The Viper of Milan

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CHAPTER TWO—Continued

FRANCISCO stepped out into the spring night, fire beating at his temples: Visconti was abroad!

The moon, half shrouded in a misty vapor, was rising above the fragrant chestnuts, and brilliant in the semidark, like flame behind a veil, the clumps of wallflowers gave out intoxicating scent.

Francisco noticed them and thought grimly they were the color of blood just dry.

The spell of the moon and of the hour lay on everything; a weird ghostliness seemed to step among the trees; a sighing came from the great bushes in the garden of the villa: "Visconti is abroad."

Francisco touched his dagger and went forward. Across his path two white moths fluttered, white by day, now silver purple, illusive and mysterious. To the man's fevered mood they seemed an omen; souls of the dead allowed to take farewell of earth; and with straining eyes he watched them ... away and up and out of sight. "Who had perchance just died?"

Francisco's giant sinews tightened. He went forward swiftly on the road and strained his eyes and ears along its silver length.

Nothing to be heard; nothing to be seen! Had he lost his chance? Had the Duke re-entered Milan? Or had he gone too far to return that night? He sat upon the bowlders where he had rested previously, his face turned toward Brescia, his hand upon his dagger.

The soft air was strengthening into a gentle wind; the poplar leaves were dancing and darkening clouds began to drive across the moon. But the man heeded not the changing; light or dark, what matter once Visconti had crossed his path? Long he waited. Not a sound save the dancing of the leaves, the rising wind, the soft noises of the night. At length Francisco leaped to his feet, and his breath came short and fast. He could hear something. The wind was against him. He lay down; he put his ear to the ground; then he leaped to his feet again, transformed. It was unmistakable, though still far off; the thud of horses' flying feet.

Francisco waited.

With each second the wind rose; the clouds raced and gathered and darkened half the sky, and the man, straining every nerve, thought at first it was the wind he heard mingling with the trample of the oncoming hoofs. Then he knew it for screams of fury and wild shouting. "It is the Visconti," he said, and involuntarily his tense arm sank and his muscles loosened; those mad shrieks would freeze the marrow.

Nearer came the onset, trampling horse and yelling rider; and Francisco set himself anew.

"He rides with his own soul for company," he muttered grimly.

Now the furious cries came clearly, terrible, inhuman; and in another moment, horse and rider were in view.

"Yes, Visconti."

Standing in the stirrups, he lashed at the foaming horse in a blind rage and horror. His cap was gone, and hair and cloak were blown about him. He shouted wildly, cursed and shrieked.

For a breath Francisco paused. This could be no human rider; well was it known in Lombardy that the Visconti trafficked with the fiend, and this must be he; and the man shrank and turned his eyes, lest he should see his damning face.

But the next instant his courage and his purpose had returned.

The horse was upon him. Swift as thought, Francisco leaped and clutched the bridle in a hand of steel.

But the mad impetus defeated him. He was dragged forward like a reed; only his own great strength for the moment saved him. And now his wild shouts were added to the rider's. He struck upward with his dagger; he tore blindly.

"Do you not know me, Visconti?" he called. "Do you not know me?"

But his dagger was dashed from him. The horse's foam blinded him as it sprang desperately on. He heard Visconti's demon scream, and as the earth whirled round with him, caught one fleeting glimpse of the white, distorted, hated face—then, he was prone upon the ground, and Visconti, spurring on his way, looked back upon him with triumphant yells.

"Fly, fly!" he screamed, "they are after us, but we escape them. Fly!"

The dawn was showing when Francisco, spent with the passion of failure rather than from any hurt, came slowly back and picked his dagger from the road. Not far from it he saw a parchment roll tossed from Visconti's doublet in that frantic forward lunge—Visconti who had safely disappeared within the walls of Milan!

Francisco picked up the roll.

It was inscribed with poetry and patched with blood.

CHAPTER THREE

The Hostage of the Estes

"A HUNDRED thousand florins—and no more, even if they refuse the bargain."

It was the Visconti who spoke. In a small dark room in the Visconti palace he and the pale-faced, red-haired man, who had held the bridle of his horse two days before in the procession that had wended toward Brescia, were seated opposite to one another at the table; between them a pile of papers over which the secretary bowed his shoulders.

"The demand is a hundred and fifty, my lord," he said, his voice meek, his eyes furtive.

"They said two hundred to begin with," was the curt answer. "A hundred thousand florins, or I go elsewhere."

The secretary's pen flew nervously across the parchment, filling it with a cramped, mean writing that trailed unevenly along the page. Visconti's secretary wrote a characteristic hand. Visconti leaned back in his chair, watching him in silence.

The room was small and circular, hung with leather stamped in gold and furnished plainly even to bareness. A narrow lancet window, placed low in the wall, admitted a subdued light, which fell upon the only spot of color in the room, the suit of turquoise blue the secretary wore.

"A hundred thousand florins, to be paid in gold," repeated Visconti; "and no more, Giannotto."

He rose and began to pace the room. Long habit and constant contact had not lessened the secretary's fear of Visconti, nor mitigated the hate, none the less intensified for being forever concealed under the mask of cringing servility. But in Giannotto's dislike there was nothing noble; it was merely mean hate of a sordid soul that grudged the success of the bold crimes itself could never dare to undertake. Had the secretary been in Visconti's place, there would have been as vile a tyrant, of equal cruelty and far less courage.

The Duke moved to the window and stood there in observation a while, then turning, spoke to Giannotto with a smile. His eyes were a beautiful gray, open wide, and just now lighting up a pensive, pleasant face. But the secretary knew it too under a different guise.

"My sister's alliance with the Duke of Orleans gratifies my ambition, Giannotto," he said, "and is well worth a hundred thousand florins. So far the Valois have never married out of royal houses."

"Yet they consider themselves honored by this match, my lord," said the secretary.

"They consider themselves well paid," returned Visconti. "Now, if I can find a daughter of the Plantagenets for brother Tisio, behold us firmly placed among the dynasties of Europe!"

Early in the fourteenth century, but no more than a meager fifty years ago, before the last Visconti culminated the evil of his race, Matteo Visconti, Gian Galeazzo's grandfather, had first firmly established his family as lords of Milan, supplanting their rival the Torlani, who had long reigned as magistrates-in-chief, and under Martin della Torre risen to some eminence. Every year of the fifty since then had seen some increase of territory, some fresh acquisition of power, till with his last overthrow of Della Scala, the seizure of Verona, and the murder of his father, already miserably deposed, Gian Galeazzo had planted himself upon a level with kings.

Almost the whole of Lombardy was under his sway, and that sway extended from Vercelli in Piedmont to Feltre and Bellvino. Florence, lately leagued against him in support of his deposed father, had been beaten in battle after battle and was glad to escape, shorn of her fairest possessions and cherishing only her liberty.

All this Giannotto knew. Della Scala, Duke of Verona, had owned fair lands and wide, Verona, Brescia, all now in Visconti's hands. The secretary wondered, as he thought, how long it would be before the triumphant Gian threw away the mere rag of respect, the mere mockery of a title which bound him to the empire, and became King of Lombardy in name as well as power.

"And thou thyself, my lord," he said, "thou wilt marry a Valois to thy sister! Who will be thy bride?"

Visconti smiled. "These marriages are for ambition. Dost thou think I shall marry for ambition? No, Giannotto, I have placed myself above need of that. The alliances that make the Visconti one with the kings of Europe are for Valentine and Tisio; I shall marry—"

"For love, my lord?" ventured the secretary, with a hint of sarcasm.

"Whom I please," said Visconti. "Which is not what Valentine is doing," he added, with a smile.

"She may give trouble yet, my lord."

Visconti frowned. He thought of Conrad von Schulembourg, the brilliant young German noble, who had been a favorite with him and all his court, and had won the heart of Valentine Visconti; no favorite of his now. "As for my lady sister," he said, "let her dare turn her eyes save where I bid her."

His own grew ominous, and Giannotto shuffled uneasily.

A noise without broke the sudden silence of reflection. Visconti, responding at once to what it meant, glanced a moment from the window where he still stood, then swept down to the head of the table. He leaned across to Giannotto, not that he valued any response that he could offer—Visconti's secretary was no more to him than the chair on which he sat, valued solely for his skill in letters—but his triumph had to have its vent. "Hark!" he cried. "Listen to it, Giannotto! The wealth of Verona is pouring into Milan! The spoils of Verona, Giannotto, the treasures from Mastino della Scala's palace!"

Giannotto winced before Visconti's passionate joy.

"'Twas a man I hated, Giannotto—I would he had lived to feel it. The only man I ever hated, because the only man I ever feared, the only man who ever dared to despise me! But he has fallen, he is dead, his wife is in my power, and in his fall he has placed me higher than my highest hopes."

Carried away by his transports, he seized Giannotto by the arm and dragged him to the window.

The secretary gazed into the courtyard, where a group of soldiers and servants were busy conveying statues, gilt and silver plate, rich tapestry, glass, china and arms, from carts and mules into the narrow doorways that led into the grim interior of the palace. They were presided over by a majordomo in a black gown, who called out directions in a shrill voice. To one side a few unhappy men, of note enough to have been spared, watched in grim silence the unlading of the spoils that came from the sacking of their palaces. The great gates stood at their widest, and through them wound a long train of soldiers, some driving before them groups of prisoners, tightly chained together, others galloping in laden with plunder of all kinds, art treasures, blackened as if by fire, banners and suits of armor.

"Ah, Giannotto, look!" cried Visconti, "Della Scala's collection, Della Scala's jewels. How my treasury will be enriched! Only one thing mars it, that he should not be here to see!"

He turned from the window. Giannotto followed, cringing.

"Still, thou hast his wife, my lord," he said. Gian's eyes flashed afresh.

"Isotta d'Este—ah!"

He leaned back against the wall in silence. A certain winter morning, five years ago, rose clearly before him; a massive castle, frowning from the rocks above Modena, and on its steps a fair girl who stood there and laughed to see him ride away back to Milan, his offer of the Visconti's friendship scorned and flung in his face by her proud family, the haughty Estes. Visconti's face grew dark as he remembered her; almost more than Della Scala, her dead husband, did he hate Isotta, Della Scala's wife. An' she was in his power. Greatly would it have soothed him to know her death was in his power, too, but the lust of ambition was greater with this man even than the lust of pride or hate.

Isotta d'Este was a valuable hostage to be used against her family, should they think of avenging their fallen kinsman.

"Where hast thou finally placed her, my lord?" asked Giannotto, with his stealthy glance. The Duke started from his reverie.

"In the West Tower," he smiled. "Every day I go to gaze on the room that holds her to make sure it is not a dream; to see and feel with my eyes and my own hands that her prison is doubly sure. If Isotta d'Este should now escape me—but she will not!"

He crossed the room to leave it, but paused at the door.

"Be watchful, Giannotto, the Princess Valentine may try to leave the palace. I have spies on her every movement; still, thine eyes upon her also will do no harm—to me!"

He laughed an instant. A rustle of the hangings and he was gone. Giannotto sat on silently, looking in front of him. His thoughts were with Valentine Visconti, Gian's unhappy sister, whom he had been told to watch; from her they traveled to the German Count, who, five days ago, had left the palace.

"I wonder if she loved him," he mused. "I do not think she did. Dear God, she did not need to wait to love a man; her life was not such that she could pick and choose her way of escaping from it. Conrad offered one and she was ready to take it—now—five days ago! Yes—Count Conrad is dead, and she will marry the Duke of Orleans! Ah, well! The German was a fool; he deserved no better fate than a fool! I do not think she'll break her heart if she can find some other way."

He returned to his papers, pausing now and then to glance toward the door, as if to keep himself on the alert for the Duke's noiseless entry.

But Gian had bent his steps elsewhere. Plainly dressed, he passed almost unnoticed across an inner courtyard to a dark angle of a wall where a secret door anew admitted him. The whole Visconti palace was a somber and gloomy place; men crept about it on tiptoe, glancing fearfully around them, afraid of their own shadows. Visconti smiled to himself at sight of fear; he loved to be feared, to hold lives in the hollow of his hand, and play with them and death.

The door let him into a long, narrow passage flagged with stone, and lit by diamond-shaped holes left in the walls; the air was damp and chill, and Visconti drew his cloak around him. Unlocking a second door, he ascended a flight of stone steps, pitch dark, from which he emerged into a large circular chamber with a thick pillar in the middle from which the groined ceiling sprang. Save table and high-backed chair of blackened wood, there was no furniture. This chamber was the outer guard-room of the prison-wing, and a gloomy-faced man leaned against the pillar, his eyes fixed upon the opening door. It could be no other than the Visconti entering thus, and he crouched almost to the ground.

"What is thy guard?" said Visconti.

"Twenty men in each guard-room, my lord, and each one picked for size and trustworthiness, and I myself keep watch upon the door. Escape is impossible."

"By so much the more thy head will answer for it."

As he spoke, Visconti flung wide one of a ring of doors opening from the chamber, and stepped into a posse of soldiers. No one spoke. Glancing keenly to the right and left, Visconti passed through their ranks into the room beyond—a small apartment, dim lit and hung with arras. An old woman sat at a tapestry frame with her back to the door, but at Visconti's entrance she rose, as at something expected, and sank in a deep obeisance.

Gian Maria closed the door behind him.

"How is she?" he said. "How does she bear her change of prison?"

The old woman glanced toward an inner door, massive and iron-clamped.

"When I am with her, my lord, she sits in silence, her eyes forever on her missal; indeed she has not spoken since we brought her here; but when she is alone, she weeps. I have heard her through the door; she weeps passionately, and calls wildly upon her husband to save her."

"I would I had him, to stand gagged against the door to hear her," said the Duke.

"By the look of her she will die of it," continued the old woman. "But if I know anything of prisoners, and I have seen a few, thou wilt never break her spirit, my lord."

"She must be more humbled now," he said to himself. "She must turn and implore me for pity."

The huge door creaked and swung on its hinges, and he stood at the top of two low stone steps, looking down into Isotta's prison. It was little better than a dungeon of stone, lofty but dark, with one window deep set, high out of reach, and thickly barred. The walls were hung with faded tapestry, the gloomy, sad-looking folds drooping like torn, captured standards. A huge chest of somber blackness leaned against the wall; above it hung a horn lantern, which after dark gave all the light that was obtained. For the rest, a few high-backed chairs stood stiffly about the room. In his black dress Visconti, pausing at the head of the steps, seemed part of its gloom. His wide-open gray eyes looked straight across at the solitary occupant.

Isotta sat in one of the huge black chairs, her delicate hands resting on the faded crimson velvet of the arms, her feet on a wooden footstool. She was of a fair and noble appearance, but her face was marred by sorrow and her eyes red from many tears. Her pale yellow hair was drawn away under a white veil. Her long gray dress clung close to about her slender figure. On her knee rested a little book, and on this she kept her eyes. Not by so much as a flutter of her hand did she show she knew of the Visconti's presence.

He waited, raging inwardly, but words would not come easily to break that silence. At last he slowly descended into the room, his eyes still on her face.

She never stirred, nor raised her eyes. With his noiseless tread Visconti paced around the chamber, raising the arras and testing with his dagger every block of stone. It was a superfluous precaution; any attempt to escape would have been simple madness, and Isotta d'Este was not likely to give way to frenzy. Still it was joy to be sure and doubly sure that she was safe. Every inch was inspected, every crevice searched. Meanwhile from time to time he observed her keenly. But she seemed not to know her solitude was broken, save that once, when he passed her, she swept in the train of her gown, as she might have done had a leper come too near. A simple thing, but it goaded him, and for a moment she was near her death; rage almost overcoming prudence. But as he stood behind her chair, half inclined to strike, he noticed on her hand a ring. His expression changed; he smiled; his hand dropped down. The ring was of pearl, cut with the arms of Della Scala, and worn on the third finger of her left hand; her wedding ring.

Visconti smiled again. Stooping, he raised her hand, and—"Will she bear this in silence?" was his thought. For a moment it seemed if she might not. The delicate fingers stiffened and half closed, then, as if remembering anew, she left her hand passive in Visconti's hold, and only by a faint quiver told she knew the ring had been withdrawn. The despoiled hand fell back again on the velvet arm, her eyes were fixed immovably upon her book, and Visconti, turning away to the door, silent as he came, looked back at her incredulous of such control. She was sitting straight and slender, her delicate head poised high, but—ah, yes, he thought it must be so!—he noted with delight that her breast heaved and the firm line of her mouth trembled ever so slightly. For a second he stood thus, a ray of pale prison light caught by the ring he held, then the door clattered and shook back into its bolts, and he was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Valentine

SWIFTLY as he had come, Visconti returned to the palace, and the banqueting hall beyond. He stepped in silently, and softly let the curtains fall behind him.

The room was of enormous size, and overawed the gaze. The four large entries, one in each wall, were curtained alike with gloomy purple. The ceiling was domed and of immense height, showing a dim tracery of carved wood, from which hung golden chains, suspending jeweled lamps. The high and narrow windows were wrought with painted saints, splendid in coloring. From domed ceiling to paneled floor the walls were carved with men, women, saints, martyrs, flowers and birds wrought together, in simple-minded joyousness of design, executed with the delicate workmanship of Niccolo Pisano's school. Silk arras, hung from carved gold rods, here and there concealed the carving. A carpet, the work of two men's lives, delicate in purple, brown and gold, spread across the center, where a long low table of walnut wood, rich and dark, could seat two hundred guests. Purple velvet chairs were set about in the corners, and the light streaming through the colored window saints fell in gold and green across an ivory footstool, inlaid with jewels.

As Visconti entered the hall was empty, yet he stepped stealthily, as if he felt eyes watching him. Seating himself in the window recess, he waited, and presently, as if at an unuttered summons, the curtains at the far end of the room were rustled apart, and a lady entered. She was Valentine Visconti, Gian's sister. Her dress was of red and brown, embroidered with gold, her tawny hair piled high under a golden net upon her well-set head. She had the clear, colorless skin and the wide red lips of the fair-haired Italians, their rich presence; she was of a fine carriage, not easy to overlook; she might have been ten years younger than her brother; she was as tall and as stately.

She looked straight toward the window where Visconti sat. Gian returned her gaze, not changing his position. Valentine drew nearer.

"Why hast thou set spies upon me?" she demanded.

"Why didst thou try to fly Milan with Count Conrad?" he returned. "I was foolish not to spy on thee before."

Her gray eyes glinted.

"I tried to escape from a life that has grown intolerable," she cried, "and I will try yet again!"

Visconti smiled.

"My sister, thou art much too precious; I shall not let thee go. Thou art worth a great deal to me. Through thee our family will be united to the royal house of France. My sister, thy husband will be the Duke of Orleans, and not a German fool."

But Valentine was also a Visconti; she advanced with blazing eyes.

"I will not marry to serve thy ambitions; I will not help to steady thee up the throne. Mark me, Gian, sooner than wed a Prince whom thou hast chosen, I will drag thy name into the mire, and sit in rags at thy palace gates."

"Only thou hast not the choice," he answered pleasantly.

Her anger rose the more as she felt her helplessness.

"I will not marry the Duke!" she cried, "I will not walk up to the altar."

"Thou canst be carried," said Visconti.

She moved up and down, twisting her hands in any agony of impotence.

"I will appeal to the Duke of Orleans himself!" she cried.

"A bridegroom who is bought for a hundred thousand florins!" sneered her brother. "And how wilt thy appeal reach him? Come, my sister, be calm; the Duke will make as good a husband as Count Conrad. Bethink thyself, thou mayst live to be crowned Queen of France. Wilt thou not thank me then, that I saved thee from a German Count?"

Valentine fell to weeping.

"What has become of him?" she sobbed, "the only human being who ever turned to me in pity. The only one who ever cared for me. What has become of him?"

"What becomes of a fool when he crosses the path of a Visconti?" asked her brother calmly.

Valentine lifted her head.

"He is dead, then?" she said.

"It matters not to thee. Thy husband will be the Duke of Orleans, and thou art a prisoner in the palace till he takes thee from it."

She caught at the arras; Visconti left her, and reached the door, his figure a shadow among the shadows.

The girl rushed forward with a cry. "Gian!" she called.

He paused, his hand upon the curtain, and looked back at her.

"Gian!" she repeated, and stood still gasping, her hand upon her breast. The stiff folds of her dress gleamed richly in the subdued light that fell upon her from the painted window. "I know thee for what thou art," she said; "there are only two of us left, only two. Where are our parents, Gian?"

"They were stricken down at Brescia," and Visconti took a quick step toward her.

"They are dead," she breathed, "and they died as our brothers died, Filipo and Matteo—"

"Did they so! Then take warning by it," and Gian, coming stealthily still nearer, turned a look on her. Valentine quailed, as Francisco well nigh had done; the hot words of remorse and rebellion died away unuttered, and she hid her face, her high spirit cowed again into a bitter weeping.

Visconti left her noiselessly.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Painter's Daughter

THREE days had passed since that futile midnight encounter, and Francisco had found no means to enter Milan.

He stood on the banks of the water looking moodily toward the city, watching the figure of Vittore, who trudged along the meadows—his errand to procure provisions.

The three still sheltered in the ruins, to which no owner had returned, nor had any signs of life or occupancy broken the silence within the villa's all-encircling walls. Now, as he watched Vittore out of sight—the boy looking back often to renew his courage—Francisco's brow was furrowed, and his eyes heavy with sleeplessness. The stream, clear, deep and sparkling, here ran darkened with the shadow of the willows that bent over it their long, bluish leaves. A path, thickly bordered with reeds, ran beside the water to the head of the small lake into which the stream flowed, whence it continued, a scarcely discernible footway, toward the city.

Behind Francisco, separated from him only by the fosse, was the wall of the villa, and, Vittore being lost to view, Francisco withdrew his gaze, always roaming restlessly in quest of something that should aid him, and glanced along it curiously. His eyes rested on a great tuft of yellow lichen, brilliant with scarlet spikes; it was so huge and spreading he could not but stare at it. From the lichen his gaze traveled slowly upward, but not a foothold could he see. Spreading above the wall the topmost boughs of a gigantic yew showed a clear-cut black against the sky, and on the broad, fanlike surface brooded a pair of doves, pink, gray and white. The beauty of the scene, its calmness and repose, exasperated the man's inaction. He stamped on the little flowers at his feet, then, with a bitter curse at his folly, threw himself upon the grass to watch for Vittore's return, and ponder, forever ponder, on his purpose. Suddenly there shot into sight upon the stream a little boat, with high, curling prow and gayly painted sides. A blue sail was furled above it, and it was impelled lightly forward by a pair of delicate oars. The grounds of the villa formed a promontory, and coming around the brow of the boat broke upon his gaze and was within hail at one and the same moment. It came rapidly nearer, and the stranger's first impulse was to hide himself from these unexpected and unwelcome intruders; but there was no time; as he rose he was observed, but the genial handwave and the merry laughter reassured him. These were simple pleasure-seekers. He reseated himself, and the boat came on.

The rower was a dark-haired man of middle age, clothed in a plain brown robe. Lean and vivacious, eager-eyed, he appeared one of those people who are always talking and moving; even seated and rowing he gave the impression of restlessness; of the good humor common to the people too. His companion was a young girl dressed in a simple blue gown. She was a delicate blonde, very young, very slender; the curls of her amber hair were blown across a round, dimpled face; eyes of a dancing blue; a sweet, small mouth curled in laughter, a fine chin and throat, a slack young figure. This was her principal characteristic, the floating yellow hair like a veil about her.

Coming abreast of Francisco, the man paused on his oars with a friendly greeting.

"Good day, messer," he called. "So thou has found our secret haunt. Graziosa and I had thought this place our own," and as he spoke he waved his hand around him at the water.

The boat rocked now alongside the path, and Francisco courteously approached.

"I am a stranger here," he said.

The other glanced at him anew, and with the awakening of a little friendly wonder.

"A stranger? Ah, then, this is new to thee—this most beautiful part of Italy. I assure thee," he continued excitedly, "I have been through the fairest parts of Tuscany, I have wandered about Naples, but never have I seen such colors, such lights as here!" Again he waved his all-inclusive hand. "Thou, messer, as a stranger, must see how wonderfully fair it is!"

He paddled the boat nearer among the reeds in his eagerness to obtain new sympathy.

"I have not been used to judge lands by their beauty," returned Francisco. "Yet methinks I have seen spots as beautiful and easier to hold in time of need."

The other twisted his mouth in contempt. The girl leaned forward laughing. "You forget, father," she said, "every one is not a painter."

But the little man, as if he had found a sudden mission, secured the boat, and still in silence, stepped ashore, helping his daughter to follow him. Francisco, preoccupied and mistrustful, saw this with uneasiness, and would gladly have withdrawn. Moreover, the smiling face of the happy girl was an added sting to a burning thought.

The enthusiast, however, had no idea of giving up a possible convert, and swept aside the other's protestations while he commenced pointing out the beauties of the yellow lichen against the villa wall, the sight of which had restored all his good humor.

"See!" he exclaimed. "How bright it is! See the contrast of the yew—so brilliant, yet so in harmony, so—you do not paint?"

"No," said Francisco, between grimness and scorn. "Do I look as if I did?"

The artist glanced anew at his huge frame and tattered attire, and mentally decided he did not.

"Ah, then thou dost not understand," he said; "but I—I am a painter. Agnolo Vistarnini is my name, messer, a student of Taddeo Gaddi." He swept off his leather cap with an air of profound respect.

"Ah, he could paint! I am far behind him, messer, but I can see! I can see—which thou canst not," he added with superb pity.

"Graziosa," he called, turning to his daughter, "we will stay here a while."

And seating himself on the bank he produced from his wallet a panel of wood, polished and carefully planed, upon which he began to draw the outline of a corner of the scene, using a dark brown pigment.

Francisco fell again to brooding while the painter chattered on, dividing his attention between the panel and his daughter, who was wandering up the stream, filling with flowers a flat basket.

"Thou seest yonder my daughter, messer," he said, pointing to the slender figure in blue. He blew a kiss in her direction. "She is the model for my angels—"

"And a model for thy devils?" asked Francisco suddenly.

Vistarnini started and looked around at the speaker.

"Devils! Messer!" He crossed himself. "God forbid there should be a model for such found anywhere," he said.

"Yet methinks thou hast in the city yonder," said Francisco with a bitter smile, "one who well might sit for the fiend himself: Visconti."

"The Duke? Ah, my friend, hush, hush, thou art a stranger, take care! Even in this lonely spot such words are far from safe. Who art thou, messer, who dost not live in Milan and yet speak with such a look of the Visconti?"

(To Be Continued.)