It was nearly two years before he felt himself able to begin his first imitation, but the time and study he had expended were not lost, and the result surpassed his expectations. So ingeniously perfect was the facsimile when finished that Meschini himself would have found it hard to swear to the identity of the original if he had not been allowed to see either of the two for some time. The minutest stains were reproduced with scrupulous fidelity. The slightest erasure was copied minutely. He examined every sheet to ascertain exactly how it had been worn by the fingers rubbing on the corners and spent days in turning a page thousands of times, till the oft-repeated touch of his thumb had deepened the colour to the exact tint.

When the work was finished he hesitated. It seemed to him very perfect, but he feared lest he should be deceiving himself from having seen the thing daily for so many months. He took his copy one day to a famous collector, and submitted it to him for examination, asking at the same time what it was worth. The specialist spent several hours in examining the writing, and pronounced it very valuable, naming a large sum, while admitting that he was unable to buy it himself.

Arnoldo Meschini took his work home with him, and spent a day in considering what he should do. Then he deliberately placed the facsimile in his employer's library, and sold the original to a learned man who was collecting for a great public institution in a foreign country. His train of reasoning was simple, for he said to himself that the forgery was less likely to be detected in the shelves of the Montevarchi's palace than if put into the hands of a body of famous scientists who naturally distrusted what was brought to them. Collectors do not ask questions as to whence a valuable thing has been taken; they only examine whether it be genuine and worth the money.

Emboldened by his success, the forger had continued to manufacture facsimiles and sell originals for nearly twenty years, during which he succeeded in producing nearly as many copies, and realised a sum which to him appeared enormous and which was certainly not to be despised by any one. Some of the works he sold were

published and annotated by great scholars, some were jealously guarded in the libraries of rich amateurs, who treasured them with all the selfish vigilance of the bibliomaniac. In the meanwhile Meschini's learning and skill constantly increased, till he possessed an almost diabolical skill in the art of imitating ancient writings, and a familiarity with the subject which amazed the men of learning who occasionally obtained permission to enter the library and study there. Upon these, too, Meschini now and then experimented with his forgeries, not one of which was ever detected.

Prince Montevarchi saw in his librarian only a poor wretch whose passion for ancient literature seemed to dominate his life and whose untiring industry had made him master of the very secret necessary in the present instance. He knew that such things as he contemplated had been done before and he supposed that they had been done by just such men as Arnoldo Meschini. He knew the history of the man's early disgrace and calculated wisely enough that the fear of losing his situation on the one hand, and the hope of a large reward on the other, would induce him to undertake the job. To all appearances he was as poor as when he had entered the service of the prince's father five and twenty years earlier. The promise of a few hundred scudi, thought Montevarchi, would have immense weight with such a man. In his eagerness to accomplish his purpose, the nobleman never suspected that the offer would be refused by a fellow who had narrowly escaped being convicted of forgery in his youth, and whose poverty was a matter concerning which no doubt could exist.

Montevarchi scarcely hesitated before going to the library. If he paused at all, it was more to consider the words he intended to use than to weigh in his mind the propriety of using them. The library was a vast old hall, surrounded on all sides, and nearly to the ceiling, with carved bookcases of walnut blackened with age to the colour of old mahogany. There were a number of massive tables in the room, upon which the light fell agreeably from high clerestory windows at each end of the apartment. Meschini himself was shuffling along in a pair of ancient leather slippers with a large volume under his

arm, clad in very threadbare black clothes and wearing a dingy skullcap on his head. He was a man somewhat under the middle size, badly made, though possessing considerable physical strength. His complexion was of a muddy yellow, disagreeable to see, but his features rendered him interesting if not sympathetic. The brow was heavy and the gray eyebrows irregular and bushy, but his gray eyes were singularly clear and bright, betraying a hidden vitality which would not have been suspected from the whole impression he made. A high forehead, very prominent in the upper and middle part, contracted below, so that there was very little breadth at the temples, but considerable expanse above. The eyes were near together and separated by the knifelike bridge of the nose, the latter descending in a fine curve of wonderfully delicate outline. The chin was pointed, and the compressed mouth showed little or nothing of the lips. On each side of his head the coarsely-shaped and prominent ears contrasted disagreeably with the fine keenness of the face. He stooped a little from the neck, and his shoulders sloped in a way that made them look narrower than they really were.

As the prince closed the door behind him and advanced, Meschini lifted his cap a little and laid down the book he was carrying, wondering inwardly what had brought his employer to see him at that hour of the morning.

"Sit down," said Montevarchi, with more than usual affability, and setting the example by seating himself upon one of the high-backed chairs which were ranged along the tables. "Sit down, Meschini, and let us have a little conversation."

"Willingly, Signor Principe," returned the librarian, obeying the command and placing himself opposite to the prince.

"I have been thinking about you this morning," continued the latter. "You have been with us a very long time. Let me see. How many years? Eighteen? Twenty?"

"Twenty-five years, Excellency. It is a long time, indeed!"

"Twenty-five years! Dear me! How the thought takes me back to my poor father! Heaven bless him, he

was a good man. But, as I was saying, Meschini, you have been with us many years, and we have not done much for you. No. Do not protest! I know your modesty, but one must be just before all things. I think you draw fifteen scudi a month? Yes. I have a good memory, you see. I occupy myself with the cares of my household. But you are not so young as you were once, my friend, and your faithful services deserve to be rewarded. Shall we say thirty scudi a month in future? To continue all your life, even if — heaven avert it — you should ever become disabled from superintending the library — yes, all your life."

Meschini bowed as he sat in acknowledgment of so much generosity, and assumed a grateful expression suitable to the occasion. In reality, his salary was of very little importance to him, as compared with what he realised from his illicit traffic in manuscripts. But, like his employer, he was avaricious, and the prospect of three hundred and sixty scudi a year was pleasant to contemplate. He bowed and smiled.

"I do not deserve so much liberality, Signor Principe," he said. "My poor services ——"

"Very far from poor, my dear friend, very far from poor," interrupted Montevarchi. "Moreover, if you will have confidence in me, you can do me a very great service indeed. But it is indeed a very private matter. You are a discreet man, however, and have few friends. You are not given to talking idly of what concerns no one but yourself."

"No, Excellency," replied Meschini, laughing inwardly as he thought of the deceptions he had been practising with success during a quarter of a century.

"Well, well, this is a matter between ourselves, and one which, as you will see, will bring its own reward. For although it might not pass muster in a court of law — the courts you know, Meschini, are very sensitive about little things ——" he looked keenly at his companion, whose eyes were cast down.

"Foolishly sensitive," echoed the librarian.

"Yes. I may say that in the present instance, although the law might think differently of the matter, we shall be doing a good deed, redressing a great injus-

tice, restoring to the fatherless his birthright, in a word fulfilling the will of Heaven, while perhaps paying little attention to the laws of man. Man, my friend, is often very unjust in his wisdom."

"Very. I can only applaud your Excellency's sentiments, which do justice to a man of heart."

"No, no, I want no praise," replied the prince in a tone of deprecation. "What I need in order to accomplish this good action is your assistance and friendly help. To whom should I turn, but to the old and confidential friend of the family? To a man whose knowledge of the matter on hand is only equalled by his fidelity to those who have so long employed him?"

"You are very good, Signor Principe. I will do my best to serve you, as I have served you and his departed Excellency, the Signor Principe, your father."

"Very well, Meschini. Now I need only repeat that the reward for your services will be great, as I trust that hereafter your recompense may be adequate for having had a share in so good a deed. But, to be short, the best way to acquaint you with the matter is to show you this document which I have brought for the purpose."

Montevarchi produced the famous deed and carefully unfolded it upon the table. Then, after glancing over it once more, he handed it to the librarian. The latter bent his keen eyes upon the page and rapidly deciphered the contents. Then he read it through a second time and at last laid it down upon the table and looked up at the prince with an air of inquiry.

"You see, my dear Meschini," said Montevarchi in suave tones, "this agreement was made by Don Leone Saracinesca because he expected to have no children. Had he foreseen what was to happen — for he has legitimate descendants alive, he would have added a clause here, at the foot of the first page — do you see? The clause he would have added would have been very short — something like this, 'Provided that the aforesaid Don Leone Saracinesca shall have no son born to him in wedlock, in which case, and if such a son be born, this present deed is wholly null, void and ineffectual.' Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly," replied Meschini, with a strange look in his eyes. He again took the parchment and looked it

over, mentally inserting the words suggested by his employer. "If those words were inserted, there could be no question about the view the tribunals would take. But there must be a duplicate of the deed at the Cancellaria."

"Perhaps. I leave that to your industry to discover. Meanwhile, I am sure you agree with me that a piece of horrible injustice has been caused by this document; a piece of injustice, I repeat, which it is our sacred duty to remedy and set right."

"You propose to me to introduce this clause, as I understand, in this document and in the original," said the librarian, as though he wished to be quite certain of the nature of the scheme.

Montevarchi turned his eyes away and slowly scratched the table with his long nails.

"I mean to say," he answered in a lower voice, "that if it could be made out in law that it was the intention of the person, of Don Leone ——"

"Let us speak plainly," interrupted Meschini. "We are alone. It is of no use to mince matters here. The only away to accomplish what you desire is to forge the words in both parchments. The thing can be done, and I can do it. It will be successful, without a shadow of a doubt. But I must have my price. There must be no misunderstanding. I do not think much of your considerations of justice, but I will do what you require, for money."

"How much?" asked Montevarchi in a thick voice. His heart misgave him, for he had placed himself in the man's power, and Meschini's authoritative tone showed that the latter knew it, and meant to use his advantage.

"I will be moderate, for I am a poor man. You shall give me twenty thousand scudi in cash, on the day the verdict is given in favour of Don Giovanni Saracinesca, Marchese di San Giacinto. That is your friend's name, I believe."

Montevarchi started as the librarian named the sum, and he turned very pale, passing his bony hand upon the edge of the table.

"I would not have expected this of you!" he exclaimed.

"You have your choice," returned the other, bringing

his yellow face nearer to his employer's and speaking very distinctly. "You know what it all means. Saracinesca, Sant' Ilario, and Barda to your son-in-law, besides all the rest, amounting perhaps to several millions. To me, who get you all this, a paltry twenty thousand. Or else——" he paused and his bright eyes seemed to penetrate into Montevarchi's soul. The latter's face exhibited a sudden terror, which Meschini understood.

"Or else?" said the prince. "Or else, I suppose you will try and intimidate me by threatening to expose what I have told you?"

"Not at all, Excellency," replied the old scholar with sudden humility. "If you do not care for the bargain let us leave it alone. I am only your faithful servant, Signor Principe. Do not suspect me of such ingratitude! I only say that if we undertake it, the plan will be successful. It is for you to decide. Millions or no millions, it is the same to me. I am but a poor student. But if I help to get them for you — or for your son-in-law — I must have what I asked. It is not one per cent — scarcely a broker's commission! And you will have so much. Not but what your Excellency deserves it all, and is the best judge."

"One per cent?" muttered Montevarchi. "Perhaps not more than half per cent. But is it safe?" he asked suddenly, his fears all at once asserting themselves with a force that bewildered him.

"Leave all that to me," answered Meschini confidently. "The insertion shall be made, unknown to any one, in this parchment and in the one in the Chancery. The documents shall be returned to their places with no observation, and a month or two later the Marchese di San Giacinto can institute proceedings for the recovery of his birthright. I would only advise you not to mention the matter to him. It is essential that he should be quite innocent in order that the tribunal may suspect nothing. You and I, Signor Principe, can stay at home while the case is proceeding. We shall not even see the Signor Marchese's lawyers, for what have we to do with it all? But the Signor Marchese himself must be really free from all blame, or he will show a weak point. Now,

when all is ready, he should go to the Cancellaria and examine the papers there for himself. He himself will suspect nothing. He will be agreeably surprised."

"And how long will it take you to do the — the work?" asked Montevarchi in hesitating tones.

"Let me see," Meschini began to make a calculation under his breath. "Ink, two days — preparing parchment for experiments, a week — writing, twice over, two days — giving age, drying and rubbing, three days, at least. Two, nine, eleven, fourteen. A fortnight," he said aloud. "I cannot do it in less time than that. If the copy in the Chancery is by another hand it will take longer."

"But how can you work at the Chancery?" asked the prince, as though a new objection had presented itself.

"Have no fear, Excellency. I will manage it so that no one shall find it out. Two visits will suffice. Shall I begin at once? Is it agreed?"

Montevarchi was silent for several minutes, and his hands moved uneasily.

"Begin at once," he said at last, as though forcing himself to make a determination. He rose to go as he spoke.

"Twenty thousand scudi on the day the verdict is given in favour of the Signor Marchese. Is that it?"

"Yes, yes. That is it. I leave it all to you."

"I will serve your Excellency faithfully, never fear."

"Do, Meschini. Yes. Be faithful as you have always been. Remember, I am not avaricious. It is in the cause of sound justice that I stoop to assume the appearance of dishonesty. Can a man do more? Can one go farther than to lose one's self-esteem by appearing to transgress the laws of honour in order to accomplish a good object; for the sake of restoring the birthright to the fatherless and the portion to the widow, or indeed to the widower, in this case? No, my dear friend. The means are more than justified by the righteousness of our purpose. Believe me, my good Meschini — yes, you are good in the best sense of the word — believe me, the justice of this world is not always the same as the justice of Heaven. The dispensations of providence are mysterious."

"And must remain so, in this case," observed the librarian with an evil smile.

"Yes, unfortunately, in this case we shall not reap the worldly praise which so kind an action undoubtedly deserves. But we must have patience under these trials. Good-bye, Meschini, good-bye, my friend. I must busy myself with the affairs of my household. Every man must do his duty in this world, you know."

The scholar bowed his employer to the door, and then went back to the parchment, which he studied attentively for more than an hour, keeping a huge folio volume open before him, into which he might slip the precious deed in case he were interrupted in his occupation.

CHAPTER XIII.

Sant' Ilario could not realise that the course of events had been brought to a standstill at the very moment when his passions were roused to fury. He could not fight Gouache for the present and Corona was so ill that he could not see her. Had he wished to visit her, the old-fashioned physician would probably have forbidden him to do so, but in reality he was glad to be spared the emotions of a meeting which must necessarily be inconclusive. His first impulse had been to take her away from Rome and force her to live alone with him in the mountains. He felt that no other course was open to him, for he knew that in spite of all that had happened he could not bear to live without her, and yet he felt that he could no longer suffer her to come and go in the midst of society, where she must necessarily often meet the man she had chosen to love. Nor could he keep her in Rome and at the same time isolate her as he desired to do. If the world must talk, he would rather not be where he could hear what it said. The idea of a sudden journey, terminating in the gloomy fortress of Saracinesca, was pleasant to his humour. The old place was ten times more grim and dismal in winter than in summer, and in his savage mood he fancied himself alone with his wife in the silent halls, making her feel the enormity of what she had done, while jealously keeping her a prisoner at his mercy.

But her illness had put a stop to his plans for her safety, while the revolution had effectually interfered with the execution of his vengeance upon Gouache. He could find no occupation which might distract his mind from the thoughts that beset him, and no outlet for the restless temper that craved some sort of action, no matter what, as the expression of what he suffered. He and his father met in silence at their meals, and though Giovanni felt that he had the old man's full sympathy, he could not bring himself to speak of what was nearest to his heart. He remembered that his marriage had been of his own seeking, and his pride kept him from all mention of the catastrophe by which his happiness had been destroyed. Old Saracinesca suffered in his own way almost as much as his son, and it was fortunate that he was prevented from seeing Corona at that time, for it is not probable that he would have controlled himself had he been able to talk with her alone. When little Orsino was brought in to them, the two men looked at each other, and while the younger bit his lip and suppressed all outward signs of his agony, the tears more than once stole into the old prince's eyes so that he would turn away and leave the room. Then Giovanni would take the child upon his knee and look at it earnestly until the little thing was frightened and held out its arms to its nurse, crying to be taken away. Thereupon Sant' Ilario's mood grew more bitter than before, for he was foolish enough to believe that the child had a natural antipathy for him, and would grow up to hate the sight of its father. Those were miserable days, never to be forgotten, and each morning and evening brought worse news of Corona's state, until it was clear, even to Giovanni, that she was dangerously ill. The sound of voices grew rare in the Palazzo Saracinesca and the servants moved noiselessly about at their work, oppressed by the sense of coming disaster, and scarcely speaking to each other.

San Giacinto came daily to make inquiries and spent some time with the two unhappy men without wholly