

Alexander the Ratcatcher

By Richard Garnett

“Alexander Octavus mures, qui Urbem supra modum vexabant, anathemate perculit.”—*Palatius. Fasti Cardinalium*, torn. v. p. 46.

I

“Rome and her rats are at the point of battle!”

This metaphor of Menenius Agrippa’s became, history records, matter of fact in 1689, when rats pervaded the Eternal City from garret to cellar, and Pope Alexander the Eighth seriously apprehended the fate of Bishop Hatto. The situation worried him sorely; he had but lately attained the tiara at an advanced age—the twenty-fourth hour, as he himself remarked in extenuation of his haste to enrich his nephews. The time vouchsafed for worthier deeds was brief, and he dreaded descending to posterity as the Rat Pope. Witty and genial, his sense of humour teased him with a full perception of the absurdity of his position. Peter and Pasquin concurred in forbidding him to desert his post; and he derived but small comfort from the ingenuity of his flatterers, who compared him to St. Paul contending with beasts at Ephesus.

It wanted three half-hours to midnight, as Alexander sat amid traps and ratsbane in his chamber in the Vatican, under the protection of two enormous cats and a British terrier. A silver bell stood ready to his hand, should the aid of the attendant chamberlains be requisite. The walls had been divested of their tapestries, and the floor gleamed with pounded glass. A tome of legendary lore lay open at the history of the Piper of Hamelin. All was silence, save for the sniffing and scratching of the dog and a sound of subterranean scraping and gnawing.

“Why tarries Cardinal Barbadico thus?” the Pope at last asked himself aloud. The inquiry was answered by a wild burst of squeaking and clattering and scurrying to and fro, as who should say, “We’ve eaten him. We’ve eaten him!”

But this exultation was at least premature, for just as the terrified Pope clutched his bell, the door opened to the narrowest extent compatible with the admission of an ecclesiastical personage of dignified presence, and Cardinal Barbadico hastily squeezed himself through.

“I shall hardly trust myself upon these stairs again,” he remarked, “unless under the escort of your Holiness’s

“Take him, my son, and a cruse of holy water to boot,” the Pope responded. “Now, how go things in the city?”

“As ill as may be, your Holiness. Not a saint stirs a finger to help us. The country-folk shun the city, the citizens seek the country. The multitude of enemies increases hour by hour. They set at defiance the anathemas fulminated by your Holiness, the spiritual censures placarded in the churches, and the citation to appear before the ecclesiastical courts, although assured that their cause shall be pleaded by the ablest advocates in Rome. The cats, amphibious with alarm, are taking to the Tiber. Vainly the city reeks with toasted cheese, and the Commissary-General reports himself short of arsenic.”

“And how are the people taking it?” demanded Alexander. “To what cause do they attribute the public calamity?”

“Generally speaking, to the sins of your Holiness,” replied the Cardinal.

“Cardinal!” exclaimed Alexander indignantly.

“I crave pardon for my temerity,” returned Barbadico. “It is with difficulty that I force myself to speak, but I am bound to lay the ungrateful truth before your Holiness. The late Pope, as all men know, was a personage of singular.

“Far too upright for this fallen world,” observed Alexander with unction.

“I will not dispute,” responded the Cardinal, “that the head of Innocent the Eleventh might have been more fitly graced by a halo than by a tiara. But the vulgar are incapable of placing themselves at this point of view. They know that the rats hardly squeaked under Innocent, and that they swarm under Alexander. What wonder if they suspect your Holiness of familiarity with Beelzebub, the patron of vermin, and earnestly desire that he would take you to himself? Vainly have I represented to them the unreasonableness of imposing upon him a trouble he may well deem superfluous, considering your Holiness’s infirm health and advanced age. Vainly, too, have I pointed out that your anathema has actually produced all the effect that could have been reasonably anticipated from any similar manifesto on your predecessor’s part. They won’t see it. And, in fact, might I humbly advise, it does appear impolitic to hurl anathemas unless your Holiness knows that some one will be hit. It might be opportune, for example, to excommunicate Father Molinos, now fast in the dungeons of St. Angelo, unless, indeed, the rats have devoured him there. But I question the expediency of going much further.”

“Cardinal,” said the Pope, “you think yourself prodigiously clever, but you ought to know that the state of public opinion allowed us no alternative. Moreover, I will give you a wrinkle, in case you should ever come to be Pope yourself. It is unwise to allow ancient prerogatives to fall entirely into desuetude. Far-seeing men prognosticate a great revival of sacerdotalism in the nineteenth century, and what is impotent in an age of sense may be formidable in an age of nonsense. Further, we know not from one day to another whether we may not be absolutely necessitated to excommunicate that fautor of Gallicanism, Louis the Fourteenth, and before launching our bolt at a king, we may think well to test its efficacy upon a rat. *Fiat experimentum*. And now to return to our rats, from which we have ratted. Is there indeed no hope?”

“*Lateat scintillula forsan,*” said the Cardinal mysteriously.

“Ha! How so?” eagerly demanded Alexander.

“Our hopes,” answered the Cardinal, “are associated with the recent advent to this city of an extraordinary personage.”

“Explain,” urged the Pope.

“I speak,” resumed the Cardinal, “of an aged man of no plebeian mien or bearing, albeit most shabbily attired in the skins, now fabulously cheap, of the vermin that torment us; who, professing to practise as an herbalist, some little time ago established himself in an obscure street of no good repute. A tortoise hangs in his needy shop, nor are stuffed alligators lacking. Understanding that he was resorted to by such as have need of philters and love-potions, or are incommoded by the longevity of parents and uncles, I was about to have him arrested, when I received a report which gave me pause. This concerned the singular intimacy which appeared to subsist between him and our enemies. When he left home, it was averred, he was attended by troops of them obedient to his beck and call, and spies had observed him banqueting them at his counter, the rats sitting erect and comporting themselves with perfect decorum. I resolved to investigate the matter for myself. Looking into his house through an unshuttered window, I perceived him in truth surrounded by feasting and gambolling rats; but when the door was opened in obedience to my attendants’ summons, he appeared to be entirely alone. Laying down a pestle and mortar, he greeted me by name with an easy familiarity which for the moment quite

disconcerted me, and inquired what had procured him the honour of my visit. Recovering myself, and wishing to intimidate him.

“ ‘I desire in the first place,’ I said, ‘to point out to you your grave transgression of municipal regulations in omitting to paint your name over your shop.’

“ ‘Call me Rattila,’ he rejoined with unconcern, ‘and state your further business.’

“I felt myself on the wrong tack, and hastened to interrogate him respecting his relations with our adversaries. He frankly admitted his acquaintance with rattery in all its branches, and his ability to deliver the city from this scourge, but his attitude towards your Holiness was so deficient in respect that I question whether I ought to report it.”

“Proceed, son,” said the Pope; “we will not be deterred from providing for the public weal by the ribaldry of a ratcatcher.”

“He scoffed at what he termed your Holiness’s absurd position, and affirmed that the world had seldom beheld, or would soon behold again, so ridiculous a spectacle as a Pope besieged by rats. ‘I can help your master,’ he continued, ‘and am willing; but my honour, like his, is aspersed in the eyes of the multitude, and he must come to my aid, if I am to come to his.’

“I prayed him to be more explicit, and offered to be the bearer of any communication to your Holiness.

“ ‘I will unfold myself to no one but the Pope himself,’ he replied, ‘and the interview must take place when and where I please to appoint. Let him meet me this very midnight, and alone, in the fifth chamber of the Appartamento Borgia.’”

“ ‘The Appartamento Borgia!’ I exclaimed in consternation. ‘The saloons which the wicked Pope Alexander the Sixth nocturnally perambulates, mingling poisons that have long lost their potency for Cardinals who have long lost their lives!’

“ ‘Have a care!’ he exclaimed sharply. ‘You speak to his late Holiness’s most intimate friend.’

“ ‘Then,’ I answered, ‘you must obviously be the Devil, and I am not at present empowered to negotiate with your Infernal Majesty. Consider, however, the peril and inconvenience of visiting at dead of night rooms closed for generations. Think of the chills and cobwebs. Weigh the probability of his Holiness being devoured by rats.’

“ ‘I guarantee his Holiness absolute immunity from cold,’ he replied, ‘and that none of my subjects shall molest him either going or returning.’

“ ‘But,’ I objected, ‘granting that you are not the Devil, how the devil, let me ask, do you expect to gain admittance at midnight to the Appartamento Borgia?’

“ ‘Think you I cannot pass through a stone wall?’ answered he, and vanished in an instant. A tremendous scampering of rats immediately ensued, then all was silence.

“On recovering in some measure from my astounded condition, I caused strict search to be made throughout the shop. Nothing came to light but herbalists’ stuff and ordinary medicines. And now, Holy Father, your Holiness’s resolution? Reflect well. This Rattila may be the King of the Rats, or he may be Beelzebub in person.”

Alexander the Eighth was principally considered by his contemporaries in the light of a venerable fox, but the lion had by no means been omitted from his composition.

“All powers of good forbid,” he exclaimed, “that a Pope and a Prince should shrink from peril which the safety of the State summons him to encounter! I will confront this wizard, this goblin, in the place of his own appointing, under his late intimate friend’s very nose. I am a man of many transgressions, but something assures me that Heaven will not deem this a fit occasion for calling them to remembrance. Time presses; I lead on; follow, Cardinal Barbadico, follow! Yet stay, let us not forget temporal and spiritual armouries.”

And hastily providing himself with a lamp, a petronel, a bunch of keys, a crucifix, a vial of holy water, and a manual of exorcisms, the Pope passed through a secret door in a corner of his chamber, followed by the Cardinal bearing another lamp and a naked sword, and preceded by the dog and the two cats, all ardent and undaunted as champions bound to the Holy Land for the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre.

II

The wizard had kept his word. Not a rat was seen or heard upon the pilgrimage, which was exceedingly toilsome to the aged Pope from the number of passages to be threaded and doors to be unlocked. At length the companions stood before the portal of the Appartamento Borgia.

“Your Holiness must enter alone,” Cardinal Barbadico admonished, with manifest reluctance.

“Await my return,” enjoined the Pontiff, in a tone of more confidence than he could actually feel, as, after much grinding and grating, the massive door swung heavily back, and he passed on into the dim, unexplored space beyond. The outer air, streaming in as though eager to indemnify itself for years of exile, smote and swayed the flame of the Pope’s lamp, whose feeble ray flitted from floor to ceiling as the decrepit man, weary with the way he had traversed and the load he was bearing, tottered and stumbled painfully along, ever and anon arrested by a closed door, which he unlocked with prodigious difficulty. The cats cowered close to the Cardinal; the dog at first accompanied the Pope, but whined so grievously, as though he beheld a spirit, that Alexander bade him back.

Supreme is the spell of the *genus loci*. The chambers traversed by the Pope were in fact adorned with fair examples of the painter’s art, most scriptural in subject, but some inspired with the devout Pantheism in which all creeds are reconciled. All were alike invisible to the Pontiff, who, with the dim flicker of his lamp, could no more discern Judæa wed with Egypt on the frescoed ceiling than, with the human limitation of his faculties, he could foresee that the ill-reputed rooms would one day harbour a portion of the Vatican Library, so greatly enriched by himself. Nothing but sinister memories and vague alarms presented themselves to his imagination. The atmosphere, heavy and brooding from the long exclusion of the outer air, seemed to weigh upon him with the density of matter, and to afford the stuff out of which phantasmal bodies perpetually took shape and, as he half persuaded himself, substance. Creeping and tottering between bowl and cord, shielding himself with lamp and crucifix from Michelotto’s spectral poniard and more fearful contact with fleshless Vanozzas and mouldering Giulias, the Pope urged, or seemed to urge, his curse amid phantom princes and cardinals, priests and courtesans, soldiers and serving-men, dancers, drinkers, dicers, Bacchic and Cotyttian workers of whatsoever least beseemed the inmates of a Pontifical household, until, arrived in the fifth chamber, close by the, to him, invisible picture of the Resurrection, he sank exhausted into a spacious chair that seemed placed for his reception, and for a moment closed his eyes. Opening them immediately afterwards, he saw with relief that the phantoms had vanished, and that he confronted what at least seemed a fellow-mortal, in the ancient ratcatcher, habited precisely as Cardinal Barbadico had described, yet, for all his mean apparel, wearing the air of one wont to confer with the potentates of the earth on other subjects than the extermination of rats.

“This is noble of your Holiness—really,” he said, bowing with mock reverence. “A second Leo the Great!”

“I tell you what, my man,” responded Alexander, feeling it very necessary to assert his dignity while any of it remained, “you are not to imagine that, because I have humoured you so far as to

grant you an audience at an unusual place and time, I am going to stand any amount of your nonsense and impertinence. You can catch our rats, can you? Catch them then, and you need not fear that we shall treat you like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. You have committed sundry rascalities, no doubt? A pardon shall be made out for you. You want a patent or a privilege for your ratsbane? You shall have it. So to work, in the name of St. Muscipulus! and you may keep the tails and skins."

"Alexander," said the ratcatcher composedly, "I would not commend or dispraise you unduly, but this I may say, that of all the Popes I have known you are the most exuberant in hypocrisy and the most deficient in penetration. The most hypocritical, because you well know, and know that I know that you know, that you are not conversing with an ordinary ratcatcher: had you deemed me such, you would never have condescended to meet me at this hour and place. The least penetrating, because you apparently have not yet discovered to whom you are speaking. Do you really mean to say that you do not know me?"

"I believe I have seen your face before," said Alexander, "and all the more likely as I was inspector of prisons when I was Cardinal."

"Then look yonder," enjoined the ratcatcher, as he pointed to the frescoed wall, at the same time vehemently snapping his fingers. Phosphoric sparks hissed and crackled forth, and coalesced into a blue lambent flame, which concentrated itself upon a depicted figure, whose precise attitude the rat-catcher assumed as he dropped upon his knees. The Pope shrieked with amazement, for, although the splendid Pontifical vestments had become ragged fur, in every other respect the kneeling figure was the counterpart of the painted one, and the painted one was Pinturicchio's portrait of Pope Alexander the Sixth kneeling as a witness of the Resurrection.

Alexander the Eighth would fain have imitated his predecessor's attitude, but terror bound him to his chair, and the adjuration of his patron St. Mark which struggled towards his lips never arrived there. The book of exorcisms fell from his paralysed hand, and the vial of holy water lay in shivers upon the floor. Ere he could collect himself, the dead Pope had seated himself beside the Pope with one foot in the grave, and, fondling a ferret-skin, proceeded to enter into conversation.

"What fear you?" he asked. "Why should I harm you? None can say that I ever injured any one for any cause but my own advantage, and to injure your Holiness now would be to obstruct a design which I have particularly at heart."

"I crave your Holiness's forgiveness," rejoined the Eighth Alexander, "but you must be aware that you left the world with a reputation which disqualifies you for the society of any Pope in the least careful of his character. It positively compromises me to have so much as the ghost of a person universally decried as your Holiness under my roof, and you would infinitely oblige me by forthwith repairing to your own place, which I take to be about four thousand miles below where you are sitting. I could materially facilitate and accelerate your Holiness's transit thither if you would be so kind as to hand me that little book of exorcisms."

"How is the fine gold become dim!" exclaimed Alexander the Sixth. "Popes in bondage to moralists! Popes nervous about public opinion! Is there another judge of morals than the Pope speaking *ex cathedra*, as I always did? Is the Church to frame herself after the prescriptions of heathen philosophers and profane jurists? How, then, shall she be terrible as an army with banners? Did I concern myself with such pedantry when the Kings of Spain and Portugal came to me like cats suing for morsels, and I gave them the West and the East?"

"It is true," Alexander the Eighth allowed, "that the lustre of the Church hath of late been obfuscated by the prevalence of heresy."

“It isn’t the heretics,” Borgia insisted. “It is the degeneracy of the Popes. A shabby lot! You, Alexander, are about the best of them; but the least Cardinal about my Court would have thought himself bigger than you.

Alexander’s spirit rose. “I would suggest,” he said, “that this haughty style is little in keeping with the sordid garb wherein your Holiness, consistent after death as in your life, masquerades to the scandal and distress of the faithful.”

“How can I other? Has your Holiness forgotten your Rabelais?”

“The works of that eminent Doctor and Divine,” answered Alexander the Eighth, “are seldom long absent from my hands, yet I fail to remember in what manner they elucidate the present topic.”

“Let me refresh your memory,” rejoined Borgia, and, producing a volume of the Sage of Meudon, he turned to the chapter descriptive of the employments of various eminent inhabitants of the nether world, and pointed to the sentence:

“LE PAPE ALEXANDRE ESTOYT PRENEUR DE RATZ.”¹

“Is this indeed sooth?” demanded his successor

“How else should François Rabelais have affirmed it?” responded Borgia. “When I arrived in the subterranean kingdom, I found it in the same condition as your Holiness’s dominions at the present moment, eaten up by rats. The attention which, during my earthly pilgrimage, I had devoted to the science of toxicology indicated me as a person qualified to abate the nuisance, which commission I executed with such success, that I received the appointment of Ratcatcher to his Infernal Majesty, and so discharged its duties as to merit a continuance of the good opinion which had always been entertained of me in that exalted quarter. After a while, however, interest began to be made for me in even more elevated spheres. I had not been able to cram Heaven with Spaniards, as I had crammed the Sacred College—on the contrary. Truth to speak, my nation had not largely contributed to the population of the regions above. But some of us are people of consequence. My great-grandson, the General of the Jesuits, who, as such, had the ear of St. Ignatius Loyola, represented that had I adhered strictly to my vows, he could never have come into existence, and that the Society would thus have wanted one of its brightest ornaments. This argument naturally had great weight with St. Ignatius, the rather as he, too, was my countryman. Much also was said of the charity I had shown to the exiled Jews, which St. Dominic was pleased to say made him feel ashamed of himself when he came to think of it; for my having fed my people in time of dearth, instead of contriving famines to enrich myself, as so many Popes’ nephews have done since; and of the splendored order in which I kept the College of Cardinals. Columbus said a good word for me and Savonarola did not oppose. Finally I was allowed to come upstairs, and exercise my profession on earth. But mark what pitfalls line the good man’s path! I never could resist tampering with drugs of a deleterious nature, and was constantly betrayed by the thirst for scientific experiment into practices incompatible with the public health. The good nature which my detractors have not denied me was a veritable snare. I felt for youth debarred from its enjoyments by the unnatural vitality of age, and sympathised with the blooming damsel whose parent alone stood between her and her lover. I thus lived in constant apprehension of being ordered back to the Netherlands, and yearned for the wings of a dove, that I might flee away and be out of mischief. At last I discovered that my promotion to a higher sphere depended upon my obtaining a testimonial from the reigning Pope. Let a solemn

¹ *Pantagruel*, Book XI. ch. 30.

procession be held in my honour, and intercession be publicly made for me, and I should ascend forthwith. I have consequently represented my case to many of your predecessors: but, O Alexander, you seventeenth-century Popes are a miserable breed! No fellow-feeling, no *esprit de corps*. *Heu pietas! heu prisca fides!* No one was so rude as your ascetic antecessor. The more of a saint, the less of a gentleman. Personally offensive, I assure you! But the others were nearly as bad. The haughty Paul, the fanatic Gregory, the worldly Urban, the austere Innocent the Tenth, the affable Alexander the Seventh, all concurred in assuring me that it was deeply to be regretted that I should ever have been emancipated from the restraints of the Stygian realm, to which I should do well to return with all possible celerity; that it would much conduce to the interests of the Church if my name could be forgotten; and that as for doing anything to revive its memory, they would just as soon think of canonising Judas Iscariot.”

“And therefore your Holiness has brought these rats upon us, enlisted, I nothing doubt, in the infernal regions?”

“Precisely so: Plutonic, necyomantic, Lemurian rats, kindly lent by the Prince of Darkness for the occasion, and come dripping from Styx to squeak and gibber in the Capitol. But I note your Holiness’s admission that they belong to a region exempt from your jurisdiction, and that, therefore, your measures against them, except as regards their status as belligerents, are for the most part illegitimate and *ultra vires*.”

“I would argue that point,” replied Alexander the Eighth, “if my lungs were as tough as when I pleaded before the Rota in Pope Urban’s time. For the present I confine myself to formally protesting against your Holiness’s unprecedented and parricidal conduct in invading your country at the head of an army of loathsome vermin.”

“Unprecedented!” exclaimed Borgia. “Am I not the modern Coriolanus? Did Narses experience blacker ingratitude than I? Where would the temporal power be but for me? Who smote the Colonna? Who squashed the Orsini? Who gave the Popes to dwell quietly in their own house? Monsters of unthankfulness!”

“I am sure,” said Alexander the Eighth soothingly, “that my predecessors’ inability to comply with your Holiness’s request must have cost them many inward tears, not the less genuine because entirely invisible and completely inaudible. A wise Pope will, before all things, consider the spirit of his age. The force of public opinion, which your Holiness lately appeared to disparage, was, in fact, as operative upon yourself as upon any of your successors. If you achieved great things in your lifetime, it was because the world was with you. Did you pursue the same methods now, you would soon discover that you had become an offensive anachronism. It will not have escaped your Holiness’s penetration that what moralists will persist in terming the elevation of the standard of the Church, is the result of the so-called improvement of the world.”

“There is a measure of truth in this,” admitted Alexander the Sixth, “and the spirit of this age is a very poor spirit. It was my felicity to be a Pope of the Renaissance. Blest dispensation! when men’s view of life was large and liberal; when the fair humanities flourished; when the earth yielded up her hoards of chiselled marble and breathing bronze, and new-found agate urns as fresh as day; when painters and sculptors vied with antiquity, and poets and historians followed in their path; when every benign deity was worshipped save Diana and Vesta; when the arts of courtship and cosmetics were expounded by archbishops; when the beauteous Imperia was of more account than the eleven thousand virgins; when obnoxious persons glided imperceptibly from the world; and no one marvelled if he met the Pope arm in arm with the Devil. How miserable, in comparison, is the present sapless age, with its prudery and its pedantry, and its

periwigs and its painted coaches, and its urban Arcadias and the florid impotence and ostentatious inanity of what it calls its art! Pope Alexander! I see in the spirit the sepulchre destined for *you*, and I swear to you that my soul shivers in my ratskins! Come, now, I do not expect you to emulate the Popes of my time, but show that your virtues are your own, and your faults those of your epoch. Pluck up a spirit! Take bulls by the horns! Look facts in the face! Think upon the images of Brutus and Cassius! Recognise that you cannot get rid of me, and that the only safe course is to rehabilitate me. I am not a candidate for canonisation just now; but repair past neglect and appease my injured shade in the way you wot of. If this is done, I pledge my word that every rat shall forthwith evacuate Rome. Is it a bargain? I see it is; you are one of the good old sort, though fallen on evil days.”

Renaissance or Rats, Alexander the Eighth yielded.

“I promise,” he declared.

“Your hand upon it!”

Subduing his repugnance and apprehension by a strong effort, Alexander laid his hand within the spectre’s clammy paw. An icy thrill ran through his veins, and he sank back senseless into his chair.

III

When the Pope recovered consciousness he found himself in bed, with slight symptoms of fever. His first care was to summon Cardinal Barbadico, and confer with him respecting the surprising adventures which had recently befallen them. To his amazement, the Cardinal’s mind seemed an entire blank on the subject. He admitted having made his customary report to his Holiness the preceding night, but knew nothing of any supernatural ratcatcher, and nothing of any midnight rendezvous at the Appartamento Borgia. Investigation seemed to justify his nescience; no vestige of the man of rats or of his shop could be discovered; and the Borgia apartments, opened and carefully searched through, revealed no trace of having been visited for many years. The Pope’s book of exorcisms was in its proper place, his vial of holy water stood unbroken upon his table; and his chamberlains deposed that they had consigned him to Morpheus at the usual hour. His allusion was at first explained as the effect of a peculiarly vivid dream; but when he declared his intention of actually holding a service and conducting a procession for the weal of his namesake and predecessor, the conviction became universal that the rats had effected a lodgment in his Holiness’s upper storeys.

Alexander, notwithstanding, was resolute, and so it came to pass that on the same day two mighty processions encountered within the walls of Rome. As the assembled clergy, drawn from all the churches and monasteries in the city, the Pope in his litter in their midst, marched, carrying candles, intoning chants, and, with many a secret shrug and sneer, imploring Heaven for the repose of Alexander the Sixth, they were suddenly brought to bay by another procession precipitated athwart their track, disorderly, repulsive, but more grateful to the sight of the citizens than all the pomps and pageants of the palmiest days of the Papacy. Black, brown, white, grey; fat and lean; old and young; strident or silent; whiskered legions tore and galloped along; thronging from every part of the city, they united in single column into an endless host that appeared to stretch from the rising to the setting of the sun. They seemed making for the Tiber, which they would have speedily choked; but ere they could arrive there a huge rift opened in the earth, down which they madly precipitated themselves. Their descent, it is affirmed, lasted as many hours as Vulcan occupied in falling from Heaven to Lemnos; but when the last tail was

over the brink, the gulf closed as effectually as the gulf in the Forum closed over Marcus Curtius, not leaving the slightest inequality by which any could detect it.

Long ere this consummation had been attained, the Pope, looking forth from his litter, observed a venerable personage clad in ratskins, who appeared desirous of attracting his notice. Glances of recognition were exchanged, and instantly in place of the ratcatcher stood a tall, swarthy, corpulent, elderly man, with the majestic yet sensual features of Alexander the Sixth, accoutred with the official habiliments and insignia of a Pope, who rose slowly into the air as though he had been inflated with hydrogen.

“To your prayers!” cried Alexander the Eighth, and gave the example. The priesthood resumed its chants, the multitude dropped upon their knees. Their orisons seemed to speed the ascending figure, which was rising rapidly, when suddenly appeared in air Luxury, Simony, and Cruelty, contending which should receive the Holy Father into her bosom.² Borgia struck at them with his crozier, and seemed to be keeping them at bay, when a cloud wrapped the group from the sight of men. Thunder roared, lightning glared, the rush of waters blended with the ejaculations of the people and the yet more tempestuous rushing of the rats. Accompanied as he was, it is not probable that Alexander passed, like Dante’s sigh, “beyond the sphere that doth all spheres enfold”; but, as he was never again seen on earth, it is not doubted that he attained at least as far as the moon.

² Per aver riposo

Portato fu fra l’anime beate
Lo spirito di Alessandro glorioso;
Del qual seguiron le sante pedate
Tre sue familiari e care ancelle,
Lussuria, Simonia, e Crudeltate.

—MACHIAVELLI, *Decennale Primo*.