

strengthen my position at a Court where I had already a round number of intriguing enemies, and prudence counselled me to turn a deaf ear and proceed on my way. Nevertheless, I did no such thing. Prudence, truth to tell, got little welcome from me at that time of my life, and recklessness and daredeviltry were the chief traits of my character. Had it been otherwise, I think I should scarcely have been hailed by all as the greatest free captain of my time in Europe; for could a cautious, mild-mannered, amiable man have ruled my mad band of villains and cutthroats from the four corners of the earth, and turned them into the best fighters to be found anywhere for the hiring of those needing defenders? Moreover, I had so many jealous enemies that my one hope of safety lay in the name I had won of being a man unsafe for meddling and very dangerous when provoked.

Del Mayno's words had been heard by his own circle, who greeted them with laughter and applause; by the pages and lackeys, who grinned and smirked and stood a-tiptoe to see what would happen next; by my own men, who were now waiting in suppressed glee to see the discomfiture which they did not doubt awaited the jester. Should I turn on my heel and pass on, to-morrow all the city of Verona would know the part I had played. There was but one course for me to pursue, and I did pursue it—not as the result of all these sage reflections, but