

The Last of the Great Swashbucklers

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*He was born with a gift of laughter and
a sense that the world was mad.*

1.

Rafael Sabatini was born April 28, 1875 in what was then the small town of Jesi, Italy, which is near the Adriatic and the thriving seaport of Ancona, Italy. Today, Jesi is basically a suburb of Ancona, in what is called the Italian Marches.

Both of Rafael's parents were part of the artistic—more precisely, the musical world. His father, Vincenzo Sabatini, an Italian, was a fine opera singer. His mother, who went by the stage name of Anna Trafford, but whose real name was Anna Jelley, had gone to Italy from the Lancashire area in England to study piano. Although it appears improbable, once in Italy, it was discovered she had a fine soprano singing voice, one well worth cultivating, and she switched her focus entirely to singing. Rafael's parents had met in the unlikely location of the Philippines, where they were performing.

When it was discovered that Anna was pregnant, the couple returned to Vincenzo's home town of Jesi, where his family could help care for Anna during her convalescence. Today, the square in old Jesi in which Rafael was born bears a plaque in his honor. Strangely enough, the plaque focuses more on the films made from Sabatini's books than it does on the books themselves. But I suppose it could be argued that any publicity is better than none.

According to his birth certificate, Rafael was illegitimate. Today that would be a matter of little concern, but in 1875 Catholic Italy, it was more important. It is hard to tell what this bohemian couple felt about the matter. They no doubt had plenty of chances to marry, so we can assume they chose, for whatever reason, not to. For that matter, it is difficult to say if they ever married. At some point, Anna started to use the name Madame

Sabatini. Whether that was affectation (a personal attribute she proudly carried throughout her life), a result of common-law, or an actuality we can't say.

Rafael's attitude about the matter is open to conjecture as well. On the surface, looking at the books he wrote, it might appear that he was troubled by the illegitimacy. After all, we are talking about the height of the Victorian Era, with its rigid social strictures. On the other hand, there has been a long tradition in Europe of the acceptance of illegitimacy. Plenty of illegitimate children of the aristocracy have risen to high positions in the military and government. In several of Sabatini's novels illegitimacy is a factor, in some cases a central focus of the book—starting with his most famous novel *Scaramouche* and including such books as *Tavern Knight*, *The Lion's Skin*, and *Master-At-Arms*. However, one must always be cautious about reading too much personal information into Sabatini's fiction. Indeed, he disdained the idea that existed in much modern fiction that a writer was nothing more than “an elegant reporter”.

Sabatini, throughout his career, was reticent about personal matters, so we know virtually nothing about his relationship with his parents. His relationship with his father seems to have been a distant one. But with Sabatini's Victorian/Edwardian veneer it is difficult to say. Few Victorians publicly displayed their emotions. In one brief letter Sabatini talked about a rushing trip to attend his father's funeral. But there doesn't seem to be the level of grief that he would express at the death of his own son years later. Rafael's mother was very much like the women Rafael would one day marry. She was flamboyant, an Artiste, with a capital A, and as the years passed a colorful eccentric.

Evidently Rafael's parents, continuing their careers in opera, must have felt that the life of an itinerate opera singer, constantly on the road, was no place for a youngster. Therefore, Rafael was sent to the home of his grandfather, John Jelley, in a village called Maghull seven miles or so north of Liverpool. Today it is very much a suburb of Liverpool. Sabatini, who his entire life was something of a scholar, must have started early, for the lad is listed in the 1881 census as a “scholar,” at the ripe old age of six. Apparently he was attending a private school.

Rafael lived with his grandfather until he was seven. During those years in England, from approximately two and a half to seven years of age, several important aspects of his personality developed. First, Rafael was constantly exposed to the English language, something that hadn't happened

before. According to John McCormack's wife, Rafael's father did not speak English at all. (Whether he spoke other languages is open to debate. Living in Portugal, Vincenzo might well have known more than just Italian.) In any case, it was Italian that was spoken in the household. In England Rafael was able to hone his skills in English. Second, Sabatini was introduced to the lush and green English countryside in Lancashire. The love of nature would remain with him, until eventually in the early 1930s he settled for the last twenty years of his life in the English countryside, far from urban centers. Third, Rafael took to reading like a duck to water. He wrote, "Before I first left England at seven I had read . . . But if I were to tell you what I had read, you would not believe me." All the attributes of the adult Sabatini were already present in the youngster of seven.

In 1882 Rafael was called back to the side of his parents. After long and distinguished careers, Vincenzo and Anna retired from the operatic stage and joined the ranks of singing teachers. At first they earned their livelihood in Porto (also called Oporto), Portugal. A large Portuguese port might seem a strange locale for an Italian tenor and English soprano to set up a school, but according to Rafael, just before retirement they had achieved considerable success in the Portuguese city, and believed they could build a successful school there. As teachers they were held in high esteem. The King of Portugal knighted Vincenzo for his educational work. Vincenzo's fame as a teacher spread so far that the young Irish tenor John McCormack, who of course went on to an illustrious singing career, heard of the teacher as far away as Dublin and studied with Vincenzo in Italy.

For Rafael, there were probably two important aspects to the move to Portugal. First, there was another language added to his repertoire. He now mastered Portuguese, as well as English and Italian. Second, Rafael attended school at a Trappist Monastery in Oporto. The boy probably got a good grounding in the classics and in languages such as Latin and Greek; but the good monks were unable to implant any religious fervor in the youngster. Throughout his writing career Sabatini time and again would rail against fanaticism of all kinds, but he was especially adamant about religious fanaticism. *The Strolling Saint*, *Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition*, and *The Hounds of God* detail religious fanaticism. *Captain Blood* and *The Nuptials of Corbal* focus on political fanaticism. In addition, Sabatini wrote a number of short stories—collected and uncollected—that highlighted the issue of fanaticism. Tolerance was a virtue Sabatini consistently promoted.

After several years, Rafael's parents returned to Italy, settling in Milan; with La Scala a prominent feature of Milan, it was an ideal location for the opera teachers. Rafael went off to school in Zug, Switzerland. For Rafael, those school years marked the beginning of Sabatini's life-long love affair with the Alpine country. It is probable that this is the time when Rafael developed his life-long love of skiing. Throughout his adult life, with the exception of war time, annual trips to Switzerland were the order of the day for him and his family.

While attending school in Switzerland, he added two more languages to his repertoire. Zug is in a German-speaking canton, so the schoolboy picked up that language. Additionally, Switzerland being tri-lingual, many of the students spoke French, so Rafael learned that language also. It was while in the Swiss school that Rafael first tried his hand at writing. It was for a student-circulated paper—in French, interestingly enough. Alas, none of that early work has survived.

Sabatini now had command of Italian, Portuguese, German, French, Spanish, and English. In addition, he also had knowledge of Greek and Latin from his Catholic school days. These latter two languages would prove valuable to him in later years when he did research into the Inquisition and into the lives of the Borgia family, producing controversial historical studies.

However, the most important part of Rafael's education was occurring outside the classroom. Apparently he was devouring romance novels by the bushel. At the age of twelve or so he encountered his first two idols—the novelist Jules Verne (1828-1905) and the American historian William Prescott (1796-1859), who was, in those days, an influential figure in historical writing. Among Prescott's most important works are *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843) and *History of the Conquest of Peru* (1847).

Since Sabatini wrote no science fiction, we can assume that Verne's influence on the young writer was primarily in the area of constructing fast-paced plots. Prescott's influence on Sabatini, however, is especially noteworthy. Indeed, it is quite remarkable how many attitudes of the historian Rafael would assume himself in later years, especially in his non-fiction. Prescott, for instance, believed that a historian should have a grasp of the language of the country, epoch, or person he was studying. Sabatini echoed that idea. Both Sabatini and Prescott believed that you had to go to the original source for your information; secondhand information was suspect, unreliable, perhaps biased. Both men believed that you had to