

**Rafael Sabatini**



*The Tyrant*

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**An Episode in the Career of Cesare Borgia, a Play in Four Acts**



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# PREFACE

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It is demanded of the writer of fiction, whether novelist or dramatist, that the events he sets forth shall be endowed with the quality of verisimilitude. What he writes need not necessarily be true; but, at least, it must seem to be true, so that it may carry that conviction without which interest fails to be aroused. The historian appears to lie under no such restraining obligation. Whilst avowed Fiction is scornfully rejected when it transcends the bounds of human probability, alleged Fact would sometimes seem to be the more assured of enduring acceptance the more flagrantly impossible and irreconcilable are its details. And this not merely by the uninformed, who are easily imposed upon by the label of History, but even by those whose activities would appear to connote a degree of mental training at least sufficient to dispel the credulity that lies ever cheek by jowl with ignorance.

Were it otherwise one of the criticisms of this play which found utterance in some quarters on its first presentation in London would not have been that it “whitewashes” Cesare Borgia, that it distorts historical records for the purposes of the theatre, and that—either out of venality, or, perhaps, ignorance—it presents a Duke of Valentinois who in nothing resembles the Duke of Valentinois of sober history.

The Duke of Valentinois of sober history is evidently conceived by these particular critics to have been a gentleman with no occupation in life other than the pursuit

of murder, incest, and other similar avocations, a prince with so much poisoning and poignarding to do in the ordinary way of business that no time remained him for any of the activities common to a fifteenth-century ruler; in short, a Duke of Valentinois as ludicrous and impossible in fiction as he would have been ludicrous and impossible in fact.

What I mean by this is that the argument of “whitewash” would appear to rest, if it rests upon anything at all, upon the following syllogism: We have been taught that Cesare Borgia in the course of his career murdered, or procured the murder of a number of persons, and that he practised various unmentionable abominations; the Cesare Borgia in this play does not commit or procure, in the course of the events it reflects, the murder of anybody, nor is he shown engaged in vices of any peculiar depravity; therefore this Cesare Borgia is not the Cesare Borgia of history.

The matter would not be worth mentioning at all if it were not for the undeniable circumstance that those who take this view have behind them the authority, if not of historians generally, at least of a certain school of historians, who derive their histories from those of Guicciardini, Giovio, Matarazzo, and a host of others, who, through some four centuries, have been busily re-editing and amplifying the grotesque and sensational tale of Borgia turpitude.

This school—ignoring all contemporary evidences of a refutatory character—represents Cesare Borgia as a monster of infamy, a devil incarnate, a gross sensualist, an inhuman scoundrel without a single redeeming feature. He

is accused (without a rag of tenable evidence, either of fact or of motive, upon which to hang the accusation) of the murder of his own brother the Duke of Gandia; he murdered, we are told, his brother-in-law Alfonso of Aragon; he attempted the murder of his brother-in-law Giovanni Sforza, Lord of Pesaro; he poisoned his cousin and friend the Cardinal Giovanni Borgia; he stabbed Pedro Caldes in the very arms of the Pope, whither the unfortunate chamberlain had fled for shelter from his fury; and he is charged with procuring in several ways the death of many others. And these are the least of his alleged crimes. In the same light and irresponsible fashion, without the support of any substantiating evidence, with a cynical disregard of the abundant evidence that might be employed in refutation, he is, together with all his family, accused of wholesale incest and other abominable practices.

Of such a character and quality are the details we are afforded of his misdeeds that if, instead of being the creation of writers who described themselves as historians, Cesare Borgia had been the creation of an avowed romancer, he would have been slain for all time by the ridicule of the public; for such is the conception's utter lack of verisimilitude that it belongs, not to the realm of sensational melodrama, but to Bedlam.

Elsewhere, and at length—in a “Life of Cesare Borgia,” which is quite frankly a brief for the defence—I have dealt critically and in detail with this curious page of Italian history, examining the sources and applying to the available evidence the ordinary tests. So much would be out of place here, nor is it necessary for my immediate aims.

For the moment, and for the purposes of my present argument, let us admit that the Duke of Valentinois perpetrated all the fantastic crimes and practised all the equally fantastic abominations with which he is charged.

From the pages of Guicciardini, written in retirement at his villa at Arcetri, a quarter of a century after Cesare Borgia's death, you will hardly gather that the Duke had any other occupations. And it is curious—in itself a proof of that deliberate malice with which Guicciardini is branded by such contemporaries as Sebastiano Macci—that whilst none of the things which the Florentine historian relates of Cesare Borgia are of the slightest historical significance, he omits almost entirely to mention those deeds and achievements which had so wide and lasting an effect upon Italian politics, and which are the only matters it is a sincere historian's function to record.

It is elsewhere that you must seek the details of the admirably conducted conquest and reorganization of the Romagna, details which reveal Valentinois as a leader of great military skill, a brilliant strategist and an enlightened administrator. Still more admirable does he appear as a ruler over those same Romagna states once he had wrested them from the turbulent, rapacious despots under whom they had previously groaned. He restored order out of revolting chaos, established courts for the proper dispensation of justice, so that persons and property could depend upon that protection which they had not known for generations.

The tyrants he deposed went raging up and down Italy, inveighing against him, dubbing him antichrist and charging

him with all manner of unutterable wickedness, seeking actively to enlist for his destruction the hostility which his growing power and boundless ambition had already aroused in the great states of Venice, Naples, Milan and Florence. But the people of the tyrannies upon which he made war hailed this antichrist as their deliverer, and they afforded him such ready and loyal service that in more instances than one his conquests, as a consequence, were bloodlessly effected.

These facts—unlike those matters of his personal turpitude—are to-day beyond the realm of controversy. They are accepted by the most hostile of Borgia critics. Even Gregorovius, most bitter and unrestrained of antipapal historians, finds it necessary to pay the following tribute to a man of whom he can say little else that is favourable:

It is undeniable that his government was energetic and good; for the first time the Romagna enjoyed peace and was rid of her vampires. In the name of Cesare justice was administered by Antonio di Monte Sansovino, president of the Ruota of Cesena, a man universally beloved.

Among the many contemporary pen-portraits that survive we have the following in a letter to his government from Bishop Soderini, Ambassador of Florence to the Duke, written at a time when the relations between Cesare Borgia and the Florentine Republic were none too friendly:

This lord is very magnificent and splendid, and so spirited in feats of arms that there is nothing so great but that it must seem small to him. In the pursuit of glory and the



acquisition of dominions he never rests, and he knows neither danger nor fatigue. He moves so swiftly that he descends upon a place before it is known that he has set out for it. He knows how to make himself beloved of his soldiers, and he has in his service the best men in Italy. These things render him victorious and formidable, and to these is yet to be added his constant good fortune. He argues with such sound reason that to dispute with him would be a long affair. His wit and eloquence never fail him.

Other pen-portraits confirming this exist in abundance, some emanating from friendly, some from hostile sources. They find in the pages of Gregorovius's "Geschichte der Stadt Rom" the following summary:

Nature had been prodigal of gifts to Cesare Borgia. Like Tiberius of old he was the most beautiful man of his day, with the shapely vigorous body of an athlete. He held his senses in subjection to an intellect that was acute and cold. He exercised a magnetic attraction towards women; but still more formidable was the magnetic attraction which he exercised towards men, disarming them. Acute and perspicacious, swift as lightning in his actions, endowed with great knowledge of men, he was remorseless, using virtue and vice indifferently to attain his ends.

Finally, as a lasting monument to Cesare Borgia's achievements, energy, industry and varied intellectual gifts, we have "The Prince," that grammar of statecraft from the pen of Niccolò Machiavelli, inspired by his close observation of the methods adopted by Cesare Borgia, who

is held up throughout as the model upon which princes should frame their conduct.

Enough will have been said to show that anyone approaching the study of this subject for the purposes of the theatre will, if he probe deeply enough into history, find himself confronted with two Cesare Borgias. There is, on the one hand, the able soldier, the astute statesman, the physically and intellectually gifted prince of those eye-witnesses Soderini, Macchiavelli, and some others. And there is, on the other hand, the depraved voluptuary, the bloodthirsty murderer, the unmitigated scoundrel of the compilations of Guicciardini and Giovio.

The popular conception of the Borgia family is based upon the latter, or, rather, upon their extensive elaboration in a seventeenth-century novel by Gregorio Leti. This novel has been rendered well known by the adaptations of it which Dumas (in his "Crimes Célèbres") and Victor Hugo (in his "Lucrezia Borgia") have given to the world. Dumas did not consider it necessary to acknowledge the source of his own romance. Victor Hugo acknowledged his borrowing from that crude, ill-constructed, ill-written and salacious piece of fiction, by putting it forward as a serious authoritative historical document, and so imposed upon a world that knew no better.

If I had attempted to write of Cesare Borgia a biographical play I must of necessity have constructed it either upon the parent story in Guicciardini, together with its lusty well-developed child in Gregorio Leti, its still lustier grandchildren in Dumas and Hugo and the subsequent and ubiquitous great-grandchildren, or else upon the very

definite and very different—though by no means singular—conception which I derived from my own independent researches.

If I had adopted the first of these alternatives, I should have been guilty of an insincerity which would have brought its own punishment. Moreover, the result would inevitably have been a melodrama so flagrantly absurd that any intelligent audience visually beholding the materialization of that farrago of ill-invented rubbish—with whatever art it might have been presented—would have laughed it off the stage. In that way, it is true, I might have rendered valuable historical service by destroying for all time, by complete exposure, the Borgia myth.

If I had adopted the second alternative I should have been under the necessity of constructing that very difficult and tedious thing, a controversial drama. I should have been accused—assuming that I could have found production for such a play—of departing from the dramatist's proper function of entertaining an audience, for the purpose of expounding an historical thesis. And since, in any case, the limitations of the theatre would never have permitted me fully to develop the arguments through which my thesis must be expounded, persons who study their history *ad hoc* in the Encyclopædia Britannica and similar books of concise and summarized reference might indeed have been justified in raising against me the cry of "whitewash."

I mention this merely in passing, because the writing of a biographical play on Cesare Borgia or any other historical character would not at any time attract me. The career of an active man of achievements, even when it is so brief a

career as Cesare Borgia's, can hardly prove of interest when telescoped into the compass of a three-hours' entertainment. More commendable seems the method of reflecting the man's personality and psychology in a single incident that shall be typical of the activities of his career. The incident need not be entirely real, although to have any true historical value it must be set in circumstances of reality and at least amid happenings that are actually true. Moreover, in this way it should be possible—or so I fancied—entirely to avoid all controversy. I would present the Cesare Borgia of Soderini and Macchiavelli, without, however, urging anything that should contradict what has been written by Guicciardini and Giovio. In other words, I would show Cesare Borgia moving through a set of circumstances that should reveal his daring, his resource, his splendour, his athletic physical beauty, his personal magnetism, his intellectual acuteness, his ruthlessness, his merciless ambition, his typical fifteenth-century cruelty and his remorseless egotism, whilst at the same time in nothing suggesting that he could not in a different set of circumstances have perpetrated any or all of the villainies with which the popular conception charges him.

Therefore, I was careful that no character in the play save Cesare Borgia himself should have a single good word to say of Cesare Borgia, or anything that might have sounded like an argument in his favour. And the very explanations which, in passing, Cesare himself offers of the horrible tales that are told of him in Italy are the explanations which he would have offered—which we know, in fact, that he did offer—whether those tales were true or

not. The actual historical incidents employed in the construction of the story are incidents about which there is no controversy between the two schools; whilst if Cesare Borgia is endowed with the attributes which Soderini and Macchiavelli admired in him, yet the invented set of circumstances and his remorseless conduct in them are such as Guicciardini might not have hesitated to include in his history, if they had been invented instead—like so many other political slanders—by some Roman, Venetian or Neapolitan contemporary.

In this way it seemed to me possible to satisfy my own conceptions without doing violence to popular belief.

But since in spite of this care with which I sought to steer a justifiable middle course between conflicting schools, I have not escaped the charge of having whitewashed Cesare Borgia, it seems to me that I may have done here better historical service than I set out to do. For the explanation should lie in the fact that it is impossible to combine in one person the gifted prince of Soderini and Macchiavelli with the brutal scoundrel of Guicciardini and his literary successors.

# CHARACTERS

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(In the order of their speaking)

PANTHASILEA DEGLI  
SPERANZONI

GIULIA

COUNT GUIDO DEGLI  
SPERANZONI

Tyrant of Solignola.

SANTAFIORA

A Condottiero.

D'ALDI

Of the Council of Ten  
of Solignola.

GIANLUCA DELLA PIEVE

A Patrician of Assisi.

DEL CAMPO

}

Of the Council of  
Solignola.

PAVIANO

SENESCHAL OF  
SOLIGNOLA

PRINCE ERCOLE  
SINIBALDI

Envoy of Venice.

A SWISS DOORKEEPER



RAMIREZ

MICHELETTO DA  
CORELLA

} Condottieri in the

SCIPIONE

service of Valentinois.

NICCOLÒ MACCHIAVELLI

Secretary of State of  
Florence.

CAPELLO

Orator of Venice.

A CHAMBERLAIN

AGABITO GHERARDI

Secretary to  
Valentinois.

CESARE BORGIA,  
DUKE OF VALENTINOIS  
AND  
ROMAGNA

GINO

A peasant.

GIOVANNI

Seneschal of Pieve  
Palace.

GASPARO

Orator of Mantua.

MARIANO

Orator of Ferrara.

TWO COUNCILLORS OF  
SOLIGNOLA

THREE LADIES OF  
ASSISI

FOUR GENTLEMEN OF  
ASSISI

FOUR SWISS GUARDS } (Silent parts.)

FOUR MEN-AT-ARMS

TWO MONKS

TWO LACKEYS

TWO PAGES

CARDINAL REMOLINO

FERRANTE

A Condottiero

# SCENES

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ACT I. A Hall in the Castle of Solignola.

ACT II. The Antechamber in the Communal Palace at Assisi.

ACT III. A room in the Pieve Palace, Assisi.

ACT IV. As Act I.

The Action takes place in the Spring of 1503. Between Acts I. and II. and Acts II. and III. a week elapses in each case; between Acts III. and IV. a day elapses.