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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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A Dinner at Imola

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

MESSER NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI had just signed his name to a letter to the Ten, when the flap of his tent swung wide in the hand of a lackey, permitting His Highness, the Prince Cesare Borgia, to enter.

"Ah! Excellency." Machiavelli half turned.

"Another letter to the Ten, Messer Machiavelli?" Cesare Borgia shrugged his shoulders. "You keep them well informed as to my movements."

Niccolo Machiavelli made a deprecating gesture. The Borgia prince smiled.

"You had best warn them against guile in their dealings with me, Messer Machiavelli. Florence holds no interest for me—but let them once deceive me, and the Medici rule no longer."

Messer Machiavelli bowed his head. "Florence has no intention, Highness, of going against your wishes. Indeed, she is most anxious to preserve your friendship."

"That will remain as it is, Messer Machiavelli. For the present I have come to ask you to dine with my company on the third night hence. The dinner is in honor of the young Duke Paolo di Colonna."

Messer Machiavelli started. He looked at his host with raised eyebrows. Only yesterday his trusted lackey had informed him of the rumor of a plot against the Borgias, the headquarters of which were in Rome, at the palaces of the Cardinals

Orsini and della Rovere. It was rumored, too, that the young Paolo di Colonna was in alliance with this secret revolt, and that he was furthering the cause by sowing the seeds of revolt among the troops in camp at Imola, while at the same time the Duke Giovanni di Orsini was seeking to stir up the Borgia soldiers at Forli. As yet Machiavelli had no knowledge that the prince knew of the affair.

Messer Machiavelli nodded his head. "You honor me," he murmured.

"You will come?"

"With pleasure."

"Very well. We will meet at table, if not before."

The prince signaled to his lackey, who raised the tent flap for his master to take leave of the Florentine envoy. But hardly had the Borgia prince left the tent than Machiavelli gave a quick, short call.

"Giulio!"

From somewhere in the rear of the tent a small, stooped figure arose and stood before Niccolo Machiavelli.

"You called me, Messer Machiavelli?"

"You heard the Borgia?" The figure nodded. "It is well. You will follow him continually until the third night hence." The lackey laughed silently. He nodded. "At the third night, report here before dinner."

The lackey nodded quickly again, and without a word vanished into the interior of the tent, to emerge in the gathering darkness at its back within the minute. Messer Niccolo Machi-

avelli yawned, and gazed speculatively at the hour-glass on his table.

AT THE hour before dinner on the third night, Messer Machiavelli was startled out of his reverie by the sudden appearance of his lackey, Giulio.

"He visited at Luigi Reni's," said Giulio abruptly.

"And this Reni?" queried Machiavelli with arched brows.

"Is a magician," answered Giulio suggestively.

"Ah! And what did the Borgia there?"

"He brought with him and left at Reni's a small portrait of the Duke Paolo di Colonna. That was yesterday. Today he went again, and the portrait was returned to him, together with a large package. This package contained, I have made certain, numerous curiously wrought candles for the table tonight."

"That is all?"

"Other than that is of no account. The Borgia prince attended to the usual matters of his troops."

Messer Machiavelli toyed with a quill on his table. "What make you of the candles, Giulio?" he asked.

The lackey smiled suggestively. He hunched his shoulders and spread his hands in an empty gesture.

"Who knows?" he said. "The Borgia takes a portrait of his enemy to a magician, and receives at its return a packet of wax candles. It is said that if one burns a wax effigy of one's foe, made according to certain secret formulas, or if one pierces it to the heart, the model dies."

Messer Machiavelli pondered a space. "How many figures are needed? How many must be burned to rid oneself of an enemy?"

"But one, Excellency. But Cesare is a true Borgia. His resources know no end."

Messer Machiavelli nodded. "It is good work, Giulio; I shall not forget it."

The lackey bowed and vanished in the shadows at the rear of the tent. Messer Machiavelli rose and donned a great cloak. He raised the flap of his tent and looked out at the cloudless sky. Far away, on the horizon toward the east, the full moon was just rising above the hills, and from the marshlands to the west thin wisps of vapor were moving toward the camp. Messer Machiavelli glanced dubiously at the hour-glass on the table, saw that the sand had passed the half-hour, and slipped out of his tent.

AT THE banquet hall the young Paolo di Colonna was the center of a boisterous crowd. Cesare Borgia stood some distance away from him, and was the first to greet the Florentine envoy at his arrival. Messer Machiavelli sought vainly for some trace, some premonition on the inscrutable face of his host; there was naught save a sardonic smile. Messer Machiavelli was uneasy; he bethought himself of the pending alliance between the Council of Ten and di Colonna. He resolved to keep a watchful eye on the Borgia ring, which he knew served as a container for the white powder that Cesare had once shown him. He had often been told that for the Borgia prince to open this ring meant instant death for someone.

Messer Machiavelli moved somewhat closer to the table, the better to observe what Cesare Borgia was occupied with. He gave an involuntary start when he noticed that the prince himself was distributing before the places at table the carven candles that he had received from the magician, Reni. He sought out the place reserved for the prince, and found it quickly by the banner of the Bull draped over the back of the chair. Directly opposite this chair stood one marked with the arms of di Colonna. Messer Machiavelli's eyes strayed unconsciously to the wax figure before his own plate, set at the

arms of the Medici. The figure was merely a replica of a trooper, and so, Messer Machiavelli saw, were many of the others. Some were copies of kings or princes, others of dukes or barons. As his eyes stole down the line of figures, Messer Machiavelli found himself curiously attracted by one, slightly larger than the rest, that bore a suspicious resemblance to someone he knew. He looked at the chair; it was the chair of Paolo di Colonna, and the figure was an exact replica of the young duke.

The strident voice of Cesare Borgia interrupted Messer Machiavelli's thoughts, calling him to table. Some of the young officers were already seated. Smiling inwardly, Machiavelli noticed that the Duke Paolo di Colonna had brought his taster with him; so, he saw, had several of the noblemen who were known to be in sympathy with Borgia enemies.

The dinner progressed smoothly—much too smoothly, Messer Machiavelli thought. Cesare Borgia, as host, discoursed volubly on many subjects, and he did not lack those to argue with him.

During the entire meal the prince had not once touched his ring. Now, toward the end of the meal, the prince indicated by example that his guests were to light the candles at their plates with tapers that had been furnished. Hardly had this been done, than, to the amazement of all present, Cesare Borgia abruptly changed the conversation.

"It is generally known, I believe, that there is a conspiracy now stirring in Rome." The prince looked casually over at the Duke Paolo di Colonna; the duke paled. "Its leaders have been determined, and unless all plans are immediately surrendered to the papal government, they and their estates will be seized and con-

fiscated by His Holiness; Alexander VI. The Cardinals Orsini and della Rovere are heading this move, and there is talk of allying the rebellious Colonna faction——"

The prince was interrupted by a hoarse scream from the Duke Paolo di Colonna, who had half risen from his chair and was clawing at his collar.

"I am burning," he shrieked, and fell toward the table.

A lackey hastily ran to aid him, and in a loud voice Cesare Borgia summoned his physician. Then he crossed around the table and supported the young duke until the doctor came. When at last he entered, the prince gave an order for the duke's removal to his own chamber, aiding the physician and two lackeys to carry the duke to the door of the hall.

Cesare Borgia returned to the table outwardly calm; all about him hummed excited whispers. Many of the soldiers looked questioningly at the duke's taster standing unharmed behind the empty chair. The prince reopened the conversation, and continued to speak until he saw that the flame of di Colonna's candle had burned out. Then he stopped abruptly, and Messer Machiavelli caught him glancing toward the door. At the same moment the curtains at the end of the hall were thrust aside, and the prince's physician ran into the room. He bowed and spoke.

"Highness," he said simply, "the Duke Paolo di Colonna is dead of an unknown illness."

The prince nodded his head and opened his lips. "It is unfortunate; but as God wills, so shall it be."

Without further comment he again opened the subject of the Orsini conspiracy.

