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THE PHILOSOPHERS' STONE

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

THE lackey at the window inclined his head toward Messer Orsini, who sat fidgeting nervously at the high oaken table near the center of the room.

"The three come, Excellency."

Messer, the Duke Ercole di Orsini, turned and rose, and walked swiftly to the window. The lackey pulled aside the heavy, velvet hangings. Three men were walking on the drawbridge of his castle. The duke made a sign; the hangings dropped.

"It is well. Admit them at once to this room."

The lackey departed. Messer Orsini meditatively donned a mask, then seated himself to await the three. He had not long to wait.

The three came into the room, bowing servilely.

"You have brought it?" came from the masked Orsini.

"We have, Messer."

"Let me see it."

One of the three men drew a long glass phial from his doublet. In the bottom of the glass gleamed a jewel. Messer Orsini repressed an exclamation.

"The philosophers' stone, as you commanded, Messer."

"Of what portent is the scroll above the stone?"

"It is a formula of death, Messer."

The Duke di Orsini threw a pouch of gold upon the table. One of the three seized it. The duke spoke again.

"There is to be no word of this in outer circles."

"It shall be as you say, Messer. Our instructions were to warn you not to open the phial before the hour of midnight; seven glasses of sand hence."

"They shall be obeyed. But carry back this warning: If the stone is not true, you die in company with your master."

"We are at your command, at your mercy, if the stone fails to perform its duty."

The curtains swished behind the three. At once Messer Orsini struck a gong. A lackey appeared.

"Seize and bind the three men who are leaving my abode. Cast them into the dungeons until further word from me is received."

The lackey disappeared. As if summoned by magic another came to take his place.

"Messer, a runner from Rome awaits your pleasure."

"From Rome?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"Bring him to me."

The lackey departed as silently as he had come. In a trice the runner stood before the Duke di Orsini. He bowed low. With a quick motion he opened an amulet about his neck and drew from it a piece of folded paper, which he threw to the table before him. The duke grasped it and read:

"Be armed; prepare to attack the Bull.
"Your cousin."

At once the duke struck his gong, and as before, a lackey appeared.

"Ring the alarum bell."

The lackey vanished, and the duke turned again to the messenger.

"You come from His Eminence?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"You are acquainted with the content of this message?"

"No, Excellency. I was told to read it only in case of attack."

"You are from my cousin's household?"

"Yes, Highness."

"It is well; you may go. Tonight you shall be housed with me; tomorrow you join my army."

A lackey conducted the runner from the room. From outside came the insistent pealing of the alarm bell, and the clatter of arms; the duke's soldiers were assembling. Messer Orsini rose and moved across the room to the terrace; he stepped onto the balcony and addressed his men-at-arms.

"It is by command of His Eminence, the Cardinal Orsini, coupled with that of His Eminence, the Cardinal della Rovere, that you are to remain constantly in arms in preparation for an attack upon the Borgia, who moves now through this country. An attempt will be made in Rome tonight to poison the Borgia usurper on the papal throne. The men of our ally, the Duke di Colonna, are in readiness; the Milanese Sforzas have declared themselves neutral. As usual, the Doge of Venice remains neutral until such time as he sees who will win the victory; then he will ally himself to the victorious standard. The Florentine de Medicis are willing to aid us, but not openly; all negotiations must be in secret. They are by no means in favor of our cause, but they live in constant fear of the Borgia Bull."

As one man the soldiers inclined their heads. The duke stepped back into the room and pulled the curtains across the window. Meditatively he turned the hour-glass. He sat down at his table and regarded the phial containing the philosophers' stone.

For a long time he sat there. A lackey came and lit the candles in their sconces, and withdrew again, leaving the duke alone. At length the Duke di Orsini drew from a panel in the table a map of the surrounding country, and began to sketch the passage of Cesare Borgia's troops. He wondered how his cousin's envoy had managed to get through the Borgia's lines. He saw clearly that the envoy would have had to come through the enemy's lines to reach him. But abruptly he dismissed the question and turned his attention to the attack he would make on the morrow.

The last grains of sand of the eleventh hour dribbled into a heap as Messer Orsini rose from the table with the phial in his hand. He moved quickly beneath a sconce of candles, the better to see the precious stone, upon which the light glittered and sparkled. Almost feverishly he broke the end of the phial. He drew out the scroll, then turned the phial upside down to catch the jewel with the palm of his outstretched hand.

But though the jewel slid down the polished surface of the glass, it never reached the hand of the Duke Ercole di Orsini. For suddenly came a sharp pop, as if a glass bubble had been broken, and immediately afterward a thin film of white dust rose like a vapor to the nostrils of the duke.

For a moment he stared in amazement at his dust-laden palm. Then he tore at the scroll, madly, as if in a frenzy. He opened it and read. His face twisted into an expression of horrible fear. He made as if to step forward. Two steps he went, then fell flat on his face, the opened scroll beneath his palm. He twitched convulsively and lay still.

The candles gleamed on the writing on the scroll, while from without came the sharp cries of a surprised army. The scroll read:

"With the compliments of Cesare Borgia!"