

LUCREZIA BORGIA.*



Lucretia de Borgia

THERE is among mankind a natural tendency to typify or concentrate in one individual traits of character which belong to a class. It does not require long to make this process similar to that controlling the growth and spread of myths. The result is that history is full of legendary figures which are gradually fading into their true proportions beneath the light of modern scientific investigations. So strong, however, are our prejudices that it is with regret that we see these illusions of our youth disappear, and we bitterly inveigh against the spirit of modern criticism, to which nothing is sacred.

Among the legendary figures of modern history not one is so interesting as that of Lucretia Borgia, and the interest in her is increased by the mystery that has always enshrouded her. In spite of her alleged crimes, there has always been about her an indefinite attraction that has raised up champions for her even at this late date. One of these,

Ferdinand Gregorovius, the celebrated historian of Rome during the Middle Ages, has recently published an elaborate monograph* upon her, based on original researches in the various archives of Italy, where he has discovered a large mass of new and interesting material. It may be well to examine this new Lucretia Borgia, and see wherein she differs from the heroine of Hugo's novel and Donizetti's opera.

Lucretia's life is naturally divided into two periods—her life in Rome until her marriage, in 1501, to Alfonso of Este, and her life in Ferrara until her death, in 1519. The first period is by far the more interesting, although unfortunately the more obscure, and to it Gregorovius has devoted the larger portion of his work, not only because it is more interesting in itself,

but because it is the period from which arose the stories which have since consigned her to infamy.

The Borgias were an old Spanish family of the province of Valencia.

The first of the family of whom any thing is known was Alfonso, born in 1378, at Xativa, a town not far from Valencia, of which city he afterward became bishop. He accompanied the King of Aragon to Naples, and was made cardinal in 1444, and eleven years later became Pope, under the title of Calixtus III.

His family was large. One of his sisters, Isabella, was the wife of a Spanish nobleman, and mother of several daughters and two sons, Pedro Luis and Rodrigo, whom the Pope adopted, and gave them his own name. Rodrigo was made cardinal in 1456, when he was only twenty-five years old, and the next year received the responsible position of Vice-Chancellor of the Romish Church. The private life of Rodrigo during the reigns of the four popes who succeeded Calixtus is buried in obscurity. It is noteworthy that the first glimpse we have of his private character reveals that sensuality which was his besetting sin throughout his life. In 1460 he was in Siena, where he indulged in such shameless excesses that Pius II. admonished him in a severe letter. He is described about this time as a handsome man, of pleasant and cheerful countenance, eloquent, and exercising a magnetic power over the other sex.

It was in 1466 or the next year, while

* The portrait is from the medal struck in 1502, after Lucretia's marriage to Alfonso, and designed by Filippo Lippi. The reverse shows Cupid bound to a laurel, against which rest a violin and a sheet of music. A broken quiver hangs from a branch, and on the ground is a bow with a broken cord. The inscription reads, *Virtuti Ac Formae Pudicitia Preciosissimum*. Gregorovius thinks the artist wished to intimate that the time for Cupid's pranks was past, and to symbolize by the laurel the famous house of Este. The signature of Lucretia is from a letter addressed to Isabella Gonzaga, and preserved in the Gonzaga archives at Mantua.

* *Lucretia Borgia. Nach Urkunden und Correspondenzen ihrer eigenen Zeit.* Von FERD. GREGOROVIVS. Stuttgart, Cotta: 1874. 2 vols.

Rodrigo Borgia was cardinal, that this magnetic power was exercised upon a Roman lady, Vanózza Catanei, who was then twenty-four years old. Her family relations are unknown; even her name is differently given by her contemporaries. She always names herself *Vanozza*, the ordinary abbreviation of *Giovanna*.

Her circumstances at the time she attracted the cardinal's attention are also unknown. In 1480, when she was already the mother of several children by him, we find mention made of a husband, for whom the cardinal obtained the position of an apostolic secretary.

Lucrezia was born April 18, 1480. Her childhood was doubtless spent in her mother's house, which stood on the Piazza Pizzo di Merlo, a few steps from the cardinal's palace. The quarter in which she lived was one of the liveliest in Rome. It was on the way to the Bridge of San Angelo and the Vatican, and was the residence of numerous merchants and bankers from Florence, Genoa, and Siena, besides many papal officers and distinguished courtesans.

Here Lucrezia continued to live until, at some unknown time, she left her mother's house to pass under the protection of a woman who exercised great influence over the cardinal and the whole Borgia family. This was *Adriana Mila*, daughter of *Don Pedro*, a nephew of *Calixtus III.*, and the cardinal's own cousin. At this time she was the widow of *Ludovico Orsini*, and on terms of the greatest intimacy with the cardinal. It is impossible to learn any thing about Lucrezia's early life and education in *Adriana Mila's* house. She may have spent some time in a convent for the purpose of receiving her religious education, which alone was given by these establishments. Lucrezia's education was not such as to raise her above her sex in any considerable degree, although, according to the notions of the day, it was complete. She was instructed in the languages, music, painting, and drawing, and her skill in embroidery was much admired afterward in Ferrara.

The French biographer of Bayard said of her in 1512: "She spoke Spanish, Greek, Italian, and French; Latin a little, but very well; and wrote and composed verses in all these languages."

When Lucrezia was old enough to comprehend the domestic relations in which she was living, they must have produced a strange impression on her mind. Her mother's husband was not her father; she and her brothers, as she must early have learned, were children of a cardinal, which scandalous relation was disguised by treating them as nephews and nieces. She soon learned how common such relations were; that most of the cardinals were absorbed in richly providing for their children. She

saw the sons of Pope Innocent VIII. attain high honors, one of them, *Franceschetto Cibo*, marrying the daughter of *Lorenzo the Magnificent*.

Gregorovius remarks that Lucrezia was probably more struck by what there was brilliant and desirable in this relation than by its immorality. Whatever might have been her feelings, they must soon have been dulled by the immoral tone of her surroundings. When she was nine years old her father fell in love with the celebrated *Julia Farnese*, the wife of *Adriana Mila's* son. It is characteristic of the times and persons, that after *Adriana* had discovered her daughter-in-law's dishonor, she should have made herself a sharer in it by encouraging it, and thus strengthening her already powerful influence over the cardinal.

Lucrezia was only eleven years old when the troubled and disgraceful story of her marriages began. She was betrothed in 1491 to *Don Cherubin Juan de Centelles*, Lord of *Val de Ayora*, in *Valencia*. This marriage did not take place, for some unknown reasons, and the same year Lucrezia was again betrothed, to another Spaniard, *Don Gasparo*, son of the Count *Aversa*. There is some confusion in the dates of the various instruments relating to these matches, and it is possible that the second was made before the first was annulled, and that Lucrezia was at the same time legally betrothed to two men.

An event which occurred the next year made important changes in the future of both Lucrezia and her brothers. *Innocent VIII.* died July 25, 1492, and on the 11th of the following month *Rodrigo Borgia* became *Pope Alexander VI.*

The new Pope named *Cæsar* Bishop of *Valencia*, and began to think about making a more brilliant match for Lucrezia. The son-in-law selected this time was a prince, although a petty one, *Giovanni Sforza*, Lord of *Pesaro*, a widower of twenty-six, a man of culture and pleasing appearance. The legal marriage took place in the Vatican February 2, 1493; Lucrezia received as a wedding portion 31,000 ducats, and was to accompany her husband to *Pesaro* within a year. The Pope gave his daughter a separate establishment near the Vatican, where she and *Adriana Mila* held a brilliant court. Here she received her husband, who made his formal entry into the city the following June, and the religious marriage took place on the 12th, in the Vatican, with great splendor, in the presence of the nobility and magistrates of the city and the foreign ambassadors.

The occasion was celebrated by a banquet and the performance of plays, as *Infessura* says, "in a very secular and lascivious manner."

The Ferrarese ambassador sent home an

account of the proceedings, which ends as follows: "In conclusion, the ladies danced, and as an interlude a good comedy was performed, with much music and singing. The Pope and all the others were present. What shall I say further? There would be no end of writing. So we spent the whole night, whether well or badly your Highness may judge."

The Pope had now generously provided for his children: Cæsar was cardinal, Juan was Duke of Gandia in Spain, Jaufrè soon became a Neapolitan prince, and Lucrezia was married to a member of the noble and powerful house of Sforza.

In 1496 all these children were gathered around their father in Rome, and afforded the edifying spectacle of three splendid courts, held by children of the reigning pontiff.

It is a mistake to suppose that the Borgias were, as they have often been represented, a fierce brood of murderers and banditti. Such a supposition is natural enough, from the number and character of their crimes, but the peculiarity and shame of Italy was that, at that time, such crimes were not inconsistent with great outward refinement of manners, and a personal character termed by contemporaries "magnanimous." As Gregorovius remarks: "The Borgias were no worse than many princes and lords of their time. They used the dagger and poison unsparingly and pitilessly; they removed whatever stood in the way of their passions, and laughed when their diabolical deeds succeeded."

The strongest argument against Lucrezia is that she was one of this family, and for a number of years shared their life, and must have been acquainted to a certain extent with their crimes. The atmosphere which surrounded her was incredibly immoral—it must have been, to have made such a pope as Alexander VI. possible; add to this immorality a savage blood-thirstiness, and there rises before us a picture of society so revolting and horrible that we can well believe Gregorovius when he says: "If one educated in our present civilization could be put back into the Italian Renaissance, his nervous system would be destroyed by the sight of the daily barbarity to which he would be exposed, and very likely he would go mad. Lucrezia lived in that atmosphere, and was herself no worse nor better than the women of her day. She was of a fickle and gay disposition, and it is impossible to tell whether she ever revolted against her surroundings. She nowhere appears, not even in later days, as a woman of extraordinary genius. If she had not been the daughter of Alexander VI. and the sister of Cæsar Borgia, she would scarcely have been mentioned in the history of her times, or would have been lost in the mass of society as an attractive and much sought-after woman."

We have hinted above that Lucrezia's marriage with Giovanni Sforza was made solely for political reasons, and when the unfortunate husband lost his political importance, as he shortly did, his position became unendurable, and in the spring of 1497 he fled from Rome, believing that his life was in danger.

An inedited chronicle of Pesaro states that he owed his life to his wife, who informed his servant of a plot against his master.

Soon after Sforza's flight, occurred the mysterious murder of the Duke of Gandia, which gave rise to so many rumors, some of which affected Lucrezia's honor, but which are not only improbable, but entirely unproven.

At the time of this tragedy she was not in her palace, but in the monastery of San Sisto, on the Appian Way. This retirement was as sudden as inexplicable, but probably had something to do with the rupture of her union with Sforza; and Gregorovius concludes that she was either banished there by her father, or had voluntarily sought refuge there from the murderous plans of her relatives. Shortly afterward Lucrezia's marriage with Sforza was dissolved on a pretext whereat all Italy laughed.

It is melancholy to find Lucrezia lending herself to her father's plans to the extent of committing perjury. Indeed, in the whole affair she appears as a person of no strength of will or character. She was, however, bitterly punished, for the dissolution of her marriage exposed her to the most scandalous reports, which her outraged husband disseminated if he did not originate. The Pope hastened to make a new and more brilliant match for his daughter, his choice falling this time upon a member of the royal house of Naples, with which he was anxious to form an alliance.

The unfortunate victim, Don Alfonso, Duke of Biselli, and nephew of the king, came to Rome without any display, and the marriage took place (July, 1498) without any festivities whatever—a sombre beginning of a melancholy end.

The position of any husband of Lucrezia must necessarily have been difficult. Her marriages were formed solely from political reasons, and Italian politics of that period were so changeable that it was impossible to foresee from day to day what disturbances might arise between the various states. The very year after Lucrezia's second marriage the league between Venice and Louis XII., which the Pope joined, rendered the young Duke of Biselli's position not only difficult, but dangerous, for the expedition of Louis XII. had for its object not only the dispossession and ruin of Ludovico Sforza, Lord of Milan, but also the conquest of Naples.

A letter from one of the Venetian ambassadors at Rome (August 4, 1499) says: "The Duke of Biselli, the husband of Madonna Lucrezia, has secretly fled and joined the Colonna at Genazzano; he has left his wife in the sixth month of her pregnancy, and she is constantly in tears."

The unhappy duke wrote his wife urgent letters, begging her to follow him. These letters fell into the Pope's hands, and he compelled her to answer them and persuade him to return to Rome. This he did the following October, and shortly after Lucrezia gave birth to a son, who was named after his grandfather, and baptized in the Sistine Chapel with great splendor. The duke had made a fatal mistake in returning to Rome. He was aware of Caesar's hatred, and his wife's inability to protect him from it. Like Giovanni Sforza, he had lost all his importance for the house of Borgia, and they were anxious to clear the way for a more brilliant match. As the present union had not been childless, it could not be dissolved as the last one had been: another proceeding was necessary.

On the night of the 15th of July, 1500, as the duke was going from his palace to the Vatican, where his wife was, he was attacked by masked assassins on the steps of St. Peter's. Although severely wounded, he managed to reach the Pope's chamber. At the sight of her bleeding husband, Lucrezia sank lifeless to the floor. The duke was carried to a room in the Vatican, and one of the cardinals absolved him. The unfortunate prince, however, recovered, and was carefully nursed by his sister, Sancia, and his wife, whom the fright had made seriously ill. They cooked his food themselves for fear of poison, and the Pope gave him a guard for his security. This bold crime gave rise to many rumors. A few days after it the Venetian ambassador wrote home: "No one knows who wounded the duke, but they say it is the same person who murdered the Duke of Gandia and threw him into the Tiber."

Cæsar, who is here alluded to, said himself to the writer of the above, "I have not wounded the duke; but if I had, he would have deserved it well." He even dared to visit his victim, and said, as he left him, "What did not happen in the morning can happen in the evening." A few days later he came in the evening, drove Lucrezia and Sancia from the room, and ordered his captain, Michelotto, to strangle the duke. What the effect of this deed was upon Lucrezia we do not know. She was ill at the time, but was able to leave the city ten days after for Nepi.

Gregorovius says: "It would be foolish to condemn this unhappy woman because in the most terrible moment of her life she did not rise to the height of a tragedy here-

ine. She appears, indeed, in this scene very weak and little. We have, however, no right to demand from Lucrezia the passions of a great soul when she did not possess it. If we judge her correctly, she was a woman who rose above the majority of her sex by the grace and not by the strength of her nature. This young woman, whom the romantic fancy of posterity has depicted as a Medea, perhaps in truth never experienced a deep passion."

Lucrezia returned to Rome in September or October, and soon recovered her usual spirits. As early as November, people began to talk about a new match for Lucrezia, with Alfonso, the Crown Prince of Ferrara, who for the last three years had been a childless widower, although he was now only twenty-four years old.

The Pope earnestly desired this marriage, not only on his daughter's account, but also on Cæsar's, whose conquests in the Romagna would thereby be assured, and who would gain powerful allies to aid him in his designs on Bologna and Florence.

The proposed union was not at first favorably considered by the Duke of Ferrara, and his son absolutely refused his consent.

Our space will not permit us to unravel the complicated negotiations by which the matter was finally settled. It is enough to say that the duke sold the honor of his house as dearly as possible, and on the 1st of September, 1501, the preliminary contract was signed at Ferrara.

When the news reached Rome, a salute was fired from the Castle of San Angelo, and the Vatican was illuminated. The next day Lucrezia went to the Church of Sta. Maria del Popolo to return thanks, and, in accordance with a strange custom, afterward gave the dress she had worn to one of her court fools, who ran through the streets, crying, "Long live the noble Duchess of Ferrara! Long live Pope Alexander!"

Lucrezia's outfit was prepared with a lavish expenditure worthy of a king's daughter. We read of an embroidered dress valued at over 15,000 ducats, and two hundred under-garments, many of them worth a hundred ducats. The ducal escort, however, did not reach Rome until the end of December, and entered the city with the pageantry common during the Renaissance. The marriage by proxy took place on the 30th, and the following week was filled with splendid festivals in the city and Vatican.

On the 6th of January, 1502, Lucrezia departed for Ferrara, leaving her son, brother, and parents behind her. She took leave of her father (her mother is never mentioned in any contemporary description of these events) in the Chamber of the Parrot. She remained alone with him until Cæsar came for her. When she left the Pope, he cried

out to her to be of good cheer, and write to him whenever she wished any thing, for he would do more for her absent than he had done for her in Rome. He then went from room to room, looking after her until the cavalcade was out of sight.

She arrived in Ferrara the 2d of February, and was brilliantly received. Her husband seems to have overcome his dislike to her very soon, and their relations in the future were always kindly, if not marked by any very profound affection. Three years later, owing to her father-in-law's death, she became Duchess of Ferrara, and was, if we can believe her contemporaries, a model of all that was virtuous and praiseworthy. Her life from this time is inseparable from the history of her state. She bore her husband several children, and devoted herself to their education and the conduct of the government, which her husband occasionally intrusted to her. Aldus Manutius praises her management of public affairs, saying, "She was an excellent regent, whose sharp judgment and penetrating mind were admired by her subjects."

Her connection with the past was gradually dissolved by the death of her relatives, and as she grew older, her thoughts turned more exclusively to religion, although she did not become bigoted.

On the 14th of June, 1519, she gave birth to a lifeless child, and eight days later, feeling that her end was approaching, she dictated a letter to Pope Leo X., asking for his blessing.

As Gregorovius says, this letter is so quiet and dignified, so entirely free from all excitement, that we may well ask whether it could have been written by a dying woman whose conscience was really burdened by the crimes attributed to the daughter of Alexander VI.

She died two days after, in the night of June 24, 1519, in the presence of her husband.

Her grave has disappeared. A contemporary says that she was of medium height, graceful figure, her face somewhat long, her nose of a fine profile, her hair golden, eyes of no particular color, mouth large, with very white teeth, neck fair and white, and adds that she was constantly joyful and smiling.

It is impossible to suppose that Lucrezia maintained herself unspotted in the midst of her surroundings; but, at the same time, we see no reason to believe the story of her shameful crime. There is no evidence that she was a person of great strength of character, and surely no one without it could have supported with such calmness as she must have done for years the consciousness of such a sin, and the most striking trait in her character was precisely that cheerfulness and brightness which charmed her contemporaries.

SIMPSON OF BUSSORA.

I HAVE a profound distrust of all travelers. Not because they are prone to tell me untruths about their experiences, for that has in a great measure become a dangerous experiment: wherever they may have been, other people have now also been, and it is easy, if I may use a professional expression, to "correct their proofs;" my distrust arises from the ideas in my own mind of the experiences that they do *not* tell me. When they get away from the regions of civilization, and out of the influence of public opinion, think I to myself, what is it these people do *not* do? For the very fact of a man's being a traveler is, between ourselves, by no means a good sign. Why does he not stop at home in the bosom of his family, or, if he has no family, acquire one? It is his duty as a citizen. When a boy runs away from school, it is, of course, the correct thing to call him "intrepid," "gallant," "high-spirited," and "independent;" but that sort of boy is in reality not—generally speaking—a good boy. It may be very true that a nation owes its nautical supremacy to this description of youth; but he don't run away to sea from that distant and patriotic motive: he goes to sea because he doesn't like what is good for him on land; and almost immediately, though that is beside the question, finds he has made a great mistake. Similarly, a man does not go to Tartary or Kamtchatka to improve his mind: if he ventured to tell me *that* (supposing he was not a very tall man, and I had no reason to suppose he had a yataghan or any other outlandish weapon concealed about his person), I should laugh in his face. No: he flies to such obscure regions because the restraints of civilization are abhorrent to his undisciplined mind, and he has some morbid taste; say, for human flesh—uncooked. The mildest-spoken man I ever met in my life, and the greatest traveler, once confided to me, after a most excellent dinner at our club, that, "after all," there was nothing like uncooked food. He did not *say* human food, but I knew well enough what he meant. He has repented since of having let out so much, and endeavors to re-assure me by conventional behavior and conversation. "The world is small," he says (he has been round it two or three times), "and give him England; for, when all is said, that is the best place to live in;" but this does not deceive me for a moment. That man is a cannibal at heart. I have seen him look at plump and tender people in a very peculiar way, and I would not trust him alone with my baby for a small fortune. That sweet child would take rank among the "mysterious disappearances." He would say, "How should I know?" like the frog who swallow-