A Strange Story.

Late one evening I arrived in one of those old Italian towns famous in our days for pictures and statuary, but in the days of the Republics of Northern Italy, famous as not least among the cities of the time. Here the family of Bernardino lived and flourished, and for years exercised a protectorate over the city, holding the title of Dukes of the same. The hotel to which I went had once been the palace of this family, but had long since passed out of their hands, and had been bought a few years ago by a company, who had turned it into a hotel. About this palace there was one rather curious story which my guide-book told me of; how that years ago one of the family, a young man of great promise, had disappeared during a popular tumult in which the palace was stormed, and with him disappeared also his young wife, whom he had just brought from Venice, and her father, a senator of that noted city. The next heir, a distant cousin, succeeded him, and was generally supposed to know the secret of his disappearance; but people either did not care, or did not dare to ask, much about the matter.

But to return to my story. Having come from a long journey I did not care to sit up long, and so went to my room. It was a huge room, hung with damask. The ceiling was vaulted, and adorned with quaint frescoes. My one small candle scarcely served to light one corner of the room, and threw dark shadows into the dimly lighted, far-off corners. After I had locked my door, feeling somewhat curious, I thought that I would look around the room. In one corner, completely hidden by the hangings, I found a small door. This I opened, and on looking out I saw a small marble staircase, lighted by candles held in branches along the wall. I also found that there was no means of fastening the small door, so I thought that I would see where the staircase led to. Unfortunately the marble was very highly polished, and after I had gone down several steps I slipped, and fell what seemed to me a long distance. I got up feeling rather sore, and looked around me. Behind me were the stairs down which I had fallen; in front of me a perfectly dark, narrow passage. I determined to explore; so taking a candle from one of the branches on the wall, I proceeded down the passage. The pavement under foot soon gave place to plain dirt, and the walls and ceilings became of rough rock, through which the water dripped in many places, showing me that I was in an underground passage; probably, I thought, one of those so common in old places, as a means of escape in time of danger. I must see, though, I thought, how and where it ends. To this end, however, I thought that I should never come; but at last the passage began to widen, and I found myself in a good-sized cave, in front of which flowed a rapid stream. No way could I see of getting out of the cave except the one by which I had entered, unless one were inclined to trust themselves to the stream in front, which might be shallow, or it might be deep. But then, my examinations were made by the light of one poor flickering candle, and there might be many things that daylight would show plainly, which could not be seen at all by such a light. Promising myself another visit, I started to return. I had gone but a short way when I came face to face with the solid rock. Evidently there was more than one passage, and I had unknowingly got into a blind one. So back I went until I found a turning, that went off in what I thought was the right direction. I continued along this for some time, until my way was again blocked; but this time it was a door which stopped my farther progress. I tried to open it, but it was locked; I tried to push, thinking that perhaps it led out into the stairway from which I had started,—and the whole door, rotten with age, came tumbling down, almost extinguishing my candle, and awakening deafening echoes in the narrow passage. In front of me there was now a curtain; this I pushed aside, and found myself in a room of moderate size, hung round with tapestry. In a moment my light burnt more brightly, and a sight met my eyes which cannot easily be described. On a long couch, clad in the gorgeous