

his fate *was* to be what he foreboded, would be preferable to a suspense which hung upon the possibility of his worst fears being visionary.

The night came: and as the hour approached when Vivenzio imagined he might expect the signs, he stood fixed and silent as a statue. He feared to breathe, almost, lest he might lose any sound which would warn him of their coming. While thus listening, with every faculty of mind and body strained to an agony of attention, it occurred to him he should be more sensible of the motion, probably, if he stretched himself along the iron floor. He accordingly laid himself softly down, and had not been long in that position when—yes—he was certain of it—the floor moved under him! He sprang up, and in a voice suffocated nearly with emotion, called aloud. He paused—the motion ceased—he felt no stream of air—all was hushed—no voice answered to his—he burst into tears; and as he sunk on the ground, in renewed anguish, exclaimed,—“Oh, my God! my God! You alone have power to save me now, or strengthen me for the trial you permit.”

Another morning dawned upon the wretched captive, and the fatal index of his doom met his eyes. Two windows!—and *two* days—and all would be over! Fresh food—fresh water! The mysterious visit had been paid, though he had implored it in vain. But how awfully was his prayer answered in what he now saw! The roof of the dungeon was within a foot of his head. The two ends were so near, that in six paces he trod the space between them. Vivenzio shuddered as he gazed, and as his steps traversed the narrowed area. But his feelings no longer vented themselves in frantic wailings. With folded arms, and clenched teeth, with eyes that were bloodshot from much watching, and fixed with a vacant glare upon the ground, with a hard quick breathing, and a hurried walk, he strode backwards and forwards in silent musing for several hours. What mind shall conceive, what tongue utter, or what pen describe the dark and terrible character of his thoughts? Like the fate that moulded them, they had no similitude in the wide range of this world's agony for man. Suddenly he stopped, and his eyes were riveted

upon that part of the wall which was over his bed of straw. Words are inscribed there! A human language traced by a human hand! He rushes towards them; but his blood freezes as he reads:

“I Ludovico Sforza, tempted by the gold of the Prince of Tolfi, spent three years in contriving and executing this accursed triumph of my art. When it was completed, the perfidious Tolfi, more devil than man, who conducted me hither one morning, to be witness, as he said, of its perfection, doomed *me* to be the first victim of my own pernicious skill; lest, as he declared, I should divulge the secret, or repeat the effort of my ingenuity. May God pardon him, as I hope he will me, that ministered to his unhallowed purpose! Miserable wretch, whoe’er thou art, that readest these lines, fall on thy knees, and invoke, as I have done, His sustaining mercy who alone can nerve thee to meet the vengeance of Tolfi, armed with his tremendous engine which in a few hours must crush *you*, as it will the needy wretch who made it.”

A deep groan burst from Vivenzio. He stood, like one transfixed, with dilated eyes, expanded nostrils, and quivering lips, gazing at this fatal inscription. It was as if a voice from the sepulchre had sounded in his ears “Prepare!” Hope forsook him. There was his sentence, recorded in those dismal words. The future stood unveiled before him, ghastly and appalling. His brain already feels the descending horror,—his bones seem to crack and crumble in the mighty grasp of the iron walls! Unknowing what it is he does, he fumbles in his garment for some weapon of self-destruction. He clenched his throat in his convulsive gripe, as though he would strangle himself, at once. He stares upon the walls, and his warring spirit demands, “Will they not anticipate their office if I dash my head against them?” An hysterical laugh chokes him as he exclaims, “Why should I? He was but a man who died first in their fierce embrace; and I should be less than man not to do as much!”

The evening sun was descending, and Vivenzio beheld its golden beams streaming through one of the windows. What a thrill of joy shot through his soul at the sight! It was a precious link that united him, for the moment, with the world beyond. There was ecstasy in the thought.



CHICOUTIMI
BIBLIOTHEQUE DE LA SOCIÉTÉ DE LA GASPÉ
1903
201