CHRONICLES —OF— COUNT ANTONIO

BY ANTHONY HOPE.

Author of "A Prisoner of Zenda," Etc.

Copyright, 1894, by Anthony Hope.

CHAPTER VI.

COUNT ANTONIO AND THE HERMIT OF THE VAULT.

Among the stories concerning the count Antonio which were told to me in answer to my questioning, and whereof I have rejected many as being no better than idle tales, there was one that met me often, and yet seemed strange and impossible to believe, for it was said that he had during the time of his outlawry once spent several days in the vault of the Peschelti, and there suffered things that pass human understanding.

This church lies hard by the Church of St. John, the Theologian, in the suburbs of Baratesta, on the banks of the river, and the Peschelti had a palace hard by, and were a family of high nobility and allied by blood to the house of Monte Velluto. But I could find no warrant for the story of Antonio's sojourn in the vault, and, although many insisted that the tale was true, yet they could not tell how or why the count came to be in the vault, until at length I found an aged woman who had heard the truth of the matter from her grandmother, and she made me acquainted with the story, flowing on me a flood of garrulous gossip, from which I have chosen as much as concerns the purpose, and here I set it down, for I believe it to be true, and I would omit nothing that touches the count, so I can be sure that what I write is based on truth.

When Count Antonio had dwelt in the hills for the space of three years and five months, it chanced that Cesare, last of the Peschelti, died, and he made a will on his deathbed whereby he bequeathed to Count Antonio his lands and also a store of money and many ornaments of gold and jewels, for Antonio's mother had been of the house of the Peschelti, and Cesare loved Antonio, although he had not dared to give him countenance for fear of the duke's anger; yet, knowing that he was dying, he bequeathed everything to him, for the duke's rath could not hurt a dead man. And, so soon as he was dead, his steward, Giuseppe, sent secretly and in haste to Antonio, saying: "My lord, you cannot take the lands or the house; but, if you will be wise, come quickly and take the money and the jewels, for fear that his highness the duke, declaring that an outlaw has no right, and can inherit nothing, will send and seize the treasure." Now, Antonio, though grieved at the death of Cesare, was glad to hear of the treasure, for he was often hard put to it to maintain his company and those who depended on him for bread. So he pondered anxiously how he might reach the palace of the Peschelti and lay hands on the treasure and return safely, for at this time Duke Valentine had posted above a hundred of his guards in the plain, and his troop watched all the approaches to the hills, so that the band could not ride forth in a body, unless it were prepared to do battle with the guards. Nor did Antonio desire to weaken the band, lest the guards, learning that the bravest were away, should dare an attack. Therefore he would not take Tommasino nor Beno, nor any of the stoutest with him, but he took four young men who had come to him from Forniola, having fallen into the duke's displeasure through brawling with his guards. These he mounted on good horses, and, having made a circuit to avoid the encampment in the plain, he came to Cesare's house on the day before that appointed for the funeral. Giuseppe came to meet him, and led him where the dead man lay, and, after the count had gazed on his face and kissed his forehead, they two went to the treasury, and Giuseppe delivered the treasure to Antonio. and Antonio made him a present of value and confirmed him in his stewardship, although it was not likely that the duke would suffer him to hold any power, inasmuch as his highness had declared his intention of forfeiting the estate into his own hand.

Now it chanced that one of the young men, being regaled with wine, drank very freely, and began to talk loud and boastfully of his master's achievements as the servants sat under the trees in front of the house; and there was with him a certain tailor, a lame man, who had furnished mourning garments for the funeral. The tailor, learning that Antonio was come, said nothing and seemed not to hear nor understand the drunken youth's talk; but at an early moment he took his departure, and straightway hobbled, as fast as his lame leg would let him, to the syndic of Baratesta, a very busy and ambitious fellow, who longed greatly to win the duke's favor. And the tailor set the price of five pieces of gold and the ordering of a new gown on the news he brought, and the syndic, having agreed, the tailor cried: "Antonio of Monte Velluto is at the house of the Peschelti, and his band is not with him. If you hasten you may catch him." At this the syndic was very greatly delighted, for the duke's commissaries were not to arirve to take possession of the house in his name till the morrow, by which time Antonio would be gone; and the syndic rubbed his hands, saying: "If I can take him my glory will be great, and the gratitude of his highness also."

And he gathered together all his constables, and hard upon twenty discharged soldiers who dwelt in the town, and fifteen men of the duke's who were stationed at Baratesta to gather his highness's dues; and thus with a force of about fifty men he set out in great haste for the house of the Peschelti, and was almost come there before a little boy ran to Giuseppe crying that the syndic and all the constables and many besides were coming to the house. And Giuseppe, who had but three men servants of an age to fight, the other five being old (for Cesare had loved to keep those who served him well, even when their powers grew less than their will), and perceiving that Antonio's four were young and untried, wrung his hands and hastened to the count with the news, saying: "Yet, weak as we are, we can die for you, my lord."

"Heaven forbid!" said Antonio, looking out of the window. "Are they all townsmen that come with this syndic?"

"Alas, no, my lord. There are certain of the duke's men, and I see among the rest men who have spent their days under arms, either in his highness's service or in free companies."

"Then," said Antonio smiling, "unless I am to share Cesare's funeral, I had best be gone. And I have seen too much fighting to be ashamed to run away from it."

"But, my lord, they are at the gates."

"And is there no other gate?"

"None, my lord, save the little gate in the wall there; and see, the syndic has posted ten men there.

"And he will search the house?"

"I fear that he will, my lord, for he must have tidings of your coming."

"Then where is my horse?" said Count Antonio, and Giuseppe showed him where the horse stood in the shadow of the portico. "Do not let him know," added Antonio, "that the young men are of my company, and send them away in safety."

"But what do you, my lord?" cried Giuseppe.

"What I have done before, Giuseppe. I ride for life," answered the count.

Then the count, delaying no more, ran lightly down the stairs, leaped on his horse, and, drawing his sword, rode forth from the portico; and he was among the syndic's company before they thought to see him; and he struck right and left with his sword, and they fell back before him in fear, yet striking at him as they shrank away; and he had come clean off but for one grizzly-haired fellow, who had served much in free companies and learned cunning, for he stooped low, avoiding the sweep of Antonio's sword, and stabbed the horse in its belly, and stood wiping his knife and saying: "My legs are old. I have done my part—do yours; the horse will not go far." And in truth the horse was wounded to death and its bowels protruded from the wound, and Antonio felt it falter and stumble. Yet the gallant beast carried him for half a mile, and then he leaped off, fearing it would fall under him and he be crushed by it, and he drew his sword across its throat that it might not linger in pain, and then ran on foot, hearing the cries of the syndic's company pressing on behind him. And thus running he came to the church of St. John, and to the vault of the Peschelti by it, and men were at work preparing for Cesare's funeral, and the door of the vault was open. Antonio hurled one man to the right and another to the left, and rushed into the vault, for his breath failed and there was no chance for his life were he overtaken in the open, and before the men regained their feet he pulled the door of the vault close and sank on his knees inside, panting, and holding his sword in readiness to slay any who entered. Then the syndic and his company came and called on him to surrender. And Antonio cried, "Come and take me." Then the syndic bade the workmen pull open the door, but Antonio held it with one hand against them both. Yet at last drew it open a little, and Antonio lunged with his sword through the aperture and wounded the syndic in the leg, so that he stumbled backward with an oath. And after that none was willing to enter first, until the grizzly-haired fellow came up, and he, seeing the aperture, rushed at it sword in hand, fearing no man, not even Count Antonio. But he could not touch Antonio, and he also fell back with a sore gash in his cheek; and Antonio laughed, saying: "Shall I surrender, syndic?"

Now the syndic was very urgent in his desire to take Antonio, but his men shook their heads, and he himself could not stand because of the sword thrust in his leg, and instead of fighting his company began to tell of the wonderful deeds Antonio had done, and they grew no bolder by this. And the grizzly-haired fellow mocked them, saying that he would go again at the aperture if two more offered. And the syndic raged and rebuked them; but he could not hurt them, being unable to stand on his feet, so that one said boldly: "Why should we die? The duke's commissaries will be here tomorrow with a company of the guard. Let the count stay in the vault till then. He is in safe keeping, and when he sees the guard he will surrender. It is likely enough that a great lord like the count would rather die than give up his sword to the syndic." Whereat the syndic was very ill pleased, but all the rest mightly well pleased, and, having heard this counsel, they could by no means be persuaded to attack again, and they let Antonio draw the door close again, being in truth glad to see the last of his sword. Therefore the syndic, having no choice, set twenty to guard the entrance of the vault, and prepared to depart. But he cried to Antonio, bidding him again to surrender, for the guard would come tomorrow, and then at least he could not hope to resist.

"Aye, but tomorrow is tomorrow, Master Syndic," laughed Antonio. "Go, get your leg dressed, and leave tomorrow till it dawn."

So the syndic went home and the rest with him, leaving the twenty on guard. And to this day, if a man has more love for fighting than skill in it, folk call him syndic of Baratesta.

Count Antonio, being thus left in the vault, and perceiving that he would not be further molested that day, looked round, and though no daylight reached the vault he could see, for the workmen had set a lamp there, and it still burned. And around him were the coffins of all the Peschelti who had died in 500 years, and the air was heavy and stifling. And he took the lamp and walked around the vault, which was of circular form, and he perceived one coffin standing upright against the wall of the vault, as though there had been no room for it on the shelves. Then he sat down again, and being weary, leaned his head against the wall and soon slept; for a man whose conscience is easy and whose head has sense in it may sleep as well in a vault as in a bed chamber. Yet the air of the vault oppressed him, and he slept but lightly and uneasily. And if a proof be needed how legends gather round the count's name, I have heard many wonderful stories of what happened to him in the vault, how he held converse with dead Peschelti, how they told him things which it is not given to men to know, and how a certain beautiful lady, who had been dead 200 years, having been slain by her husband in a jealous rage, came forth from the coffin with her hair all disheveled and a great wound yet bleeding in her bosom, and sang a low, sweet, wild song to him as he lay, and would not leave him, though he bade her soul rest in the name of Christ and the saints. But that any of these things happened I do not believe.

It was late when the count awoke, and the lamp had burned out, so that the vault was utterly dark. And as the count roused himself a sound strange in the place fell on his ear, for a man talked, and his talk was not such as one uses who speaks his own musings aloud to himself when he is alone (a trick men come by who live solitary), but he seemed to question others and to answer them, saying: "Aye," and "no," and "alas, sweet friend," and so forth, all in a low, even voice, and now and again he would sigh, and once he laughed bitterly. Then the count raised his voice, saying: "Who is there?" And the other voice answered, "Which of you speaks? The tones are not known to me. Yet I know all the Peschelti who are here." And Antonio answered: "I am not of the Peschelti, save by my mother; my name is Antonio of Monte Velluto." And on this a cry came from the darkness of a man greatly troubled and alarmed, and after that there was silence for a space. And Antonio said. "There is naught to fear. I seek to save myself, not to hurt another. But how do you, a living man, come to be in this vault, and with whom do you speak?"

Then came the sound of a steel striking on a flint, and presently a spark, and a torch was lighted, and Antonio beheld before him in the glow of the torch the figure of a man who crouched on the floor of the vault over against him; his hair was long and tangled, his beard grew to his waist, and he was naked save for a cloth about his loins, and his eye gleamed dark and wild as he gazed on Antonio in seeming fright and bewilderment. Then the count, knowing that a man collects his thoughts while another speaks, told the man who he was and how he came there, and (because the man's eyes still wondered) how that he was an outlaw these three years and more because he would not bow to the duke's will, and when he had told all he ceased. Then the man came crawling closer to him, and, holding the torch to his face, scanned his face, saying: "Surely, he is alive." and again he was silent, but after a while he spoke.

"For twenty and three years," he said, "I have dwelt here among the dead; and to the dead I talk, and they are my friends and companions. For I hear their voices and they move out and greet me; yet now they are silent and still because you are here."

"But how can you live here?" cried Antonio. "For you must starve for lack of food and come near to suffocation in the air of this vault."

The man set his hand to his brow and frowned, and said sadly:

"Indeed, I have forgotten much, yet I remember a certain night when the devil came into me, and in black fury and jealousy I lay wait by the door of the room where my wife was, and we had been wedded but a few months. There was a man who was my friend, and he came to my wife secretly, seeking to warn her that I was suspected of treason to the prince; yes, in all things he was my friend, for when I stabbed him as he came to the door, and, rushing in, stabbed her also, she did not die till she had told me all; and then she smiled sweetly at me, saying: 'Our friend will forgive, dear husband, for you did not know; and I forgive the blow your love dealt me; kiss me and let me die here in your arms;' and I kissed her, and she died. Then I laid her on her bed, and I went forth from my home, and I wandered many days. Then I sought to kill myself, but I could not, for a voice seemed to say, 'What penitence is there in death? Lo! it is sweet, Paolo!' So I did not kill myself, but I took an oath to live apart from men till God should in His mercy send me death. And coming in my wanderings to the river that runs by Baratesta, I found a little hollow in the bank of the river, and I lay down there; and none pursued me, for the duke of Forniola cared not for a crime done in Mantweglia. And for a year I dwelt in my little cave; then it was noised about that I dwelt there, and fools began to call me, who was the vilest sinners born, a holy hermit, and they came to me to ask prayers. So I begged from one a pick, and I worked on the face of the rock and made a passage through it. And I swore no more to look upon the light of the sun, but abode in the recess that I had hollowed out. And I go no more to the mouth of the cave, save once a day at nightfall, when I drink of the water of the river, and take the broken meats they leave for me."

"But here—how came you here?" cried Antonio.

"I broke through one day by chance, as I worked on the rock; and, seeing the vault, I made a passage with much labor, and having done this, I hid it with a coffin, and now I dwell here with the dead, expecting the time when in God's mercy I also shall be allowed to die. But today I fled back through the passage, for men came and opened the vault and let in the sunshine, which I might not see. Pray for me, sir; I have need of prayers."

"Now God comfort you," said Count Antonio softly. "Of a truth, sir, a man who knows his sin and grieves for it in his heart hath in God's eyes no longer any sin. So is it sweetly taught in the most holy scriptures. Therefore, take comfort; for your friend will forgive even as the gentle lady who loved you forgave, and Christ has no less forgiveness than they."

"I know not," said the hermit, groaning heavily. "I question the dead who lie here concerning these things, but they may not tell me."

"Indeed, poor man, they can tell nothing," said Antonio, gently, for he perceived that the man was subject to a madness and deluded by fancied visions and voices.

"Yet I love to talk to them of the time when I also shall be dead."

"God comfort you," said Count Antonio again.

Now while Antonio and the hermit talked, one of those who guarded the vault chanced to lay his ear against the door, listening whether Antonio moved, and he heard to his great dread and consternation the voice of another who talked with Antonio; most of what was said he did not hear, but he heard Antonio say "God comfort you," and the hermit answer something and groan heavily. And the legs of the listener shook under him, and he cried to his comrades that the dead talked with Antonio, himself being, from fright more dead than alive. And all came and listened, and still the voice of another talked with Antonio, so that the guards were struck with terror and looked at one another's faces, saying: The dead speak! The count speaks with the dead! Christ and the blessed mother of Christ and the saints protect us," and they looked neither to the right nor left, but sat quaking on the ground about the door of the vault, and presently one ran and told the syndic, and he caused himself carried thither in his chair, and he also heard and was very greatly afraid, saying: "This Antonio of Monte Velluto is a fearful man." And the report spread throughout Baratesta that Count Antonio talked with the dead in the vault of the Peschelti, whence came, I doubt not, the foolish tales of which I have made mention.

A seed is enough; men's tongues water it and it grows to a great plant. Nor did any man think that it was the hermit who talked, for although they knew of his cave, they did not know nor imagine of the passage he had made, and his voice was utterly strange, seeing that he had spoken no word to any living man for twenty years till he spoke with the count that night. Therefore the whole of Baratesta was in great fear; and they came to a certain learned priest, who was the priest of the church of St. John, and told him. And he arose and came in great haste, and offered prayers outside the vault, and bade the unquiet spirits rest, but he did not offer to enter, nor did any one of them, but they all said said: "We had determined even before to await the duke's guard, and that is still the wiser thing."

For a great while the hermit could not understand what Antonio wanted of him, for his thoughts were on his own state and with the dead. But at length having understood that Antonio would be guffied through the passage and brought to the mouth of the cave, in the hope of finding means to escape before the duke's commissaries came with the guard, he murmured wonderingly, "Do you then desire to live?" and rose, and led Antonio where the coffin stood upright against the wall, as Antonio had seen it. But it was now moved a little to one side, and there was a narrow opening through which the count had also to pass; and in his struggles he upset the coffin, and it fell with a great crash, whereat all who were outside the vault fled suddenly to a distance of a hundred yards or more in panic, expecting now to see the door of the vault open and the dead walk forth, nor could they be persuaded to come nearer again.

But Antonio, with a great effort, made his way through the opening, and followed the hermit along a narrow, rough-hewn way, Antonio's shoulders grazing the rock on either side as he went. And having pursued this way for fifteen or twenty paces they turned to the right sharply and went on another ten paces, and having passed through another narrow opening were in the cave, and the river glistened before their eyes, for it was now dawn. And the hermit, perceiving that it was dawn, and fearing to see the sun, turned to fly back to the vault, but Antonio, being full of pity for him, detained him and besought him to abandon his manner of life, assuring him that by now his sin was certainly purged, and when the hermit would not listen Antonio followed him back to the opening that led into the vault, and, forgetting his own peril, reasoned with him for the space of an hour or more, but could not prevail. So at last he bade him farewell very sorrowfully, telling him that God had made him that day the instrument of saving a man's life, which should be to him a sign of favor and forgiveness, but the hermit shook his head and passed into the vault, and Antonio heard him talking to the dead Peschelti and answering questions that his own disordered brain invented.

Thus it was full morning when Antonio came again to the little cave by the river, and bethought him what he should do for his own safety. And suddenly looking across the river, he beheld a gentleman whom he knew. Lepardo, a commissioner of the duke's, and with him thirty of the duke's guard, and they were riding very fast, for, having started at midnight to avoid the heat of the sun (it being high summer), so soon as they reached the outskirts of Baratesta they had heard that Antonio was in the vault, and were now pressing to cross the bridge and come upon him. And Antonio knew that Lepardo was a man of courage and hardihood, and would be prevented by nothing from entering the vault. But on a sudden Lepardo checked his horse, uttering a loud cry, for, to his great amazement, he had seen Antonio as Antonio looked forth from the cave, and he could not tell how he came to be there, and Antonio at once withdrew himself into the shadow of the cave.

Now the banks of the stream on the side on which Leopold rode were high and precipitous, and, although it was summer, yet the stream was too deep for him to wade, and flowed quickly; yet, at Leopold's bidding, six of his stoutest men prepared to leap down the bank and go in search of Antonio; and Antonio discerning that they would do this, and blaming himself for his rashness in looking out so incautiously, was greatly at a loss what to do; for now he was hemmed in on either side, and he saw nothing but to sell his life dearly, and do some deed that should ornament his death. So he retreated again along the passage, and passed through the opening into the vault, and he summoned the hermit to aid him, and between them they set not only one, but a dozen of the coffins of the Peschelti against the opening, laying them lengthwise and piling one on top of the other, hoping that Leopold's men would not discover the opening, or would at least be delayed some time before they could thrust away the coffins and come through. Then Antonio took his place by the gate of the vault again, sword in hand, saying grimly to the hermit: "If you seek death, sir, he will be hereabouts before long."

But Count Antonio was not a man whom his friends would abandon to a death unaided, and while the syndic was watching Antonio the four young men who were with the count made their escape from Cesare's house, and, having separated from one another, rode by four different ways toward the hills, using much wariness. Yet three of them were caught by the duke's company that watched in the plain, and, having been soundly flogged, were set to work as servants in the camp. But the fourth came safe to the hills, and found there Tommasino and Bena, and Tommasino, hearing of Antonio's state, started with Bena and eighteen more to rescue him or die with him. And they fell in with a scouting party of the duke's, and slew every man of them to the number of five, losing two of their own number, but thus they escaped, there being none left to carry news to the camp, and they rode furiously, and, by the time they came near Baratesta, they were not more than a mile behind Lepardo's company. But Lepardo, when he had detached the six men to watch Antonio, rode in hastily to find the syndic and learn from him the meaning of what he had seen, and thus Tommasino, coming opposite to the mouth of the hermit's cave, saw no more than six horses tethered on the river bank having the duke's escutcheon wrought on their saddle cloths. Then he leaped down, and, running to the edge of the bank, saw a man disappearing into the mouth of the cave, dripping wet, and this man was the last of the six, who had swum the river and were now groping their way with great caution along the narrow track that the hermit had made. Now Tommasino understood no more than Lepardo that there was any opening from the cave to the vault, but he thought that the duke's men did not swim the river for their pleasure, and he bade Bena take five and watch what should happen, while he rode on with the rest.

"If they come out again immediately," he said, "you will have them at a disadvantage, but if they do not come out, go in after them, for I know not what they are doing unless they are seeking my cousin or laying some trap for him." Then Tommasino rode after Lepardo, and Bena, having given the duke's men but the briefest space in which to come out again from the cave, prepared to go after them. And the duke's men were now much alarmed, for the last man told them of the armed men on the bank opposite, and that they did not wear the duke's badges, so the six retreated up the passage very silently, and they could not find any opening, for it grew darker at every step, and they became much out of heart. But Bena's men crossed the river and entered the mouth of the cave after them. Thus there was fair likelihood of good fighting, both in the passage and by the gate of the vault.

But the Count Antonio, not knowing that any of his band were near, had ceased to hope for his life, and he sat calm and ready, sword in hand, while the hermit withdrew to a corner of the vault and crouched there, muttering his mad answers and questions, and ever and again hailing some one of the dead Peschelti by name, as though he saw him. Then suddenly a coffin fell with a loud crash on the top of the heap on to the floor; for the duke's men had found the opening, and were pushing at it with hand and shoulder. Then Antonio sprang to his feet and left the gate and went and stood ready by the pile of coffins. But again on a sudden came a tumult from beyond the opening, for Bena and his five also were now in the passage, and the foremost of them—who indeed was Bena himself—had come upon the hindmost of the duke's men, and the six, finding an enemy behind them, pushed yet more fiercely and strenuously against the coffins. And no man in the passage saw any man, it being utterly dark; and they could not use their swords for lack of space, but drew their daggers and thrust fiercely when they felt a man's body near.

So in the dark they pushed and wrestled, and struggled and stabbed, and the sound of their tumult filled all the vault and spread beyond, being heard outside, and many outside crossed themselves with fear, saying: "Hell is broke loose. God save us!" But at that moment came Lepardo and his company, and he, having leaped from his horse and heard from the syndic that Antonio was in very truth in the vault, drew his sword and came at the head of his men to the door, and they laid hold of the handles of it and wrenched it open. And Antonio, perceiving that the door was wrenched open and not yet understanding that any of his friends were near, suddenly flung himself prone on the floor by the wall of the vault, behind two of the great coffins which the efforts of the duke's men had dislodged, and there he lay hidden, so that Lepardo, when he rushed in, saw no man, for the corner where the hermit crouched was dark, but the voice of the madman came, saying: "Welcome! Do you bring me another of the Peschelti? He is welcome!"

Then the duke's men, having pushed aside all the coffins save one, came tumbling and scrambling over into the vault, where they found Lepardo and his followers, and hot on their heels came Bena and his five, so that the vault was full of men. And now from the outside also came the clatter of hoofs and hoarse cries, and the clash of steel, for Tommasino had come and had fallen with great fury on those of Lepardo's men who were outside and on the syndic's levies that watched from afar off. And fierce was the battle outside, yet it was fiercer inside, where men fought in a half light, scarcely knowing with whom they fought, and tripping hither and thither over the coffins of the Peschelti that were strewn about the floor.

Then the Count Antonio arose from where he lay and he cried aloud: "To me, to me! To me, Antonio of Monte Velluto!" and he rushed to the entrance of the vault. Bena, hearing his voice and cutting down one who barred the way, ran to Antonio in great joy to find him alive and whole. And Antonio came to Lepardo, who stood his ground bravely, although greatly bewildered to find a party of Antonio's men where he had looked for Antonio alone. And he cried to his men to rally round them, and, keeping his face and his blade toward the mouth of the vault, in order to rejoin his men outside, for there also he perceived that there was an enemy. Thus Lepardo fell back and Antonio pressed on. But, unnoticed by any, the mad hermit now sprang forth from the corner where he had been, and as Antonio was about to thrust at Lepardo the hermit caught him by the arm and with the strength of frenzy drew him back and thrust himself forward, running even on the point of Lepardo's sword that was ready for Count Antonio, and the sword of Lepardo passed through the breast of the hermit of the vault and protruded behind his back between the shoulders, and he fell prone on the floor of the vault, crying exultantly: "Death! Thanks be to God, death!" And then and there he died of the thrust that Lepardo gave him. But Antonio, with Bena and three more—for two of Bena's five were slain—drove Lepardo and his men back before them, and thus won their way to the gate of the vault, where, to their joy, they found that Tommasino more than held his own, for he had scattered Lepardo's men, and the syndic's were in full flight, save eight or ten of the old soldiers, who had served in free companies, and these stood in a group, their swords in their right hands and daggers in the left, determined to die dearly, and the grizzly-haired fellow who had killed Antonio's horse had assumed command of them.

"Here are some fellows worth fighting, my lord," said Bena, joyfully, to Tommasino. "Let us beat them, my lord, man for man, an equal number of us." For, although Bena had killed a man and maimed another in the vault, he saw no reason for staying his hand.

"Aye, Bena," laughed Tommasino. "These fellows deserve to die at the hands of men like us."

But while they prepared to attack, Antonio cried suddenly: "Let them be! There are enough men dead over this matter of Cesare's treasure." And he compelled Tommasino and Bena to come with him, although they were very reluctant; and they seized horses that had belonged to Lepardo's men, and one of Tommasino's men also being dead, Bena took his horse. Then Antonio said to the men of free companies: "What is your quarrel with me? I do but take what is mine. Go in peace. This syndic is no matter of yours." But the men wondered and stood their ground. Then Antonio turned and rode to the entrance of the vault, where his band was now besieging Lepardo, and he cried to Lepardo: "Confer with me, sir. You can come forth safely." And Lepardo came out from the vault, having lost no less than five men there and having others wounded, and he was himself wounded in the right arm and could not hold his sword. Then the count said to him: "Sir, it is no shame for a man to yield when fortune is against him. And I trust that I am one to whom a gentleman may yield without shame. See, the syndic's men are fled and yours are scattered, and these men, who stand bravely by, are not enough to resist me." And Lepardo answered sadly—for he was very sorry that he had failed to take Antonio:

"Indeed, my lord, we are worsted. For we did not come out ten men against one, as I think he should who seeks to overcome the Lord Antonio."

To this Antonio bowed most courteously, saying: "Nay, it is rather fortune, sir," and Lepardo said:

"Yet we can die in case you put unseemly conditions upon us, my lord."

"There is no condition, save that you fight no more against me today," said Antonio.

"So let it be, my lord," said Lepardo, and to this the men of the free companies agreed, and they mingled with Antonio's band, and two of them joined themselves to Antonio that day and were with him henceforward, one being slain on Mount Agnino, and the other preserving his life through all the perils that beset the count's company.

Then Antonio went back to the house of Cesare, and brought forth the body of Cesare, and, having come to the vault, he caused those who had been slain to be carried out, and set the coffins again in decent order, and laid Cesare, the last of the house, there. But when the corpse of the hermit was brought out all marveled very greatly, and had much compassion for him when they heard from the lips of Count Antonio his pitiful story, and Antonio bestowed out of the moneys that he had from Cesare a large sum, that masses might be said for the soul of the hermit. "For of a surety," said the count, "is was heaven's will that through this misfortune and the strange madness that came upon him my life should be saved."

These things done, Antonio gathered his band, and having taken farewell of Lepardo and commenced him for the valor of his struggle, prepared to ride back to the hills. And his face was grave, for he was considering earnestly how he should escape the hundred men who lay watching him in the plains. But while he considered Tommasino came to him and said: "All Baratesta is ours, cousin. Cannot we get a change of coat, and thus ride with less notice from the duke's camp?" And Antonio laughed also, and they sent and caught twenty men of Baratesta, grave merchants and petty traders, and among them Bena laid hold of the syndic and brought him in his chair to Antonio. And the count said to the syndic: "It is ill meddling with the affairs of better men, Master Syndic. Off with that gown of yours."

And they stripped the syndic of his gown, and Antonio put on the gown. Thus the syndic had need very speedily of the new gown which he had contracted to purchase of the lame tailor as the price of the tailor's invitation. And all Antonio's men clothed themselves like merchants and traders, Antonio, in the syndic's gown, taking his place at the head. And thus soberly attired, they rode out soberly from Baratesta, neither Lepardo nor any of his men being able to restrain themselves from laughter to see them go; and most strange of all was Bena, who wore an old man's gown of red cloth trimmed with fur.

It was now noon, and the band rode slowly, for the sun was very hot, and several times they paused to take shelter under clumps of trees, so that the afternoon waned before they came in sight of the duke's encampment. Soon then they were seen, and a young officer of the guard with three men came pricking toward them to learn their business; and Antonio hunched the syndic's gown about his neck and pulled his cap down over his eyes, and thus received the officer. And the officer was deluded and did not know him, but said:

"Is there news, syndic?"

"Yes, there is news," said Antonio. "The hermit of the vault of the Peschelti is dead at Baratesta."

"I know naught of him," said the officer.

By this time Antonio's men had all crowded round the officer and his companions, hemming him in on every side; and those that watched from the duke's camp saw the merchants and traders flocking round the officer, and said to themselves: "They are offering wares to him." But Antonio said: "How, sir? You have never heard of the hermit of the vault?"

"I have not, syndic," said the officer.

"He was a man, sir," said Antonio, "who dwelt with the dead in a vault, and was so enamored of death that he greeted it as a man greets a dear friend who has tarried over-long in coming."

"In truth a strange mood!" cried the officer. "I think this hermit was mad."

"I think so also," said Antonio.

"I cannot doubt of it," cried the officer.

"Then, sir, you are not of his mind?" asked Antonio, smiling. "You would not sleep this night with the dead, nor hold out hands to death as to a dear friend?"

"By St. Prisian, no," said the young officer with a laugh. "For this world is well enough, syndic, and I have sundry trifling sins that I would be quit of before I face another."

"If that be so, sir," said Antonio, "return to him who sent you, and say that the syndic of Baratesta rides here with a company of friends, and that his business is lawful, and open to no suspicion." And even as Antonio spoke every man drew his dagger, and there were three daggers at the heart of the officer and three at the heart of each of the men with him. "For by saying this," continued the count, fixing his eyes on the officer, "and by no other means can you escape immediate death."

Then the officer looked to right and left, being very much bewildered, but Tommasino touched him on the arm, and said: "You have fallen, sir, into the hands of Count Antonio. Take an oath to do as he bids you, and save your life." And Antonio took off the syndic's cap and showed his face, and Bena rolled up the sleeve of his old man's gown and showed the muscles of his arm.

"The Count Antonio!" cried the officer and his men, in great dismay.

"Yes, and we are four to one," said Tommasino. "You have no choice, sir, between the oath and immediate death. And it seems to me that you are, in deed, not of the mind of the hermit."

But the officer cried: "My honor will not suffer this oath, my lord." And hearing this, Bena advanced his dagger. But Antonio smiled again, and said:

"Then I will not force it on you, sir. But thus much I must force on you—to swear to abide here for half an hour, and during that time to send no word and make no sign to your camp."

To this the officer, having no choice between it and death, agreed, and Antonio, leaving him rode forward softly, and, riding softly, he passed within half a mile of the duke's encampment. But at this moment the officer, seeing Antonio far away, broke his oath, and shouted loudly: "It is Antonio of Monte Velluto!" and set spurs to his horse. Then Antonio's brow grew dark, and he said:

"Ride on swiftly, all of you, to the hills and leave me here."

"My lord!" said Tommasino, beseeching him.

"Ride on," said Antonio sternly. "Ride at a gallop. You will draw them off from me."

And they dared not disobey him, but all rode on. And now there was a stir in the duke's camp, men running for their arms and their horses. But Antonio's band now put themselves to a gallop, making straight for the hills, and the commander of the duke's guard did not know what to make of the matter, for he had heard the officer cry "Antonio," but did not understand what he meant. Therefore there was a short delay before the pursuit after the band was afoot, and the band thus gained an advantage, and Antonio turned away, saying: "It is enough. They will come safe to the hills."

But he himself drew his sword and set spurs to his horse, and he rode toward where the young officer was. And at first the officer came boldly to meet him, then he wavered, and his cheek went pale, and he said to the men who rode with him: "We are four to one." But one of them answered:

"Four to two, sir."

"What do you mean?" cried the officer. "I see none coming but Count Antonio himself."

"Is not God also against oath breakers?" said the fellow, and he looked at his comrades. And they nodded their heads to him, for they were afraid to fight by the side of a man who had broken his oath. Moreover the figure of the count was very terrible, and the three turned aside and left the young officer alone.

Now by this time the whole of the duke's encampment was astir, but they followed not after Antonio, but after Tommasino and the rest of the band, for they did not know Antonio in the syndic's gown. Thus the young officer was left alone to meet Antonio, and when he saw this his heart failed him and his courage sank, and he dared not await Antonio, but he turned, set spurs to his horse and fled from Antonio away across the plain. And Antonio pursued after him, and was now very near upon him, so that the officer saw that he would soon be overtaken, and the reins fell from his hand, and he sat on his horse like a man smitten with the palsy, shaking and trembling, and his horse, being unguided, stumbled as it went, and the officer fell off from it, and he lay very still on the ground. Then Count Antonio came up to him and sat on his horse, holding his drawn sword in his hand, and in an instant the officer began to arouse himself, and looking up he saw Antonio with his sword drawn. And Antonio said:

"Shall men without honor live?"

Then the officer gazed into the eyes of the Count Antonio, and the sweat burst forth on his forehead. A sudden strange, choking cry came from him; he dropped his sword from his hand, and with both hands he suddenly clasped his heart, uttering now a great cry of pain and having his face wrung with agony. Thus he stood for an instant, clutching his heart with both his hands, his mouth twisted fearfully, and then he dropped onto the ground and lay still. And the Count Antonio sheathed his sword and bared his head, saying: "It is not my sword, but God's."

And he turned and put his horse to a gallop and rode away, not seeking to pass the duke's encampment, but directing his way toward the village of Rilano; and there he found shelter in the house of a friend for some hours, and when night fell made his way safely back to the hills, and found that the duke's men had abandoned the pursuit of his band, and that all of them were alive and safe.

But when they came to take up the young officer who had been false to his oath, he was dead, whether from fright at the aspect of Count Antonio and the imminent doom with which he was threatened, or by some immediate judgment of heaven, I know not. For very various are the dealings of God with man. For one crime He will slay and tarry not, and so, perchance, was it meted out to that officer, but with another man His way is different, and He suffers him to live long days, mindful of his sin, in self-hatred and self-scorn, and will not send him the relief of death, howmuchsoever the wretch may pray for it. Thus it was that God dealt with the hermit of the vault of the Peschelti, who did not find death till he had sought it for twenty-three years. I doubt not that in all there is purpose, even as was shown in the manner wherein the hermit, being himself bound and tied to a miserable life, was an instrument in saving the life of Count Antonio.

(To be Continued.)

THE DEATH OF THE HERMIT.

THE COUNT AND THE HERMIT.

IMPERIAL HAIR REGENERATOR.

Perfectly restores a rich, lustrous color, makes the hair healthy, and is clean. Steaming, salt, or Turkish Baths do not affect it. It is as natural as nature; does not interfere with curling and crimping.

COLORS:
1. Black. 2. Dark Brown. 3. Medium Brown. 4. Chestnut. 5. Light Chestnut. 6 Gold Blonde. 7 Ash Blonde. Price $1.50 $4.00

A sample bottle of "Venus Tint," a coloring for the cheeks, will be sent on receipt of a 2-cent stamp.

IMPERIAL CHEMICAL MFG. CO., 292 Fifth Avenue, New York.

IN OMAHA: SHERMAN & McCONNELL, 1513 Dodge Street.

THE ELLIS & GOLTERMAN "RAPID FLOW" FountainSyringe

The NAME indicates its advantages.

FOR SALE BY KUHN & CO., Douglas and 15th Sts. ALOE & PENFOLD CO., 1408 Farnam St. J. A. FULLER & CO., 1402 Douglas St.

CHICKASAW E&W TRADE MARK

Locomotor Ataxia, Epilepsy And all diseases of the SPINAL CORD Find ready amelioration from the use of Meduline The Extract of the Spinal Cord of the Ox. Prepared under the formula of DR. WM. A. HAMMOND, In his laboratory at Washington, D. C. Dose, 5 drops. Price, two drachms, $1.00. FOR SALE BY ALL DRUGGISTS. COLUMBIA CHEMICAL CO. WASHINGTON, D. C. Send for Book. 125 KUHN & CO., AGENTS FOR OMAHA.

BREAKFAST—SUPPER. EPPS'S GRATEFUL—COMFORTING. COCOA BOILING WATER OR MILK.

PATRONIZE HOME INDUSTRIES

By purchasing goods made at the following Nebraska factories. If you cannot find what you want, communicate with the manufacturers as to what dealers handle their goods:

BAGS, BURLAP AND TWINE.

BEMIS OMAHA BAG CO.

Manufacturers of all kinds of cotton & burlap bags, cotton flour sacks & twine a specialty. 514-516-518 S. 11th-st.

BREAKFAST FOOD, FLOUR, YEAST.

WM. PRESTON & CO.

Manufacturers of Preston's California Flakes, Sickle brand self raising flour & yeast. Do you use Preston's best flour?

BREWERIES.

OMAHA BREWING ASSOCIATION.

Car load shipments made in our own refrigerator cars. Blue Ribbon, Elite Export, Vienna Export, and Family Export, delivered to all parts of city.

CARRIAGE FACTORIES.

FROST & HARRIS.

Carriage & Wagon Makers. Carriages, buggies, phaetons & wagons always on hand & made to order. 1213-15 Harney-st., Omaha.

COFFEE, SPICES, BAKING POWDER.

CONSOLIDATED COFFEE CO.,