ALESSANDRO MANZONI

THE BETROTHED

|I PROMESSI SPOSI|

|1840|

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Critical Remarks on Manzoni's Betrothed : by The Count O'Mahony.

|Translated from the Italian|

To publish a novel, to analyse, to eulogise it, and recommend its perusal to the good and pious, will appear no doubt very extraordinary, and offend the prejudices of many who have agreed among themselves to consider a novel, whoever may be its author, and whatever may be its subject, form, and design, as a pestilent production. If you ask them why? "Because," they will reply—"because it is a novel!" The answer is as wise as it is peremptory and decisive, and we will spare ourselves the useless trouble of replying to arguments so profound and powerful. We will, however, submit a few serious reflections to minds of a less elevated order, were it only to prove that we can talk reasonably, even on the subject of novels.

Certainly, if we are understood to designate by the appellation of *Novel*, the written dreams and extravagant imaginations of a corrupt mind and depraved heart, where illusions are substituted for realities, vice transformed into virtue, crime justified by the passions that lead to its perpetration, and fallacious pictures presented of an ideal world, or criminal apologies for a world too real; if, we say, such are the novels to be condemned and proscribed, none more than ourselves will be disposed to confirm the sentence. The unhappy influence which productions like these have exerted over the minds of youth, and above all, the ravages which their multiplication has within a few years produced, is a fact acknowledged by all, by those who have escaped the contagion of their perusal, as well as by those whom that perusal has injured. With respect to this, the wise and the good are unanimous in their testimony and their anathemas; it is one

of those self-evident truths, about which an Englishman or a German might still elaborate many a learned dissertation, but of which we shall take no further notice, certain that we should only repeat much less forcibly and eloquently, that which a thousand writers or orators have said before us.

But there is another point of view under which we must consider novels, or rather the works so called, but which bear, to those which morals and good taste reprobate, no other resemblance than the name. These are, it is true, unhappily few in number, and therefore have not been classed by themselves, but have been comprehended in the common appellation, and included in the general proscription; like an honest man, who, bearing the same name as a rogue, partakes with him the odium of his reputation. But this is an injustice for which we are disposed to claim reparation.

Every work of imagination, in which the author causes ideal personages to speak, think, and act, according to his pleasure, has been stigmatised as a *Novel*. But, if we allow this rigorous definition, the apologue, so dear to the moralist, is a *Novel*, and deserving of proscription. We will go further; the parable, which also creates its characters and invents their words and actions, is a *novel*! But who would dare to call them so? Who would dare profane by this name, those profound allegories, those holy fables, so excellent in truth, and so replete with instruction, which God himself has related to man? Finally, if we peruse the works of the most austere philosophers, and the most severe moralists, without excepting ecclesiastical writers, we shall find among them all, pictures of fancy or ideal histories of imaginary persons, fiction serving as a veil, or rather (we must acknowledge it) as an apology for truth.

Now, we ask, by what unjust caprice would we condemn in the novelist that which we admire and applaud in the moralist and philosopher; or rather, by what title do we interdict to the former the right of being equally philosophical and moral with the latter? If man were without weaknesses and society without imperfections, truth would prevail of itself, and in order to be loved and obeyed, it would need only to be shown in its unadorned purity and undisguised nakedness. But, from the beginning of the world, pride has precipitated man into darkness. Corrupt and blind, a jealous susceptibility is

developed in his character, which continually increases in proportion to his blindness and corruptions,—that is to say, the deeper he is plunged in darkness, the more he dreads the light, and it is but by degrees, and under various disguises, that we can hope ultimately to make him endure its full blaze.

Besides, fiction, under divers forms, such as fables, apologues, novels, allegories, and tales, constitutes a large portion of the literature of every nation; to this we may add the utility, nay, even the necessity of disguising truth, in order to make it acceptable to our imperfection; and more than all, the good frequently resulting from these modest productions ought to stimulate those on whom Heaven has bestowed the same kind of talent, to employ it in exposing vice and reforming the corruptions of society.

But if the imperfection and weakness of our hearts render fiction necessary to us, a similar necessity results from the languor and inaction of our minds: for in proportion to the extent of public corruption, individual application of the mind to severe and serious study diminishes. Insensibly all continued exercise of the powers of his understanding becomes irksome to man, and he finally considers thought and *ennui* to be synonymous terms. This is, without doubt, a deplorable and alarming symptom of the decline of society; but we are obliged to confess its existence, and, not possessing the power of changing, we must submit to its caprices and satisfy its necessities.

Now, whether from instinct or observation, writers appear for some years past to have generally understood the demands of the age; and throughout Europe, men of distinguished talents have employed themselves in answering them. It might be said that Germany, England, Switzerland, and Italy, have formed as it were a literary alliance, which will probably endure longer than their *political alliance*. As to France, her attention has for fifteen years been attracted to literature as well as to politics; but she has thought it sufficient for her glory to translate foreign books, and for her prosperity to translate foreign constitutions.|[1]|

[1] In this assertion we do not agree with the critic. France, in common with other European nations, has unquestionably manifested much curiosity regarding foreign literature, and has availed herself of its treasures; but,

However this may be, the new taste for foreign literature is remarkable. Numerous works of imagination have appeared simultaneously of an elevated style and uncommon erudition. The choice, and we may add the gravity, of the subjects, the importance of the action, the extent of the developements, and the fidelity of the descriptions, stamp them with a peculiar character, and oblige us to assign to their authors a distinct rank among novel writers. Although unequal in merit, they may be arranged into two classes. The one, beholding how history was neglected, has endeavoured to restore its influence by reviving our ancient chronicles, and presenting to us in an elegant undress, the same characters from whom we avert our eyes, in the magnificent and stiff accompaniments of their historical costume. The other, less numerous, but, in our opinion, much more happily inspired, afflicted by the cold indifference with which the most excellent works on morals and politics are received, or by the insulting contempt which discards them altogether, has undertaken to allure and amuse the prejudices of the age, in order to correct them. In an imaginary picture, they have specially devoted themselves to describe the great springs of human action, and to bring prominently forward those traits of character, those inflexible criticisms on society, which under such a form will attract attention, when every direct and serious admonition would be rejected. Now, it is to this class of novel writers that Alessandro Manzoni essentially belongs.

And here, a great difficulty presents itself; a work of which the action is so simple, that an analysis of it might be given in half a page, and yet so rich in beauties, that a volume might be written in its praise; between these two extremes, the middle path is not easy to find. For, if we should content ourselves with stating that two villagers, who were betrothed, and about to be united, had been separated by the menaces of a rich and titled robber, calumniated, betrayed by a seeming friend, and aided by the unlooked-for benevolence of an enemy; again persecuted by the tyranny of the great, and then almost immolated by the

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by the original works of her own writers, the advantage has been reciprocated, particularly in the novels lately produced in Paris by such men as M. de Vigny and M. Victor Hugo. The “Notre Dame de Paris” of the latter has attained an European celebrity, and has accordingly been incorporated in the present series of “Standard Novels.”—*English Ed.*

tyranny of the people, and finally delivered by the pestilence itself; if, we repeat, we confine ourselves to this exposition, we shall have presented to our readers the abstract of the work; but shall we have given them a single idea of its beauties?

If, on the contrary, we would enter on an examination of the characters, and follow them in their developement, what a task we impose on ourselves! For here, what beauty! what truth! what originality! The character of Don Abbondio alone would furnish matter for extensive remark, as it is assuredly one of the most profoundly comic creations of the genius of romance. A coward by nature, and selfish from habit, entering the ecclesiastical order only to find in it powerful protection against future enemies, and a refuge against present terrors, during his whole life he pursues, without a single deviation, the tyrannical vocation of *fear*. Ever disturbed by the apprehension of being disturbed, and giving himself prodigious trouble in order to secure his tranquillity, the care of his repose takes from him all repose. "*A friend to all*," is his device, and "*Be quiet*," his habitual reply. For him, the evil committed in secret is preferable to the good which might excite dangerous remark. However, at the bottom of his heart, he still esteems the good and virtuous; as to the wicked, he caresses, and where there is necessity, flatters them; in every controversy, he deems the strongest party to be in the right, but his fear of mistake often prevents him from deciding which *is* the strongest. In discussions where he is personally involved, he acts not less prudently; he does not grant concessions, he does more, he freely offers them, as by so doing he saves the honour of his authority. Indeed, he does not drop a word nor risk a gesture, of which he has not previously weighed the consequences. So that by calculation and foresight, he is prepared for all, except the performance of duty under circumstances of peril and difficulty; to this he closes his ears and his eyes, and thus compromises with the world and his conscience.

And here, let us add, that if any of our readers discover, in this character, the intention, or even the possibility, of an application injurious to religion, they understand but little the mind of the author, which is constantly animated by the most ardent faith, and imbued, we may say, with its highest inspirations. The curate Abbondio appears before us chiefly to

give greater relief to the sublime figures of the friar Christopher, and the holy archbishop of Milan, and to furnish materials for scenes between these three characters, where the weakness, the cowardice, and the selfishness of the one serves to brighten, by contrast, the courage, devotion, and heroism of the others. It is an eminently philosophical conception to portray three men entering the priesthood from such different motives, in the course of their long lives, disclosing faithfully in their actions, the sources of their primitive choice. A lesson indeed! from which we may learn what religion can do with men, when they obey its laws and devote themselves to its service, and what men can do with religion, when they subject it to their caprices, or prostitute it to their interests.

But it is in the conversion of the formidable Unknown, that religion appears in all its power, and its pontiff in all the majesty of his benevolence. The interview between these two persons, the one the terror, the other the beloved of his country; the proud criminal humbling himself before the most humble of the just; the former preserving in his profound humiliation the traces of his habitual wickedness and pride, and the latter, with humility equally profound, the majestic authority of unsullied virtue. This scene, conceived and executed with equal genius, combines within itself the deepest interest, and the highest beauty.

As an illustration of the ingenuity and discernment of the author, we will offer one remark further; he has placed before us two wicked men; the one a subaltern robber, a libertine of the second rank, a swaggerer in debauch, vainer of his vices than jealous of his pleasures. The other a superior genius, who has measured how far man could descend in crime, and himself reached its depths, where he governs human corruption as its sovereign, committing no act of violence without leaving the impression of his unlimited power and inexorable will. One of these is to be converted; which will it be? The least guilty? No; coward in vice, where would he find courage to repent? He will die hardened and impenitent. It is the grand criminal who will be drawn from the abyss, for he has descended into it with all his power, and it will need a repentance proportioned to the measure of his iniquities to restore him to the favour of his God. There is evinced in this developement, great knowledge of

the human heart, and a very striking revelation of the mysterious dealings of a just and compassionate God.

We find the same sagacity of observation in other parts of the work; it appears under an altogether original form in the episode of Gertrude; irresistibly conducted to the cloister, notwithstanding her insurmountable repugnance, when she could by a single word free herself from such a condemnation, dooming her own self to a sacrifice she detests; yielding without having been conquered; the slave of her very liberty, and the victim to a voluntary fatality! It is not in a rapid sketch that we can give an idea of this singular and altogether novel character. To appreciate its excellence, we must give an attentive perusal.

But Alessandro Manzoni is not only a skilful painter of individual portraits, he excels also in grand historical representations. In that of the plague at Milan, and the famine preceding it, his manner becomes bolder, his touch more free and majestic, without, however, losing any of its exquisite delicacy. When he represents an entire people rebelling against hunger, or vanquished by disease and death, we deeply feel the horror of the picture, at the same time that an occasional smile is elicited by the comic genius of the artist, which exercises itself even amidst the agonies of famine and pestilence, so that, through the grand design of the exhibition, the delicate touches of the pencil are still visible, and individual character perceptible through the very depths of bold and general description; it is Van Dyck painting on the reverse of one of Michael Angelo's pictures.

We will not take leave of this interesting production without indulging ourselves in one more observation, which is, that in this succession of adventures, where appear, by turns or simultaneously, two robber chiefs and their followers, an unbridled soldiery, a people in rebellion, famine, and pestilence, all the evil specially resulting to the virtuous, is the consequence of the cowardice of a single man! What a lesson may we derive from such a *Novel*!

THE BETROTHED |1|

Chapter 1

That branch of the Lake of Como, which turns toward the south between two unbroken chains of mountains, presenting to the eye a succession of bays and gulfs, formed by their jutting and retiring ridges, suddenly contracts itself between a headland to the right and an extended sloping bank on the left, and assumes the flow and appearance of a river. The bridge by which the two shores are here united, appears to render the transformation more apparent, and marks the point at which the lake ceases, and the Adda recommences, to resume, however, the name of *Lake* where the again receding banks allow the water to expand itself anew into bays and gulfs. The bank, formed by the deposit of three large mountain streams, descends from the bases of two contiguous mountains, the one called St. Martin, the other by a Lombard name, *Resegone*, from its long line of summits, which in truth give it the appearance of a saw; so that there is no one who would not at first sight, especially viewing it in front, from the ramparts of Milan that face the north, at once distinguish it in all that extensive range from other mountains of less name and more ordinary form. The bank, for a considerable distance, rises with a gentle and continual ascent, then breaks into hills and hollows, rugged or level land, according to the formation of the mountain rocks, and the action of the floods. Its extreme border, intersected by the mountain torrents, is composed almost entirely of sand and pebbles; the other parts of fields and vineyards, scattered farms, country seats, and villages, with here and there a wood which extends up the mountain side. Lecco, the largest of these villages, and which gives its name to the district, is situated at no great distance from the bridge, upon the margin of the lake; nay, often, at the rising of the waters, is partly embosomed within the lake itself; a large town at the present day, and likely soon to become a city. At the period of our story, this village was also fortified, and consequently had the honour to furnish quarters to a governor,

and the advantage of possessing a permanent garrison of Spanish soldiers, who gave lessons in modesty to the wives and daughters of the neighbourhood, and toward the close of summer never failed to scatter themselves through the vineyards, in order to thin the grapes, and lighten for the rustics the labours of the vintage. From village to village, from the heights down to the margin of the lake, there are innumerable roads and paths: these vary in their character; at times precipitous, at others level; now sunk and buried between two ivy-clad walls, from whose depth you can behold nothing but the sky, or some lofty mountain peak; then crossing high and level tracts, around the edges of which they sometimes wind, occasionally projecting beyond the face of the mountain, supported by prominent masses resembling bastions, whence the eye wanders over the most varied and delicious landscape. On the one side you behold the blue lake, with its boundaries broken by various promontories and necks of land, and reflecting the inverted images of the objects on its banks; on the other, the Adda, which, flowing beneath the arches of the bridge, expands into a small lake, then contracts again, and holds on its clear serpentining course to the distant horizon: above, are the ponderous masses of the shapeless rocks; beneath, the richly cultivated acclivity, the fair landscape, the bridge; in front, the opposite shore of the lake, and beyond this, the mountain, which bounds the view.

Towards evening, on the 7th day of November, 1628, Don Abbondio, curate of one of the villages before alluded to (but of the name of which, nor of the house and lineage of its curate, we are not informed), was returning slowly towards his home, by one of these pathways. He was repeating quietly his office; in the pauses of which he held his closed breviary in his hand behind his back; and as he went, with his foot he cast listlessly against the wall the stones that happened to impede his path; at the same time giving admittance to the idle thoughts that tempted the spirit, while the lips of the worthy man were mechanically performing their function; then raising his head and gazing idly around him, he fixed his eyes upon a mountain summit, where the rays of the setting sun, breaking through the openings of an opposite ridge, illumined its projecting masses, which appeared like large and variously shaped spots of purple

light. He then opened anew his breviary, and recited another portion at an angle of the lane, after which angle the road continued straight for perhaps seventy paces, and then branched like the letter Y into two narrow paths; the right-hand one ascended towards the mountain, and led to the parsonage (*Cura*); that on the left descended the valley towards a torrent, and on this side the wall rose out to the height of about two feet. The inner walls of the two narrow paths, instead of meeting at the angle, ended in a little chapel, upon which were depicted certain long, sinuous, pointed shapes, which, in the intention of the artist, and to the eyes of the neighbouring inhabitants, represented flames, and amidst these flames certain other forms, not to be described, that were meant for souls in purgatory; souls and flames of a brick colour, upon a ground of blackish grey, with here and there a bare spot of plaster. The curate, having turned the corner, directed, as was his wont, a look toward the little chapel, and there beheld what he little expected, and would not have desired to see. At the confluence, if we may so call it, of the two narrow lanes, there were two men: one of them sitting astride the low wall; his companion leaning against it, with his arms folded on his breast. The dress, the bearing, and what the curate could distinguish of the countenance of these men, left no doubt as to their profession. They wore upon their heads a green network, which, falling on the left shoulder, ended in a large tassel, from under which appeared upon the forehead an enormous lock of hair. Their mustachios were long, and curled at the extremities; the margin of their doublets confined by a belt of polished leather, from which were suspended, by hooks, two pistols; a little powder-horn hung like a locket on the breast; on the right-hand side of the wide and ample breeches was a pocket, out of which projected the handle of a knife, and on the other side they bore a long sword, of which the great hollow hilt was formed of bright plates of brass, combined into a cypher: by these characteristics they were, at a glance, recognised as individuals of the class of bravoes.

This species, now entirely extinct, flourished greatly at that time in Lombardy. For those who have no knowledge of it, the following are a few authentic records, that may suffice to impart an idea of its principal characteristics, of the vigorous

efforts made to extirpate it, and of its obstinate and rank vitality.

As early as the 8th of April, 1583, the most illustrious and most excellent lord Don Charles of Arragon, Prince of Castelvetrano, Duke of Terranova, Marquis of Avola, Count of Burgeto, High Admiral and High Constable of Sicily, Governor of Milan, and Captain General of His Catholic Majesty in Italy, "fully informed of the intolerable misery which the city of Milan has endured, and still endures, by reason of bravoes and vagabonds," publishes his decree against them, "declares and designates all those comprehended in this proclamation to be regarded as bravoes and vagabonds,——who, whether foreigners or natives, have no calling, or, having one, do not follow it,——but, either with or without wages, attach themselves to any knight, gentleman, officer, or merchant,—— to uphold or favour him, or in any manner to molest others." All such he commands, within the space of six days, to leave the country; threatens the refractory with the galleys, and grants to all officers of justice the most ample and unlimited powers for the execution of his commands. But, in the following year, on the 12th of April, the said lord, having perceived "that this city still continues to be filled with bravoes, who have again resumed their former mode of life; their manners unchanged, and their number undiminished," puts forth another edict still more energetic and remarkable, in which, among other regulations, he directs "that any person whatsoever, whether of this city or from abroad, who shall, by the testimony of two witnesses, be shown to be regarded and commonly reputed as a bravo, even though no criminal act shall have been proved against him, may, nevertheless, upon the sole ground of his reputation, be condemned by the said judges to the rack for examination; and although he make no confession of guilt, he shall, notwithstanding, be sentenced to the galleys for the said term of three years, solely for that he is regarded as, and called a bravo, as above-mentioned;" and this "because His Excellency is resolved to enforce obedience to his commands."

One would suppose that at the sound of such denunciations from so powerful a source, all the bravoes must have disappeared for ever. But testimony, of no less authority, obliges us to believe directly the reverse. This testimony is the

most illustrious and most excellent lord Juan Fernandez de Velasco, Constable of Castile, High Chamberlain of His Majesty, Duke of the city of Freas, Count of Haro and Castelnuovo, Lord of the house of Velasco, and of that of the Seven Infanti of Lara, Governor of the State of Milan, &c. On the 5th of June, 1593, he also, fully informed "how great an injury to the common weal, and how insulting to justice, is the existence of such a class of men," requires them anew to quit the country within six days, repeating very nearly the same threats and injunctions as his predecessor. On the 23d of May, then, 1598, "having learnt, with no little displeasure, that the number of bravoes and vagabonds is increasing daily in this state and city, and that nothing is heard of them but wounds, murders, robberies, and every other crime, to the commission of which these bravoes are encouraged by the confidence that they will be sustained by their chiefs and abettors," he prescribes again the same remedies, increasing the dose, as is usual in obstinate disorders. "Let every one, then," he concludes, "carefully beware that he do not, in any wise, contravene this edict; since, in place of experiencing the mercy of His Excellency, he shall prove his rigour and his wrath—he being resolved and determined that this shall be a final and peremptory warning."

But this again did not suffice; and the illustrious and most excellent lord, the Signor Don Pietro Enriquez de Acevedo, Count of Fuentes, Captain and Governor of the State of Milan, "fully informed of the wretched condition of this city and state, in consequence of the great number of bravoes that abound therein, and resolved wholly to extirpate them," publishes, on the 5th of December, 1600, a new decree, full of the most rigorous provisions, and "with firm purpose that in all rigour, and without hope of remission, they shall be wholly carried into execution."

We are obliged, however, to conclude that he did not, in this matter, exhibit the same zeal which he knew how to employ in contriving plots and exciting enemies against his powerful foe, Henry IV., against whom history attests that he succeeded in arming the Duke of Savoy, whom he caused to lose more towns than one; and in engaging in a conspiracy the Duke of Biron, whom he caused to lose his head. But as regards the pestilent

race of bravoes, it is very certain they continued to increase until the 22d day of September, 1612; on which day the most illustrious and most excellent lord Don Giovanni de Mendoza, Marchese de la Hynojosa, gentleman, & c., Governor, & c., thought seriously of their extirpation. He addressed to Pandolfo and Marco Tullio Malatesti, printers of the Royal Chamber, the customary edict, corrected and enlarged, that they might print it, to accomplish that end. But the bravoes still survived, to experience, on the 24th December, 1618, still more terrific denunciations from the most illustrious and most excellent lord, Don Gomez Suarez de Figueroa, Duke of Feria, Governor, & c.; yet, as they did not fall even under these blows, the most illustrious and most excellent lord Gonzalo Fernandez de Cordova, under whose government we are made acquainted with Don Abbondio, found himself obliged to republish the usual proclamation against the bravoes, on the 5th day of October, 1627, that is, a year, a month, and two days previous to the commencement of our story.

Nor was this the last publication; but of those that follow, as of matters not falling within the period of our history, we do not think it proper to make mention. The only one of them to which we shall refer, is that of the 13th day of February, 1632, in which the most illustrious and most excellent lord, the Duke of Feria, for the second time governor, informs us, "that the greatest and most heinous crimes are perpetrated by those styled bravoes." This will suffice to prove that, at the time of which we treat, the bravoes still existed.

It appeared evident to Don Abbondio that the two men above mentioned were waiting for some one, and he was alarmed at the conviction that it was for himself; for on his appearance, they exchanged a look, as if to say, "'tis he." Rising from the wall, they both advanced to meet him. He held his breviary open before him, as though he were employed in reading it; but, nevertheless, cast a glance upward in order to espy their movements. Seeing that they came directly toward him, he was beset by a thousand different thoughts. He considered, in haste, whether between the bravoes and himself there were any outlet from the road, and he remembered there was none. He took a rapid survey of his conduct, to discover if he had given offence to any powerful or revengeful man; but in this matter, he was

somewhat reassured by the consoling testimony of his conscience. The bravoes draw near, and kept their eyes upon him. He raised his hand to his collar, as if adjusting it, and at the same time turned his head round, to see if any one were coming; he could discover no one. He cast a glance across the low stone wall upon the fields; no one! another on the road that lay before him; no one, except the bravoes! What is to be done? Flight was impossible. Unable to avoid the danger, he hastened to encounter it, and to put an end to the torments of uncertainty. He quickened his pace, recited a stanza in a louder tone, did his utmost to assume a composed and cheerful countenance, and finding himself in front of the two gallants, stopped short. "Signor Curate," said one of them, fixing his eyes upon him,—

"Your pleasure, sir," suddenly raising his eyes from his book, which he continued to hold open before him.

"You intend," pursued the other, with the threatening and angry mien of one who has detected an inferior in an attempt to commit some villany, "you intend to-morrow to unite in marriage Renzo Tramaglino and Lucy Mondella."

"That is," said Don Abbondio with a faltering voice, "that is to say—you gentlemen, being men of the world, are very well aware how these things are managed: the poor curate neither meddles nor makes—they settle their affairs amongst themselves, and then—then, they come to us, as if to redeem a pledge; and we—we are the servants of the public."

"Mark now," said the bravo in a low voice, but in a tone of command, "this marriage is not to take place, neither to-morrow, nor at any other time."

"But, my good sirs," replied Don Abbondio, with the mild and gentle tone of one who would persuade an impatient listener, "but, my good sirs, deign to put yourselves in my situation. If the thing depended on myself—you see plainly, that it does not in the least concern——"

"Hold there," said the bravo, interrupting him, "this matter is not to be settled by prating. We neither know nor care to know any more about it. A man once warned—you understand us."

"But, fair sirs, you are too just, too reasonable——"

“But,” interrupted the other comrade, who had not before spoken, “but this marriage is not to be performed, or (with an oath) he who performs it will not repent of it, because he'll not have time” (with another oath).

“Hush, hush,” resumed the first orator, “the Signor Curate knows the world, and we are gentlemen who have no wish to harm him if he conducts himself with judgment. Signor Curate, the most illustrious Signor Don Roderick, our patron, offers you his kind regards.” As in the height of a midnight storm a vivid flash casts a momentary dazzling glare around and renders every object more fearful, so did this *name* increase the terror of Don Abbondio: as if by instinct, he bowed his head submissively, and sai—

“If it could but be suggested to me.”

“Oh! suggested to *you*, who understand Latin!” exclaimed the bravo, laughing; “it is for you to manage the matter. But, above all, be careful not to say a word concerning the hint that has been given you for your good; for if you do, ehem!—you understand—the consequences would be the same as if you performed the marriage ceremony. But say, what answer are we to carry in your name to the most illustrious Signor Don Roderick?”

“My respects——”

“Speak more clearly, Signor Curate.”

“That I am disposed, ever disposed, to obedience.” And as he spoke the words he was not very certain himself whether he gave a promise, or only uttered an ordinary compliment. The bravoes took, or *appeared* to take them, in the more serious sense.

“'Tis very well; good night, Signor Curate,” said one of them as he retired, together with his companion. Don Abbondio, who a few minutes before would have given one of his eyes to avoid the ruffians, was now desirous to prolong the conversation.

“Gentlemen——” he began, as he shut his book. Without again noticing him, however, they passed on, singing a loose song, of which we will not transcribe the words. Poor Don Abbondio remained for a moment, as if spell-bound, and then with heavy and lagging steps took the path which led towards his home. The reader will better understand the state of his

mind, when he shall have learned something more of his disposition, and of the condition of the times in which it was his lot to live.

Don Abbondio was not (as the reader may have perceived) endowed with the courage of a lion. But from his earliest years he had been sensible that the most embarrassing situation in those times was that of an animal, furnished with neither tusks nor talons, at the same time having no wish to be devoured. The arm of the law afforded no protection to a man of quiet, inoffensive habits, who had no means of making himself feared. Not that laws and penalties were wanting for the prevention of private violence: the laws were most express; the offences enumerated, and minutely particularised; the penalties sufficiently extravagant; and if that were not enough, the legislator himself, and, a hundred others to whom was committed the execution of the laws, had power to increase them. The proceedings were studiously contrived to free the judge from every thing that might prevent his passing sentence of condemnation; the passages we have cited from proclamations against the bravoes, may be taken as a faithful specimen of these decrees. Notwithstanding this, or, it may be, in *consequence* of this, these proclamations, reiterated and reinforced from time to time, served only to proclaim in pompous language the impotence of those who issued them; or, if they produced any immediate effect, it was *that* of adding to the vexations which the peaceful and feeble suffered from the disturbers of society. Impunity was organised and effected in so many ways as to render the proclamations powerless. Such was the consequence of the sanctuaries and asylums; and of the privileges of certain classes, partly acknowledged by the legal power, partly tolerated in silence, or feebly opposed; but which, in *fact*, were sustained and guarded by almost every individual with interested activity and punctilious jealousy. Now this impunity, threatened and assailed, but not destroyed, by these proclamations, would naturally, at every new attack, employ fresh efforts and devices to maintain itself. The proclamations were efficient, it is true, in fettering and embarrassing the honest man, who had neither power in himself nor protection from others; inasmuch as, in order to reach every person, they subjected the movements of each private individual to the

arbitrary will of a thousand magistrates and executive officers. But he, who before the commission of his crime had prepared himself a refuge in some convent or palace where bailiffs never dared to enter; or who simply wore a livery, which engaged in his defence the vanity or the interest of a powerful family; such a one was free in his actions, and could laugh to scorn every proclamation. Of those very persons whose part it was to ensure the execution of these decrees, some belonged by birth to the privileged class, others were its clients and dependants; and as the latter as well as the former had, from education, from habit, from imitation, embraced its maxims, they would be very careful not to violate them. Had they however, been bold as heroes, obedient as monks, and devoted as martyrs, they could never have accomplished the execution of the laws, inferior as they were in number to *those* with whom they must engage, and with the frequent probability of being abandoned, or even sacrificed, by him who, in a moment of theoretical abstraction, might require them to act. But, in addition to this, their office would be regarded as a base one in public opinion, and their name stamped with reproach. It was therefore very natural that, instead of risking, nay, throwing away, their lives in a fruitless attempt, they should sell their inaction, or, rather, their connivance, to the powerful; or, at least, exercise their authority only on those occasions when it might be done with safety to themselves; that is, in oppressing the peaceable and the defenceless.

The man who acts with violence, or who is constantly in fear of violence from others, seeks companions and allies. Hence it happened that, during these times, individuals displayed so strong a tendency to combine themselves into classes, and to advance, as far as each one was able, the power of that to which he belonged. The clergy was vigilant in the defence and extension of its immunities; the nobility, of its privileges; the military, of its exemptions; the merchants and artisans were enrolled in companies and fraternities; the lawyers were united in leagues, and even the physicians formed a corporation. Each of these little oligarchies had its own appropriate power,—in each of them the individual found the advantage of employing for himself, in proportion to his influence and dexterity, the united force of numbers. The more honest availed themselves