CHRONICLES OF COUNT ANTONIO.

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CHAPTER V.

COUNT ANTONIO AND THE SACRED BONES.

One tale there is concerning Count Antonio of Monte Velluto, when he dwelt an outlaw in the hills, which men tell with fear and doubt, marvelling at the audacity of his act, and sometimes asking themselves whether he would in very truth have performed what he swore on the faith of his honor he would do if he did not attain what he demanded of the Duke. For the thing he threatened was such as no man of Forniola dare think on without a shudder, for we of Forniola prize and reverence the bones of our saint, the holy martyr, Prisian, above and far beyond every other relic, and they are to us, as it were, the sign and testimony of God's enduring favor to our country. But much will a man do for love of a woman, and Antonio's temper brooked no obstacle; so that none know all the truth of the matter. I may not doubt that he would have done even as he said, braving the wrath of heaven and making naught of the terror and consternation that had fallen on the city and the parts round about it. Whether that thought of his heart was one that would gain pardon, I know not; had the thing been done I could scarce hope, even in heaven's infinite mercy. Yet this story, also, I must tell, lest I be charged with covering up what shames Antonio, for with the opinions of careless and faithless men (of whom are too many in this later age) I have no communion, and I tell the tale not to move laughter or loose jests, but rather to show to what extremity a man, by nature good, may be driven by harshness and the unmerited disfavor of his Prince.

In the third year, then, of Count Antonio's outlawry his Highness the Duke looked upon the Lady Lucia and found that she was of full age for marriage. Therefore, he resolved that she should be wed, and since Robert de Beauregard, to whom he had purposed to give her, was dead, he chose from among his lords a certain gentleman of great estate, by name Lorenzo, and sent word to Lucia that she had spent too much of her youth pining for what could not be hers, and must forthwith receive Lorenzo for her husband. But Lucia, being by now a woman and no more a timid girl, returned to his Highness a message that she would look on no other man than Antonio; on this the Duke, greatly incensed, sent and took her and set her in a convent within the city walls, and made her known that there she should abide till her life's end, or until she would obey his command; and he charged the abbess to treat her harshly and to break down her pride; and he swore that she should wed Lorenzo, or, if she were obstinate, then she should take the vows of a nun in the convent. Many weeks she Lady Lucia abode in the convent, resisting all that was urged upon her. But at last, finding no help from Antonio, being sore beset and allowed no rest, she broke one day into passionate and pitiful weeping, and bade the abbess tell his Highness that, since happiness was not for her in this world, she would seek to find it in heaven, and would take the vows, rendering all her estate into the Duke's hand, that he might have it and give it to Lorenzo, or to whom he would. Which message being told to Duke Valentine, weary of contending with her, and perchance secretly fearing that Antonio would slay Lorenzo as he had slain Robert, he cursed her for an obstinate wench, and bade her take the vows, and set a day for her to take them; but her estate he assumed into his own hand, and made a gift of great value to Lorenzo. And Lorenzo, they say, was well content thus to be quit of the matter.

"For," said he, "while that devil is loose in the hills, no peace would there have been for the lady's husband."

But when it came to the ears of Count Antonio that the Lady Lucia was to take the veil on the morrow of the feast of St. Prisian, his rage and affliction knew no bounds.

"If need be," he cried, "I will attack the city with all my men before I will suffer it."

"Your men would all be killed, and she would take the veil none the less," said Tommasino. For Antonio had but fifty men, and although they were stout fellows and impossible to subdue so long as they stayed in the hills, yet their strength would have been nothing against a fortress and the Duke's array.

"Then," said Antonio, "I will go alone and die alone."

As he spoke he perceived Martolo coming to him, and calling him he asked him what he would. Now, Martolo was a devout man, and had been much grieved when Antonio fell under the sentence of excommunication; yet he abode with him. And now he bowed and answered:

"My lord, in three days it is the feast of St. Prisian, and the sacred bones will then be carried from the shrine in the church of the saint at Rilano to the city." For it was at Rilano that Prisian had suffered, and a rich church had been built on the spot.

"I remember that it is wont to be so, Martolo," answered the Count.

"When I dwelt with my father," said Martolo, "I was accustomed to go forth with all the people of my village and meet the sacred bones, and, kneeling, receive the benediction from the Lord Archbishop as he passed, bearing the bones in their golden casket. And the like would I do this year, my lord."

"But are you not excommunicated in company with Count Antonio and me?" asked Tommasino, lightly smiling.

"I pray not. I was not named in the sentence," said Martolo, signing the cross.

"Go in peace, Martolo, but see that you are not taken by the Duke's men," said Count Antonio.

"But few of them go with the Archbishop, my lord. For who would lay hands on the sacred bones? The guard is small, and I shall easily elude them." And Martolo departed, and told the man they called Bena what had passed; but Bena was a graceless fellow, and would not go with him.

Now when Martolo was gone Count Antonio sat down on a great stone, and for a long while he said nothing to Tommasino. But certain words out of those which Martolo had spoken were echoing through his brain, and he could not put them aside, for they came again and again and again, and at last, looking up at Tommasino, who stood by him, he said:

"Tommasino, who would lay hands on the sacred bones?"

Tommasino looked down into his eyes, then he laid a hand on his shoulder, and Antonio still looked up and repeated: "Who would lay hands on the sacred bones?"

Tommasino's eyes grow round in wonder; he smiled, but his smile was uneasy, and he shifted his feet.

"Is it that you think of, Antonio?" he asked in a low voice. "Beside it, it would be a light thing to kill the Duke in his own palace."

Then Antonio cried, striking his fist on the palm of his hand: "Are dead bones more sacred than that living soul, on which the Duke lays hands to force it to his will?"

"The people reverence the bones as God Himself," said Tommasino, troubled.

"I also reverence them," said Antonio, and fell again into thought. But presently he rose and took Tommasino's arm, and for a long while they walked to and fro. Then they went and sought out certain chosen men of the band—for the greater part they dared not trust in such a matter, but turned only to them that were boldest and recked least of sacred things. And to ten of such Antonio opened his counsel, and by great rewards he prevailed on them to come into the plan, although they were, for all their boldness, very sore afraid lest they, laying hands on the bones, should be smitten as was he who touched the ark of the covenant. Therefore Antonio said:

"I alone will lay hands on the golden casket; the rest of you shall but hold me harmless while I take it."

"But if the Lord Archbishop will not let it go?"

"The Lord Archbishop," said Tommasino, "will let it go." For Tommasino knew the Archbishop, because he would not remove the sentence of excommunication which he had laid upon Antonio and Tommasino at the prayer of the Abbot of St. Prisian's.

Now, when the feast of St. Prisian was come the Lord Archbishop, who had ridden from the city on the eve of the feast and had lodged in the house of the priests who served the church, went with all his train into the church and, with the rest standing afar off and veiling their eyes, took from the wall of the church, near by the high altar, the golden casket that held the bones of the blessed St. Prisian. And he wrapped the casket in a rich cloth and held it high before him in his two hands. And when the people had worshipped, the Archbishop left the church and entered his chair and passed through the village of Rilano, the priests and attendants going first, and twelve of the Duke's guard, whom the Duke had sent, following after. Great was the throng of folk, come from all the country round, to gaze upon the casket and in the procession of the Lord Archbishop, and most devout of them all was Martolo, who rested on his knees from the moment the procession left the church till it was clear of the village. And Martolo was still on his knees when he beheld go by him a party of peasants, all, save one, tall and powerful men, wearing peasants' garb, and having their faces overshadowed by large hats. These men had knelt as the casket passed, but they had risen and were marching shoulder to shoulder behind the men of the Duke's guard, a peasant behind every pikeman. Martolo gazed great at them, then he moistened his lips and crossed himself, murmuring: "What does this thing mean? Now God forbid——!" And breaking off thus, he also rose and went to the house of his father, sore vexed and troubled to know what this thing might mean. But he spoke of it to none, no, not to his father, observing the vow of secrecy in all matters which he had made to Count Antonio.

At the bounds of the village the greater part of the people ceased to follow the procession of the sacred bones, and, having received the Archbishop's blessing, turned back to their own homes, where they feasted and made merry; but the twelve peasants whom Martolo had seen followed the procession when it set forth for the next village, distant three miles on the road to Forniola. Their air manifested great devotion, for they walked with heads bent on their breasts and downcast eyes, and they spoke not once on the way; but each kept close behind a pikeman. When the procession had gone something more than a mile from the village of Rilano it came where a little stream crosses the highway; and, the rains having been heavy the week before, the stream was swollen and the ford deeper than it was wont to be. Therefore the officer of the guard, thinking of no danger, bade six of his men lay down their pikes and go lift the Archbishop's chair over the ford, lest he should be wetted by the water. And on hearing this order the tallest among the peasants put his hand up to his hat and twisted the feather of it between his thumb and his forefinger; and the shortest of them whispered, "The sign! the sign!" while every man of them drew a great dagger from under his habit and held it behind his back. Now, by this time the priests and attendants had passed the ford, and one-half the guard had lain down their pikes and were gone to raise the Archbishop's chair, the remainder standing at their ease, leaning on their pikes and talking to one another. Again the tallest peasant twisted the feather in his hat, and, without speech or cry, the peasants darted forward. Six of them seized the pikes that lay on the ground, the remaining six leaped like wildcats on the backs of the pikemen, circling the necks of the pikemen with their arms, pulling them back, and coming near to throttling them, so that the pikemen, utterly amazed and taken quite at disadvantage, staggered and fell backward, while the peasants got on top of them and knelt on their breasts and set the great daggers at their hearts. While this passed on the road, the remainder of Antonio's band—for such were the peasants—rushed into the stream and compelled the unarmed pikemen to set down the Archbishop's chair in the midst, so that the water came in at the windows of the chair, and the procession held in disarray while their own pikes sought to draw their poniards, but Antonio cried, "Slay any that draw!" And he came to the chair and opened the door of it, and, using as little force as he could, he laid hands on the casket that held the sacred bones and wrested it from the feeble hands of the Archbishop. Then he and his men, standing in line, stepped backward, with the pikes levelled in front of them, till they came out of the water and so to the dry road again; and one pikeman rushed at Antonio, but Tommasino, sparing to kill him, caught him a buffet on the side of the head with a pike, and he fell like a log in the water, and had been drowned, but two of his comrades lifted him. Then all twelve of the band being together—for the first six had risen now from off the six pikemen, having forced them, on pain of instant death, to deliver over their pikes to them—they turned with the casket in his hands, spoke in a loud voice: "I thank God that no man is dead over this business, but if you resist you shall die one and all. Go to the city, tell the Duke that I, Antonio di Monte Velluto, have the bones of the blessed St. Prisian, and carry them with me to my hiding place in the highest parts of the hills. But if he will swear by these bones that I hold and by his princely word that he will not suffer the Lady Lucia to take the vows, nor will constrain her to wed any man, but will restore her to her own house and to her estate, then let him send the Archbishop again and I will deliver up the sacred bones. But if he will not swear, then, as God lives, to-morrow at midnight I will cause a great fire to be kindled on the top of the hills—a fire whose flame you shall see from the walls of the city—and in that fire will I consume the sacred bones, and I will scatter the ashes of them to the four winds. Go and bear the message that I give you to the Duke."

And having thus said, Antonio, with his men, turned and went back at a run whence they had come; but to the village of Rilano they did not go, but turned aside before they came to it, and, coming to the house of one who knew Antonio, they bought of him, paying him in good coin of the duchy, three horses which Antonio, Tommasino, and Bena mounted, and they three rode hard for the hills, the rest following as quickly as they might, so that by nightfall they were all safely assembled in their hiding place, and with them the bones of the blessed St. Prisian. But they told not yet to the rest of the band what it was that Antonio carried under his cloak, nor did Martolo, when he returned from his house, ask what had befallen, but he crossed himself many times and wore a fearful look. But Tommasino came to Antonio and said to him:

"Why did you not ask also pardon for all of us, and for yourself the hand of Lucia?"

"A great thing, and a thing that troubles me, I have done already," answered Antonio. "Therefore, I will ask nothing for myself, and nothing may I ask for you or for my friends. But if I ask nothing but that right and justice be done, it may be that my sin in laying hands on the sacred bones will be the less."

Now after Antonio and his men were gone, the Archbishop's train stayed long by the stream on the road, lamenting and fearing to go forward. Yet at last they went forward, and being come to the next village, found all the people awaiting them at the bounds. And when the people saw the disorder of the procession, and that the pikemen had no pikes, they ran forward eagerly, asking what had befallen; and learning of the calamity, they were greatly afraid, and cursed Antonio; and many of them accompanied the Archbishop on his way to the city, where he came toward evening; and a great concourse of people awaited his coming there, and the Duke himself sat on a lofty seat in the great square, prepared to receive the Sacred Bones and go with them to the cathedral, where they were to be exposed at the gaze of the people at high mass. And they set the Archbishop's chair down before the Duke's seat, and the Archbishop came and stood before the Duke, and his priests and the pikemen with him. And the Duke started up from his seat, crying, "What ails you?" and sank back again, and sat waiting to hear what the Archbishop would say.

Then the Archbishop, his robes still damp and greatly disordered, his limbs trembling in anger and in fear, raised his voice; and all the multitude in the square were silent while he declared to his Highness what things Count Antonio had done and returned the message that he had sent. And when the Archbishop told how Antonio had sworn that as God liveth he would scatter the ashes of the sacred bones to the winds, the men caught their breath with a gasp and the women murmured affrightedly "Christ save us," and Duke Valentine dug the nails of his hand whereon his head rested into the flesh of his cheeks. For all the city held that according to the words St. Prisian had uttered before he suffered, the power and prosperity of the duchy and the favor of Heaven to it rested in the presence among them, and the faithful preservation and veneration of those most holy relics. And the Archbishop, having ended the message, cried, "God pardon my lips that repeat such words," and fell on his knees before Duke Valentine, crying: "Justice on him, my lord, justice!" And many in the throng echoed his cry, but others, and among them many of the apprenticed lads, who loved Antonio, muttered low one to another. "But the Duke has taken the sweetheart from him," and they looked on the Duke with no favorable looks.

Then Duke Valentine rose from his seat and stood on the highest step of it, and he called sundry of his lords and officers around him, and then he beckoned for silence and he said:

"Before the sun sets to-morrow the Lady Lucia shall take the vows," and he, with his train, took their way, the pikemen clearing a path for them, to the palace. And now, indeed, was silence; and all marvelled, and were struck dumb, that the Duke said naught concerning the bones of St. Prisian, and they searched one the other's face for the meaning of his words. But the Archbishop arose, and, speaking to no man, went to the cathedral and knelt there before the altar in the chapel of St. Prisian, and there abode on his knees.

Surely never, from that day until this hour, has such a night passed in the city of Forniola. For the Duke sent orders for every man of his guard to be ready to start at break of day in pursuit of Antonio, and through the hours of the night they were busied in preparing the provisions and accoutrements. But their looks were heavy and their tongues tied, for they knew, every man of them, that, though the Duke might at the end take Antonio, yet he could not come to him before the time that Antonio had said. And this the townsmen knew well also, and they gathered themselves in groups in the great square, saying: "before the Duke comes at him the sacred bones will be burned, and what will then befall the Duchy?" And those who were friendly to Antonio, foremost among them being the apprenticed lads, spread themselves here and there among the people, asking cunningly whether it concerned the people of Forniola more that the blessing of St. Prisian should abide with them or that a reluctant maiden should be forced to take the veil; and some grew bold to whisper under their breath that the business was a foul one, and that Heaven did not send beauty and love that priests should bury them in convent walls. And the girls of the city, ever most bold by reason of their helplessness, stirred up the young men who courted them, leading them on and saying, "He is a true lover who risks his soul for his love," or "I would I had one who would steal the bones of St. Prisian for my sake, but none such have I," with other stirring and inflaming taunts, recklessly flung from pouting lips and from under eyes that challenged. And all the while Duke Valentine sat alone in his cabinet, listening to the tumult that sounded with muffled din through the walls of the palace.

Now there was in the city a certain furrier named Peter, a turbulent fellow, who had been put out of his craft guild because he would not abide by the laws of the craft, and lived now as he best could, being maintained in large measure by those who listened to his empty and seditious conversation. This man, having naught that was worthy of love in Count Antonio, yet loved him because he defied the Duke, and about midnight, having drunk much wine, he came into the square and gathered together the apprentices, saying: "I have a matter to say to you—and to you—and to you," till there were many scores of them round him. Then he harangued them, and more came round; and when at last Peter cried, "Give us back the sacred bones," a thousand voices answered him: "Aye, give us back the bones!" And when the pikemen would have seized him, and women also, made a ring round him, so that he could not be taken. And sober men also, of age and substance, hearkened to him, saying: "He is a knave, but he speaks truth now." So that a very great throng assembled, every man having a staff and many also knives; and to those that had not knives the women and girls brought them, thrusting them into their hands. Nay, sundry priests also were among the people, moaning and wringing their hands and saying that the favor of St. Prisian would be lost forever to the city. And the square was thronged so that a man could not move unless all moved, nor raise his hand to his head save by the favor of his neighbor. Yet presently the whole mass began to move, like a great moving water, toward the palace of the Duke, where the pikemen stood in ranks, ready now to go against Antonio. Suddenly arose a cry: "The Archbishop comes!" and the venerable man was seen, led through the crowd by priests and some more, who brought him and set him in the front ranks of the people; and Peter cried, boldly, "Where is the Duke?" But the Captain of the guard came forward, sword in hand, and bade Peter be still, cursing him for insolence, and shouted that the people should disperse on pain of his Highness's displeasure. "Where is the Duke? Let him come out to us!" cried Peter, and the Captain, despising him, struck him lightly with the flat of his sword. But Peter, with a cry of rage, struck the Captain a great blow with his staff, and the Captain staggered back, blood flowing from his head. Such was the beginning of the fray, for in an instant the pikemen and the people had joined battle; women cried and fled in anger or even in fright; blood flowed, and many on both sides fell and rose no more, and the Archbishop came near to being trodden under foot, till his friends and the priests gathered round him, and who he saw that men were being slain he wept.

Then the Lord Lorenzo hastened to the cabinet of the duke, whom he found pacing up and down, gnawing his finger nails, and told him of what was done outside.

"I care not," said the Duke. "She shall take the vows! Let the pikemen scatter them."

Lorenzo then besought him, telling him that all the city was in arms, and that the conflict would be great. But the Duke said still: "She shall take the vows!" Nevertheless he went with Lorenzo, and came forth on to the topmost step of the palace, and when the people saw him they ceased for a moment to assail the pikemen, and cried out: "Give us back the sacred bones."

"Scatter those fellows!" said the Duke to the Captain of the guards.

"My lord, they are too many. And if we scatter them now, yet when we have gone against Count Antonio they may do what they will with the city."

The Duke sat still, pale and again gnawing his nails, and the pikemen, finding the fight hard, gave back before the people, and the people pressed on.

Then Peter, the furrier, came forward, and he hoisted well up him, and neared the pikemen; and one of the pikemen suddenly thrust Peter through with his pike, and the fellow fell dead, on which a great cry of rage rose from all the people, and they rushed on the pikemen again and slew and were slain; and the fight rolled up the steps, and in the midst of it found itself the Duke himself. And at last, able no longer to contend with all the city, he cried "Hold! I will restore the sacred bones!" But the people would not trust him, and one cried: "Bring out the lady here before us, and then her free, or we will burn the palace." And the Archbishop came suddenly and threw himself on his knees before the Duke, beseeching him that no more blood might be shed, but that the Lady Lucia should be set free. And the Duke grew pale, afraid, sent hastily to the lieutenant of the guard and ten men who came to the convent where Lucia was, and, brooking no delay, carried her with them in her bridgown and set her before the people, and swore that Antonio had sent her to the palace. And the Duke raised his hand to heaven, and before all the people he said: "Behold, she is free! Let her go to her own house, and her estate shall be hers again. And by my princely word I will constrain no lady to wed against her, she shall not take the vows, neither will I constrain her to wed any man." And when he had said this he turned sharply around on his heel, and, looking neither to the right nor to the left, went back into the palace, and the doors were shut the door. For his heart was very sore that he must yield to Antonio's demand, and, for himself, he had rather a thousand times that the bones of St. Prisian had been burned.

Now, when the Duke was gone, the people brought the Lady Lucia to her own house, driving out the steward whom the Duke had set there, and this done, they came to the Archbishop and would not suffer him to rest nor to delay one hour before he set forth to carry the Duke's promise to Antonio. This the Archbishop was ready to do, for all that he was weary. But first he sent Lorenzo to ask the Duke's pleasure, and Lorenzo, coming to the Duke, prayed him to send 200 pikes with the Archbishop. "For," said he, "your Highness has swept nothing concerning what shall befall Antonio, and so soon as he has delivered up the bones I will set upon him and bring him alive or dead to your Highness." But the Duke would not hearken.

"The fellow's name is like stale lees of wine in my mouth," said he. "Ten of my pikemen lie dead in the square, and more of my citizens. I will lose no more men over it."

"Yet how great a thing if we could take him!"

"I will take him at my own time and in my own way," said the Duke. "In God's name, leave me now."

Lorenzo therefore got from the Duke leave for but ten men to go with the Archbishop, and to go himself if he would. And thus they set out, exhorted by the people, who followed them beyond the bounds of the city, to make all speed. And when they were gone the people came back and took up the bodies of the dead, while the pikemen also took up the bodies of such of their comrades as were slain.

Yet had Duke Valentine known what passed on the hills while the city was in tumult, it may not be doubted, for all his vexation, that he would have sent the sacred bones back, and never had he a fairer chance to take Antonio. For when the Count and those who went with him to Rilano were asleep, Antonio's head resting on the golden casket, a shepherd came to the tent of the band and told them what had been done, and how all the country was in an uproar. Then a debate arose among the band, for, though they were lawless men, yet they feared God, and thought with great dread on what Antonio had sworn, so that presently they came all together, and roused up Antonio and said to him:

"My lord, you have done much for us, and it may be that we have done somewhat for you. But we will not suffer the sacred bones to be burned and scattered to the winds."

"Except the Duke yields I have sworn it, as God lives," answered Antonio.

"We care not. It shall not be—no—not though you and we die," said they.

"It is well: I hear," said Antonio, bowing his head.

"In an hour," said they, "we will take the bones, if you will not yourself, my lord, send them back."

"I hear, I hear," said Antonio, bowing his head; and the band went back to the fire round which they had been sitting, all save Martolo, who came and put his hand in Antonio's hand.

"How now, Martolo?" asked Antonio.

"What you will, I will, my lord," said Martolo. For though he trembled when he thought of the bones of St. Prisian, yet he clung always to Antonio. As for Bena and the others of the ten who had gone to Rilano, they had turned, not the bones only, but the blessed saint himself, had Antonio bidden them. Hard men, in truth, were they, and reckless.

Now, the rest of the band being gone back to their fire, and the night being very dark, in great silence and caution Antonio, Tommasino, Martolo, and their fellows, being thirteen in all—rose from their places, and, taking thirteen of them but their swords, save that Antonio carried the golden casket, they stole forth from the camp, and set their faces to climb yet higher into the heights of the hills. None spoke; one following another, they climbed the steep path that led up the mountain side, and when they had been going for the space of an hour they heard a shout from far below them.

"Our flight is known," said Tommasino.

"Shall we stand and meet them, my lord?" asked Bena.

"Nay, not yet," said Antonio, and the thirteen went on again at the best speed they could. Now they were in a deep gorge between lofty cliffs, and the gorge fell tended upward; and at length they came to the place which is now named "Antonio's Neck." There the rocks came high to meeting and utterly barring the path; yet there is a way thus one man, or, at most, two, may come through at one time. Along this narrow tongue they passed, and, coming to the other side, found a level space on the edge of a great precipice, and Antonio, pointing over the precipice, they saw in the light of the day, which now was dawning, the towers and spires of Forniola very far away in the plain below.

"It is a better place for the fire than the other," said Antonio, and Bena laughed, while Martolo shivered.

"Yet we risk being hindered by these fellows behind," said Tommasino.

"Nay, I think not," said Antonio.

Then he charged Tommasino and all of them to busy themselves in collecting such dry sticks and brushwood as they could, and there was abundance near, for the fir trees grew very high. And one of the men also went and set a snare, and presently caught a wild goat, so that they had meat. But Antonio himself took Bena and set him on one side of the way where the neck opened out into level space, and he stood on the other side of the way himself. And when they stretched out their arms the point of Bena's sword reached the hilt of Antonio's. And Antonio smiled, saying to Bena: "He had need to be a thin man, Bena, that passes between you and me."

And Bena nodded his head at Count Antonio, answering: "Indeed this is as straight as the way to heaven, my lord, and leads, as it seems to me, in much the same direction."

Thus Antonio and Bena waited in the shelter of the rocks, at the opening of the neck, while the rest built up a great pile of wood. Then, having roasted the meat, they made their breakfast, Martolo carrying portions to Antonio and to Bena. And, their prisoners not knowing the path so well, and therefore moving less quickly, it was but three hours short of noon when they heard the voices of men from the other side of the neck. And Antonio cried straightway: "Come not through at your peril. Yet one may come and speak with me."

Then a great fellow, whose name is variously given, though most of those whom I have questioned call him Sancho, came through the neck, and reaching the end of it found the two crossed swords of Antonio and Bena like a fence against his breast. And he saw also the great pile of wood, and resting now on the topof it the golden casket that held the sacred bones. And he said to Antonio:

"My lord, we love you; but sooner than that the bones should be burned, we will kill you and all that are with you."

And Antonio answered: "I also love you, Sancho; yet you and all your company shall die sooner than that my oath shall be broken."

"Your soul shall answer for it, my lord," said Sancho.

"You speak truly," answered Antonio.

Then Sancho went back through the neck and took counsel with his followers; and they made him their chief, and promised to be obedient to all that he ordered. And he said: "Let two run at their highest speed through the neck; it may be well they will die, but the bones must be saved. And after them we must, and again two. And I will be of the first two."

But they would not suffer him to be of the first two, although he prevailed that he should be of the last two. And the six being chosen, drew their swords, and, with a cry, rushed into the neck. And Antonio, hearing their feet, said to Bena:

"A quick blow is as good as a slow, Bena." And even as he spoke the first two came to the opening of the neck. But Antonio and Bena struck at them before they came out of the narrowest part or could wield their swords freely; and the second two coming on, Bena struck at one and wounded him in the breast; and he wounded Bena in the face, over the right eye; so that Bena saw not the fray, while Antonio slew his man at his first shove. And the fifth man and Sancho, the sixth, coming on, Antonio cried loudly:

"Are you mad? We could hold the neck against a thousand."

But they would not stop; and Antonio slew the fifth, and Bena was in the act to strike at Sancho, but Antonio suddenly dashed Sancho's sword from his hand and caught him a mighty buffet, so that he fell sprawling on the bodies of the five that were dead.

"Go back, fool, go back!" he cried.

And Sancho, answering nothing, gathered himself up and went back, for he perceived now that not with the loss of half of his men would he get by Antonio and Bena, and beyond them stood Tommasino, with ten whom he knew to be the stoutest of the band.

"It's a sore day's work, Bena," said Antonio, looking at the dead bodies.

"If a man be too great a fool to keep himself alive, my lord, he must die," answered Bena, and he pushed the bodies a little further back into the neck with his foot.

Then Sancho's company took counsel again, for, much as they reverenced the sacred bones, there was none of them eager to enter the neck. Thus they were at a loss, till the shepherd who had come along with them spoke to Sancho, saying:

"At the cost of a long journey you may come at him, for there is a way round that I can lead you by. But you will not traverse it in less than twelve or thirteen hours, taking necessary rest by the way."

And Sancho, counting the time, said: "It will serve; For, although a thousand came against him, yet the Count will not burn the bones before the time of his oath."

Therefore he left fifteen men to hold the neck, in case Antonio should offer to return back through it, and with the rest he followed the shepherd with great stealth and quiet; by reason of which, and of the rock between them, Antonio knew not what was to be done, but thought that the whole company lay still on the other side of the neck.

Thus the day wore to evening, as the Archbishop with the Lord Lorenzo and the guards came to the spur of the hills; and here they found a man waiting, who cried to them:

"Have you bring the Duke's promise to the Count Antonio?"

"Yes, we bring it," said they.

"I am charged," said he, "to lead the Archbishop and one other after the Count." But when the Archbishop offered himself, the hill being old and weary, Lorenzo constrained the man to take with him four of the guards besides, and the four bore the Archbishop along. Thus they were led through the secret tracks in the hills, and Lorenzo tried to return to memory his memory, that he might come again. But the way was long and devious, and it was hard to mark it. Thus going they came to the huts, and passing the huts still climbed wearily till they came near to the neck. It was then night, and as they guessed, near on the time when Antonio had sworn to burn the sacred bones; therefore they pressed on more and more, and came at last to the entrance of the neck. Here they found the fifteen, and Lorenzo running up, cried aloud:

"We bring the promise, we bring the promise!"

But scarcely had he spoken these words when a sudden great shout came from the other side of the neck, and Lorenzo, drawing his sword, rushed into the neck, the fifteen following, yet leaving a space between him and them, lest they should see him fall, pierced by Antonio and Bena. And Lorenzo stumbled and fell over the five dead bodies which lay in the way of the neck, and Bena, leaping over the prone man, he scrambled again to his feet and passed unhurt through the mouth of the neck, and the fifteen followed after him, while the guard supported the Archbishop in their hands, his chair being too wide to pass through five. And when they all thus came through, wild and strange was the sight they saw. For it chanced that at the same time Sancho's company had completed their circuit and had burst from behind upon Antonio and the twelve. And when the twelve saw them they retreated to the great pile and made a ring round it, and Antonio ordered to kill rather than allow Sancho's men to reach the pile. And it was then midnight and the time of Count Antonio's oath. And Count Antonio stood on the top of the great pile. At his feet lay the golden casket containing the sacred bones, and in his hand was a torch. And he cried aloud: "Hold them while I fire the pile!" and he leaped down and came to the side of the pile and laid his torch to the pile. And in an instant the flames shot up, for the pile was dry.

Now when Sancho's men saw the pile alight, with shouts of triumph and of terror they charged at the top of their speed against the twelve who guarded the pile. And Lorenzo and his men also rushed, but the cries of Sancho's company, together with the answering defiance of the twelve, drowned the cries of Lorenzo; and Antonio and the twelve knew not that Lorenzo was come. And the flames of the pile grew, and the highest tongue of flame licked the side of the golden casket. But Antonio's voice rose above all as he stood, aye, almost within the ambit of the fire, and shouted:

"Hold them a moment, Tommasino—a moment, Bena, and the thing is done!" Then Lorenzo tore his casque from his head and flung down his sword, and rushed unarmed between Antonio's men and Sancho's men, shouting louder than he had thought ever to shout: "The promise! the promise!" And at the same moment (so it is told—but tell it as it is told) there came from heaven a great ball of lightning, which, adding the light of the flames, fully revealed the features of Lorenzo. Back fell Sancho's men, and Antonio's arrested their swords. And then they all cried as men cry in great joy, "The promise! the promise!" And for a moment all stood still where they was. And the flames leaped higher; and as Antonio had said, they were seen by the great throng that gazed from the city walls; and they were seen by Duke Valentine as he watched from the wall of his garden by the river, and he went pale, gnawing his nails.

Then the Count Antonio leaped on the burning pile, though it seemed that no man could pass alive through it. Yet God was with him, and he gained the top of it, and, stooping, seized the golden casket and flung it down, clear of the pile, even at the Lord Lorenzo's feet; and when Lorenzo sought to lift it the heat of it blistered his hands, and he cried out with the pain. But Count Antonio, choked by the smoke, his hair and his eyebrows scorched by the fire, staggered half way down the pile and then sank on his knees. And there he had died, but that Martolo, Bena, and Sancho, each eager to outstrip the other, rushed in and drew him forth, and fetched water and gave it to him, so that he breathed again and lived. But the flames leaped higher and higher, and they said the city walls, "God help us! God help us! The sacred bones are burnt!" And women, aye, and men, too, fell to weeping, and there was great sorrow, fear, and desolation. And the Duke gnawed his nails even to the quick, and spat the blood from his mouth, cursing Antonio.

But Lorenzo, having perceived that the greater number were against Antonio, cried out to Sancho's men: "Seize him and bring him here!" For the Duke's promise carried no safety to Antonio. But Sancho answered him:

"Nay, that the sacred bones are safe we have no quarrel with my Lord Antonio." And he and his men went and laid down their swords by the feet of Antonio, where he lay on the ground, his head on Tommasino's lap. So did the whole band were now round Antonio, and Lorenzo had but four with him.

"He asks war," growled Bena to Tommasino. "Shall he not have war, my lord?"

And Tommasino laughed, answering:

"Here is a drunkard of blood!"

But Count Antonio, raising himself, said:

"Is the Archbishop here?"

Then Lorenzo went and brought the Archbishop, who, coming, stood before Antonio, and rehearsed to him the oath that Duke Valentine had taken, and told him how the Lady Lucia was already free and in her own house, and made him aware also of the great tumult that had happened in the city. And Antonio listened to his tale in silence. Then the Archbishop raised a hand to heaven and spoke in a solemn and sad voice:

"Behold, there are ten of the Duke's guard dead in the city, and there are twelve of the townsmen dead, and here in the opening of the neck there lie dead five men of those who followed you, my lord. Twenty and seven men are there that have died over this business. I pray more have not died in the city since I set forth. And for what has this been done, my lord? And more than the death of all these is there. For these sacred bones have been foully and irreligiously stolen and carried away, used with vile irreverence, and brought into imminent hazard of utter destruction, and had they been destroyed and their ashes scattered to the four winds, according to your blasphemous oath, I know not what would have befallen the country where such an act was done. And for what has this been done, my lord? It has been done that a proud and violent man may have his will, and that his pride may be satisfied. To this end is the burden of your soul, my lord; yes, on your soul is the weight of sacrilege and of much blood."

The Archbishop ceased and his hand dropped to his side. The flames on the pile were burning low and a stillness fell on all the company. But at last Count Antonio rose to his feet and stood with his elbow on Tommasino's shoulder, leaning on Tommasino. His face was weary and and sad, and he was very pale, and there was one spot the flame had scorched his cheek to an angry red. And looking round on the Archbishop, and on the Lord Lorenzo, and on them all, he sighed sadly:

"In truth, my Lord Archbishop, my burden is heavy. For I am an outlaw, and excommunicated. Twenty and seven men have died through my act, and I have used the sacred bones foully and brought them into imminent peril of total destruction according to my oath. All this is true, my lord. And yet I know not. For Almighty God, whom all we, whether honest men or robbers, men of law or lawless, humbly worship, Almighty God has His own scales, my lord. And I know not which thing be in those scales the heavier that twenty and seven men should die and that the bones of the blessed St. Prisian should be brought in peril, aye, or should be utterly destroyed—or again that one weak girl, who has no protection save in the Justice and pity of man, should be denied justice and bereft of pity, and that no man should hearken to her weeping. Say, my lord, for it is yours to teach and mine to learn, which of these things should God count the greater sin? For I know not. I have asked nothing, and for my friends here, whom I love—aye, even those I have killed for my oath's sake, I loved—I have dared to ask nothing. But I asked only that justice should be done and mercy regarded. Where, my lord, is the greater sin?"

But the Archbishop answered not a word to Count Antonio, but he and the Lord Lorenzo came and lifted the golden casket, and, no man of Antonio's company seeking to hinder them, they went back with it to the city and showed it to the people, and the people they had rejoiced greatly that the sacred bones which they had thought to be destroyed were safe the Archbishop carried the golden casket back to the shrine in the village of Rilano, where it rests till this day, and the Duke buried the five men of his band whom he and Bena had slain, and with the rest he abode still in the hills, while the Lady Lucia dwelt in her own house in the city, and the Duke, honoring the oath which he had sworn, before all the people, did not seek to constrain her to wed against her desire, but to her the estate that he had taken from her. Yet the Duke hated Count Antonio the more for what he had done, and sought the more how he might lay hands on him and put him to death.

(To be continued.)

GIVERS OF POISONS.

Women Who Have Become Famous as Murderers—Brinvilliers and Joniaux.

LONDON, Feb. 9.—The trial of the woman aptly called "the Antwerp Brinvilliers" culminated in the only possible conclusion. Mme. Joniaux was sentenced to death, being found guilty on all counts, and if she escapes with her life and the sentence be commuted to one of perpetual imprisonment, it is only because the present King of the Belgians never as yet has been persuaded to ratify capital punishment with his signature, and practically has abolished it.

Belgium has of late years been the theatre of several sensational poisoning cases of an equally revolting nature, taking into consideration the rank and status of the accused. Count Visart de Bocarmé, belonging to a noble family, poisoned his brother-in-law, and died on the scaffold, while the perpetrators of the Risk Allah murder in 1887 and the Peltzer assassination in 1888 are still in the prison of Louvain.

The birth and antecedents of Mme. Joniaux seemed at first to be guarantees of her innocence, for she was not only the wife of a high Government official, but the daughter of Gen. Ablay, formerly aide-de-camp to King Leopold I. However, it is an ascertained fact that when victims die of poison, the drug has been generally administered by women, the motive being mostly an illicit or thwarted love, and their chief object to carry out their murderous intention as promptly as possible. Nor is this form of crime modern. We can trace it to the remote periods of history, from the fair and elegant Greek Parisiates, who, when she got tired of her lovers, invited them, with others, to a sumptuous repast, and carving some dainty dish with a knife, the blade of which was poisoned on one side only, helped them to the fatal portion, and saw them die before the end of the feast, while the remaining guests escaped unharmed. Cleopatra, an artistic epicure, lightly dropped poisoned rose leaves into the wine-filled cups of the enemies she had doomed. The secret of these ancient poisons has not been transmitted to us. It is only of the compounds used by Lucrezia Borgia that we have formed some accurate idea. There is little doubt that the beautiful Duchess of Ferrara employed a white powder closely resembling sugar, which was an arsenical preparation. The famous *aqua tofana* was only a variation or adulteration of the same drug.

In the middle ages the female poisoners operated on different systems, but always in a graceful and elegant fashion. Catherine de Medicis sent death in dainty perfumed gloves, and Diane de Meridor in juicy golden oranges. In the seventeenth century, an epoch when poisons were freely used, they were currently called by the cryptical and ironical appellation of "*poudre à succession*." Mme. de Brinvilliers and La Voisin used an immense quantity of this "inheritance powder," which placed many a fortune within their grasps. The trial of the former caused great scandal, although she persistently refused to give any explanation