

"*Pâté d'alouettes farcies.*"* I had appealed to the Pope and had been told by a fat cardinal that the Holy Father had been carried down in his *portantina*† that very morning at daybreak to the Vatican gardens to watch the netting of the birds, the *caccia*‡ had been good, over two hundred birds had been caught. I had scraped off the rust from the little two-pounder the English had abandoned in the garden in 1808, and started firing off a shot every five minutes from midnight till sunrise in the hope of frightening away the birds from the fatal mountain. The ex-butcher had sued me for interfering with the lawful exercise of his trade, I had been fined two hundred lire damages. I had trained all the dogs to bark the whole night at the cost of what little sleep remained for me. A few days later my big Maremma dog died suddenly. I found traces of arsenic in his stomach. I caught sight of the murderer the next night lurking behind the garden wall and knocked him down. He sued me again. I was fined five hundred lire for assault. I had sold my beautiful Greek vase and my beloved Madonna by Desiderio di Settignano in order to raise the enormous sum he had asked for the mountain, several hundred times its value. When I came with the money, he renewed his old tactics and grinned at me that the price had been doubled. He knew his man. My exasperation had reached a point when I might have parted with everything I possessed to become the owner of the mountain. The bird slaughter went on as before. I had lost my sleep, I could think of nothing else. In my despair I fled from San Michele and sailed for Monte Cristo, to return when the last birds had passed over the island.

The first thing I heard when I came back was that the ex-butcher was lying on the point of death. Masses were read for his salvation twice a day in the church at thirty lire apiece—he was one of the richest men in the village. Towards evening arrived the *parroco*§ asking me in the name of Christ to visit the dying man. The village doctor suspected pneumonia, the chemist was sure it was a stroke, the barber thought it was *un colpo di sanguell*; the midwife thought it was *una paura***. The *parroco* himself, always on the look out for the evil eye, inclined towards the *mal'occhio*.†† I refused to go. I said I had never been a doctor in Capri except for the poor, and that the resident physicians on the island were quite capable of coping with any of these ailments. Only on one condition would I come, that the man would swear on the crucifix that if he pulled through he would never again sting out the eyes of a bird and that he would sell me the mountain at his exorbitant price of a month ago. The man refused. In the night he was given the Last Sacrament. At day-

* Swallow-pie.

† Sedan chair.

‡ Catch.

§ Priest.

|| Blood pressure.

** Fear.

†† Evil eye.