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P. R. James**

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**LEONORA D'ORCO.**

**BY**

**G. P. R. JAMES, ESQ.**

**LEONORA D'ORCO.**  
**A HISTORICAL ROMANCE.**

**BY**

**G. P. R. JAMES, ESQ.,**  
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**"TICONDEROGA," "AGNES SOREL," ETC.**

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**LEIPZIG: ALPHONS DÜRR**  
**1860.**

**LEONORA D'ORCO.**

**CHAPTER I.**

There is a mountain pass, not far from the shores of the Lago Maggiore, which has been famous of late years for anything but *fêtes* and festivals. There, many an unfortunate traveller has been relieved of the burden of worldly wealth, and sometimes of all earthly cares; and there, many a postillion has quietly received, behind an oak-tree or a chesnut, a due share of the day's earnings from a body of those Italian gentlemen whose life is generally spent in working upon the highways, either with a long gun in their hands or a chain round their middles.

But, dear reader, the times I speak of were centuries ago--those named "the good old times," though Heaven only knows why they were called "good."

The world was in a very strange state just then. The resurrection of art--the recovery of letters--the new birth of science, marked out the age as one of extraordinary development; but the state of society from which all these bright things sprang--flowers rising from a dunghill--was one of foul and filthy fermentation, where every wickedness that the corrupt heart of man can devise worked and travailed for the birth of better things. That pass, in those "good old times," saw every day as much high-handed wrong and ruthless bloodshed as any pass in all Italy at the present time.

But such was not destined to be the case upon the present occasion, though the times of which I write were the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries. Guilt, and fraud, and even murder, often in those days covered themselves with golden embroidery and perfumed flowers; and, interposed between acts of violence, rapine, and destruction, were brilliant festivals, the luxurious banquet, and the merry dance.

Wickedness, like virtue, proposes to itself enjoyment for its object; and the Bible is right when, as it often does, it uses the word wisdom as synonymous with virtue, for in the wisdom of the means is the certainty of the attainment. But the men of those days, as if they felt--how could they avoid feeling?--the insecurity of the ground on which they based their endeavours for the acquisition of happiness, were content to take the distant and doubtful payment by instalments of fruition, and let the revel, the pageant, the debauch go to the great reckoning as so much gained, without thinking of the terrible *per contra*.

That pass was well fitted to afford a scene for many of the dealings of those or these days. There the robber might lurk perfectly concealed in the dark nooks and crannies of the rocks, to spring forth upon the unwary traveller when least prepared--there a handful of men might defend the passage against an army--there, the gay, happy party might raise the wild echo of the mountains to their joyous songs--and there the artist might linger for long hours, studying the fantastic shapes into which the ground has been thrown, and filling up the shadowy recesses with forms such as Rosa loved to draw.

For somewhat less than two miles, the road, which, even in those days, was a good and well-constructed highway, passed between two ranges of rocks. On one side--the left hand, going north--a stream ran by the side of the path, some twenty feet below its level; but the bank itself could be easily descended to the river, and the stream, though deep in some places, was easily to be crossed at others, where it spread out over fallen rocks and stones. But what was the use of crossing it? On the other side was no path, and nothing but tall, ragged cliffs, in some places upright and flat, as if they had been cut with a knife, in others assuming the most wild and fantastic forms. Here was a strange grinning face, of gigantic size, starting forth in stone from the surface of the cliff; there a whole statue standing out from the rocky mass, as if a sentinel guarding the pass; then would come a castle with towers and keep, ballium and barbican and all, and yet nought but mere rock, wrought by no hands but those of time, earthquake, and tempest. But every here and there, from pinnacle and point, or out of dell and cavern, would spring a dark pine or light green ash; and the sight of even vegetable life would harmonize the scene with human thoughts.

The average width of the bottom of the valley, including river and road, might be a hundred yards; but there was one place, nearly at the middle of the gorge--probably where, in ages far remote, before history or even tradition began, the stream, rushing new-born from the mountains, had paused in its course to gather strength ere it forced its way through the rocky barrier opposed to it--in which a little amphitheatre appeared, the mountains receding on either hand to let the river make a circuit round a low knoll and its adjacent meadow, some three hundred yards across. A clump of trees had gathered together on the top of the little hillock, the turf was short and smooth; the stream, though still rapid, and fretting at the fallen stones in its way, had less of the torrent-like turbulence which it displayed where the pass was narrower; now and then, too, it would lapse into a quiet, deep, unruffled pool, where the many-coloured rocks and pebbles at the bottom could be seen, glazed and brightened by its crystal waters; and the white clouds, floating over the deep blue Italian sky, would seem to pause, with curious pleasure, in their flight, to look down for a moment on that fair spot, amid so much stony ruggedness.

Through this wild gorge, toward noon of a soft but breezy spring day in the year of grace 1494, coming from the northwest, rode a gay, a numerous, and a brilliant party; too few, indeed, to constitute an army, but too many and too well armed to fear the attack of any party of banditti less in number than those great mercenary bands whose leisure in those days was seldom long enough to rob on their own account, so great was the demand for their services, in the same way, among the princes of the land. And yet the cavalcade of which I speak did not altogether assume a military aspect. It is true that the rear was brought up by a body of a couple of hundred lances, and that between these and those who rode foremost were a number of gentlemen, old and young, from beneath whose surcoats glanced corslet and cuissard, and who, though they rode with velvet cap on head and sometimes a hawk upon the wrist, had helmet, and lance, and shield near at hand, borne by gay and splendidly-dressed pages. But the most remarkable group had no warlike signs about it. All men but ecclesiastics and serfs, in those days, bore some kind of arms during their most peaceful avocations; and thus there were swords and daggers enough among the little party; but there were men in the robes of the Church--bishops, and archdeacons, and even a monk or two, while those of secular habit looked more like the carpet-treading, soft-lying children of a court than warriors born for strife and conquest.

Thrown a little in advance of the mass rode two men-at-arms, heavily harnessed, and behind them, at perhaps twenty paces distance, five or six others, lance in hand. Then, however, came the principal group, at the head of which, with a crimson velvet bonnet or round cap on his head, ornamented with a single large ruby clasping a long, thin feather, appeared, as it seemed, a mere youth. He was short in stature, and somewhat, though not remarkably, deformed; at least, the fall of his wide and fur-trimmed mantle concealed in a great degree the defect of symmetry in his figure. All, indeed, had been done that the tailor's courtly art could do to conceal it, and the eye was more inclined to rest upon the countenance than upon the form. The face was not very handsome, but there was a frank, bold expression about it which won upon the regard at first sight; and yet a certain look of suffering--the trace, as it seemed, of a struggle between a high courage and bodily infirmity--saddened his aspect. A mere passing stranger would have fixed the age of that young horseman probably at eighteen or nineteen, but he had seen, in reality, between twenty-two and twenty-three years; and although many vicissitudes had not attended his course, enough experience of the world, and courts, and men, had been his to have made him older in appearance and older in mind than he was.

Grouped half a step behind this figure, and stretching quite across the road--for no one would yield a place which he could fairly claim near the fountain of all honour and the source of advancement--were a number of cavaliers, of all sorts of callings, distinguished in general by some peculiarity of costume. At least, any eye accustomed to the dress of that day could distinguish among them the hard old warrior, the bishop, the high officer of the law, and gay and gallant courtiers not a few, among whom, holding their rank immediately behind the principal personage, were six pages, habited in what was called purple cloth of gold, mounted on light but beautiful horses, bedizened with silken housings, and knots of ribbons, and flaunting feathers.

Among these last was no rivalry for place, for each had his particular station assigned to him; but with the rest an occasional angry word, and a more frequent angry look, would mark the indignation of some aspiring courtier at what he thought an attempt upon the part of another to get before him.

"My Lord of Tremouille," said one sharply, "I wish you would refrain your horse; I have hardly space to ride."

"He will not be refrained, my reverend lord," replied the other, "'tis an ambitious beast, well nigh as aspiring as a churchman. He will forward, whatever be in his way. Good sooth, he knows his place well too, and thinks that, though he might make a poor show in a king's closet, he may be found better near his sovereign in the march or the battle than any of the mules of the Church."

The words were spoken in no very low tone, and probably they reached the ears of the young man at the head of the cavalcade; but he took no notice, though the prelate turned somewhat red, and several who were near laughed low; and a moment or two after, the whole party emerged from the narrower part of the gorge into that little amphitheatre which I have lately described.

"Why, what is here?" cried the leader of the band, reining up his horse. "This is a scene of fairy land? Who expected to meet with such a spectacle in this desert?"

"Why, sire," replied the prelate, "you may remember his Excellency the Regent of Milan promised to meet you somewhere near this spot--at least before you reached the city."

"Ah, Louis the Moor knows where to lay chaff for young birds," muttered La Tremouille; "commend me to these Italians for wheedling and trickery."

"Hush, hush!" said one of his companions; "you cannot deny, Tremouille, that this Ludovic is a stout and skilful soldier, as well as a shrewd politician. I know not how he gained the name of 'The Moor,' but---"

"Why, they gave him the name because all his relations die black, or turn black after they die," answered the gallant soldier, with a bitter laugh; "but, on my life, the pageant is pretty. 'Tis a gallantry not expected in this wild place. Only, my good friend, look to what wine you drink at Ludovic's expense; it sometimes has a strange taste, and stranger consequences, men say, especially upon his enemies."

"I am no enemy," answered the other; "you, look to yourself, Tremouille. You must either dare the boccone or die of thirst."

"Nay, he will find out that I am one of his best friends," answered La Tremouille; "for I would fain have dissuaded the king from this wild expedition; and Master Ludovic, who urged it so strongly, will find, before he has done, that, ask a Frenchman to dinner, and he'll stay to supper also."

The scene which had excited so much surprise, and even admiration among the French, derived its principal interest from the ruggedness of the objects around. Some twenty or thirty small tents had been pitched in the little meadow, round which the river circled, each with its pennon fluttering from the top of the gilt pole which supported it, while the group of trees upon the little monticule in the midst was so interlaced, at some eight feet from the ground, with

ribbons and festoons of flowers, that it afforded as complete a shade from the sun as any of the pavilions. The trunks of the trees, too, were bound round with garlands, and although neither Tasso nor Guarini had yet fully revived the taste for the pastoral amongst the Italian people, the groups which were seen, both in the tents and under the branches, were all habited as shepherds and shepherdesses, according to the most approved notions of Golden Age costume in those days.

In each of the pavilions, the canvas door of which was thrown wide open, was spread a table apparently well supplied, and beneath the trees appeared a kingly board covered with fine linen and rich plate, while a buffet behind groaned beneath a mass of gold and silver. But the sharp eye of La Tremouille soon espied that the two shepherds who stood at either end of the buffet, as well as two more behind it, were especially well armed for a pastoral race; and he did not fail to comment with a laugh upon the anomaly.

"Pooh! pooh!" cried the young King Charles VIII., turning his head over his shoulder to the stout soldier, but smiling at his remarks, "why should not shepherds have arms? They must defend their muttons, especially when such wolves as you are about!"

La Tremouille answered with a proverb of very ancient date, "Well, sire, they cannot say I am a wolf in sheep's clothing. God send your majesty may not find some in this country, where they are plenty, I am told. Will you not dismount, sire, to do honour to this festa?"

"But where are our hosts?" asked Charles, looking round. "My Lord Archbishop, can you distinguish among the shepherds, Prince Ludovic or his fair lady? You have had advantage of us all in seeing their Highnesses."

"On my hopes, sire, I cannot tell which they are, if they be here," replied the prelate. "Here, pretty maiden, will you let us know who is the lord of this feast, and who are to be the guests?"

The last words were spoken in Italian to a very handsome, dark-eyed shepherdess, who, with a coquettish air, had passed somewhat near the royal party. But the girl merely replied by the word "Hark!" bending her head on one side and affecting to listen attentively. A moment after, the flourish of some trumpets was heard from the continuation of the pass on the other side of the meadow; and La Tremouille, turning round, gave some orders in a low tone to one of his attendants. By him they were carried to the rear, and immediately the party of lances which formed the king's escort put itself in motion, and spread out round one side of the meadow in the form of a crescent, leaving the monarch and his immediate attendants grouped on horseback in the midst.

If this was a movement of precaution against any party approaching from the other side, it was unnecessary. A moment after, on the opposite side of the meadow, issuing from the gorge like a stream of gold, appeared a cavalcade which the chroniclers of the day have delighted to describe as the height of splendour and magnificence. At its head appeared Ludovico Sforza, nicknamed "the Moor," accompanied by the Princess of Ferrara his young wife, and followed by the whole court of Milan, each vying with the other in luxury and display. "The princess," says an Italian writer of the day, "was mounted on a superb horse, covered with cloth of gold and crimson velvet. She wore a dress of green cloth of gold, floating over which was a light gauze. Her hair, only bound by a ribbon, fell gracefully upon her shoulders and upon her bosom. On her head she bore a hat of crimson silk, surmounted by five or six feathers of red and grey. Her suite comprised twenty-two ladies of the first rank, all dressed like herself, and six cars followed, covered with cloth of gold, and filled with the rarest beauties of Italy."

It would be tedious as well as difficult to give any description of the scene that followed. The two parties soon mingled together. Ceremony and parade were forgotten in gallantry and enjoyment. The younger men at once gave themselves up to the pleasures of the hour, and even the older and more sedate warriors and counsellors soon shook off their frosty reserve under the warming influence of beauty and wine; and thus began the expedition of Charles VIII. to Naples, more like some festal pilgrimage than the hostile invasion of a neighbour's dominions. Thus it began, and thus it proceeded till the end was obtained, and then the scene changed to hard blows instead of feasts and pageants, and care and anxiety instead of revelry and enjoyment.

I have said it would be tedious to describe what followed; but there were episodes in the little drama acted in that wild amphitheatre which connect themselves with my story, and must be told.

## CHAPTER II.

General conversation between the two courts of France and Milan was somewhat difficult; for, to say sooth, there were many there who could not speak the language of their neighbours, or spoke it very imperfectly. But Frenchmen, and Italians likewise, are famous for delivering themselves from such difficulties. They talk with a happy carelessness of whether they are understood or not, and eke out the defect of language with a sign or gesture. But there were some, there present, to whom both tongues were familiar; and while the King of France sat beneath the trees with Lodovico Sforza and his lovely wife, one of the youths who had followed him might be seen at the other side of the little grove, stretched easily on the ground between two young girls who had accompanied the princess, and with one of whom, at least, his acquaintance seemed of early date.

The young man was tall, well formed, and handsome; and he looked older than he really was, for he had not yet seen more than eighteen summers. The two girls were younger still, neither having reached the age of fifteen years. Both gave promise of exceeding beauty--otherwise perhaps they would have been excluded from the gay train of the princess; but, though womanhood ripens earlier under Italian skies than in colder climates, they were still evidently in girlhood, and, what was more rare, they had apparently preserved all the freshness and innocent frankness of their age.

One called the young man "Cousin Lorenzo," and teased him gaily with criticisms of his dress and appearance; vowed he had promised to bring back a beard from France, and yet he had not even a moustache; declared that she abominated the hair cut short before and hanging down behind after the French mode, and assumed that the large sleeves of his surcoat must be made to carry provisions in, not only for himself, but for all his company. She was the younger of the two, and probably not yet fourteen years of age; and though there was a world of merriment in her sparkling blue eyes, and a gay, bright smile kept playing lightly round her lips, yet it would have been a hard critic who could, in her, have discovered any of that coquetry from which even her age is not exempt. On the contrary, she seemed to strive to direct her cousin's admiration to her fair companion, who, in her eyes, was the most beautiful and perfect creature in the universe; and, in truth, there was many a one in after days who thought so to his cost.

Very different in personal appearance was she from her younger companion: tall for her age, and of that light, slender form which, in early youth, often promises the rich, flowing contour at an after period, which Guido loved, and even Raphael and Julio Romano did not undervalue. She was dark in complexion, too--that is to say, her hair was black as a raven's wing; and her full, almond-shaped eyes, with the lashes that shaded them, and the arched eyebrows above were dark as the hair. But yet there was something that softened all. Either it was the flowing of the lines into each other, or the happy blending of the tints, but nothing in the face or form was sharp or too defined. The skin was clear, and soft, and bright--so far dark, indeed, as to harmonize with the hair and eyes; but through the slight olive tint of southern climes shone the clear, warm rose of health; and, over all, youth and dawning womanhood shed their thousand inexpressible graces, like the winged loves which, in one of Albano's pictures, flutter round the Goddess of Beauty. She was gay, too--gay even as her bright-eyed companion at times; but it was with sudden fits and starts; and every now and then would intervene lapses of thought, as if she were questioning with herself of things beyond her knowledge. It is not rare to find that a thoughtful youth ripens into a passionate maturity. Her dress was one common at that day, we find, in the court of Ferrara; but it had not long been the mode in any part of Italy; and to the eyes of the young Lorenzo, who had been nearly two years absent from his native country, it seemed strange and hardly decent. It consisted of a robe somewhat like that of the princess, except that the ground of the cloth of gold, instead of green, was of a pale delicate rose colour. The sleeves, in the young girl's case, fitted tight to the rounded arms, but the front of each, from the shoulder nearly to the wrist, was cut open, showing the chemise of snowy lawn, except where, every two or three inches, a small jewel, in the form of a button, gathered the edges of the cloth of gold together. The robe in front also was thrown back from the neck and bosom, which was only shaded by the profuse curls of jetty hair. Instead of the small hat, with its plume of feathers, worn by the wife of the regent, a veil of rich black lace, fastened at the back of the head with a jewelled pin, thence to the shoulders; and round her waist was a knotted cord of gold, the tassels of which, strangely twisted and contorted, fell almost to her feet.

Such was the appearance of Leonora d'Orco at the age of fourteen, or very little more. Of that which is beyond appearance I may have occasion to speak hereafter.

Facts may seem trite, which nevertheless must be said in explanation of the character he depicts by any one who writes the history of another. We lose the key of a cabinet, nearly new, perhaps, and we send to a vender of old iron to see if we cannot find one to fit it. We select one and then another for trial, and find at length a key which seems to conform to the shape of the keyhole. Would any one object to its trial because it is old and rust-worn? Well, it is old; it may have served in a hundred locks before, for aught we know; but it fits, and opens, and shuts this lock, and that is all we have to do with it.

It has often been said, and was frequently insisted upon by Goethe, that each human being is a different being at each period of his age from that which he was at an anterior period. The very substance of the body, say the physiologists, is entirely changed in every seven years. What of the mind? Do cares, and sorrows, and experience, and joys, and hopes, and fruitions, effect no change in it? God forbid! If we believe the mind immortal, and not subject, like the body, to death and resurrection, still greater must be the changes; for its state must be progressive towards evil

or towards good. Expansion certainly comes with knowledge; every day has its lesson, its reproof, its encouragement; and the very development or decay of the mortal frame affects the tenant within--hardens, strengthens, elevates, instructs; or, entenders, enfeebles, depresses, depraves. Suffice it here to say, that perhaps no one ever in life experienced greater changes of thought, feeling, character, than Leonora d'Orco, as the winged moments flew over her head. And yet the indestructible essence was the same; every essential element remained; it was but the combinations that were modified. A few years later, had you asked her if she had ever felt such sensations, or thought such thoughts as she felt and thought now, she would instantly have said "No;" but one moment's lifting of the veil which hides the pictures of the past would have shown her that she had felt, had thought such things; one moment's scrutiny of her own heart would have shown her that, in another form, she felt them, thought them still.

But let us regard her only in the present. See how her eye sparkles, how her lip wreaths itself in smiles, and how the joyous laugh breaks forth clear, and sweet, and musical, finding expression not only in its own melodious tones, but in every feature--aye, and even in the colour that rises in a gay bashfulness, and spreads suddenly over cheek and brow, as if a ray of morning sunshine had found its way through the green branches and lighted up her face. And then all is still again--still, and quiet, and thoughtful--and her eyes bend down and the long lashes kiss her cheek--and the rose has faded away--and the clear skin is paler than before, till something from one or the other of her gay companions awakens merriment again, and then she changes once more with the sudden change of mountain skies.

But see! they are talking of more serious matters now.

"Not enter Milan!" cries Leonora; "not enter beautiful Milan! Signor Lorenzo, how is that? Have you lost all love and pride in your own fair country?"

"I must not enter Milan," he answered with a sigh; "but if I might, Leonora, I could not."

"But why--why?" she asked eagerly; "are you one of the exiles? Oh, if that is so, the princess loves me well, and besides, when you come with the King of France, a guest of Count Ludovic, the past must be forgotten in the present, and you be welcomed too. Oh, do not say you will not come."

She spoke eagerly, and then cast down her eyes, for his met hers with a look too full of admiration to be mistaken.

"Do not ask him--do not ask him," said sweet Bianca Maria di Rovera; "he is going to my grandfather's villa till the king marches on. That is already settled, Leonora."

"And you never told me, when your grandfather engaged us to go there too," said Leonora; "but how will the King of France be pleased?"

"He has given permission," answered Lorenzo; "he understands well that the son of Carlo Visconti could only enter Milan in one manner."

The young girl bent her head, and only answered, in a low tone, "I would fain hear more. It seems to me a strange arrangement."

"You shall hear all, at some other time and place, Signora Leonora," replied Lorenzo: "every minute I expect the trumpets to sound to horse; and my tale, which is a sad one, should have some quiet spot for the telling, and evening skies, and few listeners near."

The listeners, indeed, were, or might be, too many in a place where all was suspicion and much was danger. Every instant some one was passing near them--either one of the pastoral gentry who had waited for the meeting of the two courts, or some one from the suites of the two princes.

The latter part of the lad's reply seemed at once to awaken Leonora to the necessity of caution. Her younger companion, indeed, who seemed ignorant of her cousin's early history, pressed him with girlish eagerness to tell all then and there; but the other, who even then knew more of Italian life--not without an effort, yet with much delicacy of judgment and feeling--directed their conversation into other channels, and soon brought back the gaiety and the sparkle which at that time was cultivated almost as an art by the higher classes of Italy. Speedily thought, and sentiment, and mood followed the course of even such light things as words: serious topics and dark remembrances, and even present dangers and discomforts, were forgotten--and, as if in order to give relief to the lights in the future of life some dark shades were needed--the young three there gathered appeared to find in the faint allusion made to more painful things an accession of gaiety and enjoyment. The strangeness of first acquaintance was cast away between the two who had never met before. Bianca Maria, or Blanche Marie, as the French would have termed her, forgot how long a time had passed since she had seen her cousin, and all for the time was once more joy and light-hearted merriment. The same spirit *seemed* to pervade the whole party there assembled. It is hard to say *seemed*, for any eye that gazed upon that scene would have boldly concluded that all was peace and joy.

Oh, false word! Oh, false seeming! There was doubt, and fear, and malevolence, and treachery there in many a heart; and of all the groups into which those two gay courts had separated

themselves, perhaps reality, and enjoyment, and careless mirth were more truly to be found among those three young people, who, forgetful of courtly ceremony, had taken their seats beneath the trees on the west of the knoll, with their backs turned toward the royal and princely personages present. They, at least, knew how to enjoy the hour; and there let us leave them, with the benediction and applause of Lorenzo the Magnificent upon them:

"Quant' e bella giovinezza  
Che si fugge tuttavia  
Chi vuol esser lietto, sia  
Di doman non c'è certezza."

### CHAPTER III.

If the world be a stage, as the greatest of earth's poets has said, and all the men and women in it merely players, human life divides itself not only into acts, but scenes. The drop curtain falls for a longer or a shorter period; and, without whistle or call, the place is shifted, and the interval is filled up with nought which affects the actors before the public, or the general course of their own parts, or the end of the great drama played. Let us pass over the mere shiftings of the scene; the pompous reception of Charles VIII. in Milan; the time he wasted there in youthful merriment and courtly gallantry; the intrigues ending in nothing which went on during his stay in the Lombard capital; all the French *gaieté de coeur* with which the dashing and daring warriors of the most charming land in the world cut a throat, or make love, or stake a fortune on a card--let us pass them all by, with the exception of one slight incident, which had some influence upon the fate of one of our principal characters.

It is very customary--indeed, it is always customary with men of impulse, especially when the impulses are impetuous and ill-regulated--for persons possessing great power to be awed, as it were, for a short time by the terrible responsibilities of their position--to seek uninterrupted thought, with an endeavour in their own mind to find support under the weight from their own intellect, or, frustrated in their dependence upon so frail a reed, to apply to a higher guide, who can give not only direction but strength--not only counsel but capability. There is many an occasion in which the most self-relying and resolute feels the need of an intelligence higher than his own, and a force beyond the force of his own character.

In many respects the character of Charles VIII. was to be admired. His expedition to Italy was rash, ill-conceived, and ill-executed; but the conception was great, the objects when rightly viewed, noble, and the result, though not fortunate, such as showed in the young king the higher qualities of fortitude, resolution, and that courage which crushes obstacles by boldly confronting them. But many a time Charles doubted of his own course--only, indeed, in times of success and seeming prosperity--and asking himself whether that course was right, was prudent, was wise, sought guidance and instruction from on high.

On these occasions he avoided all companionship, and asked direction from the throne of wisdom in solitary prayer. It was thus he came forth in the early morning to the Church of St. Stephen, attended only by a single page, and habited plainly enough to attract no attention. He had entered the chapel of St. Ambrose, the patron saint of the city, and was in the very act of kneeling, when the voices of two other men, speaking somewhat loud in the general stillness, attracted his attention.

"Ah!" said the one, "it was there he slew him, and had there been men to second him, Lombardy would have now been free."

"It goes about the city," said the other, "that young Lorenzo, his son, is close at the gates of Milan, ready to avenge his father's death upon the Sforzeschi."

"He had better look to his own safety," replied the first speaker, "for he has to do with powerful enemies, and what the strong hand and the sword cannot accomplish, the dagger or the cup can perchance perform."

The king listened, but nothing more of interest met his ear, and when his prayer was finished he returned to his private cabinet, and wrote a few words in haste, without consulting even his most approved counsellors. It was done; and then he rang a little hand-bell on the table. It was not like a modern bell, being four-sided, but it had a good, loud sound, and it immediately brought an attendant from the ante-room.



"Call hither the Baron de Vitry," said the king. He spoke of that De Vitry who was the ancestor of the well-known Marechal de Vitry, and who, a few days after, became Marquis de Vitry on the death of his father. "Tell him to be quick, for he sleeps late when there is no fighting to be done."

The man hastened away to execute his commands, but it was some twenty minutes before the officer summoned appeared, and then, to say sooth, he was but imperfectly appparelled. There was a point here and there untrussed, and his collar was certainly not placed in its usual and intended position--indeed, some severe critics of costume might have supposed that it was turned wrong side before.

"Always behind, De Vitry," said the monarch, who had grown impatient in waiting.

"I was not behind at St. Aubin, sire," replied the young officer with a gay confidence; "but, sire, we were bound to sit up so late last night for the honour of France that our eyes had leaden weights upon them this morning."

"Ay, a revel, of course," said the king; "too much revelling, De Vitry. We must think of more serious things."

"Good faith! sire, we are all ready," replied the young officer; "we only revel because we have nought else to do. While your majesty and your wise counsellors are gravely deliberating in the cabinet, we have nought else to do but dance, and drink, and sing in the hall; and I am sure you, sire, would not have us behind the Italian in dancing and drinking, when they go so far before us in singing; but only give us something else to do, and we are ready to ride, or fight, or work in any way tomorrow."

The young king mused for a moment, and then murmured the words, "A just reproof!" Then taking the paper he had written, he added, "Take a hundred men of your company of ordnance, De Vitry, and set out at once toward Vigevano. Five miles on this side of the town, on the bank of the Ticino, you will find a villa belonging to the Count of Rovera. There you will find young Lorenzo Visconti. Give him that paper, appointing him to the command of the troop of poor young Moustier, who was stabbed, no one knows why or how."

"Oh, sire, I know why, and how too," answered De Vitry, in his usual gay, light-hearted tone; "he was stabbed because he chose to make love to the daughter of the confectioner who lives just below the castle--she is, indeed, a wonderful little beauty; but she is betrothed to a young armourer, and Moustier was not right to seek her for his leman, under her promised husband's very nose. There are plenty of free-hearted dames in Milan, without his breaking up the happiness of two young people who never sought him. Then, as to the way, sire, that is very easily explained--a dark corner, a strong hand, and a sharp dagger over the left shoulder, and the thing was soon accomplished. Ludovic says he will have the young armourer broken on the wheel, to satisfy your majesty; but I trust you will tell him not; for, in the first place, nothing can be proved against him; and, in the next, according to his own notions, he did nothing but what was right; and, in the next, De Moustier was all in the wrong; and, in the next, this youth, Tomaso Bondi, is the best armourer in Italy--no man I ever saw can inlay a Milan corslet as he can."

"All very cogent reasons," answered the king, "and the regent shall do nought to him, to satisfy me. De Moustier forgot the warning I gave him after I was ill at Lyons, when he insulted the young wife of the dean of the weavers; and as he has sought his fate, so he must abide it. But, as I have said, seek out my young Cousin Lorenzo, give him the paper, and tell him to join you next day at Pavia or Vigevano; but do not let your men dismount, and take care that they commit no outrage on the lands of Signor Rovera. At Vigevano you may halt till you hear that I am on my way to Pavia. You shall have timely notice."

The officer took the open paper from the king's hand, and in a nonchalant way gazed at the contents, exclaiming as he did so, "On my faith, it is fairly written!"

The cheek of Charles turned somewhat red, and, fixing his eye keenly upon De Vitry, he said, "You mean no offence, young sir, I believe; but, Baron de Vitry, I tell you, if two years ago your king could not write his name, it was not his fault. Would that all my nobility would try to retrieve their errors as I have striven to remedy the defects of my education."

The young monarch was evidently much pained at what he thought an allusion to the ignorance in which he had been brought up; and De Vitry, whose thoughts were perfectly innocent of such offence, bent his knee and kissed his sovereign's hand, saying, in his frank way, "On my life, sire, I only admired the writing, and wished I were as good a clerk. Heaven knows that, though I can write fast enough, no man can read as fast what I have written. It has cost me many a time more James, than an hour to make out my own letters. This carrying a confounded lance, ever since I was eighteen, makes my finger unfit for handling a quill; and, unless I fall in love, and have to write sweet letters to fair ladies--which God forbid--I dare say the time will come when I shall be unable to write at all."

The king smiled good-humouredly at his blunt officer, for Charles's anger soon passed away, and, bidding him rise, he said, "There, go, De Vitry; you are a rough specimen of our French soldiers, for these silken ladies of the South. I fear you will not make much way with them."

"Oh, they love me all the better, sire," answered De Vitry; "I'm a new dish at their table. But I

go to perform your will, sire; and, good faith! I am not sorry to be in the saddle again. But what am I to do with that young fellow, Bayard, who struck the big Ferrara man for calling us barbarians? We have kept a close eye upon him, for he seems never to dream that, if the signor were to meet him alone, he would put a dagger in him, or break his back as a storm breaks a hard young sapling. Good faith, sire, the man would eat the boy up as the old giants used to do with the princes and princesses of I don't know where in days of yore."

"That is well bethought," replied the king. "I wish to have no brawling, De Vitry. Take Bayard with you to Pavia. Stay! let me consider what I can do to smooth his removal from the court, for he is a brave lad, and will some time make a name in life. They are hardy soldiers, these men of the Isere."

"He is of such stuff as kings of France have most need of," answered De Vitry. "Give him ten years more, and I would match him against Mohammed. But the cornet of my troop, you know, sire, died on Friday last of wine poison at Beccafico's--we hold our life on slender tenure in this land--and if your majesty would please to name Bayard to fill his place, he would be very well content, for he loves Bellona's harness more than Cupid's, as my old tutor, the Abbé de Mortemar, used to say when he could not get me to construe Ovid. But I know not how Bayard may take Signor Lorenzo's appointment to De Moustier's troop, he being also one of your pages, and more than a year older."

"Lorenzo Visconti is our cousin, sir," replied Charles, somewhat sternly; "and, were he not so, we suffer no one to comment on our will in ordaining how we shall be served. If Pierre de Terrail hesitates at the honour we confer on him so young, because we name our own kindred to a higher command at a younger age, let him remain as he is. We will not resent such conduct, but we will make him feel that we are King of France."

There was sufficient irritation in his tone to induce the young officer to withdraw; and he left the king's presence, repeating to himself, "Our cousin! I see not how that is; but we are all cousins in Adam, God wot; and the affinity must be somewhere thereabout, I take it. Well, God send me some royal cousins, or right noble ones, for 'tis the only road to promotion in this world."

#### CHAPTER IV.

It was early in the month of September. The grapes were already purple with the draughts of sunshine which they had drunk in through a long, ardent summer, and the trees had already begun to display "the sear and yellow leaf"--early, early, like those who exhaust in life's young day all the allotted pleasures of man's little space. The autumn had fallen upon them soon. Yet it was a lovely scene, as you gazed from one of those little monticules which stud the Lombard plains. There is something in the descent from the mountains into Italy which seems to anticipate the land--not so much in its physical as in its moral features; a softness, a gentleness, a gracefulness which is all its own, while round about, unseen, but felt in every breeze, is the dark, pestilential swamp, gloomy and despairing, or else a brighter but more treacherous land, fair to the eye, but destructive to vitality, which lures but to destroy. One easily conceives the character of a large portion of the people of the middle ages in Italy from the aspect of the land. But it is of the people of the middle ages only. One can hardly derive any notion of the ancient Roman from the characteristics of the country till one plunges into the Campagna, where the stern, hard features of the scenery seem to represent that force which, alas! has passed away.

And yet it was a lovely scene, and a moment of sweet and calm enjoyment, as three young people sat together on the lower step of a terrace near Vigevano, with a fountain gushing and murmuring some twenty feet above, and a beautiful garden filled with mulberry-trees and vines, and some oranges, not very luxuriant, but diffusing a pleasant but languid odour round. The eye wandered over the shrubs and trees to the lands watered by the Ticino on its way to Pavia; and beyond, in the evening light, long lines of undulating country were marked out in the deep blue tints peculiar to the distant scenery of Italy. The terrace, below which the three were seated, was long and wide, and rising therefrom, near the centre, was one face of a villa, built in a style of which few specimens remain. The taste and genius of Palladio had not yet given to the villa-architecture of Lombardy that lightness and grace which formed the characteristic of a new style of art. There was something, at that time, in every country-house of Italy of the heavy, massive repulsiveness of the old castello. But yet the dawn of a better epoch was apparent, in the works of Andrea Palladio's great master, Trissino; and in the very villa of which I speak, though here and there a strong, tall tower was apparent, and the basement story contained stone enough to have built a score of modern houses, much ornament of a light and graceful character had been lavished upon the whole building, as if to conceal that it was constructed for defence as well as enjoyment. Indeed, as is generally the case, there was a certain harmony between the times and

state of society and the constructions of the period. The Italian smiled, and revelled, and feasted, and called in music, and song, and poetry, to cover over the dangers, and the griefs, and the terrors of every day; and the palace in the city, or the villa in the country, was often as richly decorated as if its massy inner walls were never intended to preserve the life and fortune of its owner from the hands of rude assailants, nor its halls ever to witness deeds of horror and cruelty within their dark recesses.

It was, indeed, an evening and a scene such as Lorenzo Visconti had described as fitted for the telling of his own history. All was still and quiet around; the leaves of the vines hardly moved with the light air, the glow of the western sky faded off into deep purple as the eye was raised from the horizon to the zenith; no moving object--no, not a floating cloud, could be seen on any side; and the murmur of the fountain seemed to add to, rather than detract from, the stillness. The three young people--I need not tell the reader who they were--had ranged themselves as their nature or their temporary feelings prompted. On the lowest step Bianca Maria had placed herself, looking up with her sweet confiding eyes towards the young companion whom she almost idolized. On the step above was her cousin Lorenzo; and on a step above them both, but leaning with her elbow on her knee, and her cheek resting on her hand, a little to the right of Lorenzo and the left of Bianca, was Leonora d'Orco, with her dark eyes bent down, drinking in the words of the young soldier.

It was a group such as Bronzino might have delighted to paint; for not only were there those colours in it which all Italians love, and all Italian artists take pleasure in blending and harmonizing--the deep browns, which characterise the complexion of their country, with the rarer and exceptional fairness sometimes found among them--the flowing flaxen hair of the North, and its rich crimsons, but in the dress of the three also there were those strong contrasts of harmonious hues, if I may use what may seem at first sight (but only at first sight) a contradiction in terms--the rich red, and the deep green, and the yellow touching upon brown, and the pale blue. How charming, how satisfactory was the art of those old painters in reproducing on the canvas the combinations which nature produces every day. And yet Art, following Nature in its infinite variety, has shown us, in the works of Murillo and some other Spanish artists, that perfect harmony of colouring can afford as much pleasure as harmonized contrasts, and that in painting also there may be Mozarts as well as Beethovens.

The evening light fell beautifully upon that young group, as they sat there on the steps of the terrace, and, just glancing round the angle of an old ruined building of Roman date in the gardens below, touched gently and sweetly upon the brow and eyes of Bianca Maria, lighted up the face of Lorenzo, and shone full upon the whole figure of Leonora, as she gazed down upon the speaker.

"I must go back far into the times past," he said; "I dare say you are well aware that the Viscontis once reigned as lords and dukes of Milan. Do not suppose, Leonora, that I am about to put forth any claim to that rich inheritance; for, though nearly allied to the ruling race, my branch of the family were already separated from the parent stem when the imperial bull was issued which conferred sovereignty on the branch that ended with Filippo Maria. That bull limited the succession strictly, and we had and have no claim. At the death of Filippo, the Milanese found still one spark of ancient spirit, and they declared themselves a republic. But republics have in them, unhappily, no seeds of durability. There is not strength and virtue enough in man to give them permanence. Rude nations may be strong and resolute enough to maintain such institutions in their youth; but art and luxury soften, and in softening enfeeble, so that men learn to love ease more than independence, pleasure better than freedom. A new dynasty was destined soon to succeed the old. The Viscontis were noble, of high race and long descent, connected with every sovereign house of Europe. But the son of a peasant was to gather their inheritance and wear their coronet.

"There was a man born at Cotignola, in Romagna, named Sforza Attendolo, of very humble birth, but prodigious strength of body and extraordinary military genius. Famine drove him to seek food in the trade of war. He joined one of the great companies, rose by the force of genius and courage, and in the end became one of the two most famous condottieri in Italy. After a career of almost unexampled glory and success, he was drowned in swimming the Pescara, but his son Francesco succeeded to his command, and to more than his inheritance of military fame. He was, indeed, a great man; and so powerful did he become, that Filippo Maria Visconti promised him--to the illegitimate son of a Romagnese peasant--the hand of his only daughter to secure his services in his many wars. He hesitated long, it is true, to fulfil a promise which he felt to be degrading, but he was compelled to submit at length. With the aid of Francesco Sforza he was a great prince--without him he was nothing; and when he died, old and blind, he left his people to struggle against the man whom he had aided to raise, but upon whom his own fate had very often depended. Francesco was noble at heart, though ambitious. His enemies he often treated with unexampled generosity, forbearance, and even kindness. He showed that he feared no man, by freeing the most powerful and most skilful of his captive enemies; but he pursued his course steadily toward dominion, not altogether unstained by deceit and falsehood, but without cruelty or tyranny. Sore pressed by famine, and with his armies beneath their walls, the Milanese, who recognised his high qualities, though they feared his dominion, threw open their gates to him, and renounced their liberty at the feet of a new duke in February, 1450. The Viscontis had nothing to complain of. The reigning branch was extinct; the rest were not named in the imperial bull, and they, with their fellow-citizens, submitted calmly of the rule of the

greatest man then living in Italy. Nor had they cause to regret the act during the life of Francesco Sforza. He ruled the land justly and moderately, maintained his own renown to the last, and showed none of the jealousy of a tyrant towards those whose birth, or fortune, or talents might have made them formidable rivals. He was wise to conciliate affection in support of power. His good reign of sixteen years did more to enslave the Milanese people than the iron heel of any despot could have done; but there were not wanting those among his children to take cruel advantage of that which his virtues had accomplished. He died about thirty years ago, and to him succeeded his eldest son, the monster Galeazzo. From that hour the iron yoke pressed upon the neck of the Milanese. The new duke had less ambition than his father, and inherited none of his talents; but he had a genius for cruelty, and an energy in crime unequalled even by Eccelino. Those whom he seemed most to favour and who least feared the tyrant's blow, were always those on whom it fell most heavily and most suddenly; and they furnished, when they little expected it, fresh victims for the torture, or for some new and unheard-of kind of death. His luxury and his licentiousness passed all bounds; no family was safe; no lady's honour was unassailed or uncalumniated; violence was resorted to when corruption did not succeed; in each day he comprised the crimes of a Tarquin and the ferocity of a Nero. There were, however, three noble hearts in Milan, and they fancied there were many more. They dreamed that some public spirit still lingered among their countrymen--at least enough, when delivered from actual fear of the tyrant, to seize the opportunity and regain their liberty. When there is no law, men must execute justice as they can; and those three resolved to put Galeazzo to death--a mild punishment for a life of crime. Their names were Olgiati, Lampugnani, and Carlo Visconti. All had suffered from the tyrant. Olgiati's sister had fallen a victim to his violence. Lampugnani's wife was another. My mother only escaped by death. But it was not vengeance that moved the patriots. They had only suffered what others had suffered. The evils of the country had become intolerable; they were all the work of one man; and the three determined to deprive him of the power to inflict more. They looked upon their undertaking not only as a great and glorious enterprise, but as a religious duty, and they prepared themselves for its execution with prayer and fasting, and the most solemn sacrament of the Church. Many difficulties intervened. Either the consciousness that his tyranny and crimes had become intolerable, or one of those strange presentiments of coming fate which have affected many men as the hour of their destiny drew nigh, rendered Galeazzo less accessible, more suspicious and retired than before. He seldom came forth from his palace, was no longer seen on occasions of public ceremony, or in fêtes and festivals. There was, indeed, one day when he could hardly fail to show himself, and that was on St. Stephen's day--a day when, by immemorial custom, every one honours the first martyr by attending mass at the great church. That day they fixed upon for the execution of their design, and each was early in the church, with a dagger hidden in the sleeve of his gown. The world has called it a sacrilege; but they looked upon it as a holy and a righteous deed, sanctified by the justice of the cause, that the most sacred place could not be polluted by it.

"In the mean time Galeazzo seemed to feel that the day and hour of retribution had arrived. He would fain have avoided it; he sought to have mass performed in the palace; he applied to a chaplain--to the Bishop of Como--but in all instances slight obstacles presented themselves, and in the end he determined to go to the Cathedral. One touch of human tenderness and feeling, the first for many a day, broke from him. He sent for his two children, took leave of them tenderly, and embraced them again and again. He then went forth; but the conspirators awaited him in the church; and hardly had he entered when three daggers were plunged into his breast and back. Each struck a second blow; and the monster who had inflicted torture, and death, and disgrace upon so many innocent fellow-creatures sank to the pavement, exclaiming, 'Sancta Maria!'

"The three then rushed towards the street to call the people to arms; but Lampugnani stumbled, catching his feet in the long trains of the women who were already kneeling in the nave. As he fell he was killed by a Moor, one of Galeazzo's base retainers. My father was killed where he stood, and Olgiato escaped into the street only to find the people, on whom he trusted either dead to all sense of patriotism and justice, or stupified and surprised. Not a sword was drawn--not a hand was raised in answer to his cry, 'To arms!' and torture and the death of a criminal once more closed the career of a patriot.

"I was an infant at that time, but in the days of Galeazzo Sforza infants were not spared, and the nurse who had me in her arms hurried forth, carrying me with her, ere the gates of the city could be closed, or the followers of the duke came to search and pillage our house. She took refuge in a neighbouring village, whence we were not long after carried to Florence, where the noble Lorenzo de Medici, after whom I had been baptized, received me as his child, and when he felt death approaching, sent me to the court of France to finish my education among my relatives there."

"And was this Prince Ludovic the son of Galeazzo?" asked Leonora, as soon as he had paused.

"Oh no--his younger brother," replied Lorenzo. "He holds the son in durance, and the son's wife, on the pretence of guardianship, though both are of full age; but, if I be not mistaken, the day of their deliverance is near at hand, for I have heard the king say he will certainly see them, and learn whether they are not fitted to rule their own duchy without the interference of so dangerous a relation."

"God grant the king may be in time," said Bianca Maria; "for it is said the young duke is very sick, and people say he has poison in all he eats."

"Hush! hush!" cried Leonora, anxiously. "Long confinement and wearing care are enough to make him sick, Bianca, without a grain of poison. No one can die now-a-days without people saying he is poisoned. 'Tis a sad tale, indeed, you tell, Lorenzo, and I have often heard our sweet Princess of Ferrara say that Galeazzo was a bad man; but Ludovic surely is not cruel. He has pardoned many a man, I have heard, who had been condemned by the tribunals."

A somewhat bitter smile came upon the lips of Lorenzo Visconti, but he merely replied, "The good and innocent always think others good and innocent till bitter experience teaches them the contrary."

Perhaps he might have added more, but the sound of footsteps on the terrace above caught his ear, and he and Leonora at once turned to see who approached. The steps were slow and deliberate, and were not directed toward the spot where the young people sat; but they instantly checked further conversation on the subjects previously discussed, while from time to time each of the three gave a glance toward two gentlemen who had just appeared upon the terrace. The one was a man somewhat advanced in years, though not exactly what might be called an old man. His hair and beard were very gray, it is true, but his frame was not bent, and his step was still firm and stately. He was richly dressed, and wore a large, heavy sword, of a somewhat antique fashion. Lorenzo asked no questions concerning him, for he knew him already as the grandfather of his young cousin, Bianca Maria. The other was a younger man, dressed in black velvet, except where the arms were seen from under the long hanging sleeves of his upper garment, showing part of an under coat of cloth of silver. He was tall and thin, and his face would have deserved the name of handsome had it not been that the eyes, which were fine in themselves, and overshadowed by strongly-marked eyebrows, were too close together, and had a slight obliquity inward. It was not what could be absolutely called a squint, but it gave a sinister expression to his countenance, which was not relieved by a habit of keeping his teeth and lips closely compressed, as if holding a rigid guard over what the tongue might be inclined to utter.

They took their way to the extreme end of the terrace, and then walked back till they came on a line with the spot where the three young people sat, still silent, for there is a freemasonry in youth that loves not to have even its most trifling secrets laid bare to other eyes, or its most innocent councils broken in upon.

There the two gentlemen paused, and the younger seemed to end some conversation which had been passing between them by saying, "I know not much, Signor Rovera, of the history or views of other times, or for what men lived and strove for in those days; but I do know, and pretty well, the history of my own times, and the rules by which we have to guide ourselves in them. If we have not ourselves power, we must serve those who have power; and while we keep ourselves from what you would call an evil will on our own part, we must not be over nice in executing the will of those above us. Theirs is the deed, and theirs the responsibility. The race of Sforza is not, methinks, a higher or a better race than the race of Borgia. Both are peasants compared to you or me, but the Borgias are rising, and destined to rise high above us both; the Sforzas have risen, and are about to fall, or I mistake the signs of the times. Men may play with a kitten more safely than with a lion; and when Ludovico called this King of France into Italy, he put his head in the wild beast's mouth."

"Ah, that that were all!" exclaimed the old Count of Rovera. "I should little care to see that wild beast close his heavy jaws upon the skull of his inviter, if that would satisfy him; but Italy--what is to become of Italy?"

"God knows," answered the other drily. "She has taken so little care of her children, that, good faith! they must take care of themselves and let her do the same, my noble cousin. We are both too old to lose much by her fall, and neither of us young enough to hope to see her rise. Phoenixes are rare in these days, Signor Count. There," he continued, pointing to the little group upon the steps, "there are the only things that are likely to spring up, except corn, and mulberry-trees, and such vegetables. Why, how the girl has grown already! She is well-nigh a woman. She will need a husband soon, and then baby-clothes, and so forth. I must speak with her. Leonora! Leonora!"

At the sound of his voice, Leonora, who had been sitting with her head bent down and her eyes fixed upon the marble at her feet, sprang up like a startled deer, and ran up the steps toward him; but when within a step, she paused, and bent before him without speaking.

## CHAPTER V.

"Who is that man?" asked Lorenzo Visconti in a low tone, while Leonora stood before the

stranger, silent and, as it were, subdued.

"That is her father, Ramiro d'Orco," answered Bianca Maria; "he has just returned from Romagna, I suppose; he has not been here for a year, and I heard he was there."

"Her father!" exclaimed the youth; "and is it so a child meets a father? Oh God! had I a parent living who came back from a long absence, how I should spring to receive his first caress! how the first tone of his voice--the first sound of his footstep, would move the whole blood within me. I do believe the very proximity of his spirit would make my whole frame thrill, and I should know that he was present before one of my senses assured me of the fact. My father! oh, my father! could you rejoin your son, should I meet you as a stranger, or bow before you as a ruler?"

"It is not her fault, Lorenzo," said her cousin, eagerly, zealous in her friend's cause; "I do not know how to tell you what he is, Lorenzo. He is hard, yet not tyrannical; cold, yet not without affection. There is no tenderness in him, yet he loves her better than aught else on earth, except, I have heard my grandfather say, except ambition. He is liberal to her, allowing her all she wants or wishes, except, indeed, his tenderness and care. You and I are both orphans, Lorenzo, and perhaps we let our fancy lead us to picture exaggerated joy in the love and affection of parents."

"I love him not, Bianca," answered the young man, with a slight shudder; "there is something in his look which seems to chill the blood in one's heart. I can see in that gaze which he bends upon her, why it is her arms are not thrown round his neck, why her lips are not pressed to his, why words of love and affection are not poured forth upon her father when she meets him after a long absence. She is his child, but he is not a father to her--perhaps a tyrant."

"Oh, no, no!" answered the young girl; "he loves her--indeed he does, and he does not tyrannize over her. But whether it is that there is a natural coldness in his manner, or that he affects a certain Roman hardness, I cannot tell; he only shows his love in indulging her in everything she desires, without a tender look or tender word, such as most fond fathers bestow upon a well-loved child."

"And such a child!" said Lorenzo, musing. "Well, it is strange, Bianca; perhaps he may love her truly, and more than many fathers whom I have seen in France fondle their children as if their whole soul was wrapped up in them, and then sacrifice their happiness to the merest caprice--perhaps it may be so, and yet I do not like his looks. I cannot like him. See how he gazes at us now! It is the gaze of a serpent, cold, and hard, and stony. Who was her mother? She can have gained no part of her nature from him."

"Oh, no," cried the young girl, feeling all that he felt, though unwilling to allow it; "she is like him in nothing, except, indeed, the forehead and the shape of her face. Her mother was almost as beautiful as she is. I remember well; it is not three years since she died. She was a great heiress in the Ghiaradda. All she had was on her marriage secured by the forms of law to herself and her children, and they say he strove almost cruelly to make her give it up to him. After her death he obtained possession of it, but not entirely for himself. It was decided that he should possess it till Leonora married, making suitable provision for her maintenance, but that, when she married, the great estates at Castellano should go to her and her husband. My grandfather, who was her mother's uncle, took much interest in the matter, and for a time he and Signor d'Orco were at bitter enmity; but when the case was decided, and it was found that Leonora's father assigned her more for her portion than the law would have demanded, my grandfather became convinced that he had striven only for what he conceived a right, and became reconciled to him. Indeed, he is quite liberal in all things concerning her; allows her the revenue of a princess, and is himself a man of small expense; but it seems his is an unbending nature. He lets her do what she wills in most things--seldom thwarts her; but when he speaks his own will, there is no appeal from it--neither to his heart nor his mind. I can often persuade my grandfather, though he is quick and hasty, as you know, and sometimes convince him, but it is of no use to try to do either with Ramiro d'Orco."

Lorenzo fancied he comprehended, at least in a degree, the character which, in her youthful way, she strove to depict; but yet there was something in the look of Leonora's father which left a dark, unpleasant impression upon his mind. There are faces that we love not, but which afford no apparent reason for the antipathy they produce. There is often even beauty which we cannot admire--grace which affords no pleasure. There is, perhaps, nothing more graceful upon earth than the gliding of a snake, never for a moment quitting what the great moral painter called "the line of beauty." There is nothing more rich and resplendent than his jewelled skin, and yet how few men can gaze upon the most gorgeous of that reptile race without a shuddering sensation of its enmity to man? Can it be that in the breast of the reasoning human creature, God, for a farther security than mere intellect against a being that is likely to injure, implants an instinct of approaching danger which no fairness of form, no engagingness of manner can at first compensate? It may be so. At all events, I have seen instances where something very like it was apparent. And yet, with time, the impression wears away; the spirit has spoken once its word of warning; if that word is not enough, it never speaks again. The snake has the power of fascinating the bird which, in the beginning, strove to escape from him; and we forget the monitor which told us our danger.

In an hour from that time Lorenzo was sitting at the same table with Ramiro d'Orco, listening well pleased to searching and deep views of the state of Italy, expressed, not indeed with

eloquence, for he was not an eloquent man, but with a force and point he had seldom heard equalled.

It would not be easy to give his words, for, even were they recorded, they would lose their strength in the translation; but the substance we know, and it would give a very different picture of Italy in that day from any that can be drawn at present. We see it not alone dimmed by the distance of time, but in a haze of our own prejudices. We may gather, perhaps, the great results; but we can, I believe, in no degree divine the motives, and most of the details are lost. Read the history of any one single man in those days, as portrayed by modern writers, and compare one author with another. Take for instance that of Lorenzo de Medici, as carefully drawn by Roscoe, or brightly sketched by Sismondi. What can be more different? The facts, indeed, are the same, but how opposite are all the inferences. In both we have the dry bones of the man, but the form of the muscle, and the hue of the complexion are entirely at variance. Writers who undertake to represent the things of a past age are like a painter required to furnish portraits of persons long dead. Tradition may give them some guidance as to the general outline, but the features and the colouring will be their own.

It is therefore with the great facts of the state of Italy at that time that I will deal, as nearly in the view of Ramiro d'Orco as I can; but it must be remembered that his view also was not without its mistiness. If we cannot see early on account of the remoteness of the objects which we contemplate, his vision also was indistinct, obscured by the prejudices of class, interest, party, hope, apprehension, and above all, ambition. He painted the condition of Italy only as Ramiro d'Orco believed it to be. How much even of that belief was to be ascribed to his own desires and objects, who can say?

Lombardy, the great northern portion of Italy, indeed, had ever been isolated from the rest in manners and habits of thought. Italians the Lombards certainly were; but the characteristics of the northern conquerors predominated in that portion of the peninsula. Except at Genoa and in Venice, republicanism in no shape had taken any deep root. From very early times, although the voice of the people had occasionally proclaimed a republic here and there, the babe was strangled ere it got strength, even by those that gave it birth. The epoch of democratic independence in Lombardy lasted barely a century and a half. No republic flourished long north of the River Po, except those I have named, and even the two which took some glory from the name little deserved it. Less real liberty was known in Venice than perhaps existed under the most grinding tyranny of a single man; and Genoa, in her most palmy days, was a prey to aristocratic factions, which soon made the people but slaves to princes. But it must not be supposed that nothing was obtained in return: a more chivalrous and warlike spirit existed in that division of Italy than in the central portion. It was not so early refined, but it was not so speedily softened. Corrupt it might be, and indeed was, to even a fearful degree; but it was the corruption of the hard and the daring, rather than of the weak and effeminate. Men poisoned, and slew, and tortured each other, and the minds of all became so familiar with blood and horror, that much was endured before resistance to oppression was excited; but conspiracies were generally successful in their primary object, because the conspirators were bold and resolute. A tyrant might fall only to give place to another tyrant, but still he fell; and you rarely saw in Lombardy such weakness as was displayed in the enterprise of the Pazzi.

Men in the north fought openly in the field for counties, and marquises, and dukedoms; but there was little finesse or diplomatic skill displayed except by Venice. There was cunning, indeed, but it was always exercised to gain some military advantage. The ambition of that part of the land was warlike, not peaceful. It was not luxury, and ease, and graceful enjoyment that was desired in combination with power, but it was splendour, and pomp, and domination. Weak tyrants were sure to fall; merely cruel ones generally retained their power; and cunning ones were frequently successful; but it was only by wielding the sword, either by their own hands or those of others.

At the time in which Ramiro d'Orco spoke, every vestige of liberty was extinct in Lombardy. The Visconti, and after them the Sforzi, in Milan; the house of Della Scala, and after them the Visconti, in Verona; the Gonzagas in Mantua; the D'Estes in Ferrara; the Carraras in Padua; the Bentivogli in Bologna, and a hundred other princely houses, had attained power by both policy and the sword, and Genoa had passed frequently from anarchy to subjection, and subjection to anarchy. But the great military school of Alberic de Barbiano had raised up a vigorous and healthy spirit in the people, which, had it lasted, would have secured to both Romagna and Lombardy strength to resist foreign enemies, even if it could not control intestine divisions. But the great company of St. George, founded by Barbiano, was succeeded by two others, who, though they possessed all the energy of their predecessors, and were led by men of very superior abilities, were merely the companies of adventurous soldiers known as the Bracceschi and Sforzeschi. Their swords were at the command of those who could pay them best, and their leaders were men who sought to found dynasties upon military success. In this object Braccio de Montana failed. He was mortally wounded at Aquila in 1424, and his formidable band gradually dispersed, after having passed under the command of several others. Though Sforza perished in passing the Pescara ere he attained the power at which he aimed, the object was accomplished by his son Francesco, who established himself in the ducal throne of Milan.

Thus, at the time when Ramiro d'Orco spoke, in 1494, the whole of Lombardy was under the domination of various princes, commonly and not unjustly called tyrants; but the chivalrous spirit of the people was by no means extinct; and even the course of the arts showed the tendency of the popular mind. It is true, Milan itself was more famous for the manufacture and even the

invention of arms than for the fine arts, but in the pictures of that country during this and the preceding centuries saints and martyrs, angels and demons, are frequently represented in knightly harness, and in some it would be difficult to distinguish the messenger of peace from one of the terrible legionaries of the great companies.

It seemed, indeed, as if Lombardy had returned to its normal feudal notions, in which chivalry was inseparably attached to monarchy and aristocracy.

The central states of Italy clung to republican forms of government long after they had been extinguished in the north; but it was republicanism founded upon wealth, not upon purity of character or simplicity of manners--no, nor upon real patriotism. A celebrated writer of late days has spoken of "the virtue of Florence" in this very century. Let us see how that virtue was depicted by the best judges of the times of which he, at this late day, speaks. "I never imagined," said Piero de Medici, father of Lorenzo, on his death-bed, addressing the chief citizens of Florence, "that times would come when the conduct of my friends would force me to esteem and long for the society of my enemies, and wish that I had been defeated instead of victorious." He then went on to reproach them with their vices and their crimes. "You rob your neighbours of their wealth," he said, "you sell justice, you evade the law, you oppress the weak, and exalt the insolent. There are not, throughout all Italy, so many and such dreadful examples of violence and avarice as in this city."

Again Machiavelli describes the youth of Florence as having become "more dissolute than ever, more extravagant in dress, feasting and other licentiousness," and says that, "being without employment they wasted their time and means on gaming and women, their principal care being how to appear splendid in apparel, and obtain a crafty shrewdness in discourse." Nor can I look upon the persevering efforts of that republic to subjugate all the neighbouring cities as a proof of virtue or of love of liberty.

Their military virtues seem to have been upon a par with their domestic qualities. Their battles were fought by hired mercenaries, and where the Florentine forces did appear in the field, they apparently merited the reproach which Machiavelli casts upon the military in general of the central and southern portions of Italy. In describing the campaign of 1467, he says, "A few slight skirmishes took place, but in accordance with the custom of the time, neither of them acted on the offensive, besieged any town, or gave the other any opportunity of coming to a general battle; but each kept within its tents, and they conducted themselves with the most remarkable pusillanimity." Indeed, his description of all the battles in which none of the great condottieri were engaged, is merely ludicrous. Moreover, the political virtues of the people seem, at this time at least, not to have surpassed those of the heart and mind. Florence had the name of a republic, but its government was in reality an oligarchy. There is a consciousness in man that persons whose time is devoted to daily labour have not those opportunities of mental culture, and that leisure for deep thought, which alone can fit men for the task of leading and governing. However strong may be democratic sentiment, however jealously tenacious of the name of equality citizens may be, there is, in the natural course of all communities, a tendency to produce an aristocracy. In the warring elements of a political chaos, the first efforts of order are to resolve the people into classes--nay, into castes. The hatred of hereditary authority generally directs these efforts to elevate riches to the highest place. The wealthy, in whom one sort of pre-eminence is already obvious, are not so obnoxious at first sight as those who have no real source of influence but the intangible one of birth; and thus from republics, founded frequently upon purely democratic principles, generally rises the most hateful and debasing of all aristocracies, the aristocracy of wealth. This had long been the case with Florence at the time I speak of: wealth was nobility, and that nobility was rapidly tending toward monarchy. Lorenzo de Medici had exercised until his death, in April, 1492, an anomalous sovereignty, denied the character of prince of a monarchical state, and yet divested of the restraints of a magistrate of a free people. He was addressed by all public bodies and all private persons as "Most Magnificent Lord," and swayed the destinies of the country, influenced the character of the people, and deeply affected the fate of all Italy, without any legal right or actual station. His was solely a monarchy of influence, and, though even Cromwell felt the necessity of giving to his power the sanction of a name, Lorenzo ruled his countrymen till his death in the character of a citizen.

The south of Italy had in the mean time passed through several phases, and the monarchical element had long predominated in its government. The only question was to whom it should belong. Foreign families struggled for the often contested throne; and Italians then only drew their swords or raised their voices in favour of one or another usurper. The destinies of the north and the south were sealed; and in Tuscany no wide field was offered for ambition. A man might raise himself to a certain degree by subservience to some powerful prince, but he must continue to serve that prince, or he fell, and would never aspire to independent domination where hereditary power was recognised by the people, and lay at the foundation of all acknowledged authority. It was alone in central Italy, and especially in Romagna and in the States of the Church--where a principle antagonistic to all hereditary claims existed in the very nature of the Papal power--that any adventurer could hope, either by his individual genius or courage, or by services rendered to those who already held authority, to raise himself to independent rule, or to that station which was only attached to a superior by the thin and nearly worn-out thread of feudal tenure.

"Those who would find fortune," said Ramiro d'Orco, "such fortune as Francesco Sforza conquered and the Medici attained must seek it at Rome. There is the field, the only field still



open to the bold spirit, the strong, unwavering heart, the keen and clear-seeing mind--there is the table on which the boldest player is sure to win the most. With every change of the papacy, new combinations, and, consequently, new opportunities must arise, and, thanks to the wise policy of the College of Cardinals, those changes must be frequent. A man there may, as elsewhere, be required to serve in order at length to command; but if he do not obtain power at length, it is his fault or Fortune's, and in either case he must abide the consequences. Good night, Signor Rovera."

## CHAPTER VI.

"What is it, dear girl?--Let me think?" said Leonora to her young cousin. They sat in a small ante-room between their sleeping chambers, which gave entrance from the corridor to each.

"And what would you think of, Leonora?" asked Bianca, laughing wickedly.

Leonora gazed from the window, whence was seen the garden below bathed in moonlight, with faint glimpses of the distant country, and the sparkle of the rays upon the fountain whose voice came murmuring up. She did not answer, but continued silent, with her cheek resting on her hand, and her arm upon the sill of the window.

"I know right well whom you are thinking of," said Bianca, bending down her head so as to gaze upon the beautiful face.

"Not you," said Leonora; "I am thinking of my father; and how strange it is that he who loves me well, I know, should show his love so little."

"Can you think of two things at once, Leonora?" asked her cousin, "for I know one thing you are thinking of, and you tell me of another. You are thinking of Lorenzo Visconti; and how strange it is that you, who love him well, have not the heart to own it to yourself."

"Go, go, you are a silly child," answered Leonora, "you cannot know what love is, nor I either, except love for your parents or your kinsfolk. I think not of Lorenzo Visconti; he is a comely youth, and pleasant in his conversation; but he will go hence in a day, forget me in another, and I him before the third evening comes. You want to make me fall in love with him, but I tell you, Blanche, you will tire me of him."

"Faith, I do not want you to love him," replied Bianca, "for I am half in love with him myself, and can't spare him--only, you know, there is one obstacle."

"Well, well, go and sleep over it," replied Leonora, "then rise to-morrow, and whisper gently in his ear that, if he will but wait a year or two--this loving land and warm climate notwithstanding--he can wed the beautiful heiress of the house of Rovera, and--but what obstacle do you talk of, Blanche?"

"The Church! the Church!" replied the other girl; "we are full cousins, you know, Leonora--within the forbidden degrees. My mother's eldest sister was his mother."

"But a poor obstacle," answered Leonora; "one of the two bags of the Church is always open to take in gold, and the other to let out dispensations."

"Yes: but somehow I can never look on him as aught else but a cousin," replied Bianca--"a sort of brother. As such I love him well; but as I said, I am only half in love with him--a fraternal love, which is a half love, I suppose. I do not know much about it; but I do not judge I could let him kiss me so coolly if I loved him any better. Bless my poor heart, Leonora, we were boy and girl together when we were in Florence, and were we to marry, I should always think him playfellow instead of husband. But I'll to bed and sleep; I have nothing to keep me awake. You go to bed and sleep, if you can. I know you, Leonora."

"No, you do not," murmured her cousin; "but I shall sit up and look at the moonlight for a time."

"And wish that the nightingale had not ceased to sing true-love ditties," replied Bianca gaily. "Well, good night. Leave the doors open, that I may hear if you sigh about Lorenzo in your sleep."

Bianca, or, as the French called her, Blanche Marie, then left her gaily, and with a light heart was soon asleep. Leonora d'Orco sat quite still by the window, and gazed forth. All was still and tranquil. The air was clear and soft, and yet there seemed a sort of haze--a haze of brightness

over the landscape. Have you never remarked, reader, especially in southern climates, that the moon sometimes pours forth her pale rays in such profusion that it seems as if a mist of light spread over the scene? So was it at that moment; and though the nightingale, as Blanche Marie had said, no longer trilled his summer song, yet every now and then a note or two from his sweet voice burst upon the ear--a song, begun as if in memory, and broken off as if in despair. The time of love was past, and he could sing no more; but the remembrance of happy days woke up under the warm autumn splendour, and a few short plaintive notes came welling from the fountains of regret.

Of what was the young maiden thinking? What feelings woke up in her bosom under that bright moon?

What harmonious chord vibrated in her bosom to the broken tones of the solitary songster of the night?

Gaze down into a deep, deep well, reader, and if you gaze long enough, you will catch an uncertain gleam of light, you know not whence, glistening upon the surface of waters below you; but you cannot fathom those waters with the eye, nor see aught that they cover; and so it is with the heart of woman to those who would scan it from a distance. If you would know what is beneath, plunge down into its depths, torch in hand; you may perish, but you will know all that can be known of that most deep, mysterious thing.

At length there was the sound of a light footstep on the terrace beneath, and Leonora started and listened. The foot that produced the sound was still distant, and she quietly glided through the open door into her cousin's chamber. Blanche Marie was already sleeping peacefully, the light covering hardly veiling the contour of the young beautiful limbs, the hair already escaped from the net intended to restrain it, and the white uncovered arm cast negligently under the warm, rosy cheek. Her breathing was soft, and low, and even, and the half-open lips showed the pearly teeth between.

"How beautiful she is!" murmured Leonora; "and how sweet and gentle she looks! So looked Psyche;" and with a noiseless step she left the room, and closed the door behind her.

She took her seat near the window again, behind the rich deep moulding, as if she would see without being seen; but the lighted taper on the table cast her shadow across without her knowing it; and there she sat, and once more listened. The step was very, very near now, and the next instant it stopped beneath the window. Then came a silent pause for a moment, and Leonora's heart beat.

"Bianca," said the voice of Lorenzo, "is that you, dear cousin?"

Leonora was strongly tempted to say yes, but yet she felt ashamed of the positive falsehood, and, with a sort of compromise with conscience, she answered, almost in a whisper:

"Hush! speak low."

"Which is Leonora's chamber?" asked the voice again.

"Why?" demanded the young girl, in the same low tone, but with strange sensations in her bosom.

"I wish to sing to her," answered the youth, "and to tell her all I dared not tell this evening. I am ordered to Pavia early to-morrow, dear cousin, and must leave you to plead my cause, but I would fain say one word for myself first."

Oh, how Leonora's heart beat.

"Then it is not Bianca," she murmured to herself; "it is not Bianca. The next room on your right," she answered, still speaking low; but suddenly there came upon her a feeling of shame for the deception, and she added, "What is it you would say, Lorenzo? Leonora is here; Bianca has been sleeping for an hour. But don't sing, and speak low. Signor Rovera's apartments are close by."

But Lorenzo would not heed the warning; and though he did not raise his voice to its full power, he sang, in a sweet, low tone, a little canzonetta, which had much currency some few years before in Florence:

"What time the Greek, in days of yore,  
Bent down his own, fair work before,  
He woke the echoes of the grove  
With words like these, 'Oh, could she love!'

"Heaven heard the sculptor's wild desire;  
Love warmed the statue with its fire;  
But when he saw the marble move,  
He asked, still fearful, 'Will she love?'

"She loved--she loved; and wilt thou be  
More cold, Madonna, unto me?  
Then hear my song, and let me prove  
If you can love--if you can love."

"Songs are false--men are falser, Lorenzo," answered Leonora, bending a little from the window: "you will sing that canzonetta to the next pretty eye you see."

"It will be Leonora's then," answered the youth. "Can you not come down, dear Leonora, and let me hear my fate under the olive-trees? I fear to tell you all I feel in this place, lest other ears should be listening. Oh! come down, for I must go hence by daybreak to-morrow."

"Oh! do not go so soon," murmured Leonora; "I will be down and on the terrace by daybreak; but to-night--no, no, Lorenzo, I cannot, for very maiden shame, come down to-night. There, take my glove, Lorenzo, and if I find you still wear it for my sake when next we meet, I shall know--and then, perhaps--perhaps I will tell you more. But there is some one coming--fly! fly!--the other way. He is coming from the east end of the terrace."

"I never turned my back on friend or foe," answered Lorenzo, turning to confront the new comer.

Leonora drew back from the window and put out the light, but she listened with eager ears. "It was very like my father's figure," she thought; "his height, his walk, but yet, methinks, stouter. Hark! that is not his voice--one of the servants, perhaps."

The next instant there was a clash of steel, and she ran anxiously to the window. At some twenty yards distance she saw Lorenzo, sword in hand, defending himself against a man apparently much more powerful than himself. For a moment or two she gazed, bewildered, and not knowing what to do. Lorenzo at first seemed to stand entirely on the defensive; but soon his blood grew hot, and, in answer to his adversary's lunge, he lunged again; but the other held a dagger in his left hand, and with it easily parried the blade. The next pass she saw her lover stagger. She could bear no more, and, running down, she screamed aloud to wake the servants, who slept near the hall. An old man, a porter, was still dozing in a chair, and started up, exclaiming:

"What is it; what is it, signorina?"

"Haste! haste! Bring your halbert!" cried Leonora, pulling back slowly the great heavy door, and running down the steps; "there is murder about."

She fancied she should behold Lorenzo already fallen before his more vigorous enemy; but, on the contrary, he was now pressing him hard with an agility and vigour which outweighed the strength of maturity on the part of the other. All was as clear in the bright moonlight as if the sun had been shining; and, as Leonora sprung forward, she beheld, or thought she beheld, her lover's assailant gain some advantage. Lorenzo was pressed back along the terrace towards the spot where she stood. He seemed to fly, though still with his face to his adversary, but he had been well disciplined to arms in Italy as well as France, and knew every art of defence or assault. The space between him and his foe increased till he nearly reached the young girl's side, and then, with a sudden bound, like that of a lion, he sprang upon his enemy and passed his guard. What followed Leonora could not see; it was all the work of a moment; but the next instant she beheld the elder man raise his hand as if to strike with his dagger, drop it again, and fall back heavily upon the terrace.

Lorenzo leaned upon his sword, and seemed seeking to recover breath, while Leonora ran up to him, asking, "Are you hurt; are you hurt, Lorenzo?"

Ere he could answer there were many people around them. No house in Italy was unaccustomed to such scenes in those days. Indeed, scenes much more terrible habituated everybody, servants, masters, retinue, to wake at the first call, and to have everything ready for resistance and defence. A number of the attendants poured forth from the door she had left open, some with useless torches lighted, some with arms in their hands. Then came her father, Ramiro d'Orco, and last, the old Count Rovera himself, while Blanche Marie appeared at the window above, eagerly asking what had befallen.

No one answered her, but the Signor d'Orco advanced calmly to the side of the fallen man, gazed at him for a moment, and then turned to Lorenzo, asking, "Is he dead?"

"I know not," replied the young man, sheathing his sword.

"Who is he?" demanded Ramiro again.

"Neither know I that," said the youth; "he attacked me unprovoked as I walked here upon the terrace in the moonlight; but I never saw his face before, that I know of."

"Walked and sang," answered Ramiro, drily. "Perhaps he did not like your music, Signor Visconti."

"Probably," replied the youth, quite calmly. "It was but poor, and yet not worth killing a man for. Besides, as it was not intended for him, but for a lady, it could give him no offence."

"Not quite clear logic that, good youth," answered Ramiro. "Do any of you know this man?" he continued, turning to the servants.

"Not I;" "not I," answered several; but the old Count of Rovera bent down his head toward the man's face, waving the rest away that the moonlight might fall upon him. "Why, this is Pietro Buondoni, of Ferrara;" he exclaimed; "an attendant on Count Ludovico, and a great favorite. What could induce him to attack you, Lorenzo?"

"I know not, sir," replied Lorenzo; "I never set eyes on him before. He called me a French hound, and, ere I could answer him, he had nearly run me through the body. I had hardly time to draw."

"Well, bear him in--bear him in," said the old lord; "though I judge from his look he will not attack any one again. Did I not see Leonora here?"

But by this time she was gone, and Lorenzo took care not to answer. As he followed the rest into the villa, however, he stooped to pick up something from the ground. What if it were a lady's glove!

## CHAPTER VII.

The servants bore Buondoni into the great hall; but it was in vain they attempted for a moment or two to rouse him into consciousness again. There was no waking from the sleep that was upon him. Lorenzo's sword, thrust home, had passed through and through his body, piercing his heart as it went. Very different were the sensations of the different persons who gazed upon his great, powerful limbs and handsome face, as he lay in death before them. Ramiro d'Orco could hardly be said to feel anything. It was a sight which he had looked on often. Death, in the abstract, touched him in no way. To see a man take any one of his ordinary meals or die was the same to him. It was an incident in the world's life--no more. He had no weak sympathies, no thrilling sensibilities, no fanciful shudderings at the extinction of human life. A man was dead--that was all. In that man he had no personal interests. He knew him not. There had been no likelihood that he ever would know him; if anything, less probability that that man could ever have served him, and therefore there seemed nothing to regret. Neither had there been any chance that Buondini could ever have injured him, therefore there could be no matter for rejoicing; but yet, if anything, there was a curious feeling of satisfaction, rather than otherwise, in his breast. Death--the death of others--was a thing not altogether displeasing to him. He knew not why it was so, and perhaps it sometimes puzzled him, for he had been known to say, when he heard a passing-bell. "Well, there is one man less in the world! There are fools enough left."

Old men grow hardened to such things, and in the ordinary course of nature, as their own days become less and less, as life with them becomes more and more a thing of the past, they estimate the death of others, as they would estimate their own approaching fate, but lightly. The old Count Rovera looked with but very little feeling upon the dead man; but he thought of his young relation Lorenzo, and of what might be the consequences to him. At first, when he remembered that this man had been a great favourite with Ludovic the Moor, and thus another offence had been offered by a Visconti to a Sforza, he entertained some fears for the youth's safety. But then the recollection of the King of France's powerful protection gave him more confidence, and his sympathies went no farther.

The feelings of Lorenzo himself were very different; but as they were such as would be experienced by most young men unaccustomed to bloodshed in looking for the first time upon an enemy slain by their own hands, we need not dwell much upon them. There was the shuddering impression which the aspect of death always makes upon young, exuberant life. There was the natural feeling of regret at having extinguished that which we can never reilluminate. There was that curious, almost fearful inquiry which springs up in the thoughtful mind at the sight of the dead, when our eyes are not much accustomed to it, "What is life?"

While he was still gazing, one of the servants touched the old count's arm and whispered something to him, "Ha!" cried Rovera; "I am told, Lorenzo, you received a letter to-night, which was sent up to your room by one of your men, after we all parted. It was not a challenge, perchance? If so, you should have chosen some other place for your meeting than our terrace."

"It was not so, sir," replied Lorenzo, promptly. "I had no previous quarrel with the man. The

letter was from his Majesty King Charles. Here it is; you can satisfy yourself."

"My eyes are dim," said the old man; "read it Ramiro."

The Lord of Orco took the paper, and read while one of the servants held a flambeau near.

"WELL-BELOVED COUSIN"--so ran the note--"It has pleased us to bestow on you the troop of our ordnance, become vacant by the death of Monsieur de Moustier. We march hence speedily, and the Seigneur de Vitry proceeds to-night toward Pavia. As he will not be able to depart till late in the day, we judge it best to advise you, in order to your preparation, that he will halt near the Villa Rovera for an hour to-morrow early, and that we expect you will accompany him on his march without delay. Fail not as you would merit our favour."

"CHARLES."

Ramiro read the letter aloud, and then, without any comment on the contents, remarked:

"You have left the impress of your thumb in blood upon the king's missive, Signor Visconti; you are wounded, mayhap."

"Ah! a scratch--a mere scratch in my right shoulder," answered Lorenzo; "I could not completely parry one of his first thrusts, and he touched me, but it is nothing."

"Oh, you are hurt, Lorenzo! you are hurt!" cried Bianca Maria, who had come down from her chamber, and was standing behind the little circle which had gathered round the dead man.

"Get you to bed, child!" said the old count sharply; "these are no matters for you. Your cousin has but a scratch. Get you to bed, girl, I say; this is a pretty pass, that two men cannot fight without having all the women in the house for witnesses!"

In the mean time Ramiro d'Orco had raised the left hand of the dead man, in which was still firmly clasped his poniard--his sword had fallen out of the right when he fell--and, taking a torch from one of the servants, he gazed along the blade.

"This dagger is grooved for poison, Conte," he said, addressing his host in the same quiet, indifferent tone he generally used; "better look to the young gentleman's wound."

"I thank you, sir," replied Lorenzo; "but it came from his sword, not his poniard. I will retire and let my men stanch the bleeding."

"Better, at all events, apply some antidote," said Ramiro; "a little parsley boiled will extract most poisons, unless they remain too long. It were well to attend to it speedily."

"Well, I will go," replied Lorenzo; "but, I call Heaven to witness, I have no blame in this man's death. He attacked me unprovoked, and I killed him in self-defence."

"We must take measures to discover how this came about," said the count, thoughtfully. "Buondoni cannot have come here unattended."

"Better perchance let it rest," said Ramiro d'Orco, "there may be motives at the bottom of the whole affair that were not well brought to the surface. I have gathered little from tonight's discourse of this youth's history; but he is a Visconti, and that alone may make him powerful enemies, who had better still be his enemies than yours, father."

"I fear them not," replied the old nobleman; "let diligent inquiry be made around and on the road to Pavia for any stranger arrived this night. Now, Ramiro, come with me for awhile, and we will talk farther. Lights, boys, on there in my cabinet. You are in your night gear, signor; but I will not keep you long ere I let you to your slumbers again."

"They will be my first slumbers," answered Ramiro. "I had not closed an eye when I heard talking, and singing, and then clashing of swords--no unusual combinations in our fair land, Signor Rovera."

As he spoke he followed the old count into a small, beautiful room, every panel of which held a picture, of great price then, and invaluable now as specimens of the first revival of art. When they were seated and the doors closed, the elder man fell into a fit of thought, though he had invited the conference, and Ramiro d'Orco spoke first.

"Who is this young Visconti?" he asked; "and how comes the King of France to give him cousinship?"

"Why, he is the son of that Carlo Visconti who stabbed Galeazzo Sforza," answered the count, "and was killed in the church. The boy was carried by some of his relations to his godfather, Lorenzo de Medici, and educated by him."

"Then 'tis Ludovic's doing," said Ramiro; "he has sent this man to make away with him, though that was a bad return for his father's kind act in lifting him to power. By my faith he should have raised and honoured the boy. That good stroke of a dagger was worth three quarters of a dukedom to the good prince. But I suppose, from all I learn, that the youth is now trying adventure as a soldier."

"Soldier he is under the King of France," answered the old man; "but an adventurer he hardly can be called, for he has large estates in Tuscany. When Ludovic seized the regency, he was fain to court Lorenzo de Medici for support, and right willingly he agreed to change the estates of his brother's executioner for the lands which his father Francesco had obtained in gratuity from Florence. No, he is wealthy enough, and if he serves, it is but for honour or ambition."

"But how is he cousin to the King of France?" asked Ramiro; "it is a cousinship of much value as events are passing nowadays."

"Why, do you not recollect?" asked the old man, somewhat testily, "that Valentina Visconti married Louis, brother of Charles the Sixth of France, grandfather of the present Duke of Orleans, who will one day be King of France too, if the marriage of this young king be sterile. Three years have passed without any prospect of another heir, and then the future of this youth, is bright indeed."

"It is," answered Ramiro; and, after a moment's thought, he added, "I suppose you intend to marry him to your granddaughter?"

"Good sooth, they may do as they like, Ramiro," answered the old man. "I have made marriages for my children, and seen none of them happy or successful. Some remorse--at least regret--lies in the thought. I have but this child left for all kindred, and she shall make her marriage for herself. I may give advice, but will use no compulsion. In truth, I one time sought her union with Lorenzo, for he is not only full of promise, rich, noble, allied to royal houses both of France and England, but, with high spirit, there is allied in him a tenderness and love but rarely found. I marked it in him early, when he was page to that magnificent prince his godfather. The other lads, who loved or seemed to love him, were sure to prosper through his advocacy of merits less than his own. In furtherance of my wish, I had Bianca brought up with him in Florence; but, like an unskilful archer, I fear I have overshot my mark. The one is as a brother to the other; and I believe she would as soon marry her brother as Lorenzo. On his part I know not what the feelings are. He seems to love her well, but still with love merely fraternal, if one may judge by eyes and looks. I've seen more fire in one glance at Leonora than in poor Lorenzo's life was given to any other. But this unfortunate fight may breed mischief, I fear. If Ludovic sent the man to kill him, he will not soon be off the track of blood. Thank Heaven! he is soon going on."

"I think there is no fear," replied Ramiro, "unless Buondoni's blade was well anointed. Ludovic is too wise to follow him up too fiercely. We may run down our game eagerly enough upon our own lands, but do not carry the chase into the lands of another, Signor Rovera."

"As soon as Lorenzo can rejoin the King of France, he is safe," rejoined the Count, "and methinks, till then, I can take care of him. I know the look of a poisoner or assassin at a street's distance. Only let us look to his wound; I have known one of the same scratches end a good strong man's life in a few hours."

"So say I," answered Ramiro, "but I will go out and walk upon the terrace. I feel not disposed to sleep. If you should want me, call me in. I know something of poisons and their antidotes; I studied them when I was in Padua; for, in this life, no one knows how often one may be called upon to practise such chirurgy on his own behalf."

Thus saying, he left the Count de Rovera, and while the other, half dressed as he was, hurried up to Lorenzo's chamber, Ramiro, with his usual calm and almost noiseless step, went forth and walked the terrace up and down. For more than an hour he paced it from end to end, with all his thoughts turned inward. "A distant cousin of this King of France," he thought, "and almost german to his apparent heir! Wealthy himself and full of high courage! The lad must rise--ay, high, high! He has it in his look. Such are the men upon whose rising fortunes one should take hold, and be carried up with them. It was surely Leonora's voice I heard talking with him from the windows. If so, fortune has arranged all well; yet one must be careful--no too rapid steps. We fly from that which seeks us--run after that which flies. I will mark them both well, and shut my eyes, and let things take their course, or else raise some small difficulties, soon overleaped, to give the young lover fresh ardour in the chase. Pity he is so young--and yet no pity either. It will afford us time to see how far he reaches."

With such thoughts as these he occupied himself so deeply that his eyes were seldom raised from the ground on which he trod. At length, however, he looked up toward the windows; and there was one in which the lights still burned, while figures might be seen, from time to time, passing across.

"That must be his chamber," said Ramiro to himself. "I fear the blade was poisoned, and that it has had some effect. I must go and see. 'Twere most unlucky such a chance should escape me. Let me see; where is that snake-stone I had? It will extract the venom," and, entering the house, he mounted the stairs rapidly to Lorenzo's chamber.

He found him sick indeed. The whole arm and shoulder were greatly swollen; and while the old count stood beside his bed with a look of anxious fear, a servant held the young man up to ease his troubled respiration. Lorenzo's face seemed that of a dying man--the features pale and sharp, the eye dull and glassy.

"Send for a clerk," said the youth; "there is no time for notaries; but I wish my last testament taken down and witnessed."

"Cheer up, cheer up, my good young friend," said Ramiro. "What! you are very sick; the blade was poisoned, doubtless."

"It must be so," said the young man, faintly; "I feel it in every vein."

"Well, well, fear not," answered Ramiro; "I have that at hand which will soon draw out the poison. Here man," he continued, speaking to one of the attendants, who half filled the room, "run to my chamber. On the stool near the window you will find a leathern bag; bring it to me with all speed. You, sir, young page, speed off to the buttery, and bring some of the strongest of the water of life which the house affords. It killed the King of Navarre, they say, but it will help to give life to you, Lorenzo."

"The bottigliere will not let me have it, sir," replied the boy.

"Here, take my ring," said the old count; "make haste--make haste!"

The boy had hardly left the room, when the servant first despatched returned with the leathern bag for which he had been sent. It was soon opened, and, after some search, Ramiro took forth a small packet, and unfolded rapidly paper after paper, which covered apparently some very precious thing within, speaking quietly as he did so:

"This is one of those famous snake-stones," he said, "which, when a man is bitten by any reptile, be it as poisonous as the Egyptian asp, will draw forth the venom instantly from his veins. Heaven knows, but I know not, whether it is a natural substance provided for the cure of one of nature's greatest evils, or some cunningly invented mithridate compounded by deep science. I bought it at a hundred times its weight in gold from an old and renowned physician at Padua; and it is as certain a cure for the case of a poisoned dagger-wound as for the bite of a snake. Ah! here it is! have bare the place where the sword entered."

"Pity it came not a little sooner," said Lorenzo's servant, taking off some bandages from his master's shoulder; "physic is late for a dying man."

Ramiro d'Orco gave him a look that seemed to pierce him like a dagger, for the man drew back as if he had been struck, and almost suffered his master to fall back upon the bed.

"Hold him up, fool!" said Ramiro, sternly; and, holding the wound, which had been stanchd, wide open with one hand till the blood began to flow again, he placed what seemed a small brownish stone, hardly bigger than a pea, in the aperture, and then bound the bandages tightly round the spot.

"That boy comes not," he said; "some of you run and hasten him."

But ere his orders could be obeyed the page returned, with a large silver flagon and a Venice glass on a salver.

"Now, Signor Visconti, drink this," said Ramiro, filling a glass and applying it to his lips.

Lorenzo drank, murmuring,--"It is like fire."

"So is life," answered Ramiro; "but you must drink three times, with a short interval. How feel you now?"

"Sick, sick, and faint," replied Lorenzo. But some lustre had already come back into his eye; and after a short pause, Ramiro refilled the glass, saying,

"Here, drink again."

The young man seemed to swallow more easily than before, and, in a moment or two after he had drunk, he said in a low voice,

"I feel better. That stone, or whatever it is, seems as it were sucking out the burning heat from the wound. I breathe more freely, too."

"All is going well," replied Ramiro. "One more draught, and, though you be not cured, and must remain for days, perchance, in your chamber, the enemy is vanquished. You shall have cheerful faces and sweet voices round you to soothe your confinement; but you must be very still and quiet, lest the poison, settling in the wound itself, though we have drawn it from the heart, should beget gangrene. Bianca, your dear cousin, and my child Leonora, shall attend you. Here, drink again."

Lorenzo felt that with such sweet nurses he would not mind his wound; but the third draught revived him more than all. His voice regained its firmness, his eye its light. The sobbing, hard-drawn respiration gave way to easy, regular breathing; and, after a few minutes, he said,

"I feel almost well, and think I could sleep."

"All goes aright," said Ramiro; "you may sleep now in safety. That marvellous stone has already drawn into itself all the deadly venom that had spread through your whole blood. Nothing is wanting but quiet and support. Some one sit by him while he sleeps; and if perchance he wakes, give him another draught out of this tankard. Let us all go now, and leave him to repose."

"I will sit by him, signor," said the man who had been supporting him; "for there be some who would not leave a drop in the tankard big enough to drown a flea, and I have sworn never to taste *aqua vitæ* again, since it nearly burst my head open at Rheims, in France."

Before he had done speaking Lorenzo was sound asleep; and while the servant let his head drop softly on the pillow, the rest silently quitted the room.

## CHAPTER VIII.

A few hours earlier on the day of which we have just been speaking, a gallant band of men-at-arms rode forward on the highway between Milan and Pavia. It consisted of nearly four hundred lances, that is to say, of about eight hundred men. Had it been complete, the number would have amounted to many more, for the usual proportion was at least three inferior soldiers, esquires, or pages to each lance; but the eagerness of the young King of France to achieve what he believed would be an easy conquest had hurried his departure from France ere his musters were one half filled.

A short repose in Milan had sufficed to wipe away all stains of travel from his host; and the band of the Lord of Vitry appeared in all their accoutrements, what Rosalind calls "point device." It is true, the day had been somewhat dry and sultry, and some dust had gathered upon splendid surcoats, and scarfs, and sword-knots; and the horses, so gay and full of spirit in the morning, now looked somewhat fatigued, but by no means jaded.

At their head rode their commander, a man of some thirty to two and thirty years of age, of a fine, manly person and handsome countenance, although the expression might be somewhat quick and hasty, and a deep scar on the brow rather marred the symmetry of his face. By his side, on a horse of much inferior power, but full of fire and activity, rode a man, not exactly in the garb of a servant, but yet plainly habited and nearly unarmed. Sword and dagger most men wore in those days, but he wore neither lance nor shield, cuirass nor back-piece. He carried a little black velvet cap upon his head, with a long feather; and he rode in shoes of untanned leather, with long, sharp points, somewhat like a pod of mustard-seed.

"Are you sure you know the way, Master Tony?" asked De Vitry.

"I know the way right well, noble lord," replied the other; "but you do me too much honour to call me master. In Italy none is master but a man of great renown in the arts."

"Good faith, I know not what you are," answered the leader, "and I never could make out what young Lorenzo kept you always trotting at his heels for, like a hound after his master."

"You do me too much honour again, my lord," replied the other, "in comparing me to a hound."

"What, then, in Fortune's name, are you?" asked De Vitry, laughing.

"A mongrel," replied Antonio, "half French, half Italian; but pray, your lordship, don't adjure me by Fortune; for the blind goddess with the kerchief over her eyes has never been favourable to me all my life."

"Time she should change then," answered De Vitry.

"Oh, sir, she is like a school-boy," answered Antonio; "she never changes but from mischief to mischief; only constant in doing evil; and whichever side of her wheel turns uppermost, my lot is sure to slide down to the bottom. But here your lordship must turn off."

De Vitry was following on the road to which the other pointed, when a voice behind said:

"You are leaving the high road, my lord. If you look forward, you will see this is but a narrow



lane."

"By my faith that is true," said the commander of the band; "you are not tricking me, I trust, Master Antonio? Halt there--halt!"

"It might be fine fun to trick a French knight if I were my lord's jester," said Antonio, "but I have not arrived at that dignity yet."

"Where does that road lead to, then, sirrah?" demanded De Vitry, pointing to the one they were just leaving.

"To Pavia, my lord," replied the man; "but you will find this the shortest, and, I judge, the best."

There was a lurking smile upon Antonio's face, which De Vitry did not like; and, after but a moment's hesitation, he turned his horse back into the other path, saying:

"I will take the broad way; I never liked narrow or crooked paths in my life."

"I trust you will then allow me to follow the other, sir," said Antonio; "first, because there is no use in trying to guide people who will not be guided, and, secondly, because I have something important to say to my young lord."

"No, sir--no," answered De Vitry, sharply; "ride here by my side. To-morrow, at farthest, I will take care to know whether you have tried to deceive me: and if you have, beware your ears."

"You will know to-night, my lord," said the man, "and my ears are in no danger, if you are not given, like many another gentlemen, to cuffing other people for your own faults."

"You are somewhat saucy, sir," replied the marquis; "your master spoils you, methinks."

The man saw that his companion was not to be provoked farther, and was silent while they rode onward.

It was now drawing towards evening, but the light had not yet faded; and De Vitry gazed around with a soldier's eye, scanning the military aspect of the country around.

"Is there not a river runs behind that ridge, Master Tony?" he asked at the end of ten minutes, with easily recovered good-humour.

"Yes, sir," replied the man shortly.

"And what castle is that on the left--there, far in the distance?"

"That is the castle of Sant' Angelo," answered Antonio.

"Why, here is the river right before us," said De Vitry, "but where is the bridge?"

"Heaven knows," replied the man, with the same quiet smile he had borne before; "part of it, you may see, is standing on the other side, and there are a few stones on this, if they can be of any service to your lordship. The rest took to travelling down toward the Po some month or two ago, and how far they have marched I cannot tell."

"Doubtless we can ford it," said De Vitry, in an indifferent tone.

"First send your enemy, my lord," replied Antonio, "then your friend, and then try it yourself--if you like."

"By my life, I have a mind to send you first, head foremost," replied the commander, sharply, but the next moment he burst into a good-humoured laugh, saying, "Well, what is to be done? The stream seems deep and strong. We did you wrong, Antonio. Now lead us right, at all events."

"You did yourself wrong, and your own eyesight, my lord," answered the man, "for, if you had looked at the tracks on the road, you would have seen that all the ox-carts for the last month have turned off where I would have led you. You have only now to go back, again."

"A hard punishment for a light fault," replied De Vitry. "Why told you me not this before, my good sir."

"Because, my lord, I have always thought St. Anthony, my patron, was wrong in preaching to fishes which have no ears. But we had better speed, sir, for it is touching upon evening, and night will have fallen before we reach Sant' Angelo. There you will find good quarters in the Borgo for your men; and, doubtless, the noble signor in the castle will come down at the first sound of your trumpets, and ask you and your prime officers to feast with him above. He is a noble lord, and loves the powers that be. Well that the devil has not come upon earth in his day, for he would have entertained him royally, and might have injured his means in honour of his guest."

De Vitry burst into another gay laugh, and, turning his horse's head, gave orders for his band to retrace their steps, upon which, of course, the young men commented as they would, while the

old soldiers obeyed without question, even in their thoughts.

Night had long fallen when they reached Sant' Angelo a place then of much more importance than it is now, or has been for two centuries. But Antonio had been mistaken in supposing that De Vitry and his principal officers would be invited to lodge within the castle. The lord thereof was absent, knowing that the route of the King of France must be close to his residence. He was well aware that the attachment professed toward the young monarch by persons more powerful than himself was all hollow and deceptive, and that inferior men, in conflicts of great interests, always suffer, whose party soever they espouse. But he knew, too that unexplained neutrality suffers more than all, and he resolved to absent himself from his lands on the first news of the arrival of the King of France in Italy, that he might seem to favour neither him nor his opponents, and yet not proclaim a neutrality which would make enemies of both.

The castle, indeed, would at once have opened its gates, had it been summoned; but De Vitry, knowing the king's anxiety to keep on good terms with all the Italian nobles of Lombardy, contented himself with lodgings in the humble inn of the place, and hunger made his food seem as good as any which the castle could have afforded. The supper passed gaily over; the men were scattered in quarters through the little borough; wine was with difficulty procured by any but the officers, and sober perforce, the soldiery sought rest early. De Vitry and one or two others sat up late, sometimes talking, sometimes falling into fits of thought.

Antonio, in the meantime, had not even thought of rest. He had carefully attended to his horse, had ordered him to be fed, and seen him eat his food, and he stood before the door of the inn, gazing up at the moon, as if enjoying the calm sweetness of the soft Italian nights, but in reality meditating a farther ride as soon as all the rest were asleep. It was in the shadiest corner of this doorway that the man had placed himself, and yet he could see the full nearly-rounded orb without coming under her beams. As so often happens, two processes seemed going on in his mind at once; one suggested by objects present, and finding utterance in an occasional murmured sentence or two, the other originating in things past, and proceeding silently.

"Ay, Madam Moon," he said; "you are a curious creature, with your changes, and your risings, and your settings, and your man with his dog and lantern. I wonder what you really are. You look like a great big ducat nailed upon the sky, or a seal of yellow wax pendent from the charter of the heavens. I could almost fancy, though, that I can see behind you on this clear night. Perhaps you are but the big boss of a sconce, put up there to reflect the light of the sun. You will soon be up there, just above the watch-tower of the castle, like a ball upon a gate-post. Hark! there are people riding late. By my faith! if they be travellers coming hither, they will find scanty lodging and little to eat. These gormandizing Frenchmen have gobbled up everything in the village, I warrant, and occupied every bed. On my faith, they will find themselves too confident some day: not a sentry set except at the stables; no one on guard; the two or three officers in the dining-hall. They think they have got Italy at their feet; they may discover that they are mistaken before they leave it. These horsemen are coming hither. Who can they be?"

While these thoughts had been occupying one part of the man--I know not how better to express it--and had more or less clothed themselves in words, another train, more nearly allied to feeling, had been proceeding silently in the deeper recesses of his bosom. There was something which made him half sorry that he had been prevented from proceeding further before nightfall, half angry with him who had been, partly at least, the cause of the delay. "I do not believe," he thought, "that the big bravo can reach the villa before morning. He had not set out when we came away, and yet I should like to see the young lord to-night. I have a great mind to get upon my horse's skin at once and go on. But then, a thousand to one, De Vitry would send after and stop me; and if I were to meet Buondoni and his people, I should get my throat cut, and all my news would escape through the gash. If I could persuade this dashing French captain to lend me half a dozen men now, I might do something; but their horses are all tired with carrying the cart-load of iron each has got upon his shoulders. Hark! these travellers are coming nearer. Perhaps they may bring some news from the Villa Rovera. They are coming from that side."

He drew farther back into the shadow of the gateway. It may seem strange that he did so; for even in distracted England, in those days as well as afterward, the first impulse of the lodger in an inn was to meet the coming guest and obtain the general tidings which he brought, and which were hardly to be obtained from any other source. But in Italy men had learned such caution that every stranger was considered an enemy till he was ascertained to be a friend. The evils of high civilization were upon the land, without any of its benefits; nay, more, this had endured so long that suspicion might almost be looked upon as the normal condition of the Italian mind.

The republics of Italy have been highly extolled by eloquent men, but their results were all evil except in one respect. They served to preserve a memory of the arts--to rescue, in fact, something which might decorate life from the wreck of perished years. In thus speaking, I include commerce with the arts. But as to social advancement, they did nothing except through the instrumentality of those arts. They endeavoured to revive ancient forms unsuited to the epoch; they succeeded in so doing only for the briefest possible period, and the effort ended everywhere, first in anarchy, and then in despotism--each equally destructive to individual happiness, to general security, and to public morals. They afforded a spectacle, at once humiliating and terrible, of the impotence of the human mind to stem the strong, calm current of pre-ordained events. Their brief existence, their lamentable failure, the brightness of their short course, and the evils consequent upon the attempts to recall rotten institutions from millennial graves, were

but as the last flash of the expiring candle of old Rome, ending in darkness and a bad smell. For more than two centuries, at the time I speak of, life and property in Italy had enjoyed no security except in the continual watchfulness of the possessor. The minds of men were armed as well as their bodies, and thus had been engendered that suspicion and that constant watchfulness which rendered life a mere campaign, because the world was one battlefield.

Oh! happy state under the old Saxon king of England, when from one end to the other of the bright island a young girl might carry a purse of gold unmolested!

Antonio drew back as the travellers approached to hear something of who and what they were before he ventured to deal with them personally. They were within a few yards of him in a minute, drawing in the rein when they came opposite the archway leading to the stable-yard. There the first challenge of a sentinel was heard, and the answer given, "Amici!" showed that they were Italians.

The word was uttered quickly and in a tone of surprise, which showed they were unaware the borgo had been occupied by the French troops; but, after a few whispered sentences, one of the four who had newly arrived asked the sentinel, in marvellous bad French, to call the landlord or one of the horse-boys. They wanted food for themselves and horses, they said, and hoped to find some place to rest in for the night.

The sentinel grumbled forth something to the effect that they were much mistaken, but, raising his stentorian voice, he called the people of the house into the courtyard; and Antonio gazed forth and scrutinised the appearance of the new-comers for a minute or two, while they made their application for entertainment, and heard all the objections and difficulties laid before them by the landlord, who was already overcrowded, but unwilling to lose certain *lire* which they might expend in his house.

"I can but feed your horses in the yard, and give you some straw and covering for yourselves, Signor Sacchi," replied the landlord; "and then you must lie on the floor of the hall."

The leading horseman turned to consult with his three companions, saying, "He told us to wait him here if he came not in an hour."

"Nay, I understood, if he came not in an hour," replied another, "we were to conclude he had obtained entertainment in the Villa--, which the count's letter was sure to secure for him; but I did not hear him say we were to come back here, as I told you long ago, Sacchi."

But before they had proceeded even thus far, Antonio had re-entered the house, and was conversing eagerly with the young Marquis de Vitry.

"If you will but let me have half a dozen common troopers, my lord," said he--"I know not how many this man may have with him--but I will risk that."

"But who is he? who is he?" asked De Vitry, "and what are your causes of suspicion?"

"Why I told you, my lord," replied Antonio, "he is that tall big-limbed Ferrara man who is so great a favourite with the Count Regent--Buondoni is his name. Then, as to the causes of suspicion, I came upon Ludovic and him talking in the gallery of the castle last night, and I heard the count say, 'Put him out of the way any how; he is a viper in my path, and must be removed. Surely, Buondoni, you can pick a quarrel with the young hound, and rid me of him. He is not a very fearful enemy, I think, to a master of fence like you!' Thereupon the other laughed, saying, 'Well, my lord, I will set out to-night or to-morrow, and you shall hear of something being done before Thursday, unless Signor Rovera takes good care of his young kinsman.' 'Let him beware how he crosses me,' muttered the Moor. And now, Signor de Vitry, I am anxious to warn my young lord of what is plotting against him."

"After all, it may be against another, a different person from him you suppose," replied De Vitry. "This Buondoni, if it be the same man, was insolent to young De Terrail, and Bayard struck him. We also were going to halt at the Villa Rovera, and Ludovic knew it."

"But, my lord," exclaimed Antonio, "do you not perceive--"

"I see, I see," replied De Vitry, interrupting him: "I know what you would say. Ludovic has no cause to hate Bayard or to remove him; it was but Buondoni's private quarrel. There is some truth in that. Are you sure these men just arrived are his servants?"

"As sure as the sun moves round the earth," replied Antonio.

"Nay, that I know nought of," answered De Vitry; "but here they come, I suppose. Find out De Terrail, Antonio. Tell him to take twenty men of his troop and go forward with you. You can tell him your errand as you go. I will deal awhile with these gentlemen, and see what I can make out of them."

Antonio retired quietly keeping to the shady side of the large ill-lighted hall, while the three freshly-arrived travellers moved slowly forward, with a respectful air, toward the table near which De Vitry sat.

"Give you good evening, gentlemen," said the marquis, turning sharply round as soon as he heard their footsteps near. "Whence come you?"

"From Pavia, my lord," said Sacchi, a large-boned, black-bearded man.

"And what news bring you?" inquired the French commander. "None, my lord," replied the man; "all was marvellous peaceful."

"Ay, peace is a marvel in this wicked world," answered De Vitry. "Called you at the Villa Rovera as you passed?"

"No, sir--that is, we stopped a moment, but did not call," replied Sacchi.

"And what did you stop for?" asked the Frenchman.

"Only just to--to be sure of our way," replied Sacchi.

"And you came from Pavia, then?" said De Vitry. "You must have set out at a late hour, especially for men who did not rightly know their way. But methinks I saw you in Milan this morning. Will you have the bounty to wake that gentleman at the end of the table, who has gone to sleep over his wine?"

He spoke in the calmest and most good-humoured tone, without moving in his seat, his feet stretched out before him, and his head thrown back; and the man to whom he spoke approached the French officer who was seated sleeping at the table, and took him by the shoulder.

"Shake him," said De Vitry; "shake him hard; he sleeps soundly when he does sleep."

Sacchi did as he was bid, and the officer started up, exclaiming:

"What is it? Aux armes!"

"No need of arms, Montcour," answered his commander; "only do me the favour of taking that gentleman by the collar, and placing him in arrest."

He spoke at first slowly, but increased in rapidity of utterance as he saw his officer's sleepy senses begin to awaken. But Montcour was hardly enough roused to execute his orders, and though he stretched out his hand somewhat quickly towards Sacchi's neck, the Italian had time to jump back and make toward the door.

De Vitry was on his feet in a moment, however, and barred the way, sword in hand. The other servants of Buondoni rushed to the only other way out; but there were officers of De Vitry's band not quite so sleepy as Montcour, and, without waiting for orders, they soon made three out of the four prisoners. The other leaped from the window and escaped.

"My lord, my lord, this is too bad!" exclaimed Sacchi; "you came here as friends and allies of the noble regent, and you are hardly ten days in the country before you begin to abuse his subjects and servants."

For a moment or two De Vitry kept silence, and gazed at his prisoner with a look of contempt. The man did not like either the look or the silence. Each was significant, but difficult to answer; and in a moment after, De Vitry having given him over to one of the subaltern officers, nodded his head, quietly saying:

"We understand you, sirrah, better than you think. If I were to consider you really as a servant of Prince Ludovic, I might remark that the regent invited us here as friends and allies, and we had been scarcely ten days in the land ere he sent you and others to murder one of our officers, and a kinsman of our king; but I do not choose to consider you as his servant, nor to believe that he is responsible for your acts. The king must judge of that as he finds reason, and either hang you or your master, as in his equity he judges right. As to other matters, you know your first word was a lie, that you do not come from Pavia at all, and that the beginning and end of your journey was the Villa Rovera. What you have done there I do not know, but I know the object of your master."

"But, sir, I have nought to do with my master's business," replied Sacchi. "I know nought of his objects; I only know that I obey my orders."

"Hark ye! we are wasting words," said De Vitry. "Doubtless you will be glad to know what I intend to do with you. I shall keep you here till an hour before daybreak, and then take you on to the villa. If I find that one hair of Lorenzo Visconti's head has suffered, I will first hang your master, the worshipful Signor Buondoni, on the nearest tree, and then hang you three round him for the sake of symmetry. I swear it on the cross;" and he devoutly kissed the hilt of his sword.

Sacchi's face turned deadly pale, and he murmured:

"It will be too late--to-morrow--before to-morrow it will be done."

"What is that you mutter?" said De Vitry; "what do you mean will be done?"

"Why, my lord," replied the man, "my master--my master may have some grudge against the young lord Lorenzo. He is a man of quick action, and does not tarry long in his work. I know nought about it, so help me Heaven! but it is hard to put an innocent man's life in jeopardy for what may happen in a night. Better set off at once and stop the mischief rather than avenge it."

"So, so!" said De Vitry; "then the story is all too true. Bayard! Bayard!"

"He has just passed into the court, seigneur," replied one of the young officers who was standing near the window; "he and some others are mounting their horses now. Shall I call him?"

"No, let him go," answered the leader; "he is always prompt and always wise. We can trust it all to him. As for these fellows, take them and put them in an upper room where they cannot jump out. Set a guard at the door. You, signors, best know whether your consciences are quite clear; but if they be not, I advise you to make your peace with Heaven as best you may during the night, for I strongly suspect, from what you yourselves admit, that I shall have to raise you a little above earthly things about dawn to-morrow. There, take them away. I do not want to hear any more. Our good King Louis, eleventh of the name, had a way of decorating trees after such a sort. I have seen as many as a dozen all pendent at once when I was a young boy, and I do not know why it should go against my stomach to do this same with a pack of murderous wolves, who seem made by Heaven for the purpose of giving a warning to their countrymen."

## CHAPTER IX.

When Lorenzo awoke--and his sleep was not of such long duration as fully to outlive the darkness--he found more than one person watching him. Close by his side sat Ramiro d'Orco, and near the foot of his bed the lamplight fell upon the well-known face of his faithful follower, Antonio. He felt faint and somewhat confused, and he had a throbbing of the brow and temples, which told him he was ill; but for some moments he remembered nothing of the events which had taken place the night before.

"How feel you, my young friend?" asked Ramiro, in a far more gracious tone than he commonly used; "yet speak low and carefully, for, though the antidote has overwrought the poison, you must long be watchful of your health, and make no exertion."

"You are very kind, Signor Ramiro," replied the young man. "I believe I was wounded last night, and that the blade was poisoned--yes, it was so, and I owe you my life."

"I speak not of that, Lorenzo," replied Ramiro; "I am right glad I was here, and could wish much that I could remain to watch you in your convalescence, for a relapse might be fatal; but I will trust you to hands more delicate, if not so skilful as my own. Men make bad nurses; women are the fit attendants for a sick room, and your pretty little cousin, Bianca Maria--as gentle and sweet as an angel--and my child Leonora, whom you know, shall be your companions. I will charge them both to watch you at all moments, and, under their tender care, I warrant you will soon recover. I myself must ride hence ere noon, for I must be in Rome ere ten days are over. Ere that you will be quite well; and should it be needful that Leonora should follow me, I will trust to your noble care to bring her on through this distracted country. I know you will reverence her youth and innocence for her father's sake, who has done all he could for you in a moment of great peril."

Lorenzo's heart beat with joy at the mere thought. I would have said thrilled, but, unhappily, the misuse of good words by vulgar and ignorant men banishes them, in process of time, from the dictionary. The multitude is too strong for individual worth, and prevails.

"On my honour and my soul," replied Lorenzo, "I will guard her with all veneration and love, as if she were some sacred shrine committed to my charge."

A slight irrepressible sneer curled Ramiro's lip, for all enthusiasms are contemptible to worldly men; but he was well learned in fine words and phrases, and had sentiments enough by rote.

"The mind of a pure girl," he said, "is indeed as a saint in a shrine. Woe be to him who desecrates it. We are accustomed to think of such things too lightly in this land; but you have had foreign education amongst the chivalrous lords of France, in whom honour is an instinct, and I will fearlessly trust you to guard her on her journey through the troubled country across which she will have to pass."

"You may do so confidently, signor," replied Lorenzo, in a bold tone; but then he seemed to

hesitate; and raising himself on his arm, after a moment's thought, he added, "I hope, my lord, you will not consider that I violate the trust reposed in me, if perchance I should, in all honour, plead my cause with her by the way. Already I love her with an honourable and yet a passionate love, and I must win her for my wife if she is to be won. We are both very young, it is too true; but that only gives me the more time to gain her, if you do not oppose. As for myself, I know I shall never change, and I would lose neither time nor opportunity in wooing her affections in return. I fear me, indeed," he added, "that I could not resist the occasion, were she to go forward under my guard, and therefore I speak so plainly thus early."

He paused a moment, and then continued, with an instinctive appreciation of the character of him to whom he spoke, which all Ramiro's apparent disinterested kindness had not been able to affect:

"What dower she may have, I know not, neither do I care. I have enough for both, and allied as I am to more than one royal house, were I ambitious--and for her sake I may become so--I could carve me a path which would open out to me and mine high honours and advantages, unless I be a coward or a fool."

"Well, well, good youth, we will talk more of this another time," replied Ramiro d'Orco; "you have done nobly and honestly to speak of it, and it will only make me trust you more implicitly. Coward you are none, as you have shown this night, and fool you certainly are not. You may want the guidance of some experience, and if you be willing to listen to the counsel of one who has seen more of life than you, I will show you how to turn your great advantages to good account. It might not be too vast a scope of fancy to think of a Visconti once more seated in the chair of Milan. But I have news for you, one of your comrades in arms has arrived during the night, warned, it would seem, that some harm was intended you."

"Who is he?" asked Lorenzo eagerly.

"Young Pierre de Terrail," answered Ramiro. "He seems a noble youth, and was much grieved to hear that you were suffering. He has brought some twenty men with him, whom we have lodged commodiously; but I would not suffer him to come up while you were sleeping, as undisturbed repose was most necessary to your recovery."

Lorenzo expressed a strong wish to see his young comrade; and in a few minutes he, so celebrated afterwards as the Chevalier Bayard, was introduced. He was at this time a youth of about eighteen years of age, who at first sight appeared but slightly made, and formed more for activity than strength. Closer observation, however, showed in the broad shoulders and open chest, the thin flank, and long, powerful limbs, the promise of that hardy vigour which he afterwards displayed.

Lorenzo held out his hand to him with a warm smile, saying, "Welcome, welcome, De Terrail! You find me here fit for nothing, while there you are still in your armour, as a reproach to me, I suppose, for not being ready to march."

"Not so, not so, Visconti," said the young hero. "I did not know how soon you might wake, or how soon I might have occasion to go on to Pavia, and therefore I sat me down and slept in my armour, like a lobster in his shell. But how feel you now? Is the venom wholly subdued?"

"Yes, thanks to this noble lord," replied Lorenzo.

"Nevertheless," rejoined Ramiro, "you will need several days' repose before you can venture to mount your horse. Any agitation of the blood might prove fatal."

"Why, he has just been named by the king to the command of a troop in our band," answered De Terrail; "but we must manage that for you, Visconti. We will take it turn and turn about to order your company for you till you are well."

"Nay, I do not intend to have that troop," replied his young friend. "It is yours of right, Terrail. You entered full three months before me; and I will not consent to be put over your head."

"I will have none of it," answered the young Bayard. "It is the king's own will, Visconti; and we must obey without grumbling. Besides, do you think I will rob a man of his post while he is suffering on my account?"

"How am I suffering on your account?" asked Visconti. "What had you to do with my wound?"

"Do you not know that I struck this big fellow in the castle court at Milan because he was insolent?" said Bayard. "He vowed he would kill me before the week was out, and, depend upon it, he mistook you for me. He knew I was coming hither, and thought I was coming alone; for at first the king ordered me to carry you the news of your nomination, but he afterwards changed his mind, and sent it by the trumpet who was going to Pavia. He might not have killed me as easily as he thought; but he met a still worse playfellow in you, for you killed him instead. You were always exceedingly skilful with rapier and dagger, though I think I am your equal with the lance."

"O! superior far," answered Lorenzo. "So he is dead, is he? I have but a confused notion of all

that took place last night. I only know that he attacked me like a wild beast, and I had not even time to draw my dagger."

"Ay! dead enough," replied De Terrail. "I had a look at him as he lies below in the hall, and a more fell visage I never saw on a corpse. Your sword went clear through him, from the right side to the left; and you only gave him what he well merited--the murderous scoundrel, to poison his weapons!"

"That is a practice which sometimes must be had resort to, when men serve great princes," observed Ramiro, with a quiet smile, "but in a private quarrel it is base."

"Ay, base enough any way," replied the young Bayard. "However, you have rid me of an enemy and the world of an assassin, Lorenzo, and I hope you will not suffer long. But there, the day is coming up in the east, and I must on to Pavia presently. I had orders last night to ride early this morning and mark out our quarters; but when your good fellow there gave us news of your danger, I came on, by De Vitry's order, to see if we could defend you."

"If you will wait but half an hour, and break your fast with us in the hall," said Ramiro d'Orco, "I will ride on with you, and take advantage of the escort of your men-at-arms, Signor de Terrail."

"Willingly," answered the other; "some breakfast were no bad thing; for, good faith! we supped lightly last night. But I will go and see that all is ready for departure when we have done our meal."

He quitted the room, and Ramiro d'Orco soon after followed, promising to see his patient again before he departed for the South.

Left alone with his young lord, Antonio drew nearer, and, bending down his head, said, "I wonder, signor, what charm you have used upon the Signor d'Orco to make his hard iron as soft as soap. Why, he is the picture of tenderness--Mercy weeping over the guilt of sinners--a lineal descendant from the good Samaritan, or of that gentleman from whom the Frangipani are descended, or some other of the charitable heroes of antiquity. He was never known to shed a tear that was not produced by something that tickled his nose, or to laugh except when he saw the grimaces of a man broken on the wheel."

"Hush, hush!" said Lorenzo; "to me he has been very kind, and I must judge of people as I find them."

"Ay, sir, judge when you know them well," answered Antonio. "Your pardon, excellent lord; but hear a word or two more. He who was more than a father to you, placed me near you to serve you, not only with my limbs, but with my tongue--in the way of counsel, I mean. This man has benefited you. Be grateful to him; but be not the less on your guard. Give him no power over you, lest he should abuse it. The smallest secret in the keeping of a wicked man is a sword over the head of him who trusted him. If we lock up our own money, how much more should we lock up our thoughts. I have seen a mountebank's pig walk upon his hind legs; but I never saw one that could do it long at a time. If you wait and watch, cunning will always show itself in its true colours. The face of a man's nature is always too big for any mask he can buy, and some feature will always be uncovered by which you can know the man. No one can cover his whole person with a veil; and if you cannot judge by the face, you can find him out by the feet."

"Well, well," said Lorenzo, somewhat impatiently; "open that window wide, Antonio. My head aches, and I feel half suffocated. Then just smooth my bed, and put out that winking lamp. I should not have my chamber look like the room of an hospital."

Quick to comprehend, Antonio did not only what Lorenzo ordered, but much more, and set himself busily to give an air of trim neatness to the apartment, removing his master's bloody clothing which was lying on the ground, and placing on a stool clean linen and a new suit, but taking care to move neither the sword nor the arms, which had been cast negligently on the table. There was something picturesque in their arrangement that suited his fancy, and he let them remain. But in the course of his perquisitions he came to the silver flagon which had been brought by the page, and, after smelling to it, he asked, "Why, what is this?"

"Nay, I only know that it kept up my strength when I felt as if each moment I should die," answered Lorenzo. "I do not think even the antidote he applied to my arm would have been sufficient to save me but for its aid; the poison was so potent."

"Doubtless," replied Antonio; "but it gives me a secret how to accelerate your cure, my good lord--A wet napkin round his head will take off the head-ache, at all events," he muttered to himself; "but not just yet. Better let these men depart first."

"Now, Antonio, sit down and tell me all that has befallen since I sent you to Milan," said Lorenzo. "Did you find the small picture of my mother where old Beatrice told me it would be found?"

"Yes, my lord; but the case was much broken," replied Antonio. "Here it is."

As he spoke, he produced one of those miniature portraits which sometimes even the most

celebrated artists of the day were pleased to paint, and handed it to Lorenzo. It was fixed in an embossed case of gilded brass; but as the man had said, the back of the case had been apparently forced sharply open, so as to break the spring lock and one of the hinges.

Lorenzo took it, and, raising himself on his elbow, gazed at the features of a very lovely woman which the picture represented.

"And this was my mother!" he murmured, after looking at it for a long time; and then he added, in a still lower tone, "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!"

He then turned the portrait, drew off the dilapidated back of the case, and read some words which were written round a small oval box forming part of the frame, but concealed by the case when it was closed.

"A cure for the ills of life!" were the words; and, lifting the lid of the box, he beheld several small papers, containing some substance within them, discoloured by age.

"Know you what these are?" he asked of Antonio.

"No, my lord," replied the man; "poison, I suppose, as death is 'the only cure for all the ills of life.'"

"Right!" replied Lorenzo, musing, "right! He told me she had only escaped dishonour by death."

"Ay, my good young lord, I can tell you more of it," answered Antonio. "You were a baby then; but I am well-nigh fifteen years older, and I remember it all right well. I was then in Milan, and---"

He had not time to finish the sentence ere Ramiro d'Orco entered the room, followed by Bianca Maria and Leonora. The expression of the countenance of each of the two girls was somewhat significant of their characters, Blanche Marie gazed, shrinking and timid, round the room, as if she expected to behold some ghastly spectacle, till her eyes lighted upon Lorenzo, and then a glad smile spread over her whole face. Leonora looked straight on, her eyes fixing upon her wounded lover at once, as if divining rather than seeing where he lay; and, walking straight to his bedside, she took the chair nearest, as if of right.

"I have brought you two nurses, Lorenzo," said Ramiro; "they will give their whole care to you, and you will soon be well. But you must promise me, in honour of the skill which has saved your life, that you will not hazard it by attempting any exercise for several days."

"I will not," answered Lorenzo, "unless the king's orders especially require my service. Of course if they do, his orders must be obeyed."

"Certainly, certainly," replied the other; "but those orders will not come. He shall hear how near death you have been, and of course will be considerate. But now farewell. I must go join Monsieur de Terrail. You shall hear from me, when I reach Bologna, concerning what was spoken of. Till then, I leave you in kind and tender hands."

Thus saying, he bade him adieu and left him; and Antonio followed, judging perhaps that Lorenzo's two fair companions would afford attendance enough.

## CHAPTER X.

"Who times gallops withal!" Alas! dear Rosalind, you might have found a sweeter illustration than that which you give. Doubtless "he gallops with a thief to the gallows," but I fear me, impatient joy and reluctant fear, like most opposites in the circle of all things, meet and blend into each other. Time gallops full as fast when he carries along two lovers, and between the hours of meeting and parting his pace is certainly of the quickest.

Never, perhaps, did he travel so fast as with Leonora and Lorenzo. Their feelings were so new; they were so eager and so warm; they were so full of youth and youth's impetuous fire, that---smouldering as love had been for the last ten days, unseen even by their own eyes, and only lighted into a blaze by the events of the night before--we might pursue the image of a great conflagration, and say, both were confused and dazzled by the light, and hardly felt or knew the rapid passing of the quick-winged moments.



Blanche Marie might perhaps have estimated the passage of time more justly; for the unhappy third person--however he may love the two others, and whatever interests he may feel in their happiness--has, after all, but a sorry and a tedious part to play; and although the fairer and the milder of the two girls was not yet more than fourteen, she might long--while she sat there, silent, and striving not to listen to the murmured words of the two lovers--she might long for the day when her happy hour would come, and when the whole heart's treasury would be opened for her to pick out its brightest gems. Nay, perhaps, I might go even a little farther, and remind the reader that life's earlier stage is shorter in Italy than in most other European countries; that the olive and the orange ripen fast; and that the fruits of the heart soon reach maturity in that land. Juliet--all Italian, impassioned Juliet--was not yet fourteen--not till "Lammas Eve"--when the consuming fire took possession of her heart, and Lady Capulet herself was a mother almost at the years of Blanche Marie.

But it is an hour---that at which she had now arrived in life's short day--it is an hour of dreams and fairy forms, in the faint, vapoury twilight which lies between the dawn and the full day, when the rising sun paints every mist with gold and rose-colour, and through the very air of your existence spreads a purple light. The tears of that sweet time are but as early dew-drops brightened into jewels by the light of youthful hope, and the onward look of coming years, though kindled with the first beams of passion, knows not the fiery heat of noon, nor can conceive the arid dryness of satiety.

Blanche Marie sat and dreamed near her two cousins. At first, she heard some of the words they spoke; but then she listened more to the speakers in her own heart; and then she gave herself up to visions of the future; and the outward creature remained but a fair, motionless statue, unconscious of aught that passed around her, but full of light and ever-varying fancies.

How passed the time none of the three knew, but it passed rapidly, and Bianca was awakened from her reveries by the sound of a strange voice, saying, "Pardon, sweet lady," as some one passed her, brushing lightly against her garments, which he could not avoid touching, on his way to Lorenzo's bedside.

"Why, how now, Visconti!" exclaimed the new-comer, "What! made a leader, assaulted by an assassin, wounded with a poisoned weapon, vanquisher in the fight, saved by a miracle, and nursed by two beautiful ladies--all in twenty-four hours? By my fay, thou art a favoured child of chivalry indeed!"

Blanche Marie looked round at the speaker, roused from her reverie suddenly, but not unpleasantly. There was something joyous, light-hearted, and musical in the voice that spoke, which won favour by its very tone. Oh! there is a magic in the voice, of which we take not account enough. Have you not often marked, reader, how one man in a mixed company will win attention in an instant, not by the matter of his words, not by the manner, but by the mere tone in which they are spoken? Have you not sometimes seen two men striving to gain the ear of a fair lady, and eloquence, and sense, and wit all fail, while sweet tones only have prevailed? The eye and the ear are but sentries on guard, and the fair form and the sweet tone are but as passwords to the camp. Nay, more: some voices have their peculiar harmonies with the hearts of individuals. One will have no sweetness in its tone to many, while to another it will be all melody; and all this is no strange phenomenon; it is quite natural that it should be so. Where is the man to whom the owl is as sweet a songster as the lark! and who can pass the nightingale on his spray, though he may not pause a moment by the gaudy parrot? The blackbird's sweet, round pipe, the thrush's evening welcome to the approaching spring, the lark's rejoicing fugue in the blue sky, are all sweet to well-tuned ears; but each finds readier access to some hearts than to others.

The voice which awoke Bianca Maria from her reverie was very pleasant to her ear. There was an unaffected frankness in it--as if welling up clear from the heart--which was prepossessing to a pure, young, innocent mind like hers.

"Ah! Signor De Vitry," replied Lorenzo, "I have, indeed, had good fortune in many ways; and I suppose I ought in common gratitude to Heaven, to think it all unmixed good. But I have somewhat suffered in body, and now I am troubled to think what is to become of my troop while I lie here useless. I would the king would bestow it upon De Terrail, and let me have another chance."

"Think not of it," answered De Vitry; "we will arrange all things for you. Bayard is a noble fellow, who will win high fame some day, but we must obey the king. I find De Terrail has been here, and suppose you have seen him, for they tell me he went on two hours ago."

"Two hours!" exclaimed Lorenzo; "hardly so much, I think."

"Ay! time flies fast under bright eyes," answered De Vitry, with a laugh. "Two hours the servants below tell me, and no less. However, I must on my way. I only stopped to inquire what had happened, for no news had reached me when I marched; and I found a prisoner below whom Bayard left for me--a man who waited without, it seems, while Monsieur Buondoni busied himself with you within. I had three others of the villains in my power before, but they do not seem to be as deep in their master's secrets as this gentleman. But my provost must have finished the work I gave him by this time, and so I must on. Your pardon, sweet young lady, will you give me leave just to look forth from this window?"

He passed Blanche Marie with a courteous inclination of the head, and gazed forth toward the high road, and then, turning to Lorenzo, added:

"Ay, it is all right. Farewell for the present, Visconti. Rest quietly till you are quite well. We shall halt at Pavia for two or three days till the king comes on, and then probably for some days more. But I will come and see you from time to time, and we will make all needful arrangements. Shall I be welcome, sweet lady?"

"Oh, right welcome, noble sir," replied Bianca Maria, to whom his words were addressed; "but you must not go without tasting some refreshment, and you must see the Count Rovera, my grandsire."

"Nay, I have but little time," answered De Vitry; "and yet a cup of wine from such fair hands were mightily refreshing after a dusty ride. Your grandsire I will see when I am in a more fitting attire. 'Tis but six miles to Pavia, I am told; and I will soon ride over again, were it but to make excuse to the old count for hanging an assassin just before his gates. However, it may chance to warn others of the same cloth to venture here no more."

Bianca Maria's cheek turned somewhat pale, and she suddenly turned her eyes in the direction toward which De Vitry had been looking from the window a moment or two before. There was a dark object hanging among the bare branches of a mulberry-tree long divested of its leaves. She could not exactly distinguish what that object was, but she divined; and, turning away with a shudder, she murmured:

"For Heaven's sake, my lord, have him cut down."

"Certainly, if you wish it," replied De Vitry; "but, dear lady, it is needful to punish such villains, or we should soon have but few of our French nobles, or those who hold with us, left alive. However, there can be no great harm in cutting him down now, for my provost does not do any such things by halves."

He took a step toward the door, and then paused for a moment, as if not quite certain of the fair young girl's wishes.

"You know, I suppose," he said, in a tone of inquiry, "that this man whom they have just hanged, is one of those who came to assassinate Signor Visconti here?"

"My cousin has avenged himself in defending himself," answered Bianca Maria. "I am sure he does not wish any others to suffer."

"Well," answered De Vitry, with a laugh; "I thought myself mightily compassionate that I did not hang the other three, as, I dare say, they all well deserved; but this fellow was caught waiting for Buondoni, and was, we found, in the whole secret. However, we will have him cut down, if such be your pleasure."

"Oh, pray do, my lord--pray do, at once!" cried Bianca; "perhaps there may be life in him yet."

"Now Heaven forbid!" cried De Vitry; "but come with me, sweet lady, and you shall hear the order given instantly. Adieu, Visconti! Farewell, beautiful lady with the dark eyes! You have not bestowed one word upon me; but, nevertheless, I kiss your hand."

Thus saying, he left the room with Blanche Marie, who led him by a staircase somewhat distant from that which conducted to the great hall, where the body of Buondoni still lay, to a vestibule, where several of the marquis's attendants were waiting. There the orders which De Vitry had promised were soon given, and a cup of wine was brought for his refreshment. He lingered over it for a longer space of time than he had intended, and while he did so, he contrived to wile Bianca Maria's thoughts away from the event that had saddened them. Indeed, though the young girl was less light and volatile than she seemed to be, and many of her age really were, he effected his object--if it was an object--far more readily than could have been supposed. There was something in his manner toward her which amused and yet teased her, which pleased but did not frighten her. There was a certain touch of gallantry in it, and evidently no small portion of admiration; and yet it was clear he looked upon her as a child, and that in all his civil speeches there was at least as much jest as earnest. Nevertheless, every now and then there was a serious tone which fell pleasantly upon the young girl's ear, and was thought of in after hours.

"I trust the count will soon be here," she said, at length; "you had better stay, Signor de Vitry, and see him. He sat up during the greater part of the night, I am told, anxious about my cousin. But he must rise soon."

"My sweet lady," answered the soldier, "I must not stay. I have two--nay, three good reasons for going: first that a beautiful young lady has already beguiled me to stay longer than I should; secondly, that a pleasant old gentleman might beguile me to stay still longer; and, thirdly, that, as I intend to come back again often, I must husband excuses for my visits, and one shall be to see the count, and to apologize in person for acting high justiciary upon his lands. You have forgiven me already, I think, else there in no truth is those blue eyes; and so I kiss your hand, and promise to behave better when next I come."

Blanche Marie had ample matter for meditation during the rest of that day, at least.

## CHAPTER XI.

In those days, as in the present, there was situated, somewhere or other in the garden, farm, or podere of every Italian villa, sometimes hid among the fig-trees, olives, or mulberries, sometimes planted close to one of the gates of the inclosing walls, a neat farm-house, the abode of the contadino, who dwelt there usually in much more happiness and security than attended his lords and masters in their more magnificent abodes. It is true that occasionally a little violence might be brought down upon the heads of the family, by any extraordinary beauty in a daughter or a niece, or any very ferocious virtue upon the parents' part; but, sooth to say, I fear me much that, since the times of Virginius, Italian fathers have not looked with very severe eyes upon affairs of gallantry between their daughters and men of elevated station, nor have the young ladies themselves been very scrupulous in accepting the attentions of well-born cavaliers. The inconveniences resulting from such adventures apart, the life of an Italian peasant was far more safe and far more happy in those days than the life of a noble or a citizen, and Sismondi has justly pointed out that they were more contented with their lot, and had more cause for content, than any other class in the land. No very heavy exactions pressed upon them; their lords were generally just, and even generous; and it rarely happened that they saw their harvests wasted even by the wandering bands, whose leaders wisely remembered that they and their soldiers must depend upon those harvests for support.

The house of a contadino has less changed than almost any other building in Italy. There was always a certain degree of taste displayed in its construction, and there was always one room a good deal larger than any of the rest, with plenty of air blowing through it, to which, when the sun shone too strongly under the porch, any of the family could retire *per pigliar la fresca*. It was in this large room at the farm, in the gardens of the villa, that, at an early hour of the day which succeeded the death of Buondoni, a strange sight might be seen. The door was locked and barred, and from time to time each of those within--and there were several--turned a somewhat anxious, fearful look towards it or to the windows, as if they were engaged in some act for which they desired no witnesses. Two women, an old and a young one, stood at the head of a long table; a second girl was seen at the side; a young man was near the other end, holding a large, heavy bucket in his hand; and at some distance from all the rest, with his arms folded on his chest and somewhat gloomy disapproving brow, was the contadino himself, gazing at what the others were about, but taking no part therein himself.

The object, however, of most interest lay upon the table. It was apparently the corpse of a man from thirty-five to forty years of age, dressed in the garb of a retainer of some noble house. His long black hair flowed wildly from his head, partly soiled with dust, partly steeped with water. His dress also was wet, and the collar of his coat as well as that of his vest seemed to have been torn rudely open. He had apparently died a violent death: the face was of a dark waxen yellow, and the tongue, which protruded from the mouth, had been bitten in violent agony between the teeth. Round his neck, and extending upwards towards the left ear, was a dark red mark, significant of the manner of his death.

"Here, Giulo, here!" cried the elder woman, "pour the water over him again. His eyes roll in his head. He is coming to!"

"Ah, Marie! what a face he makes," exclaimed one of the girls, shutting out the sight with her hands.

"Poor fools! you will do more harm than good," murmured the contadino; "let the man pass in peace! I would sooner spend twenty lire in masses for his soul than bring him back to trouble the world any more."

"Would you have us act like tigers or devils, you old iniquity?" asked his wife, shaking three fingers at him. "The life is in the poor man yet. Shall we let him go out of the world without unction or confession, for fear of what these French heretics may do to us?"

"Besides, Madonna Bianca had him cut down to save his life," cried the girl who stood nearest his head. "You would fain please her, I trow, father. I heard her myself pray for him to be cut down, and she will be glad to hear we have recovered him. It was that which made me run away for Giulio as soon as the order was given."

While this dialogue was going on, the young man, Giulio, had poured the whole bucket of water over the recumbent body on the table, dashing it on with a force which might well have driven the soul out of a living man, but which, on this occasion, seemed to have the very opposite effect of bringing spirit into a dead one. Suddenly the eyelids closed over the staring eyes; there

was a shudder passed over the whole frame; the fingers seemed to grasp at some fancied object on the table, and at length respiration returned, at first in fitful gasps, but soon with regular and even quiet action. The eyes then opened again, and turned from face to face with some degree of consciousness; but they closed again after a momentary glance around, and he fell into what seemed a heavy sleep, distinguished from that still heavier sleep into which he had lately lain by the equable heaving of the chest.

The mother and the two girls looked on rejoicing, and Giulio, too, had a well-satisfied look, for such are the powers of that wonderful quality called vanity, that as it was under his hand the man recovered, he attributed his resuscitation entirely to his own skill; and had his patient been the devil himself come to plague him and all the world, good Giulio would have glorified himself upon the triumph of his exertions. And well he might; for, unfortunately, as this world goes, men glory as much over their success in bad as in good actions, judging not the merit of deeds by their consequences, even where those consequences are self-evident. Success, success is all that the world esteems. It is the gold that will not tarnish--the diamond whose lustre no breath can dim.

The old contadino, however, was even less pleased with the result of his family's efforts than he had been with the efforts themselves.

"Satan will owe us something," he muttered, "for snatching from him one of his own, and he is a gentleman who always pays his debts. By my faith, I will go up and tell the count what has chanced. I do not choose to be blamed for these women's mad folly. Better let him know at once, while the fellow is in such a state that a pillow over his mouth will soon put out the lighted flame they have lighted in him--if my lord pleases."

"What are you murmuring there, you old hyena?" asked his gentle wife.

"Oh, nothing, nothing, good dame," replied the husband; "'twas only the fellow's grimaces made me sick, and I must out into the podere. C--e! I did not think you would have succeeded so well with the poor devil. I hope he'll soon be able to jog away from here; for, though he may move and talk again--and I dare say he will--I shall always look upon him as a dead man, notwithstanding. Suppose, now, that it should not be his own soul that has come back into him, wife, but some bad spirit, that all your working and water--I am sure it was not holy water--has brought back into his poor, miserable corpse!"

"Jesu Maria! do not put such thoughts into my head, Giovanozzo," exclaimed the old lady with a look of horror; "but that cannot be, either, for I made Giulio put some salt into the water, and the devil can never stand that; so go along with you. You cannot frighten me. Go and try to get back your senses, for you seem to have lost them, good man."

The contadino was glad to get away unquestioned; and, unlocking the door, he issued forth from his house. At first he did not turn his steps toward the villa, but took a path which led down to the river. At the distance of some hundred or hundred and fifty yards, however, where the trees screened him from his own dwelling, he looked round to see that none of his family followed, and then turned directly up the little rise. When near the terrace he saw a man coming down the steps toward him, and suddenly paused; but a moment's observation showed him that he need have no alarm. The person who approached was no other than Antonio, between whom and the good peasant a considerable intimacy had sprung up since Lorenzo Visconti had been at the Villa Rovera. Would you taste the best wine on an estate, or eat the sweetest fig of the season, make friends with the contadino and his family; and, perhaps acting on this maxim, Antonio had often been down to pass an hour or two with Giovanozzo, and enliven the whole household with his jests.

"The very man," said the contadino to himself; "he'll tell me just what I ought to do. He has travelled, and seen all manner of things. He is just the person. Signor Antonio, good morning to your excellency! What is in the wind to-day?"

"Nothing but a strong scent of dead carrion that I can smell," answered Antonio.

"Well," said the contadino, with a grin, "I do not wonder, for there's carrion down at our house, and the worst carrion a man think of, for it's not only dead carrion, but live carrion, too."

"Alive with maggots. I take you," answered Antonio; "that is a shallow conceit, Giovanozzo. It hardly needs an ell yard to plumb that."

"Nay, nay you are not at the bottom of it yet," replied the peasant; "it is alive and dead, and yet no maggots in it."

"Then the maggots are in thy brain," answered Antonio. "But speak plainly, man, speak plainly. If you keep hammering my head with enigmas, I shall have no brains left to understand your real meaning."

"Well, then, signor," said the contadino, gravely, "I want advice."

"And, like a wise man, come to me," replied his companion; "mine is the very shop to find it; I have plenty always on hand for my customers, never using any of it myself, and receiving it fresh daily from those who have it to spare. What sort of advice will you have, Giovanozzo? the advice

interested or disinterested--the advice fraternal or paternal--the advice minatory, or monitory, or consolatory--the advice cynical or philosophical?"

"Nay, but this is a serious matter, signor," answered the contadino.

"Then you shall have serious advice," answered Antonio. "Proceed. Lay the case before me in such figures as may best suit its condition, and I will try and fit my advice thereunto as tight as a jerkin made by a tailor who loves cabbage more than may consist with the ease of his customers."

"Well, let us sit down on this bank," said Giovanozzo, "for it is a matter which requires much consideration and--"

"Like a hen's egg, requires to be sat upon," interrupted Antonio. "Well, in this also I will gratify you, signor. Now to your tale."

"Why, you must know," proceeded the contadino, "that this morning, an hour or two ago, just when I was coming up from the well, I saw Judita and Margarita, with Giulio, carrying something heavy into the house. It took all their strength, I can tell you, though the man was not a big man, after all."

"A man!" exclaimed Antonio; "was it a man they were carrying?"

"Nothing short of a man," replied Giovanozzo.

"And yet a short man too," said Antonio. "Was he a dead man?"

"Yes and no," replied the peasant; "he was dead then, but he is alive now. But just listen, signor. It seems that a whole troop of these Frenchmen came down this way at an early hour, on their way to Pavia, and that they halted at the gates; but before they halted, they saw a man on horseback, standing at the little turn-down to Signor Manini's podere; and that, as soon as he saw them, he tried to spur away, but their spurs were sharper than his; so they caught him and brought him back. Then, some hours after, up comes another party, and they held a sort of council over him, and confronted him with two or three other prisoners, and then strung him up to the branch of the great mulberry-tree. But presently some one came out of the villa and ordered him to be cut down, and as soon as that was done they all rode away, leaving him there lying on the road. That is what Giulio told me, for he was looking over the wall all the time."

"Dangerous peeping, Signor Giovanozzo," said Antonio solemnly; "but what did the lad do, then?"

"Why, he would have let him lie quiet enough, if he had had his own way," replied the contadino, "for Giulio is a discreet youth. He takes after me in the main, and knows when to let well enough alone, when his mother and his sisters are not at his heels; but the good *madre* you know--" and here he added a significant grimace, which finished the sentence. "However," he continued, "Margarita, who is tiring-woman to the young contessa, came running out of the villa, and told Giulio that it was Bianca Maria's orders to see if there was any life in the man, and try to save him. So they looked at him together, and fancied they saw his face twitch, and then they called Judita and carried him down into the house."

"And then?" asked Antonio.

"Why, then they sluiced him with cold water, and poured Heaven knows what all down his throat, or into his mouth, at least."

"And then?" said Antonio, again.

"Why, then he began to wake up," replied the contadino, "and now he is snoring on a table down below, and I dare say he will be all the better for his hanging."

"He might have been so, if Giulio had not been too near," answered Antonio, drily, and then fell into a fit of thought.

"I am sure the devil has something to do with it," said Giovanozzo, in an inquiring tone.

"Beyond doubt," replied Antonio, solemnly; "but whether in the hanging or the resuscitation, who shall say? However, I will go down and see the gentleman. Do you know who he is?"

"One of Signor Buondoni's men, I fancy," replied the peasant. "We hear the signor was killed last night on the terrace, and I was thinking to come up and see the corpse. He must lay out handsomely, for he was a fine-looking man. I saw him by the moonlight just when he came to the gates yester-evening. I hope you do not think our people will be blamed by the old count for whatever we have done."

"Oh, no," replied Antonio, "you have done right well; though, if you had killed the one and not saved the other, you might have done better. Now let us go down to your house."

They walked some hundred yards in silence, and then Antonio said abruptly, "I wonder what is the good man's name. One of my old playfellows was in Buondoni's service, I hear. What like is

he, Giovan'?"

"Why he is little and thin," answered the contadino, "with a big beard like a German's, and a sharp face. His muzzle is much like a hedgehog's, only he is as yellow as a lemon."

"That has to do with the hanging," answered Antonio. "I have seen many a man hanged when I was in France. The late king, who was no way tender, did a good deal in that way, and most of those he strung up were very yellow when they were cut down. I should have thought it would have turned them blue, but it was not so. However, I think I know this gentleman, and if so, must have a talk with him before he goes forth into the wicked world again. I would fain warn him, as a friend, against bad courses, which, though (as he must have found) they often lead to elevated places, are sure to end in a fall, and sometimes in a broken neck. But here we are before your house, Giovanozzo, and there goes Giulio, seeking you, I expect. Let him go, man--let him go. I wish you would send Margarita one way after him and Judita the other, and then get up a little quarrel with your amiable wife, for I must positively speak with this gentleman alone, and may bestow some time upon him."

## CHAPTER XII.

By the side of a small bed, in a small room next to the larger one of which I have already spoken in noticing the usual arrangements of a contadino's house, sat our friend Antonio, nearly an hour after his meeting with Giovanozzo. The same man who, some time before, had lain upon the table in the adjoining chamber now occupied the bed; but he was apparently sound asleep. The contadino's Xantippe had informed her husband, or rather Antonio, for whom she entertained much higher veneration, that the "poor soul," as she called Buondoni's retainer, had awoke and spoken quite cheerfully, but that he had now fallen into a more refreshing kind of slumber; and anxious to busy herself about her household affairs, she had willingly left her patient to Antonio's care, upon being assured that they were old companions.

Antonio, as the reader may have remarked, had that curious habit, common to both sages and simpletons, of occasionally giving vent to his thoughts in words, even when there was no one to listen to them--not in low tones, indeed, but in low-muttered murmurs--not in regular and unbroken soliloquy, but in fragments of sentences, with lapses of silent meditation between.

"It is Mardocchi," he said; "it is Mardocchi beyond all doubt. Mightily changed, indeed, he is--but that scar cutting through the eyebrow. I remember giving him the wound that made it with the palla."

He fell into silence again for a few minutes, and then he murmured, "We used to say he would be hanged. So he has fulfilled his destiny, and got off better than most men in similar circumstances." Here came another break, during which the stream of thought ran on still; and then he said, "Now let any one tell me whether it was better for this man to be brought to life again or not. His troubles in this life were all over, he had taken the last hard gasp; the agony, and the expectation, and the fear were all done and over, and now they have all to come over again, probably in the very same way too, for he is certain to get into more mischief, and deserve more hanging, and take a better hold of Purgatory, even if he do not go farther still. He never had but one good quality; he would keep his word with you for good or ill against the devil himself. He had a mighty stubborn will, and once he had said a thing he would do it."

Here came another lapse, which lasted about five minutes, and then Antonio murmured quite indistinctly, "I wonder if he be really asleep! He could feign anything beautifully, and his eyes seemed to give a sort of wink just now. We will soon see." Some minutes of silence then succeeded, and at length Antonio spoke aloud: "No," he said, as if coming to some fixed and firm conclusion, "no; it would be better for him himself to die. The good woman did him a bad service. These Frenchmen will hang him again whenever they catch him, and if there be any inquiry into the death of Buondoni, they will put him on the rack; besides, we may all get ourselves into trouble by conniving at his escape from justice. Better finish it at once while he is asleep, and before he half knows he has been brought to life again."

He then unsheathed his dagger, which was both long and broad, tried the point upon his finger, and gazed at his companion. Still there was no sign of consciousness. The next moment, however, Antonio rose, deliberately pushed back his sleeve from his wrist, as if to prevent it from being soiled with blood, and then raised the dagger high over the slumbering man.

The instant he did so, Mardocchi started up, and clasped his wrist, exclaiming, "Antonio Biondi, what would you do? kill your unhappy friend?"

Antonio burst into a loud laugh, saying, "Only a new way of waking a sleeping man, Mardocchi. The truth is, I have no time to wait till your shamming is over in the regular course. We have matters of life and death to talk of; and you must cast away all trick and deceit, and act straightforwardly with me, that we may act quickly; your own life and safety depend upon it. Now tell me, what did the Lord of Vitry hang you for?"

"His morning's sport, I fancy," answered the man; "but softly, good friend; you forget I hardly know as yet whether I am of this world or another. My senses are still all confused, and you, Antonio--my old playmate--should have some compassion on me."

"So I have, Mardocchi," answered Antonio; "and, as these good people have brought you back to life, I wish to save you from being sent out of it again more quickly than you fancy."

"Where is the danger?" asked Mardocchi, hesitating.

"That is just what I want to discover," said the other; "not vaguely, not generally, but particularly, in every point. General dangers I can see plenty, but I must know all the particular ones, in order to place you in safety. Do you know that your lord, Buondoni, is dead?"

"Ay, so the good woman told me," replied the other; "killed by that young cub of the Viscontis. Curses on him!"

Antonio marked both the imprecation and the expression of countenance with which it was uttered; but he did not follow the scent at once. "Do you know at whose prayer you were cut down?" he asked.

"They tell me at the instance of the Signorina de Rovera," replied Mardocchi; "a young thing I think she is. I saw her once, I believe, with the Princess of Ferrara. If I live, I will find some way to repay her."

"Well, that is just the question," replied Antonio, "if you are to live or die? Hark you, Mardocchi! you must tell me all, if you would have me save you."

"But can you, will you save me?" inquired the man; "and yet why should I fear? The Frenchmen cut me down themselves, I am told."

"Ay, but they are very likely to hang you up again, if they find you out of sight of the pretty lady who interceded for you. Nay, more, Mardocchi: all men believe that you were deep in the secrets of Buondoni and of the Count Regent through him. Now, as you know, the King of France is very likely to put you to the rack if he finds you, to make you tell those secrets; and your good friend Ludovic the Moor, is very likely to strangle you, to make sure that you keep them."

Mardocchi made no reply, for he knew there was much truth in Antonio's words; but, after a moment's pause, the other proceeded, "You must get out of Lombardy as fast as possible, my good friend."

"But where can I go? what can I do?" asked the unhappy man. "I have lost my only friend and patron. I am known all through this part of the country. I almost wish the women had let me alone."

"It might have been better," said Antonio in a meditative tone. "'Once for all' is a good proverb, Mardocchi. However, I think I could help you if I liked; I think I could get you out of Lombardy, and into the Romagna, and find you a good master, who wants just such a fellow as yourself."

"Then do it! do it!" cried Mardocchi, eagerly; "do it for old companionship; do it, because, for that old companionship, I have forgiven more to you than I ever forgave to any other man. Why should you not do it?"

"There is but one reason," answered Antonio, gravely, "and that lies in your own words. When you spoke of Lorenzo Visconti just now, you called down curses upon him. Now he is my lord and my friend. I was placed near him by Lorenzo the Magnificent, and promised I would always help and protect him. Do you think I should be doing either if I aided to save a man who would murder him the first opportunity? I always keep my word, Mardocchi."

"And so do I," answered Mardocchi, gloomily. "Sacchi and the rest told all they knew to the Frenchman, out of fear for their pitiful lives, and they saved themselves. I refused to tell anything, because I had promised not, and they strung me up to the branch of a tree. But I will promise you, Antonio, I will never raise my hand against the young man. I shall hate him ever, but--"

"Let me think," said Antonio; and, after meditating for a moment, he added, "there are ways of destroying him without raising your hand against him: there is the cord. Listen to my resolution, Mardocchi, and you know I will keep it: if you will promise me not to take his life in any way--for I know you right well--I will help you, for old companionship, to escape, and to join a noble lord in the Romagna; but, if you do not promise, I will make sure of you by other means. I have but to speak a word, and you are on the branch of the mulberry-tree again--"

"Stop, stop!" said Mardocchi; "do not threaten me. I am weak--sick--hardly yet alive, but I do not like threats. The crushed adder bites. Let me think: I hate him," he continued, slowly, recovering gradually from the excitement under which he had first spoken. "I shall always hate him, but that is no reason I should kill him. I have never promised to kill him--never even threatened to kill him. If I had, I would do it or die; but I do not like death. I have tasted it, and no man likes to eat of that dish twice. It is very bitter; and I promise you in your own words, Antonio. But you likewise must remember your promise to me."

"Did you ever know me fail?" said the other. "The first thing is to get you well, the next to shave off that long beard and those wild locks, and then, with a friar's gown and the cord of St. Francis, I will warrant I get you in the train of one of these French lords. Can you enact a friar, think you, Mardocchi?"

"Oh, yes," said Mardocchi, with a bitter grin, "I can drink and carouse all night, tell a coarse tale with a twinkling eye, laugh loud at a small jest, and do foul services for a small reward, if it be to save my life; but then I cannot speak these people's language, Antonio."

"All the better--all the better," answered Antonio; "many of them know a little Italian, and hard questions put in a foreign tongue, are easily parried. It would be a good thing for one half of the world if it did not understand what the other half said."

"But who is this good lord to whom you are going to send me?" asked the man. "Is he a courtier or a soldier?"

"A little of both," answered Antonio, "but more a man of counsel than either. His name is Ramiro d'Orco."

"Ah! I have heard of him," said Mardocchi. "He puzzles the people about the court. All men think that at heart he has vast ambition, and yet none can tell you why he thinks so. All agree in that, though some think he is a philosopher, some a simpleton."

"Well, well," answered Antonio, "the first thing is for you to recover health and strength, the next to get you safely away, the third to make you known to the Signor Ramiro. He is the sort of man to suit your views. I know him well. He is rich, and, as you say, ambitious. He is wise, too, in a certain way; and though he has not yet found a path to the objects he aims at, he will find one in time, or make one, even were he to hew it through his own flesh and blood. He wants serviceable men about him, and that is the reason I send you to him. If he rises, he will pull you up; if he falls, there is no need he should pull you down with him. But we will converse more to-morrow; to-day you have talked enough, perhaps too much."

"But, Antonio, Antonio," said the other, eagerly catching his sleeve, "you will tell no one that I am here?"

"No one on earth," answered Antonio; and, bidding him farewell, he left him.

The journey of Antonio back to the villa was somewhat longer than it needed to have been. He took devious and circuitous paths, and even turned back for a part of the way more than once. It was not, however, that he fancied himself watched, or that he feared that any one might discover where he had been; but his brain was very busy, and he did not wish his thoughts interrupted till they had reached certain conclusions from which they were distant when he set out. He asked himself if he could really trust to Mardocchi's word, knowing but too well how predominant the desire of revenge is in every Italian heart. He half accused himself of folly in having promised him so much; and though he was, in truth, a good and sincere man, yet the common habits and feelings of his country every now and then suggested that it would be easy to put an end to all doubt and suspicion, if he saw cause, by the use of the Italian panacea, the stiletto. "But yet," he said to himself, "it may be better to take my chance of his good faith, and let him live. I never knew him break his word, and by his means, perhaps, I may penetrate some of Signor Ramiro's purposes in regard to young Lorenzo. I will tie him down to some promise on that point too. He will need my help yet in many ways; and though I will not set a man to betray his master, yet I may well require him to warn his friends."

It was an age and a country in which men dealt peculiarly in subtleties, so much so, indeed, that right and truth were often refined away to nothing, especially in the higher and better educated classes of society. The bravo, indeed, was often a more straightforward and truthful man than the nobleman who employed him. He would own frankly that he was committing a great sin; but then he had faith in the Virgin, and she would obtain remission for him. His employer would find a thousand reasons to justify the deed, and would so pile up motives and necessities in self-defence that it would seem almost doubtful which was most to be pitied, himself or his victim. Antonio was by no means without this spirit of casuistry; and though no man could cut through a long chain of pretences with more trenchant wit than he could, in the case of another, yet he might not unfrequently employ them in his own. He resolved, therefore, not to engage Mardocchi to betray his master's secrets, but only to reveal them when it was necessary that he, Antonio, should know them. The difference, indeed, was very slight, but it was sufficient to satisfy him.

Antonio's mind then naturally reverted to Ramiro d'Orco, and he asked himself again and



again what could be the motive which led a man so famous for stoical hardness to show such tenderness and consideration for Lorenzo Visconti. "It may be," he thought, "that this grim old tyrant thinks it a splendid match for his daughter. But then they say she has a magnificent fortune of her own--her dower that of a princess. There must be some other end in view. She is a glorious creature too, midway between Juno and Sappho. Well, we must wait and watch. Heaven knows how it will all turn out. Perhaps, after all, Ramiro has some scheme against one of the princes of Romagna, in which he hopes to engage the King of France through young Lorenzo's influence.--It is so, I think--it is so, surely. He wants serviceable men, too, and asked me if I knew of any. Well, I think I have fitted him with one at least, and he will owe me something for the good turn. But I must hie homeward, and keep these things to myself. No more interfering between Lorenzo and his young love. He bore my warnings badly this morning: I must let things take their course, and try to guide without opposing."

### CHAPTER XIII.

Milan had its attractions even for the gay court of France. It was a devout and dissolute city; and we know how jovially, in some countries and at some times, dissoluteness and devotion have contrived to jog on together. Pastime and penitence, pleasure and penance, alternated among the courtiers of Charles VIII. with very agreeable variety; and it has been whispered that the young king himself was not unwilling either to finger forbidden fruit, or to express contrition afterward. At all events, he wasted many precious days in the Lombard capital. Morning after morning, fresh detachments of his army were sent forward to Pavia, till that city might be considered in possession of his troops; but still the young king lingered, and it was not till nine days after the events we have recorded in the last two or three chapters that the main host of France took its way southward.

How passed the intermediate time with those we have left in the Villa de Rovera? It was very sweetly. We must not dwell upon it, because it was so sweet; but a few words will tell all. Lorenzo almost longed to remain an invalid, that there might be a fair excuse for Leonora's tending; and Leonora feared to see him recover health and strength too soon, lest the order to depart should hurry him away.

Strange tales are told of the effects of Italian poisons in those days, and doubtless much exaggeration mingles with all the accounts we have received, but certain it is, that, though the youth recovered steadily, each day gaining a little, yet his convalescence was slow, and the subtle bane of Buondoni's sword was more or less felt for many after days. Still no order to march arrived, but every day, about noon, the good Lord de Vitry rode over, well attended, from Pavia to inquire after the health of his young friend; and although it is certain that Leonora could have given him more minute accounts of Lorenzo's state, and the old Count de Rovera could have furnished him with juster and more scientific views of Lorenzo's progress towards recovery, it was always Bianca Maria he first asked for. He speedily became a great favorite with the old count nevertheless. There was something in his frank, soldier-like bearing that pleased, and something in his ever merry conversation that amused the old man, so that he began to wish the day far distant when the noble Lord of Vitry would come no more.

Bianca Maria was very happy too, and she gave the rein to happiness without fear. Neither she nor De Vitry ever dreamed that he was making love. She thought herself too young to be the object of passion, and he thought so too. He fancied he should like to have a daughter just like herself, without the slightest change in thought or look--he would not have had a word she said altered--he would not have parted with one ringlet from her head; and she pictured to herself how pleasant it would have been to have an elder brother just like De Vitry.

At the house of the contadino all went on favourably likewise. Antonio visited the place every day, till at length, one morning early, he walked forth with a sandaled friar, who passed round the wall of the podere with him, and mounted a mule which was held by a little peasant-boy. Some ten minutes after, a troop of twenty French lances rode slowly on towards Pavia, and the friar, by Antonio's intercession, was permitted to join himself to the band. The contadino and the contadino's wife were for once satisfied with the same thing.

At length, however, the eventful day arrived when the King of France commenced his march from Milan against Naples. Drum, and trumpet, and pennon, and banderol, and long lines of glittering lances, and gorgeous surcoats, and splendid suits of armour, passed along the road within sight of the Villa Rovera, and though no absolute order had arrived commanding Lorenzo to join his troop and assume the command which had been bestowed upon him, yet, as he gazed upon the passing host from the higher windows, he felt that duty required him to linger no longer, and that the next day, at the latest, he was bound to tear himself away from those who, in

the short space of a few weeks, had become so dear to him. He felt sad; and yet there was something to a young and eager mind like his, in the inspiring sight of military array, which had its consolatory influence. He thought of acquiring glory and renown for Leonora's sake, and returning to her with bright fame and a glorious name, with a proud consciousness of courage and of skill in arms. "If we must part--" he said to himself.

If they were to part! That was the consideration most painful, for he had flattered himself every day with the hope that the promised letter of Ramiro d'Orco would arrive, giving him authority to escort his fair promised bride to join her father: and oh! how many enchanted scenes had Fancy fabricated out of the vague shadows of that expected journey! No letter had arrived; the army was on its march; he could delay no longer; and the bitterness of disappointment was added to the bitterness of anticipated separation.

The last troopers of the main host of France disappeared; and Leonora gazed in Lorenzo's eyes, knowing, divining what was passing in his heart, as they stood, together, with Bianca Maria gazing from the neighbouring window.

"You must go, Lorenzo," said the beautiful girl, "you must go, I know it. Fear not to speak the words; Leonora would not keep you from the path of fame and honour if she could. It will be very terrible, but still you must go. I had hoped, indeed--"

"See! see!" cried Bianca Maria: "there are more horsemen coming. It is the king himself and his court; I remember well the array; and there is Count Ludovic, on the monarch's left."

Leonora and her lover turned to the window again, and saw the royal train sweep on towards them. But suddenly the king drew in his rein just opposite the gates. He did not dismount; but a horseman dashed out from the escort, and rode into the court-yard of the villa.

"It is the order," said Lorenzo, in a low voice, "it is the order, and I must run down to receive it."

The two lovely girls followed him quickly; for theirs was an age when nature's impulses have not been curbed and disciplined, restrained and checked, either by the iron rules of a factitious state of society or the harder and more terrible shackles of experience. At the bottom of the great staircase he found the old Count of Rovera speaking with one of the king's officers, out of whose mouth he took the words of the monarch's message, saying, as soon as he saw Lorenzo, "His Majesty the King of France, my young cousin, desires your presence without. He has not time to dismount, this noble gentleman tells me, otherwise he would have honoured our poor house by his presence."

Lorenzo hurried away unbonneted, and the count, looking with a smile at his cousin and granddaughter, said gaily:

"Now would I wager this jewel against a fool's bauble that you girls would give your ears to hear the conference. If so, take the rich peaches Giovanozzo brought just now--one take them on the gold salver, and let the other carry out a cup of our best wine to refresh the monarch after his long ride."

But there is an innate modesty which requires no teaching of art, and Leonora answered:

"I pray you excuse me, sir; they are all men there without, and we should blush to obtrude ourselves upon the gaze of so many eyes."

As she spoke a warm glow came upon the face of Bianca Maria, but it was not her cousin's words that called it there. A shadow darkened the doorway, and the sound of a step well-known to the young girl's ear was heard, which brought the joyous blood from the heart to the cheek in a moment.

"I have stolen away," said De Vitry, "like a thief, and I have been a thief, too, sweet ladies, and my noble lord. Just before I set out from Pavia to meet the king, a courier came from Bologna; and, good faith, when I found out what he carried, I made free to rob him of his bags, not knowing who else might finger them. That letter for you, my lord count--that for you, Signora Leonora; and here is one also for Visconti, which I may as well trust to you also, very sure you will deliver it safely."

"And none for me?" asked Blanche Marie, with a faint smile.

"None--only a message," said De Vitry, while the others busied themselves with their letters they had received; and, as he spoke, he drew the fair young girl aside, adding, "I must deliver it quickly, for I must be back ere I am missed."

What he said to her in that low whisper, who shall tell? Her cheek turned pale, and then glowed crimson red, and her knees shook, and her lips quivered, so as to stop the words that struggled for utterance, and yet there was joy in her eyes. It was as if he had given her the key of some treasury in her own heart which overwhelmed her with the first sight of the riches within.

"A soldier's love, a soldier's hand, a noble name, an honourable name--that is all I have to

offer," were the words of De Vitry. "I know I am nearly old enough to be your father; but if you don't mind that, I don't."

He paused a moment as if for an answer, while Blanche Marie stood still trembling and silent; and, with a shade upon his broad, frank brow, he was turning away, when she murmured:

"Stay! stay!" and, drawing the glove from her hand, she put it into his.

"I will carry it into the cannon's mouth," he said, hiding it in his scarf; and then he kissed her hand, and returned to the old count and her fair cousin. "Lady, I must go," he said, taking Leonora's gloved hand, and bending over it. "My lord the count, farewell. We shall all meet again soon, I hope; and, in the meantime, you shall hear no evil of De Vitry, unless some of those foul cannon shot carry off his head. Adieu! adieu!"

In the meantime, Lorenzo had hurried forth, and stood by the side of the king's horse. Charles gazed kindly at him, and inquired after his health, while Ludovic the Moor bent his eyes upon him, but without suffering the slightest shade of enmity to cross his face.

"How goes it with you, fair cousin?" asked the king: "think you that you are able to ride on with the army towards Naples in a day or two?"

"Quite able, sir," answered the young man; "to-morrow, if it should be your Majesty's pleasure."

"Pale--pale," said the monarch, who seemed to have been studying his countenance. "Is that with loss of blood, Lorenzo, or the venom of the sword?"

"I lost little blood, sire," answered the young man; "but the poison was very deadly, and required both skill and careful nursing to bring me through with life."

"Now curses upon the foul heart and foul mind," exclaimed the young king, "that first conceived so dastardly a wickedness as that of smearing a good honest sword-blade with a deadly drug."

The face of Ludovic the Moor turned somewhat white, and his lip curled.

"Your Majesty's curse," he said, "must go somewhat far back, and somewhat low down; for the art was invented long ago, and the man who invented it, if he is to be damned at all, is very well damned by this time."

"Well, then, my curse shall have greater extent, noble sir," replied the king, frowning; "I will add--and curses be upon every one who uses such dark treachery."

The regent did not reply, but there were very angry feelings in his heart; and it is probable that nothing but the knowledge that the dominions over which he ruled, and which he intended should soon be his own in pure possession, were absolutely at the mercy of the French king's soldiery, prevented him from seeking vengeance. Indeed, nothing but fear can account for a man so unscrupulous having endured the mortifications which Charles inflicted upon him during the French stay in Lombardy; but it must be remembered that not only were many of his towns and castles in possession of the French, and others without any preparation for resistance, but that his own person was every hour within reach of the French swords, and that, though not quite a prisoner in his own court, he might become so any moment, if he excited suspicion or gave offence to the young monarch. He endured in silence then, and treasured his vengeance for a future day.

An unpleasant pause succeeded; and then Charles, turning to Lorenzo, continued the conversation, saying, "So you think yourself quite ready to ride. Well, then, join us to-morrow at Pavia, Lorenzo. Methinks no one, however high his station, will venture to assail you when near our own person. Yet, as it is evident from what has already happened, that some one in this land would fain remove you to a better, you shall have a guard with you, and must not walk the streets of Pavia unattended. Where is De Vitry? We will give orders for a part of your troop in his company to join you here to-night."

"He has gone into the villa for a moment, sire," replied Lorenzo, "for the purpose, I believe, of bidding adieu to the good old count, as I presume your majesty marches on speedily."

"Nay, he will have plenty of time hereafter," said Charles; "I shall not leave Pavia for some days. I have matters to inquire into; but, in the mean time, I will give orders for the men to join you to-night; and methinks a score of French lances will be sufficient to protect you from any number of Buondonis who may be inclined or hired to assassinate you."

There was an insulting tone of superiority in the young king's voice and manner, which could not have been very sweet to the Regent Ludovic, but he seemed still to pay no attention to the monarch's words, gazing forward on the road without change of countenance, as if busy with his own thoughts.

"Ah! here comes De Vitry," said the young king. "Mount, mount, my lord marquis. Adieu, my

fair cousin Lorenzo. I will give the orders;" and, thus saying, he rode on.

Lorenzo saw the train depart and pass away, receiving many a good-natured greeting from old friends in the king's suite as it filed off along the road. When he returned to the vestibule of the villa with a somewhat gloomy heart, he found the old Count of Rovera, with the two young girl's, still there and apparently in earnest conversation; but Leonora exclaimed, as soon as she saw him, "When must you go, Lorenzo?"

"To-morrow," said the young man sadly.

"Oh, then you will have plenty of time," exclaimed Blanche Marie, addressing her beautiful cousin.

"To do what?" asked Lorenzo.

"To get ready to go with you," answered Leonora, "if you will be troubled with such a companion. Here is a letter for you from my father which will probably explain all. I have had another from him, telling me to come on with you, and join him at Bologna, if you have a sufficient train to render our journey secure; but he says there is little or no danger by the way."

The old Count of Rovera shook his head with a disapproving look, murmuring, "Mighty great danger on the way, I think. On my life, I believe Ramiro is mad; but I must admonish the youth strictly before he goes, and take care that she has plenty of women about her."

#### CHAPTER XIV.

"See, De Vitry, that a force of twenty lances be sent from Pavia to our young cousin ere night," said the king; "that will be enough for his protection, my lord regent, I presume?"

"More than enough, sire," replied Ludovic, somewhat sternly. "Himself alone, with a few of his own servants, could pass quite safely--except, indeed, in case of some sudden tumult."

"Which tumults are easily raised in this Italy of yours," replied the young monarch. "It is therefore better he should have a French pennon with him. Methinks, after our alliance, offensive and defensive, no one will dare to attack that, my lord regent."

Ludovic bit his lip, but then he smiled grimly, saying, "Not unless he should chance to encounter the forces of our dear cousin Alphonso, King of Naples, coming to drive the poor Sforzas out of Milan, and give your majesty some trouble in the plains of Lombardy. They would not, methinks, show much reverence for a French pennon, nor even for the banner of France itself."

"'Tis strange we have no news," said Charles, with a shadow on his brow; "our last intelligence dates the 14th of last month, and then the Neapolitan fleet were under full sail."

"It is possible that Prince Frederick, who commands his brother's fleet, may have defeated the Duke of Orleans and landed in Tuscany, sire," observed Ludovic; "in that case we shall hear nothing of the enemy till we see him. May it not be better for me to summon all my forces, and march with your majesty till we are assured the roads are open? I can gather twenty thousand men together, from different garrisons, in eight days, but I have only four thousand now in Pavia."

The king seemed to hesitate; but just then De Vitry, who was riding half a horse's length behind on the king's right, raised his voice, saying bluntly, "Better wait decision till we are in the city, my liege, and then I will tell your majesty why."

"Better wait till then, at all events," said the king, thoughtfully; "but what is your reason, De Vitry?"

"Simply this, my liege," said the good soldier; "in the grey of the morning there came in a courier from Bologna. He said he was bound by his orders to stay in Pavia till your majesty arrived or sent. But he had letters for you, sire, which he would show to no one; and some private letters for the camp, which I took from him. They gave no tidings, however, that I could learn."

"Did he give no intelligence himself?" asked Ludovic, eagerly.

"He was mightily cautious of committing himself, Sir Count," answered De Vitry, drily; "a most discreet and silent messenger, I can assure you."

All parties fell into silence, and rode on for about half a mile at a slow pace, when the count regent turned to the king, saying, "Here I will spur on, so please you, sire. I would fain see that all is rightly prepared to receive you royally. I have been obliged to trust that care to others hitherto; but I would fain confirm the assurances given me by my people, by my own eyesight." Charles bowed his head with a somewhat doubtful look, and Ludovic instantly forced his horse forward with great speed. Some twenty horsemen drew out from the rest of the cavalcade and followed him, and Charles turned his head toward De Vitry with an inquiring look.

"Let him go, sire--let him go," said De Vitry, in a low voice, spurring up to the king's side; "he can do no harm. I have cared for all that. I have so posted our men that he has no more power in Pavia than an Indian has. Lucky that you sent me on as your quarter-master some days before; for I had time to fix on all the commanding spots; and as I passed the army this morning, I gave the leaders instructions, and furnished them with guides to their several quarters. But, what is more important still, if your majesty will bend your ear for a moment, I drew from this courier, upon promise that I would not deprive him of his largesse, but add something on my own part, that the good Duke of Orleans, with his little squadron, had contrived to drive back the whole Neapolitan fleet into Naples. Had he had galleys enough he would have taken half of them, and, perhaps, Prince Frederick into the bargain. As it was, he could only take one galley and sink another. The news is certain, sire; so Signor Ludovic's cunning scheme of joining his men with yours must fail."

"Think you he meant mischief?" asked the young king, whose face had gradually been lighted up as his gallant officer spoke.

"He meant to have the power of doing mischief or not as he pleased," replied De Vitry; "with twenty thousand men, sire, while you had certain enemies and uncertain friends before you, he might have proved a dangerous comrade on the march whenever he chose to turn traitor, which he will do, depend upon it, at the slightest reverse. A man who can shut up his own nephew and ward, with the poor lad's wife and child, in the castle of Pavia, and feed them all three upon slow poison till there is no strength left in any of them, cannot be well trusted, sire."

"Has he done that," exclaimed the young king, with his cheek flushing and his eyes all in a blaze; "has he done that?"

"I have it from the very best authority," replied the other. "I cannot speak from my own knowledge; for they would not let me into the castle; but I have been told so by those who know; and if he were not afraid of letting you see what is going on in that dark old fortress, why should he not assign you the magnificent rooms, where so many Lombard kings and Roman emperors have sat, and put the gates in possession of your troops? The house he has had prepared for your majesty is fine enough; but it is but a citizen's house, after all; and, depend upon it, there are things within the walls of the castle he would not have you see with your own eyes."

"He shall find himself mistaken," said the young king--"he shall find himself mistaken. I will see, and that at once. How many men have we with us now, De Vitry?"

"Some four hundred, I should guess, sire," replied the officer; "but there are a thousand more in the little guard-house square at the gates, ready to escort your majesty to your dwelling."

"That is right! that is right!" said Charles, with a smile; "let us put our horses to a quicker pace, good friend. We will be upon the worthy regent's heels before he expects us."

In three-quarters of an hour, Charles and his escort had reached the gates of Pavia. There was bustle and some disarray among the Lombard soldiers on guard; for the monarch had appeared before he was expected; but they hurried forth from the guard-houses to salute him as he passed, and the French men-at-arms and soldiers in the little square were up and arrayed in a minute. At the entrance of the street leading from the Milan gate into the heart of the city--a street which the reader may well remember, from its gloomy aspect, specially if he have entered Pavia on a rainy day--a gallant party of horsemen, dressed in the robes of peace, advanced to meet the King of France, and, after due salutation, told him they had been sent by the regent to conduct him to his dwelling.

"Good! We will follow you speedily," said the monarch; "but there is one visit we have to pay first, which cannot be omitted. In kingly courtesy and in kindred kindness we are bound to set foot to the ground in Pavia, for the first time, at the dwelling of our young cousin, the Duke Giovan Galeazzo. Lead on to the castle, De Vitry, and let the whole train follow. We will then accompany these good gentlemen to the dwelling prepared for us by the regent's kindness."

Some consternation was apparent among the retainers of the Count Ludovic; they spoke together in whispers; but the young king showed no inclination to wait for the conclusion of their deliberation, and rode on, guided by De Vitry, merely saying to the Lombard nobles, with a somewhat stern look, "Gentlemen, we hope for your escort to the castle."

They did not dare to disobey an invitation which was so like a command; and the whole cavalcade moved onward toward the citadel, with the exception of one small page, who slunk away at the first corner of a street they came to, and was no further seen. It was not long ere the frowning barbican, with its drawbridge and portcullis, appeared before the royal party; and

Charles, turning to the retainers, said, with a somewhat bitter smile, "Will you request the warders to open the gates for the King of France, to visit his fair cousin the duke? We must not summon them ourselves, having so many armed men with us; for that might seem too peremptory."

There was a moment of doubt and hesitation, evidently, on the part of the envoys. The men-at-arms nearest the king, who, with the quick wit of Frenchmen, seemed to comprehend the whole situation in a moment, grasped their lances more firmly; and the king's brow began to darken at finding his orders disobeyed. Upon that moment hung the fate of Pavia, and perhaps of Lombardy; but it ended by one of the Lombard nobles riding forward and speaking to the officer at the gates. Whether he heard or not the sound of horses' feet at a gallop, I cannot tell, but certain it is that while he seemed to parley with the soldiers, who were apparently unwilling to open the gates even at his command, Ludovic the Moor, with two or three attendants, dashed into the open space before the barbican, and rode quickly to the front. He had had notice of the young monarch's movements, and his part was decided in a moment.

"How now, sirrah!" he exclaimed, addressing the soldiers beneath the gateway in a loud and angry tone, "do you keep the King of France waiting before the gates like a lackey? Throw open the gates! Down with the drawbridge! My lord king," he continued, with bated breath, "I regret exceedingly that these men should have detained you; but they are faithful fools, and take no orders but from me or my dear nephew. Had your majesty hinted your intention, orders to admit you instantly would have been long since given. I proposed to introduce you to-morrow to the duke, with due ceremony; but you are always determined to take your servants by surprise."

Charles coloured a little, and felt himself rebuked; but when the regent sprang to the ground and would have held his stirrup, he would not permit him, taking the arm of De Vitry, and bowing his head courteously, but without reply. At the gates, De Vitry drew back, suffering the king and Ludovic to pass on; but they had hardly reached the second gates, when the archway of the barbican and the drawbridge were taken possession of by the French soldiers, who began gaily talking to the Italians, though the latter understood not a word they said. The Lombard nobles looked sullen and discontented; but they sat still on their horses, little accustomed to the dashing impudence of the French, and not knowing well what demeanour to assume toward men who came as their friends and allies, but who so soon showed that they considered themselves their masters.

In the mean time, each followed only by a page, the king and the count regent walked on through several dim passages and lofty, ill-lighted halls. Few attendants were observed about, and Ludovic took notice of none of them till he reached a large and apparently more modern saloon, where an old man, somewhat richly dressed, stood at a door on the other side. Him he beckoned up, saying, "Tell my dear nephew, Franconi, that I am bringing his Majesty the King of France to visit him. This royal lord, considering the duke's ill health, dispenses with the first visit. Will your majesty take a cup of wine after your long ride? It will just give the old seneschal time to announce your coming, lest such an unexpected honour should agitate the poor boy too much."

"I thank you, my lord, I am not thirsty," answered the king, drily, "and, for certain reasons given by my physicians, I drink but little wine."

A slight and somewhat mocking smile passed over the hard features of Ludovic, as if he suspected some fear in the mind of Charles, and gloried, rather than felt shame, in an evil reputation. Both remained silent; and in a few minutes the old man returned to usher them into the presence of the young duke.

Oh! what a sad sight it was when the seneschal, now joined by two inferior officers, threw open the door of a chamber at the end of the adjacent corridor, and displayed to the eyes of Charles the faded form of Giovan Galeazzo, the young Duke of Milan, stretched upon a richly-ornamented bed, and covered with a dressing gown of cloth of gold. The corpse of Inez de Castro seemed only the more ghastly from the regal garments which decked her mouldering frame; and the splendour of the apartment, the decoration of the bed, and the glistening bedgown only gave additional wanness to the face of the unhappy Duke of Milan. Once pre-eminently handsome, and with features finely chiselled still, tall and perfectly formed, not yet twenty years of age, he lay there a living skeleton. His cheek was pale as ashes; his brow of marble whiteness; the thin but curling locks of jet black hair falling wildly round his forehead; his lips hardly tinted with red; and a preternatural light in his dark eyes, which gave more terrible effect to the deathly pallor of his countenance.

A sweet, a wonderfully sweet smile played round his mouth when he saw the young King of France; and he raised himself feebly on his elbow to greet him as he approached.

"Welcome, my most noble lord, the king," he said in a weak voice; "this is indeed most kind of your majesty to visit your poor cousin, whom duty would have called to your feet long ago, had not sore sickness kept him prisoner. But, alas! from this bed I cannot move--never shall again, I fear."

Charles seated himself by the unhappy young man's side, and kindly took his hand. They were first cousins; their age was nearly the same, and well might the young monarch's bosom thrill with compassion and sympathy for the unhappy duke.

"I grieve," said the king, "to see you so very ill, fair cousin; but I trust you will be better soon, the heats of summer have probably exhausted you, and----"

Giovan Galeazzo shook his head almost impatiently, and turned a meaning look upon his uncle.

"Has this continued long?" asked the king.

"It began with my entrance into this accursed fortress," replied the youth, "now some two years ago. It has been slow, but very, very certain. Day by day, hour by hour, it has preyed upon me, till there is not a sound part left."

"He fancies that the air disagrees with him," said Ludovic the Moor, "but the physicians say it is not so; and we have had so many tumults and insurrections in the land, that, for his own safety, it is needful he should make his residence in some strong place."

"For my safety!" murmured the unhappy duke; "for my destruction. Tumults, ay, tumults--would I could strike the instigator of them! 'Tis not alone the air, good uncle; 'tis the water also. 'Tis everything I eat and drink in this hateful place."

"The caprice of sickness, believe me, nephew," answered Ludovic, bending his heavy brows upon him. "You are too ill to have appetite."

"Ay, but I have thirst enough," replied the young man; "one must eat and drink, you know, my lord the king. Would it were not so."

"It often happens, I have heard," said Charles, addressing himself to the regent, "that what a sick man fancies will cure him, is of a higher virtue than all medicines--what he believes destructive, will destroy him. He says, I think, he was quite well till he came here."

"Oh, how well!" exclaimed the dying prince; "life was then a blessing indeed, and now a curse. Each breath of air, each pleasant sight or sound, went thrilling through my veins with the wild revelry of joy. The song birds and the flowers were full of calm delight, and a gallop over the breezy hill was like a madness of enjoyment. But now--now--now---how is it all changed now! Verily, as the wise man said, 'The song of the grasshopper is a burden.'"

"We must change all this," said Charles, greatly moved; "we must have you forth from Pavia to some purer air. My own physician shall see you."

The unfortunate young man shook his head, and again turned his eyes upon his uncle with a meaning look.

"It is vain, my lord the king," he said, "or rather it is too late. My sickness has obtained too great a mastery. The subtle enemy has got me completely in his toils--the sickness I mean; he has got me in every limb, in every vein; a little more and a little more each day--do you understand me, sire?--and he will never loose his hold while I have a breath or a pulsation left. But I have a wife, you know, and a child--a fine boy--who is to be Duke of Milan. For them I crave your royal protection. Let them be as your wards--indeed, I will make them so. If-if," he continued, hesitating, and turning a furtive glance towards his uncle; "if I could see your majesty alone, I would communicate my last wishes."

"You shall--you shall see me," said Charles, with a gush of feeling which brought the tears to his eyes. But those feelings were destined to be still more excited.

While he yet spoke there was a noise without, and a woman's voice was heard speaking in high and excited tones.

"I *will* pass," she said, "who dares to oppose me? I will speak with the noble King of France; he is my cousin--he will be my protector."

The moment after the door burst open, and a beautiful young girl--for she was no more--entered, and threw herself at Charles's feet. Her hair had fallen from its bandages, and flowed in beautiful profusion over her neck and shoulders. Her dress, though rich, was torn, as if main force had been employed to detain her, and her eyes were full of the eagerness and fire of a late struggle. Ludovic the Moor turned pale, and two men, who appeared at the door by which she entered, made him a gesture of inquiry, as if asking him whether they should tear her from the king's feet. Ludovic answered not but by a frown; and in the meantime the princess poured forth her tale and her petitions in a voice that trembled with anxiety, and hope, and terror.

"Protect us, oh, my lord the king," she cried, "protect us! Do not raise me; I cannot rise, I will not rise, till you have promised to protect us. Protect us from that man--from that base relative, false guardian, traitor, subject. Look upon my husband, my lord; see him lying there withered, feeble, powerless; and yet but two years ago--oh, how beautiful and strong and active he was! What has done this? What can have done it but drugs mixed with his daily food? Who can have done it but he who seeks to open for himself a way to the ducal seat of Milan? Why is he here confined, a captive in his own dukedom, in his own city, in his own house? Why is he not suffered to breathe the free air, to control his own actions, to name his own officers and servants? Tumults! who instigates the tumults? The people love their prince--have always loved him; cheers

and applause went wherever he trod; he passed fearlessly among them as among his brethren, till his kind uncle there, in his tender care for his safety, first stirred up a tumult by one of his own edicts, and then shut his sovereign up in a prison in everything but name. Deliver us, my lord king, from this captivity! Have compassion upon my lord, have compassion upon me, have compassion upon our poor helpless child! If ever your noble heart has burned at a tale of long and unredressed wrong--if ever it has melted at a story of unmerited suffering--if ever your eyes have overflowed at the thought of cruelty shown to a woman and a child--as you are mighty, as you are noble, as you are a Christian, deliver us from the heavy yoke we bear! As king, as Christian, as knight, deliver us!"

"I will--I will," answered Charles, raising her and seating her by him; "by every title you have given me, you have a right to demand my aid, and I am bound to give it. My good cousin the count, this must be seen to at once. I will tarry in Pavia for the purpose of inquiring into these matters, and seeing them rightly regulated before I go hence."

"As your majesty pleases," answered Ludovic, bowing his head with a look of humility. "You will find, upon full inquiry, that I have acted for my nephew's best interests. The lady, poor thing, is somewhat prejudiced, if not distraught; but all these matters can be made perfectly clear when you have time to listen."

The young duke gave him a look of disdain, and she answered, "Ay, perfectly clear, count, if the king will but hear both parties."

"I will, dear lady, doubt it not," answered Charles, tenderly. "Be comforted. No time shall be lost. My cousin here shall be removed to a purer air; my own physician shall visit him. Be comforted."

A smile--the first smile of hope that had visited her lip for many a day--came upon the poor girl's face. "Thank you--oh, thank you, sire," she said.

Well had she stopped there! But she was very young, had no experience of the omnipotence of selfishness with man. Her fate had been a very sad one. She never sang to her child but with tears; and yet all had not taught her that oceans of blood would not bar man from an object of great desire.

"I cannot be comforted, my lord," she answered, "notwithstanding all your generous promises--nay, notwithstanding even their fulfilment, while my poor father, against whom your mighty power is bent--I speak of Alphonso, King of Naples--is in such a case of peril."

Charles's brow darkened; the compassionate look passed away; but still the unhappy girl went on, crushing out in the bosom of the young king the spark of pity which her melancholy situation had lighted. "My poor father, my lord," she continued, "has done nothing to call down your indignation upon him. Let me entreat your mercy on him; let me beseech you to pause and consider ere you ruin a man--a king who has never injured you--nay, who is ready to submit to any terms you are pleased to dictate. Oh, my noble lord, hear me; let me plead not only for my husband and myself, and my child, but for my father and my brother also."

Ludovic the Moor, one of the most subtle readers of the human heart that the world has ever produced, heard her first reference to her father with delight; and his eyes were instantly turned towards the young king's face. He traced but too easily the change of feelings going on. He saw the first spark of irritation produced by the unwelcome topic: he saw her gradually fanning it into a flame by her efforts to change the settled and selfish purpose of the king. He saw the struggle between the sense of justice and a favourite scheme; he saw the anger which a consciousness of wrong, together with a resolution to persevere in wrong invariably produces, growing up in Charles's bosom; and he let her go on without a word, till he perceived that the effect was complete. Then suddenly interposing, he said, "May it please your majesty, such exciting scenes are too much for the feeble health of my poor nephew; I must care for it, if this lady does not. You have heard all she has to say, and if you will mark the duke's countenance, you will perceive, from the change which has taken place, that further discussion now would be dangerous if not fatal. I will therefore beseech your majesty to give this matter further consideration at a future day, and to visit the poor dwelling I have prepared for you."

The king rose; and the poor duchess, perceiving too late the error she had committed, bent down her head upon her hands and wept. Charles took a kindly leave of the young duke, removing the further consideration of his case to that "more convenient season" which never comes, and merely saying to the poor helpless girl, who had pleaded for her father as well as for her husband, "Be comforted, madam. We will see to your protection and future fate."

She raised not her eyes, but shook her head sadly, and the king departed. We all know that when we are dissatisfied with ourselves we are dissatisfied with others; and the young King of France felt as if the duchess had injured him in seeking a justice that he would not grant.

He walked hastily onward, then, somewhat in advance of the count regent. Ludovic followed more slowly, with a slight smile upon his countenance; and the door closed upon the young Duke of Milan and his fate for ever.

Through the long corridor, into the great reception-room, and across it, sped the King of



France, displeased with himself and every one. The door was held open by the seneschal till Ludovic had passed it; but the Moor lingered a moment upon the threshold, gave a quick glance around, and whispered in the ear of the seneschal, "Give him a double portion in his wine tonight. We must have no more conferences." Then following the monarch, with a thoughtful look, he aided him to mount his horse, and took his place by his side. Rumours spread through the City of Pavia on the following day that Giovan Galeazzo was in a dying state, and Ludovic confirmed them to the King of France, saying, "I feared the excitement would be too much for his weakened frame."

That night, in the midst of a joyous banquet, the heavy bell of the great church was heard tolling slowly, announcing that another Duke of Milan had gone to his tomb.

## CHAPTER XV.

All was bustle and the hurry of preparation in the Villa Rovera. Leonora's two young maids had as much trouble in packing up her wardrobe as a modern lady's maid in arranging her bridal wardrobe, though, be it said, if a lady's apparel in those days was richer, it was not quite so multitudinous as the wardrobe of a modern lady. But these two young maids were not destined to be her only attendants; for the old count, thinking, as he had expressed it, that the Signor Ramiro d'Orco must be mad to entrust the escort of his lovely daughter to so young a cavalier as Lorenzo Visconti, had engaged a respectable and elderly lady, who had served for many years in his own household, to give dignity and gravity to the train of his young relation.

Many and particular were the instructions which he gave in private conclave to the ancient Signora Mariana; and faithfully did she promise to obey all his injunctions, and keep up the utmost decorum and propriety of demeanour by the way.

But alas! there is no faith to be put in old women, especially those of the grade and condition of life which was filled by Mariana. They are all at heart duennas, and, strange to say, generally, however hard and cold their exteriors, feel a sympathy with the tenderness and warmth of youth. The old lady smiled as she left the old man; and perhaps she judged rightly that thus to restrain the actions and keep close supervision on the conduct of a young lady and a young lord upon a long journey through a distracted country was a task so much above her powers that it would be better not to attempt it. "I shall have enough to do to take care of my old bones upon a rough trotting horse during the day, and to rest them during the night, without minding other people's affairs," she said. "Besides, the Signor Lorenzo is a nice, honourable young man, and would do nothing that is wrong, I am sure; and the signora is quite discreet, and moreover, proud, which is better."

Leonora and Lorenzo were full of joy and anticipation. Perhaps never in history was a long journey over rough roads, through a wild country, with the prospect of but poor accommodation anywhere but in the large cities, contemplated with so much wild joy. Fancy was like a bird escaped from its cage, and it soared over the future on expanded wings--soared high and sang.

Every now and then, it is true, a feeling of she knew not what awe or dread came over Leonora's heart--a sensation as if of some danger--a fear of the very wideness of her range, of her perfect freedom from all control--a consciousness that she was a woman and was weak, and very much in love. But it soon passed away when she thought of Lorenzo's high and chivalrous spirit; and then she gave herself up to hope and joy again.

Poor Blanche Marie was the only one to be pitied, and she was very sad. Even the thought that she was loved--that the timid dream of her youth's dawning twilight was already verified, could not console her. She was losing her loved companion, her bright cousin, and her lover all at once. For the loss of the two first, indeed, she had in some degree to blame herself; for, with girlish enthusiasm, she had resolved, from the moment she heard that Lorenzo was about to return to Italy, that he should fall in love with Leonora, and she rejoiced that all had gone according to her plans, but she would rather have had them remain at the Villa Rovera, and make love there beside her. Then, as to De Vitry, she would not have withheld him from the field of fame for the world; but she would rather have had the lists where glory was to be gained, at the back of the garden than far away at the end of Italy. Sometimes she asked herself if she really loved him--if she were not too young to know what love was; but then the pain she felt at the thought of his leaving her for months, perhaps for years, convinced her little heart that there was something in it which had never been there before.

Thus waned the day of the king's halt at the villa gates, and the morning came, when Lorenzo and his train, now amounting to twenty lances and some forty inferior soldiers, were to depart.

Besides these, however, were Leonora's servants, male and female, Lorenzo's personal attendants, horses and mules and pannieris, and a baggage-wagon, with six silver-grey oxen to draw it. Moreover, with the baggage-wagon were six foot soldiers, armed with hand-guns, then a new invention, for the manufacture of which, as I think I have mentioned before, Milan had become famous. It made altogether a grand cavalcade, occupying so much of the road while the party waited for their young leader and the fair lady he was to escort, that the peasant carts could hardly get past on their way to supply the market of Pavia with all the luxuries which the King of France's arrival in the city had brought into demand.

Much and sage advice had to be given by the old Count of Rovera both to Lorenzo and Leonora; and long was their leave-taking with poor Blanche Marie; but, in some sort it was fortunate it was so; for, before all was over, the Seigneur de Vitry appeared among them, exclaiming, in his usually gay tone, though there was a certain degree of shadow on his brow, "To horse! to horse, Visconti! You are to have a longer march than you contemplated. It has been decided by the king that seven miles is too short a ride for a young cavalier like you; and you are to march straight by Pavia, and act as an advance party on the way to Naples."

"But where am I to halt?" asked the young cavalier; "remember, Seigneur de Vitry, that it is long since I quitted this land, and I know not the distances."

"All that is arranged," answered De Vitry--"arranged upon the very best judgment and authority, that of a man who knows not the worthy count regent, but who knows the country well. At Belgiojoso, just seven miles beyond Pavia, you will find the route-card, as far as Bologna, with every day's march laid down, in the hands of the king's harbinger, old St. Pierre, who goes with you, with twenty lances more, to mark out the royal quarters. But, remember, you command the whole party, and the king relies upon your fidelity and discretion. From each station you will march forward at eight in the morning, unless contrary orders from the court reach you earlier. If you should obtain information of any hostile movements in the front, you will send back intelligence, unless you meet with an enemy, in which case you will fall back upon the van."

"Without fighting?" asked Lorenzo.

"Why, methinks," said De Vitry, with a gay glance at Leonora, "that, considering that you have some non-combatants of your party, the less you fight the better till they are safely bestowed in the rear. But you must use your own discretion in that matter. It would not do to see a French pennon retreat before a handful. But you must be careful."

"I will, depend upon it, on the signora's account," answered Lorenzo.

"'Tis a good guarantee," said De Vitry; "but does the king know she goes with you?--Well, well, do not colour and look perplexed; I will arrange all that for you, only you must tell me what tale I am to relate to his majesty. Am I to say aught about hasty marriages and a Signora Visconti? or that the days of knight errantry have been fully revived by you and De Terrail, and that you are escorting a distressed demoiselle to a place of safety?"

Though Leonora blushed deeply, Bianca Maria laughed gaily. "Why, you might have heard all about it yesterday, my lord," she said, "had you waited till Leonora opened her letter from her father, or till Lorenzo came back. It is by his command she goes--at his request my cousin escorts her. But you were in such a hurry to leave us, you would stay for nothing."

"I stayed till I had got all I wanted for the time," replied the good soldier, "though I may want more by and by."

It was now Marie's turn to blush; but Lorenzo came to her aid, saying, "I had hoped to ask the king's permission to-day at Pavia. I could not ask it yesterday, for his majesty was gone ere I received Signor Ramiro's letter."

"Well, let it pass," said De Vitry. "I give leave for the present, and the king will not call the lady back when you are forward on the march, I think."

"But, Seigneur de Vitry," said Leonora, "I fear truly we shall lose our way, for neither Lorenzo nor I know a step beyond Pavia, and all these soldiers are French I imagine."

"Have you not the renowned Antonio with you?" said De Vitry, gaily; "trust to him--trust to him; but never doubt him or ask if he is sure of the road, or he will let you run into a broken bridge and a swollen river. But get you to horse as speedily as may be. Where is my lord the count?"

"I am going to take leave of him," said Leonora, "and will show you the way."

"One moment, my lord," said Lorenzo, leading his commander a little aside; "tell me, I beg, why I am not suffered to halt in Pavia. There must be something more than you have said."

"Why, I believe it is simply this," answered De Vitry, after a moment's thought; "the good count regent is making a new road to Milan. He has already prepared to remove all the big rocks in the way; and the king thinks, and I think too, that he might judge it expedient to sweep away even the pebbles. The name of Visconti is not pleasant to him, Lorenzo--there are many druggists'

shops in Pavia: so ask no more questions, my good friend, but mount and away. God speed you on your march and in your love. Well for you that you took the dark-eyed cousin. If you had chosen the other I would have cut your throat."

No need to pause longer on the parting; no need to follow them on that day's march, for it was without incident. It seemed very short too, to the young lovers, although the distance was greater than had been expected--all distances are. The seven miles from the villa to Pavia and the seven miles from Pavia to Belgiojoso stretched themselves into full sixteen miles, which is contrary to all rules of arithmetic, but still it is an invariable result. The day was charming. It was like youth: it might have been too warm but for certain clouds which shadowed the sky from time to time, and tempered the ardour of the sun. The heavy-armed horses suffered a little: but at length the pretty village--for it deserved not the name of town--which has since given a famous name to a beautiful, high-spirited, but unfortunate lady, appeared before them about four o'clock in the afternoon. Old St. Pierre, the king's harbinger, had been there for some hours with his twenty lances; the quarters were all marked out, and everything prepared.

"As the king must occupy his own lodging first, my lord," he said, "I cannot give you the best inn; but here is a very pretty little place at the edge of the village, where they seem good people, and I reserved that for you. I did not expect, indeed, so many ladies," he continued, looking towards Leonora and her maids, "but I dare say they can all be accommodated. Come and see."

Lorenzo rode on, with the old gentleman, who was on foot, walking by the side of his horse and talking all the time. The little inn to which he led them is, I dare say, there still. It certainly was so some twenty years ago--much changed, doubtless, from what it was then, but still with somewhat of the antique about it. There were vines over both sides of the house, and the rooms to the back looked over the gardens, and small, richly cultivated fields that surrounded the place. The leaves of the vines were turning somewhat yellow, and many a cluster had been already plucked from the bough; but Leonora pronounced it charming, and Lorenzo thought so too. Happy had they both been if Fate had never placed them in higher abodes. Oh, those pinnacles; they are dangerous resting-places.

Let us pass over an hour or two. The men had been dispersed to their quarters and the proper guard set; a light meal had been taken, and the country wine tasted; the maids had found lodging, and were amusing themselves in various ways, with which neither the writer nor the reader has aught to do; Signora Mariana, like a discreet dame, was dosing in an upper chamber, and Lorenzo and Leonora were seated together in the little saloon at the back of the house, with the foliage trailing over the window and its verandah, and a small but neat garden stretching out down a little slope. They were alone together; the dream was realised; and what if they gave way to young, passionate love as far as honour and virtue permitted. His arm was round her; the first kiss had been given and repeated; the beautiful head rested on his bosom, and heart had been poured into heart in the words which only passion can dictate and youth supply. Ah! they were very beautiful and very happy! and the attitude into which they had cast themselves was such as painters might copy, but not the most graceful fancy could imagine. It was full of love, and confidence, and nature.

As they sat, they were somewhat startled for a moment by the sound of a lute played apparently in the garden; but it was not very near, and the tones were so rich and full, the skill of the player so exquisite, that instead of alarming the timidity of young love, they only added to "the loving languor which is not repose" which before possessed them.

After listening for a moment, and gazing forth through the open window, they resumed their previous attitude, and continued their conversation.

Leonora's beautiful head again lay on Lorenzo's bosom, with her look turned upward to his face, while he gazed down into her eyes--those wells of living light--with his head bowed over her, as if the next moment his lips would stoop for a kiss: and now and then a grave earnest look would come upon their faces, while the words came sometimes thick and fast, sometimes ceased altogether, in the intensity of happiness and feeling.

What made Lorenzo look suddenly up at the end of about a quarter of an hour, he himself could not tell; but the moment he turned his eyes to the window he started and laid his hand upon his sword. But then a voice of extraordinary melody exclaimed, "Do not move! for Heaven's sake, do not move! Alas! you have lost it; you can never assume that pose again; but, thank Heaven, I can remember it, with what I have already done."

The man who spoke was a remarkably handsome man of about forty-four or five years of age, with a countenance of wonderful sweetness. He was dressed in a black velvet coat, with a small cap of the same material on his head, and a little feather in it. His seat was a large stone in the garden just before the window, and on his knee rested a curious-looking instrument, which seemed the model of a horse's head cut in silver and ivory. Upon it was stretched a small scrap of paper, on which he still went on, tracing something with a pencil.

"This, sir, is hardly right," said Lorenzo, advancing to a door leading direct into the garden, which, like the window, was wide open. "You intrude upon our privacy somewhat boldly;" but the next instant he exclaimed, in a voice of delight, as he gazed over their strange visitor's shoulder, "Good heaven! how beautiful! Leonora! Leonora! Come hither and see yourself depicted better

than Venetian mirror ever reflected that loved face and form."

"And you too, Lorenzo! and you too!" exclaimed Leonora. "Oh! it is perfect!"

The artist looked up and smiled with one of those beaming smiles which seem to find their way direct to the heart, as if an angel looked into it. "It is like you both," he said; "but it was the attitude I sought, and you started up before I had completed the sketch. Yet I can remember it. My mind, from long habit, is like a note-book, in which every beautiful thing I behold is written down as soon as seen. Look how I will add in a moment all that is wanting," and he proceeded with rapid pencil to add the arm of Lorenzo cast round Leonora's waist, and her arm resting on her lap, with her hand clasped in her lover's.

The colour came in the beautiful girl's cheek, but without remarking it the artist said:

"Was it not so?"

"Even so, I fear," murmured Leonora.

"You must let me have this drawing," said Lorenzo; "you can put no higher value on it than I will be right glad to pay. It will be to me a memorial of one of the happiest days of my life, and of her I love better than life."

"Nay, I would not part with it for any payment," said the other; "but, having done as you said just now--intruded on your privacy--I will pay for the intrusion by sketching for each of you, the portrait of the other, and that without price. But let us come into the saloon, and call for lights; it is getting somewhat dark. Will you, young gentleman, take my lute, while I put up the sketch and my pencils."

"Is this then a lute?" asked Lorenzo, taking the horse's head in ivory and silver. "Oh! I see; here is a finger-board, and the strings are fastened to the lower jaw. I never saw a lute like this."

"Probably not," the other answered; "it is my own design and workmanship."

"Then was it you whom we heard playing, just now?" asked Leonora. "The music was divine."

"It might be so," answered the artist gaily, "for Cupid was very near--though I knew not of the god's neighbourhood--and it is the nature of all godlike beings to cast their influence far around them, and raise common things toward divinity. He is a mighty deity that Cupid, and, when worshipped purely, has precious gifts for the sons of men. You two are very young," he continued, thoughtfully, "and doubtless noble."

"We are young," answered Lorenzo, "and noble as far as blood is concerned. Noble in a better sense I trust we are likewise. Here is one, at least, who is, and what may be wanting in myself my love for her shall give."

"'Tis one of the precious gifts I talked of," answered the artist, moving to the house, and entering the little saloon; "a high and pure love ennobles him who feels it; and well, young gentleman, have you distinguished between two nobilities. Yet, constituted as this world is--nay, not only as this world, but as man himself is--there must always be a factitious nobility, which, in the eyes of the world, will rise above the other. The notion of anything like equality ever existing among men is a dream of human vanity, contrary to all experience, and to the manifest will of God. The only reason why men ever entertained it is that the lower intellects feel their selfishness wounded at acknowledging they are inferior. Now, as the lower intellects predominate immensely in point of numbers, and all their vanities combine to pull down those superior to their own level, you will always find democratic republics attempted in those countries where there is no great predominance of intellect in any, or that predominance is confined to a very few. If there be one intellect vastly superior to any others, the constitution of the state will soon become a monarchy; if there be more than one or two greatly above the rest, you will have an aristocracy, and the natural order, as far as I have seen in the world, will be the monarch representing the highest intellect and most powerful will; an aristocracy representing those next in mental powers; and below them the plebeians, representing the great mass of stupidity and ignorance which exist in this world--the weak, the vicious, the thoughtless, the idle, the brutal, the barbarous. Granted that these several classes will not long justly represent the reality; but still the order is the natural order, and men strive against it in vain. We have seen these democratic republics tried over and over again in this our Italy, producing misery and disorder during their existence, and all tending to the same consummation."

"But how is equality among men contrary to the will of God!" asked Lorenzo; "the incarnate Son of God himself seems to have preached such a doctrine."

"I humbly think you are mistaken," answered the artist. "On the contrary, he always inculcated submission to our superiors. But you ask how is it contrary to the manifest will of God? I reply, not only by the difference of mere worldly advantages which he has bestowed upon various men, for that might depend upon a false and mistaken scheme of society, but by the difference of mental and spiritual powers which he himself has ordained and bestowed, without any intervention of man or of man's will. Take one of the many idiots, or half idiots, who sit upon the steps of St. John at Rome, and place him by the side of the late Lorenzo de Medici. Take them as

mere infants, and try to educate them alike nay, give the highest culture to the idiot, the lowest to Lorenzo, what would be the result? The one would tower above the other with his gigantic mind, the other would remain an intellectual pigmy; the one would be a prince of thought, the other a plebeian. Here is an inequality decreed by God himself; and although I have taken an extreme case, you will find the same rule pervade all minds and all natures. No man has the same capabilities. Every gift is unequally apportioned; and the same Almighty Being who gives to one man wealth and to another poverty, to one man the stature of a hero, to another the height of a dwarf, has decreed that inequality of station against which the vanity of multitudes struggles in vain. I myself am a plebeian, you are nobles, yet I would not alter the order of society if I could. But let us change the topic; or, while this sweet half light still lingers in the west, I will play upon my favourite lute again, and let you hear some verses which flow somewhat with the current of our thoughts."

For a moment he leaned his cheek against the instrument, struck a few chords, put the strings in perfect tune, and then, with the skill of a great musician, drew forth harmonies such as were seldom heard in those days. A minute or two after, his voice, far sweeter than any sounds which could be brought from the lute, joined in, and he sang some irregular verses, which he seemed to improvise.

SONG.

"Let him who cannot what he will,  
Will only what he can.  
'Tis surely Folly's plan,  
By willing more, to compass his own will.  
Then wise the man who can himself restrain  
To will within his power; he ne'er shall will in vain.

"Yet many a joy and many woe,  
From knowing or not knowing what to will,  
In sweet and bitter drops distil,  
For from ourselves our fate does mostly flow.  
Fair skies to him who steers his bark aright,  
And keeps the pole-star--duty--ever in his sight.

"He who takes all, is rarely blessed;  
The sweetest things turn soonest sour,  
When we abuse our power.  
Oft have I wept for joys too soon possessed.  
What lessons, then, from these light verses flow?  
That which we ought to do, and what we ought to know."

## CHAPTER XVI.

"Bring lights," said Lorenzo to a girl who appeared as the song concluded; and he sighed as if some sweet dream had been broken and passed away. "Oh! music--music such as that is indeed divine."

"Ay," answered the singer "music is divine and so is poetry--so sculpture, painting, architecture. Every art, every science that raises man from his primitive brutality has a portion of divinity about it; for it elevates toward the Creator. Christ has said, 'Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect;' and though we cannot reach perfection, we may strain for it.

"Nor, as some have supposed, do the arts render effeminate. They may soften the manners, as the old Roman says, but not the character. On the contrary, all that tends to exercise tends to strengthen. It is idleness, it is luxury which enfeebles. Athens in her highest pride of art was in her highest pride of power, and her artists learned by the pencil or the chisel to put on the buckler and to grasp the sword. And what does the combination of art and science do? What has it done, and what will it not do?"

He gazed up for a moment like one inspired, and then added, "God knows, for in extent and majesty the results are beyond even our dreams. But I ever see the times afar when the yet undeveloped powers of man and nature shall work miracles--when mountains shall be moved or forced from side to side to smooth the path of our race, and bring nation closer to nation--when the very elements shall become subservient to the will of man, and when the energies of his nature, directed by science, shall no longer be squandered in war and bloodshed, but shall render

war impossible, and bloodshed, under whatever name, a crime.

"Oh peace, how beautiful art thou! Oh goodness, how wide and comprehensive ought to be thy reign! Angel of love, thou art the seraphim nearest to the throne of God! So help me Heaven, I would not kill the smallest bird that flutters from spray to spray, nor tread upon a beetle in my path!"

There was something so exquisitely sweet in his voice, so sublime in his look, so marvellously graceful in his manner, that the two young lovers, while they gazed and listened, could almost have fancied him the angel of love whom he apostrophized. They sat silent when he paused, listening eagerly for more; but when he began to speak again, all was changed except that captivating power which seemed to command the assent or overrule the judgment of all who heard him. His mood was now changed, and nothing could be more light and playful than his talk, till the door was opened and another mood came over him.

"Ah, Catarina," he said to the girl who tardily brought in the lights, "if the world waits upon you for illumination, we shall have another dark age upon us. Now see what it is: this little candle in a moment brings out of obscurity a thousand things which would not be discerned before. Thus it is in this world, Catarina; we grope our twilight way among things unseen till comes some light of science, and we find ourselves surrounded by multitudes of beautiful things we could not before discern. Do you understand me, Catarina?"

"No, signor," answered the girl, opening her great black eyes, "but I love to hear you speak, even when I know not what you are speaking of."

"How can she understand such things?" asked Leonora. "Probably she has never been out of the village."

"And she is wise not to go," answered the stranger. "What would she gain by going, to what she might lose? Do you love the cultivation of flowers, sweet lady? If so, you will know that there be some which love the shade and will not bear transplanting. That poor girl, right happy here, with youth, and health, and a sufficiency of all things, might be very miserable in a wider scene. Oh no, God's will is best. We should never pray for anything but grace and peace, I cannot but think that prayers--importunate, short-sighted prayers--are sometimes granted in chastisement. There is one eye alone which sees the consequence; of all things. There may be poison in a cup of nectar; but you cannot so well conceal the venom in a draught of pure water from the well. Let the poor girl stay here. Now sit you still, and I will draw you both, one for the other; but talk at will; I would not have you dull and silent. Any bungler can draw the body. I want to sketch the spirit likewise. Eyes, nose, and mouth are easily drawn; the heart and the soul require a better pencil. Ay, now you are smiling again. You were all too grave just now."

"But your discourse has been very serious," replied Lorenzo. "Some things might well puzzle, some sadden us."

"'Tis well," said the artist gravely, "to prompt thought, and I sought to do it. You two were dreaming when first I saw you. I have but awakened you. I know not your names nor your history; but you are both very young; and when the Jove-born goddess took on bodily the part of Mentor, she knew that youth and inexperience require an almost superhuman monitor. I can give no such counsels, but every man can bring a little cool water where he sees a fire. Ah! lady, would I had my colours here to catch that rosy blush before it flies."

"Fie! fie!" she answered, "or you will make me fly also. You cannot suppose that either Lorenzo or I would wish or do aught that is wrong. Your admonitions were cast away upon us, for we needed them not."

"God knows," said the artist, laughing, "but neither you nor I, young lady. Your speech is not Florentine, but his is: how comes that? Is he carrying home a bride?"

"The difference of our speech is soon explained," said Lorenzo, "though we are both of the same land. But she has ever lived in Lombardy. I have travelled far and wide, but my youth was all spent in Florence. I came there when I was very young, and remained till the death of Lorenzo de Medici, whose godson I am."

"Then you are Lorenzo Visconti," said the artist; "but who is this?" and he pointed toward Leonora with the end of his pencil.

"You divine," answered the young man without noticing his question; "are you skilled in the black art among all your other learning, signor?"

"I am really skilled in very little," replied their companion. "In a life neither very long nor very short, but one of much labour and much study, I have never produced one work--nay, done one thing with which I was wholly satisfied. The man who places his estimate of excellence very high may surpass his contemporaries, and yet fall far short of his own conceptions. Hereafter men may speak of me well or ill, as they please. If ill, their censure will not hurt me: if well, their faintest applause will go beyond my own. As to the black art, Signor Lorenzo, the blackest arts are not those of the magician; yet many things seem magical which are very simple. Lorenzo de Medici had but one Lombard godson; and I remember you well, now, when you were a little boy in

Florence. The only marvel is that I ever forgot you. But you have not introduced me to this lady."

"Nay, I know not whom to introduce," answered the young man.

"Ah! you have entangled me in my own net," said the artist. "Well it is right you should both know who it is gives counsels unsought, and teaches lessons perhaps unneeded. A good many years ago there lived in Florence a poor gentleman named Ser Pietro da Vinci. His means were small, but he had great capacity, though he turned it to but little account. His taste for art was great, however, and he frequented the houses of the best painters and sculptors in Italy.

"Well, he had a son, a wild, fitful boy, who studied everything, attempted much, and perfected little. He plunged into arithmetic, mathematics, geometry, and used to find a good deal of fun in puzzling his masters with hard questions. Again, he would work untaught in clay, and make heads of children and of laughing women; and again he would sing his own rude verses to the lute, or sketch the figures and faces of all who came near him.

"This was all when he was very young--a mere boy, indeed; but among his father's friends was the well-known Andrea Verrocchio, the great painter; and in his bottega was soon found the boy, studying hard, and only now and then giving way to his wild moods by darting away from his painting, sometimes to some sister art, sometimes to something directly opposite. He drew plans for houses, churches, fortresses; he devised instruments of war, projected canals, laid out new roads, sung to his lute, danced at the village festivals, studied medicine and anatomy.

"But his fancies and designs went beyond the common notions of the day; men treated them as whims impossible of execution, projects beyond the strength of man to complete. His drawings, and his paintings, and his sculpture, however, they admired, patted him on the head, and called him the young genius.

"At length he was set to paint part of a picture which his master had commenced, and the result was that Verrocchio threw away his pallet, declaring he would never paint more, as he had been excelled by a boy. That boy went on to win money and fame till people began to call him Maestro, and the wild little boy became Maestro Leonardo da Vinci, who, some say, is a great painter. By that name, Signor Lorenzo, you may introduce me to the lady, for my sketches are now finished."

The love for art in Italy at that time approached adoration: the name of Leonardo da Vinci was famous from the foot of the Alps to the Straits of Messina, and Leonora took the great painter's hand and kissed it with as much veneration as if he had been her patron saint.

"Ah! and so this is the fair Signora d'Orco?" said Leonardo. "Now I understand it all. You are travelling to join your father. I met with him at Bologna as I passed."

"How, long ago was that, Maestro Leonardo?" asked Leonora, with some surprise.

"It was some days since," replied the painter, "and he must be in Rome by this time."

The lovers looked inquiringly into each other's faces, and after a moment's thought, Lorenzo said:

"We expected to overtake him at Bologna. His letters led us to believe we should find him there; but doubtless he has left directions for our guidance."

"Perhaps so," replied Leonardo, in a somewhat sombre and doubtful tone; "but, if you do not find such directions, what will you do?"

"We can but go on, I suppose," answered Leonora; "Lorenzo must march with the French army, which directs its course to Rome, and I cannot be left without some one to protect me."

The painter shook his head gravely.

"Far better, my child," he said, "that you should remain in Bologna. The ways are dangerous; Rome is no fit place for you. Besides, your father has gone thither, I am told, on affairs of much importance, and you would be but a burden to him. He goes, they told me, to hold a conference with Cardinal Cæsar Borgia, who seeks a man of great skill and resolution to hold in check the somewhat turbulent and discontented inhabitants of the territories in Romagna, bestowed upon him by his father, Pope Alexander. Go not after him to Rome, but by his express desire. I will give you a letter to the Abbess Manzuoli, in Bologna, who will be a mother to you for the time you have to stay."

"All must be decided by my father's will," replied Leonora; "but I thank you much, Signor da Vinci, for the promised letter, which cannot but be of service to me in case of need."

"Well, then," replied the great painter, changing his tone, "come round here, and look over my shoulder. Here are the two portraits. 'Did you ever see two uglier people? Is he not frightful, Signora Leonora? and as to her face and figure, they are, of course, hideous, Lorenzo.'"

Leonora took the rapid sketch, which represented Lorenzo with a drawn sword in one hand and a banner in the other, looking up to a cloudy sky, through which broke a brighter gleam of

light, gazed at it a moment with what may well be called ecstasy, and then placed it in the scarf which covered her bosom, while he pressed his lips upon the other paper in silent delight.

"You need not do that, Lorenzo," said the painter, with a quiet smile; "your lips will soil my picture--my picture will soil your lips. There are others near where the paint will not come off, for they are limned by a hand divine. But are you both satisfied?"

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Leonora, joyfully; but Lorenzo answered at once, "No, unless you will promise me, Signor da Vinci, to paint me a portrait of her, as you can only paint, I cannot be satisfied."

"When she is your wife," answered Leonardo, "you have but to write to me that Mona Leonora Visconti will sit, and be I at the distance of two hundred leagues, I will come. But now, I will hie me to the little chamber they have given me, and write the letter I spoke of, and then return. Perchance the lady may have retired ere then, but I shall find you here, Lorenzo. Is it not so?"

"Assuredly," replied the young man; "I have to visit the guards, and see that all is rightly disposed in the town; but I will not go till you return."

I will not follow the indiscreet example of Leonardo, and try to sketch them as they sat alone after his departure. Indeed, it were not an easy task. They were very happy, and happiness is like the chameleon, ever changing its hues. An hour and a half, or a moment; for such it seemed to them, had passed when old Mona Mariana, on whose discreet and reasonable forbearance be a benediction, put her head into the room, and said, in a sleepy tone:

"Is it not time for rest, dear lady?"

"You seem to think so Mariana, for you are half asleep already."

"Ah, young hearts! young hearts!" said the old lady, who had slept for several hours; "they have thoughts enough to keep them waking, and strength to bear it. Old people have only to pray and sleep. But, indeed, you had better come to rest; we have all to rise betimes."

After a word or two more, Leonora parted from her lover, and soon seeking her bed, lay down and dreamed, but not asleep.

As if the painter had heard her light foot on the stairs, she had not been gone a minute when Leonardo appeared. He took Lorenzo's hand eagerly in his, and said, in a low, earnest tone:

"Let her not go to Rome, I beseech you, young gentleman--let her not go to Rome."

"And why are you so eager she should not go there?" asked Lorenzo, somewhat surprised, and even alarmed by his new friend's manner. "Is there any danger?"

"Every danger," answered Da Vinci.

"Why?"

"For a thousand reasons, but they are difficult to explain. Yet stay; I remember rapping a fellow student's knuckles to prevent his putting his profane hand on a bunch of beautiful grapes, all covered with their vineyard bloom, when I was about to paint them. This young lovely girl--this Signora d'Orco, is like one of those grapes, rich in the bloom of innocence. There is the sweet fruit within--there is, or is to come the ardent wine of love and passion, but the bloom is there still. Oh, let it not be brushed away too soon, Lorenzo! Now listen: Rome is a place of horror and vice. In the chair of the Apostle sits the incarnation of every sin and crime. The example is too widely, too eagerly followed by people ever ready to learn. The very air is pollution. The very ground is foul. Would you take her into a pest-house? But more, still more--nay, what shall I say? How shall I say it? Her father--her very father has been gained by the foulest of the foul offspring of Borgia. Ramiro d'Orco is now the bosom counsellor of Cæsar, who, in a shorter space of time than it took his great namesake to make himself master of the Roman State, has accumulated more vices,--committed more crimes, than any man now living, or that ever lived."

"But how have they gained him? Why have they sought him?" asked Lorenzo. "He is himself wealthy; his daughter is more so. They cannot approach him by mercenary means: and then, why should they seek a man who has no political power?"

"A tale long to tell, an intrigue difficult to explain," replied Da Vinci. "I can show you why and how, in a few words indeed; but if you must seek proofs of what I say, you may have to buy them dearly. Listen then to them, Lorenzo Visconti. Men seek that which they have not. Money might not tempt Ramiro d'Orco. The prospect of that political power which he does not possess has tempted him. They have promised him what I may well call prefectal power in one half of Romagna, and he has yielded. What would he not sacrifice for that? His own honour--perhaps his child's. Thus your first question is answered. Thus they have approached and gained him.

"Now to your second question, Why they have sought him? The first motive was to control, or, rather to restrain and mollify the bitterest and now most powerful enemy of the house of Borgia. Do you know that he is nearly related to the family of Rovera? that he is not only first cousin, but



schoolfellow and playmate of that famous cardinal, Julian de Rovera, whose enmity to Alexander and to Cæsar is so strong that, were it at the peril of his own life and the disorder of all Christendom, he would attempt to hurl the present pontiff from his seat, and has already branded the head of the Church with all the infamies that can disgrace a man, much more a priest--ambition, avarice, fraud, heresy, adultery, murder?

"With him, who now journeys with the King of France, Alexander and his bastard hope to negotiate, and to mollify him through the intercession of Ramiro d'Orco, the only one on earth who has influence worth consideration with the stern Cardinal Julian. This is why they seek him. There are many other motives, but this is enough. Take her not to Rome, young man. Listen to the counsel of one who can have no object but your good and hers. If you do not listen, you are responsible for all the results."

"I fear not that anything can make her aught but what she is," replied Lorenzo, with all the proud enthusiasm of young love. "Better, nobler she cannot be, and as the foulest breath cannot sully the diamond, so can no foul atmosphere tarnish her purity."

A faint smile fluttered for a single instant round the lips of Da Vinci; but he resumed his serious aspect instantly--nay, his countenance was more grave and stern than before.

"Doubtless," he said, "doubtless; for they who study much the human face, learn to read it as a book; and hers is a beautiful page--clear, and pure, and bright. But there are arts, young man, you know not of--drugs of terrible power, which lull the spirit into a sleep like that of death, and leave the body impotent for resistance or defence. Nay, violence itself--coarse, brutal violence, may be dreaded in a place--"

"They dare not!" exclaimed Lorenzo, fiercely, "they dare not!"

"What dare not a Borgia do?" asked Leonardo. "When they have set at nought every tie, moral and religious--when they have made crime their pastime, vice their solace, poison and murder their means--provoked to the utmost, without a fear, the wrath of man and the vengeance of God--what dare not the Borgias do? And what could be your vengeance, that they should fear it?"

"But her father," said Lorenzo, "her father!"

An expression almost sublime came upon the great painter's countenance, and he answered, in a tone of stern warning.

"Trust not to her father. His God is not our God! There are things so abhorrent to the first pure, honest principles which Nature has planted in the hearts of the young, that it is too dreadful a task to open innocent eyes to their existence. But mark me, Lorenzo Visconti, there have been men who have sold their children for money. Ambition is a still fiercer passion than avarice. I have done. My task is performed, and I may say no more than this: take her not to Rome: let her not set foot in it, if you can prevent it."

"I will not--no, I will not," replied the young man, thoughtfully. "I will prevent it--nay, it might be wise to acquire a right to prevent it."

"Never do a wrong to attain what you judge right," answered Da Vinci. "And now good-night. You have your posts to look to; a calm walk beneath the moon, with thought for your companion, will do you good."

Lorenzo pressed his hand and they parted.

## CHAPTER XVII.

There was a little monticule by the road-side just on the Tuscan frontier. At the distance of about three quarters of a mile in front was the small fortified town of Vivizzano with its citadel, seeming strong and capable of defence; but the walls were old, especially those of the town, and along the flat, and apparently perpendicular faces of the curtain, the goats, unconscious of danger, were walking quietly along, browsing on those fresh shoots of the caper plant, which frequently appear during a benign autumn. At a distance it seemed that there was not footing even for a goat, but the presence of those animals showed the mortar to have been worn out between the stones; and at one spot the keen eye of Lorenzo Visconti perceived three or four of the bearded beasts of the mountain gathered together as if in conclave. He marked the fact well, for he had learned that nothing should escape a soldier's notice.

He and his party had taken up their position on the little hill in consequence of orders received from the main body, which was coming up rapidly, and no opposition having yet been met with in the course of the march, Leonora and her women sat on their horses and mules beside him, little anticipating any danger.

"It looks a beautiful old place, Lorenzo," said Leonora; "at least at this distance, though one cannot tell what it may be within. But what made the king order you to halt here as soon as you came in sight of the town, instead of marching on as before?"

"I cannot tell," replied her lover, "unless, dear girl, it is that I sent last night to know if I might fall back to confer with your severe relation, the Cardinal Julian de Rovera as to the journey to Bologna. The roads may part here. Do you not see that yellow streak running away through the meadows, and then skirting the foot of the mountain? That may be the highway to Bologna perhaps. The king is always kind and considerate."

"Jesu Maria!" cried Madonna Mariana, "what's that?"

The moment before she spoke a flash, sudden and bright, glanced along a part of the old wall, and after a second or two the loud boom of one the cannons of those days burst upon the ear. Hardly had it ceased when a ball came whizzing by, and ploughed up the earth some fifty yards behind them, and at about the same distance on the right.

"By heavens!--they have fired a falconet at us," exclaimed Lorenzo. "Back, back, dear Leonora; you and your women ride to that cottage behind the point of rock. Nay, delay not, beloved. I will send some men to keep guard."

"I am not afraid," replied Leonora, with a smile, leaning over towards him, and looking up in his face. "Am I not to be a soldier's bride, Lorenzo? I must accustom myself to the sound of cannon. Those good people must fire better ere they frighten me."

"But they frighten me, dear lady," cried Mariana. "Oh, come back, come back! I am sure they fired well enough to come so near us."

"Oh, come back! come back!" cried all the maids in chorus.

"Well, go--go," answered Leonora; "I will join you in a moment or two. I want to see them take another shot."

The women waited for no further permission, but hurried off with all speed, and Lorenzo was still engaged in persuading Leonora to follow them, when a small troop of men-at-arms came galloping up the pass. At their head was De Terrail.

"Halt--halt here, and form upon the company of the Seigneur di Visconti," cried the young Bayard. "My lord, I bear the king's orders to you to advance no further, but to wait for his personal presence. He thought, indeed, you had gone farther than he had commanded when he heard that shot. It was a cannon, was it not?"

"A cannon, and not badly aimed for the first shot," replied Lorenzo; "there is the furrow the ball made."

"For God's sake send the lady to a place of safety," cried Bayard; "what are you thinking of, my friend?"

"I cannot persuade her to go," replied Lorenzo.

"Well, I will--I will," answered Leonora, turning her horse's head. "Farewell, Lorenzo; win fame for your lady's sake--yet be not rash."

Something bright glistened in her eye; and she turned to the cottage where her women had already taken refuge. A small guard was then stationed at the door, and the trumpets of the cavalry were already heard blowing through the pass, but still Lorenzo and his friend had time to exchange a few words before the head of the array appeared.

"What is the king going to do?" asked Lorenzo.

"Attack the town and take it," replied De Terrail. "On my soul, these Tuscans are rather bold to make a stand in such a place as that. But they have good bombardiers it would seem. That ball came far and well."

"Who leads the attack?" asked Lorenzo. "Was anything settled when you came away?"

"Nothing fixed," answered Bayard; "but I fear it will all be left to the Gascons and the Swiss. They are all infantry, you know, and if the place is to be taken by a *coup de main* they must do it, and we support them. The popguns<sup>[1]</sup> they carry, it is supposed, will do everything."

"Out upon their popguns!" cried Lorenzo. "Good faith, I trust the king will let us have our share; it is my right, I think. I have led during the whole march, and I have heard say, he who does so, is privileged to make the first charge."

"But what would you do?" asked Bayard. "You would not charge those stone walls, would you?"

"No," replied the other; "but I would dismount my men, take none but volunteers, and lead them as *enfants perdus*. If the king will but consent, I will undertake to carry that place sword in hand, or, at least, be as soon in as any one."

Another shot from the walls, coming still nearer than the preceding ball, interrupted their conversation, and before it could be renewed, the Gascon infantry began to debouche from the path and deploy to the left. Then came the Swiss infantry, and then a body of cavalry, under the Count d'Entragues. All was glitter and display, shining arms, waving banners, nodding plumes, lances and pikes, arquebusses, crossbows, halberts, surcoats of silk and cloth of gold and silver; but what most struck the eyes of the two young soldiers was the admirable array of the Swiss infantry, as every movement and evolution was performed. No rank was broken, no disorder appeared, but shoulder to shoulder, man treading in the step of man, they marched, they wheeled, they deployed, as if the body of which they formed a part was one of those machines which change their form continually at the will of those who manage them, without ever losing their solidity.

At length appeared the magnificent escort of the king, who immediately rode up to the little hill on which Lorenzo was posted, and gazed forward towards the town, while two more shot from the walls were heard, and a slight agitation among the Gascon infantry on the left, told that this time some effect had followed.

At the king's first appearance, Lorenzo had sprung to the ground, and approached his stirrup, but he suffered him to gaze over the scene uninterrupted, till Charles turned his eyes upon him, and said:

"Well, what has happened, my young lord?"

"Nothing, sire, but that they have fired a few shots at us from the walls. I beseech your majesty, as I have led all the way, to let me have my place in the attack. I would fain lead still, if you will permit me to dismount my men, and I think I will show you that gentlemen-at-arms can take a place as well as foot soldiers. I have marked a spot where I will undertake to force an entrance."

"Where? where?" asked the monarch, eagerly.

"I cannot well point it out, sire," replied the young man; "but I can find it if you will permit me."

The king looked round to the superior officers about him, saying in a hesitating tone:

"It is contrary to the order we proposed. What say you, La Tremouille?"

"Why, sire, there must be *enfants perdu* either taken from the Gascons or some other," replied the great commander.

"Let him go--let him go!" cried De Vitry, gaily; "if the youth will wager his life against his spurs, why let him go, sire."

"Support him by the Swiss, and the Swiss by some men-at-arms, to guard against a sortie, and let him go in God's name," added La Tremouille. "Make haste, Visconti! Select your men well, and call for some ladders from the rear."

"Better summon the place first," said the king.

"It is the rule, sire, and should be done," answered the other; "but methinks these good people imagine they have been summoned already by the answers they send from their walls. There they go again! By my life they are aiming at the royal banner. Pity the artillery is so far behind, or we would answer them in kind. From that youth's eye, however, I think we shall have no need of bombards. He has spied some advantage, I will stake my life."

A trumpet was accordingly sent forward, and was suffered to approach close to the walls; but he returned with the answer that the garrison was strong, had been placed there by the Signoria of Florence, and could not consent to surrender without a stroke struck. In fact, they saw that no artillery was present at the time with the king's army, and did not believe the place could be taken without a breach being made.

In the meantime Lorenzo had addressed a few words to his troop, asking who would accompany him to lead the attack. Such was the confidence he had gained during the march that every man sprung to the ground and professed himself ready, even to the lowest casstelier. Only fifty, however, were selected, and the rest ordered to remain with the horses. Some scaling-ladders were procured, and all was ready to advance when the trumpet returned. A short pause ensued, and then was heard the beat of the drum.

Lorenzo sprang forward; his men came rapidly after, bearing the ladders horizontally; and the Swiss followed with an interval of some fifty yards. A strong body of Gascons, with petards,

directed their course towards one of the gates of the town; and a battalion of Swiss moved towards a postern, which had been discovered in the curtain. But Lorenzo was before them all, and lost not an inch of ground. Straight towards what seemed to the eye of the king the most inaccessible spot of the fortress he bent his way, taking advantage of every undulation of the ground to shelter his men from the cannon-balls, which now came somewhat faster than at first, till he arrived within fifty paces of the spot where he had marked the goats climbing and standing. There in a little ravine, which the guns, as they were planted on the walls, could not bear upon, he turned for one moment to the men, exclaiming:

"Here, gentlemen, I have seen the goats go up and down, and surely we can do so too. The lowest part is the most difficult. The ladders--the ladders to the front; now, on with a rush!"

All were active, all were strong. The ditch, then dry, was speedily reached; and the ladders raised. They were too short to approach the summit of the wall, but Lorenzo's keen eye had not deceived him. Where he had seen the goats gathered together several huge stones had fallen; and, from that spot, there was a clear but narrow pathway up. At first it seemed as if he would meet but small resistance; for attacked in three quarters and divided in opinion amongst themselves, the superior officers of the Florentine garrison were consulting whether it would not be better to hang out a white flag and treat for a surrender. But speedily, soldiers came running along the platform above, hand guns and cross-bows were pointed at the ascending party, and large stones were cast down upon their heads. It was too late to treat now: the attack had fully commenced, the struggle was for life or death, and the defenders fought with the energy of despair.

In the meantime there were many and varying feelings in and around the cottage above where Leonora and her women had taken refuge. Fear--for with all the personal courage she had shown, and with an eager longing for his renown, the young girl still felt for her lover's safety. Fear, and hope, and anxious expectations succeeded each other in Leonora's bosom, like the changing aspects of a dream. Now she saw him in imagination mangled and bleeding in the fight; now beheld him carrying the banner of France triumphantly over the worsted foe; now fancied him still detained with the cavalry on the hill, and fretting at inaction.

"Run out--run out, Antonio!" she cried, after bearing the struggle in her heart for some time, "see what has become of your lord, and let me know if he be still on the hill."

"Certainly, Signora, if you desire it," answered the other, "although, thank Heaven, I am one of God's peaceable creatures, and love not cannon-balls more than my neighbours, yet, where not more than one man out of five hundred is likely to be hit during a whole day, I may take my chance for five minutes without gaining the evil reputation of a fighting man."

He went out as he spoke, but stayed more than the five minutes; for to say the truth, he soon became interested in the scene, as he beheld the three bodies of French troops moving down to the assault. He could not, it is true, discover to which body his young lord was attached, but he saw clearly enough that he had left the hill. The horses and the men not engaged had moved towards the rear out of cannon shot, and the little monticule was now occupied only by the king, his Scottish archers and several of his counsellors and immediate attendants.

After watching for a few moments, Antonio glided in amongst the horses till he reached the side of young Bayard, and pulling his surcoat, he said, "Signor de Terrail, will you tell me where Signor Visconti is?"

"There!" answered Bayard, pointing with his hand, "he is leading the centre attack at the head of the forlorn hope."

"God shield us!" exclaimed Antonio, "is he fool enough to plunge into forlorn hopes, when he has got such warm ones in that cottage there?"

"Ah, I had forgot the lady," replied de Terrail, "she must doubtless be anxious."

"Ay, as anxious as a hen who sees her brood of ducklings venture into a pond," answered Antonio.

"Tell her I will come and bring her news from time to time," replied Bayard, "a lady's fears are to be revered, my good friend, especially when she nobly sends her lover to the field with strengthening words. Go, and say all goes well, and I will come and bear her tidings."

Thus saying, while Antonio turned back to the cottage, the young hero fixed his eyes upon the small party of his friend, and never lost sight but for a moment or two, when some irregularity of the ground or the masses of the Swiss infantry interposed, of the surcoat of violet and gold, which Lorenzo wore that day.

"They are nearing the wall," said the king aloud, "God send the youth has not deceived himself; but he will be there before the others reach the gates."

"Look, sire, there is a rush!" cried La Tremouille.

"He has got three ladders up by Heaven?" exclaimed de Vitry, "now God speed you, brave

heart!"

The Swiss quickened their pace to support, and as they poured in over the rise in the ground hid the *enfants perdus* from sight, and all for a moment or two seemed confusion, while the defenders upon the walls alone appeared distinctly, hurling down masses of stone, and firing upon the assailants from every embrasure. At length, however, a figure appeared on the top of one of the ladders, carrying a banner in his left hand. He sprang, as it appeared at that distance, straight against the side of the wall. But he gained footing there; and then bounded up towards the summit. Another, and another followed; but still the banner bearer was the first; and at length, though surrounded evidently by a crowd of foes, he stood firm upon the parapet and waved the flag proudly in the air, while a gleam of sunshine broke through the cloud of smoke and shone upon the surcoat of violet and gold.

"Visconti for a thousand crowns?" cried Bayard enthusiastically, "he is first in, he has won the town!"

"Are you sure it is he?" demanded the king.

"Certain, sire," replied De Terrail, "I have kept my eye on him all the time. I can see his surcoat distinctly."

"Oh, yes, it is he," said La Tremouille, "the Swiss are pouring up after. The place is taken, and see, they have forced the south gate. But Visconti is first in. His be the *los!*"

"Your pardon for a moment, sire," said Bayard, "but by your leave I will carry the tidings to yon cottage behind the angle of the rock. The Signora Leonora d'Orco is waiting anxious there for tidings. She sent Lorenzo forth with the words, 'Win fame for your lady's sake.'"

"And he has won it like a paladin," cried Charles, whom everything that smacked of ancient chivalry kindled quickly into a glow. "In truth did she say so? 'Twas like a noble lady. Shame is me, I had forgotten her in this unexpected resistance. Carry her this ring from me, De Terrail, tell her that Lorenzo has won the town and a pair of spurs this day!"

"And mind, De Terrail," cried De Vitry, "that you kiss her hand when you put the ring on her finger. By my faith it is worth kissing, though I know one still fairer than that."

"Lucky Lorenzo!" thought Bayard as he rode away; but never was man so little envious of another's good fortune, and though he could not but regret that he had not been permitted to take part in the assault, no jealousy of his friend mingled with the sigh that he gave to his own ill luck.

"All goes well--all goes well, Signora," he cried as he approached the cottage door at which Leonora was standing. "Visconti has stormed the town and taken it!"

"Lorenzo--my Lorenzo!" exclaimed Leonora, "so young--he storm the town!"

"He did, dear lady," replied Bayard, "he scaled the walls, he was first upon the parapet. I saw him myself with his banderol in his hand before another soldier entered. The king saw him too, and has sent you this ring, for we all know that it was your love and your words that gave him strength and valour to do all he has done this day."

Leonora could bear no more joy, and she bent down her head and wept, while Bayard gently put the ring upon her finger adding, "His majesty bade me tell you that Lorenzo has won the town and a pair of spurs this day."

"Then he is well--then he is uninjured?" said Leonora.

"He may have a scratch or two perhaps," replied Bayard, "but he can have no serious hurt if I may judge by the way he waved the banderol on the wall when he had gained it."

"Thank God for that also," said the beautiful girl, "but here, if I mistake not, comes his majesty himself."

As she spoke, followed by some half dozen of his guard, and accompanied by an elderly man in the scarlet robes of the highest clerical rank, the monarch rode slowly up and dismounted at the cottage door.

"There is no more to be seen there," he said, approaching Leonora, "the banner of France floats over every tower and gate. So now, fair lady, I have time to pay my knightly devoirs to you; and moreover to introduce you to a near relation, who tells me he has not seen you since you were a child. This is the Cardinal Julian de Rovera."

Leonora made a low obeisance to the king, in whose sweet and somewhat suffering face she saw a spirit of kindness and generous feeling that encouraged her, but knelt before the cardinal and reverently kissed his hand. His was a harsh though handsome countenance, and there was a flash in his dark eye which seemed to betoken a fiery and passionate nature.

"Rise, rise, my child," said he good humouredly enough. "I was much surprised, when a few

nights ago, I joined his majesty of France, to hear that you were journeying with so young a cavalier as this Lorenzo Visconti."

"It was by my father's express command, your eminence," replied Leonora, "and besides, as you see, I have not only my own women with me, but also Mona Mariana here, a person of discreet age, sent with me by your uncle the count."

A slight smile, unperceived by the cardinal; passed across the sweet lips of the beautiful girl, as she thought of the amount of Mariana's discretion.

"Well, well, that is all right," said the hasty cardinal, "and how has he comported himself towards you, this young lord?"

"With all care and kindness," answered Leonora.

"Ay, doubtless," he answered, "but with reverence too, I hope--sought to do you no wrong?"

The colour came up into Leonora's cheek, but it was evidently not the blush of shame.

"Lorenzo Visconti is incapable of doing wrong to any one, my Lord Cardinal," she said, "and were he not, the last one, methinks, he would seek to wrong his promised wife."

"Ay, and has it gone as far as that?" said the cardinal, "pray is this with your father's knowledge?"

"With his knowledge and his full consent, my lord," replied Leonora, not a little offended at his close questions and harsh manner before so many witnesses. It must indeed be recollected that Ramiro d'Orco, though cold in manner towards his child, had left her almost to the guidance of her own will, before we can judge of the feelings created by Julian's assumption of authority.

"Well, it is all well, I suppose," replied the old man, "and now, Signora, can you tell me what it is your young protector wants to say to me. Doubtless, you know he wrote to his majesty, here present, requesting to be permitted to fall back in order to confer with me."

"He sought your counsel and directions, my lord," replied Leonora; "the course of the army had been changed, and marched by Parma instead of Bologna. My father had also gone on from Bologna, where I was to have joined him, to Rome, which Lorenzo thought not a fit place for me, and there were many other reasons which he can explain better than I can, why he thought you, sir--reverend as you are, by life and profession--should be consulted as soon as we heard you were near."

A well-pleased smile came upon the face of the old man. "That is as it should be," he said, in a much mollified tone; "this young Lorenzo, my child, seems, as I have heard he is, a youth of great discretion and judgment. You must not think my questions hard; they spring from regard for Ramiro's child. I will see your young lover, and talk with him more."

While this conversation had been passing between the Cardinal of St. Peter's and Leonora, the young King of France had cast himself upon one of the cottage settles, and was speaking quietly with the Duke of Montpensier, D'Entragues, and some other officers who had come with him; but he had heard several of the questions of the cardinal, and he now joined in saying, "You estimate too lightly, my Lord Cardinal, the chivalry of our French knights. Lorenzo Visconti has been brought up at our court, and when a beautiful lady like this is entrusted to his charge, he looks upon her by the laws of chivalry as a sacred relic which he has to bear to some distant shrine."

"No reason for his not kissing the relic," said De Vitry, in a low tone, "indeed, it were but a becoming act of devotion--but who comes here running like a deer?--One of your Majesty's pages; now God send nothing has gone wrong."

"What is it, Martin de Lourdes?" asked the king, as the boy bounded up.

"There is a horseman coming at full speed from the town, sire," said the youth, "he looks like the Seigneur de Visconti, and Monsieur de la Tremouille thought it best to let you know."

"But Lorenzo had dismounted," said the king; "his horse, with the rest of the troop, are up the pass there."

"He could easily find one in the town, sire," said Montpensier. But while they were discussing the matter, Lorenzo himself rode up, and dismounted a few steps from the spot where the king was seated. His surcoat was rent and torn; his crest and helmet hacked with blows, and in one place dented in; but there was no blood or sign of injury about him, and his face was flushed with haste and excitement.

"The town is taken, sire," he said, "but I grieve to say there is no restraining the soldiery. Not only do the rabble of Swiss and Gascons give no quarter to armed men; but they are killing and plundering the unarmed and defenceless."

"Let them kill! let them kill, Visconti!" said the Count d'Entragues. "You must be accustomed to such sights."

"I beseech you, sire, send down a company of men-at-arms, and put a stop to this cruel disorder."

"They deserve punishment for daring to hold out an untenable place," said the young king, sternly, "such is the law of arms; is it not, Montpensier?"

"Assuredly, sire," replied the duke, "no one can claim quarter as a right in a town taken by assault, and if the attempt is made to resist when the place is notoriously untenable, the strict law condemns every one of the garrison to the cord. I should judge, however, that by this time the slaughter has gone far enough to strike terror into the other towns before us. It might, therefore, be as well to send down a few lances to keep the infantry in order."

"De Vitry, you go," said Charles, eagerly, for cruelty was no part of his character, "give my express command to cease from pillage and bloodshed."

"But your Majesty said this youth had won a pair of spurs. I would fain see them on his heels before I go, and here is a fair lady quite ready to buckle them on."

"Go--pray go at once, De Vitry," said Lorenzo, "do not stop to jest on such nonsensical themes. You know not what barbarities are being committed."

"I do not jest at all," replied De Vitry, "but I will go. To hear the boy, one would think I was made up of bad jokes."

"It was no joke, Signor Lorenzo," said the king. "You have taken the first town we have attacked, for I saw you first upon the walls. But go, my Lord Marquis, restore order in the place, and as you pass the hill, send down our banner. We will give him the accolade, even here in his lady's sight, under the royal standard, to encourage others to serve their lady and their king as well as he has done to-day."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

It was in the king's tent, on the night after the fall of Vivizano--for so rapid had been the capture of the place that time for a short march towards Sarzana still remained after its fall, and so wild and uncultivated was the country round, so scanty the supply of provisions and fodder, that all were anxious to get into a more plentiful region--it was in the king's tent then, a wide and sumptuous pavilion, that on the night after the capture of Vivizano a council was assembled, amongst the members of which might be seen nearly as many churchmen as soldiers.

It is impossible to narrate a thousandth part of all that took place; messengers and soldiers came and went; new personages were introduced upon the scene; and some of the old characters which had disappeared returned to the monarch's court.

A young man, magnificently dressed, and of comely form and face, sat near to Charles on his right hand; and when Bayard, who was standing with Lorenzo a little behind the king's chair, asked Visconti who the new comer was, Lorenzo answered:

"That is Pierre de Medici. We were old companions long ago; for he is not many years my elder."

"His face looks weak!" said Bayard; "I should not think he was equal to his father."

Lorenzo shook his head with a sigh; and De Terrail continued:

"There is our old friend, Ludovic the Moor, too. He arrived to-day, I suppose. I wonder the king has you here; he was always so anxious to keep you out of his way."

"The camp is a safer place than the court," said Lorenzo; "he cannot well poison me here."

"No, nor stab you either," said Bayard, "that is to say, without being found out. Yet you had better beware; for he has got a notion, I am told, that you may some time or another dispute his duchy with him."

"That is nonsense, De Terrail," replied Lorenzo: "the Duke of Orleans is nearer to the dukedom than I am."

"Ay, but policy might keep the duke out and favour you," said Bayard. "It does not do to make a subject too powerful. But what are they about now? What packet is that which Breconnel is

opening and laying its contents before the king?"

"That looks like the papal seal pendant from it," replied Visconti. "Hark! the bishop is about to read it aloud."

The conversation of the two young men had been carried on in a low tone, and many another whispered talk had been going on amongst the courtiers, drowned by the louder sounds which had issued from the immediate neighbourhood of the table at which the king sat; but the moment that the Bishop of St. Malo began to read, or rather to translate aloud, the letters which he held in his hand, and which were written in Latin, every tongue was stilled, and each ear bent to hear.

"His Holiness greets your Majesty well," said the bishop; "but he positively prohibits your advance to Rome under pain of the major censures of the Church. These are his words," and he proceeded in a somewhat stumbling and awkward manner to decipher and render into French the pontifical missive.

The despatch was rather diffuse and lengthy, and while the good bishop went on, an elderly man plainly habited in black, came round and whispered something several times in the king's ear. Charles turned towards him and listened while the prelate went on; and at last the monarch replied, saying something which was not heard by others, and adding a very significant sign. The secret adviser withdrew at once into an inner apartment of the tent, from the main chamber of which it was separated by a crimson curtain. He returned in a moment with a large book, on the wood and velvet cover of which reposed a crucifix and a rosary. The Bishop of St. Malo read on; but without noticing him, the man in black knelt before the king, who immediately laid his hand on the crucifix, and then, after murmuring some words in a subdued tone, yet not quite in a whisper, raised the volume to his lips and kissed it with every appearance of reverence.

The book, the crucifix, and the rosary were then removed as silently as they had been brought, and the reading of the papal brief proceeded without interruption. When the prelate had concluded the reading of the missive which threatened the monarch of France, the eldest son of the Church, with all the thunders of the Vatican if he dared to advance upon Rome, Charles, in his low, sweet voice, addressed the bishop, saying:

"My Lord Bishop, I have but one answer to make to the prohibition of His Holiness, but I trust that answer will be deemed sufficient by all the members of my council, though all are devout men, and some of them peculiarly reverend by profession and by sanctity of life. I should wish an answer written to our Apostolic Father, assuring him of our deep respect and our willingness to obey his injunctions in all matters of religion, where superior duties from which he himself cannot set us free do not interpose; but informing him of a fact which he does not know, that we are bound by a sacred vow sworn upon the Holy Evangelists, and upon a crucifix which contains a portion of the true cross, to visit the shrine of St. Peter before we turn our steps homewards. Is that not sufficient cause, my Lord Cardinal," he continued, looking towards Julian de Rovers, "to pass by all impediments and prohibitions and go forward on our pilgrimage?"

"Sufficient cause," exclaimed the eager and impetuous prelate, "what need of any cause? what need of any vow?"

He paused, almost choked by the impetuosity of his feelings; and a smile which had passed round the council at hearing a vow just taken, alleged as an excuse for disregarding a prohibition issued long before, faded away in eagerness to hear the further reply of a man whose powerful mind and iron will were known to all.

"My lord, the king," he answered, in a calmer tone, after he had recovered breath. "Your vow is all-sufficient, but there are weightier causes even than that solemn vow which call you to Rome. The greatest, the most important task which ever monarch undertook lies before you. A Heresiarch sits in the throne of St. Peter, a man whose private life, base and criminal as it is, is pure compared with his public life--whose guilt, black as it is, as a priest and a pontiff, is white as snow compared with his guilt as the pretended head of the Christian church, in negotiating with, and allying himself to infidels--to the slaves of Mahomed, against Christian men and monarchs, the most devout servants of the holy see. Well may I see consternation, surprise, and even incredulity, on the countenances of all present! But I speak not on rumour, or the vague report of the enemies of Alexander Borgia, calling himself Pope. Happily into my hands have fallen these letters which have passed between him and Bajazet, the Infidel Sultan. They are too long to read now; but I deliver them into the hands of the king's council, and will only state a few of the facts which they make manifest. Thus it appears, from these letters, of which the authenticity is beyond doubt, that this heretical interloper in the chair of St. Peter, has agreed to receive, and does receive an annual pension from Antichrist, and that he has engaged for three hundred thousand ducats to assassinate an unhappy prince of the infidels, named Zizim, who is in his power, to gratify the impious Sultan of the Turks. Let the council read these letters; let them consider them well; let them compare the life and conversation of the man with these acts of the pontiff, and then decide whether it is not the duty of the Most Christian King, not only to march to Rome, but to call a council of the Church Universal, for the trial and deposition of one who holds his seat, not by the grace of God, but by the aid of simony, and the machinations of the devil. My lord the king, I address you as the eldest son of the Church, as the descendant of those who have struggled, and fought, and bled for her; and I call upon you to deliver her from the oppression under which she groans, to eject from her highest place the profane man who has no



right to the seat of St. Peter, and to purify the temple and the altar from the desecration of a Borgia."<sup>[2]</sup>

Charles hesitated for a few moments ere he replied, and two or three of those quiet counsellors, one of whom had previously addressed him, now came separately and spoke to him in low tones over the back of his chair.

"My lord the cardinal," he said at length, "the grave subject your Eminence has brought before us, is of so important a nature that it requires much and calm consideration. Rome is yet far off, and on our march thither we shall have many an occasion to call for your counsel. This subject, surpassing all others in importance, must engage our attention when we can have a more private interview; for it will be needful to avoid in doing our best to purify the Church, the great danger of creating a scandal in the Church itself."

"Wisely spoken, my lord the king," answered the prelate, "but I should like at present to know, who is the messenger who has had the hardihood to bear a prohibition from entering the holy city to the successor of Charlemagne.<sup>[3]</sup> Can it be one of the Sacred College? If so, why is he not here present?"

"Why, to speak the truth," said the Bishop of St. Malo, with a rueful smile, "his holiness has not altogether shown the respect which is due to his own brief, or to his Majesty's crown, in the choice of a messenger. He who has brought the missive is a common courier. He calls himself, indeed, a gentleman of Rome, and, by the way, he has with him a man who desires to see and speak with your Eminence, for whom, he says, he has letters. They may, perhaps, throw some light upon the question why his holiness did not entrust such an important paper to a more dignified bearer."

To uninstructed ears the words of the good bishop had little special meaning; but intrigue and corruption were then so general, especially in Italian courts, that the Cardinal Julian at once perceived from the language used, a doubt in the mind of some of the king's counsellors as to whether, while declaiming against Alexander, he might not be secretly negotiating with him for his own purposes.

"Let the man be brought in," he said, abruptly. "I know not who should write to me from Rome; but we shall soon see. Good faith! I have had little communication with any one in that city since the taking of Ostia. Let the man be called, I beseech you, my good and reverend lord."

The Bishop of St. Malo spoke to one of the attendants; the man quitted the tent, and some other business was proceeded with, occupying about a quarter of an hour, when a personage was introduced and brought to the end of the table, whom the reader has heard of before. He was a small, thin, wiry man, dressed as a friar. His countenance was not very prepossessing, and his complexion both sallow and sun-burned, except where a thick black beard closely shaved, gave a bluish tint to the skin; and there a great difference of hue in the skin itself, seemed to intimate that the razor had only lately been applied.

"Who are you, sir?" said the cardinal sharply, as soon as his attention had been directed to the new comer, "and what want you with me? I am Julian de Rovera, Cardinal of St. Peter's, if you are seeking that person."

"I am but a poor friar of the Order of St. Francis, Brother Martin by name," replied the man, "and the Signor Ramiro d'Orco, a noble lord now in Rome, hearing that I was journeying to Bologna----"

"But this is not Bologna," said the Cardinal, "nor on the way thither."

"True, your Eminence," answered the other, "but, as I was saying, the Signor Ramiro, hearing that I was going to Bologna, entrusted certain letters to my care for your Eminence, whom he asserted to be his near relation----"

"Ay, ay! cousins--first cousins," said the impetuous prelate, "what then?"

"Why, holy sir," continued the pretended friar, "finding that you were not where the Signor Ramiro thought, and knowing that the letters were important, I joined myself to the messenger of his Holiness and came on hither."

A slight smile passed over the lip of Ludovic the Moor, as the man spoke; and it is not at all improbable that he recognised in the monk a follower of his bravo, Buondoni; but he took no notice, and the cardinal exclaimed:

"Where are these letters? Let me see them, brother."

"They are here, Eminence," answered the man, feeling in the breast of his gown. "This is for you," and he presented one letter to the cardinal, while he held another in his hand.

"And what is that? Who is that for?" asked Julian, sharply.

"That is for the Signora Leonora d'Orco, if I can find her," replied the monk.

"I can find her," said the cardinal; "let me see the letter."

The man hesitated; but the prelate repeated, in a stern tone, "Let me see the letter," and it was handed to him with evident reluctance. Without the slightest ceremony he broke the seal, even before he had examined the letter addressed to himself, and began reading it by the light of the candelabra which stood near him.

The contents seemed by no means to give him satisfaction, and as he was much in the habit of venting his thoughts aloud, it is probable that an oath or two would have found their way to his lips, had he not been restrained, not only by a sense of his sacred calling, but by the presence of so many strangers.

"Santa Maria!" he exclaimed, "did ever man hear! A pretty father truly. Would he cradle a new-born infant in a sow's sty?"

"Hark ye, friar! if you reach Rome before me, tell my good cousin that I have too much regard for his wife's child to let her set her foot in the palace of any of the Borgias. Tell him that, being guarded by a noble gentleman and a good soldier, and guided and directed by me, she will be quite safe till she reaches Florence, and that there I shall place her under the matronly care of our cousin, Madonna Francesca Melloni. Now get you gone."

"Your Eminence says nothing of his letter to yourself," said the pretended friar, with a slight sneer. "I will not fail to give him your answer to his letter to his daughter."

"Ha! his letter to myself," said Julian; "I had forgotten that--but doubtless it is of no great importance;--let me see," and he tore open the epistle.

It seemed to afford him less satisfaction than even the other had given; for his face worked, and many a broken sentence burst angrily from his lips; but at length he turned to the messenger, again saying:

"Tell him I will answer this in person--perhaps in the Vatican. Yet stop; say, moreover, 'none but wolves herd with wolves.' Let him mark that; he will understand. There is money for your convent; now get ye gone."

It had not been without some feeling of indignation that Lorenzo had beheld Ramiro d'Orco's letter to his daughter so dealt with; but the conclusion to which the prelate came pleased him well.

The whole interview between the cardinal and the messenger had not occupied much more than about five minutes; but yet it could hardly be called an episode in the council of King Charles, for on some account most of those present seemed to take no inconsiderable interest in what was passing at that part of the table, and all other business was suspended. The eyes of the king and his counsellors were directed now to the prelate, now to the messenger, and the only sounds that interfered with the conversation were some whispered remarks going on amongst the young officers behind.

When the monk was gone, there was a silent pause, as if every one waited for another to open some new topic for discussion, but at length the king said--

"You seem dissatisfied with your cousin's letter, my lord cardinal. Is it of importance?"

"Not in the least, sire," answered Julian; "Ramiro tries to compose what he calls, 'an ancient but really slight difference,' between me and Alexander Borgia. Really slight difference! Oh yes, the saints be praised, it is as slight as the difference between oil and water, or fire and ice. Can the man think that a few soft words, or the offer of two or three towns and castles, can make me look with favour upon a simonise, an adulterer, a poisoner, a heretic, and an abettor of heretics, in the chair of St. Peter? No, no. There is the letter, my lord the king, for your private reading. I have nothing to conceal; I deal in no serpent-like policy; and now, with your Majesty's permission, I will retire. I have not the strength I once had, and I am somewhat weary. If you will allow me I will take the young gentleman, Lorenzo Visconti, with me, as I see him here. We can take counsel together as I go to my tent."

"We are sorry to lose your wisdom at our council, my lord cardinal," replied the king; "but happily our more important business is over. Signor Visconti, conduct his Eminence to his quarters."

"Let me call the torch-bearers, my lord," said Lorenzo, springing to the entrance of the tent, round which a crowd of attendants were assembled. But the impetuous prelate came hard upon his steps, and stood more patiently than might have been expected till his flambeaux were lighted. Two torchbearers and a soldier or two went before, and he followed with Lorenzo by his side, walking slowly along, and keeping silence till they had nearly reached his pavilion.

"Well, young man?" said the cardinal at length, "what think you of my reply to my good cousin Ramiro? Did it satisfy you?"

"Fully, your Eminence," answered the young man; "it was all that I could wish or desire."

Indeed I cannot but think that it was a special blessing of God that you were here to rescue me from a terrible difficulty regarding the Signora Leonora."

"How so--how so?" asked the prelate quickly, "you would not have sent her to Rome, would you, even if I had not been here?"

"No, my lord cardinal," answered Lorenzo firmly, "but it is a terrible thing to teach a child to disobey a parent. You had spiritual authority and a nearer right, and no one can doubt that you decided justly and well. Had I done the same, all men would have judged that my mere inclinations led me."

"You are wise and prudent beyond your years," said the old man, well pleased, "no use of conference as I told you this morning, there before Vivizano. I make up my mind of men's characters rapidly but seldom wrongly. Here take Ramiro's letter to Leonora, and recount to her all I did. Tell her, that by the altar I serve and the God I worship, and the Saviour in whom I put my trust, I could not consent to her being plunged into a sea of guilt and pollution, such as the world has never seen since the days of Heliogabalus."

"I fear, my lord cardinal, she has retired to rest," said Lorenzo, "but if so I will deliver the letter and your Eminence's words to-morrow."

A slight smile came upon the old man's face; but notwithstanding his sternness and occasional violence, softer and kinder emotions would sometimes spring up from his heart. He crossed himself as if sorry for the mere worldly smile; and then looking up on high, where the stars were sparkling clear and bright, he murmured, "Well, after all, this pure young love is a noble and beautiful thing. Good night, my son, God's benison and mine be upon you."

They had now reached the entrance of his tent and there they parted.

## CHAPTER XIX.

From the rejoicing gates of Pisa--set free by the King of France from the burdensome yoke of Florence--the royal army took its way to the daughter of Fiesole. Steadily, though slowly it marched on, and Lorenzo Visconti led the van. Oh what thoughts, what struggles of feeling, what various emotions perplexed him when he saw the walls and towers of Florence rising before him! There his early infancy had passed after his father had perished in the successful effort to rid his country of a tyrant, but only, alas, to give her another. There had his youth been protected, his life saved, his education received, his fortunes cared for, his happiest days passed. And now he approached the cradle of his youth at the head of an invading army.

With his lance upon his thigh and his beaver raised he gazed upon the beautiful city with apprehension but not without hope. He knew that Florence had no power to resist; that her walls were too feeble, her towers not strong enough to make any successful defence against the tremendous train of artillery which followed the French army. He trembled to think of what might be the consequence of one bombard fired from those battlements, one gate closed upon the foe. The scenes of Vivizano returned to his imagination, and he thought he saw the forms of well known friends and early companions exposed to the licence and brutality of the cruel soldiery.

"I at least come not as an enemy," he thought, "and perchance if it be God's good will, I may do something in return for all that Florence has done for me."

He looked anxiously round as he continued his march, but he could see no signs of resistance. Now his eyes rested upon the calm Arno flowing on, alternately seen and lost; and then he caught a glimpse of the Mugnione, and a torrent but now a brook, rushing down from the Apennines. Many a winding road caught his eye, but nothing appeared upon them but trains of peasantry seemingly seeking shelter from the apprehended pillage by the light troops of the French army.

Many a time he sent a message back to the king to say that all was quiet and peaceable; and more than once he fell somewhat into the rear of his party to speak a word or two to some one in a litter, well guarded, which had followed during the last three days' march. But still all remained quiet, and he saw no reason to suppose that the rumors which had been current in the French camp had any foundation. Those rumours had imported, that the acts of Pierre de Medici, who had sought the King of France and humbly submitted to any terms which the monarch's council thought fit to dictate, had been disavowed by the Signoria, Pierre himself obliged to fly in disgrace, and that the citizens were resolved to defend their homes to the last. It is true that he had never seen such a number of peasants seeking the city before; and he remarked that there

were few, if any, women, and no children amongst them. But there stood the gates wide open, with nothing but half a dozen armed men at some of the entrances to indicate that it was a fortified place. No order had been given to halt at any particular spot, and Lorenzo rode on till he was not more than three hundred yards from the Pisa gate, when a large party of the king's *fouriers* and harbingers, accompanied by a trumpeter, passed him at the gallop and rode straight up to the city. The trumpet blew, and admission for the King of France was demanded in a loud tone, when one of the officers on guard stepped forward and replied, "We have no orders to oppose the king's entrance."

Just at that moment the Cardinal Julian came up on a fine swift mule, followed by numerous cross bearers and attendants, and paused by the side of Lorenzo, saying, "Follow me into the city, my son. I have the king's order to that effect. We will first carry our young charge to the house of Madonna Francesca, and then both you and I may have some charitable work on hand to mediate between the monarch and the citizens."

"But whither does his majesty direct his own steps?" asked Lorenzo eagerly, "how shall we find him?"

"He goes direct to the palace of the Podesta," said the cardinal; "come on--come on, before the crowd of soldiery overtakes us."

The troop moved on and was the first body of regular soldiers to pass the gates. There was some noise and confusion, the *fouriers*, a loud and boisterous body of men, asking many questions of the Florentine soldiers at the guard-house, to which but sullen answers were returned; and Lorenzo judged it a point of duty to relieve the Tuscans of the charge of the gate and place a French guard there to ensure against anything like treachery. The cardinal coinciding, the change was soon made without resistance, and the troops passed on into the city. The day was dark, and the tall fortress-like houses of the streets looked sad and gloomy, though through the narrow windows of the massive walls peered forth a crowd of human faces watching in silence the passage of the French men-at-arms. No smile was upon any countenance, no look of admiration at the rich surcoats and glittering arms; but everything bore the same stern and gloomy aspect, and Lorenzo remarked that many of the persons he saw were heavily armed.

At length, in the Via Ghibelina, Julian de Rovera stopped his mule before a large heavy entrance-gate, and commanded one of his palfreniers to seek admittance. The whole cavalcade was eyed attentively by more than one person through a small iron-grated window at the side of the door, and though it was announced to the observers that no less a person than the Cardinal of St. Peter's sought admission to see his cousin, Mona Francesca, he was not permitted to enter till one or two embassies had passed between the wicket and the saloons above. At length he was suffered to pass into the court with his own train alone; but Lorenzo and his band, and even Leonora and her women, were kept waiting in the street, subject to the gaze of many an eye from the houses round.

The two young lovers did not fail to employ the time of expectation to the best advantage. It was a painful and somewhat embarrassing moment, and required both consolation and consideration. They were about to be separated, after having enjoyed unrestrained a period of sweet companionship and happy intimacy which falls to the lot of few young people so situated towards each other. Lorenzo leaned into the litter and spoke to her he loved with words little restrained by the presence of Mona Mariana, of whose kindness and discretion he was by this time well aware, and whom he had bound to himself for life by a more valuable present than any one else was at all likely to bestow.

What matters it what he said? It would be strangely uninteresting to others, though his words caused many an emotion in her to whom they were addressed, and sprang from many an emotion in his own heart. He sketched eager plans of future meeting; he proposed schemes for evading the strictness and severity of the lady Francesca, whom neither of them knew; he arranged the means of communication when the king's forward march should prevent the possibility of any personal intercourse.

Vain! vain! as every scheme of man regarding the future. Fate stands behind the door and laughs while lovers lay their plots. Half the schemes of Lorenzo were needless, and the other half proved impracticable.

The cardinal detained them but a short time, and when he returned Lorenzo found he had been throwing away stratagems.

"Haste! hand the dear child from her litter," he said, "and both of you come with me. Mona Francesca agrees to receive and protect her as her own child, provided you will give her the security of a French guard; for she mightily fears the Swiss and the Gascons. I have assured her that you will leave twenty men here for the present, and that I will obtain the consent of King Charles to your being quartered with all your troops in the court and the lower story; the men must be quartered somewhere, you know."

"Certainly," replied Lorenzo, with almost too much readiness, "and why not here--if it be the wish of your Eminence--as well as elsewhere?"

While speaking he advanced to the side of the litter, and aided Leonora to descend. She was somewhat paler than usual, for the feeling of being in a strange city, occupied suddenly by foreign troops, upon whom there was no knowing how soon a fierce and active population might rise, was more terrible to her than even the sight of actual war.

Expectation almost always goes beyond reality both in its fears and in its hopes. It is uncertainty which gives its sting to dread. The cardinal, however, took her by the hand and led her into the court-yard, where a few old men and two or three younger, but perhaps not more serviceable persons, were assembled in arms, and turning sharp to the right ascended the great staircase to the principal apartments of the palace. A magnificent hall and several large saloons intervened between the first landing and the smaller cabinet in which Mona Francesca awaited her visitors.

What a different personage presented herself at length to the eyes of Leonora and Lorenzo from that which either had expected to behold.

The one had pictured her distant cousin as a tall, thin, acerb-looking Madonna, more fitted for the cloister than the world. The other had figured her as a portly commanding dame, to whose behests all were to bow obsequiously. But there sat the future guardian of Leonora, the picture of good-humoured indolence. The remains of a very beautiful face, a countenance rather sweet than firm, a figure which might have once been pretty, but which was now approaching the obese, a pretty foot stretched out from beneath her dress, with fine hair and teeth, made up almost altogether the sum of Mona Francesca. She had been for ten years a virtuous wife. She had been for twelve or thirteen years a discreet and virtuous widow. She loved her ease and her independence too well to risk again matrimony, once tried, and with some feelings of devotion, and a good deal both of time and money to spare, she had gained with the clergy and with the religious orders of Florence almost the character of a saint--by doing nothing either wrong or right.

She welcomed Leonora kindly, and perhaps none the less that she was accompanied by a young and handsome cavalier,--for though her weaknesses never deviated into indiscretions, he had a great taste for the beautiful, and was a true connoisseur of masculine beauty. She made Leonora sit beside her, and gave Lorenzo her jewelled hand to kiss, entering with him at once into a conversation which might have been long, had not the impatient cardinal interfered.

"Well, well," he exclaimed, "you can talk with him about all that hereafter. You will have plenty of time. At present we must follow the king to the Podesta."

"Stay, stay," cried Mona Francesca. "Do not forget he is to leave twenty men on guard. Ah! I fear those dreadful Frenchmen terribly! They tell me the widows suffered more than any at Vivizano."

"I doubt it," said the cardinal; but Lorenzo consoled her, by assuring her that twenty men should certainly be left to protect her, without adding that they were all those dreadful Frenchmen whom she seemed to fear so much; and then followed the cardinal to the court-yard, where his arrangements were soon made. A French ensign was hung out above the great gate, a couple of soldiers stationed on guard in the street, and a sufficient force left within to ensure the safety of the place against any body of those licentious stragglers which followed all armies in those days in even greater numbers than they do at present.

In the meantime the cardinal had ridden on, accompanied by his own train; and Lorenzo followed, guiding his men himself through the well-remembered streets, where so much of his own young life had been spent. It was not without some uneasiness that he marked the aspect of the city. There was many a sign, or rather many an indication that though the Florentines had admitted the army of the King of France within their walls, they were prepared to resist even in their own streets, any attempt at tyrannical domination. Few persons appeared out of shelter of the houses, and those few were well armed. But the multitudes of faces at the windows, and the glance of steel at every door that happened even to be partly open, showed a state of preparation equal to the occasion, and the youth, calculating the chances of a struggle between the army and the population of the city, should a conflict arise, could not but come to the conclusion that, shut up in streets and squares of which they knew nothing, surrounded by houses, every one of which was a fortress, and opposed by a body vastly more numerous, the French force might find all its military skill and discipline unavailing, and have cause to rue the rash confidence of the king.

Just as he was entering upon that great square, near which are collected so many inestimable treasures of art, a man fully armed, started forth from a gateway, and laid his hand upon his horse's rein. Lorenzo laid his hand upon his sword; but the other without raising his visor, addressed him by name in a stern voice: "I little thought to see you here, with a foreign invader, Lorenzo Visconti," he said, "but mark me, and let your king know. Florence will be trodden down by no foreign despot. Let him be moderate in his demands, calm and peaceful in his demeanour, or he will leave his last man in these streets should we all perish in resisting insolence or tyranny. Look around you as you go, and you will see that every house is filled with our citizens or peasantry; and though willing to concede much for peace, we are ready to dare all for liberty. Let this be enough between us. Ride on, and ride fast, for on this very moment hangs a destiny. At the first sound of the bell, a conflict will begin that will seal the fate of Italy. Ride on, I say. You know our customs. Take care that the bell does not ring."

"Who are you? What is your name?" asked Lorenzo; but the man made no reply, and retreated under the archway whence he had come.

Winding through the crowds which occupied the Piazza, the young knight and his party overtook the cardinal just as he was dismounting at the gates of the great heavy building, known as the Podesta; and springing to his stirrup, Lorenzo in a whisper communicated to him rapidly the fears he entertained of some sudden and terrible conflict between the citizens and the French soldiery, should the demands of the king be excessive or tyrannical.

"It is right his Majesty should know the state of the city," he said; "and if I can obtain speech of him, he shall know it; for no one can judge of the signs around us better than myself, whose boyhood has been passed in these streets and squares."

"You shall have speech of him," said the cardinal, "follow me quickly. They must be at it already. Where is the king, boy?--where is the council?"

A page whom he addressed led him up the great staircase, and hurrying his pace, he was soon in that great council chamber where the fate of Florence had been so often decided.

The scene it now presented was very striking. The King of France was seated in a chair of state, with many of his officers and counsellors around, and the Bishop of St. Malo standing at his left hand. Before him stood a number of the magistrates of Florence, richly robed, and on the faces of all present might be seen a sharp and angry expression, as if some bitter words had been already passing. The room was crowded; but as the cardinal and Lorenzo entered, they could see the Bishop of St. Malo take a step across the open space between the king and the magistrates, and hand a written paper to one of the latter, on whose face the very first words brought a heavy frown.

Holding Lorenzo by the hand, Julian de Rovera pushed his way through the crowd, murmuring, "God send we be not too late," and at length reached the monarch's side, where he bent his head to the king's ear, saying abruptly, "This young man has matter of life and death to communicate to you, sire. Listen to him for a moment ere you do aught else."

The king raised his eyes to Lorenzo's face, and then inclined his ear, making the young man a sign to speak.

"My lord," said Lorenzo in a whisper, "no one about you knows Florence as well as I do. You and your army are on the brink of a volcano. The houses all around are filled with armed men. Not only are the citizens prepared to rise at a moment's notice, but the town has been crowded with the neighbouring peasantry, and although your Majesty is in full possession of the town, a conflict in these streets might be more disastrous than can be told."

"Hark," said the king, "the old man is speaking;" and, raising his head, he gazed upon the magistrate who had been reading the paper.

"King of France," said the old man, in a fierce and impetuous tone, "these demands are outrageous. They are insulting to the people of Florence; and thus I deal with them;" and as he spoke he tore the paper in pieces and flung the fragments on the floor. "I tell you, sire," he continued, "that nothing like these terms will be granted. Our course is taken; our minds are made up. We were all willing to pay you due respect,--to grant all that might be requisite for your security, or to assist you for your comfort. But we will not be treated as a conquered people till we are conquered; and, even then, we will be the slaves of no man. Either propose terms in reason, or else--why, sound your trumpets and we will toll our bells, and on him who is the aggressor fall the guilt of all the blood which will dye our streets."

"Good God! the man is mad," exclaimed one of the king's councillors.

"*Mère de Dieu!*" cried another, "he has had the insolence to tear the edict!"

"We are ready to obey your Majesty's commands," said the stern Montpensier, in a cold tone.

"I go to take orders against an outbreak, sire," said La Tremouille, in a low voice, "it is not to be concealed that we are in a somewhat dangerous position here."

"Sire, you had better get out of the rat-trap," said De Vitry, "I will guard you with my men-at-arms, and keep one gate open for the rest to follow. My head for your safety; and once out we shall soon bring these gentlemen to reason."

"Peace," said the king, "peace, my friends. Let me speak.--You have done wrong, sir, to tear that paper," he continued with an air of much dignity, addressing the bold old man. "We had not read it ourselves. It was far from our intention to demand any outrageous terms; but only such as a republic might expect who had refused our friendship and set at nought our proffers of alliance. Hastily drawn up by our council, and tendered to you here more as an outline of what might be our demands than as what they actually are, the paper may have contained something you could not comply with, but nothing to warrant so much heat, I think. Have you a copy, my Lord Bishop?"

"Here is one, sire," replied the minister, handing him a paper.

The king took it and read it with slowness and evident difficulty. "This is too much," he said when he had done, "Signor Pierro Capponi has some show of reason for his anger. My Lord Bishop, these terms must be mitigated. I will retire to another chamber and leave you with the magistrates of the city to decide upon some more equitable arrangement, with his Eminence here to moderate between you. What I demand is that compensation shall be made in gold for the expense and delay to which I have been subjected by the resistance of strong places in a country professing to be friendly to me; and that sufficient security be given that my return to France, when it pleases me, shall not be interrupted. Your council had better be held in private. There are too many persons present. Let all but my council and the Signoria of Florence follow me."

Thus saying, he rose and left the hall.

The result is well known. A large sum of money, part of which found its way into the purses of the king's counsellors, and vague promises of alliance and security, were all that the Florentines had to pay; and the lesson of the morning was sufficiently impressive to produce better discipline and forbearance amongst the French troops than they had exercised elsewhere.

## CHAPTER XX.

On, those days of happiness, how soon they come to an end! Poets and philosophers have attempted in vain to convey to the mind by figures and by argument the brevity of enjoyment, and the great master only came near the truth when he declared it was--

"Brief as the lightning in the collid night,  
That in a spleen unfolds both heaven and earth,  
And ere a man hath power to say--Behold!  
The jaws of darkness do devour it up."

Enjoyment is the most brief of all things, for its very nature is to destroy time. Like the fabled monster of one of the Indian tribes--we drink up the waters in which we float, and leave ourselves at last on a dry and arid shore. But if enjoyment be so transient, hope is permanent. Well did the ancients represent her as lingering behind after all else had flown out of the casket of Pandora. She does linger still in the casket of every human heart, whether it be joys or evils that pass away.

"Quando il miser dispera  
La speranza parla e dice,  
Sta su, tienti, vivi, e spera  
Che sarai ancor felice.

\* \* \* \*

"Ogni casa al mondo manca  
La speranza mai si perde."

So sang Serafino l'Aquilano, a poet of the days of Lorenzo and Leonora, and for a time at least they found the song true.

Hope remained after happiness had passed; but yet how bright were those days and nights of happiness which the two young lovers passed in Florence!

Are you old enough to have forgotten, reader, how, in your early youth, you deified the object of your love? How her very presence seemed to spread an atmosphere of joy around her? How her look was sunshine and her voice the song of a seraph? Can you remember it? Then think what must have been the feelings of Lorenzo Visconti and Leonora d'Orco, at an age when the fire of passion is the brightest, because the purest--where all those attributes of beauty, and grace, and excellence with which imagination is wont to invest the beloved objects were really present, and when the fancy of the heart spread her wings from a higher point than she commonly can find on earth. Think what must have been their feelings when in a lovely climate, amidst beautiful scenes, in a land of song, where the treasures of ancient and of modern art were just beginning to unfold themselves--the one issuing from the darkness of the past, the other dawning through the twilight of the future; think what must have been their feelings, when, in such scenes and

with such accessories to the loving loveliness in their own hearts, they were suffered, almost unrestrained, to enjoy each other's society to the full, when and where they liked.

The old cardinal, plunged deep in politics and worldly schemes and passions, took little heed of them. Mona Francesca was no restraint upon them. Sometimes in long rambles by the banks of the Arno, sometimes mingling with the gay masked multitudes that thronged the streets on the clear soft autumnal nights, sometimes seated in the beautiful gardens of the city of flowers, sometimes reposing in the luxurious apartments of the Casa Morelli, the days and greater part of the nights were passed during the stay of the French army in Florence. It was a dream of joy, and it passed as a dream.

Gradually, however, the shadow stole over the sunshine. The day for the march was named, and came nearer and nearer. Lorenzo had to go on, fighting his way with the forces of the king; Leonora was to remain behind in Florence. They were to part, in short; and the sorrow of parting came upon them. But then there was hope--hope singing her eternal song of cheering melody, picturing the coming time when a bright reunion would wipe out the very memory of sorrow, and when, perhaps, the link of their fate might be riveted too firmly for any future separation. The old cardinal encouraged the idea, and promised to give the blessing on their union, and Mona Francesca sighed, and thought, perhaps, matrimony the next happiest state to widowhood.

The day came: the last parting embrace was given--the last, long clinging kiss was taken--the last wave of the hand, as the troop filed down the street, and then Leonora d'Orco was left to the solitude of her own thoughts. The multitude of turbulent emotions which had thrilled through her heart were all still. It was as when a gay crowd that has been laughing, and singing, and revelling, suddenly departs and leaves the scene of rejoicing all silent and solitary. The words of Leonardo da Vinci's song came back to her mind--

"Oft have I wept for joys too soon possessed!"

And retiring to her own chamber she gave way to very natural tears. Nor were they soon over, nor was the emotion in which they arose transient. Nothing was evanescent in the character of Leonora d'Orco. Even young as she was, all was deep, strong, and permanent.

But I must leave her alone for the present with her tears, or with the sadness that followed them, and proceed with Lorenzo Visconti on the march towards Rome and Naples; not that I intend to dwell upon battles or sieges, intrigues or negotiations; but I merely purpose to give a slight sketch of the historical events that followed, with one or two detached scenes more in detail, where public transactions affected the fate of those of whom I write. With audacity bordering upon folly, Charles VIII. advanced rapidly upon Rome, without having taken any efficient steps to guard his communications with France. Each step rendered his position more perilous, and had there been anything like unity amongst the Italian princes or states it is probable that neither the King of France nor his gallant army would ever have seen Paris again. The pope, too, thundered at him from the Vatican, admitted Neapolitan troops into Rome, and endeavoured to raise the partisans of the Church in the imperial city, to aid him in repelling the advancing enemy. But Alexander found no support. No one loved, no one respected him, and his call upon the citizens was made in vain. On, step by step, the French monarch advanced, but, as he neared the city, which had once been the capital of the world, a degree of uncertainty came over him, and discord manifested itself in his council. The Cardinal of St. Peter's urged him strongly to depose the monster whose brow defiled the tiara; several other bishops and cardinals joined in the demand. Some of the stern old military men, too, argued on the same side, but the smooth Bishop of St. Malo and many of the king's lay-counsellors recommended negotiation; advised that the march of the army should be retarded or stopped, and that skilful diplomatists should be sent forward to treat for peaceful admission into Rome.

An eminent position is a curse for the weak, and a peril for the strong. Till we can see into the hearts of men, no king can ever know the secret motives, the dark selfishness, the pitiful objects, the vain, the mercenary, the ambitious ends which lie at the bottom of all the advice, and every suggestion they receive. We see the honest and the true neglected; we see the noble and the wise make shipwreck, and we know not whence it comes. The man who would map out the currents of the ocean would confer a signal benefit upon his race and accomplish a most laborious task; but he who would trace and expose all the under-currents of a court would undertake a more herculean enterprise still. Nor can the wisest and the best of those who rule the destinies of men escape such pernicious influences. They can but judge by what they see, while it is what they do not see which is bearing them wrong. They may consult the magnet or the pole-star; they may reckon closely and well, but they can neither calculate nor perceive those undercurrents which are bearing them upon the shoals or rocks of injustice or of danger. Nor are they in most cases to blame. Suffice it, if in regard to great and plain facts where there can be no deceit, their unassisted judgment leads them right. I myself, accustomed to courts, have seen the wisest, the very firmest of men misled to do small acts of wrong to their most deserving of friends. Could I blame them even if I myself suffered? Oh, no! The whispered word, the well-improved opportunity, the casual insinuation--all the arts which the noble will not stoop to practise, are engines in the hands of the crafty, which will blind the clearest eye, deceive the most perspicacious mind.



How much more allowance should be made for a young, inexperienced, and half-educated monarch like Charles VIII. if he did not discover that the hope of a cardinal but swayed Breconnel in his advice; that this counsellor had been promised a sum of money; or that had hopes of a castle or an estate in Romagna; that one aimed at being prothonotary; or another an archdeacon of the Roman hierarchy. All these things were going on in his court and camp, and all these influenced the advice he received; but how could he know it?

The party of the negotiators succeeded. Charles sent envoys into Rome. to treat with Alexander. They went away full of confidence; they told the king that in a few days they would return with all the stipulations he required, assented to. What was his surprise to hear that his envoys had been arrested, two thrown into prison, and two given up to the Neapolitan troops which were in the city.

Rage and indignation took possession of him, and he gave orders that the army should march the next morning; but there were still peaceful counsellors near at hand; the march was put off till next day, and before that hour the news arrived that two of the envoys had been set free. Two, however, were still detained, and the further advance of the army began.

Still Alexander vacillated and hesitated, now giving way to bursts of furious passion, now yielding to immoderate terror; but that vacillation had now to give way. A military envoy appeared at the court of the sovereign pontiff, and with very little ceremony delivered his message in the presence of Ferdinand, the young prince of Naples, who stood at Alexander's right hand.

"What have you to say, Signor de Vitry?" asked the pope, affecting a tone of calmness which he was far from feeling.

"Merely this, Holiness," answered Vitry, "the army of my Sovereign Lord the King of France is within an hour's march of the walls; he desires to know if you are prepared to receive him within them. The day is nearly spent; he will have no time to force the gates to-night, and the men must be lodged somewhere."

Alexander trembled--partly, perhaps, with rage, but certainly with fear also. He looked to the Prince of Naples; he looked to his son, the Cardinal Borgia, upon whose handsome lips there was a sort of serpent smile; but no one ventured to utter one word of advice, till Ramiro d'Orco slowly approached his chair, and spoke a few words in a low tone.

"Well," said the pontiff, "tell the King of France, that I will not oppose his entrance. The Church does not seek to drive even her disobedient children to sacrilege. For myself, I will make no treaty--no stipulation with one who can disregard the repeated injunctions he has received. But for this young prince and his forces I demand a safe conduct."

"Not for me, your Holiness," said Ferdinand, raising his head proudly. "I need none. My sword is my safe conduct, and I will have no other."

"Then my errand is sped," said De Vitry. "I understand there will be no opposition to the king's entrance?"

The pontiff bowed his head with the single word, "None," and the envoy retired from his presence and from the city.

"And now to St. Angelo with all speed," cried Alexander. "Quick, Burchard, quick. Let all the valuables be gathered together and carried to the castle. Come, Cæsar--come, my son, and bring all the men you can find with you. The place is well provisioned already;" and he left the room without bestowing another word upon the young Prince of Naples.

Ferdinand paused a moment in deep thought, and then, with a heavy sigh, quitted the Vatican. Half an hour after he marched out of Rome at the head of a few thousand men, and beheld, by the fading light, the splendid host of the king who was marching to strip his father and himself of their dominions, winding onward--like a glittering snake--towards the gates of Rome.

Here, as at Florence, the fouriers and harbingers of the monarch rode on before the rest of the army, and passed rapidly through the ancient streets filled with the memories of so many ages, marking out quarters for the troops and lodgings for the king and his court. They took no heed to triumphal arch, or broken statue, or ruined amphitheatre; but they marked the faces of the populace who thronged the streets and gathered thickly at the gates, and they saw a very different expression on those countenances from that which had appeared amongst the Tuscans. To the Romans Charles came as a deliverer, and an occasional shout of gratulation burst from the people as the strange horsemen passed. Hasty preparations only could be made, for the royal army was close behind, and just after sunset on the last day of the year 1494, the French army reached the gates of Rome. Those gates were thrown wide open; and shout after shout burst from the multitude as the men-at-arms poured in. Charles himself was at their head, armed cap-à-pie; "with his lance upon his thigh," says an eye-witness, "as if prepared for battle." The drums beat, the trumpet sounded; and every tenth man of the army carried a torch casting its red glare upon the dazzling arms and gorgeous surcoats of the cavalry, and upon the eager but joyous faces round. Shout after shout burst from the multitude; and thus, as a conqueror, Charles entered Rome.

## CHAPTER XXI.

Rome, still grand even in her ruin, was in the hands of Charles of France. He had never in his life seen a stroke stricken in actual warfare, except at the insignificant town of Vivizano; he had never made a conquest more important than that of a village, nor obtained a victory over more than a score or two of men, and yet he felt himself almost on a par with Charlemagne when he stood in Rome exercising all the powers of an emperor. "He suited his corps de gardes and placed his sentinels in the squares of the noble city," says Old Brantome, "with many rounds and patrols, planted his courts of justice with gallowses and whipping-posts in five or six places; requisitions were made in his name; his edicts and ordonnances were cried and published with the sound of the trumpet as in Paris. Go find me a King of France who has ever done such things, except Charlemagne; and even he, I think, proceeded not with an authority so proud and imperious."

The morning dawned and found Charles in possession, full and entire, of all Rome, except the Castle of St. Angelo; and what is of more importance than the mere fact of being in full possession, he was so with the cordial assent of the whole Roman people. They had groaned under oppression and wrong for years, and the very fact that the oppression was exercised by the most despicable of men, had driven the iron deeper into their souls. Any change was to them a deliverance; and so strongly was this felt, that when at daybreak some women stood to gaze at the corpse of a robber who had been caught and hanged by his provosts in the night, they shrugged their shoulders, with a laugh, saying, "No more robbers now."

Not long after that early hour, and not far from the spot where some of the orations of Cicero were poured to the admiring people, a young gentleman, in the garb of peace, but with sword by his side and dagger in his girdle, walked slowly up and down, as if waiting for some one, and presently after a small man, in a monk's gown, whom Lorenzo had once seen before, came up, and saluting him led him away in the direction of some buildings, at that time appropriated to the use of distinguished visitors or great favourites of the Papal Court.

They were not unwatched, however; for from behind an old column which stood there not many years ago--it may stand there still for aught I know--glided out the figure of our friend Antonio, and followed them at some distance, keeping in the deep shade cast by the rising sun upon the eastern side of the street. His keen sharp eye was fixed upon them with a suspicious and even anxious look; "By my faith," he said, "good old Master Esopas was right when he warned us not to warm vipers. I fear me still that one which I helped to save when he was tolerably well frost-bitten, will some day turn and bite me, or, what is worse, bite young Lorenzo. Perhaps I had better warn his youthful knighthood. He is mighty docile for a young man, and will take a hint from me. But then he knows I love him, and that is the secret of it, I do believe; for love's a rarity as this world goes, and, poor boy, having neither father nor mother, who is there to love him but Antonio. By Hercules! I had forgotten the signorina. I am half jealous of the girl, and the only way I can manage to escape being so quite is to love her myself. Ha! they are stopping at that gate; Ramiro lodges there for a score of ducats. Well, well, I will even go in after them, and have a chat with my friend the friar. It is well the holy man should know that he has an intimate acquaintance near."

By this time Lorenzo and the monk had disappeared under the archway and ascended a staircase on the right. It was dirty and dark enough, but the door at the top led into a suite of rooms of almost regal splendour and oriental luxury. The first and the second chambers were vacant; but in the third Ramiro d'Orco was walking up and down with slow steps, and his stern, thoughtful eyes bent upon the ground. It is probable that he had heard the step of Lorenzo from his first entrance; but he was one of those men who never show emotion of any kind, whatever they may feel--men who are never known to start; and it was not till the young man and the friar were quite near that he even looked up.

"Welcome to Rome, Lorenzo," he said, without embracing him as most Italians would have done, or giving him his hand as an Englishman would not have failed to do. "Friar, you may leave us, and do not let us be interrupted. Sit, Lorenzo, sit! Will you rest on that pile of cushions or on that stuffed dais--stuffed with the inner down of some strange northern bird?"

"I thank you, Signor d'Orco," replied Lorenzo, "but I have been lately taught to sit and lie hard enough. You have, indeed, every sort of luxury here."

"Do not call them mine," said Ramiro, with a bitter smile. "They belong to my landlord, the holy and noble Cardinal Borgia. Men propose to themselves different objects in life, young sir. Some judge our short space here was given only for enjoyment; others, again, think it should be a time of active enterprise; one man seeks glory; another power; another wealth. They mostly

imagine that they are only, in every object, seeking a means to an end--the covetous will enjoy his wealth hereafter--the ambitious only desires power to benefit his friends or crush his enemies--but they deceive themselves. Only Cæsar Borgia and I admit the naked truth. He says enjoyment in life. I say ambition is enjoyment. But an ambitious man must not sit on soft stools. There is my common seat," and he drew towards him an old wooden chair of the rudest and most uneasy form.

"So," he continued abruptly, after they were seated, "you have not brought Leonora with you."

"My lord, the matter was decided without me," replied Lorenzo; "the Cardinal of St. Peter's, your near relation, judged that this was not a fit place for her: but I will not conceal from you that I should have brought her with great reluctance, though every hour of her company is dearer to me than the jewels of a monarch's crown."

"The cardinal was right, and you were right," said Ramiro d'Orco, and plunging into thought, remained silent for several minutes, then looking calmly up in Lorenzo's face he said, "You are not married yet?"

"Assuredly not, my lord," said the young man, with his cheek somewhat burning from a consciousness of thoughts--nay, of wishes, if not purposes--which had come and gone in his own heart. "You gave your consent to our betrothal, but not to our marriage."

Ramiro d'Orco's eye had been fixed upon him with a cold steadfast gaze while he spoke, and the colour in his cheek still deepened.

"I have placed great confidence in you, Lorenzo Visconti," said Leonora's father. "I do not believe you would abuse it. I do not believe you would wrong her or wrong me. See that you do not."

"I am incapable of doing either, Signor Ramiro," replied Lorenzo, boldly. "I may sometimes have thought for a brief moment, that the only mode of removing some difficulties that presented themselves to us, was to take your consent for granted and unite my fate to hers by a tie which would give me a right both to direct and protect her; but the half-formed purpose was always barred by remembrance of the trust you had reposed in me; and Leonora herself can testify that I never even hinted at such a course."

Ramiro d'Orco again paused in silence for a moment, and then said, "Lorenzo Visconti, I have loved you well from causes that you know not. Listen for a moment; there are some men who are so formed that a kindness received or a wrong endured is never forgotten. They are perhaps not the best men in the world's opinion, they have their faults, their frailties; they may commit sins, nay crimes, according to the world's estimation---they may be considered cold, selfish, unprincipled; but the waters of these men's hearts have in them a petrifying power which preserves for ever the memories of other men's acts towards them. They cannot forgive, nor forget, nor forbear like other men. A kind word spoken, a good act done towards them in times of difficulty or danger will be remembered for years--ay, for long years--twenty? more than that; and a wrong inflicted will equally cut into the memory and will have its results, when he who perpetrated will himself have forgotten it. I am one of those men, Lorenzo; and, though I speak not often of myself, I would have you know it. But let us talk of other things," he added in a less severe and serious tone. "Now tell me truly, did you not think when I told Leonora to come on to Rome, that I had changed my purposes towards yourself, or that, at least, they were shaken; that some more wealthy match presented itself, or some ambitious object led me to withdraw my approbation of your suit? You doubted, you feared--was it not so?"

As he spoke another person entered the room with a gliding but stately step. He was dressed richly in a morning robe of precious furs, and his remarkably handsome person was set off to every advantage by the arrangement of the hair, the beard, and the garb. Ramiro d'Orco only noticed his coming by rising and inclining his head, while the other cast himself gracefully down upon the pile of cushions, and began to eat some confections which he took from a small golden box.

Almost without pause, Ramiro proceeded: "Did you not think so? You were wrong, Lorenzo, if you did. I have consented to your marriage with my daughter, I wish your marriage with her. I here, in the presence of this noble prince, give my full consent, and had you brought her on here, I would have joined your hands ere you go hence. But it is well as it is. And now let us again to other objects; my lord cardinal, your Eminence wished to see my young friend here."

"He is very handsome," said Cæsar Borgia; for he it was who lay upon the cushions. "He is very handsome, and I am told that the Signora Leonora is very beautiful, too--nay, a marvel of loveliness--is it not so?"

"In my eyes certainly," said Lorenzo drily, for there was something in the tone of the man he did not like.

"Marry her soon--marry her soon," said Cæsar Borgia, "a peach should always be tasted ere it is too ripe. I envy you your privileges, sir. I who am bound to a sour life of celibacy, may well think you happy who are free and blessed."

Lorenzo rose and raised his bonnet from the floor where he had cast it, as if to depart.

"Stay, stay," said Ramiro d'Orco, "these French-bred gentlemen, my lord cardinal, are very touchy upon some points. They understand no jests where their lady loves are concerned. We in Italy, and especially you in Rome, are somewhat too light-tongued upon such matters."

"Well, then, let us talk of other things," cried Borgia, starting up with a look entirely changed, the soft, indolent, almost effeminate expression gone, the eye fiery and the lips stern and grim. "You are right, Ramiro: we are too light-tongued in such matters. I meant not to offend you, sir, but as yet you are unaccustomed to our manners here. I wished to see and speak with you from the reports I have heard of you. You have, I think, served the King of France well---marvellously well for one so young. I have heard of your doings at Vivizano, and I have heard moreover that you are high in the personal esteem of Charles of France himself. Nay, more, it seems, by what means I know not, but they must be extraordinary, for scripture says the deaf adder stoppeth her ears and will not heart she voice of the charmer--it seems, I say, that by some means, you have won the confidence of Julian of Rovera, an enemy of me and of my father's house. With both this cardinal and this king you must have opportunities of private communication."

He kept his eye fixed upon Lorenzo's face while he spoke, marking every change of expression, and probably adapting his discourse to all he saw there; for no man was ever more terribly endowed with that serpent power of persuasion which bends and alters the wills and opinions of others, not by opposing force to force, but by instilling our thoughts in the garb of theirs into the minds of even our opponents. By that power how many did he bring to destruction, how many did he lure to death!

"I wish not," he continued, "to lead you to do or say aught that can be prejudicial to the King of France. I know that you are incapable of it; but it is for that very reason I have desired to see you. I seek no communication with those whom I can buy, and who the day after will sell themselves to another. I desire to address myself to one eager to serve his lord, and who will dare to tell him the truth, even if it be first spoken by the mouth of an enemy. Such a man I believe you to be, Signor Visconti, and therefore I sought this interview. Now, sir, King Charles is surrounded with men who will not let the truth reach his ears. You may ask why? what is their object? I will tell you. They have Rome in their power. My father, it is true, is safe up there--but still Rome is theirs; and, if they can but prevail upon the King of France, by false statements--by cunning persuasions--by the suppression or distortion of facts--to use his advantage ungenerously, they calculate upon forcing his Holiness to buy them wholesale. Ay, buy them, sir; for there are not two in all the king's council who cannot be bought--by benefices, by gold, by estates, by dignities. This is the reason they keep the truth from the monarch's mind; for they well know that, if his position and his duties were once clearly stated to him, full peace and alliance would soon be re-established between the crown of France and the Holy See; and they would be deprived of the power of extracting from my father the last ducat in his treasury, the last benefice in his gift. Do you understand me?"

"Methinks I do," answered Lorenzo, who had seen good reason to believe that Borgia's view of the characters of the French counsellors was not far from the truth. "But what is it, your Eminence, that the King of France should know that he does not know? He has about his person many a clear-sighted military man who is competent to perceive the truth and too honest to conceal it."

"Not exactly, my young friend," replied the cardinal; "the truth is not always so easy a thing to find as you imagine. The negotiators, at all events, have the king's ear--civilians or ecclesiastics--all. We know not that these military friends of yours have discovered the whole truth; or, if they have, that they have revealed it. Now, what I wish is, that you--you, Lorenzo Visconti, should learn the whole truth, and should seize the very first opportunity of telling it to the king. I will give you a correct and accurate statement of the true position of affairs--at least, as I see them. If I am wrong, your own clear mind will detect the error: for, of course, though I cannot pretend to speak without some prejudice, you can have none. An Italian by birth--about to wed an Italian lady, many of your sympathies must be with us, while gratitude and education afford a fair counterpoise in favour of France. But listen to my statement."

He then went on with the most skilful and artful, but apparently the most unpremeditated eloquence, to set before the young knight a totally different view of the questions between Alexander and the King of France. He dwelt long and severely upon the scandal to all Christendom exhibited by the eldest son of the Church--a title of which French monarchs had ever been proud--forcing his way into the holy city, contrary to the repeated injunctions of the Church's head. He asked if it were the part of one who pretended and hoped to drive back the wave of Mahomedan invasion from Europe and plant the Cross itself in Constantinople, to commence his enterprise by setting at nought the power and authority of the Vicar of Christ, driving him from his home to take refuge in a fortress, to despoil him of his means, and to trample on his dignity. "They speak ill of his Holiness, indeed," continued Borgia, "they calumniate him and misrepresent all that he does. Let us even admit, however, all that they say against him, that he has the passions which afflict all men of ardent temperaments--that he has at times indulged the propensities common to all men--that he has done openly, in short, and without hypocrisy, all that his predecessors have done covertly and hypocritically--that he calls his son his son, and not his nephew--never forgetting, however, that all these faults occurred before his elevation to the holy see; but granting all, admitting every charge, I will ask you,

Lorenzo, if these faults of the man, which affect not the holy office, are so great a scandal to the Church as to see the first of--I had almost said pretended--the first of Christian monarchs set at nought the authority, oppress the person, and plunder the property of the representative of the apostles? But I have dwelt too long upon this aspect of the question. Perhaps it does not affect you; it may not affect the King of France, and I did not intend to speak of it at length. I meant to deal with the political view of the case--of that which touches the king's material interests, and I now turn to that."

The bright, comprehensive, and sagacious picture which he now drew of the actual position and future prospects of the King of France, was perhaps unequalled by any of the most splendid efforts of the man with whom Macchiavelli himself found it hard to cope; and well might one so young and inexperienced as Lorenzo have been carried away by his eloquence, even if there had not been much truth in the details, much accuracy in the reasoning. But there was far more of both than of falsehood or rhetoric. He stripped the position of the King of France from its fictitious splendour: he painted him as in the midst of a foreign country, with no communications open behind him, without a fleet, and with an exhausted treasury, without a sincere friend in Italy, with a resolute enemy before him, and without one faithful ally behind. He showed and asserted he could prove that Ludovico Sforza was busily weaving the web of a confederation against him; that the Duke of Ferrara was already gained; that the Venetians were arming in haste, and that Florence was eager to avenge the humiliation she had received, by giving aid to the league; that even the Emperor and the King of Spain, though bought off for a time by sacrifices disastrous to France, showed signs already of wavering in their faith to the young king, and were only true to their policy of treachery.

"This splendid army will melt away," he continued, "by battle and disease; while that of the league against you will increase every hour. Where will you draw reinforcements? how will they reach you if they can be raised at all? To your enemies men will flow in from every quarter, and will find all roads open. The remnants of the great companies will easily be gathered together, all men practised in warfare under leaders of consummate skill. The Albanian bands of the Venetians will sweep the country of its provisions, and put a desert between you and France. What the sword spares, famine and pestilence will slay, and an expedition begun with festivals and successes will end in disaster and tears.

"Show me where I am wrong, and I will admit it; but this, Signor Visconti, is my view, and I give it you plainly and sincerely. Now you may ask what I would deduce from all this?--that the King of France should desist from his enterprise, and return with defeat and disgrace to his own land? Far from it; I would have him push on to Naples with all rapidity, before the plans of his enemies are mature, or their preparations made. He may subdue that kingdom rapidly, and with the command of the sea coast, and a new and defensible position, set his foes at defiance till his army can be recruited and reinforced. But I would not have him stay here and waste time, every moment of which is precious, in trying to humble a pontiff whom he is bound to reverence, or destroy a sovereign who is ready to be his friend. If such madness seizes him he is lost. How much better, at no loss of honour or of interest, but merely by that reverence for the Church, which, as a Christian king, he is bound to show--how much better to have a friendly power, though perhaps a weak one, between him and the enemies in his rear!"

"But what surety has the king that this will prove a friendly power," asked Lorenzo, "that these Roman States--this very city will not be armed against him as soon as he has passed on?"

"The pope will give him securities," said Cæsar Borgia, promptly, although a slight shade had come over his brow while the young man spoke. "He shall have ample guarantees; such fortresses to hold as will ensure him against that danger; and as for myself, I care not if I go as a hostage with his forces."

Lorenzo paused, and thought without reply, and Borgia added, "Nay more, Zizim shall be given into his hands, though perchance that act may bring down the wrath of Bajazet upon Italy, and we may again see our coasts ravaged by Turkish fleets."

"And who is Zizim?" asked Lorenzo, in surprise.

"It matters not," replied Borgia, "but whisper that name in the king's ear--only say you have somewhat to tell him regarding Zizim, and he will give eager audience to all the rest."

"But I must also tell him on what authority I speak," said Lorenzo.

"Do so!" exclaimed Cæsar Borgia, at once, "let him know that you have seen me in company with this good lord who sits silent here, who knows the truth of every word I speak."

"I do," said Ramiro d'Orco; "and moreover as you may want proof of the corruption in the king's council you have heard of, give this small packet, my son, to the good Bishop of St. Malo--not before you have conferred with the king, but afterwards--not when the worthy prelate has company around him; but when he is quite alone."

Lorenzo took the small paper packet which Ramiro held out, not without some doubts; but it contained something hard and bulky, and evidently was not a letter, of which he might have hesitated to be the bearer. "Well," he said, at length, "I presume, sir, that you would not put upon

me any unbecoming task. But your Eminence spoke something regarding the Cardinal of St. Peter's. What do you desire that I should say to him?" he continued, addressing Borgia.

A sort of spasm passed over Cæsar's face, and he kept his teeth firmly pressed together for a moment; but when he answered it was with a calm, though stern voice, "Tell him that no cardinal who dethrones a supreme pontiff ever becomes pope. His holy brethren know him too well. That is all I have to say to him--and now my task is over," he continued, throwing himself back upon the cushions, "let us taste some wine. Will you drink, Signor Lorenzo?"

The young lord excused himself, and shortly after took his leave.

"Too young, I fear me," said Ramiro d'Orco, as Visconti quitted the room.

"All the better," replied Borgia, languidly, "we must work with all kinds of tools, according to our objects, Ramiro--women, valets, boys, wise men. A wise man would not suit me now, for he would conceal half that he has heard. This youth will tell it all, and that is what I desire."

## CHAPTER XXII.

While the conversation which I have narrated in the preceding chapter was going on in the rooms above, one of a very different character, though relating to the same topic, took place below. We need not be very long detained in its detail, but there were certain parts therein which must be related. The scene was a small room near that sort of buttery window at which Italian nobles have in all times been accustomed to sell or retail the produce of their estates. The interlocutors were our friend Antonio and the pretended friar Mardocchi, and after the first greetings, the substantial conversation began, by the former gently reproaching him of whom he had aided to cheat the cord, with not having visited him when in the French camp at Vivizano.

"Ah! how did you know I was there?" asked Mardocchi. "Why, I was only one night in all."

"I know everything that happens within a hundred miles of me," replied Antonio, who had discovered the great benefit of assuming more knowledge than he possessed, "you had not been five minutes in the camp before I knew it. But why did you not come?"

"I have told you already," answered Mardocchi. "I was but one night in the camp, and I got such rough usage from that old cardinal of the devil, that I was glad to get out by daybreak."

"Ay, he has no smooth tongue, I wot," answered Antonio; "if he licks his cubs with that when they are born, they will go into the world skinless. But how liked the excellent Signor Ramiro the answer he got to his letter?"

"I know little of his liking," answered the other. "He is not like my good deceased lord, Buondoni, who would tell me this or that, or swear or stamp in my presence as if there were no one there but himself. This man keeps all, or thinks he keeps all, to himself; but one thing I have found out, and that I like him for, because in that he is like myself. If a man does him a good turn he never forgets it; and if a man does him an injury he does not forget that either."

"I suppose not," replied Antonio, "he is a good lord in many things, and all the wiser for keeping his secrets to himself. In all the world he cannot find any one who can keep them as well. Then he did not show any anger when he found the Signora Leonora was not coming?"

"Not a whit," answered Mardocchi; "he only said, 'it is well; it is very well.'"

The conversation was then turned to other subjects by Antonio demanding if his companion did not think that the Signor Ramiro had laid his egg in a wrong nest when he attached himself to the Borgias.

"Not at all," answered Mardocchi; "they are men who are not afraid of doing anything; if one way does not answer they take another; and such men are sure to succeed."

He then went on to give his view of the situation of the Pope and the King of France, to which Antonio, who had come for the purpose of learning all he could, listened attentively. It was somewhat different from the view of Cæsar Borgia, and to say the truth, somewhat more extended; for he contemplated amongst the pope's resources both poison and the dagger. Indeed he had not studied under Buondoni without improvement; for he clearly showed Antonio that it would be perfectly possible to destroy almost all the king's army in Rome by poisoning the wells.

"But, good Heaven! you would poison all the people likewise!" cried Antonio.

"And no great harm either," said Mardocchi, gruffly: "did you not hear how the beasts last night were cheering and vivaing those French heretics? But if the Holy Father in his mercy chose to spare them, he could easily do it by sending the monks and priests amongst them to tell them which wells were poisoned and which not."

"I forgot that," said Antonio, "and the scheme does seem a feasible one. But I hope, my dear friar, that if you have recourse to it, you will let me know where it is safe to drink. I, in return, will promise that when those who are left of the French army--for I must tell you that one half of them have had no knowledge of water since their baptism--when those that remain sack and fire the city, I will bring you out as my own particular friend, and save you from being impaled or burned. These French gentlemen who drink nothing but wine are not tender, I can tell you, and if they found their friends die poisoned, you would soon see a pope dancing in the middle of a bonfire, and the whole College of Cardinals writhing upon lance-heads."

"Oh! they will not try the trick," said Mardocchi, with a countenance somewhat fallen, "at least, they would try all other measures first. I doubt not that if his Holiness will give up Zizim to King Charles that will settle all differences."

"And who is Zizim?" asked Antonio.

"Why, do you not know?" exclaimed Mardocchi; "that shows the king's secrets are well kept in his own camp. Hark ye!" and lowering his voice he went on to explain to his companion not only who the unfortunate Zizim was, but the object which the King of France was supposed to have in view in seeking to obtain possession of his person. The tale was full of scandal to Christian ears, but seemed to shock Mardocchi not in the least; and as it was somewhat long, as he told it, it shall be abridged for the reader's benefit. Zizim was the brother of the Sultan Bajazet, some indeed say, his elder brother. At all events he was his competitor for the throne of Turkey. Their respective claims had been settled for a time at least by arms. Zizim defeated, was fortunate enough to escape from the vengeful policy of the Ottoman race, and first took refuge, it would seem, with the Knights of St. John at Rhodes. He thence sailed to France, and appeared for a short time at the court of Charles. The pope, however, who was alternately the ally and enemy of every prince around him, at that time actually contemplated a new crusade, and believed, or affected to believe, that Zizim, appearing in his brother's territories, supported by a considerable force, might subserve his plans, by destroying the Ottoman dominions. This at least was his excuse for inviting the unhappy prince from Paris to Rome. Charles consented to his departure, but upon the express stipulation that Alexander should give him up to France whenever he was required. With the usual mutability of the Papal councils at that time, however, but a few months elapsed ere Alexander was the friend and ally of Bajazet, and the life of Zizim was placed in no slight peril. Charles had in vain required that the pope should fulfil his engagement by sending the Turkish prince back to France. It must not, however, be supposed that the French king was actuated solely by compassion for the unfortunate exile. He too had ambitious ends to attain, and he too imagined that Zizim might assist in the execution of his schemes. History leaves no doubt that the conquest of Naples, though the primary, was not the ultimate object of Charles's expedition into Italy. The wildest of chimeras possessed his brain, and he imagined that the whole Turkish empire was destined to fall before his inefficient means and inexperienced sword. Naples was to be, in fact, but a step to Constantinople. Flatterers and poets combined to raise the young king's vain intoxication to the highest pitch, and we find one of the latter singing of the conquest of Turkey as an event almost accomplished.

The pope, however, had very different views. So long as he detained the Turkish prince in a sort of honourable imprisonment, a pension of forty thousand gold ducats was his from Bajazet, and as soon as he thought fit to capitalize that annuity by putting Zizim to death, three hundred thousand ducats were promised to him. To take the prince from him was like tearing out his entrails; but upon that point Charles was resolute, and Mardocchi, as well as Cardinal Borgia, was wise enough to see that the time was come when the monarch's demand must be granted.

Such was the tale which had been poured into Antonio's ear, when steps were heard slowly descending the great staircase, and, on looking out, he perceived his young lord just about to issue from the gates.

So deep was the fit of thought into which all he had heard and seen that morning had thrown Lorenzo, that he was not aware for some time that Antonio was near him. He turned over and over in his mind the statements of Cardinal Borgia. He tried to discover a flaw in his reasoning--an improbability in his assertions; but all was reasonable, all was probable; and the peril to the king and his army was so clear that he felt himself bound, even at the risk of being thought intrusive, to lay the whole picture, which had been given him, before the monarch.

From such thoughts he turned to the consideration of the character of Borgia himself. Strange to say, although he had been at first both offended and disgusted by the cardinal's demeanour, the impression now was favourable rather than otherwise. Indeed, such was the case with all men brought for any length of time under his fascination. The most clear-sighted, the most wise, those who knew him best, those who had most cause to shun and dread him, fell an easy prey to his serpent tongue, if once they could be brought to listen. Witness the Vitelli and the Orsini, Gravina, and Oliverotto da Fermo, all lead to death by his specious eloquence.

It is no wonder that one with so little experience as Lorenzo, and who had no reason to fear or doubt him, but the vague rumours and insinuations which were current in the various cities through which he had lately passed, should feel the influence of his extraordinary powers when brought to bear upon him.

"It is a pity," he thought, "that a man of such boundless energy and ability, should give himself up at any time to the effeminate and luxurious habits which he seems to indulge in when not roused to action."

But Lorenzo little dreamed that the effeminate and luxurious habits went hand in hand with the darkest vices and the most fearful crimes. The character of the man might puzzle him: it might, and did perhaps, inspire doubt, and even suspicion; but the doubt was unmingled with horror, the suspicion had no definite form.

He was still deep in thought when a voice close behind him, said:

"You are going wrong, my lord, if you are seeking either your own quarters or the king's."

"Oh, is that you, Antonio?" said Lorenzo; "I did not know you were so near. Which way then?"

"To the right, my lord," replied the man; "but indeed, my lord, in this city you should always know who is so close behind you. I have been within stiletto length of you for the last ten minutes."

"But no one will try to hurt me here, Antonio," said his lord. "Ay, here we are! Glide quickly in, see if you can ascertain whether the king has heard mass yet, and if he has, find out if he is alone."

Antonio passed the guard and entered the palace, while Lorenzo spoke a few words with the officer on duty. In a minute or two the man returned, and answered that the king was quite alone.

"He is waiting for the bishop in his cabinet," said Antonio, "but the prelate is always either long at his sleep or at his prayers, and the chamberlain says he won't be there this half-hour."

"Wait here for me, then," said Lorenzo, and entered.

### CHAPTER XXIII.

The young King of France sat in a small room dressed in a gown of black velvet, with a bonnet or toque upon his head, for the winters were now cold, and, to tell the truth, Roman houses were then, as now, better fitted for the summer than the winter months of the year. Beside him stood Lorenzo Visconti, listening rather than speaking; for although, when he craved through the chamberlain a private audience, he had said that he had matters of great moment to communicate to the monarch, Charles, as was not unusual with him, had begun the conversation with tales of his own griefs and annoyances.

"Upon my life, Visconti," he said, "I am of the mind to trust old men no more, for what they have in wisdom and experience is drowned in selfishness and ambition. A very young man may be a fool, but he is rarely a scoundrel; and it is a sad thing, cousin, to be always doubting whether a man in a grey beard is advising you for your interest or his own. Look you now! they promised me that if I but entered Rome, the pope would be brought to terms at once; and now there he sits up in the castle there, looking down upon us like an eagle from his eyrie, without showing one sign of a desire to treat. I have ordered ten bombards to be brought to the bridge and pointed at the gates, and, on my life, they shall fire unless he shows signs of life before noon."

"I think, sire," replied Lorenzo, "you will not have to give the order. His Holiness may have shown no open signs of a desire to treat, but he seems of your Majesty's opinion, that young men are the best counsellors. In a word, sire, I have had a long interview, unsought and unexpected, with Cardinal Borgia this morning, and it is on that account I have intruded on you thus early."

Charles's attention was now fully aroused. "What!" he exclaimed, "have you been admitted to the castle?"

"No, sire," answered Lorenzo; "I last night received a note from Signor Ramiro d'Orco, appointing a place of meeting, and, judging that his object had reference solely to his daughter, I went. We had not conversed five minutes when we were joined by the Cardinal Don Cæsar Borgia, and he gave me, expressly for your Majesty's hearing, his views of the state of affairs in



Italy, and hinted very distinctly what are the terms which his Holiness is inclined to concede."

"Speak! speak! tell me all!" cried the king. "By heaven, I hope we shall not be interrupted. Call in the chamberlain or his page. That bishop comes here about this hour; he should, indeed, be here now; but he is somewhat negligent and unpunctual. He shall have to wait, however, for I will not admit him till your tale is done."

The chamberlain was called in, the king's orders given not to admit even his council, and Lorenzo went on to tell his tale. His memory was good, the words of Cæsar Borgia had impressed themselves deeply on his mind, and Charles lost hardly anything by hearing from another mouth.

The monarch was evidently much struck with the new view of his own situation now presented to him. The old adage that "one story is good till another is told," is constantly applicable to every view we take of ourselves, our fate, our circumstances. Whoever told the other story, it would always be found very different from our own. Charles paused long and meditated in silence. His was neither a quick nor a comprehensive mind: and when the golden visions of glory and ambition have once entered into the brain, it is difficult to displace them; but yet he saw obstacles he had never dreamed of, impediments which had been suggested neither by his own judgment nor by the sagacity of his counsellors, dangers which were more than probable, imminent and menacing. His courage was too great, his ambition too deeply engaged, his honour too much implicated for him to recede from his enterprise against Naples. But he saw strong good sense in the plan suggested and the advice given by Cardinal Borgia, and he concluded that they would not be furnished by an enemy, or that if they were, they could not be furnished in an inimical spirit.

He pondered these matters more at length, and perhaps more profoundly than he had ever considered anything before. Steps were heard in the adjoining chamber, a hand was placed upon the latch, words were spoken, some in a tone of remonstrance, and some almost in that of anger, but they did not rouse the young king from his reverie.

At length the king woke, as if he had suddenly come to some resolution. "I will demand only what must absolutely be granted," he said, looking up--"only what is absolutely needful. We must not, by asking too much, risk the loss of all. Now tell me, cousin--you alluded to certain conditions to which the cardinal said his uncle, or rather his father, would agree. Let me know them distinctly, and be sure that you remember them aright."

Lorenzo repeated as closely as possible the words of Cæsar Borgia, giving something even of his manner and intonation. The king listened with fixed attention; but when Lorenzo came to that part of the offer by which it was promised that Zizim should be given into Charles's hands, the words did not produce the effect which the young knight had expected. The monarch remained almost entirely unmoved; the vision of Constantinople had passed away. In showing him his real situation at that actual moment, Borgia had taught the young king the vanity of his schemes for the future.

"Well, then," said Charles, when Lorenzo had concluded, "almost all is offered which I could reasonably demand. There is only one thing left vague, and that is the security to be given that the Roman territory shall be kept open when it either suits me to return or when I see fit to bring reinforcements from France; but the details of that question can be settled by negotiators on both parts. It may give my ministers an opportunity of making something for themselves, and when it can be done with honour, my good cousin, I do not object to advance the interests of those who serve me well."

"Perhaps this little packet, sire, may serve to smooth the way with your Majesty's ministers," said Lorenzo; "I promised to give it to my reverend lord the Bishop of St. Malo some time when he was alone if I could, but I did not engage not to ask your Majesty's permission."

"Oh, give it to him, give it to him," said the good-humoured king; "but he should have been here long ere this. He is becoming sadly tardy."

"I think, sire, he has already come, but your Majesty ordered no one to be admitted."

"True! true!" replied Charles. "Well, then, go, good cousin, take him aside, and give him the packet; then send him in to speak with me."

Lorenzo, as he expected, found the king's minister in the antechamber; but the good bishop was in no very placable mood. He eyed the young cavalier, as he came forth from the king's closet, with a glance that can only be given by a courtier who sees another receive high honour from his sovereign, and he had almost turned on his heel when Lorenzo approached him.

"I wish to speak with you alone for a moment, my lord bishop," said the young man, respectfully.

"I cannot imagine what you can have to say to me, Signor Visconti, nor with the king either," said the minister, tartly; "but, as I have been kept long enough among pages, I may as well gratify you. This way, sir."

Lorenzo followed him with a smile, and the bishop led him to a vacant chamber, saying, as

soon as they entered, "Now, sir?"

"I have the honour, my lord," said Lorenzo, "of delivering this into your hands from Cardinal Borgia--"

"Who! what!" exclaimed the prelate, interrupting him, in a tone greatly altered.

"He directed me, reverend sir," continued the young man, not noticing his exclamations, "to place the packet in your hands when you were alone. This must plead my excuse for so venturing to occupy your time and detaining you from the king."

But before Lorenzo had finished the sentence the bishop had torn open the packet, and was gazing in admiration at what it contained. Lorenzo did not wonder at the surprise and satisfaction which had shown themselves on the prelate's face when he saw in his hands the largest and most beautiful diamond he had ever beheld, except among the jewels of the King of France. But there was something more; for the bishop gazed at some words written in the cover, and he murmured, loud enough to be heard, "And a cardinal's hat!" Apparently that was all that was written, for he repeated the words again, "And a cardinal's hat! I understand."

Those few words were quite sufficient, however, for Cæsar Borgia knew his man, and was aware that no long explanations were needed.

Lorenzo was then about to retire, but the bishop stopped him with a very gracious look, saying, "Stay, Signor Visconti, stay! Then you know his Eminence, and have seen him lately."

"My lord, I must not detain you with explanations," said Lorenzo, "for I know his Majesty wishes to consult you on matters of deep importance."

"At all events, I trust, from your bringing me this little token," said the bishop, moving toward the door, "that, notwithstanding your intimacy with the Cardinal of St. Peter's, you are not one of those who will counsel the king to deal hardly with the Holy See."

"My counsel will never be asked, my lord bishop," replied the young nobleman, walking by his side; "but if it were, I should undoubtedly advise his Majesty to come to an accommodation with his Holiness as speedily as possible, and upon as generous terms as may be compatible with his own dignity and security."

"That is well! that is well!" said the bishop, with a gratified smile. "My son, you have my benediction. Blessed be the peace-makers!"

Thus ended their interview; but the following day, to his great surprise, Lorenzo found that the bishop had requested to have his presence at a conference with some negotiators on the part of the pope, alleging that it would be better to have the assistance of some Italian gentleman.

In truth, several military men had been joined with him in the commission, and the good prelate feared that counsels opposite to his own wishes might prevail unless he had the support of some one of whose opinions he had made sure.

The negotiations were not so soon or so easily terminated as either Lorenzo or the king had expected. Though Cæsar Borgia for once acted in good faith, the pope vacillated and delayed, and the subject of the military guarantees was attended with great difficulties.

At length, however, it was agreed that Civita Vecchia, Terracina, and Spoleto, together with Ostia, which would seem to have been already in his possession, should be placed in Charles's hands as security; that the solemn investiture of the kingdom of Naples should be given; that Zizim should be delivered to him; and that Cardinal Borgia should accompany the royal army as a hostage.

On his part, Charles promised to show every outward sign of obedience and submission to the Holy See; and Alexander returned to the Vatican to receive the homage of the King of France for the kingdom of Naples, and to enjoy an apparent triumph over him who had invaded his dominions, set at nought his authority, and driven him from his palace.

#### CHAPTER XXIV.

Nothing can be more evanescent than the impressions of reason on a small mind. That of Charles VIII. might almost be compared to a looking-glass; it reflected only that which was before

it; and, ere the conditions of accommodation between himself and the pope were completely arranged, he had forgotten his desire to march on speedily--he had forgotten the extreme peril of not doing so.

A whole month passed in fêtes and ceremonies, and found the French monarch and his army still in Rome; but there were persons in his camp and court both wiser and more impatient, and at length he was induced to name the day of departure.

Again he commenced his advance, with troops refreshed, and all the pageantry of war renewed and brightened. The order of march was made as it had been before; a few small bodies of cavalry in advance, then the Swiss and Gascon foot, then the great body of men-at-arms, and lastly, at some distance in the rear, the household of the king, escorted by his own guard, and followed by an immense train of courtiers, servants, and attendants.

In this part of the cavalcade appeared two groups of peculiar interest. Mounted on a splendid charger, and attired more like a warrior than a churchman, came the Cardinal Borgia, the hostage for the pope. An enormous train followed him, more in number, indeed, than that which attended upon the king. Led horses, with their grooms, mules and pack-saddles, litters, with curtains of crimson and gold, in which, it was whispered, were some of the flowers of the cardinal's seraglio, an immense quantity of baggage drawn slowly on in ox-carts, and a number of men on foot, tolerably well armed for the attendants of a cardinal, followed him in the march, and made his part of the cavalcade as brilliant as any other.

Still farther in the rear appeared a somewhat lugubrious troop, at the head of which was borne a square black banner on a gilded pole. Then came litter after litter with black curtains, followed by a small body of mounted men, whose turbans and cimeters betokened the race from which they sprang.

In the front litter, the curtains of which were in part drawn back, might be seen a man about the middle age, somewhat large and heavy in figure, but with a mild, intelligent face. This was the unfortunate Zizim, the brother of Bajazet, who followed the King of France rather as a guest than a prisoner, but who well knew that he was no more the master of his own actions than if there had been manacles on his wrists. Yet there was hope in his heart--hope which had not tenanted it for many a long month. He knew, indeed, that he was to be subservient to the will of a powerful monarch, but he knew also that, in the coming struggle, when, supported by French troops, he was to shake the throne of his brother, there was a chance, and a good one, of recovering what he rightly or wrongly considered as his own. His family followed in the litters behind him; and a few faithful servants and attendants who shared his fortunes in good and evil, made up the rest of the band.

With drums, and trumpets, and banners flying, and nodding plumes, and all-the pomp and pageantry of war, the French army marched forward, while the first breath of spring was felt in the air, and a slight filmy cloud here and there in the sky promised, like the hopes of youth, an early enjoyment of summer long before, in reality, it approached. Mirth and laughter reigned in the ranks of the French army, and the expedition seemed more like an excursion of pleasure than a great military enterprise.

The day's march was somewhat long, although it did not commence very early; but Charles had suddenly re-awakened to the necessity of reaching Naples speedily; and even the sluggish Duke of Montpensier, who rarely rose before noon-day, was eager to get forward, and had been in the saddle by nine.

At length the halt was ordered; lodgings were found in a small village for the king and the principal personages who attended him; tents were pitched in the fields and groves around; and, after one of those scenes of indescribable bustle and confusion which always attend the first night's encampment of an army, the gay French soldiery gave themselves up to revelry and merriment.

Couriers came from Rome during the evening, bringing delicious wines and delicacies as presents from Pope Alexander to the king; and, although it was somewhat dangerous to eat of his meat or drink of his cup, let it be said, none of the French court was injured that day by the bounties he provided.

On the following morning the march recommenced in the same order; the encampment again took place at night; the night passed away; but, while the army was getting under arms in the early morning, it was found that two of the king's honoured guests were gone.

Cardinal Borgia, the pope's hostage, was nowhere to be found; litters and rosy curtains, attendants on foot and on horseback, pack-horses and mules, had all disappeared, and it became very evident that Cæsar, not liking the position he occupied in the French army, had quitted it, and taken himself back to Rome.

Zizim also, the unfortunate Ottoman prince, had departed, but on a longer journey, and to a more distant land. He had been taken ill during the night; symptoms of poison had shown themselves at an early hour; the disease, whatever it was, had a rapid course, and ere day dawned the eyes of Zizim were closed in the night of death. It was shown that messengers from

his friend Pope Alexander had visited him during the preceding evening, and a thousand vague stories ran through the camp not at all complimentary to the moral character of the pope; but Charles VIII., whatever might be his suspicions, sent back the family and the corpse of the Turkish prince to Alexander. The latter, indeed, was a valuable present, perhaps more so than any corpse ever was before or since; for, on delivering it to the agents of Bajazet, the messengers of the pope received three hundred thousand ducats of gold, as compensation for some act faithfully performed.

These events created much surprise and some uneasiness in the court of Charles VIII. The graces, the exceeding beauty, and the winning eloquence of Cæsar Borgia had dissipated all the doubts and suspicions which, even at that early period of his life, hung about him. At a distance, men abhorred and condemned him; once within the magic circle of his influence, fear and hatred passed away, and friendship and confidence succeeded in even the most cautious. But now, when he fled from the post he had voluntarily undertaken, when he set at nought the engagements which he had been the first to propose, suspicion was re-awakened; couriers were sent off in haste to the towns which Alexander had surrendered as securities to the king, and the officers commanding the garrisons were strictly enjoined to keep guard carefully against a surprise.

Before that day's march was ended, new causes of apprehension were added to those which already existed. Intelligence was received that Alphonso, King of Naples, who had merited and won the hatred of his people, had abdicated in favour of his son Ferdinand, a prince universally beloved and respected. Gallant in the field, courteous and kind in his personal demeanour, constant and firm, as well as gentle, he boasted at an after period that he had never inflicted an injury upon any of his own or his father's subjects, and there were none found to contradict.

Such a prince might be naturally expected to rally round him all that was noble, generous, and gallant among the Neapolitan people; and whatever Charles himself might think, there were many in his council who knew well how difficult a task it is to conquer a united and patriotic nation.

They heard that he had assumed the crown amidst shouts and rejoicings, that voluntary levies were swelling his forces, and that he himself had advanced to the frontier of his kingdom, and had taken up a commanding position ready to do battle in defence of his throne.

The march of the King of France became much more circumspect; parties were thrown out in different directions to obtain intelligence, and no longer with gay and joyous revelry, but with compact array and rigid discipline, the host moved forward, and passed the Neapolitan frontier.

Where was the army which was to oppose its progress? Where the numerous and zealous friends of the young sovereign? Nowhere.

Some turbulent proceedings in the city of Naples, instigated, it is supposed, by French emissaries, recalled Ferdinand for a few days to his capital. When he returned to the army, he found it nearly disbanded, terror in the hearts of those who remained, and perhaps treachery also.

There was no possibility of keeping the troops together; and with disappointment, but not with despair, Ferdinand returned to Naples, in the hope of defending the city against the invader. Vain was the hope; misfortune dogged him still.

The volatile people, who had shouted so loudly at his succession, received him in dull and ominous silence; and he soon learned that he could neither depend upon their support nor upon the fidelity of the mercenary troops with which his father had garrisoned the two great citadels. Day by day from the various fortresses of the kingdom came warnings of what might be expected of the people of Naples.

Terrified at the approach of the French, the inhabitants of the various cities on Charles's line of march clamoured for immediate surrender even before they were summoned; and the governors and garrisons only delayed that surrender till they could make a bargain with the counsellors of the French monarch, not for safety and immunity, but for payment and reward.

It was an observation of the cunning Breconnel, that golden bullets shattered down more walls in the kingdom of Naples than any of the bombards of the army; but, as the finances of Charles were not very flourishing, he was obliged to be lavish of promises when he could not pay in money.

But I must follow a little farther the history of the gallant prince whom the French monarch came to dethrone. Left almost alone in his palace, Ferdinand saw nothing around him but desertion and treachery--heard of nothing but plots against his person or his power. Calmly, deliberately he took his resolution. He selected several vessels in the harbour, manned them with persons on whom he could rely, and then addressed the people of Naples, telling them, in a speech which may be apocryphal, but which is full of calm dignity and noble courage, that it was his intention to leave the capital.

He told them that he was ready to fight with them and for them, but that the cowardice of the soldiery and treachery of their leaders deprived him of the hope of success. He advised them, as soon as he was gone, to treat with France; he set them free from their allegiance to him; he

exhorted them to live peacefully under their new lord. But he told them that he would ever be near them, and promised that, should the yoke of the stranger ever become insupportable, they would find him by their side, ever ready to shed his last drop of blood for their deliverance.

"In my exile," he said, "it will be some consolation to me if you allow that since my birth I have never injured any one of you, that I have done my best to render you happy, and that it is not by my own fault that I have lost a throne."

Some of the people wept, we are told, but the rest stole away to the palace, and at once commenced the work of pillage. Ferdinand drove them out at the point of the sword; but, finding that the garrison of Castel Nuovo had already conspired to seize his person and sell him to the French, he hurried on board his ships with a few friends, set fire to the rest of the vessels in the harbour, and sailed for the Island of Ischia.

There a new trait of human baseness awaited him. The governor of the island and of an old castle, built, as is said, by the Saracens, which then stood on the island, attempted to parley with the prince to whom he owed all, refusing to receive him with more than one attendant. Ferdinand sprang ashore alone, seized the villain by the throat, and, casting him under his feet, trampled upon him in presence of his own forces and the garrison. The castle was soon in his possession, but he remained not long in Ischia.

On the 21st February, 1495, the French monarch approached the city of Naples. The gates were thrown open, the streets hung with tapestry, the windows crowded with admiring groups, and Charles entered, as if in triumph, with an imperial crown upon his head, a sceptre in one hand, and a globe in the other, while heralds proclaimed him emperor, though it does not appear that they said of what empire.

The mercurial population went half wild with excitement, and shouted, and danced, and screamed before his horse's feet; and had Charles been St. Januarius himself, Naples could not have roared with more lusty joy.

Yet the two castles still held out, the one merely to make conditions for the benefit of the garrison, the other from nobler motives. The Castel Nuovo was bought and sold without a shot being fired; but in the Ovo was Frederick, the uncle of the dethroned king, and a faithful garrison. The French artillery advanced and opened fire; the guns of the castle replied boldly. Some damage was done in the city, and it became evident that many of the finest buildings might be destroyed.

Negotiation was then commenced, and to Frederick's high honour be it said, that he sought no terms for himself, although he knew that the castle could not hold out many days. It was his nephew alone that he thought of; and he strove hard to persuade the King of France to bestow upon Ferdinand the duchy of Calabria on condition of his abdicating the throne: but the council of the king would not consent to leave so popular a competitor in Italy. They offered large possessions in France, and drew out the negotiations to such a length, that Frederick, finding the Ovo could hold out no longer, withdrew with a small body of men, and, joining his nephew, took refuge with him in Ischia.

The city of Naples was now completely in the power of the French, but the kingdom was not so. Scattered over its various provinces were many strong places. Brindisi, Otranto, Regio, Gallipoli, held out for the house of Arragon, and the governors, too honest or too wise, would not suffer themselves to be corrupted. The French army, holding already several fortresses in Naples and the States of the Church, could not afford men enough either to form the regular siege of any of those places, or to garrison them if taken; and Charles and his court gave themselves up to all those enjoyments for which the city of the Siren has always been renowned.

## CHAPTER XXV.

In a small but richly-decorated room in Naples sat three gentlemen in the picturesque, the beautiful costume of the times. Two were mere youths compared with the other, and yet he was a man far on the sunny side of middle age. Before them was a table bearing upon it dried fruits and some wine; and many vases of fair flowers were placed upon the board and in different angles of the chamber. The expression on the countenance of each was somewhat grave, but it was more striking on that of the elder man, as his face and features were, even when at rest, of a playful turn, gay, frank, and beaming.

"I do not like this, my young friends," he said, in a very serious tone, "I do not like this at all,"

and he drank off another silver cupful of the wine.

"You seem to like it well, Seigneur do Vitry," said one of the young men--"that is to say, if you mean the wine; you have drunk more than I have ever seen you drink before."

"I have the drunkard's ever-ready excuse, De Terrail," answered De Vitry; "I drink to drive away care. But I did not mean the wine; it is good enough, I believe. What I meant was, I do not like this state of affairs here in Naples, and I asked you two boys to dine with me to talk with you about it. Why, I believe we three seated here are the only men left reasonable in this city--the only three Frenchmen, I should have said; but that will not do either, for one of us is not a Frenchman by birth; at all events, I may say the only three of the king's army."

"As for these Neapolitans, they are, I believe, all born mad, so there is no use taking them into the account at all. Now Lorenzo is reasonable. He is in love; it is the most sobering thing in the world. I am reasonable from perhaps somewhat the same cause; but as to you, De Terrail, I do not understand how you came to retain your senses when men with white beards lose theirs, unless it be something in your nature, for you are too perfect a knight not to be proud of your love, if you had one."

"Well, seigneur," replied Bayard, "it is not my place to find fault with my elders; my only business is to govern my men and my own conduct aright, but yet I cannot but say with you that I do not like this."

"And I as little as either," said Lorenzo; "his Majesty surely cannot know all that is taking place here. He cannot be aware that we are daily losing both the respect and affection of the people. Why, when first we arrived, they seemed almost ready to worship us, and now every man one meets is ready to lay his hand upon his dagger."

"Ay, that is natural and common in all countries," said De Vitry; "the common herd are always volatile, one day bowing down to their fellow-man as an idol, the next day trampling upon him as a dog. But the worst of it is, we have given them cause to change. We treat the men like dogs; we consider the women as harlots. We insult men's wives and their daughters, or do worse, and we kill the husbands and brothers, or fathers, if they show a regard for their own honour. Sometimes we get killed ourselves, it is true, and 'twere no pity if 'twas oftener, but for the thinning of the king's ranks, and there are few enough of us left, I can tell you. Then see, again, how we pillage and oppress the people? Why, I came suddenly yesterday upon a fellow of a sutler taking away a poor old man's fish without payment, and the old fisherman dancing out of his skin with anguish. I had the scoundrel tied up to the strappado, and made his back acquainted with the thongs; but what did that matter, when the same thing takes place every day unpunished."

"But what you say about their women is the worst," replied Bayard; "they are naturally a jealous people here in Naples, and we certainly do give them good cause for jealousy. We not only treat them as if we had conquered them, when, in truth, we have hardly struck a stroke or crouched a lance, but as if we had made them slaves."

"We should have respected them more if they had fought us better," said Lorenzo, who had listened without seeming to attend. "Have you heard what the pope says? He declares that King Charles has passed through Italy, not sword in hand, but chalk in hand. He means, I suppose, that we have had nothing to do but to mark out our quarters. That is a hard word for an Italian to speak or an Italian to hear."

"It is very true though, Visconti," said De Vitry. "I wonder what can have made such a change among the people. The Italian great companies used to fight us as well or better than any other men in the world."

"It was those great companies themselves which caused the decline of a warlike spirit in the land," said Lorenzo; "at least I think so, my lord. When the prince depends for support on his throne, and the peasant for protection in his cottage, upon the hands and arms of mercenaries, the social prospects of a country are very sad. Wealth may indeed grow up, luxury extend itself, arts be cultivated; but the hardy spirit, the power of endurance, the sense of self-reliance, are gone."

"For many years, here in Italy, the great companies formed the chief dependence of Italian states, and the company of St. George was the school of Italian chivalry; but, in the meantime, the people lost their skill and their courage in war, and when those great companies melted away, as they did but a few short years ago, they felt themselves, like the Britons when abandoned by the Romans, unable to defend themselves against their enemies or to protect their friends."

"Well, really, Lorenzo, I know not how the Britons felt, or when they were abandoned by the Romans," said De Vitry, laughing. "I am no great scholar in history, but I know the Britons make very good soldiers now, as we have felt in France. But let us talk of things not quite so far away. I fear that while we are enjoying ourselves here, and losing the love of the people, there are storms gathering in the north, which may break pretty hard upon us if we do not mind."

"I know it too well," replied Lorenzo; "I heard the facts first in Rome from Cardinal Borgia, and related the whole to the king."

"Ay, Cæsar Borgia! Cæsar Borgia!" said De Vitry. "I doubt much his good faith, and would sooner have him for an enemy than a friend."

"Why so, seigneur?" asked De Terrail. "I would always have men my friends if I can, my enemies only when I must."

"I will tell you why, good friend," answered De Vitry. "If Cæsar were my enemy, I would cut his throat in ten minutes; if he were my friend, he would poison me in five. But this matter weighs upon my mind, and I thought that perhaps you, Lorenzo, might do something to awaken the king to the true state of affairs, being admitted so much to his privacy."

Lorenzo shook his head almost sadly, saying, "I can do nothing, my lord. As to the licence of our soldiery, the king gives orders which are not obeyed, and he loves not to hear complaints. As to the menacing state of things in our rear, he depends upon his Highness of Orleans being able to join us with strong reinforcements. He has already passed the Alps, I hear."

"With men enough to give us help were he with us, not to force a passage to us," said De Vitry; "and, by Heaven! it's just as well that he should not be here at present, for how the duke and the rufflers who are with him would take what has happened this morning it is hard to say."

"Why, what has happened?" asked Bayard and Lorenzo both together. "We heard of nothing particular when we rode in from Portici."

De Vitry smiled. "It is nothing very particular now-a-days," he said, "but, by my faith, such things did not often happen when I was your age, lads. Stephen de Vese, whom we all can remember, the king's valet de chambre, has been made a duke, and has got a nice little slice of the Kingdom of Naples to make up his duchy. I wonder what will come next?"

"But the worst of all is, these witty Neapolitans know all this; and though they are very sore at seeing every office, and benefice, and confiscated estate given to Frenchmen, they laugh to see the old nobility mortified by such acts as this. One saucy fellow said that he thought the king must be a necromancer, for he changed his swine into lions."

"By my faith," said Bayard, "it does not take much to make a Neapolitan lion. Heaven forbid, however, that any of us should grumble at what the king is pleased to do. But I cannot be so grave, my lord, as you and our friend Lorenzo seem to be. The Duke of Orleans will fight his way through to us, or we to him, depend upon it. Visconti has been as sad, as solemn all day as a crow in a rain-storm."

"No, no, De Terrail," said Lorenzo, "I have neither been sad nor solemn, though a little silent, perhaps. The fact is, yesterday was the day when my messenger should have returned from Florence, and I am anxious for his arrival."

"Ay, that fellow of yours, Antonio," said De Vitry, laughing, "has lost his way at length, I warrant. I had as near as possible thrown him into the river once for letting me mislead myself;" and he went on to tell the story of the broken bridge, much to the amusement of his two companions.

"Hark! there is a horse's feet coming at a gallop," said Bayard. "Nothing new going wrong, I trust!" and approaching the window, he looked out into the street; then, turning round his head, he said with a laugh, "The old story of the devil, my good lords. Antonio, on my life, Lorenzo."

Lorenzo turned a little pale with very natural agitation. Since his departure from Florence he had heard nought of Leonora, and if it is terrible even in these days of comparative security and peace, to be without intelligence of those we love--if treacherous imagination brings forth from the treasury of Nemesis all the dangers and misfortunes which surround mortal life, and pile them up on the head of the beloved, how much more dreadful must it have been in those times, when real dangers, perils, and misfortunes without number dogged the steps of every-day life, and were as glaring and apparent as the sun at noon?

It must be remembered, too, that he was very young; that his early life had been clouded with misfortune, teaching the young heart the sad lesson of apprehension; that, since fortune had smiled upon him again, he had found none to love till he had met with the dear girl who had given her whole soul to him, and to whom his whole soul had been given in return; that by the very intensity of their passion they stood, as it were, alone and separate from the rest of mankind, relying, dependent upon, and wrapped up in each other, and that for four long months they had neither seen nor held any communication with each other. It will be easily understood how, on the return of his courier from Florence, agitation shook him to the very soul. He would gladly have started up and run down to meet the messenger; but fear of the laugh of his companions restrained him, and he sat mastering his emotions as best he could.

Antonio was not long ere he ascended, however. His horse's bridle was thrown over the hook in the wall, a few brief words with the servant in the gateway followed, and then his light, agile step was heard coming up the stairs.

"God save you, my lord!" said Antonio, entering the room, "here is a packet from your fair lady."

"Did you see her? Is she well? Is she happy?" asked Lorenzo, cutting the silken threads, which bound the letter, with his dagger.

"I did see her, my lord, and she is quite well, but not happy, thank God!" said Antonio, in his usual quaint way.

"Not happy?" said Lorenzo, pausing just as he had begun to read; "not happy?"

"Yes, my lord, not happy. Heaven forbid that she should be over happy while you are away. Oh, she told me a long and very pitiful tale of how miserable she had been, thinking of how often you had been killed and wounded in the great battles and sieges that never took place between Rome and Naples. Seven times she dreamed you were dead, and had all the trouble of burying you over and over again."

"Hush, hush, my good friend Antonio; I am in no mood for such bantering just now," said Lorenzo, and turned to his letter again.

But the pertinacious Antonio, though he left his young lord to read, could not help pouring forth some of the joyful fun, which welled up in his heart whenever he was the bearer of good news, upon his master's young friend, De Terrail.

"By the bones of St. Barnabas!" he said, "the lady was looking sad enough when I first found her out, perched up on the high terrace overlooking the Mugnione, but when she saw me, she had nearly jumped out of the window with joy. But when I told her my lord was well, and that I had brought her a letter from him, I thought she would have kissed me--all for joy too. Well, she did not, or I should not have dared to come back again, for murder and kisses will come out some way."

Lorenzo's face, as he read on, lighted up with an expression of comfort and joy such as it had not borne for many a day, and many an emotion, though all happy, passed over his countenance, like the lights and shades of a bright spring day over a sunny landscape.

At length he laid the letter on his knee with a deep sigh, and paused for a moment in thought. As for his two companions, Bayard had smiled at Antonio's description of his meeting with Leonora, but De Vitry sat grave and almost stern, with his thoughts apparently far away.

At length Lorenzo woke up from his meditations, and raised the letter, saying, "Here are some lines for you too, Seigneur De Vitry."

"Then, in the fiend's name, why did you not tell me before?" exclaimed De Vitry, with a start, and looking really angry. "Here have I been sitting this half hour envying you that letter, and you never let me know that I have a share in it. Read, read, and let me know what it is."

"Tell the Marquis De Vitry," said Lorenzo, reading, "that I have heard from my dear cousin Blanche Marie, and that she wishes to know if he wears her glove still, and what fortune it has found. She says, if he has not forgotten her, and any couriers pass by Pavia, she would fain hear of his health."

"Is that all!" exclaimed De Vitry. "Bless her dear little soul, and her beautiful eyes, that look like two blue mountain lakes reflecting heaven; I have carried her glove wherever it could gain glory; but very little of that commodity is to be won in this mere marching war, and wherever it does occur, you must needs slip in, Visconti, and take it all to yourself. I shall have to cut your throat some day in order to get my own share. Well, I will write to her, though, by the Lord, it is so long since I have handled a pen, that I know not what I shall make of it. I would send a courier on purpose, if I thought he could make his way through that dangerous bit between Florence and Milan."

"He could not do it, my lord," said Antonio, "for the whole country there is up in arms, and a courier known to be from the French army could not pass. I only got through as far as Florence because I had an Italian tongue in my head. I told them I was a servant of Count Ascanio Malatesta; and, whether there is such a personage or not in the world, they let me pass on account of his good name."

"Then we shall have to march back ourselves, as I always thought we should," said De Vitry, "and I shall be the bearer of my own letter. Well, the sooner the trumpet sounds to horse the better. What say you, De Terrail?"

"The sooner the better, by all means," answered Bayard: "but let us hear a little more of this, my good friend Antonio. You must have seen a good deal by the way. Cannot you give us a notion how things are going?"

"Assuredly, my lord," replied Antonio: "I always wake with both eyes open, and sleep with only one shut. In the first place, I saw many fine men and pretty women, and many good towns and strong castles; but I remarked one thing, which was, that most of the men had harness on their backs, that the armourer's shops were very busy, and that the work the ladies liked best were embroidered scarfs and sword-knots. Moreover, in those good towns and strong castles the masons were very busy on the outside walls, and people with teams of oxen were hauling up long



tubes, and piling up heavy balls beside them.

"Then, as I passed through Rome, I found that his pious and immaculate Holiness was holding a Consistory, in which, people said, he was proposing to the cardinals this knotty point, on which he had decided in his own mind already, viz. whether he should join the league against the King of France or not? I rode, moreover, with some messengers journeying from Venice; some addressed to our king from Monsieur de Commines, and some to the Venetian ambassador here."

"Could you obtain any intelligence from them?" asked De Vitry, eagerly.

"Oh yes, my lord!" said Antonio, with a laugh; "every man has a weak side somewhere, and if I can be but three days with him--as I was with these men--I have plenty of time to walk round him and find out where his weak side is. I pumped out of them all they had to tell when we were yet two days from Naples, and it amounted to this, that the Venetians joined the league some time ago; that the King of Spain is as far in as any of them; that the emperor is ready to attack the king on one side, and Burgundy on the other; so that we may expect a pretty warm reception if we march back, and a pretty hot house if we stay here."

"By Heaven! you must tell all this to the king," said De Vitry, greatly excited. "Lorenzo, can you--but no! I will do it myself. Why should I put upon another what it is my own duty to do? Hark ye, Antonio! be with me this night at seven. I must have audience just before his *coucher*; otherwise we shall have a pack of those lazy bishops and cardinals with us. On my life, I do think the Cardinal of Rouen must have two or three pretty mistresses in Naples, he is so unwilling to leave it. Can you come, man? speak! for it is true that every loyal subject should do his best to rouse Charles from his apathy. Something must be determined speedily."

"I can, of course, my lord," replied Antonio, more gravely than usual, "if it is Signor Visconti's pleasure to spare me. I shall only have to tell Jacques Gregoire to wake me up with one bucket of water, and bring back my scattered senses with another, for, to say sooth, I am mighty tired and somewhat stupid with riding so many hundred miles in such a hurry."

"Here, drain off the rest of the flask," said De Vitry; "there is enough there to besot a Fleming. It may bring you to life. Let us see you take a deep draught."

Antonio did not disappoint him, but saw the bottom of the vessel before he took it from his lips. As soon as he had done, however, he said, "Well, my lords, I will humbly take my leave, and wait in his antechamber, like other poor fools, till my patron comes back. I have certain little particulars for his own private ear, which----"

"About what?" asked De Vitry, gaily, resolved to pay Lorenzo back a smile he had seen upon his lips while he was reading Blanche Marie's message--"about what, Antonio. Speak out, or we shall think it treason."

"My lord, 'tis but about how much bacon the horses ate upon the road, and how much hay I consumed; how much wine they drank, and how much water I tippled; how I fell under the wrath of a magistrate for eating raw cabbages in a man's garden when I was tied by the bridle to one of the posts thereof, and how my horse had to do penance in a white sheet for certain vices of his which shall be nameless."

The whole party laughed, and De Vitry sent the man away, commending him for a merry soul, and telling him to bid the man at the door bring up more wine. Lorenzo, however, would drink no more. There was nectar enough in Leonora's letter without wine, and he was anxious to hear all those details--those never-sufficient details--on every word of which a lover pleases to dwell.

Antonio had not been gone five minutes ere Lorenzo rose and followed. A smile came upon the faces of both his friends, but De Vitry exclaimed, "Well, let those laugh who win, De Terrail: now I would give a thousand golden ducats to be just in his case."

## CHAPTER XXVI.

The most successful men in life are usually those who, by experience or by instinct, have learned to calculate other people's actions. It is not invariably so, although, at first sight, such ought naturally to be the result. If a man knows and sees all the paths around him clearly, surely he ought to be able to choose that which will lead him to the end he has in view.

But we always forget one element in our calculation of others, namely, self. We omit it altogether, or we do not give it its just value. Yet what an important element it is! We may know--

we may calculate, in general or in detail, what will be the course in which each man's mind will lead him; but if we know not ourselves, we can never direct the results; for, take away the main-spring from the watch, and the cogs and wheels are idle.

However that may be, Antonio was one of the keenest and most clear-sighted men at that time in Italy, although his fortunes were still humble, and his prospects not very brilliant. It required no very deep consideration to show a man of his character that Lorenzo would be at his quarters almost as soon as himself. He therefore walked quickly, and had not waited five minutes before his young lord was in the room.

"I wish to Heaven I could help bantering," thought Antonio, as he sat expecting every minute to hear Lorenzo's foot on the stairs; "it is as well to be serious sometimes; but, on my life, the more one lives in this world the less one thinks there is anything serious in it. It is all one great farce from beginning to end, and the only people who cannot look upon it as a joke are infants who have skewers stuck into them by their nurses, men who are going to be broken on the wheel, and young lovers. These are the folks, especially the last, who cannot understand a joke. But here he comes; I must try to be grave."

"Now, Antonio," said Lorenzo, eagerly, "let me hear all about your journey;" and then he added with that sort of dalliance with the desired subject which youth and love are wont to show, "How long were you in getting to Florence?"

"Upon my soul, my lord, I cannot tell," replied Antonio, "unless I were to stay to calculate how many inns I stopped at, how many times my horse cast a shoe, and how often I had to go round to get out of the way of some wild beast or another. But I got there as fast as I could, be sure of that; and even then I was disappointed, for when I got to Madonna Francesca's house I found everything shut up, and nothing but an old custode so deaf that he could not distinguish between Francesca and Ghibellina, for he told me that was the street when I asked for his mistress. I made him comprehend at last by signs, and I then found out that the whole family, servants, pages, etc., had all gone to the villa on the Bolognese road to spend the summer. There, of course, I had to go; but I put it off from the grey of the night, as it then was, till the grey of the next morning; and a fine old place it is. Don't you recollect it, signor, when we were in Florence long ago? just up in the chestnut woods on the second slope of the mountains."

Lorenzo shook his head. "Well," continued Antonio, "it is somewhat like that villa you admired close by Urbino, half castle, half palace. On one side it looks as gloomy as a prison, and on the other as gay and light as a fire-fly; and it has such a beautiful view all over the Val d'Arno, running up to San Miniato, and taking in Heaven knows how much of the country over the hills!"

"Well, well," said Lorenzo, impatiently, "I trust I shall see it ere long."

"Well, my lord, I put up my horse," continued Antonio, "and asked among the servants for the signora. All the people recollected me, and I found she had a habit of sitting out in the garden in the early morning, just as she used to do at the Villa Rovera, which shows how people can be mistaken, for I thought she would have given up that custom when there was no person to sit with her; but they said she would sit there and think for hours."

Lorenzo smiled, for he thought that he knew of whom she was thinking, and he remembered that, even in the bustle of the march, he had passed many an hour sitting listlessly on his horse, thinking of her.

"Well, I did not find her very easily, my lord," continued Antonio, "for it is a curious labyrinth of a place--villa, and gardens, and all--but a last I caught sight of something like a white robe just in the shade of a tall old cypress tree. The beautiful lady was very flattering to me; and I am a personable sort of a man, I believe, not easily to be forgotten when once seen. But she remembered me in a minute, and started up and ran forward to meet me, crying out, 'What news--what news, Antonio? Is he safe--is he well?' Then she gave me her hand to kiss, and I kissed it, and put your letter into it, and then she kissed the letter; but it was a hypocritical kiss, that, for she tore it the next minute in a very barbarous manner, in order to get at the inside. Then she kissed it again and read it. Then she read it again, and she did not speak a word for nearly half an hour, but went back and picked out little bits of the letter, just as a child picks the nice bits out of a pie."

"Out upon you, Antonio!" cried Lorenzo; "here the dear girl has been showing all the warm feelings of her heart only for you to laugh at."

"Indeed, I was more like to cry, for she herself cried in the end, and the tears flowed over the long black lashes and fell upon the letter, and had I been a crying person, I must fain have wept to keep her company. It is very funny, my lord, that people cry when they are extremely happy, for I am quite certain that Donna Leonora was not crying for sorrow then, and yet she cried as if her eyes were fountains of diamonds; and then she wiped them with her kerchief, and turned away her head and laughed, and said, 'This is very foolish, Antonio, but I have been dreaming of this letter's coming so long, and now it is so much sweeter than I thought it would be, that--' and then she forgot what she was going to say, or perhaps she never intended to say anything more; but I understand very well what she meant, for all that."

Antonio paused, but Lorenzo was not yet half satisfied. He taxed the man's memory to the utmost. I am not sure he did not tax his imagination also to tell him every word, and to describe every look of Leonora. Then he made him speak of the villa; and there Antonio was quite at home, for, during the three days he had stayed, nothing had escaped his attention. He knew every corner in the house, and every walk or terrace in the gardens; and a strange, wild, rambling place it must have been, the manifold intricacies of which spoke but too plainly the terrible and lawless times which existed at the time of its construction, and which, alas! existed still.

The ruins may still be seen upon the slope of the Apennines, and many a passage and chamber may be found lighted only by the rays which can find their way through a thin plate of marble undistinguishable on the outside from the wall or rock. The light thus afforded, be it remarked, though dim, and at first hardly sufficient to guide the footsteps, is mild and pleasant, and the eye soon becomes accustomed to it.

Mona Francesca and sweet Leonora d'Orco have passed away; the walls have crumbled, and in many parts fallen; on base, and capital, and fluted column wild weeds and tangling briars have rooted themselves, but a short, smooth turf, dotted with the deep-blue gentia, leads from the high road to the villa; and where several terraces once cut upon the side of the hill, may still be traced, and over which the feet of Leonora once daily walked, a thick covering of short myrtle, with its snowy stars, has sprung up, as if fragrance and beauty rose from her very tread.

Antonio described the place as it then was, and the young lover fancied he could see the first, dearest object of his ardent nature wandering amid the cypresses which led in along avenue from the villa to the convent higher up the hill, or seated upon the terrace looking toward Naples and counting, with the painful longing which he felt in his own heart, the long hours which had to elapse ere they could meet again.

It seemed as if Antonio's eyes could look into his heart, for just at the moment when that longing had reached its highest point, he said quietly, "I wonder, my lord, that you do not quit this French service and court, and here, in our own beautiful Italy, spend the rest of your days, when you have here large estates, and the loveliest and sweetest lady in all the world ready to give you her hand for the asking. On my life, I would take the cup of happiness when it is full. Heaven knows, if you let it pass, how empty it may be when it comes round again, if ever."

Wise, wise Antonio! you have learned early the truth of the words of your old patron,

"Chi vuol esser lieto sia.  
Di doman non c'è certezza."

Lorenzo remained silent and thoughtful, and it must be owned the temptation was very strong; but he remained silent, as I have said, and the man went on. "What advantage can you, sir, gain from France? What tie binds you to follow a monarch engaged in the wildest enterprises that ever entered a vainglorious head!"

"Hush! hush! Antonio," said Visconti; "speak no ill of King Charles. Much leads me to follow him; many advantages can be reaped from France, and advantages which, for my Leonora's sake, I must not neglect. Have I not received from Charles's hands the order of chivalry? Have I not been led by him into the way of glory and renown? Has he not protected my youth, treated me with every kindness, advanced me even above those who are superior to me in all respects?"

"And would you have me share in all the glorious and successful past of his career, and leave him at a moment when clouds are gathering in the sky, and danger and difficulty menace his future course? But even were I base enough to do so, where is security, peace, justice, tranquillity to be found in this unhappy land? Were I alone in life, without bond of love, or the happiness of any other depending upon me, I might, indeed, cast myself into the struggling elements now at work in Italy--I might venture all to serve or save my country. But Leonora, what would become of her? France may meet with a reverse or a misfortune, but it can only be for a time. There is peace and security for her I love. Even here, under the banner of the king, is the only safety, the only hope of justice and security. I must not abandon one who can and will give aid and protection to all who serve him faithfully."

"But suppose this king were to die," said Antonio, "where would be your security then?"

"Founded more strongly than ever," answered Lorenzo; "the Duke of Orleans is more nearly related to me than King Charles, and I have always stood high in his favour. But there is no chance of King Charles dying. He is young, healthy, and destined, I trust, to a long life and a long reign. The thought would be far more pleasant to me to take my Leonora into France, where, safe from all the dangers of this beautiful and beloved but distracted land, she might spend her days in security and peace, than to remain with her here, were all the highest prizes of ambition ready to fall into my hand. No, no, Antonio, I must not dream of such things. My lot is cast with that of the King of France, at least for the present. Perchance, ere long, the opportunity may occur of bearing my Leonora away to other lands. I cannot form plans, I cannot even judge of probabilities, where all is uncertainty and confusion; but through the mists of the present and the darkness of the future twinkles still a star of hope, which will guide us home at last, I trust. Now go and get rest and food, Antonio. I have taxed your patience; but you would forgive me if you

knew what had been the anxieties of the last few weeks and the relief of this day."

Antonio left him, and Lorenzo turned to Leonora's letter again. As he read he kissed the lines her hand had traced again and again; but they must have a place alone, as showing the character of her who wrote better than any words of mine could do.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### LETTER OF LEONORA D'ORCO TO LORENZO VISCONTI.

"It has come--it has come! Oh, yes, it has come at length. Dear Lorenzo, my own Lorenzo, forgive me if I am wild with joy. How I have longed, how I have looked for this letter! longed and looked, till hope itself grew very like despair! and yet what a fool I was to expect it sooner. You would not write till you reached Naples. I knew it well; you told me so. But what a time has it seemed! Oh, those three months between the day of your departure and the day when you wrote--three *short* months, people would say; three long ages to me--how slowly, how heavily have they passed away!

"I believe the sun has shone and the sky been clear, and winter has gone and spring has come again, and the earth, grown weary of having no flowers, is putting out blossoms on every spray, and sprinkling the ground with gems; but every day has been a day of mist and darkness to me, a night of fear and dread.

"Consider that I knew nought of your fate--that in every siege or battle that took place my whole hopes, my whole happiness was perilled upon each stroke that fell. I could bear it, dear Lorenzo, if I were near. I could ride with you through the thickest of the fight; no weak terror, no idle cautions should keep you back, or distract your mind, or bate your daring, or paralyse your arm, were I but near to bathe your brow, or pillow your head, or soothe your pain, if you came back sick and wounded. But you were alone, with none but menials near you. In the hour of anguish or of death there was no Leonora to console, to comfort, to tend you, and, at the last, to go hand in hand with you on high, and be your sister in a better world. This is what gave poignancy to all the sorrows of absence.

"But why should I plead my cause with you as if you would blame my terror; or think hardly of the anxieties I have felt? I know you can understand them--I know you can sympathise with them. Yes, yes, you have been apprehensive and anxious for me--I see it in every line of your letter--for me, whose days have passed without event or incident, without danger and without fear.

"Oh, my beloved, what can be more wearisome, what can be more full of dark, dull dread than those still, eventless days, when, like a prisoner in his solitary cell, our soul sits expecting the blow of fate.

"But it has come--the dear assuaging letter has come to tell me that you are safe, that you are well, that you love me still, that your heart yearns for our meeting. It was long upon its way; but I, do believe poor Antonio brought it as fast as he could. I think he knew how I longed for its coming--how I longed for yours.

"Oh, how I long for it still, my Lorenzo; and yet there is a pleasure in having to write. I can tell you on this page--I can dare to own to you more than I could by spoken words. This paper cannot see my cheek glow, nor, though cold and unsympathetic as the world, can it smile coldly at feelings it cannot comprehend. Oh yes, there are many hundred miles between us, and I dare pour out my whole heart to you. I dare tell you how much I love you; how you have become part of my happiness--of my being; how my existence is wrapped up in yours.

"When I think of that long journey together--of that journey which your noble nature made safe for me, and oh! how happy too, I thank Heaven, which has made me know a man whom I can reverence as well as love.

"Even as I write, the memory of those sweet days comes back, every act, every word, every look is remembered. The tones that were music to me, the look that was light, are present to my eye and ear; my head upon your bosom; your eyes look into mine, and the burning kisses go thrilling through my veins into my heart.

"Oh come soon, Lorenzo, come and realize all our dreams; blot out this long period of anxious absence from my memory, or only leave it as a dark contrast to our bright joy. I can part with you no more, my beloved; I must go with you where you go. Nothing now opposes our union; you say my father's consent is given. Let me have the right to be with you everywhere, whether in the city

or the camp. Let me be your companion, your friend, your consolation, and you shall be my guide, my protector, my husband.

"How wildly, how madly I write! some would say how unwomanly. Let them say what they please. They who blame have never loved as we have loved--have never trusted as we trust; or else they have never known you, and cannot comprehend how worthy you are of seeing a clear picture of Leonora's heart, how little capable of misinterpreting one word she writes, or abusing one feeling which you yourself have inspired.

"Perhaps, were you here, I could not tell you all this; my tongue might hesitate, my voice might fail me, but the same sensations would be within, and the words, unspoken, would be written in my heart.

"It is hard to come forth from our own separate world, and speak of the things of the common, every-day life. Indeed, I have nothing to tell, for I have lived in my own dear world ever since you left me; but one thing I must mention. Tell the Marquis de Vitry that I have heard from my dear cousin Blanche Marie, and she wishes to know if he wears her glove still, and what fortune it has found. She says, if he has not forgotten her, and any couriers pass by Pavia, she would fain hear of his health.

"This is the way in which I ought to write to you, I suppose, Lorenzo; but I cannot do so; and yet, Heaven bless the dear girl, and grant that her union with De Vitry may be as happy as ours. She well deserves as much happiness as can be found on earth, for she has ever preferred others to herself. I almost feel selfish when I compare myself with her, and consider how completely your love has absorbed every thought and feeling of your

LEONORA."

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

"From this, sire, I am of opinion," continued the Cardinal Bishop of St. Malo, after having given a long exposition of his views in regard to the state of Italy, "that it would be wise for your Majesty to send some high dignitary of the Church to confer with the pope, and endeavour to detach him from the League, of which people speak so much, and of which Monsieur de Commines is so much afraid. His Holiness can hardly be supposed to be sincerely attached to it, and will doubtless yield to some slight inducements. At the same time, I will send messengers to Monsieur de Commines, instructing him to negotiate with the Venetians concerning a commercial treaty and a guarantee of the coasts of Italy against the invasion of the Turks. There is nothing, to my eye, very formidable in the treaty between the Italian powers, which was fairly and openly published at the Vatican, and in which his Majesty was invited to take part. It is not usual for monarchs to be asked to fight against themselves, and I cannot but believe that the objects of the confederation have been plainly and candidly stated, notwithstanding the terrors of Monsieur de Commines, who has now somewhat of the timidity of age about him."

The prelate looked round the council-board, at which were seated some of the most distinguished soldiers of France, and it was evident, from the self-satisfied features of his countenance, that he thought he had made a very effectual and convincing speech. He was destined to be much disappointed, however; for, though Montpensier and several others held their tongues, a somewhat sarcastic smile curled the lips of the old soldiers, and La Tremouille probably spoke the universal sentiment, though in rather an abrupt and discourteous way.

"There spoke a priest," he said, "my lord the king; this is a council of war, I think, and though I could not probably celebrate mass as well as monseigneur here can cook a ragout, yet I think I know somewhat more of war than he does, and perhaps as much of policy. Commines is not alarmed without cause.

"Put by paltering with naked facts, and you will find the case to stand thus: The most formidable league, probably, that ever was formed against a King of France, has been entered into by the Venetians, the Duke of Lombardy, all the petty princes of the North of Italy, the King of Spain, the Emperor of Germany, and the King of the Romans. All these are jealous of your Majesty's conquest of Naples, and the pope, knowing that he has given you good cause of offence, hates you because he has done you wrong, has broken his treaty with you, and fulfilled not one single promise that he made, except giving cardinals' hats to the Bishop of St. Malo and the Archbishop of Rouen. He also has joined the league against you. There is one plain fact.

"Now for another, sire. Your enemies are in an active state of preparation. The Venetians have

levied large forces, both of men-at-arms, of infantry, and of light Albanian cavalry. These Stradiotes are scouring all Lombardy. The Duke of Milan alone has a force in the field superior in numbers to any your Majesty can bring against him. The houses of Este and Gonzaga are both in arms; the fleets of Genoa and Venice are both upon the sea to cut off your reinforcements, and the King of Spain is hurrying his preparations, not alone to bar your passage into France, but to attack your French dominions.

"Now, sire, it does not behove the high officers of your Majesty's crown and army to risk the perdition of their monarch for an old woman's tale or a churchman's delays. What is the advice we are bound to give you? To remain here shut up in this remote corner of Italy till your enemies gather strength every day, attack you on all sides, and sweep us up, as one of these Neapolitan fishermen sweeps up the fish in his net? Certainly not. The only course, then, is for you to return to France. Can you return by sea? It is impossible; we have no ships at hand to carry us, and if we had, there are superior fleets upon the water. By land, then, is the only way--I was going to say--still open, but I can hardly say that, for De Vitry here tells me that troops are gathering fast upon the Taro. But they are not yet in sufficient numbers to be of much account."

"But, Monsieur de la Tremouille," said the king, interrupting him, "would you have me abandon Naples, after all it has cost us to acquire it?"

"That does not follow, sire," replied La Tremouille; "You can garrison the principal strong places of this kingdom, and then, with the rest of the army, march, lance in hand, to the frontier of France. I will undertake, upon my head, that we cut our way through if we set out at once; if we delay, God only knows what will be the result. Our junction once effected with the Duke of Orleans, we have nothing more to fear, and may then either turn upon this Ludovic the Moor and chastise his many crimes, or gathering fresh forces in France, return to Naples, and set all our enemies at defiance. This is my advice. I know not what is the opinion of the other lords here present."

"I go with my good cousin, sire," said Montpensier: "and if it be needful, and your Majesty so commands, I am ready to remain here in Naples, and do my best to keep the kingdom for you till you can return yourself or send me reinforcements."

Every member of the council, with the exception of the bitterly-mortified Cardinal of St. Malo, concurred in the views of La Tremouille.

Charles still hesitated, and ended by endeavouring to combine the advice of his minister with that of his generals. He gave orders to prepare for immediate departure, and sent prelates to the pope, and letters to his ambassador at Venice. The appearance of the first in Rome served to warn Alexander to fly from the approach of the French army; the receipt of the latter in Venice only served to hasten the preparations of the Venetians to oppose the king's passage. But still with some vacillation of purpose, before the council rose he questioned De Vitry as to the nature and source of the intelligence he had received regarding the concentration of troops upon the Taro.

"I have got the man here without, sire," replied De Vitry; "shall I call him in, that your Majesty may examine him yourself?"

The king bowed his head, and a moment after Antonio was in his presence. The scene was somewhat imposing, for all the greatest men of France--those who had served their country--those who had made themselves a name in history, were present round that council-board; but I fear, Antonio's was not a very reverent nature. It was not alone that he had but small respect for dignities, but that he had as little for what are generally considered great actions. Doughty deeds were to him but splendid follies; and he felt more reverence in the presence of a woman suckling her babe than he would have felt for Cæsar in his hour of triumph. If he was a philosopher, it was certainly of the school of the cynics.

On the present occasion he appeared before the King of France with perfect unconcern; perhaps there was a little vanity in it, for he argued, "They may know more about some things, but my mother-wit is as good as theirs, and may be better. Why should I stand in awe of men, many of whom are inferior to myself, and few superior?"

"Well, sir, tell what you know of this matter," said the king, taking it for granted that De Vitry had told him why he was brought within.

"Of what matter, sire?" asked Antonio; "I know a good deal of several matters."

"I mean of what is taking place beyond the mountains," said the king. "I thought Monsieur De Vitry had explained."

"He merely told me to come to your Majesty's presence," replied Antonio. "As to what is taking place beyond the mountains, sire, there are many things I wish were not. It is now the month of May, and the prospects of the harvest are but poor. There is plenty of it, but the crop is likely to be bad--spears and bucklers instead of wheat and furrows, sire, and blood and tears instead of gentle rain and light airs."

"Be more precise, sirrah," said the Cardinal of St. Malo, sharply; "we want facts, and not any

more moralizing."

"Heaven forbid that I should moralize in your Eminence's presence," replied Antonio, with great gravity; "but if his Majesty wishes to know what I saw on my journey from this place to Florence and back again, I will deliver it at large."

"Pray spare yourself that trouble," said De Vitry, interposing; "merely tell, and that as briefly as possible, my good friend, what you told me just now about the state of the country, especially on the other side of the Apennines."

"Why, my lord, the people are arming all through Romagna and the Papal States," replied Antonio. "I have never seen such an arming in Italy before. There is not a small baron or a vicar of the Church who is not getting men together; and had it been known I was in the French service, I could not have passed; from which I argue that all this preparation bodes no good to France. Then, as to the other side of the mountains, I saw nothing with my own eyes. But I heard from a muleteer, who had been plundered of his packs by the Albanians, that about Fornovo and Badia there is a Venetian force of several thousand men--a thousand lances, he said, at the least, besides foot-soldiers, and that the Stradiotes were scouring the country right and left, and bringing in food and fodder to a camp they are forming near Badia on the Taro. Another told me that on the road near Placenza he had passed a force of some five thousand men marching towards the mountains; and the report ran that his Highness of Orleans had been stopped near Novara by a superior army and forced to throw himself into that place."

"That accounts for there being no letter, sire," said La Tremouille.

"He surely could have found means of sending us intelligence," said Charles; "it is always customary, I believe, my lords, to send more couriers than one, and by different routes."

"No French courier could pass, sire," said Antonio; "there are barriers across the whole of Italy, whose sole business is to cut off all communication between your Majesty and your French dominions."

"Then how did you pass?" exclaimed the king, somewhat irritated by the man's boldness.

"Because I can be a Frenchman when I like and an Italian when I like, may it please your Majesty," replied Antonio; "this time I thought fit to be an Italian, and that saved me."

"I would fain have the man asked," said La Tremouille, "if he knows by whom those bands are commanded, led, or instigated."

"I know nothing but by common report," replied Antonio, "and she is a stumbling jade upon whom it is not well to rest weighty matters. However, she sometimes stumbles right, and the general rumour throughout the whole country was that his Eminence the Cardinal Cæsar Borgia was at the bottom of the whole. Certain it is that the men who stopped and robbed the muleteer professed themselves to be his soldiers."

"I cannot believe it," said the king; "he was wrong in leaving our camp it is true, when he had voluntarily surrendered himself as a hostage, but in all our communications he showed reverence for the crown of France, and professed respect and affection for our person."

A slight smile came upon the lips of several of the counsellors, who had learned by experience the difference between professions and realities, but no one ventured to assail the king's opinion, and shortly after Antonio was dismissed; but it was only to give place to the king's provost, who came to report very unmistakable signs of mutiny and sedition in the city of Naples itself. From his account it appeared that even those who had been most discontented with the Arragonese princes, and had greeted most warmly the entrance of Charles into Naples, longed for the restoration of the old dynasty, and were, step by step, advancing towards revolt.

"They are an ungrateful people," said Charles; "have I not freed them from taxes and burdens insupportable?"

"Yes, sire," replied bluff La Tremouille; "but I must say in their favour that if *you* have freed them, some of our good friends have burdened them sufficiently. In fact, your Majesty, it has been but a change in the nature, not in the weight of the load, and the old story goes, if I recollect right, that the ass who carried the gold, found his pack quite as heavy as the ass who carried the hay."

"You are somewhat bold," replied the king, with a frowning brow.

"I am, sire," replied the undaunted soldier; "perhaps too bold, and I can crave your pardon on the plea that I am rendered bold by my zeal for your Majesty's service. The people of the whole kingdom we know to be discontented at the end of three short months. Now, as your Majesty has shown yourself full of the kindest and most liberal feelings towards them, this discontent can only be produced by the exactions and peculations of inferior persons. I mention it now, whatever it may produce, because I sincerely hope and trust that Naples may ever remain a dependency of the French crown; and it will be necessary that these things be examined into very closely, in order that the country may be rendered a willing and attached dependency, rather than a hot-bed

of mutiny and discontent--a sore in the side of France."

"You mean well, I know," said the king, rising; "let all preparations be made with speed to commence our march at the earliest possible day. Montpensier, we will confer with you privately on the defence and maintenance of the kingdom at the hour of noon--that is to say," he continued, with a faint smile, "if you can contrive to rise so early in the morning."

Thus saying, Charles quitted the council chamber with a sad feeling of the weight and difficulty, the care and anxiety, the duty and responsibility of a crown.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

I am about to quote from another who knew well the facts he recorded. His name matters not, but the whole is a translation, upon my word. "The king had remaining nine hundred men-at-arms, comprising his household troops, two thousand five hundred Swiss, two thousand of the French infantry, and about fifteen hundred men fit to bear arms that followed the army. These troops formed a body of nine thousand combatants at the utmost, with whom he had to cross all Italy.

"This small army was not yet out of Naples when Ferdinand had effected his landing on the coast of Calabria, at the head of some Spanish troops. Charles began his march on the 20th day of May, not long after his coronation. He met with no impediment on his march to Rome, from which city the pope had fled. He passed through it, strengthened himself by the reinforcements collected from various garrisons which he had left in the strong places of the ecclesiastical states, and sacked the small town of Toscanella, which refused to receive his troops."

So far my author; but after quitting Rome, whither did Charles direct his march? First to Viterbo, thence to Sienna, and from Sienna to Pisa. Was he bending his steps to Florence? Was the long-looked-for hour coming quick to Lorenzo Visconti? Poor youth! he could not tell. His heart beat when he thought of it. He formed eager and passionate plans--he dreamed dreams of joy. He would press Leonora to an immediate union; he would carry her with him to France; he would take her to the sweet banks of the Loire, and in that old chateau he so much loved he would see melt away at least some few of those bright days of youth which God made for happiness. Oh! the cup and the lip--the cup and the lip! How short the span that will contain many and momentous events!

The army arrived at Pisa, and every one asked his neighbour what was the direction of the next day's march. No one could tell. The morning broke, and no orders were given. The citizens of Pisa rejoiced, provided for the French soldiers as if they had been brothers, rivalled each other in showing kindness and courtesy, and lost no means in testifying that gratitude which they might well feel, or of conciliating that friendship which had already proved so valuable.

The King of France busied himself with their affairs, endeavoured to moderate between them and the Florentines, and enjoyed all the pleasures of that city in the fairest period of the year; but though every day increased his peril, he spoke not of the forward march, and never hinted an intention of visiting Florence ere his departure from Italy.

At length Lorenzo could endure suspense no longer, and craved permission to absent himself for a few days.

"They must be few indeed," said the king gravely. "If you can ride thither in one day and back in another, you can spend one day with your sweet lady, my good cousin. On the fourth we march forward for Pontremoli."

The time was very short, but still a day--an hour with Leonora was a boon not to be neglected. It was night when Lorenzo received the permission, and ere an hour was over he was on the way to Florence with a small train. The air was clear and calm, the moon was shining brightly, near the full, and the ghost-like, dreamy beauty of the white marble buildings harmonized with the lights that fell upon them. Oh fair Pisa! city of beauty, of sorrow, and of crime! Standing in thy streets and remembering thy past history, one knows not whether to admire, to grieve, or to abhor!

The word was given, the gates were opened, and the train passed out, not numerous enough for any military expedition, yet comprising too many men, and those too well armed, for any party of mere pleasure, except in days of war and peril. Then the country between Pisa and Florence was regarded as peaceful, as those days were; but peace was a mere name in the time I speak of, and it was well known that armed parties had ravaged the adjacent districts ever since the arrival



of the King of France at Pisa.

Yet how calm and tranquil was the sky, how soft and soothing the early summer air, how melodiously peaceful the song of the choristers of the night, and even the voice of the cricket on the tree or the insects in the grass! The eternal warfare of earth and all earth's denizens seemed stilled as if the universal knell awaited the coming day.

Through scenes, oh, how fair! passed on Lorenzo and his train, twelve mounted men, fully equipped and armed, and half a dozen pages and servants, and as they rode, the same feelings-varied, but yet the same--were in the bosom of both leader and followers; a weariness of the turmoil and ever-irritating watchfulness of war, a sense of relief, a blessed sensation of repose in the quiet night's ride, and the peaceful moon, and sweet bird's song--a consciousness of calm, such as comes upon the seaman when the storm has blown out its fury, and the sky is clear, and the ocean smooth again.

The rudest man in all the train felt it, and all were silent as they rode, for few of them knew the sources of the emotions they experienced, fewer sought to analyse them, and only one was moved by passions which rendered the scenes and circumstances through which he passed accessories to the drama playing in his own heart. Lorenzo felt them all, it is true, but it was feeling without perception. The moonlight, and the trees, and the birds' song, and the glistening murmur of the river, all sank into his mind and became part of the dream in which he was living, and yet he remarked none of all these things distinctly, and gave every thought to Leonora.

"She will come with me," he thought, "she will surely come with me. What matters it that the time is short? It is not as if we were the mere acquaintances of a day. We have wandered half through Italy together; she has rested in my arms, and pillowed her head upon my bosom. She will never refuse to come, though there be but one day for decision and action. But then Mona Francesca, will she not oppose? She is one of those soft, considerate women of the world, who dress themselves at the world's eye, and regulate every look by rule. She cannot feel as we feel, and will think it easy for me to return a few months hence and claim my bride with all due ceremony--a few months, and a few months! Why life might slip away, and Leonora never be mine. The present only is ours in this fleeting world of change, and we must not let it fly from us unimproved. Yet Mona Francesca will certainly oppose. At all events, she will wish to consult some one, to shield herself under the opinions of others from the world's comments. On Leonora only can I rely, and on her must I rely alone. Here, Antonio, ride up beside me here: I wish to speak with you."

The man rode up, and Lorenzo questioned him much and often. He asked if there were not a church near the villa, and what he knew, if he knew anything, of the priest.

"There is a church some two miles off in the valley," said Antonio, "but I never saw the priest. The servants told me, however, he was a severe man, who exacted every due to the uttermost."

That was not the man for Lorenzo's purpose; and he paused and waited, and then propounded other questions, to which he received answers not much more satisfactory. At length Antonio exclaimed, with a laugh, "Tell me, my lord, what is it you want with a priest, and it shall go hard but your poor Antonio will find means to gratify you. You cannot want to confess, methinks, since you confessed last, or you must have sinned somewhat cunningly for me not to find you out."

"See here, Antonio," replied Lorenzo; "I must be back on the day after to-morrow at Pisa. Now, in a word, the Signora d'Orco must be mine ere I depart."

"Oh, then, my lord, take her home with you," said Antonio, with some feeling. "If your absence now has caused her such pain when you are but lovers, think how she would pine, poor lady, if you were so long absent from your wife."

"Such is my intention, Antonio," answered Lorenzo. "When I meet her again, I can part with her no more; but here is the difficulty: Mona Francesca will oppose our hasty union. It must, therefore, be private. Once mine by the bonds of the Church, and with her father's full consent, which I have in writing, no opposition can avail. She is mine beyond all power to separate us--she is mine, and for ever. Mona Francesca must perforce consent to her going with me to France, and, indeed, if she did not, her opposition would be vain."

"I wish you had brought more men with you, my lord," replied Antonio, "but that is neither here nor there. As we have begun, so we must go on. Then, next, as to a priest, which is now, I suppose, the all-important question. First, we must find one who is willing; next, we must find one who is sure; and, thirdly, we must find one who is dexterous. Give me but two hours, and I think I can make sure of the man. When I was telling you all about the Villa Morelli, I mentioned that there was a monastery just above, not a quarter of a mile up the mountain. You did not take much notice of what I said, for you did not know how serviceable it might be. Oh, my lord, you cannot imagine how useful convents and monasteries are on various occasions, nor what various sorts of men can be found within them. Now there are always many who have taken priest's orders, and in this monastery there is one, at least, qualified in every way to celebrate matrimony, or anything else you like. He is Madonna Francesca's director, and therefore must be a holy and devout man."

There was a slight touch of sarcasm in Antonio's tone, but that did not prevent Lorenzo from presenting the very reasonable objection that he was the last man who ought to be asked to perform the marriage ceremony of Mona Francesca's temporary ward without her knowledge and consent.

"My good lord is not much acquainted with priests and friars," said Antonio; "but just as certain as Monseigneur Breconnel steals the king's money just when his Majesty has most need of it himself, so will Fra Benevole marry you to the signora, and help to keep Madonna Francesca quiet and ignorant till all is over. Why, I have drunk more than one bottle with him; and for a sufficient sum--for the benefit of the monastery--always for the benefit of the monastery, you know--he will either give Mona Francesca such a penance for all the sins she has even wished to commit as will keep her in her own chamber all day, or he will drug her little cup of vino di Monte Capello, which she takes every morning, so as to make her sleep for four-and-twenty hours, or he will poison her outright and save you all further trouble about her, just as your lordship likes," and Antonio touched his cap with solemn irony.

"The two latter alternatives are rather too strong for my taste, Antonio," replied Lorenzo, "but the first will do well enough, if you can depend upon your boon companion."

"We can make him reliable, sir," said Antonio; "that depends entirely upon the ducats. Faith is a very good thing when it is of the right sort; but the only faith that is good is faith in God and the blessed Virgin. Faith in man must be tied with gold, and then it may hold fast. What am I to promise him if he perform the marriage ceremony, in the chapel of the villa, between you and the signorina some time to-morrow, and contrive the means?"

"Why, Cynic, he will demand the money in hand," said his young master. "Why should he trust to your faith if you will not trust to his?"

"We will both trust half way, my lord," replied Antonio, "and then it will be the interest of neither to deceive the other. If you please, we will give him half the money for his promise, and the other half after his performance. He shall have one moiety when he says he will do it; and the other when he gives you, under his own hand, the certificate of the marriage. What do you think he ought to have?"

"Whatever he asks," replied Lorenzo; "a couple of hundred ducats."

"Oh! the extravagance of youth!" exclaimed Antonio; "he would poniard his own father for a quarter of that sum. If I understand you right, I am to offer him anything he seeks under two hundred ducats."

"Nay, I placed not that limit absolutely, my good friend," answered the youth; "the truth is, Antonio, this marriage must take place at once. I will not leave my Leonora again, and now she can only go with me as my wife. Whatever he asks he must have. I have about five hundred ducats with me, and he can surely trust my word for more, should it be necessary."

"Heaven forgive us!" exclaimed Antonio; "you are almost blasphemous, sir, to suppose that a priest of the Catholic Church would set such a price upon matrimony when he charges so little for any other sin you please to mention. I will arrange the matter for you easily, now I know how far you will go. You have no mind, perhaps, to have any cardinal assassinated, or any rich lord put out of the way, for I dare say I could get it done gratis, as a sort of make-weight, when your lordship is so liberal about matrimony! But look upon that matter as all arranged. You have nothing to do but prepare the lady and obtain her consent, and I will let you know, within four hours after we arrive, the when, and the where, and the how."

"You have but a sad opinion of the clergy of your own country, my good Antonio," said Lorenzo, with a mind greatly relieved by his companion's promises.

"On my life, it is not of the clergy alone I have such a favourable opinion," replied Antonio, laughing; "from prince to peasant it is all the same thing, only the clergy have the best opportunities. Look at our friend Ludovic of Milan; look at your friend Cardinal Cæsar; pope, prince, lawyer, doctor, friar, it is all the same thing. We have got into a few trifling bad habits here in Italy, what between Guelphs and Ghibelines, popes and emperors. Those who dare not draw a sword, unsheath a dagger; and those who wish not to spill blood, because people say it leaves a mark behind it, use poison, which leaves none. Buondoni, who came near killing you, was, I do believe, one of the best of all the rascals in Italy. He was always ready to peril his own life, and rather preferred it. Why, he could have had you put out of the way by something dropped into a cup of wine or scattered on a bunch of grapes for half a sequin."

"What! in the Villa Rovera?" asked Lorenzo, in a tone of doubt.

"It might have been difficult there, it is true," replied Antonio, "and perhaps Ludovic was in a hurry; otherwise he would have had it performed, as they call it, anywhere on your journey, for less than it cost Buondoni to feed his horses on the road to Milan. Death is cheap here, my lord. But let us talk of business again. I had better lighten your purse at once of a hundred ducats, that I may be prepared when we arrive to go to early mass, which I can do safely, as I have nothing on my conscience but a small trifle of matrimony, which we are told is a holy state."

Lorenzo not only gave him readily the money he required, but would fain have pressed more upon him, for he was fearful even of the least impediment occurring to frustrate or delay the execution of his plan.

Throughout the livelong night he and Antonio continued to discuss every part and particular of the scheme they had devised; not, indeed, that there was anything more of importance to be said, but Lorenzo loved to dwell upon details which gave rise to happy thoughts, and Antonio had an amiable toleration for his master's passion.

Day dawned at length, and found the party of horsemen some five miles from the city of Florence; but their course was no longer to be pursued in that direction. Under the guidance of Antonio, they left the broad highway between Pisa and Florence, and began to ascend by a narrower and steeper path toward the villa they were seeking. It was a wild and somewhat savage region through which they now passed--beautiful, indeed, but stern in its beauty.

The sides of the Apennines in those days were covered with dense forests, which, long after, were cut down to take away their shelter from the robbers which infested them; and the oaks and chestnuts had even in some places encroached upon the road. In other spots, however, large masses of rock appeared; and in others, again, the path, having been cut along the side of the hill, displayed a grand view over the wide and beautiful valley of the Arno and the surrounding country. At the first of these gaps, where the open landscape presented itself, neither Lorenzo nor Antonio looked toward it, for both had matter of thought within which made them somewhat indifferent to external objects. They might have even passed the second and third without notice, but one of the soldiers who followed exclaimed, "That is a good large body of men, my lord."

"Ha!" cried Lorenzo, immediately turning his eyes to the open country. "Indeed it is, Parisot. There must be full five hundred spears."

"More than that, sir," replied the man; "but they are not coming our way."

"Nor going to Florence, either," remarked Antonio. "They are no Florentine troops, Monsieur Parisot."

"I do not know what they are," said the soldier, "but I know what they are not. They are not French troops, or you would see them in better order. Why, they are riding along like a flock of Sarcelles."

"Ay, I see," said Antonio; "not half the regularity of a flock of wild geese."

"Don't you think, my lord," continued Parisot, without remarking Antonio's quiet sneer at his boast of his countrymen's military array, "don't you think they look like one of those irregular bands which we sometimes saw in the Roman States? people said they were kept up by Cardinal Borgia. They go flying about just in the same way, shifting from flank to rear--now in line, now in hedge, and now in no order at all."

"They do look like them," said Lorenzo; "but I should hardly think the cardinal would venture his men so far as this."

"Oh, my lord, you cannot tell how far he will venture," said Antonio, "especially when he is only taking the dues of the Church. He and his holy father have a right to tithes, and those bands are merely sent out to collect a tenth of all the property in Italy. But what are they doing now? Some twenty of them have gone to that pretty little villa to get a draught of water, I warrant."

"Well, let us pass on," said Lorenzo; "they do not see us up here, or they might prove troublesome fellow-travellers."

But before he could move on beyond the break in the trees from which he had been observing the cavalry in the valley below, a thin white smoke rose up from the villa, and the detachment which had ridden up to it was seen retreating towards the main body of their comrades, who had paused upon the high road. The next moment a flash of flame mingled with the smoke, and then, from two of the windows, lines of fire were seen to extend along a verandah, probably of wood, which ran round three sides of the house. Another moment, and all was in flames, while indistinctly were seen several persons, apparently women, in the hands of the brutal soldiery.

Lorenzo shut his teeth close and rode on. He uttered not a word aloud, but he thought, "Oh that I had supreme power over this beautiful land, if but for a brief space of time, I would be a tyrant for the people's good--remorseless, cruel to all such fiends as these. But I would stop the crimes that make a hell of a paradise, or die."

The ascent seemed very long. Oh, how long the last portion of any journey seems when we are hastening to those we love! "Is it much farther, Antonio? is it much farther?" asked Lorenzo, repeatedly.

"Only a mile, my lord--only half a mile," replied the man. But the mile seemed a day's journey, the half mile a league.

At length the joyful words were heard, "We turn off here, signor." But still the chestnut woods

hid the villa from sight; and though Lorenzo now pushed on his jaded horse fast along the more level ground they had reached, some more slow moments passed ere he came upon the smooth, free turf-ground, bedizened with flowers, which Antonio had described at the approach to the villa. It opened out at a turn of the road very suddenly, and the young knight was upon it ere he was aware. But in an instant he reined in his horse, and was still gazing forward with a look of dismay and anguish when his men came up.

There indeed stood the Villa Morelli--at least what was left of it. There were the old towers firm and perfect externally, though the windows were cracked and broken; but the more modern edifice which was turned towards the west for the purpose of catching the full influence of the most beautiful hour of Italy, with its light graceful architecture, its richly-ornamented windows, and fairy colonnade, where was it?

Parts still stood shattered and toppling over, as if about to fall the next moment; part lay in fragments upon the terrace, and part had fallen inward, crushing the luxurious halls and splendidly-furnished chambers, while here and there a wandering wreath of smoke, and even a creeping line of fire among scorched and broken beams, told by what agency the ruin had been produced.

Old men hardened in the petrifying experience of the world, and men of iron souls created and fashioned for the sterner things of life, may be brought suddenly into the presence of such scenes, may even have personal interest in them, without feeling more than a vague general sense of disgust and horror at those who have produced them, and the sorrow which is natural to the human mind in seeing fair things blighted, either by gradual decay or sudden accident. But Lorenzo Visconti was not one of those. There was a certain degree of firmness--even perhaps sternness in his character, it is true; but he was full of emotions, and sensitive, and very young.

There had dwelt his young bride when last he heard of her; there he had every reason to believe she had been dwelling peacefully within a few short hours. Is it wonderful that, besides all the terrible fears which rushed in an indistinct crowd through his head, a thousand wild thoughts should crowd upon his brain and seem to paralyse its functions.

Where was she now? What had become of her? Had she been carried off by the baud of ruthless marauders he had seen below? Was she buried in those dreadful ruins? These and a thousand other fearful questions were flooding his mind like the waves of a sea stirred by a hurricane.

All paused in awe-struck silence for a moment, and then Lorenzo struck his horse with the spur, and dashed on up the terrace even among the still hot fragments. "Ho! is there any one here?" he cried--"is there any one here? For the love of God, answer if there be! Ride round to the back, Antonio. Parisot, take that other way to the left. See if you can find any to answer. But be quick--be quick! there is no time to spare."

"But what would you do, my lord?" asked Antonio, in a sad tone.

"Pursue the villains to the gates of hell!" cried Lorenzo. "I will, I tell you! quick!"

More than once Lorenzo repeated the shout, "Ho! is there any one there?" while the men were absent, and sometimes he would think of sending some of the men down to a small peasant-house he saw about half a mile below, and then he would remember that he might need them all at a moment's notice; and often would he mutter words to himself, such as "They dare not resist a French pennon. What if they do? Then die. Better to die a thousand times than live to think of her in their hands."

The few minutes the men were absent passed thus as if in a dream; but at length Antonio reappeared, bringing a man with him pressed tightly by the arm. It was a peasant of the middle age, who seemed somewhat unwilling to come where he was led, and was evidently afraid; but, if one might judge from the expression of his face, the dull, heavy look of despair, there was sorrow mingled with his fear.

"You need not hold me so hard, signor," he said, in the rich but somewhat rough Tuscan tongue; "I will come. I only ran from you because I thought you were a party of the band."

"Here!" cried Lorenzo, springing up to meet them; "tell me who has done this. What of the ladies who were here? Where are they? What has become of them? Speak, man, quick! I am half mad."

"Oh, signor, if you had seen your daughter carried away by ruffians you might be whole mad," answered the peasant, and his eyes gushed forth with tears.

"I am sorry for you from my heart," replied Lorenzo, in an altered tone; "yet, my good friend, give me any information in your power. My bride may be where your daughter is, and if so I will pursue them."

The man gave a hopeless, nay, almost a contemptuous look at the handful of men which followed the young lord.

"Never mind," said Lorenzo, well understanding what he meant; "only tell me what you know, and leave the rest to me."

"All I know is very little, signor," replied the man. "A little before daybreak, when it was just grey, I heard a great many horses go by my house yonder, coming this way, and, thinking it strange, I got up and looked after them. I then saw it was a great band of armed men. My heart misgave me, for my poor Judita was up here helping the people at the villa. As fast as I could I crept through the vines; but of course they were a long way before me, and I found that the way to the villa was guarded. I know not how long I stayed, for if it had been but a minute it would have seemed an hour, but I saw after awhile a bright light in the windows of that big old tower, and then the windows of the great new hall were all in a blaze. Everything had been silent till then--at least I could not hear anything where I lay hid by that big stone, covered with the old uva Sant Angelica--but just when the glare came in the windows, there were sounds made themselves heard--cries, and shrieks, and such noises as make men's hair stand on end. Then a whole party came hurrying out, with a fine, handsome man at their head--and he was laughing, too--who said to the first of those that followed, 'Put them on the horses and away. You are sure that fire has taken everywhere.' What the other answered I do not know, for just then I caught sight of the women they were dragging out."

"Who were they?" said Lorenzo, eagerly. "It must have been day by that time. You must have seen their faces."

"I saw no one but my daughter, signor," said the poor man, simply; and after a pause, he added, "and she was soon out of sight for ever. Her body will be in the Arno or the Mugnione tomorrow, and we shall be childless."

Lorenzo's head drooped, and for some moments he kept silence. There was an intensity of grief in the poor parent's tone which awed even his grief.

"Could you distinguish any of these men," he asked at length, "so as to know them again?"

"I saw nothing very clearly," replied the other--"nothing but Judita; only I know that one of the men called the other 'Monsignore.' He looked to me more like a devil than a cardinal, and yet he was a handsome man too."

"My lord, you can see the band from here," said one of Lorenzo's troop; they are taking the Pisa road. "They will fall in with our outposts, if they do not mind."

"Well, they must be followed, and, if possible, cut off," replied his lord, who had now recovered some presence of mind. "If they take their way toward Pisa we shall have them."

"Your pardon, my lord," said Antonio, "but will it not be better to go up to the monastery, and make inquiries there? Depend upon it, the good fathers did not stand looking on at the burning of the villa without marking all, if they did not do all they could. They had no daughters in the villa, and saw more than this poor man, depend upon it. Five minutes will take you thither. You can see one of the towers up yonder, just above the tree-tops."

"Well bethought," replied his lord; "we may, indeed, hear tidings there. But we must not lose sight of the enemy. Parisot, ride on to the verge of the rocks there. You can see them thence for ten miles, at least, I should think. Keep good watch upon them. All the rest stay here. I will be back speedily;" and, so saying, with Antonio for a guide, he rode on.

### CHAPTER XXX.

How much accident sometimes serves us--nay, how often our own follies and indiscretions lead us to better results than our wisdom and prudence could have attained!

"Conduct is fate," "Knowledge is power," are the favourite doctrines of those who believe they have conduct, or presume they have knowledge. Carried to the infinite, both axioms are true, but in every degree below the infinite they are false; and oh, how false with man! Every abstract, indeed, is often found to be a practical falsehood. The wisest and the best of men, from Socrates to Galileo, have, by the purest conduct, won the worst of fates; and power, either to do good or evil, slipped from the hands of Bacon just when he reached the acme of his knowledge. It seems as if God himself were pleased to rebuke continually the axioms of human vanity, and to show man that no conduct can overrule his will--no knowledge approach even to the steps of power.

It was unfortunate for Lorenzo that he had imprudently left all his men but Antonio below.

There were two old monks sitting on the rocks just before the great gates of the monastery, and talking with each other earnestly. Both started and rose when they heard the sound of horses' feet; but as the place where they stood commanded a full view down the road, they could see at once that the party which approached was not formidable in point of numbers.

In troublous times men built their houses for defence as well as shelter, and the monks had found it necessary to use even as much precaution as their more mundane brethren. The monastery was well walled, and the rocks on which it stood were fortifications in themselves; but all the skill of the builder had been expended upon the great gates, which were assailable from the road leading directly to them. Two massy towers, however, one on either side, a portcullis with its herse ready to fall on the heads of any enemies who approached too near, a deep arch behind that, with loop-holes in the dark, shadowy sides, and machicolations above, and then two heavy iron-plated doors, gave sufficient defence against anything but cannon, which were not likely to be dragged up those heights.

One of the monks, as soon as he had satisfied himself of the number of the approaching party, seated himself again on the rock; the other retreated a few steps as if to re-enter the building, but stopped just under the portcullis.

"What seek you, my son?" said the first, as Lorenzo rode up and drew in his rein by his side. "We are in great trouble this morning, and the prior, though unwilling to stint our vowed hospitality, has commanded that no one be admitted."

"I came to seek intelligence regarding those most dear to me, father," replied Lorenzo; "there has been a terrible act committed at the Villa Morelli down below."

"Alas! alas!" said the old man, "a terrible act indeed."

The monk at the gate had by this time drawn nearer, and was looking steadfastly at Antonio. "Why, surely," he said, "I saw you at the villa some weeks ago with the ladies Francesca and Leonora."

"Assuredly," replied Antonio; "you came down seeking Brother Benevole, and stayed for an hour to hear of what was doing at Naples. It is those two ladies we are seeking. My young lord set out last night from Pisa, and we have travelled all night, for the purpose of visiting the Signora Leonora and Madonna Francesca, and when we arrive we find nothing but ruin and destruction."

"Alas! alas!" said the old monk who was seated on the rock, fixing a very keen, and Lorenzo thought a very meaning, look upon the other friar; "alas! alas! it is very terrible."

"But can you give me any information respecting these ladies, good fathers?" asked the young lord, somewhat impetuously. "If you knew how closely I am connected with them, you would comprehend what I would give for even the slightest information regarding them."

"Alas! we can give you none, my son," answered the old man; "can we, Brother Thomas? In the grey of the morning we were disturbed by the coming of that fiend in the shape of a man, and some of us ran out when they heard the cries and saw the flames, but the prior recalled us all by the bell, and made us shut the gates and keep quite close within till the man and his company was gone."

"Of whom are you speaking, father?" asked Lorenzo, abruptly. "Whom do you call 'the man' and 'that fiend'?"

"Do you not know?" exclaimed the monk. "I mean that demon, enemy of God and man, calling himself Cæsar, Cardinal of Borgia."

"He shall answer me for this, if it be in the Vatican!" said Lorenzo, setting his teeth hard. "Come, Antonio, I must follow these men, and may chance to bring those upon them who will take a bloody vengeance."

"Stay a moment, my lord," whispered Antonio; "there is more to be got here--there is some news, and it may be good news, lying hid somewhere. If they saw nothing but what the good monk says, how does he know it was Don Cæsar? Let me deal with him. Good Father Sylvester," he continued aloud---

"That is not my name, my son," said the monk upon the rock. "I am called Fra Nicolo, though sometimes men call me Fra Discreto."

"Well, good Father Nicolo, then," said Antonio, "my young lord here, Signor Lorenzo Visconti, Knight, proposes to pursue yonder company of wicked men and bring upon them the whole power of the King of France, whose cousin he is."

"He will do a good deed," said the old monk, drily.

"But, good father, he cannot do so," said Antonio, "without food for his horses and men, and drink also. Now I will crave Fra Tomaso here to go into the prior, and tell him of our case. Ask

him to speak with my young lord in person, for he has a dozen or two of men below, and as many horses, but he did not choose to approach your peaceful gates with such a force."

"Brother Thomas can do as he pleases," said the old monk, "but I don't think the prior can feed so many, especially the horses; so there is not much use of his going."

Fra Tomaso, however, thought differently, for he immediately turned to go into the convent; and Antonio, who had dismounted a moment or two before, went with him as far as the inner gate, whispering eagerly in his ear all the time. Lorenzo did not perceive that the friar answered anything, but Antonio's face was much more cheerful when he returned than it had been after witnessing the ruin of the Villa Morelli.

The old monk who remained did not appear to have any great benevolence in his nature, or it was not excited by Lorenzo and his servant. "It is useless," he said--"all useless. There is the prior's mule: that is all we have."

"Oh, we and our horses are soon satisfied," said Antonio, in his usual tone. "We only want a little hay and water for ourselves and a little white bread and wine for our horses."

"I think you are mocking me, my son," said the monk, with a very cloudy brow. "I do not bear mocking well."

"And yet your Heavenly Master was both mocked and scourged," said Antonio, "and he uttered not a word."

How far the dispute might have gone between Antonio and Fra Discreto or Nicolo, had it remained uninterrupted much longer, it is difficult to say, for the worthy monk was evidently waxing irate; but at that moment came, almost running forth from the gates, a portly, jovial-looking friar of some fifty-five or sixty years of age, who took Antonio in his arms, and gave him a mighty hug. "Welcome! welcome, my son!" cried Fra Benevole, for he it was; "thrice welcome at this moment, when we need better comfort than wine can give us--though, Heaven bless the Pulciano, it was the only thing that did me good at first. Now this is your young lord, I warrant, of whom you told me so much, and whom the signorina loves so well."

The very reference to Leonora's name brought down upon the jovial monk a whole host of questions, but he gave a suspicious look to the old man, who still continued to oppress the rock, and he likewise professed inability to answer. But there was something in his manner which renewed hope in the bosom of Lorenzo, though it did not remove apprehension. He had spoken of Leonora in the present tense too, not in the past, and that was something.

"But come to my cell," he cried; "come and rest, and have some light refreshment; for though I must touch nothing myself, for these three hours, I can always cater for my friends."

His face was turned toward Lorenzo as he spoke, as if the invitation was principally directed toward him, and the young nobleman answered, "I am afraid, good father, I must await the return of Fra Tomaso, who has gone to bear a message to the prior."

"Oh, Brother Thomas will know where to find you," replied Benevole. "It was he who told me of your arrival and sent me to you. He will be sure to seek you first in my cell."

But the monk's hospitable intentions were frustrated by the appearance of Tomaso himself, followed by no less dignified a person than the prior himself, a nobleman by birth and a churchman of fair reputation. Lorenzo dismounted to meet him, and their greetings were courteous, if not warm.

"I will beg you, my lord," the prior said, "to repose in my apartments for a time, while your horses and men are cared for by the monastery. All attention shall be paid to their wants and comfort, and if you will explain to Brother Benevole where they are exactly, he will have them brought up to the strangers' lodging."

"They are down by the ruins of the villa," said Lorenzo, "and one man must remain there to watch that brutal band, for, God willing, they shall not escape punishment. But I beseech you, reverend father, give my mind some ease as to the fate----"

The prior bowed his head with graceful dignity, saying, "Of that presently, my son; let us always trust in God. As to your sentinel, neither he nor any need remain. We have a watchman in the campanile of the church. He can see farther than any one below, and will mark everything at least as well. I lead the way."

Lorenzo followed, leaving Antonio with his friend Benevole and the horses, and the prior conducted him through a wide court, past the church, and through the cloister-court to a suite of apartments which spoke more the habits of a somewhat luxurious literary man than a severe ecclesiastic.

"These are, by right," said the prior, "the apartments of the abbot; but an election, as it is called, has not been held for some years, and may not, perhaps, till a new pope blesses the Church. Pray be seated, my lord. I see you are impatient," he added, closing the door, and looking

round to assure himself that what he said could not be overheard. "Set your mind at rest. She for whom I know you feel the deepest interest has not been injured."

"But is she free? Have not those men carried her off, as they did others?" exclaimed Lorenzo, in as much impatience as ever.

"She is safe--she is in no danger," replied the prior; "let that suffice you for the present. If you proposed to follow those daring, wicked men to rescue her from their hands, the attempt would have been madness and without object, for she is not with them."

"Let me be sure that we speak of the same person," said Lorenzo, still unsatisfied.

"Of the Signorina Leonora d'Orco," replied the monk.

"Thank God! oh, thank God!" exclaimed Lorenzo, with a deep sigh. "And Mona Francesca?" he asked, after a pause; "you have said nothing of her fate, reverend father."

"Alas! my son," replied the prior, "her fate has been perhaps less happy, perhaps more so than that of her younger and fairer companion. It will be as God's grace is granted to her. Let us speak no more of this. Have you anything else to ask?"

"Simply this," replied Lorenzo; "you are doubtless aware, father, as you seem to have full knowledge of my relations with the Signora d'Orco, that she is my promised wife, with the full consent of her father and the blessing of the good Cardinal Julian de Rovera. It is absolutely necessary that I should see her, and see her speedily, as I am obliged to rejoin his Majesty of France at an early hour to-morrow."

"I fear, my son, that is not possible," said the prior; but the door opened to admit some of the *servitory* of the monastery bearing more than one kind of food and wine, and the good monk stopped suddenly in his reply. As soon as the refreshments had been spread on a small stone table, and the room was again clear, he pressed Lorenzo to take some meat and wine, saying, "I can speak to you while you eat, my son."

Lorenzo seated himself at the table, and, before he ate anything, filled the large silver goblet with wine, and drank it off. The mind was more depressed by anxiety than the body by fatigue. The monk watched him; for, removed as he was from much active participation in the world's affairs, he had long been a spectator of the great tragedy of human life, and comprehended at once, by slight indications, what was passing in the shadow of the bosoms around him.

"I fear it is impossible, my son," he said, "that you should see the lady so speedily as you wish. I can communicate with her, it is true, and can procure for you, under her own hand, assurance which you cannot doubt, that she is, as I have told you, safe and well; but more I cannot promise."

"Father, I do not doubt you," said Lorenzo, ceasing from his meal before more than one mouthful had been tasted. "You would not deceive me, I am sure; but you cannot tell what I feel--you cannot comprehend what I endure, and shall endure till I see her again--till I can clasp her to my heart, and, after she has escaped such a peril, thank God, with her, for her preservation. In your blessed exemption from the passions as well as the cares of secular life, you cannot even imagine the eager, the burning desire I feel to see her, to touch her hand, to assure myself by every sense that she is safe--that she is mine. Could you conceive it, you would find or force a way to bring me to her presence ere I depart for France."

"My son, you are mistaken," said the prior, in a tone of solemn, even melancholy earnestness. "I can conceive the whole. God help us, poor sinful mortals that we are. When we renounce the world we renounce its indulgences; but can we, do we, renounce its passions? How many a heart beneath the cowl--ay, beneath the mitre--thrills with all the warmest impulses of man's nature! How many--how terrible are the struggles, not to subdue the unsubduable passions, but to curb and regulate them; to bring them into subjection to an ever-present sense of duty; to chasten, not to kill the most fiery portion of our immortal essence! My son, you are mistaken; I can conceive your feelings--nay, I can feel with you and for you. God forbid that, as some do, I should say these impulses, these sentiments, these sensations are unconquerable, and therefore must be indulged. On such principles let the Borgias act. But I say that we--even we churchmen--must tolerate their existence in our hearts while we refrain from their indulgence, and that thereby we retain that sympathy with our fellow-mortals which best enables us to counsel them aright under all temptations. I will do my best for you, and, if it be possible, you shall see your Leonora for a time. When must you go hence?"

"I should set out by sun-down, father," replied Lorenzo; "the King of France must make a hasty march. Would to Heaven indeed it had been hastier, for the news we have is bad."

"Can you not remain behind?" said the monk; "you are an Italian, and not his subject, and it might serve many an excellent purpose if you could tarry here even for a few days."

"It cannot be, father," answered the young man; "were I to follow my own will, I would remain for ever by Leonora's side, but I am bound to King Charles by every tie of gratitude and honour. Those, indeed, I fear me, I might break in any common circumstance, and trust the king would



pardon me upon the excuse of love; but, father, this is a moment when I dare not, for my honour, be absent from his force. There are dangers before and all around him. A battle must be fought ere we can cut our way to France. His army is small enough, and even one weak hand may turn the chance for or against him. I had hoped indeed, and I will own it frankly, that my beloved girl, with her father's full sanction to our union, which she has, would have consented to be mine by a hasty marriage, and go with me to France; but, alas! I fear----"

"My son, my son," exclaimed the monk, in a reproachful tone, "you would not surely dream of taking her into such scenes of danger as you speak of: nay, that is selfish."

"Is she not in greater danger here in Tuscany?" asked Lorenzo.

"She is in none, I trust," replied the prior. "It was imprudent, beyond doubt, to come in such times as these to a defenceless villa; but in Florence she will be safe as any one can be where wrong and rapine rage as here in Italy. But what you wish is quite impossible. If you have duties that must take you hence, she has duties also that must bind her here. I will keep my promise with you; but you must give up vain wishes and purposes that cannot be executed. She herself will tell you that it is impossible. Stay a moment; I must ask some questions."

The prior rose and left the room. He did not close the door behind him, and Lorenzo heard him give orders to some one without to go up to the belfry and ascertain if anything could still be seen of the party who had burned the villa. That done, he rejoined his young guest, but did not renew the conversation, merely pressing him to eat. In a few moments, a good fat monk rolled into the room, and announced that the party of the Borgias were still in sight.

"They have halted, and seem regaling themselves in the gardens of the Villa Morone," he said; "but I see--at least I think I see, and so does Brother Luigi--that there are movements taking place about the gates of the city, and if they stay much longer the Signoria will most likely send out troops to drive them hence."

"Let them be watched well, good father, I beseech you," exclaimed Lorenzo; "for if the Florentine troops come forth to attack them, I will go down to help."

"What an appetite have some men for fighting!" said the prior, making the monk a sign to depart; "but, my son, you will be better here. Though our gates and walls may set them at defiance, I do believe, yet to know that we have some men whose trade is war within might save us from attack. Now, my son, will you sit here and read, or go with me to our church and hear high mass? The latter I would counsel, if your mind be in a fitting state; if not, I never wish any one to attend the offices of religion with wandering thoughts and inattentive ears."

"I will go with you, father," said the young knight. "I have much to be thankful for although some hopes may be disappointed; and my thoughts, I trust, will not wander from my God when I have most cause to praise Him for sparing to me still the most valuable of all the blessings he has given me. But is it really the hour for high mass? How the time flies from us!"

"It wants but a few minutes," said the prior. "Time does fly quickly to all and every one; but it is only towards the close of life we really feel how quickly it has flown. Then--then, my son, we know the value of the treasures we have cast away neglected. Come, I will show you the way. At the church door I must leave you, and perhaps may not see you again for several hours; but you can find your way back here and read or think, if the curiosity of our good brethren be too great for your patience."

"But you promised," said Lorenzo, eagerly, "that I should see the Signora Leonora for a time."

"If it be possible," replied the monk; "such was the tenor of my promise, and it shall not be forgotten. I think it will be possible," he added, seeing a shade of disappointment, or, rather, of anxiety, upon Lorenzo's brow; "but the continued presence of those bad men in the valley scares away from us those we most need at the present moment."

He explained himself no further, but led the way onward to the church.

It cannot perhaps be said that the attention of the young nobleman was not sometimes diverted from the office in which he came to take part; but there was a soothing influence in the music, and a still more comforting balm in the very act of prayer. They who reject religion little know the strength and the consolation, the vigour and the assurance which is derived even from the acknowledgment of our dependence upon a Being whom we know to be all-powerful and all-good--how we can dare all, and endure all, and feel comfort in all when we raise our hearts in faith to him who can do all for us. How often in the course of each man's life has he to say--and oh! with what different feelings and in what different circumstances is it said--"Help, Lord, I sink!" Nor is it ever said without some consolation; nor is it ever asked but it is granted--ay, some help is granted, either in strength, or in resolution, or in patience, or in deliverance. The fearful exclamation might show some want of faith in him who had been eye-witness to a thousand miracles, but with us it shows some faith also. We call upon whom we know to be able to help, and in the hour of adversity or the moment of peril we remember the Lord our God, and put our last, best trust in Him.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

Lorenzo had mounted the many steps leading to the top of the belfry of the church, and there, with the old monk who was keeping watch, he gazed over the beautiful valley of the Arno. High--high up in the air he stood, far above the rocks and treetops, with the whole country round, as it were, mapped out before him. The sun was rapidly nearing the horizon, and there was that undefinable transparent purple in the atmosphere which in Italy precedes, for nearly an hour, the shades of night; but yet all was still clear and bright, and the various objects in the landscape could be distinguished perhaps more sharply than in the full light of day.

"There they go," said the old monk who was on watch, pointing with his hand in the direction of the mountains. "They have a good guess that the people of Florence would not have them here much longer, and so they are taking themselves away."

Lorenzo turned his eye in the direction to which the monk pointed, and saw, winding along the mountain road to San Miniato, a long troop of horse, evidently the same which had been ranging the Valley of the Arno. He watched them over the several undulations of ground, now disappearing, now rising again into sight, till at length the foremost horseman reached the gap over the farthest hill in view, and one by one they passed out of the range of vision, except a small party which lingered for a moment or two on the side of the hill, as if taking a survey of the country they were leaving, and then, following their companions, disappeared.

"I must go down and tell the prior," said the monk; "but I may as well ring the bell as I go, to let the people of the country know they are gone."

Thus saying, he began to descend; but Lorenzo lingered still a few minutes on the top of the tower, while the great bell below him tolled out in quick, and, to his ear, joyful tones, the announcement to the whole country round that the brutal marauders had departed. Hardly had three or four strokes been given upon the bell when Lorenzo could perceive a number of women issuing from the various peasants' houses in sight, and taking their way by narrow mountain paths towards the monastery or the villa.

He followed the monk down, however, without much delay, and at the base of the belfry found the old man talking with the prior between the church and the tower.

"Come with me, my son," said the prior; "I can now keep my promise with you;" and he led him on through the close around the church, through the cloisters, and through a long, dimly-lighted passage, which opened by a key at the prior's girdle, and the next moment Lorenzo found himself in a small octagonal room, the arched ceiling of which was supported by a light column in the centre. It seemed well and tastefully furnished, and on one of the sides was a little recess, where hung a crucifix and a vessel of holy water.

"Wait here, my son, a few minutes," said the monk; "as soon as the women come up from below, the signora will join you. She can remain with you till the hour you have named for your departure. Be wise, be good, and may God bless you and reunite you soon."

The light in the room was very dim, for the windows consisted only of those light plates of marble which have been mentioned before; and the prior, turning before he departed, added, "I will bid her bring a lamp, otherwise you will soon be in darkness."

He went not out by the same door through which he had entered, and Lorenzo could hear for some moments the fall of his sandal upon the pavement, as if he were walking through a long and vaulted passage. The sound ceased, and the young man's heart beat high with hope and expectation; but still many a minute elapsed--and to him they seemed long minutes indeed--before any sound again met his ear. Then there was a slight rustle, with a quick, light footstep, and through the chink of the door, which the prior had left ajar, came a ray of light as from a lamp.

But poor Lorenzo was to be again disappointed. True, the door opened, and a female form appeared bearing a light; but it was that of a country girl, who, setting down the lamp on the table, looked up in Lorenzo's face with a frank good-humoured smile, saying:

"The signora will be here as soon as I get back to attend on Mona Francesca."

Thus saying, she tripped away, and in a few moments more, a sound not to be mistaken met Lorenzo's ear, the well known fall of Leonora's foot, which had so often made his heart thrill in the halls of the Villa Rovera.

He could not wait till she had reached the room, but ran along the passage to meet her, and

then she was in his arms, and then their lips were pressed together in all the warmth of young and passionate love, and then her face was hid upon his bosom, and the tears poured forth abundantly; and then he kissed them away, and, with his arm cast round her, and her hand in his, he led her into the room to which the prior had conducted him.

Let us pass over some five or ten minutes, for all was now a tumult and confusion of sensations, and words, and caresses, which it would be difficult to distinguish, and which had meaning only for those who felt and heard them.

At length, when some degree of calmness was restored, the quick and eager explanations followed. Leonora told him how the news of the king's arrival at Pisa had been brought two days before by the peasantry, and how she had waited, and watched, and could not sleep, and rose while day was yet infirm and pale, in order not to lose one moment of his beloved company. Then she told him that on the morning of that eventful day she had left her bed early, and was hardly dressed when the sound of horses' feet on the road had made her start to the window in the joyful hope that they had come at length. She saw strange arms and strange faces by the pale light of morning, but still she fancied they were French corps which she did not know; and, imagining that he must have dismounted and entered before his companions, she ran along the broad corridor to meet him. To her surprise and terror, however, she saw a stranger gorgeously habited and followed by two men in arms, and turning suddenly back, she fled towards her own apartments. She heard her own name called aloud, she said, and a sweet and musical voice bidding her stop; but, as if it were by instinct, she continued her flight. Then came a fierce oath, and an angry command to follow and bring her back.

"In Heaven's name, how did you escape, my beloved?" exclaimed Lorenzo, pressing her closely to him.

"Most happily," replied Leonora; "Mona Francesca--it was but yesterday--had made a great exertion for her, and shown me all the apartments of the villa, the passages, the corridors, and even the private way, which her husband constructed before his death, from the old part of the villa to the monastery above. He was a very pious man, she said, and often ascended by that passage to pray alone in the church. I know not why, but I had remarked the passage particularly and the secret door that led to it; and, without any reason that I know of, I had opened and shut the door several times, as if to make myself completely mistress of the means. It would almost seem that I had a presentiment that my safety might depend upon it; and yet I do not remember any such feeling at the time. Now, however, when I heard the footsteps of the three men following me fast, I darted past my own room, and, winged with fear, fled through the corridors toward the apartments of Mona Francesca; but I heard voices and loud words in that direction, and, turning sharply to the right through the old stone hall, I came suddenly on the secret door, and had opened, passed in, and closed it before I well knew what I was doing. I stopped as soon as I had entered the passage, and leaned against the wall for support, for I was terrified and out of breath with the rapidity of my flight. Every moment I expected to hear them at the door, and, though it was well concealed in the masonry, feared they might discover it and break in. I suppose that my quickness in threading passages which they did not know had puzzled them, for I heard no steps approach the door while I stood there. But other and terrible sounds met my ear. I heard the shrieks of women. Oh! dear Lorenzo, I heard the voice of my own poor girl Judita crying for mercy; and I fled onward to the monastery; hoping that the good monks might be able to give that help which I could not give. I know not well how I came hither, but it was through long passages, and up many flights of steps, and at last I found myself in the church. Nor can I well describe to you all that followed, for my brain seemed confused and stupified with terror. The prior, and, indeed, all the monks, were very kind to me; but when I besought them to go down and help the poor people in the villa, they shook their heads sadly, and pointed to the red light that was rising up over the tree-tops. The prior, however, brought me along these passages to a room beyond--it is in one of the towers upon the walls, I believe--and, leaving me there told me I should be safe, and that he would go to see what could be done for my poor kinswoman. Oh, Lorenzo, what a terrible half hour I passed there; and, at length, sorrow was added to fear, for they bore in upon a pallet poor Mona Francesca, living, it is true, and, I trust, likely to live, but dreadfully burned; her neck, her face, her hands, all scorched and swollen, to that you would not know her. She is suffering agony, and the livelong day I have sat bathing her with water from the cool well. I have had none to help me till a few minutes ago, for the peasant girls, it seems, have been afraid to come up as long as these terrible men were in sight. At length, however, the girl you saw just now arrived, and then the prior told me you were here, but must depart tonight. Oh, Lorenzo, is it so? and will you leave me again so soon?"

Lorenzo's tale had now to be related, and he told her all--the bond of honour which he felt himself under to accompany the King of France, and the hopes--the wild, delusive hopes--with which he had come thither. Leonora listened sadly, and for a few moments after he had done speaking she sat silent, with the tears glittering in her eyes, but not overrunning the long black lashes.

"You must go, Lorenzo," she said at length--"you must go. God forbid that I should keep you when honour and duty call you hence, though my selfish heart would say, 'Stay.' Oh that you had been a day earlier! Then all this day's terrible agonies might have been spared us, and even the pain of parting which is before us. Willingly--willingly, my Lorenzo, would I have been your bride at an hour's notice, and I do believe that poor Francesca would have gone with us. But now, oh Lorenzo! you cannot ask me to leave her. I know you will not. If you could see the agony she is

suffering, you would not have the heart to do it."

Lorenzo was silent, for the struggle in his bosom was terrible. She spoke in such a tone that he thought he might still prevail if he had but the hardness to press her urgently, and yet he felt that he should esteem, if not love, her less if she yielded. He remained silent, for he could not speak; but at length her sweet voice decided him. "Lorenzo, strengthen me," she said; "I am very weak. Tell me--tell me that it is my duty to remain--that not even love can justify such a cruel, such an ungrateful act; and, as I tell you to go because honour calls you away, oh bid me to stay because it is right to do so."

He pressed her to his heart more fondly than ever; he covered her brow, her cheeks, her lips, with kisses; he held her hand in his as if he never could part with it, and but few more words were spoken till the prior came to tell him his horses were prepared and his men mounted. Then came the terrible parting.

"Father," he said, "I leave her to your care. Oh! you can not tell what a precious charge it is! In a few weeks I will return to claim her as my own. Oh! watch over her till then. My brain seems disordered with the very thought of the dangers that surround her in these days of violence and wrong."

"Be calm, my son--be calm," said the prior. "Trust in a holier and more powerful protector. He has saved her this day; He can save her still. As for me, I will do all that weak man can do. But the first thing is to remove her, as soon as may be, to the city. Even such holy walls as these are no safeguard from the violence of man in these days; but in the city she will be secure. And now, my son, come. Do you not see how terribly a lingering parting agitates her? Do not protract it, but come away at once, and then rejoin her again, as soon as it is possible, to part no more."

Both felt that what he said was just, and yet one long, last, lingering embrace, and then it was over. All seemed darkness to the eyes of Leonora d'Orco as she sat there alone. All seemed darkness to Lorenzo Visconti as he rode away.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

This is a cold age of a cold world. Not more than one man or woman, in many, many thousands can sympathise with--nay, can conceive the warm, the ardent love which existed between the two young hearts new separated. But it must be remembered that theirs was an age and a land of passion; and where that passion did not lead to vice and crime, it obtained sublimity by its very intensity.

It may be asked if such feelings were not likely to be evanescent--if time, and absence, and new objects, and a change of age would not diminish, if not extinguish the love of youth. Oh, no! Both were of firm and determined natures; both clung long and steadily to impressions once received; and yet, when they next met, how changed were both!

They were destined to be separated far longer than they anticipated, and to show what was the reason and nature of the change they underwent, it would be necessary to follow briefly the course of each till the youth had become a man and the young girl a blossoming woman.

When Lorenzo reached Pisa with his little band, he found the army of the King of France about to march; indeed, the vanguard had already gone forward. In the retreat, however, the corps of men-at-arms to which he was attached brought up the rear, and thus he was spared the horror of seeing the butchery committed by the Swiss infantry at Pontremoli.

Riding slowly on by the side of his commander and friend, De Vitry, he conversed with him from time to time, but with thoughts far away and an insurmountable sadness of spirits. Indeed, the elder was full of light and buoyant gaiety; the younger was cold and stern. The cause was very plain; the one was leaving her whom he loved, the other approaching nearer every day to the dwelling of Blanche Marie. Many a danger and difficulty, however, hung upon the path before them. Hourly news arrived of gathering troops and marching forces, of passages occupied, and ambuscades; and at length, in descending from the Apennines towards the banks of the Taro, near its head, the scouts brought in intelligence that the allied forces were encamped at Badia, determined to oppose the passage of the river. It soon became evident that a battle must be fought somewhere between the small town of Fornovo and Badia, and the great numerical superiority of the confederate army rendered the chances rather desperate for France. With the light-hearted courage of the French soldier, however, both men and officers prepared for the coming event as gaily as for a pageant, but the lay and clerical counsellors of the king saw all the

dangers, and lost heart. Again they had recourse to negotiation, and the confederate princes, with cunning policy, seemed willing for a time to sell, for certain considerations, a passage towards Lombardy to the King of France. They knew that Fornovo, where he was encamped, could only afford a few days' supply of provisions, and there is every reason to believe that they hoped, by delaying decision from day to day, to starve the royal army into a surrender. The king's counsellors might perhaps have been deceived; but his generals saw through the artifice, and it was determined at length to force the passage of the Taro.

I need not enter into all the details of the battle of Fornovo, the only one at which the young King of France was ever present, but it is well known that if in the engagement he did not show all the qualities of a great commander, he displayed all the gallantry of his nature and his race. By sheer force of daring courage and indomitable resolution the passage was forced, and not by skill or stratagem. More than once the king's life or liberty was in imminent danger; and once he was saved by the boldness of a common foot-soldier, once rescued out of the very hands of the enemy, by Lorenzo Visconti. It may easily be believed that the affection which existed between the young king and his gallant cousin was increased by the service rendered, and to the hour of Charles's death Lorenzo received continued marks of his regard, though some of them, indeed, proved baleful to the young man's peace.

The victory at Fornovo proved only so far beneficial to the King of France as to enable him to negotiate with his adversaries from a higher ground. Slowly he advanced toward Milan, in order to deliver the Duke of Orleans, who, in bringing reinforcements to the monarch's aid, had been drawn into Novara and besieged by the superior forces of Ludovic the Moor. The position of both armies was dangerous. That of the king was lamentably reduced in numbers, and little was to be hoped from the French garrison in Novara, which was enfeebled by famine and sickness.

The army of the Duke of Milan, on the other hand, had much diminished since he commenced the siege, and his ancient enemies, the Venetians, were daily gaining a preponderance in Italy, which he saw would be perilous to his authority. The usual resource of negotiation followed. Peace was re-established between Charles and Ludovic Sforza. Novara was surrendered to the latter, but the Duke of Orleans was suffered to march out with all the honours of war, yielding up the city in conformity with the terms of a treaty of peace, and not of a capitulation wrung from him by force of arms.

The king paused for a short time in Lombardy; festivities and rejoicings succeeded to the din of war; large reinforcements from France swelled his army to more than its original numbers, and for some time the idea was entertained at the court that Naples would be again immediately invaded, and its conquest rendered more complete. But hour by hour, and day by day, came intelligence from that kingdom more and more disastrous for the cause of France. A fleet of French galleys suffered a disastrous defeat; the people of Naples rose against the small French force remaining in the city, and drove them into the two citadels; town after town returned to the allegiance of the House of Arragon; and the very day after the Battle of Fornovo the young King Ferdinand re-entered in triumph his ancient capital.

These events might well cause a change of purpose at the court of France; the work of reducing the kingdom of Naples was all to be done over again; and it was impossible for even the most oily flatterers of the king to conceal the fact that the attempt would be attended by difficulties which had not been experienced in the previous expedition. In fact, the people of Naples had learned what it was to submit to the yoke of France; all their vain expectations had been disappointed; they had found the burden intolerable; they had cast it off, and were resolved to die rather than receive it again.

In the meantime, however, from the aspect of the court and camp of France, no one could have supposed that it was a time of disaster and distress; all was gaiety, merriment, and lighthearted irregularity; and friendships and loves, which had been formed the preceding year, were now renewed as if neither coldness nor hostilities had intervened.

In the midst of all these events a small party left the camp of the King of France and took its way toward the city of Pavia. They went lightly armed, as if upon some expedition of pleasure, and, indeed, the country for fifty miles on the other side of the Po was quite safe and free from all adverse forces; but beneath the Apennines on either side lay the armies of the confederates, blockading every pass, and cutting off communication between Northern and Southern Italy, except by sea. Thus, with no offensive and but little defensive armour, the party rode securely on till they reached the gates of the Villa Rovera, where the two first horsemen dismounted and entered the gardens.

The aspect of all things about the villa was greatly changed since Lorenzo and De Vitry had been there before. There was a stillness, a gloomy quietness about the place which somewhat alarmed them both. In the great hall was seated but one servant, and when they inquired of him for the old count and the young lady, he answered,

"Alas! my lords, you do not know that his excellency is at the point of death."

Such was the state of affairs when Lorenzo and his friend reached the dwelling of Blanche Marie, and what resulted from it must be told hereafter.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

In change lies all our joy; in change lies all our pain. Change is the true Janus whose two faces are always looking different ways. I know not whether it may please the reader, but I must change the place and the time, and change it so suddenly and so far as to pass over for a time, events not only interesting in themselves, but affecting deeply the fate of those who have formed the principal objects of my history. Yet it must be so, for there are inexorable laws established by judges against whom is no appealing, which limit the teller of a tale to a certain space; and were I to relate in detail all the events which occupied the two years succeeding the events last mentioned in this book, I should far transgress the regulations of the craft, and perhaps exhaust the patience of my readers. Those events, therefore, must be gathered from others which followed, and, indeed, perhaps this is the best, as it certainly is the shortest way of giving them to the public.

There is a fine old chateau in the south of France, two towers of which are still standing, and hardly injured by the tooth of time. I have a picture of it before me by the hand of one who, born in lofty station and of surpassing excellence, was, as a beacon at a port of refuge, raised high to direct aright all who approached her, who lived not only honoured, but beloved, and has not left a nobler or a better behind. Her eye can never see these lines; her ear can never hear these words; but I would that this work were worthy to be a monument more lasting than brass, to write on it an epitaph truer than any that ever consoled the living or eulogised the dead.

I have the picture before me, with two great towers standing on the wooded hill, with vineyards at the foot, and many a ruined fragment scattered round, showing where the happy and the gay once trod, and commenting silently upon the universal doom. Oh! a ruin is the best *memento mori*, for it tells not the fate of one, but of many generations, and gives to death that universality which most impresses the mind and most prepares the heart.

Those buildings were all fresh, and many of them new at the time of which I write. Not a century had passed since the first stone of the whole edifice was laid; and sumptuously furnished, after the fashion of those times, was the great suite of rooms occupying one floor of both those great towers and of the connecting building, now fallen.

In one of these rooms was a fine hall, lighted by windows of many-coloured glass, with two oriels or bays penetrating the thick walls and projecting into air, supported by light brackets and corbels of stonework without. The floor of those bays was raised two or three steps above the ordinary level of the hall, and each formed, as it were, a separate room within the room.

In one of those bays, just two years after the event which closed the last chapter, sat a tall, powerful man of perhaps thirty-six years of age, dressed in those gorgeous garments of peace which were common to the higher classes in that day. His face was somewhat weather-beaten; there was a scar upon his cheek and on his hand, and the short, curling hair over the forehead had been somewhat worn away by the pressure of the helmet. On the back of the head and on the temples it flowed in unrestrained luxuriance, somewhat grey, indeed, but with the deep brown predominating.

At his knee, on a stool of Genoa velvet--it was her favourite seat--was a beautiful girl, seemingly sixteen or seventeen years of age, fair as a snow-drop, with light, flowing hair, and eyes of violet-blue, deep fringed and tender. Her head rested against his side, her arm lay negligently upon his knee, and those blue eyes were turned towards his face with a look of love--nay, almost of adoration.

They were De Vitry and Blanche Marie, some two months after their marriage. Her good old grandsire, on his bed of death, had committed her to the guardianship of the King of France, with the request that in two years he would bestow her hand upon the gallant soldier, if she loved him still. Nor had that love for a moment faltered, while, under the care of fair Anne of Brittany, she had passed the allotted time at the court of France; and now she was happy--oh! how supremely blessed with him whose character, without shade or concealment, with all its faults and all its perfections, had stood plain and straightforward from the first.

But why does De Vitry turn his eyes so often towards the window and gaze forth upon the road, which, winding down from the castle, ploughs its way through the thick vineyard, and, crossing the Isere by its bridge of stone, ascends the opposite slopes?

"Is he coming, love?" said Blanche Marie. "Do you see him, De Vitry? yes, you do; there is the falcon look in your eyes. They are upon something now."

"How can I tell what it is at this distance, lady mine?" answered her husband; "falcon, indeed, if I could see so far. There is a dark something moving yonder on the far verge of the hills. It may be a train of horsemen; it may be some country carts, for aught I know. But, Madame Blanche," he added, casting his right arm round her, "by my fay, I shall be jealous of this Lorenzo, if you are so eager for his coming."

"Out, false knight," she answered; "I defy you to be jealous of any man on earth. To make you jealous, is alas! beyond my power, for like a foolish girl, I have let you know too well how much I love you."

She spoke gaily, but the moment after she said, in a saddened tone:

"But poor Lorenzo! he is so unfortunate--so unhappy, De Vitry. I may well wish for my cousin's coming when I know that only with you and me he finds any consolation. And yet every time I see him I feel almost self-reproach, as if I had a share in making him so miserable. I loved her so; I believed her so good, so noble, so kind, that I foolishly planned their marriage long before they ever met, and did all I could to promote their love when they did meet; and now to think that she should be so faithless, so cold, so cruel, when she knows he loves her more than life."

"It is indeed strange," said De Vitry with a clouded brow; "she seemed to me as she seemed to you, one of the noblest girls I ever saw. She is not married yet, however. That story is false. I saw a messenger from Rome three days ago. He says she is living with her father, who is now one of the vicars in the Church in Romagna, and she is certainly unmarried."

"That is but poor consolation for Lorenzo," replied Blanche Marie; "he has too much pride, too much nobility of heart, to take her hand now, were it offered him after such conduct."

"I trust he has," said De Vitry; "and were I he, I would cast her from my thoughts for ever. Beauty is something, my love, but there must be goodness, too; otherwise one might as well fall in love with a picture, my dear girl. But tell me, Blanche, when last she wrote to you did she show any such signs of strange caprice?"

"It is near eighteen months since she wrote at all," replied the young wife, "and then her billet, it is true, was somewhat strange and constrained, but it gave no indication of such a change. Oh, how happy is it, De Vitry, to have a constant heart? How dreadful it must be to see one we love change toward us without cause. It is that which makes me pity Lorenzo so much, for it is plain he loves her still."

"We must have that away," said her husband; "he must be reasoned with, amused, engaged in some new pursuit, my Blanche. I will do my best, and you must help me. Look there! upon my life 'tis he. Those are mounted men coming down the hill; but they are bringing thunder with them, and if they do not ride faster the storm will catch them ere they reach us. Do you not see those clouds rising above the trees, looking as hard as iron and as grey as lead. By my faith! dear lass, you have never seen a storm in the valley of the Isere, and it is something to see. I have been in many lands, my Blanche, but I never beheld any like it, when the clouds rolled down from the mountains like black smoke, pouring forth a deluge such as no other part of the world has ever been soaked with since the days of Noah. In less than half an hour you will see the valley a lake, and the bridge quite covered. Your little heart will rejoice to think that the castle is built upon a hill, for I never saw the water come higher than the edge of the vineyard there."

"Does it come as high as that?" exclaimed Blanche, with a look of alarm; "why, how will Lorenzo cross!"

"He will not be able to cross at all unless he make more haste," answered her husband. "Pardieu, I cannot guess what has come to him; he who, for the last eighteen months, has never ridden up hill or down dale at less than a gallop, as if some devil were tempting him to break his own neck or his horse's, is now creeping down the hill as if he were at a funeral or a procession."

By this time De Vitry had risen and gone near the open window. The sun had near an hour to run before its course for the day would be ended. The clouds, as he said, were rapidly and heavily descending the mountains, and the rain could be seen at the distance of three or four miles sweeping the valley like a black pall. The sun was still shining bright and clear upon the chateau, and the bridge, and the vineyard. But a moment after De Vitry had taken his place, a redder and a fiercer light blazed fitfully across the scene, followed a few moments after by a peal of thunder which seemed to shake the castle to its foundations.

"Oh, come away, De Vitry, come away," cried Blanche Marie; "the lightning might strike you at that open window."

De Vitry turned round his head with a laugh, calling her a little coward, and then resumed his watch again upon the party of horsemen coming down the opposite hill.

"Ay, ride fast," cried the marquis, "or you will not be in time; but what are all the people thinking of? they have lost their way."

As he spoke the party on whom his eyes were fixed turned from the direct road toward the chateau, and took a smaller path, which, slanting along the hill side, led down the stream.

"Lorenzo is not among them," said De Vitry, abruptly; "he knows the way here as well as I do, my love; but that party of fools will get into a scrape if they do not mind; there is no shelter for ten miles down the river, and the road on the bank will be under water in ten minutes. Ha! they have seen their mistake, and are turning back. Now ride hard, my gallants, and you may reach the bridge yet."

The lightning now flashed nearer, the thunder followed close upon its flaming messenger, the heavy drops of rain began to fall, and poor Blanche Marie, who had much more taste for the beauties than the sublimities of nature, covered her face with her hands, while her heart beat quick. The next moment she felt a warm and kindly kiss upon her brow, and the voice of De Vitry said--

"Take courage, love, take courage; God is everywhere. In His hand we stand, as much in that fierce blaze and amid that thunder roar, as in the gay saloon with nothing but music near. Do not fear, my Blanche, but remember you will soon have guests to entertain. These gentlemen are coming hither. They have passed the bridge just in time, and five minutes will see them in this hall. I would not have them say that De Vitry's wife is afraid of a little thunder."

Blanche took her fingers from her eyes, and, looking up with a smile, put De Vitry's great strong hand on her beating heart, and pressed her own delicate hand upon it.

"See, De Vitry," she said, "just as your hand is stronger than my hand, so is your heart firmer than my heart. Mine is a very weak one, husband, but I will show no fear before your guests. I will be very brave."

The words were hardly uttered when there came another flash, and Blanche's promised bravery did not prevent her from starting and covering her eyes again; and De Vitry, with a laugh, turned to the window and gazed forth once more.

"By Heaven!" he exclaimed, "it is his highness the Duke of Orleans. I heard he was coming down to Valence, but never dreamed of his coming here. It is lucky the castle lies so near the road. But I must down and meet him;" and he hastily quitted the room.

Blanche was left for some time alone to give way to all her terrors at the storm, without any one to laugh at them, for De Vitry took every hospitable care of his royal guest, and spared his young wife the trouble of giving those orders for the entertainment of the duke and his train which Blanche might have found it difficult to think of in the perturbation of her mind at the time.

As every one knows, the storms on the Isere are frequently as brief as they are fierce; and the one in question was passing away when De Vitry led into the hall the Duke of Orleans, now clothed in fresh and dry garments.

Always courteous and gentle in demeanour, the Duke of Orleans, afterwards Louis XII. of France, applied himself to put his entertainers at their ease. He took Blanche's hand and kissed it, saying, "Your noble husband, dear lady, tells me you expect here to-night your cousin and mine, Lorenzo Visconti. If he come, I shall call it a lucky storm that drove me for shelter to your house, as I have much to say to him; but I fear he cannot reach Vitry to-day. The sun is well-nigh down, and the waters of the river seem as high as ever."

"The storm, too, seems going directly along his road," said De Vitry, "and if it reached him where I think he must have first felt it, he will know that he cannot cross the bridge tonight, and find shelter amongst the peasants' cottages out beyond the hills there. But I trust your highness will stay over to-morrow, as you wish to see him. He is certain to be here, I think, early in the morning."

"I must be away before noon," said the duke, "and in case he should not arrive before I go, you must tell him from me, De Vitry, that I have the king's permission to call any noble gentleman to my aid who is willing to draw the sword for the recovery of my heritage of Milan. Now I think a Visconti would rather see a child of a Visconti in the ducal chair of Milan than any other. Thus I fully count upon his aid toward the end of autumn, with all the men that we can raise. So tell him from me, De Vitry."

"You may count surely, my lord the duke, upon Lorenzo's going to any place where there is a chance of his losing his life," said De Vitry. "He is in a curious mood just now."

"I have remarked it," replied the duke. "He used to be gentle, courteous, gay, bright, and brave as his sword, but when last I saw him he had grown stern and somewhat haughty, careless of courtesies, and curt and sharp of speech. They said that some disappointment weighed upon his mind."

"The most bitter, your highness, that can press down the heart of man or woman," answered Blanche Marie; "no less than the faithlessness of one he loved. She is my cousin, yet I cannot but blame her for breaking so noble a heart. They parted with the fondest hopes. She promised to wait his coming in Florence, where they were to be united immediately. When he arrived there she was gone, without leaving letter or message, or announcement of any kind. He could not follow her to Rome, from the state of the country; and though he wrote, and took every means to make her know where he was, his letters remained unanswered, or were sent back. He might



have doubted some foul play; but a few words in her own hand, written carelessly on a scrap of paper, in a packet returned to him, showed too well that she was cognizant of all that had been done; and the last news was that she was married, or to be married to another."

"Then let him marry another too," said the Duke of Orleans; but the conversation was here cut short by the announcement that supper was spread in the hall below, and the duke's noble followers assembled there.

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

Lorenzo Visconti rode along but slenderly accompanied. A few attendants and one or two pack-horses formed all the train which followed him. A carelessness had come over him, not only of all display, but of life and all things that life could give. He rode, as De Vitry had described, at headlong speed. It seemed as if he were flying from something--perhaps from bitterly contrasted memories; but, as ever, black care sat behind the horseman, and no furious riding could shake him off. His eyes were fixed upon the ground, but he saw not loose stone or slippery rock, and never marked the heavy clouds which, having ravaged the valley of the Isere, were now rising over the hills upon his left, and threatening to pour down their fury upon him.

Grave and, for him, strangely sad, Antonio was following close behind him, watching with eager anxiety the obstructions in his master's way, and marking also the coming tempest. "My lord," he said, at length, with a somewhat hesitating voice, "were it not better to seek some shelter and to ride more slowly?"

"Why?" asked Lorenzo; "the road is good."

"Because, my lord," replied the man, "if we do not seek some shelter we shall be half drowned in ten minutes, and if we ride so hard, though you may go safe, we worse mounted men will break both our necks and our horses' knees, as soon as the sun sets, which will be in a quarter of an hour."

Lorenzo drew in his rein; but the only word he spoke was "Well?"

"We just passed a handsome chateau, my lord," urged Antonio, "and I am sure they will give you ready welcome there, if you like to rest there for the night."

"Whose chateau is it?" inquired his lord, with no great signs of interest.

"Is it that of Madame de Chaumont?" replied Antonio. "Do you not remember her and her beautiful daughter at the court last year? They were very fond of your society, and will gladly receive you, I will warrant."

"Yes, she is very beautiful," said Lorenzo, carelessly, "but light as vanity: what woman is not? But I cannot stay tonight, my good Antonio. My cousin and her husband expect me, and I must on."

"But you will never be able to pass the Isere, my lord," said Antonio; "that cloud has left half its burden there, depend upon it. Do you not remember how the river rises in an hour? I will wager a crown to a coronet there is ten feet of water on the bridge by this time. But here come the drops, and we shall have water and fire too enough before we have done. I have a hideous cold, my lord, and cold bathing is not good for me."

Lorenzo turned towards him with a cynical smile; but, before he could reply, there was a gay, ringing laugh came up from the gorge into which they were just descending, and two ladies, followed by several servants, some with falcons on their hands, some carrying dead game across their saddles, came cantering up. They glanced towards Lorenzo as they approached, and, at first did not seem to recognize him; but the next moment the younger exclaimed, "Dear mother, it is the young Seigneur Visconti. Give you good day, my lord--give you good day. We cannot stay to greet you; but turn your horse and ride back with us, for the roof of our chateau is a better covering for your head than yonder black cloud. Mother, make him come."

Lorenzo carelessly turned his horse as the gay and beautiful girl spoke, and a few words of common courtesy passed between him and the Marquis de Chaumont. But Eloise de Chaumont would have her part in the conversation, and she exclaimed, "Come, Seigneur Visconti, put spurs to your steed and show your horsemanship. I am going home at full gallop, otherwise the plumes in my beaver will be as draggled as those of the poor heron that my bird struck in the river. The haggard kite would not wait for him to tower. On! on! I will bet you my last embroidered

hawking-glove against an old gauntlet that my jennet reaches the castle first." Thus saying, she applied the whip somewhat unmercifully to her horse, and Lorenzo put spurs to his. The race was not very equal, for Lorenzo's hackney was tired with a long journey and hard riding; but still the young knight kept up side by side with his fair companion till they came to a narrow pass between a high cliff and a deep dell, where Lorenzo somewhat drew in the rein to leave the lady better room.

"Ay," she exclaimed, "I shall beat you. See, your horse is out of breath. Spur up, spur up, or the day is mine."

Whether Lorenzo did imprudently use the spur, or that the horse shied at something on the way, I do not know, but in trying to regain his place by the lady's side the hackney (as lighter horses were then called) swerved from the centre of the road and trod upon the loose stones at the side. They gave way beneath his feet and went rattling down into the glen, while the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled around. The gallant beast made a strong effort to recover his footing, but it was in vain; the ground yielded beneath his hoofs, and he fell down the slope, rolling over his master as he went.

"Jesu Maria!" cried Eloise de Chaumont, with a scream, "I have killed him."

That he was killed seemed for several minutes true, for he lay without sense or motion. Antonio and several of the servants scrambled down and raised the young lord's head, but he lay senseless still. Eloise had bounded from her jennet and stood wringing her hands upon the brink, and even Madame de Chaumont stayed for several minutes gazing down; but at length the rain became too heavy for her patience, and she said, "We can do no good here, Eloise. Let them carry him up to the chateau. We shall only get cold and spoil all our housings. Mark, look to that bird: its hood is all awry. Come, my child, come;" and, without waiting for reply, she rode on.

Eloise remained, however, not doing much good, it is true, but at least showing sympathy; and at length Lorenzo was raised, and with difficulty brought up to the road again. A deep groan as they carried him told that life was not yet extinct, and the rain falling in his face revived him as three of the servants carried him in their arms towards the chateau. When he opened his eyes Eloise de Chaumont was walking by his side, weeping, and, as soon as memory of all that had occurred came back, he said, with a great effort, "I am not much hurt, I believe. Do not grieve, dear lady."

"O you are--you are, Lorenzo," she cried, "and I did it, foolish, wicked girl that I am. But do not speak. We shall soon be at the chateau. Ride, Guillaume, ride to the priest of St. Servan--he knows all about chirurgy--bid him come up at all speed. Give the jennet to Jean Graille. Ride on, I say, and be quick. Oh, Seigneur Visconti, I am so sorry for my folly."

In a few minutes Lorenzo was borne into the chateau, and carried to a chamber, where, stretched upon a bed, he waited the arrival of the priest. But Eloise de Chaumont would not leave him, notwithstanding several messages from her mother. With her own hands she wiped the earth from his brow; with her own hands she gave him water to drink, and more than ever she called him Lorenzo, bringing back to the young lord's mind a suspicion which he had once entertained, but speedily dismissed as a vain fancy, that Eloise de Chaumont viewed him with more favour than most others at a court where she was universally sought and admired.

It skills not to dwell upon the tedious process of a long sickness and a slow recovery. Madame de Chaumont, a lady of a light and selfish character, though not fond of witnessing suffering, visited Lorenzo religiously once every day. Eloise de Chaumont, never accustomed to restraint in anything, was in his chamber morning, noon, and night. In his sickness she regarded him as a pet bird, or a favourite horse; and, to say sooth, it would seem there were other feelings too, for one time when he was sleeping he was wakened by the touch of her lips upon his brow. Guests came and went at the chateau, but their presence made no change in her conduct. When Mademoiselle de Chaumont was asked for, the reply was, usually, "She is in the Seigneur de Visconti's chamber;" and people began to wonder and to talk.

The circles made on the clear bosom of the waters by a pebble cast into them differ in this from those produced by the spread of rumour; in the one case they become more and more faint in proportion to their distance from the centre; in the other, they are not only extended, but deepened. The gossip of the neighbouring chateaux spread to the neighbouring towns, thence to wider circles still. They reached the chateau of De Vitry, and they reached the court, and many a circumstance was added which had never existed. Blanche Marie and De Vitry rejoiced, for they hoped that the tendance of Eloise de Chaumont might not only aid to cure Lorenzo from mere physical evils, but to apply still more efficacious remedies to his mind. She was young, she was beautiful, she was wealthy, the only child left by one of the first nobles in the land; and there seemed all the frankness and freedom of innocence about her, with a kindly heart, and a mind which was brilliant, if not strong. They rode over together to see their young cousin, and Blanche Marie was charmed with all she saw. She knew not how dangerous it is to give way to impulses where feelings are not backed by principles. She thought Eloise one provided by Heaven to wean Lorenzo from the memory of another more dear, whom she believed to be unworthy of him.

At the court of the King of France--the lawful guardian of the young heiress--the rumours of what was taking place at Chaumont produced some agitation. Eloise was a special favourite of

sweet Anne of Brittany, and the queen was vexed and alarmed. Men are not so easily affected by scandal as women, and the king laughed at what had grieved his wife. "My life for it," he said, "this matter will be easily explained. My young cousin Lorenzo is not one to peril a lady's reputation, and if he has done so he must make reparation. We will send for him, however, my dear lady."

When the king's letter arrived, requiring in kindly terms Lorenzo's presence at Amboise, that young nobleman, though able to rise from his bed, was by no means sufficiently recovered to take a long journey, or even to mount his horse. He assured the king in his reply, however, that the moment he could ride he would get out on the journey; and, to tell the truth, he longed not a little to leave the castle at Chaumont. He himself felt that his residence there was becoming somewhat dangerous to him. The memory of Leonora could not be banished from his mind. Disappointment, indignation, and even a certain feeling of contempt, which the indifference he believed her to have shown had generated, could not extinguish entirely that first-born, fairy love, which, once it has possession of the heart, rarely goes out entirely. But yet Eloise de Chaumont was, as the poet says, "beautiful exceedingly"--of a very different character from Leonora, more fair, more laughing, with less soul in the look, less depth and intensity of mind in the eyes, but still very beautiful. A sort of intimacy too, of a nature difficult to describe, had sprung up during her long attendance upon him; they called each other by their Christian names, and, although no word of love had ever passed between them, it was evident to everyone around that Eloise, knowing that her loveliness and wealth gave her the choice of almost any man in France, looked upon Lorenzo as her own, and would have been as much surprised as grieved to think there was a doubt of her becoming his wife.

Lorenzo, for his part, could not but be grateful, could not but admire. One thing, however, proved that he did not love--he saw in her many faults. He wished she was not so light, so frivolous. He wished he could see some indications of firm character and steadfast principles. "And yet," he thought, "where I believed they most existed they were the most wanting. What matters it to me whom I wed now? If Eloise can love me, that amounts to the utmost sum of happiness I can now hope for."

Nevertheless, when, at the end of another fortnight, he mounted his horse to proceed to Amboise, not a word had passed to bind him to her who had nursed him so kindly.

"When will you be back, Lorenzo?" asked Eloise, as she gave him her cheek to kiss at parting.

"I know not what the king wishes," replied Lorenzo, "or how long he may detain me--not long, I hope."

Those words bound him to nothing in the common eye of the world; but, as he pondered them while riding on his way, he felt that they implied a promise to return as soon as the king left him free to do so. And yet he hesitated, and yet he doubted, and yet he asked himself, "Can she make my happiness, or can I make hers?"

"It is well to be off with the old love  
Before we are on with the new,"

says an old song, and Lorenzo had reason to regret that he did not apply the maxim it contains to his own heart.

After traversing one half of France, and at Blois increasing his retinue by a number of his servants from Paris, he rode on to fair Amboise, where the king was then engaged in erecting those splendid buildings which since his day have been the scene of so many tragical events. He arrived at the castle early in the morning, and was immediately admitted to Charles's presence. The monarch received him kindly, saying,

"So, my good cousin, you have come at length; your illness must have been severe and tedious. What was its nature?"

"Some broken bones, may it please your Majesty, and a body all bruised and shaken by my horse falling down a hill and rolling over me," replied Lorenzo.

"By my faith! it does not please my Majesty at all," said the king, laughing. "Odds life! dear Lorenzo, if your horse had served you so at Fornovo, I should have been at the tender mercies of the Venetians, most likely. But they tell me you found consolation in a fair lady's society, and had plenty of it."

"Mademoiselle de Chaumont attended me most kindly, and gave me as much of her time as she could spare," replied Lorenzo, gravely.

"She gave you a little of her reputation too, I am told," answered the king, "and this is a subject on which I must speak to you seriously, my cousin. You are perhaps not aware that idle and malicious tongues have been busy with your name and that of Eloise de Chaumont. They say that she would pass more than one half the night in your chamber."

The angry blood rushed up into Lorenzo's face, but he answered at first scoffingly. "If she did, sire, it must have been when I was insensible to the honour," said Lorenzo; but he added, in a sterner tone, "in short, my lord the king, he who said so is a liar, and I will prove it on his body with my lance."

"There is an easier manner to clear the young lady's reputation," replied Charles, "for cleared, of course, it must be. She is a ward of the crown. Her father was one of our best subjects and most faithful friends, and your own station and fortune, as well as our affection for you, render you, of all others, the man on whom we should wish to bestow her hand. But, my dear cousin," he continued, in a lighter tone, "there was, if I remember right, a fair lady in Italy whose knight you were when we were there?"

Lorenzo winced as if a serpent had stung him.

"She is nothing to me, my lord, nor I to her," he said; "her own will has severed every bond between us."

"Then there is no impediment," said the king, "to your marriage to Mademoiselle de Chaumont?"

"None whatever that I know of, sire," replied Lorenzo.

"And you promise me, whatever may happen to myself," said Charles, "that you will heal this little scandal, produced by her great kindness to yourself, by making her your wife as speedily as may be?"

"If she will accept my hand," replied Lorenzo, "of which as yet I know nothing; for no one word of love has ever passed between us; but God forbid that any evil chance should befall your Majesty, as your words seem to anticipate."

"Who can tell?" said the king in a gloomy tone. "Of four children my dear Anne has given me, not one remains alive; they have perished in their beauty and their bloom. Why should I not perish with them? This world is full of accidents and dangers, and we walk continually within the shadow of death. My thoughts have been very gloomy lately, my good cousin," and he laid his hand affectionately on Lorenzo's shoulder; "and yet what matters it," he continued, "whether it be to-day, to-morrow, or the next day? Stretch life out as long as we can, it is but a span at last. However, it is well, in this uncertainty of being, to delay not one hour anything that may be ruined by delay. I will have the royal consent to your marriage with the ward of the crown drawn out this morning. Come to me towards the hour of three, and it shall be ready for you. The queen will then receive you more graciously, when I have told her all, than she might do now."

When Lorenzo returned at the hour appointed, he was conducted into that beautiful hall still to be seen at Amboise, where he found the king, the queen, and several attendants, apparently ready to go forth. Anne of Brittany did receive him most graciously; and Charles handed him the paper authorizing his immediate marriage with Eloise de Chaumont.

"We shall but give you time to bait your horses, Seigneur Visconti," said the Queen of France, "and then send you back to your fair bride. No stain must rest upon a lady's reputation long; and though this be but the work of evil tongues, without a shadow of foundation for the scandal, the sooner they are silenced the better. We are now going out by the old postern into the fosse to see a game of tennis played, in which, perchance, my lord may take part. We invite you to go with us, that all the world may see we give no credit to these wild rumours."

One of the chamberlains hastened to open the door of the hall, and the royal party passed out, followed by Lorenzo and the attendants. They took their way through the great marble hall below, and through a long, narrow corridor or passage in the thick wall of the castle. It was terminated by a low-browed, stone archway, with an oaken door, in passing through which Charles, miscalculating its height, struck his head violently against the arch, and would have fallen had he not been caught by Lorenzo, who came close behind.

For a moment or two the king seemed confused and almost stunned; but the accident he had met with was so commonplace and apparently insignificant that nobody took much notice of it. The ladies who followed the queen were inclined to smile, and Charles himself treated it more lightly than any one. He pressed his hand, it is true, once or twice upon the top of his head, and took off his bonnet for the cool air, but he declared it was "nothing--a mere nothing."

A paleness had spread over the young monarch's face, however, which Lorenzo Visconti did not like; but the royal party were soon in the dry deep fosse, and the memorable *jeu de paume* began.

Charles prided himself upon his skill in all manly exercises, and after looking on for a time, he took a racket, and joined in the game. He was, or he was suffered to appear, the best player present; but after he had played one score he gave up the racket, and withdrew from the game, remaining for a short while as a spectator; and Lorenzo remarked that, as the king stood looking on, he twice pressed his hand upon his heart. At length he turned to the queen, and the rest of the party who had accompanied him thither, and proposed to return into the castle, adding a few words to Lorenzo on his approaching marriage. The young nobleman walked nearly by his side,

but a little behind, and all passed the postern, and entered the narrow gallery or corridor, still talking. When they had nearly reached a flight of steps which led to the halls above, the king turned suddenly towards Lorenzo, saying, "Remember," and then fell at once upon the pavement.

A scene of indescribable confusion followed. Some of the attendants raised the monarch to carry him up the stairs, but the chief chamberlain forbade them to move him till a physician should be called. Some cushions were brought to support his head, and speedily a number of fresh faces crowded the passage; but the king remained without consciousness. Some broken words fell from his lips, but no one could discover what they meant, and, after a short struggle with death, Charles VIII. passed away, beloved and mourned rather than respected.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

Again let us change the scene. There is another whose course we must trace, from the fatal, the terrible moment when she parted from Lorenzo Visconti in Tuscany, to the death of Charles VIII. Ere we do so, however, it may be needful to notice a small incident which affected greatly her fate, without appearing to be in a direct manner connected with it.

In a magnificent room in one of those grand buildings, half palace, half fortress, with which Rome in those days abounded, sat Cæsar Borgia and Ramiro d'Orco, on the very day on which Charles VIII. began his march from Lombardy to France. The cheek of Ramiro was less pale than usual, and there was a slight gathering together of the eyebrows, not to say a frown, which in an ordinary man might have signified very little, but in one who had so strong an habitual command over his features and over his emotions would indicate to those who knew him well, an unusual degree of excitement. His voice was calm, however, his tone courteous, and from time to time a quiet smile belied the aspect of his brow.

"My lord," he said, "I must have some security. Not that I doubt your Eminence in the least. Heaven forbid! But all wise men like to have some guarantee for anything that is promised to them, and are always willing to give guarantees for that which they really intend to perform."

"I swear by my soul and my salvation," answered Borgia, "that if you will aid me in this matter--aid me in its consummation--I will molest her in no shape. She shall be to me as sacred as a nun."

"I am sure your lordship is sincere," replied Ramiro, "but if oaths were to be accepted at all, I would prefer that you swore in something you believe in, rather than by your soul and your salvation. Then as to your looking upon her as sacred as a nun, I have never heard that you regarded nuns as sacred at all. It is better we should understand each other clearly. I find, during your pleasure tour in Tuscany, you entered the Villa Morelli, had very nearly caught and carried her off, had she not been somewhat too light of foot for your gentlemen-in-armour, and that you then set fire to the villa in order to 'smoke her out,' as you expressed yourself. I have all the information, my lord, and although you are pleased to pass the matter off as a wild caprice to gratify your soldiery with a few fair captives, without any cognizance of her being in the villa, yet the answers to the inquiries you caused to be made at Florence should have satisfied you that she could be nowhere else. Now I believe I can aid you to the very man you want; and, as you are somewhat impatient, can do it without delay; but I must, in the first place, have some strong place put in my possession, where my daughter can be more safe than she was in the Villa Morella, until such time as her lover becomes her husband, and she leaves Italy for a somewhat quieter land."

Cæsar Borgia laughed low and quietly.

"Now what a strange thing is this that men call morality and virtue!" he exclaimed, with a bitter sneer. "Not the chameleon changes colour more frequently, and more completely according to the things around. But we have no time for philosophical reflections, my dear Ramiro. Tell me, are these men near at hand?"

"They are here in Rome," replied Ramiro d'Orco. "In fact, my lord, being a man of no great wealth and no power, I judged it expedient in coming here in order to seek for both, to gather round me at times serviceable men from various states of Italy, who might supply me with a kind of authority tantamount to that which I did not possess. Your Eminence's people, it seems, fail you at this step, although, God wot, I should have thought they had few scruples left by this time. I am willing to aid you with mine, provided you insure me against some little frailties of your Eminence, which might lead to things displeasing to me."

"Well, well, send the men to me," said Cæsar Borgia; "it shall be done."

"It must be done before they come here, my lord," replied Ramiro d'Orco.

A flush passed over the young cardinal's countenance; but he said, starting up suddenly--

"Well, wait here till I return. I must get the donation from his Holiness."

"Remember, I must have all rights and privileges--of high and low justice--of war and of defence, with only reservation of homage of the Holy See. I know not what it is exactly that your Eminence requires these men to do; but they have strong stomachs, and are not likely to be nauseated by trifles."

"I doubt not they are by no means dainty," replied Borgia, and he left the room.

Ramiro d'Orco remained alone for more than an hour, during which he hardly moved his position. One sentence did escape his lips just after Cæsar Borgia left him. "This man is angry," he said, "and his anger is dangerous." What he thought afterward I know not; probably it was of self-preservation, for he drew his dagger, and looked all along the blade, examining most carefully a small groove which extended from the hilt to the point, then sheathed it again, and seemed to fall into quiet meditation.

At length, when it was well-nigh dark, the door opened again, and the cardinal re-entered with a parchment in his hand. His face was now all placid and benign, and advancing toward Ramiro, he said, "I have been long, my friend; but if you knew how much I have had to do in one short hour, you would say I had been expeditious. There--that paper gives you Imola and its dependencies, with all the rights and privileges you require. It took me one half the time to persuade his Holiness to grant it. Had he known to what it tended, he would have cut off his right hand ere he signed it."

"I thank your Eminence sincerely," replied Ramiro, taking the parchment; "mutual benefits bind men together. They must never be all on one side. Either I miscalculate my own powers, or you shall have the worth of this gift in a few hours in services of the most acceptable kind. Now let us know what you want done."

"I want a man removed from my path," said Borgia, abruptly; "one whose shadow is too tall for me--who stands between me and the sun."

"That is easily done, my lord," replied Ramiro d'Orco, "there is such a river as the Tiber, and men will fall in at times, especially when they are either drunk or badly wounded."

"You catch my meaning readily," replied Borgia. "It were done easily, as you say, Ramiro, were this a common case, but there are men upon whom vulgar assassins would fear to try their steel."

"They must have faint hearts or poor brains," replied Ramiro. "A man is but a man, and a fisherman's life is as good to him as a cardinal's. It is as valuable, too, in the eye of the law; and he who can conceal one deed can conceal another. May I know at what quarry you wish me to let loose the hounds?"

Cæsar Borgia rose, and walked slowly up and down the room. There was something that moved him--that troubled him. What could it be? Remorse? No, he knew no remorse nor pity. The human heart will sometimes, in its dark recesses, conceive things so horrible, that, though it will retain and nourish them as its most cherished offspring, it will dread that any other eye should see them, and long to build around them, like the Cretan queen, a dark and intricate edifice, to hide them for ever from man's sight. It might be this that moved him. He had need of aid; he had need of instruments; he was obliged to speak that which he fain would have had done but never uttered. His beautiful countenance was overshadowed by the expression of a demon--not a triumphant, but a suffering demon; his eyes were fixed upon vacancy, and his broad, tall forehead was covered with a cold dew. At length he seated himself again close to Ramiro d'Orco, and in a voice low but distinct, said--

"My friend, whoever will attain great power must not suffer impediments to be in his way. He must remove them, Ramiro. Nor must one prejudice of man, one canting maxim of priests--not even of those habitual weaknesses which are implanted in us during childhood, and reared and nourished by women and servants, remain to stumble at. Who, think you, has most kept me from the light since I was born? Who, without striving, has won all the prizes in the games of life, and left me nothing but the fragrance of his banquet?"

It was nearly dark, and they could hardly see each other's faces, so that the paleness which spread over Ramiro d'Orco's face escaped the eyes of his companion. Ramiro answered nothing, and Borgia went on.

"When this mighty city was founded, two brothers, equal in power, laid it out and planned it. One was feeble as compared with the other, and the stronger mind soon saw that there was not room for two. Had Remus lived, what had Rome been now? A village in a marsh. But his great and glorious brother knew well what course to take in founding a new dominion, and he took it. Nor is such conduct uncommon nowadays with those who have strong hearts and seek great

objects. Look at that mighty people whom we poor fools fear and call infidels. Have we ever seen, since the days of Rome's greatest glory, a more powerful, energetic, conquering race than the Saracens? Does the sultan, or caliph, or whatever he may be, suffer his power to be shaken or his course to be impeded by a weak horde of brothers? No, no. He sends out of the troubles of life those who are not gifted for life's mighty contests. Why, this man Bajazet has paid three hundred thousand ducats for the dead body of his brother Zizim, lest perchance he should some day trouble his repose. Shall I be more scrupulous when the Duke of Gandia builds up a wall between me and my right course? No, Ramiro, no! I am about to cast off these priestly robes, that only trammel me, to pursue the path which nature by a mistake opened him; to strive in arms and policy for the great designs of ambition; and I would have the course cleared before me. Do you understand me now, Ramiro?"

"I think I do, my lord," replied Ramiro d'Orco; but Borgia went on without attending to him.

"A mistake of nature, did I say? a blunder--a gross blunder. Had I had Gandia's opportunities, should I have neglected them as he has done? What should I have been now? What would my friends have been? This miserable cardinalate, what does it give me? Not enough to reward a horse-boy. Give me but room, and I will make sure to carve me a principality out of this land which will enable me to raise my name on high, and recompense all who serve me. I will so work the dissensions of these States, that if I bring them all not under my heel, I will bind a sufficient number in a fasces to render my power unassailable. But I must have room, Ramiro, I must have room; and I must have it quickly. Between this hour and my father's death, who can say what time will be allowed me? Yet all must be done within that space; and if I pause and hesitate at the first step, the precious moment will have slipped by. Gandia must die, my friend. He bars my way, he extinguished my light. An accident made him my elder brother; we must have some accident which shall leave me without one. Now, then, you know all. Can you help me? How can you help me?"

"I am too old to help you with my own hand, my lord," replied Ramiro d'Orco, "but I have those who can and will. You need not explain aught to them. You need never name the man, but merely designate him by outward signs. You know his haunts--his habits. Let them watch for him in some convenient place, and treat him as they would some gay gallant who has raised the jealousy of some noble husband."

"But it must be done quickly, Ramiro," replied the other. "In a few days I must quit Rome for Naples, and I would have it finished before I go."

"That is easy too," replied Ramiro d'Orco. "You must learn where he may be found. Give them but the hour and place, and they will spare you all future trouble."

Cæsar Borgia did not seem altogether satisfied. He sat silent, with his eyes fixed upon the ground, gnawing his lower lip; and, after a moment's pause, passed apparently in intense thought, Ramiro added,

"There is but one way, my lord, in which this thing can be done properly and well. You shall see the men yourself; you can be either incognito or not, as you please: but deal with them separately. Four will be enough, for I know that each man I send you is equal to a dozen common cut-throats. You have but to tell me where and when they shall come to you, and I will have them there, one by one, with a quarter of an hour between their visits."

"You are, indeed, a good deviser, my friend Ramiro," replied Borgia, with a well-pleased look. "No witness to my conversation with either. They can meet and arrange their plans afterward, but that commits not me. As to incognito it is hardly possible and hardly needful. My face is too well known in Rome, and my word better than any single bravo's."

"When shall I send them, my lord?" asked Ramiro d'Orco.

"This night--this very night," answered Borgia, eagerly; "no time is to be lost. Such things should be hardly thought of ere they be executed. The deed should tread upon the heels of the determination."

"And here?" asked Ramiro.

"Ay, even here," replied Borgia. "Strange people come here sometimes my Ramiro."

"Then I hasten to fulfil your lordship's will," replied his companion. "Lay not your finger on my household gods, and you will find no one to serve you better. I have already given you some proof of it by throwing such nets around my good cousin, the Cardinal Julian, that all his enmity toward your father has proved impotent as yet. In this matter you shall find that I can be serviceable too."

"As to your household gods or goddesses, dear Ramiro," replied Borgia, with a light laugh, "be under no fear. I was a fool about that business of the villa. I knew not that you would take the thing so much to heart, for I am too wise to risk the loss of a strong friend for a light love. You told me just now to swear by something I believed in. I swear by my ambition, Ramiro, that I will never seek your daughter, or trouble her again. May fortune never favour me if I do! You will believe that oath, Ramiro?"

"It is the most binding your Eminence could take," replied d'Orco, drily; "and now I take my leave, for I believe with you, that if this is to be done at all, it should be done at once. Yet one word more; as you seek no incognito, I will send you a man who knows you already, and whom you know. He is better and more trusty than one of those I thought of. He has been bred in a rare school for such operations. Buondoni of Milan was his tutor, and Ludovic the Moor the regent of the university where he studied."

"Ah! who is he?" asked Borgia, with a smile. "He should be a great professor if he have any genius."

"Oh, he is a ripe scholar, and a man of much ability," answered Ramiro. "He knows the course of the jugular vein, and the exact position of the heart, as if he were an anatomist. This is no other than our good friend, Friar Peter. He may come to you to-night without his robes on, but you will find Pierre Mardocchi as good a devil as any friar of them all. But we waste time, and again I take my leave."

What were the feelings of Ramiro d'Orco as he left the Borgia palace would be difficult to say. He was a man of few scruples, and hardened in that worst of all philosophies, which some even in our own day are so eager to teach, the main axiom of which is, that all men are equally bad, and bold crime is superior to timid vice by the great element of courage. It is hardly possible for a misanthropist to be anything but a villain. And yet, although he would not have shrunk from any ordinary crime, there was something in the calm determination of Borgia to murder his own brother--ay, and even in the arguments he had used to palliate, if not justify the act, which had sent the blood back from his cheek and from his lips, and it seemed to stagnate for a moment.

But short consideration was needed to show him that there was but one course left for him to pursue with any chance of safety. The dangerous confidence which Cæsar Borgia had placed in him did not admit of any choice but between death and crime. He must be an accomplice or he must be an enemy; and to be Cæsar Borgia's enemy, for any man unarmoured in mighty power, was to stand upon the brink of the grave. All remorse, all hesitation, therefore, were quickly done away. "I must serve him well," he thought--"must help him to accomplish the deed--must teach him he cannot do without me. Then his own interest will make him my friend in acts, if not in heart."

Not three quarters of an hour had passed ere a friar presented himself at the Borgia palace. He stayed some twenty minutes, and ere he left another man was admitted to the cardinal--a man of swaggering military air, who had lost one eye, apparently in fight. These two came forth together, crossed over to the other side of the street, and stood there conversing for some time under an archway. During the next half hour, two others, each of whom had previously visited the Borgia palace, were added to the group, and it must be admitted that four more consummate scoundrels have seldom been gathered together.

On the following night there was a great entertainment at the house of Rosa Vanozza, the mother of the Borgias, the concubine of the pope. Guest after guest departed, some with lights to guide their steps, some apparently not so willing that the course they took should be marked. There was a servant, richly dressed, who stood in the square opposite the house, who scanned every group as it came out, and at the farther corner of the square were three or four men, discussing, it would seem, some knotty point with Italian vehemence of gesture.

Though apparently indifferent to everything but their own conversation, the eyes of these men also ran over each group that came from the Casa Vanozza. All passed by, however, without their moving; the lights wound away through the narrow streets, and all became darkness in the square. The men then moved on towards the servant, who still remained where he had been stationed before, as if intending to pass him; but just at the moment they were doing so, he staggered some paces with a groan, and fell upon the pavement. The men returned to the spot where they had been previously standing.

A few minutes after, two gay-looking young cavaliers came forth from Vanozza's house, and walked partly across the square together at some distance from where the dead man lay. One of them looked round, saying, "Where can my valet be? The dog has grown weary of waiting, I suppose. Have you no servants with you, Cæsar?"

"No," replied the other, "I have no fear of walking the streets of Rome alone--I am so beloved, you know, Gandia," and he added a short bitter sort of a laugh.

"Well, I take this street to the right," said the Duke of Gandia. "I have some business down near San Jacomo."

"Good night," said the other. "I know where you are going, Gandia. You can't cheat me."

"Good-night, cardinal," replied the duke, laughing, and they parted.

The same night, a few hours afterward, a boatman upon the Tiber, watching a load of wood which he had landed near the church of St. Jerome, and lying apparently asleep in his boat, saw two men come forth from the narrow alley which ran by the side of the church, and look cautiously all round, up one street and down another, as if to insure that all were free from passengers. Everything was still about the city--no step was heard, no moving object seen--and



the two men returned to the alley whence they had issued forth.

Shortly after, four men appeared at the mouth of the alley, one of whom was on horseback, and all approached at a quick pace toward a spot on the banks of the Tiber not more than ten yards from the boat in which the man was watching. When they came near he perceived that the horseman had the corpse of a dead man behind him, flung carelessly over the crupper, with the head and arms hanging over on one side, and the feet and legs on the other. When near the river, the horseman wheeled his horse and backed it to the brink. His companions then took the body from behind him, swung it to and fro several times to give it greater impetus, and then cast it as far as they could into the Tiber. The horseman then turned and gazed upon the shining surface of the river, upon which the moon was now pouring a flood of light.

"What is that black thing floating there?" he asked.

"It is his cloak," replied one of the others.

"Cast some stones upon it quick," said the horseman. His orders were obeyed, and the cloak disappeared.

When the boatman, many days afterward, told his story, upon being questioned as to whether he had seen anything particular on the fatal Wednesday night, he was asked with some surprise why he had not given information at once. He answered that within the last few years he had seen more than a hundred dead thrown into the Tiber, and had never considered it any business of his.

On the following day Rome was startled with the intelligence that the Duke of Gandia, the pope's eldest son--the only one, indeed, who possessed in any degree the love or respect of the people--was missing; and sinister rumours spread around.

But there was one man within the gates of Rome who knew the whole on the Wednesday night. Cæsar Borgia went not to bed when he returned from his mother's entertainment; but, dismissing all his train to rest, he waited for news of the events which he was well aware were to happen. I might give a fanciful picture of the agitation of his mind--of the listening ear and the straining eye, and the pallid cheek, and the quivering lip--and it might have every appearance of verisimilitude; for at that moment a brother was being murdered by his order. But it was not so. He sat upon velvet cushions, playing with a small, silky-haired monkey. He seemed as thoughtless, careless, and sportive as the poor beast itself. For half an hour he amused himself thus. He teased it, he irritated it, and then he soothed it. Again he teased it, and at length the monkey bit him, when, seizing it by the legs, he dashed its head against the floor, and the poor beast lay dead at his feet. He washed the blood from his hand with a handkerchief, and stood gazing at the dead brute with a face that betokened no grief or regret. At length he kicked the body into a corner, murmuring, "People must not bite me."

People! Did he think that monkey was his brother?

The only time when he showed some degree of agitation was when more than an hour and a half had elapsed since his return, and yet no tidings arrived. "Can they have failed?" he said, in a low voice; "can they have failed? Oh no, impossible!" and, sitting down again--for he had risen while the momentary fear crossed his mind--he took up a book and read some love songs of that day. Nearly another hour passed, and then a step was heard upon the staircase. The next instant a friar entered the room, and silently closed the door behind him.

"It is done your Eminence," said the man, approaching Borgia, and speaking low and quietly.

"What have you done with the body?" asked the cardinal.

"It is at the bottom of the Tiber," replied Mardocchi, "I am somewhat late, for we had to drag him into Michelotto's house, near St. Jerome's, and we did not like to carry him to the river bank as long as a single soul could be seen moving in the streets."

"Right--right," said Cæsar Borgia! "that might have been ruinous."

"Not an eye saw," said Mardocchi, "though he fought for a minute or two; for Michelotto missed his first blow, and it took nine wounds to dispatch him. Some one must have given him three. I only gave him two, but they were good ones. One was between the throat and the breast-bone; the other, which was the best, was in the middle of the left side; that brought him down, and he never moved or spoke after that."

"You are a good and faithful fellow," replied Borgia, "and have bound you to me for ever. You shall take away with you to-night the ducats I promised yourself and your companions; but that ring is for yourself, and engages you in my particular service."

Mardocchi took the ring and held it in his hand, apparently hesitating.

"I beg your Eminence to pardon me," he said, at length, "but I cannot quit the Lord Ramiro."

"Ha! do you love the good lord so much?" asked Borgia.

"No, your Eminence, I do not love him at all," replied the friar; "but--but--I have an object in staying with him."

"Speak out--speak out, Mardocchi," said Cæsar Borgia; "you have nothing to fear from me, and if I can help you, I will."

"It is a long story, my lord," replied the friar; "but to tell you as shortly as may be. The signor's daughter, it seems, is to be married shortly to young Lorenzo Visconti. Now I have an old grudge against that young man. I have promised not to practise against his life, and I will keep my promise, for I always do; but I have not promised not to do him all the harm I can, for revenge I will have, and I can only have it by staying with Ramiro d'Orco."

"That suits me well," replied Cæsar Borgia. "You shall be my servant, Mardocchi, but not quit the good lord. You may remain with him, go with him where he goes, serve him against all men except me; but you will remember you are mine, and be ready to serve me at a moment's notice. I need such men as you. You will receive a hundred ducats in the year from my treasurer, and I count upon you for any service, even should it be against Ramiro himself."

"I trust I may count upon your Eminence's countenance too," said Mardocchi, "in case I should get into any trouble on this Signor Visconti's matters, for my revenge upon him I will have."

"You shall have my protection, and those whom I protect are tolerably safe," said Borgia, rising and going to a small beautiful cabinet that stood in the room. "Here, take this bag of ducats; it is what I promised. Divide them equally with your companions, and say nothing about the ring I have given you. Come to me to-morrow, and we will speak further. I will now retire, and shall sleep better than I have done for weeks."

Mardocchi took the heavy bag, and as he did so, Cæsar Borgia saw that there was blood on the man's hand. It was his brother's blood; and the sight did for an instant touch his obdurate heart, which nothing else had reached. He did not sleep so well that night as he expected.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

Ramiro d'Orco sat in his own splendid room while rumours of the death of the unfortunate Duke of Gandia spread consternation through the city; but he had before him a parchment with a large pendant seal, which gave him the important ecclesiastical fief of Imola, and he thought of little else. The first great step he had ever been able to take in that high road of ambition which he had so long been eager to follow was now taken. He saw before him along career of greatness, and he calculated that, step by step, as Cæsar Borgia rose, he must rise with him. He did not over-estimate at all the abilities of that very remarkable man; and it was no wild calculation to presume that, with such abilities, with such courage, with such ambition, and without a scruple, Cæsar Borgia, in that unscrupulous age, must rise to the highest point of power and dignity.

True, the town of Imola had its own lords; true, it was strongly garrisoned; but the barony had been declared forfeited to the Holy See, and the fortifications were too much decayed to withstand a siege. Linked as he was now with Cæsar Borgia, and knowing that his services, especially with the hostile Cardinal of St. Peter's, were necessary to the Holy See, he doubted not that the forces of the pope, which were soon to be employed against Forli, in the immediate neighbourhood of Imola, would be permitted to place him in possession of the vicariate. He was resolved, however, to make sure of that point as early as possible, and if not successful in his application, to raise troops himself and endeavour to surprise the place.

The second day after the assassination of the Duke of Gandia, Ramiro d'Orco, with more splendour than he had yet displayed in Rome, presented himself first at the Vatican, and then at the palace of the cardinal. At the Vatican he was refused admittance, and the attendants told him the dreadful sufferings of the father for the loss of his eldest and best-beloved son. They assured him, and assured him truly, that the pope, shut up in his cabinet, had neither seen any one, nor tasted food of any kind since the death of the duke had been ascertained. At the Borgia palace he was admitted, and he found in the gorgeous saloons a number of the high nobility of Rome, brought thither by the same motive which he himself professed, namely, to condole with the young cardinal upon his brother's death. With a grave air and a sad look, he advanced slowly toward Borgia, and expressed in graceful and well-chosen terms his regret and horror at the event which had occurred.

The drama was well played on both parts, although, to tell the truth, Cæsar was so much amused at the farce, that, had he not been the most complete master of dissimulation in the

world, he must have laughed aloud. He looked grave and sad, however; and when Ramiro, after having stayed for some time in the hope that the other visitors would depart, rose to do so himself, Cæsar said to him, in that bland and caressing tone which he knew so well how to use--

"Stay with me, my Ramiro. Your company will give me consolation. You must partake my poor dinner, though, to say truth, I have no stomach for aught."

One by one the barons departed, and if any one suspected that the cardinal was not so much grieved as he appeared to be, they took care not to express their doubts to any one--no, not to their dearest friends or most trusted confidant. When they were gone, a quiet smile passed over Cæsar Borgia's lips, but neither he nor Ramiro made the slightest allusion to the events of the past.

The cardinal, however, was in the most benign and generous humour. His appetite at dinner showed no signs of decay, nor did he altogether avoid the wine-cup. Ramiro knew that he was necessary to him, and therefore ate and drank with him without fear, although it was not always a very safe proceeding. In the course of the dinner Ramiro alluded to the difficulties he might have in obtaining possession of Imola; but Cæsar cut him short with a kindly smile, saying--

"I have thought of all that, and that will be easily arranged, I trust. My journey to Naples once over--and it will only take ten days--I march against these traitor vicars of the Holy See, and will expel them from the possessions they unjustly retain. The pope, my friend, does not bestow a fief without putting the recipient in possession of it. The first occupation of his forces under my command will be to establish you safely in your city, trusting that I shall have your aid and good counsel in dealing with the others which I have to reduce. Ramiro," he continued, changing his tone and speaking abruptly, "you have done me vast service, and those who serve me well are sure of my gratitude. You have rendered great services, too, to the Holy See, and can render greater still, for there is only one enemy we have to fear, that fierce Julian. Continue to keep him in check for my sake, and as long as my father lives you may count upon me as your friend."

"I hope, indeed, to be able to do still more," and Ramiro; "for when my daughter is united to a cousin of the King of France, his companion and his friend, I shall have a mouthpiece at that court which can whisper a word in the king's closet more potent than all that Julian de Rovera can say at the council table."

"Good--good," said Cæsar Borgia; and then they proceeded to discuss many points in regard to their future proceedings, which would not interest the reader. Suffice it to say, a few weeks after this conversation, a strong body of the papal troops appeared before the gates of Imola, and summoned the garrison to surrender. Merely a show of resistance was made: but at the first mention of terms the garrison agreed to capitulate, and before night marched out. On the following morning Cæsar Borgia pursued his way toward Forli, and Ramiro d'Orco, with a splendid train and a considerable band of armed men, whom he had engaged in Rome, made his public entry into the city. The people, who had suffered some oppression from their late lords, shouted and rejoiced, and all his first acts gave promise of a gentle and paternal rule.

Only two days had passed after he became Lord of Imola, when Father Peter, as he was now called, was summoned to the presence of Ramiro d'Orco, and told to prepare for an immediate journey to Florence.

"I send a noble lady of this place," said the baron, "with twenty men-at-arms and some women servants, to bring my daughter hither; but you, my good Mardocchi, have an especial part to play in this business. You will hand her my letter; tell her, her presence is needful to me, and that the dangers she feared in Rome do not exist at Imola. You have told me, I think, that you have seen and known the young Lord Lorenzo Visconti. He is expected in Florence soon to wed my daughter, and will go at once to the Casa Morelli. You must remain behind after the Signora Leonora has set out, and wait for his coming. When he arrives you must immediately see him, and induce him to come hither. Tell him that I found it expedient for many reasons that Leonora should be with me until he came to claim her hand, but for none more than this: I have certain information that my good cousin, Mona Francesca Morelli, having lost her beauty from the effects of injuries she received some months since, is about immediately to enter the convent of San Miniato. Leonora will then be without protection in Florence, unless she goes with Mona Francesca to the convent, which would not please me, as I fear the influence of the sisters upon her mind. You will tell Signor Visconti, however, that I am forgetful of no promises, and that I am ready to bestow upon him my child's hand as soon as he arrives at Imola."

"But how long am I to wait for him, noble lord?" asked Mardocchi: "young gentlemen are sometimes fickle, and perchance he may not come as soon as you expect."

A sudden flush passed over Ramiro's face, and his brows contracted; but after a short pause he answered, in his usual tone:

"He is not fickle, my good friend. He will be there within a month after you reach Florence; the ways are all open now, and there is nothing to impede him; but even if, from some accident which we cannot foresee, he should be delayed a fortnight or three weeks longer, I would have you stay for him. Few men, my good Mardocchi, are likely to be fickle with *my* daughter."

He laid an emphasis on the word "my", but yet there was something of paternal pride and tenderness in his tone.

"I should think it would be somewhat dangerous," said the friar with a laugh; "however, I will be ready, my lord, at your command, and will obey you to the tittle."

"Dangerous!" said Ramiro, after the man left him. "But this is nonsense; he dare not slight her."

In some eighteen days' time Leonora appeared in Imola, more beautiful, perhaps, than ever, and many of the young nobles of the neighbouring country would willingly have disputed her hand with any one; but Ramiro d'Orco took care to make it known that her heart, with his approbation, had been won by another, whose bride she was soon to be. Toward her he was, perhaps, in some degree, more tender than he had shown himself before, yet there was but little difference in his manner or his conduct; there was the same indulgence of her slightest wishes; the same grave, almost studied reserve. He told her more as a command than a permission, that she would be united to Lorenzo as soon as he arrived; and Leonora's heart beat high with hope and expectation.

Week passed by after week, and still Lorenzo did not come. One letter arrived from Florence informing Ramiro and his daughter that Mona Francesca, deprived of Leonora's society, which had of late been her only solace, had retired from the world even earlier than she had intended; but nothing was heard of Mardocchi, though he was known to be a good scribe.

Six weeks--two months passed, and fears of various kinds took possession of Leonora's heart. Ramiro d'Orco said nothing, but he appeared more grave and stern than ever.

At length a carrier passing by Imola brought a letter from Mardocchi. It was merely to ask if he should return. He made no mention of Lorenzo, but he merely laconically remarked that he thought he had stayed long enough. Ramiro d'Orco laid the letter before his daughter without remark, but he took advantage of a messenger going to France from Cæsar Borgia to order Mardocchi to return.

And what did Leonora do? A tear or two dropped on the villain's letter. She had no doubt of Lorenzo's constancy. His heart was imaged in her own, and she saw nothing fickle, nothing doubtful there. She thought he must be ill--wounded, perhaps, in some encounter--unable to come or write. But she had heard of the courier's passing too, and she longed to write. There had been something in her father's manner, however, that made her hesitate, and, after long thought she went boldly up to his private cabinet. He was seated, signing some official papers, but he looked up the moment she entered, saying--

"What is it, Leonora?"

A new spirit had entered into her with her love for Lorenzo Visconti, and she answered no longer with the timidity, nay, with that fear which at one time she felt in speaking to her father.

"Lorenzo must be ill, my father," she said. "I am told that there is a courier going to France, and I long to write by him. I feel it would be better, wiser, to have no secrets from my father--to let him know my whole heart and all my acts. I, therefore, will not write without your permission."

"Write--write, my child," said Ramiro d'Orco, with a more beaming look than usually came upon his countenance. "God grant that this young man's disease may be more of the body than the mind. His conduct is strange, but yet I will lose no chance. I cannot write to him, but you may. Woman's love may pardon what man's harder nature must revenge. Perhaps this letter may be explained. God grant it!"

Leonora retired to her chamber and wrote:

"My spirit is very much troubled, dear Lorenzo"--such were the words--"You promised to return in two months after we parted. Five have passed; and you have neither come nor written. I know you are ill. I entertain no other fear; but my father, I can see, has doubts that have never entered into my mind. I beseech you remove them. A messenger has been waiting for you at Florence to explain to you that my father has become Lord of Imola, and that I have joined him here. It is probable that this good man, Father Peter, may not be able to remain waiting for you any longer, and I therefore write to let you know where you will find me. That you will seek me as soon as it is possible, or write to me if it is impossible for you to seek me soon, no doubt exists in the mind of your

LEONORA."

She folded and sealed the letter, and took it at once to her father; but Ramiro remarked on the green floss silk with which it was tied.

"Take some other colour, my child," he said; and, stretching across the table, he threw before

her a small bundle of those silks with which it was customary to attach a seal to letters in that day. "There is crimson," he said; "that will suit better for the occasion."

There seemed a meaning lurking in his speech which Leonora did not like; but she obeyed quietly, and was about to leave the letter re-sealed with him, when he suddenly said--

"Stay! better put in the corner, 'To be shown to the Reverend Father Peter, at the Casa Morelli, Florence, in case the Signor Lorenzo Visconti should have arrived.' If he be there, it would be useless to send the letter on to France; if not there, Father Peter will forward it."

Leonora obeyed willingly, for during the short time she had been in her father's house she had found that the friar was high in Ramiro's good opinion, and that all the attendants, taking the colour of their thoughts from those of their lord, spoke well of Father Peter. Nor had the little which she had seen of him in Florence at all enlightened her as to the real character of the man. To the eyes of children fragments of coloured glass look like gems, and Leonora was too young to distinguish in a moment, as one old and experienced can sometimes do, the false from the true stone.

The direction was written in the corner with her own hand, which prevented the letter from ever reaching her lover.

No sooner was it shown to Mardocchi than he told the messenger he would keep it, as he had certain intelligence that the young cavalier would be in Florence in three days. Lorenzo Visconti had been in Florence long before, and from the old porter at the Casa Morelli had heard the story which Mardocchi had put in the man's mouth; that Leonora had gone to join her father at Imola, thence to proceed immediately to some distant part of Italy, no one knew where. The deaf old man's kindly feeling prevented him from telling all that Mardocchi suggested, namely, that it was Ramiro d'Orco's intention to wed his daughter to some of his new friends in the south, and that Leonora made no opposition. That was the tale which reached Lorenzo afterwards, for it was diligently spread; and as more than half of the intelligence of Europe was in those days conveyed by rumour, it passed current with most men, though it came in no very tangible form.

No sooner had Cæsar Borgia's courier departed from Florence than Mardocchi set out for Imola. He was engaged in a somewhat hazardous game, and it was necessary for him to be on the spot where it could most conveniently be played. The one predominant passion, however, was as strong in his heart as ever, and, had it cost him his life, he would have played out that game for revenge. The circumstances of the time favoured all his machinations. There were no regular posts in those days. Communication was slow and scanty. An armed horseman carried the letter of this or that great lord or merchant from town to town, and sometimes was permitted, if his journey was to be a long one, to take up small packages from private citizens in the places through which he passed. It may easily be conceived that, in such circumstances as these, it was easy for a villain, shrewd and determined in his purpose, to intercept what communication he pleased. A flagon of fine wine, a golden ducat, readily brought all ordinary couriers to reason; and the dangerous secrets he possessed gave Mardocchi, even with his lord, an influence denied to any other man in Imola.

I may well, therefore, pass over all the details of those means by which he worked the misery of Lorenzo Visconti and Leonora d'Orco. Only two facts require to be mentioned. He soon found, or rather divined, that it would be needful to stop Leonora's correspondence with her cousin Blanche; and after the first two or three, no letters, addressed to the latter, left the castle of Imola. They were, in general, burned immediately; but, in carelessly looking through one of them, the traitor found a few words which he thought might answer his purpose at some future time.

Leonora's pride, in writing to her cousin, had somewhat given way on hearing of the approaching marriage of Blanche and De Vitry, and she alluded sadly to her own disappointment. "For once," she wrote, "an early engagement has been crowned with happiness. Oh! what a fool I was to cast away the first feelings of my heart, without knowing better the man to whom I gave them."

These words were carefully out out, and when at length a letter from Lorenzo came, sent from Rome by Villanova (the new ambassador of the French king to the Papal court), it did not share the fate of the rest. It was a last effort to draw at least some answer from Leonora; and it had very nearly reached her for whom it was intended, the courier having arrived at a very unusual hour. But Mardocchi was all ears and all eyes, and he stopped the packages at the very door of Ramiro d'Orco's cabinet.

"The good lord slept," he said; "he had been exhausted by long labours in the service of his people. The letters should be delivered as soon as he woke."

In the meantime he held them in charge; and when they were delivered, one was missing. That one was sent back again to France some few months before the death of Charles VIII., and into the cover was slipped the scrap of paper containing those words in Leonora's own hand, "Oh! what a fool I was to cast away the first feelings of my heart without knowing better the man to whom I gave them!"

Mardocchi laughed as he placed the writing close under the seal. Whether he saw the extent

of the evil he was working, who can tell? Vague notions might flit before his imagination of dark ulterior consequences--of Ramiro d'Orco's seeking vengeance for the slight shown to his daughter--of Lorenzo's fiery spirit urging on a quarrel--of his own power to direct the dagger or the poison, though he had vowed to use neither with his own hand; but certain it is that no result could be too terrible for his desires.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

Two years had passed, and Leonora d'Orco had changed with everything around her. Alliances had been formed and broken; great commanders had won victories, and yielded to the stronger hand of Fate. Kings had descended from the proud pitch of power and betaken themselves to the humblest of beds; new combinations had been formed over the whole earth; enemies had become friends, friends enemies; love was burning soon to become cold; and there was coldness where the most ardent passion had once been felt.

I must be pardoned if I pause in my simple tale to show how the strange transforming-rod of time had affected Leonora d'Orco. Anguish, disappointment, anger--yes, I may say anger--had produced for a time those results which mental excitement almost of any kind fails not to work on the human frame.

When a whole year had elapsed without tidings or explanation from Lorenzo Visconti, her cheek might be seen to become paler and paler every day. Her limbs and form could not lose their grace, but they lost their beautiful contour. She became thin as well as pale; her bright eyes, too, lost somewhat of their lustre. She was still a young girl, and it was painful to see how her loveliness faded as her best hopes faded. She sought solitude; she avoided all society; she shunned especially that of men. Her father's was an exception. Parent and child seemed drawn closer together by the events which had inflicted a different kind of pain upon the heart of each. Often, after gazing at her for a while, cold, stern, remorseless Ramiro d'Orco would suddenly seek his cabinet, and, pressing his hands together till the fingers grew white, would utter but one word--"revenge!"

This state of things lasted but a few months, however, when suddenly a new change came over the beautiful girl. She had been studying hard and diligently, and strange books fell into her hands. It seemed as if from intellectual culture, new sources of happiness became opened to her. It might, indeed, be that pride came to her aid--that she resolved to cast away all thoughts of a man she deemed unworthy of her. It might be that she sought to cheer and solace her father. And yet there must have been something more, some stronger power at work within, for she showed that she was not one of those "to love again and be again deceived." Oh, no, she would not hear the very name of love.

The gayest, the brightest, the noblest, the most handsome strove for one smile, one token of her favour, but in vain. Yet she came forth from her solitude--she became the star of her father's little court. Amid admiring eyes and looks that seemed almost to worship her, she moved in beauty, but as cold as ice. Colour came back to her cheek, light to her eye, roundness and symmetry to every limb. The sweet, arching lips regained all their redness, but the heart seemed to have lost its warmth for ever.

The tenderness of the young girl, too, had apparently gone--the timidity, the shyness of youth. Not that she was hard, unkind, or harsh--oh, far from it. She was an angel of mercy in that city of Imola. She pleaded for the prisoner, turned often aside the blow from those appointed to die, solaced the sick and the needy. Her own great wealth, left solely to her disposal, raised up many a drooping head, cheered many a despairing heart. But now she dared to do what she would have shrunk from in the years passed by. She would approach her father, fearless, in his sternest moods, entreat, argue, remonstrate, and often, by the power of her will, bend him from his most settled purposes. Her beauty had acquired something of the character which her mind now assumed, and it must have been now that those pictures we have of her were taken. Though it was of the finest, the most delicate, the most exquisitely engaging style both in line and colouring, there was a dignity in the expression and in the whole air which the canvas can but faintly convey; and yet who could gaze upon her eyes, those wells of light, without seeing that there was some marvellous self-sustaining power within.

Leonora became fond, too, of the decoration of her person. Jewels, and cloth of gold, and rich embroidery decked those lovely hands and arms, or were wreathed in the clustering masses of her jetty hair, or arrayed those graceful limbs; and her tire-women had no longer reason to complain that she forgot her station or neglected her apparel as they had once done. To them she was gentleness itself; but the suitors who still would ask her hand could not but feel that their

dismissal had something of the sting of scorn in it. She strove to soften it, but she could not; and the beautiful lip would curl, however mild the words might be, as if she thought it strange that any man could think she would condescend to bestow herself on him.

It must be said, however, that no one had any right to complain of having been led on to love merely to be refused. No approving smile ever encouraged the first advance; and if the attentions were too marked to be misunderstood, a sudden coldness gave the answer without a word. Once only she showed her contempt plainly. It was when a nobleman of pride and power declared he would appeal from her decision to her father. She told him her father had no power to wed her to a man whom she despised, and, if he ever had possessed it, he had given her fate into her own hands long before.

"I have his promise," she said--"a promise that, for good or bad, has not yet been broken to human being--that he will never, even by word, urge me to wed mortal man. So now go, my lord, and appeal to whom you will, but let me not see you any more. I am no man's slave, not even a father's."

There were violent things done in Italy in those days; and I know not whether it was some idle but threatening words, muttered by this bold lover as he left her, or the rumour that Imola was soon to be visited by Cæsar Borgia--the only being on earth she seemed to fear--that had led her to a step which must be told.

There was a monastery of Cistercian monks upon a hill some five miles distant from Imola, and, in the early morning of a summer's day, a gallant cavalcade of some eight horsemen and three women, with Leonora at their head, stopped at the gates. She dismounted, and, bidding the attendants wait, went in alone. She asked the porter to call Father Angelo to her; but the old man, when he came, evidently knew her not. He was a servile-looking, shrewd-eyed man, and her air, as well as her attire, impressed him. "What is it, daughter?" he said. "Can I give you any spiritual aid?"

Leonora fixed her lustrous eyes upon him, and seemed to look into his very heart. "No, father," she answered; "I have my own confessor, and a holy and good man he is. It is aid of another kind I seek from you. I have heard that you have cultivated much the natural sciences, know all the secret virtues of herbs and minerals, and have prepared drugs which will remove from earth a dangerous friend or a potent enemy."

"But, daughter," said the monk, interrupting her, "these drugs are not to be intrusted to girls and children, and----"

"Hear me out," she said; "I seek none of these. What I demand, and what I must have, is for my own defence. One I loved very well was once injured by a poisoned weapon, and it took much skill and deep knowledge to save his life. It struck me then, and it has often occurred to my mind since, that a weapon so anointed were no poor defence, even in a woman's feeble hand. Nay, more, that if placed beyond all hope of safety, she might preserve herself from wrong by a slight scratch, when her coward hand might fail to plunge the weapon in her own heart. Once such a means might have been needful to me, but, thank Heaven, another mode of escape was found. See here. I have bought this dagger against time of need. The groove, you see, is perfect, but I want that which makes it efficacious. That you must give--sell me, I should have said, for you shall have gold enough; and if any scruple linger in your mind, I promise you, by all I hold most sacred, never to use it but in my own defence."

"Well, there may be truth in what you say," replied the monk. "Rome is not far off, and there are strange things, they tell me, taking place in Rome. But you are a strange lady, and approach boldly matters that even men treat with some circumlocution."

"I do so because my purposes are holy," replied Leonora. "I have nothing to conceal, because I have nothing to fear, good father. But let us not waste time. Will a hundred ducats satisfy you?"

"It should be a hundred and fifty," said the monk. "Such things are dangerous, and our good father the pope has strictly forbidden the sale of these drugs to anybody out of his own family."

"Well, take the hundred and fifty," said Leonora. "Bring the poison quickly, for my attendants will grow impatient."

"But I must mark the phial 'Poison,'" he replied; "then, if you misuse it, the fault is yours."

"Mark it what you please," she answered. "Here is the money in this purse when you bring the drug; but be speedy."

The old man gazed into her eyes for a moment as if to read her real purposes; then bidding her remain beneath the arch, he hurried away. In a few minutes he returned with a small vial containing a white powder, and not only gave it to her, but showed her how to apply it to the blade of the dagger so that the slightest scratch would prove fatal. "Mix it with water," he said, "and then a drop not bigger than a drop of dew will do; and remember, daughter, this is no common drug, such as vulgar, unlearned assassins use. Its effects are instant, either taken by the lips or infused into the veins. Be cautious, therefore; and mind, when you apply it, use a thick gauntlet."

"There--there--there is the money," said Leonora, taking the vial eagerly; and then she added, speaking to herself, "Now, man, I defy you. I have my safety in my own hands," and, paying the monk the money, she remounted her horse and rode down the hill.

The old monk, while he counted the money carefully, gazed after her, muttering to himself, "Now that is for some fair rival, belike, or else for some faithless lover. Mayhap her husband has played her false. Ay, Heaven help us! we have always some good excuse for covering over our real intentions from the eyes of others. To save her honour at the expense of her life! That is a likely tale indeed! We have no Lucretias now-a-days except the pope's daughter, and she is a Lucretia of another sort."

Whatever the old man in his hardened nature might think, Leonora d'Orco had no purpose but the one she stated. She had long felt the necessity of the means of self-defence. She had long known that the only dread she ever experienced now, would vanish if she possessed the immediate power of life or death over an assailant or over herself. The dagger she had bought in Florence some weeks after the burning of the Villa Morelli, but she doubted her strength--not her courage--to use it with effect. But when the least wound would prove fatal, the weapon had a higher value. "One scratch upon my arm or upon his hand," she said to herself, "and I am safe from worse than death."

It must have been a terrible state of society which led a young girl to contemplate such a resource as a blessing. I cannot venture to give anything like a picture of that state. Suffice it that the fears of Leonora d'Orco were not superfluous, nor her precautions without cause.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

I have heard it said that the world is weary of the picturesque in writing, tired of landscape painters, eager only for the tale or for the characters--the pepper and salt of fiction. So be it. But yet there is something in a scene--in the place, in the very spot where any great events are enacted, which gives not only an identity, but a harmony to the narrative of these events. Imola, with its old castle and its sombre walls, now repaired and strengthened by the care of Ramiro d'Orco, lay, like the hard and rugged stone of the peach, in the centre of more sweet and beautiful things.

That was the age of villa building in Italy, and, as I have shown in a previous part of this work, some of the noblest architects that the world ever produced had already appeared, and produced specimens of a new and characteristic style, unsurpassed by any other efforts. Imola was surrounded by villas, but there was one more costly and extensive than any of the rest, which hung upon the hill-side, with gardens, and terraces, and fountains round about. The villa now belonged to Ramiro d'Orco, and thither he would often retire, after the labours of the day were over, to walk, solitary and thoughtful, as was his wont, under the great stone-pines which lined the avenue.

It was the favourite home of Leonora; for, though she was so much changed in every habit, if not in every thought, there was one exception--she still loved to sit beneath the trees or upon a terrace, whence she could see over a wide landscape. She no longer sought absolute solitude, it is true; she suffered herself not to be plunged into those deep fits of thought, which had been her only comfort during Lorenzo's long absence at Naples. Usually she had one of her maids with her, well-educated girls, who could converse, though not very profoundly; and their light talk, though it did not always wean her mind from the subjects on which it was bent, just sufficed to ripple the too still waters of meditation.

She was thus seated one afternoon, just in the beginning of the autumn, in an angle of the gardens, whence she could see on all sides around but one, with a girl named Carlotta at her feet. If there be aught on earth which deserves the name of divine, it is the weather in some parts of Italy when the summer has lost its full heat, and the autumn knows nothing yet of wintry chill, when the grape is just beginning to grow purple, and the cheek of the fig looks warm. Such was that day, and it would seem that the balmy influence of the air and the brightness of the scene had their influence upon poor Leonora, bringing back some of the gaiety and sportiveness of other years.

"So, foolish Carlotta," said her mistress, "you must needs go down to the dusty town this morning--to see your lover, I warrant, and arrange for this wedding I have heard of."

Carlotta blushed and smiled, and said "Ay;" and her mistress gave her a tap upon the cheek, exclaiming--



"Out upon you, silly girl! can you not be content without making yourself a slave?"

"It is woman's nature, lady," replied the girl; "we all like to be slaves to those we love. I do believe that there is no woman who does not wish to marry; and do you know, lady, that people wonder that you have never given your hand to any one."

"I!" exclaimed Leonora, with a start, and an expression almost of pain upon her face; "I marry any one! I wish to marry any one! to be the passive plaything of a rude boor--to be sported with at his will and pleasure--to have the sanctity of my chamber invaded by a coarse man! When I think of it, I cannot but marvel that any woman, with the feelings of a woman, can so degrade herself."

"The feelings of the woman prompt her, lady," said Carlotta; "but, do you know, I saw a man at Mother Agostina's--that is, my Bernardino's aunt--a courier just returned from France, and he told me that all the people there say that you are married."

"More likely to be buried, my Carlotta," replied Leonora; "but what have the people of France to do with me?"

"Why, they seem to have a great deal to do with Italy now," rejoined the girl. "Since the pope's son has been to the place they call Chinon, and has been made Duke of Valentinois by the new King of France, that monarch seems to be as much pope in Rome as the Holy Father himself. Have you not heard, lady, that a whole crowd of Frenchmen--lords and knights, and such like--are coming over with some chosen troops to help Alexander and the new duke to make up a great duchy here in Italy for him who used to be a cardinal, and who is now a soldier?"

"No, I have heard nothing of it," replied Leonora; "doubtless my father has, if the gossip be true."

"Oh! it is quite true, lady," replied the girl; "all was in preparation when Giacomo came away, and, besides, at the King of France's desire, the pope has made one of these young lords Prefect of Romagna. But he is Italian by birth, they say, and a cousin of the King of France, and brings his beautiful young wife with him."

Leonora rose from her seat and gazed into the girl's eyes for a moment in silence, with a look that almost frightened poor Carlotta. "Did you hear his name?" she asked, at length.

"It was Lorenzo something," replied the girl; "Visconti, I think."

Leonora turned away abruptly, and with a quick step climbed the hill, entered the villa, and sought her own apartments. She passed through the ante-room, and through that where her maids sat embroidering, without speaking a word, and entering her own chamber, cast herself down upon her bed and wept.

"Fool! fool! fool that I am!" she cried, at length, starting up. "I thought I had torn it out by the roots; but it is there still."

She drew the dagger, in its sheath of velvet and gold, from her bosom, gazed at it for a moment and murmured,

"Only this, or what this gives, can root it out; but no, no, I am not mad. This will all pass away. I will conquer it now--even now. I may have to see him again! Then I will look upon him now, as he was when I believed him faithful and true, as he was when he seemed all that was noble and just," and, opening a drawer in the table, she took forth a small, beautiful gilded frame, in the centre of which appeared the sketch of Lorenzo which had been drawn by Leonardo da Vinci. "Ah! picture," she said, gazing at it, "how often hast thou been my comfort and solace in other hours--ay, even to the last; for who could gaze upon that noble face and think the soul so base! Lorenzo! Lorenzo! you have made my misery! Pray God that you have not made your own too. What has become of good Leonardo's auguries? what of his dream, that by the features you could read the spirit? But it matters not. I will steel myself to meet you, should you come--to gaze upon this fair wife you have preferred to Leonora, and who, men say, is so light, and so unworthy of the man I thought you. Perhaps she may suit you better than I should have done; for God knows she cannot be more fickle than you are. Yes, the momentary madness is passing away. I shall soon be myself again, and will play my part to the end, let it be what it may."

"Madam, a cavalier below desires to see you," said a servant, opening the door abruptly. Leonora started with a look almost of terror, for her mind was so full of one object that she thought the stranger could be no other than Lorenzo; but the servant went on: "He says his name is Leonardo da Vinci, and that you know him."

"This is strange," said Leonora to herself; and then turning to the man she added, "take him to my own saloon, and see that he and his servants be well cared for. I will be down in a few moments."

She washed away the marks of tears from her eyes, brushed smooth her hair, and then descended the short flight of steps which led as a private way from her chamber to the gorgeous room below, which was known and held sacred as her own saloon. She found the great painter standing in the midst, and gazing at some fine pictures which ornamented the walls.

"Welcome, signor," she said--"most welcome to Imola. No other house must be your home while you are here than this, or my father's palace in the citadel."

"Your pardon, bright lady," said Leonardo, gazing at her, "my home is ever an inn, and I cannot sacrifice my liberty even to you."

"You are wise, maestro," answered Leonora, somewhat gravely. "No man should sacrifice his liberty to a woman, nor any woman to a man. It is a new creed I have got, but I think it is a good one."

"Old creeds are best," replied Leonardo, seriously. "We can advance from one to another, as we can mount the steps of a temple to the holy of holies, but each step must be founded upon that which went before, and each must rest upon truth."

"Alas! where shall we find truth?" asked Leonora; and then she added, in a melancholy but sweet tone, "Let us not approach painful subjects, my good friend. We cannot meet without thinking of them. If we speak of them we shall think of them still more. I know that truth is in my own heart--where else I know not."

"Perhaps where you least think," replied the painter; "but you are right, lady. Could it do any good, I might speak even of the most painful things; but where the irrevocable seal is fixed it is vain to explain--vain to regret. You are as beautiful as ever, I see, but with that change which change of thought and feeling brings. I have come to paint your picture; and I can paint it now better than I could when we last met."

"Indeed! How so?" asked Leonora.

"Because it is easier to paint matter than spirit--angel or demon, as the case may be--which, transfusing itself through the whole frame, breathes from the face and animates every movement. Again, at other times, it leaves the human tenement vacant, or sits retired in a corner of the heart, pondering the bitterness of life. Mere animal life then acts and carries us through the business of existence; but the sentient, feeling soul is dead or entranced, and pervades not the face or limbs with that varying beauty which is so difficult for the painter to seize and to transfer. I can paint you better now than formerly; and the painting to the common eye will be more beautiful, but to mine and to the poet's there may be a lack of something--of that expression of soul which the features require for harmony--and yet it is not entirely wanting. When you first came in, there was a rigidity about your look, as if you mastered some emotion. Now there is more light, as if there were emotion still. You must have suffered agitation lately. Forgive me. I am a rough, plain-spoken man, too apt to give counsel where it is not sought, and to note feelings people would wish concealed."

"You see too deeply and too well," replied Leonora; "but still I say, maestro, let us not converse on such things. The past is dead. The present, alas! has no life in it for me. Emotion is the most transient of all things with me. Like a stone dropped by a boy into a still lake, it may go deep but ripples the surface only for a moment, and all is still again. If you wish my portrait, take it; but let not our thoughts be saddened while the work is beneath your hand by memories of other days, when happiness gave that spirit to my face which, as you judge rightly, has departed for ever. Let us talk of art, of science--what you will, in short; for I have studied much since last we met, and can encounter you with more knowledge, but not less humility; but let us speak no more of buried feelings, the very ghosts of which bring fear and anguish with them."

"Alas! that it should be so, sweet lady," replied Leonardo; "but, sad as may be your fate, there may be others, seemingly more happy, who are more miserable still."

"Nay, I am not miserable," she answered; but then, recollecting the keen insight of the man she spoke to, she paused and added, "If I am, 'tis but in fits. As an old wound, I am told, long healed, will smart with a change of weather, so at times my heart will ache when something comes to weaken it. But enough of this, maestro. Look at those pictures on the wall. Those three are by one hand, and that the hand of a youth. Are they not beautiful?"

"Nay, they are sublime," replied Leonardo. "Who is the painter? He will one day be one of the mighty men of his day."

"His name is Buonaroti Simoni," replied Leonora, "I brought them with me from Florence. My father has two more, which he will show you."

She thus changed the subject to one of colder interest; but when Leonardo left her, some of his words lingered in her mind, and brought back to her thoughts things which had better been forgotten.

"Perhaps I might find truth where I least thought," said Leonora to herself. "Those were his words. What can he mean? 'There may be those, seemingly more happy, who are more miserable still.' There is something beneath all this; but it is vain--vain--all vain. I will think of it no more;" and yet she thought.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

"Prefect of Romagna!" said Ramiro d'Orco to himself, walking up and down his private cabinet in the castle of Imola; "that may create a conflict of jurisdictions with the vicars of the Church. It is an awkward office to give or to hold."

He spoke in a low voice to himself, and though his words were serious, and implied a difficulty of some magnitude, there was an unwonted smile upon his lip, as if there was something that satisfied him well.

He rang a little silver bell which stood upon the table, and when a servant appeared, ordered him to seek for Father Peter and bring him thither. The man was a long time absent, but Ramiro d'Orco sat quietly, with that well-pleased smile on his lip, gazing at some papers before him, but quite unconscious of the characters with which they were covered. What were his meditations, who can say? for some smiles are not altogether pleasant; and his was far from being benign.

At length the friar appeared--now in reality a friar, for there were strange transformations in those days; assassins sometimes became friars, and friars were not unfrequently assassins.

"Sit, good father, sit," said Ramiro d'Orco, "I have news for you."

"Good news, I hope, my lord," replied Mardocchi. "I have some news for you, too; but mine is not the best; however, it matters but little."

"Mine matters much," said Ramiro d'Orco. "What think you, Mardocchi? Our friend, Lorenzo Visconti, has been appointed by the pope, at the instigation of Louis XII., King of France, Prefect of Romagna, and is about, in this fine weather, to make a tour through the exarchate and the legations. He must come to Imola of course; and I have letters here from that high and mighty prince Cæsar, Duke of Valentinois, requiring me, by the favour in which I stand with him, to receive the prefect with all due honour, and to make his time pass pleasantly. We will do it, Mardocchi--we will do it; for, although there is a very palpable hint in Borgia's missive that no harm is to be done to the cousin of King Louis, yet, perhaps, we can so manage that he shall find means to harm himself. He has an army at his back to help Cæsar Borgia in carving out a principality from the heart of Italy; but the vicars of the Holy See, and I as the humblest of them, must reverently crave his Holiness to spare us the burden of the prefect's troops. We will receive him gladly with a noble train, but methinks we cannot admit an armed French force within our walls."

"Of course," replied Mardocchi, "that would be selling yourself to the devil without pay. But I should think he would not come to Imola. He cannot like to show himself before your eyes--and, if he did come, it would be somewhat painful to the signora your daughter."

"He will come--he will come," replied Ramiro; "and he shall be gallantly received. Fêtes and festivals shall greet him; he shall have every reverence and every joy. He shall be taught to think that we can forget as easily as he can; but he shall find that to slight the daughter of Ramiro d'Orco is to tread upon an asp. As for my Leonora, she has a proud and a noble heart. I have seen all the struggles--I have marked the terrible conflict in her breast, and she has come out victorious. My word for it, she will meet the young prefect and his fair wife with all calm courtesy, greet him as an old friend, and seem never to remember that he betrayed her unsuspecting heart, slighted her love, and left her to disappointment and regret."

"That is all very good for the beginning," said Mardocchi, who was quite a practical man; "but how does your lordship intend to proceed in the more weighty part of the business? This Lorenzo Visconti is not so easily reached as people might suppose. I told you how he killed my friend and lord, Buondoni, under the very nose of the Duke of Milan--a better man than Signor Buondoni never lived--and, if my advice had been taken, and a dagger used instead of a sword, the youth would not have troubled us any more; but Buondoni was always fond of the sword, and of doing things openly, and so----"

"I know the whole history better than even you do, my friend," replied Ramiro d'Orco; "Buondoni did like the sword, but he liked it well anointed, and this Lorenzo would have died had I not cured him. His life is mine, for I saved it for him; but as to how I shall proceed I cannot yet determine. That must depend upon the time and circumstances of his coming; but I have thought it needful to have you warned and prepared in the matter; for on your skill and assistance I rely, and you know I never forget services rendered any more than offences given."

Mardocchi made no answer for a few minutes, but remained gazing in silent thought upon the ornamented floor, until, at length, Ramiro exclaimed:

"You make no answer, friar; what are you thinking of?"

"I was thinking," said Mardocchi slowly, "of what a glorious thing it would be if we could so entangle him that we could make him not only forfeit his own life, but also that honour and renown of which he is so proud. Such things have been done, my lord, and may be done again. I have heard that when Galeazzo was Duke of Milan, he got a cavalier to poison his own sister to save her honour, as he thought, then proved the crime upon him, and put him to the rack. Now, this Lorenzo, if I have heard rightly, cares little for mere life--nay, would almost thank the man who took it from him."

"Why so?" asked Ramiro, sharply, a sudden doubt flashing across his mind, like a light in a dark night lost again as soon as seen; "why so, friar?"

"If there be any truth," said Mardocchi, fully on his guard, "in the reports brought by the followers of the great duke from France, this wife whom he has wedded is as light a piece of vanity as ever made a husband miserable. Nothing has been proved against her, but there are many suspicions of her faithlessness. She is ever followed by a train of lovers, giving her smiles now to the one, now to the other. Visconti feels the wound with all the bitterness of a proud heart, but cannot find the cure. In the meanwhile he bears himself carelessly, as if he thought not of it; but Antonio Pistrucci, Duke Cæsar's under purse-bearer, assured me that the young man was weary of his life, and that, at the storming of a castle in Navarre, he so clearly sought to lose it that the whole army saw his purpose. What I would infer, my lord, is this: if you give him merely death, you give him what he wants, and he remains unpunished but if you give him dishonour too, you inflict all that other men feel in death, and something more besides."

"That were hard to accomplish," said Ramiro d'Orco, rising, and pacing backward and forward in the room; "I see not how it can be done."

"We have time to think, my lord," replied the friar; "leave me to devise a scheme. If my brain be better than a mouldy biscuit, I will find some means. If I fail, we can always recur to the ordinary plan."

"Well, ingenuity does much," said Ramiro d'Orco; "and, as you say, Mardocchi, there is time to consider our plans well. But you mentioned news you had to bring me: what may be their purport?"

"'Tis no great matter," answered Mardocchi; "but it bears upon the very subject we have spoken of. As I came hither at your lordship's order, I saw, riding in by the Forli gate, no other than an old friend of mine, one Antonio, whom you know well, for he procured me the honour of your service. I know not whether he is a follower of this Lorenzo still, but I should think he is; and if I can find him in the city, where he must stop at least to bait his horse, I can perhaps procure information which may be serviceable."

"Serviceable indeed," replied Ramiro d'Orco, with more eagerness than he was accustomed to show; "hasten down, good friar. See where he lodges; obtain all the news you can from him. What we most want is information of this young man's plans and purposes. That once obtained, we can shape our own course to meet them. But remember, my good Mardocchi, this man, this Antonio, is a personage to be treated warily. He is shrewd and far-seeing. You must guard well every word you say."

"I know him well, my lord," replied Mardocchi. "We were at school together when we were boys, and he is not much changed since. But I will not waste time in talking. He was riding fast when I saw him, and perhaps he may only stop to bait his horse and get some food for himself."

Thus saying, Mardocchi left the room, and proceeded straight from the castle through the sort of esplanade that lay before the gates, and into the town. He walked fast, but with a meditative air; and it must be remembered that he had many things to consider.

When there is in the human heart a consciousness of evil done, there is always more or less fear; and his first thoughts were directed to calculate what were the chances of explanations taking place between Lorenzo Visconti and Ramiro d'Orco if they ever met again on familiar terms.

He soon saw, however, that those chances were small; that Lorenzo, by his marriage, had placed a barrier between the present and the past, that was not likely to be overleaped; and that while he was certain never to seek explanations himself, there was as little probability of Ramiro or Leonora either giving or receiving them.

"Besides," he argued, "if all the explanations in the world took place, they can prove nothing in the world against me."

The next consideration that presented itself was the promise he made Antonio to practise nothing against his lord's life; and though it may seem strange that a man so utterly unscrupulous should attach such importance to an adherence to his word, yet we see such anomalies every day in human character, and in his case it might easily be explained, if we had time or space to bestow upon it.

Suffice it, however, to say, in a few words, that this adherence to his word, once pledged, was the only virtue he had retained through life. A stubborn adhesion to his resolutions of any kind had characterized him even as a boy, and it had become a matter of pride with him to abide by what he had said. The difficulty with him now was that Ramiro d'Orco would indubitably require assistance from his own hand in taking vengeance upon Lorenzo Visconti, if some means could not be found to betray the young nobleman into some dangerous act which would fall back upon his own head.

This scheme had flashed suddenly through his mind while conversing with Ramiro; and he saw in it the only means of escaping from the breach of his word, or the acknowledgment of scruples which he knew would be treated with contempt. The plan when he first suggested it, was without form or feature; but now his busy and crafty brain eagerly pursued the train, and a thousand schemes suggested themselves, some of which were feasible, some wild and hopeless.

During all this time, however, he forgot not his immediate errand. He watched everything passing in the street around him, and looked in at the two small taverns in the street of the citadel. There was a better inn, however, on the small square by the bishop's palace, where were also most of the best houses of the city, and thither Mardocchi bent his way. On reaching it, he entered the great court-yard, and inquired if any strangers had arrived that day.

"Yes, father," replied the ostler to whom he spoke, "some seven or eight; one gentleman, with four or five servants and three sumpter mules, and two or three other persons."

"I will go into the stable and see the horses, my son," said Mardocchi. "You know I am fond of a fine beast, and my own mule has not its match in Imola."

The two strolled onward to the stable door, conversing familiarly, as was the custom with friar and citizen in those days; and Mardocchi passed down the line of stalls, discussing the merits of the horses, till at length he laid his hand upon the haunch of a fine grey barb, saying, "I want to see the man who rode this horse."

"He is within, at dinner in the hall," answered the ostler. "He came himself to see his horse fed while they got ready for him. He is a careful signor, and marks everything he sees. He told me in a minute that those other horses belong to the great maestro Leonardo da Vinci though he did not know him, for they passed each other close without speaking."

"I will go in and see him," said the friar; and entering the inn by the back way, he strolled into the dining-hall with an indifferent and purposeless look, as if there was no object in his coming.

Antonio was sitting alone at a table, with his back towards the door by which Mardocchi entered; but the tread of the latter upon the rushes which strewed the floor made the other turn sharply round as he came near.

"Ah! Signor Antonio, is that you?" exclaimed Mardocchi; "why what, in Fortune's name, brings you to Imola?"

"Well met, father--father what is your name? for, by my faith, I have forgotten," cried Antonio, keeping his eye fixed upon him more firmly than Mardocchi altogether liked; "and what brings you to the Keys of St. Peter? I thought that taverns and public-houses were forbidden to your sacred calling except in time of travel."

"Many things are forbidden that men do," replied Mardocchi, with a laugh; "and my sacred calling does not prevent my throat from getting dry. I came seeking a small flagon of the wine they have here, which is the best in Italy. Have you tasted it?"

"Good faith! no," answered Antonio; "I thought not to find anything worth drinking in this small, dull place."

"Then I will have a big flagon instead of a small one," rejoined Mardocchi, "and you shall share it with me. Here, drawer! drawer! bring me a big flagon of that same old Orvietto wine which I had when last I was here. You mistake much, Signor Antonio, both as to the wine and as to the place. It is no dull town, I can tell you, but as gay a city as any in Italy."

"It will be gayer before we have done with it," replied Antonio, "for there are high doings where my lady is, and she will be here ere many days are over."

"Indeed!" said Mardocchi; "but taste that wine, my son--taste that wine, and tell me if ever you drank better. Sour stuff we used to have where I passed my novitiate. They were strict in nothing but that, Antonio; but it was the rule of the order that the body must be mortified in some way, and they judged that the wine way was the safest; for, there being taverns not far off, a man might mend his drink when he went out to buy for the convent."

"By my faith! it is good, indeed," said Antonio, after a deep draught; "if the meat be as good as the drink, we shall fare well."

"Nowhere better," replied the friar; "woodcocks with bills that long, and breasts that thick" (and he demonstrated the measures on his arm and hand); "beef as fat and as juicy as if it had

been cut out of an abbot's sirloin; fish from the Adriatic and the brook for Fridays; and now and then a wild-boar steak, which would make a hermit break Lent."

"Well then, my lady will fare sumptuously, and I shall be spared scolding the purveyors, as I was obliged to do at Forli," was Antonio's reply.

"But you speak only of your lady," remarked Mardocchi; "does not your lord come likewise?"

"That I cannot tell," answered Antonio; "I only know that she comes first, and waits for him here, while he makes a tour through the legations. He thinks the air of Rome too cool for her health, and, as he is very careful of her, she comes hither."

There was a sly humour in his speech which Mardocchi well understood; and he asked, "But why did he choose Imola for her residence; because he thought it was so dull, as you said just now?"

"He did not choose it," replied Antonio; "no, no, 'twas she. He gave her the choice of several cities around, and she chose Imola. She knew, perhaps, it was the place he would least like; for some of the good-natured babblers of the court had taken care to tell her of certain passages in days past, and also that the lady of his early love lived here. Madonna Eloise might think it would give him pain to meet a dame who had treated him so unkindly, and so she chose Imola."

"Theirs must be a sweet life, by all accounts," said the friar; "I have heard a good deal of this matter before from men in the cardinal's train when he went to France. They say she is unfaithful to him."

"Nay, nay, not unfaithful," replied Antonio, quickly, "but light enough to make men think her so. But now, my good friend Mardocchi, what makes you interest yourself so much in all this matter? You have got over all old grudges by this time, I hope."

"No," answered Mardocchi bluntly, "I never forget grudges or promises either, Antonio. You tied my hands, or I would have sent your lord to a better world long ago. I could have taken his life in the French camp, just when he parted from the old Cardinal Julian; for I was close behind them both, and nobody would have known it."

"I should," replied Antonio, "for I know your handiwork, Mardocchi, just as a connoisseur knows the touch of a great master's pencil. But why should you bear him ill-will? His sword got you a much better master than Buondoni."

"That I deny," said Mardocchi; "besides, I am little with this Signor Ramiro now; I am but a poor friar, and he is great lord."

"Yes, but you are much with greater lords than he," said Antonio. "I have heard of you in Rome, Mardocchi; and I could tell where you were on certain nights which you wot of; but I am as secret as the grave, my good friend. Now tell me how it fares with the Lady Leonora?"

"Oh, she is well, and gay as a sunbeam," replied Mardocchi; "the life and the delight of the city."

"Methinks if I had treated a lover so, first broke his heart and then driven him to wed without love, I should not be quite so happy," was Antonio's answer.

"It is strange," said the friar, in a natural tone; "but women are full of wild caprices."

"That is true, indeed," replied Antonio; "but she might at least have written to say she had changed her mind--that her mood was altered--that she had seen some one else she loved better."

"Did she never write?" asked the friar.

"He never received her letter, if she did," answered Antonio, in a tone so peculiar that Mardocchi's cheek changed colour, not unperceived by his companion. But Antonio instantly sought another subject, and the conversation was prolonged for more than an hour. The wine was very good, and both drank deep; but neither could persuade the other to pass the bound where the brain becomes unsteady and the tongue treacherous. When they rose to separate, the balance of knowledge gained, however, was certainly on Antonio's side. He had told nothing but what was known, or soon would be known to every one. Neither had the monk in words; but Antonio gathered not his intelligence from words. It was one of his quaint sayings that no two things were so opposite as words and facts. But every look, every turn of expression, every doubtful phrase, or endeavour to evade the point or double round the question, gave him light; and by the time Mardocchi left him, if he had not reached the truth, he had come somewhat near it.

True, he fancied that the friar had been but Ramiro's instrument in breaking through the engagement between Leonora and her lover; but that her letters had been stopped, and probably Lorenzo's intercepted, he did not doubt. To a mind so keen as his this was a sufficient clue to after discoveries; and while Mardocchi hurried back to the citadel to tell Ramiro that Antonio would stay out the day, and was about to hire the great Casa Orsina, next to the bishop's palace, for the prefect's wife--that she would be in Imola in a few days, and that Lorenzo's coming was

uncertain, Antonio remained for half an hour in thought.

"No, no," he said to himself, "hers was true love, if ever I beheld it; and he says she is gay, the life and soul of the place. That is unnatural--she loves him still! And he, poor youth, loves her; and is ever contrasting her in his mind with this light, half-harlot wife, with whom it has pleased Heaven to curse him. I can see it in his eyes when he looks at her--I can see it when she scatters round her smiles on the gilded coxcombs of the court. Yet there must be something more to discover, and, please God, I will discover it."

## CHAPTER XL.

Days flew; the wife of the prefect arrived at Imola; Ramiro d'Orco went out to meet her at a league's distance from the city; no honour, no attention did he neglect; the guards at the gates received her drawn up in martial array; and in the palace which had been engaged for her, at the foot of the great staircase, Leonora waited with her maids to welcome the young wife of him whom she had so tenderly loved.

It was a strange meeting between these two girls--for both were yet girls--neither twenty years of age. They both gazed upon each other with curious, scrutinizing eyes; but their feelings were very different. Eloise de Chaumont marvelled at Leonora's wonderful beauty--at the profusion of her jetty hair--at the softened lustre of her large, full, shaded eyes--at the delicate carving of the ever varying features--at the undulating grace, flowing, with every movement of her rounded, symmetrical limbs, into some new form of loveliness. She thought, "Well, she is beautiful, indeed! No wonder Lorenzo loved her. But, on my faith, she does not appear one to treat any man cruelly. I should rather think she would yield at love's first summons."

Leonora, on the other hand, though she was calm and perfectly composed, felt matter for pain in the gaze which Eloise fixed upon her. She could plainly see that Lorenzo's wife knew of the love which had once existed between him and herself. "Perhaps he himself had told her of it--and how had he told it? Had he boasted that he had won her heart and then cast her off? She would not believe it. Notwithstanding all, she believed him to be noble still. He might be fickle; but Lorenzo could not be base. Oh yes, fickle he was even to Eloise," she thought. "From every report which had reached her, he had soon wearied of her who had supplanted the first love of his heart."

A certain wavering look of grief, which came from time to time into the countenance of Eloise, showed that she too was somehow disappointed, and a strange, unnatural bond of sympathy seemed to establish itself between two hearts the most opposite in feelings and in principles, the least likely, from circumstances, to be linked together.

They passed nearly an hour together; and Eloise promised on the following day to come and partake of a banquet at the villa on the hill. She had a sort of caressing way with her which was very winning; and when Leonora told her she must go, for that Leonardo, the great painter, waited her at home, she took the once promised bride of her husband in her arms, and held her there for a moment, kissing her cheek tenderly. "You are very beautiful," she whispered; "well may the painter take you for his model!"

Leonora blushed and disengaged herself; and, though she was still calm as a statue externally, many an hour passed before her heart recovered from the agitation of that interview.

She was destined to feel more emotion, too, that day. Leonardo de Vinci waited her as she expected, and at once proceeded to his work. While Ramiro d'Orco remained, the painter was nearly silent; but as soon as the baron was gone, he began to speak; and his speech was cruel upon poor Leonora. He asked her many questions regarding her late meeting with Lorenzo's wife, made her describe Eloise, and commented as she spoke.

Then he began to ask questions as to the past--not direct and intrusive, but such as forced indirectly much of the truth from Leonora regarding her own feelings and her view of Lorenzo's conduct--and the painter meditated gloomily. He had not yet mentioned Lorenzo's name, but at length it was spoken with a melancholy allusion to the many chances, deceits, and accidents which might bring disunion between two hearts both true.

Leonora burst into tears, and, starting up, exclaimed, "I cannot--I cannot, my friend. If you would have my picture, forbear! Come to-morrow; to-day I can bear no more."

So saying, she left the room, and Leonardo remained in thought, sometimes gazing at the picture he had commenced, sometimes at the pallet in his hand, figuring in fancy strange forms

and glowing landscapes out of the colours daubed upon it. But though the eye, and the fancy, and the imagination had occupation, the reasoning mind, which has a strange faculty of separating itself from things which seem its attributes, nay, even parts of its essence, to the superficial eye, was busy with matters altogether different. It was engaged with Leonora and her fate.

"This is strange--this is unaccountable," he thought; "she loves him still; she always has loved him. She casts the blame of their separation on him; and he--miserable young man!--thinks her to blame, and has put a seal upon his own wretchedness by marrying yon light piece of vanity whom I saw in Rome. Pride, pride! How much wretchedness would be spared if people would condescend to explain; and yet perhaps there has been some dark work under this; it must be so, or some explanation would have taken place. I will search it to the bottom. I will know the whole ere I am done. They cannot, they shall not baffle me."

He started up, laid down his pallet and his brushes, and then, after gazing at the picture for a moment, took his way down the few steps which led from Leonora's saloon down to a little flower-garden, shaded by some pine-trees, in a quiet nook at the end of the terrace. Two marble steps brought him to the terrace itself, and, hurrying along its broad expanse, not without feeling and noticing the beauty of the view, Leonardo reached the wide avenue, lined with stone-pines, which led to the gates of the gardens.

About half way down he met a man coming leisurely up; and, as his all-noting eye fell upon him, the painter suddenly stopped, saying:

"Who are you, my friend? I know your face right well, and yet I cannot attach a name to it."

"I know yours too, signor," replied the other; "but there is a difference between Leonardo da Vinci, the great master, and poor Antonio, the humble friend and servant of Lorenzo Visconti; the one name will live for ever, the other will never be known. I met you and spoke to you once or twice at Belgiojoso in happier days."

"Ay, I recollect you now," said Leonardo; "but how happens it, my friend, that you are going up to the villa of the Signor d'Orco and his daughter?"

"I was going to see the young signora," replied Antonio. "I do not perceive why I should not. I have ever loved her in my humble way, and love her still; for, to tell the truth, signer maestro, I cannot believe that she has ever wilfully ill-treated one whom I love better still."

"Nor I--nor I, Antonio," cried the painter, eagerly grasping his arm; "she believes that he has ill-treated her."

"Nay, God knows, not that," replied Antonio. "Oh, had you seen how he pined, signor, for the least news of her, or how his heart was torn and moved when his letters were returned with nothing but a scrap of her handwriting, contemptuous in its tone and meaning, you would know at once he is not to blame."

"Nor she either, by my hopes of Heaven!" cried Leonardo. "But come with me, good friend--come with me. You cannot see the lady--she is ill; and I have matter for your own private ear. There is some dark mystery here, which I fain would unravel with your aid. I am resolute to sound it to the very depth."

"But how can we do that?" said Antonio; "those who have kept their secrets so well and so long, are not likely to let it slip out of their hands now. These are no babes we have deal with, signor, and if Ramiro d'Orco is at the bottom of it, you might as well hope to see through a block of stone as to discover anything that is in his mind."

"He has no share in it, I think," answered Leonardo, after a moment's thought. "He is a man moved solely by his ambition or his interests; and all his interests would have led him to seek this marriage rather than break it off. Not a man in Italy, who seeks to gain a seat upon the hill of power, but looks to the King of France to lend a helping hand, and this breach between his daughter and Lorenzo tends more to Ramiro's destruction than his elevation. Do you not know some one who has some ancient grudge or desperate enmity towards our young prefect?"

Antonio started as if some one had struck him a blow. The truth, the whole truth, flashed upon his mind at once.

"The villain!" he murmured; "but, to expose him altogether, and to discover all, we must, we must be very careful. I do know such a man, Signor Leonardo; but let us be very secret or we may frighten him. Satan was never more cunning, Moloch more cruel. He was bred up in a school of blood and craft, and we must speak of him in whispers till we can grasp him by the neck. Let us be silent as we pass through the town. There, at your lodgings in the inn, after seeing that all the doors are closed, and no one eaves-dropping around, I will tell you all I know, and leave you to judge if my suspicions are right."

Not a word more was spoken; and as the results of the conversation which took place between them after they reached the "Keys of St. Peter" will be developed hereafter, it were mere waste of time to relate it in this place.



Some words, sad, but true, may, indeed, be noted.

"For our own heart's ease," said Leonardo, "we had better solve all doubts; but yet what skills it? They can never be happy. Lorenzo's rash marriage puts an everlasting bar between them."

"I will not only solve all doubts, but I will punish the traitor," said Antonio; "for, if we let him escape he may do more mischief still. He shall die for his pains, if my own hand does it. But I think I have a better hold on him than that; I will make him over to a stronger hand."

That day came and went. There was a great banquet at the villa of Ramiro d'Orco, which passed as such banquets usually do, and was only marked by one expression of the Countess Visconti when she was led by Leonora through her own private apartments. She was pleased particularly with the beautiful saloon, and the sweet retired garden on the terrace with the steps between.

"Oh! what a charming spot to meet a lover!" she said, gazing laughingly into Leonora's eyes.

"I meet no lover here but my own thoughts," replied Leonora; and the conversation dropped.

The next day every one of distinction was invited to the house of the young countess; and it seemed strange to Leonora to find there several gentlemen, both French and Italian, arrived that day from Rome. They were evidently very intimate with the fair Eloise, but she was somewhat on her guard, and nothing appeared to shock or offend, although Leonora thought:

"If I had a husband, I would not waste so many smiles on other men."

Balls, festas, parties of pleasure through the country round succeeded during the ensuing week, chequered but not saddened by the news that there had been hard fighting at Forli, where lay the army of the Duke of Valentinois, assisted by the French under Lorenzo Visconti, and that the town, besieged by them, still held out. Imola had never seen such gay doings; and Leonora, at her father's desire, took part in all the festivities of the time, admired, sought, courted, but apparently indifferent to all. Strange to say she seemed at once to have won the regard, if not the affections of Eloise Visconti. When there was no gay flatterer near her, she must have the society of her beautiful Leonora; and certainly there was something wonderfully engaging in Eloise when she chose. There might be something in her manner, even apart from her demeanour toward men, which created a doubt, a suspicion in the bosom of a pure-minded woman; but yet it was soon forgotten in her apparent child-like simplicity.

Leonardo da Vinci did not seem to love her; her beauty was not of the style that pleased him, and when asked to paint her portrait he declined, alleging that he had undertaken more than he could accomplish already. His portrait of Leonora made more progress in a week than any work he had ever undertaken. The head was finished, the limbs and the drapery sketched out; but when he had arrived at about the tenth sitting, he requested to have easel and picture both brought down to the citadel, where a large room was assigned to him. It fatigued him, he said, to go to the villa every day; and, having finished the face and head, the few more sittings which were required could be given him there whenever he found it necessary to ask them. Leonora willingly consented to come at his call; and for several days he worked diligently for nearly twelve hours a day, shut up in the hall where he painted, or in a small room adjoining, where he kept the implements of his art.

It was on Tuesday, the 19th of September, early in the morning, that Leonora received a brief note from the great painter, loosely translatable as follows:

"MOST BEAUTIFUL AND EXCELLENT LADY,-Though to your perfections my picture owes an excellence which the painter could never have given from his mere mind, yet there are wants which time and observation have enabled me to detect. Come to me, then, if it be possible, at four this evening, and enable me to supply those graces which had previously escaped me. Be as beautiful as possible, and, for that object, as gay. Might I commend to you the depth of two fingers breadths of that fine old Pulciano wine before you come? It heightened your colour, I saw, when last you tasted it; and I want a little more of the red in the cheek."

Leonora was punctual to the appointment, and Leonardo, meeting her at the door of the hall, led her round by the back of the picture to the small room I have mentioned, saying, "You must not see it now till it is finished." Then, seating her in a large arm-chair, he stood and gazed at her for a moment, saying, laughingly, "You must be content to be stared at, for I wish to take down every shade of expression in the note-book of my mind, and write it out upon the picture in the other room." After a few minutes, changing her attitude once or twice, and changing her hair to suit his fancy, he went out into the hall, and engaged himself upon the picture.

For some five minutes Leonora sat in solitude, and all seemed silence through the citadel. Then came some noise in the courtyard below--the clatter of horses feet and voices speaking; and then some steps upon the flight of stairs which led up to the grand apartments of the castle. All these sounds were so usual, however, that in themselves they could excite no emotion. But yet Leonora

turned somewhat pale. There was something in the sound of the step of one of those who mounted the stairs which recalled other days to her mind. It might be heavier, firmer, less elastic, but yet it was very like Lorenzo's tread. Who ever forgets the footstep of one we have loved?

Before she could consider long, Leonardo da Vinci came back to her, and seeming to have noticed nothing that went on without, took his place before her, and gazed at her again. He had nearly closed the door behind him, but not quite, and the next moment a step was heard in the adjoining hall, and some one speaking.

"This is the saloon, my lord," said the voice of Antonio, opening the door of the hall. "There it stands; and a masterpiece of art it is. I will now tell the Signor Ramiro that you are here; but I will go slowly, so you will have time."

The well-know step sounded across the marble pavement of the hall, at first firm and strong, then less regular, then weak and unsteady.

Next came a silent pause, and Leonora could hear her heart beat in the stillness; and then a voice was raised in lamentation.

"Oh, Leonora! Leonora!" it cried, "had you been but as true as you are beautiful, what misery would you have spared the heart that loved you as never woman before was loved! Had you but told me to pour out the last drop of life's blood in my veins at your feet, you had been kind, not cruel; but you have condemned me to endless tortures for having loved--nay, for loving you still too well!"

Leonardo da Vinci took Leonora's hand as if he would have led her towards the door, but she snatched it from him, and covered her eyes, while her whole frame shook as if with an ague-fit.

The speaker in the hall was silent; but then came once more the sound of steps upon the stairs, and Lorenzo's voice exclaimed, "Oh, God! have they given me but this short moment?" and his steps could be heard retreating towards the door. Then the voice of Ramiro d'Orco was heard saluting him in courteous terms, and the sound died away altogether.

Profound silence reigned in the hall and in the little room adjoining; but at length Leonora took her hands from her eyes, and said, in a mournful and reproachful tone, "If you have done this, you have been very cruel."

"I did it not," answered Leonardo; "but yet I am right glad it has happened. You accuse him of having been faithless to you, he accuses you of having been fickle to him. Both have been betrayed, my child. Both have been true, though both may be wretched."

"But what matters it to either of us?" said Leonora, almost sternly; "the time has passed, the die is cast, and there is no retrieving the fatal throw."

"And yet," said Leonardo da Vinci, "to a fine mind, methinks it must be a grand and noble satisfaction to discover that one we loved, but doubted or condemned, had been accused unjustly--that we have not loved unworthily--that the high qualities, the noble spirit, the generous, sincere, and tender heart, were not vain dreams of fancy or affection, but steadfast truths of God's own handiwork, which we had revered and loved as the finest gifts of the Almighty Benefactor. You may not feel this now, Leonora, in the bitterness of disappointment, but the time will come when such thoughts will be comfort and consolation to you--when you will glory and feel pride in having loved and been loved by such a man."

Leonora snatched his hand and kissed it warmly. "Thank you," she said, "thank you. To-night or to-morrow I shall have to meet him in public, and your words will give me strength. Now that I know him worthy as I once thought him, I shall glory in his renown, as you have well said; for my Lorenzo's spirit, I feel, is married to mine, though our hands must be for ever disunited. Farewell, my friend, farewell. I will no longer regret this accident; it has had its bitter, but it has its sweet also;" and, clasping her hands together, she exclaimed almost wildly, "Oh, yes, I am loved, I am loved--still loved!"

She arose from her chair as if to go, but then, catching hold of the tall back, she said, "Let me crave you, Signor Leonardo, bid some of the attendants order my jennet round to the back of the palace. I am wonderfully weak, and I fear my feet would hardly carry me in search of them myself."

"I will go with you to the villa," said Leonardo. "My horse is here below. Sit you still in that chair till I return, and meditate strong thoughts, not weak ones. Pause not on tender recollections, but revolve high designs, and your mind will recover strength, and your body through your mind."

## CHAPTER XLI.

On what a miserable thing it must be to return to a home, and to find that the heart has none, the fond, true welcome wanting--the welcome of the soul, not the lips. Oh, where is the glad smile! where the cordial greeting! where the abandonment of everything else in the joy of seeing the loved one return! Where, Lorenzo?--where?

'Tis bad enough when we find petty cares and small annoyances thrust upon us the moment our foot passes the threshold--to know that we have been waited for to set right some trivial wrong, to mend some minute evil, to hear some small complaint--when we have been flying from anxieties and labours, and thirsting for repose and love, to find that the black care, which ever rides behind the horseman, has seated himself at our fireside before we could pull off our boots. 'Tis bad enough--that is bad enough.

But to return to that which ought to be our home, and find every express wish neglected, every warning slighted, every care frustrated, and all we have condemned or forbidden, done--that must be painful indeed!

The arrival of Lorenzo Visconti in Imola was unexpected; and his short stay with Ramiro d'Orco but served to carry the news to the gay palazzo inhabited by his wife, and create some confusion there. True, when he entered the wide saloons, where she was surrounded by her own admiring crowd, Eloise rose and advanced to meet him, with alight, careless air of independence, saying, "Why, my good lord, you have taken us by surprise. We thought you still at the siege of Forli."

"Forli has capitulated, madame," replied Lorenzo, gazing round, and seeing all those whom he wished not to see. "It was too wise to be taken by surprise. But I am dusty with riding--tired too. I will retire, take some repose, and change my apparel."

Thus saying, he left the room. Eloise made no pretence of following him; and, as he closed the door, he could hear her light laugh at a jest--perhaps at himself--from some of her gay attendants.

Oh, how his heart sickened as, led by Antonio, he trod the way to the apartments of his wife!

"Leave me, Antonio," he said, "and return in an hour. There, busy not yourself with the apparel. Heaven knows whether I shall want it. Leave me, I say!"

"When you have leisure, my lord, I would fain speak a word or two in your private ear," said Antonio; "you rode so fast upon the road I could not give you some information I have obtained."

"Regarding whom?" asked Lorenzo, with a frowning brow; "your lady?"

"No, my lord, regarding the Signora d'Orco," replied the man.

But Lorenzo merely waved his hand for him to depart; and when he was gone, pressed his hands upon his burning temples, and sat gazing on the ground. His head swam; his heart ached; his mind was irresolute. In his own soul he compared Leonora d'Orco with Eloise de Chaumont. He asked himself if, fickle as she had shown herself to be, Leonora, once his wife, would have received him so on his return from labour and dangers.

He remembered the days of old, and answered the question readily. But then he turned to bitterer and more terrible inquiries. Was his wife faithful to him? or was he but the butt and ridicule of those whom, contrary to his plainest injunctions, she had brought from Rome?

He was of no jealous disposition. By nature he was frank and confiding; but her conduct had been such--was such, that those comments, so hard to bear--those suspicions, that sting more terribly than scorpions, had been busy round his ears even at the court of France.

In vain he had remonstrated, in vain had he used authority. He found her now, as he had left her in Rome, lighter than vanity itself. That accident, propinquity, and some interest in the accident she had brought upon him, with the vanity of winning one who had been considered cold and immovable, had induced her to give him what little love she could bestow on any one, and confirm it with her hand, he had long known. Long, too, had he repented of his rash marriage; but that carelessness of all things, that weariness of the world, that longing for repose, even were it the repose of the grave, which Leonora's fancied fickleness had brought upon him, had not been removed by his union with Eloise de Chaumont. A thousand evils had been added--evils the more terrible to a proud, high mind. He had never expected much; but he had believed Eloise innocent, though thoughtless; tender and affectionate, though light. But he had not found the tenderness after the ring was on her finger; and the very semblance of affection had soon died away.

"What was there on earth worth living for?" he asked himself; "what was there to compensate the pangs he endured--the burthen he bore. Nothing--nothing. Life was only not a blank because

it was full of miseries."

Thus he sat, with a wrung heart and whirling brain, for nearly half an hour. At length he took a picture from his bosom--one of those small gems of art which the great painters of that and the preceding age sometimes took a pride in producing--and gazed upon it earnestly. It was the portrait of a very beautiful woman (his own mother), which the reader has seen him receive from Milan. He thought it like Leonora d'Orco; but oh! that mother was faithful and true unto the death. She had defended her own honour, she had protected herself from shame, she had escaped the power of a tyrant, by preferring the grave to pollution.

He turned to the back of the picture, now repaired, and read the inscription on it, "A cure for the ills of life."

"And why not my cure?" asked Lorenzo of his own heart; "why should I not pass from misery and shame even as my mother did?"

He pressed the spring, and the lid flew open. There were the fatal powders beneath, all ready to his hand.

He was seated in his wife's room, and among many an article of costly luxury on the table were a small silver cup and water-pitcher. Lorenzo stretched out his hand to take the cup, laying the portrait with the powders down while he half filled the cup with water. But, ere he could take a powder from the case, Antonio re-entered.

"The hour has passed, my lord, and I do hope you will now hear me," he said. "I have to tell you that which, perhaps, may be of little comfort, but is yet important for you to know."

"Speak on, my good Antonio," said Lorenzo, in a gentler tone than he had lately used; for the thoughts of death were still upon him, and to the wretched there is gentleness in the thoughts of death. "What is it you would say? I am in no haste;" and he set down the cup upon the table by the picture.

"My lord, we have been all terribly deceived," said Antonio; "you, I, the Signora Leonora--all. While you have thought her false and fickle, she has believed you the same."

"Antonio!" exclaimed his lord, in a reproachful tone, "Antonio, forbear. Try not to deceive me by fictions."

"My lord, I stake my life upon the truth of what I say," replied Antonio. "I have seen a maid whom she hired in Florence after the rest had left her--those who were carried away from the Villa Morelli, and never heard of more. I had my suspicions; and, after having won her good graces, I questioned the girl closely. Signora d'Orco wrote to you often--sent letters by any courier that was going to France--wept at your silence--pined, and nearly died."

"But I wrote often," said Lorenzo.

"Your letters never reached her, nor hers you," replied the man; "by a base trick----"

"But her handwriting!" exclaimed Lorenzo, "her own handwriting! I saw it--read it."

"I know not what that handwriting implied, my lord," was the answer; "but perhaps, if you were to examine it closely, you might find either that it was not hers, or that, thinking you false and forsworn, she wrote in anger, as you have spoken and thought of her."

Lorenzo meditated deeply, and then murmured, "It may be so. O God! if this be true!"

"It is true, my lord, by my salvation," replied Antonio; "I have the whole clue in my hands. The Signor Leonardo da Vinci, too, knows all, and can satisfy you better than I can."

"Is he here?" asked Lorenzo, in a tone of melancholy interest, remembering the happy house at Belgiojosa. "If he be convinced, there must be some truth in it. But tell me, Antonio, what fiend has done this? It cannot surely be Ramiro d'Orco?"

"Oh no," replied the man; "but ask me no more, my lord, at present. See the Signor Leonardo. He and I have worked together to discover all, and he will tell you all. Well may you call the man a friend; but I am on his traces, like a staghound, and I will have my fangs in his flanks ere long. Let the maestro tell you, however. I only wished to let you know the truth, as the Signora Leonora is even now with her father below, and you must meet her presently. You could not meet the faithless as the faithful; and she is true to you, my lord--has been ever true."

Lorenzo started up. "Leonora here!" he exclaimed; "I must see her--I will see her. Where leads that door, Antonio?"

"To the room reserved for your lordship's toilet," replied the man.

"Quick! send my varlets up," cried the master; "I will but shake off this dust and go down."

"Better appear as becomes you, my noble lord," replied Antonio; "there is a splendid company

below--indeed, there always is when the countess receives her guests. Your apparel is all put forth and ready. To dress will but take you a few minutes."

"Well, be it so," said Lorenzo; "bring me those lights, my good Antonio;" and he walked straight to the door of the dressing-room, leaving his mother's portrait and the poison on the table. He remembered it once while going down the stairs after dressing, but there was too much eagerness in his heart for him to return to take it then, and from that moment events and--more engrossing still--feelings hurried on so rapidly, he forgot entirely his purpose of going back for the portrait at an after period.

The entrance of the young prefect into his wife's splendid saloons caused no slight movement among the many guests there present. His noble and dignified carriage, the strange air of command in one so young--an air of command obtained as much by sorrows endured, and a manly struggle against despair, as by the habit of authority--impressed all the strangers in the room with a feeling going somewhat beyond mere respect. But there was one there present whose feelings cannot be described. He was to her, as it were, a double being--the Lorenzo of the past, the Lorenzo of the present. The change in personal appearance was very slight, though the youth had become the man. The dark, brown curling beard, the greater breadth of the shoulders, the powerful development of every limb, and perhaps some increase of height, formed the only material change, while the grace as well as the dignity was still there. In the ideal Lorenzo--the Lorenzo of her imagination--the change was, of course, greater to the eyes of Leonora. He was no longer her own--he was no longer her lover--he was the husband of another--there was an impassable barrier between them; but that day had diminished the difference. She now knew that he was as noble as ever, that he had not been untrue to her without cause, that he had loved her faithfully, painfully, sorrowfully (she dared not let her mind dwell on the thought that he loved her still); and there was a sort of a tie between her heart and his, between the present and the past, produced by undeserved grief mutually endured.

Oh! how she longed to tell him that she had never been faithless to him--that she had loved him ever! Again, she did not dare to admit that she loved him still.

Yet she commanded herself wonderfully. She had come prepared; and she had long obtained the power of concealing her emotions. That she felt and suffered was only known to one in the whole room. She clung more tightly to her father's arm, her fingers pressed more firmly on it; and Ramiro d'Orco felt all she endured, and imagined more. He said not a word indeed to comfort or console her, but there were words spoken in his own heart which would have had a very different effect if they had found breath.

"The day of vengeance is coming," he thought--"is coming fast;" but his aspect betrayed no emotion.

Lorenzo took his way straight to where the Lord of Imola and his daughter stood, close by the side of his own wife; and Eloise laughed with a gay, careless laugh, as she saw the sparkle in her husband's eyes.

"This is my friend, the Signora d'Orco," she said; but Lorenzo took Leonora's hand at once, saying, "I have long had the happiness of knowing her;" and he added (aloud, though in a somewhat sad and softened tone) words which had only significance for her; they were: "I have known her long, though not as well as I should have known her."

He stood and spoke with Leonora herself for some moments. He referred no farther to the past, for the icy touch of her hand on that warm night told him plainly enough that she was agitated as far as she could endure, and he strove to diminish that agitation rather than increase it.

He then turned to Ramiro d'Orco, saying, "My Lord of Imola, I will beseech you to go with me through the rooms, and introduce me to the noble gentlemen and ladies of your city."

Ramiro d'Orco was all graciousness, and led him from one to another, while Eloise with some malice, whispered in Leonora's ear:

"He is marvellously handsome, is he not? When you were standing together the Count do Rouvri whispered me that you were the two most beautiful personages in Italy."

"He is a poor judge and a poor courtier," replied Leonora; and the conversation dropped.

She had now fully recovered her composure, and she thanked God that the trying moment was over. Numbers flocked round her, gay words and pleasant devices passed, and all that fine wit for which the Italians were famous, displayed itself. Nor did Leonora do her part amiss, although it must be owned her thoughts sometimes wandered, and her words were once or twice somewhat wide of the mark.

At length the prefect and Ramiro d'Orco returned, and then began arrangements for the following day. It seemed understood that on alternate nights the Lord of Imola and the lady of the prefect should entertain the nobility of the city and the district round, and their meeting for the following evening had been fixed for rather an early hour at the villa on the hill, before Lorenzo's unexpected arrival at Imola. Eloise, however, who was not without her caprices, thought fit to

change the arrangement, declared that she was weary of so much gaiety, felt herself somewhat indisposed, and would prefer a day of rest, if it were not inconvenient to the Signor d'Orco to postpone his festa till the following day.

Ramiro d'Orco declared that, on the contrary, the change would be convenient to him, for that he was bound to go, either on the morrow or the day after, to hold a court of high justiciary at a small town just within his vicariate, and that he could not return the same night.

"I will set out to-morrow, my lord," he said, "and shall be back early on the following day. In the mean time, I must leave my daughter here to do the honours of the city to you and your fair lady; and if she fails in any point, she shall be well rated at my return."

Thus saying, he and Leonora took their leave; but the festivities in Lorenzo's house continued long. He himself was present to the last, although his presence certainly did not throw much gaiety upon the scene. To the citizens of Imola he was attentive and courteous, but to the crowd of butterflies who had followed Eloise from Rome, without being repulsive, he was cold and distant. When the last guest was gone, he and his wife took their several ways, she to her chamber, he to his dressing-room; and, long after she had retired to rest, she heard her husband's voice conversing eagerly with Antonio.

"Talking over my foibles, I suppose," said Eloise to herself; "I wish I could hear what they say;" and she raised herself up in bed to go towards the door, but she felt weary, and her natural indifference got the better of her curiosity. She sank back upon her pillow, and soon was buried in sleep.

The conversation of which she had heard the murmur had no reference to herself. Lorenzo questioned his humble friend in regard to the facts he had mentioned in the earlier part of the evening, and many and varied were the feelings which the intelligence he received produced--deep and bitter regret, some self-reproval, and a sensation which would have resembled despair had not a sort of dreamy, moonlight joy, to know that he had been still beloved, pervaded all his thoughts with a cold but soothing light. He sought to know on whom the suspicions of Antonio and Leonardo fixed as the agent of all his misery, but the good man refused to satisfy him.

"Leave him to me, my lord," he said; "I have means of dealing with him which you have not. I will only beseech you tell me how long the great Duke of Valentinois remains at Forli, and to give me leave to absent myself for a day or two at any time I may think fit."

"Oh, that you have, of course," replied Lorenzo. "Did I ever restrain you, Antonio? As to Borgia, he will most probably remain a month at Forli. I left him as soon as the place capitulated; for I love him not, although my good cousin, King Louis, is so fond of him. Well, policy, like necessity, too often brings the base and the noble together. But, as the capitulation imported that the town would surrender, if not relieved, in three days, and I know that De Vitry is on his march with three thousand men, which will render relief impossible, I thought I might very well leave this good lord duke to watch the city by himself. He is an extraordinary, a great, and a mighty man, but as bad a man as ever the world produced--unless it be his father."

"That will do right well," replied Antonio; "I neither love him nor hate him, for my part, but I must use him for my purposes."

"He generally uses other men for his," answered his lord, with a doubtful look.

"Great stones are moved by great levers," said Antonio; "and I have got the lever in my hands, my lord, with which I can move this mighty man to do well-nigh what I wish. I will set out to-morrow evening, I think, and ride by night--no, it must be on the following day. There is a game playing even now upon which I must have my eye. In the mean time, your lordship had better see the Signor Leonardo; he will tell you much; and if there be a lingering doubt, as there well may be, that your poor servant has ascertained the facts he states beyond a doubt, the maestro will confirm all I have said."

"Antonio," said Lorenzo, giving him his hand, "if ever there was a man who faithfully loved and served another, so you have loved and served me. But love and service are sometimes blind and dull. Not such have been yours. Where I have wanted wisdom, perception, or discretion, you have furnished them to me; and of all the many benefits conferred on me by Lorenzo de Medici, his placing you near me was the greatest. Power, and wealth, and authority are often irritable, and sometimes unjust. If I have ever shown myself so to you, Antonio, forgive me for it; but never believe that, knowing you as I know you, I ever doubt your truth."

Antonio made no reply, but kissed his lord's hand, as was the custom in those reverent ages, and left him with a swimming eye.

Lorenzo cast from him the gorgeous dress at that time common in Italy, the gorgeous chain of gold, the knightly order of St. Michael, the surcoat of brown and gold, the vest and haut-de-chaussée of white satin and silver, and, after plunging his burning head several times in water, cast on a loose dressing-gown, and seating himself in a wide easy-chair, endeavoured to sleep. The day had been one of fatigue and excitement. Neither mind nor body had enjoyed any repose, but sleep was long a stranger to his eyelids. At length she came, fanning his senses with her downy wings, but only as a vampire, to wound his heart while she seemed to soothe. He dreamed

of Eloise. He saw her dying by the dagger-blow of a hand issuing from a cloud. All was forgotten--indignation, anger, shame, I may say contempt. She was his wife, the wife of his bosom, the wife plighted to him by the solemn vow of the altar. He seized the visionary hand, uplifted for a second blow, and pushed it back, exclaiming, "No, no, strike me! If any one must die, strike me!" and then he woke.

The lights which he had left burning were nearly in the sockets. The first blue gleam of morning was seen through the windows; and Lorenzo, dressing himself quietly in his ordinary garments, descended to the court-yard, endeavouring to forget the troublous visions of the night.

## CHAPTER XLII.

Under a wide-spreading and drooping fig-tree in the lower part of the gardens of the villa on the hill was seated a man who kept his eyes steadily fixed upon a certain spot at the end of the terrace far above. The distance in a direct line to the object toward which his eyes were turned was some two hundred and fifty yards; it might be a little more, but at all events, he could see distinctly all that passed above.

At first it seemed as if there was but little to be seen. A lady was seated, reading, in a small plot or garden, close by a highly-ornamented doorway which led into the interior of the villa. It was in an angle of the building, where a large mass of architecture protruded beyond the general façade. Thus, when the sun was in the west, a deeper shade was cast there than upon any other point of the terrace. It was, perhaps, that the sun had nearly reached the horizon, and that the shades of night were coming fast, which caused the lady to lay the manuscript book upon her knee, and, looking up to the sky, seem to contemplate a flight of tinted clouds, which looked like the leaves of a shedding rose blown over a garden by the rifling wind.

But hark! what is that sound that strikes his ear? the fast footfalls of horses coming along the road beneath the stone walls of the garden. They pause close by him.

"Here! hold the horse, and wait till I return," said a voice, and the next moment a cavalier vaulted over the wall, and stood within twenty yards of where the watcher sat.

For a moment the stranger seemed uncertain which way to turn, but then he forced his way through the vines to a path which led up to the main entrance of the villa on the terrace. He looked up and around from time to time as he ascended; but suddenly an object seemed to meet his eyes to the right, and, striking away from the path, he took a course direct toward it, regardless of any obstacle. The watcher kept his eye upon him while he climbed the hill, mounted the steps of the terrace, and stood by the lady's side.

Who can tell what words were spoken? Who can tell what feelings were expressed! Who can tell what memories were re-awakened? Who can tell what passions had power in that hour?

The watcher saw him stand beside her talking for several minutes, then cast himself down on the ground by her side. A moment after, his arm glided round her; and one could almost fancy that wafted on the air came the words, "One--one kiss before we part."

Their lips evidently met, and God forgive them if it was a sin! The next instant Leonora rose from her seat, and, hand in hand, they entered the building by the door which led to her own saloon.

"Ha! ha!" said the watcher, with a bitter laugh. But two minutes had not elapsed before lights flashed from the windows of that very room, and the shadows of three figures passed across.

"What means this?" said the man who sat beneath the fig-tree; and, creeping forth from his concealment, he stole up the hill. He reached the terrace at some distance from the little garden, and then walked along in the direction of the spot where he had seen Lorenzo and Leonora. His sandalled foot made very little noise; and he kept so close to the building that his gown brushed against the stone-work. When he reached the first window of Leonora's saloon, he paused for an instant, and by an effort--for he was short of stature--raised himself sufficiently to look in. It was enough. Seated side by side were those whom the Count de Rouvri had well termed the two most beautiful persons in Italy. But at the farther side of the saloon was one of Leonora's maids busily plying the needle.

Had Eve refused to taste the forbidden fruit in Eden, Satan could hardly have felt more rancorous disappointment than that friar experienced at what he saw.

That night passed, and the following day; but when evening came, the villa on the hill blazed with lights; the gardens were illuminated, and gay groups were seen in the long saloons and on the terrace, and in many a part of the gardens. Many a tale of love was told that night, and many a whispered word was spoken that decided fates for ever. There was much pleasure, much joy, some happiness; but there were pains and heartburning also.

It was toward the end of the entertainment that Eloise, passing along with the young Marquis de Vibraye at her side, came suddenly upon her husband leaning against one of the pillars of the door which led out upon the terrace. De Vibraye was one of those peculiarly obnoxious to Lorenzo, for there was a braggart spirit in him which sported with woman's fame in the society of men with little heed of truth or probability. There was a look of triumph on his face as he passed Lorenzo with hardly an inclination of the head. But he went not far; for his foot was not on the terrace ere Lorenzo's hand was on his shoulder.

"A word with you, seigneur," said the young prefect, and drew him to some distance.

"Well, my lord," said De Vibraye, with a cheek somewhat pale, "what do you want with me?"

"But little," replied Lorenzo. "I gave you a sufficient hint in Rome that your society was not desired within my doors. I find you here. If you are in Imola to-morrow at noon, I will out off your ears, and turn you out of the gates as a worthless cur. You had better go while you are safe."

He waited no answer, but returned to the side of his wife, who greeted him in a fretful tone, saying--

"Well, this is courteous in you two gentlemen to leave me standing here alone like a chambermaid!"

"Madame, you shall be alone no longer," answered Lorenzo, drawing her arm through his, and leading her back into the great saloon.

She did not venture to resist, for he spoke in a tone she had heard once before, and she knew that when he used it he would bear no opposition. But a few minutes after, a cry ran through the rooms that the Countess Visconti had fainted.

"Bear her to my daughter's saloon!" cried Ramiro d'Orco, as Lorenzo caught up Eloise in his arms; "bear her to my daughter's saloon! She will soon recover. Here, follow me--make way, gentlemen! All the lady requires is cooler air; the rooms are too crowded."

"This way, Signor Visconti," said Leonora; and in a few moments Eloise was laid upon a couch, and the door closed to prevent the intrusion of the crowd.

It was very like death; and Lorenzo and Leonora looked upon her with strange and mingled sensations. There lay the only obstacle to their happiness, pale and ashy as a faded flower. Seldom has the slumber of the grave been better mocked; and yet the sight had a saddening and heart-purifying effect on both. So young--so beautiful--so sweet and innocent-looking in that still sleep! They could not, they did not wish that so bright a link in the chain which bound both to the pillar of an evil destiny should be rudely severed. The maids who had been called tried in vain to bring her back to consciousness; and Ramiro d'Orco, who had been gazing too with sensations differing from any in the breasts of those around him, called the girls aside, and bade them seek the friar.

"He is skilled in medicinal arts," he said; "fetch him instantly."

Leonora pointed to the inanimate form of her lover's wife, and said in a low tone--

"Look there, Lorenzo! Is it not sad? There is but one thing to be done. I will take refuge in a convent, lest evil dreams should come into our hearts."

"O forbear! forbear yet awhile!" said Lorenzo; but, ere he could add more, Ramiro d'Orco had returned to their side; and a few minutes after, Friar Peter was in the room. He approached the couch with a quiet, stealthy step, gazed on the face of Eloise, laid his hand upon the pulse, and, taking a cup of water from one of the maids, dropped some pale fluid into it from a phial, and, raising the head of his patient, poured it into her mouth.

"She will revive in a moment," he said; "that is a sovereign cure for such affections of this bodily frame. Oppression of the spirit may be harder to reach, and, I should think, in this case there is something weighing heavy on the heart or mind."

Lorenzo kept silence, though he thought that the friar had perhaps divined aright.

At all events, his remedy, whatever it was, proved effectual. After about a minute, Eloise opened her eyes, and looked around her faintly. "Where am I?" she said. "Oh, is that you, Leonora?"

"How are you, madame," said Ramiro d'Orco; "you have swooned from the crowded rooms and overheated air. I trust you will be quite well shortly."



"I am better," she said, "much better, but very weak; I would fain go home. Let some one bring my litter."

"I will go with you," said Lorenzo. "I beseech you, signor, have my horses ordered. But, ere we go, I must thank this good friar for his most serviceable aid. That for your convent, father," he said, drawing him aside and giving him money. "I thank you for your skilful tendance on my wife; but I think that perhaps your counsels might, as you hinted even now, be as good for her mental condition as your drugs have been for her bodily health. I will pray you, therefore, good father, visit her tomorrow towards noon. You can explain your coming as a visit to a patient rather than a penitent; but if you can inspire her with somewhat more careful thought regarding her demeanour in the world, you will do well."

"But the lady knows not yet that I tended on her," said Mardocchi; "let me speak with her again before she goes."

He then approached the side of Eloise, and once more laid his fingers on her pulse.

"Not quite recovered yet," he said, with a grave air; "give me some water. A few more drops will, I trust, complete the cure, daughter;" and he took the phial from his gown.

"Not here, friar--not here!" whispered Ramiro d'Orco.

But Mardocchi put him back with his hand, dropped out some more of the liquid, and gave it to Eloise, saying:

"This will restore you perfectly for to-night. To-morrow I will see you again, to know how you are then."

It was on the following day toward noon that Friar Peter entered the Episcopal Square, and approached the palace which had been hired for Lorenzo Visconti. He walked with downcast eyes and a thoughtful look, but none of the townspeople who passed him attributed any very high or holy meditations to the friar; for the Italians, especially of the lower class, are the most clear-sighted persons in the world into the depths of human character. "What is he calculating?" they thought; "what is he scheming now?"

With a quiet, almost noiseless step, he approached the wide gates of the palazzo, and asked for the signora.

"She is in the hall above with some French cavaliers, father," replied the janitore; "you can go up."

"I would rather see her alone," answered the friar; "I attended upon her last night when she fainted at the Villa Ramiro, and wish to speak to her about her health. Can you not call her out of the hall for a moment?"

The porter led him to the door of the hall, and, leaving him there, entered alone. He was gone but a moment, and then returning, led the friar up another flight of stairs to Eloise's chamber, where he left him, saying that his lady would be up in a few minutes.

He closed the door when he departed, and Mardocchi gazed around him with no small curiosity and interest. There were many ornaments scattered round the room--little works of art, beautiful trifles and invaluable gems. Mardocchi remarked all, examined all, and handled not a few. Among the rest he took up the small picture of Lorenzo's mother, which the young prefect had left there on the night of his arrival. He gazed at the face for a moment or two, seeming to have some faint remembrance of the features, and then examined the case with some curiosity. He was not long in discovering the spring by which the back opened, and the powders and inscription were exposed to view.

"A cure for the ills of life!" he said: and then, as if something which required thought suddenly struck him, he seated himself, and with his eyes fixed upon the case, fell into profound meditation.

The reader will remember that there was a smaller chamber next to that of Eloise; and a door of communication between the two. As the friar sat there thinking, that door moved slightly on its hinges, and a chink appeared through which one might have passed a Spanish crown piece,--no larger.

A few minutes after, the countess entered. Mardocchi had the picture with the case still open in his hand; but he laid it not down as might have been expected. On the contrary, he rose from his seat, and, bowing his head, said, with a humble air:

"I have committed a great indiscretion, Madonna, I took up this beautiful portrait to look at it, when suddenly, I know not how, it came open as you see."

"Oh! that is the picture of my husband's mother," said Eloise carelessly; "I found it here two or three days ago. I cannot tell how it came here, for he carries it usually in his bosom. But what is that little box behind? I was puzzling over these powders and the inscription only yesterday, but

could make nothing of them."

"Let me see," said Mardocchi, carrying the case to the window, as if for a better light.

He remained for a moment or two with his back to the lady, apparently examining the powders, and then brought the case back, saying:

"They are apparently love powders."

"Then I will take one of them," said Eloise, laughing; "I am sure I need them."

"For Heaven's sake, forbear, Madonna," said Mardocchi; "I don't, know what they are--I only guess. God help us! they may contain poison, in this wicked age."

"Well, well, I will put the case back in his dressing-room," said Eloise; but the friar stayed her, saying, "Better leave them where he left them, my daughter. I have but a few moments to stay, and I wish to inquire after your health."

"Oh! my health in excellent, good father," replied the lady, lightly, "thanks to your skill; I believe it never was better."

"Permit me to feel your pulse, Madonna," said Mardocchi. "Let me see. This is the ninth day of the moon; and, from the eighth to the fourteenth, some mild and calming remedies are useful. Your pulse is somewhat agitated."

"Well it may be," said Eloise; "my husband is in a mighty sweet humour, father. He takes offence at the slightest trifles; and, on my life, if I did not know him noble at heart, I should think, as you said, that these papers contained poisons, and that he had left them here that I might try their virtues myself."

"That were easily tested," said Mardocchi, with an eager look. "Give one of them to some of your maids; bid them put it in a piece of meat, and throw it to a dog. If they be venomous, the venom will soon do its work. Here, give her this one at the top;" and, taking one of the powders out of the case, he laid it down on the table.

"And, now again, Madonna, as to your health," continued Mardocchi; "you are not so well as you think yourself. A malady affects you proceeding from some shock to the spirits, which will return at intervals of sixteen hours, unless you do something to arrest its course. It may be very violent indeed, and attended with sore pains and terrible suffering; but I can prevent its having any fatal effect. Let me calculate. Last night you had the first slight attack at about ten o'clock; a stronger one will seize you at two to-day. It is now too late to avert it entirely; but if in an hour's time, you will take this powder which I now give you--mind! do not confound it with the other, which is to be tried upon the dog--you will find the paroxysms much mitigated. Do not be alarmed, though you may suffer much, for at the moment when the convulsion seems most strong, it will suddenly cease, and you will sleep quietly."

Eloise gazed at him with surprise and even alarm.

"I feel quite well," she thought; "what can this mean? And yet I felt quite well five minutes before I fainted last night. Well, the monk soon cured me then, and I will follow his counsel now. In an hour, father, did you say?" she asked aloud.

"Ay, in an hour," replied the friar; "that will just give me time to try one of those other powders on a dog. I shall like to hear the result, and will see you again to-morrow, when I trust I shall find this malady is quite vanquished. You then can tell whether those in the case are safe. They are probably very idle drugs."

"I will have them tried, good father," replied Eloise; "and now farewell."

"Shall I send one of your women to you, Madonna?" asked the friar; and then he added with apparently a sudden change of thought, "It may be as well not to say how you came by the powders, or why you wish this trial made. It might lead to injurious suspicions."

"True--true," said Eloise, in an absent tone. "I will say nothing. Send one of them here. You will find them in the end room of the suite. Farewell."

Mardocchi left her, and speedily found the chamber where her women were at work. His quick eye glanced over them, and fixed upon one he thought suited to his purpose.

"I wish to speak to you, signora," he said, beckoning her into the corridor; and when she laid down her work and followed him, he added in a low tone, "The countess wants you in her chamber. She may say little to you in her present mood, and therefore I wish to warn you to be careful what you do. Her husband has left her some powders to take. She is doubtful of what they are, and wishes to have one of them tried upon a dog before she swallows them. Give it in some meat, and don't lose sight of the animal till you see the effect. Then return to your lady, and tell her what you have seen. But talk with her as little as possible, for she is unwell."

In the meanwhile, Eloise sat alone in somewhat sad and solemn meditations. If there be

sympathies between the beings of this mortal world and those unclogged with clay--if there be warnings conveyed without voice, or impulses given from a higher sphere, it is natural to suppose that they are more clearly heard, more keenly felt, when we are approaching near the world from which they come. Eloise was very sad--the lightness of her character was gone. She was serious now for once, and thoughts unwonted, undesired, had full possession of her.

Who is there that can review even a few years of his past life without finding many things to regret? And oh! what a sad retrospect did the last two years afford to Eloise Visconti! How many an act worthy of penitence, if not remorse--how many a blessing cast away--how many an opportunity neglected!

She tried to shake off that painful, self-reproachful mood; but it clung to her; and when the woman entered, she hardly saw her.

"What are your commands, Madonna?" asked the girl.

Eloise started, and then, taking one of two small packets which lay at some distance from each other on the table, she held it out, saying--

"Put that in a piece of meat, and give it to one of the dogs. Come back and tell me if it lives or dies."

The girl took the paper and departed, but not without remarking that there was another packet of much the same shape and size upon the table.

Eloise fell into thought again, and was soon as completely absorbed in meditation as ever. She knew not how long the girl was absent; but at length she returned, saying, with a look of some consternation--

"Madam, the poor dog fell into great agonies and died in about three minutes."

"Ha!" said the young countess; "thank God! I now know what they are."

"I thank God too, Madonna," answered the girl; "how can any one be so cruel?"

"Cruel or kind, as the case may be, Giovanetta," replied her mistress, "when life is a burden, he is kind who takes it off our shoulders."

"But oh! Madonna, for a husband to----!" said the girl.

But Eloise waved her away, saying, "Go, girl, go; you know not what you talk of. Leave me!"

The girl went unwillingly, for she liked not the change from light-hearted mirth to stern sadness in her gay mistress; and she would fain have taken the other powder with her, but she dared not disobey.

"What means this deep gloom that is upon me?" said Eloise to herself, as soon as the girl was gone. "It must be the approach of the attack the friar mentioned. It is time to take the medicine--nay, more than time, I fear. I will swallow it at once, though I love not drugs. This at least has life in it--not death;" and, with that conviction, she mixed the powder Mardocchi had left with some water, and drank it.

"It is very sweet," she said, "but it burns my throat;" and, seating herself, she took up a book of prayers and began to read.

Ten minutes after the silver bell rang violently once and again, for the maids heard not the first summons. At the second, Giovanetta started up and ran to the chamber of her mistress; but, as she approached, she heard the sound of a heavy fall, and when the door was opened, she and another who followed found Eloise upon the floor in strong convulsions.

"Oh, she is poisoned!" cried Giovanetta, wringing her hands.

"My husband! my husband!" murmured Eloise, with a terrible effort: "my husband; tell him I never sinned against him as he thought--tell him I have been faithful to him--oh, girls, raise me up! I am choked--I cannot breathe."

They raised her and laid her on her bed, and for a moment or two she seemed relieved; but then a still more terrible paroxysm succeeded, and, ere any assistance could be sought, the light, thoughtless spirit passed away to seek mercy at the throne of God.

## CHAPTER XLIII.

In the court-yard of the castle of Imola were many horses and attendants, and in the great hall various personages of high and low degree. A scene very frequent in ancient and modern time, and which never loses its terrors, was there going on. It was the trial of a man accused of a capital offence. The Lord of Imola, possessing, as he had stipulated, what was then called high and low justice, sat upon the raised seat at the end of the hall, and by his side appeared the young Prefect of Romagna, whom he had asked to assist him by his advice in a case which seemed to present some difficulties. The hour was about twenty minutes after noon, and the testimony had all been taken.

Before the tribunal stood a man, between two guards, of some forty years of age, and of a ferocious aspect. But his cheek was pale, and his eye dim with fear; for he had heard it distinctly proved that he had been taken in the act of a coldblooded brutal assassination of a young girl.

"I refuse this tribunal," he cried, hoarsely. "I do not acknowledge the power of this court. I am of noble blood, as every one here knows; and you have no authority to sentence me, Ramiro d'Orco."

"What say you, my lord prefect?" asked Ramiro, in his cold, quiet tones. "I leave you to pass sentence."

"I can but give an opinion, my lord," replied Lorenzo; "I presume to pass no sentence within your vicariate. You have, I know, power of high justice; therefore his claim of nobility in your court can avail him nothing, except in giving him the right to the axe rather than the cord. His guilt is clear. His sentence must, I presume, be death."

"I will order him at once to the block," said Ramiro, sternly.

But Lorenzo interposed.

"Nay, give him time," he said; "I beseech you give him time. Death is a terrible thing to all men, even to those who have lived the purest lives; but, from what we have heard, this unhappy man's soul is loaded with many a crime. Give him time for thought, for counsel, for repentance. Abridge not the period of religious comfort. Send him not hot from the bloody deed before the throne of the Almighty Judge."

"How long?" asked Ramiro, somewhat impatiently.

"Allow him four-and-twenty hours for preparation," said Lorenzo. "It is short enough."

"So be it," said Ramiro d'Orco; "take him hence. Let him have a priest to admonish him; and at this hour to-morrow, do him to death in the court-yard by the axe. My lord prefect, will you ride with me? Our horses are all ready, and I have again to leave the city for a few hours. There are some curious things of the olden time by the road side."

"Willingly," answered Lorenzo, "if we can be back before night, for I expect, from day to day, intelligence from the Duke of Valentinois, now lying before Forli."

Ramiro d'Orco assured him that their return would be before sunset; and, descending to the court-yard, they mounted and rode out of the Ravenna gate. Each was followed by numerous well-armed servants, and, whether by accident or design, their trains were very equal in numbers.

In the meantime, the unhappy criminal cast himself down upon a bench, and fell into a fit of despairing thought. Even among the hardest and harshest of the human race, there lingers long a certain feeling of compassion for intense misery; but yet it is not probable that the guards and attendants of Ramiro d'Orco would have suffered the murderer to sit quietly there, had they not been moved by an inclination to talk over the various events of the day, and hear the scandal of the town and neighbourhood.

The Italian is very fond of scandal; but he loves it not for the sake of the coarse enjoyment which many others feel in feeding on the follies of their kind, but rather for the exercise of the fine-edged wit, the keen but delicate sarcasm of his nation, to which it gives an ample field. Even the hard men there present had each his slight smile, and his light and playful jest at the subject of their discourse. Alas! that subject was the fair wife of Lorenzo Visconti and her train of French and Roman cavaliers.

They had not been thus engaged five minutes, when suddenly a door just behind the seat of judgment opened, and the friar, Father Peter, entered, looking eagerly round. The wit and the jest ceased instantly, and the men looked at him in silence, with no very loving aspect. None had any tangible cause of dislike; but men have antipathies instinctive, deeply seated, not to be resisted.

With his still noiseless step Mardocchi advanced, stepped down, and asked where Ramiro

d'Orco was. They told him that their lord had gone forth by the Ravenna gate, and his countenance fell. He said little, however, for he was very careful of his words; and, after having gazed at the murderer--the only one who seemed to take no notice of him--he withdrew by the great door. At the head of the staircase he paused and meditated for several minutes, then descended into the court and sought the great gates. He there halted again, and muttered to himself--

"Well, no matter? It may be as well that at first there should seem no suspicion. It will look more natural. Slight causes at first, and then graver doubts, and then formal inquiries, and then damning proofs. That were the best course. But this Signor d'Orco of mine is so thirsty for his blood, it has been difficult to restrain him hitherto, and he may hurry on too fiercely. As well he should not know the thing till night. She will be dead by two; by five or six they will be home, and in the interval between I shall have time to prepare the public mind for the tale of poison--without hinting at her husband, however. Let that come afterwards."

But Mardocchi's plans were destined to be disappointed, in part at least. He was not allowed time to prepare the public mind, as he proposed; for though, from a vulgar assassin, he had risen by skill and assiduous study to be something like a politician, and his schemes were often deep and well laid, yet the finest politicians must often be the slaves of circumstances, and sometimes their own cupidity frustrates their best devised projects.

Friar Peter reached what was called the little piazza, and stopped for a moment to speak with one of the Roman gentlemen who had followed Eloise Visconti to Imola. The nobleman asked the monk several questions in a low voice. "I really know not what is the lady's malady," said Mardocchi at length, following out his purpose; "I should say it is the effect of a slow poison, but that I know no one has any cause to put her out of the way."

"Be not too sure of that," replied the other; "she left us in a very sudden way to-day, and the servants told us, retired to her room ill. But as to causes, I could tell you what I overheard, just before she fainted last night. Hark, you, friar!"

But before he could add more, a man in a dusty dress came up and took Mardocchi by the arm, saying, "I wish to speak with you in private, father."

Mardocchi stepped aside with him, and the other continued, in a low voice, "Mount your mule instantly and speed to Forli. The duke sends you word he has need of you."

"What duke?" asked Mardocchi; "and what token does he send?"

"The Duke Valentino, to be sure," replied the man; "do you not remember me? I have seen you at the Borgia Palace a dozen times three years ago. As for the token, he says, By the horse, and the month, and the Church of San Bartholomew, come to him!"

"Will not to-morrow do?" asked Mardocchi. "I have matters of importance to see to to-day."

"No," replied the other; "Don Cæsar says what has to be done must be done to-night. You have four-and-twenty miles to ride, and it is now near one hour past noon."

"Well, I will speed," said the friar; "I promised always to be ready at his bidding, and I never fail to keep my word. But I have a letter to write--nay, it is but short--ten words are enough. I will but step into this scrivener's and borrow pen and paper. Then I will go for my mule. It is a quick beast and enduring, and I shall reach Forli ere night."

Thus saying, he sped away, and, procuring the means of writing, considered for one moment, and then decided on the words he was to use for the purpose of conveying his meaning without betraying his secret.

"Illustrious Lord," he wrote at length, "my part of the business is over. I have confessed my penitent and given her the viaticum. It is for you to discover whether she came to her present state fairly; and, I doubt not, if her chamber is closely searched, and her women examined, enough will be made manifest to fix the guilt upon the right person. Go slowly and go surely. I am called suddenly to Forli by commands I dare not disobey; but, if possible, I will be in Imola again ere to-morrow night."

He read the words over more than once, and then saying, "That discloses nothing," folded the paper and sealed it. His next consideration was by whose hands he should convey it to Ramiro d'Orco. The scrivener himself was an old acquaintance; and, after some thought, he decided to entrust the letter to him. Many were the injunctions he laid upon him to deliver it immediately on the Lord of Imola's return: and then he sought his mule and set out for Forli.

But the scrivener was fond of knowing every one's secrets--it was part of his profession in those days. Thus the seal of the letter was not very long intact. The contents puzzled the old man. He saw there was a double meaning; but he could not divine the enigma. "I will find out by-and-

bye," he said; and, sitting down, he deliberately took a copy of the letter. Then, by a process still well known in Italy, he sealed it up again, so that no eye could detect that the cover had been opened.

About half an hour after all this had been done, people were seen hurrying through the streets, and symptoms of agitation and terror were apparent in the town.

"What is the matter? what is the matter, Signor Medico?" asked the scrivener, running out from his booth, and catching the sleeve of a physician who was walking more slowly than the rest.

"The Countess Visconti, the lady of the prefect, has been poisoned, they say," replied the physician. "I know no more about it, for they did not send for me, or perhaps I might have saved her."

"Then she is dead?" asked the scrivener.

"Ay, dead enough," answered the other, and walked on.

The scrivener had his own thoughts; but the name of Ramiro d'Orco had become somewhat terrible in Imola, and Mardocchi's letter was safely delivered as soon as that nobleman returned.

#### CHAPTER XLIV.

The air was balmy, the breeze was fresh and strong, the large masses of clouds, like spirit thrones, floated buoyant over the sky, followed by the dancing sunshine. The manes of the horses waved wildly in the wind, and their wide nostrils expanded to take in the delicious air. The influence of the hour and scene spread to the heart of Lorenzo Visconti, and seemed, for the time at least, to banish the thought of sorrow and of ill. Out of the city, with the wide country between Imola and Ravenna stretching in deep blue waving lines before his eyes, the wind refreshing his brow and fanning his cheek, and his noble horse bounding proudly under him, a sense of freedom from earthly shackles and the hard bond of fate came over him. It sparkled in his eye, it beamed upon his lip.

Ramiro d'Orco gazed upon him, and his aspect, more like what it had been in early youth, brought back the thought of other days. Did they soften that hard, obdurate heart? Did they mollify the stern, dark purposes within his breast? Oh, no! He only thought, "Soon--very soon!" And if there was any change in his feelings, it was but inasmuch that the momentary relief--the temporary joy in Lorenzo's aspect promised to give zest to his revenge, and add pangs to the sufferings he hoped to inflict.

Yet he was courteous, gentle--oh, marvellously courteous. To have seen him, one would have thought he was riding by the side of his dearest friend; no one could have dreamed that there was one rankling passion in his breast. Grave he was truly, but he was always grave. The expression of his countenance, shaded by the long, iron-grey hair, was even somewhat stern; but his words were smooth, and even kind; and there was a sort of rigid grace about him, like that of some statues, which gave force to all he said. They rode on (their two trains mingling together) for about ten miles from Imola, and then Ramiro, pointing with his hand to a low hill on the right, told Lorenzo that just beyond that rise there had been lately found a curious ancient tomb, apparently of an earlier date than any known Roman monument.

"We will go and see it," he said; "we shall have plenty of time. 'Tis but a quarter of a mile from the road."

Lorenzo willingly consented: but when they had passed the rise, and were turning from the road to the right, some white objects rose over the slope, and a few steps more showed several lines of tents, with sentries on guard, and horses picketed near.

"Ha! what is this?" exclaimed Ramiro d'Orco, with a look of displeasure manifest on his countenance.

"Troops of France, my good lord," replied Lorenzo. "Do you not see the banners? Probably your relation, the Lord de Vitry, with the auxiliary force promised to his Highness the Duke of Valentinois."

"It is strange, my lord prefect, that they should be camped on this side of Imola," said Ramiro; "they were more needed at Forli, methinks."

He had drawn in his bridle while speaking, as if hesitating whether he should go on or turn back; but Lorenzo spurred forward at once, and was already speaking to the sentries, when the other came up.

They were led almost immediately into the camp, and welcomed by De Vitry at the door of his tent.

"Come in, nobles," he said, "come in; you are just in time to crush a cup of right French wine with me. Good faith, I and the great maestro were about to drain the goblet. He has promised to paint me a portrait, Signor Ramiro, of your fair relation, my sweet Blanche; and I tell him if he wants the picture of an angel for any of his great pictures, he shall have the portrait to copy at his wish."

Something common-place was said by Ramiro d'Orco in reply, and all three entered the tent, where they found Leonardo da Vinci seated with a cup of wine before him, but in dusty apparel, and with a very grave expression of countenance. The ceremonious salutations of the day took place, and some fine wine of the Rhone was handed round; but De Vitry was more abrupt and thoughtful than ordinary. At length he rose, and beckoned Lorenzo aside, saying:

"I want to speak to you, Visconti. How long are you from Forli?"

"But a few days," replied Lorenzo, following him; "I suppose you have stopped the intended succour?"

De Vitry made no answer to this half question, but whispered hastily---

"I understand it all; everything shall be done as he says. Devil take that Antonio! what has he gone away for, just at such an emergency?"

"My noble friend, I know not what you mean," replied Lorenzo; "where has he gone? what emergency?"

Ere De Vitry could answer, Ramiro d'Orco had risen, and, with a bland smile upon his lip, was approaching them.

"I crave pardon, noble lords," he said, "but if we pursue not our journey soon, signor, we shall not reach Imola ere dark."

"Do not let me detain you," said De Vitry, with his usual frank, soldier-like manner. "Tell the duke, Visconti, that I think all danger past, but that I will hold my ground till the last-named day has seen the sun set, and then retire to Ravenna. My lord of Imola, I ought to have paid my respects to you yesterday, but we were all tired with a long march. Tomorrow, when the sun is declining, I will be with you; but, I beg, no ceremony. I come but scantily attended, and form and display are needless. Will you not taste more wine?"

Both Ramiro and Lorenzo declined; and the former felt well satisfied when he saw the readiness with which the young prefect accompanied him, for evil purposes are always suspicious, and he had thought the few words spoken in private between Lorenzo and De Vitry must have some reference to himself.

"He suspects nothing," he thought, as they remounted and rode on; "but how could he? I am too eager. Like a boy chasing a butterfly, or a youth a woman, I fear the prize will escape me, even when it is within my grasp."

The rest of the journey was uninteresting. The two cavaliers soon reached the object to which their steps tended--a small town, or rather village, which Ramiro was fortifying, to command a pass through a morass. The Etruscan tomb was forgotten, and their return to Imola was made by a narrower and steeper, but much shorter path, which brought them to the gates just as the sun had set.

A single lantern, which hung from the vault of the arched gateway, gave them barely light to guide their horses, and as it fell upon the dark countenances of the guard, Lorenzo thought, "It feels like entering a prison."

At this moment a man stepped out of the shadow and handed Ramiro d'Orco a paper, with the one word "important."

"A light! bring me a light!" exclaimed the Lord of Imola; and, with some difficulty, a torch was lighted at the lantern, and held up so that he could read. The contents of the letter seemed to puzzle him for a moment, but gradually his pale cheek flushed, and his eye flashed with a triumphant light.

"Here we must fain part for the night, my lord prefect," he said. "You take to the bishop's square, and I, I am sorry to say, back to the castle, for business of importance will keep me there to-night. We shall meet again to-morrow. Good night."

"Good night," replied Lorenzo; and he turned his horse into the street just within the walls.

"Oh, my lord, my lord," cried a voice, ere he had ridden a hundred yards, "what news I have to tell you! Alas! alas! my lady is dead."

"Dead!" exclaimed Lorenzo, throwing his horse almost on his haunches by the suddenness with which he reined him up; "dead! The man is mad! Why, Bazil, what do you mean?"

"Too true, too true, my noble lord," replied the Frenchman; "she died at two o'clock--quite suddenly. But come up, my lord. 'Tis ill talking of such things here in the street."

Lorenzo spurred on his horse; and oh! what a tumult of wild feelings were in his heart; But there was one predominant. It was regret--almost remorse. He had spoken harshly, he thought--had acted harshly. She had felt it more than he believed she could or would, as her fainting on the previous night had shown. True, she had given abundant cause for harsh words, and even harsher acts than he had used. But the cause was forgotten in the thought of one so young, so beautiful, so full of happy life, being laid suddenly in the cold grave. A thousand times had he wished that he had never seen her; but, now that she was gone, he would have given his right hand to recall her to life. He reached the palace; he sprang from his horse and rushed in. He heard the confused tale of the servants, and he sprang up the stairs; but, as he went, his pace slackened. An awe came over him; and he trod the corridor as if his step could have awakened the dead. With a trembling hand he opened the door, and entered the chamber of death. There were lights at the head and at the feet of the corpse, with two of Eloise's maids--Giovanetta and another--seated one on either side. Late autumn flowers were strewed on the fair form of the poor girl, cut off in her young spring, and the painful odour of the death incense spread a sickly perfume through the room.

Lorenzo approached with slow and silent tread, uncovered the face, and gazed at it for a moment. Then kneeling by the bedside, he took one of her marble-cold hands in his and pressed his lips upon it. A few tears fell upon the alabaster skin, and rising, he beckoned Giovanetta toward the adjoining room.

At the door he paused, and said in a low voice--

"You may both retire; but be near at hand; I will watch beside her."

"You, my lord!" exclaimed the girl.

"I," answered Lorenzo: "Why not I? But mark me, lock the door. I will watch here, and when the priests return, say I will have nothing farther done till to-morrow. She must lie as she is now. There is something strange here, girl, on which I must be satisfied."

"Ay, strange indeed," said Giovanetta.

"Well, it must be unravelled before a grain of earth falls upon her," replied Lorenzo. "Now leave me; I cannot talk more to-night."

"I must tell you my lady's last words," said the girl: "it was her command. In the agony of death, she cried, 'My husband! my husband! tell him I never sinned against him as he thought--tell him I have been faithful to him.' That is what she said."

"Oh, God! Do not torture me!" cried Lorenzo, waving her away. The girl returned into the chamber of the dead, and whispered a few words to her companion. Then both rose and retired, locking the door behind them.

Lorenzo seated himself in the large chair, so that he could see through the open door the bed and its inanimate burden. I will not attempt to trace his feelings. Twice he rose, went to the bedside, gazed upon the pale face, and returned to his watching-place; and often he covered his eyes with his hands. There were various sounds without--the return of priests--the movements of the servants; but he gave them no heed; and shortly all was silent again.

At length there came a nearer sound. It seemed in the room beside him--near, very near; and Lorenzo, starting, turned his head. Suddenly his arms were seized by two strong men, and a third put his hand upon the hilt of Lorenzo's sword to prevent him from drawing it. "You are our prisoner, my lord prefect," said one of the men, "charged with the murder of your wife. Come with us without resistance, for resistance is vain. The palace is in our hands."

Lorenzo gazed round from one to another, and perceived that there were several more figures at the door. He had no thought of resistance, however. Taken by surprise at a moment when his mind was overpowered with grief and horror, the fire of his character was quite subdued.

"The murder of my wife!" he said, "the murder of my wife! Who dares to charge me? Who is mad enough to accuse me?"

"Of that we know nothing, my lord," replied the man who had before spoken; "but you must come with us."

Silently, and without even caring to take his bonnet from the table, he accompanied his captors, looking round the vacant corridors and halls with a feeling of desolation words cannot



convey. Not one of all his servants was to be seen; no familiar face presented itself; he was all alone in the hands of an enemy. The truth had flashed upon his mind at length, but how he knew not. Was it an instinct? was it the accumulated memories of many little incidents in the past, each next to nothing by itself, but swelling to a mountain by the piling of one small grain upon another, which showed him now, that Ramiro d'Orco was his foe, and had been compassing his destruction? Or was it that a dark and terrible--almost prophetic warning, which that same man had given him in the palace of Cæsar Borgia, came back to his recollection then?

That same man had said that he never forgave--that he never forgot--that years might pass, circumstances change, the chain between the present and the past seem severed altogether, and yet the memory of an injury remain the only adamant link unbroken. Lorenzo remembered the words even then, as they marched him through the cold, dark streets towards the citadel. He remembered, too, that by a fatal error Ramiro had been led to think he had slighted his alliance, destroyed his daughter's happiness, and treated her with scorn and neglect. And now every courtesy he had received since he came to Imola recurred to his memory as a menace which he should have heeded, every smile as a lure which should have been avoided. How could he suppose, he asked himself, that such a man as that would forget so great an injury? how could he believe that he would so hospitably receive the injurer without some dark and deadly purpose beneath the smooth exterior?

Thought after thought, all painful, flashed through his brain. They were many--innumerable, and, ere he could give them any clear and definite order, the gates of the citadel were opened for his entrance, and a few minutes after, the low, damp dungeon of a murderer received him. They left him in solitude and in darkness to all the bitterness of thought; and then all that was to follow presented itself to his mind in full and terrible array--the trial; the death; the disgrace; the blighted name; the everlasting infamy. Oh! for the battle-field, the cannon's roar, the splintering lance, the grinding wound, the death of triumph and of glory!

Vain wishes: the heavy iron door was there, barring from every active scene of life; but that was not all he had to suffer that night. To the felon's dungeon was to be added the felon's chains. The door opened, the torchlight flashed in; fetters were placed upon his hands and ankles, and the ring of the chain was fastened to a ring in the wall. The guard withdrew, but left the door ajar, and a narrow line of light marked the entrance. It grew fainter and fainter as the torches receded, and then a human figure, like a dark shadow, crossed the light as it became broader while some one entered.

Could it be any one to bring him comfort? Oh no. The well-known voice of Ramiro d'Orco spoke in its cold, calm accents.

"Young man," it said, "you should beware when you are well warned. My lord prefect, you have to die to-morrow. Make your peace with God, for there is no help for you on earth. You shall have a fair trial in our court, that all the world may know the proud Lorenzo Visconti has not been condemned unjustly, but is truly guilty of the murder of a poor defenceless woman--his own wife--and that history may record the fact among the famous deeds of the great house of Milan. The proofs admit of no doubt; so be prepared; and when the axe is about to fall, remember me and Leonora d'Orco." "Man, you are deceived!" exclaimed Lorenzo. But Ramiro waited no reply, and the heavy key turned in the open door.

## CHAPTER XLV.

It was a bright and sunshiny morning--considering the season of the year, more summer-like and warm than usual--and Leonora d'Orco sat in her beautiful little garden without covering for her head, and with her rich black hair in less trim array than usual, falling over her lovely neck and shoulders. Her eyes were fixed upon the fountain in its marble basin just before her, and there was something calm but melancholy in their gaze. She watched the water as it sprung bounding up, and then fell again in glittering drops, and presently the long, jetty eyelashes overflowed with tears.

"Poor unhappy girl!" she murmured: "the fountain of bright life is dried up for her--the gay and sparkling drops all spent. Oh Eloise--poor Eloise!"

One of her maids came out and stood by her side; but Leonora did not notice her, although the girl seemed anxious to tell her something. Her lady turned away her eyes. Below, at the distance of about half a mile, lay the city, with its dark walls and citadel strongly marked out in the clear light, and she saw a horseman riding up at headlong speed.

"Who is that coming, Carlotta?" asked Leonora. "It is not my father surely."

"Oh, no, signora," replied the girl. "It looks like the maestro. He will speak to you of what I was going to tell you."

"What were you going to tell?" asked Leonora with sudden eagerness.

"Oh! bad news, signora--nothing but bad news now," replied the girl: "they say--I don't know how true it is, but Marco told me--they say that the lord prefect was arrested last night by the Signor Ramiro's order, for poisoning his lady."

Leonora started up with a face as pale as death; but, after gazing on the girl for a moment with a wild look, she seated herself again and put her hand to her head.

Two minutes had hardly passed ere Leonardo was seen hurrying along the terrace, and the next moment he took her hand and kissed it.

"Pardon, dear lady, pardon my abruptness; but I have no time to lose."

"Speak! speak!" cried Leonardo, in a low but firm tone. "Let me hear all and quickly."

"The trial is over," said Leonora. "Your father would not preside; but his creatures have condemned him. No time was allowed to summon other witnesses. Some poison, concealed in the case of a portrait known to be Lorenzo's, was found in the unhappy lady's chamber; a girl called Giovanetta testified that her mistress and Friar Peter both told her that two papers--one of which she tried upon a dog who died instantly, and the other which her mistress took--were given to the countess by her husband. Some other small circumstances of suspicion appeared, and on this he was condemned, although there were numerous inconsistencies. He is innocent, believe me; but in two hours he will be done to death before the south gate, unless your father can be persuaded to respite him. There are many in the town that are sure of his innocence, but too few I fear--"

"He is innocent! he is innocent!" cried Leonora, with her brow burning, and her cheek pale. "He is innocent as a babe. I will go down--I will return with you--I will see my father--I will save him or die with him."

"But, lady, they will let no one enter the town," said Leonardo; "they have trebled the sentries at the gates. All may come forth who will, but no one can return. So they told me as I passed; and, unless you have the key of the postern, as you once had, I fear--"

"I have--I have," said Leonora; "stay but one moment."

She flew into the house and was but an instant gone. Leonardo saw her hide something like a small vial in her bosom, but the large key was in her hand; and merely beckoning him to follow, she ran down the steps of the terrace, and through the garden toward the gate. Leonardo followed rapidly, merely saying to the girl---

"Send down my horse to the gate."

Leonora was at the postern first, however, but her hands so trembled she could not put the key in the lock. The painter took it from her, opened the little gate, and, passing in, she sped on towards the citadel. She did not observe that Leonardo was no longer with her; but, with frantic speed, and hair escaped from all its bindings, she sped on through the almost deserted streets till she reached the gates of the citadel.

"Where is my father?" she cried; "where is the Lord of Imola?"

"Why, lady," replied a man standing beside the sentinel, "he is not here; he is in the bishop's piazza, waiting till the execution is over. This is a terrible day, and will bring ruin on the city, I can see."

But ere his last words were uttered, Leonora was gone.

Ramiro d'Orco truly stood in the square before the bishop's palace, which was not two hundred yards from the south gate. His arms were crossed upon his chest; his head was held high, his brow contracted; his jaws so firmly set, that when he spoke, in answer to any of the lords and officers who surrounded him, the sounds issued from between his teeth, and his lips were hardly seen to move.

"Do you not think, my lord, this is very dangerous," said one; "do you remember he is the prefect?"

"He himself decided yesterday at this very hour, that no rank can shield a murderer from death," replied Ramiro d'Orco.

"He made no defence," said another, "but denied the competence of your court, declared the charge a lie, and appealed to the Pope and the King of France."

"He himself pronounced my court competent to all high justice, yesterday," said Ramiro, drily.

"Let him appeal. When his head is off, they cannot put it on again. No more of this. He dies, if I live."

A short pause ensued, and then a man was seen running rapidly up the street which led toward the south gate.

"Who is this?" asked Ramiro d'Orco. "They have not called noon from the belfry yet, have they?"

"No, my lord," answered a young priest; "it wants half an hour of noon. But they have taken the prisoner down to the gate," he added, well comprehending what was going on in the heart of his lord. "I saw them pass as I came up a minute ago. But what has this fellow got in his arms?"

"He is one of the guards from the gates," said another; "and, by my life, I think they must have anticipated the hour, for that is a man's head he is carrying."

"No great evil," murmured Ramiro d'Orco; but a moment after a soldier reached the spot where they stood, and laid a bloody head at Ramiro's feet. All, however, remarked that the hair was somewhat grey, and the crown shaved.

"A pennon of horse from his Highness the Duke of Valentino is at the gate, my lord, seeking admission," said the messenger, almost breathless. "We did not admit them, as your lordship had ordered the gates not to be opened; but the leader threw this head in through the wicket, saying that the duke had sent it to you for the love he bears you. It is Friar Peter's head, my lord; do you not see? and the officer says he confessed last night having poisoned the Countess Visconti. What are we to do?"

A murmur of horror ran through the little crowd around, and a look of relief and satisfaction at the timely intervention spread over almost every countenance except that of Ramiro d'Orco, whose brow had gathered into a deeper frown than ever.

"What are we to do with the lord prefect?" asked the man again.

"Hence, meddling fool!" exclaimed Ramiro d'Orco, stamping his foot upon the ground. "Strike off his head! The sentence of my court shall not be reversed. Strike off his head, I say! Wait no longer--'twill be noon ere you reach the gate again. Away! Then open the gates. But mark me, no delay, as you value your own life! Go fast, sirrah! Have your feet no strength?"

The soldier ran down the street in haste, and Ramiro turned his eyes from the pained and anxious countenances around him; but it was only to meet a sight that affected him still more.

"Oh! I would have been spared this!" he cried, as Leonora rushed toward him and cast herself at his feet.

"My lord--my father!" she exclaimed, stretching out her hands towards him, "spare him! spare him! He is innocent--you know he is innocent! Lose not a moment--send down the pardon--some gentleman run down. He pardons him. Be quick! oh be quick!"

"Hold, on your lives!" cried Ramiro d'Orco, in a voice of thunder. "Hence, girl. Take her away--some one take her away. He dies, if I live!"

"Then hear, Ramiro d'Orco!" cried Leonora, "send me to the block instead of him. I poisoned her more surely than he did. See, here is the poison. I am ready; take me to the block! I confess the crime. But hear me, lords and gentlemen all: Lorenzo Visconti is innocent--innocent of the death of his poor wife--innocent of the neglect and insult my father thinks he offered me, and for which, in truth, he does him to death; innocent of all offence, as this hard parent will find when we are both in our still graves."

"Ha! what is that?" exclaimed her father, gazing at her; "she raves--take her away!"

"I rave not. It is all true," cried Leonora; "so help me God, as he has explained all. Will you send the pardon now? Oh, speak! speak!"

"It is too late," said Ramiro, in a low and gloomy tone, pointing with his hand down the street.

Leonora turned and gazed, with her eyes almost starting from her head. Four men were carrying a bier with something stretched upon it, and a cloak thrown over all. Leonora sprung upon her feet, uttered a shriek that rung through the whole square, and then fell senseless on the ground.

A brief lapse of forgetfulness came to that wrung and agonized heart, and then she opened her eyes, but she closed them quickly again. She fancied she was in a dream. What was it she thought she saw? The face of Lorenzo Visconti bending over her; French soldiers all armed; the banners of the Church mingled with others she knew not. Oh, it was a dream--a deceitful dream!

"Let me take her, Lorenzo," said a voice she had not heard for years; "joy kills as well as sorrow. Leonora--cousin Leonora, it is De Vitry: wake up--wake up. Things are not so bad as they seemed. It was the corpse of a murdering villain you saw, justly condemned to death yesterday at

this hour. Visconti is safe."

Leonora opened her eyes again, and found herself in the arms of De Vitry. She gazed anxiously round. There stood Lorenzo with his head uncovered, and his upper garment off; and a smile, like that of an angel, came upon her lips; but when he advanced a step towards her, she shrunk back in De Vitry's arms, murmuring, "Take me to my father! Oh! where is my father?" and, covering her eyes with her hands, she wept profusely.

"A litter is coming speedily from the inn there," said Leonardo da Vinci; "let me escort her, my lord. You have other matters to attend to just now, and she will be well in privacy for a time. Here comes Antonio with a litter."

De Vitry lifted her in his stalwart arms, and placed her, as tenderly as if she had been an infant, in the sort of covered bier then commonly used in Italy by ladies too feeble or too timid to travel on horseback. Leonardo drew the curtains round; but, leaning his hand upon the woodwork, he walked on by her side, while four stout bearers carried her on toward the gate leading to the villa. Twice Leonora drew back the curtain and looked out. Once she asked, "Where is my father? Is this all true, signor maestro, or am I dreaming still?"

"Your father is at the citadel waiting for the French and Roman lords," replied Leonardo. "All is real, my child, and happy is it that it is so; for both Antonio and I had nearly been too late. The number of men we could introduce last night was too small; and, had you not left the postern key in my hands, the Lord of Vitry and the French forces could hardly have entered ere the axe had fallen."

Leonora shuddered and let fall the curtain; but after a moment or two she looked out again on the other side, saying--

"Oh! good Antonio, is that you? Surely I saw him--surely I saw your lord."

"Yes, dear lady, you saw him safe," replied Antonio; "we were preparing to force the gate; but we should have been too late had not the maestro brought round the French forces from the other side of the town and let us in."

"God be praised!" murmured Leonora; "but oh, Antonio, does any one believe him guilty still? If they do, that will kill him by a sharper death than that of the axe."

"No one does--no one can," replied Antonio. "Mardocchi--that is, Father Peter--made full confession last night of the darkest and most damnable plot that ever was hatched. I could not tell the Duke of Valentino all, for there were many things I could not discover; but when I showed him plainly that Mardocchi had betrayed some of his most terrible secrets, he had him put to the torture; and then the bloody-minded knave confessed the whole, filling up all the gaps that my tale had left. The duke showed no reverence for his shaved head, but struck it off, and sent it to Imola, with his whole evidence written down by the Dominican who was there present. No, no, lady, no one can entertain even a suspicion now."

"Thank God for that also," said Leonora, in a low tone. "Oh, this has been a terrible day."

Again she let fall the curtain of the litter; and the bearers moved slowly up the hill. They carried her along the terrace to her own saloon; but when they stopped, and Leonardo would have aided her to descend, they found her sound asleep.

Tired nature, exhausted with the conflict of passions, had given way, and slumber had sealed her eyes at the first touch of returning peace. There was a sweet, well-contented smile upon her lips, but Leonardo marked a bright red spot upon her cheek, and calling her maids to her, he himself stayed at the villa till she awoke. The burning fever was already upon her; her words were incoherent, her pulse beating terribly. For fourteen days Leonora d'Orco hung between life and death; and happy was it, perhaps, that anything occurred to place a veil between her eyes and the last terrible act of the drama in which she herself had borne so conspicuous a part.

Every one at all acquainted with Italian history knows what followed; how Cæsar Borgia, about four days after the events last recorded had taken place, commanded the personal attendance of Ramiro d'Orco on his terrible and treacherous march to Senegaglia; how Ramiro found himself compelled to obey, both by the presence of the French and the papal troops in his capital, and by fear lest his machinations against Lorenzo Visconti should be too closely investigated; and how his dead body was found one morning out in two pieces, in the marketplace of Bologna. None knew how he died, or by whose command; and Leonora never suspected that he had suffered a violent death.

That he was dead they told her as soon as she could bear such tidings; and under the escort of De Vitry and his forces she joined Bianca Maria and returned, after some months, to the Milanese. At the end of some fifteen or sixteen months, Lorenzo Visconti and Leonora d'Orco cast off the garb of mourning, and united their fates for ever. It was on the day when she reached her twenty-first birthday; and if the reader will look back through this veracious history, he will see that few so young have ever gone through such varied and terrible griefs and trials; nor will he wonder that, while I say Leonora d'Orco was at last happy, I add, that a shade of melancholy mingled with her joy, and that the dark cloud of memory still hung over the past, forming a

sombre background to the sparkling sunshine of the present.

## FOOTNOTES

[Footnote 1](#): Paul Jovius describes these guns--the embryo musket--amongst the arms of the Swiss infantry, which did such good service in the campaign against Naples. They were at first looked upon with great contempt by the men-at-arms.

[Footnote 2](#): The facts alleged against Alexander by the cardinal were, unfortunately, only too notorious, and the letters produced were the authentic letters of Borgia and Bajazet. They are still extant and authenticated by the Apostolic notary. In one from the pope to the sultan he demands "*ut placeat sibi (Bajazet) quam citius mittere. nobis ducatos quadraginta millia in auro venetos, pro annata anni praesentis, quae finiet ultimo die novembris,*" and Bajazet sweetly suggests to his Christian ally, "*dictum Gem (Zizim) levare facere ex augustiis istius mundi et transferrri ejus animam in alterum saeculum ubi meliorem habebit quietem,*" promising him three hundred thousand ducats as soon as the corpse is delivered to his (Bajazet's) agents.

[Footnote 3](#): The Kings of France always claimed to be such, and the bishop flattered the monarch's pride by the allusion.

## THE END

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LEONORA D'ORCO: A HISTORICAL ROMANCE \*\*\*

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