

SPICY ADVENTURE STORIES



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"Help me! I am betrayed!" she cried.

“LOADED dice!” he cried. His hand shot out toward gold, but I was too quick for him. I rose, icily cold, the dice already in my pouch, the gold ignored. What did I care for a little heap of gold when I had the young fool’s note for three thousand sequins, payable at his father’s bank?

“Show me those dice!” he bawled.

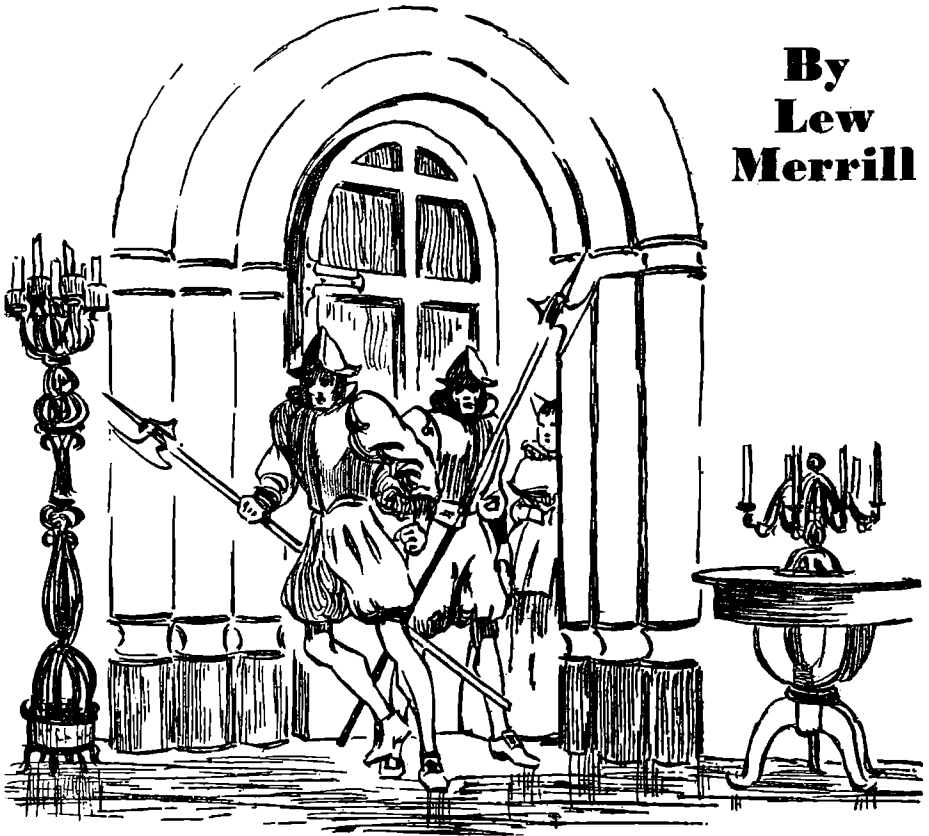
“I do not permit my honor to be called in question,” I retorted.

The gaming-room above the apothecary’s was in an uproar. On all sides youths were pressing in upon me. Yet they held back, knowing my reputation as a swordsman, and realizing that, be-

Rat Trap

The choice was simple that Machiavelli offered—death on the gallows, or freedom and money. With that choice before him, Domenico dared even to match wits with Lucrezia Borgia, monster of evil!

**By
Lew
Merrill**



ing so tightly packed, it would be difficult for them to draw. As for the young fool, his face was the picture of rage and fear.

"You will give back my notes, or I shall denounce you to the Eight!" he shouted, while "Cheat!" and "Rascal!" were tossed from lip to lip.

"Kill the Florentine dog!" said

the young fool's companion, a Roman noble, like himself, visiting our city.

That insult checked the anger of the crowd, which began to waver, and it probably saved my life. I am not slow to seize an opportunity.

"These Roman curs think they can lord it over us of free Flor-

ence," I said "If they could fight as badly as they play, and in the same foul spirit—"

He came at me with sword out-thrust, dagger in left hand. I whirled, to oppose my cloak to the shorter weapon, and, as our points clashed, I saw the young man was indeed a novice. The merest flick of my wrist sent his sword flying out of his hand among the spectators.

"Hold! Enough!" they shouted.

But my blood was up, and, while the young Roman fumbled with his dagger, I sprang at him, let him catch his dagger in the folds of my cloak, and plunged my own to the hilt between his ribs.

WITH that, my habitual coolness returned. I saw that I had lost not only the gold, but the note, since I could never dare hope that the bank would honor it. I was like to lose my life, too, if the Eight caught me. Besides, Messer Niccolo Machiavelli and I had had a falling out before concerning some escapades of mine.

And yet what other course had I had than crooked gambling since all our family possessions had been confiscated when the Medici, our patrons, were driven from Florence? For weeks that winter my mother and I had shivered over our tiny charcoal fire in the two wretched rooms in the Calimala.

Conscience troubled me not at all, but I cursed the folly into which my hot blood had led me. The young fool was a Roman and a noble, and justice would be hot after me.

I leaped down the stairway and gained the street, racing along the

Lung' Arno, with a dozen men at my heels, raising an outcry loud enough to wake the dead. Still, I was gaining on them when I saw a company of the watch running toward me from the opposite direction.

"It is a matter of honor, a quarrel among gentlemen," I cried, as they closed about me.

"By all the gods, 'tis our friend Domenico again!" cried the leader. "So you are up to your old tricks, despite Messer Machiavelli's warning. What has he done, gentlemen?"

"He has killed a man, a Roman noble, whom he robbed with loaded dice," panted one of my pursuers.

"Well, you come now to the Bargello," said the leader of the watch to me. "Psst! Hold your inventions for Messer Niccolo Machiavelli himself. Come, Messer Domenico; the sooner we are there the better."

My heart sank as we entered the gloomy courtyard of the Bargello. The officer in charge there leered at me.

"Again, Messer Domenico?" he asked. "You'll have a crick in your neck by noon tomorrow."

As I sank down upon the stone flags of my cell, I had little doubt that this would be the case.

TWO figures were in the small arched room. One was Piero Soderini, the Gonfaloniere, the second Niccolo Machiavelli, his beady black eyes staring at me, his mouth curved in a mocking smile.

I confess that never had I been able to look upon this man whose

web of intrigue was spun throughout all Italy without fear and repugnance. Since the expulsion of the Medici, Soderini had held the chief magistracy of Florence, but behind him, directing him like a puppet, and many a prince besides, stood Messer Niccolo.

"So there is a new charge against you, Messer Domenico," sneered Machiavelli, as my jailer halted me before him. "It seems that Florence is too small to hold a man of your high spirits, but you must needs add murder to your other crimes, you thieving *sgherro*, you broken gamester."

"The Roman drew on me first!" I cried, stung to fury by Messer Niccolo's words. "Moreover, he had assailed my honor."

"Your honor. Ah, to be sure, your honor!" sneered Machiavelli. "What do you think of this, Messer Piero?" he asked of the Gonfaloniere, who, as Chief Magistrate, presided over the Eight.

"I am for hanging the rogue in the Bargello yard forthwith," rasped Soderini.

"Of course," mused Machiavelli thoughtfully, "we should legally await the Roman's death before proceeding with the execution of the sentence. If he recovers, it will be the galleys for life."

The Gonfaloniere shrugged his shoulders. "As you please, Messer Niccolo," he said, drawing his furred coat about his throat. "I am ready to sign the sentence at any time."

He walked through an archway. Machiavelli signed to my guard to disappear. Now we two stood alone. I had wondered why the Gonfaloniere had arisen in the chill

of the dawn merely to see a man doomed to die; of a sudden I seemed to see a certain significance in his presence there with Machiavelli. And Machiavelli was scrutinizing me with those beady eyes of his, and, I could see, pondering.

"Which would you choose, Messer Domenico," he asked softly, "a miscreant's death upon the gallows with the possible alternative of a lifetime at the galleys, or life, freedom, and as much money as you won from that young rogue upon his note with those loaded dice of yours?"

"Why, Messer Niccolo, I should choose life, freedom, and gold," I answered.

HE rubbed that blue-black chin of his. "It happens to be within your power to render a service to the Republic," he said, "since your family was ever faithful to the exiled Medici. In brief, then, Madonna Clarice has sought shelter with her young sons, and her sister, Madonna Tessa, at the castle of the Duchess of Ferrara. The boys being the last representatives of the Medici family, their possession is vital to the Republic of Florence.

"To be plain with you, Messer Domenico, Pope Julius has demanded that Florence restore the Medici and pay a hundred thousand gold florins, or submit to war, and his army of Spaniards is already marshaled upon our borders.

"The Pope has sent a messenger to Madonna Clarice, bidding her bring her sons to Pistoja, where his army has its headquarters.

This messenger was captured by our outposts two days ago, bearing a letter and the papal signet ring. He yielded up his secret before he died—the fools racked him unskillfully.

“You, Messer Domenico, will take his place, bearing the letter and ring. You will present yourself to Madonna Clarice, reminding her of your family’s loyalty to the House of Medici. You will persuade her, her sons, and her sister to accompany you—ostensibly to the invading army’s headquarters at Pistoja. Actually, you will bring them here. With the last scions of the Medici in our hands, we shall then be in a position to dictate terms, not to receive them. Florence will free herself of the papal yoke, and the accursed Medici will—disappear for ever.”

“But that will mean treachery!” I cried. “My honor—!”

Machiavelli smiled coldly. “The honor of a crooked gamester?” he inquired. “Come, Messer Domenico, I have no time to fence with you. You will leave Florence at once, with a troop of a dozen men, whom you will leave at a pass in the Apennines near Forli. You will ride on to Ferrara alone, and present the letter and ring, persuade the ladies to bring the two boys to Pistoja.

“On the way—at Forli—you will be surprised by the troop you have left there, captured, and brought back to Florence. Come, it is always simple.”

“It is not always simple to betray women,” I said.

“I do not know another man in Florence who could play the trai-

tor quite so well as you, Messer Domenico,” he answered. And he thrust a bag of gold into my hands.

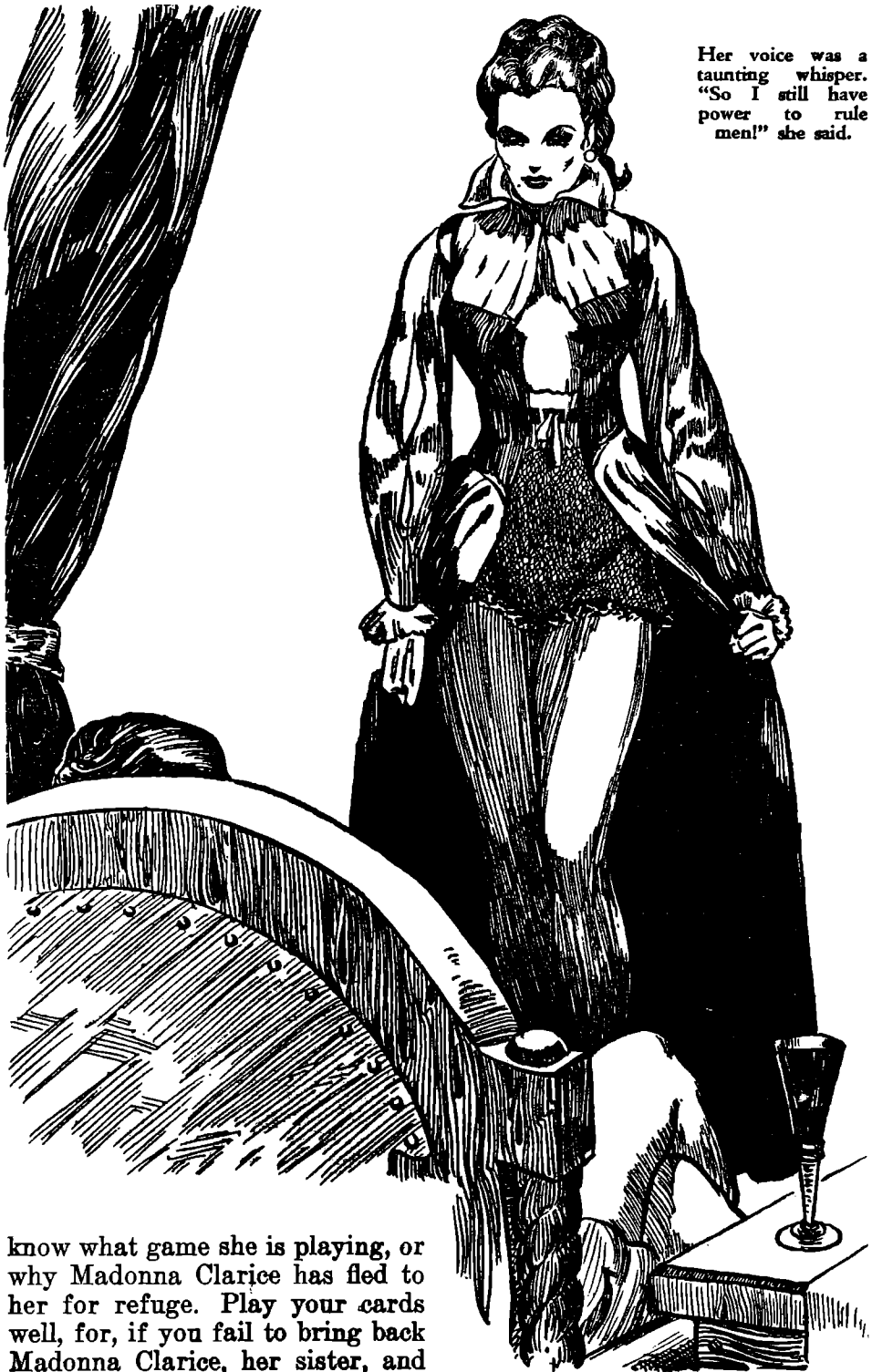
THAT was not the end of our talk. I thought it over that same afternoon as I rode at the head of my troop on a fine charger, toward the Apennines.

There had been a brief interview with my mother, who had looked doubtfully at the gold I brought her, and wept with happiness when I assured her that I had earned it in the service of the State, and yet looked doubtfully at me again, until suddenly she clasped me in her arms and commended me to God and kissed me.

I was thinking that, had she known it was in my mind to betray two women to whom our lives had been devoted, she would have called down imprecations on my head. I was planning to betray them—for my mother’s sake, I pretended, but actually, I knew, to save my own neck from stretching in the Bargello yard.

I was thinking over the rest of my talk with Machiavelli. There was only one person to be feared, he warned me, and that was the Duchess of Ferrara, once known as Lucrezia Borgia, of infamous memory. How many murders, how many poisoned draughts, what depths of intrigue had been associated with her name, before she became ruler of Ferrara Duchy and gathered together her little court of poets and painters and those skilled in the new sciences?

“I think you, Messer Domenico, will be her match in guile,” said Machiavelli, “even though I do not



Her voice was a taunting whisper.
"So I still have
power to rule
men!" she said.

know what game she is playing, or why Madonna Clarice has fled to her for refuge. Play your cards well, for, if you fail to bring back Madonna Clarice, her sister, and

her two children, I pledge you that all Italy shall be too small to save you from the gibbet in the *cortile* here."

"It is unnecessary to threaten me, Messer Niccolo," I answered. "I shall come back."

"Aye," he croaked, "or else look to that old mother of yours, for the Eight have evidence enough of her correspondence with the Medici to send her to the stake."

He had me in his trap, that devil, who left nothing undone. I was thinking over all this, over my past, as I rode through the sunshine at the head of my troop. Everything passed before my mind in review—my luxurious childhood, before the banishment of the Medici stripped us of our fortune, my mother, my desperate, crooked gaming, the swelling bosoms of the masked women in the gambling hall above the apothecary, the look on the face of the Roman as I stabbed him. . . .

"If it will comfort you," Machiavelli added, "the young man is likely to get well. This for your encouragement. Nevertheless, fail me, and I pledge myself to hang you!"

MY TROOP looked more like cutthroats than trained soldiers, and their leader, one Carlo, a scowling, bearded ruffian with a sword-gash across his cheek, which had twisted it into a dog's snarl, showed me from the first that he regarded me as his equal.

"So we are to camp in the pass and await your magnificence's return with some ladies and children?" he asked insolently.

"Those are the orders," I returned curtly.

"Ah," he grinned, "and if your magnificence goes to Ferrara you will be putting your head into the lion's jaws. *Santiddio*, I should say the lioness rather, for the sister of Cesare Borgia, under whom I served, is not one to permit a personable young man to escape her clutches. How come it, magnificence, that we go to Ferrara?"

"That is not my business," I answered sharply. "I take my orders, as you take mine."

He subsided, growling, but it was not an auspicious beginning. And in the afternoon something occurred that disturbed me more. I was remounting, after we had partaken of our lunch of bread and cheese, sour wine and olives, when my horse stumbled, flinging me from the saddle. As I rose to my feet, I heard a tinkle, and saw that my pouch had come open, and spilled a few gold florins.

Carlo picked them up and handed them to me with a bow, but I saw the furtive glances that the cutthroats gave one another, and I knew that the night in the pass was likely to be my end.

In fact, as the sun set, and it began to grow dark, I felt it necessary to ride apart from my men, to forestall any sudden attack from the rear. This tactics, which was not unnoticed, brought forth drunken jests. They looked on me as a callow youth, and my accident with the horse had given them no high opinion of my prowess. Yet they feared Machiavelli too much to attack me until we had reached the pass, and then the approach was clumsy.

Carlo roweled his horse, so that it collided with my own. I think he expected to see me fall, but I leaned out of my saddle and boxed his ears soundly.

"There, lout! Be more careful in future," I said.

He leaped to the ground, pouring out oaths. "You raise your hand to me, who rode with Cesare Borgia?" he cried. And began circling with drawn sword.

A thunderstorm had come up, and, by the vivid lightning flashes, I could see the troop beginning to circle me too.

I leaped to my feet and backed my horse toward a ridge of rocks, to see two of the troop creeping in on me with their daggers.

I thrust, wrenched out my steel, and thrust again, and they dropped shrieking. The rest shrank back, and I sprang into my saddle again and galloped through the pass toward Ferrara.

THE sun was just rising when I rode into the town, through empty streets, past yawning market-dealers, and so up toward the castle, frowning down upon the houses huddled beneath it.

The old warden at the wicket stared at me when I cried that I was on a message of urgency to the Duchess, but presently the creaking portcullis went up, and the drawbridge dropped, and I rode into the bailey, between walls guarded by sentries, and past sheds from which yawning soldiers were issuing, buckling on their armor.

A page took my horse and ushered me into a washing-room within the castle, holding the basin

while I removed the stains of travel.

"Will you please to eat, sir," he asked, "while I convey your name to her magnificence?"

"Tell her," I answered, "that a messenger from His Holiness desires urgent audience with her. And meanwhile I will break my fast as quickly as possible." For I had fought in the Pisan war, and an old campaigner never quarrels with his stomach.

Within a few minutes I had refreshed myself with a lark patty and haunch of venison, with better wine than I had tasted for a long time. I had just completed my meal when the page returned, announcing that the Duchess awaited me in the gardens.

Around a bastion of the castle I came upon as pretty a scene as I have ever witnessed.

In the mild climate of Ferrara, innumerable Spring flowers were already spangling the ground. Beyond a dense hedge of hawthorn, a company of young men and ladies was seated on the sward.

Upon a cushion among them I could see Lucrezia Borgia, Duchess of Ferrara, and I was amazed to see this monster of evil, as I had considered her, merely a woman approaching middle age, and of a striking, stately beauty in her gown of black velvet, sprinkled with pearls.

Beside her was a lady who could be none other than Madonna Clarice, wearing a rose-colored gown, with a purse and rosary attached to her belt, holding a small boy by the hand. On her other side was a girl of about twenty years,

whom I guessed to be her sister, Madonna Tessa.

She was clad all in white. About her fair hair, which glistened golden in the sunlight, was a white fillet, fastened with a golden pin, and the beauty of her took my heart. Suddenly I grew breathless. Suddenly I knew that Madonna Tessa was the one woman in the world for me. I loved her—and she, unconscious of me, was listening to a young man with a lute.

Then I was pressing my lips to the Duchess's hand yet all the while conscious of Madonna Tessa, looking like one of those angels that Fra Angelico has painted on the walls of San Marco. And then Madonna Clarice was looking at me with wide eyes as I revealed my identity.

“DOMENICO, of the House of Strozzi,” I said, “and your servitor, Madonna. And entrusted with a letter from His Holiness to you.”

I handed it to her, and the signet ring, and I saw nothing but the eyes of her sister, Tessa. I saw Madonna Clarice break the seal and read the letter, then pass it silently to the Duchess. I withdrew a little while the ladies whispered together. Then the Duchess beckoned to me.

“Your name and person are sufficient guarantee for us,” she said. “And you are to escort us to Pistoja, to His Holiness's headquarters. But is the road safe?” She bent her dark brows on my face. “Safe where the future of Florence is at stake?” she asked, and glanced at the two boys.

“I guarantee it,” I answered.

“I shall, of course, send a troop with Madonna Clarice, to ensure her safety.”

I hadn't reckoned on that, but I kept my face steady. And all the while, because of the treachery I planned, I forced myself to think of my mother, aging, shivering in the cold of our wretched rooms in the Calimala.

The Duchess turned to Madonna Clarice. “You will be prepared to start at dawn tomorrow!” she asked. “And will a dozen guards suffice against all possibility of attack by brigands?” she inquired of me. “And have you news of Florence? We seem in backwater here in quiet Ferrara, and hear only rumors. Is there a possibility that that arch-rogue, Machiavelli, will offer armed resistance to the forces of His Holiness?”

“Magnificence, it is a long time since I was in Florence,” I answered, watching her warily, and remembering Machiavelli's warning.

“Ah, to be sure. Well, Messer Domenico, make yourself comfortable. Madonna Tessa, present Messer Domenico to some of our ladies and gentlemen.”

The girl in white gave me a swift, searching glance, before which my own eyes fell. It was no dream, my love for her, though it had come upon me like a thunderclap. And, but for the thought that Machiavelli had my mother at his mercy, I believe I would have fallen upon my knees, and then and there confessed my knavery. As it was, I accompanied the girl as she introduced me about the garden.

I REMEMBER the afternoon meal in the refectory, with the musicians playing soft airs, the courteous company, the stroll through the gardens, Madonna Tessa sometimes at my side, the silences and the shy speech. Once she said to me:



As the third man went down, I saw the chance for Tessa and me to escape.

"I am bewildered by this web of intrigue that is being spun all around me. I am afraid for the safety of my sister and my two nephews. Are you sure—can you pledge yourself that we shall not be intercepted on the road to Pistoja? That this Machiavelli is not plotting our destruction?"

"I pledge my word that there will be no interception," I answered—God forgive me! And I thought of Carlo and his cut-throats waiting in the pass at Forli.

Sunset through the slit in my tower window. The clank of the changing guard upon the walls. I was about to remove my doublet and trunk-hose for bed when there came a tapping upon my door.

Outside stood a page, not the one who had first assisted me, but a sly-faced boy of about fourteen, whom I had noticed in attendance upon the Duchess that day.

"Messer Domenico," he said, "her magnificence would speak with you concerning the preparations for the journey. Will it please you to accompany me?"

Startled, I tried to collect my wits. An interview with the Duchess was the last thing that I desired. However, there was nothing for me to do but accompany the page, through the long stone corridors, then down three flights of stairs, and so to a door behind some hanging tapestries.

A woman opened, whispered a word or two, and vanished.

"Will you enter, sir?" asked the page.

I found myself in a dimly lit *saletto*, with heavy furniture, and a soft Saracen rug upon the floor.

The room was empty, but a door opposite was opening.

The Duchess of Ferrara stood in the entrance. She was clad in a single long black garment. A band of jewels around her throat scintillated with colored fires. She raised one slim, white hand and beckoned to me.

The door closed softly behind me. I was in the Duchess's bedroom, containing the great carven bed of state, with crimson canopies. Two candles filled the room with flickering shadows.

"Be seated, Messer Domenico," said Lucrezia. "I wished to have you assure me again that there is no possibility of danger on the way to Pistoja."

"Magnificence, I have already given my assurances as to that," I answered.

"It would be unfortunate if the little Tessa were to be captured. Ah, do you think I have no eyes? Messer Domenico, this is the first time that any man has dared to look so at another woman in the presence of Lucrezia Borgia, Duchess of Ferrara. Look well at me now—look at me, I say!"

With a single sweep of her hand she tore the long black garment from her.

MY HEART contracted, then sent out furious pulsations, as I saw the beauty of her. Underneath the gown she wore nothing except a short garment of sheerest silk through which the curves of her bosom, the white arch of her hips were visible as though no garment existed.

She swayed slightly, and her breasts, full and divinely mould-

ed, moved with the gracious undulation of her form. A mocking smile played on her red lips. I forgot Tessa, everything. I caught her in my arms, and heard her taunting whisper:

"So Lucrezia Borgia still has the power to rule men, as of old? And you are a beautiful youth, my Domenico, such as I would have died for in the old days. Love—love—it is sweet, is it not, Domenico? And, since I am Duchess of Ferrara, and I may love only in the silence of the night, let us drink a pledge to our love, Domenico."

From a tall table she brought two cups brimming with wine. She raised her glass to mine, and we drank together. New life seemed to flow through me with that fiery draught. We sat side by side under the scarlet canopy, Lucrezia's white form with the thin, shimmering garment so close beside me that I could inhale the sweet and subtle perfume emanating from her. And yet I was afraid.

I was afraid, and trembling, like a boy with his first sweetheart, though I had loved women aplenty. I sat the cup down and looked at her. I heard her low laugh:

"Are you afraid of me, Domenico? I am nothing but a woman. Have you never had a sweetheart? And do you think me fair as that Tessa? Touch me, and see that I am neither marble nor bronze. Flesh and fire, perhaps, Domenico!"

She took my hand and placed it upon her smooth, gleaming shoulder. Again I clasped her, and her

very flesh seemed to melt into mine. I lost all sense of being. I only felt Lucrezia's lips clamped against mine, and her quickening breathing straining her rounded form against me. . . .

Then, out of the sweet blackness I heard her screaming, "Help me! I am betrayed!"

I tried to rise, but I was helpless, bound fast by the subtle poison of the draught she had given me. I heard the rush of serving-men and maids and pages, felt them wrenching and hammering at my insensate body; then Lucrezia's voice:

"Liar and traitor, I knew you were Machiavelli's envoy from the first, for the stone in that signet-ring had been reversed, which was to warn me."

I GROANED, opened my eyes. I was lying upon my back on a heap of sacking in a small stone cell, and twilight of morning was coming faintly through a slit in the wall.

I struggled up. I had regained the use of my limbs now, but my head was racking me, and, remembering those moments of madness, I cursed the abominable woman who had first used me and then entrapped me.

I cursed myself yet more for I had no doubt what my fate must be. The rack, the torture-chamber, and, finally, the gibbet. Better to have defied Machiavelli and accepted my fate in the yard of the Bargello.

The cell door opened. Two guards stood outside, with a crowd of ruffianly hangers-on

(Continued on page 98)

Rat Trap

[Continued from page 17]

peering over their shoulders, mocking me.

"A brazen scoundrel to force his way by night into the chamber of her magnificence as if she were some goose-wench! She'll twist his pretty limbs for him."

"Flay him alive, more likely, and use his skin for vellum."

"Be silent, knaves!" shouted one of the guards. "Come, fellow, would you hold up the entire party?" he cried to me.

"Where do I go?" I asked, still stupid from the drug.

He laughed. "To Pistoja, for the question and the torture, so far as I know," he answered. "Hasten, magnificence!"

At point of pike I was thrust upstairs and out into the bailey, where the blinding light of the newly risen sun seared my eyeballs. Nevertheless I could discern the party already gathered at the entrance—the two ladies and the boys, seated on horses richly caparisoned, their maids on palfreys, the mailed guard, beginning to form ranks; behind, a dozen mules laden with baggage, and other beasts for the accommodation of the men-servants.

At my appearance shouts of laughter, taunts and oaths resounded. I was prodded toward a mule and bidden mount. Somebody thrust a chunk of bread into my hand.

In the tail of the procession, with an armed, mounted guard on either side of me, I saw all faces turned upon me in derision and

mockery—all save those of Donna Clarice and Tessa, who looked fixedly ahead of them.

The portecullis rose, the drawbridge clanked down, foot by foot, with creak of chains. The procession started. I rode between the castle towers, down toward Ferrara, on my way toward Pistoja, torture, death, and infamy.

Yet more bitter than all was the remembrance of those moments when Lucrezia Borgia's body had been warm and pliant against me. If I could have strangled the accursed woman, I could have died with better grace.

Of Madonna Tessa I dared not think, for I had betrayed my undeclared love for her.

WOULD Carlo and his men be waiting in the pass at Forli—waiting for the chance of plunder? That filled my mind to the exclusion of all else as we wound uphill toward the crest of the Apennines.

We halted for food at midday. My guards, who watched me closely, gave me more bread and sour wine. I could see from my place in the rear of the procession that some discussion was taking place ahead of me.

"Well, well, and so we push on to cross the pass of Forli before nightfall," said one of my guards to me. "It is considered safer to camp in the plain beyond. You shall see Pistoja the sooner, *sgherro!* You must have been mad with drink, I'll warrant me, to

push into the apartment of her magnificence. Eh, and tore the clothing from her! Tell me, is it true that she is shaped like Venus? Eh, thou'lt remember her, for thy consolation, on the rack, varlet!"

He roared with laughter. I ate my bread and drank my wine in silence. That decision to cross the pass at nightfall seemed to me madness. If Carlo was still waiting there. . . .

Half-way up, a storm burst upon us, smothering the embers of the setting sun, sweeping down in a deluge of icy rain, and throwing the line into confusion. There was a halt, while drivers struggled with the refractory mules. Had I wished to escape, now seemed my chance. But my eyes were set upon the ladies and the boys, halted ahead. I did not know what my purpose was, but I meant to remain with them.

"Forward! Forward!" The mules, under the lash, broke into a gallop, my own beast too, the guards shouting and swearing as they brought up the rear. We were nearing the pass now. The red of the setting sun had vanished, gray twilight was changing into night. Then suddenly a boulder came toppling down, striking a mule and pinning it to the ground. More boulders, a stampede of the maddened beasts—then mounted men came charging down upon us, yelling madly.

Carlo and his cutthroats had not abandoned their intentions.

A man rode at me, and his sword-slash gashed my mule's neck. I was afoot in an instant. As the man raised his sword again,

I drove my shoulder into his body, thrusting him to the ground. Next moment his sword was in my hand. I ran up ahead, where the guards were contending furiously with Carlo's cutthroats.

I could see only struggling shadows in the blackness, but I heard a woman scream close beside me, and saw a man dragging her away. I recognized Carlo by that dog's snarl of his, and thrust.

My point pierced his throat, and he dropped, bubbling horribly in his death-agony. I caught the woman as she toppled, and recognized Madonna Tessa.

Three more made at me, howling with fury as they heard my voice and knew. I pierced one through the body, disengaged my sword just in time to meet the play of the second, and, even as we clashed, I saw the third was upon me from the left side, dagger-hand drawn back. Then suddenly Madonna Tessa's cloak went over the fellow's head and blinded him; while he struggled with the folds of it, I got my own man under the hauberk, a good belly-thrust that sent him down writhing in slow death.

Then the third man had fled. I saw a gap in the wall of the pass ahead of me, and, dragging Tessa with me, made for it. The noise of battle was dying away; everything was hidden in a swirling cloud of snow.

I found a little cave, into which we crawled, and lay close to each other for warmth in the bitter cold of the Apennines. But the power of the accursed woman's drug was still upon me. Almost

upon the moment I was unconscious.

“SO, THEN, Madonna,” I said, returning from my exploration the next morning, “it appears that your party have won through to Pistoja, for they have left no dead, whereas five bodies of the brigands are frozen in the snow.”

She looked at me coldly. “What is your purpose with me?” she asked.

“You know me, Madonna. I came to Ferrara to entrap your sister and her two sons, and failed.”

“I am not of the Medici. I matter nothing. Here, too, you have failed, Messer Domenico,” she answered. “So what is your plan?”

“Madonna, you would hardly expect me to escort you to Pistoja, to face the rack, the torture, and the gibbet? My way lies back toward Florence.”

“Would more gold tempt you?” she inquired in a curious tone.

“I think, Madonna, you do not understand,” I said. “Because of our loyalty to the Medici, my mother and I suffered cold, hunger, and privation for years, and none of the Medici remembered us or sent us a sequin. Thus I was forced to become a cheat, a gamester, and a traitor, and Machiavelli picked me for that role because he could find none baser in all Florence. Now look at me with those great eyes of yours, Madonna, you who have been reared all your life in gentleness, and pass judgment on me.”

She put her hands upon my shoulders. “I do not pass judg-

ment on you, Messer Domenico,” she said, “because you do not judge yourself fairly. Last night you cried out in your sleep that it is to save your mother’s life you are returning to Florence—and death.”

“If I were not returning to my death, I would not dare to tell you that I love you,” I said. “Yes, I go to Florence. But first I shall escort you to some nunnery for refuge.”

Her eyes were luminous. “No, Messer Domenico, I shall go to Florence with you, since I myself am of no value to Machiavelli,” she answered. “You see, I love you too.”

I THINK we walked through Paradise, we two, tramping like peasants over rough goat-tracks toward Florence, and eating gratefully the crusts that the farmers gave us. That night we lay still closer together in a rick of straw, holding each other in our arms like children, and beneath her soft breast I felt the steady rhythm of Tessa’s heart, as if seeking to attune itself to mine.

But the next day, in the distance, I saw great clouds of smoke covering the horizon, and, as it seemed, flashes of fire in the heart of it.

I did not know from which city it came, but it showed me one thing—Pope Julius and his Spaniards were on the march against Florence, and this was the first fruits of the war.

Once Tessa stopped and put her hands on my shoulders in that dear way of hers.

"Domenico, if it were not for your mother, we might flee to some city where we might be safe for ever," she said. "Is there no other way than to go back?"

"No, there is no other way," I said. "Besides, I have pledged my word to Machiavelli."

She said no more, and we went on our way, I going to death, Tessa to captivity, both immeasurably content. The smoke clouds were behind us now, and, shortly after noon, suddenly I saw the glorious city on the Arno, the Duomo and the spire of the Campanile, and an army maneuvering in the fields without the walls.

Very solemnly we stopped and kissed each other, and then went on in silence, till three scouts came upon us suddenly with cries to yield.

I knew their leader, who greeted me with a cry of astonishment. "You, Messer Domenico? Whence come you? Not from Prato? They say the Spaniards have taken it by the sword, and fired the town, and Florence is expecting to see the enemy vanguard at any hour."

"That news," I said, "is for Messer Niccolo."

"Where is the troop you took with you?"

"That news is also for Messer Niccolo."

He grinned. "You are a very unlucky man, Messer Domenico," he said. "I understand that Messer Niccolo has given orders you are to be brought before the military tribunal forthwith. They are hanging traitors by dozens."

"I shall make the baker's dozen, then," I answered, referring to a country proverb.

We went with our captors across the fields, where all the city train-bands were encamped, preparing to repel the expected attack. All the while there had been no question regarding Tessa, but, when we reached the city confines—now attended by an entire troop, it was indicated to me that I was to go forward alone.

"Remember always that I love thee, *Domenico mio*," said Tessa kissing me.

BACK in a cell of the Bargello, I wondered whether it had not all been a dream, and I awaiting judgment for the stabbing of the Roman in the gaming-house. Tessa, my mother, the infamous woman of Ferrara were all jumbled in my mind, and yet out of this confusion my love for Tessa emerged like a bright star.

I had lost all count of time when my cell door opened, and a voice hailed me:

"Come out, Messer Domenico. Your case is to be heard."

I stumbled up into the *cortile*, expecting to find the gibbet waiting for me; but the *cortile* was empty, though the streets were filled with a shouting crowd. I was led into a chamber on the ground floor, and left there.

A door opened, and *he* came forward with a soft step, the archfiend who had sent me on my mission. His beady eyes blazed into mine.

"Well, Messer Domenico—you failed?"

"I failed, Messer Niccolo."

"And came back?"

"As I pledged myself. Now I am ready for your worst."

Machiavelli made a clucking sound with his tongue. His hand dropped upon my shoulder.

"He would be a poor statesman," he said, "who was not prepared to change his policy to suit the times. Well, I see you know nothing. Florence has made her peace with Pope Julius and the Spaniards. Your failure to secure the princes was the cause of our success. You are free, Messer Domenico!"

I gaped at him incredulously.

And now I could hear the shouts of the crowd again. They were calling "*Palle! Palle!*" the watch-cry of the Medici. Our cause had triumphed!

"In the next room," said Machiavelli, linking his arm through mine, "there awaits a lady who has interested herself in you, and is now a person of extreme consequence."

He released me, and I went stumbling blindly through—into Madonna Tessa's arms.