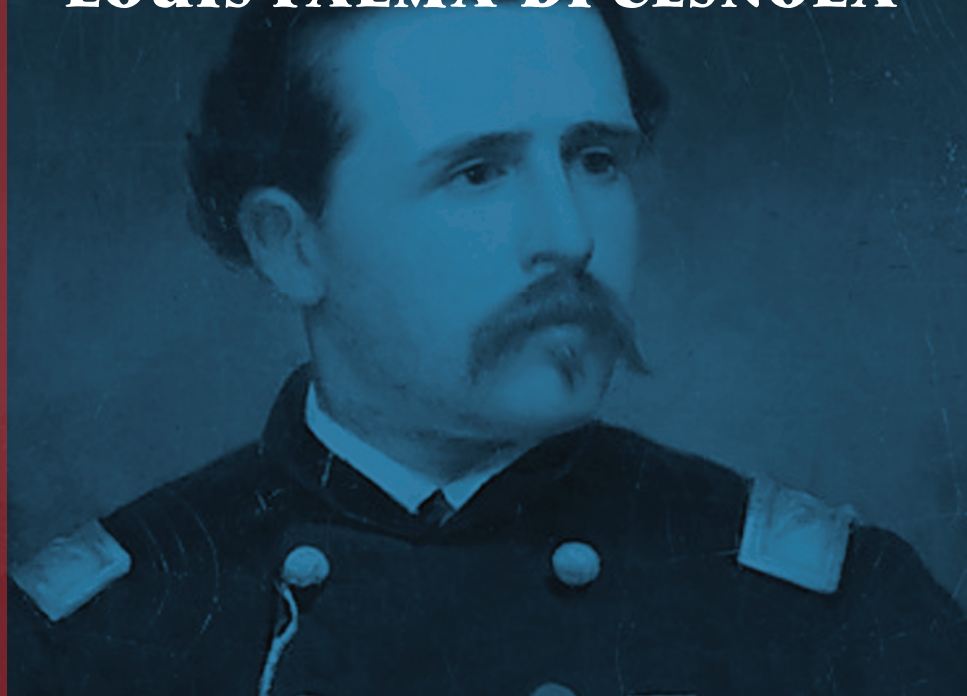


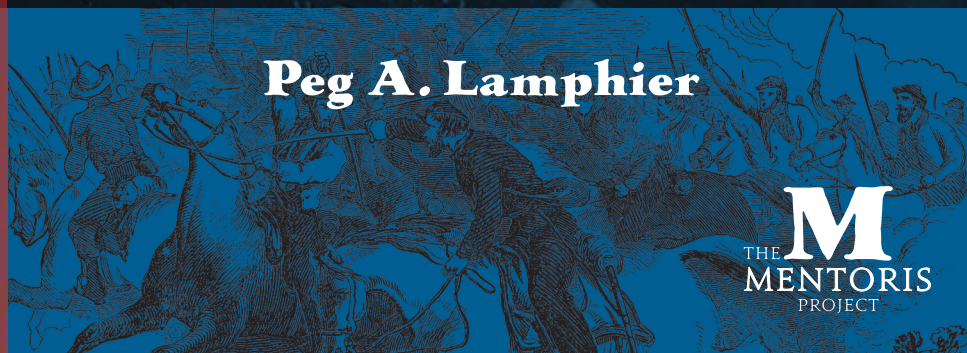
A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
LOUIS PALMA DI CESNOLA



SOLDIER, DIPLOMAT, ARCHAEOLOGIST

The Bold Life of Louis Palma di Cesnola

Peg A. Lamphier



M
THE
MENTORIS
PROJECT

Prologue

CHARGE AND CHARGE AGAIN

Aldie Gap, Virginia—June 17, 1863

One, two, three. Stop. He pivoted on his boot heel. One, two, three. His head bumped into the down slope of the tent. He stopped and scowled at the tent wall. Sweat trickled down his lower back. Would no one ever invent a tent that wasn't either oven hot or freezing cold? It felt like he'd spent his entire life in military tents, first in northern Italy, then in the Crimea, and now here in Virginia. He ought to know by now that a man couldn't pace in a military tent, not even a colonel's field operations tent. He stood still, hands clenched by his side, reviewing the morning. Once again his temper got the better of him. He should have been more careful. While he was confined to quarters his men were out there fighting at Aldie Gap. They'd die, some of them. His men. He could hear horses and yelling and the boom of artillery, along with the higher-pitched sound of mine balls. And the gunpowder, its scent on the morning breeze like an evil flower. And he wasn't there. He felt his nails dig into his palms. If he'd just kept his mouth shut he wouldn't be under arrest right now.

When would he learn? Of course Parnell would make the best Lieutenant Colonel. He had more cavalry experience than anyone in the Union army, himself included. He'd been one of the few Hussars to come back from that ill-fated charge at Balaclava. What had the poet called it? The Charge of the Light Brigade, that's what it was. The Union Army didn't have one man brave enough to make that charge or good enough to survive it. And still they wouldn't give Parnell the promotion that would make him Louis's second in command. But he should have gone about his protest more carefully. On the continent a Colonel and the son of a Count might speak frankly with a General, but not in America. He shouldn't have charged into Pleasanton's tent in a temper and he shouldn't have said what he had. He'd handed the General an excuse to take his weapons and place him under arrest. It didn't matter that Pleasanton was wrong, only that he was his commanding officer. Pleasanton. There was a misnamed fellow if ever there'd been one. The Cavalry Corp's commander hated foreigners and thought they ought to be removed from the Union Army. And he had no trouble saying so at every opportunity, even after their great cavalry victory at Brandy Station.

Though in truth, the Union Army seemed to specialize in fools for generals. Most of them didn't know a thing about war, neither how to move troops nor how to fight. Oh, they'd been to school, knew all about books and battlefield theory, but only a simpleton thought that sort of thing had any meaning when it came to the mud and blood of war. They certainly didn't have the sense to treat experienced soldiers with respect. General Gregg was no better and no worse than most of them, making regimental decisions based on personal preference, not military

capability. Why, he'd put his own brother in command of Louis's brigade on no better recommendation than ties of blood.

Louis heaved a sigh that was half growl, pulled his one chair away from his camp desk and sat. After that trouble in January he'd promised Mary he'd be more careful. Still, it made him angry that he had to be careful. In a fair world he'd be one of the generals. No one in this country had his experience in war. Why should a man whose best qualification was that he was a general's brother get bridge command and not himself, a man on his third war?

Northern elites hated the Irish and Gregg was from one of those old Calvinist families that thought so highly of themselves. People like that didn't like Italians much more than the Irish. What they really hated was Catholics, regardless of where they came from. As if a man's religion mattered on the battlefield. He'd fought with Muslim Turks in the Crimea and they'd been as dependable and skilled as the French or British.

He pulled open the top drawer of his small desk and removed a piece of paper. He'd write to Kilpatrick and explain. Judd Kilpatrick was Irish. He knew what sort of men Gregg and Pleasanton were. Louis dipped the pen in the inkwell and then paused, cocking his head toward the tent door. A horse snorted and stamped, so close it sounded like it was in the tent. Louis heard the thump of a man dismounting and he grinned. He'd recognize the jangle of those particular spurs anywhere. They were particular to the British Hussars.

"Stand aside, man."

Louis heard a scuffle outside his door, then the wooden framed canvas door swung open.

William Parnell stepped inside, his bushy beard preceding his high forehead in a manner that suggested he was in an awful temper. “For the love of Mary, what are you doing sitting on your arse? There’s fighting to be done.” Parnell grinned at Louis before his face turned serious. “You’ve got to come. The men won’t move without you. ”

Louis reared back his head and stared at Parnell. “I’ve been arrested and confined to quarters, Major. You were there when it happened.” Poems were written about the Light Brigade’s bravery but Louis had seen it for himself. Parnell had been one of the few men to make it back that great and terrible day. He had been British Army and the one of the things the British excelled at was troop discipline.

Parnell shook his head and stepped toward the door. “The men. They attacked and were routed. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor is dead, shot through the head. The men won’t go back. Not without you. You want them all cashiered? Or worse? Hung?” He pushed open the door. “Let’s go. *Now.*”

Louis thought for a second. Poor Taylor hadn’t been Lieutenant Colonel for a day before he’d been killed. Louis knew that his men needed him. And a real leader took care of his men. He buttoned the top two brass buttons of his navy blue cavalry tunic and buckled his belt. Then he reached for his saber, which he always leaned against his desk when off duty, but his hand slapped empty air. He remembered. He’d surrendered it to General Gregg at dawn, along with his Sharps carbine and Colt revolver.

Parnell’s face fell. He shook his head again. “I forgot about your weapons. I’ll tell the men. They can’t expect you to go into battle empty handed.”

Louis pulled his kit bag out from under his camp cot, shaking his head. "Hold on." He thrust his hand into the bag and brought out a six-shot Remington revolver. "It's almost useless except in a close fight. So we'll have to get close." He shoved the revolver into his belt.

He stepped out the tent door and ran into the pimply-faced private who stuck his head in the door.

The boy blushed deep red. His mouth gaped at the site of Louis and he looked past Louis for Parnell. "Major, I'm supposed to be guarding the Colonel. I'll get in trouble for sure if this door is open." The boy pretended he couldn't see the colonel standing before him, clearly disobeying orders.

"Then you best close the door," Parnell barked. "Colonel, are you sure?"

Louis snorted, breaking the illusion. "You came to get me, didn't you Parnell? Private, you'll just have to say I over-powered you and escaped." He pushed past the private. "I see you brought my Red." Louis slapped his chestnut horse on the shoulder and said, "Once more into the breach, dear Red." The horse snorted in agreement. Louis laughed as he heaved himself up into the saddle. He looked down at Parnell, still standing in the tent doorway. "See there, Parnell. Even Red thinks I should go."

Parnell shook his head and grinned. "And people say the Irish are hot heads." Parnell mounted his horse and spurred him forward. Louis followed, laughing as he went. In their wake Louis could hear the young private swearing.

Louis surveyed the Fourth New York Cavalry. They were both a pitiful and a glorious bunch. Of the nearly 800 men he had recruited just over half were still alive, the rest fallen to sabers,

bullets, cannon fire or bloody flux. The Cavalry Corps, along with a great portion of the Army of the Potomac, crossed the Rappahannock a week ago, pushing hard under the scorching sun through the gap in the mountains at a tiny town called Aldie. They were in a race, trying to cut off General Lee before he got his army to Pennsylvania. Allie sat at a crucial crossroads of the Ashby's Gap Turnpike and the Little River Turnpike, but it wasn't much of a town, so food was in short supply. The punishing heat and lack of water hadn't done the horses any good either. The water at Bull Run Creek this morning had been a muddy mess, more frogs than wet. Thank goodness the Little River, where they'd made camp, had water in it or half the horses would be dead. So here they were, in a fight for the Gap.

"Men," he bellowed as he rode down the line. "Remember Kelly's Ford!"

A cheer rose from the cavalrymen. Though the newspapers said the Union Army lost Kelly's Ford the men who'd been there knew otherwise. It had been a fine day for the cavalry, full of slashing sabers and clashing horses. Louis was proud of his rag-tag regiment. He accepted all men, regardless of their country of origin or their religion. Not like other regiments, who only wanted American-born Protestants. He had Germans, Frenchmen, Hungarians, one Spanish fellow, and a handful of Italians.

"That fox Lee intends to take his war north, to Pennsylvania. And Jeb Stuart's cavalry to help him." Louis stopped Red so he stood at the center of the cavalry line. "Will they go forward?"

"No!" The men cried back. "No!"

Louis wheeled Red around. He raised his arm high, then slashed it downward as if he had his saber in his hand. Red sprang forward. The Fourth New York followed hard on his heels.

They rode like men possessed. Sabers flashed, blood flew. People said the Confederate Cavalry man Jeb Stuart was the best the country had ever seen. After today people would know that wasn't true.

Louis rode back and forth across the field, exhorting the men. Yellow grass bent, then crushed into dust with the press of hooves and boots. Red screamed, slashing with his forelegs at fallen men in grey. The organized charge turned into a melee.

Louis rallied his men. They pushed forward, up the hill with the Confederate artillery. Cannon balls exploded around them, sending clumps of dirt everywhere, each as hard as a rock. Dust and smoke in the air made it hard to see. Through the grey Louis saw Parnell engage a grey uniformed cavalryman, sabers flashing. Parnell didn't see the other Reb on his flank. Louis raised his arm, then remembered his hand was empty. If Parnell died because that fool of a general had taken his saber he'd punch the man in the nose and damn the consequences. Louis kned Red forward. The second man never saw Louis and Red's charge. They crashed into him, knocking him right off his horse. Red stomped on the man whose head split like a melon dropped off a wall.

Parnell slashed at his opponent, sinking his saber deep in the man's neck. A great gout of blood gushed from the man before he slumped and slid off his horse. He pulled back his sword, wheeling to meet the men behind him. Parnell's sword came around, right at Louis. Red dodged. Parnell's sword came up. It swept past the tip of Louis's nose, hitting only hot wind.

The two men grimaced at each other, each only too aware of how close they'd come to death. Louis looked across Parnell to the fallen man, now still on the ground. The fellow's sword lay with him, still gripped in his hand.

“I’ll get it, sir,” Parnell hollered as he moved to dismount. Off to the left a cannon ball exploded.

“Leave it,” Louis screamed. He wheeled Red in a tight circle. Time to regroup, he thought. “Retreat,” he bellowed. He muscled Red around, pulling hard at the horse’s head and spurring him back the way they came. The men followed. They rode back down the hill and into the trees, where Confederate cavalymen were loath to follow. Louis turned and checked over his shoulder. Parnell was back there; he could see the Irishman’s grey horse. Louis breathed out a great gasp of air. A great commotion of thundering hooves and jangling metal sounded to the west. Red wheeled and Louis again reached for his missing saber, grabbing at nothing. He swore in Italian. A small group of men in dark blue uniforms broke through the trees. Lieutenant Estes, aide to General Kilpatrick, rode at their head.

Louis grinned as Estes pulled his horse to a stop before him. Estes grinned back, then saluted. “The General wants you.” The young man pulled his horse around and dashed back the way he’d come, his men hard on his heels. Louis followed Estes and the others through the trees to Kilpatrick’s temporary headquarters. Parnell went with him like he always did.

General Kilpatrick was a small scrap of a man, like a lot of the Irish, and no more than twenty-five years old. The two often shared a drink and told stories, some of them truer than others. A lot of American military men didn’t care for Kilpatrick, calling him Kill-Cavalry behind his back, but that was because they didn’t understand how to use Cavalry soldiers in an army. Most generals thought Cavalry were good for no more than patrols and surveillance, but Judd Kilpatrick understood the real strength of a Cavalry unit was in the mayhem and fear a good offensive cavalry action could inspire. Men died in attacks like

that, but men died of the bloody flux lying in camp too and no one complained about that. Louis thought the men who objected to the pugnacious little general really did so because he was Irish. And fearless.

Kilpatrick jerked his chin at Louis, his voluminous side-whiskers waving in the breeze as he did. “Cesnola, you got a talent for trouble. It’s why I keep you around. If the brass are fussing about you, they can’t be fussing about me.” Kilpatrick frowned. “Gregg put you under arrest.”

Louis shot a glance at Parnell. Parnell shrugged.

Kilpatrick swept his arm out, gesturing at the field of battle below. “And yet I saw your charge.”

Louis nodded. He could hear the screams of men and horses, the shots of rifles, the boom of the cannon. Men were fighting and dying while he stood here like a schoolboy in trouble for pulling a girl’s hair. “Sir, the 4th is crucial to Pleasanton’s battle plans, is it not?”

Now it was Kilpatrick’s turn to nod.

“The men refused to attack without me.” Louis said, resisting the temptation to explain further.

Kilpatrick looked at Parnell.

“It’s true, Sir. The new Lieutenant Colonel took a bullet in the first charge. They wouldn’t go again. The Colonel’s their good luck charm.”

Kilpatrick chuckled. He looked back at Louis. “So you defied the order of a superior officer and charged into battle.”

“Yes Sir.”

“Without your weapons.”

Louis shrugged and gestured at the pistol, still tucked in his belt. “I had a pistol, Sir.”

“But no saber. Nor carbine.”

“No Sir.” Kilpatrick would have been apprised of the arrest of one of his colonels within the hour of the event.

“Colonel, I’ve seen a number of brave actions in this army, but nothing like yours today.” He nodded into the distance, then pointed. “The Rebs are dug in at the top of that hill, behind the fence. We need that hill. And your men will follow you.”

Kilpatrick turned to face his aide. “Estes, I hate to ask but could you loan this crazy Italian your saber?”

Estes grinned widely. “Glad to, Sir.” He unbuckled his belt and handed it and the sheathed sword to Louis. “Give ’em hell, Colonel.”

Louis took the saber in his right hand. What just happened?

Then, as if what he’d done was not at all remarkable, Kilpatrick looked over his shoulder at an older man behind him. “Oh, and Sergeant, find the Colonel a carbine, would you? He’s going to need it.”

Twenty minutes later Louis rode into the clearing that held the men of the 4th New York. One of his captains saw him first and let out a cry. “Huzzah!” Someone else hollered, “The Colonel’s back.”

“And he’s got a sword!”

“And a rifle,” came another voice. After that it got noisy as men laughed and talked.

Parnell rode alongside Louis, a broad grin on his face. “Shall we?”

Louis called his men to attention and gave them their orders. They charged out of the trees and across the small valley toward the hill like men with the devil at their backs.

Three times the 4th charged the hill; three times they were beaten back. By late afternoon they were exhausted and back in the trees. Louis handed Red off to one of his captains and walked

among his men, offering words of encouragement and praise as he went. His uniform was so wet with sweat he felt as if he could take it off and wring it out. Near the end of his circuit Parnell found him.

He looked his major in the eye. "Remind you of anything?"

Parnell shook his head. "Not even close. Balaclava was a hundred times worse than this. It was a hopeless waste of life."

Louis wordlessly laid his hand on Parnell's shoulder. Sometimes he forgot how young his friend was. Sometimes he forgot how young *he* was. He'd been in three wars before his thirtieth birthday.

"I am worried about the horses." Parnell understood that in the matter of cavalry offensives the health of one's mount made all the difference.

Louis looked over at the makeshift corral. "They're in a lot better shape than a month ago. Thank the Blessed Mother for spring grass. They've got one more charge in them."

The men mounted up again. The light was failing as they rushed out of the trees and toward the hill a fourth time. They made it across the valley before the Confederate artillery boomed.

Louis laughed out loud. He'd be willing to bet the enemy thought they'd had enough for one day. Louis charged up the hill, his men behind him. They were halfway up the hill before the rebel cavalry rode out to meet them. Sabers flashed in the failing light. Horses screamed in terror and anger. Louis slashed his saber right and left at the grey-clad men in his way. Red never slowed his surge upwards. They crested the hill to see Confederate foot soldiers and artillerymen in flight.

Louis wheeled Red to face his men. Behind him the Rebel cavalry was in disarray. Where was this great cavalier, Jeb Stuart?

On the right a knot of three Confederates surrounded one of his men. Louis couldn't see who but it didn't matter. He wrapped Red's reins around the pommel, squeezed with his knees to keep Red still, and pulled his Sharps carbine. He sighted down the barrel, aiming at one of the men in gray. Just as he squeezed the trigger Red staggered and his shot went wild. Something struck Louis in the head.

They fell together, he and Red. Time slowed down. They fell and fell and fell. He hit the ground with his shoulder, then Red landed on him with a great, shattering whoomph. For a second he thought he'd never breathe again. He gasped and his breathing came back. He yanked at his leg. It was pinned beneath Red, who lay as unmoving as a dead thing.

Louis didn't want to look. Didn't want to know. Of all the deaths he'd lived through in his life, it was the horses that were the worst. Because they hadn't had a choice. Because a cavalrman was supposed to keep his horse safe before himself. He lifted his head. His eyesight blurred. He wiped at his eyes, his hand coming away red with blood. At least he could see. He looked at Red's head. Nothing. He tried to lay his hand on Red's shoulder. Blinding pain shot through him. He turned his head and quietly puked up what little was in his stomach. It felt like he'd been shot in the shoulder. He turned his head carefully and looked again. It was near dark now, but it looked like there was a bullet hole in his uniform, at the shoulder. Blood didn't show on navy wool. He tried for Red's body again, this time more carefully. He laid his hand upon the horse's neck. Nothing. No echo of a great, beating heart, no quiet rise and fall of respiration. The poor beast. He'd been a gallant mount. Louis lay in the dark mourning the death of his horse. Then something struck

the back of his head, knocking his chin down onto his chest. His teeth rattled and he was gone.

For a time it was dark. When he opened his eyes it was still dark. He tried to lift his head, but a wave of dizziness told him it was a bad idea. He turned his head, careful not to lift it from the cold ground. The stars were out, bright as any clear spring night. He couldn't feel his leg. Probably what came of having a half-ton of cooling dead horse lying on it for hours.

He lay there in the dark, with only his dead horse for company. How had it come to this? How did the second son of a Sardinian count end up near dead on a battlefield thousands of miles from home? What would his mother say? He lay there in the night thinking about the answers to those questions while he waited for rescue or capture. Whichever came first.

Chapter One

NO SOONER MET

Rivarola, Italy—1844–1846

Luigi pulled at his collar, hating its starchy constraint. Mother caught his movement from the corner of her eye, turned her head infinitesimally and frowned. Then she redirected her gaze to the front of the church. Luigi gave his collar one more tug and looked up at the shiny black casket not more than six feet from him. He was supposed to be sad, but he wasn't. Not even one little bit.

He'd hardly known the man. Father stayed away from them for months at a time, living down the valley in Turin with his friends and his whores. Mother pretended not to know. Not knowing unpleasant realities was Mother's specialty. And she never stood up for her sons when he did come home. He would charge into the house like a bull into a herd of cows. Everything displeased him. Then he'd pick one of his sons, most often Louis, and punish him for some infraction, real or imagined, it didn't matter which. One day he'd grabbed Alerico by the arm and punched him square in the chest. Alerico, who was three years older than Luigi, had shoved the old man hard enough to push

him into Mother's blanket chest. From behind a chair where he'd been hiding Luigi watched his father stumble and go down. When Alerico walked away Father let him go. That's when he learned what his father really was: a bully. And Father Pietro said all bullies were cowards. Luigi bided his time, waiting for the moment when he could fight back like Alerico.

And then the day came. Father staggered into the kitchen where Luigi was eating a bowl of wide noodles bathed in oil, anchovies, and garlic.

"Come here now, boy," Father bellowed, swaying to stay on his feet. He had a riding crop in his right hand, which he smacked against the side of his leg.

Cook took one look at Father and scuttled out the kitchen door.

Luigi watched her go. He didn't blame her. He stared at his father in disgust. It was just lunchtime and already the old man was drunk.

"Young pup, you do as you're told." The riding crop swished through the air but hit nothing, not even the table.

Luigi looked regretfully at his pasta bowl. Cook really did make the best Tajarin. But Luigi had been growing and he was almost as big as his father. It was time. He pushed his bowl away from him, took a deep breath and then threw himself out of his chair with a great clatter. By the time the chair hit the wall behind him he'd hit his father, barreling head first into the old man's alcohol-softened gut. Just like Alerico, Father fell. Luigi fell with him, but he let go and was scrabbling back up as soon as his father hit the floor.

Luigi learned two things that day. First, speed and sobriety was more important than size or age in a fight. Second, when a boy knocked his father down he was no longer a boy.

Father sent him away to the Jesuit school in Ivrea after that. He'd driven Luigi to the gates of the school and handed him over to Father Pietro. "You can have him, and good riddance," Father told the old Jesuit. Father Pietro tucked his hands into his robe and looked down his long nose at Father. "You intend him for the priesthood then?"

Father nodded, then remounted his horse and rode away, leaving Luigi without a backwards glance.

The Ivrea Jesuits lived in a huge stone fortress that was always cold, no matter how warm the day. Luigi lasted in the place for just over a year. Some parts of his Jesuit experience had been quite pleasant. He enjoyed learning so he particularly enjoyed the Jesuits' emphasis on literature and language. He loved Dante and Shakespeare in equal measure. In his time at Ivrea Luigi learned the rudiments of Greek, Latin, German, and English. He'd already learned French and Italian at his mother's knee because she, like all gently reared Piedmontese, spoke the two languages almost interchangeably. His favorite days in school were the ones where they acted out plays, from ancient Greek dramas to more modern Italian works like those by Francesco Ongaro. None of the priests approved of Ongaro's liberal politics, but they enjoyed his humorous plays. Luigi liked the plays that called for sword fights, even if they did use only wooden swords. He also enjoyed playing his flute on stage. The boys made fun of him for his choice of instrument, but he loved his flute. Unlike most instruments, you could tuck a flute into a pocket and take it anywhere. No, the education at Ivrea had been fine. More than fine really, though Luigi would never admit that to either of his parents. The problem was that he didn't want to be a priest because priests didn't have adventures. Father Pietro said Luigi lacked self-restraint. Luigi just wanted

to be treated like the other boys, the regular boys. While most orders of the priesthood only took students studying for the priesthood, the Jesuits educated a great number of the sons of the nobility with the aim of returning them to society. Sons headed for the priesthood were treated differently, more stringently, than the boys who would eventually return home to join the family business.

Luigi hated the constraints of being an acolyte. He was moved from place to place with quiet dignity. *Quiet dignity?* What fun was there in that?

One day he received yet another summons to Father Pietro's austere office. He went expecting a gentle but stern lecture on his failings. Instead the Jesuit handed Luigi a letter, his face impassive as always. Luigi noted that the wax seal imprinted with the family crest was broken. He looked at the seal. "Oppress Resurgent." Oppressed, He Rises. He looked up at Father Pietro, feeling unsure. Father made a waving motion with his hand, the black folds of his robe quietly rustling with the sudden movement.

To Emmanuelle Pietro Paolo Maria Luigi Palma di Cesnola,

*My son, I regret to inform you that your father has been killed.
You will come home for the funeral and remain home, ending your
tenure with the Jesuits.*

Your Mother,

Countess Eugenia Rica di Casstelvecchio Palma di Cesnola

Luigi held the letter very still, aware that Father Pietro was watching him. It was just like Mother to send such a short, unemotional message and yet release him from this terrible exile.

She was not a lady to be trifled with, stern and rigid in her ideas, but she was a much better parent than her husband. Luigi wanted to throw the letter in the air in joy. He wanted to whoop and caper about the room but he did not. Even he knew one did not rejoice in a parent's death in front of a Jesuit priest. Instead he returned to his room, packed his bag, took his horse from the stable where it had been since he arrived thirteen months earlier and rode home. The funeral took place the day after Luigi arrived.

Mother tapped Luigi on the shoulder, bringing him back to the present. He lurched to his feet, conscious of the ache in his knees as he did. How long had he been kneeling? Alerico and four of Father's friends from town stepped forward to hoist the coffin to their shoulders. Louis stood to join them. He had to because his younger brothers were too small. When Mother asked him to do his duty as a pallbearer his first impulse had been to refuse. Then it occurred to him that he'd be doing it for *her*, not his father who'd been so foolishly drunk he'd allowed himself to be run down in the street by a pair of runaway horses.

They carried Luigi Mauricio Palma di Cesnola into the churchyard and past a herd of tumbledown, lichen-covered headstones. Though it was early summer and sunny the day was only warm, the sort of weather one might take advantage of with a hike and a picnic. This far north, in the Piedmont, surrounded by the snow-capped Alps, they rarely had uncomfortably warm days. Not like down south, towards Rome or even Sicily. Louis loved the Piedmont. It was a place of extremes and its people were strong.

Luigi watched two old men lower his father's casket into a dark, damp hole. He sighed, wishing he'd known his father before he'd become a drunkard. Once, long ago, he'd been a revolutionary along with Uncle Alerino. The two brothers left

Rivarola when they were not much older than Luigi was today. They'd gone to France to fight for the revolution. His father had almost died on the long march back from Russia in the winter of 1812. When Luigi was little his father used to tell stories and the one Luigi remembered most vividly was the one about how Father and Uncle Alerino caught and roasted rats for dinner.

After that Father and Uncle fought in the Piedmontese revolution, the one back in the 1820s with the Carbonari. When that revolution failed Father and all the other Carbonari were excommunicated and ordered imprisoned but they had managed to escape to Spain. A few years later Father applied for and received a papal dispensation and was allowed to return to Rivarola. The Pope viewed Father's older brother Alerino as one of the movement's leaders and would not pardon him. Uncle, now living in Greece, lived under a death sentence to this day.

One of the two old men took up a shovel, then looked expectantly at the parish priest. The black-clad Franciscan stepped forward and said a few words. Well, more than a few words. In Luigi's experience no priest ever said two words when a hundred would suffice. The priest chanted and they chanted back. Finally it ended. Mother stepped forward with her sons lined up behind her. Luigi watched as they each dropped a scoop of dirt into the hole. When it was his turn he bent, grabbed a handful of moist, dark loam and squeezed it into a tight ball. He held his hand out over his father's grave and opened his fingers. As he did he vowed to never ever be like his father. He would not be a failed revolutionary, bitter and abusive to his family. He would fight for things that mattered and he would not sell himself for safety and drink. He would not waste his life and leave a widow and children behind to fend for themselves.

He walked away from the grave. Like his father when he had dropped Luigi off at the Jesuit school, he did not look back.

Abrielle, Abrielle, Abrielle. Luigi paused and shot a look over his shoulder before hastening up the path. The Castello Abrielle Roxanna Balbo. She was perfect in every way. Her hair was the rich, soft brown of the finest honey, her eyes dark and always sparkling with fun, framed by two perfect half-moon arches of eyebrows. And she was a Balbo, so not even his mother could object to her. Her uncle Cesare was both an intellectual and a revolutionary, and most importantly a man who had figured out how to navigate between revolutionary and papal politics without upsetting either side. And the Balbos were an old Sardinian family. Mother had gone to convent school with Abrielle's mother Agneta, though Agneta had married a handsome young count while Luigi's mother had married a man forty years older than her, for all that Father had also been a Count.

He had known her since childhood. Like his brothers, she had always been there. But a year ago he began to see her differently: she had begun to glow in his mind. The more time they spent together the more he loved her. No one paid them any mind because everyone thought they were too young for love.

Luigi knew better because Shakespeare knew better. Romeo and Juliet had been young. He'd copied passages from the play and given them to Abrielle. Once she'd given him some lines from *As You Like It*. He never forgot them. "No sooner met, but they looked, no sooner looked than they loved." Sometimes he played her arias on his flute. Or read her poetry. And month after month no one seemed to notice they were in love. That would all change soon.

Luigi stuck his hand in his pocket. Yes, her latest note was still there. He resisted the temptation to take it out and read it again. It was so short that he had memorized it the first time he read it. "*Meet me at the Castello at 3. Come alone. A.*"

Last Sunday afternoon he had asked Abrielle to marry him. Oh, he knew they were both too young, but they loved each other too much to wait. Romeo and Juliet waited and look how that turned out. Well, maybe they hadn't waited, but their unhappy ending was reason enough to seize this moment. Once engaged, he would finish military school. In two years time they would both be sixteen and of an age to legally wed. In the mean time everyone would know they belonged to each other.

He hurried up the path, breathing out short puffs of air against the climb. The Castello Cesnola had once housed Palmas, but that had been long, long ago. Mother often told the story of how the castle had been built eight hundred years ago by one of his ancestors. The man had been a Spanish adventurer who pledged himself to the Savoy and was granted a large parcel of land that became the Palmas' home. The Spaniard built the castle with Savoyard funds to guard the mountain pass against rivals. By the 1600s the House of Savoy had grown to such a power in the region that the area no longer required a castle fortress in Rivarola. The Palmas moved to a much more comfortable villa in the valley and the old fortress fell into disrepair. Now covered in moss and vines, surrounded by wild flowers and chestnut trees, it was a popular place for family outings and lovers' trysts.

He crested the hill and approached the Castello. Off in the distance a bird sang. Just in front of him was a looming rock wall, interrupted by a large stone arch that led to the interior. He stepped through the arch and into the Castello, looking up

as he always did. The absence of a roof always surprised Luigi, though he had played in this space since he was old enough to climb the hill. He glanced around, then smiled so widely that he thought the corners of his mouth might reach his ears.

Abrielle sat on a stone just ahead of him, the sun shining on her in a way that made her glow like a old Roman coin his mother kept in her jewelry box. He hurried toward her, then stopped, puzzled. These last few months she always ran toward him when she saw him. It was one of the things he loved most about her—her impetuous enthusiasm for life. But this afternoon she sat on her stone, unmoving. She did not return his smile.

His stomach rolled over in unease. Part of him wanted to go back the way he had come so he would not have to hear what his golden girl would say.

Last week she had refused to give him an answer to his proposal. She had held his face in her soft hands and said, “I must ask my parents for permission. You understand, don’t you?”

He did. Abrielle was a good girl, from a good family. He was from a good family. Oh, sure, he got in trouble occasionally, but nothing major. And however much his father might be regarded as a failure, he had been a noble and a Count. And there was no shame in being a second son in a family as old and distinguished as the Palmas. He understood she wanted to ask permission and he had been sure the answer would be yes. So sure. Their mothers were friends, weren’t they?

He approached her, knowing in his heart that he’d been wrong. He stopped two, maybe three steps away from her.

She bit her lip, shook her head, and then burst into tears. Luigi couldn’t help himself. He swept her into his arms. He felt her tears hot on his shoulder, seeping through his linen shirt like tiny drops of acid. After less than a minute she stopped and

withdrew from him. He didn't know that he would never hold her again.

"So the answer is no," he half whispered.

She shrugged her soft, round shoulders. "It's worse than that."

He waited.

She took a deep breath. "I'm to marry your brother Alerico and be the new Countess."

Louis wanted to scream, to cry out to the open blue sky above him. Alerico had never even looked at his Abrielle. Never once. All he cared about were his dusty old books. He'd been reading while Luigi had been outside riding with Abrielle. He'd been reading while Louis danced with Abrielle at parties, while they'd hiked this very hill. Boring old Alerico had never made daisy crowns for her hair. And *he* got her? Because he was first born and the count?

"When?"

"The first Sunday after my sixteenth birthday. We have more than a year before that. We can meet in secret. I love you." She sniffed, but did not start crying again.

He steadied himself. She loved him. But she had no more choice than he did. She would be Alerico's wife one way or the other. He had no right to make her miserable, not if he loved her. He made up his mind.

"Alerico is a good man. He's kind and gentle. He'll be a good husband to you. You should spend the year with him, not me." Before she could see his tears he turned and walked away. For the second time in his life he did not look back.

He lay on his bed for two days, thinking and praying. Why had God given him this great love only to take it away? He asked God, but God had no answer. Mother had his meals sent up to

him but he couldn't eat. He felt dead inside, hollow and empty. On the morning of the third day of his self-imprisonment he rose from his bed, washed himself, and dressed. He tried to put on his funeral suit, thinking it would suit the way he felt, but it no longer fit. He'd grown too much the last two years. He reminded himself of the family crest. 'Oppressed, he rises.' Luigi went downstairs to speak to his mother.

He knew she knew. She had to. Father had been dead for over a year so she must have arranged the marriage between Abrielle and Alerico. And certainly Abrielle's mother would have told her about Luigi's proposal to her daughter. She knew. That's why she'd had his meals sent up to his room.

Mother was sitting on the back veranda, taking her morning espresso in the dappled sunshine. She sat down her tiny coffee cup at his approach. "I am glad to see you up and about, my son," she said quietly.

He bowed at her and then took a seat next to her. Whenever he saw his mother he experienced a moment of surprise. The mothers of his school friends looked like mothers, stout, sturdy ladies in black mantillas and heavy gold jewelry. His mother looked barely older than a school girl. She'd been forty years younger than Father when they married and was the local beauty. Father had been old and impoverished, but he had the title and that title made him a good match. Like Alerico, Luigi thought bitterly.

She looked him over. "I know you are disappointed, but you should have known."

He resisted the urge to yell at his mother. She did not tolerate emotional displays and would send him away if he raised his voice. He sighed again. "It's because I'm a second son, isn't it?"

“Of course,” she agreed. “Abrielle is from a good family, a prosperous family. Her dowry is immense. I regret to say your Father was a poor money manager and the estate needs money.”

Luigi raised his chin and looked his mother in the eye. “I thought you brought money when you married Father. And look how he treated you.” He wanted her to know that he knew she’d been sold, just like Abrielle was about to be sold.

“It is the way of the world, Luigi. I wish you were more practical. You have a romantic streak like your father and Uncle.”

“But couldn’t I marry Abrielle for both romantic *and* practical reasons? Her dowry would become ours regardless of which son she marries.” As soon as he said the words Luigi heard how stupid they were.

She shook her head sadly. “It’s the title and you know it. Your brother is already Count Palma di Cesnola and your Abrielle will be Countess when she marries him. And, more importantly, her son would be a count some day. That’s what her family wants.”

He slumped his shoulders in defeat. It was a defeat he’d known was coming.

She poured a tiny cup of coffee and pushed it over to him. “Luigi, today you feel as if you could die. You will get over this.” She held up her hand to stop his denial. “You will. You are strong. Not like your brother Alerico. If God had willed it you would have been the first born. Alerico is the family intellectual. He would make a better priest than Count. You, my son, are brave and bold and strong, in both body and mind. You will love again because you’re a survivor. Which makes me think it is a good thing Alerico is first born and not you. He’s a house cat, Luigi. He will be happy staying here in this small, safe place for the rest of his life. You would shrivel and die for you are a tiger who cannot be caged. Like your father, you need adventures.

You need to see the world and conquer it. If you married Abrielle you'd leave her, over and over again, like your father left me. You would break her." She left unsaid: *like your father broke me.*

Luigi took a sip and stared into the distance. Part of him wanted to argue with her, but the larger part of him knew she was right. He was stronger than his brother. He was larger, though Alerico was two years older than him, and he could ride and climb and jump far better than Alerico. And he was handsome. He had thick auburn hair like his mother, but he was tall and broad like his father. Abrielle wasn't the first girl he'd kissed. He'd just thought she'd be the last.

Then he steeled his resolve and asked Mother if he could transfer from his current school to the Military Academy at Cherasco. Mother looked at him with understanding. "It's 50 miles or more away. You'd have to board there full-time."

He nodded. Cherasco was south of Turin, a good two days' ride away. Mother could be a hard woman sometimes. He supposed she had to be. He waited, watching her face for a sign.

She sighed. "I suppose it's for the best. I'll have to find the money."

He tried to smile but could not.

He left before the week was out, riding out of the villa gates on his favorite horse at dawn. This time he did look back, fixing the place in his mind. He knew it would be a long time before he had the courage to return.