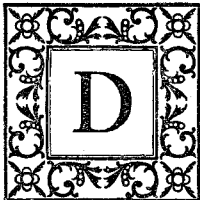


A Florentine Face

BY BERNICE KENYON

Author of "Songs of Unrest"

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HARRY TOWNSEND

"ON'T believe them. They never tell the truth."

In plain English, the words sounded straight against his mind, without the intermediary process of translation; therefore they had a singular force, and captured his attention. He traced their direction—some tables down and to the right across the dining-room. From his lonely vantage-point he saw two people, a man and a woman; the man faced him, and had, now that he noticed it, one of the strangest faces in the world. High domed brow, shrewd eyes, and satyric mouth, very little color at all, but wrinkles indicative of cruel humor. Julian Henderson, watching, put his age at fifty, and wondered why the face seemed so familiar here in Italy, where he knew no one. Then it dawned on him—it was the face of a famous drawing of Machiavelli's "Prince."

"Don't believe them, I say. They never tell the truth." The repeated sentence brought up a second time against Julian's attention. To what part of a conversation, he wondered, did it apply? But what followed was less distinct, and he could not make it out. Well, it really didn't matter, and it was no affair of his; still, English was pleasant to hear.

In that dining-room of the Casino Hotel, in Rapallo, were some three hundred people, of whom about two hundred and fifty were wealthy Germans, and the rest a bad assortment of French, English, Italians, and Americans. Julian felt more alone than ever before in his life. It was impossible to be interested in his American countrymen here represented, and the English were not much better. He wondered what brought all these people together. Italy was no place to come

for rest or diversion. One's very mind shrivelled in the cold Riviera wind, and with it all pleasant sentiment and fellow-feeling. The best one could do was sit and look on at the rest of the dreadful hotel guests until, from disillusion and persistent hardness, one's face grew to look like that of Machiavelli's "Prince" over yonder.

Julian Henderson himself made a striking, dark, clean-cut figure in that room full of rotund Germans. They had no style, no apparent breeding or culture. Still, they appeared to be enjoying life, while he could not shake off a persistent uneasy sadness. Yet he didn't envy them their jollity, for somehow, at that moment, it seemed to him obscene. They laughed without humor, heavily, and with their mouths full. In their harsh Teutonic chatter, the softer voices speaking French or English were lost and confounded; he could no longer hear distinguishable words.

To forget for a moment the unpleasantness of the surrounding scene, he pulled a letter out of his pocket, and began to read:

"Villa Paraggi, Paraggi, Italy.

"My dear," (it began). "The happiness that you give me is not given to many women. It is more than I can express to you in words. It takes immense courage to do what you have done. And because you make me so very happy, I can wish much good to the whole world—I can even wish that your ex-wife may enjoy her new freedom as much as I shall enjoy yours.

"But I am writing like a fool. What I want to say is come—come immediately. This villa which I have lived in so long, with a fair amount of content, seems suddenly empty, waiting for you, though you have never seen it. At last I find some

reason in all my work. I never knew why I planted flowers, or rebuilt terraces, or constructed the breakwater to the west of the point. Now I know—it was for you, my dearest.

“And if I cannot write you a warm and moving letter, remember all my letters of the past, that were warm, and did move you. All that I said in them is true today. Come, and you will know this beyond a doubt. Forgive me if I have forgotten persuasion. There’s something about this country that turns one hard; and when the need or the desire for softness comes, there’s no way left to express it.

“I wonder, are you as happy as I am? If I could only make you so, dear Julian!”

Happy! Happy! When had he been happy?

Nevertheless, through his mood crept a warm excitement. It colored his thoughts to sudden irrational loveliness, as a vision of this woman took shape before him. Ten years since he had seen her; she would be thirty-five now, and he only five years older. Something startling and overwhelming would come of their meeting; with both of them grown mature, but not old. They would both have changed, but what did that matter, since their letters had already bridged whatever differences lay between them?

And yet— It was absurd, this mood; and yet, something in that letter did have an ominous sound that frightened him profoundly. “I cannot write you a warm and moving letter,” and “there’s something about this country that turns one hard.” Was it true? Did the country do it, or did one’s own life and character cause the hardness? If the first, then he could win again to all the woman’s fascination that had charmed him; but if the second, it would be gone, there’d be nothing left to win. Always his excitement gave way in the end to the uneasiness which had possessed him since he reached Italy the week before. His coming would fulfil the happiness he had put aside for ten years and almost given up as lost; but being here to claim it made him neither happy nor assured.

The great dining-room emptied gradually, and grew quiet. Julian smoked and drank his *strega*, and watched the remain-

ing couples move out. Every one was gone now except Machiavelli’s “Prince” and his companion. With the woman’s back toward him, it was still safe to imagine that she, too, might have an interesting face. Her black curly hair was cut short in the back like a boy’s, in the latest neat French fashion; the shoulder-straps of her dinner-gown were sea green in color, and fitted smoothly over the well-formed shoulders. She undoubtedly had on a pretty gown, though he did not hope to find her a pretty woman. There weren’t any in the hotel. Not that prettiness mattered, but one did need beauty now and then—beauty of faces—human, live, changing. It grew tiresome finding one’s share of beauty always in distant and impersonal things like clouds and sea and trees. Even music, to Julian’s being as necessary as bread, satisfied him now only while it lasted, and at its end left in him the same empty craving that had been there before it began.

On his way out to the terrace, where he intended to smoke a cigar in the dark, Julian passed the last occupied table, and turned to catch a glimpse of the woman’s face. No, she wasn’t really pretty.

He went quickly by, and out. For a time, strolling up and down the different levels of the garden, he listened to attenuated dance-music coming from across the drive, through the curtained glass of the casino windows. Nobody gambled over there any more since Mussolini put a stop to roulette. Not that he wanted to gamble—but what was a casino for? To dance in, apparently, round and round aimlessly between the little tables, under the glaring light, like dazed moths. Last year’s American jazz, on a tuneless piano and an uncertain violin, sifted toward him through the darkness and the shadows of trees.

But one could always look at the water and the small lights of the town. Rapallo, clustered under bleak hills close to the sea, settled early to sleep. By day its tiny, crooked, arched streets, between rose-tinted walls, streamed with market-people intent on their own simple affairs, oblivious of tourists. Along the water-side, where spindling wooden docks ran out as landings for the fishing-boats, children played and women sat before



"I drink to the happiness of your stay in Italy, monsieur."—Page 64.

their bolster-shaped colored pillows, making lace in the sun; and barefooted old men crouched mending nets, the wooden shuttles flying in their stubby fingers. Toward twilight, as it grew cold, they would move back from the water into their houses, calling out their good nights to each other in a friendly way through the dusk. A few lights would shine in the doorways of bars and shops, but they were put out soon. The village lapsed into evening quietness.

But there was no quietness in Julian's being. Here, where he hoped to have a moment of strengthening peace, his thoughts would not let him alone. It had been that way in Genoa, but vaguely he had believed that coming to the small fishing-town would steady him. What was it he needed? Maybe the exchange of words with his own kind. He should never have come to this tourists' hotel.

He shivered in the dark. The cold mistral was blowing up, destroying the softness of the air, chilling him through.

He went back aimlessly into the salon and found a chair. At his right, her back half turned, sat the woman he had noticed in the dining-room, and beyond her the man with the extraordinary face. Julian contemplated him out of the corner of his eye. A hard face, distorted by a queer personality. Presently Julian was surprised to see the woman turn aside from her companion and address him in French.

"I beg your pardon, monsieur, but perhaps you would be kind enough to assist me? You will forgive, I hope, the unconventional way in which I enlist your services. You can help me greatly if, by any chance, you are English or American. Am I right in taking you for one or the other?"

"Yes, I'm American, and I should be delighted to help you if I can, madame." Julian moved his chair around toward their table. She was attractive when she talked, he thought; a warm, intuitive person, and very much at her ease.

"That's splendid," she said. "I'm glad you are American, because, you see, I'm French. Would you be good enough to translate a little English for me? For some foolish reason, I never learned your language. However, my friend here has

been instructing me, but he refuses to translate anything—says I should get the meaning by intuition. And I left the dictionary up-stairs."

"If I can help you, madame—" began Julian. But at this point her companion interrupted, using English, his sharp, lined face breaking into a crafty smile as he spoke.

"Please do not help her. You will readily see why. As a lesson for to-night I have been teaching her the following wisdom: 'Don't believe them. They never tell the truth.' You understand me, I hope, my dear sir? And seeing that you do, we may as well change the subject, with this lady's permission. But I note that you are sitting alone. Will you not join us in more general conversation? I have given enough wise instruction for one evening." He put enough of this into French so that the woman could understand him, and after that they spoke no more English.

"Wisdom is all very well, you see," laughed the "Prince," in Julian's direction; "but it would be displeasing to have this lady learn too much. For if you have a great amount of wisdom—or rather I should say if you have more than you need—you get to have a face like mine. Now you wouldn't care for that, would you, my dear Odette?"

The shrewd deep-set eyes sharpened with mirth as he bent his brows in a pretended scowl. Julian had never before seen such a great domed forehead on a living human being. The colorless wrinkled face looked like a gray mask, moulded to reveal a diabolic wisdom. There was nothing exactly evil about that face; rather, it astounded and fascinated you at the same time, till you doubted its reality. Sardonic was the only adjective that fitted it.

"My companion," remarked the lady, "always boasts about his countenance, or else threatens me with the possibility of looking like him some day. But I confess to you that I am accustomed to his appearance, which no longer awes me as much as it did once. But the threat—the threat is useless. No woman could ever grow to look like that, no matter what she might learn of the world. Is it not true?"

They sat laughing at each other, and presently the older man pulled out a pack of cards and set up a game of Canfield. He played along for a time, and when the cards didn't come to suit him, he misplayed them so that they did.

"Oh, don't be surprised at the way I play," he remarked pleasantly as he saw Julian watching him. "I always cheat at cards, when I play by myself. It's the only thing I do cheat at, and I come by it quite naturally. It's part of an old desire to fool myself. I always hope, vainly of course, that when I win by manipulation I'll be able to forget how I won. But it's quite hopeless. And I've won enough times fairly to understand how that feels, too, and to know that it really doesn't matter." And he went on quietly putting down one card after another.

"Now I am French, as I told you," smiled Odette, "so of course I don't see the charm of playing like that—taking no chances. But monsieur my companion is a Florentine, and therefore feels differently."

The "Prince" continued to play without looking up.

"She's right," he said. "The difference in our feelings is purely national, and relates to national standards. Now the French patrician standard is charm, a partially interior quality; while the Italian patrician standard may be described as fineness of finish—success on the surface, if you will. At any rate, it's nothing very interior. Look at our frescoed houses, made to appear from a distance like marble palaces or like picture-galleries. Or look at our beautiful decorated leatherwork, or our lace. But perhaps this bores you, my dear sir?"

"Oh, not at all," exclaimed Julian Henderson. "I've been trying to understand Italy ever since my arrival, and what you say helps a great deal. Please go on."

"Then you must remember always that what I say does not apply to peasant Italy, or to such joyful young manifestations as those of the Fascisti and the like. I'm speaking about people of our own class."

"We're old, and some of us are charmingly corrupt. We're polished, like our jewels or our leather; but first we are hardened, before we can take the polish. And some of us are so fine-grained that

we have no grain at all. There's nothing mysterious about us except our future. What will become of us? We older Italians have a terrible way of lasting, you know; and what is the use of lasting, will you tell me, when you look like me? You frighten the world ahead of your face. Maybe you think me cynical, but I tell you, my dear fellow, I am one of a type, and I know what I'm talking about. I haven't lived for nothing. None of us have, I suppose. But unhappily, all my life I've had a genius for finding out the wrong things about life, the things that take away illusion. I leave you to guess from your own experience what sort of things these were. And now, even if I achieved a new illusion I could never make it apparent, on account of this surface—this face. You remember, people sometimes dared jokes about the nose of Cyrano, and those jokes kept him sensitive and humble; but nobody has ever been known to make a joke about my forehead. You can't make a joke about the Rock of Gibraltar. My forehead isn't a sad, misfit feature. It's just the forehead I ought to have. It's reality."

And he continued to play.

"Please try to forgive my companion his horrible conceit," the woman remarked. "And don't take him for a typical Florentine. I assure you he is not typical of anything. As for me, I am conceited too, but it's about another matter. I have a son eighteen years old. I was married at fifteen. I'm proud of that. You see, now and then as I travel around giving my concerts (for I'm a singer), I find myself near to Fontainebleau, where he's studying, and it makes me very proud to have him doing so well. But possibly you have children of your own, and therefore understand me. Now my companion, who has an American wife in Florence, but no children, thinks me a fool." She blew out a deep cloud of smoke.

"Nevertheless, Odette, I think you have one good thing about you besides your charm: you're the only woman I've known well who's never been afraid of me. That's rather foolish of you, too, but I can't help liking it. It makes you a delightful travelling companion."

"But I do feel, my dear sir, that we've bored you with too much talk about our-

selves—a failing that the bourgeoisie can never forgive, but which, I'll venture, you don't really count as a failing. And tell me, have you been seeing the sights about here? It's really a beautiful coast when the weather serves, and I'm quite fond of it. Between here and Genoa there are many charming places. You've been to Portofino, I suppose?"

"Not yet, no." The vague excitement stirred again in Julian. He would be going in that direction soon.

"Well, when you go," the poised voice continued, "you'll like to drive by the sea-road; and when you're nearly there, you'll pass Paraggi, a town so small that it barely serves to mark a loop in the road. But before you get there you'll reach the Villa Paraggi, on a point jutting out to the left into the bay. I used to know one of your countrywomen who lives there. She's had the place a long time for an American—nearly ten years. A lonely sort of woman. But she's lately taken a great interest in the old villa, and made modern improvements. She's even built a breakwater back of which small boats can anchor. You'll see as you go by." For a moment the gray mask of the Florentine's face was lifted from his successful games of patience; and he appeared to be gazing not at Julian or at Odette, but past the two of them in the direction of an entertaining memory.

"She used to be a very pretty woman," he said.

As he listened, the fear that had been in Julian rose again suddenly and grew to a formless pain. He did not reply but sat perfectly still, trying to control his hands so that no motion of them, as he smoked, would betray him. He could feel the eyes of the Florentine slipping toward his, and presently he looked up into that face. There was no change in it—but of course there could be no change. He could not tell whether the Italian read at all what had been passing in his mind.

"But you are surely going to Portofino sometime?" the quiet cynical voice was asking him. "The loveliest miniature sea-town in Italy. And yet, on second thought, I do not see why you should go. One loves a country just as well—better, perhaps—for not seeing everything in it. I tell you I have seen too much, or the

wrong things. And yet, though I have lived on the Continent most of my life, Europe remains studded with famous sights I have not seen. In Paris, for instance, where I lived many months, I never went to look at the Mona Lisa. I prefer to keep her a mystery, because I know very well what I should discover if I gazed at her: a hard, complacent woman, smiling not mysteriously at some secret of her race, but fatuously and sneeringly at her own selfish triumphs. I should understand her perfectly, and her smile, too; but I could not like her. But then, she was an Italian woman, if you remember. And one understands one's own kind."

During this speech, a frankly worried look had come into Odette's face. She crushed out her cigarette hastily against the tray, and kept glancing at Julian.

"I think," she remarked, "that we have been taking liberties with this gentleman's interest and with his time. He is probably tired, and would prefer to leave us. We might drink another liqueur before we break up our little party, though, might we not? Waiter, three *camparis*, please. I hope, monsieur, that you like the Italian cordials? You may have noticed that they are strong and full-flavored, but they do not warm you as do the French ones."

When the pale-gold liquid had been poured out into their glasses, the Florentine lifted his, with a queer twist of his wrist, to the light.

"I drink to the happiness of your stay in Italy, monsieur," he proposed. "I have always liked Americans." And he tilted the glass to his fine, narrow lips. Odette, watching the faces of the men, took a sudden gulp of her liqueur; and Julian quickly raised his glass, and acknowledged the toast with a bow.

"I suppose in Italy as in France," he said, "one drinks to his own happiness? It is a custom I find very hard to remember, it being quite against my national superstitions. Still, I thank you both." And he drank, and then went up to his room.

He was alone, and, being alone, came gradually to wonder what his sudden renewed distress had all been about.



From a drawing by Harry Townsend.

It was better not to know the wrong things—better to keep one illusion.—Page 67.

A chance meeting with a strange couple in a hotel full of unpleasant people. A conversation about racial and temperamental differences.

No, no. Might as well face it. This terrible man, this cryptic gray-faced fellow, had destroyed what little assurance remained to him.

And what could it mean to a woman, association with men like this—listening to this sort of philosophy? For of course she would have met many people like him, having lived in the country so long. She would not have stayed friendless for ten years. And if this man were typical of his race— Still, whatever powers changed most people need not have changed her, for hers had never been a weak character.

To keep himself from fearing, he turned on the light over his table, and started to compose a letter. It began well enough.

"Your message reached me in Genoa, and I have come on here, but only for a day or two. I should be with you in three days. I could make it sooner, but I am not quite ready yet to meet you after so long a time. I want to come in a boat and take you away with me. We won't have to speak about my recent life, or yours. A trip along the Mediterranean, by ourselves, ought to cut us off at last from the rest of the world, and give us what we have wanted.

"My dearest, it is only now that I can believe, being so near you, that ten years has not been long to wait. It has been an eternity. But for some things one spends an eternity gladly, and when at last I've reached the end of this one, and can re-join you—can see you—touch you—hear you speak—hear you laugh again because we have both something at last to be happy over—"

He could not write any more, for somehow, at that moment, he knew he would never reach her. The ten years were gone for nothing.

He thought of his wife, a light, unthinking person. She had not greatly cared whether he existed or not. People like himself went through hell when they made the mistake of marrying the wrong person. Everybody's precious time was wasted—life, years of it—thrown away for some reason no deeper than a whim.

His wife—his wife no longer—had a nature that did not brood too much over things. She would not take her experiences very hard. There were fortunately no children to worry about, so that she was now entirely free. She'd do as she pleased, and forget him easily. One thing cleared up, anyhow.

Outside the mistral was blowing harder, and the sky beginning to cloud over. A jabber of guttural German came to him through the thin walls of the hotel room. The old war feeling of hatred surged up in him, as it always did when he was forced to live among these people. The war hadn't humbled them in the least; it had merely coarsened them. And it had tempered the British, and stung the French to a lasting fury, and made the Italians laugh, though somewhat unsteadily. Their own private war wasn't over yet, and they were being nice to the Germans now, and sneering at the English, and paying no attention to the French. Italy—Italy of the old great days—where did it remain? Surely, not only in the minds of a few patricians, proud, uneasy, cynical, behind some moveless Florentine mask like that of the fellow down-stairs? He would never really live again, that man. He was a pathetic figure, if you could look at it that way.

No, he was a devil. He was evil incarnate. And he had put into Julian's head the idea of not going to Paraggi, ever, after all, not by land nor by sea. He had established Julian's fear—made him feel he did not dare to go to the villa, nor to discover what woman was living there, at the end of ten years.

That night in his high room overlooking the sea, Julian fought it out with himself. What business had he in Italy at all, if not to see her? Possibly she would not be the same woman that he had known ten years before; still, he had no right to deny himself or her any pleasure they might have of this late meeting. And had not everything in his recent life been leading up to this? The divorce with his side of the case uncontested, his business arranged to run without him for a year, and, more important than that, his hope and his every desire—the long hurting want of her at last to be healed,

the happiness just beyond him to be taken and possessed after so many days.

"Don't believe them. They never tell the truth." The words from the dining-room echoed across his mind without relation or meaning. Who never told the truth, or what? His fears? If they would only once be untrue! If he went to her house, he knew what he would find: some one hard and strange, not the woman he had hoped to meet again.

He would have to go and see for himself. Really, all he was facing was a possible disappointment. It sounded quite simple when put like that.

"Don't believe them. They never tell the truth." A nightmarish feeling came over him, till his thoughts lost coherence. "Florentines never tell the truth. They cheat at cards, they have ghastly gray faces, and smile horribly— Good God!"

Outside he could hear the sea roaring up against the rocky terrace below the hotel. It would be roaring up against her house, too, and against the breakwater, behind which a boat might anchor in safety. She, too, must be very tired of

loneliness and the cold mistral. She wanted to see him; she said so, and he could not now refuse her. He needed to know what had been happening to her.

He ought to take his chances—claim what he had fought for. Did it matter, really, whether or not that thing proved empty? If it did, one could go about the world forever, gazing out of a mask-like face—a grim Florentine face—and nobody would know whether that meant triumph or defeat, for both of these are frightening things, and mark the end of illusion.

There stood his hope and his fear.

And he kept saying to himself something which sounded like a lesson he was trying to learn, or to understand: "Don't believe them—" Don't believe which, hope or fear?

But he already knew—had known for a long time. Hope lied. Hope lied.

He could not go. It was better not to know the wrong things—better to keep one illusion.

Deliberately he took the half-written letter, tore it into small pieces, and flung them down before him on the table.

Possession

BY BARBARA FROST

THEY say I own the cottage on the hill.

But it ain't so.

The cottage owns *me*, though,

That's how it really is. It ain't *my* will

To just keep staying on, year after year.

I've often thought I'd get away from here.

Just half way up—guess you can see it now—

Faded and brown,

It kind of snuggles down.

The trees bend over it, you notice how?

Protecting-like, and whispering so low

It's quieter than anything I know.

My married sister wrote and sent for me.

And I did try—

She couldn't figure why

I never came. Queer, how a house can be—

The house they say I *own*, up on the hill—

So little and so *stubborn* and so still.