

Hope Anthony

The Chronicles of Count Antonio



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CHAPTER I

HOW COUNT ANTONIO TOOK TO THE HILLS

Countless are the stories told of the sayings that Count Antonio spoke and of the deeds that he did when he dwelt an outlaw in the hills. For tales and legends gather round his name thick as the berries hang on a bush, and with the passage of every succeeding year it grows harder to discern where truth lies and where the love of wonder, working together with the sway of a great man's memory, has wrought the embroidery of its fancy on the plain robe of fact. Yet, amid all that is of uncertain knowledge and so must rest, this much at least should be known and remembered for the honour of a noble family, how it fell out that Count Antonio, a man of high lineage, forsook the service of his Prince, disdained the obligation of his rank, set law at naught, and did what seemed indeed in his own eyes to be good but was held by many to be nothing other than the work of a rebel and a brigand. Yet, although it is by these names that men often speak of him, they love his memory; and I also, Ambrose the Franciscan, having gathered diligently all that I could come by in the archives of the city or from the lips of aged folk, have learned to love it in some sort. Thus I am minded to write, before the time that I must carry what I know with me to the grave, the full and whole truth concerning Antonio's flight from the city and the Court, seeking in my heart, as I write, excuse for him, and finding in the record, if little else, yet a tale that lovers must read in pride and sorrow, and, if this be not too high a hope, that princes may study for profit and for warning.

Now it was in the tenth year of the reign of Duke Valentine over the city of Firmola, its territories and dependent towns, that Count Antonio of Monte Velluto – having with him a youthful cousin of his, whom he loved greatly, and whom, by reason of his small stature and of a boyish gaiety he had, men called Tommasino – came from his own house on the hill that fronts the great gate of the city, to the palace of the Duke, with intent to ask His Highness's sanction for his marriage with the Lady Lucia. This lady, being then seventeen years of age, loved Antonio, and he her, and troth had been privily plighted between them for many months; and such was the strength and power of the love they bore the one to the other, that even to this day the old mock at young lovers who show themselves overfond, crying, "'Tis Lucia and Antonio!"

But since the Lady Lucia was an orphan, Antonio came now to the Duke, who enjoyed wardship over her, and setting out his passion and how that his estate was sufficient and his family such as the Duke knew, prayed leave of His Highness to wed her. But the Duke, a crafty and subtle prince, knowing Antonio's temper and the favour in which he was held by the people, counted not to augment his state and revenues by the gift of a bride so richly dowered, but chose rather to give her to a favourite of his, a man in whose devotion he could surely trust and whose disposition was to serve his master in all things fair and foul, open or secret. Such an one the Duke found in the Lord Robert de Beauregard, a gentleman of Provence, who had quitted his own country, having been drawn into some tumult there, and, having taken service with the Duke, had risen to a great place in his esteem and confidence. Therefore, when Antonio preferred his request, the Duke, with many a courteous regretful phrase, made him aware that the lady stood promised to Robert by the irrevocable sanctity of his princely pledge.

"So forget, I pray you, my good cousin Antonio," said he, "forget, as young men lightly can, this desire of yours, and it shall be my charge to find you a bride full as fair as the Lady Lucia."

But Antonio's face went red from brow to chin, as he answered: "My gracious lord, I love the lady, and she me, and neither can wed another. As for my Lord Robert, your Highness knows well that she loves him not."

"A girl's love!" smiled the Duke. "A girl's love! It rains and shines, and shines and rains, Antonio."

"It has shone on me since she knew a man when she looked on him," said Antonio.

And Tommasino, who stood by, recking as little of the Duke as of the Duke's deerhound which he was patting the while, broke in, saying carelessly, "And this Robert, my lord, is not the man for a pretty girl to love. He is a sour fellow."

"I thank you for your counsel, my lord Tommasino," smiled the Duke. "Yet I love him." Whereat Tommasino lifted his brows and patted the hound again. "It is enough," added the Duke. "I have promised, Antonio. It is enough."

"Yes, it is enough," said Antonio; and he and Tommasino, having bowed low, withdrew from the presence of the Duke. But when he got clear outside of the Duke's cabinet, Antonio laid his hand on Tommasino's shoulder, saying, "It is not well that Robert have her."

"It is mighty ill," said Tommasino.

And then they walked in silence to the city gate, and, in silence still, climbed the rugged hill where Antonio's house stood.

But the Duke sent for Robert de Beauregard into his cabinet and said to him: "If you be wise, friend Robert, little grass shall grow under your feet this side your marriage. This Antonio says not much; but I have known him outrun his tongue with deeds."

"If the lady were as eager as I, the matter would not halt," said Robert with a laugh. "But she weeps and spits fire at me, and cries for Antonio."

"She will be cured after the wedding," said the Duke. "But see that she be well guarded, Robert; let a company of your men watch her. I have known the bride to be missing on a marriage day ere now."

"If he can touch her, he may wed her," cried Robert. "The pikemen are close about her house, and she can neither go in nor come forth without their knowledge."

"It is well," said the Duke. "Yet delay not. They are stubborn men, these Counts of Monte Velluto."

Now had the Lady Lucia been of a spirit as haughty as her lover's, it may be that she would have refused to wed Robert de Beauregard. But she was afraid. When Antonio was with her, she had clung to him, and he loved her the more for her timidity. With him gone and forbidden to come near her, she dared not resist the Duke's will nor brave his displeasure; so that a week before the day which the Duke had appointed for the wedding, she sent to Antonio, bidding him abandon a hope that was vain and set himself to forget a most unhappy lady.

"Robert shall not have her," said Antonio, putting the letter in his belt.

"Then the time is short," said Tommasino.

They were walking together on the terrace before Antonio's house, whence they looked on the city across the river. Antonio cast his eye on the river and on the wall of the Duke's garden that ran along it; fair trees, shrubs, and flowers lined the top of the wall, and the water gleamed in the sunshine.

"It is strange," said Antonio, musing, "that one maiden can darken for a man all the world that God lights with his sun. Yet since so it is, Tommasino, a man can be but a man; and being a man, he is a poor man, if he stand by while another takes his love."

"And that other a stranger, and, as I swear, a cut-throat," added Tommasino.

When they had dined and evening began to come on, Antonio made his servants saddle the best horses in his stable – though, indeed, the choice was small, for Antonio was not rich as a man of his rank counts riches – and the two rode down the hill towards the city. But, as they went, Antonio

turned once and again in his saddle and gazed long at the old gray house, the round tower, and the narrow gate.

"Why look behind, and not forward?" asked Tommasino.

"Because there is a foreboding in me," answered Antonio, "that it will be long before that gate again I pass through. Were there a hope of persuading you, Tommasino, I would bid you turn back, and leave me to go alone on this errand."

"Keep your breath against when you have to run," laughed Tommasino, pricking his horse and tossing his hair, dark as Antonio's was fair, back from his neck.

Across the bridge they rode and through the gates, and having traversed the great square, came to the door of Lucia's house, where it rose fronting the Duke's palace. Here Antonio dismounted, giving his bridle into Tommasino's hand, and bade the servants carry his name to the Lady Lucia. A stir arose among them and much whispering, till an old man, head of the servingmen, came forward, saying: "Pardon, my lord, but we are commanded not to admit you to the Lady Lucia;" and he waved his hand towards the inner part of the porch, where Antonio saw a dozen or more pikemen of the Duke's Guard drawn across the passage to the house; and their pikes flashed in the rays of the setting sun as they levelled them in front of their rank.

Some of the townsmen and apprentice lads, stout fellows, each with a staff, had gathered now around Antonio, whom they loved for his feats of strength and his liberal gifts to the poor, and, understanding what was afoot, one came to him, saying: "There are some, my lord, who would enter with you if you are set on entering," and the fellow's eyes sparkled; for there was a great enmity in the town against the pikemen, and a lusty youth with a stick in his hand is never loth to find a use for it.

For a moment Count Antonio hesitated; for they flocked closer to him, and Tommasino threw him a glance of appeal and touched the hilt of his sword. But he would not that the blood of men who were themselves loved by mothers, wives, and maids, should be shed in his quarrel, and he raised his hand, bidding them be still.

"I have no quarrel with the pikeman," said he, "and we must not fight against His Highness's servants."

The faces of the townsmen grew long in disappointment. Tommasino alone laughed low, recognising in Antonio's gentleness the lull that heralds a storm. The Count was never more dangerous than when he praised submission.

"But," continued Antonio, "I would fain see the Lady Lucia." And with this he stepped inside the porch, signing to Tommasino to stay where he was; but the lad would not, and, leaping down, ran to his kinsman and stood shoulder to shoulder with him.

Thus they stood facing the line of pikemen, when suddenly the opposing rank opened and Robert de Beauregard himself came through. Starting slightly on sight of Antonio, he yet bowed courteously, baring his head, and Antonio, with Tommasino, did the like.

"What is your desire, my lord?" asked Robert.

"I have naught to ask of you," answered Antonio, and he took a step forward. Robert's hand flew to his sword, and in a moment they would have fought. But now another figure came forward with uplifted hand. It was the Duke himself, and he looked on Antonio with his dark smile, and Antonio flushed red.

"You seek me, Antonio?" asked the Duke.

"I seek not your Highness, but my plighted wife," said Antonio.

Duke Valentine smiled still. Coming to Antonio, he passed his arm through his, and said in most friendly fashion: "Come with me to my house, and we will talk of this;" and Antonio, caught fast in the choice between obedience and open revolt, went frowning across the square, the Duke's arm through his, Robert on the Duke's other side, and, behind, Tommasino with the horses. But as they went, a sudden cry came from the house they left, and a girl's face showed for an instant, tear-

stained and pallid, at an open window. A shiver ran through Antonio; but the Duke pressing his arm, he went still in silence.

At the door of the palace, a lackey took the horses from Tommasino, and the four passed through the great hall and through the Duke's cabinet beyond and into the garden; there the Duke sat down under the wall of the garden, near by the fish-pond, and turning suddenly on Antonio, spoke to him fiercely; "Men have died at my hands for less," said he.

"Then for each of such shall you answer to God," retorted Antonio, not less hotly.

"You scout my commands in the face of all the city," said the Duke in low stern tones. "Now, by Heaven, if you seek to see the girl again, I will hang you from the tower of the gate. So be warned – now – once: there shall be no second warning."

He ceased, and sat with angry eyes on Antonio; and Robert, who stood by his master, glared as fierce. But Antonio was silent for a while, and rested his arm on Tommasino's shoulder.

"My fathers have served and fought for your fathers," said he at last. "What has this gentleman done for the Duchy?"

Then Robert spoke suddenly and scornfully: "This he is ready to do, to punish an insolent knave that braves His Highness's will."

Antonio seemed not to hear him, for he did not move but stood with eyes bent on the Duke's face, looking whether his appeal should reach its mark. But Tommasino heard; yet never a word spoke Tommasino either, but he drew off the heavy riding-glove from his left hand, and it hung dangling in the fingers of his right, and he looked at the glove and at Robert and at the glove again.

"I would his Highness were not here," said Tommasino to Robert with a smile.

"Hold your peace, boy," said Robert, "or the Duke will have you whipped."

Youth loves not to be taunted with its blessed state. "I have no more to say," cried Tommasino; and without more, caring naught now for the presence of the Duke, he flung his heavy glove full in Robert's face, and, starting back a pace, drew his sword. Then Antonio knew that the die was cast, for Tommasino would gain no mercy, having insulted the Duke's favourite and drawn his sword in the Duke's palace; and he also drew out his sword, and the pair stood facing the Duke and Robert de Beauregard. It was but for an instant that they stood thus; then Robert, who did not lack courage to resent a blow, unsheathed and rushed at the boy. Antonio left his cousin to defend himself, and, bowing low to the Duke, set his sword at the Duke's breast, before the Duke could so much as rise from his seat.

"I would not touch your Highness," said he, "but these gentlemen must not be interrupted."

"You take me at a disadvantage," cried the Duke.

"If you will swear not to summon your guard, I will sheath my sword, my lord; or, if you will honour me by crossing yours on mine, you shall draw yours."

The place where they sat was hidden from the palace windows, yet the Duke trusted that the sound of the clashing steel would bring aid; therefore, not desiring to fight with Antonio (for Duke Valentine loved to scheme rather than to strike), he sat still, answering nothing. And now Tommasino and Robert were engaged, Robert attacking furiously and Tommasino parrying him as coolly as though they fenced for pastime in the school. It was Tommasino's fault to think of naught but the moment and he did not remember that every second might bring the guard upon them. And Antonio would not call it to his mind, but he said to the Duke: "The boy will kill him, sir. He is a finer swordsman than I, and marvellously active."

Then the Duke, having been pondering on his course, and knowing Antonio – sitting there with the Count's sword against his breast – did by calculation what many a man braver in fight had not dared to do. There was in truth a courage in it, for all that it was born of shrewdness. For, thus with the sword on his heart, fixing a calm glance on Antonio, he cried as loudly as he could, "Help, help, treason!"

Antonio drew back his arm for the stroke; and the Duke sat still; then, swift as thought, Antonio laughed, bowed to Duke Valentine and, turning, rushed between the fighters, striking up their swords. In amazement they stood for a moment: Antonio drove his sword into its sheath, and, while Robert was yet astounded, he rushed on him, caught him by the waist, and, putting forth his strength, flung him clear and far into the fish-pond. Then seizing Tommasino by the arm he started with him at a run for the great hall. The Duke rose, crying loudly, "Treason, treason!" But Antonio cried "Treason, treason," yet louder than the Duke; and presently Tommasino, who had frowned at his pastime being interrupted, fell a-laughing, and between the laughs cried "Treason, treason!" with Antonio. And at the entrance of the hall they met a dozen pikemen running; and Antonio, pointing over his shoulder, called in tones of horror, "Treason, treason!" And Tommasino cried, "The Duke! Help the Duke!" So that they passed untouched through the pikemen, who hesitated an instant in bewilderment but then swept on; for they heard the Duke's own voice crying still "Treason, treason!" And through the hall and out to the portico passed the cousins, echoing their cries of "Treason!" And every man they met went whither they pointed; and when they leapt on their horses, the very lackey that had held them dropped the bridles with hasty speed and ran into the palace, crying "Treason!" Then Antonio, Tommasino ever following, and both yet crying "Treason!" dashed across the square; and on the way they met the pikemen who guarded the Lady Lucia, and the townsmen who were mocking and snarling at the pikemen; and to pikemen and townsmen alike they cried (though Tommasino hardly could speak now for laughter and lack of breath), "Treason, treason!" And all to whom they cried flocked to the palace, crying in their turn, "Treason, treason!" so that people ran out of every house in the neighbourhood and hurried to the palace, crying "Treason!" and every one asking his neighbour what the treason was. And thus, by the time in which a man might count a hundred, a crowd was pushing and pressing and striving round the gate of the palace, and the cousins were alone on the other side of the great square.

"Now thanks be to God for that idea!" gasped Tommasino.

But Antonio gave not thanks till his meal was ended. Raising his voice as he halted his horse before the Lady Lucia's house, he called loudly, no longer "Treason!" but "Lucia!" And she, knowing his voice, looked out again from the window; but some hand plucked her away as soon as she had but looked. Then Antonio leapt from his horse with an oath and ran to the door, and finding it unguarded, he rushed in, leaving Tommasino seated on one horse and holding the other, with one eye on Lucia's house and the other on the palace, praying that, by the favour of Heaven, Antonio might come out again before the crowd round the Duke's gates discovered why it was, to a man, crying "Treason!"

But in the palace of the Duke there was great confusion. For the pikemen, finding Robert de Beauregard scrambling out of the fish-pond with a drawn sword in his hand, and His Highness crying "Treason!" with the best of them, must have it that the traitor was none other than Robert himself, and in their dutiful zeal they came nigh to making an end of him then and there, before the Duke could gain silence enough to render his account of the affair audible. And when the first pikemen were informed, there came others; and these others, finding the first thronging round the Duke and Robert, cried out on them for the traitors, and were on the point of engaging them; and when they also had been with difficulty convinced, and the two parties, with His Highness and Robert, turned to the pursuit of the cousins, they found the whole of the great hall utterly blocked by a concourse of the townsmen, delighted beyond measure at the chance of an affray with the hated pikemen, who, they conceived, must beyond doubt be the wicked traitors that had risen in arms against the Duke's life and throne. Narrowly indeed was a great battle in the hall averted by the Duke himself, who leapt upon a high seat and spoke long and earnestly to the people, persuading them that not the pikemen, but Antonio and Tommasino, were the traitors; which the townsmen found hard to believe, in part because they wished not to believe ill of Antonio, and more inasmuch as every man there knew – and the women and children also – that Antonio and Tommasino, and none else of all the city had raised

the alarm. But some hearkened at last; and with these and a solid wedge of the pikemen, the Duke and Robert, with much ado, thrust their way through the crowd and won access to the door of the palace.

In what time a thousand men may be convinced, you may hope to turn one woman's mind, and at the instant that the Duke gained the square with his friends and his guards, Count Antonio had prevailed on the Lady Lucia to brave His Highness's wrath. It is true that he had met with some resistance from the steward, who was in Robert's pay, and had tarried to buffet the fellow into obedience; and with more from an old governess, who, since she could not be buffeted, had perforce to be locked in a cupboard; yet the better part of the time had to be spent in imploring Lucia herself. At last, with many fears and some tears, she had yielded, and it was with glad eyes that Tommasino saw the Count come forth from the door carrying Lucia on his arm; and others saw him also; for a great shout came from the Duke's party across the square, and the pikemen set out at a run with Robert himself at their head. Yet so soon as they were started, Antonio also, bearing Lucia in his arms, had reached where Tommasino was with the horses, and an instant later he was mounted and cried, "To the gate!" and he struck in his spurs, and his horse bounded forward, Tommasino following. No more than a hundred yards lay between them and the gate of the city, and before the pikemen could bar their path they had reached the gate. The gate-wardens were in the act of shutting it, having perceived the tumult; but Tommasino struck at them with the flat of his sword, and they gave way before the rushing horses; and before the great gate was shut, Antonio and he were on their way through, and the hoofs of their horses clattered over the bridge. Thus Antonio was clear of the city with his lady in his arms and Tommasino his cousin safe by his side.

Yet they were not safe; for neither Duke Valentine nor Robert de Beauregard was a man who sat down under defeat. But few moments had passed before there issued from the gate a company of ten mounted and armed men, and Robert, riding in their front, saw, hard on a mile away, the cousins heading across the plain towards the spot where the spurs of Mount Agnino run down; for there was the way of safety. But it was yet ten miles away. And Robert and his company galloped furiously in pursuit, while Duke Valentine watched from the wall of the garden above the river.

Now Count Antonio was a big man and heavy, so that his horse was weighed down by the twofold burden on its back; and looking behind him, he perceived that Robert's company drew nearer and yet nearer. And Tommasino, looking also, said, "I doubt they are too many for us, for you have the lady in your arms. We shall not get clear of the hills."

Then Antonio drew in his horse a little and, letting the bridle fall, took the Lady Lucia in both his arms and kissed her, and having thus done, lifted her and set her on Tommasino's horse. "Thank God," said he, "that you are no heavier than a feather."

"Yet two feathers may be too much," said Tommasino.

"Ride on," said Antonio. "I will check them for a time, so that you shall come safe to the outset of the hill."

Tommasino obeyed him; and Antonio, riding more softly now, placed himself between Tommasino and the pursuers. Tommasino rode on with the swooning lady in his arms; but his face was grave and troubled, for, as he said, two feathers may be overmuch, and Robert's company rode well and swiftly.

"If Antonio can stop them, it is well," said he; "but if not, I shall not reach the hills;" and he looked with no great love on the unhappy lady, for it seemed like enough that Antonio would be slain for her sake, and Tommasino prized him above a thousand damsels. Yet he rode on, obedient.

But Antonio's scheme had not passed undetected by Robert de Beauregard; and Robert, being a man of guile and cunning, swore aloud an oath that, though he died himself, yet Tommasino should not carry off Lucia. Therefore he charged his men one and all to ride after Tommasino and bring back Lucia, leaving him alone to contend with Antonio; and they were not loth to obey, for it was little to their taste or wish to surround Antonio and kill him. Thus, when the company came within fifty yards of Antonio, the ranks suddenly parted; five diverged to the right, and four to the left,

passing Antonio in sweeping curves, so far off that he could not reach them, while Robert alone rode straight at him. Antonio, perceiving the stratagem, would fain have ridden again after Tommasino; but Robert was hard upon him, and he was in peril of being thrust through the back as he fled. So he turned and faced his enemy. But although Robert had sworn so boldly before his men, his mind was not what he had declared to them, and he desired to meet Antonio alone, not that he might fight a fair fight with him, but in order treacherously to deceive him – a thing he was ashamed to do before his comrades. Coming up then to Antonio, he reined in his horse, crying, "My lord, I bring peace from His Highness."

Antonio wondered to hear him; yet, when Robert, his sword lying untouched in its sheath, sprang from his horse and approached him, he dismounted also; and Robert said to him: "I have charged them to injure neither the Lady Lucia nor your cousin by so much as a hair; for the Duke bids me say that he will not constrain the lady."

"Is she then given to me?" cried Antonio, his face lighting up with a marvellous eagerness.

"Nay, not so fast," answered Robert with subtle cunning. "The Duke will not give her to you now. But he will exact from you and from me alike an oath not to molest, no, not to see her, for three months, and then she shall choose as she will between us."

While he spoke this fair speech, he had been drawing nearer to Antonio; and Antonio, not yet convinced of his honesty, drew back a pace. Then Robert let go hold of his horse, unbuckled his sword, flung it on the ground, and came to Antonio with outstretched hands. "Behold!" said he; "I am in your mercy, my lord. If you do not believe me, slay me."

Antonio looked at him with searching wistful eyes; he hated to war against the Duke, and his heart was aflame with the hope that dwelt for him in Robert's words; for he did not doubt but that neither three months, nor three years, nor three hundred years, could change his lady's love.

"You speak fair, sir," said he; "but what warrant have I?"

"And, save your honour, what warrant have I, who stand here unarmed before you?" asked Robert.

For a while Antonio pondered; then he said, "My lord, I must crave your pardon for my doubt; but the matter is so great that to your word I dare not trust; but if you will ride back with your men and pray the Duke to send me a promise under his own hand, to that I will trust. And meanwhile Tommasino, with the Lady Lucia, shall abide in a safe place, and I will stay here, awaiting your return; and, if you will, let two of your men stay with me."

"Many a man, my lord," returned Robert, "would take your caution in bad part. But let it be so. Come, we will ride after my company." And he rose and caught Antonio's horse by the bridle and brought it to him; "Mount, my lord," said he, standing by.

Antonio, believing either that the man was true or that his treachery – if treachery there were in him – was foiled, and seeing him to all seeming unarmed, save for a little dagger in his belt which would hardly suffice to kill a man and was more a thing of ornament than use, set his foot in the stirrup and prepared to mount. And in so doing he turned his back on Robert de Beauregard. The moment for which that wicked man had schemed and lied was come. Still holding Antonio's stirrup with one hand, he drew, swift as lightning, from under his cloak, a dagger different far from the toy in his belt – short, strong, broad, and keen. And that moment had been Antonio's last, had it not chanced that, on the instant Robert drew the dagger, the horse started a pace aside, and Antonio, taken unawares, stumbled forward and came near falling on the ground. His salvation lay in that stumble, for Robert, having put all his strength into the blow, and then striking not Antonio but empty air, in his turn staggered forward, and could not recover himself before Antonio turned round, a smile at his own unwariness on his lips.

Then he saw the broad keen knife in the hand of Robert. Robert breathed quickly, and glared at him, but did not rush on him. He stood glaring, the knife in his hands, his parted lips displaying grinning teeth. Not a word spoke Antonio, but he drew his sword, and pointed where Robert's sword

lay on the grass. The traitor, recognising the grace that allowed him to take his sword, shamed, it may be, by such return for his own treachery, in silence lifted and drew it; and, withdrawing to a distance from the horses, which quietly cropped the grass, the two faced one another.

Calm and easy were the bearing and the air of Count Antonio, if the pictures of him that live drawn in the words of those who knew him be truthful; calm and easy ever was he, save when he fought; but then it seemed as though there came upon him a sort of fury akin to madness, or (as the ancients would have fabled) to some inspiration from the God of War, which transformed him utterly, imbuing him with a rage and rushing impetuosity. Here lay his danger when matched with such a swordsman as was little Tommasino; but for all that, few cared to meet him, some saying that, though they called themselves as brave as others, yet they seemed half appalled when Count Antonio set upon them; for he fought as though he must surely win and as though God were with him. Thus now he darted upon Robert de Beauregard, in seeming recklessness of receiving thrusts himself, yet ever escaping them by his sudden resource and dexterity and ever himself attacking, leaving no space to take breath, and bewildering the other's practised skill by the dash and brilliance of his assault. And it may be also that the darkness, which was now falling fast, hindered Robert the more, for Antonio was famed for the keenness of his eyes by night. Be these things as they may, in the very moment when Robert pricked Antonio in the left arm and cried out in triumph on his stroke, Antonio leapt on him and drove his sword through his heart; and Robert, with the sword yet in him, fell to the ground, groaning. And when Antonio drew forth the sword, the man at his feet died. Thus, if it be God's will, may all traitors perish.

Antonio looked round the plain; but it grew darker still, and even his sight did not avail for more than some threescore yards. Yet he saw a dark mass on his right, distant, as he judged, that space or more. Rapidly it moved: surely it was a group of men galloping, and Antonio stood motionless regarding them. But they swept on, not turning whither he stood; and he, unable to tell what they did, whether they sought him or whither they went, watched them till they faded away in the darkness; and then, leaving Robert where he lay, he mounted his horse and made speed towards the hills, praying that there he should find his cousin and the Lady Lucia, escaped from the pursuit of the Duke's men. Yet had he known what those dimly discerned riders bore with them, he would have been greatly moved at all costs and at every hazard to follow after them and seek to overtake them before they came to the city.

On he rode towards the hills, quickly, yet not so hastily but that he scanned the ground as he went so well as the night allowed him. The moon was risen now and to see was easier. When he had covered a distance of some two miles, he perceived something lying across his path. Bending to look, he found it to be the corpse of a horse: he leapt down and bent over it. It was the horse Tommasino had ridden; it was hamstrung, and its throat had been cut. Antonio, seeing it, in sudden apprehension of calamity, cried aloud; and to his wonder his cry was answered by a voice which came from a clump of bushes fifty yards on the right. He ran hastily to the spot, thinking nothing of his own safety nor of anything else than what had befallen his friends; and under the shelter of the bushes two men of the Duke's Guard, their horses tethered near them, squatted on the ground, and, between, Tommasino lay full length on the ground. His face was white, his eyes closed, and a bloody bandage was about his head. One of the two by him had forced his lips open and was giving him to drink from a bottle. The other sprang up on sight of Antonio and laid a hand to his sword-hilt.

"Peace, peace!" said Antonio. "Is the lad dead?"

"He is not dead, my lord, but he is sore hurt."

"And what do you here with him? And how did you take him?"

"We came up with him here, and surrounded him; and while some of us held him in front, one cut the hamstrings of his horse from behind; and the horse fell, and with the horse the lady and the young lord. He was up in an instant; but as he rose, the lieutenant struck him on the head and dealt him the wound you see. Then he could fight no more; and the lieutenant took the lady, and with the

rest rode back towards the city, leaving us charged with the duty of bringing the young lord in so soon as he was in a state to come with us."

"They took the lady?"

"Even so, my lord."

"And why did they not seek for me?"

The fellow – Martolo was his name – smiled grimly; and his comrade, looking up, answered: "Maybe they did not wish to find you, my lord. They had been eight to one, and could not have failed to take you in the end."

"Aye, in the end," said Martolo, laughing now. "Nor," added he, "had the lieutenant such great love for Robert de Beauregard that he would rejoice to deliver you to death for his sake, seeing that you are a Monte Velluto and he a rascally –"

"Peace! He is dead," said Count Antonio.

"You have killed him?" they cried with one voice.

"He attacked me in treachery, and I have killed him," answered Antonio.

For a while there was silence. Then Antonio asked, "The lady – did she go willingly?"

"She was frightened and dazed by her fall, my lord; she knew not what she did nor what they did to her. And the lieutenant took her in front of him, and, holding her with all gentleness, so rode towards the city."

"God keep her," said Antonio.

"Amen, poor lady!" said Martolo, doffing his cap.

Then Antonio whistled to his horse, which came to his side; with a gesture he bade the men stand aside, and they obeyed him; and he gathered Tommasino in his arms. "Hold my stirrup, that I may mount," said he; and still they obeyed. But when they saw him mounted, with Tommasino seated in front of him, Martolo cried, "But, my lord, we are charged to take him back and deliver him to the Duke."

"And if you do?" asked Antonio.

Martolo made a movement as of one tying a noose.

"And if you do not?" asked Antonio.

"Then we had best not show ourselves alive to the Duke."

Antonio looked down on them. "To whom bear you allegiance?" said he.

"To His Highness the Duke," they answered, uncovering as they spoke.

"And to whom besides?" asked Antonio.

"To none besides," they answered, wondering.

"Aye, but you do," said he. "To One who wills not that you should deliver to death a lad who has done but what his honour bade him."

"God's counsel God knows," said Martolo. "We are dead men if we return alone to the city. You had best slay us yourself, my lord, if we may not carry the young lord with us."

"You are honest lads, are you not?" he asked. "By your faces, you are men of the city."

"So are we, my lord; but we serve the Duke in his Guard for reward."

"I love the men of the city as they love me," said Antonio. "And a few pence a day should not buy a man's soul as well as his body."

The two men looked at one another in perplexity. The fear and deference in which they held Antonio forbade them to fall on him; yet they dared not let him take Tommasino. Then, as they stood doubting, he spoke low and softly to them: "When he that should give law and uphold right deals wrong, and makes white black and black white, it is for gentlemen and honest men to be a law unto themselves. Mount your horses, then, and follow me. And so long as I am safe, you shall be safe; and so long as I live, you shall live; and while I eat and drink, you shall have to drink and eat; and you shall be my servants. And when the time of God's will – whereof God forbid that I should doubt –"

is come, I will go back to her I love, and you shall go back to them that love you; and men shall say that you have proved yourselves true men and good."

Thus it was that two men of the Duke's Guard – Martolo and he whom they called Bena (for of his true name there is no record) – went together with Count Antonio and his cousin Tommasino to a secret fastness in the hills; and there in the course of many days Tommasino was healed of the wound which the Lieutenant of the Guard had given him, and rode his horse again, and held next place to Antonio himself in the band that gathered round them. For there came to them every man that was wrongfully oppressed; and some came for love of adventure and because they hoped to strike good blows; and some came whom Antonio would not receive, inasmuch as they were greater rogues than were those whose wrath they fled from.

Such is the tale of how Count Antonio was outlawed from the Duke's peace and took to the hills. Faithfully have I set it down, and whoso will may blame the Count, and whoso will may praise him. For myself, I thank Heaven that I am well rid of this same troublesome passion of love that likens one man to a lion and another to a fox.

But the Lady Lucia, being brought back to the city by the Lieutenant of the Guard, was lodged in her own house, and the charge of her was commended by the Duke into the hands of a discreet lady; and for a while His Highness, for very shame, forbore to trouble her with suitors. For he said, in his bitter humour, as he looked down on the dead body of Robert de Beauregard: "I have lost two good servants and four strong arms through her; and mayhap, if I find her another suitor, she will rob me of yet another stalwart gentleman."

So she abode, in peace indeed, but in sore desolation and sorrow, longing for the day when Count Antonio should come back to seek her. And again was she closely guarded by the Duke.

CHAPTER II

COUNT ANTONIO AND THE TRAITOR PRINCE

Of all the deeds that Count Antonio of Monte Velluto did during the time that he was an outlaw in the hills (for a price had been set on his head by Duke Valentine), there was none that made greater stir or struck more home to the hearts of men, howsoever they chose to look upon it, than that which he performed on the high hill that faces the wicket gate on the west side of the city and is called now the Hill of Duke Paul. Indeed it was the act of a man whose own conscience was his sole guide, and who made the law which his own hand was to carry out. That it had been a crime in most men, who can doubt? That it was a crime in him, all governments must hold; and the same, I take it, must be the teaching of the Church. Yet not all men held it a crime, although they had not ventured it themselves, both from the greatness of the person whom the deed concerned, and also for the burden that it put on the conscience of him that did it. Here, then, is the story of it, as it is still told both in the houses of the noble and in peasants' cottages.

While Count Antonio still dwelt at the Court, and had not yet fled from the wrath aroused in the Duke by the Count's attempt to carry off the Lady Lucia, the Duke's ward, the nuptials of His Highness had been celebrated with great magnificence and universal rejoicing; and the feasting and exultation had been most happily renewed on the birth of an infant Prince, a year later. Yet heavy was the price paid for this gift of Heaven, for Her Highness the Duchess, a lady of rare grace and kindness, survived the birth of her son only three months, and then died, amidst the passionate mourning of the people, leaving the Duke a prey to bitter sorrow. Many say that she had turned his heart to good had she but lived, and that it was the loss of her that soured him and twisted his nature. If it be so, I pray that he has received pardon for all his sins; for his grief was great, and hardly to be assuaged even by the love he had for the little Prince, from whom he would never be parted for an hour, if he could contrive to have the boy with him, and in whom he saw, with pride, the heir of his throne.

Both in the joy of the wedding and the grief at the Duchess's death, none had made more ostentatious sign of sharing than His Highness's brother, Duke Paul. Yet hollow alike were his joy and his grief, save that he found true cause for sorrow in that the Duchess left to her husband a dear memorial of their brief union. Paul rivalled the Duke in his caresses and his affected love for the boy, but he had lived long in the hope that His Highness would not marry, and that he himself should succeed him in his place, and this hope he could not put out of his heart. Nay, as time passed and the baby grew to a healthy boy, Paul's thoughts took a still deeper hue of guilt. It was no longer enough for him to hope for his nephew's death, or even to meditate how he should bring it about. One wicked imagining led on, as it is wont in our sinful nature, to another, and Satan whispered in Paul's ear that the Duke himself was short of forty by a year, that to wait for power till youth were gone was not a bold man's part, and that to contrive the child's death, leaving his father alive, was but to double the risk without halving the guilt. Thus was Paul induced to dwell on the death of both father and son, and to say to himself that if the father went first the son would easily follow, and that with one cunning and courageous stroke the path to the throne might be cleared.

While Paul pondered on these designs, there came about the events which drove Count Antonio from the Court; and no sooner was he gone and declared in open disobedience and contumacy against the Duke, than Paul, seeking a handle for his plans, seemed to find one in Antonio. Here was a man driven from his house (which the Duke had burnt), despoiled of his revenues, bereft of his love, proclaimed a free mark for whosoever would serve the Duke by slaying him. Where could be a better man for the purposes of a malcontent prince? And the more was Paul inclined to use Antonio from the fact that he had shown favour to Antonio, and been wont to seek his society; so that Antonio,

failing to pierce the dark depths of his heart, was loyally devoted to him, and had returned an answer full of gratitude and friendship to the secret messages in which Paul had sent him condolence on the mishap that had befallen him.

Now in the beginning of the second year of Count Antonio's outlawry, His Highness was most mightily incensed against him, not merely because he had so won the affection of the country-folk that none would betray his hiding-place either for threats or for reward, but most chiefly by reason of a certain act which was in truth more of Tommasino's doing than of Antonio's. For Tommasino, meeting one of the Duke's farmers of taxes, had lightened him of his fat bag of money, saying that he would himself assume the honour of delivering what was fairly due to His Highness, and had upon that scattered three-fourths of the spoil among the poor, and sent the beggarly remnant privily by night to the gate of the city, with a writing, "There is honour among thieves; who, then, may call Princes thieves?" And this writing had been read by many, and the report of it, spreading through the city, had made men laugh. Therefore the Duke had sworn that by no means should Antonio gain pardon save by delivering that insolent young robber to the hands of justice. Thus he was highly pleased when his brother sought him in the garden (for he sat in his wonted place under the wall by the fish-pond) and bade him listen to a plan whereby the outlaws should be brought to punishment. The Duke took his little son upon his knees and prayed his brother to tell his device.

"You could not bring me a sweeter gift than the head of Tommasino," said he, stroking the child's curls; and the child shrank closer into his arms, for the child did not love Paul but feared him.

"Antonio knows that I love Your Highness," said Paul, seating himself on the seat by the Duke, "but he knows also that I am his friend, and a friend to the Lady Lucia, and a man of tender heart. Would it seem to him deep treachery if I should go privately to him and tell him how that on a certain day you would go forth with your guard to camp in the spurs of Mount Agnino, leaving the city desolate, and that on the night of that day I could contrive that Lucia should come secretly to the gate, and that it should be opened for her, so that by a sudden descent she might be seized and carried safe to his hiding-place before aid could come from Your Highness?"

"But what should the truth be?" asked Valentine.

"The truth should be that while part of the Guard went to the spurs of the Mount, the rest should lie in ambush close inside the city gates and dash out on Antonio and his company."

"It is well, if he will believe."

Then Paul laid his finger on his brother's arm. "As the clock in the tower of the cathedral strikes three on the morning of the 15th of the month, do you, dear brother, be in your summer-house at the corner of the garden yonder; and I will come thither and tell you if he has believed and if he has come. For by then I shall have learnt from him his mind: and we two will straightway go rouse the guards and lead the men to their appointed station, and when he approaches the gate we can lay hands on him."

"How can you come to him? For we do not know where he is hid."

"Alas, there is not a rogue of a peasant that cannot take a letter to him!"

"Yet when I question them, aye, though I beat them, they know nothing!" cried Valentine in chagrin. "Truly, the sooner we lay him by the heels, the better for our security."

"Shall it be, then, as I say, my lord?"

"So let it be," said the Duke. "I will await you in the summer-house."

Paul, perceiving that his brother had no suspicions of him, and would await him in the summer-house, held his task to be already half done. For his plan was that he and Antonio should come together to the summer-house, but that Antonio should lie hid till Paul had spoken to the Duke; then Paul should go out on pretext of bidding the guard make ready the ambush, and leave the Duke alone with Antonio. Antonio then, suddenly springing forth, should slay the Duke; while Paul – and when he thought on this, he smiled to himself – would so contrive that a body of men should bar Antonio's escape, and straightway kill him. Thus should he be quit both of his brother and of Antonio, and no

man would live who knew how the deed was contrived. "And then," said he, "I doubt whether the poor child, bereft of all parental care, will long escape the manifold perils of infancy."

Thus he schemed; and when he had made all sure, and noised about the Duke's intentions touching his going to the spurs of Mount Agnino, he himself set forth alone on his horse to seek Antonio. He rode till he reached the entrance of the pass leading to the recesses of the hills. There he dismounted, and sat down on the ground; and this was at noon on the 13th day of the month. He had not long been sitting, when a face peered from behind a wall of moss-covered rock that fronted him, and Paul cried, "Is it a friend?"

"A friend of whom mean you, my lord?" came from the rock.

"Of whom else than of Count Antonio?" cried Paul.

A silence followed and a delay; then two men stole cautiously from behind the rock, and in one of them Paul knew the man they called Bena, who had been of the Duke's Guard. The men, knowing Paul, bowed low to him, and asked him his pleasure, and he commanded them to bring him to Antonio. They wondered, knowing not whether he came from the Duke or despite the Duke; but he was urgent in his commands, and at length they tied a scarf over his eyes, and set him on his horse, and led the horse. Thus they went for an hour. Then they prayed him to dismount, saying that the horse could go no farther; and though Paul's eyes saw nothing, he heard the whinnying and smelt the smell of horses.

"Here are your stables then," said he, and dismounted with a laugh.

Then Bena took him by the hand, and the other guided his feet, and climbing up steep paths, over boulders and through little water-courses, they went, till at length Bena cried, "We are at home, my lord;" and Paul, tearing off his bandage, found himself on a small level spot, ringed round with stunted wind-beaten firs; and three huts stood in the middle of the space, and before one of the huts sat Tommasino, composing a sonnet to a pretty peasant girl whom he had chanced to meet that day; for Tommasino had ever a hospitable heart. But seeing Paul, Tommasino left his sonnet, and with a cry of wonder sprang to meet him; and Paul took him by both hands and saluted him. That night and the morning that followed, Paul abode with Antonio, eating the good cheer and drinking the good wine that Tommasino, who had charged himself with the care of such matters, put before him. Whence they came from, Paul asked not; nor did Tommasino say more than that they were offerings to Count Antonio – but whether offerings of free-will or necessity, he said not. And during this time Paul spoke much with Antonio privily and apart, persuading him of his friendship, and telling most pitiful things of the harshness shown by Valentine his brother to the Lady Lucia, and how the lady grew pale, and peaked and pined, so that the physicians knit their brows over her and the women said no drugs would patch a broken heart. Thus he inflamed Antonio's mind with a great rage against the Duke, so that he fell to counting the men he had and wondering whether there were force to go openly against the city. But in sorrow Paul answered that the pikemen were too many.

"But there is a way, and a better," said Paul, leaning his head near to Antonio's ear. "A way whereby you may come to your own again, and rebuild your house that the Duke has burnt, and enjoy the love of Lucia, and hold foremost place in the Duchy."

"What way is that?" asked Antonio in wondering eagerness. "Indeed I am willing to serve His Highness in any honourable service, if by that I may win his pardon and come to that I long for."

"His pardon! When did he pardon?" sneered Paul.

To know honest men and leave them to their honesty is the last great gift of villainy. But Paul had it not; and now he unfolded to Antonio the plan that he had made, saving (as needs not to be said) that part of it whereby Antonio himself was to meet his death. For a pretext he alleged that the Duke oppressed the city, and that he, Paul, was put out of favour because he had sought to protect the people, and was fallen into great suspicion. Yet, judging Antonio's heart by his own, he dwelt again and longer on the charms of Lucia, and on the great things he would give Antonio when he ruled the Duchy for his nephew; for of the last crime he meditated, the death of the child, he said naught then,

professing to love the child. When the tale began, a sudden start ran through Antonio, and his face flushed; but he sat still and listened with unmoved face, his eyes gravely regarding Paul the while. No anger did he show, nor wonder, nor scorn, nor now any eagerness; but he gazed at the Prince with calm musing glance, as though he considered of some great question put before him. And when Paul ended his tale, Antonio sat yet silent and musing. But Paul was trembling now, and he stretched out his hand and laid it on Antonio's knee, and asked, with a feigned laugh that choked in the utterance, "Well, friend Antonio, is it a clever plan, and will you ride with me?"

Minute followed minute before Antonio answered. At length the frown vanished from his brow, and his face grew calm and set, and he answered Duke Paul, saying, "It is such a plan as you, my lord, alone of all men in the Duchy could make; and I will ride with you."

Then Paul, in triumph, caught him by the hands and pressed his hands, calling him a man of fine spirit and a true friend, who should not lack reward. And all this Antonio suffered silently; and in silence still he listened while Paul told him how that a path led privately from the bank of the river, through a secret gate in the wall, to the summer-house where the Duke was to be; of this gate he alone, saving the Duke had the key; they had but to swim the river and enter by this gate. Having hidden Antonio, Paul would talk with the Duke; then he would go and carry off what remained of the guard over and above those that were gone to the hills; and Antonio, having done his deed, could return by the same secret path, cross the river again, and rejoin his friends. And in a short space of time Paul would recall him with honour to the city and give him Lucia to wife.

"And if there be a question as to the hand that dealt the blow, there is a rascal whom the Duke flogged but a few days since, a steward in the palace. He deserves hanging, Antonio, for a thousand things of which he is guilty, and it will trouble me little to hang him for one whereof he chances to be innocent." And Duke Paul laughed heartily.

"I will ride with you," said Antonio again.

Then, it being full mid-day, they sat down to dinner, Paul bandying many merry sayings with Tommasino, Antonio being calm but not uncheerful. And when the meal was done, Paul drank to the good fortune of their expedition; and Antonio having drained his glass, said, "May God approve the issue," and straightway bade Tommasino and Martolo prepare to ride with him. Then, Paul being again blindfolded, they climbed down the mountain paths till they came where the horses were, and thus, as the sun began to decline, set forward, at a fair pace, Duke Paul and Antonio leading by some few yards; while Tommasino and Martolo, having drunk well, and sniffing sport in front of them, sang, jested, and played pranks on one another as they passed along. But when night fell they became silent; even Tommasino turned grave and checked his horse, and the space between them and the pair who led grew greater, so that it seemed to Duke Paul that he and Antonio rode alone through the night, under the shadows of the great hills. Once and again he spoke to Antonio, first of the scheme, then on some light matter; but Antonio did no more than move his head in assent. And Antonio's face was very white, and his lips were close shut.

It was midnight when Duke Paul and Antonio reached the plain: the moon, till now hidden by the mountains, shone on them, and, seeing Antonio's face more plainly, Paul cried, half in jest, half in uneasiness, "Come, man, look not so glum about it! 'Tis but the life of a rogue."

"Indeed it is no more," said Antonio, and he turned his eyes on Duke Paul.

Paul laughed, but with poor merriment. Whence it came he knew not, but a strange sudden sense of peril and of doom had fallen on him. The massive quiet figure of Antonio, riding ever close to him, silent, stern, and watchful, oppressed his spirit.

Suddenly Antonio halted and called to Martolo to bring him a lantern: one hung from Martolo's saddle, and he brought it, and went back. Then Antonio lit the lantern and gave an ivory tablet to Paul and said to him, "Write me your promise."

"You distrust me, then?" cried Paul in a great show of indignation.

"I will not go till you have written the promise."

Now Paul was somewhat loth to write the promise, fearing that it should be found on Antonio's body before he could contrive to remove it; but without it Antonio declared he would not go. So Paul wrote, bethinking himself that he held safe in his house at home permission from the Duke to seek Antonio and beguile him to the city, and that with the witness of this commission he could come off safe, even though the tablet were found on Antonio. Taking the peril then, rather than fail, he wrote, setting out the promises he made to Antonio in case (thus he phrased it) of the death of his brother. And he delivered the tablet to Antonio; and Antonio, restoring the lantern to Martolo, stowed the tablet about him, and they set forth again.

As the clock in the tower of the cathedral, distantly booming in their ears, sounded the hour of two, they came to where the road parted. In one direction it ran level across the plain to the river and the city, and by this way they must go, if they would come to the secret gate and thence to the Duke's summer-house. But the second road left the plain, and mounted the hill that faces the wicket-gate, which is now called the Hill of Duke Paul. And at the parting of the road, Antonio reined in his horse and sat silent for a great while. Again Paul, scanning his face, was troubled, so that Martolo, who had drawn near, saw him wipe a drop from his brow. And Paul said, "For what wait we, Antonio? Time presses, for it has gone two o'clock."

Then Antonio drew him apart, and fixing his eyes on him, said, "What of the child? What mean you by the child? How does it profit you that the father die, if the child live?"

Paul, deeming that Antonio doubted him and saw a snare, and holding it better to seem the greatest of villains than to stir suspicion in a man who held him in his hands, smiled cunningly, and answered, "The child will grow sickly and pine when his father is not alive to care for him."

"It is enough," said Antonio; and again a flush mounted on his face, and died down again, and left him pale. For some think he would have turned from his purpose, had Paul meant honestly by the child. I know not. At least, the foul murder plotted against the child made him utterly relentless.

"Let us go on and end the matter," urged Paul, full of eagerness, and, again, of that strange uneasiness born of Antonio's air.

"Ay, we will go on and finish it," said Antonio, and with that he leapt down from his horse. Paul did the like, for it had been agreed that the others, with the horses, were to await Antonio's return, while the Count and Paul went forward on foot: and Tommasino and Martolo, dismounting also, tied the horses to trees and stood waiting Antonio's orders.

"Forward!" cried Paul.

"Come, then," said Antonio, and he turned to the road that mounted the hill.

"It is by the other road we go," said Paul.

"It is by this road," said Antonio, and he raised his hand and made a certain sign, whereat the swords of his friends leapt from their scabbards, and they barred the way, so that Duke Paul could turn nowhere save to the road that mounted the hill. Then Paul's face grew long, drawn, and sallow with sudden fear. "What means this?" he cried. "What means this, Antonio?"

"It means, my lord, that you must mount the hill with me," answered Antonio, "even to the top of it, whence a man can see the city."

"But for what?"

"That this matter may be finished," said Antonio; and, coming to Paul, he laid a hand on his shoulder and turned him to the path up the hill. But Paul, seeing his face and the swords of Tommasino and Martolo that barred all escape, seized his hand, saying, "Before God, I mean you true, Antonio! As Christ died for us, I mean you true, Antonio!"

"Of that I know not, and care not; yet do not swear it now by Christ's name if it be not true. How meant you, my lord, by your brother and your brother's son?"

Paul licked his lips, for they had gone dry, and he breathed as a man pants who has run far and fast. "You are three to one," he hissed.

"We shall be but man to man on the top of the hill," said Antonio.

Then suddenly Tommasino spoke unbidden. "There is a priest in the village a mile away," said he, and there was pity in his voice.

"Peace, Tommasino! What priest has he provided for his brother?"

And Tommasino said no more, but he turned his eyes away from the face of Duke Paul: yet when he was an old man, one being in his company heard him say he dreamed yet of it. As for Martolo, he bent his head and crossed himself.

Then Paul threw himself on his knees before Antonio and prayed him to let him go; but Antonio seemed not to hear him, and stood silent with folded arms. Yet presently he said, "Take your sword then, my lord. If I fall, these shall not touch you. This much I give, though it is more than I have right to give."

But Paul would not take his sword, but knelt, still beseeching Antonio with tears, and mingling prayers and curses in a flow of agonised words.

At last Antonio plucked him from the ground and sternly bade him mount the hill; and finding no help, he set out, his knees shaking beneath him, while Antonio followed close upon him. And thus Tommasino and Martolo watched them go till the winding of the path hid them from view, when Martolo fell on his knees, and Tommasino drew a breath as though a load had rested on his chest.

It was but a short way to the summit, but the path was steep, and the two went slowly, so that, as they came forth on the top, the first gleam of dawn caught them in its pale light. The city lay grey and drab below them, and the lonely tree, that stands to this day upon the hill, swayed in the wind with mournful murmurings. Paul stumbled and sank in a heap on the ground. And Antonio said to him, "If you will, pray," and went and leant against the bare trunk of the tree, a little way apart. But Paul, thinking on man's mercy, not on God's, crawled on his knees across the space between and laid hold of Antonio's legs. And he said nothing, but gazed up at Antonio. And at the silent appeal Antonio shivered for an instant, but he did not fly the gaze of Paul's eyes, but looked down on him and answered, "You must die. Yet there is your sword, and there a free road to the city."

Then Paul let go Antonio's legs and rose, and drew his sword. But his hand was trembling, and he could scarce stand. Then Antonio gave to him a flask that he carried, holding strong waters; and the wretch, drinking greedily, found some courage, and came suddenly at Antonio before Antonio looked for his attack. But the Count eluded him, and drawing his blade awaited the attack; and Paul seized again the flask that he had flung on the ground, and drained it, and mad now with the fumes rushed at Antonio, shrieking curses and blasphemies. The sun rose on the moment that their blades crossed; and before its rays had shone a minute, Antonio had driven his sword through the howling wretch's lung, and Duke Paul lay dying on the grassy hill.

Then Count Antonio stripped off his doublet and made a pillow of it for Paul's head, and sat down by him, and wiped his brow, and disposed his body with such ease as seemed possible. Yet he took no pains to stanch the blood or to minister to the wound, for his intent was that Paul should die and not live. And Paul lay some moments on his back, then twisted on his side; once he flung his legs wide and gathered them again under his body, and shivered, turning on his back again: and his jaw fell, and he died there on the top of the hill. And the Count closed his eyes, and sat by him in silence for many minutes; and once he buried his face in his hands, and a single sob shook him.

But now it was growing to day, and he rose, and took from the Duke's waist the broad silken band that he wore, wrought with golden embroidery on a ground of royal blue. Then he took Paul in his arms and set him upright against the trunk of the tree, and, encircling tree and body with the rich scarf, he bound the corpse there; and he took the ivory tablet from his belt and tied the riband that hung through a hole in it to the riband of the Order of St. Prisian, that was round Paul's neck, and he wrote on the tablet, "Witness my hand – Antonio of Monte Velluto." And he wiped the blade of his sword long and carefully on the grass till it shone pure, clean, and bright again. Then he gazed awhile at the city, that grew now warm and rich in the increasing light of the sun, and turned on his heel and went down the hill by the way that he had come.

At the foot, Tommasino and Martolo awaited him; and when he came down alone, Martolo again signed the cross; but Tommasino glanced one question, and, finding answer in Antonio's nod, struck his open palm on the quarters of Duke Paul's horse and set it free to go where it would; and the horse, being free, started at a canter along the road to the city. And Antonio mounted and set his face again towards the hills. For awhile he rode alone in front; but when an hour was gone, he called to Tommasino, and, on the lad joining him, talked with him, not gaily indeed (that could not be), yet with calmness and cheerfulness on the matters that concerned the band. But Paul's name did not cross his lips; and the manner in which he had dealt with Paul on the hill rested unknown till a later time, when Count Antonio formally declared it, and wrote with his own hand how Duke Paul had died. Thus, then, Count Antonio rode back to the hills, having executed on the body of Paul that which seemed to him right and just.

Long had Duke Valentine waited for his brother in the summer-house and greatly wondered that he came not. And as the morning grew and yet Paul came not, the Duke feared that in some manner Antonio had detected the snare, and that he held Paul a prisoner; for it did not enter the Duke's mind that Antonio would dare to kill his brother. And when it was five o'clock, the Duke, heavy-eyed for want of sleep, left the summer-house, and having traversed the garden, entered his cabinet and flung himself on a couch there; and notwithstanding his uneasiness for his brother, being now very drowsy, he fell asleep. But before he had slept long, he was roused by two of his pages, who ran in crying that Duke Paul's horse had come riderless to the gate of the city. And the Duke sprang up, smiting his thigh, and crying, "If harm has come to him, I will not rest till I have Antonio's head." So he mustered a party of his guards, some on horseback and some on foot, and passed with all speed out of the city, seeking his brother, and vowing vengeance on the insolence of Count Antonio.

But the Duke was not first out of the city; for he found a stream of townsmen flocking across the bridge; and at the end of the bridge was a gathering of men, huddled close round a peasant who stood in the centre. The pikemen made a way for His Highness; and when the peasant saw him, he ran to him, and resting his hand on the neck of the Duke's horse, as though he could scarce stand alone, he cried, pointing with his hand to the hill that rose to the west, "The Duke Paul, the Duke Paul!" And no more could he say.

"Give him a horse, one of you, and let another lead it," cried the Duke. "And forward, gentlemen, whither he points!"

Thus they set forth, and as they went, the concourse grew, some overtaking them from the city, some who were going on their business or for pleasure into the city turning and following after the Duke and his company. So that a multitude went after Valentine and the peasant, and they rode together at the head. And the Duke said thrice to the peasant, "What of my brother?" But the peasant, who was an old man, did but point again to the hill.

At the foot of the hill, all that had horses left them in charge of the boys who were of the party, for the Duke, presaging some fearful thing, would suffer none but grown men to mount with him; and thus they went forward afoot till they reached the grassy summit of the hill. And then the peasant sprang in front, crying, "There, there!" and all of them beheld the body of Duke Paul, bound to the tree by the embroidered scarf, his head fallen on his breast, and the ivory tablet hanging from the riband of the Order of St. Prisian. And a great silence fell on them all, and they stood gazing at the dead prince.

But presently Duke Valentine went forward alone; and he knelt on one knee and bowed his head, and kissed his brother's right hand. And a shout of indignation and wrath went up from all the crowd, and they cried, "Whose deed is this?" The Duke minded them not, but rose to his feet and laid his hand on the ivory tablet; and he perceived that it was written by Duke Paul; and he read what Paul had written to Antonio; how that he, the Duke, being dead, Antonio should come to his own again, and wed Lucia, and hold foremost place in the Duchy. And, this read, the Duke read also the subscription of Count Antonio – "Witness my hand – Antonio of Monte Velluto." Then he was very

amazed, for he had trusted his brother. Yet he did not refuse the testimony of the ivory tablet nor suspect any guile or deceit in Antonio. And he stood dry-eyed, looking on the dead face of Duke Paul. Then, turning round, he cried in a loud voice, so that every man on the hill heard him, "Behold the body of a traitor!" And men looked on him, and from him to the faces of one another, asking what he meant. But he spoke no other word, and went straightway down the hill, and mounted his horse again, and rode back to the city; and, having come to his palace, he sent for his little son, and went with him into the cabinet behind the great hall, where the two stayed alone together for many hours. And when the child came forth, he asked none concerning his uncle the Duke Paul.

Now all the company had followed down from the hill after the Duke, and no man dared to touch the body unbidden. Two days passed, and a great storm came, so that the rain beat on Paul's face and the lightning blackened it. But on the third day, when the storm had ceased, the Duke bade the Lieutenant of the Guard to go by night and bring the body of Paul: and the Lieutenant and his men flung a cloak over the face, and, having thus done, brought the body into the city at the break of day: yet the great square was full of folk watching in awe and silence. And they took the body to the Cathedral, and buried it under the wall on the north side in the shade of a cypress tree, laying a plain flat stone over it. And Duke Valentine gave great sums for masses to be said for the repose of his brother's soul. Yet there are few men who will go by night to the Hill of Duke Paul; and even now when I write, there is a man in the city who has lost his senses and is an idiot: he, they say, went to the hill on the night of the 15th of the month wherein Paul died, and came back mumbling things terrible to hear. But whether he went because he lacked his senses, or lost his senses by reason of the thing he saw when he went, I know not.

Thus died Duke Paul the traitor. Yet, though the Duke his brother knew that what was done upon him was nothing else than he had deserved and should have suffered had he been brought alive to justice, he was very wroth with Count Antonio, holding it insolence that any man should lay hands on one of his blood, and, of his own will, execute sentence upon a criminal of a degree so exalted. Therefore he sent word to Antonio, that if he caught him, he would hang him on the hill from the branches of the tree to which Antonio had bound Paul, and would leave his body there for three times three days. And, this message coming to Antonio, he sent one privily by night to the gate of the city, who laid outside the gate a letter for the Duke; and in the letter was written, "God chooses the hand. All is well."

And Count Antonio abode still an outlaw in the mountains, and the Lady Lucia mourned in the city.

CHAPTER III

COUNT ANTONIO AND THE PRINCE OF MANTIVOGLIA

I know of naught by which a man may better be judged than by his bearing in matters of love. What know I of love, say you – I, whose head is grey, and shaven to boot? True, it is grey, and it is shaven. But once it was brown, and the tonsure came not there till I had lived thirty years and borne arms for twelve. Then came death to one I loved, and the tonsure to me. Therefore, O ye proud young men and laughing girls, old Ambrose knows of love, though his knowledge be only like the memory that a man has of a glorious red-gold sunset which his eyes saw a year ago: cold are the tints, gone the richness, sober and faint the picture. Yet it is something; he sees no more, but he has seen; and sometimes still I seem to see a face that last I saw smiling in death. They tell me such thoughts are not fitting in me, but I doubt their doing a man much harm; for they make him take joy when others reap the happiness that he, forestalled by fate's sickle, could not garner. But enough! It is of Count Antonio I would write, and not of my poor self. And the story may be worth the reading – or would be, had I more skill to pen it.

Now in the summer of the second year of Count Antonio's banishment, when the fierce anger of Duke Valentine was yet hot for the presumption shown by the Count in the matter of Duke Paul's death, a messenger came privily to where the band lay hidden in the hills, bringing greeting to Antonio from the Prince of Mantivoglia, between whom and the Duke there was great enmity. For in days gone by Firmola had paid tribute to Mantivoglia, and this burden had been broken off only some thirty years; and the Prince, learning that Antonio was at variance with Duke Valentine, perceived an opportunity, and sent to Antonio, praying him very courteously to visit Mantivoglia and be his guest. Antonio, who knew the Prince well, sent him thanks, and, having made dispositions for the safety of his company and set Tommasino in charge of it, himself rode with the man they called Bena, and, having crossed the frontier, came on the second day to Mantivoglia. Here he was received with great state, and all in the city were eager to see him, having heard how he had dealt with Duke Paul and how he now renounced the authority of Valentine. And the Prince lodged him in his palace, and prepared a banquet for him, and set him on the right hand of the Princess, who was a very fair lady, learned, and of excellent wit; indeed, I have by me certain stories which she composed, and would read on summer evenings in the garden; and it may be that, if I live, I will make known certain of them. Others there are that only the discreet should read; for what to one age is but mirth turns in the mind of the next to unseemliness and ribaldry. This Princess, then, was very gracious to the Count, and spared no effort to give him pleasure; and she asked him very many things concerning the Lady Lucia, saying at last, "Is she fairer than I, my lord?" But Antonio answered, with a laugh, "The moon is not fairer than the sun, nor the sun than the moon: yet they are different." And the Princess laughed also, saying merrily, "Well parried, my lord!" And she rose and went with the Prince and Antonio into the garden. Then the Prince opened to Antonio what was in his mind, saying, "Take what command you will in my service, and come with me against Firmola; and when we have brought Valentine to his knees, I will take what was my father's, and should be mine: and you shall wring from him your pardon and the hand of your lady." And the Princess also entreated him. But Antonio answered, "I cannot do it. If Your Highness rides to Firmola, it is likely enough that I also may ride thither; but I shall ride to put my sword at the service of the Duke. For, although he is not my friend, yet his enemies are mine." And from this they could not turn him. Then the Prince praised him, saying, "I love you more for denying me, Antonio; and when I send word of my coming to Valentine, I will tell him also of what you have done. And if we meet by the walls of Firmola, we will fight like men; and, after that, you shall come again to Mantivoglia;" and he drank wine with Antonio, and so bade him

God-speed. And the Princess, when her husband was gone, looked at the Count and said, "Valentine will not give her to you. Why will not you take her?"

But Antonio answered: "The price is too high."

"I would not have a man who thought any price too high," cried the Princess.

"Then your Highness would mate with a rogue?" asked Count Antonio, smiling.

"If he were one for my sake only," said she, fixing her eyes on his face and sighing lightly, as ladies sigh when they would tell something, and yet not too much nor in words that can be repeated. But Antonio kissed her hand, and took leave of her; and with another sigh she watched him go.

But when the middle of the next month came, the Prince of Mantivoglia gathered an army of three thousand men, of whom seventeen hundred were mounted, and crossed the frontier, directing his march towards Firmola by way of the base of Mount Agnino and the road to the village of Rilano. The Duke, hearing of his approach, mustered his Guards to the number of eight hundred and fifty men, and armed besides hard upon two thousand of the townsmen and apprentices, taking an oath of them that they would serve him loyally; for he feared and distrusted them; and of the whole force, eleven hundred had horses. But Count Antonio lay still in the mountains, and did not offer to come to the Duke's aid.

"Will you not pray his leave to come and fight for him?" asked Tommasino.

"He will love to beat the Prince without my aid, if he can," said Antonio. "Heaven forbid that I should seem to snatch at glory, and make a chance for myself from his necessity."

So he abode two days where he was; and then there came a shepherd, who said, "My lord, the Duke has marched out of the city and lay last night at Rilano, and is to-day stretched across the road that leads from the spurs of Agnino to Rilano, his right wing resting on the river. There he waits the approach of the Prince; and they say that at daybreak to-morrow the Prince will attack."

Then Antonio rose, saying, "What of the night?"

Now the night was very dark, and the fog hung like a grey cloak over the plain. And Antonio collected all his men to the number of threescore and five, all well-armed and well-horsed; and he bade them march very silently and with great caution, and led them down into the plain. And all the night they rode softly, husbanding their strength and sparing their horses; and an hour before the break of day they passed through the outskirts of Rilano and halted a mile beyond the village, seeing the fires of the Duke's bivouacs stretched across the road in front of them; and beyond there were other fires where the Prince of Mantivoglia lay encamped. And Bena said, "The Prince will be too strong for the Duke, my lord."

"If he be, we also shall fight to-morrow, Bena," answered Antonio.

"I trust, then, that they prove at least well matched," said Bena; for he loved to fight, and yet was ashamed to wish that the Duke should be defeated.

Then Count Antonio took counsel with Tommasino; and they led the band very secretly across the rear of the Duke's camp till they came to the river. There was a mill on the river, and by the mill a great covered barn where the sacks of grain stood; and Antonio, having roused the miller, told him that he came to aid the Duke, and not to fight against him, and posted his men in this great barn; so that they were behind the right wing of the Duke's army, and were hidden from sight. Day was dawning now: the campfires paled in the growing light, and the sounds of preparation were heard from the camp. And from the Prince's quarters also came the noise of trumpets calling the men to arms.

At four in the morning the battle was joined, Antonio standing with Tommasino and watching from the mill. Now Duke Valentine had placed his own guards on either wing, and the townsmen in the centre; but the Prince had posted the flower of his troops in the centre; and he rode there himself, surrounded by many lords and gentlemen; and with great valour and impetuosity he flung himself against the townsmen, recking little of how he fared on either wing. This careless haste did not pass unnoticed by the Duke, who was a cool man and wore a good head; and he said to Lorenzo, one of his lords who was with him, "If we win on right and left, it will not hurt us to lose in the middle;"

and he would not strengthen the townsmen against the Prince, but rather drew off more of them, and chiefly the stoutest and best equipped, whom he divided between the right wing where he himself commanded, and the left which Lorenzo led. Nay, men declare that he was not ill pleased to see the brunt of the strife and the heaviest loss fall on the apprentices and townsmen. For a while indeed these stood bravely; but the Prince's chivalry came at them in fierce pride and gallant scorn, and bore them down with the weight of armour and horses, the Prince himself leading on a white charger and with his own hand slaying Glinka, who was head of the city-bands and a great champion among them. But Duke Valentine and Lorenzo upheld the battle on the wings, and pressed back the enemy there; and the Duke would not send aid to the townsmen in the centre, saying "I shall be ready for the Prince as soon as the Prince is ready for me, and I can spare some of those turbulent apprentices." And he smiled his crafty smile, adding, "From enemies also a wise man may suck good;" and he pressed forward on the right fighting more fiercely than was his custom. But when Antonio beheld the townsmen hard pressed and being ridden down by the Prince of Mantivoglia's knights and saw that the Duke would not aid them, he grew very hot and angry, and said to Tommasino, "These men have loved my house, Tommasino. It may be that I spoil His Highness's plan, but are we to stand here while they perish?"

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