FRANCESCO FIASELLA.

By A. L. Stevenson.

In the autumn of the year 1632 Francesco Fiasella, a young Milanese of good family, was seized by order of Count D'Oria, and thrown into prison.

In what way he could have provoked the Count's wrath Francesco was ignorant; but he rightly guessed that a charge had been trumped up against him by his enemy, Orsino Carlone. He and Carlone were rivals for the hand of Rosa Palmieri, and the fair Rosa had shown by unmistakable signs that Francesco was the favoured suitor. Carlone was of a mean and cowardly disposition, and instead of challenging his rival to a duel, or even hiring bravos to assassinate him, he adopted the safer course of accusing him falsely before his patron Count D'Oria. The count by nature suspicious and vindictive—lent a ready ear to the charges, and without waiting to examine into their truth, or to hear the defence of the accused, he gave secret orders to three or four of his armed retainers. Fiasella's house was invaded one night, and he was overpowered, gagged, and carried away to Castle Vecchio, one of the Count's strongholds in Northern Lombardy.

The Castle stood on a rocky eminence rising from the centre of a wide valley girt on each side by lofty hills. The stream that ran through the valley was at this point spanned by an ancient stone bridge, and the road, after crossing this bridge, wound steeply up through the village to the castle. It was a huge and massive structure, flanked on either hand by a square tower. The front rested upon a precipice, and commanded a magnificent view of the landscape, but from the rear the slope was more gradual. To a cell deep down in the basement of this latter portion his captors led Francesco, and there they left him, after ungagging him and removing the bandage from his eyes.

For some minutes he sat as one stupefied. The sound of the men's retreating footsteps, as they climbed the stone stairs, grew fainter and fainter until it died away, and there was total silence. When his eyes were accustomed to the gloom he found that the cell in which he was confined was about twelve feet square, the walls and floor being of rough hewn stone, and perfectly bare. In one corner lay a straw mattrass with some old and tattered bedding and beside it stood a rickety wooden chair. The light—such as it was—was admitted by two narrow slits high up near the ceiling. As his eyes had been bandaged during the whole of the long journey he had no means of judging the time of day, but he guessed it must be near sunset. He moved the chair up to the foot of one of the windows, and tried to peer through it, but the attempt was useless—it was far too high. He now began to feel hungry, and on looking round discovered, near the door, a plate of coarse food and a jug of water. He ate and drank, and then, worn out with fatigue and anxiety, threw himself on the pallet and fell asleep.

He was awakened the next morning by the entry of his jailer, bringing bread and water for his breakfast. He enquired the time and the man briefly replied that it was seven o'clock, but declined all further parley. Having finished his scanty meal he carefully explored every part of his cell, but discovered nothing fresh except here and there bits of rubbish which—for want of something better to do—he gathered into one pile. While so engaged, he noticed a ray of light on the wall, and on looking up saw that it was reflected from one of the narrow windows. He watched this ray with anxious interest. How long would that light remain? The answer to that question depended on the position of his cell. If it looked to the South or South-West, well and good, but if not—! For some time—it might be an hour or more—the light remained steady, while he gazed on it as a miser might on a bar of gold; then—though he would not at first believe it—it gradually faded and faded, until it altogether disappeared! The prisoner was filled with dismay. It was evident that his cell had a North or North-West aspect, and that

as winter came on the sunlight would grow less and less until it ceased altogether. How could he—a child of the sunshine—live through the dark dreary months! A cold sweat came over him, and he sat in a stupor of horror and despair until the jailer entered with his mid-day meal. Rousing himself he besought the man, in moving tones, to supply him with books and paper, that he might have something to occupy him in his solitude. The jailer—by name Giuseppe—answered in a surly tone that the Count did not provide such luxuries for his prisoners and that he must amuse himself as best he could. Thus deprived of all hope or resource, Francesco sat through the long afternoon with his head on his hands, while his cell grew darker and darker. His state was between sleeping and waking—a ghastly trance such as visits a fever-stricken patient. Scenes from his past life came before his mental vision. He saw the white walls of his home, bosomed amid orange groves, and bathed in the golden sunlight; the streets of Milan thronged with citizens; the stately Duomo, towering aloft with its hundred pinnacles. Then Rosa tripped daintily along, smiling at him archly from under her black veil, and after her came a troop of maskers, dressed in all the fantastic glitter of the Carnival. Faster and faster they moved, in tumultuous procession, a medley of every imaginable hue; and then suddenly the great bell of the Duomo tolled, and all was blotted out in darkness.

So oblivious was he of his surroundings, that Giuseppe entered unnoticed with his supper, and it was some minutes before he became aware that the man had left a small lamp behind him. After eating his meal he made a search for bits of paper amongst the heap of rubbish. Alas, there was nothing of the kind—only bits of wood, charcoal, plaster and similar debris. Be it so—he would use the walls instead of paper, a piece of charcoal should serve him for a pencil. His captors had fortunately allowed him to retain a small pocket knife, and by its aid he could point his pencil. Seized with this idea he took out his knife, and began to shape the piece of charcoal. It was a slow process, and before he had finished it the lamp went out, and he was left in total darkness. This then was to be his allowance of light! The lamp had not, as he judged, burnt more than two hours; how was he to employ himself till he felt ready for sleep? He decided to walk about till he felt tired, and began pacing up and down his cell, counting the number of times as he went. He counted up to one hundred, two hundred, and so on, till at last he began to feel a little tired, and he lay down and closed his eyes. But sleep did not visit him. On the contrary his brain grew more active as he lay motionless, and now his mind, forsaking the past, travelled into the future. He saw the days of his captivity drag themselves out, one after another, in a long, dreary procession—each day a monotonous copy of the one that preceded it. And over all brooded the shadow of darkness — darkness increasing as winter came on, but never absent, even in the height of summer. Had he not said farewell to the sun! That thought was beyond endurance, and rising to his feet he began pacing wildly to and fro. Could he support this captivity—a captivity whose length depended on the caprice of his relentless persecutor? No, it was impossible; he must make an end, one way or another; there were means —he had **his knife**!—

He opened the blade and passed the edge over his finger. It was not very sharp, but it was good Ferrara steel. He groped in the dark, and found a piece of brick on which he carefully whetted the edge till he brought it to a tolerable keenness. Yes, that knife, if drawn with a rapid firm stroke across his throat would end all in a moment, and he would be free! What a comfort in that thought —why should he delay? He raised the knife, then paused. No, he was young and strong; he would not yet abandon hope, but when he did there was this unfailing friend! He closed the knife, and meditated, now

with more calmness. Something he must have to occupy his mind, or his reason would give way. Books and paper were denied him and such writing as was possible on the rough walls of his cell required some sort of light. What he wanted was something that he could do during the long hours of darkness.

Long and earnestly he considered then suddenly an idea struck him. Some years ago a friend had taught him to play chess and though he had since then for various reasons abandoned the game he remembered it had, at the time, given him great pleasure. Could he not, with this same knife fashion a set of chess-men, mark out a board on the floor of his cell, and amuse himself with chess? He remembered that his instructor, Signor Albino, used to say that the combinations of the gamé were practically of endless variety; also that even a blind man might play chess, either by the sense of touch or, after constant practice, from memory. A blind man—was he not himself virtually blind when night invaded his cell, and might not he, spite of the gloom that surrounded him, find solace in chess! Yes, that thought was an inspiration—there lay hope for him, hope of averting madness and suicide! Quieted and comforted he once more lay down, and soon sank into a dreamless sleep.

His first thought on waking in the morning, was of his chessmen. Hunting diligently amongst the rubbish he collected together all the odd bits of wood that would serve his purpose, and began fashioning them with his knife into the semblance of the different pieces. This was a slow and laborious process, but, persevering steadily, he had, by the end of the day, made a fair amount of progress. In the evening he continued his work as long as the lamp light lasted, and then, in the darkness, pondered over the moves and positions of the pieces till he fell asleep.

Continuing his efforts after this fashion, he had, within a fortnight, completed a set of chessmen, rude, indeed, in appearance, but adequate for purposes of play. To distinguish the rival forces he blackened half the number with bits of charcoal. It remained, now, to povide a chessboard. For this he had already selected a suitable spot, namely, a large round slab of stone, evidently an old mill-stone that had been used, with other miscellaneous material, for the floor of his cell. Within this circle he inscribed a square, as best he could, using his scarf as a measure, and scratching the lines with the point of an old nail that he had found. He then drew the requisite number of parallel lines both ways, and blackened every alternate square with charcoal. The board was now ready, and arranging the men in order he contemplated his work with much satisfaction.

Winter was now approaching, and the days grew shorter and shorter. Slowly but steadily the sunlight dwindled, until not a single ray visited his dreary cell. Long, terribly long, now seemed the days of captivity. To make them somewhat more endurable, he divided them, according to a regular plan, between writing, exercise, and chess. The writing was a tedious matter, but he persevered, and covered a good many stones with quotations in poetry and prose, and occasional verses of his own composition. For exercise he paced his cell, or practised the gymnastic movements and postures he had learnt at the Milan fencing school. But chess was his chief resource, especially when darkness closed in on the short afternoons. As long as he could he pored over the board by the aid of the lamp's feeble glimmer, and when it went out, he still pursued the game as well as he could in blindfold fashion. To this end he cut a small cleft in the top of each black piece, so that he could tell at once which colour he was handling. Sometimes he would engage in a game with an imaginary opponent, playing, as far as possible, the best moves on either side; sometimes he set up, from memory, curious positions or problems that had been shown him. Of these he had,

in some cases, forgotten the solutions, and the discovery of them, after many days of puzzling, gave him great pleasure. When this field was exhausted he tried his own hand at composition and succeeded in producing a few problems that though of an elementary nature were for him invested with all the charm of novelty. Thus alone and forsaken he learnt to love his ill-shapen chessmen as if they had been living things, and he felt that to lose them would plunge him into the blackest despair.

For this reason he had, from the first, jealously guarded them from the observation of Giuseppe, dreading lest, either through malevolence or suspicion, he should take them from him. When not in use he put them in a corner, behind the rubbish heap, and concealed the chessboard with the chair. His hearing, preternaturally sharpened by confinement, enabled him always to distinguish Giuseppe's tread, as soon as he began to descend the long flight of steps outside, and he thus had time to remove all traces of chess before he entered. At length, however, came the inevitable discovery. One cold and gloomy January day he had sat late into the afternoon puzzling over a difficult problem of Salvio's. Try as he would he could not solve it, and as his food had that day been particularly poor and scanty he felt exhausted with the effort. At length he decided to rest a few minutes before proceeding with the solution and sitting on the edge of the bed he closed his eyes; then, before he was aware of it, an irresistible drowsiness came over him and he was sound asleep.

Waking with a start he saw Giuseppe before him, a lantern in his hand. Instinctively he turned towards the chessmen, but Giuseppe laid a rough hand on his shoulder.

"Not so fast, Signor!" cried he. "So this is a secret, is it? Well, the Count does not allow his prisoners to have secrets. Explain the meaning of those figures, or it will be the worse for you."

"It is nothing", cried Francesco, in an agony of fear; "only a game that I have made to lighten my captivity. Surely the Count could not grudge me this!"

"A game, is it!" said Giuseppe, with a sneer. "Then why did you keep it hidden all this time, eh?"

"Because—because it is worth so much to me! It has been almost my only solace during the long dark hours."

"And you were afraid I should take it away? Well, suppose I do!"

He made a movement towards the chessmen, but Francesco threw himself before him.

"Cruel man!" he cried, "you shall not take them except by force. Kill me, and make an end of it, for I cannot live without them!"

Giuseppe burst into a hoarse laugh. "Bravo, Signor," he cried; "you have a fine spirit! Calm yourself, I was only joking. You may keep your worthless bits of wood, since they amuse you, and much good may they do you."

So saying he departed, leaving Francesco much agitated, though relieved. After this he no longer troubled to hide his chessmen, and now and then he was engaged with them when Giuseppe entered. On these occasions the latter gave them a more or less contemptuous glance, but coming in one day and finding Francesco deeply absorbed in the study of a problem, he approached and touched him on the shoulder.

"What do you call that game, Signor?" he asked.

"Chess," replied Francesco, startled at the interruption.

"Chess, eh? It must be less stupid than I supposed, since it interests you so much. How do you play it, is it difficult?"

"The moves are easy to learn, but to become a good player needs much practice."

"And what makes it so absorbing? When you are busy with it you seem to have eyes and ears for nothing else."

"The answer to that" replied Francesco, "can only be found by learning the game. He who plays chess knows that it is the most interesting pastime in the world; that

for the time being it makes one forget all pain, sorrow, and misfortune."

"Is that so?, why drink could hardly do more!"

"Drink could not do so much," exclaimed Francesco, "for the drunkard drowns, in the wine-cup, his senses as well as his cares; whereas the chess-player keeps his powers of mind unimpaired."

"Wonderful indeed!" cried Giuseppe, impressed, though somewhat mystified, by the other's eloquence. "Signor,will you teach me this game?"

"Willingly," returned Francesco, much surprised and pleased; "Come on this side of me, and I will show you something of the moves."

Giueseppe complied, and Francesco half reclining before the round stone, his usual attitude, gave him his first lesson in chess. This extended as far as the moves and the initial position of the pieces.

The next day his pupil came for another lesson, and by his accurate remembrance of what had been taught him showed that his mind, though slow, was retentive. Francesco now initiated him into the elementary principles of the game. This was uphill work, but Giuseppe was not without a certain dogged, though undeveloped, intelligence, and he also possessed a modicum of that logical faculty without which the acquisition of chess is impossible. By the end of three weeks he had grasped the main features of the game, and his interest therein increased with extraordinary rapidity, much to the advantage of Francesco, towards whom his demeanor changed considerably. Not only was his manner more courteous, but he supplied his prisoner with better food, brought him a fresh mattrass, and in many other ways relaxed the rigors of his confinement. Francesco was beyond measure grateful for these little favors, and, recognizing that the wondrous change was due to the fascination of chess, he redoubled his efforts to maintain this unabated. So painstaking and thorough was his instruction that before long Giuseppe was able to play games at odds. The contests were of course unequal but Francesco enjoyed them as a relief from solitary study, especially as his pupil did not mind being beaten.

Giuseppe was, in fact, too intent on the beauties of the game to care whether he lost or won, and his teacher's skill was so far above him as to put any thought of rivalry out of the question. "What a fine stroke!" was his exclamation, when he was mated in brilliant fashion; and he more than once observed that "the very Devil must have taught the Signor chess!" a remark intended for the highest compliment.

The winter months gradually passed away. Slowly the days lengthened until Francesco, waking one clear morning, saw a narrow beam of sunlight slanting across the opposite wall. Who shall tell what emotion that sunbeam awoke in the poor captive's heart! His first feeling was one of joy; for he knew that every day the sun would rise farther and farther, and would shine longer on his cell; but this thought soon changed to poignant sorrow. Of what avail would the sunlight be to him—a prisoner! Out in the world men were moving happily, bathed in sunshine, while he must pine in this living tomb! Ah, yes, the summer would, in a way, be harder to endure than the winter! In winter hope slumbered, as if dead; in summer it revived, and struggled vainly, like a bird beating its wings against the wires of a cage. But day by day the sunlight grew, until at last an irresistible longing seized him to look out at least once from his prison window. He had previously failed in the attempt, but now, piling up every available piece of furniture, including a small table that Giuseppe had recently brought him, he mounted on the top and did at length succeed in getting a glimpse through one of the narrow openings. Yes, there was the golden sunlight, streaming over the slopes of the olive-clad hills! Below, in the valley, glittered the winding stream, while far in the distance a silvery streak showed where it dashed, in a torrent of foam and spray, from the mountain

side. For some minutes he clung there motionless, drinking in the sight with ecstasy, like a man dying of thirst; then he descended, and sitting on the edge of his mattrass burst into tears. The dark, cold winter had numbed his feelings, but now he realized the depth of his woe. If a term had been set for his imprisonment, say five, or even ten years, he might have borne it; but all was uncertain; he might pine there forgotten till youth and strength were wasted away! From this day a change came over him! He became more and more depressed, and even chess ceased to interest him, though he strove to conceal this during his games with Giuseppe. Food grew distasteful to him, and he passed many sleepless nights. At length on rising one morning he was seized with a fit of giddiness, and nearly fell on the floor. He sat a while, and then again tried to move about, but the effort was vain, and he lay back half unconscious on his bed. Giuseppe, coming in, found him thus, and in some alarm, enquired what was the matter.

"It is nothing," murmured Francesco, "merely a little faintness; it will soon be over."

"You are ill,Signor," said Giuseppe, his rough heart stirred by a sudden impulse of pity. "You have not taken enough food lately, I have noticed it. Wait one minute, I will be back directly." He hurried out, and shortly reappeared with a jug and glass.

"Here is wine," said he; "drink some; it will do you good."

Francesco complied, and the wine, crude and sour as it was, somewhat revived him.

"You are better, Signor," said Giuseppe; "is it not so? One more draught and you will feel another man. Good; I will leave the jug here, so that you may have a pull at it when you like;—it is the best of medicines! Now you must eat your breakfast, and later on you will perhaps feel inclined for a game of chess."

When he had gone Francesco struggled through his meal. He certainly felt better, but the improvement was only temporary. When Giuseppe asked him, after dinner, to play a game of chess, he agreed but the effort was too much for him, and before the game was over he retired, exhausted, to his bed. This time the wine was of no avail. He remained in a state of lethargy for the rest of the day, only rousing himself, at Giuseppe's urgent entreaty to take a little food in the evenings; and when morning came he made no attempt to rise.

"You are very ill, Signor," said Giuseppe, bending over him, with a look of concern; "it is the close air of the prison that is the cause."

"Yes, that it is," said Francesco, faintly. "The other day I looked through yonder narrow window, and I saw the country outstretched before me, lit by God's own sunshine. Ah, if only I were there, I should soon be well again!"

"Doubtless, Signor, and therefore you must have patience and pluck up heart. Your imprisonment will not last forever. Some day the order will come for your release, that is, if your offence was not a grave one."

"Offence," exclaimed Francesco, "I have committed none!"

"Pardon me, Signor, all the prisoners say that. There must have been some cause for the Count's displeasure."

"Doubtless, but not of my making. I swear to you, Giuseppe, that I am an innocent man."

"So! then let me hear the whole story."

Francesco briefly related the facts of the case. So earnest was his manner that Giuseppe was wholly convinced of his sincerity.

"Signor!" he cried, "You have been treated with great injustice; and that scoundrel Carlone, I should like to slit his throat! But the Count must know this; you shall write a letter, and I will get it sent him."

"No, no, it would be useless. He is stern and implacable. He judged me unheard, why should he listen to me now?"

"That is true," assented Giuseppe, "but something must be done; I will think it over. Now try to get a little

sleep. Courage, Signor; leave the matter to me."

In a few days Francesco had so far recovered as to be able to move about and to resume a certain amount of interest in chess but his depression clung to him, and he grew daily thinner and paler. Giuseppe, who had now, in his rough way, become really attached to him, watched him anxiously. He felt in his heart that Francesco must die, if he remained much longer a prisoner, and he thought long and earnestly on the matter, till his mind was made up.

"Signor, I have something to say to you," he began one morning, abruptly. "I have resolved that you shall leave this prison!"

Francesco started with surprise but his features soon resumed their hopeless expression.

"I thank you for your good wishes," he murmured, "but we have already discussed the matter, it is vain to appeal to the Count."

"Doubtless," returned Giuseppe, "but this is another plan altogether and it will, yes, it must succeed."

Francesco, darting a swift glance at the other's face, saw an expression there that was new to him.

"What do you mean?" he asked, bewildered.

"Why, this," replied Giuseppe; "I will help you to make your escape!"

Francesco's heart beat violently, and he would have fallen had not Giuseppe caught him.

"Steady, Signor! Yes, you shall escape, I mean it!"

"You will help me to do this? Is it true, do not deceive me!"

"It is true, yes, I swear it!" said Giuseppe solemnly.

His manner left no room for doubt, and Francesco embraced him in a transport of joy.

"My deliverer," he cried, "may blessings light on you! But what means do you propose, and supposing I do escape, which God grant, how will you ensure your own safety? Not even to regain liberty would I have evil light on you!"

"Have no fear on that score," said Giuseppe; "I shall come with you!"

"You!"

"Yes, Signor. I have determined to free you, and if you go, I must go too, for if they found I had let you out I should soon be dangling with a rope round my neck."

"But in any case you will incur a risk!"

"Yes a small one. But I am no coward, and I would willingly venture a good deal more on your account."

Francesco grasped his hand in silence.

"See here, Signor," continued Giuseppe, "I have no near kindred of my own, and I have taken a liking for you. And when I see your wonderful skill in yon game I say to myself, "Is it not a shame that a man who can play chess like that should be in prison, and for no fault of his own!" I am tired, too, of this jailer work, and if we get safely away from here, as I make no doubt we shall, you will perhaps help me to some honest trade."

"That I will, Giuseppe; it would be but a small return for your service. But now let me hear your plan."

"It is this," said Giuseppe. "At the top of the first flight of steps leading up from here there is a passage, and at the end of this passage is a door (little used) opening out on the slope at the back of the castle. It is by this door that we must escape. Each night I take the keys of the various doors to the Castellan, who sleeps with them under his pillow. To get at them there would be a hard matter, but luckily I chanced some months ago, on a bunch of old keys and on looking through them the other day I found two that bear a near likeness to the two that we want, namely the key of your cell and of the door I have mentioned. When the time is come I shall exchange these for the true keys, and hand them over with the rest to the Castellan, who, be sure, will not notice the difference. Then we wait till midnight, steal quietly out, and away over the hills."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Francesco, "and what direction do you intend to take?"

"We will go northwards, into the

very heart of the mountains, to some lonely hamlet where the Count could never find us. There we can remain in hiding till it is safe for us to take to the open road."

"And as to money, Giuseppe? I, alas, have none here."

"I have some little savings, Signor, and they will last us till you are able to get remittances. Let us see, today is Monday, and the moon is already on the wane. We will make the attempt on Saturday. By that time there will be no moon and I shall have everything in readiness."

From that hour Francesco was a new man. All depression vanished, and though he endeavored to be calm, his eyes gleamed and his hand shook with suppressed excitement. One sole thought occupied his mind, the prospect of escape; all else seemed shadowy and unreal, and sometimes he touched the walls of his cell to convince himself that he was not dreaming. At length the appointed evening arrived. Giuseppe, after bringing him supper, withdew, promising to return at the time appointed. One by one the minutes took their slow course while Francesco waited and waited. It seemed an age before a slight sound at last broke the stillness, and he knew that Giuseppe was approaching. Just at that moment, as he stood motionless, every nerve quivering, his eye fell on the chessmen. Hastily stooping down he gathered them up, and placed them in his pocket. They had been his friends in adversity, and they should go with him! Another moment and Giueppe entered, fully equipped, and bearing a cloak, slouch hat and knapsack for Francesco. Silently and cautiously they mounted the stone steps, and traversed the passage. The door opened smoothly, Giuseppe having previously oiled the lock, and they passed out in the clear night air. Oh, how fresh and sweet it seemed to Francesco! He followed Giuseppe rapidly down the slope, his whole frame quivering with ecstasy. He felt no fatigue as he went on and on, over the dewy grass, past olive groves, through deep valleys, and up steep mountain paths. He was free—free; he could think of nothing but that! For the rest of the night they hurried on, making a brief halt now and then, till at last a faint streak of dawn appeared on the horizon. Broader and broader it grew, and then, as they were traversing a stretch of elevated table land, the sun burst forth in all his splendor, and Francesco, falling on his knees, gave thanks to Heaven that had once again vouchsafed him that glorious sight.

The rest of the narrative may be briefly told. All went well with the fugitives, and they eventually proceeded to a southern province of Italy, where Francesco put himself under the protection of the powerful Duc di Montebello, then at deadly feud with Count D'Oria. Here he wedded Rosa Palmieri, who had remained faithful to him, and lived safely until the death of the Count, five years later, when, having nothing more to fear, he returned to his native Milan. Carlone had, ere this, been killed in a drunken brawl, so that Giuseppe, who had developed into a steady cabinet-maker, was baulked of his desire to finish him with his dagger. Francesco now devoted himself with energy to an official career, and was eventually, for his great services to the state, rewarded with the title of Count. Mindful of the circumstances to which he had owed the preservation of his reason and his rescue from captivity, he adopted a chess-board as his heraldic device, and this chess-board—"gules and sable, surmounted by a castle sable", remains the crest of the Fiasellas to the present day.

THE ETHICS OF CHESS.

By S. J. Stevens.

(*Concluded.*)

In a study of abstract reasoning the symbols used to register the change of strategy, if crude in form or arrangement, will mar and flaw the harmony between that which speaks within and that through which it speaks. The Lilliputians must conform to certain standards; either be delineators of war—if we cannot choose a more comely device,—and