

Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady

By Vernon Lee

[To H.H. the Ranee Brooke of Sarawak]

IN the year 1701, the Duchy of Luna became united to the Italian dominions of the Holy Roman Empire, owing to the extinction of its famous ducal house in the persons of Duke Balthasar Maria and of his grandson Alberic, who should have been third of the name. Under this dry historical fact lies hidden the strange story of Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady.

I

The first act of hostility of old Duke Balthasar towards the Snake Lady, in whose existence he did not, of course, believe, was connected with the arrival at Luna of certain tapestries after the designs of the famous Monsieur Le Brun, a present from his most Christian Majesty King Lewis the XIV. These Gobelins, which represented the marriage of Alexander and Roxana, were placed in the throne room, and in the most gallant suit of chambers overlooking the great rockery garden, all of which had been completed by Duke Balthasar Maria in 1680; and, as a consequence,

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consequence, the already existing tapestries, silk hangings and mirrors painted by Marius of the Flowers, were transferred into other apartments, thus occasioning a general re-hanging of the Red Palace at Luna. These magnificent operations, in which, as the court poets sang, Apollo and the Graces lent their services to their beloved patron, aroused in Duke Balthasar's mind a sudden curiosity to see what might be made of the rooms occupied by his grandson and heir, and which he had not entered since Prince Alberic's christening. He found the apartments in a shocking state of neglect, and the youthful prince unspeakably shy and rustic; and he determined to give him at once an establishment befitting his age, to look out presently for a princess worthy to be his wife, and, somewhat earlier, for a less illustrious but more agreeable lady to fashion his manners. Meanwhile, Duke Balthasar Maria gave orders to change the tapestry in Prince Alberic's chamber. This tapestry was of old and Gothic taste, extremely worn, and represented Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady Oriana, alluded to in the poems of Boiardo and the chronicles of the Crusaders. Duke Balthasar Maria was a prince of enlightened mind and delicate taste; the literature as well as the art of the dark ages found no grace in his sight; he reproved the folly of feeding the thoughts of youth on improbable events; besides, he disliked snakes and was afraid of the devil. So he ordered the tapestry to be removed and another, representing Susanna and the Elders, to be put in its stead. But when Prince Alberic discovered the change, he cut Susanna and the Elders into strips with a knife he had stolen out of the ducal kitchens (no dangerous instruments being allowed to young princes before they were of an age to learn to fence) and refused to touch his food for three days.

The tapestry over which little Prince Alberic mourned so
greatly

greatly had indeed been both tattered and Gothic. But for the boy it possessed an inexhaustible charm. It was quite full of things, and they were all delightful. The sorely frayed borders consisted of wonderful garlands of leaves, and fruits, and flowers, tied at intervals with ribbons, although they seemed all to grow, like tall, narrow bushes, each from a big vase in the bottom corner ; and made of all manner of different plants. There were bunches of spiky bays, and of acorned oakleaves, sheaves of lilies and heads of poppies, gourds, and apples and pears, and hazelnuts and mulberries, wheat ears, and beans, and pine tufts. And in each of these plants, of which those above named are only a very few, there were curious live creatures of some sort—various birds, big and little, butterflies on the lilies, snails, squirrels, and mice, and rabbits, and even a hare, with such pointed ears, darting among the spruce fir. Alberic learned the names of most of these plants and creatures from his nurse, who had been a peasant, and spent much ingenuity seeking for them in the palace gardens and terraces ; but there were no live creatures there, except snails and toads, which the gardeners killed, and carp swimming about in the big tank, whom Alberic did not like, and who were not in the tapestry ; and he had to supplement his nurse's information by that of the grooms and scullions, when he could visit them secretly. He was even promised a sight, one day, of a dead rabbit—the rabbit was the most fascinating of the inhabitants of the tapestry border—but he came to the kitchen too late, and saw it with its pretty fur pulled off, and looking so sad and naked that it made him cry. But Alberic had grown so accustomed to never quitting the Red Palace and its gardens, that he was usually satisfied with seeing the plants and animals in the tapestry, and looked forward to seeing the real things when he should be grown up. “When I am a man,” he would say to himself—for his nurse scolded him

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him for saying it to her—"I will have a live rabbit of my own."

The border of the tapestry interested Prince Alberic most when he was very little—indeed, his remembrance of it was older than that of the Red Palace, its terraces and gardens—but gradually he began to care more and more for the pictures in the middle.

There were mountains, and the sea with ships ; and these first made him care to go on to the topmost palace terrace and look at the real mountains and the sea beyond the roofs and gardens ; and there were woods of all manner of tall trees, with clover and wild strawberries growing beneath them, and roads, and paths, and rivers, in and out—these were rather confused with the places where the tapestry was worn out, and with the patches and mendings thereof, but Alberic, in the course of time, contrived to make them all out, and knew exactly whence the river came which turned the big mill wheel, and how many bends it made before coming to the fishing nets ; and how the horsemen must cross over the bridge, then wind behind the cliff with the chapel, and pass through the wood of firs in order to get from the castle in the left hand corner nearest the bottom to the town, over which the sun was shining with all its beams, and a wind blowing with inflated cheeks on the right hand close to the top.

The centre of the tapestry was the most worn and discoloured ; and it was for this reason perhaps that little Alberic scarcely noticed it for some years, his eye and mind led away by the bright red and yellow of the border of fruit and flowers, and the still vivid green and orange of the background landscape. Red, yellow and orange, even green, had faded in the centre into pale blue and lilac ; even the green had grown an odd dusky tint ; and the figures seemed like ghosts, sometimes emerging and then receding again into vagueness. Indeed, it was only as he grew bigger that Alberic began

began to see any figures at all ; and then, for a long time he would lose sight of them. But little by little, when the light was strong, he could see them always ; and even in the dark make them out with a little attention. Among the spruce firs and pines, and against a hedge of roses, on which there still lingered a remnant of redness, a knight had reined in his big white horse, and was putting one arm round the shoulder of a lady, who was leaning against the horse's flank. The knight was all dressed in armour—not at all like that of the equestrian statue of Duke Balthasar Maria in the square, but all made of plates, with plates also on the legs, instead of having them bare like Duke Balthasar's statue ; and on his head he had no wig, but a helmet with big plumes. It seemed a more reasonable dress than the other, but probably Duke Balthasar was right to go to battle with bare legs and a kilt and a wig, since he did so. The lady who was looking up into his face was dressed with a high collar and long sleeves, and on her head she wore a thick circular garland, from under which the hair fell about her shoulders. She was very lovely, Alberic got to think, particularly when, having climbed upon a chest of drawers, he saw that her hair was still full of threads of gold, some of them quite loose because the tapestry was so rubbed. The knight and his horse were of course very beautiful, and he liked the way in which the knight reined in the horse with one hand, and embraced the lady with the other arm. But Alberic got to love the lady most, although she was so very pale and faded, and almost the colour of the moonbeams through the palace windows in summer. Her dress also was so beautiful and unlike those of the ladies who got out of the coaches in the Court of Honour, and who had on hoops and no clothes at all on their upper part. This lady, on the contrary, had that collar like a lily, and a beautiful gold chain, and patterns in gold (Alberic made them out little by little) all over her

her bodice. He got to want so much to see her skirt ; it was probably very beautiful too, but it so happened that the inlaid chest of drawers before mentioned stood against the wall in that place, and on it a large ebony and ivory crucifix, which covered the lower part of the lady's body. Alberic often tried to lift off the crucifix, but it was a great deal too heavy, and there was not room on the chest of drawers to push it aside ; so the lady's skirt and feet remained invisible. But one day, when Alberic was eleven, his nurse suddenly took a fancy to having all the furniture shifted. It was time that the child should cease to sleep in her room, and plague her with his loud talking in his dreams. And she might as well have the handsome inlaid chest of drawers, and that nice pious crucifix for herself next door, in place of Alberic's little bed. So one morning there was a great shifting and dusting, and when Alberic came in from his walk on the terrace, there hung the tapestry entirely uncovered. He stood for a few minutes before it, riveted to the ground. Then he ran to his nurse, exclaiming, "Oh, nurse, dear nurse, look—the lady——!"

For where the big crucifix had stood, the lower part of the beautiful pale lady with the gold thread hair was now exposed. But instead of a skirt, she ended off in a big snake's tail, with scales of still most vivid (the tapestry not having faded there) green and gold.

The nurse turned round.

"Holy Virgin," she cried, "why she's a serpent!" Then noticing the boy's violent excitement, she added, "You little ninny, it's only Duke Alberic the Blond, who was your ancestor, and the Snake Lady."

Little Prince Alberic asked no questions, feeling that he must not. Very strange it was, but he loved the beautiful lady with the thread of gold hair only the more because she ended off in the
long

long twisting body of a snake. And that, no doubt, was why the knight was so very good to her.

II

For want of that tapestry, poor Alberic, having cut its successor to pieces, began to pine away. It had been his whole world; and now it was gone he discovered that he had no other. No one had ever cared for him except his nurse, who was very cross. Nothing had ever been taught him except the Latin catechism; he had had nothing to make a pet of except the fat carp, supposed to be four hundred years old, in the tank; he had nothing to play with except a gala coral with bells by Benvenuto Cellini, which Duke Balthasar Maria had sent him on his eighth birthday. He had never had anything except a grandfather, and had never been outside the Red Palace.

Now, after the loss of the tapestry, the disappearance of the plants and flowers and birds and beasts on its borders, and the departure of the kind knight on the horse and the dear golden-haired Snake Lady, Alberic became aware that he had always hated both his grandfather and the Red Palace.

The whole world, indeed, were agreed that Duke Balthasar was the most magnanimous and fascinating of monarchs; and that the Red Palace of Luna was the most magnificent and delectable of residences. But the knowledge of this universal opinion, and the consequent sense of his own extreme unworthiness, merely exasperated Alberic's detestation, which, as it grew, came to identify the Duke and the Palace as the personification and visible manifestation of each other. He knew now—oh how well—every time that he walked on the terrace or in the garden (at the hours when no one else ever entered them) that he had always abominated

abominated the brilliant tomato-coloured plaster which gave the palace its name: such a pleasant, gay colour, people would remark, particularly against the blue of the sky. Then there were the Twelve Cæsars—they were the Twelve Cæsars, but multiplied over and over again—busts with flying draperies and spiky garlands, one over every first floor window, hundreds of them, all fluttering and grimacing round the place. Alberic had always thought them uncanny; but now he positively avoided looking out of the window, lest his eye should catch the stucco eyeball of one of those Cæsars in the opposite wing of the building. But there was one thing more especially in the Red Palace, of which a bare glimpse had always filled the youthful Prince with terror, and which now kept recurring to his mind like a nightmare. This was no other than the famous grotto of the Court of Honour. Its roof was ingeniously inlaid with oyster shells, forming elegant patterns, among which you could plainly distinguish some colossal satyrs; the sides were built of rockery, and in its depths, disposed in a most natural and tasteful manner, was a herd of lifesize animals all carved out of various precious marbles. On holidays the water was turned on, and spurted about in a gallant fashion. On such occasions persons of taste would flock to Luna from all parts of the world to enjoy the spectacle. But ever since his earliest infancy Prince Alberic had held this grotto in abhorrence. The oyster shell satyrs on the roof frightened him into fits, particularly when the fountains were playing; and his terror of the marble animals was such that a bare allusion to the Porphyry Rhinoceros, the Giraffe of Cipollino, and the Verde Antique Monkeys, set him screaming for an hour. The grotto, moreover, had become associated in his mind with the other great glory of the Red Palace, to wit, the domed chapel in which Duke Balthasar Maria intended erecting monuments to his

his immediate ancestors, and in which he had already prepared a monument for himself. And the whole magnificent palace, grotto, chapel and all, had become mysteriously connected with Alberic's grandfather, owing to a particularly terrible dream. When the boy was eight years old, he was taken one day to see his grandfather. It was the feast of St. Balthasar, one of the Three Wise Kings from the East, as is well known. There had been firing of mortars and ringing of bells ever since daybreak. Alberic had his hair curled, was put into new clothes (his usual raiment was somewhat tattered), a large nosegay was put in his hand, and he and his nurse were conveyed by complicated relays of lackeys and of pages up to the Ducal apartments. Here, in a crowded outer room, he was separated from his nurse and received by a gaunt person in a long black robe like a sheath, and a long shovel hat, whom Alberic identified many years later as his grandfather's Jesuit confessor. He smiled a long smile, discovering a prodigious number of teeth, in a manner which froze the child's blood; and lifting an embroidered curtain, pushed Alberic into his grandfather's presence. Duke Balthasar Maria, known as the Ever Young Prince in all Italy, was at his toilet. He was wrapped in a green Chinese wrapper, embroidered with gold pagodas, and round his head was tied an orange scarf of delicate fabric. He was listening to the performance of some fiddlers, and of a lady dressed as a nymph, who was singing the birthday ode with many shrill trills and quavers; and meanwhile his face, in the hands of a valet, was being plastered with a variety of brilliant colours. In his green and gold wrapper and orange head-dress, with the strange patches of vermilion and white on his cheeks, Duke Balthasar looked to the diseased fancy of his grandson as if he had been made of various precious metals, like the celebrated effigy he had erected of himself in the great burial chapel. But, just as
Alberic

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Alberic was mustering up courage and approaching his magnificent grandparent, his eye fell upon a sight so mysterious and terrible that he fled wildly out of the Ducal presence. For through an open door he could see in an adjacent closet a man dressed in white, combing the long flowing locks of what he recognised as his grandfather's head, stuck on a short pole in the light of a window.

That night Alberic had seen in his dreams the ever young Duke Balthasar Maria descend from his niche in the burial-chapel; and, with his Roman lappets and corslet visible beneath the green bronze cloak embroidered with gold pagodas, march down the great staircase into the Court of Honour, and ascend to the empty place at the end of the rockery grotto (where, as a matter of fact, a statue of Neptune, by a pupil of Bernini, was placed some months later), and there, raising his sceptre, receive the obeisance of all the marble animals—the giraffe, the rhinoceros, the stag, the peacock, and the monkeys. And behold! suddenly his well-known features waxed dim, and beneath the great curly peruke there was a round blank thing—a barber's block!

Alberic, who was an intelligent child, had gradually learned to disentangle this dream from reality; but its grotesque terror never vanished from his mind, and became the core of all his feelings towards Duke Balthasar Maria and the Red Palace.

III

The news—which was kept back as long as possible—of the destruction of Susanna and the Elders threw Duke Balthasar Maria into a most violent rage with his grandson. The boy should be punished by exile, and exile to a terrible place; above all, to a
place

place where there was no furniture to destroy. Taking due counsel with his Jesuit, his Jester, and his Dwarf, Duke Balthasar decided that in the whole Duchy of Luna there was no place more fitted for the purpose than the Castle of Sparkling Waters.

For the Castle of Sparkling Waters was little better than a ruin, and its sole inhabitants were a family of peasants. The original cradle of the House of Luna, and its principal bulwark against invasion, the castle had been ignominiously discarded and forsaken a couple of centuries before, when the dukes had built the rectangular town in the plain; after which it had been used as a quarry for ready cut stone, and the greater part carted off to rebuild the city of Luna, and even the central portion of the Red Palace. The castle was therefore reduced to its outer circuit of walls, enclosing vineyards and orange-gardens, instead of moats and yards and towers, and to the large gate tower, which had been kept, with one or two smaller buildings, for the housing of the farmer, his cattle, and his stores.

Thither the misguided young prince was conveyed in a carefully shuttered coach and at a late hour of the evening, as was proper in the case of an offender at once so illustrious and so criminal. Nature, moreover, had clearly shared Duke Balthasar Maria's legitimate anger, and had done her best to increase the horror of this just though terrible sentence. For that particular night the long summer broke up in a storm of fearful violence; and Alberic entered the ruined castle amid the howling of wind, the rumble of thunder, and the rush of torrents of rain.

But the young prince showed no fear or reluctance; he saluted with dignity and sweetness the farmer and his wife and family, and took possession of his attic, where the curtains of an antique and crazy four-poster shook in the draught of the unglazed windows, as if he were taking possession of the gala chambers of

a great palace. "And so," he merely remarked, looking round him with reserved satisfaction, "I am now in the castle which was built by my ancestor and namesake, Alberic the Blond."

He looked not unworthy of such illustrious lineage, as he stood there in the flickering light of the pine torch: tall for his age, slender and strong, with abundant golden hair falling about his very white face.

That first night at the Castle of Sparkling Waters, Alberic dreamed without end about his dear, lost tapestry. And when, in the radiant autumn morning, he descended to explore the place of his banishment and captivity, it seemed as if those dreams were still going on. Or had the tapestry been removed to this spot, and become a reality in which he himself was running about?

The guard tower in which he had slept was still intact and chivalrous. It had battlements, a drawbridge, a great escutcheon with the arms of Luna, just like the castle in the tapestry. Some vines, quite loaded with grapes, rose on the strong cords of their fibrous wood from the ground to the very roof of the tower, exactly like those borders of leaves and fruit which Alberic had loved so much. And, between the vines, all along the masonry, were strung long narrow ropes of maize, like garlands of gold. A plantation of orange trees filled what had once been the moat; lemons were spalliered against the delicate pink brickwork. There were no lilies, but big carnations hung down from the tower windows, and a tall oleander, which Alberic mistook for a special sort of rose-tree, shed its blossoms on to the drawbridge. After the storm of the night, birds were singing all round; not indeed as they sang in spring, which Alberic, of course, did not know, but in a manner quite different from the canaries in the ducal aviaries at Luna. Moreover other birds, wonderful white
and

and gold creatures, some of them with brilliant tails and scarlet crests, were pecking and strutting and making curious noises in the yard. And—could it be true?—a little way further up the hill, for the castle walls climbed steeply from the scaboard, in the grass beneath the olive trees, white creatures were running in and out—white creatures with pinkish lining to their ears, undoubtedly—as Alberic's nurse had taught him on the tapestry—undoubtedly *rabbits*.

Thus Alberic rambled on, from discovery to discovery, with the growing sense that he was in the tapestry, but that the tapestry had become the whole world. He climbed from terrace to terrace of the steep olive yard, among the sage and the fennel tufts, the long red walls of the castle winding ever higher on the hill. And, on the very top of the hill was a high terrace surrounded by towers, and a white shining house with columns and windows, which seemed to drag him upwards.

It was, indeed, the citadel of the place, the very centre of the castle.

Alberic's heart beat strangely as he passed beneath the wide arch of delicate ivy-grown brick, and clambered up the rough paved path to the topmost terrace. And there he actually forgot the tapestry. The terrace was laid out as a vineyard, the vines trellised on the top of stone columns; at one end stood a clump of trees, pines, and a big ilex and a walnut, whose shrivelled leaves already strewed the grass. To the back stood a tiny little house all built of shining marble, with two large rounded windows divided by delicate pillars, of the sort (as Alberic later learned) which people built in the barbarous days of the Goths. Among the vines, which formed a vast arbour, were growing, in open spaces, large orange and lemon trees, and flowering bushes of rosemary, and pale pink roses. And in front of the house, under
a great

a great umbrella pine, was a well, with an arch over it and a bucket hanging to a chain.

Alberic wandered about in the vineyard, and then slowly mounted the marble staircase which flanked the white house. There was no one in it. The two or three small upper chambers stood open, and on their blackened floor were heaped sacks, and faggots, and fodder, and all manner of coloured seeds. The unglazed windows stood open, framing in between their white pillars a piece of deep blue sea. For there, below, but seen over the tops of the olive trees and the green leaves of the oranges and lemons, stretched the sea, deep blue, speckled with white sails, bounded by pale blue capes and arched over by a dazzling pale blue sky. From the lower story there rose faint sounds of cattle, and a fresh, sweet smell as of cut grass and herbs and coolness, which Alberic had never known before.

How long did Alberic stand at that window? He was startled by what he took to be steps close behind him, and a rustle as of silk. But the rooms were empty, and he could see nothing moving among the stacked up fodder and seeds. Still, the sounds seemed to recur, but now outside, and he thought he heard someone in a very low voice call his name. He descended into the vineyard; he walked round every tree and every shrub, and climbed upon the broken masses of rose-coloured masonry, crushing the scented rag-wort and peppermint with which they were overgrown. But all was still and empty. Only, from far, far below, there rose a stave of peasant's song.

The great gold balls of oranges, and the delicate yellow lemons, stood out among their glossy green against the deep blue of the sea; the long bunches of grapes, hung, filled with sunshine, like clusters of rubies and jacinths and topazes, from the trellis which patterned the pale blue sky. But Alberic felt not
hunger

hunger, but sudden thirst, and mounted the three broken marble steps of the well. By its side was a long narrow trough of marble, such as stood in the court at Luna, and which, Alberic had been told, people had used as coffins in pagan times. This one was evidently intended to receive water from the well, for it had a mask in the middle, with a spout; but it was quite dry and full of wild herbs and even of pale, prickly roses. There were garlands carved upon it, and people twisting snakes about them; and the carving was picked out with golden brown minute mosses. Alberic looked at it, for it pleased him greatly; and then he lowered the bucket into the deep well, and drank. The well was very, very deep. Its inner sides were covered, as far as you could see, with long delicate weeds like pale green hair, but this faded away in the darkness. At the bottom was a bright space, reflecting the sky, but looking like some subterranean country. Alberic, as he bent over, was startled by suddenly seeing what seemed a face filling up part of that shining circle; but he remembered it must be his own reflection, and felt ashamed. So, to give himself courage, he bent over again, and sang his own name to the image. But instead of his own boyish voice he was answered by wonderful tones, high and deep alternately, running through the notes of a long, long cadence, as he had heard them on holidays at the Ducal Chapel at Luna.

When he had slaked his thirst, Alberic was about to unchain the bucket, when there was a rustle hard by, and a sort of little hiss, and there rose from the carved trough, from among the weeds and roses, and glided on to the brick of the well, a long, green, glittering thing. Alberic recognised it to be a snake; only, he had no idea it had such a flat, strange little head and such a long forked tongue, for the lady on the tapestry was a woman from the waist upwards. It sat on the opposite side of the well,
moving

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moving its long neck in his direction, and fixing him with its small golden eyes. Then, slowly, it began to glide round the well circle towards him. Perhaps it wants to drink, thought Alberic, and tipped the bronze pitcher in its direction. But the creature glided past, and came around and rubbed itself against Alberic's hand. The boy was not afraid, for he knew nothing about snakes; but he started, for, on this hot day, the creature was icy cold. But then he felt sorry. "It must be dreadful to be always so cold," he said, "come, try and get warm in my pocket."

But the snake merely rubbed itself against his coat, and then disappeared back into the carved sarcophagus.

IV

Duke Balthasar Maria, as we have seen, was famous for his unfading youth, and much of his happiness and pride was due to this delightful peculiarity. Any comparison, therefore, which might diminish it was distasteful to the ever young sovereign of Luna; and when his son had died with mysterious suddenness, Duke Balthasar Maria's grief had been tempered by the consolatory fact that he was now the youngest man at his own court. This very natural feeling explains why the Duke of Luna had put behind him for several years the fact of having a grandson, painful because implying that he was of an age to be a grandfather. He had done his best, and succeeded not badly, to forget Alberic while the latter abode under his own roof; and now that the boy had been sent away to a distance, he forgot him entirely for the space of several years.

But Balthasar Maria's three chief counsellors had no such reason for forgetfulness; and so in turn, each unknown to the other,

other, the Jesuit, the Dwarf, and the Jester, sent spies to the Castle of Sparkling Waters, and even secretly visited that place in person. For by the coincidence of genius, the mind of each of these profound politicians, had been illuminated by the same remarkable thought, to wit : that Duke Balthasar Maria, unnatural as it seemed, would some day have to die, and Prince Alberic, if still alive, become duke in his stead. Those were the times of subtle statecraft ; and the Jesuit, the Dwarf, and the Jester were notable statemen even in their day. So each of them had provided himself with a scheme, which, in order to be thoroughly artistic, was twofold, and so to speak, double-barrelled. Alberic might live or he might die, and therefore Alberic must be turned to profit in either case. If, to invert the chances, Alberic should die before coming to the throne, the Jesuit, the Dwarf, and the Jester had each privately determined to represent this death as purposely brought about by himself for the benefit of one of three Powers which would claim the Duchy in case of extinction of the male line. The Jesuit had chosen to attribute the murder to devotion to the Holy See ; the Dwarf had preferred to appear active in favour of the King of Spain, and the Jester had decided that he would lay claim to the gratitude of the Emperor ; the very means which each would pretend to have used had been thought out : poison in each case ; only while the Dwarf had selected arsenic, taken through a pair of perfumed gloves, and the Jester pounded diamonds mixed in champagne, the Jesuit had modestly adhered to the humble cup of chocolate, which whether real or fictitious, had always stood his order in such good stead. Thus had each of these wily courtiers disposed of Alberic in case that he should die.

There remained the alternative of Alberic continuing to live ; and for this the three rival statemen were also prepared. If
Alberic

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Alberic lived, it was obvious that he must be made to select one of the three as his sole minister ; and banish, imprison, or put to death the other two. For this purpose it was necessary to secure his affection by gifts, until he should be old enough to understand that he had actually owed his life to the passionate loyalty of the Jesuit, or the Dwarf, or the Jester, each of whom had saved him from the atrocious enterprises of the other two counsellors of Balthasar Maria,—nay, who knows ? perhaps from the malignity of Balthasar Maria himself.

In accordance with these subtle machinations, each of the three statesmen determined to outwit his rivals by sending young Alberic such things as would appeal most strongly to a poor young prince living in banishment among peasants, and wholly unsupplied with pocket-money. The Jesuit expended a considerable sum on books, magnificently bound with the arms of Luna ; the Dwarf prepared several suits of tasteful clothes ; and the Jester selected, with infinite care, a horse of equal and perfect gentleness and mettle. And, unknown to one another, but much about the same period, each of the statesmen sent his present most secretly to Alberic. Imagine the astonishment and wrath of the Jesuit, the Dwarf, and the Jester, when each saw his messenger come back from Sparkling Waters, with his gift returned, and the news that Prince Alberic was already supplied with a complete library, a handsome wardrobe and not one, but two horses of the finest breed and training ; nay, more unexpected still, that while returning the gifts to their respective donors, he had rewarded the messengers with splendid liberality.

The result of this amazing discovery was much the same in the mind of the Jesuit, the Dwarf, and the Jester. Each instantly suspected one or both of his rivals ; then, on second thoughts, determined to change the present to one of the other items (horse,
clothes,

clothes, or books, as the case might be) little suspecting that each of them had been supplied already ; and, on further reflection, began to doubt the reality of the whole business, to suspect connivance of the messengers, intended insult on the part of the prince, and decided to trust only to the evidence of his own eyes in the matter.

Accordingly, within the same few months, the Jesuit, the Dwarf, and the Jester, feigned grievous illness to their Ducal Master, and while everybody thought them safe in bed in the Red Palace at Luna, hurried, on horseback, or in a litter, or in a coach, to the Castle of Sparkling Waters.

The scene with the peasant and his family, young Alberic's host, was identical on the three occasions ; and, as the farmer saw that these personages were equally willing to pay liberally for absolute secrecy, he very consistently swore to supply that desideratum to each of the three great functionaries. And similarly, in all three cases, it was deemed preferable to see the young prince first from a hiding place, before asking leave to pay their respects.

The Dwarf, who was the first in the field, was able to hide very conveniently in one of the cut velvet plumes which surmounted Alberic's four-post bedstead, and to observe the young prince as he changed his apparel. But he scarcely recognised the Duke's grandson. Alberic was sixteen, but far taller and stronger than his age would warrant. His figure was at once manly and delicate, and full of grace and vigour of movement. His long hair, the colour of floss silk, fell in wavy curls, which seemed to imply almost a woman's care and coquetry. His hands also, though powerful, were, as the Dwarf took note, of princely form and whiteness. As to his garments, the open doors of his wardrobe displayed every variety that a young prince could need ; and,
while

while the Dwarf was watching, he was exchanging a russet and purple hunting dress, cut after the Hungarian fashion with cape and hood, and accompanied by a cap crowned with peacock's feathers, for a habit of white and silver, trimmed with Venetian lace, in which he intended to honour the wedding of one of the farmer's daughters. Never, in his most genuine youth, had Balthasar Maria, the ever young and handsome, been one quarter as beautiful in person or as delicate in apparel as his grandson in exile among poor country folk.

The Jesuit, in his turn, came to verify his messenger's extraordinary statements. Through the gap between two rafters he was enabled to look down on to Prince Alberic in his study. Magnificently bound books lined the walls of the closet, and in this gap hung valuable maps and prints. On the table were heaped several open volumes, among globes both terrestrial and celestial, and Alberic himself was leaning on the arm of a great chair, reciting the verses of Virgil in a most graceful chant. Never had the Jesuit seen a better-appointed study nor a more precocious young scholar.

As regards the Jester, he came at the very moment that Alberic was returning from a ride ; and, having begun life as an acrobat, he was able to climb into a large ilex which commanded an excellent view of the Castle yard. Alberic was mounted on a splendid jet-black barb, magnificently caparisoned in crimson and gold Spanish trappings. His groom—for he even had a groom—was riding a horse only a shade less perfect : it was white and he was black—a splendid negro such as great princes only own. When Alberic came in sight of the farmer's wife, who stood shelling peas on the doorstep, he waved his hat with infinite grace, caused his horse to caracole and rear three times in salutation, picked an apple up while cantering round the Castle yard, threw it in the air with
his

his sword and cut it in two as it descended, and did a number of similar feats such as are taught only to the most brilliant cavaliers. Now, as he was going to dismount, a branch of the ilex cracked, the black barb reared, and Alberic, looking up, perceived the Jester moving in the tree.

"A wonderful parti-coloured bird!" he exclaimed, and seized the fowling-piece that hung by his saddle. But before he had time to fire the Jester had thrown himself down and alighted, making three somersaults, on the ground.

"My Lord," said the Jester, "you see before you a faithful subject who, braving the threats and traps of your enemies, and, I am bound to add, risking also your Highness's sovereign displeasure, has been determined to see his Prince once more, to have the supreme happiness of seeing him at last clad and equipped and mounted . . ."

"Enough!" interrupted Alberic sternly. "Say no more. You would have me believe that it is to you I owe my horses and books and clothes, even as the Dwarf and the Jesuit tried to make me believe about themselves last month. Know, then, that Alberic of Luna requires gifts from none of you. And now, most miserable councillor of my unhappy grandfather, begone!"

The Jester checked his rage, and tried, all the way back to Luna, to get at some solution of this intolerable riddle. The Jesuit and the Dwarf—the scoundrels—had been trying *their* hand then! Perhaps, indeed, it was their blundering which had ruined his own perfectly concocted scheme. But for their having come and claimed gratitude for gifts they had not made, Alberic would perhaps have believed that the Jester had not merely offered the horse which was refused, but had actually given the two which had been accepted, and the books and clothes (since there had been

books

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books and clothes given) into the bargain. But then, had not Alberic spoken as if he were perfectly sure from what quarter all his possessions had come? This reminded the Jester of the allusion to the Duke Balthasar Maria; Alberic had spoken of him as unhappy. Was it, could it be, possible that the treacherous old wretch had been keeping up relations with his grandson in secret, afraid—for he was a miserable coward at bottom—both of the wrath of his three counsellors, and of the hatred of his grandson? Was it possible, thought the Jester, that not only the Jesuit and the Dwarf, but the Duke of Luna also, had been intriguing against him round young Prince Alberic? Balthasar Maria was quite capable of it; he might be enjoying the trick he was playing to his three masters—for they were his masters; he might be preparing to turn suddenly upon them with his long neglected grandson like a sword to smite them. On the other hand, might this not be a mere mistake and supposition on the part of Prince Alberic, who, in his silly dignity, preferred to believe in the liberality of his ducal grandfather than in that of his grandfather's servants? Might the horses, and all the rest, not really be the gift of either the Dwarf or the Jesuit, although neither had got the credit for it? "No, no," exclaimed the Jester, for he hated his fellow servants worse than his master, "anything better than that! Rather a thousand times that it were the Duke himself who had outwitted them."

Then, in his bitterness, having gone over the old arguments again and again, some additional circumstances returned to his memory. The black groom was deaf and dumb, and the peasants it appeared, had been quite unable to extract any information from him. But he had arrived with those particular horses only a few months ago; a gift, the peasants had thought, from the old Duke of Luna. But Alberic, they had said, had possessed other horses before,

before, which they had also thus taken for granted, must have come from the Red Palace. And the clothes and books had been accumulating, it appeared, ever since the Prince's arrival in his place of banishment. Since this was the case, the plot, whether on the part of the Jesuit or the Dwarf, or on that of the Duke himself, had been going on for years before the Jester had bestirred himself! Moreover, the Prince not only possessed horses, but he had learned to ride; he not only had books, but he had learned to read, and even to read various tongues; and finally, the Prince was not only clad in princely garments, but he was every inch of him a Prince. He had then been consorting with other people than the peasants at Sparkling Waters. He must have been away—or—someone must have come. He had not been living in solitude.

But when—how—and above all, who?

And again the baffled Jester revolved the probabilities concerning the Dwarf, the Jesuit, and the Duke. It must be—it could be no other—it evidently could only be. . . .

“Ah!” exclaimed the unhappy diplomatist; “if only one could believe in magic!”

And it suddenly struck him, with terror and mingled relief, “Was it magic?”

But the Jester, like the Dwarf and the Jesuit, and the Duke of Luna himself, was altogether superior to such foolish beliefs.

V

The young Prince of Luna had never attempted to learn the story of Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady. Children sometimes conceive an inexplicable shyness, almost a dread, of knowing more on subjects which are uppermost in their thoughts; and
such

such had been the case of Duke Balthasar Maria's grandson. Ever since the memorable morning when the ebony crucifix had been removed from in front of the faded tapestry, and the whole figure of the Snake Lady had been for the first time revealed, scarcely a day had passed without there coming to the boy's mind his nurse's words about his ancestor Alberic and the Snake Lady Oriana. But, even as he had asked no questions then, so he had asked no questions since ; shrinking more and more from all further knowledge of the matter. He had never questioned his nurse, he had never questioned the peasants of Sparkling Waters, although the story, he felt quite sure, must be well known among the ruins of Alberic the Blond's own castle. Nay, stranger still, he had never mentioned the subject to his dear Godmother, to whom he had learned to open his heart about all things, and who had taught him all that he knew.

For the Duke's Jester had guessed rightly that, during these years at Sparkling Waters, the young Prince had not consorted solely with peasants. The very evening after his arrival, as he was sitting by the marble well in the vineyard, looking towards the sea, he had felt a hand placed lightly on his shoulder, and looked up into the face of a beautiful lady veiled in green.

"Do not be afraid," she had said, smiling at his terror. "I am not a ghost, but alive like you ; and I am, though you do not know it, your Godmother. My dwelling is close to this castle, and I shall come every evening to play and talk with you, here by the little white palace with the pillars, where the fodder is stacked. Only, you must remember that I do so against the wishes of your grandfather and all his friends, and that if ever you mention me to anyone, or allude in any way to our meetings, I shall be obliged to leave the neighbourhood, and you will never see me again. Some day when you are big you will learn why ;
till

till then you must take me on trust. And now what shall we play at?"

And thus his Godmother had come every evening at sunset; just for an hour and no more, and had taught the poor solitary little prince to play (for he had never played) and to read, and to manage a horse, and, above all, to love: for, except the old tapestry in the Red Palace, he had never loved anything in the world.

Alberic told his dear Godmother everything, beginning with the story of the two pieces of tapestry, the one they had taken away and the one he had cut to pieces; and he asked her about all the things he ever wanted to know, and she was always able to answer. Only, about two things they were silent: she never told him her name nor where she lived, nor whether Duke Balthasar Maria knew her (the boy guessed that she had been a friend of his father's); and Alberic never revealed the fact that the tapestry had represented his ancestor and the beautiful Oriana; for, even to his dear Godmother, and most perhaps to her, he found it impossible even to mention Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady.

But the story, or rather the name of the story he did not know, never loosened its hold on Alberic's mind. Little by little, as he grew up, it came to add to his life two friends, of whom he never told his Godmother. They were, to be sure, of such sort, however different, that a boy might find it difficult to speak about without feeling foolish. The first of the two friends was his own ancestor, Alberic the Blond; and the second that large tame grass snake whose acquaintance he had made the day after his arrival at the castle. About Alberic the Blond he knew indeed but little, save that he had reigned in Luna many hundreds of years ago, and that he had been a very brave and glorious prince indeed, who had helped

helped to conquer the Holy Sepulchre with Godfrey and Tancred and the other heroes of Tasso. But, perhaps in proportion to this vagueness, Alberic the Blond served to personify all the notions of chivalry which the boy had learned from his Godmother, and those which bubbled up in his own breast. Nay, little by little the young Prince began to take his unknown ancestor as a model, and in a confused way, to identify himself with him. For was he not fair-haired too, and Prince of Luna, *Alberic*, third of the name, as the other had been first? Perhaps for this reason he could never speak of this ancestor with his Godmother. She might think it presumptuous and foolish; besides, she might perhaps tell him things about Alberic the Blond which might hurt him; the poor young Prince, who had compared the splendid reputation of his own grandfather with the miserable reality, had grown up precociously sceptical. As to the Snake, with whom he played everyday in the grass, and who was his only companion during the many hours of his Godmother's absence, he would willingly have spoken of her, and had once been on the point of doing so, but he had noticed that the mere name of such creatures seemed to be odious to his Godmother. Whenever, in their readings, they came across any mention of serpents, his Godmother would exclaim, "Let us skip that," with a look of intense pain in her usually cheerful countenance. It was a pity, Alberic thought, that so lovely and dear a lady should feel such hatred towards any living creature, particularly towards a kind, which like his own tame grass snake, was perfectly harmless. But he loved her too much to dream of thwarting her; and he was very grateful to his tame snake for having the tact never to show herself at the hour of his Godmother's visits.

But to return to the story represented on the dear, faded tapestry in the Red Palace.

When

When Prince Alberic, unconscious to himself, was beginning to turn into a full-grown and gallant-looking youth, a change began to take place in him, and it was about the story of his ancestor and the Lady Oriana. He thought of it more than ever, and it began to haunt his dreams ; only it was now a vaguely painful thought, and, while dreading still to know more, he began to experience a restless, miserable, craving to know all. His curiosity was like a thorn in his flesh, working its way in and in ; and it seemed something almost more than curiosity. And yet, he was still shy and frightened of the subject ; nay, the greater his craving to know, the greater grew a strange certainty that the knowing would be accompanied by evil. So, although many people could have answered—the very peasants, the fishermen of the coast, and first, and foremost, his Godmother—he let months pass before he asked the question.

It, and the answer, came of a sudden.

There occasionally came to Sparkling Waters an old man, who united in his tattered person the trades of mending crockery and reciting fairy tales. He would seat himself, in summer, under the spreading fig tree in the castle yard, and in winter, by the peasants' deep, black chimney, alternately boring holes in pipkins, or gluing plate edges, and singing, in a cracked, nasal voice, but not without dignity and charm of manner, the stories of the King of Portugal's Cowherd, of the Feathers of the Griffin, or some of the many stanzas of *Orlando* or *Jerusalem Delivered*, which he knew by heart. Our young Prince had always avoided him, partly from a vague fear of a mention of his ancestor and the Snake Lady, and partly because of something vaguely sinister in the old man's eye. But now he awaited with impatience the vagrant's periodical return, and on one occasion, summoned him to his own chamber.

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“Sing

“Sing me,” he commanded, “the story of Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady.”

The old man hesitated, and answered with a strange look :—

“My lord, I do not know it.”

A sudden feeling, such as the youth had never experienced before, seized hold of Alberic. He did not recognise himself. He saw and heard himself, as if it were some one else, nod first at some pieces of gold, of those his godmother had given him, and then at his fowling piece hung on the wall ; and as he did so, he had a strange thought : “I must be mad.” But he merely said, sternly :—

“Old man, that is not true. Sing that story at once, if you value my money and your safety.”

The vagrant took his white-bearded chin in his hand, mused, and then, fumbling among the files and drills and pieces of wire in his tool basket, which made a faint metallic accompaniment, he slowly began to chant the following stanzas :—

VI

Now listen, courteous Prince, to what befel your ancestor, the valorous Alberic, returning from the Holy Land.

Already a year had passed since the strongholds of Jerusalem had fallen beneath the blows of the faithful, and since the sepulchre of Christ had been delivered from the worshippers of Macomet. The great Godfrey was enthroned as its guardian, and the mighty barons, his companions, were wending their way homewards : Tancred, and Bohemund, and Reynold, and the rest.

The valorous Alberic, the honour of Luna, after many perilous adventures, brought by the anger of the Wizard Macomet,
was

was shipwrecked on his homeward way, and cast, alone of all his great following, upon the rocky shore of an unknown island. He wandered long about, among woods and pleasant pastures, but without ever seeing any signs of habitation; nourishing himself solely on the berries and clear water, and taking his rest in the green grass beneath the trees. At length, after some days of wandering, he came to a dense forest, the like of which he had never seen before, so deep was its shade and so tangled were its boughs. He broke the branches with his iron-gloved hand, and the air became filled with the croaking and screeching of dreadful night-birds. He pushed his way with shoulder and knee, trampling the broken leafage under foot, and the air was filled with the roaring of monstrous lions and tigers. He grasped his sharp double-edged sword and hewed through the interlaced branches, and the air was filled with the shrieks and sobs of a vanquished city. But the Knight of Luna went on, undaunted, cutting his way through the enchanted wood. And behold! as he issued thence, there rose before him a lordly castle, as of some great prince, situate in a pleasant meadow among running streams. And as Alberic approached the portcullis was raised, and the drawbridge lowered; and there arose sounds of fifes and bugles, but nowhere could he descry any living creature around. And Alberic entered the castle, and found therein guardrooms full of shining arms, and chambers spread with rich stuffs, and a banquetting hall, with a great table laid and a chair of state at the end. And as he entered a concert of invisible voices and instruments greeted him sweetly, and called him by name, and bid him be welcome; but not a living soul did he see. So he sat him down at the table, and as he did so, invisible hands filled his cup and his plate, and ministered to him with delicacies of all sorts. Now, when the good knight had eaten and drunken his fill, he drank to
the

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the health of his unknown host, declaring himself the servant thereof with his sword and heart. After which, weary with wandering, he prepared to take rest on the carpets which strewed the ground ; but invisible hands unbuckled his armour, and clad him in silken robes, and led him to a couch all covered with rose-leaves. And when he had laid himself down, the concert of invisible singers and players put him to sleep with their melodies.

It was the hour of sunset when the valorous Baron awoke, and buckled on his armour, and hung on his thigh his great sword Brillamorte ; and the invisible hands helped him once more.

And the Knight of Luna went all over the enchanted castle, and found all manner of rarities, treasures of precious stones, such as great kings possess, and store of gold and silver vessels, and rich stuffs, and stables full of fiery coursers ready caparisoned ; but never a human creature anywhere. And, wondering more and more, he went forth into the orchard, which lay within the walls of the castle. And such another orchard, sure, was never seen, since that in which the hero Hercules found the three golden apples and slew the great dragon. For you might see in this place fruit trees of all kinds, apples and pears, and peaches and plums, and the goodly orange, which bore at the same time fruit and delicate and scented blossom. And all around were set hedges of roses, whose scent was even like heaven ; and there were other flowers of all kinds, those into which the vain Narcissus turned through love of himself, and those which grew, they tell us, from the blood-drops of fair Venus's minion ; and lilies of which that Messenger carried a sheaf who saluted the Meek Damsel, glorious above all womankind. And in the trees sang innumerable birds ; and others, of unknown breed, joined melody in hanging cages and aviaries. And in the orchard's midst was set a fountain, the most wonderful ever made, its waters running
in

in green channels among the flowered grass. For that fountain was made in the likeness of twin naked maidens, dancing together, and pouring water out of pitchers as they did so ; and the maidens were of fine silver, and the pitchers of wrought gold, and the whole so cunningly contrived by magic art that the maidens really moved and danced with the waters they were pouring out : a wonderful work, most truly. And when the Knight of Luna had feasted his eyes upon this marvel, he saw among the grass, beneath a flowering almond tree, a sepulchre of marble, cunningly carved and gilded, on which was written, "Here is imprisoned the Fairy Oriana, most miserable of all fairies, condemned for no fault, but by envious powers, to a dreadful fate,"—and as he read, the inscription changed, and the sepulchre showed these words : "O Knight of Luna, valorous Alberic, if thou wouldst show thy gratitude to the hapless mistress of this castle, summon up thy redoubtable courage, and, whatsoever creature issue from my marble heart, swear thou to kiss it three times on the mouth, that Oriana may be released."

And Alberic drew his great sword, and on its hilt, shaped like a cross, he swore.

Then wouldst thou have heard a terrible sound of thunder, and seen the castle walls rock. But Alberic, nothing daunted, repeats in a loud voice, "I swear," and instantly that sepulchre's lid upheaves, and there issues thence and rises up a great green snake, wearing a golden crown, and raises itself and fawns towards the valorous Knight of Luna. And Alberic starts and recoils in terror. For rather, a thousand times, confront alone the armed hosts of all the heathen, than put his lips to that cold, creeping beast ! And the serpent looks at Alberic with great gold eyes, and big tears issue thence, and it drops prostrate on the grass, and Alberic summons courage and approaches ; but when the serpent
glides

glides along his arm, a horror takes him, and he falls back unable. And the tears stream from the snake's golden eyes, and moans come from its mouth.

And Alberic runs forward, and seizes the serpent in both hands, and lifts it up, and three times presses his hot lips against its cold and slippery skin, shutting his eyes in horror, and when the Knight of Luna opens them again, behold! O wonder! in his arms no longer a dreadful snake, but a damsel, richly dressed and beautiful beyond comparison.

VII

Young Alberic sickened that very night, and lay for many days with raging fever. The peasant's wife and a good neighbouring priest nursed him unhelped, for when the messenger they sent arrived at Luna, Duke Balthasar was busy rehearsing a grand ballet in which he himself danced the part of Phœbus Apollo; and the ducal physician was therefore despatched to Sparkling Waters only when the young prince was already recovering.

Prince Alberic undoubtedly passed through a very bad illness, and went fairly out of his mind for fever and ague.

He raved so dreadfully in his delirium about enchanted tapestries and terrible grottoes, Twelve Cæsars with rolling eyeballs, barbers' blocks with perukes on them, monkeys of verde antique, and porphyry rhinoceroses, and all manner of hellish creatures, that the good priest began to suspect a case of demoniac possession, and caused candles to be kept lighted all day and all night, and holy water to be sprinkled, and a printed form of exorcism, absolutely sovereign in such trouble, to be nailed against the bed-post. On the fourth day the young prince fell
into

into a profound sleep, from which he awaked in apparent possession of his faculties.

"Then you are not the porphyry rhinoceros?" he said, very slowly as his eye fell upon the priest; "and this is my own dear little room at Sparkling Waters, though I do not understand all those candles. I thought it was the great hall in the Red Palace, and that all those animals of precious marbles, and my grandfather, the duke, in his bronze and gold robes, were beating me and my tame snake to death with Harlequin's laths. It was terrible. But now I see it was all fancy and delirium."

The poor youth gave a sigh of relief, and feebly caressed the rugged old hand of the priest, which lay on his counterpane. The prince lay for a long while motionless, but gradually a strange light came into his eyes, and a smile on to his lips. Presently he made a sign that the peasants should leave the room, and taking once more the good priest's hand, he looked solemnly in his eyes, and spoke in an earnest voice. "My father," he said, "I have seen and heard strange things in my sickness, and I cannot tell for certain now what belongs to the reality of my previous life, and what is merely the remembrance of delirium. On this I would fain be enlightened. Promise me, my father, to answer my questions truly, for this is a matter of the welfare of my soul, and therefore of your own."

The priest nearly jumped on his chair. So he had been right. The demons had been trying to tamper with the poor young prince, and now he was going to have a fine account of it all.

"My son," he murmured, "as I hope for the spiritual welfare of both of us, I promise to answer all your interrogations to the best of my powers. Speak them without hesitation."

Alberic hesitated for a moment, and his eyes glanced from one long lit taper to the other.

"In

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“In that case,” he said, slowly, “let me conjure you, my father, to tell me whether or not there exists a certain tradition in my family, of the loves of my ancestor, Alberic the Blond, with a certain Snake Lady, and how he was unfaithful to her, and failed to disenchant her, and how a second Alberic, also my ancestor, loved this same Snake Lady, but failed before the ten years of fidelity were over, and became a monk. . . . Does such a story exist, or have I imagined it all during my sickness?”

“My son,” replied the good priest, testily, for he was most horribly disappointed by this speech, “it is scarce fitting that a young prince but just escaped from the jaws of death—and, perhaps, even from the insidious onslaught of the Evil One—should give his mind to idle tales like these.”

“Call them what you choose,” answered the prince, gravely, “but remember your promise, father. Answer me truly, and presume not to question my reasons.”

The priest started. What a hasty ass he had been! Why these were probably the demons talking out of Alberic’s mouth, causing him to ask silly irrelevant questions in order to prevent a good confession. Such were notoriously among their stock tricks! But he would outwit them. If only it were possible to summon up St. Paschal Baylon, that new fashionable saint who had been doing such wonders with devils lately! But St. Paschal Baylon required not only that you should say several rosaries, but that you should light four candles on a table and lay a supper for two; after that there was nothing he would not do. So the priest hastily seized two candlesticks from the foot of the bed, and called to the peasant’s wife to bring a clean napkin and plates and glasses; and meanwhile endeavoured to detain the demons by answering the poor prince’s foolish chatter, “Your ancestors, the two Alberics—a tradition in your Serene family—
yes,

yes, my Lord—there is such—let me see, how does the story go?—ah yes—this demon, I mean this Snake Lady was a—what they call a fairy—or witch, malefica or stryx is, I believe, the proper Latin expression—who had been turned into a snake for her sins—good woman, woman, is it possible you cannot be a little quicker in bringing those plates for his Highness's supper? The Snake Lady—let me see—was to cease altogether being a snake if a cavalier remained faithful to her for ten years; and at any rate turned into a woman every time a cavalier was found who had the courage to give her a kiss as if she were not a snake—a disagreeable thing, besides being mortal sin. As I said just now, this enabled her to resume temporarily her human shape, which is said to have been fair enough; but how can one tell? I believe she was allowed to change into a woman for an hour at sunset, in any case and without anybody kissing her, but only for an hour. A very unlikely story, my Lord, and not a very moral one to my thinking!”

And the good priest spread the table-cloth over the table, wondering secretly when the plates and glasses for St. Paschal Baylon would make their appearance. If only the demon could be prevented from beating a retreat before all was ready! “To return to the story about which your Highness is pleased to inquire,” he continued, trying to gain time by pretending to humour the demon who was asking questions through the poor Prince's mouth, “I can remember hearing a poem before I took orders—a foolish poem too, in a very poor style, if my memory is correct—that related the manner in which Alberic the Blond met this Snake Lady, and disenchanted her by performing the ceremony I have alluded to. The poem was frequently sung at fairs and similar resorts of the uneducated, and, as remarked, was a very inferior composition indeed. Alberic the Blond afterwards
came

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came to his senses, it appears, and after abandoning the Snake Lady fulfilled his duty as a prince, and married the princess. . . . I cannot exactly remember what princess, but it was a very suitable marriage, no doubt, from which your Highness is of course descended.

“As regards the Marquis Alberic, second of the name, of whom it is accounted that he died in the odour of sanctity, (and indeed it is said that the facts concerning his beatification are being studied in the proper quarters), there is a mention in a life of Saint Fredevaldus, bishop and patron of Luna, printed at the beginning of the present century at Venice, with approbation and license of the authorities and inquisition, a mention of the fact that this Marquis Alberic the second had contracted, having abandoned his lawful wife, a left-handed marriage with this same Snake Lady (such evil creatures not being subject to natural death), she having induced him thereunto in hope of his proving faithful ten years, and by this means restoring her altogether to human shape. But a certain holy hermit, having got wind of this scandal, prayed to St. Fredevaldus as patron of Luna, whereupon St. Fredevaldus, took pity on the Marquis Alberic’s sins, and appeared to him in a vision at the end of the ninth year of his irregular connection with the Snake Lady, and touched his heart so thoroughly that he instantly forswore her company, and handing the Marquisate over to his mother, abandoned the world and entered the order of St. Romuald, in which he died, as remarked, in odour of sanctity, in consequence of which the present Duke, your Highness’s magnificent grandfather, is at this moment, as befits so pious a prince, employing his influence with the Holy Father for the beatification of so glorious an ancestor. And now, my son,” added the good priest, suddenly changing his tone, for he had got the table ready, and lighted the candles, and only

only required to go through the preliminary invocation of St. Paschal Baylon—"and now, my son, let your curiosity trouble you no more, but endeavour to obtain some rest, and if possible——"

But the prince interrupted him.

"One word more, good father," he begged, fixing him with earnest eyes, "is it known what has been the fate of the Snake Lady?"

The impudence of the demons made the priest quite angry, but he must not scare them before the arrival of St. Paschal, so he controlled himself, and answered slowly by gulps, between the lines of the invocation he was mumbling under his breath:

"My Lord—it results from the same life of St. Fredevaldus, that . . . (in case of property lost, fire, flood, earthquake, plague) . . . that the Snake Lady (thee we invoke, most holy Paschal Baylon!). The Snake Lady being of the nature of fairies, cannot die unless her head be severed from her trunk, and is still haunting the world, together with other evil spirits, in hopes that another member of the house of Luna (thee we invoke, most holy Paschal Baylon!)—may succumb to her arts and be faithful to her for the ten years needful to her disenchantments—(most holy Paschal Baylon!—and most of all—on thee we call—for aid against the . . .)——"

But before the priest could finish his invocation, a terrible shout came from the bed where the sick prince was lying:

"O Oriana, Oriana!" cried Prince Alberic, sitting up in his bed with a look which terrified the priest as much as his voice. "O Oriana, Oriana!" he repeated, and then fell back exhausted and broken.

"Bless my soul!" cried the priest, almost upsetting the table; "why the demon has already issued out of him! Who would have

have guessed that St. Paschal Baylon performed his miracles as quick as that ! ”

VIII

Prince Alberic was awakened by the loud trill of a nightingale. The room was bathed in moonlight, in which the tapers, left burning round the bed to ward off evil spirits, flickered yellow and ineffectual. Through the open casement came, with the scent of freshly cut grass, a faint concert of nocturnal sounds : the silvery vibration of the cricket, the reedlike quavering notes of the leaf frogs, and, every now and then, the soft note of an owlet, seeming to stroke the silence as the downy wings growing out of the temples of the Sleep god might stroke the air. The nightingale had paused ; and Alberic listened breathless for its next burst of song. At last, and when he expected it least, it came, liquid, loud and triumphant ; so near that it filled the room and thrilled through his marrow like an unison of Cremona viols. He was singing in the pomegranate close outside, whose first buds must be opening into flame-coloured petals. For it was May. Alberic listened ; and collected his thoughts, and understood. He arose and dressed, and his limbs seemed suddenly strong, and his mind strangely clear, as if his sickness had been but a dream. Again the nightingale trilled out, and again stopped. Alberic crept noiselessly out of his chamber, down the stairs and into the open. Opposite, the moon had just risen, immense and golden, and the pines and the cypresses of the hill, the furthest battlements of the castle walls, were printed upon her like delicate lace. It was so light that the roses were pink, and the pomegranate flower scarlet, and the lemons pale yellow, and the grass bright green, only differently coloured from how they looked by day,

day, and as if washed over with silver. The orchard spread up-hill, its twigs and separate leaves all glittering as if made of diamonds, and its tree trunks and spalliers weaving strange black patterns of shadow. A little breeze shuddered up from the sea, bringing the scent of the irises grown for their root among the cornfields below. The nightingale was silent. But Prince Alberic did not stand waiting for its song. A spiral dance of fire-flies, rising and falling like a thin gold fountain, beckoned him upwards through the dewy grass. The circuit of castle walls, jagged and battlemented, and with tufts of trees profiled here and there against the resplendent blue pallor of the moonlight, seemed turned and knotted like huge snakes around the world.

Suddenly, again, the nightingale sang ; a throbbing, silver song. It was the same bird, Alberic felt sure ; but it was in front of him now, and was calling him onwards. The fire-flies wove their golden dance a few steps in front, always a few steps in front, and drew him up-hill through the orchard.

As the ground became steeper, the long trellises, black and crooked, seemed to twist and glide through the blue moonlight grass like black gliding snakes, and, at the top, its marble pillarets, clear in the moonlight, slumbered the little Gothic palace of white marble. From the solitary sentinel pine broke the song of the nightingale. This was the place. A breeze had risen, and from the shining moonlit sea, broken into causeways and flotillas of smooth and of fretted silver, came a faint briny smell, mingling with that of the irises and blossoming lemons, with the scent of vague ripeness and freshness. The moon hung like a silver lantern over the orchard ; the wood of the trellises patterned the blue luminous heaven, the vine leaves seemed to swim, transparent, in the shining air. Over the circular well, in the high grass, the
fire-flies

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fire-flies rose and fell like a thin fountain of gold. And, from the sentinel pine, the nightingale sang.

Prince Alberic leant against the brink of the well, by the trough carved with antique designs of serpent-bearing mænads. He was wonderfully calm, and his heart sang within him. It was, he knew, the hour and place of his fate.

The nightingale ceased: and the shrill songs of the crickets was suspended. The silvery luminous world was silent.

A quiver came through the grass by the well; a rustle through the roses. And, on the well's brink, encircling its central blackness, glided the Snake.

"Oriana!" whispered Alberic. "Oriana!" She paused, and stood almost erect. The Prince put out his hand, and she twisted round his arm, extending slowly her chilly coil to his wrist and fingers.

"Oriana!" whispered Prince Alberic again. And raising his hand to his face, he leaned down and pressed his lips on the little flat head of the serpent. And the nightingale sang. But a coldness seized his heart, the moon seemed suddenly extinguished, and he slipped away in unconsciousness.

When he awoke the moon was still high. The nightingale was singing its loudest. He lay in the grass by the well, and his head rested on the knees of the most beautiful of ladies. She was dressed in cloth of silver which seemed woven of moon mists, and shimmering moonlit green grass. It was his own dear God-mother.

IX

When Duke Balthasar Maria had got through the rehearsals of the ballet called *Daphne Transformed*, and finally danced his part

part of Phœbus Apollo to the infinite delight and glory of his subjects, he was greatly concerned, being benignly humoured, on learning that he had very nearly lost his grandson and heir. The Dwarf, the Jesuit, and the Jester, whom he delighted in pitting against one another, had severely accused each other of disrespectful remarks about the dancing of that ballet; so Duke Balthasar determined to disgrace all three together and inflict upon them the hated presence of Prince Alberic. It was, after all, very pleasant to possess a young grandson, whom one could take to one's bosom and employ in being insolent to one's own favourites. It was time, said Duke Balthasar, that Alberic should learn the habits of a court and take unto himself a suitable princess.

The young prince accordingly was sent for from Sparkling Waters, and installed at Luna in a wing of the Red Palace, overlooking the Court of Honour, and commanding an excellent view of the great rockery, with the verde antique apes and the porphyry rhinoceros. He found awaiting him on the great staircase a magnificent staff of servants, a master of the horse, a grand cook, a barber, a hairdresser and assistant, a fencing master, and four fiddlers. Several lovely ladies of the Court, the principal ministers of the Crown and the Jesuit, the Dwarf and the Jester, were also ready to pay their respects. Prince Alberic threw himself out of the glass coach before they had time to open the door, and bowing coldly, ascended the staircase, carrying under his cloak what appeared to be a small wicker cage. The Jesuit, who was the soul of politeness, sprang forward and signed to an officer of the household to relieve his highness of this burden. But Alberic waved the man off; and the rumour went abroad that a hissing noise had issued from under the prince's cloak, and, like lightning, the head and forked tongue of a serpent.

Half-an-hour later the official spies had informed Duke
Balthasar

Balthasar that his grandson and heir had brought from Sparkling Waters no apparent luggage save two swords, a fowling piece, a volume of Virgil, a branch of pomegranate blossom, and a tame grass snake.

Duke Balthasar did not like the idea of the grass snake; but wishing to annoy the Jester, the Dwarf, and the Jesuit, he merely smiled when they told him of it, and said: "The dear boy! What a child he is! He probably, also, has a pet lamb, white as snow, and gentle as spring, mourning for him in his old home! How touching is the innocence of childhood! Heigho! I was just like that myself not so very long ago." Whereupon the three favourites and the whole Court of Luna smiled and bowed and sighed: "How lovely is the innocence of youth!" while the Duke fell to humming the well-known air, "Thrysis was a shepherd boy," of which the ducal fiddlers instantly struck up the ritornel.

"But," added Balthasar Maria, with that subtle blending of majesty and archness in which he excelled all living princes, "but it is now time that the prince, my grandson, should learn"—here he put his hand on his sword and threw back slightly one curl of his jet black peruke—"the stern exercises of Mars; and, also, let us hope, the freaks and frolics of Venus."

Saying which, the old sinner pinched the cheek of a lady of the very highest quality, whose husband and father were instantly congratulated by all the court on this honour.

Prince Alberic was displayed next day to the people of Luna, standing on the balcony among a tremendous banging of mortars; while Duke Balthasar explained that he felt towards this youth all the fondness and responsibility of an elder brother. There was a grand ball, a gala opera, a review, a very high mass in the cathedral; the Dwarf, the Jesuit, and the Jester each separately offered

offered his services to Alberic in case he wanted a loan of money, a love letter carried, or in case even (expressed in more delicate terms) he might wish to poison his grandfather. Duke Balthasar Maria, on his side, summoned his ministers, and sent couriers, booted and liveried, to three great dukes of Italy, carrying each of these in a morocco wallet emblazoned with the arms of Luna, an account of Prince Alberic's lineage and person, and a request for particulars of any marriageable princesses and dowries to be disposed of.

X

Prince Alberic did not give his grandfather that warm satisfaction which the old duke had expected. Balthasar Maria, entirely bent upon annoying the three favourites, had said, and had finally believed, that he intended to introduce his grandson to the delight and duties of life, and in the company of this beloved stripling to dream that he, too, was a youth once more: a statement which the court took with due deprecatory reverence, as the duke was well known never to have ceased to be young.

But Alberic did not lend himself to so touching an idyll. He behaved, indeed, with the greatest decorum, and manifested the utmost respect for his grandfather. He was marvellously assiduous in the council chamber, and still more so in following the military exercises and learning the trade of a soldier. He surprised every one by his interest and intelligence in all affairs of state; he more than surprised the Court by his readiness to seek knowledge about the administration of the country and the condition of the people. He was a youth of excellent morals, courage and diligence; but, there was no denying it, he had

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positively no conception of *sacrificing to the Graces*. He sat out, as if he had been watching a review, the delicious operas and superb ballets which absorbed half the revenue of the duchy. He listened, without a smile of comprehension, to the witty innuendoes of the ducal table. But worst of all, he had absolutely no eyes, let alone a heart, for the fair sex. Now Balthasar Maria had assembled at Luna a perfect bevy of lovely nymphs, both ladies of the greatest birth, whose husbands received most honourable posts military and civil, and young females of humbler extraction, though not less expressive habits, ranging from singers and dancers to slave-girls of various colours, all dressed in their appropriate costume: a galaxy of beauty which was duly represented by the skill of celebrated painters on all the walls of the Red Palace, where you may still see their fading charms, habited as Diana, or Pallas, or in the spangles of Columbine, or the turban of Sibyls. These ladies were the object of Duke Balthasar's most munificently divided attentions; and in the delight of his newborn family affection, he had promised himself much tender interest in guiding the taste of his heir among such of these nymphs as had already received his own exquisite appreciation. Great, therefore, was the disappointment of the affectionate grandfather when his dream of companionship was dispelled, and it became hopeless to interest young Alberic in anything at Luna, save despatches and cannons.

The Court, indeed, found the means of consoling Duke Balthasar for this bitterness, by extracting therefrom a brilliant comparison between the unfading grace, the vivacious, though majestic, character of the grandfather, and the gloomy and pedantic personality of the grandson. But, although Balthasar Maria would only smile at every new proof of Alberic's bearish obtuseness, and ejaculate in French, "Poor child! he was born
old

old, and I shall die young !” the reigning Prince of Luna grew vaguely to resent the peculiarities of his heir.

In this fashion things proceeded in the Red Palace at Luna, until Prince Alberic had attained his twenty-first year.

He was sent, in the interval, to visit the principal Courts of Italy, and to inspect its chief curiosities, natural and historical, as befitted the heir to an illustrious state. He received the golden rose from the Pope in Rome ; he witnessed the festivities of Ascension Day from the Doge’s barge at Venice ; he accompanied the Marquis of Montferrat to the camp under Turin ; he witnessed the launching of a galley against the Barbary corsairs by the Knights of St. Stephen in the port of Leghorn, and a grand bull-fight and burning of heretics given by the Spanish Viceroy at Palermo ; and he was allowed to be present when the celebrated Dr. Borri turned two brass buckles into pure gold before the Archduke at Milan. On all of which occasions the heir-apparent of Luna bore himself with a dignity and discretion most singular in one so young. In the course of these journeys he was presented to several of the most promising heiresses in Italy, some of whom were of so tender age as to be displayed in jewelled swaddling-clothes on brocade cushions ; and a great many possible marriages were discussed behind his back. But Prince Alberic declared for his part that he had decided to lead a single life until the age of twenty-eight or thirty, and that he would then require the assistance of no ambassadors or chancellors, but find for himself the future Duchess of Luna.

All this did not please Balthasar Maria, as indeed nothing else about his grandson did please him much. But, as the old duke did not really relish the idea of a daughter-in-law at Luna, and as young Alberic’s whimsicalities entailed no expense, and left him entirely free in his business and pleasure, he turned a deaf ear to

the

the criticisms of his councillors, and letting his grandson inspect fortifications, drill soldiers, pore over parchments, and mope in his wing of the palace, with no amusement save his repulsive tame snake, Balthasar Maria composed and practised various ballets, and began to turn his attention very seriously to the completion of the rockery grotto and of the sepulchral chapel, which, besides the Red Palace itself, were the chief monuments of his glorious reign.

It was this growing desire to witness the fulfilment of these magnanimous projects which led the Duke of Luna into unexpected conflict with his grandson. The wonderful enterprises above mentioned involved immense expenses, and had periodically been suspended for lack of funds. The collection of animals in the rockery was very far from complete. A camelopard of spotted alabaster, an elephant of Sardinian jasper, and the entire families of a cow and sheep, all of correspondingly rich marbles, were urgently required to fill up the corners. Moreover, the supply of water was at present so small that the fountains were dry save for a couple of hours on the very greatest holidays; and it was necessary for the perfect naturalness of this ingenious work that an aqueduct twenty miles long should pour perennial streams from a high mountain lake into the grotto of the Red Palace.

The question of the sepulchral chapel was, if possible, even worse; for, after every new ballet, Duke Balthasar went through a fit of contrition, during which he fixed his thoughts on death; and the possibilities of untimely release, and of burial in an unfinished mausoleum, filled him with terrors. It is true that Duke Balthasar had, immediately after building the vast domed chapel, secured an effigy of his own person before taking thought for the monuments of his already buried ancestors; and the statue, twelve feet high, representing himself in coronation robes of green bronze brocaded

brocaded with gold, holding a sceptre and bearing on his head, of purest silver, a spiky coronet set with diamonds, was one of the curiosities which travellers admired most in Italy. But this statue was unsymmetrical, and moreover had a dismal suggestiveness, so long as surrounded by empty niches; and the fact that only one half of the pavement was inlaid with discs of sardonyx, jasper and cornelian, and that the larger part of the walls were rough brick without a vestige of the mosaic pattern of lapis-lazuli, malachite, pearl, and coral, which had been begun round the one finished tomb, rendered the chapel as poverty-stricken in one aspect as it was magnificent in another. The finishing of the chapel was therefore urgent, and two more bronze statues were actually cast, those to wit of the duke's father and grandfather, and mosaic workmen called from the Medicean works in Florence. But, all of a sudden the ducal treasury was discovered to be empty, and the ducal credit to be exploded.

State lotteries, taxes on salt, even a sham crusade against the Dey of Algiers, all failed to produce any money. The alliance, the right to pass troops through the duchy, the letting out of the ducal army to the highest bidder, had long since ceased to be a source of revenue either from the Emperor, the King of Spain, or the Most Christian One. The Serene Republics of Venice and Genoa publicly warned their subjects against lending a single sequin to the Duke of Luna; the Dukes of Parma and Modena began to worry about bad debts; the Pope himself had the atrocious bad taste to make complaints about suppression of church dues and interception of Peter's pence. There remained to the bankrupt Duke Balthasar Maria only one hope in the world—the marriage of his grandson.

There happened to exist at that moment a sovereign of incalculable wealth, with an only daughter of marriageable age. But this

this potentate, although the nephew of a recent Pope, by whose confiscations his fortunes were founded, had originally been a dealer in such goods as are comprehensively known as drysaltery ; and, rapacious as were the princes of the Empire, each was too much ashamed of his neighbours to venture upon alliance with a family of so obtrusive an origin. Here was Balthasar Maria's opportunity ; the drysalter prince's ducats should complete the rockery, the aqueduct and the chapel ; the drysalter's daughter should be wedded to Alberic of Luna, that was to be third of the name.

XI

Prince Alberic sternly declined. He expressed his dutiful wish that the grotto and the chapel, like all other enterprises undertaken by his grandparent, might be brought to an end worthy of him. He declared that the aversion to drysalters was a prejudice unshared by himself. He even went so far as to suggest that the eligible princess should marry not the heir-apparent, but the reigning Duke of Luna. But, as regarded himself, he intended, as stated, to remain for many years single. Duke Balthasar had never in his life before seen a man who was determined to oppose him. He felt terrified and became speechless in the presence of young Alberic.

Direct influence having proved useless, the duke and his councillors, among whom the Jesuit, the Dwarf and the Jester had been duly re-instated, looked round for means of indirect persuasion or coercion. A celebrated Venetian beauty was sent for to Luna—a lady frequently employed in diplomatic missions, which she carried through by her unparalleled grace in dancing. But Prince Alberic, having watched her for half an hour, merely
remarked

remarked to his equerry that his own tame grass snake made the same movements as the lady, infinitely better and more modestly. Whereupon this means was abandoned. The Dwarf then suggested a new method of acting on the young Prince's feelings. This, which he remembered to have been employed very successfully in the case of a certain Duchess of Malfi, who had given her family much trouble some generations back, consisted in dressing up a certain number of lacqueys as ghosts and devils, hiring some genuine lunatics from a neighbouring establishment, and introducing them at dead of night into Prince Alberic's chamber. But the Prince, who was busy at his orisons, merely threw a heavy stool and two candlesticks at the apparitions; and, as he did so, the tame snake suddenly rose up from the floor, growing colossal in the act, and hissed so terrifically that the whole party fled down the corridor. The most likely advice was given by the Jesuit. This truly subtle diplomatist averred that it was useless trying to act upon the Prince by means which did not already affect him; instead of clumsily constructing a lever for which there was no fulcrum in the youth's soul, it was necessary to find out whatever leverage there might already exist.

Now, on careful inquiry, there was discovered a fact which the official spies, who always acted by precedent and pursued their inquiries according to the rules of the human heart as taught by the Secret Inquisition of the Republic of Venice, had naturally failed to perceive. This fact consisted in a rumour, very vague but very persistent, that Prince Alberic did not inhabit his wing of the palace in absolute solitude. Some of the pages attending on his person affirmed to have heard whispered conversations in the Prince's study, on entering which they had invariably found him alone; others maintained that, during the absence of the Prince from the palace, they had heard the sound of his private harpsichord,

harpichord, the one with the story of Orpheus and the view of Soracte on the cover, although he always kept its key on his person. A footman declared that he had found in the Prince's study, and among his books and maps, a piece of embroidery certainly not belonging to the Prince's furniture and apparel, moreover, half finished, and with a needle sticking in the canvas ; which piece of embroidery the Prince had thrust into his pocket. But, as none of the attendants had ever seen any visitor entering or issuing from the Prince's apartments, and the professional spies had ransacked all possible hiding-places and modes of exit in vain, these curious indications had been neglected, and the opinion had been formed that Alberic, being, as every one could judge, somewhat insane, had a gift of ventriloquism, a taste for musical-boxes, and a proficiency in unmanly handicrafts which he carefully dissimulated.

These rumours had at one time caused great delight to Duke Balthasar ; but he had got tired of sitting in a dark cupboard in his grandson's chamber, and had caught a bad chill looking through his keyhole ; so he had stopped all further inquiries as officious fooling on the part of impudent lacqueys.

But the Jesuit foolishly adhered to the rumour. "Discover her," he said, "and work through her on Prince Alberic." But Duke Balthasar, after listening twenty times to this remark with the most delighted interest, turned round on the twenty-first time and gave the Jesuit a look of Jove-like thunder ; "My father," he said, "I am surprised—I may say more than surprised—at a person of your cloth descending so low as to make aspersions upon the virtue of a young Prince reared in my palace and born of my blood. Never let me hear another word about ladies of light manners being secreted within these walls." Whereupon the Jesuit retired, and was in disgrace for a fortnight, till Duke Balthasar

Balthasar woke up one morning with a strong apprehension of dying.

But no more was said of the mysterious female friend of Prince Alberic, still less was any attempt made to gain her intervention in the matter of the drysalter Princess's marriage.

XII

More desperate measures were soon resorted to. It was given out that Prince Alberic was engrossed in study, and he was forbidden to leave his wing of the Red Palace, with no other view than the famous grotto with the verde antique apes and the porphyry rhinoceros. It was published that Prince Alberic was sick, and he was confined very rigorously to a less agreeable apartment in the rear of the palace, where he could catch sight of the plaster laurels and draperies, and the rolling plaster eyeball of one of the Twelve Cæsars under the cornice. It was judiciously hinted that the Prince had entered into religious retreat, and he was locked and bolted into the State prison, alongside of the unfinished sepulchral chapel, whence a lugubrious hammering came as the only sound of life. In each of these places the recalcitrant youth was duly argued with by some of his grandfather's familiars, and even received a visit from the old duke in person. But threats and blandishments were all in vain, and Alberic persisted in his refusal to marry.

It was six months now since he had seen the outer world, and six weeks since he had inhabited the State prison, every stage in his confinement, almost every day thereof, having systematically deprived him of some luxury, some comfort, or some mode of passing his time. His harpsichord and foils had remained in the
gala

gala wing overlooking the grotto. His maps and books had not followed him beyond the higher story with the view of the Twelfth Cæsar. And now they had taken away from him his Virgil, his inkstand and paper, and left him only a book of Hours.

Balthasar Maria and his councillors felt intolerably baffled. There remained nothing further to do ; for if Prince Alberic were publicly beheaded, or privately poisoned, or merely left to die of want and sadness, it was obvious that Prince Alberic could no longer conclude the marriage with the drysalter Princess, and that no money to finish the grotto and the chapel, or to carry on Court expenses, would be forthcoming.

It was a burning day of August, a Friday, thirteenth of that month, and after a long prevalence of enervating sirocco, when the old duke determined to make one last appeal to the obedience of his grandson. The sun, setting among ominous clouds, sent a lurid orange beam into Prince Alberic's prison chamber, at the moment that his ducal grandfather, accompanied by the Jester, the Dwarf and the Jesuit, appeared on its threshold after prodigious clanking of keys and clattering of bolts. The unhappy youth rose as they entered, and making a profound bow, motioned his grandparent to the only chair in the place.

Balthasar Maria had never visited him before in this, his worst place of confinement ; and the bareness of the room, the dust and cobwebs, the excessive hardness of the chair, affected his sensitive heart, and, joined with irritation at his grandson's obstinacy and utter depression about the marriage, the grotto and the chapel, actually caused this magnanimous sovereign to burst into tears and bitter lamentations.

"It would indeed melt the heart of a stone," remarked the Jester sternly, while his two companions attempted to soothe the weeping

weeping duke—"to see one of the greatest, wisest, and most valorous princes in Europe reduced to tears by the undutifulness of his child."

"Princes, nay, kings' and emperors' sons," exclaimed the Dwarf, who was administering Melissa water to the duke, "have perished miserably for much less."

"Some of the most remarkable personages of sacred history are stated to have incurred eternal perdition for far slighter offences," added the Jesuit.

Alberic had sat down on the bed. The tawny sunshine fell upon his figure. He had grown very thin, and his garments were inexpressibly threadbare. But he was spotlessly neat, his lace band was perfectly folded, his beautiful blond hair flowed in exquisite curls about his pale face, and his whole aspect was serene and even cheerful. He might be twenty-two years old, and was of consummate beauty and stature.

"My lord," he answered slowly, "I entreat your Serene Highness to believe that no one could regret more deeply than I do such a spectacle as is offered by the tears of a Duke of Luna. At the same time, I can only reiterate that I accept no responsibility . . ."

A distant growling of thunder caused the old duke to start, and interrupted Alberic's speech.

"Your obstinacy, my lord," exclaimed the Dwarf, who was an excessively choleric person, "betrays the existence of a hidden conspiracy most dangerous to the state."

"It is an indication," added the Jester, "of a highly deranged mind."

"It seems to me," whispered the Jesuit, "to savour most undoubtedly of devilry."

Alberic shrugged his shoulders. He had risen from the bed to close

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close the grated window, into which a shower of hail was suddenly blowing with unparalleled violence, when the old duke jumped on his seat, and, with eyeballs starting with terror, exclaimed, as he tottered convulsively, "The serpent! the serpent!"

For there, in a corner, the tame grass snake was placidly coiled up, sleeping.

"The snake! the devil! Prince Alberic's pet companion!" exclaimed the three favourites, and rushed towards that corner.

Alberic threw himself forward. But he was too late. The Jester, with a blow of his harlequin's lath, had crushed the head of the startled creature; and, even while he was struggling with him and the Jesuit, the Dwarf had given it two cuts with his Turkish scimitar.

"The snake! the snake!" shrieked Duke Balthasar, heedless of the desperate struggle.

The warders and equerries, waiting outside, thought that Prince Alberic must be murdering his grandfather, and burst into prison and separated the combatants.

"Chain the rebel! the wizard! the madman!" cried the three favourites.

Alberic had thrown himself on the dead snake, which lay crushed and bleeding on the floor, and he moaned piteously.

But the Prince was unarmed and overpowered in a moment. Three times he broke loose, but three times he was recaptured, and finally bound and gagged, and dragged away. The old duke recovered from his fright, and was helped up from the bed on to which he had sunk. As he prepared to leave, he approached the dead snake, and looked at it for some time. He kicked its mangled head with his ribboned shoe, and turned away laughing.

"Who knows," he said, "whether you were not the Snake Lady? That foolish boy made a great fuss, I remember, when
he

he was scarcely out of long clothes, about a tattered old tapestry representing that repulsive story."

And he departed to supper.

XIII

Prince Alberic of Luna, who should have been third of his name, died a fortnight later, it was stated, insane. But those who approached him maintained that he had been in perfect possession of his faculties ; and that if he refused all nourishment during his second imprisonment, it was from set purpose. He was removed at night from his apartments facing the grotto with the verde antique monkeys and the porphyry rhinoceros, and hastily buried under a slab, which remained without any name or date, in the famous mosaic sepulchral chapel.

Duke Balthasar Maria survived him only a few months. The old duke had plunged into excesses of debauchery with a view, apparently, to dismissing certain terrible thoughts and images which seemed to haunt him day and night, and against which no religious practices or medical prescription were of any avail. The origin of these painful delusions was probably connected with a very strange rumour, which grew to a tradition at Luna, to the effect that when the prison room, occupied by Prince Alberic, was cleaned, after that terrible storm of the 13th August of the year 1700, the persons employed found in a corner, not the dead grass-snake, which they had been ordered to cast into the palace drains, but the body of a woman, naked, and miserably disfigured with blows and sabre cuts.

Be this as it may, history records as certain, that the house of Luna became extinct in 1701, the duchy lapsing to the Empire. Moreover, that the mosaic chapel remained for ever unfinished, with

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no statue save the green bronze and gold one of Balthasar Maria above the nameless slab covering Prince Alberic ; and that the rockery also was never completed ; only a few marble animals adorning it besides the porphyry rhinoceros and the verde antique apes, and the water supply being sufficient only for the greatest holidays. These things the traveller can confirm ; also, that certain chairs and curtains in the porter's lodge of the now long deserted Red Palace are made of the various pieces of an extremely damaged arras, having represented the story of Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady.