

**Raphael Sabatini**



*The Justice  
of the Duke*



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[1. THE HONOUR OF VARANO](#)

[2. THE TEST](#)

[3. FERRANTE'S JEST](#)

[4. GISMONDI'S WAGE](#)

[5. THE SNARE](#)

[6. THE LUST OF CONQUEST](#)

[7. THE PASQUINADE](#)

[THE END](#)

# 1. THE HONOUR OF VARANO

## [Table of Contents](#)

CESARE BORGIA, Duke of Valentinois and Romagna, rose slowly from his chair, and slowly crossed to the window of that spacious chamber in the Rocca of Imola. He stood there in the autumn sunshine gazing down upon the tented meadow and the river beyond, and upon the long ribbon of road, the ancient Via Aemilia, stretching smooth and straight with never a crease until it was lost in the distant hazy pile that was Faenza.

That road which crosses Northern Italy diagonally—a line of almost unwavering straightness for a hundred miles from the ancient Rubicon to Piacenza—may well have been a source of pride to Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, some fifteen hundred years before; to Cesare Borgia, contemplating it upon that autumn day, it was no better than a source of vexation—a way north and south by which to his relief might march the troops he did not dare to summon.

From the road his eyes shifted again to the besieging camp in the meadows by the river. There all was bustle, an incessant movement of men and horses, industrious as a colony of ants. Yonder a group of engineers were mounting a park of artillery with which they hoped to smash a way into his stronghold. Farther off was a great coming-and-going of glittering armed figures about the large green tent that housed the too-daring Venanzio Varano. Away to the west a half-naked swarm of men laboured with picks and spades at a ditch by which to deviate the water from the

river and so serve them as a rampart against any sudden sortie of the besieged.

A faint hum of all this business reached the watcher in his eyrie, and he cursed it between contempt and anger; contempt, to think how the mere lifting of his finger would scatter that presumptuous little army, as a flock of sparrows scatters perceiving the hawk poised above them in the blue; anger, to consider that he dared not lift that same finger lest other and greater plans, not yet mature, should suffer by this too-early display of might; contempt again, of this fool Varano, and his petty daring, to conceive that Cesare Borgia was at the end of his resources and a prey for such a handful of mercenaries—the very sweepings of the martial market-place—as Varano had assembled; anger again, that for a day, for an hour, he must allow Varano to continue in that conceit. With what a puffed-up arrogance would not this fool of Camerino be ordering the business of the siege against this Imola that gave no sign, against this brown citadel drowsing unresponsive in the late autumn sunshine under the Borgia banner with its bull device that floated from the Maschio Tower.

A stealthy step in the room behind him went unheeded by the Duke. That it did so, proved the extent of his absorption, for there never lived a man of keener senses; never a man who combined with an intellect superacute such splendid animal faculties as were his. Merely to behold him was to perceive all this. He was in the very flower of his youth; some seven and twenty years of age; tall, straight and lithe as steel. His father, Pope Alexander VI, had been accounted in early life the handsomest man of his day; of a

beauty of countenance, it was said, that acted upon women as the lodestone upon iron—which had by no means helped him to the virtuous course that should be looked for in a churchman. That beauty Cesare had inherited, but refined and glorified by the graces of Madonna Vanozza de' Catanei, the Roman lady who had been his mother. If there was sensuality in the full lips of the red mouth, half-hidden by the silky tawny beard, this was corrected by the loftiness of the pale brow; the nose was delicately arched, the nostrils sensitive, and the eyes—who shall describe the glory of those hazel eyes? Who shall read their message, who shall depict the will, the intellect, the dreamy wistfulness, the impassiveness that looks out of them?

He was dressed from head to foot in black; but through the slashings of his velvet doublet gleamed the rich yellow of an undervest of cloth-of-gold; a ruby-studded girdle gripped his loins, and on his hip hung a heavy gold-hilted Pistoja dagger in a golden sheath of cunning workmanship. His tawny head was bare.

Again came never so faintly the creak of that stealthy footstep behind him, and again it went unperceived. Nor yet did Cesare move when another and heavier tread rang on the staircase mounting to his room. Absorbed he continued his survey of Varano's camp.

The door was opened and reclosed. Someone had entered and was approaching him. Still he did not stir; yet without stirring he spoke, addressing the newcomer by name.

"And so, Agabito," said he, "you have sent my summons to Varano?"

To another less accustomed than his secretary, Agabito Gherardi, to Cesare's ways, this might have seemed almost uncanny. But Agabito was familiar with that superacuteness of his master, whose perceptions were keen as a blind man's and who could recognise a step where another would have needed to behold the face.

He bowed as Cesare turned to him. He was a man of middle height, well nourished, with a mobile, humorous mouth and keen dark eyes. His age may have been forty, and, as became his clerkly station, he wore a black surcoat that descended to his knees.

"It has gone, Highness," he answered. "But I doubt the gentleman of Camerino will decline the invitation."

Agabito observed the Duke's glance to stray past and beyond him. Musing and idle seemed his eyes to Agabito—which but serves to show that, intimately though the secretary accounted that he knew his master, yet he had not fathomed the inscrutability of Cesare's glance. For the eyes which looked dreamy were alert and watchful, and the brain behind them was working swiftly to conclusions. The arras over beyond the great carved writing-table was quivering never so faintly. This Cesare was observing—seeming to muse—and he was considering that the air was still and that no draught could account for that phenomenon. Yet when presently he spoke, he betrayed nothing of observation or conclusion.

"Art ever a pessimist, Agabito," said he.

"True-sighted, my lord," amended the secretary, with the easy familiarity Cesare conceded him. "For the rest, what does it matter, whether he comes or not?" And he smiled, a

thousand wrinkles gathering about his eyes. "There is always the back door."

"It is your cursed pessimism again to remind me that there is that and naught but that."

Agabito spread his hands, his countenance a grimace of deprecation.

"Who cares to open that back door?" quoth the Duke.

"Why, man, if I make the allies aware of its existence, if I so much as lift the latch, the click of it will so scare them that they'll every one escape me. The back door, you say! You are growing old, Agabito. Show me the way to drive off that shallow fool with such means as I dispose of here."

"Alas!" sighed the secretary hopelessly.

"Alas, indeed!" snapped the Duke, and strode past him into the room. There he paced a while, considering the position, Agabito observing him.

To a more vexatious pass than this matters could not have come. It was the season of the league against him formed by the Orsini in alliance with his own revolted captains Vitelli and Baglioni. These rebels stood in arms a full ten thousand strong, determined upon his destruction, having sworn his death. Cunningly they spread their net to hem him in, believing that they had him safe and that his strength was sapped. And he, the better to take them in the toils they were spinning for himself, had indulged them in their conviction that he was powerless and unprepared. Actively had he done so, deliberately dismissing three of his companies of French lances—the very, backbone of his army—and putting it about that they had left him of their own accord, led off by their captains with whom he had



quarrelled. Thus had it seemed as if his knell had indeed sounded; already the allies accounted him their prey, for, without the French lances, the forces of which he disposed were of no account. But they knew nothing of the Romagnuoli men-at-arms that Naldo had assembled for him, still less of the Swiss foot and the Gascon mercenaries whom his officers held ready for him in Lombardy—nor should they know until the hour was ripe. He had but to lift his finger, and there would sprout up such an army as should make the allies sick with misgivings. Meanwhile he desired that they should bait their trap for him, lulled by their false security. He would walk into it complacently enough; but—by the Host!—what a surprising stir would he not make within it. How the springs of that same trap should take them on the recoil and crush them!

To have planned so well, so precisely to have reckoned the moves that must enable him to cry "Checkmate!"—and to find himself, instead, stalemated by the act of this rash fool of Camerino who sat out there in egregious self-complacency, little recking the volcano that was under him!

For here is what had happened. This Venanzio Varano, one of the dethroned lords of Camerino, impatient at the sluggishness of the allies, and unable to urge them into swifter action, had drawn off and taken matters into his own hands. Gathering together a desperate, out-at-elbow army of discredited mercenaries of all nations, numbering perhaps a thousand strong, he had marched upon Imola, and there laid siege to Cesare in his stronghold—cursed alike by the allies and by Cesare for his interference in the plans of each.

"Perhaps," said Agabito presently, "if the allies observe the success that seems to attend Varano, they will join him here. Then would be your opportunity."

But Cesare waved a hand impatiently. "How can I put a net about them here?" he asked. "I could rout their army; but what of that? It is the brains of it I want—and at one blow. No, no," he ended. "Meanwhile, let us see what answer Varano makes to my invitation, and what comes of it."

"And if nothing comes, you'll strike?" said Agabito, as though he urged it.

Cesare pondered, his face clouding. "Not yet," said he. "I'll wait and hope for some chance. My luck—there is my luck, remember." He turned to the massive, richly wrought writing-table, and took up a packet. "Here is the letter for the Signory of Florence. I have signed it. Contrive to get it hence."

Agabito took the package. "It will tax my ingenuity," said he, and pursed his lips.

"Attend to it," said Cesare, and so dismissed him.

The door closed upon the secretary; his steps receded down the stone staircase, and the sound of them was lost. Then Cesare, standing in mid-apartment, faced the arras which had quivered on Agabito's entrance.

"Come forth, messer the spy," said he quite calmly.

He was prepared to see a man emerge in answer to that summons—and he had some notion of that man's identity—but he was quite unprepared for the manner in which his order was to be obeyed.

The arras was swept aside, and across the intervening space, it seemed to Cesare, was hurled as from a catapult a

great, brown human shape with one arm raised to strike. The blow descended. The dagger took Cesare full in the breast, and there snapped suddenly. As the broken blade tinkled on the floor, the Duke's hands closed like manacles about the wrists of his assailant.

The wretch may never have seen Cesare snap a horseshoe in his fingers, nor yet seen Cesare decapitate a bull at one single stroke of a spadoon, but of the awful strength that could accomplish such feats as those he had now the fullest and most painful demonstration. This murderer was a big fellow, of stout thews and sinews, yet in the grip of that lithe young man his strength was all turned to water. He felt as if the iron pressure of Cesare's fingers were crushing his wrists to pulp, were twisting his elbows out of joint. He came howling to his knees, then caught his nether lip in his teeth to repress another howl. His right hand opened and released the hilt and stump of his poniard, which went to rejoin the blade upon the floor. He looked up with fearful eyes into the Duke's face, and found it calm—horribly, terrifically calm—betraying neither anger nor exertion.

"Messer Malipiero," said his Highness, "you should never have chanced a shirt of mail when there was my naked throat to offer you so fair a mark." And he smiled amiably—the very superlative of mockery—into the other's tortured countenance. Then he released him. "Get up!" he said more briskly. "We must talk."

"My lord! My lord!" whimpered the assassin, holding out his maimed wrists. "Forgive! Forgive!"

"Forgive?" echoed Cesare, halting as he moved away.  
"Forgive what?"

"My—the thing I did but now."

"Oh, that! Why, it is the manliest thing you have done since you came hither. Count it forgiven. But the rest, Malipiero—your offering your sword to me in a time of need, your lies to me, your gaining my confidence, and you the spy of Varano—must I forgive that too?"

"My lord!" groaned the abject Malipiero.

"And even if I forgive you all this, can you forgive yourself—you, a patrician—that you should have come to turn spy and assassin?"

"Not—not assassin, my lord. I had not meant that. It was in self-defence, seeing myself discovered and accounting myself lost. Oh, I was mad! Mad!"

The Duke moved away towards the table. "Well, well," said he, "it is over and done with." He took up a silver whistle, and blew a blast upon it. Malipiero, staggering to his feet, turned if possible a shade paler than he had been. But the Duke's next words reassured him. "And for my own part, since you lay such store by it—I forgive you."

"You forgive me?" Malipiero could not believe his ears.

"Why not? I am a good Christian, I hope; and I practise the Christian virtue of forgiveness; so much indeed, that I deplore most deeply the necessity of hanging you none the less."

Malipiero flung wide his aching arms, and made a sound in his throat, terror staring from his protruding eyes.

"What choice have I?" quoth Cesare, in answer to that incoherent cry. "There are the things you have overheard. It

was unfortunate."

"Gesu!" cried the other, and advanced a step towards Cesare. "I swear that I'll be dumb."

"You shall," said Cesare.

Heavy steps approached. Malipiero gulped, then spoke quickly, with fearful earnestness.

"I swear no word of what I heard shall ever cross my lips—I swear it by all my hopes of heaven, by the Blessed Mother of God!"

"You shall not be forsworn," Cesare assured him. Then the door opened, and the officer of the guard stood at attention on the threshold.

Malipiero clutched at his breast, swung about this way and that in the frenzy of his despair, until his glance met Cesare's calm eyes and impassive countenance. Then his tongue was loosened. Imprecations, ordures of speech too horrible for chronicling, poured torrentially from his quivering lips, until a touch upon the shoulder struck him into a shuddering silence. Limply he surrendered himself to the officer who at a sign from Cesare had advanced.

"Let him be confined in solitude," said the Duke, "until I make known my pleasure."

Malipiero looked hopelessly at Cesare. "When—when is it to be?" he asked hoarsely.

"At dawn tomorrow," Cesare answered. "God rest your soul!"

A trumpet blared beneath the walls of Imola, and its brazen voice reached Cesare Borgia in that room in the Maschio Tower. He dropped his pen and lay back in his chair. Conjecturing what might hang upon that trumpet-blast, he



smiled pensively at the groined ceiling that was painted blue and flecked with golden stars, and waited.

Presently came Messer Gherardi with news that an ambassador had arrived from Varano's camp, and Cesare ceased to smile.

"An ambassador?" he echoed, his brows knitting. "Does a servant come in response to the invitation I sent the master?"

Agabito's ready smile deprecated this vexation. "Is it really matter for wonder? These Varani are treacherous, bloody men. Venanzio fears that you might deal with him as he with you in the like circumstances. He knows that were he removed his mercenaries would not avenge him, would not stand together for a day. You will see the ambassador, my lord? I can promise that you will find Varano's choice of messenger most interesting."

"How?" quoth Cesare shortly.

But the secretary's answer seemed almost an evasion. "There has been an arrest made since last I was here," said he. "I never trusted Gustavo Malipiero. How came he in this room, Highness?"

"That matters little. What he sought matters rather more. It was my life." And Cesare pointed to the pieces of the broken dagger, still lying where Malipiero had dropped them half-an-hour ago. "Pick it up, Agabito," said he.

On the point of obeying, Agabito checked, a queer smile twisting the corners of his mobile mouth. "You might presently wish that I had left it," said he. "Let it lie there yet a while, my lord."

Cesare's eyes questioned the secretary.

"Shall I introduce the ambassador of Varano?" was Agabito's bland inquiry.

"Why—what has he to do with Malipiero's dagger?" quoth the Duke, perceiving that in Gherardi's mind some connection must exist.

"Perhaps nothing, perhaps much. Be your Highness the judge."

Cesare waved a hand, assenting. Agabito crossed to the door, opened it and called; then leisurely returned to take his stand by the table at Cesare's elbow. Steps ascended the stairs. Two men-at-arms in morion and corselet clattered in and flanked the doorway, and between them entered, with clank of scabbard and ring of spurs, an elderly man of middle height, very splendid in purple velvet. In midapartment he checked with military abruptness, and bowed stiffly, yet profoundly, to the Duke. Then he came upright again, and out of a vulture face a pair of shifty eyes met Cesare's stem glance.

Whilst a man might count a dozen there was utter silence in the chamber, the ambassador waiting for the Duke to address him, the Duke seeming in no haste, but staring at the man and understanding what had been in Gherardi's mind when he had begged that the dagger should be let lie a while.

A bee sailed through the window and the hum of its wings was the only sound that disturbed a stillness that was becoming unnatural. At last Cesare spoke to the ambassador of Varano, to the father of the man who half-an-hour ago had sought to murder him.

"It is thou, Malipiero, eh?" said he, his face impassive as a mask, his brain a whorl of speculation of considering and connecting.

The man bowed again. "Your servant always, Highness."

"Art the servant of the Lord of Camerino?" the Duke amended. "Art the fox that waits upon the wolf?" And the evenness of his tones was marred by the faintest suspicion of a sneer. "I bade your master attend me that we might arrange the terms upon which he will consent to raise this siege. He sends you in his place. It is an affront—tell him—which I shall lay to his already very heavy score. Let him flout me while the little fleeting chance is his. But let him not cry out hereafter when I call the reckoning."

"My lord was afraid to come, Magnificent."

Cesare laughed shortly. "I nothing doubt it. But you—you, Malipiero?" And he leant forward, his tone of a sudden invested with a deadly menace. "Were you not afraid to take his place?"

Malipiero started, his natural pallor deepened, and the corners of his mouth were perceived by Agabito to quiver slightly. But before he could answer, the Duke had sunk back into his chair again, and asked in normal tones: "Why have you come?"

"To treat in my lord's name."

Cesare considered him a moment in silence. "For that and nothing else?" he inquired.

"What else, indeed, Highness?"

"'Tis what I asked thee," said Cesare shortly.

"My lord," the other cried in quaking protest, "I come as an ambassador."

"Why, true. I was forgetting. Discharge your embassy. You know the thing that I would buy. Tell me the price this trader of Camerino asks."

Malipiero the elder drew himself erect, and formally performed his errand. As he spoke his eyes strayed to the broken dagger lying almost at his feet, the gold hilt gleaming in a shaft of sunlight; but the weapon told him nothing, it was plain, for he never checked or faltered in the delivery of his message.

"My lord of Camerino," he announced, "will raise this siege and withdraw his army in return for your signed undertaking to recall your troops from Camerino, reinstating him in his lordship and leaving him to enjoy it unmolested."

Cesare stared in amazement at the effrontery of the demand. "Was he drunk, this lout of Camerino, when he sent that message?" Malipiero quailed under the scorn of the Duke's eyes. "Magnificent," he said, "it may be that my Lord Venanzio seems arrogant to you. But you will find him firm in his resolve. He has you, he swears, in the hollow of his hand."

"Has he so? Body of God! Then he shall find that I am made of gunpowder, and when I burst that same hand of his shall be blown to rags. Go tell him so."

"You'll not accept his terms?"

"Sooner will I sit in Imola until the Resurrection of the Flesh." Malipiero paused a moment like a man undecided. His glance shifted to the shaven, humorous face of Agabito Gherardi; but he saw nothing there to embolden him. Nevertheless like a good ambassador, he said what else he had been bidden say.

"Vitellozzo, the Orsini and the Baglioni are coalescing."

"Do you give me news? And how shall that serve Varano? His subjects of Camerino loathe him for a bloody tyrant, and being once rid of him they'll never suffer his return."

"I am not sure..." began Malipiero.

"I know thou'rt not. But I, who am, tell thee." He pushed back his chair on that, and rose. "Agabito, let this ambassador of Varano be reconducted, and with courteous treatment."

And with that, as if dismissing the entire matter from his mind, he sauntered across the room, past Malipiero, towards the window; and as he went he drew from his pocket a little comfit-box in gold and blue enamel.

Agabito experienced a pang of disappointment. Not so, by much, had he pictured the conclusion of this interview. And yet, perhaps Cesare in his cunning and unfailing calculation counted upon something more. Even as he thought of it he saw in Malipiero's attitude that it was so, indeed. For the ambassador made no shift to go. He stood there shuffling uneasily, his foxy old eyes roaming from the secretary to the young duke, and betraying the labour of his mind.

"Highness," he said at last, "may I speak with you alone?"

"We are alone," said Cesare over his shoulder. "What else have you to add?"

"Something that will make for the advancement of your interests."

Cesare turned his back to the window, and his beautiful eyes grew very narrow as they surveyed the bowing Malipiero. Then a faint smile hovered round his lips. He



made a sign to the men-at-arms standing by the door. They turned and clattered out.

"Agabito remains. I have no secrets from my secretary. Speak out."

"Highness..." began the ambassador, and halted there. Then, under Cesare's impatient eye, "My Lord Varano is in earnest," he concluded lamely.

Cesare shrugged and raised the lid of his comfit-box. "So I had understood from you already. Is there nothing more?"

"You were pleased to correct me, Highness, when upon entering here I announced myself your servant."

"By what tortuous ways do you travel to your goal? Well, well! You were my servant once; now you are his. Would you be mine again? Is that your meaning?"

Malipiero bowed eloquently. The Duke considered him, shot a glance at Agabito, then with deliberation picked a coriander-seed.

"The lord of Camerino's fortunes, then, do not wear so very prosperous a look?" said he, between question and conclusion, and thereby set Malipiero infernally ill at ease.

The ambassador had looked for some eagerness on Cesare's part. This calm, half-mocking indifference chilled him. At last he took his courage in both hands. "It was I," he announced, "who made Varano afraid to come—to the end that he might send me."

The lid of the comfit-box snapped down. His Magnificence of Valentinois was interested at last, it seemed. Encouraged, Malipiero went on, "I did this that I might lay my poor services at your disposal; for at heart, Highness, I have ever been your most devoted. My only son is in your service."

"You lie, you foul, infernal traitor. You lie!" And Cesare advanced upon him as if to strike him into dust. Gone now was the impassive calm on his face; gone the inscrutable softness of his eyes; their glance enveloped Malipiero as in a flame—a flame that swept about his heart and left it ashes.

"My lord! My lord!" he babbled foolishly.

Cesare halted in his approach, and resumed his quiet manner as abruptly as he had cast it off.

"Look at that dagger at your feet," he said, and Malipiero obeyed him stupidly. "It was broken an hour ago against my breast. Can you guess whose the hand that wielded it? Your son's—this precious only son of yours, who is in my service."

Malipiero recoiled, bearing a hand to his throat as if something choked him.

"You came hither for such scraps of knowledge as that spy might have gleaned. My invitation to Varano was your opportunity. Without it you would still have come, bearing as spontaneous the offer that you brought as answer. The object of your spying you best know—you that never yet kept faith with any man. Oh, there is no doubt, Malipiero, that at heart you have ever been my devoted servants—you and your son."

"O God!" groaned the unhappy wretch.

"Your only son is to be hanged at daybreak tomorrow. It shall be from this window here, in sight of this Varano whom he served, in sight of you who have ever been my most devoted."

Malipiero cast himself upon his knees; he flung out his arms wildly. "My lord, I swear to you that I knew naught of any plot to—to hurt you."

"Why, I believe you for once. There may have been no such plot. But I caught your son in the act of spying, and so he took, perhaps, what seemed to him the only course. It makes no difference. He would have hanged without that."

Malipiero, on his knees, raised a livid face, his brow glistening with the sweat of the agony that racked him.

"Highness," he cried, in a quavering voice, "I have it in my power to make amends for my son's folly. I can rid you of this bankrupt of Camerino. Shall it—shall it be a bargain between us? My son's life for the raising of this siege?"

Cesare smiled. "It was to make me some such proposal, I think, that you desired to speak with me alone. Nothing is altered but the price—for not a doubt but that you intended some other profit from the treachery you had conceived."

Malipiero flung dissimulation to the winds. What, indeed, could it avail him against one who looked so deep and unerringly into motives? The greed of gold which had made him a constant traitor to any whom he served had been his only stimulus in this fresh treachery. But now, the life of his boy was all the recompense he asked. He frankly said as much.

"I will not bargain with you," was Cesare's contemptuous answer.

Tears welled to the eyes of the distraught man and coursed down the furrows of the livid cheeks. Wildly he implored clemency and urged upon the Duke's attention the gain he stood to make.

"There is not in all Italy a knave with whom I would so scorn to deal as you, Malipiero. Man, you have steeped

yourself in the filth of treachery until you stink of it. The very sight of you offends me."

"My lord," the wretch clamoured, "I can raise this siege as could no other man. Grant me Gustavo's life, and it shall be done to-morrow. I will draw Varano away—back to Camerino. What are his men without him? You know their worth, Highness—a parcel of hirelings with no heart in the business, who would never stay to oppose a sally if Varano were not at hand to urge them."

Cesare measured the man with a calculating eye. "What means have you to perform so much?"

At that suggestion that the Duke was inclined to treat with him, Malipiero rose. He shuffled a step nearer, licking his lips. "Varano loves his throne of Camerino dearly. But there is one thing he loves still more—his honour. Let it be whispered to him that the lady, his wife—" He leered horribly. "You understand, Magnificent? He would leave his camp out yonder and dash back to Camerino, where she bides, as fast as horse could bear him."

Cesare felt his soul revolt. The thing was vile, the fruit of a vile mind, uttered by a vile mouth; and as he looked at the leering creature before him, a sense of nausea took him. But his face showed no sign of this; his beautiful passionless eyes betrayed none of the loathing with which this arch-traitor inspired him. Presently his lips parted in a smile; but what that smile portended Malipiero could not guess until he spoke.

"Possibly there is in Italy a viler thing than thou; probably there is not. Still, it is for me to use thee, not convert thee. Do this thing, then, since you are assured it may be done."

Malipiero drew a deep breath of relief. Insults were of no account to him. "Grant me my son's life, and I undertake that by tonight Varano shall be in the saddle."

"I'll make no bargains with you," Cesare answered him.

"But if I do this thing you will be clement, you will be merciful, Highness?"

"Rest content. You shall not fail to find me just."

"I am content," said Malipiero. "I count upon that. And yet—and yet... Reassure me, Highness! I am a father. Promise me that, if I serve you in this, Gustavo shall not hang."

Cesare eyed him a moment and shrugged contemptuously. "He shall not hang. I have said that you shall find me just. And now to details." Cesare crossed briskly to the writing-table. "Have you power in Varano's name to grant a safe-conduct?"

"I have, Highness."

"Here is what you will need. Write, then—for twenty men from Imola."

Malipiero snatched a quill, and in a hand that shook, for all his efforts to steady it, he wrote and signed the order Cesare demanded. The Duke took the paper and sat down.

"How shall I have knowledge that Varano has departed?" he inquired.

Malipiero considered a moment. Then, "As soon as he goes tonight I will extinguish the cresset that burns outside his tent. You can see it from here."

Cesare nodded shortly, and blew upon his silver whistle. To the men-at-arms, re-entering in answer to that summons, he consigned the person of the ambassador, bidding them reconduct him to the gates.



When the door had closed again, Cesare turned to Agabito with a smile of grim contempt. "I had best served the world had I violated the sacredness of that ambassador's person, and held a family hanging in the morning. The toad! Madonna! The foul, crapulous toad! But there! Summon Corella, and bid them have young Malipiero at hand."

When, presently, Cesare's Venetian captain, whom so many supposed to be a Spaniard, stalked into the room—a tall, stately man, all steel and leather—the Duke tossed Malipiero's safe-conduct across to him, and gave his orders.

"You will watch tonight the cresset that burns outside Varano's tent. Ten minutes after it has been quenched you will ride out with the twenty men you choose, and make for Camerino." Cesare unrolled a map and beckoned Corella to his side. "But not this way, Michele—not by Faenza and Forli. You shall take to the hills and thus outstrip another party going by the main road. Contrive that you reach Camerino in advance of it by at least six hours, and remember that those others will ride desperately. Agabito will instruct you later in what else you have to do. The manner of it shall be in your own hands."

Michele da Corella gasped. "They will set out before me," he said. "They will take the shorter road, and they will ride desperately. Yet I am to be in Camerino at least six hours ahead of them. In short, I am to work a miracle, and I am just Michele da Corella, a captain of horse."

Cesare looked up quietly. "Chucklehead!" said he. "You will detach the two best-mounted men of your company, and send them after the other party by the Rimini road. Let

them pass and precede them, and so contrive with the relays to delay them upon the road sufficiently to enable you to do as I command."

Corella flushed out of shame of wits that must appear so dull.

"Now, go, Michele," the Duke bade him, "and make ready."

As Corella was withdrawing the Duke recalled him. "I said twenty men. I should have said nineteen—counting yourself; the twentieth will be Messer Gustavo Malipiero, who is to ride with you. Bid them bring him in now."

Corella saluted and withdrew. Cesare sat back in his great leathern chair and glanced at Agabito. "Well?" he inquired. "Do you perceive what a web of justice I am weaving?"

"Not yet, my lord," confessed Agabito.

"Not? I sometimes think you are as dull-witted as Michele."

And Agabito kept it to himself that he sometimes thought his master possessed all the guile and craft of Satan.

As Malipiero the older had undertaken, so did he perform; though in the performance he went near to being strangled by the powerful hands of Venanzio Varano.

He repaired at nightfall to Venanzio's tent with his foul invention, and at the first hint of his meaning the passionate lord of Camerino flung into a fury. He caught Malipiero by his scraggy throat, swung him off his feet, and went over with him in a dark corner of the tent.

There he pinned him to the ground under a knee that seemed to be crushing every bone in the old traitor's breast.

"Dog!" he snarled, and Malipiero writhed and squirmed, halfdead from shock and fright, expecting to feel the other's teeth close on his windpipe, so brutal was Varano become in his great rage. "Do you proclaim my wife a trull?" he roared. "Say that you lied! Confound yourself, you rogue, or, by the Host I'll wring your carrion neck."

Then Malipiero, coward though he was at heart, was fired with the courage of despair. "Fool!" he panted, struggling for breath. "Fool, I spoke out of love for you, and I can prove the thing I say."

"Prove it?" roared the infuriated Varano, and he heaved the wretch up to dash him down again. "Prove it? Can lies be proved?"

"No," said Malipiero. "But truth can."

It was a simple and very obvious retort. Yet it produced its effect upon Varano, and Malipiero was able to breathe more freely at last. Varano had released him; he had risen and was bawling for lights. Malipiero sat up, nursing his bruises, making sure that no bones were broken, and breathing a prayer of thanksgiving to Our Lady of Loreto—who had ever been the object of a special devotion on his part—that he had had the wit to forge proofs betimes that should lend countenance to the foul charges he made against a pure lady's honour. He comforted himself, too, with the reflection that those same proofs would avenge the mishandling he had suffered, and that for the bruises Varano had dealt his body he would presently deal such bruises to Varano's soul as should go some way to make them quits.

Lights came, revealing the shrivelled, yellow-faced man sitting there upon the floor, with tumbled hair and rent garments and a very evil glimmer in his rat's eyes, and the other—the great lumbering Varano—standing over him, no less pale and evil to behold.

"Now, dog, the proofs."

This was Malipiero's hour of vengeance. Slowly he loosed the points of his purple doublet; slowly he groped within the breast of it, and slowly he drew forth a package tied with an orange ribbon.

Slowly he was proceeding to unfasten it, when Varano, with an oath of impatience, stooped, snatched the package, and tore away the ribbon. Then he strode to the table, unfolded a letter, and spread it under his great hand.

Malipiero, watching him with fearful, unblinking eyes, saw the great head slowly sink forward on to his breast. But Varano rallied quickly. His faith in his wife was no mere thistledown to be so lightly scattered. He sank to a chair, and turned to Malipiero, who had now risen.

"Tell me," he said, "tell me again, how came these into your hands?" There was now no anger in his voice. He spoke like a man who is struggling between dark unconsciousness and painful consciousness.

"Madonna's chamberlain Fabio brought them an hour ago during your absence. He dared not come while you were here. Love of you made him traitor to your lady. Fear of you kept him from delivering the letters to you himself. And no sooner had he said so much to me than he was gone again, leaving the cursed package in my hands."

"If—if they were false!" cried Varano, wrestling with that fierce natural jealousy of his upon which the cunning Malipiero had built his schemes.

The traitor's face grew long with simulated sorrow. "My lord," he murmured dolefully, "to bid you build on that were not to love you. What ends could Fabio wish to serve? And Fabio loves you. And Fabio, who purloined those letters from madonna's treasure casket, knew of their existence, else he had not sought them."

"Enough!" cried the wretched Varano—a cry of anguish. Then with an oath he opened out another letter. "Oh, vile!" he groaned. "Oh, worse and worse," and he read the signature—"Galeotto"—then knit his brows. "But who is this Galeotto?"

On the livid face of the satyr behind his chair a faint smile was smeared. He had a sense of humour, this Malipiero, and in the fiction of that name, in the equivoque it covered, it had found a sly expression. Aloud he parodied a line of Dante's:

*"Galeotto fu il nome, e chi lo scrisse!"*

With a snort the lord of Camerino turned to a third letter. His hand clenched and unclenched as he read. Then he raised it, and smashed it down upon the table with a fearful oath. He came to his feet. "Oh, shameless!" he inveighed. "Adulteress! Trull! Oh, and yet—so fond to all seeming, and so foully false! God help me! Is it possible—is it—"

He checked, his blood-injected eyes fastened upon Malipiero, and Malipiero recoiled now in horror of the devil he had raised. He drew hastily aside, out of Varano's way, as

the latter, moved by a sudden resolve, strode to the entrance of the tent, beating his hands together and calling.

"Saddle me three horses on the instant," he commanded, "and bid Gianpaolo make ready for a journey." Then, striding back into the tent, "The third horse is for you, Malipiero."

"For me?" clucked the traitor, in a greater fright than any that had yet touched him since embarking on this evil business.

"For thee," said Varano sternly. Then towering above the shivering wretch, "Hast ever known torture, Malipiero?" he inquired. "Hast ever seen the hoist at work, or the rack disjuncting bones and stretching sinews till they burst, till the patient screams for the mercy of a speedy death? If God in His great clemency should please that you have lied to me—as I pray He may—you shall make acquaintance with those horrors, Malipiero. Ah, it makes you faint to think on them," he gloated, for he was, as Cesare had said a cruel, bloody man. Then suddenly, sternly, "Go make you ready for this journey," he commanded, and Malipiero went.

Here was a tangle, a complication on which the astute Venetian—for this Malipiero hailed from Venice, the very home and source of craft—had failed to reckon. That Varano should still be suspicious amid all his passion of jealousy, and should wish to make sure of Malipiero against the chance of precisely some such situation as the existing one, was something that had never entered the traitor's calculations.

What was he to do? Mother of God, what was he to do?

As he stood in his own tent a sickness took him, a sickness that was physical as well as spiritual. Then he

rallied, played the man a moment, and drew his sword. He ran his thumb along the edge of it to test its keenness; he set the hilt against the ground, and paused. He had but to place himself with his heart over the point—so—and drop forward. A Roman death was here—swift and painless. Surely he had reached the end, and if he took not this easy means of egress there were the horrors Varano had promised him—the rack and the hoist.

Then he bethought him of his son. His son would hang at dawn unless Varano went. And if he killed himself now, Varano must guess the truth, and would remain. That and the reflection that between Imola and Camerino much might betide, restrained him. He took up his sword again, and restored it to its sheath. Steps sounded without; a soldier stood at the entrance, with a summons from Varano. The traitor braced himself to go.

As they reached Varano's tent he bethought him of one thing there was yet to do, and turning to the mercenary who paced behind him, "Quench me that cresset," he commanded shortly.

The fellow caught up a pail of water standing near, and flung the contents on the blaze, extinguishing it.

"Why, what is this?" asked Varano, stepping forth.

"There was too much light," said Malipiero glibly. "They can see us from the castle."

"What then, man?"

"Would you have Cesare Borgia know that you ride forth?" cried Malipiero, with a very obvious sneer for the thing the other overlooked.