

## Chapter 1 - The Shipwrecked Stranger

The Loggia de' Cerchi stood in the heart of old Florence, within a labyrinth of narrow streets behind the Badia, now rarely threaded by the stranger, unless in a dubious search for a certain severely simple door-place, bearing this inscription:

QUI            NACQUE            IL            DIVINO            POETA.  
To the ear of Dante, the same streets rang with the shout and clash of fierce battle between rival families; but in the fifteenth century, they were only noisy with the unhistorical quarrels and broad jests of wool-carders in the cloth-producing quarters of San Martino and Garbo.

Under this loggia, in the early morning of the 9th of April 1492, two men had their eyes fixed on each other: one was stooping slightly, and looking downward with the scrutiny of curiosity; the other, lying on the pavement, was looking upward with the startled gaze of a suddenly-awakened dreamer.

The standing figure was the first to speak. He was a grey-haired, broad-shouldered man, of the type which, in Tuscan phrase, is moulded with the fist and polished with the pickaxe; but the self-important gravity which had written itself out in the deep lines about his brow and mouth seemed intended to correct any contemptuous inferences from the hasty workmanship which Nature had bestowed on his exterior. He had deposited a large well-filled bag, made of skins, on the pavement, and before him hung a pedlar's basket, garnished partly with small woman's-ware, such as thread and pins, and partly with fragments of glass, which had probably been taken in exchange for those commodities.

'Young man,' he said, pointing to a ring on the finger of the reclining figure, 'when your chin has got a stiffer crop on it, you'll know better than to take your nap in street corners with a ring like that on your forefinger. By the holy 'vangels! if it had been anybody but me standing over you two minutes ago — but Bratti Ferravecchi is not the man to steal. The cat couldn't eat her mouse if she didn't catch it alive, and Bratti couldn't relish gain if it had no taste of a bargain. Why, young man, one San Giovanni three years ago, the Saint sent a dead body in my way — a blind beggar, with his cap well lined with pieces — but, if you'll believe me, my stomach turned against the money I'd never bargained for, till it came into my head that San Giovanni owed me the pieces for what I spend yearly at the Festa; besides, I buried the body and paid for a mass — and so I saw it was a fair bargain. But how comes a young man like you, with the face of Messer San Michele, to be sleeping on a stone bed with the wind for a curtain?'

The deep guttural sounds of the speaker were scarcely intelligible to the newly-waked, bewildered listener, but he understood the action of pointing to his ring: he looked down at it, and, with a half-automatic obedience to the warning, took it off and thrust it within his doublet, rising at the same time and stretching himself.

‘Your tunic and hose match ill with that jewel, young man,’ said Bratti, deliberately. ‘Anybody might say the saints had sent you a dead body; but if you took the jewels, I hope you buried him — and you can afford a mass or two for him into the bargain.’

Something like a painful thrill appeared to dart through the frame of the listener, and arrest the careless stretching of his arms and chest. For an instant he turned on Bratti with a sharp frown; but he immediately recovered an air of indifference, took off the red Levantine cap which hung like a great purse over his left ear, pushed back his long dark-brown curls, and glancing at his dress, said, smilingly —

‘You speak truth, friend: my garments are as weather-stained as an old sail, and they are not old either, only, like an old sail, they have had a sprinkling of the sea as well as the rain. The fact is, I’m a stranger in Florence, and when I came in footsore last night I preferred flinging myself in a corner of this hospitable porch to hunting any longer for a chance hostelry, which might turn out to be a nest of blood-suckers of more sorts than one.’

‘A stranger, in good sooth,’ said Bratti, ‘for the words come all melting out of your throat, so that a Christian and a Florentine can’t tell a hook from a hanger. But you’re not from Genoa? More likely from Venice, by the cut of your clothes?’

‘At this present moment,’ said the stranger, smiling, ‘it is of less importance where I come from than where I can go to for a mouthful of breakfast. This city of yours turns a grim look on me just here: can you show me the way to a more lively quarter, where I can get a meal and a lodging?’

‘That I can,’ said Bratti, ‘and it is your good fortune, young man, that I have happened to be walking in from Rovezzano this morning, and turned out of my way to Mercato Vecchio to say an Ave at the Badia. That, I say, is your good fortune. But it remains to be seen what is my profit in the matter. Nothing for nothing, young man. If I show you the way to Mercato Vecchio, you’ll swear by your patron saint to let me have the bidding for that stained suit of yours, when you set up a better — as doubtless you will.’

‘Agreed, by San Niccolo,’ said the other, laughing. ‘But now let us set off to this said Mercato, for I feel the want of a better lining to this doublet of mine which you are coveting.’

‘Coveting? Nay,’ said Bratti, heaving his bag on his back and setting out. But he broke off in his reply, and burst out in loud, harsh tones, not unlike the creaking and grating of a cart-wheel: ‘Chi abbaratta — baratta — b’ratta — chi abbaratta cenci e vetri — b’ratta ferri vecchi?’

‘It’s worth but little,’ he said presently, relapsing into his conversational tone. ‘Hose and altogether, your clothes are worth but little. Still, if you’ve a mind to set yourself up with a lute worth more than any new one, or with a sword that’s been worn by a Ridolfi, or with a paternoster of the best mode, I could let you have a great bargain, by making an allowance for the clothes; for, simple as I stand here, I’ve got the best furnished shop in the Ferravecchi, and it’s close by the Mercato. The Virgin be praised! it’s not a pumpkin I carry on my shoulders. But I don’t stay caged in my shop all day: I’ve got a wife and a raven to stay at home and mind the stock. Chi abbaratta — baratta — b’ratta? ... And now, young man, where do you come from, and what’s your business in Florence?’

‘I thought you liked nothing that came to you without a bargain,’ said the stranger. ‘You’ve offered me nothing yet in exchange for that information.’

‘Well, well; a Florentine doesn’t mind bidding a fair price for news: it stays the stomach a little though he may win no hose by it. If I take you to the prettiest damsel in the Mercato to get a cup of milk — that will be a fair bargain.’

‘Nay; I can find her myself, if she be really in the Mercato; for pretty heads are apt to look forth of doors and windows. No, no. Besides, a sharp trader, like you, ought to know that he who bids for nuts and news, may chance to find them hollow.’

‘Ah! young man,’ said Bratti, with a sideway glance of some admiration, ‘you were not born of a Sunday — the salt-shops were open when you came into the world. You’re not a Hebrew, eh? — come from Spain or Naples, eh? Let me tell you the Frati Minori are trying to make Florence as hot as Spain for those dogs of hell that want to get all the profit of usury to themselves and leave none for Christians; and when you walk the Calimara with a piece of yellow cloth in your cap, it will spoil your beauty more than a sword-cut across that smooth olive cheek of yours. — Abbaratta, baratta — chi abbaratta? — I tell you, young man, grey cloth is against yellow cloth; and there’s as much grey cloth in Florence as would make a gown and cowl for the Duomo, and there’s not so much yellow cloth as would make hose for St

Christopher — blessed be his name, and send me a sight of him this day! — Abbaratta, baratta, b'ratta — chi abbaratta?’

‘All that is very amusing information you are parting with for nothing,’ said the stranger, rather scornfully; ‘but it happens not to concern me. I am no Hebrew.’

‘See, now!’ said Bratti, triumphantly; ‘I’ve made a good bargain with mere words. I’ve made you tell me something, young man, though you’re as hard to hold as a lamprey. San Giovanni be praised! a blind Florentine is a match for two one-eyed men. But here we are in the Mercato.’

They had now emerged from the narrow streets into a broad piazza, known to the elder Florentine writers as the Mercato Vecchio, or the Old Market. This piazza, though it had been the scene of a provision-market from time immemorial, and may, perhaps, says fond imagination, be the very spot to which the Fesulean ancestors of the Florentines descended from their high fastness to traffic with the rustic population of the valley, had not been shunned as a place of residence by Florentine wealth. In the early decades of the fifteenth century, which was now near its end, the Medici and other powerful families of the popolani grassi, or commercial nobility, had their houses there, not perhaps finding their ears much offended by the loud roar of mingled dialects, or their eyes much shocked by the butchers’ stalls, which the old poet Antonio Pucci accounts a chief glory, or dignita, of a market that, in his esteem, eclipsed the markets of all the earth beside. But the glory of mutton and veal (well attested to be the flesh of the right animals; for were not the skins, with the heads attached, duly displayed, according to the decree of the Signoria?) was just now wanting to the Mercato, the time of Lent not being yet over. The proud corporation, or ‘Art,’ of butchers was in abeyance, and it was the great harvest-time of the market-gardeners, the cheesemongers, the vendors of macaroni, corn, eggs, milk, and dried fruits: a change which was apt to make the women’s voices predominant in the chorus. But in all seasons there was the experimental ringing of pots and pans, the chinking of the money-changers, the tempting offers of cheapness at the old-clothes stalls, the challenges of the dicers, the vaunting of new linens and woollens, of excellent wooden-ware, kettles, and frying-pans; there was the choking of the narrow inlets with mules and carts, together with much uncomplimentary remonstrance in terms remarkably identical with the insults in use by the gentler sex of the present day, under the same imbrowning and heating circumstances. Ladies and gentlemen, who came to market, looked on at a larger amount of amateur fighting than could easily be seen in these later times, and beheld more revolting rags, beggary, and rascaldom, than modern householders could well picture to themselves. As the day wore on,

the hideous drama of the gaming-house might be seen here by any chance open-air spectator — the quivering eagerness, the blank despair, the sobs, the blasphemy, and the blows:

‘E vedesi chi perde con gran soffi,  
E bestemmiar colla mano alla mascella,  
E ricever e dar di molti ingoffi.’

But still there was the relief of prettier sights: there were brood-rabbits, not less innocent and astonished than those of our own period; there were doves and singing-birds to be bought as presents for the children; there were even kittens for sale, and here and there a handsome gattuccio, or ‘Tom,’ with the highest character for mousing; and, better than all, there were young, softly-rounded cheeks and bright eyes, freshened by the start from the far-off castello at daybreak, not to speak of older faces with the unfading charm of honest goodwill in them, such as are never quite wanting in scenes of human industry. And high on a pillar in the centre of the place — a venerable pillar, fetched from the church of San Giovanni — stood Donatello’s stone statue of Plenty, with a fountain near it, where, says old Pucci, the good wives of the market freshened their utensils, and their throats also; not because they were unable to buy wine, but because they wished to save the money for their husbands.

But on this particular morning a sudden change seemed to have come over the face of the market. The deschi, or stalls, were indeed partly dressed with their various commodities, and already there were purchasers assembled, on the alert to secure the finest, freshest vegetables and the most unexceptionable butter. But when Bratti and his companion entered the piazza, it appeared that some common preoccupation had for the moment distracted the attention both of buyers and sellers from their proper business. Most of the traders had turned their backs on their goods, and had joined the knots of talkers who were concentrating themselves at different points in the piazza. A vendor of old clothes, in the act of hanging out a pair of long hose, had distractedly hung them round his neck in his eagerness to join the nearest group; an oratorical cheesemonger, with a piece of cheese in one hand and a knife in the other, was incautiously making notes of his emphatic pauses on that excellent specimen of marzolino; and elderly market-women, with their egg-baskets in a dangerously oblique position, contributed a wailing fugue of invocation.

In this general distraction, the Florentine boys, who were never wanting in any street scene, and were of an especially mischievous sort — as who should say, very sour crabs indeed — saw a great opportunity. Some made a rush at the nuts and dried figs, others preferred the farinaceous delicacies at the cooked provision stalls — delicacies to which certain fourfooted dogs also, who had learned to take kindly to Lenten fare, applied a discriminating nostril, and then

disappeared with much rapidity under the nearest shelter — while the mules, not without some kicking and plunging among impeding baskets, were stretching their muzzles towards the aromatic green-meat.

‘Diavolo!’ said Bratti, as he and his companion came quite unnoticed, upon the noisy scene, ‘the Mercato is gone as mad as if the Holy Father had excommunicated us again. I must know what this is. But never fear: it seems a thousand years to you till you see the pretty Tessa, and get your cup of milk; but keep hold of me, and I’ll hold to my bargain. Remember, I’m to have the first bid for your suit, specially for the hose, which, with all their stains, are the best panno di garbo — as good as ruined, though, with mud and weather stains.’

‘Ola, Monna Trecca,’ Bratti proceeded, turning towards an old woman on the outside of the nearest group, who for the moment had suspended her wail to listen, and shouting close in her ear: ‘Here are the mules upsetting all your bunches of parsley: is the world coming to an end, then?’ ‘Monna Trecca’ (equivalent to ‘Dame Greengrocer’) turned round at this unexpected trumpeting in her right ear, with a half-fierce, half-bewildered look, first at the speaker, then at her disarranged commodities, and then at the speaker again.

‘A bad Easter and a bad year to you, and may you die by the sword!’ she burst out, rushing towards her stall but directing this first volley of her wrath against Bratti, who without heeding the malediction, quietly slipped into her place, within hearing of the narrative which had been absorbing her attention; making a sign at the same time to the younger stranger to keep near him.

‘I tell you I saw it myself,’ said a fat man, with a bunch of newly-purchased leeks in his hand. ‘I was in Santa Maria Novella, and saw it myself. The woman started up and threw out her arms, and cried out and said she saw a big bull with fiery horns coming down on the church to crush it. I saw it myself.’

‘Saw what, Goro?’ said a man of slim figure, whose eye twinkled rather roguishly. He wore a close jerkin, a skullcap lodged carelessly over his left ear as if it had fallen there by chance, a delicate linen apron tucked up on one side, and a razor stuck in his belt. ‘Saw the bull, or only the woman?’

‘Why, the woman, to be sure; but it’s all one, mi pare: it doesn’t alter the meaning — va!’ answered the fat man, with some contempt.

‘Meaning? no, no; that’s clear enough,’ said several voices at once, and then followed a confusion of tongues, in which ‘Lights shooting over San Lorenzo for three nights together’ — ‘Thunder in the clear

starlight' — 'Lantern of the Duomo struck with the sword of St Michael' — 'Palle' — 'All smashed' — 'Lions tearing each other to pieces' — 'Ah! and they might well' — 'Boto caduto in Santissima Nunziata!' — 'Died like the best of Christians' — 'God will have pardoned him' — were often-repeated phrases, which shot across each other like storm-driven hailstones, each speaker feeling rather the necessity of utterance than of finding a listener. Perhaps the only silent members of the group were Bratti, who, as a new-comer, was busy in mentally piecing together the flying fragments of information; the man of the razor; and a thin-lipped eager-looking personage in spectacles, nearing a pen-and-ink case at his belt.

'Ebbene, Nello,' said Bratti, skirting the group till he was within hearing of the barber. 'It appears the Magnifico is dead — rest his soul! — and the price of wax will rise?'

'Even as you say,' answered Nello; and then added, with an air of extra gravity, but with marvellous rapidity, 'and his waxen image in the Nunziata fell at the same moment, they say; or at some other time, whenever it pleases the Frati Serviti, who know best. And several cows and women have had still-born calves this Quaresima; and for the bad eggs that have been broken since the Carnival, nobody has counted them. Ah! a great man — a great politician — a greater poet than Dante. And yet the cupola didn't fall, only the lantern. Che miracolo!'

A sharp and lengthened 'Pst!' was suddenly heard darting across the pelting storm of gutturals. It came from the pale man in spectacles, and had the effect he intended; for the noise ceased, and all eyes in the group were fixed on him with a look of expectation.

'Tis well said you Florentines are blind,' he began, in an incisive high voice. 'It appears to me, you need nothing but a diet of hay to make cattle of you. What! do you think the death of Lorenzo is the scourge God has prepared for Florence? Go! you are sparrows chattering praise over the dead hawk. What! a man who was trying to slip a noose over every neck in the Republic that he might tighten it at his pleasure! You like that; you like to have the election of your magistrates turned into closet-work, and no man to use the rights of a citizen unless he is a Medicean. That is what is meant by qualification now: netto di specchio no longer means that a man pays his dues to the Republic: it means that he'll wink at robbery of the people's money — at robbery of their daughters' dowries; that he'll play the chamberer and the philosopher by turns — listen to bawdy songs at the Carnival and cry 'Bellissimi!' — and listen to sacred lauds and cry again 'Bellissimi!' But this is what you love: you grumble and raise a riot over your quattrini bianchi' (white farthings); 'but you take no notice when the public treasury has got a hole in the bottom for the gold to run into Lorenzo's drains. You like to pay for footmen to walk before

and behind one of your citizens, that he may be affable and condescending to you. 'See, what a tall Pisan we keep,' say you, 'to march before him with the drawn sword flashing in our eyes! — and yet Lorenzo smiles at us. What goodness!' And you think the death of a man, who would soon have saddled and bridled you as the Sforza has saddled and bridled Milan — you think his death is the scourge God is warning you of by portents. I tell you there is another sort of scourge in the air.'

'Nay, nay, Ser Cioni, keep astride your politics, and never mount your prophecy; politics is the better horse,' said Nello. 'But if you talk of portents, what portents can be greater than a pious notary? Balaam's ass was nothing to it.'

'Ay, but a notary out of work, with his inkbottle dry,' said another bystander, very much out at elbows. 'Better don a cowl at once, Ser Cioni; everybody will believe in your fasting.'

The notary turned and left the group with a look of indignant contempt, disclosing, as he did so, the sallow but mild face of a short man who had been standing behind him, and whose bent shoulders told of some sedentary occupation.

'By San Giovanni, though,' said the fat purchaser of leeks, with the air of a person rather shaken in his theories, 'I am not sure there isn't some truth in what Ser Cioni says. For I know I have good reason to find fault with the quattrini bianchi myself. Grumble, did he say? Suffocation! I should think we do grumble; and, let anybody say the word, I'll turn out into the piazza with the readiest, sooner than have our money altered in our hands as if the magistracy were so many necromancers. And it's true Lorenzo might have hindered such work if he would — and for the bull with the flaming horns, why, as Ser Cioni says, there may be many meanings to it, for the matter of that; it may have more to do with the taxes than we think. For when God above sends a sign, it's not to be supposed he'd have only one meaning.'

'Spoken like an oracle, Gorol!' said the barber. 'Why, when we poor mortals can pack two or three meanings into one sentence, it were mere blasphemy not to believe that your miraculous bull means everything that any man in Florence likes it to mean.'

'Thou art pleased to scoff, Nello,' said the sallow, round-shouldered man, no longer eclipsed by the notary, 'but it is not the less true that every revelation, whether by visions, dreams, portents, or the written word, has many meanings, which it is given to the illuminated only to unfold.'



‘Assuredly,’ answered Nello. ‘Haven’t I been to hear the Frate in San Lorenzo? But then, I’ve been to hear Fra Menico in the Duomo too; and according to him, your Fra Girolamo, with his visions and interpretations, is running after the wind of Mongibello, and those who follow him are like to have the fate of certain swine that ran headlong into the sea — or some hotter place. With San Domenico roaring *e vero* in one ear, and San Francisco screaming *e falso* in the other, what is a poor barber to do — unless he were illuminated? But it’s plain our Goro here is beginning to be illuminated, for he already sees that the bull with the flaming horns means first himself, and secondly all the other aggrieved taxpayers of Florence, who are determined to gore the magistracy on the first opportunity.’

‘Goro is a fool!’ said a bass voice, with a note that dropped like the sound of a great bell in the midst of much tinkling. ‘Let him carry home his leeks and shake his flanks over his wool-beating. He’ll mend matters more that way than by showing his tun-shaped body in the piazza, as if everybody might measure his grievances by the size of his paunch. The burdens that harm him most are his heavy carcass and his idleness.’

The speaker had joined the group only in time to hear the conclusion of Nello’s speech, but he was one of those figures for whom all the world instinctively makes way, as it would for a battering-ram. He was not much above the middle height, but the impression of enormous force which was conveyed by his capacious chest and brawny arms bared to the shoulder, was deepened by the keen sense and quiet resolution expressed in his glance and in every furrow of his cheek and brow. He had often been an unconscious model to Domenico Ghirlandajo, when that great painter was making the walls of the churches reflect the life of Florence, and translating pale aerial traditions into the deep colour and strong lines of the faces he knew. The naturally dark tint of his skin was additionally bronzed by the same powdery deposit that gave a polished black surface to his leathern apron: a deposit which habit had probably made a necessary condition of perfect ease, for it was not washed off with punctilious regularity.

Goro turned his fat cheek and glassy eye on the frank speaker with a look of deprecation rather than of resentment.

‘Why, Niccolo,’ he said, in an injured tone, ‘I’ve heard you sing to another tune than that, often enough, when you’ve been laying down the law at San Gallo on a festa. I’ve heard you say yourself, that a man wasn’t a mill-wheel, to be on the grind, grind, as long as he was driven, and then stick in his place without stirring when the water was low. And you’re as fond of your vote as any man in Florence — ay, and I’ve heard you say, if Lorenzo —’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Niccolo. ‘Don’t you be bringing up my speeches again after you’ve swallowed them, and handing them about as if they were none the worse. I vote and I speak when there’s any use in it: if there’s hot metal on the anvil, I lose no time before I strike; but I don’t spend good hours in tinkling on cold iron, or in standing on the pavement as thou dost, Goro, with snout upward, like a pig under an oak-tree. And as for Lorenzo — dead and gone before his time — he was a man who had an eye for curious iron-work and if anybody says he wanted to make himself a tyrant, I say, ‘Sia; I’ll not deny which way the wind blows when every man can see the weathercock.’ But that only means that Lorenzo was a crested hawk, and there are plenty of hawks without crests whose claws and beaks are as good for tearing. Though if there was any chance of a real reform so that Marzocco might shake his mane and roar again, instead of dipping his head to lick the feet of anybody that will mount and ride him, I’d strike a good blow for it.’

‘And that reform is not far off, Niccolo,’ said the sallow, mild-faced man, seizing his opportunity like a missionary among the too light-minded heathens; ‘for a time of tribulation is coming, and the scourge is at hand. And when the Church is purged of cardinals and prelates who traffic in her inheritance that their hands may be full to pay the price of blood and to satisfy their own lusts, the State will be purged too — and Florence will be purged of men who love to see avarice and lechery under the red hat and the mitre because it gives them the screen of a more hellish vice than their own.’

‘Ay, as Goro’s broad body would be a screen for my narrow person in case of missiles,’ said Nello; ‘but if that excellent screen happened to fall, I were stifled under it, surely enough. That is no bad image of thine, Nanni — or, rather, of the Frate’s; for I fancy there is no room in the small cup of thy understanding for any other liquor than what he pours into it.’

‘And it were well for thee, Nello,’ replied Nanni, ‘if thou couldst empty thyself of thy scoffs and thy jests, and take in that liquor too. The warning is ringing in the ears of all men: and it’s no new story; for the Abbot Joachim prophesied of the coming time three hundred years ago, and now Fra Girolamo has got the message afresh. He has seen it in a vision, even as the prophets of old: he has seen the sword hanging from the sky.’

‘Ay, and thou wilt see it thyself, Nanni, if thou wilt stare upward long enough,’ said Niccolo; ‘for that pitiable tailor’s work of thine makes thy noddle so overhang thy legs, that thy eyeballs can see nought above the stitching-board but the roof of thy own skull.’

The honest tailor bore the jest without bitterness, bent on convincing his hearers of his doctrine rather than of his dignity. But Niccolo gave

him no opportunity for replying; for he turned away to the pursuit of his market business, probably considering further dialogue as a tinkling on cold iron.

‘Ebbene,’ said the man with the hose round his neck, who had lately migrated from another knot of talkers, ‘they are safest who cross themselves and jest at nobody. Do you know that the Magnifico sent for the Frate at the last, and couldn’t die without his blessing?’

‘Was it so — in truth?’ said several voices. ‘Yes, yes — God will have pardoned him.’ ‘He died like the best of Christians.’ ‘Never took his eyes from the holy crucifix.’

‘And the Frate will have given him his blessing?’

‘Well, I know no more,’ said he of the hosen; ‘only Guccio there met a footman going back to Careggi, and he told him the Frate had been sent for yesternight, after the Magnifico had confessed and had the holy sacraments.’

‘It’s likely enough the Frate will tell the people something about it in his sermon this morning; is it not true, Nanni?’ said Goro. ‘What do you think?’

But Nanni had already turned his back on Goro, and the group was rapidly thinning; some being stirred by the impulse to go and hear ‘new things’ from the Frate (‘new things’ were the nectar of Florentines); others by the sense that it was time to attend to their private business. In this general movement, Bratti got close to the barber, and said —

‘Nello, you’ve a ready tongue of your own, and are used to worming secrets out of people when you’ve once got them well lathered. I picked up a stranger this morning as I was coming in from Rovezzano, and I can spell him out no better than I can the letters on that scarf I bought from the French cavalier. It isn’t my wits are at fault, — I want no man to help me tell peas from paternosters, — but when you come to foreign fashions, a fool may happen to know more than a wise man.’

‘Ay, thou hast the wisdom of Midas, who could turn rags and rusty nails into gold, even as thou dost,’ said Nello, ‘and he had also something of the ass about him. But where is thy bird of strange plumage?’

Bratti was looking round, with an air of disappointment.

'Diavolo!' he said, with some vexation. 'The bird's flown. It's true he was hungry, and I forgot him. But we shall find him in the Mercato, within scent of bread and savours, I'll answer for him.'

'Let us make the round of the Mercato, then,' said Nello.

'It isn't his feathers that puzzle me,' continued Bratti, as they pushed their way together. 'There isn't much in the way of cut and cloth on this side the Holy Sepulchre that can puzzle a Florentine.'

'Or frighten him either,' said Nello, 'after he has seen an Englisher or a German.'

'No, no,' said Bratti, cordially; 'one may never lose sight of the Cupola and yet know the world, I hope. Besides, this stranger's clothes are good Italian merchandise, and the hose he wears were dyed in Ognissanti before ever they were dyed with salt water, as he says. But the riddle about him is —'

Here Bratti's explanation was interrupted by some jostling as they reached one of the entrances of the piazza, and before he could resume it they had caught sight of the enigmatical object they were in search of.