

VENDETTA!

CHAPTER I.

I, WHO write this, am a dead man. Dead legally—dead by absolute proofs—dead and buried! Ask for me in my native city, and they will tell you I was one of the victims of the cholera that ravaged Naples in 1884, and that my mortal remains lie moldering in the funeral vault of my ancestors. Yet—I live! I feel the warm blood coursing through my veins—the blood of thirty summers—the prime of early manhood invigorates me, and makes these eyes of mine keen and bright—these muscles strong as iron—this hand powerful of grip—this well-knit form erect and proud of bearing. Yes!—I am alive, though declared to be dead; alive in the fullness of manly force—and even sorrow has left few distinguishing marks upon me, save one. My hair, once ebony-black, is white as a wreath of Alpine snow, though its clustering curls are thick as ever.

“A constitutional inheritance?” asks one physician, observing my frosted locks.

“A sudden shock?” suggests another.

“Exposure to intense heat?” hints a third.

I answer none of them. I did so once. I told my story to a man I met by chance—one renowned for medical skill and kindness. He heard me to the end in evident incredulity and alarm, and hinted at the possibility of madness. Since then I have never spoken.

But now I write. I am far from all persecution—I can set down the truth fearlessly. I can dip the pen in my own blood if I choose, and none shall gainsay me! For the green silence of a vast South American forest encompasses me—the grand and stately silence of a virginal nature, almost unbroken by the ruthless step of man's civilization—a haven of perfect calm, delicately disturbed by the fluttering wings and soft voices of birds, and the gentle or stormy murmur of the free-born winds of heaven. Within this charmed circle of rest I

dwell—here I lift up my overburdened heart like a brimming chalice, and empty it on the ground, to the last drop of gall contained therein. The world shall know my history.

Dead, and yet living! How can that be?—you ask. Ah, my friends! If you seek to be rid of your dead relations for a certainty, you should have their bodies cremated. Otherwise there is no knowing what may happen! Cremation is the best way—the only way. It is clean, and *safe*. Why should there be any prejudice against it? Surely it is better to give the remains of what we loved (or pretended to love) to cleansing fire and pure air than to lay them in a cold vault of stone, or down, down in the wet and clinging earth. For loathly things are hidden deep in the mold—things foul and all unnameable—long worms—slimy creatures with blind eyes and useless wings—abortions and deformities of the insect tribe born of poisonous vapor—creatures the very sight of which would drive you, oh, delicate woman, into a fit of hysteria, and would provoke even you, oh, strong man, to a shudder of repulsion! But there is a worse thing than these merely physical horrors which come of so-called Christian burial—that is, the terrible *uncertainty*. What, if after we have lowered the narrow strong box containing our dear deceased relation into its vault or hollow in the ground—what, if after we have worn a seemly garb of woe, and tortured our faces into the fitting expression of gentle and patient melancholy—what, I say, if after all the reasonable precautions taken to insure safety, they should actually prove insufficient? What, if the prison to which we have consigned the deeply regretted one should not have such close doors as we fondly imagined? What, if the stout coffin should be wrenched apart by fierce and frenzied fingers—what, if our late dear friend should *not* be dead, but should, like Lazarus of old, come forth to challenge our affection anew? Should we not grieve sorely that we had failed to avail ourselves of the secure and classical method of cremation? Especially if we had benefited by worldly goods or money left to us by the so deservedly lamented! For we are self-deceiving hypocrites—few of us are really sorry for the dead—few of us remember them with any real tenderness or affection. And yet, God knows! they may need more pity than we dream of!

But let me to my task. I, Fabio Romani, lately deceased, am about to chronicle the events of one short year—a year in which was compressed the agony of a long and tortured lifetime. One little year!—one sharp thrust from the dagger of Time! It pierced my heart—the wound still gapes and bleeds, and every drop of blood is tainted as it falls!

One suffering, common to many, I have never known—that is—poverty. I was born-rich. When my father, Count Filippo Romani, died, leaving me, then a lad of seventeen, sole heir to his enormous possessions—sole head of his powerful house—there were many candid friends who, with their usual kindness, prophesied the worst things of my future. Nay, there were even some who looked forward to my physical and mental destruction with a certain degree of malignant expectation—and they were estimable persons too. They were respectably connected—their words carried weight—and for a time I was an object of their maliciously pious fears. I was destined, according to their calculations, to be a gambler, a spendthrift, a drunkard, an incurable *roue*, of the most abandoned character. Yet, strange to say, I became none of these things. Though a Neapolitan, with all the fiery passions and hot blood of my race, I had an innate scorn for the contemptible vices and low desires of the unthinking vulgar. Gambling seemed to me a delirious folly—drink, a destroyer of health and reason—and licentious extravagance an outrage on the poor. I chose my own way of life—a middle course between simplicity and luxury—a judicious mingling of home-like peace with the gayety of sympathetic social intercourse—an even tenor of intelligent existence which neither exhausted the mind nor injured the body.

I dwelt in my father's villa—a miniature palace of white marble, situated on a wooded height overlooking the Bay of Naples. My pleasure-grounds were fringed with fragrant groves of orange and myrtle, where hundreds of full-voiced nightingales warbled their love-melodies to the golden moon. Sparkling fountains rose and fell in huge stone basins carved with many a quaint design, and their cool murmurous splash refreshed the burning silence of the hottest summer air. In this retreat I lived at peace for some happy years, surrounded by books and pictures, and visited frequently by friends—young men whose tastes were more or less like my own, and who were capable of equally appreciating the merits of an antique volume, or the flavor of a rare vintage.

Of women I saw little or nothing. Truth to tell, I instinctively avoided them. Parents with marriageable daughters invited me frequently to their house, but these invitations I generally refused. My best books warned me against feminine society—and I believed and accepted the warning. This tendency of mine exposed me to the ridicule of those among my companions who were amorously inclined, but their gay jests at what they termed my “weakness” never affected me. I

trusted in friendship rather than love, and I had a friend—one for whom at that time I would gladly have laid down my life—one who inspired me with the most profound attachment. He, Guido Ferrari, also joined occasionally with others in the good-natured mockery I brought down upon myself by my shrinking dislike of women.

"Fy on thee, Fabio!" he would cry. "Thou wilt not taste life till thou hast sipped the nectar from a pair of rose-red lips—thou shalt not guess the riddle of the stars till thou hast gazed deep down into the fathomless glory of a maiden's eyes—thou canst not know delight till thou hast clasped eager arms round a coy waist and heard the beating of a passionate heart against thine own! A truce to thy musty volumes! Believe it, those ancient and sorrowful philosophers had no manhood in them—their blood was water—and their slanders against women were but the pettish utterances of their own deserved disappointments. Those who miss the chief prize of life would fain persuade others that it is not worth having. What, man! Thou, with a ready wit, a glancing eye, a gay smile, a supple form, thou wilt not enter the lists of love? What says Voltaire of the blind god?"

"Qui que tu sois voilà ton maître,
Il fût-il est—ou il doit être!"

When my friend spoke thus I smiled, but answered nothing. His arguments failed to convince me. Yet I loved to hear him talk—his voice was mellow as the note of a thrush, and his eyes had an eloquence greater than all speech. I loved him—God knows! unselfishly, sincerely—with that rare tenderness sometimes felt by school-boys for one another, but seldom experienced by grown men. I was happy in his society, as he, indeed, appeared to be in mine. We passed most of our time together, he, like myself, having been bereaved of his parents in early youth, and therefore left to shape out his own course of life as suited his particular fancy. He chose art as a profession, and, though a fairly successful painter, was as poor as I was rich. I remedied this neglect of fortune for him in various ways with due forethought and delicacy—and gave him as many commissions as I possibly could without rousing his suspicion or wounding his pride. For he possessed a strong attraction for me—we had much the same tastes, we shared the same sympathies, in short, I desired nothing better than his confidence and companionship.

In this world no one, however harmless, is allowed to continue happy. Fate—or caprice—cannot endure to see us

monotonously at rest. Something perfectly trivial—a look, a word, a touch, and lo! a long chain of old associations is broken asunder, and the peace we deemed so deep and lasting is finally interrupted. This change came to me, as surely as it comes to all. One day—how well I remember it!—one sultry evening toward the end of May, 1881, I was in Naples. I had passed the afternoon in my yacht, idly and slowly sailing over the bay, availing myself of what little wind there was. Guido's absence (he had gone to Rome on a visit of some weeks' duration) rendered me somewhat of a solitary, and as my light craft ran into harbor, I found myself in a pensive, half-uncertain mood, which brought with it its own depression. The few sailors who manned my vessel dispersed right and left as soon as they were landed—each to his own favorite haunts of pleasure or dissipation—but I was in no humor to be easily amused. Though I had plenty of acquaintance in the city, I cared little for such entertainment as they could offer me. As I strolled along through one of the principal streets, considering whether or not I should return on foot to my own dwelling on the heights, I heard a sound of singing, and perceived in the distance a glimmer of white robes. It was the Month of Mary, and I at once concluded that this must be an approaching Procession of the Virgin. Half in idleness, half in curiosity, I stood still and waited. The singing voices came nearer and nearer—I saw the priests, the acolytes, the swinging gold censers heavy with fragrance, the flaring candles, the snowy veils of children and girls—and then all suddenly the picturesque beauty of the scene danced before my eyes in a whirling blur of brilliancy and color from which looked forth—one face! One face beaming out like a star from a cloud of amber tresses—one face of rose-tinted, child-like loveliness—a loveliness absolutely perfect, lighted up by two luminous eyes, large and black as night—one face in which the small, curved mouth smiled half provokingly, half sweetly! I gazed and gazed again, dazzled and excited; beauty makes such fools of us all! This was a woman—one of the sex I mistrusted and avoided—a woman in the earliest spring of her youth, a girl of fifteen or sixteen at the utmost. Her veil had been thrown back by accident or design, and for one brief moment I drank in that soul-tempting glance, that witch-like smile! The procession passed—the vision faded—but in that breath of time one epoch of my life had closed forever, and another had begun!

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Of course I married her. We Neapolitans lose no time in

such matters. We are not prudent. Unlike the calm blood of Englishmen, ours rushes swiftly through our veins—it is warm as wine and sunlight, and needs no fictitious stimulant. We love, we desire, we possess; and then? We tire, you say? These southern races are so fickle! All wrong—we are less tired than you deem. And do not Englishmen tire? Have they no secret ennui at times when sitting in the chimney nook of “home, sweet home,” with their fat wives and ever-spreading families? Truly, yes! But they are too cautious to say so.

I need not relate the story of my courtship—it was brief and sweet as a song sung perfectly. There were no obstacles. The girl I sought was the only daughter of a ruined Florentine noble of dissolute character, who gained a bare subsistence by frequenting the gaming-table. His child had been brought up in a convent renowned for strict discipline—she knew nothing of the world. She was, he assured me, with maudlin tears in his eyes, “as innocent as a flower on the altar of the Madonna.” I believed him—for what could this lovely, youthful, low-voiced maiden know of even the shadow of evil? I was eager to gather so fair a lily for my own proud wearing—and her father gladly gave her to me, no doubt inwardly congratulating himself on the wealthy match that had fallen to the lot of his dowerless daughter.

We were married at the end of June, and Guido Ferrari graced our bridal with his handsome and gallant presence.

“By the body of Bacchus!” he exclaimed to me when the nuptial ceremony was over, “thou hast profited by my teaching, Fabio! A quiet rogue is often most cunning! Thou hast rifled the casket of Venus, and stolen her fairest jewel—thou hast secured the loveliest maiden in the two Sicilies!”

I pressed his hand, and a touch of remorse stole over me, for he was no longer first in my affection. Almost I regretted it—yes, on my very wedding-morn I looked back to the old days—old now though so recent—and sighed to think they were ended. I glanced at Nina, my wife. It was enough! Her beauty dazzled and overcame me. The melting languor of her large limpid eyes stole into my veins—I forgot all but her. I was in that high delirium of passion in which love, and love only, seems the key-note of creation. I touched the topmost peak of the height of joy—the days were feasts of fairy-land, the nights dreams of rapture! No; I never tired! My wife’s beauty never palled upon me; she grew fairer with each day of possession. I never saw her otherwise than attractive, and within a few months she had probed all the depths of my nature. She discovered how certain sweet looks of hers

could draw me to her side, a willing and devoted slave; she measured my weakness with her own power; she knew—what did she not know? I torture myself with these foolish memories. All men past the age of twenty have learned somewhat of the tricks of women—the pretty, playful nothings that weaken the will and sap the force of the strongest hero. She loved me? Oh, yes, I suppose so! Looking back on those days, I can frankly say I believe she loved me—as nine hundred wives out of a thousand love their husbands, namely—for what they can get. And I grudged her nothing. If I chose to idealize her, and raise her to the stature of an angel when she was but on the low level of mere womanhood, that was my folly, not her fault.

We kept open house. Our villa was a place of rendezvous for the leading members of the best society in and around Naples. My wife was universally admired; her lovely face and graceful manners were themes of conversation throughout the whole neighborhood. Guido Ferrari, my friend, was one of those who were loudest in her praise, and the chivalrous homage he displayed toward her doubly endeared him to me. I trusted him as a brother; he came and went as pleased him; he brought Nina gifts of flowers and fanciful trifles adapted to her taste, and treated her with fraternal and delicate kindness. I deemed my happiness perfect—with love, wealth, and friendship, what more could a man desire?

Yet another drop of honey was added to my cup of sweetness. On the first morning of May, 1882, our child was born—a girl-babe, fair as one of the white anemones which at that season grew thickly in the woods surrounding our home. They brought the little one to me in the shaded veranda where I sat at breakfast with Guido—a tiny, almost shapeless bundle, wrapped in soft cashmere and old lace. I took the fragile thing in my arms with a tender reverence; it opened its eyes; they were large and dark like Nina’s, and the light of a recent heaven seemed still to linger in their pure depths. I kissed the little face; Guido did the same; and those clear, quiet eyes regarded us both with a strange half-inquiring solemnity. A bird perched on a bough of jasmine broke into a low, sweet song, the soft wind blew and scattered the petals of a white rose at our feet. I gave the infant back to the nurse, who waited to receive it, and said, with a smile, “Tell my wife we have welcomed her May-blossom.”

Guido laid his hand on my shoulder as the servant retired; his face was unusually pale.

“Thou art a good fellow, Fabio!” he said, abruptly.

"Indeed! How so?" I asked, half laughingly; "I am no better than other men."

"You are less suspicious than the majority," he returned, turning away from me and playing idly with a spray of clematis that trailed on one of the pillars of the veranda.

I glanced at him in surprise. "What do you mean, *amico*? Have I reason to suspect any one?"

He laughed, and resumed his seat at the breakfast-table.

"Why, no!" he answered, with a frank look. "But in Naples the air is pregnant with suspicion—jealousy's dagger is ever ready to strike, justly or unjustly—the very children are learned in the ways of vice. Penitents confess to priests who are worse than penitents, and by Heaven! in such a state of society, where conjugal fidelity is a farce"—he paused a moment, and then went on—"is it not wonderful to know a man like you, Fabio? A man happy in home affections, without a cloud on the sky of his confidence?"

"I have no cause for distrust," I said. "Nina is as innocent as the little child of whom she is to-day the mother."

"True!" exclaimed Ferrari. "Perfectly true!" and he looked me full in the eyes, with a smile. "White as the virgin snow on the summit of Mont Blanc—purer than the flawless diamond—and unapproachable as the furthest star! Is it not so?"

I assented with a certain gravity; something in his manner puzzled me. Our conversation soon turned on different topics, and I thought no more of the matter. But a time came—and that speedily—when I had stern reason to remember every word he had uttered.

CHAPTER II.

EVERY one knows what kind of summer we had in Naples in 1884. The newspapers of all lands teemed with the story of its horrors. The cholera walked abroad like a destroying demon; under its withering touch scores of people, young and old, dropped down in the streets to die. The fell disease, born of dirt and criminal neglect of sanitary precautions, gained on the city with awful rapidity, and worse even than the plague was the unreasoning but universal panic. The never-to-be-forgotten heroism of King Humbert had its effect on the more educated classes, but among the low Neapolitan populace abject fear, vulgar superstition, and utter selfishness reigned supreme. One case may serve as an example of many others.

A fisherman, well known in the place, a handsome and popular young fellow, was seized, while working in his boat, with the first symptoms of cholera. He was carried to his mother's house. The old woman, a villainous-looking hag, watched the little procession as it approached her dwelling, and taking in the situation at once, she shut and barricaded her door.

"Santissima Madonna!" she yelled, shrilly, through a half-opened window. "Leave him in the street, the abandoned, miserable one! The ungrateful pig! He would bring the plague to his own hard-working, honest mother! Holy Joseph! who would have children? Leave him in the street, I tell you!"

It was useless to expostulate with this feminine scarecrow; her son was, happily for himself, unconscious, and after some more wrangling he was laid down on her doorstep, where he shortly afterward expired, his body being afterward carted away like so much rubbish by the *beccanorti*.

The heat in the city was intense. The sky was a burning dome of brilliancy, the bay was still as a glittering sheet of glass. A thin column of smoke issuing from the crater of Vesuvius increased the impression of an all-pervading, though imperceptible ring of fire, that seemed to surround the place. No birds sung save in the late evening, when the nightingales in my gardens broke out in a bubbling torrent of melody, half joyous, half melancholy. Up on that wooded height where I dwelt it was comparatively cool. I took all precautions necessary to prevent the contagion from attacking our household; in fact, I would have left the neighborhood altogether, had I not known that hasty flight from an infected district often carries with it the possibility of closer contact with the disease. My wife, besides, was not nervous—I think very beautiful women seldom are. Their superb vanity is an excellent shield to repel pestilence; it does away with the principal element of danger—fear. As for our Stella, a toddling mite of two years old, she was a healthy child, for whom neither her mother nor myself entertained the least anxiety.

Guido Ferrari came and stayed with us, and while the cholera, like a sharp scythe put into a field of ripe corn, mowed down the dirt-loving Neapolitans by hundreds, we three, with a small retinue of servants, none of whom were ever permitted to visit the city, lived on farinaceous food and distilled water, bathed regularly, rose and retired early, and enjoyed the most perfect health.

Among her many other attractions my wife was gifted with a beautiful and well-trained voice. She sung with exquisite

expression, and many an evening when Guido and myself sat smoking in the garden, after little Stella had gone to bed, Nina would ravish our ears with the music of her nightingale notes, singing song after song, quaint *stornelli* and *ritornelli*—songs of the people, full of wild and passionate beauty. In these Guido would often join her, his full barytone chiming in with her delicate and clear soprano as deliciously as the fall of a fountain with the trill of a bird. I can hear those two voices now; their united melody still rings mockingly in my ears; the heavy perfume of orange-blossom, mingled with myrtle, floats toward me on the air; the yellow moon burns round and full in the dense blue sky, like the King of Thule's goblet of gold flung into a deep sea, and again I behold those two heads leaning together, the one fair, the other dark; my wife, my friend—those two whose lives were a million times dearer to me than my own. Ah! they were happy days—days of self-delusion always are. We are never grateful enough to the candid persons who wake us from our dreams—yet such are in truth our best friends, could we but realize it.

August was the most terrible of all the summer months in Naples. The cholera increased with frightful steadiness, and the people seemed to be literally mad with terror. Some of them, seized with a wild spirit of defiance, plunged into orgies of vice and intemperance with a reckless disregard of consequences. One of these frantic revels took place at a well-known café. Eight young men, accompanied by eight girls of remarkable beauty, arrived, and ordered a private room, where they were served with a sumptuous repast. At its close one of the party raised his glass and proposed, "Success to the cholera!" The toast was received with riotous shouts of applause, and all drank it with delirious laughter. That very night every one of the revelers died in horrible agony; their bodies, as usual, were thrust into flimsy coffins and buried one on top of another in a hole hastily dug for the purpose. Dismal stories like these reached us every day, but we were not morbidly impressed by them. Stella was a living charm against pestilence! her innocent playfulness and prattle kept us amused and employed, and surrounded us with an atmosphere that was physically and mentally wholesome.

One morning—one of the very hottest mornings of that scorching month—I woke at an earlier hour than usual. A suggestion of possible coolness in the air tempted me to rise and stroll through the garden. My wife slept soundly at my side. I dressed softly, without disturbing her. As I was about to leave the room some instinct made me turn back to

look at her once more. How lovely she was! she smiled in her sleep! My heart beat as I gazed—she had been mine for three years—mine only!—and my passionate admiration and love of her had increased in proportion to that length of time. I raised one of the scattered golden locks that lay shining like a sunbeam on the pillow, and kissed it tenderly. Then—all unconscious of my fate—I left her.

A faint breeze greeted me as I sauntered slowly along the garden walks—a breath of wind scarce strong enough to flutter the leaves, yet it had a salt savor in it that was refreshing after the tropical heat of the past night. I was at that time absorbed in the study of Plato, and as I walked, my mind occupied itself with many high problems and deep questions suggested by that great teacher. Lost in a train of profound yet pleasant thought, I strayed on further than I intended, and found myself at last in a by-path, long disused by our household—a winding footway leading downward in the direction of the harbor. It was shady and cool, and I followed the road almost unconsciously, till I caught a glimpse of masts and white sails gleaming through the leafage of the overarching trees. I was then about to retrace my steps, when I was startled by a sudden sound. It was a low moan of intense pain—a smothered cry that seemed to be wrung from some animal in torture. I turned in the direction whence it came, and saw, lying face downward on the grass, a boy—a little fruit-seller of eleven or twelve years of age. His basket of wares stood beside him, a tempting pile of peaches, grapes, pomegranates, and melons—lovely but dangerous eating in cholera times. I touched the lad on the shoulder.

"What ails you?" I asked. He twisted himself convulsively and turned his face toward me—a beautiful face, though livid with anguish.

"The plague, signor!" he moaned; "the plague! Keep away from me, for the love of God! I am dying!"

I hesitated. For myself I had no fear. But my wife—my child—for their sakes it was necessary to be prudent. Yet I could not leave this poor boy unassisted. I resolved to go to the harbor in search of medical aid. With this idea in my mind I spoke cheerfully.

"Courage, my boy," I said; "do not lose heart! All illness is not the plague. Rest here till I return; I am going to fetch a doctor."

The little fellow looked at me with wondering, pathetic eyes, and tried to smile. He pointed to his throat, and made an effort to speak, but vainly. Then he crouched down in the

grass and writhed in torture like a hunted animal wounded to the death. I left him and walked on rapidly; reaching the harbor, where the heat was sulphurous and intense, I found a few scared-looking men standing aimlessly about, to whom I explained the boy's case, and appealed for assistance. They all hung back—none of them would accompany me, not even for the gold I offered. Cursing their cowardice, I hurried on in search of a physician, and found one at last, a sallow Frenchman, who listened with obvious reluctance to my account of the condition in which I had left the little fruit-seller, and at the end shook his head decisively, and refused to move.

"He is as good as dead," he observed, with cold brevity. "Better call at the house of the Miserecordia; the brethren will fetch his body."

"What!" I cried; "you will not try if you can save him?" The Frenchman bowed with satirical suavity.

"Monsieur must pardon me! My own health would be seriously endangered by touching a cholera corpse. Allow me to wish monsieur the good-day!"

And he disappeared, shutting his door in my face. I was thoroughly exasperated, and though the heat and the fetid odor of the sun-baked streets made me feel faint and sick, I forgot all danger for myself as I stood in the plague-stricken city, wondering what I should do next to obtain succor. A grave, kind voice saluted my ear.

"You seek aid, my son?"

I looked up. A tall monk, whose cowl partly concealed his pale, but resolute features, stood at my side—one of those heroes who, for the love of Christ, came forth at that terrible time and faced the pestilence fearlessly, where the blatant boasters of no-religion scurried away like frightened hares from the very scent of danger. I greeted him with an obeisance, and explained my errand.

"I will go at once," he said, with an accent of pity in his voice. "But I fear the worst. I have remedies with me; I may not be too late."

"I will accompany you," I said, eagerly. "One would not let a dog die unaided; much less this poor lad, who seems friendless."

The monk looked at me attentively as we walked on together.

"You are not residing in Naples?" he asked.

I gave him my name, which he knew by repute, and described the position of my villa.

"Up on that height we enjoy perfect health," I added.

"I cannot understand the panic that prevails in the city. The plague is fostered by such cowardice."

"Of course!" he answered, calmly. "But what will you? The people here love pleasure. Their hearts are set solely on this life. When death, common to all, enters their midst, they are like babes scared by a dark shadow. Religion itself"—here he sighed deeply—"has no hold upon them."

"But you, my father," I began, and stopped abruptly, conscious of a sharp throbbing pain in my temples.

"I," he answered, gravely, "am the servant of Christ. As such, the plague has no terrors for me. Unworthy as I am, for my Master's sake I am ready—nay, willing—to face all deaths."

He spoke firmly, yet without arrogance. I looked at him in a certain admiration, and was about to speak, when a curious dizziness overcame me, and I caught at his arm to save myself from falling. The street rocked like a ship at sea, and the skies whirled round me in circles of blue fire. The feeling slowly passed, and I heard the monk's voice, as though it were a long way off, asking me anxiously what was the matter. I forced a smile.

"It is the heat, I think," I said, in feeble tones like those of a very aged man. "I am faint—giddy. You had best leave me here—see to the boy. Oh, my God!"

This last exclamation was wrung out of me by sheer anguish. My limbs refused to support me, and a pang, cold and bitter as though naked steel had been thrust through my body, caused me to sink down upon the pavement in a kind of convulsion. The tall and sinewy monk, without a moment's hesitation, dragged me up and half carried, half led me into a kind of *auberge*, or restaurant for the poorer classes. Here he placed me in a recumbent position on one of the wooden benches, and called up the proprietor of the place, a man to whom he seemed to be well known. Though suffering acutely I was conscious, and could hear and see everything that passed.

"Attend to him well, Pietro—it is the rich Count Fabio Romani. Thou wilt not lose by thy pains. I will return within an hour."

"The Count Romani! Santissima Madonna! He has caught the plague!"

"Thou fool!" exclaimed the monk, fiercely. "How canst thou tell? A stroke of the sun is not the plague, thou coward! See to him, or by St. Peter and the keys there shall be no place for thee in heaven!"

The trembling innkeeper looked terrified at this menace, and

submissively approached me with pillows, which he placed under my head. The monk, meanwhile, held a glass to my lips containing some medicinal mixture, which I swallowed mechanically.

"Rest here, my son," he said, addressing me in soothing tones. "These people are good-natured. I will but hasten to the boy for whom you sought assistance—in less than an hour I will be with you again."

I laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Stay," I murmured, feebly, "let me know the worst. Is this the plague?"

"I hope not!" he replied, compassionately. "But what if it be? You are young and strong enough to fight against it without fear."

"I have no fear," I said. "But, father, promise me one thing—send no word of my illness to my wife—swear it! Even if I am unconscious—dead—swear that I shall not be taken to the villa. Swear it! I cannot rest till I have your word."

"I swear it most willingly, my son," he answered, solemnly.

"By all I hold sacred, I will respect your wishes."

I was infinitely relieved—the safety of those I loved was assured—and I thanked him by a mute gesture. I was too weak to say more. He disappeared, and my brain wandered into a chaos of strange fancies. Let me try to revolve these delusions. I plainly see the interior of the common room where I lie. There is the timid innkeeper—he polishes his glasses and bottles, casting ever and anon a scared glance in my direction. Groups of men look in at the door, and, seeing me, hurry away. I observe all this—I know where I am—yet I am also climbing the steep passes of an Alpine gorge—the cold snow is at my feet—I hear the rush and roar of a thousand torrents. A crimson cloud floats about the summit of a white glacier—it parts asunder gradually, and in its bright center a face smiles forth! "Nina! my love, my wife, my soul!" I cry aloud. I stretch out my arms—I clasp her! bah! it is this good rogue of an innkeeper who holds me in his musty embrace! I struggle with him fiercely—pantingly.

"Fool!" I shriek in his ear. "Let me go to her—her lips pout for kisses—let me go!"

Another man advances and seizes me; he and the innkeeper force me back on the pillows—they overcome me, and the utter incapacity of a terrible exhaustion steals away my strength. I cease to struggle. Pietro and his assistant look down upon me,

"*E morto!*" they whisper one to the other.

I hear them and smile. Dead? Not I! The scorching sunlight streams through the open door of the inn—the thirsty flies buzz with persistent loudness—some voices are singing "La Fata di Amalfi"—I can distinguish the words—

"Chiagnarò la mia sventura
Si non tuorne chiù, Rosella!
Tu d'Amalfi la chiù bella,
Tu na Fata si pe me!
Viene, viè, regina mia,
Viene curre a chisto core,
Ca non c'è non c'è no sciore
Non c'è stella comm' a tel!"*

That is a true song, *Nina mia!* "*Non c'è stella comm' a te!*" What did Guido say? "Purer than the flawless diamond—unapproachable as the furthest star!" That foolish Pietro still polishes his wine-bottles. I see him—his meek round face is greasy with heat and dust; but I cannot understand how he comes to be here at all, for I am on the banks of a tropical river where huge palms grow wild, and drowsy alligators lie asleep in the sun. Their large jaws are open—their small eyes glitter greenly. A light boat glides over the silent water—in it I behold the erect lithe figure of an Indian. His features are strangely similar to those of Guido. He draws a long, thin shining blade of steel as he approaches. Brave fellow!—he means to attack single-handed the cruel creatures who lie in wait for him on the sultry shore. He springs to land—I watch him with a weird fascination. He passes the alligators—he seems not to be aware of their presence—he comes with swift, unhesitating step to me—it is I whom he seeks—it is in my heart that he plunges the cold steel dagger and draws it out again dripping with blood! Once—twice—thrice!—and yet I cannot die! I writhe—I moan in bitter anguish! Then something dark comes between me and the glaring sun—something cool and shadowy, against which I fling myself despairingly. Two dark eyes look steadily into mine, and a voice speaks:

"Be calm, my son, be calm. Commend thyself to Christ!"

It is my friend the monk. I recognize him gladly. He has returned from his errand of mercy. Though I can scarcely speak, I hear myself asking for news of the boy. The holy man crosses himself devoutly.

"May his young soul rest in peace! I found him dead."

I am dreamily astonished at this. Dead—so soon. I can-

*A popular song in the Neapolitan dialect.

not understand it; and I drift off again into a state of confused imaginings. As I look back now to that time, I find I have no specially distinct recollection of what afterward happened to me. I know I suffered intense, intolerable pain—that I was literally tortured on a rack of excruciating anguish—and that through all the delirium of my senses I heard a muffled, melancholy sound like a chant or prayer. I have an idea that I also heard the tinkle of the bell that accompanies the Host, but my brain reeled more wildly with each moment, and I cannot be certain of this. I remember shrieking out after what seemed an eternity of pain, "Not to the villa! no, no, not there! You shall not take me—my curse on him who disobeys me!"

I remember then a fearful sensation as of being dragged into a deep whirlpool, from whence I stretched up appealing hands and eyes to the monk who stood above me—I caught a drowning glimpse of a silver crucifix glittering before my gaze, and at last, with one loud cry for help, I sunk—down—down! into an abyss of black night and nothingness!

CHAPTER III.

THERE followed a long drowsy time of stillness and shadow. I seemed to have fallen in some deep well of delicious oblivion and obscurity. Dream-like images still flitted before my fancy—these were at first undefinable, but after awhile they took more certain shapes. Strange fluttering creatures hovered about me—lonely eyes stared at me from a visible deep gloom; long white bony fingers grasping at nothing made signs to me of warning or menace. Then—very gradually, there dawned upon my sense of vision a cloudy red mist like a stormy sunset, and from the middle of the blood-like haze a huge black hand descended toward me. It pounced upon my chest—it grasped my throat in its monstrous clutch, and held me down with a weight of iron. I struggled violently—I strove to cry out, but that terrific pressure took from me all power of utterance. I twisted myself to right and left in an endeavor to escape—but my tyrant of the sable hand had bound me in on all sides. Yet I continued to wrestle with the cruel opposing force that strove to overwhelm me—little by little—inch by inch—so! At last! One more struggle—victory! I woke! Merciful God! Where was I? In what horrible atmosphere—in what dense darkness? Slowly, as my senses returned to me, I remembered my recent illness. The monk—the man Pietro—where were *they*? What had they done to me? By degrees,

I realized that I was lying straight down upon my back—the couch was surely very hard? Why had they taken the pillows from under my head? A pricking sensation darted through my veins—I felt my own hands curiously—they were warm, and my pulse beat strongly, though fitfully. But what was this that hindered my breathing? Air—air! I must have air! I put up my hands—horror! They struck against a hard opposing substance above me. Quick as lightning then the truth flashed upon my mind! I had been buried—buried alive; this wooden prison that inclosed me was a coffin! A frenzy surpassing that of an infuriated tiger took swift possession of me—with hands and nails I tore and scratched at the accursed boards—with all the force of my shoulders and arms I toiled to wrench open the closed lid! My efforts were fruitless! I grew more ferociously mad with rage and terror. How easy were all deaths compared to one like this! I was suffocating—I felt my eyes start from their sockets—blood sprung from my mouth and nostrils—and icy drops of sweat trickled from my forehead. I paused, gasping for breath. Then, suddenly nerving myself for one more wild effort, I hurled my limbs with all the force of agony and desperation against one side of my narrow prison. It cracked—it split asunder!—and then—a new and horrid fear beset me, and I crouched back, panting heavily. If—if I were buried in the ground—so ran my ghastly thoughts—of what use to break open the coffin and let in the *mold*—the damp wormy mold, rich with the bones of the dead—the penetrating mold that would choke up my mouth and eyes, and seal me into silence forever! My mind quailed at this idea—my brain tottered on the verge of madness! I laughed—think of it!—and my laugh sounded in my ears like the last rattle in the throat of a dying man. But I could breathe more easily—even in the stupefaction of my fears—I was conscious of air. Yes!—the blessed air had rushed in somehow. Revived and encouraged as I recognized this fact, I felt with both hands till I found the crevice I had made, and then with frantic haste and strength I pulled and dragged at the wood, till suddenly the whole side of the coffin gave way, and I was able to force up the lid. I stretched out my arms—no weight of earth impeded their movements—I felt nothing but air—empty air. Yielding to my first strong impulse, I leaped out of the hateful box, and fell—fell some little distance, bruising my hands and knees on what seemed to be a stone pavement. Something weighty fell also, with a dull crashing *thud* close to me. The darkness was impenetrable. But there was breathing room, and the atmosphere was cool.