

THE SWORD OF ISLAM

Rafael Sabatini

Table of Contents

<u>THE SWORD OF ISLAM</u>	1
<u>Rafael Sabatini</u>	2
<u>I</u>	3
<u>II</u>	5
<u>III</u>	7
<u>IV</u>	9
<u>V</u>	11
<u>VI</u>	13
<u>VII</u>	15

THE SWORD OF ISLAM

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- I
 - II
 - III
 - IV
 - V
 - VI
 - VII
-

THE SWORD OF ISLAM

I

Ordinarily Dragut Reis — who was dubbed by the Faithful "The Drawn Sword of Islam" — loved Christians as the fox loves geese. But in that summer of 1550 his feelings acquired a far deeper malignancy; they developed into a direct and personal hatred that for intensity was second only to the hatred which the Christians bore Dragut.

The allied Christian forces, under the direction of their emperor, had smoked him out of his stronghold of Mehedia; they had seized that splendid city, and were in the act of razing it to the ground as the neighbouring Carthage had been razed of old.

Dragut reckoned up his losses with a gloomy, vengeful mind. He had lost his city; and from the eminence of a budding Basha in the act of founding a kingdom he had been cast down once more to be a wanderer upon the seas.

He had lost three thousand men, and amongst them the very flower of his fiery corsairs. He had lost some twelve thousand Christian slaves — the fruit of many a desperate raid by land and water. He had lost his lieutenant and nephew, Hisar, who was even now a captive in the hands of his inveterate enemy, Andrea Doria. It is little wonder that he lost his temper, too. But he recovered it quickly, that he might set about recovering the rest. He was not the man to waste his days in brooding over what was done. Yesterday and to-day are but as pledges in the hands of destiny.

So he returned thanks to Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, that he was still alive and free upon the seas, with three galleasses, twelve galleys, and five brigantines; and bent his energetic, resourceful, knavish mind to the matter of making good his losses. Meanwhile, he had been warned by the Sultan of Constantinople, the Exalted of Allah, that the Emperor Charles, not content with the mischief he had already wrought, had, in letters to the Grand Seignior, avowed his intent to pursue to the death "the pirate Dragut, a corsair odious to both God and man." He knew, moreover, that the emperor had entrusted the task to the greatest seaman of the day — to the terrible Admiral of Genoa, Andrea Doria, and that the Genoese was already at sea upon his quest.

Now, once already had Dragut been captured by the navy of Genoa, and for four years, which it afforded him little satisfaction to remember, he had toiled at an oar aboard the galley of the admiral's nephew, Gianettino Doria. He had known exposure to heat and cold; naked had he been broiled by the sun, and frozen by the rain; he had known aching muscles, hunger and thirst; filthy crawling things, and the festering sores begotten of the oarsman's bench; and his shoulders were still a criss-cross of scars where the bo'suns' whips had lashed him to revive his flagging energies.

All this had Dragut known, and he was not minded to renew the knowledge. It behoved him, therefore, to make ready fittingly to receive the admiral.

And by way at once of replenishing his coffers, venting a little of his vengeful heat, and marking his contempt for his Christian pursuers, he had made a sudden swoop upon the south-western littoral of Sicily. Beginning at Gergenti, he carried his raid as far north as Marsala, leaving ruin and desolation behind him. At the end of a week he stood off to sea again with the spoils of six townships and some three thousand picked captives of both sexes.

He would teach the infidel Christian dog to allude to him as "the pirate Dragut, a corsair odious to both God and man." He would so, by the beard of Mahomet!

He put the captives aboard a couple of galleys, in charge of his lieutenant, Othmani, and dispatched them straight to Algiers, to be sold there in the slave market. With the proceeds Othmani was to lay down fresh keels. Until these should be ready to reinforce his little fleet, Dragut judged it well to avoid encounters with the Genoese admiral, and with this intent he kept a southward course along the coast towards Tripoli. Towards sunset of the day on which Othmani's galleys set out alone for Algiers, a fresh breeze sprang up from the north and blew into the corsair's range of vision a tiny brown-sailed felucca, as it might have blown a leaf in autumn. It was hawk-eyed Dragut himself who, lounging in the poop of his galley, first sighted this tiny craft.

He pointed it out to Biretta, the renegade Calabrian gunner, who was near him.

"In the name of Allah," quoth he, "what walnut-shell is this that comes so furiously after us?"

Biretta, a massive, sallow fellow, laughed.

"The fury is not hers, but of the wind," said he. "She goes wherever it blows her. She'll be an Italian craft."

THE SWORD OF ISLAM

"Then the wind that blows her is the wind of Destiny. Haply she'll have news of Italy."

He turned on his heel and gave an order to a turbaned officer below. Instantly the brazen note of a trumpet rang out, clear above the creak and dip of oars. As instantly the rowers came to rest, and from the side of each galley six—and—twenty massive yellow oars stood out, their wet blades glistening in the evening sunlight.

Thus the Moslem fleet waited, rocking gently on the little swell that had arisen, and its quality was blazoned by the red and white ensign charged with a blue crescent, which floated from the masthead of Dragut's own galley.

On came the little brown-sailed felucca, hopelessly driven by what Dragut accounted the breeze of Destiny. At last, when she was in danger of being blown past them, Dragut crossed to meet her. As the galley's long prow ran alongside of her, grappling hooks were deftly flung to seize her at mast and gunwale, and but for these she must have been swept over by those gigantic oars.

From the prow, Dragut himself, a tall and handsome figure in gold-embroidered scarlet surcoat that descended to his knees, his snowy turban heightening the swarthiness of his hawk face, with its square-cut black beard, stood to challenge the crew of that ill-starred felucca.

There were aboard of her six scared knaves, something betwixt seamen and lackeys, whom the corsair's black eyes passed contemptuously over. He addressed himself to a couple who were seated in the stern-sheets — a tall and very elegant young gentleman, obviously Italian, and a girl, upon whose white, golden-headed loveliness the corsair's bold eyes glowed pleasurably.

"Who are you?" he demanded shortly in Italian.

The willowy young man answered for the twain, very composedly, as though it were a matter of everyday life with him to be held in the grappling-hooks of a Barbary pirate.

"My name is Ottavio Brancaleone. I am from Genoa on my way to Spain."

"To Spain!" quoth Dragut and he laughed. "You steer an odd course for Spain, or do you look to find it in Egypt?"

"We have lost our rudder," the gentleman explained, "and we were at the mercy of the wind."

"I trust you have found it as merciful as you hoped," said Dragut. He leered at the girl, who, in affright, shrank nearer her companion. "And the girl, sir? Who is she?"

"My — my sister."

"Had you told me different you had been the first Christian I ever knew to speak the truth," said Dragut, quite amiably. "Well well, 'tis plain you're not to be trusted to sail a boat of your own. Best come aboard and see if you can do better at an oar."

"I'll not be trespassing on your hospitality," said Brancaleone with that amazing coolness of his.

Dragut wasted no time in argument. It was not his way. Of the grinning, turbaned corsairs who swarmed like ants upon the prow, he flung a half-score down into the felucca. Brancaleone had time to stab but one of them before they overpowered him.

The prize proved far less insignificant than at first Dragut had imagined. For in addition to the eight slaves acquired — and the girl was fit to grace a sultan's harem — they found a great chest of newly minted ducats, which it took six men to heave aboard the galley, and a beautifully chiselled gold coffer full of gems of price. They found something more. On the gold coffer's lid was engraved the owner's name — Amelia Francesca Doria.

Dragut snapped down the lid with a prayer of thanks to Allah the One, and strode into the poop cabin, where the girl was confined.

"Madonna Amelia," he called softly, to test her identity. She looked up at once. "Will you tell me what is your kinship with the Admiral of Genoa?"

"I am his granddaughter, sir," she answered, with something fierce behind her outward softness, "and be sure that he will terribly avenge upon you any wrong that is done to me."

Dragut nodded and smiled.

"We are old friends, the admiral and I," said he, and went out again.

THE SWORD OF ISLAM

A mighty Nubian bearing a torch — for night had now descended with African suddenness — lighted him to the galley's waist, where, about the mainmast, lay huddled the seven pinioned prisoners.

With the curved toe of his scarlet slipper the corsair touched Messer Brancaleone.

"Tell me, dog," said he, "all that you know of Messer Andrea Doria."

"That is soon told," answered Brancaleone. "I know nothing, nor want to."

"Therein, of course, you lie," said Dragut, "for one thing, you know his granddaughter."

Brancaleone blinked, and recovered.

"True, and several others of his family. But I conceived your question to concern his movements. I know that he is upon the seas, that he is seeking you, and that he has sworn to take you alive, and that when they take you — as I pray God they will — they will so deal with you that you shall implore them of their Christian charity to hang you."

"And is that all you know?" quoth Dragut, unruffled. "You did not, peradventure, sight this fleet of his as you were sailing?"

"I did not."

"Do you think that with a match between your fingers you might remember?"

"I might invent," said the Italian. "I have told you the truth, Messer Dragut. Torture could but gain you falsehood."

The corsair looked searchingly into that comely young face, then he turned away as if satisfied. But as he was departing Messer Brancalone called him back. The Italian's imperturbability had suddenly departed. Anxiety amounting almost to terror sounded in his voice, "What fate do you reserve for Madonna Amelia?" he asked.

Dragut considered him, and smiled a little. He had no particular rancour against his prisoner; indeed, he was inclining to admiration for the cool courage which the man had shown. At the same time, there was no room for sentiment in the heart of the corsair. He was quite pitiless. He had been asked a question, and he answered it without malice.

"Our lord the Sublime Suleyman," said he, "is as keen a judge of beauty as any living man. I do the girl the honour of accounting her a gift worthy even of the Exalted of Allah. So I shall keep her safe against my next voyage to Constantinople."

And then Brancalone's little lingering self-possession left him utterly. From his writhing lips came a stream of vituperation, expressions of his impotent rage, which continued even after the Nubian had struck him upon the mouth and Dragut had taken his departure.

Next day a slave on Dragut's galley who had been taken ill at his oar was, in accordance with custom, unshackled and heaved overboard. Brancalone, stripped to his delicate white skin, was chained in the fellow's empty place. There were seven men to each oar, and Brancalone's six companions were all Christians and all white — or had been before exposure had tanned them to the colour of mahogany. Of these, three were Spaniards, two were Italian, and the other was a Frenchman. All were indescribably filthy and unkempt, and it was with a shudder that the delicately nurtured Italian gentleman wondered was he destined to become as they?

Up and down the gangway between the rowers' benches strode two Moslem bo'suns, armed with long whips of bullock-hide, and it was not long ere one of them, considering that Brancalone was not putting his share of effort into his task, sent that cruel lash to raise a burning weal upon his tender flesh. He was sparingly fed with his half-brutalized companions upon dried figs and dates, and he was given a little tepid water to drink when he thirsted, which was often. He slept in his shackles on the rowers' bench, which was but, some four feet wide, and, despite the sheepskins with which that bench was padded, it was not long ere the friction of his constant movement began to chafe and blister his flesh.

In the scorching noontide of the second day he collapsed, fainting upon his oar. He was unshackled and dragged out upon the gangway. There a bucket of sea-water was flung over him to revive him, and the too-swift healing action of the salt upon his seared flesh was a burning agony. He was put back to his oar again with the warning that did he permit himself a second time the luxury of swooning he would have the whole ocean in which to revive.

On the third day they sighted land, and towards evening the galleys threaded their way one by one through the shoals of the Boca de Cantara into the spacious lagoon on the north-east side of the Island of Jerbah, and there came to rest.

It was Dragut's intent to lie snug in that remote retreat until Othmani should be ready with the reinforcements that were to enable the corsair to take the seas once more against the Admiral of Genoa. But it would seem that already the admiral was closer upon his heels than he had supposed, and that, trackless as are the ocean ways, yet

THE SWORD OF ISLAM

Andrea Doria had by some mysterious means, contrived to gather information as he came that had kept him upon the invisible spoor of his quarry.

IV

Not a doubt but that the folk on that ravaged Sicilian seaboard would be eager to inform the redoubtable admiral of the direction in which the Moslem galleys had faded out of sight. Perhaps even that empty felucca left tossing upon the tideless sea had served as an index to the way the corsairs had taken, and perhaps from the mainland, from Monastir, or one of the other cities now in Christian hands, a glimpse of Dragut's fleet had been caught and Doria had been warned. Be that as it may, not a week had Dragut been anchored at Jerbah when one fine morning brought a group of friendly islanders with the alarming news that a fleet of galleys was descending upon the island from the north.

The news took Dragut ashore in a hurry with a group of officers. From the narrow spur of land at the harbour's mouth he surveyed the advancing ships. What already he had more than feared became absolute certainty. Two-and-twenty royal galleys were steering straight for the Boca de Cantara, and the foremost was flying the admiral's ensign. Back to his fleet went Dragut for cannon and slaves, and so feverishly did these toil under the lash of his venomous tongue, and of his bo'suns' whips, that within an hour he had erected a battery at the mouth of the harbour and fired a salute straight into the Genoese line as the galleys were in the very act of dropping anchor. Thereupon the fleet of Doria stood off out of range, and hung there, well content to wait, knowing that all that was now required on their part was patience. The fox was trapped, and the sword of Islam was like to be sheathed at last.

Forthwith the jubilant Doria sent word to the Emperor that he held Dragut fast, and he dispatched messengers to the Viceroys of Sicily and Naples asking for reinforcements with which, if necessary, to force the issue. He meant this time to leave nothing to chance.

Dragut, on his side, employed his time in fortifying the Boca de Cantara. A fort arose there, growing visible under the eyes of the Genoese, and provoking the amusement of that fierce veteran, Doria. Sooner or later, Dragut must decide him to come forth from his bottle-necked refuge, and the longer he put off that evil day the more overwhelming would be the numbers assembled to destroy him.

Never since Gianettino Doria had surprised him in the road of Goialatta, off the coast of Corsica, on that famous occasion when he was made prisoner, had Dragut found himself in so desperately tight a corner. He sat under the awning of the poop of his galley, and cursed the Genoese with that astounding and far-reaching fluency in which the Moslem is without rival upon earth. He pronounced authoritatively upon the evil reputation of Doria's mother and the inevitably shameful destiny of his daughters and their female offspring. He foretold how dogs would of a certainty desecrate the admiral's grave, and he called perfervidly upon Allah to rot the bones and destroy the house of his arch-enemy. Then, observing that Allah remained disdainfully aloof, he rose up one day in a mighty passion, and summoned his officers.

"This skulking here will not avail us," he snarled at them, as if it were by their contriving that he was trapped. "By delay we but increase our peril. What is written is written. Allah has bound the fate of each man about his neck. Betide what may, to-night we take the open sea."

"And by morning you'll have found the bottom of it," drawled a voice from one of the oars.

Dragut, who was standing on the gangway between the rowers' benches, whipped round with an oath upon the speaker. He encountered the languid eyes of Messer Brancaleone. The repose of the last few days had restored the Italian's vigour, and certain thoughts that lately he had been thinking had revived his courage.

"Are you weary of life?" quoth the infuriated corsair. "Shall I have you hanged ere we go out to meet your friends out yonder?"

"You're very plainly a fool, Messer Dragut," was the weary answer. "Hang me, and you hang the only man in all your fleet who can show you the way out of this trap in which you're taken."

Dragut started between anger and amazement. "How can that be?"

"Strike off my fetters, restore me my garments, and give me proper food,

"You can show me a way out of this trap?" he cried. "What way may that and I'll discuss it with you."

Dragut glowered.

"We have a shorter way to make men speak," said he.

THE SWORD OF ISLAM

Brancaleone smiled, and shook his head.
"You think so? I might prove you wrong."

It was odd what a power of conviction dwelt in his languid tones. The corsair issued an order and turned away. A half-hour later Messer Brancaleone, nourished, washed and clothed, once more the elegant, willowy Italian in his doublet of sapphire velvet and in pleasantly variegated hose of blue and white, stepped on to the poop-deck where Dragut awaited him.

Seated cross-legged upon a gorgeous silken divan that was wrought in green and blue and gold, the handsome corsair combed his square black beard with fretful fingers. Behind him, stark naked save for his white loin-cloth, stood his gigantic Nubian, his body oiled until it shone like ebony, armed with a gleaming scimitar.

"Now, sir," growled Dragut, "what is this precious plan of yours — briefly?"

"You begin where we should end," said the imperturbable Genoese. "I owe you no favours, Messer Dragut, and I bear you no affection that I should make you a free gift of your life and liberty. My eyes have seen something to which yours are blind, and my wits have conceived something of which your own are quite incapable. These things, sir, are for sale. Ere I part with them we must agree on the price."

Dragut pondered him from under scowling brows savagely. He could scarce believe that the world held so much impudence.

"And what price do you suggest?" he snarled, half-derisively, by way of humouring the Genoese.

"Why, as to that, since I offer you life and liberty, it is but natural that I should claim my own life and liberty in return, and similarly the liberty of Madonna Amelia and of my servants whom you captured; also, it is but natural that I should require the restoration of the money and jewels you have taken from us, and since you have deprived us of our felucca, it is no more than proper that you should equip us with a vessel in which to pursue the journey that you interrupted. Considering the time we have lost in consequence of this interruption, it is but just that you should make this good as far as possible by presenting me with a craft that is capable of the utmost speed. I will accept a galley of six-and-twenty oars, manned by a proper complement of slaves."

"And is that all?" roared Dragut.

"No," said Brancaleone quietly. "That is but the restitution due to me. We come now to the price of the service I am to render you. When you were Gianettino Doria's prisoner, Barbarossa paid for you, as all the world knows, a ransom of three thousand ducats. I will be more reasonable."

"Will you so?" snorted Dragut. "By the splendour of Allah, you'll need to be!"

"I will accept one thousand ducats."

"May Allah blot thee out, thou impudent son of shame!" cried the corsair, and he heaved himself up in a fury.

"You compel me to raise the price to fifteen hundred ducats," said Brancaleone smoothly. "I must be compensated for abuse, since I cannot take satisfaction for it as between one honourable Christian gentleman and another."

It was good for Dragut that his feelings suddenly soared to a pitch of intensity that defied expression, else might the price have been raised even beyond the figure of the famous ransom that Barbarossa had paid. Mutely he stood glowering, clenching and unclenching his sinewy hands. Then he half-turned to his Nubian swordsman.

"Ali ——" he began, when Brancaleone once more cut in.

"Ah, wait," said he. "I pray you calm yourself. Remember how you stand, and that Andrea Doria holds you trapped. Do nothing that will destroy your only chance. Time enough to bid Ali hack off my head when I have failed."

That speech arrested Dragut's anger in full flow. He wheeled upon the Genoese once more. "You accept that alternative?"

Brancaleone met his gaze blandly.

"Why not? I have no slightest fear of failure. I have said that I can show you how to win clear of this trap and make the admiral the laughing-stock of the world."

"Speak, then," cried Dragut, his fierce eyes kindling.

"If I do so before you have agreed my terms then I shall have nothing left to sell."

Dragut turned aside and strode to the taffrail. He looked across the shimmering blue water to the fortifications

THE SWORD OF ISLAM

at the harbour's mouth; with the eyes of his imagination he looked beyond, at the fleet of Genoa riding out there in patient conviction that it held its prey. The price that Brancalone asked was outrageous. A galley and some two hundred Christian slaves to row it, and fifteen hundred ducats! In all it amounted to more than the ransom that Kheyr-ed-Din Barbarossa had paid for him. Yet Dragut must pay it or count his destiny fulfilled. He came to reflect that he would pay it gladly enough to be out of this tight corner.

He came about again. He spoke of torture once more, but in a half-hearted sort of way; for he did not himself believe that it would be effective with a man of Brancalone's mettle.

VI

Brancaleone laughed at the threat and shrugged his shoulders.

"You may, as profitably hang me, Messer Dragut. Your infidel barbarities would quite as effectively seal my lips."

"We might torture the woman," said Dragut the ingenious.

On the words Brancaleone turned white to the lips; but it was the pallor of bitter, heart-searing resolve, not the pallor of such fear as Dragut had hoped to awaken. He advanced a step, his imperturbability all gone, and he spat his words into the face of the corsair with the fierceness of a cornered wildcat.

"Attempt it," said he, "and as God's my witness I leave you to your fate at the hands of Genoa — ay, though my heart should burst with the pain of my silence. I am a man, Messer Dragut — never doubt it."

"I do not," said Dragut convinced. "I agree to your terms. Show me a way out of Doria's clutches, and you shall have all that you have asked for."

Trembling still from his recent emotion, Brancaleone hoarsely bade the corsair to call up his officers and repeat his words before them.

"And you shall make oath upon this matter," he added. "Men say of you that you are a faithful Moslem. I mean to put it to the test."

Dragut, now all eagerness to know what plan was stirring in his prisoner's brain, unable to brook further suspense in this affair, called up his officers, and before them all, taking Allah to witness, he made oath upon the beard of the Prophet, that if Brancaleone could show him deliverance, he, on his side, would recompense the Genoese to the extent demanded. Thereafter Dragut and Brancaleone went ashore with no other attendant but the Nubian swordsman. It was the Genoese who led the way, not towards the fort, as Dragut had expected, but in the opposite direction. Arrived at the northernmost curve of that almost circular lagoon, where the ground was swampy, Brancaleone paused. He pointed across a strip of shallow land, that was no more than a half-mile or so in width, to the blue-green sea beyond. Part of this territory was swampy, and part was sand; vegetation there was of the scantiest; some clumps of reeds, an odd date palm, its crest rustling faintly in the breeze, and nothing else.

"It is really very simple," said the Italian. "Yonder lies your way."

A red-legged stork rose from the edge of the marsh and went circling overhead. Dragut's face empurpled with rage. He deemed that this smooth fellow dared to mock him.

"Are my galleys winged like that stork, thou fool?" he demanded passionately. "Or are they wheeled like chariots, that I can sail them over dry land?"

Brancaleone returned him a glance that was full of stupefaction.

"I protest," said he, "that for a man of your reputation you fill me with amazement. I said you were a dull fellow. I little dreamed how dull. Nay, now, suppress your rage. Truth is a very healing draught, and you have need of it."

"I compute, now, that aboard your ships there will be, including slaves, some three thousand men. I doubt not you could press another thousand from the island into your service. How long, do you think, would it take four thousand men to dig a channel deep enough to float your shallow galleys through that strip of land?"

Dragut's fierce eyes flickered as if he had been menaced with a blow.

"By Allah!" he ejaculated; and gripped his beard. "By Allah!"

"In a week the thing were easily done, and meanwhile your fort there will hold the admiral in play. Then, one dark night, you slip through this canal and stand away to the south, so that by sunrise you shall have vanished beyond the skyline, leaving the admiral to guard an empty trap."

Dragut laughed aloud now in almost childish glee, and otherwise signified his delight by the vehemence with which he testified to the unity of Allah. Suddenly he checked. His eyes narrowed as they rested upon Brancaleone.

"'Tis a scurvy trick you play your lady's grandsire!" said he.

The Genoese shrugged.

"Every man for himself, Messer Dragut. We understand each other, I think. 'Tis not for love of you that I do

THE SWORD OF ISLAM

this thing."

"I would it were," said the corsair, with in odd sincerity. And as they returned to the galleys it was observed that Dragut's arm was about the shoulders of the infidel, and that he spoke with him as with a brother.

VII

The fact is that Dragut, fired with admiration of Brancalone's resourcefulness, deplored that so fine a spirit should of necessity be destined to go down to the Pit. He spoke to him now of the glories of Islam, and of the future that must await a gentleman of Brancalone's endowments in the ranks of the Faithful. But this was a matter in which Brancalone proved politely obdurate, and Dragut had not the time to devote to his conversion, greatly as he desired it. There was the matter of that canal to engage him.

The Italian's instructions were diligently carried out. Daily the fort at the Boca de Cantara would belch forth shot at the Genoese navy, which stood well out of range. To the admiral this was but the barking of a dog that dared not come within biting distance; and the waste of ammunition roused his scorn of that pirate Dragut whom he held at his mercy.

There came a day, however, when the fort was silent; it was followed by another day of silence, in the evening of which one of the admiral's officers suggested that all might not be well. Doria agreed, laughing heartily in his long white beard.

"All is not at all well with that dog Dragut," said he. "He wants us within range of his guns. The ruse is childish."

And so the Genoese fleet continued well out of range of the empty fort, what time Dragut himself was some scores of miles away, speeding for the Archipelago and the safety of the Dardanelles as fast as his slaves could row.

In the words of the Spanish historian Marmol, who has chronicled the event, Dragut had left Messer Andrea Doria "with the dog to hold."

Brancalone accompanied the Moslem fleet at first, though now aboard the galley which Dragut had given him in accordance with their agreement. And with the Genoese sailed the lovely Amelia Francesca Doria, his chest of gold, the jewels, and the fifteen hundred ducats that Dragut — grimly stifling his reluctance — had paid him. On the second day after leaving Jerbah, Messer Brancalone and the corsair captain parted company, with mutual expressions of goodwill, and the Genoese put about and steered a north-westerly course for the coast of Spain.

It was some months ere Dragut learnt the true inwardness of Messer Brancalone's conduct. He had the story from a Genoese captive, the captain of a carack which the corsair scuttled in the Straits of Messina. This fellow's name, too, was Brancalone, upon learning which Dragut asked him was he kin to one Ottavio Brancalone, who had gone to Spain with the admiral's grand-daughter.

"He was my cousin," the man answered.

And Dragut now learnt that in the teeth of the opposition of the entire Doria family the irrepressible Brancalone had carried off Madonna Amelia. The admiral had news of it as he was putting to sea, and it was in pursuit not only of Dragut, but also of the runaways, that he had gone south as far as Jerbah, having reason to more than suspect that they were aboard one of Dragut's galleys. The admiral had sworn to hang Brancalone from his yardarm ere he returned to port, and his bitterness at the trick Dragut had played was increased by the circumstance that Brancalone, too, had got clear away.

Dragut was very thoughtful when he heard that story.

"And to think," said he afterwards to Othmani, "that I paid that unconscionable dog fifteen hundred ducats, and gave him my best galley manned by two hundred Christian slaves that he might render himself as great a service as ever he rendered me!"

But he bore no malice. After all, the Genoese had behaved generously in that he had left Dragut — though not from motives of generosity — the entire glory of the exploit. Dragut's admiration for the impudent fellow was, if anything, increased. Was he not, after all, the only Christian who had ever bested Dragut in a bargain? If he had a regret it was that so shrewd a spirit should abide in the body of an infidel. But Allah is all-knowing.