

SIR JOHN HAWKWOOD

CHAPTER I

BARE STEEL.

"GIOVANNI DELLA GUGLIA!"

The words, subdued yet perfectly audible, fell on my ears just as I set my foot on the threshold of the door leading into the palace loggia. A titter accompanied them, and a buzz of whispering comment followed. Instantly I swung round on my heel, narrowed my eyes, and glanced keenly about to discover the author of the jest.

My task was like to prove no easy one, I saw at once; for all the busy court-yard was thronged with onlookers who now fixed me with glances of amusement. A group of pert young pages in white and gold livery were gathered round the fountain—the taunt might have come from one of them, but I thought not, for they had learned that I was no safe butt for their tricks. Gorgeous lackeys stood about in troops, soldiers of the Prince's Guard sprawled on the stone pavement and played at dice, and not far from where I stood I perceived a score