

***The Lust of  
Conquest***

**Rafael Sabatini**

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# THE LUST OF CONQUEST

*By Rafael Sabatini*



Cesare Borgia lay at Soligno with his army, master of the whole territory of Foggia, with the sole exception of the capital itself, which, grim and impregnable, defied him from its eminence. Cesare was too good a captain to be in haste where haste must prove expensive. Soligno afforded him pleasant quarters, and these he was content to enjoy what time Famine did his work for him with the defiant town.

In Foggia itself, one evening of early autumn, the old Count Guido degli Speranzoni sat in council with his captains considering the desperate straits to which Cesare had reduced them, a consideration which brought them nothing but the gloom of hopelessness.

“There is one course only can save Foggia,” said del Campo, and when they pressed him to name that course, “The death of Cesare Borgia,” he explained.

Men shrugged their shoulders. Del Campo told them nothing that they did not know, but he told them something they could not achieve.

“I would,” growled Speranzoni, his fierce old eyes narrowing most wickedly—“I would I had him here in Foggia.” And his wrinkled hand, held out palm upwards, tightened without closing, like an eagle’s talons, ready to seize and rend.

“You’ll have him soon enough,” snapped Paviano, who inclined to grimness in his humor.

“Aye, when he comes in power, you mean,” the Lord of Foggia assented sadly. “Not so mean I. I would have him seized at Soligno where he lies, and brought a captive here to be held for ransom. Thus might I save the State.” He looked about him at the despondent ones who formed his council. “Is there none will attempt it for the love of Foggia?” he asked point-blank.

In his captains' faces, one and all, he read that he asked the impossible, and he turned as for sympathy to his daughter, his only child and heiress to the State of Foggia, who in that quality was present among those men in council. Her splendid beauty inspired in him a fresh line of intercession. He turned once more to his captains.

"Is there none will do it for the love of Eufemia degli Speranzoni?" quoth he, and caught in more than one pair of eyes a responsive gleam. "It were but fitting," he explained, "that Foggia's savior in such an hour should be Foggia's future ruler—my daughter's future husband."

Del Campo, young, ardent, and ambitious, looked as he would make the task his own; Paviano, too, though far from young, seemed on the point of taking up the challenge, and two or three besides. But it was Guido's daughter, herself, who was the first to speak.

"What you say, my lord father, is most just," said she. "Foggia's future ruler should be Foggia's savior in this hour, and so she shall be."

"You, Eufemia?" cried her sire, wheeling in his chair to face her.

She stood before them, magnificently tall and graceful, her bosom heaving slightly, the color ebbing and flowing in her cheeks.

"Yes, I," she answered without weakness. "Here is a task that asks for guile, not strength. Let it be mine to attempt it."

Loud-voiced protests filled the room. All the men had risen, and each swore this must not be.

"But the danger!" wailed her sire, raising shaking hands and fearful eyes.

"Will not be as the danger to del Campo or Paviano or any other of these noble gentlemen. I shall know how to guard myself. Depend upon me."

When Count Guido spoke of her as Foggia's future ruler, he was less than accurate; for she ruled there already, and what Madonna Eufemia degli Speranzoni wanted none might long gainsay her. And she prevailed now as she prevailed ever, and if when she left Foggia in the dead of night she left behind a loving dread for her, she left, too, a certain hopefulness, for men knew and had confidence in her mettle and her wit.

Soligno conquered—and all trace of conquest sedulously removed, as was the way of Cesare Borgia—was settling down to its workaday aspect. In

what, after all, can one ruler differ intrinsically from another to the ruled? Though princes perish, thrones crumble, and dynasties be supplanted, citizens must live and eat and go about their business. Thus, whilst some remained in Soligno who scowled as Cesare Borgia, Duke of Valentinois, went abroad, the greater portion bared their heads and bowed their duty to the conqueror, the great captain who had made it his life's task to build a mighty empire out of all the petty tyrannies into which Italy was broken.

One fair morning in late August Cesare rode down the Borgo dell'Annunziata, the centre of a group of horsemen, mostly young, all richly-apparelled, and seeming by their talk and laughter in the gayest mood. Debouching from a narrow street into the market-place—thronged now with traders as in time of peace—the little cavalcade was met by another coming in the opposite direction and very different of appearance, all being in harness and full-armed. At its head rode Don Miguel—Cesare's Spanish captain—and he alone was without armor, dressed in clumsy peasant garb, for he was newly returned from a secret visit to the city of Foggia, where he had spent the last three days reconnoitring the strength of the besieged and their supplies. He now drew rein, that he might give his master the fruits of his daring expedition.

The horsemen, mingling what time Don Miguel and Duke Cesare talked apart, so blocked the entrance to the street that a litter advancing towards it from the market-place was forced to halt and wait until its way should be clear again.

Don Miguel was talking earnestly, urging Cesare to make assault upon a point at which he fancied weakness—for all that he was seldom a man to advocate measures rough and direct. Cesare listened, half-idly, nowise inclined to be guided by his counsel, and allowing his eyes to stray, as do the eyes of a man not over-engrossed in what is being told him. They chanced to fall upon the litter, and what he saw there caught his roving glance and held it. A curtain had been drawn aside, and at the very moment that he looked he saw an elderly woman pointing him out—or so it seemed to him—to her companion. It was this elderly dame's companion whose splendid beauty now engrossed his gaze, and in that instant her eyes, large and solemn as a child's, were raised. Their glances met across the little intervening space, and the Duke saw her lips part as in surprise, saw the color perish in her cheeks, leaving them ivory-white. In homage, not to the woman, but to the beauty that was hers—for, like all of his race, he accounted beauty the most cardinal of all virtues—the conqueror doffed his hat and bowed to the very withers of his horse.

Checked in the middle of his argument, Don Miguel frowned at this proof of inattention, and frowned more darkly still when to show the extent of that same inattention Cesare asked him softly:

“Who is that lady? Do you know?”

The Spaniard turned to look; but in that moment the curtains fell again. Cesare, a smile on his lips, heaved a soft sigh and then fell very pensive, pondering the element of abnormality, slight as it was, that the incident had offered. He had been pointed out to her, and at sight of him she had turned pale. What was the reason? He could not recollect that he had ever seen her before, and had he seen her, hers was not a face he would be likely to forget. Why, then, did the sight of him affect her in so odd a manner. Many men had turned pale before him—aye, and women too—but there had always been a reason. What was the reason here?

Don Miguel’s escort had drawn aside, leaving a passage clear, through which the litter and its attendants were now passing. Cesare’s eye went after it awhile, then he turned again to Miguel.

“We’ll talk of this again,” said he. “Meanwhile, follow me that litter, and bring me word where its occupant resides.” With that, Cesare pushed on, his cavaliers about him; but he went thoughtful, still pondering that question: Why did she turn pale?

The reason, had he known it, might have flattered him. Madonna Eufemia had come to Soligno to destroy by guile one whom she had ever heard described as an odious monster, the devastator of all Italy, another scourge of God, more worthy of the name than Attila himself. She had looked to find a horror of a man, hideous, malformed, prematurely aged, and ravaged by disease and the wrath of Heaven. Instead, she beheld a youthful cavalier, resplendent of raiment, magnificent, though slight, of shape, and beautiful of countenance beyond all men that she had ever seen. The glory of his eyes when she had found them full upon her had seemed to turn her faint and dizzy. Nor did she recover until the curtain fell again, and she bethought her that, however superb and gallant his appearance, he was the enemy of her race, the man whose destruction it was her high mission to encompass as she stood pledged.

The litter moved forward. She reclined with half-closed eyes, smiling to herself as she remembered how avid had been his gaze. It was well.

“Madonna, we are being followed,” whispered her companion fearfully.

Eufemia's smile grew broader, more content. The affair was speeding excellently.

She was housed in the palace that had been Paviano's, in the Via del Cane, hard by the Duomo; and thrice that day her women brought her word that the Lord Cesare Borgia had ridden by, all eyes upon the windows. Towards sunset she bade a lackey set a chair for her in the marble balcony that overlooked the street, and there on the occasion of his fourth passing the great captain beheld her seated, taking the cool of eventide what time one of her women read to her.

She had no eyes for him at first; they were turned skyward, a rapt expression on her face, as though her soul were lost in the exquisite melody of words which her woman was pouring forth for her delectation. Anon, however, she seemed to grow conscious of his presence, and looked down to find that he had reined in his jennet and sat considering her, his auburn head bared in homage as though he stood before a shrine, his glorious eyes full of strange wonder. As their glances met, he bowed low, as he had done that morning; and she, mastering the odd emotions stirring in her, smiled palely down on him in recognition. As if content with that, he gently shook his reins; his horse moved on, and she fancied she caught the flutter of a sigh—but that was surely fancy. Slowly he rode down the street, turning as he went ever and anon to look over his shoulder, nor covering his head again until he did so in a final gesture of salutation ere he was lost to her view beyond the corner.

On each of the three days that followed was this pretty scene repeated, and on the fourth there came at noon a dainty page to Paviano's house, bearing a scented letter in the Duke's own hand, wherein the latter craved like the humblest suitor for the honor of permission to offer in person his services to Madonna Eufemia Guasti—for by this name she had elected to be known, giving out that she was the daughter of a rich Venetian trader.

This permission being accorded, the Borgia came some few hours later, and, leaving his splendid cavalcade to await him in the street, he went alone into her presence. He came superbly arrayed, as a suitor should; his doublet was of cloth of gold, milk-white one silken hose, sky-blue the other, and the girdle from which his sword was hung blazed with priceless stones.

She received him in a chamber well worthy of his magnificence, and for company she had none but Basilia—her elderly companion of the litter. Tightly strung to her task though she be, yet she feasted her eyes upon the

rare beauty of his resplendent presence, nor repelled the dangerous rapture that his haunting eyes and soft melodious voice awakened in her.

They sat awhile in studied talk, flavored with hints of his regard for her, and her wonder grew at the difference between the man she saw and the ogre she had looked for; he was, she had been told, a creature whose soul was all compounded of intelligence and ambition; harsh, unscrupulous, terrible to friend and foe alike; a man devoid of heart; and devoid, therefore, of pity or of mercy. She found him gentle, respectful, mildly gay, and of a rare sweetness of speech, till she was forced to ask herself might not envy of his great generalship be the only source of the detestation in which he was held by those upon whom he warred.

Wine was brought by a page, golden Falernian in an exquisitely wrought Venetian vessel, from which with her own hands she poured it into two cups of beaten gold.

“It is most opportune,” said he, his voice calm and deferential, “that I may pledge you.”

She flushed as if well pleased, and, taking one cup, she bade her page to offer him the other. At that some of the passion latent in him, at which, as if despite him, his ardent glance had hinted now and again, seemed to leap forth. He repulsed the cup. “Nay, nay!” said he, his great eyes full upon her, their glance seeming to envelop and hold her as in a spell. “Let one cup suffice, I do beseech you, madonna, unworthy though I be. Pledge me, and leave me wine in which to pledge you in my turn.”

She would have put the honor from her as too great—for not until Basilia told her afterwards did she suspect that this was less a measure of gallantry than precaution. Cesare Borgia took no risks of being poisoned. She protested then; but Borgia insisted, and his will made sport with hers as does the breeze in autumn with the withered leaf.

She drank, and handed him the cup. He received it with bent knee, as though it were a sacrament, and drained it, his eyes upon her.

He took his departure soon thereafter, having first obtained her leave to come again. When he was gone she shivered, and sank limp into a chair, to fall a-weeping for no reason in the world that she could fathom. Yet that night she wrote to the Count, her father, that all was going better than she could have dared to hope, and that within the week she looked to place that in his hands which should enable him to end the siege of Foggia.



At that same night, in council at Soligno, there was a scene that threatened to grow stormy. Cesare's captains, urged by the arguments of Ramiro del'Orca, complained of the inaction in which they sat, of the precious time that was being wasted, and clamored that Foggia forthwith be taken by assault.

"It will be costly in human lives," Cesare reminded them, and left them stricken by the softness of this contention from one who was so little wont to reckon in lives the cost of what he desired.

"Will it be less costly a week hence?" quoth the great Ramiro, snorting.

"Assuredly," was the smooth reply. "Famine will have weakened their resistance, we shall have completed our mining of the wall at the spot where Don Miguel found it weakened, and through the breach we can pour our men into a starving city that will be in no case to offer us resistance, seeing us within."

"And what of the time that is being lost?" Ramiro asked.

Cesare shrugged, and his lips parted in a soft smile. "It will pass pleasantly enough, no doubt, here in Soligno," said he.

"Aye!" thundered the other. "There is the whole truth and cause of this delay." He smote the board a blow of his colossal fist; his great red face grew apoplectic; his rolling eyes seemed shot with blood. "The time passes pleasantly enough for your magnificence here in Soligno." And he laughed most horridly. "Meanwhile——"

"Meanwhile," Cesare's voice interrupted him, his words falling like drops of icy water upon the captain's red-hot temper—"meanwhile Ravenna needs a temporary governor. You shall fill the office, Ser Ramiro, until I can spare a better man. You start to-night."

To the contempt implicit in Cesare's words, Ramiro gave no thought. His dismissal at such a moment from the seat of war left his spirit limp as an empty bag. Recovering an instant, he flushed and spread a hand in protest.

"My lord——" he began. But again he was not suffered to proceed. From mask-like in its impassivity, Cesare's face was of a sudden stirred. His eyes narrowed.

"Captain del'Orca," said he, "you are interrupting the business of this council. If you have aught to say to me, say it when I come to Ravenna in a fortnight's time. Fare you well."

He uttered no threat, as another might have done; he did not so much as raise his voice; but the menace quivering, nevertheless, in his even tones was such that the great captain heaved himself up, bowed low, and went without another word.

Thus departed from Soligno the only spirit great enough to have saved Cesare from the peril that delay was spreading for him. The remainder, cowed by the Duke's invincible resolve, and by the example he had made of the one who had dared oppose it, bowed to his will in the matter of the reduction of Foggia.

Days passed, and for Cesare, at least, it seemed that they passed pleasantly, as he had promised that they should. He was so much at the house of Paviano, at the feet of the peerless Monna Eufemia Guasti, that it seemed his court had been removed thither from the castle. For Eufemia herself, the season was one of sore experience. In his absence she laid her plans for his ultimate capture, in correspondence with her father; in his presence she was all numb, fascinated, filled with horror almost by her task, the very creature of his will.

At last was reached that fateful evening that had been settled for the odious deed. He came at twilight, as was now his wont, and kissed her hand in greeting, as was also his custom now. The windows of the great apartment in which she met him stood open to the gardens, and thither he invited her to go with him before he had been two minutes in her presence.

"It is chill," she demurred, "and there is the dew." Slight though this demur, so great was her subjection to him that her heart-beats quickened as she urged it.

He sighed heavily. "I am oddly oppressed to-night," said he. "I have need of air. Come, my Eufemia." And he took her hand to lead her forth.

She shivered at his endearment, at the soft caress of his voice, the pleading ardor of his eyes, and suffered herself to be led into the open. Slowly they paced down a laurel-bordered avenue towards the grotto that was the garden's most conspicuous feature. It was known as the temple of Pan, and the marble figure of the sylvan god could be descried gleaming faintly amid the green darkness of the cave. In a little clearing opposite stood a marble bench. Here Cesare bade her sit; here he seated himself beside her, and, as before, he sighed.

"It is sweet in you to have done my will," said he, "since it is to be my last evening with you, my Eufemia."

She started guiltily. His last evening! How knew he that?

“As how, my lord?” she asked.

“Harsh necessity commands me,” he answered. “To-morrow we deliver the final assault that shall carry Foggia.”

Here was news. It seemed that not a moment too soon had she arranged to act.

“You—are certain it will be final?” she questioned, puzzled by his assurance.

He smiled confidently. “You shall judge,” said he. “There is a weakness in the walls, to the north, above the river, spied out a week ago by Don Miguel. Since then we have spent the time in mining at the spot, and there has been during this week an odd lack of vigilance in Foggia. It is as a town lulled by some false hope. It has served us well. Our preparations are complete, and at dawn we fire the mine and enter through the breach.”

“So that I shall see you no more,” said she, feeling that something she must say. And then, whether urged by make-believe or by sheer femininity, she continued: “Will you ever think again, I wonder, when you pass on to further conquests, of poor Eufemia and her loneliness in Soligno?”

He turned sharply, and his calm eyes looked deeply into hers—so deeply that she grew afraid, thinking he must see the truth in the very soul of her. And then, behind them somewhere, there was a crunch of gravel, and Cesare was looking over his shoulder in the direction of the sound. Across the avenue at that moment a shadow flitted and was lost amid the denser shadows of the laurels. Apparently he either saw it not or left it unheeded, for he turned again to Eufemia, who sat cold with terror. He leaned towards her.

“Shall I come back to you, Eufemia?” he asked her ardently, his eyes upon her, his arms outstretched. “Would you have it so?”

Again their glances met, and she turned almost dizzy under those eyes of his, instinct with a mysterious passion that seemed to enwrap her as in a mesh of fire. She swayed towards him. “My lord! My dear lord!” she murmured, faltering. His arms were round her, crushing her slender body against his own, his lips were scorching hers. Thus a moment; then with a panting cry, her palms against his breast, she thrust him from her.

“What now?” he asked her gently, wondering.

“You love me?” quoth she. Then begged him: “Say that you love me!”

“What else?” he answered, questioning in his turn, his hungry arms held out again.

“Wait! Wait!” she panted. She was livid now; her eyes distraught. Suddenly she hid her face in her hands, and fell a-sobbing. “Oh, I am vile!” she cried. “I am most vile!”

“What are you saying, sweet?”

As suddenly as she had lost it did she regain her self-control. “You shall learn,” she promised him. “Awhile ago you heard a step behind us. Assassins wait you in the garden there—brought here by my contriving!”

He never stirred. Smiling, he continued to look down upon her, and it flashed through her mind that, so great was his faith in her, he could not believe this thing she told him.

“I was sent hither,” she informed him, “to lure you into capture, that you may be held as hostage for the safety of all Foggia.”

He seemed slightly to shake his head, his smile enduring still. “All this being so, why do you tell me?”

“Why?” she cried, her eyes dilating in her white face. “Why? Do you not see? Because I love you, Cesare, and can no longer do the thing I came for.”

Save a sigh, that seemed to be of satisfaction, there was still no change in his demeanor; his smile, if anything, grew sweeter. She was prepared for horror, for anger, or for loathing from him; but for nothing so terrible as this calm, fond smile. She drew away from it in fascinated terror, as she would not have drawn away from his poniard had he made shift to kill her for her treachery. Sick and faint she reclined there, uttering no word.

Then, smiling still, Cesare rose quietly and moved a step in the direction of the alley, the zone of danger. It became clear to her that he was going; going without a word of reproach or comment; and the contempt of it was as a whip of scorpions to her flesh.

“Have you naught to say?” she wailed.

“Naught,” he answered, pausing.

Under the spur of pain her anger rose. “My men are still there,” she reminded him, a lurking fierceness in her quivering voice.

His answer seemed to shatter her wits. “So, too, are mine, Eufemia degli Speranzoni.”

Crouching on the bench, she stared at him. She swallowed hard with a gulping sound. "You knew?" she breathed.

"From the hour I met you," answered he. "Don Miguel had penetrated into Foggia to reconnoitre. When your litter passed me in the Via del Cane I sent him after it. He had seen you at your father's palace."

"Then—then—why?" she faltered, leaving her meaning to be guessed.

At last his voice was raised from its habitual even tones, and it rang like stricken bronze. "The lust of conquest," he answered, smiling fiercely now. "Should I who have brought all Italy to heel fail to reduce me Count Guido's daughter?" He leaned towards her as he explained, and his voice sank once more, but a bitter mockery abode in it. "I was resolved to win this fight against you and your woman's arts, myself; and your confession, when it came, should be the admission that I am conqueror in your heart as I am elsewhere. For the rest," he added, and the mockery grew keener, "such was their faith in you at Foggia that they relaxed their vigilance and afforded me the chance I needed to prepare the mine." He gathered his cloak about him to depart, doffed his hat and made her an obeisance. She rose painfully, one hand to her brow, the other to her heart.

"And I, my lord?" she asked in a strangled voice. "What fate do you reserve for me?"

He considered her in the fading light. "Lady," said he, "I leave you to your own."

He beat his hands together thrice. There was a rustle among the laurel bushes, and a half-dozen men came down the garden towards him. He addressed their leader shortly. "Amedeo," said he, "you will apprehend what men are ambushed here."

One glance he cast at the white, crouching figure on the seat; then he turned and without haste departed.

Next morning Foggia fell, and Cesare, the conqueror, sat in the palace of the Speranzoni.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Lust of Conquest* by Rafael Sabatini]