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A FLORENTINE DESPOT.

Some three hundred years ago a certain Florentine citizen, one Alessandro Ceccheregli, wrote and published an interesting little book.[1] He explains in a short preface that he was urged to the composition of his work by the consideration that there are two things above all others which endear men to their fellow-creatures,—to wit, entertaining them and helping them. He appears to have had no doubt that the matter of his book was such as to entitle him to gratitude on both those scores; since it was a record, as full as he could make it, of the wise sayings and sagacious actions of a prince whom he represents as gifted with an extraordinary degree of insight and of judgment, and as possessing every quality which could win the respect and love of his subjects; no less a person, in fact, than Alessandro de Medici, usually known as the first Duke of Florence.

Ceccheregli has thrown his work into the form of a conversation carried on by six grave and leisurely citizens, who, finding the weather extremely hot, have wisely resolved to sit chatting in the shade until it grows cool again. Three of them indeed,—Messer Lodovico Domenichi, a much-respected philosopher and historian, with two merchants, Messer Francesco Mannini and Messer Francesco Ricoveri—have been diverting themselves in this agreeable manner for several days, and have derived such deep satisfaction from their discourses on various subjects that they can feel nothing but sympathy for their three friends, Messer Hortensio Brusciati, Messer Lodovico del Trevaglia, and Messer Bastiano Saluetti, who have only just joined them, and thus lost their share in these pleasant conversations. However, the weather is as hot as on any one of

[1] The full title of the book is "Delle Attioni et Sonteuze del S. Alessandro de'Medici, Primo Duca di Fiorenza." It was dedicated to M. Giovanettorio Soderini, and was published at Venice in the year 1565.

those past days; the delight of sitting in the shade of the laurels is no less than before; while the appetite of the company for conversation is rather whetted than blunted by their previous discussions. The wise course is, therefore, to sit down again; and after casting about for some time in search of a subject, and much interchange of compliments, which, however appropriate to a hot day in Florence, might be found tedious in a brisker climate, they light at last upon Duke Alexander, whose murder by his cousin, Lorenzo de Medici, the unworthy namesake of a great ancestor, was fresh in all their minds.

Domenichi is the leader of the conversation. His training and position as a scholar and a historian have enabled him to collect a mass of information about Duke Alexander, in whose actions he finds not only vivacity of spirit, but also incredible care for the State, inestimable piety, royal justice, and a degree of love towards his subjects which was nothing less than supernatural. And first for his care concerning the public welfare.

It was customary in Florence after a bad harvest to appoint officers whose duty it was by every exertion to keep down the price of corn. They were to make inquisitions, to discover where corn was being hoarded, and to insist on the stores being immediately thrown on the market. Nothing enraged the duke more than any such development of self-interest as constitutes what is now, in commercial jargon, known as "a corner;" and his indignation was therefore extreme when it reached his ears that the Commission of Plenty were themselves hoarding grain, and counting on the profit of a rising market. The consequence was that the price of corn was already half as much again as it need be; and the duke sent in hot haste for the commissioners. "What is your duty?" he asked them roughly, when they arrived; and when they answered that it was to provide for the public during seasons of scarcity, he asked again: "If so, how is it that you have allowed the price of corn to rise so high? Can you say you thought that my wish?" "Signor," they answered humbly enough, "it was the bad harvest which was to blame." But the duke would have none of it. "Once for all," he said, "I tell you thus. The market must be fully supplied at not more than four grossi the bushel. I will have it so," stopping the excuses which he saw forming themselves. "You do your duty, and be wise." The commissioners were wise, and the thing was done.

In the same season or in another equally bad, the duke had laid up great stores of corn for public use; and being by no means desirous that private persons should retain their stores until his own were spent, he issued proclamations early in March calling upon every one who had grain to sell it in that month, and ordaining that any one who sold after March had expired should forfeit the grain, and stand the loss. Now there was a certain favorite of the duke, a man much about his person, who fancied himself able to influence his sovereign to his own advantage. This man had a huge quantity of corn lying in his barns; and, seeing that the market price was still low, he made up his mind to disregard the proclamation, and trust to escaping the penalty by his friendship with the duke. Time passed, and the price of corn rose. But when May was near at hand the Commissioners of Plenty swooped down suddenly on the courtier, and sequestrated all the corn lying in his barns. Full of wrath, this man of commercial instincts ran to the palace, and told his story to the duke, enforcing it with a plain statement that if his Highness did not allow him to sell the corn, it would be impossible for him to maintain his station about the court. The duke professed great sorrow at hearing this. "But how has it happened?" he asked. "Did you not see the proclamations?" "Yes, but at that time the price was so low that I could do nothing with it." "The devil!" exclaimed the duke. "Pray what did you want to do? To besiege Florence,

perhaps, or make yourself duke? But the matter is out of my hands; the best I can do for you is, to advise you to do nothing and wait." The courtier took this speech as a hint that the duke would interfere secretly on his behalf, and said nothing more, except to point out that the corn, being in his barns, would be spoiled in the hot weather which was now near at hand. "Don't be anxious about that; leave it to me," said the duke; and the courtier went away reassured, fully expecting that in a few days he would receive permission to dispose of his corn. However, a month went by and he had heard nothing from the duke. Accordingly one day he ventured to observe, "Signor, that corn is spoiling." To which the duke answered cheerfully, "Don't be uneasy; leave it in my hands." The weather grew hotter, and the case more serious. Still nothing could be extracted from the duke, save a cheery assurance that he had not forgotten the matter. Meanwhile the corn was spoiled. By degrees the courtier began to perceive that the duke had been too subtle for him; and thinking it more prudent to let the matter drop, now that the loss had been sustained, he did not revert to it until the following year, when, the harvest being at hand, he went to the duke again, saying: "Signor, now the corn is spoiled, you will allow me to clear it out of my barns, and throw it away?" "Put it off a little while," said the duke. And so the matter went on, until at last the courtier built him new barns. The old ones were never emptied, but fell into ruin, and the loss to the greedy courtier taught him to obey the law in future.

Thus Domenichi reveals to his eagerly listening friends the methods of paternal government in Florence; and is rewarded whenever he pauses by a little murmur of eulogy, sometimes of himself, but more often of the duke. "Oh wondrous resolution!" exclaims Mannini, at the close of the last story. "Oh wondrous resolution, taking count of nothing but the public safety!" And Travaglia chimes in: "Oh, astonishing skill in procuring obedience! Worthy stratagems! Subtle devices!" And so forth, until Domenichi, who is less interested in their comments than they are in his stories, cuts them short by saying, "Now listen!"

Among the officers of the court was one filling the post of chamberlain to whom the duke was much attached. This man had run up a long account for robes with a poor wool-merchant, who, being unable to wait longer for his money, solicited payment. The chamberlain put him off time after time; and at length told him he came too often, and was growing a nuisance. Still the merchant, who really needed his money, persevered, and after some months had passed in futile efforts to gain his point, he took the advice of his friends, and went to the palace to seek audience of his Highness. The duke, who was always accessible to any one of his subjects, listened to the merchant's story, questioned him, and convinced himself of its truth. "Go home," he said; "send to the chamberlain once more, asking for payment; and report the result to me." The merchant did as he was bid, but had to report only an insolent reply to his request. "Very well," said the duke. "I will arrange it for you." He sent the man away and let a few days pass. Then, choosing a favorable opportunity, when the chamberlain was dressing him, he began to caress him, patting him gently on the head, stroking his cheeks, and finally, dropping his hand on the chamberlain's neck, he took off a chain of great value, and turning to one of his pages, said: "Take this chain; carry it to the wool-merchant, and tell him to keep it carefully until our friend here pays him for the robes he has had." Then, in a meaning tone, he added to the chamberlain: "You will oblige me very much by redeeming that chain within eight days." And with that he went off hunting, leaving his dishonest servant overwhelmed with shame.

"I am stupefied," Travaglia declares, "as I listen to the wise speeches of the duke."

"You will be more stupefied when

you hear how generous he was towards his subjects," says Mannini, and on this hint, with the object perhaps of reducing Travaglia to the condition indicated, Domenichi plunges into another anecdote of the duke's wisdom and justice.

There was a certain citizen in Florence who had contracted a good many debts, not through misfortune but through simple disinclination to pay. He was very rich, but concealed that fact as much as possible; and by representing himself to the Council as a poor man well-nigh crushed with misfortunes, had obtained from them a letter protecting him from arrest. Among his creditors was a poor widow, who had placed in his hands the chief part of her small provision for life, but could get neither interest nor principal from him. She importuned him for payment; but he, emboldened by impunity, began to deny that he had ever known her. Then the widow resorted to the law-courts. Her case was plain: the merchant made no defence; and sentence was delivered in the widow's favor. The merchant ignored it; and finding that he did so, the widow took steps to have him arrested. The officers of the law found him in his house, and were about to lay hands on him, when he suddenly drew forth his letter of protection, flourished it in their faces, and discomfited them. There was but one course left, and the woman took it. She went to the duke, who listened to her story patiently, and being satisfied of its truth, sent a secretary to the merchant bidding him do what was right. The secretary returned with a plausible answer; but nothing was done, and in a few days the widow came again to say she was as far as ever from getting her money. "Why do you not have him arrested?" asked the duke. "How can I, signor, when the Council protects him?" "Then he cannot have the means of paying," the duke argued. "On the contrary, he is very rich; and nothing but his avarice led him to seek protection." "It is a strange case," said the duke. "Come back to me in six days more." That period Duke Alexander passed in making inquiries as to the real position of the merchant; and having fully informed himself of this, he summoned the man to the palace, and requested him courteously to discharge his debt, representing that it would be a pleasure to himself to know the poor woman had her rights. The merchant declared he would pay her shortly, but added that he was a poor man, and could not do it at the moment. He left the duke, assuring him that the money would be paid ere long; but when the widow returned to the palace at the end of the stipulated period, the duke found she had heard nothing from her debtor. Instantly he called a page, saying sharply: "Find the man who is in debt to this poor woman, and bring him here at once." His manner was so stern that the page lost not a moment on the way, but brought back the merchant in less time than one might have thought possible. The duke was standing by the fire, his cloak thrown about his shoulders, for he was going to mass, and waited only to despatch the business which he had in hand; and as he stood, he was raking among the coals and ashes with a stick. "So," said he, when he saw the defaulting citizen enter, "then you have not yet paid this poor woman?" "Oh, signor, I am too poor," was the reply. "Too poor!" broke in the woman, "too poor! Then sell your farms in this place, your stores of corn in that, your olive-trees, and all your other wealth, and pay me what you justly owe!" The duke listened with a smile, and, drawing his stick out from the fire, he traced a circle on the floor with the blackened end. "Get into that space," he said, and the merchant obeyed. "Now," said the duke, "you shall not come outside that circle until you have paid the widow. If you do, I will cut off your head." "Signor, signor!" protested the frightened man. "I shall have to stay here forever." "On the contrary," said the duke calmly. "I am now going to mass; if I find you here when I return, be assured that I will hang you." The duke departed. The merchant, half dead

with fear (for the duke was quite able to keep his word), sent in post-haste for some of his friends, who succeeded in telling out the money due to the widow just before the duke returned.

"Less violence," observes Mannini, "would not have answered with one so pig-headed." Mannini is fond of dropping pregnant remarks, sometimes couched in language so sententious as to be a little over the heads of his companions. Perhaps Ricoveri suspected him of some such design to elaborate the present occasion; for he proceeded to suggest that in the enjoyment of this banquet of the mind which Domenichi had spread before them, it would be well not to forget that their bodies too had needs. Dinner-time was near, and they could finish talking about the duke afterwards. Whereupon they all adjourned to Ricoveri's house, where they dined sumptuously, and then separated, some to play at various gentle games, others to sleep away the hot hours in cool, silent chambers. Late in the afternoon they met again on the balcony of the house, whence there was a wide view over the valley beyond Florence, rich with waving cornfields. There these incorrigible talkers fell into an argument as to whether nature or art were the mightier; and they would probably have spent the whole day over that interesting topic had not Ricoveri, who seemed to care little which view was correct, recalled them to the duke. Domenichi was again installed in the seat of honor, and the others crowded round him to listen.

Long ago there came to Florence in his youth a velvet-maker from Bergamo, who opened a shop, and, aided by fortune and his own good sense, became very rich. He had neither wife nor child; and thus in his old age, being without any incentive to continue his work, he sold his shop, and retired to a pleasant house near Florence, where he spent his time in good works. The life which he had renounced still held his interests, however, and he constantly visited an old friend, also a velvet-maker, who still retained his shop, and was glad enough to keep in touch with a rich man who had no pressing claims upon his wealth. Indeed the fact that his old gossip had hardly any use for his money so impressed itself on this astute merchant, that he began to ponder some scheme by which that money could be worthily employed; and having at last thought the matter out he assumed a very mournful air whenever he was in his old friend's society. The old man did not fail to notice this melancholy, and was made the more anxious by it, since all his questions as to its cause were deftly turned aside. Days passed, and the merchant's gloom increased; at last so deep did it become that the old man, who had a kindly heart and a very strong regard for his former fellow-tradesman, took him out to dinner at his house one day, and as they sat at table in the garden, pressed and even conjured him to disclose its cause, professing himself ready to do anything in his power to remove the distress which was oppressing so good a man. The merchant had hooked his fish, but he was too clever to bring him to land at once. So he returned evasive answers, assumed a semblance of gaiety, and even told his friend one or two pointless little stories which the old man knew quite well already. By these devices, varied by occasional relapses into deep melancholy, he worked up his friend's curiosity to the highest pitch, and when he judged the proper moment to have come, he declared he was half dead with anxiety about his business, being afraid that he would have to close his shop and accept disgrace. Some time ago, it appeared, he had bought stock worth eight hundred scudi. He had paid three hundred and fifty down at the time, and had left the remainder to stand over, relying on getting in moneys which were due to him. But he had not been paid those moneys.—Florence was full of dishonest fellows!—the time was at hand when he must complete the payment for his velvets, and he was at his wits' ends. He would not have distressed his colleague by telling him this, he added, if he had not been so

urgently pressed. The good old man was greatly concerned. "Don't despair, gossip," he said. "God will not desert you. Stay here till I return." He ran off to the house, and came back with a bag, in which was the greater part of the money he had obtained from the sale of his shop. There was a broken pillar standing near, and on it the old man counted out four hundred and fifty scudi, saying, "Take them for six or eight months at your convenience." He knew his old friend too well to ask for a receipt; such formalities were not necessary where both parties trusted each other. The merchant overwhelmed his friend with thanks, and went home gaily, protesting he had never until that moment known the worth of true affection. Time passed; the six months or eight months for which the money had been lent sped by, but nothing was said about returning it. The old man wondered, but felt a delicacy in reminding his friend of the transaction. Eighteen months slipped away, however, and at last he reminded the other gently that the term fixed for repaying the money was long past. "Money!" answered the merchant, with a puzzled expression. "What money are you talking of?" "What money? Why the scudi which I lent you in my garden." "Upon my word," the man of velvets protested with every appearance of good faith, "I think you must be jesting. I have not the least idea what you are speaking of, nor did I ever accept money from you without failing to return it promptly." The old man continued with rising indignation to assert his claim, but without the least success, and finally the other pushed him out of his shop, saying peevishly: "There, go away in God's name, before I do or say anything I shall be sorry for."

Thus insulted and swindled, the old man betook himself to the duke, in whose justice and resource he felt that his last hope lay of recovering his money. The duke after listening to his story, made inquiries of those who knew the other party to the transaction. Of the honest old man he had some personal knowledge; and having thoroughly satisfied himself from their antecedents which was likely to be the liar, he caused them to be confronted in his presence. When he saw the merchant enter, the old man, who had been instructed what to do, formally demanded his money, and was answered exactly as before. On this the duke interposed, saying he knew the old man well, and was assured he would not claim a debt which was not due to him. "Pray, therefore," said he in his most gracious manner, "pray therefore let him have the money." "I vow I never had it," cried the merchant; and at this the old man lost patience, and both adversaries, forgetting the duke's presence, raised their voices at once, and began to dispute loudly and angrily. "Was there absolutely no one present when you lent the money?" the duke asked. "No, signor, we were alone," the creditor answered; "there was nothing near us except the broken shaft of a pillar on which I told the money out." "Excellent!" cried the duke. "Fetch me that pillar; I will get the truth out of it." Off ran the simple old man, while the duke, ordering the dishonest merchant to wait, turned to other business. After a little while, not looking up from the papers he was reading, he observed carelessly, "What a long time our friend takes in fetching that pillar!" "Signor, he could scarcely be back yet; the pillar is large and heavy." The duke said nothing, but glanced up over his papers, and fixed a piercing look upon the merchant, who, being quite acute enough to see that he had betrayed too much knowledge of the pillar, grew more and more uneasy. He felt himself in the duke's power; he did not feel certain what was at the bottom of this business of the pillar. The silence weighed on him; from time to time he found the duke's eyes fixed on his, as if he read the lie clearly in them. At last Duke Alexander spoke again, as if to himself: "What sort of men are these to lend money without any kind of receipt or witness to the transaction!" And then, turning on the merchant quickly, he

asked: "Is it really the fact that no one was present but the pillar?" "No one at all," answered the frightened merchant, terrified into the truth. "That is quite enough," said Duke Alexander; "the pillar has made you tell the truth. Go now, and pay the money. Be grateful that I do not punish you as a swindler and a thief, as I most assuredly shall if I have to intervene in the affair again." Cowed and disgraced the fraudulent merchant slunk away from the palace; and before the day was over, he had paid his debt in full.

In acting the part of the Cadi under the palm-tree Duke Alexander's quick intelligence served him well. Another anecdote shows that he could be magnanimous to those who had been his enemies as well as just to those who professed themselves his subjects. There was a certain officer who, during the troubles of the years preceding the imposition of Duke Alexander upon the free citizens of Florence, had served with honor on the side of liberty; that is, on the side of the people, Domenichi explains, his native republican feeling showing itself this once amid all his affection for the ruler whom the people had not freely chosen. When the dissensions were over, this officer tendered his services to the duke; but more than one of the courtiers advised against accepting them, saying that this man had fought more desperately than any other against the duke's party, showing an absolute recklessness of life. "Did he indeed fight so well?" said the duke with interest. "Then I would not lose him for the world. He will fight as well for us as he did against us."

One of his friends often told him that it was not becoming to a prince of his rank to go dressed so quietly, and quoted Aristotle, who says that princes should always be splendidly dressed, so that they may be known at once by their vassals. But the duke answered that it was more honorable to clothe his servants splendidly. "For," said he, "it is much better for me to dress many and deprive myself, than to deprive many that I may dress myself."

We will give one more instance of this ready tongue. The duke was at Naples, collecting troops for the expeditions which the emperor, his father-in-law, was preparing against Tunis. Among the regiments which passed before him, there was a cripple marching with the rest. Now there stood beside the duke a courtier whose courage in war was by no means undoubted, and said he, pointing to the crippie, "There is a man who ought to be on horseback." "I think not," the duke answered. "I should say on foot." "Why, signor?" "Because in war men are wanted to stand still, not to run away."

It was a biting remark, which probably made an enemy, and of enemies Duke Alexander had only too many. Imposed on the Florentines as their ruler by the influence of Pope Clement the Seventh, whom many believed to be his father, backed by the powers of France and Germany, he was inevitably associated in the minds of his people with the partial loss of their free institutions and the commencement of a tyranny. Political feelings were always fierce in Florence. Rome and the other chief cities of Italy were never free from bands of exiles who were perpetually plotting to regain their homes beside the Arno, and whose fiery hatred towards the existing government of their native city was a standing danger. These men had partisans within the walls, and were ever on the watch for blunders which might give them a handle against the duke.

How far Alexander was qualified by his character and talents to occupy a throne which was so insecurely propped is a question on which historians do not thoroughly agree. Some represent him as an abominable tyrant; others again think Florence might have been happy under his rule, had not the sword of an assassin cut it short. There is no ground for distrusting the stories which Ceccheregli has recorded. They have the ring of truth; and they prove that the duke possessed many

qualities of a great prince. But the gossips give only the bright side of the picture. Of the duke's difficulties Domenichi tells us nothing. He is silent as to all the circumstances of his death; and indeed there is not a word in Ceccheregli's book from which it could be gathered that Alexander's reign was not a season of profound peace, a sort of golden age.

Benvenuto Cellini, brightest and most graphic of chroniclers, gives us many glimpses of the duke. He tells us how Alexander gave him an order for a medal, in the progress of which he was so much interested that he ordered the goldsmith to be admitted to the palace at any hour at which he might present himself. Accordingly, Benvenuto saw him often reclining on his couch after dining with his cousin, Lorenzino de Medici, a man whom Cellini marvels that he trusted. On one occasion, when a subject for the reverse of the medal was under discussion, Benvenuto said: "Signor, be at ease. The medal shall be much finer than the one I made for Pope Clement, which was indeed my first attempt; and Messer Lorenzo here, who is a very clever and learned person, shall give me some splendid reverse for it." Lorenzo answered quickly: "I was thinking of nothing else than a reverse which would be worthy of his Excellency." The duke smiled, and said: "Lorenzo, you shall give him the reverse, and he shall do it here, without leaving Florence." "I will do it as soon as ever I can; and I hope it will be a thing to astonish the world." The duke turned away smiling at his cousin's conceit; but Lorenzo was not a man whose words could be so dismissed. There was a double meaning in them; and the reverse he was preparing was one of the blackest treachery which history can disclose. Duke Alexander was extravagantly licentious. Lorenzo made himself the companion of his vices, lured his prince to a solitary house, and stabbed him with his own hand as he lay in bed.

That night Benvenuto was riding towards Rome, when, having reached the summit of a small eminence, he and his companions cried at the same moment: "God in heaven! What is that mighty thing in the sky over toward Florence?" It was, as Cellini describes it, a great mass of fire, spreading across the darkened sky and throwing out a light of extraordinary brilliance. "Certainly," said Benvenuto to his companions, "we shall hear to-morrow of some great event at Florence."

Late on the following day came the news of Lorenzo's crime; and immediately there arrived a rush of Florentine exiles at Cellini's shop.

First came Francesco Soderini, bumping about on a sorry mule of his, laughing immoderately all along the street like a madman, and crying out: "Here is the reverse of the medal which Lorenzino promised you for that rascally tyrant! You were for immortalizing our dukes; but I tell you we will have no more dukes."

And then came Baccio Bettini, another of the Florentine exiles (an ugly fellow, says Benvenuto, with a head as big as a basket), crying out: "We have unduked him! And now we will have no more dukes!"

Whereupon the whole crew began to jeer at Cellini, as if he had been the chief supporter of the dukes. He bore their gibes for some time in contemptuous silence, but at last he turned. "You silly fellows," he said, "I am only a poor goldsmith, serving whoever pays me, though you jeer at me as if I were at the head of a party; but I tell you, however loudly you laugh now, you will have another duke within three days, perhaps much worse than the last."

The next day Bettini came back again, saying: "There is no use in spending money on couriers when you know everything before it happens." And with that preface, he told Cellini that Lorenzo's crime had missed its aim, and that Cosimo de Medici had been chosen duke, but only on stringent conditions which would probably keep him within bounds.

At this hope Benvenuto laughed. "These men of Florence," he said, "set a young man upon a mettled horse;

they give him spurs, throw the bridle loose in his hand, and lead him out upon a smooth lawn, where are flowers and fruits and every delight. Then they draw a line, and bid him not venture to pass it. Tell me then who shall hold him, if he will cross the line? The laws are not for those who are masters of them."

These words, spoken of Duke Cosimo, but suggested by the deeds of Duke Alexander, sum up tersely enough the story of his short life.