

THE HOUSE OF FRIENDS AND ENEMIES 315

stairs at a stride, "Strike all, and strike home ! Forward all !"

But those below and behind had not waited for the command. With the first break of the hush came the swift scuffle of feet drowned in an answering roar. From the right hand in turned Perego, and from the left de Casera, and Patcham's shout was still stirring the dust of the roof and rumbling mid the ancient rafters when the groans and cries of the smitten rose up to echo on the discord.

In the astonishment of the surprise there was at first no defence, and so but little rattle of steel ; the tramp and rasp of feet upon the stones, the whisper of clothing edged along the wall, smothered oaths, unheeded orders, sudden shivering outcries, were the voices of the struggle. But presently above and through these came the sharper, shriller speech of sword on sword, the clang, the clash, the clatter ; and what at the first had been sheer slaying turned to a brief disordered fight fierce with the courage and terror of despair. Plan of battle there was, there could be, none. The cramped space forbade that—cramped, that is, for the jostling numbers that now thronged it, and for the business they were at.

But the fire was over-hot to last. From the very first all thought of attack was abandoned to the one purpose of forcing a retreat, nor, in the end, so wild and breathless had been the onslaught, was there much heart felt to stay the flight. Di Gadola and