

CHRONICLES OF COUNT ANTONIO.

BY ANTHONY HOPE. Author of "A Prisoner of Zenda," Etc.

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COUNT ANTONIO AND THE TRAITOR PRINCE.

Of all the deeds that Count Antonio of Monte Velluto did during the time that he was an outlaw in the hills, a price having been set on his head by Duke Valentine, there was none that made greater stir or struck more home to the hearts of men...

While Count Antonio still dwelt at the court and had not yet fled from the wrath aroused in the duke by the count's attempt to carry off the Lady Lucia, the duke's wrath, the count's highness had been celebrated with great magnificence and universal rejoicing...

Now, in the joy of the wedding and the grief at the duke's death, none had more ostentatious signs of sharing than his highness's brother, Duke Paul. Yet how alike were his joy and his sorrow, save that he found true cause for sorrow in that the duke had left her husband a dead man...

In the beginning of the second year of Count Antonio's outlawry, his highness was most mightily incensed against him, not merely because he had slain the duke...

"You could not bring me a sweeter gift than the head of Tommasino," said the duke, "but he knows that I am his friend and friend to the Lady Lucia, and a man of tender heart..."

"But what should the truth be?" asked Valentine. "The truth should be that while part of the guard went to the spur of the mountain, the duke should have been with them..."

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him by the head the better for my security." "So let it be," said the duke. "I will await you in the summer house."

"A friend of whom mean you, my lord?" came from the duke. "Of whom else than of Count Antonio?" cried Paul.

"I indeed it is no more," said Antonio, and he turned his eyes upon the Duke Paul. Paul laughed, but with poor merriment.

"I will not go till you have written the promise." Now Paul was somewhat loath to write that promise, feeling that it should be found on Antonio's hand, and he could not remove it, but without it Antonio declared he would not go...

"What was that?" asked Antonio, in wondering eagerness. "Indeed, I am willing to serve his highness in any honorable position, if by that I may win his pardon and come to that I long for."

"His pardon! When did he pardon?" To know honest men and leave them to their honesty is the last great gift of villainy. But Antonio had it not, and now he unfolded to Antonio the plan that he had made, saying (as needs not be said) that part of it whereby Antonio himself was to meet his death...

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should not lack reward. And all this Antonio suffered silently and in silence, still he intended to do as he had said. But he hid his secret from the bank of the river through the wall to the summer house, where the duke was to be. Of this gate he alone, save the duke, had the key; they had but to swim the river and enter by this gate. Secretly Antonio, Paul would talk with the duke; then he would go and carry off that remained of the guard over and above those that had gone to the hills; and Antonio, having done his deed, could return by the same secret path, cross the river again, and rejoin his friends. And in showing the time Paul would recall him with honor to the city and give him Lucia to wife.

"And if there be a question as to the hand that dealt the blow, there is a scowl whom the duke flouted but a few days since—a steward in the palace. He deserves hanging for a thousand things of which he is guilty, and will trouble me little to hang him on your behalf if he chances to be innocent." And Duke Paul laughed heartily.

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Antonio, and coming to Paul, he laid a hand on his shoulder, and turned him to a path that led to the duke and his company. So that a multitude went after Valentine and the peasant, and they rode together at the head. And the duke said thrice to the peasant...

"What of my brother?" but the peasant, who was an old man, did but point again to the foot of the hill all that had not hitherto been in charge of the boys who were of the party, for the duke, presenting some fear, had taken to the water, and then they went forward as if they reached the grassy summit of the hill. And then the peasant sprang in front crying, "There, there!"

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