

and in the afternoon I used to lie alone, and watch the sun get lower and lower— Oh, you can't understand! It makes me sick to look at a sunset now!"

A long pause.

"Well, then I went up country, to see if I could get work anywhere—it would have driven me mad to stay in Lima. I got as far as Cuzco, and there— Really I don't know why I'm inflicting all this ancient history on you; it hasn't even the merit of being funny."

She raised her head and looked at him with deep and serious eyes. "Please don't talk that way," she said.

He bit his lip and tore off another piece of the rug-fringe.

"Shall I go on?" he asked after a moment.

"If—if you will. I am afraid it is horrible to you to remember."

"Do you think I forget when I hold my tongue? It's worse then. But don't imagine it's the thing itself that haunts me so. It is the fact of having lost the power over myself."

"I—don't think I quite understand."

"I mean, it is the fact of having come to the end of my courage, to the point where I found myself a coward."

"Surely there is a limit to what anyone can bear."

"Yes; and the man who has once reached that limit never knows when he may reach it again."

"Would you mind telling me," she asked, hesitating, "how you came to be stranded out there alone at twenty?"

"Very simply: I had a good opening in life, at home in the old country, and ran away from it."

"Why?"

He laughed again in his quick, harsh way.

"Why? Because I was a priggish young cub, I suppose. I had been brought up in an over-luxurious home, and coddled and faddled after till I thought the world was made of pink cotton-wool and sugared almonds. Then one fine day I found out that someone I had trusted had deceived me. Why, how you start! What is it?"

"Nothing. Go on, please."

"I found out that I had been tricked into believing a lie; a common bit of experience, of course; but, as I tell you, I was young and priggish, and thought that liars go to hell. So I ran away from home and plunged into South America to sink or swim as I could, without a cent in my pocket or a word of Spanish in my tongue, or anything but white hands and expensive habits to get my bread with. And the natural result was that I got a dip into the real hell to cure me of imagining sham ones. A pretty thorough dip, too—it was just five years before the Duprez expedition came along and pulled me out."

"Five years! Oh, that is terrible! And had you no friends?"

"Friends! I"—he turned on her with sudden fierceness—"I have *never* had a friend!"

The next instant he seemed a little ashamed of his vehemence, and went on quickly:

"You mustn't take all this too seriously; I dare say I made the worst of things, and really it wasn't so bad the first year and a half; I was young and strong and I managed to scramble along fairly well till the Lascar put his mark on me. But after that I couldn't get work. It's wonderful what an effectual tool a poker is if you handle it properly; and nobody cares to employ a cripple."

"What sort of work did you do?"

"What I could get. For some time I lived by odd-jobbing for the blacks on the sugar plantations, fetching and carrying and so on. It's one of the curious things in life, by the way, that slaves always contrive to have a slave of their own, and there's nothing a negro likes so much as a white fag to bully. But it was no use; the overseers always turned me off. I was too lame to be quick; and I couldn't manage the heavy loads. And then I was always getting these attacks of inflammation, or whatever the confounded thing is.

"After some time I went down to the silver-mines and tried to get work there; but it was all no good. The managers laughed at the very notion of taking me on, and as for the men, they made a dead set at me."

"Why was that?"

"Oh, human nature, I suppose; they saw I had only one hand that I could hit back with. They're a mangy, half-caste lot; negroes and Zambos mostly. And then those horrible coolies! So at last I got enough of that, and set off to tramp the country at random; just wandering about, on the chance of something turning up."

"To tramp? With that lame foot!"

He looked up with a sudden, piteous catching of the breath.

"I—I was hungry," he said.

She turned her head a little away and rested her chin on one hand. After a moment's silence he began again, his voice sinking lower and lower as he spoke:

"Well, I tramped, and tramped, till I was nearly mad with tramping, and nothing came of it. I

got down into Ecuador, and there it was worse than ever. Sometimes I'd get a bit of tinkering to do,—I'm a pretty fair tinker,—or an errand to run, or a pigstye to clean out; sometimes I did—oh, I hardly know what. And then at last, one day——"

The slender, brown hand clenched itself suddenly on the table, and Gemma, raising her head, glanced at him anxiously. His side-face was turned towards her, and she could see a vein on the temple beating like a hammer, with quick, irregular strokes. She bent forward and laid a gentle hand on his arm.

"Never mind the rest; it's almost too horrible to talk about."

He stared doubtfully at the hand, shook his head, and went on steadily:

"Then one day I met a travelling variety show. You remember that one the other night; well, that sort of thing, only coarser and more indecent. The Zambos are not like these gentle Florentines; they don't care for anything that is not foul or brutal. There was bull-fighting, too, of course. They had camped out by the roadside for the night; and I went up to their tent to beg. Well, the weather was hot and I was half starved, and so—I fainted at the door of the tent. I had a trick of fainting suddenly at that time, like a boarding-school girl with tight stays. So they took me in and gave me brandy, and food, and so on; and then—the next morning—they offered me——"

Another pause.

"They wanted a hunchback, or monstrosity of some kind, for the boys to pelt with orange-peel and banana-skins—something to set the blacks

laughing— You saw the clown that night— well, I was that—for two years. I suppose you have a humanitarian feeling about negroes and Chinese. Wait till you've been at their mercy!

"Well, I learned to do the tricks. I was not quite deformed enough; but they set that right with an artificial hump and made the most of this foot and arm— And the Zambos are not critical; they're easily satisfied if only they can get hold of some live thing to torture—the fool's dress makes a good deal of difference, too.

"The only difficulty was that I was so often ill and unable to play. Sometimes, if the manager was out of temper, he would insist on my coming into the ring when I had these attacks on; and I believe the people liked those evenings best. Once, I remember, I fainted right off with the pain in the middle of the performance— When I came to my senses again, the audience had got round me—hooting and yelling and pelting me with—"

"Don't! I can't hear any more! Stop, for God's sake!"

She was standing up with both hands over her ears. He broke off, and, looking up, saw the glitter of tears in her eyes.

"Damn it all, what an idiot I am!" he said under his breath.

She crossed the room and stood for a little while looking out of the window. When she turned round, the Gadfly was again leaning on the table and covering his eyes with one hand. He had evidently forgotten her presence, and she sat down beside him without speaking. After a long silence she said slowly:

"I want to ask you a question."

"Yes?" without moving.

"Why did you not cut your throat?"

He looked up in grave surprise. "I did not expect *you* to ask that," he said. "And what about my work? Who would have done it for me?"

"Your work— Ah, I see! You talked just now about being a coward; well, if you have come through that and kept to your purpose, you are the very bravest man that I have ever met."

He covered his eyes again, and held her hand in a close passionate clasp. A silence that seemed to have no end fell around them.

Suddenly a clear and fresh soprano voice rang out from the garden below, singing a verse of a doggerel French song:

"Eh, Pierrôt! Danse, Pierrôt!
Danse un peu, mon pauvre Jeannôt!
Vive la danse et l'allégresse!
Jouissons de nôtre bell' jeunesse!
Si moi je pleure ou moi je soupire,
Si moi je fais la triste figure—
Monsieur, ce n'est que pour rire!
Ha! Ha, ha, ha!
Monsieur, ce n'est que pour rire!"

At the first words the Gadfly tore his hand from Gemma's and shrank away with a stifled groan. She clasped both hands round his arm and pressed it firmly, as she might have pressed that of a person undergoing a surgical operation. When the song broke off and a chorus of laughter and applause came from the garden, he looked up with the eyes of a tortured animal.

"Yes, it is Zita," he said slowly; "with her officer friends. She tried to come in here the other night, before Riccardo came. I should have gone mad if she had touched me!"

"But she does not know," Gemma protested softly. "She cannot guess that she is hurting you."

"She is like a Creole," he answered, shuddering. "Do you remember her face that night when we brought in the beggar-child? That is how the half-castes look when they laugh."

Another burst of laughter came from the garden. Gemma rose and opened the window. Zita, with a gold-embroidered scarf wound coquettishly round her head, was standing in the garden path, holding up a bunch of violets, for the possession of which three young cavalry officers appeared to be competing.

"Mme. Reni!" said Gemma.

Zita's face darkened like a thunder-cloud. "Madame?" she said, turning and raising her eyes with a defiant look.

"Would your friends mind speaking a little more softly? Signor Rivarez is very unwell."

The gipsy flung down her violets. "Allez-vous en!" she said, turning sharply on the astonished officers. "Vous m'embêtez, messieurs!"

She went slowly out into the road. Gemma closed the window.

"They have gone away," she said, turning to him.

"Thank you. I—I am sorry to have troubled you."

"It was no trouble." He at once detected the hesitation in her voice.

"'But?'" he said. "That sentence was not finished, signora; there was an unspoken 'but' in the back of your mind."

"If you look into the backs of people's minds, you mustn't be offended at what you read there."

It is not my affair, of course, but I cannot understand——"

"My aversion to Mme. Reni? It is only when——"

"No, your caring to live with her when you feel that aversion. It seems to me an insult to her as a woman and as——"

"A woman!" He burst out laughing harshly. "Is *that* what you call a woman? 'Madame, ce n'est que pour rire!'"

"That is not fair!" she said. "You have no right to speak of her in that way to anyone—especially to another woman!"

He turned away, and lay with wide-open eyes, looking out of the window at the sinking sun. She lowered the blind and closed the shutters, that he might not see it set; then sat down at the table by the other window and took up her knitting again.

"Would you like the lamp?" she asked after a moment.

He shook his head.

When it grew too dark to see, Gemma rolled up her knitting and laid it in the basket. For some time she sat with folded hands, silently watching the Gadfly's motionless figure. The dim evening light, falling on his face, seemed to soften away its hard, mocking, self-assertive look, and to deepen the tragic lines about the mouth. By some fanciful association of ideas her memory went vividly back to the stone cross which her father had set up in memory of Arthur, and to its inscription:

"All thy waves and billows have gone over me."

An hour passed in unbroken silence. At last she rose and went softly out of the room. Coming back with a lamp, she paused for a moment,

thinking that the Gadfly was asleep. As the light fell on his face he turned round.

"I have made you a cup of coffee," she said, setting down the lamp.

"Put it down a minute. Will you come here, please."

He took both her hands in his.

"I have been thinking," he said. "You are quite right; it is an ugly tangle I have got my life into. But remember, a man does not meet every day a woman whom he can—love; and I—I have been in deep waters. I am afraid——"

"Afraid——"

"Of the dark. Sometimes I *dare* not be alone at night. I must have something living—something solid beside me. It is the outer darkness, where shall be—— No, no! It's not that; that's a sixpenny toy hell;—it's the *inner* darkness. There's no weeping or gnashing of teeth there; only silence—silence——"

His eyes dilated. She was quite still, hardly breathing till he spoke again.

"This is all mystification to you, isn't it? You can't understand—luckily for you. What I mean is that I have a pretty fair chance of going mad if I try to live quite alone—— Don't think too hardly of me, if you can help it; I am not altogether the vicious brute you perhaps imagine me to be."

"I cannot try to judge for you," she answered. "I have not suffered as you have. But—I have been in rather deep water too, in another way; and I think—I am sure—that if you let the fear of anything drive you to do a really cruel or unjust or ungenerous thing, you will regret it afterwards. For the rest—if you have failed in this one thing,

I know that I, in your place, should have failed altogether,—should have cursed God and died."

He still kept her hands in his.

"Tell me," he said very softly; "have you ever in your life done a really cruel thing?"

She did not answer, but her head sank down, and two great tears fell on his hand.

"Tell me!" he whispered passionately, clasping her hands tighter. "Tell me! I have told you all my misery."

"Yes,—once,—long ago. And I did it to the person I loved best in the world."

The hands that clasped hers were trembling violently; but they did not loosen their hold.

"He was a comrade," she went on; "and I believed a slander against him,—a common glaring lie that the police had invented. I struck him in the face for a traitor; and he went away and drowned himself. Then, two days later, I found out that he had been quite innocent. Perhaps that is a worse memory than any of yours. I would cut off my right hand to undo what it has done."

Something swift and dangerous—something that she had not seen before,—flashed into his eyes. He bent his head down with a furtive, sudden gesture and kissed the hand.

She drew back with a startled face. "Don't!" she cried out piteously. "Please don't ever do that again! You hurt me!"

"Do you think you didn't hurt the man you killed?"

"The man I—killed—— Ah, there is Cesare at the gate at last! I—I must go!"

When Martini came into the room he found the

Gadfly lying alone with the untouched coffee beside him, swearing softly to himself in a languid, spiritless way, as though he got no satisfaction out of it.

CHAPTER IX.

A FEW days later, the Gadfly, still rather pale and limping more than usual, entered the reading room of the public library and asked for Cardinal Montanelli's sermons. Riccardo, who was reading at a table near him, looked up. He liked the Gadfly very much, but could not digest this one trait in him—this curious personal maliciousness.

"Are you preparing another volley against that unlucky Cardinal?" he asked half irritably.

"My dear fellow, why do you a-a-always attribute evil m-m-motives to people? It's m-most unchristian. I am preparing an essay on contemporary theology for the n-n-new paper."

"What new paper?" Riccardo frowned. It was perhaps an open secret that a new press-law was expected and that the Opposition was preparing to astonish the town with a radical newspaper; but still it was, formally, a secret.

"The *Swindlers' Gazette*, of course, or the *Church Calendar*."

"Sh-sh! Rivarez, we are disturbing the other readers."

"Well then, stick to your surgery, if that's your subject, and l-l-leave me to th-theology—that's mine. I d-d-don't interfere with your treatment of broken bones, though I know a p-p-precious lot more about them than you do."

He sat down to his volume of sermons with an

intent and preoccupied face. One of the librarians came up to him.

"Signor Rivarez! I think you were in the Duprez expedition, exploring the tributaries of the Amazon? Perhaps you will kindly help us in a difficulty. A lady has been inquiring for the records of the expedition, and they are at the binder's."

"What does she want to know?"

"Only in what year the expedition started and when it passed through Ecuador."

"It started from Paris in the autumn of 1837, and passed through Quito in April, 1838. We were three years in Brazil; then went down to Rio and got back to Paris in the summer of 1841. Does the lady want the dates of the separate discoveries?"

"No, thank you; only these. I have written them down. Beppo, take this paper to Signora Bolla, please. Many thanks, Signor Rivarez. I am sorry to have troubled you."

The Gadfly leaned back in his chair with a perplexed frown. What did she want the dates for? When they passed through Ecuador—

Gemma went home with the slip of paper in her hand. April, 1838—and Arthur had died in May, 1833. Five years—

She began pacing up and down her room. She had slept badly the last few nights, and there were dark shadows under her eyes.

Five years;—and an "overluxurious home"—and "someone he had trusted had deceived him"—had deceived him—and he had found it out—

She stopped and put up both hands to her head. Oh, this was utterly mad—it was not possible—it was absurd—