

again having to rack her tired brain for conversation. To her great annoyance the footsteps paused near to the screen; then Signora Grassini's thin, piping little voice broke off for a moment in its stream of chatter.

The other voice, a man's, was remarkably soft and musical; but its sweetness of tone was marred by a peculiar, purring drawl, perhaps mere affectation, more probably the result of a habitual effort to conquer some impediment of speech, but in any case very unpleasant.

"English, did you say?" it asked. "But surely the name is quite Italian. What was it—Bolla?"

"Yes; she is the widow of poor Giovanni Bolla, who died in England about four years ago,—don't you remember? Ah, I forgot—you lead such a wandering life; we can't expect you to know of all our unhappy country's martyrs—they are so many!"

Signora Grassini sighed. She always talked in this style to strangers; the rôle of a patriotic mourner for the sorrows of Italy formed an effective combination with her boarding-school manner and pretty infantine pout.

"Died in England!" repeated the other voice. "Was he a refugee, then? I seem to recognize the name, somehow; was he not connected with Young Italy in its early days?"

"Yes; he was one of the unfortunate young men who were arrested in '33—you remember that sad affair? He was released in a few months; then, two or three years later, when there was a warrant out against him again, he escaped to England. The next we heard was that he was

married there. It was a most romantic affair altogether, but poor Bolla always was romantic."

"And then he died in England, you say?"

"Yes, of consumption; he could not stand that terrible English climate. And she lost her only child just before his death; it caught scarlet fever. Very sad, is it not? And we are all so fond of dear Gemma! She is a little stiff, poor thing; the English always are, you know; but I think her troubles have made her melancholy, and——"

Gemma stood up and pushed back the boughs of the pomegranate tree. This retailing of her private sorrows for purposes of small-talk was almost unbearable to her, and there was visible annoyance in her face as she stepped into the light.

"Ah! here she is!" exclaimed the hostess, with admirable coolness. "Gemma, dear, I was wondering where you could have disappeared to. Signor Felice Rivarez wishes to make your acquaintance."

"So it's the Gadfly," thought Gemma, looking at him with some curiosity. He bowed to her decorously enough, but his eyes glanced over her face and figure with a look which seemed to her insolently keen and inquisitorial.

"You have found a d-d-delightful little nook here," he remarked, looking at the thick screen; "and w-w-what a charming view!"

"Yes; it's a pretty corner. I came out here to get some air."

"It seems almost ungrateful to the good God to stay indoors on such a lovely night," said the hostess, raising her eyes to the stars. (She had good eyelashes and liked to show them.) "Look,



signore! Would not our sweet Italy be heaven on earth if only she were free? To think that she should be a bond-slave, with such flowers and such skies!"

"And such patriotic women!" the Gadfly murmured in his soft, languid drawl.

Gemma glanced round at him in some trepidation; his impudence was too glaring, surely, to deceive anyone. But she had underrated Signora Grassini's appetite for compliments; the poor woman cast down her lashes with a sigh.

"Ah, signore, it is so little that a woman can do! Perhaps some day I may prove my right to the name of an Italian—who knows? And now I must go back to my social duties; the French ambassador has begged me to introduce his ward to all the notabilities; you must come in presently and see her. She is a most charming girl. Gemma, dear, I brought Signor Rivarez out to show him our beautiful view; I must leave him under your care. I know you will look after him and introduce him to everyone. Ah! there is that delightful Russian prince! Have you met him? They say he is a great favourite of the Emperor Nicholas. He is military commander of some Polish town with a name that nobody can pronounce. *Quelle nuit magnifique! N'est-ce pas, mon prince?*"

She fluttered away, chattering volubly to a bull-necked man with a heavy jaw and a coat glittering with orders; and her plaintive dirges for "*nôtre malheureuse patrie*," interpolated with "*charmant*" and "*mon prince*," died away along the terrace.

Gemma stood quite still beside the pomegranate tree. She was sorry for the poor, silly

little woman, and annoyed at the Gadfly's languid insolence. He was watching the retreating figures with an expression of face that angered her; it seemed ungenerous to mock at such pitiable creatures.

"There go Italian and—Russian patriotism," he said, turning to her with a smile; "arm in arm and mightily pleased with each other's company. Which do you prefer?"

She frowned slightly and made no answer.

"Of c-course," he went on; "it's all a question of p-personal taste; but I think, of the two, I like the Russian variety best—it's so thorough. If Russia had to depend on flowers and skies for her supremacy instead of on powder and shot, how long do you think '*mon prince*' would k-keep that Polish fortress?"

"I think," she answered coldly, "that we can hold our personal opinions without ridiculing a woman whose guests we are."

"Ah, yes! I f-forgot the obligations of hospitality here in Italy; they are a wonderfully hospitable people, these Italians. I'm sure the Austrians find them so. Won't you sit down?"

He limped across the terrace to fetch a chair for her, and placed himself opposite to her, leaning against the balustrade. The light from a window was shining full on his face; and she was able to study it at her leisure.

She was disappointed. She had expected to see a striking and powerful, if not pleasant face; but the most salient points of his appearance were a tendency to foppishness in dress and rather more than a tendency to a certain veiled insolence of expression and manner. For the rest, he was as swarthy as a mulatto, and, notwithstanding his



lameness, as agile as a cat. His whole personality was oddly suggestive of a black jaguar. The forehead and left cheek were terribly disfigured by the long crooked scar of the old sabre-cut; and she had already noticed that, when he began to stammer in speaking, that side of his face was affected with a nervous twitch. But for these defects he would have been, in a certain restless and uncomfortable way, rather handsome; but it was not an attractive face.

Presently he began again in his soft, murmuring purr ("Just the voice a jaguar would talk in, if it could speak and were in a good humour," Gemma said to herself with rising irritation).

"I hear," he said, "that you are interested in the radical press, and write for the papers."

"I write a little; I have not time to do much."

"Ah, of course! I understood from Signora Grassini that you undertake other important work as well."

Gemma raised her eyebrows slightly. Signora Grassini, like the silly little woman she was, had evidently been chattering imprudently to this slippery creature, whom Gemma, for her part, was beginning actually to dislike.

"My time is a good deal taken up," she said rather stiffly; "but Signora Grassini overrates the importance of my occupations. They are mostly of a very trivial character."

"Well, the world would be in a bad way if we *all* of us spent our time in chanting dirges for Italy. I should think the neighbourhood of our host of this evening and his wife would make anybody frivolous, in self-defence. Oh, yes, I know what you're going to say; you are perfectly right, but they are both so deliciously funny with their

patriotism.—Are you going in already? It is so nice out here!"

"I think I will go in now. Is that my scarf? Thank you."

He had picked it up, and now stood looking at her with wide eyes as blue and innocent as forget-me-nots in a brook.

"I know you are offended with me," he said penitently, "for fooling that painted-up wax doll; but what can a fellow do?"

"Since you ask me, I do think it an ungenerous and—well—cowardly thing to hold one's intellectual inferiors up to ridicule in that way; it is like laughing at a cripple, or——"

He caught his breath suddenly, painfully; and shrank back, glancing at his lame foot and mutilated hand. In another instant he recovered his self-possession and burst out laughing.

"That's hardly a fair comparison, signora; we cripples don't flaunt our deformities in people's faces as she does her stupidity. At least give us credit for recognizing that crooked backs are no pleasanter than crooked ways. There is a step here; will you take my arm?"

She re-entered the house in embarrassed silence; his unexpected sensitiveness had completely disconcerted her.

Directly he opened the door of the great reception room she realized that something unusual had happened in her absence. Most of the gentlemen looked both angry and uncomfortable; the ladies, with hot cheeks and carefully feigned unconsciousness, were all collected at one end of the room; the host was fingering his eye-glasses with suppressed but unmistakable fury, and a little group of tourists stood in a corner casting amused



glances at the further end of the room. Evidently something was going on there which appeared to them in the light of a joke, and to most of the guests in that of an insult. Signora Grassini alone did not appear to have noticed anything; she was fluttering her fan coquettishly and chattering to the secretary of the Dutch embassy, who listened with a broad grin on his face.

Gemma paused an instant in the doorway, turning to see if the Gadfly, too, had noticed the disturbed appearance of the company. There was no mistaking the malicious triumph in his eyes as he glanced from the face of the blissfully unconscious hostess to a sofa at the end of the room. She understood at once; he had brought his mistress here under some false colour, which had deceived no one but Signora Grassini.

The gipsy-girl was leaning back on the sofa, surrounded by a group of simpering dandies and blandly ironical cavalry officers. She was gorgeously dressed in amber and scarlet, with an Oriental brilliancy of tint and profusion of ornament as startling in a Florentine literary salon as if she had been some tropical bird among sparrows and starlings. She herself seemed to feel out of place, and looked at the offended ladies with a fiercely contemptuous scowl. Catching sight of the Gadfly as he crossed the room with Gemma, she sprang up and came towards him, with a voluble flood of painfully incorrect French.

"M. Rivarez, I have been looking for you everywhere! Count Saltykov wants to know whether you can go to his villa to-morrow night. There will be dancing."

"I am sorry I can't go; but then I couldn't dance if I did. Signora Bolla, allow me to introduce to you Mme. Zita Reni."

The gipsy glanced round at Gemma with a half defiant air and bowed stiffly. She was certainly handsome enough, as Martini had said, with a vivid, animal, unintelligent beauty; and the perfect harmony and freedom of her movements were delightful to see; but her forehead was low and narrow, and the line of her delicate nostrils was unsympathetic, almost cruel. The sense of oppression which Gemma had felt in the Gadfly's society was intensified by the gipsy's presence; and when, a moment later, the host came up to beg Signora Bolla to help him entertain some tourists in the other room, she consented with an odd feeling of relief.

"Well, Madonna, and what do you think of the Gadfly?" Martini asked as they drove back to Florence late at night. "Did you ever see anything quite so shameless as the way he fooled that poor little Grassini woman?"

"About the ballet-girl, you mean?"

"Yes, he persuaded her the girl was going to be the lion of the season. Signora Grassini would do anything for a celebrity."

"I thought it an unfair and unkind thing to do; it put the Grassinis into a false position; and it was nothing less than cruel to the girl herself. I am sure she felt ill at ease."

"You had a talk with him, didn't you? What did you think of him?"

"Oh, Cesare, I didn't think anything except how glad I was to see the last of him. I never met anyone so fearfully tiring. He gave me a



headache in ten minutes. He is like an incarnate demon of unrest."

"I thought you wouldn't like him; and, to tell the truth, no more do I. The man's as slippery as an eel; I don't trust him."

### CHAPTER III.

THE Gadfly took lodgings outside the Roman gate, near to which Zita was boarding. He was evidently somewhat of a sybarite; and, though nothing in the rooms showed any serious extravagance, there was a tendency to luxuriousness in trifles and to a certain fastidious daintiness in the arrangement of everything which surprised Galli and Riccardo. They had expected to find a man who had lived among the wildernesses of the Amazon more simple in his tastes, and wondered at his spotless ties and rows of boots, and at the masses of flowers which always stood upon his writing table. On the whole they got on very well with him. He was hospitable and friendly to everyone, especially to the local members of the Mazzinian party. To this rule Gemma, apparently, formed an exception; he seemed to have taken a dislike to her from the time of their first meeting, and in every way avoided her company. On two or three occasions he was actually rude to her, thus bringing upon himself Martini's most cordial detestation. There had been no love lost between the two men from the beginning; their temperaments appeared to be too incompatible for them to feel anything but repugnance for each other. On Martini's part this was fast developing into hostility.

"I don't care about his not liking me," he said one day to Gemma with an aggrieved air. "I don't like him, for that matter; so there's no harm done. But I can't stand the way he behaves to you. If it weren't for the scandal it would make in the party first to beg a man to come and then to quarrel with him, I should call him to account for it."

"Let him alone, Cesare; it isn't of any consequence, and after all, it's as much my fault as his."

"What is your fault?"

"That he dislikes me so. I said a brutal thing to him when we first met, that night at the Grassinis'."

"You said a brutal thing? That's hard to believe, Madonna."

"It was unintentional, of course, and I was very sorry. I said something about people laughing at cripples, and he took it personally. It had never occurred to me to think of him as a cripple; he is not so badly deformed."

"Of course not. He has one shoulder higher than the other, and his left arm is pretty badly disabled, but he's neither hunchbacked nor club-footed. As for his lameness, it isn't worth talking about."

"Anyway, he shivered all over and changed colour. Of course it was horribly tactless of me, but it's odd he should be so sensitive. I wonder if he has ever suffered from any cruel jokes of that kind."

"Much more likely to have perpetrated them, I should think. There's a sort of internal brutality about that man, under all his fine manners, that is perfectly sickening to me."

"Now, Cesare, that's downright unfair. I