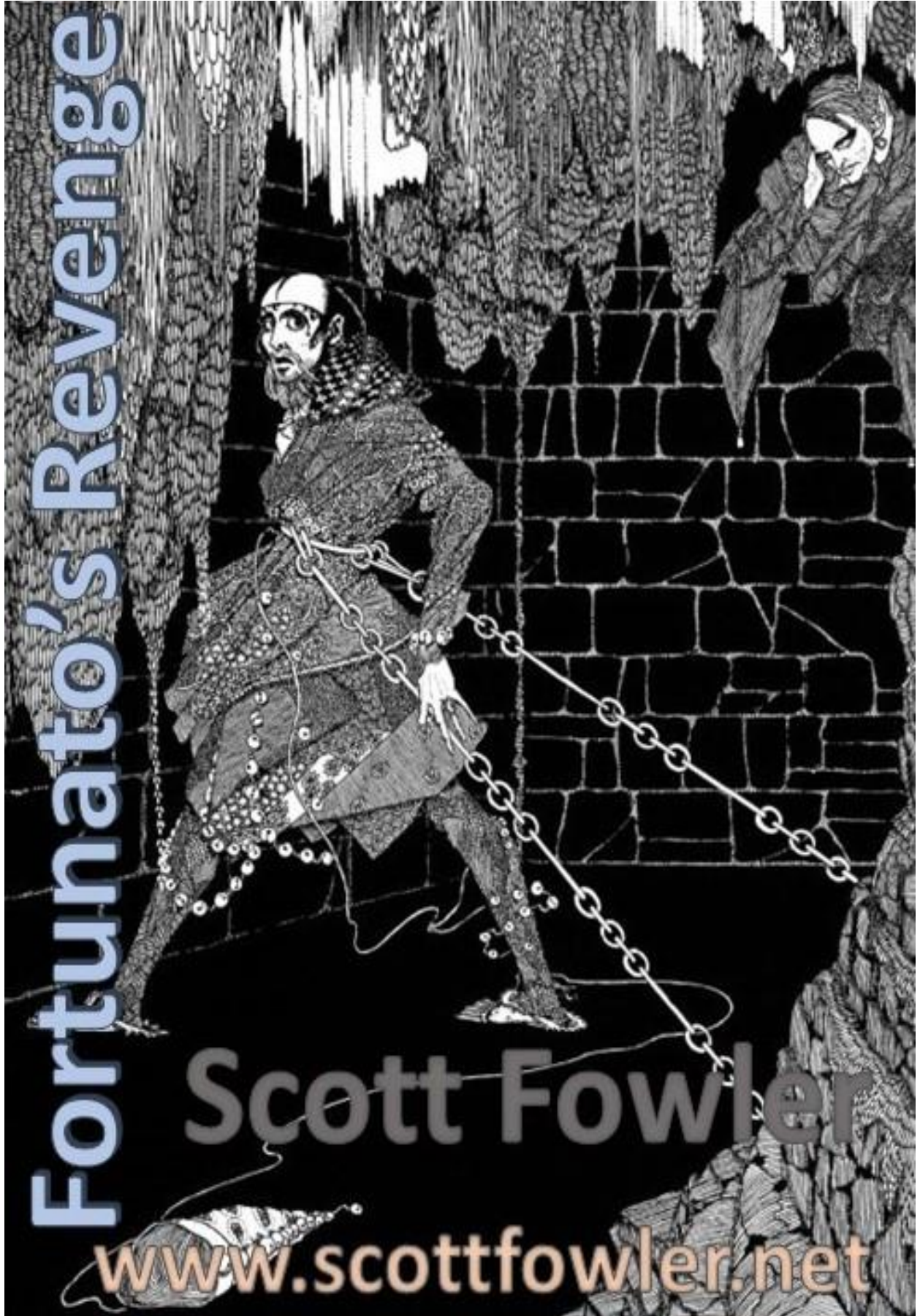


Fortunato's Revenge

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I know not what injuries befell you nor what insult caused you to act as you did, my friend. Perhaps it was something I said or did in throes of inebriation. For certain, I was often of a drunken mind in those times. But there I sat, cold metal across my chest and darkness surrounding me in a frigid womb of stink and fear, enduring the punishment you wrought on me for my perceived slights. For certain, I cried out during the first hours of my plight, screaming your name and "For the love of God!" but all I got in return was silence, only this and nothing more.

I know not how long I sat there, wide eyed and manic, breath coming in hectic bursts from my flared nostrils, praying to the Mother of Jesus for help. It could have been less than an hour. It could have been days. I wouldn't know. I remember clearly, once my drunken brain began to right itself, the dripping of moisture somewhere in the black sea around me. Drip, drip, drip. I fixated on it for a quite some time, my only oasis in the desert of the senses that was this tomb. Drip, drip, drip.

Ah, but I have a secret, my friend. And I began to think of it at that time, these class of fancies flashing in my head at this place in time where the confines of the waking world blend with the world of dreams.

We were not luckily met that night, my dear friend. We were meant to meet in the madness of the carnival. You thought my excessive warmth was because of my drinking. Admittedly, I had been drinking that night. After all, it was the carnival and that's what you do on such occasions. But you underestimate my tolerance to alcohol. After years of drinking bottle after bottle of various wines; sherry, port, Médoc, and, yes, amontillado, my friend; my personage had developed an immunity to which I hardly felt it at all. What would normally make a man immobile with drunkenness, I was able to drink with impunity. That night, my warmth to you was to lure you into a false security.

For you see, despite not a word from you, your actions and your deeds showed me your true colors long ago. I knew your intent, maybe even before you did. As you smiled in my face, I smiled back into yours.

As I sat in that stone coffin, unable to see anything except that in my mind's eye, I remembered all the injuries you visited on me, all the insults you hurled at me. I remembered the promise I forced out of my friend, Luchesi, some time ago. A promise I knew he would keep.

You know me as a Mason, my friend. Perhaps it was that very fact that drove you to entomb me there. You made fun of it as we entered your family crypt, do you remember? The advantage of being part of the Masonry is you have quite a few friends. Luchesi, who you thought I hated, is actually one of my dearest and closest friends. We both took the oath together.

It was a warm summer morning one day some years ago when I met with Luchesi for coffee in a small café near the Forum.

"I fear for your life," he said with all seriousness.

I laughed, almost spitting out the coffee I had in my mouth at the time. "Why do you say that?"

"Your friend, Montresor, he concerns me."

I put down my cup, clinking it against the saucer as I did, and leaned forward. By this point, I had my own suspicions about you. “Why is that?”

Luchesi had eyed me up and down then, not sure how to respond, “He seems,” pausing, “not rational.”

I nodded at that, “I sense that as well. He has a grudge against me I believe. Though for what, I do not know.”

“We must do something!” This was passionate for he did love me dearly.

“And we will, my friend. But we mustn’t make the first move. Watch him closely and when he moves we’ll know.”

Luchesi leaned back into his seat, taking his cup to his lips. A drop of sweat trickled down his cheek.

“He can’t know that which you know, Luchesi. For now, we must appear to be enemies. Or else he may become suspicious. Will you swear to it?”

He nodded at that and then played his part brilliantly.

In the darkness of the cave, in my deep despair, I remembered this and remembered I had an ally from the Brotherhood. I stood up then, the chains that held me clanking together like a ghost in an attic, the bells on my hat jingling almost merrily, and began pounding on the new wall in front of me with my fists. I had done this for at least the first hour of my imprisonment but the wall would not budge. You had built it well, my friend.

There was no reason to think it would budge this time either but that wasn’t the point at that moment. I shouted out, though my lungs and throat were sore from inhaling the nitre incased on the walls and my moment of panic early on. My voice echoed back at me, deafening my own ears.

You see my friend, on the night of the carnival, I had hoped to meet you there as we did. I knew your tendency to walk those avenues during the moonlit hours. I knew the madness of the carnival would drive you away to solitude. I knew, if given the chance, you would enact your plan. I decided I was tired of waiting. I decided to give you your chance.

You thought us alone on that quiet street but we had an audience. I had Luchesi sitting at a window in a room overlooking the avenue, watching our exchange. He was dressed for the carnival just as I was. While I wore the costume of a fool, he wore the guise of death, a black mask with the painting of a skull hidden under a black hood.

As we made our way to your vaults, he followed in the shadows behind. As we entered your home, I am sure he watched us with the eyes of an eagle. By then, I had lost sight of him myself but knowing Luchesi as I did, I’m sure he looked through a window or even snuck into your home behind us and saw us enter your family’s vault. I could only hope he continued from there.

In the pitch blackness of my tomb, I began to tire once again. I had exerted myself against the masonry in front of me and collapsed on the hard floor, the vibrations making a pile of bones nearby rattle. My breath came in great gasps and I noticed a distinct wheeze in my lungs. My cough from earlier, which I had faked for you to keep you going, was now back for real.

“Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! – Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! – Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!”

At some point during my hacking, I am sure I vomited out all that wine I had consumed during the night plus whatever dinner I had which was long forgotten now. Its scent mixed with that of death and nitre in the tiny confines setting me to hacking again.

“Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! – Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! – Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!”

It was some time before I could calm down again. I sat in the dark, despair clouding over me once again, and wept. My hands covered my face and great tears pooled in my palms.

Then I felt something touch my foot and I jumped. I first imagined it as a snake slithering in these dank cellars. That, of course, morphed in my brain to the image of the Montresor crest, a bare foot in a field crushing a serpent whose fangs are imbedded in the heel. That reminded me of the Fortunato arms, a gauntleted hand holding a sword on a field strewn with corpses slicing off a bare foot. I burst out laughing at the image suddenly. It was uncontrollable.

I snapped out of my revelry when I heard pebbles hitting the floor in front of me. I became silent and listened intently. There was a scratching sound coming from the wall in front of me. Then a knocking.

I stood up, the chains rang a great clanking sound, and I shouted out an expletive and then listened. The knocking stopped and then began again but in earnest. After some time, the knocking stopped and the scratching sound began again. Listening closely, I imagined someone using a trowel or a dagger to dig at the mortar between the stones.

My heart leapt. There was someone on the other side of Montresor’s wall and whoever it might be knew I was trapped in there.

Then one of stones, the one right before my face, dropped out of place and landed with a thud between my feet. If my feet had been together, they would have been crushed. A skull that was placed on a stack of bones rolled off them when the stone hit the floor and rolled against my right foot, its empty eye sockets looking up at me.

A dull yellow light came through the hole left there and shined into my eyes. I had to squint despite the dimness of the light. A face appeared in the hole and I smiled, a grin of true glee, not the fake smiles I would give to you, Montresor. For this was my true friend, my brother, Luchesi.

He reached his hand through and I gave him the handshake all brothers use to greet each other.

“How long?” I asked, realizing suddenly just how weak my throat actually was.

“Two days,” he answered.

It took him several hours to remove all the stones. When he had a big enough hole in the wall, he reached into my chamber and managed to use his dagger to break the lock which kept me chained to the wall. I wanted to crawl through as soon as I was free from the wall but the hole was too small. I had to wait for him to finish.

Once I was free, both Luchesi and myself were exhausted and we sat on the ground in the catacombs drinking from the bottle of water he had brought with him. While we sat there, my friend told me about his plight. He had indeed crept into the Montresor home after seeing us enter. He followed us down into the vaults but got lost among the passageways. He managed to escape later that night while you slept but without finding where I had gone. He went home and procured several jugs of water and torches, re-entering the catacombs the next night. He wandered the crypts looking for me, knowing I had gone down but did not come up. For all he knew, my spirit had already left my body.

Then he heard a muffled sound from behind a wall and then a pounding. That's when he began to dig.

After we both got some strength back, I helped Luchesi rebuild the wall, tier by tier, block by block. When we were done, we re-erected the old rampart of bones so it perfectly matched the rest of the vault. Exhausted we made our way out of the underground, leaning against each other like lovers, pausing briefly at the door to make sure no one was in the Montresor mansion who could see us. Fortunately, it was again night and the household lay asleep.

I spent some time at Luchesi's residence convalescing. God knows, Luchesi needed it too. Once I was feeling myself and healed, I left the country, succeeding as a winemaker in France.

For fifty years, you thought me dead and buried in your family's crypt. For fifty years, you felt you had gotten away with it, comfortable in your belief you had committed the perfect crime. I'm here to tell you, my friend. You didn't.

I've waited for this moment, standing now at your door these many years later, watching closely, your silver eye, your vulture eye, reflecting light back to me. We have both grown old, my friend. Neither of us able to escape the trap of time, it seems.

Yes, they will say that I am mad but I am old and sick. Caused by my time in the nitre covered tombs, I am certain. But the disease has sharpened my senses, not destroyed, not dulled them. My hearing in particular is acute indeed.

Soon, vengeance will be mine. A dish best served cold.