

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—

And yet, how they had dragged that harbour!

Five years—and he was “not twenty-one” when the Lascar—— Then he must have been nineteen when he ran away from home. Had he not said: “A year and a half——” Where did he get those blue eyes from, and that nervous restlessness of the fingers? And why was he so bitter against Montanelli? Five years—five years——

If she could but know that he was drowned—if she could but have seen the body; some day, surely, the old wound would have left off aching, the old memory would have lost its terrors. Perhaps in another twenty years she would have learned to look back without shrinking.

All her youth had been poisoned by the thought of what she had done. Resolutely, day after day and year after year, she had fought against the demon of remorse. Always she had remembered that her work lay in the future; always had shut her eyes and ears to the haunting spectre of the past. And day after day, year after year, the image of the drowned body drifting out to sea had never left her, and the bitter cry that she could not silence had risen in her heart: “I have killed Arthur! Arthur is dead!” Sometimes it had seemed to her that her burden was too heavy to be borne.

Now she would have given half her life to have that burden back again. If she had killed him—that was a familiar grief; she had endured it too long to sink under it now. But if she had driven him, not into the water but into—— She sat down, covering her eyes with both hands. And her life had been darkened for his sake, because he was dead! If she had brought upon him nothing worse than death——

Steadily, pitilessly she went back, step by step, through the hell of his past life. It was as vivid to her as though she had seen and felt it all; the helpless shivering of the naked soul, the mockery that was bitterer than death, the horror of loneliness, the slow, grinding, relentless agony. It was as vivid as if she had sat beside him in the filthy Indian hut; as if she had suffered with him in the silver-mines, the coffee fields, the horrible variety show——

The variety show—— No, she must shut out that image, at least; it was enough to drive one mad to sit and think of it.

She opened a little drawer in her writing-desk. It contained the few personal relics which she could not bring herself to destroy. She was not given to the hoarding up of sentimental trifles; and the preservation of these keepsakes was a concession to that weaker side of her nature which she kept under with so steady a hand. She very seldom allowed herself to look at them.

Now she took them out, one after another: Giovanni's first letter to her, and the flowers that had lain in his dead hand; a lock of her baby's hair and a withered leaf from her father's grave. At the back of the drawer was a miniature portrait of Arthur at ten years old—the only existing likeness of him.

She sat down with it in her hands and looked at the beautiful childish head, till the face of the real Arthur rose up afresh before her. How clear it was in every detail! The sensitive lines of the mouth, the wide, earnest eyes, the seraphic purity of expression—they were graven in upon her memory, as though he had died yesterday.

Slowly the blinding tears welled up and hid the portrait.

Oh, how could she have thought such a thing! It was like sacrilege even to dream of this bright, far-off spirit, bound to the sordid miseries of life. Surely the gods had loved him a little, and had let him die young! Better a thousand times that he should pass into utter nothingness than that he should live and be the Gadfly—the Gadfly, with his faultless neckties and his doubtful witticisms, his bitter tongue and his ballet girl! No, no! It was all a horrible, senseless fancy; and she had vexed her heart with vain imaginings. Arthur was dead.

"May I come in?" asked a soft voice at the door.

She started so that the portrait fell from her hand, and the Gadfly, limping across the room, picked it up and handed it to her.

"How you startled me!" she said.

"I am s-so sorry. Perhaps I am disturbing you?"

"No. I was only turning over some old things."

She hesitated for a moment; then handed him back the miniature.

"What do you think of that head?"

While he looked at it she watched his face as though her life depended upon its expression; but it was merely negative and critical.

"You have set me a difficult task," he said.

"The portrait is faded, and a child's face is always hard to read. But I should think that child would grow into an unlucky man, and the wisest thing he could do would be to abstain from growing into a man at all."

"Why?"

"Look at the line of the under-lip. Th-th-that is the sort of nature that feels pain as pain and wrong as wrong; and the world has no r-r-room for such people; it needs people who feel nothing but their work."

"Is it at all like anyone you know?"

He looked at the portrait more closely.

"Yes. What a curious thing! Of course it is; very like."

"Like whom?"

"C-c-cardinal Montan-nelli. I wonder whether his irreproachable Eminence has any nephews, by the way? Who is it, if I may ask?"

"It is a portrait, taken in childhood, of the friend I told you about the other day——"

"Whom you killed?"

She winced in spite of herself. How lightly, how cruelly he used that dreadful word!

"Yes, whom I killed—if he is really dead."

"If?"

She kept her eyes on his face.

"I have sometimes doubted," she said. "The body was never found. He may have run away from home, like you, and gone to South America."

"Let us hope not. That would be a bad memory to carry about with you. I have d-d-done some hard fighting in my t-time, and have sent m-more than one man to Hades, perhaps; but if I had it on my conscience that I had sent any l-living thing to South America, I should sleep badly——"

"Then do you believe," she interrupted, coming nearer to him with clasped hands, "that if he were not drowned,—if he had been through your experience instead,—he would never come back and

let the past go? Do you believe he would *never* forget? Remember, it has cost me something, too. Look!"

She pushed back the heavy waves of hair from her forehead. Through the black locks ran a broad white streak.

There was a long silence.

"I think," the Gadfly said slowly, "that the dead are better dead. Forgetting some things is a difficult matter. And if I were in the place of your dead friend, I would s-s-stay dead. The *revenant* is an ugly spectre."

She put the portrait back into its drawer and locked the desk.

"That is hard doctrine," she said. "And now we will talk about something else."

"I came to have a little business talk with you, if I may—a private one, about a plan that I have in my head."

She drew a chair to the table and sat down.

"What do you think of the projected press-law?" he began, without a trace of his usual stammer.

"What I think of it? I think it will not be of much value, but half a loaf is better than no bread."

"Undoubtedly. Then do you intend to work on one of the new papers these good folk here are preparing to start?"

"I thought of doing so. There is always a great deal of practical work to be done in starting any paper—printing and circulation arrangements and——"

"How long are you going to waste your mental gifts in that fashion?"

"Why 'waste'?"

"Because it is waste. You know quite well that you have a far better head than most of the men you are working with, and you let them make a regular drudge and Johannes factotum of you. Intellectually you are as far ahead of Grassini and Galli as if they were schoolboys; yet you sit correcting their proofs like a printer's devil."

"In the first place, I don't spend all my time in correcting proofs; and moreover it seems to me that you exaggerate my mental capacities. They are by no means so brilliant as you think."

"I don't think them brilliant at all," he answered quietly; "but I do think them sound and solid, which is of much more importance. At those dreary committee meetings it is always you who put your finger on the weak spot in everybody's logic."

"You are not fair to the others. Martini, for instance, has a very logical head, and there is no doubt about the capacities of Fabrizi and Lega. Then Grassini has a sounder knowledge of Italian economic statistics than any official in the country, perhaps."

"Well, that's not saying much; but let us lay them and their capacities aside. The fact remains that you, with such gifts as you possess, might do more important work and fill a more responsible post than at present."

"I am quite satisfied with my position. The work I am doing is not of very much value, perhaps, but we all do what we can."

"Signora Bolla, you and I have gone too far to play at compliments and modest denials now. Tell me honestly, do you recognize that you are using up your brain on work which persons inferior to you could do as well?"