

Birds of the rarest plumage and sweetest notes, were confined in nets so delicate and extended, that they could not feel themselves prisoners; shrubs from all the known world, the English primrose and hawthorn, the Frenchman's darling mignonette, the fragrant rose, and the graceful clematis, were wreathed with the myrtle and acacia, into a foliage so dense, they formed a perfect shelter from the noon-day sun. Marble vases filled with fresh flowers, were scattered around; and in the centre of this little paradise was a *jet d'eau*, which threw its sparkling dew-drops high in air, to be caught as they fell, by vases held by fairy naiads, whose beautiful proportions even Cellini need not blush to have chiselled.

On a little knoll which rose to meet the sun's rays, stood a dial, on which was the motto, "*Horas non numero, nisi serenas*"—"I count only the hours that are serene,"—and but few others had it yet counted for Beatrice Portonari; and yet a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, had passed over the edge of the dial, and she feared it might increase, and cover its whole surface.

It was Beatrice's invariable custom to pass the time given by her parents to their *siesta*, in this sweet spot, where with her lute and books, she whiled her time away; yet not alone with them; her fancy was ever busy with those fairy castles, "*Chateaux d'Espagne*," which give so much delight in construction, but which are crushed by the first cloud that hovers over them. Often were her silent meditations interrupted by a visitant from the distant city, in the guise of a carrier-dove, who had been trained to bear messages of love to the fair girl. The bird seemed to know his errand would give pleasure. When he came, he always hovered a few moments in the air, rustling his wings, and cooing in a low tone, to attract her attention, an object quickly gained, for her ear was ever intent to catch the first sound of his approach. With a gentle whistle, she wooed him to her hand, when he would raise his wing, and show to her eager gaze the precious billet he had borne her many a weary mile, and which unerring instinct taught him to deliver to her alone. He was always repaid for the faithful discharge of his duty, with fond caresses.

On a lovely day in October, Beatrice was reclining on the soft turf, watching the fleecy clouds that wreathed themselves into a thousand fantastic shapes, when her feathered visitor broke upon the reverie which her fancy had conjured up. She had not expected him that day, but he was none the less welcome. With a trembling hand, she untied the silken string that confined his precious burden, and with eager haste perused the

note. There was that in its contents that moved the maiden with deep emotion. As she read, the rose tint flushed her usually pale cheek, and then retreated, leaving her fairer than before.

It told of perils and escapes; of the fear of faction; of the sudden insurrection in the unquiet city; but above all, it breathed a spirit of tenderness, which hallowed even this picture of unhappy Florence. The messenger bird had nestled in her bosom, to find there a rest for its weary wings; but as if anxious to speed on its homeward course with some message of love, it flew to the water, dipped in its pretty head, and soft wings, then smoothing its ruffled plumage, and completing its rustic toilette with as much coquetry, and far more grace than the fair *belles* of the cities of the earth, it rested again upon Beatrice's shoulder, and cooed forth a few farewell notes. "Stop, pretty pet," she said, "I cannot let thee go without some token of remembrance, else will thy master deem thou hast been ^{ruled} by another." So drawing a turquoise ring from her finger, she tied it with the silken riband that confined the bouquet in her girdle, to the wing of the dove, who circled round a few times in the air, and then his rapid wing was cleaving the way in the direction of Florence.

Again and again did Beatrice read the scroll, where thoughts that breathe were expressed in the glowing language of the poet. She might be pardoned if a feeling akin to pride swelled her breast, as she felt that she alone was the inspiration of the youthful poet. "No one knows him as I do," she murmured; "to the world, he is Duranti, the Guelph; to me Dante, the lover-poet, the impersonation of my day-dreams. Would I could but withdraw him from the cabals in which he is engaged! I tremble at the thought of the danger to which he has but now been exposed. I will make one more effort to obtain my father's consent to our marriage, and then I can induce him to relinquish these ineffectual struggles to establish the liberty of Florence."

With the letter in her hand, Beatrice sought her father. When very young she had attracted Duranti Alghieri by her extreme beauty, which was of a style altogether different from her countrywomen. Her fair hair fell in rich profusion over a face it was for the poet not the painter to depict; its ever-flitting expression could not be caught on the canvass. The heavenly purity which beamed from her eyes gave her so spiritual a look, that no one who gazed on her could think of the mere beauty of the woman. She was well fitted to inspire the poet in this world, or to be his guide in his visits to another and more mysterious existence. To his early love for her,