

EPILOGUE.

"GEMMA, there's a man downstairs who wants to see you." Martini spoke in the subdued tone which they had both unconsciously adopted during these last ten days. That, and a certain slow evenness of speech and movement, were the sole expression which either of them gave to their grief.

Gemma, with bare arms and an apron over her dress, was standing at a table, putting up little packages of cartridges for distribution. She had stood over the work since early morning; and now, in the glaring afternoon, her face looked haggard with fatigue.

"A man, Cesare? What does he want?"

"I don't know, dear. He wouldn't tell me. He said he must speak to you alone."

"Very well." She took off her apron and pulled down the sleeves of her dress. "I must go to him, I suppose; but very likely it's only a spy."

"In any case, I shall be in the next room, within call. As soon as you get rid of him you had better go and lie down a bit. You have been standing too long to-day."

"Oh, no! I would rather go on working."

She went slowly down the stairs, Martini following in silence. She had grown to look ten years older in these few days, and the gray streak across her hair had widened into a broad band. She mostly kept her eyes lowered now; but when, by

chance, she raised them, he shivered at the horror in their shadows.

In the little parlour she found a clumsy-looking man standing with his heels together in the middle of the floor. His whole figure and the half-frightened way he looked up when she came in, suggested to her that he must be one of the Swiss guards. He wore a countryman's blouse, which evidently did not belong to him, and kept glancing round as though afraid of detection.

"Can you speak German?" he asked in the heavy Zürich patois.

"A little. I hear you want to see me."

"You are Signora Bolla? I've brought you a letter."

"A—letter?" She was beginning to tremble, and rested one hand on the table to steady herself.

"I'm one of the guard over there." He pointed out of the window to the fortress on the hill. "It's from—the man that was shot last week. He wrote it the night before. I promised him I'd give it into your own hand myself."

She bent her head down. So he had written after all.

"That's why I've been so long bringing it," the soldier went on. "He said I was not to give it to anyone but you, and I couldn't get off before—they watched me so. I had to borrow these things to come in."

He was fumbling in the breast of his blouse. The weather was hot, and the sheet of folded paper that he pulled out was not only dirty and crumpled, but damp. He stood for a moment shuffling his feet uneasily; then put up one hand and scratched the back of his head.

"You won't say anything," he began again

timidly, with a distrustful glance at her. "It's as much as my life's worth to have come here."

"Of course I shall not say anything. No, wait a minute——"

As he turned to go, she stopped him, feeling for her purse; but he drew back, offended.

"I don't want your money," he said roughly. "I did it for him—because he asked me to. I'd have done more than that for him. He'd been good to me—God help me!"

The little catch in his voice made her look up. He was slowly rubbing a grimy sleeve across his eyes.

"We had to shoot," he went on under his breath; "my mates and I. A man must obey orders. We bungled it, and had to fire again—and he laughed at us—he called us the awkward squad—and he'd been good to me——"

There was silence in the room. A moment later he straightened himself up, made a clumsy military salute, and went away.

She stood still for a little while with the paper in her hand; then sat down by the open window to read. The letter was closely written in pencil, and in some parts hardly legible. But the first two words stood out quite clear upon the page; and they were in English:

"Dear Jim."

The writing grew suddenly blurred and misty. And she had lost him again—had lost him again! At the sight of the familiar childish nickname all the hopelessness of her bereavement came over her afresh, and she put out her hands in blind desperation, as though the weight of the earth-clods that lay above him were pressing on her heart.

Presently she took up the paper again and went on reading:

"I am to be shot at sunrise to-morrow. So if I am to keep at all my promise to tell you everything, I must keep it now. But, after all, there is not much need of explanations between you and me. We always understood each other without many words, even when we were little things.

"And so, you see, my dear, you had no need to break your heart over that old story of the blow. It was a hard hit, of course; but I have had plenty of others as hard, and yet I have managed to get over them,—even to pay back a few of them,—and here I am still, like the mackerel in our nursery-book (I forget its name), 'Alive and kicking, oh!' This is my last kick, though; and then, to-morrow morning, and—'Finita la Commedia!' You and I will translate that: 'The variety show is over'; and will give thanks to the gods that they have had, at least, so much mercy on us. It is not much, but it is something; and for this and all other blessings may we be truly thankful!

"About that same to-morrow morning, I want both you and Martini to understand clearly that I am quite happy and satisfied, and could ask no better thing of Fate. Tell that to Martini as a message from me; he is a good fellow and a good comrade, and he will understand. You see, dear, I *know* that the stick-in-the-mud people are doing us a good turn and themselves a bad one by going back to secret trials and executions so soon, and I *know* that if you who are left stand together steadily and hit hard, you will see great things. As for me, I shall go out into the courtyard with as light a heart as any child starting

home for the holidays. I have done my share of the work, and this death-sentence is the proof that I have done it thoroughly. They kill me because they are afraid of me; and what more can any man's heart desire?

"It desires just one thing more, though. A man who is going to die has a right to a personal fancy, and mine is that you should see why I have always been such a sulky brute to you, and so slow to forget old scores. Of course, though, you understand why, and I tell you only for the pleasure of writing the words. I loved you, Gemma, when you were an ugly little girl in a gingham frock, with a scratchy tucker and your hair in a pig-tail down your back; and I love you still. Do you remember that day when I kissed your hand, and when you so piteously begged me 'never to do that again'? It was a scoundrelly trick to play, I know; but you must forgive that; and now I kiss the paper where I have written your name. So I have kissed you twice, and both times without your consent.

"That is all. Good-bye, my dear."

There was no signature, but a verse which they had learned together as children was written under the letter:

"Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live
Or if I die."

Half an hour later Martini entered the room, and, startled out of the silence of half a life-time, threw down the placard he was carrying and flung his arms about her.

"Gemma! What is it, for God's sake? Don't

sob like that—you that never cry! Gemma! Gemma, my darling!"

"Nothing, Cesare; I will tell you afterwards—I—can't talk about it just now."

She hurriedly slipped the tear-stained letter into her pocket; and, rising, leaned out of the window to hide her face. Martini held his tongue and bit his moustache. After all these years he had betrayed himself like a schoolboy—and she had not even noticed it!

"The Cathedral bell is tolling," she said after a little while, looking round with recovered self-command. "Someone must be dead."

"That is what I came to show you," Martini answered in his everyday voice. He picked up the placard from the floor and handed it to her. Hastily printed in large type was a black-bordered announcement that: "Our dearly beloved Bishop, His Eminence the Cardinal, Monsignor Lorenzo Montanelli," had died suddenly at Ravenna, "from the rupture of an aneurism of the heart."

She glanced up quickly from the paper, and Martini answered the unspoken suggestion in her eyes with a shrug of his shoulders.

"What would you have, Madonna? Aneurism is as good a word as any other."

THE END.



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