

sents. One alone refused to take the furred mantle destined for him.

"It is not that I care less for fine robes than my brethren here," he said, "but I do not wish to depart without seeing the face of the noble master of the castle. What I am to receive, let me have it from his own hands."

"He is not here," replied the castellan, "here is your robe; if you wish it, take it; if not, leave room for others."

"Who is it then," insisted the minstrel, "who has just arrived here?"

"The Count del Balze," was the reply.

"Well! he will do. Lead me to him, or at least tell him that Tremacoldo is in waiting."

At this moment the count appeared at the entrance, and the minstrel advancing, requested to be admitted to his presence.

"I have heard," he said, "that Ottorino——"

"Stay," interrupted the Count, "thou shalt have immediate entrance;" and in a few minutes Tremacoldo was ushered into the presence of the count and countess.

"What news bringest thou?" exclaimed the latter hastily advancing to meet him. "Where are they? When will they be here?"

"Of whom speak ye, noble lady?" inquired the minstrel, quite bewildered.

"I ask thee if thou hast seen Ottorino and Beatrice?"

"Seen them? No."

"Hast thou heard aught of them then?"

"Yes! I have heard that they had not yet arrived at Castelletto. I knew they were expected here, and arrived this morning to assist in the celebration of nuptials which I had foreseen ever since that day at Bellano. Good right had I therefore to compose an epithalamium, and here it is if your ladyship would deign to peruse it."

So saying, he threw back his mantle and taking a parchment from his girdle, presented it to the countess. He thus displayed a dagger which was hanging at his belt, and which the count, who was standing beside him, at once recognised as having belonged to Ricciardino, one of the men-at-arms who had accompanied Ottorino and Beatrice.

"Where got'st thou that poignard?" he asked in accents of surprise and agitation.

"What poignard?" inquired the minstrel.

"That hanging by thy side."

Tremacoldo calmly unfastened it, and, placing it in the hands of the count, replied:

"I purchased it yesterday from an armourer at Callarate."

"What see'st thou particular about the poignard?" asked Ermelinda of her husband; and the reply, "'Tis Ricciardino's!" caused such an in-

crease of her agitation, that the minstrel began to comprehend that he had unwittingly got himself into trouble. He therefore drew cautiously towards the door, with the intention of making a sudden exit; the way was clear, the portcullis up, the drawbridge down, and his horse ready in the court-yard; but he paused as he reached the threshold.

"No," he said to himself, "Tremacoldo can hold his head up wherever he goes. I would not give any one reason to suspect that I had a hand in any knavery. I will stay and see how matters stand."

The count, who had been occupied in attending to Ermelinda, now turned to him; and from the questions which were showered upon him, Tremacoldo soon gathered the state of affairs. The warm-hearted minstrel, moved by the grief of the two parents, remembering with gratitude, the kindness of Ottorino and of Lupe, and urged on by a certain craving for adventure, which was ever most powerful with him, resolved to take up the slight trace he already had, and endeavour to fathom the mystery. The count and countess received with the warmest gratitude the offer of his services, and pressed upon him assistance, both in attendants and in money; but all their offers he firmly rejected, asserting that he had enough of money, and as for attendants, they would but embarrass him.

"It chances luckily for me," said he, "that I can thus employ my lute in a last work of charity, before changing it into the psalter, as I hope shortly to do. If I succeed in this my quest, mayhap you may have influence to assist in my transformation."

He added, in explanation, that the interdict being now removed, he intended to apply for readmission into the church; and even, if possible, his former benefice, the prebend of Crescenazago. Then, with a lowly obeisance, he left the hall, and set out on his search.

Three days passed without any tidings of him, or of any of the missing parties, and the count and his wife returned grieved and dejected to Milan. But Tremacoldo had been by no means idle during that period. He had first proceeded to the shop of the armourer at Callarate, where he had purchased the poignard, and, under colour of procuring a complete suit of armour, brought him into conversation, and ultimately led him away to a tavern in the neighbourhood. When they had emptied a flask or two, he began, cautiously and circumspectly, to sound him about the dagger. The armourer had bought it, he said, from a kinsman of his own, who resided at Rescaldina, and, and who had received that, along with some other trifles, as his share of the booty