

# THE CALL OF THE RACE

By Ernest Poole.

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"TANK Gott he's a Schneider!" old Otto would mutter in deep relief. And so he was—a Schneider huge beyond all bounds. As he sat at the cashier's desk in the snug little butcher shop of his sire, the prodigious body of Salvatore hour by hour overflowed like a wagonload of hay, until only the bending, creaking legs of the chair remained in view. Customers glanced at him in surprise; startled babies took one look and ducked their heads in speechless fright. But even babies learned to trust and gaze in solemn wonder. For through the whole vast labyrinth of his veins the Schneider blood flowed quietly, as it had flowed for long generations; while from morning to night the eyes were serious, steadily fixed, as Salvatores made out the bills.

But blood is a mysterious thing. Already it had produced this exuberance out of Otto and Margarita, his wife, who were both rotund little people. What other surprise lurked deep in this fortress of flesh? Otto had never ceased watching. He was taking no chances.

Nineteen years before in that mighty wedding of peoples which is to bring forth some day a strange new race of men in the hybrid city of Greater New York, Otto had become a daring pioneer. Reckless for once in his life, romantic and blind with emotion he had married the lovely young daughter of an Italian greengrocer close by. But when he had roused to what he had done and its possible bearing upon his career, then Otto had opened his steady blue eyes and had never quite closed them since. On the christening day, when Margarita, in all the appealing weakness and charm of brand new motherhood, begged that the bambino be named Salvatore, Otto gave in. But this was the last of Italy's triumphs. Day by day and year by year, every trace of that fiery land of the South was toned away. Margarita grew plump and submissive and beaming; Otto grew stout and cheery and brisk. And working in happy domestic accord, they had bred in the pliable soul of their son all the virtues of order, frugality, thrift, and hard, patient application to work.

So here the budding monster sat, flowering slowly but surely into a sober business man. And the danger sprung from the reckless past seemed buried forever behind.

Salvatore suddenly heaved a monstrous quivering sigh.

Restlessness, the insidious longings of nights and days, tugging at the heart strings—all burst softly forth in Salvatore's sigh. Then he began making out a new bill:

Two pounds Sirloin Steak.....@ .20 .40  
Three pounds Wiener Schnitzel...@ .25 .75  
One pound—

All at once, with a crash of drum and cymbal, a hurdygurdy wheeled into action close by the open door. The noise was deafening. With a frown of indignation Salvatore looked around—and stared.

Through the open window at his elbow a girl was gazing at him in amazement and delight. When Salvatore scowled with all the annoyance of pompous eighteen, her eyes only sparkled the brighter, her head nodded twice in vigorous approval, and in Italian she whispered:

"Madre de Dio, come splendido quel uomo come magnifico!"

Salvatore understood, his rosy cheeks turned suddenly a darker hue, and at this she threw back her airy young head and laughed so joyously that even he relented. On his face there appeared a quiet, indulgent smile; as a huge Newfoundland dog might stare at a kitten, so Salvatore looked down upon the girl. And seeing this, she gave an odd, graceful hitch to her skirts, shifted her tambourine with a tinkle, and stood there wholly oblivious under his eyes. Over her head was a kerchief of gray with little golden spangles; from under the edges the soft black hair strayed in negligent, lazy fashion, and under the black arched brows were two assertive gray eyes that now looked up again, challenging, mocking, elusive, curious, prying with eager scrutiny right into Salvatore's soul.

With a nervous laugh he tossed her a nickel. She caught the coin in her tambourine, looked at it, flushed like a child, and then flashed upon him a smile so intimate and warm that Salvatore grunted and fell back aghast. And at this the girl sprang nimbly away. With her old father she seized the crazy piano and trundled it swiftly down the street. And Salvatore, left alone, gazed dumfounded into the deepening twilight, his two great black eyes in scandalous disaccord with the rest of him; twinkling, eager, restless, dazed, almost ready to flash.

So she came day after day in the balmy weeks that followed, derivative no longer, sneering and prying no longer, respectfully curious, humble, strangely intent, waiting until he should toss her the coin. The coin was his sign of dismissal, and the girl always obeyed. And now with the first sharp thrill of uneasiness gone, he felt safe, this colossal man of eighteen. The whole silent drama was hidden from Otto and Margarita by the high counter behind. And Salvatore, who until now had barely looked on the face of a woman, would look at the stranger with all the serene assurance of a sagacious old man of the world, and her big eyes would open wide and look frankly back into his.

"My name is Gemma," she said abruptly in the midst of one of these mutual stares. Salvatore good-humoredly nodded and bent again over his work, feeling a curious brand-new tingling up and down his spine.

"I knew you could," she said softly, still in Italian.

"Could what?" growled Salvatore.

"You are doing it now—speaking like me! You are Italian! I knew it! You are Italian—like me!"

Salvatore looked heavily around, saw that he was

alone in the shop, gave a grunt of relief, turned back and surveyed her in silence.

"How old are you?" he asked grumpy. Gemma glanced over her shoulder, gave that peculiarly graceful hitch to her skirt, dropped her head on one side and looked at him gravely.

"Seventeen," she said. Salvatore stared. He had thought her at least twenty-five, and something romantic inside of him dropped. But she saw the change in his face, and in an instant her eyes had half closed, she drew into herself, few, strange, mysterious, wise, like a gypsy witch.



THE UNFLINCHING MONSTER LIGHTED HIS PIPE.

"I am older than you," she said slowly, with a provoking smile. He gave a short laugh of amusement.

"I am," she said calmly, "because I know more." And all at once she threw back her head and laughed till the tears shone bright in her eyes. She stopped. Her voice grew mysterious, thrilling and low: "What do you see," she asked, "on the streets—in the night?" Salvatore watched her uneasily.

"I mind my own business," he growled. She eyed him with scorn.

"That is stupid," she said severely. "You should never mind your own business! You should watch!" He scowled.

"Watch what?" he asked, but the enchantress was already back with the white old man at the curb; and together they thrummed the battered old instrument noisily down the street.

In the evening, seated in front of the shop, he loomed unassailable, placidly puffing great circles of smoke. When he saw the pair coming he made no sign, except to throw one backward glance at Otto busily talking far in the rear of the shop. When they stopped at the curbstone before him and the music burst gayly forth, and the enchantress came forward, her tambourine in her hand—the unflinching monster only took out a match from his box and carefully held it over the bowl of his already glowing pipe. When she raised the tambourine slowly over her head and softly beat time to the music, and began bending and turning, her eyes dilating and filling with strange, uncanny delight; when as the throb of the music came faster, her light young body responded, twisting, tossing and whirling into mad, rollicking life—still Salvatore, the Schneider sat motionless, strictly attending to business, puffing in dignified silence like an old Indian warrior chief. But he took out his pipe with a breath of relief as the crowd closed in between them.

She came many nights. She sang. And her crude, deep voice, like her dancing, was of swiftly changing moods; now rough, impatient, fiercely stirring; now low and appealing and hungry; and again radiant, laughing, mocking and gay. Some evenings Margarita would slowly steal out of the shop and stands with arms akimbo—beaming. Once with a sudden suspicion she cast a look of uneasiness down at her precious son, but the giant gave such a stony grunt that Margarita, breathed easy and listened and watched to her heart's content.

One night in early May the old hurdygurdy stopped a block down the street. The moon shone bright and clear; he could see Gemma dim, fantastic and airy, dancing like a sprite. Then the crowd closed round her, and Salvatore lounged far back on the stoop, confidently waiting until she should come. But a few moments later he sat up and scowled. The crowd was dispersing; the pair had

turned and were going back by the way they had come!

This happened five nights.

And then one evening slowly the huge bulk of Salvatore reared from the stoop and with his black felt hat tipped carelessly back on his flaxen head, the stem of his long Dutch pipe in his teeth, and the bowl in his great right hand, he lumbered off from the safe Schneider shop, off into the sparkling night!

Once loosed from his moorings, through the long balmy evenings of May, Salvatore roamed hither and thither, now aimlessly, dazed, seeing nothing at all; and now watching life with genial eyes. Evening by evening the tinkle and bang of the battered old piano floated steadily down the west side of Manhattan, each night farther away from the snug and respectable Schneider abode, each night farther down toward the teeming, scandalous, joyous quarter where lived the children of the South.

One night in the middle of June, after a slow and sagacious detour, he found the piano waiting just at the head of a long, dark street which he had never entered before. So narrow it was that the tenement roofs seemed meeting above in the distance; below in the canyon for blocks and blocks the pavement was black with a surging mass; and in arches and long festoons, tiny lights by thousands were twinkling festive and fairy-like; and out of it all came the hum of voices so thrilling with gladness that Salvatore pushed back his hat and stood rooted foot to the spot.

Suddenly, from behind him, Gemma came spinning on feet light as air, tossing, bending and stamping and banging the old tambourine circling round him and laughing unsteadily out of her half-closed eyes. In an instant, before he had time to escape, he found himself in a circle of hundreds of faces; glad shouts of "Gemma! Gemma!" rang out from the crowd; and with one fiery upward glance Gemma came spinning straight into his arms, jerked him round with a merry shriek—and Salvatore was dancing!

Tumultuous cheers resounded. From the street all around, from row upon row of windows above, the eyes of his countrymen flashed into his. And with his whole great soul a fiery furnace, he gambled and pranced and swung his arms; while high above all the shouting and dominating it all, there suddenly thundered a laugh so prodigious it tore the air! With one hand clutching Gemma's young arm, his bulging cheeks palpitating with glee, the demeanor of Schneider forever lost and the soul of Italy bursting out in his eyes, Salvatore shook with the sheer joy of life and fairly bellowed his mirth!

And truly that was a festive night. Before all the crowd did he kiss Gemma square on her blushing cheek. When in a rage, she sprang off in the crowd, he chased her and caught her; seizing the handle of the piano, he turned it furiously round and round; and in sonorous Italian he shouted, "Dance—dance—dance!" Off she whirled, and as the crowd began roaring a ballad in time to her dancing, Salvatore joined in, catching words here and there and laughing between. And when at last the band music was over, Gemma sent home her weary old father; the giant gripped the piano shafts; and together, chuckling, laughing, jabbering fast and low, those two went wandering off in the night.

After that, every evening for weeks, Salvatore would sluggishly rise from the Schneider home doorstep and lazily drift down the street, turn the corner, hasten his pace, and jog contentedly off to the appointed corner. Gemma was always waiting alone; for her stooping old father, worn by the work of the long, hot day, was only too glad to rest at night. And in the powerful hands of its jovial master the crazy old instrument crashed forth its music as though to proclaim that the weary old world had had a fresh birth and that life was suddenly dazzling new.

Salvatore the vagabond beamed upon life. Gemma the witch began teaching him how to pry into its secrets; with a slowly increasing intensity; she forced his eyes open and held his gaze as though she would burn the love of it all forever deep into his soul.

Sometimes as she danced and Salvatore watched her, all unconsciously his hand on the grinder would revolve faster and faster, until, gasping for breath, the girl would stop and seize his arm. And then, quite forgetting the faces around, they would look at each other and laugh till the tears rolled down their glistening cheeks.

Through the midsummer nights the bellowing laugh of Salvatore rose above all the street's bedlam of sounds, like a huge advertisement announcing the fun. It thickened the crowd, it doubled the penalties; and when the wise Gemma saw this, she taught him to bring it in, at just the right moments in perfect accord with her dances and songs. So startling was the effect and so captivating to the simple Italians, that little by little he added rough jokes of his own, loud indignant remarks, pathetic roars of appeal to bystanders. And the great voice of the jovial monster ringing free and glad in his mother tongue seemed heralding forth to all the world the mirth and the loves and the throbbing life of the happy-go-lucky South.

But when at last the streets grew hushed, when the fire escapes were filled with the sleepers, the moon sank over the tenement roofs, and the stars grew dim in the misty skies, then Salvatore would go slowly back as though drawn by some irresistible power, back to his neat and snowy couch and sleep and the orderly business life in the shop of his Teuton sire.

And here by day, as week followed week, over

the cheery home there crept an ominous shadow. The anxious parents suspected; but knowing their son, they resolutely refrained from the questions that might only bring on the storm. Margarita was silent and guilty, feeling that she was the source of it all. Otto barely uttered a word, indignantly hacking and sawing his steaks. Only each morning, when in increasing numbers, the bills came back for correction, he carefully looked them over, went to the desk, and silently pointed out the mistakes.

And little by little, from the innermost depths of Salvatore's soul, there rose insistent and sharp and clear, the still small voice of Schneider.

In the ominous silence he scowled. He scowled at the glances that he could feel, at the whispered words that came to his ears. He scowled at every mistake in the bills, as it loomed a mute accusing witness under Otto's finger. He melted and burned with the midsummer's heat, he cursed his head that was aching and dull from the sleep he had missed in his roving. He ground his teeth and strove to be careful and exact. But in his work the mistakes swelled day by day, and the gloom of the butcher shop deepened. So through the dragging, sweeter weeks a Schneider by day and a Salvatore by night struggled to win that mammoth soul.

At last, one stifling morning in August, when the short rosy finger of Otto pointed to five mistakes in one bill, then up leaped Salvatore. Speechless, he stood all aquiver with mortification and rage. Undaunted, vigilant, careful, stout little Otto looked steadily up; his breath came hard, but when he spoke his voice was low and solemn.

"So! . . . So—my poy—now you see! No man can attend to his business when he is a vagabond every night! . . . So! . . . And now you must choose." Here Otto suddenly swallowed hard, but his voice was as quiet as ever: "You must choose for yourself, my poy," he said. "I will do noddings to boss you."

For one moment longer the giant glared down. Then without warning his head jerked back, the great neck shook, and for the first and only time the house of Schneider rang with that scandalous bellow of mirth. It ended. And Salvatore lurched from his desk and out through the door, and went unsteadily, blindly, swiftly up the street.

Back in the shop Margarita stood like one in a dream. Slowly the tears welled in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. She turned to her hus-



JABBERING FAST AND LOW THEY WENT WANDERING OFF IN THE NIGHT.

band and laid one hand on his trembling arm.

"Otto," she whispered imploringly, "Otto! Don't—don't be so angry!" Her voice broke in a frightened sob. "Otto," she wailed, "I did my best! How could I help being born?" Again did Otto swallow hard.

"You couldn't help," he said tenderly. "You was already born—you couldn't help." He squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Wait," he said, "he will come back, Margarita, he is a good poy! He will come back!"

And little Margarita's sob gradually subsided, she dried her eyes and sat quietly down to her sewing. And after an hour of silent work she looked up with a guilty light in her eyes.

"Madre Dio," she thought, "what a magnificent laugh!" And Margarita sighed.

Far and wide did Salvatore roam over Manhattan that day, dark and lowering, like a bull who has broken his pasture bounds.

But at night, haggard and pale, the prodigal came home. He said not a word but went up to bed and fell into heavy sleep.

The next day he was up bright and early. Without one break or even a grunt he worked at his desk through the long, sultry hours. And that evening, and for three nights thereafter, Salvatore sat on the doorstep quietly smoking the pipe of peace of honest repose from a day well spent.

But on the fourth evening, moment by moment the mountainous bulk of him seemed to tighten. Suddenly, with a breath that was like an explosion, he rose, jammed his broad black hat firmly down over his eyes, and with a look of heroic decision, strode off toward the old place of meeting.

Swinging sharply around the corner he met Gemma face to face. At first she did not see him. She stood by the old hurdygurdy alone, and staring across the street in a way that made Salvatore stop short. When she saw him, Gemma gave a quick gasp, and both hands leaped to her throat and then her face cleared and relaxed, and looking up into his scowling visage the girl laughed triumphantly, long and low.

But Salvatore was in no joking mood. With a solemn businesslike frown, he advanced, took her hand, squeezed it until she winced with the pain, and growled:

"Now I know what I want to do! We will go to a priest, we will be married, and then we will go to my father and mother! Let him try! What can he say? My mother herself was Italian!"

As Gemma looked up, her face slowly changed, grew utterly dazed. For a moment she seemed to grasp nothing. But all at once her eyes fairly crackled with wrath.

"Me?" she gasped. "Like your mother?"

"Yes," said Salvatore, suddenly beaming. "Don't be afraid. You can be just the same."

"Me? . . . Me the same?" She started to laugh, stopped, looked at him again, pursed her red lips and spoke in a tone of withering scorn:

"Salvatore! I have seen your mother in the shop! And rather than be a Signora Schneider like her, I would wrap my throat tight, tight in my hair, and pull and pull until I was dead! Ugh!" She threw up both expressive young hands.

Salvatore was dumb with amazement. Thrice he tried and could not utter a word. But as he glared down at Gemma, slowly his cheeks puffed out, and out in swelling indignation.

"Good-by!" he burst out at last. He bounced around heavily and started away.

"No! Salvatore! no—no—no!" Her strong supple fingers clung tight to one of his arms; the girl was panting between her teeth. An instant she seemed hesitating. "No!" she whispered. "I will not tell!"

"Tell what?" he asked roughly. She shook her head, and her face broke into a flashing smile.

"Salvatore. Come." Her voice was coaxing and tremulous now. "Come. One evening more—only one. It is not so much. When I dance I can think; when I sing I can see! And then I will tell you what we can do! We will find a good way, a beautiful way. Come! Salvatore! Come!"

And Salvatore gave in!

That night they hardly knew where they wandered; they barely saw the swarthy faces pressing close around. The eyes of Gemma kept hungrily turning up to the face of her lover, striving to grip again the vagabond spirit that she had awakened to life. Salvatore himself could feel this part of his rise to respond. But his old self, the Schneider self of sobriety, order and thrift, this too rose to the struggle. And while the witch danced till the tenement street was a mass of delighted faces, while she sang with fiery heat the old mountain songs that had once made him thrill with strange new dreams and longings, Salvatore stood at his post firm as the ancient Colossus of Rhodes. His face was fixed in a gloomy scowl, through which the new soul of him broke only in faint occasional gleams. And the bellowing laugh was silent now, buried deep in the fortress. Stoutly did the house of Schneider stand the storm that night.

At last when the struggle had gone on for hours, after a desperate titling effort which brought the tremendous applause, when Gemma turned and met as before only that stony expression of gloom, her dusky face grew suddenly white. She came to him swiftly, stamped her feet, threw her little young body into a posture of terrible scorn, and with one hand outstretched and shaking, the girl poured forth her pent-up wrath.

"Now go! Go back to your Schneiders, your sausages, cows—and pigs! Go back! Go to sleep! Grow fatter than all the pigs in the world—and eat! You are good for nothing—nothing—nothing! Go!"

Salvatore looked down at his feet, gave a short angry laugh, and turned and went quickly away.

And Gemma, facing the crowds with cheeks that now were flaming, went into peal upon peal of wild hysterical laughter.

"Who," she shouted at last, "who will play while I dance?"

Three gallant countrymen sprang to the grinder. And laughing and shrieking in gay little bursts, the airy witch whirled round and round, till the whole street echoed with long and resounding "Bravos!" of applause.

Since then, in the snug little butcher shop, nine long happy years have glided smoothly by.

And now each morning, his books held firmly under his arm, a neat and decorous youngster trots dutifully to school. His face is plump, his stiff little flaxen curls peep demurely from under his cap; as he goes, his serious, steady blue eyes, standing strictly to business, are fixed determinedly straight ahead. And to give not the slightest chance for a doubt, his name is Otto Gottfried Schneider.

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