

Arthur's face contracted painfully at the name. "I thought you wouldn't have heard of it," Gemma went on; "but I suppose they've told you. Bolla must be perfectly mad to have imagined such a thing."

"Such a thing——?"

"You don't know about it, then? He has written a horrible letter, saying that you have told about the steamers, and got him arrested. It's perfectly absurd, of course; everyone that knows you sees that; it's only the people who don't know you that have been upset by it. Really, that's what I came here for—to tell you that no one in our group believes a word of it."

"Gemma! But it's—it's true!"

She shrank slowly away from him, and stood quite still, her eyes wide and dark with horror, her face as white as the kerchief at her neck. A great icy wave of silence seemed to have swept round them both, shutting them out, in a world apart, from the life and movement of the street.

"Yes," he whispered at last; "the steamers—I spoke of that; and I said his name—oh, my God! my God! What shall I do?"

He came to himself suddenly, realizing her presence and the mortal terror in her face. Yes, of course, she must think——

"Gemma, you don't understand!" he burst out, moving nearer; but she recoiled with a sharp cry:

"Don't touch me!"

Arthur seized her right hand with sudden violence.

"Listen, for God's sake! It was not my fault; I——"

"Let go; let my hand go! Let go!"

The next instant she wrenched her fingers away

from his, and struck him across the cheek with her open hand.

A kind of mist came over his eyes. For a little while he was conscious of nothing but Gemma's white and desperate face, and the right hand which she had fiercely rubbed on the skirt of her cotton dress. Then the daylight crept back again, and he looked round and saw that he was alone.

CHAPTER VII.

IT had long been dark when Arthur rang at the front door of the great house in the Via Borra. He remembered that he had been wandering about the streets; but where, or why, or for how long, he had no idea. Julia's page opened the door, yawning, and grinned significantly at the haggard, stony face. It seemed to him a prodigious joke to have the young master come home from jail like a "drunk and disorderly" beggar. Arthur went upstairs. On the first floor he met Gibbons coming down with an air of lofty and solemn disapproval. He tried to pass with a muttered "Good evening"; but Gibbons was no easy person to get past against his will.

"The gentlemen are out, sir," he said, looking critically at Arthur's rather neglected dress and hair. "They have gone with the mistress to an evening party, and will not be back till nearly twelve."

Arthur looked at his watch; it was nine o'clock. Oh, yes! he would have time—plenty of time——

"My mistress desired me to ask whether you would like any supper, sir; and to say that she

hopes you will sit up for her, as she particularly wishes to speak to you this evening."

"I don't want anything, thank you; you can tell her I have not gone to bed."

He went up to his room. Nothing in it had been changed since his arrest; Montanelli's portrait was on the table where he had placed it, and the crucifix stood in the alcove as before. He paused a moment on the threshold, listening; but the house was quite still; evidently no one was coming to disturb him. He stepped softly into the room and locked the door.

And so he had come to the end. There was nothing to think or trouble about; an importunate and useless consciousness to get rid of—and nothing more. It seemed a stupid, aimless kind of thing, somehow.

He had not formed any resolve to commit suicide, nor indeed had he thought much about it; the thing was quite obvious and inevitable. He had even no definite idea as to what manner of death to choose; all that mattered was to be done with it quickly—to have it over and forget. He had no weapon in the room, not even a pocket-knife; but that was of no consequence—a towel would do, or a sheet torn into strips.

There was a large nail just over the window. That would do; but it must be firm to bear his weight. He got up on a chair to feel the nail; it was not quite firm, and he stepped down again and took a hammer from a drawer. He knocked in the nail, and was about to pull a sheet off his bed, when he suddenly remembered that he had not said his prayers. Of course, one must pray before dying; every Christian does that. There are even special prayers for a departing soul.

He went into the alcove and knelt down before the crucifix. "Almighty and merciful God——" he began aloud; and with that broke off and said no more. Indeed, the world was grown so dull that there was nothing left to pray for—or against. And then, what did Christ know about a trouble of this kind—Christ, who had never suffered it? He had only been betrayed, like Bolla; He had never been tricked into betraying.

Arthur rose, crossing himself from old habit. Approaching the table, he saw lying upon it a letter addressed to him, in Montanelli's handwriting. It was in pencil:

"My Dear Boy: It is a great disappointment to me that I cannot see you on the day of your release; but I have been sent for to visit a dying man. I shall not get back till late at night. Come to me early to-morrow morning. In great haste,
"L. M."

He put down the letter with a sigh; it did seem hard on the Padre.

How the people had laughed and gossiped in the streets! Nothing was altered since the days when he had been alive. Not the least little one of all the daily trifles round him was changed because a human soul, a living human soul, had been struck down dead. It was all just the same as before. The water had plashed in the fountains; the sparrows had twittered under the eaves; just as they had done yesterday, just as they would do to-morrow. And as for him, he was dead—quite dead.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, crossed his arms along the foot-rail, and rested his forehead upon them. There was plenty of time; and his

head ached so—the very middle of the brain seemed to ache; it was all so dull and stupid—so utterly meaningless——

The front-door bell rang sharply, and he started up in a breathless agony of terror, with both hands at his throat. They had come back—he had sat there dreaming, and let the precious time slip away—and now he must see their faces and hear their cruel tongues—their sneers and comments—If only he had a knife——

He looked desperately round the room. His mother's work-basket stood in a little cupboard; surely there would be scissors; he might sever an artery. No; the sheet and nail were safer, if he had time.

He dragged the counterpane from his bed, and with frantic haste began tearing off a strip. The sound of footsteps came up the stairs. No; the strip was too wide; it would not tie firmly; and there must be a noose. He worked faster as the footsteps drew nearer; and the blood throbbed in his temples and roared in his ears. Quicker—quicker! Oh, God! five minutes more!

There was a knock at the door. The strip of torn stuff dropped from his hands, and he sat quite still, holding his breath to listen. The handle of the door was tried; then Julia's voice called:

"Arthur!"

He stood up, panting.

"Arthur, open the door, please; we are waiting."

He gathered up the torn counterpane, threw it into a drawer, and hastily smoothed down the bed.

"Arthur!" This time it was James who called,

and the door-handle was shaken impatiently.

"Are you asleep?"

Arthur looked round the room, saw that everything was hidden, and unlocked the door.

"I should think you might at least have obeyed my express request that you should sit up for us, Arthur," said Julia, sweeping into the room in a towering passion. "You appear to think it the proper thing for us to dance attendance for half an hour at your door——"

"Four minutes, my dear," James mildly corrected, stepping into the room at the end of his wife's pink satin train. "I certainly think, Arthur, that it would have been more—becoming if——"

"What do you want?" Arthur interrupted. He was standing with his hand upon the door, glancing furtively from one to the other like a trapped animal. But James was too obtuse and Julia too angry to notice the look.

Mr. Burton placed a chair for his wife and sat down, carefully pulling up his new trousers at the knees. "Julia and I," he began, "feel it to be our duty to speak to you seriously about——"

"I can't listen to-night; I—I'm not well. My head aches—you must wait."

Arthur spoke in a strange, indistinct voice, with a confused and rambling manner. James looked round in surprise.

"Is there anything the matter with you?" he asked anxiously, suddenly remembering that Arthur had come from a very hotbed of infection. "I hope you're not sickening for anything. You look quite feverish."

"Nonsense!" Julia interrupted sharply. "It's only the usual theatricals, because he's ashamed to face us. Come here and sit down, Arthur."

Arthur slowly crossed the room and sat down on the bed. "Yes?" he said wearily.

Mr. Burton coughed, cleared his throat, smoothed his already immaculate beard, and began the carefully prepared speech over again:

"I feel it to be my duty—my painful duty—to speak very seriously to you about your extraordinary behaviour in connecting yourself with—a—law-breakers and incendiaries and—a—persons of disreputable character. I believe you to have been, perhaps, more foolish than depraved—a——"

He paused.

"Yes?" Arthur said again.

"Now, I do not wish to be hard on you," James went on, softening a little in spite of himself before the weary hopelessness of Arthur's manner. "I am quite willing to believe that you have been led away by bad companions, and to take into account your youth and inexperience and the—a—a—imprudent and—a—impulsive character which you have, I fear, inherited from your mother."

Arthur's eyes wandered slowly to his mother's portrait and back again, but he did not speak.

"But you will, I feel sure, understand," James continued, "that it is quite impossible for me to keep any longer in my house a person who has brought public disgrace upon a name so highly respected as ours."

"Yes?" Arthur repeated once more.

"Well?" said Julia sharply, closing her fan with a snap and laying it across her knee. "Are you going to have the goodness to say anything but 'Yes,' Arthur?"

"You will do as you think best, of course," he answered slowly, without moving. "It doesn't matter much either way."

"Doesn't—matter?" James repeated, aghast; and his wife rose with a laugh.

"Oh, it doesn't matter, doesn't it? Well, James, I hope you understand now how much gratitude you may expect in that quarter. I told you what would come of showing charity to Papist adventuresses and their——"

"Hush, hush! Never mind that, my dear!"

"It's all nonsense, James; we've had more than enough of this sentimentality! A love-child setting himself up as a member of the family—it's quite time he did know what his mother was! Why should we be saddled with the child of a Popish priest's amourettes? There, then—look!"

She pulled a crumpled sheet of paper out of her pocket and tossed it across the table to Arthur. He opened it; the writing was in his mother's hand, and was dated four months before his birth. It was a confession, addressed to her husband, and with two signatures.

Arthur's eyes travelled slowly down the page, past the unsteady letters in which her name was written, to the strong, familiar signature: "Lorenzo Montanelli." For a moment he stared at the writing; then, without a word, refolded the paper and laid it down. James rose and took his wife by the arm.

"There, Julia, that will do. Just go downstairs now; it's late, and I want to talk a little business with Arthur. It won't interest you."

She glanced up at her husband; then back at Arthur, who was silently staring at the floor.

"He seems half stupid," she whispered.

When she had gathered up her train and left the room, James carefully shut the door and went back

to his chair beside the table. Arthur sat as before, perfectly motionless and silent.

"Arthur," James began in a milder tone, now Julia was not there to hear, "I am very sorry that this has come out. You might just as well not have known it. However, all that's over; and I am pleased to see that you can behave with such self-control. Julia is a—a little excited; ladies often—anyhow, I don't want to be too hard on you."

He stopped to see what effect the kindly words had produced; but Arthur was quite motionless.

"Of course, my dear boy," James went on after a moment, "this is a distressing story altogether, and the best thing we can do is to hold our tongues about it. My father was generous enough not to divorce your mother when she confessed her fall to him; he only demanded that the man who had led her astray should leave the country at once; and, as you know, he went to China as a missionary. For my part, I was very much against your having anything to do with him when he came back; but my father, just at the last, consented to let him teach you, on condition that he never attempted to see your mother. I must, in justice, acknowledge that I believe they both observed that condition faithfully to the end. It is a very deplorable business; but——"

Arthur looked up. All the life and expression had gone out of his face; it was like a waxen mask.

"D—don't you think," he said softly, with a curious stammering hesitation on the words, "that—all this—is—v—very—funny?"

"*Funny?*" James pushed his chair away from

the table, and sat staring at him, too much petrified for anger. "Funny! Arthur, are you mad?"

Arthur suddenly threw back his head, and burst into a frantic fit of laughing.

"Arthur!" exclaimed the shipowner, rising with dignity, "I am amazed at your levity!"

There was no answer but peal after peal of laughter, so loud and boisterous that even James began to doubt whether there was not something more the matter here than levity.

"Just like a hysterical woman," he muttered, turning, with a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders, to tramp impatiently up and down the room. "Really, Arthur, you're worse than Julia; there, stop laughing! I can't wait about here all night."

He might as well have asked the crucifix to come down from its pedestal. Arthur was past caring for remonstrances or exhortations; he only laughed, and laughed, and laughed without end.

"This is absurd!" said James, stopping at last in his irritated pacing to and fro. "You are evidently too much excited to be reasonable to-night. I can't talk business with you if you're going on that way. Come to me to-morrow morning after breakfast. And now you had better go to bed. Good-night."

He went out, slamming the door. "Now for the hysterics downstairs," he muttered as he tramped noisily away. "I suppose it 'll be tears there!"

The frenzied laughter died on Arthur's lips. He snatched up the hammer from the table and flung himself upon the crucifix.

With the crash that followed he came suddenly to his senses, standing before the empty pedestal,