

BELLARION THE FORTUNATE

A Romance

BY
RAFAEL SABATINI

Table of Contents

BOOK I

- CHAPTER I THE THRESHOLD
- CHAPTER II THE GREY FRIAR
- CHAPTER III THE DOOR AJAR
- CHAPTER IV SANCTUARY
- CHAPTER V THE PRINCESS
- CHAPTER VI THE WINDS OF FATE
- CHAPTER VII SERVICE
- CHAPTER VIII STALEMATE
- CHAPTER IX THE MARQUIS THEODORE
- CHAPTER X THE WARNING
- CHAPTER XI UNDER SUSPICION
- CHAPTER XII COUNT SPIGNO
- CHAPTER XIII THE TRIAL
- CHAPTER XIV EVASION

BOOK II

- CHAPTER I THE MIRACLE OF THE DOGS
- CHAPTER II FACINO CANE
- CHAPTER III THE COUNTESS OF BIANDRATE
- CHAPTER IV THE CHAMPION
- CHAPTER V THE COMMUNE OF MILAN
- CHAPTER VI THE FRUITLESS WOOING

CHAPTER VII MANŒUVRES
CHAPTER VIII THE BATTLE OF TRAVO
CHAPTER IX DE MORTUIS
CHAPTER X THE KNIGHT BELLARION
CHAPTER XI THE SIEGE OF ALESSANDRIA
CHAPTER XII VISCONTI FAITH
CHAPTER XIII THE VICTUALLERS
CHAPTER XIV THE MULETEER
CHAPTER XV THE CAMISADE
CHAPTER XVI SEVERANCE
CHAPTER XVII THE RETURN
CHAPTER XVIII THE HOSTAGE

BOOK III

CHAPTER I THE LORD BELLARION
CHAPTER II THE BATTLE OF NOVI
CHAPTER III FACINO'S RETURN
CHAPTER IV THE COUNT OF PAVIA
CHAPTER V JUSTICE
CHAPTER VI THE INHERITANCE
CHAPTER VII PRINCE OF VALSASSINA
CHAPTER VIII CARMAGNOLA'S BRIDGES
CHAPTER IX VERCELLI
CHAPTER X THE ARREST
CHAPTER XI THE PLEDGE
CHAPTER XII CARMAGNOLA'S DUTY

CHAPTER XIII THE OCCUPATION OF CASALE

CHAPTER XIV THE VANQUISHED

CHAPTER XV THE LAST FIGHT

THE END

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

THE THRESHOLD

Half god, half beast,' the Princess Valeria once described him, without suspecting that the phrase describes not merely Bellarion, but Man.

Aware of this, the anonymous chronicler who has preserved it for us goes on to comment that the Princess said at once too much and too little. He makes phrases in his turn—which I will spare you—and seeks to prove, that, if the moieties of divinity and beastliness are equally balanced in a man, that man will be neither good nor bad. Then he passes on to show us a certain poor swineherd, who rose to ultimate eminence, in whom the godly part so far predominated that naught else was humanly discernible, and a great prince—of whom more will be heard in the course of this narrative—who was just as the beasts that perish, without any spark of divinity to exalt him. These are the extremes. For each of the dozen or so intermediate stages which he discerns, our chronicler has a portrait out of history, of which his learning appears to be considerable.

From this, from his general manner, from the fact that most of his illustrations are supplied by Florentine sources, and from the austere elegant Tuscan language in which he writes, a fairly definite conclusion is possible on the score of his identity. It is more than probable that this study of Bellarion the Fortunate (Bellarione Il Fortunato) belongs to that series of historical portraits from the pen of Niccolò Macchiavelli, of which 'The Life of Castruccio Castracane' is perhaps the most widely known.

Research, however, fails to discover the source from which he draws. Whilst many of his facts agree completely with those contained in the voluminous, monkish 'Vita et Gesta Bellarionis,' left us by Fra Serafino of Imola, whoever he may have been, yet discrepancies are frequent and irreconcilable.

Thus, at the very outset, on the score of his name, Macchiavelli (to cling to my assumption) tells us that he was called Bellarion not merely because he was a man of war, but because he was the very child of War, born as it were out of the very womb of conflict—'*e di guerra propriamente partorito.*' The use of this metaphor reveals a full acquaintance with the tale of the child's being plucked from the midst of strife and alarums. But Fra Serafino's account of the name is the only one that fits into the known facts. That this name should have been so descriptive of Bellarion's after life merely provides one of those curious instances of homonymy in which history abounds.

Continuing his comments upon the Princess Valeria's phrase, Macchiavelli states that Bellarion's is not a nature thus to be packed into a sentence. Because of his perception of this fact, he wrote his biographical sketch. Because of my perception of it, I have embarked upon this fuller narrative.

I choose to begin at a point where Bellarion himself may be said to make a certain beginning. I select the moment when he is to be seen standing upon the threshold of the secular world, known to him until that moment only from the writings of other men, yet better known to him thus than it is to many who have lived a lifetime among their fellows. After all, to view a scene from a distance is to enjoy advantages of perspective denied to the actors in that scene.

Bellarion's reading had been prodigious. There was no branch of learning—from the Theological Fathers to Vegetius Hyginus on The Art of War—to which he had not addressed his eager spirit. And his exhaustion of all immediately available material for study was one of the causes of his going forth from the peace of the convent of which he was a nursling, in quest of deeper wells of learning, to slake his hot intellectual thirst. Another cause was a certain heretical doctrine of which it was hoped that further study would cure him; a doctrine so subversive of theological teaching that a hundred years later it must have made him closely acquainted with the operations of the Holy Office and probably—in Spain certainly—have brought him to the fire. This abominable heresy, fruit of much brooding, was that in the world there is not, nor can be, such a thing as sin. And it was in vain that the Abbot, who loved him very dearly, sought by argument to convert him.

'It is your innocence that speaks. Alas, my child, in the world, from which hitherto you have been mercifully sheltered, you will find that sin is not only real but terribly abundant.'

Bellarion answered with a syllogism, the logical formula to which he had reduced his doctrine. He presented it in the Socratic manner of inquiry, which was the method of argument he ever preferred.

'Are not all things in the world from God? Is not God the fount of all goodness? Can, therefore, any created thing be other than good?'

'And the devil, then?' quoth the Abbot.

Bellarion smiled, a singularly sweet smile that had power to draw men's love and lead them into agreement with him.

'Is it not possible that those who invented the devil may have studied divinity in Persia, where the creed obtains that powers of light and darkness, Ormuzd and Ahriman, strive perpetually for mastery of the world? Surely, otherwise, they would have remembered that if the devil exists, God must have created him, which in itself is blasphemy, for God can create no evil.'

Aghast, the Abbot descended at a stride from the theological to the practical.

'Is it not evil to steal, to kill, to commit adultery?'

'Ah, yes. But these are evils between men, disruptive of society, and therefore to be suppressed lest man become as the beasts. But that is all.'

'All? All!' The Abbot's deep-set eyes surveyed the youth with sorrow. 'My son, the devil lends you a false subtlety to destroy your soul.'

And gently, now, that benign and fatherly man preached him a sermon of the faith. It was followed by others in the days that ensued. But to all the weapons of his saintly rhetoric Bellarion continued to oppose the impenetrable shield of that syllogism of his, which the Abbot knew at heart to be fallacious, yet whose fallacy he laboured in vain to expose. But when the good man began to fear lest this heresy should come to trouble and corrupt the peace and faith of his convent, he consented to speed its author to Pavia and to those further studies which he hoped would cure him of his heretical pravity. And that is how, on a day of August of the year of grace 1407, Bellarion departed from the convent of Our Lady of Grace of Cigliano.

He went on foot. He was to be dependent for food and shelter mainly upon the charity of the religious houses that lay on his way to Pavia, and as a passport to these he bore in his scrip a letter from the Abbot of the Grazie. Beside it lay a purse, containing for emergencies five ducats, a princely sum not only in his own eyes, but in those of the Abbot who at parting had bestowed it upon him. The tale of his worldly possessions is completed by the suit of coarse green cloth he wore and the knife at his girdle, which was to serve all purposes from the carving of his meat to affording him a means of defence from predatory beasts and men. To fortify him spiritually in his adventurous pilgrimage through Lombardy he had the Abbot's blessing and a memory of the fond tears in the eyes of that old man who had reared him from the age of six. At the last the Abbot had again reminded him of the peace of the convent and of the strife and unhappiness that distract the world.

'Pax multa in cella, foris autem plurima bella.'

The mischief began—and you may account it symbolical—by his losing his way. This happened a mile or two beyond the township of Livorno. Because the peace of the riverside allured a mind that for seventeen years had been schooled in peace, because the emerald meadows promised to be soft and yielding to his feet, he left the dusty highway for the grassy banks of Po. Beside its broad waters winding here about the shallow, pleasant hills of Montferrat, Bellarion trudged, staff in hand, the green hood of his cape thrown back, the long liripipe trailing like a tail behind him, a tall, lithe stripling of obvious vigour, olive-skinned, black-haired, and with dark eyes that surveyed the world bold and fearlessly.

The day was hot. The air was laden with the heavy perfumes of late summer, and the river swollen and clouded by the melting snows on distant Monte Rosa.

He wandered on, lost in day-dreams, until the sunlight passed with the sinking of the sun behind the wooded heights across the river and a breeze came whispering through the trees on his own bank. He checked, his dark eyes alert, a frown of thought rumpling the fair smoothness of his lofty brow. He looked about, became aware of a deep forest on his left, bethought him of the road, remembered where the sun had set, and realised hence that for some time he had been travelling south, and consequently in the wrong direction. In following the allurements offered to his senses he had gone astray. He made some homely philosophy upon that, to his infinite satisfaction, for he loved parallels and antitheses and all such intellectual toys. For the rest, there was about him no doubt or hesitation. He computed, from the time he had taken and the pace at which he had come, the extent to which he had wandered from the road. It must run too far beyond this forest to leave him any hope of lying that night, as he had intended, with the Augustinian fathers at their house on the Sesia, on the frontiers of the State of Milan.

Save for the hunger that beset him, he was undismayed. And what after all is a little hunger to one schooled to the most rigid lenten fasts in season?

He entered the wood, and resolutely went forward in the direction in which he knew the road to lie. For a half-mile or more he penetrated by a path growing less visible at every step, until darkness and the forest swallowed him. To go on would certainly be to lose himself completely in this maze. Better far to lie down

and sleep where he was, and wait for the morning sun to give him his orientation.

So he spread his cloak upon the ground, and this proving no harder as a couch than the pallet to which he was accustomed, he slept soundly and peacefully.

When he awakened he found the sunlight in the forest and something else of almost more immediate interest; a man in the grey habit of a minor friar. This man, tall and lean, was standing beside him, yet half turned from him in a curious attitude of arrested movement, almost as if the abrupt suddenness with which Bellarion had sat up—a single heartbeat after his eyes had opened—had checked his intention to depart.

Thus an instant, then the friar was facing him again, his hands folded within the loose sleeves of his robe, a smile distending his countenance. He uttered a benedictory greeting.

'Pax tecum.'

'Et tecum, frater, pax,' was Bellarion's mechanical answer, what time he studied this stranger's villainous, patibulary countenance, marking the animal looseness of mouth, and the craft peering from the little eyes that were black beads thrust into a face of clay. A closer scrutiny softened his judgment. The man's face was disfigured, ridged, scarred, and pitted from the smallpox. These scars had contracted the skin about the eyes, thus altering their expression, and to the ravages of the disease was also due the sickly pallor overspreading cheek and brow.

Considering this and the habit which the man wore—a habit which Bellarion had no cause to associate with anything that was

not sweet and good—he disposed himself to make amends for the hastiness of his first assumptions.

'Benedictus sis,' he murmured, and with that abandoned Latin for the vulgar tongue. 'I bless the Providence that sends you to a poor traveller who has lost his way.'

The friar laughed aloud at that, and the lingering apprehension left his eyes, which thus relieved grew pleasanter to look upon.

'Lord! Lord! And I like a fool and coward, having almost trod upon you, was for creeping off in haste, supposing you a sleeping robber. This forest is a very sanctuary of thieves. They infest it, thick as rabbits in a warren.'

'Why, then, do you adventure in it?'

'Why? Ohé! And what shall they steal from a poor friar-mendicant? My beads? My girdle?' He laughed again. A humorous fellow, clearly, taking a proper saintly joy in his indigenous condition. 'No, no, my brother. I have no cause to go in fear of thieves.'

'Yet supposing me a thief, you were in fear of me?'

The man's smile froze. This stripling's simple logic was disconcerting.

'I feared,' he said at last, slowly and solemnly, 'your fear of me. A hideous passion, fear, in man or beast. It makes men murderers at times. Had you been the robber I supposed you, and, waking suddenly, found me beside you, you might have suspected some intent to harm you. It is easily guessed what would have followed then.'

Bellarion nodded thoughtfully. No explanation could have been more complete. The man was not only virtuous, but wise.

'Whither do you journey, brother?'

'To Pavia,' Bellarion answered him, 'by way of Santa Tenda.'

'Santa Tenda! Why, that is my way too; at least as far as the Augustinian Monastery on the Sesia. Wait here, my son, and we will go together. It is good to have a comrade on a journey. Wait but some few moments, to give me time to bathe, which is the purpose for which I came. I will not keep you long.'

He went striding off through the grass. Bellarion called after him:

'Where do you bathe?'

Over his shoulder the friar answered him: 'There is a rivulet down yonder. But a little way. Do not stray from that spot, so that I may find you again, my son.'

Bellarion thought the form of address an odd one. A minorite is brother, not father, to all humanity. But it was no suspicion based on this that brought him to his feet. He was a youth of cleanly habits, and if there was water at hand, he too would profit by it. So he rose, picked up his cloak, and went off in the wake of the swiftly moving friar.

When, presently, he overtook him, Bellarion made him a present of a proverb.

'Who goes slowly, goes soundly.'

'But never gets there,' was the slightly breathless answer. 'And it's still some way to the water.'

'Some way? But you said ...'

'Aye, aye. I was mistaken. One place is like another in this labyrinth. I am none so sure that I am not as lost as you are.'

It must have been so, for they trudged a full mile before they came to a brook that flowed westward towards the river. It lay in a dell amid mossy boulders and spreading fronds of ferns all dappled now with the golden light that came splashing through the trees. They found a pool of moderate dimensions in a bowl of grey stone fashioned by the ceaseless sculpture of the water. It was too shallow to afford a bath. But the friar's ablutionary dispositions scarce seemed to demand so much. He rinsed face and hands perfunctorily, whilst Bellarion stripped to the waist, and displaying a white torso of much beauty and more vigour, did what was possible in that cramped space.

After that the friar produced from one of the sack-like pockets of his habit an enormous piece of sausage and a loaf of rye bread.

To Bellarion who had gone supperless to bed this was as the sight of manna in the desert.

'Little brother!' he cooed in sheer delight. 'Little brother!'

'Aye, aye. We have our uses, we little brothers of Saint Francis.' The minorite sliced the sausage in two equal halves. 'We know how to provide ourselves upon a journey.'

They fell to eating, and with the stilling of his hunger Bellarion experienced an increasing kindness to this Good Samaritan. At

the friar's suggestion that they should be moving so as to cover the greater part of the road to Casale before the noontide heat, Bellarion stood up, brushing the crumbs from his lap. In doing so his hand came in contact with the scrip that dangled from his girdle.

'Saints of God!' he ejaculated, as he tightened his clutch upon that bag of green cloth.

The beady eyes of the minorite were upon him, and there was blank inquiry in that ashen, corrugated face.

'What is it, brother?'

Bellarion's fingers groped within the bag a moment, then turned it inside out, to reveal its utter emptiness. He showed his companion a face which blended suspicion with dismay.

'I have been robbed!' he said.

'Robbed?' the other echoed, then smiled a pitying concern. 'My surprise is less than yours, my son. Did I not say these woods are infested by thieves and robbers? Had you slept less soundly you might have been robbed of life as well. Render thanks to God, Whose grace is discernible even in misfortune. For no evil befalls us that will not serve to show how much greater that evil might have been. Take that for comfort ever in adversity, my child.'

'Aye, Aye!' Bellarion displayed ill-humour, whilst his eyes abated nothing of their suspicious glance. 'It is easy to make philosophy upon the woes of others.'

'Child, child! What is your woe? What is the full sum of it? What have you lost, when all is said?'

'Five ducats and a letter.' Bellarion flung the answer fiercely.

'Five ducats!' The friar spread his hands in pious remonstrance. 'And will you blaspheme God for five ducats?'

'Blaspheme?'

'Is not your furious frame of mind a blasphemy, your anger at your loss where there should be a devout thankfulness for all that you retain? And you should be thankful, too, for the Providence that guided my steps towards you in the hour of your need.'

'I should be thankful for that?' Bellarion stressed the question with mistrust.

The friar's countenance changed. A gentle melancholy invested it.

'I read your thoughts, child, and they harbour suspicion of me. Of Me!' he smiled. 'Why, what a madness! Should I turn thief? Should I imperil my immortal soul for five paltry ducats? Do you not know that we little brothers of Saint Francis live as the birds of the air, without thought for material things, our trust entirely in God's providence? What should I do with five ducats, or five hundred? Without a single minted coin, with no more than my gown and my staff I might journey from here to Jerusalem, living upon the alms that never fail us. But assurances are not enough for minds poisoned by suspicion.' He flung wide his arms, and stood cruciform before the youth. 'Come, child, make search upon me for your ducats, and so assure yourself. Come!'

Bellarion flushed, and lowered his head in shame.

'There ... there is not the need,' he answered lamely. 'The gown you wear is a full assurance. You could not be what you are and

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

