

romantic valley at the foot of Monte Ventoso, is at first a crystal stream, with flower-enamelled banks; but as it advances, it assumes a darker aspect, and becomes restless and impetuous, chafing against the fantastic rocks that imprison it on every side, till its waters seem gathered in one deep fountain, over which the rocks, like giant sentinels, keep guard, though here and there the limpid element overflows its barriers, and runs trickling down in many a silver rivulet over the rough granite to the vale below. Above the head of the fountain, swells a cliff of prodigious height, which throws its sombre shade upon the surface of the waters, deepening the solemnity of the scene, and increasing the superstitious awe which exists in the minds of many, owing to the circumstance that the fountain has never been fathomed, but its waters rise without noise or bubble, proclaiming to none the mysterious source from whence comes their exhaustless fulness. The small patches of soil among the cliffs are covered, or at least were so in the time of Petrarch, with clumps of olives and the richest verdure, and the poet planted groves of laurel all about this lovely and sacred spot, in commemoration of his mistress.

It is not to be wondered at that a place so beautiful in itself, and forming such an agreeable contrast to noisy, busy Avignon, should have charmed the susceptible fancy of Petrarch. Young as he was, his tastes were pure, and his imagination vivid, and here he could indulge to the utmost, his love of the wonderful and the beautiful; for years after, when he became its "genius loci," we find that his most striking images are drawn from the varied scenery around the fountain of Vaucluse.

It was Pietro's earnest desire that his son should study the civil law, and he had made such progress under the tuition of Convenevole, that at the early age of fourteen he was sent to Montpellier to commence his legal education. But his mind had already become too deeply imbued with the love of classic lore, to find pleasure in the barren fields of legal knowledge, and his advance was so slow, that his father removed him to Bologna, where he trusted the superior talents of the professors would stimulate him to greater diligence.

But vain was this hope, for though Petrarch was anxious to please his father, whom he tenderly loved, he could not resist the fascinations of poetry and eloquence, and Virgil and Cicero were his constant companions. Petrarch suspecting this to be the case, went one day unexpectedly to Bologna, and finding his son enjoying his fascinating authors, whose manuscripts were spread on the table before him, he seized the precious scrolls, and cast them into the fire. The horror of Francesco at this sacrilegious act was indescribable, and he uttered such piteous lamentations, that his father snatched them from the flames, and restored them to his son, kindly bidding him read Virgil for his comfort, and

Cicero, to excite him to pursue the study of the law.

The death of his father shortly after, relieved Petrarch from all obligation to continue his legal studies, and quitting Bologna he returned to Avignon, and resided with his mother till her death, which event overwhelmed him with affection. His brother Gerard was now his sole surviving relative, and possessing but little property, they both, as a dernière resort, embraced the ecclesiastical profession. Francesco, however, never received priest's orders, though he accepted the gift of an arch-deaconry and two canonries.

His limited circumstances, and the difficulty of obtaining the manuscript works of the best authors, would have rendered it almost impossible for Petrarch to have persevered in a literary career, had it not been for the friendship and patronage of Giacomo Colonna, the head of the noble Colonna family. This young man, who had been Petrarch's fellow-student at Bologna, was always attracted by the gentle manners and intellectual face of the youthful poet, and he now lost no time in cultivating his acquaintance, and furnishing him with means to indulge his elegant tastes, inviting him to become an inmate of his family, where he fully enjoyed the luxury of "lettered ease."

Indeed, the high estimation in which Petrarch was held by his noble friend, is exemplified in an anecdote, which also bears honourable testimony to the perfect integrity and truthfulness of his character. Some serious difficulty had arisen in the Colonna household, and the retainers dividing into parties, took arms against each other. Giacomo, desirous to ascertain from whence the trouble originated, put every member of his family upon oath, but when Petrarch approached to declare his innocence, the Cardinal closed the book, saying,

"As for you, Petrarch, your word is sufficient."

What a glorious tribute to truth and goodness was contained in these few simple words; of far more worth, than all that princely power or wealth could lavish from its overflowing coffers.

Till Petrarch attained his twenty-third year, he had known no passion, except that for literary distinction. He was in truth the censor of the age, living aloof from the dissipation and follies of his time, and especially indulging his virtuous severity against Avignon, which was notoriously a corrupt and licentious city. But, about this time, an important alteration took place in his feelings and character, which was marked by a corresponding change in the style and subjects of his writings. We quote his own words in alluding to the circumstance that preceded it:

"It was," he says, "the first Monday in Passion Week, 1327, that I first beheld Laura, at the church of St. Clair in Avignon. She was then just twenty and possessed all the charms of her sex."