the lining had been divided at the top from the outer leather. I thrust my hand into that secret pocket that the thief had opened, and at the bottom I found a scrap of paper, no more than a corner that had been torn from one of the documents I now know that it contained. Upon that shred of paper I found but two words written,

two words of no account whatever—save that the character of the writing was my own.”

He paused again, and in a deathly silence the company waited for him to proceed.

“I knew for certain, then, that the murdered man was one of our comrades in the affair on which we are met tonight. Had I made the discovery earlier, had I known where each of you was lodged, I had found means to warn you not to come here tonight. As it is I can only hope that we are not yet betrayed. But this I know: that the man who came possessed of the secret of our plot sits here among us now.”

Again there was that rustling stir, and several voices spoke, harsh and hot with threats of what should be the fate of this rash spy. Gismondi gnawed his lip in silence, waiting and wondering, the strength all oozing from him.

“Eighteen of us were to have foregathered here tonight,” said the red mask impressively. “One of us lies dead, yet eighteen are here. You see, my friends,” said he, a sardonic note vibrating in his voice, “that there is one too many. That one,” he concluded, and from sardonic his voice turned grim, “we must weed out.”

He rose as he spoke, a splendid figure, tall and stately. “I will ask you one by one to confer with me apart a moment,” he announced. “Each of you will come when summoned. I shall call you not by name, but by the city from which you hail.”

He left the table, and moved down into the shadows at the far end of the long chamber, and with him went the two who had attended him on his arrival. Gismondi watched them, fascinated; the two attendants, no doubt, would do the uprooting when the weed was found; that, he thought, was the purpose for which they accompanied the gentleman in scarlet, and for that was it that they withdrew into the shadow as more fitting than the light for the deed of darkness that would presently be done.

“Ancona!” called the voice of the president, and the name echoed mournfully through the chill air. A masker rose upon the instant, thrusting back his chair, and marched fearlessly down to confer with the master-plotter.

Gismondi wondered how many moments of life might yet be left himself. There was a mist before his eyes, and his heart was thumping horribly at the base of his throat with a violence that seemed to shake him in his chair at each pulsation, and he marveled that the boom of it did not draw the attention of his neighbor.

“Asti!” came the voice from across the chamber, and another figure rose and went apart, passing the returning Ancona on the way. Bologna followed Asti, and now Gismondi began to realize that the president was taking them alphabetically, and he wondered how many more there might be ere Forli was called, for Crespi he knew was from Forli. He wondered, too, what questions would be asked him. From the knowledge those papers had imparted to him, he found that he was able to surmise them, and he knew what answers he should make. Still, his terror did not leave him; some other question there must be—something for which those papers did not make provision.

“Cattolica!” came the summons, and a fourth conspirator arose, and then of a sudden the whole company was on its feet; mechanically, and from very force of imitation, Gismondi had risen too, and the heart-beats in his throat were

quicken now with sudden hope. In the distance there had been a sound of voices, and this was followed on the instant by a heavy tread in the corridor without, a tread accompanied by the clank of armor.

"We are betrayed!" cried a voice, after which in awful silence the masked company stood and waited.

A heavy blow smote the door, and it fell open. Across the threshold, the candlelight reflected from his corselet as from a mirror, came a mighty figure armed cap-a-pie; behind him three men-at-arms, sword on hip and pike in hand, pressed closely.

Three paces within the room the captain came to a halt and surveyed them with eyes that smiled grimly from a bearded face. "Sirs," said he, "resistance will be idle. I have fifty men with me."

The president advanced with a firm step. "What may be your will with us?" quoth he, a fine arrogance in his voice.

"The will of his Highness the Duke of Valentinois," was the man's answer, "to whom your plot is known in its every detail."

"You are come to arrest us?"

"One by one," said the captain with an odd significance and a slight inclination of the head. "My grooms await you in the courtyard."

For an instant there was silence, as well there might be at that pronouncement. The memory of the terrible justice the duke had wrought in Sinigaglia was still fresh in every mind, and Gismondi understood—as all understood—that here in the courtyard of the Palazzo Mattoli these gentlemen caught red handed were to meet the fate that had overtaken Vitelli and his confederates.

"Infamy!" cried one who stood beside Gismondi. "Infamy! Are we to have no trial?"

"In the courtyard," replied the captain grimly.

"Not I, for one," exclaimed another. "I am as noble as the duke himself. I'll not be strangled in a corner like a capon. If die I must I claim by right of birth the ax."

"By right of birth," the captain mused, and smiled. "Indeed, your very birthright, so it seems. Come, sirs."

But others stormed with interruptions, and one there was who called upon his fellows to draw what steel they carried and die with weapons in their hands.

Gismondi, apart, with folded arms, watched them and grinned behind his vizor. It was with him an hour of exultation in the revulsion from his recent terrors. He wondered to what length of folly these rash fools would go. He thought he might witness a pretty fight; but the man in red disappointed him of such expectations. He came forward to the table-head, and his voice was raised to dominate and quell the others.

"Sirs," said he, "the game is lost. Let us pay the forfeit and be done."

Again for a moment a silence fell. Then one, with a sudden strident laugh, stepped forward. "I'll lead the way, my brothers," he said, and bowing to the captain, "I am at your orders, sir," he announced.

The captain made a sign to his men. Two deposed their pikes, and coming forward seized that volunteer. Swiftly and without word spoken they hurried him from the chamber. Gismondi smiled. This entertainment amused his cruel nature better than had done that other of a little while ago. Swiftly the soldiers went

about their work, and in a brief ten minutes there remained but four of the conspirators. One of them was the man in scarlet, who, as their captain, reserved to himself the honor of going last; two others were the men who had been attendant upon him, and the fourth was Gis-mondi.

The men-at-arms reentered, and the man in red made a sign to Gismondi that was plain of meaning. Gismondi shrugged, smiled to himself, and stepped forward jauntily. But when the soldiers seized him he shook them off.

“A word with you, sir,” said he to the captain.

The captain eyed him keenly. “Ah!” said he. “You will be he whom I was told to look for. Tell me your name that I may know you.”

“I am Benvenuto Gismondi.”

The captain nodded thoughtfully. “I must permit myself no error here. You are Benvenuto Gismondi, and —?” He paused inquiringly.

“And,” answered Gismondi with impatience, “I am here on behalf of Duke Cesare Borgia.”

A quiet, wicked laugh broke from the captain’s bearded lips. One of his heavy gauntleted hands fell upon Gismondi’s shoulder, the other tore the vizor roughly from his face.

“Does your excellence know the villain?”

“I do not,” answered the man in red, and added, “God be thanked!”

He clapped his hands, and now it was that Gismondi saw into what manner of trap he had fallen, what manner of ruse the master-plotter had adopted to weed out, as he had promised, the one who had usurped the place of him that had been slain on the Bologna road. That clapping of hands was your summons, in answer to which there came trooping back into the chamber the entire company of muffled plotters. No farther than the corridor had they been taken, and on arrival there, to each had been explained the test that was afoot.

Betimes next morning Don Miguel—Cesare Borgia’s Spanish captain—waited upon his master with a dagger and a bloodstained scrap of paper. He had to report the finding of the body of Benvenuto Gismondi under the trees in the square that fronted the Palazzo Mattoli. The dagger that had slain the man had been employed to attach to him the label Don Miguel presented to the duke, on which was written, *The property of Cesare Borgia*. Don Miguel wondered did his magnificence desire the culprits to be brought to account.

Cesare shook his head and smiled.

“It has fallen out as I intended,” said he, and fell to musing. “It would have grieved me had they not discovered him, for it would have put me to the need of sterner measures. As it is, I think their discovery will have heightened their dread of me and of the ubiquity of my spies, and in their terror they will have scattered, their plot abandoned. It is best so. To give them open trial and expose their plot would be to invite imitators to follow in their lead, for man excels himself in playing the ape. You may go, Miguel. I think Messer Benvenuto Gismondi has served my purpose as excellently as I meant he should, and, incidentally, he has had his wage.”

