

# SPEED ADVENTURE STORIES



MAY, 1944

Vol. 2, No. 4

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SPEED ADVENTURE STORIES is published bi-monthly by Arrow Publications, Inc., 29 Worthington Street, Springfield, 3, Mass. Editorial offices at 126 East Forty-sixth Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter, March 23, 1943, at the Post Office at Springfield, Mass., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Yearly, \$3.75; single copy, 15c. Canadian and foreign postage extra. Manuscripts should be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope and are submitted at the author's risk. Copyright, 1944, by Arrow Publications, Inc.

# FOOL OF FLORENCE

**O**F all the things that bring most harm upon this earth I place first the letter-writing woman. Of Madonna Maddalena's amours, I have nothing to say, seeing she was a young and comely woman, and His Magnificence,

Duke Lorenzo, was an old and tedious man. Nevertheless, she should never have written letters.

To me, for instance—to me, the court fool, since I had served her in a few matters, pages and pages of letters, when I



"Let the fellow go!" shouted the Count. "I shall deal with him anon."

was in Rome with His Magnificence: "Come back, my Tito, for without your wisdom I am lost. I need your guidance in a maze of perplexities." And so forth, almost every day.

Now, about my duties: it is true that

# By ARTHUR CUTLER

★ ★ ★

*Madonna Maddalena alone  
could see the real man beneath  
the trappings of a Court Fool,  
and that fact was enough  
to change the course of  
history*

★ ★ ★



His Magnificence had made me his Court Fool, and given me a parti-colored robe of red and yellow. And, because my aging mother had been left destitute, I was

compelled to accept the task, and to make His Magnificence merry. And I was a young man of twenty-two, with the hot blood of adolescence in my veins. Judge, then, if I loved the role that His Magnificence had imposed on me, because I had the gifts of wit and agility.

Judge, too, how I liked being the Fool, when I performed in the presence of the nobility. It was only at night, when I laid aside my parti-colored clothes, that I felt myself a man again.

And what sustained me was the friendship of Madonna Maddalena, who saw the

man through the fool's trappings, and bestowed on me her confidence.

"This is how it stands, then, Tito," she said to me. "I have written foolish letters to the son of the Duke of Mantua. And the Papal Ambassador has obtained possession of them, and threatens to tell my lord Lorenzo. How can you help me, my dearest friend, Tito?"

"You were a foolish woman to have written foolish letters," I said. "And this son of the Duke of Mantua—you no longer love him?"

"I hate him," she cried. "I wish he were dead. Nevertheless, he has been robbed of those letters, and the Papal Ambassador holds them, and threatens to show them to Lorenzo. What can I do?"

**N**OW this is how the matter was: My master, Duke Lorenzo, of Florence, was sought by two parties—by Pope Julius and by the Duke of Mantua. Whichever of these two he favored with his alliance would have predominance over Italy. My master was an old man, and difficult to move, but the Mantuan alliance would present a solid block of the Italian States against Pope Julius, who would have swallowed us, each in turn.

And Count Forzi, the ambassador of Pope Julius, had obtained those letters that Madonna Maddalena had written to the Duke of Mantua's son, in the hot flush of their love, two years before, and threatened to use them for political purposes.

Now, as I said, I hold no brief for Madonna, save that she was my friend, and had deluged me with her letters, and old Duke Lorenzo, of Florence, was tedious, and no fit mate for so comely a young woman. Nevertheless, if this Count Forzi displayed those letters of his wife's to Duke Lorenzo, it would mean the end of the Mantuan alliance. Pope Julius would have Florence behind him in his schemes for the dominance of Italy. And Florence, in her turn, would become a puppet state of Rome.

It was therefore essential, for our very existence, that Count Forzi should not show those letters to my master, Duke Lorenzo, of Florence.

"Dear Tito, how can I get those letters back?" Madonna Maddalena asked me. She was so beautiful, with her flaxen hair and blue, innocent eyes. Few would have dreamed of the recklessness with which she had given her love here and there, and especially to the son of the Duke of Mantua. "Dear Tito, my only friend," she pleaded, gripping my arm.

"You are a little fool, Madonna," I answered her. For a court fool has one privilege, that of free speech. "I don't know that I would help you if I could."

"You will help me, Tito," she sobbed, and kissed me on the cheek. "You'll help me, dear Tito."

Well, what could I do? I knew that if Duke Lorenzo even suspected her falsehood he would have her put to death, like as not. And then, Madonna Maddalena was young, and beautiful, and foolish, and I was a man, despite my motley and my foolscap.

"What do you want me to do, Madonna?" I asked her.

"Get back those letters from Count Forzi. I do not know how he obtained them, but, if he shows them to my husband, it means ruin, perhaps death for me. Ruin for Florence, too. Lorenzo will accept the terms of Pope Julius for an alliance."

"I think you are more interested in yourself than in our city—State of Florence," I answered. "Nevertheless, I'll do what I can."

**N**OW among the illustrious guests whom His Magnificence had gathered at the Palace was Madonna Lucrezia Borgia, the Duchess of Ferrara. Her name has been aspersed somewhat, I think, both on account of her charms, and of the sudden death that has befallen many of those who crossed her path.

That Madonna Lucrezia had inherited some secrets of deadly brews, and preferred them—being a woman—to the dagger, I shall not gainsay. That she possessed a deadly power over my own sex I must acknowledge. But what turned my thoughts in her direction was that Madonna Lucrezia was a deadly enemy of Pope Julius.

In fact, all the Borgia influence had been directed to the prevention of his election. As for the duchy of Ferrara itself, its only hope of perpetuation lay in the alliance of Florence and Mantua. If Florence yielded to Pope Julius's de-

"You'll help me, Tito?" she begged.



mands, it meant the end of Ferrara, as well as of all the independent States of the peninsula.

In fact, the Duchess of Ferrara was at that moment in Florence in order to dissuade His Magnificence, Lorenzo, from this act of policy. And the issue hung, not upon policy, but upon that package of love-letters that was hidden inside the tunic of Count Forzi, the papal emissary. I knew that, trusting nobody, he kept them about his person night and day.

Well, then, like any woman, Madonna Maddalena, my mistress, was for hasty means. "My Tito, it means no more than

the thrust of a knife on some dark night," she pleaded. "You can arrange it for me. Three or four sgherri—gangsters from the slums of Florence—a handsome payment, which I can afford, a package of letters restored to me, and my eternal gratitude."

"And you would have it said," I chided her, "that the city of Florence could not protect the ambassador of His Holiness

against her own gangsters. You are mad, Madonna Maddalena. Leave it to me."

"If you fail me, Tito," she wept, "my head will fall beneath the axe of the executioner. Lorenzo grows more jealous daily."

"I shall save that beautiful little neck of yours," I told her. "At least, I'll try. And, if I succeed, I hope you'll be more prudent in your affairs in future."

**I** KNEW she had been confiding in Lucrezia Borgia, the Duchess of Ferrara. The two women had been putting their heads together. I was opposed to this. A change of policy, and Lucrezia, who now smiled and basked in the graces of His Magnificence, my master, might become a very viper toward us.

I leaned toward simpler measures. I had been studying the life of this young gallant, Count Forzi, who held the future of all Italy in a package of letters hidden in the folds of his well-padded doublet.

He trusted no one. Yet a doublet of blue or crimson satin must be cleaned, and it was the daughter of the tailor in the Calimala who came to clean it.

She was a pretty little thing of no more than sixteen years, and in her eyes I, the Fool, was a great personage, because of my connection with the court.

I, who tumbled and jested, in my parti-garb, with shame in my heart, and mockery upon my lips, was a hero in the eyes of this one person alone, this little maid of sixteen years, the daughter of the tailor of Calimala.

I scraped acquaintance with her, and I discovered that she was enamored of this Count Forzi, in an innocent way. He was the greatest person who had ever crossed her horizon. He was her fairy prince—and I suppose he had hardly exchanged a dozen words with her.

He had thrown her his doublet, after removing its contents—a bag of money, a package of documents—

"Are you sure that there were documents, Tessa?" I asked her.

"Oh, yes," she answered. "He carries all his confidential papers on his doublet,

for fear of thieves."

That was enough for me. I set to work to woo her. That was not too difficult a task, for despite her day-dreams about Count Forzi, she was shrewd enough to know that the love of the Court Fool was not to be despised.

Thus, then, I was making my plans, while that foolish woman, Madonna Maddalena, was putting her head together with the head of Lucrezia Borgia, despite my warnings. I saw little harm in their schemes, but it seemed to be that the key to the situation was little Tessa, the daughter of the Calimala tailor and cleaner, who took away Count Forzi's doublet.

**H**E was her fairy prince, I said. The thought of any close association with him never entered Tessa's innocent little head, I am sure. But he was all she might ever have dreamed of in a sweet-heart. And I, who had wooed her deliberately, was a very commonplace but still desirable Court Fool, and not to be despised by the daughter of a Calimala tailor.

I said: "I shall accompany you to Count Forzi's apartment next time you bring back his doublet. I shall be the presser, who is solicitous of the Count's further patronage. Do not betray me."

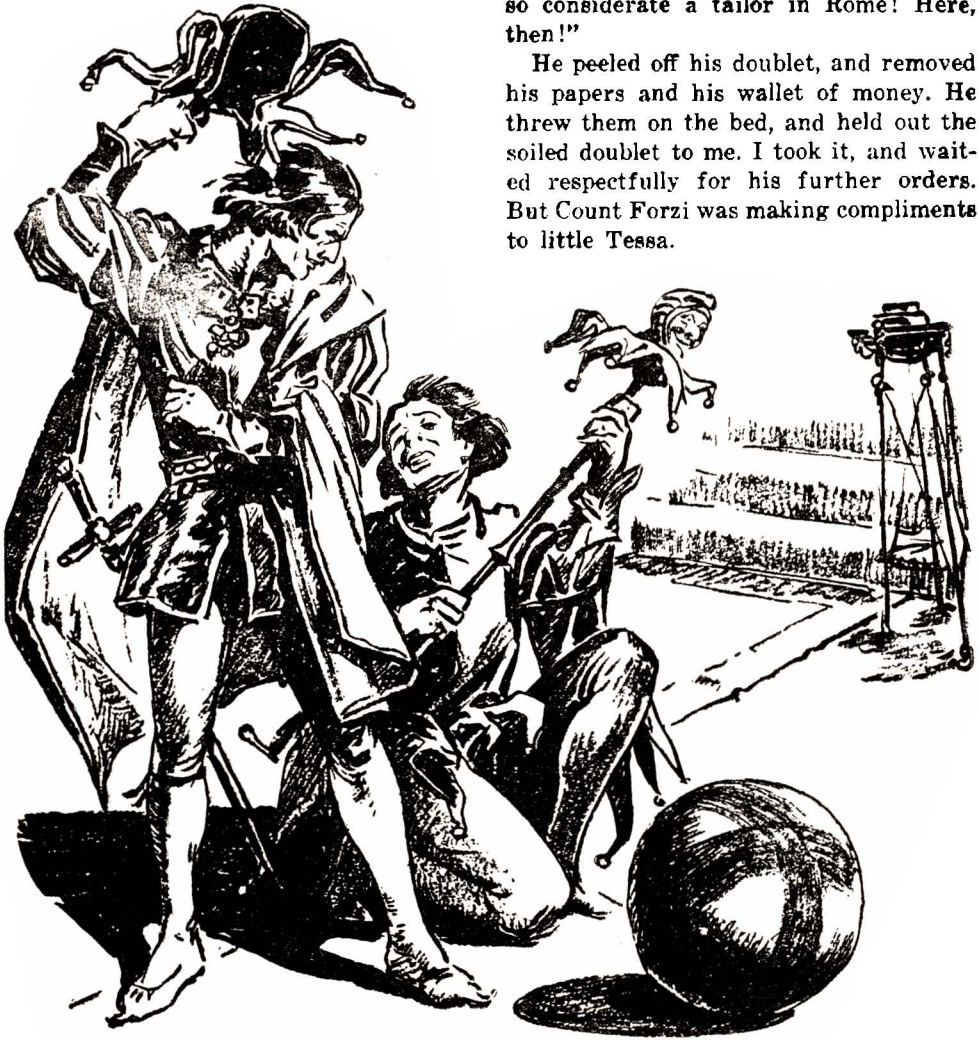
She was troubled. "But why?" she asked me.

"Because," I told her, "the fate of Florence may hang upon the cut of the Count's doublet. If he follows the new Roman fashion of slashed sleeves, that means he is antagonistic to our policy of state. All this is too difficult for that pretty little head of yours, Tessa. Nevertheless, you can be of service to Florence in this matter."

"The Count has slashed sleeves," she said. "But they are tiny slashes. I have seen wider ones."

"We must investigate," I answered her. "So much may hang upon so little."

I convinced her. I accompanied her to Count Forzi's apartment in the Palace two days later. I was sure he would not recognize the motleyed Fool, in my shabby clothes, and so it proved. His valet ad-



Even for a fool. I'd done a dangerous thing, so I feared what would happen next.

mitted us to the ante-room, and soon the Count came in. I knew of course, that it was to see Tessa that he had come, for a noble does not seek personal contact with his tailor.

"You are a day ahead of time," he addressed Tessa.

Now I had coached her carefully about this and other matters, and I answered:

"Nobility, the day after tomorrow is the festival of Saint Ambrose, when our workmen will be picnicking on the banks of Arno. My master did not wish that you should wear a soiled doublet at the grand reception of His Magnificence."

"Santiddio," he exploded, "I wish I had

so considerate a tailor in Rome! Here, then!"

He peeled off his doublet, and removed his papers and his wallet of money. He threw them on the bed, and held out the soiled doublet to me. I took it, and waited respectfully for his further orders. But Count Forzi was making compliments to little Tessa.

He had drawn her aside into the window embrasure. That gave me my opportunity. Now the package, which, I was sure, contained the letters of Madonna Maddalena, was exactly as I had expected, those wide sheets of hers, with the broken seals, fastened together in a covering of green paper.

I picked up the soiled doublet, leaving the wallet and letters and the papers, and went out with Tessa. She looked at me dubiously; I saw that she was thrilled by the Count's compliments and attentions. In her simple little head she was weighing the different advantages of the Count's love, and of myself as a husband.

**N**OW it was well understood that at the grand reception of my master, His Magnificence, the Duke Lorenzo, the respective propositions of Rome and Mantua would be set forth, weighed, and debated. It was essential for my purpose that the doublet which I had taken away should be restored before that date. I bade Tessa's father clean it and have it in readiness.

"But surely his nobility will not have soiled the doublet I have already cleaned by the time of the Duke's reception," he protested. "To do the job properly, I must give up Saint Ambrose Day, and the festival I have been looking forward to, and the picnic, and the good wine. My wife will hardly forgive me for a long time."

"And are you so afraid of your wife that you would sacrifice the court custom that I have brought you?" I demanded.

"Per Baccho, no, Messer Tito," he answered. "If you say so, it shall be done. But I shall have to work all day. Those Romans are fastidious about their clothes."

"So long as the doublet is ready by the next morning, and the Count can have the choice of it for the Duke's reception that afternoon, all will be well. Tessa," I addressed the little maid, "in the morning after the festival you will meet me at the kitchen entrance of the Palace, and we shall go together to the Count's apartment again."

I assumed a scowl of jealousy, which, I could see, mightily pleased both Tessa and her father. "Santiddio, I do not choose to permit so fair a maid as you to go alone to Count Forzi. His reputation is not of the best," I cried.

And I stalked out, and went to my own room, on the top floor of the Palace, where I spent most of the day practising my new tumbling act, which I had had from a traveling acrobat whom I had befriended and given court patronage.

But all the time my heart was heavy for Madonna Maddalena, with her sweet face and pleading manner. I knew that Count Forzi would not hesitate to show the letters to Duke Lorenzo. They had

been intercepted from the post, and one of the riders had been slain in the affray. Still, I believed that my scheme might be accomplished.

A fool has to think fast, and have his wits about him at all times. But I had set my trap; it remained to be seen whether Count Forzi would step into it.

**N**OW, next to the letter-writing woman, I think I most detest the one who interferes with a man's plans. Cunning I grant women, and even sagacity, but never prudence, or that far-sighted judgment that belongs to my own sex.

And at this point I discovered how those two foolish women, Lucrezia Borgia, Duchess of Ferrara, and Madonna Maddalena, had been putting their heads together, and formulating a scheme of their own, which did not happen to tally with mine.

It was Lucrezia sent for me to her apartment that night, and I found her and Madonna Maddalena with the air of conspirators, and quite alone, and the door to the maids' apartment closed.

"Ecco, giovanne, I am pleased to see you," said Madonna Lucrezia. "He is really a taking youth, my dear Maddalena. I should like to beg him from His Magnificence. Do you think you would like the Ferrara air, my Tito?"

I looked so woebegone at this that both the ladies burst out laughing. My devotion to Madonna Maddalena was well known at court, and His Magnificence, the Duke of Florence, had more than once commented upon it with amusement. For one of the privileges of a fool is that of friendship with and devotion toward a lady who stands far above him as a saint.

Not that I would attribute the qualities of sainthood to Madonna, you understand, but she had always shown me friendship, and the Duke had never taken it amiss.

"Now to the point," said Lucrezia. "I understand that the Duchess has given you her full confidence, touching on certain letters."

"That is my understanding, Magnificence," I answered.



"Well, and what have you done about it?" she demanded brusquely.

Now I was not prepared to answer that question. My plan might very well miscarry, and then I like to keep my plans under my own hat, as they say in France.

"I have been thinking—" I began.

"Bah, thinking! What is the use of only thinking, when the sands are running out? While you have been thinking, we women have been planning. Now attend to me, Tito. How are you getting on with your new tumbling act?"

"Fairly well, Magnificence," I said.

"Good. Since the Duke adores tumbling acts, you shall put him in a good humor at tonight's reception, and that will pave the way. Afterward I shall entrust you with the more difficult part of the task."

"Tell him now, Lucrezia," said Maddalena breathlessly.

**N**OW here I must interpose, to make things plainer. This night was the eve of Saint Ambrose day, and the Duke of Florence would hold his customary reception. The next day, that of Saint Ambrose, would be given up to revelry. And on the third evening would come the Duke's great reception, when matters of policy would be discussed, and the great decision made.

"Tell him now," repeated Madonna Maddalena, and I saw the desperation in her heart. My own heart grew chill. I was sure that those two foolish women had some plan that was going to destroy all mine.

"Briefly, then," said Lucrezia, "how good are you with the sword, Tito? And would you dare use it on behalf of a lady—perhaps two ladies, who love you, and wish you well?"

"I am not unversed in the use of it," I answered. For in Florence even a fool had to know how to take his own part upon occasion.

"And would you dare use it upon nobility, or even on an ambassador?" Lucrezia queried.

I saw her point now. Since her one way out of trouble was the use of the sword, the dagger, or the poison cup, she and Ma-

donna Maddalena had been concocting the murder of Count Forzi.

"You will be protected. I swear no harm shall come to you," said Lucrezia. She jumped up and took me by the arm. Half-laughing and half-crying, she said: "Will you be the only man in the world who has had the hardihood to refuse a request of Lucrezia Borgia?" she demanded.

But it was the look on Maddalena's face that brought the response to my lips. "I shall do it if you ladies insist upon it," I said. "But I would rather continue thinking, and as like as not an idea will come to me."

Maddalena put her hand on mine. "No, dear Tito, enough of that thinking of yours," she said. "Now listen to the idea that has been worked out by us two women."

**H**ERE was their scheme: Count Forzi, being a young man, had been taking his pleasure rather recklessly in Florence, and the spies of the court had, of course, kept track of all his movements, and of his companions.

Although these spies had no knowledge or suspicion of the letters, it had been noticed that Count Forzi suffered no one to approach his person closely, from which they inferred that he was carrying either papers of importance or wearing most valuable jewelry.

Naturally his rooms had been ransacked thoroughly, but this was a standard procedure at all courts. Obviously, too, Count Forzi knew that the only safe hiding-place for the letters was inside his doublet.

On Saint Ambrose night it was almost certain that the Count and his companions would be roistering in Florence. They would return, most probably, a little before daylight, and it could be guessed that they would all be heavy with wine. There should be three or four of them to bid the Count good-night at the palace postern. And there the ambush was to be set.

There was to be no hiring of Florentine bravos. Lucrezia had brought three gentlemen from Ferrara in her train, all

*(Continued on page 87)*

# Fool of Florence

(Continued from page 65)

expert swordsmen, and it might be guessed that they had worked in her service on more than a few occasions. These three, then, would hold up and put to flight the Count's companions. The Count himself would be disarmed and held, while I went quickly through his doublet.

"You see, Tito," said my mistress, "there will be no blood-letting, and especially we cannot permit the Roman ambassador to suffer harm. He will be considered the victim of a night brawl. And everybody will be masked. You, too, Tito. Come let me see how you look in a mask."

She took one, of black satin, from a drawer, and fitted it over my face. Then the two ladies burst out laughing.

"He looks like an accomplished cavalier, does he not, Maddalena?" smiled Lucrezia. She turned to me. "Come, then, it is a bargain, Tito," she said. "Your reward will be great, in gold or a post at the Ferrara court. You will make two women eternally your debtors. And you will be given instruction on Saint Ambrose night."

She extended her hand, which I took and kissed. Then Madonna Maddalena's. And so I left them, cursing their stupidity, and half-resolved to abandon my own plans.

**T**HE reception on Saint Ambrose Eve was as brilliant as ever. On his throne, tired old Duke Lorenzo received his guests. It was an informal gathering,

on which nothing political was supposed to be discussed. But the Roman embassy, who were flushed with the anticipation of victory, could not forebear to show their triumph, least of all Count Forzi.

After the usual congratulations, he observed: "I speak now as the ambassador of a friendly State, Magnificence, but at our next meeting I shall address you as His Holiness's brother, and close ally, as well as son."

It was an impudent remark, but Forzi had already drunk too much. I was standing in a recess, awaiting my own summons. I watched the old Duke's troubled face, and the grave Mantuan ambassador, in black, standing beside him. I knew that only under hard urging would His Magnificence, Duke Lorenzo, consent to the papal alliance. For Florence was at the cross-roads of her history, and must either unite with Mantua against Rome, or be swallowed up in due course.

Nothing but the production of those letters would change the old duke's determination.

The Mantuan ambassador answered: "I think your excellency is a little premature—unless, of course, you are able to produce very cogent arguments, of which I know nothing."

"Oh, I have the arguments, and you know nothing of them," retorted Forzi. "There is but one other person in this hall, I believe, who is acquainted with them. I shall produce them in due course."

And he stared boldly into the face of Madonna Maddalena, seated at the Duke's side.

I have said that she was a foolish woman, but I could only admire the way in which she returned his stare without flinching, or reddening, or showing the least sign that she understood. There was a long tension, and then the Duke called to his musicians in the gallery.

And now it was my time to play my part as Fool. I came into the room, tumbling head over heels, in a way that brought shouts of astonished laughter from all those in the hall. The old Duke rose on his throne, clapping his hands and crying out his approval.

"Good, my fool, good!" he called, as I halted breathless. "Ask me a favor, fool, and, if it be not too foolish, I shall do my best to grant it."

"I pulled a long face. "Grant, then, Magnificence, that my cap of state may rest where it belongs," I answered. And I took off my foolscap, tumbled up to Count Forzi, and placed it upon his head.

**H**E tore it off with an oath. It was a daring thing for even a fool to have done. I trembled a moment, fearing he would recognize me as the tailor's lout. But he hardly looked at me. He was at the point of explosion, but, since all the hall was rocketing with laughter, he decided to laugh too. Only the Duke looked grim. It was a serious affront, and I feared that I had lost the favor of His Magnificence.

He waved me away, and I took to flight, and from a distance watched the departure of the guests. In a little while the Palace was quiet as usual. And then, as I had expected, one of the little pages from Ferrara found me, and beckoned me into a room in one of the gentlemen's apartments. There I found a good-looking man examining the point of a sword.

"You know the part you are to play tonight?" he asked, in his heavy Ferrarese accent, which I could hardly understand.

"I have been told," I replied.

"Good! I am in charge of the little welcoming party. There should be no blood-

letting. Nevertheless, it will be needful for you to wear the dress of a cavalier, also a mask and sword. Be careful with that sword. I do not wish to be pricked by it, nor my companions."

"You need have no fears from me," I said.

"Good again. This sword is yours. You will find dress and mask in this closet. I shall not be with you for some hours. You will wait here until the summons comes. Do you require entertainment?"

"Oh, I shall practise my tumbling. The hours will go by very pleasantly," I answered.

He frowned at that, and left me. It must have been a long time afterward that three masked men came into the room and stood looking at me. I had donned dress and mask, and I took up my sword.

"He'll do," said the one who had talked with me. "Come, now, through these apartments."

We went through several rooms, until we reached the narrow hall that faces the postern. Ordinarily there were two guards on duty there, but now there was nobody. Inside the guardroom, however, I saw one of them lying on his side, snoring drunk.

"Saint Ambrose Eve," said my Ferrarese. "Now play the man, Messer Fool. I do not think we shall have long to wait."

While they paced the floor, I remained seated by the drunken guard, growing more and more nervous, and cursing the folly that had made me yield to the mad scheme of the two women. In the streets crowds were still parading, though it was near the dawn; all the city seemed to be still revelling.

Suddenly my man tapped me on the shoulder. We moved out through the postern and took up our stations flat against the alley wall, in the shadow of the plane trees. The night was pitch dark all about us. I guessed a scout had brought news that our man was on the way.

**T**HEY came, four abreast, crowding the alley, roaring out a song, which, nevertheless ceased as they turned up toward the Palace, for an ambassador

does not come home, to a ducal residence, shouting like a drunken sailor. They were nearly abreast of us when one of them shouted warning; and at the same moment the three Ferrarese leaped out of the shadows.

Of course my heart was not in this business. I had disliked it from the first, and my principal anxiety was that Count Forzi would be killed, and so all the work I had been doing would go for nothing. The whole affair was of very brief duration. The Count's companions leaped forward to protect him, there was a brief clashing of swords, and one of them reeled back, dropping his weapon, then turned and took to his heels, screaming footpads and murder.

The second slipped in the muddy road, and went sprawling. The third went down, unwounded, but thrown by the weight of two of our men. And that left Count Forzi, who stood alone in the middle of the alley, with his sword in his hand, waiting.

As our leader engaged him, I sprang forward and flung my arms about him. Next moment the four of us were engaging him, seeking, not to injure him, but to get his doublet off.

I say it was all a matter of moments, for already shouts were coming from the Palace, and there was a flashing of lights inside. And that doublet seemed to stick to the Count like glue. At last it ripped; I had it over his head, nearly choking him—and then it was in my hands, and the four of us were racing for the postern gate.

Count Forzi made no attempt to retrieve his clothing. He stood in the alley, in his shirt, roaring with laughter, while we made our escape in the nick of time, through the gate and into the apartments of the Ferrarese, where we stood panting a moment.

Then they snatched the doublet from my hands, and we all saw that it contained nothing. It was the cheap doublet of some shopman or laboring man, which Count Forzi had assumed for his disguise, while he went roystering on Saint Ambrose Eve. No wonder he had stood laughing in the alley.

The three Ferrarese were infuriated. They turned upon me. "It must have fallen out in the street, lout!" they cried. And finally, after much coming and going, they thrust me into the room in which I had donned mask and sword, and standing there were Madonna and Lucrezia.

"SO you have failed me, Tito," said Madonna Maddalena, and her face was the picture of woe. "And I believed you were my friend."

"Madonna," I answered boldly, "I have served you well in other matters, but always on one condition, that you should give me leave to think. Now, since the affair was taken out of my hands, will you hold me responsible?"

"There is nothing now, Maddalena, but to flee from Florence before your absence can be discovered," said Lucrezia. All her assumed gentleness of two days before had vanished; she looked like the tigress she really was. "I told you, Maddalena, that you were unwise to place your fate in the hands of this fool," she continued. "Now, I shall ride with you, and my three gentlemen shall see you safe to Ferrara, before the storm breaks."

"No," answered Maddalena, "I shall stay here and meet my fate. It shall rather be said that I was indiscreet, and stayed, than that I ran away. Besides, we have not yet given Tito a chance to explain why he failed me."

"Madonna Magnificence," I protested warmly, "you will acknowledge that this plan was not of my brewing. If the Count guessed that some such scheme might be afoot and chose to disguise himself in an old workman's doublet, how can I be blamed for it? If your magnificence had given me leave to think, the upshot might have been different. As it is, I am still not hopeless."

"What? You have another plan?" she cried. "But how can such a plan be put into effect, when tonight brings the reception and the decision?"

"And yet, Madonna, I don't think I have ever failed you," I responded.

"Come, Maddalena, it is almost day," interposed Lucrezia harshly. "My advice

to you is to leave Florence with me within an hour, before the Duke is astir."

"No," answered Madonna. "I have already made up my mind not to flee. That would only bring greater shame upon me. And then I am not wholly assured but that Tito may have some scheme for me—when he has finished his thinking."

And the look Madonna gave me restored me to both hope and confidence.

I HAD no time for sleep or breakfast. I donned my clothing of a tailor's laborer, or apprentice, and met little Tessa by the kitchen door. "Come, there is no time to lose," I said, taking the doublet from her. "Thank your father for his work, and tell him he can always count on me as his friend. So you did not go to the picnic yesterday?"

She dropped her eyes. "I went," she answered.

"With a party of young girls and men from the city?"

"Messer Tito, please do not ask me," she blurted out. "You have not the right, and I do not think I shall give you the right. And it may please you to take this doublet to the Count's room, for that is not my business."

I gripped her by the shoulders and looked into her face. "Per Baccho, but that explains it. So it was with Count Forzi that you spent the afternoon and far into the night!"

"Let me go, Messer Tito!"

"You have betrayed me," I said. "And as for your father, were he to know—"

"Ah, Messer Tito, I thought you were my friend. You will not tell him—and you will forgive me!"

"Well, Tessa, my heart is tender toward you. But you must accompany me to the Count's apartment, and there—well, I must see whether his feeling for you is sincere. Santiddio, I thought you were a modest girl. Now I am not sure whether I shall take you back, when the hot fit is past, or tell your father the reason. Get along!" I addressed her roughly. "And if you let drop a word as to who I am, nothing will save you from the Bargello!"

She was trembling with fright when the page ushered us into the apartment.

He went into the next room to call the Count, who presently appeared in a gold-brodered Turkish robe, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

"Why, it is the tailor's workman and little Tessa!" he exclaimed. "And my doublet back! Ah, what a day yesterday, and footpads to end it all."

He turned back and began emptying the pockets of his doublet. There was the green-wrapped package on the bed again, his wallet and his money. I went up to him.

"Nobility, your actions of yesterday displease me," I said boldly.

He swung about. "Eh?" he asked in amazement. His eyes fell upon Tessa in the doorway. "Oh, I understand. Here is a piece of gold."

"I prefer to save my honor this way," I answered, and felled him with a blow between the eyes.

**H**E lay half-stunned for a moment; Tessa screamed, and ran to him; then he was on his feet, groping for his sword. I anticipated him. I seized it and held it at his breast, and he recoiled, shouting.

The page was bawling at the door. A chamber guard of his suite came running in, saw me with the sword, and snatched his own from its scabbard. I grasped the shrieking girl, and backed between the two men.

"Let the fellow go!" shouted Count Forzi. "I shall deal with him anon, after I have seen the Gonfaloniere. No bloodshed here!"

It may have been the Count's words, or the menace of my sword, but the attendant and the page fell back, and I quickly regained the backstairs, and thence the kitchen. Tessa was trembling, and weeping her heart out.

"Go home, my dear," I said, "and tell your father nothing. I have avenged you, and taught these foreigners that they cannot play with the affections of our Florentine maidens. Go, I say!"

She went, turning around to stare at me as if I had suddenly taken the Count's place in her heart. I drew in a long

breath. If Forzi had recognized me, he would have gone very ill with me.

**O**LD DUKE LORENZO rose in the reception hall. "Excellency," he addressed Count Forzi, "we have considered the propositions of your master, His Holiness, and likewise those that have been made to us from other quarters. You will tell His Holiness that we greatly appreciate his offer, but that we prefer being his son to becoming his brother."

"Your Magnificence has fully considered this matter, no doubt," returned Count Forzi, sneering. "And yet I spoke of certain arguments that might convince Your Magnificence that an alliance between Florence and Mantua might prove unwise."

"You have already advanced them, Excellency," replied Duke Lorenzo.

"Not all of them, Magnificence." From his doublet he produced the packet of letters, in the green paper. As he unwrapped them, the writing of Madonna Maddalena, which was square, and bold, in contrast to our flowing hand of Florence, was discernible by everybody who stood near.

"Will your Magnificence deign to cast your eyes over a few of these, and then say whether I have advanced new arguments?" asked Forzi blandly.

By this time almost everybody in the hall realized that something was amiss. The Duke, who was a keen judge of events, saw it too, and his hand trembled as Forzi, on one knee, handed him the packet.

I saw the face of Maddalena as she sat by the Duke's side, and again she neither reddened nor blanched, but sat perfectly still, staring in front of her.

Duke Lorenzo opened a letter and began to read. He read another, another, and another. Ten minutes went by, and nobody spoke or stirred.

Then the Duke handed the package to his Chamberlain. "I thank you, Excellency, for having found these letters," he said. "I shall not ask you how you came into possession of them. But what about this argument that you intended to present to us?"

"Those love-letters are my argument," cried Count Forzi, losing all self-control.

Duke Lorenzo went into a peal of laughter, whether all genuine or only in part so, I could not determine. "Love letters?" he shouted. "Say rather letters of gratitude from my wife. Her Magnificence, to my fool Tito, who has my full confidence, and the right to pay his addresses to her as he pleases!"

For, as I said, that foolish and beloved lady, my protectress, had written me pages upon pages of gratitude for the way I had served her. And, after I had discovered the package in Count Forzi's apartment, it had not been difficult for me to exchange it for a similar packet of letters addressed to me. A fool needs sleight-of-hand, if he is to make a success of his profession.

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