

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.

and refreshing. With some pain and difficulty I raised myself to a sitting position where I had fallen. My limbs were stiff and cramped as well as wounded, and I shivered as with strong ague. But my senses were clear—the tangled chain of my disordered thoughts became even and connected—my previous mad excitement gradually calmed, and I began to consider my condition. I had certainly been buried alive—there was no doubt of that. Intense pain had, I suppose, resolved itself into a long trance of unconsciousness—the people of the inn where I had been taken ill had at once believed me to be dead of cholera, and with the panic-stricken, indecent haste common in all Italy, especially at a time of plague, had thrust me into one of those flimsy coffins which were then being manufactured by scores in Naples—mere shells of thin deal, nailed together with clumsy hurry and fear. But how I blessed their wretched construction! Had I been laid in a stronger casket, who knows if even the most desperate frenzy of my strength might not have proved unavailing! I shuddered at the thought. Yet the question remained—Where was I? I reviewed my case from all points, and for some time could arrive at no satisfactory conclusion. Stay, though! I remembered that I had told the monk my name; he knew that I was the only descendant of the rich Romani family. What followed? Why, naturally, the good father had only done what his duty called upon him to do. He had seen me laid in the vault of my ancestors—the great Romani vault that had never been opened since my father's body was carried to its last resting-place with all the solemn pomp and magnificence of a wealthy nobleman's funeral obsequies. The more I thought of this the more probable it seemed. The Romani vault! Its forbidding gloom had terrified me as a lad when I followed my father's coffin to the stone niche assigned to it, and I had turned my eyes away in shuddering pain when I was told to look at the heavy oaken casket, hung with tattered velvet and ornamented with tarnished silver, which contained all that was left of my mother, who died young. I had felt sick and faint and cold, and had only recovered myself when I stood out again in the free air with the blue dome of heaven high above me. And now I was shut in the same vault—a prisoner—with what hope of escape? I reflected. The entrance to the vault, I remembered, was barred by a heavy door of closely twisted iron—from thence a flight of steep steps led downward—downward to where in all probability I now was. Suppose I could in the dense darkness feel my way to those steps and climb up to that door—of what avail? I was locked—nay, barred—and as it

was situated in a remote part of the burial-ground, there was no likelihood of even the keeper of the cemetery passing by it for days—perhaps not for weeks. Then must I starve? Or die of thirst? Tortured by these imaginings, I rose up from the pavement and stood erect. My feet were bare, and the cold stone on which I stood chilled me to the marrow. It was fortunate for me, I thought, that they had buried me as a cholera corpse—they had left me half-clothed for fear of infection. That is, I had my flannel shirt on and my usual walking trousers. Something there was, too, round my neck: I felt it, and as I did so a flood of sweet and sorrowful memories rushed over me. It was a slight gold chain, and on it hung a locket containing the portraits of my wife and child. I drew it out in the darkness; I covered it with passionate kisses and tears—the first I had shed since my death-like trance—tears scalding and bitter welled into my eyes. Life was worth living while Nina's smile lightened the world! I resolved to fight for existence, no matter what dire horrors should be yet in store for me. Nina—my love—my beautiful one! Her face gleamed out upon me in the pestilent gloom of the charnel-house; her eyes beckoned me—her young faithful eyes that were now, I felt sure, drowned in weeping for my supposed death. I seemed to see my tender-hearted darling sobbing alone in the empty silence of the room that had witnessed a thousand embraces between herself and me; her lovely hair disheveled; her sweet face pale and haggard with the bitterness of grief! Baby Stella, too, no doubt she would wonder, poor innocent! why I did not come to swing her as usual under the orange boughs. And Guido—brave and true friend! I thought of him with tenderness. I felt I knew how deep and lasting would be his honest regret for my loss. Oh, I would leave no means of escape untried; I would find some way out of this grim vault! How overjoyed they would all be to see me again—to know that I was not dead after all! What a welcome I should receive! How Nina would nestle into my arms; how my little child would cling to me; how Guido would clasp me by the hand! I smiled as I pictured the scene of rejoicing at the dear old villa—the happy home sanctified by perfect friendship and faithful love!

A deep hollow sound booming suddenly on my ears startled me—one! two! three! I counted the strokes up to twelve. It was some church bell tolling the hour. My pleasing fancies dispersed—I again faced the drear reality of my position. Twelve o'clock! Midday or midnight? I could not tell. I began to calculate. It was early morning when I had been

taken ill—not much past eight when I had met the monk and sought his assistance for the poor little fruit-seller who had after all perished alone in his sufferings. Now supposing my illness had lasted some hours, I might have fallen into a trance—died—as those around me had thought, somewhere about noon. In that case they would certainly have buried me with as little delay as possible—before sunset at all events. Thinking these points over one by one, I came to the conclusion that the bell I had just heard must have struck midnight—the midnight of the very day of my burial. I shivered; a kind of nervous dread stole over me. I have always been physically courageous, but at the same time, in spite of my education, I am somewhat superstitious—what Neapolitan is not? it runs in the southern blood. And there was something unutterably fearful in the sound of that midnight bell clanging harshly on the ears of a man pent up alive in a funeral vault with the decaying bodies of his ancestors close within reach of his hand! I tried to conquer my feelings—to summon up my fortitude. I endeavored to reason out the best method of escape. I resolved to feel my way, if possible, to the steps of the vault, and with this idea in my mind I put out my hands and began to move along slowly and with the utmost care. What was that? I stopped; I listened; the blood curdled in my veins! A shrill cry, piercing, prolonged, and melancholy, echoed through the hollow arches of my tomb. A cold perspiration broke out all over my body—my heart beat so loudly that I could hear it thumping against my ribs. Again—again—that weird shriek, followed by a whir and flap of wings. I breathed again.

“It is an owl,” I said to myself, ashamed of my fears; “a poor innocent bird—a companion and watcher of the dead, and therefore its voice is full of sorrowful lamentation—but it is harmless,” and I crept on with increased caution. Suddenly out of the dense darkness there stared two large yellow eyes, glittering with fiendish hunger and cruelty. For a moment I was startled, and stepped back; the creature flew at me with the ferocity of a tiger-cat! I fought with the horrible thing in all directions; it wheeled round my head, it pounced toward my face, it beat me with its large wings—wings that I could feel but not see; the yellow eyes alone shone in the thick gloom like the eyes of some vindictive demon! I struck at it right and left—the revolting combat lasted some moments—I grew sick and dizzy, yet I battled on recklessly. At last, thank Heaven! the huge owl was vanquished; it fluttered backward and downward, apparently exhausted, giving one wild screech of baffled fury, as its lamp-like eyes disappeared in the dark-

ness. Breathless, but not subdued—every nerve in my body quivering with excitement—I pursued my way, as I thought, toward the stone staircase, feeling the air with my outstretched hands as I groped along. In a little while I met with an obstruction—it was hard and cold—a stone wall, surely? I felt it up and down and found a hollow in it—was this the first step of the stair? I wondered; it seemed very high. I touched it cautiously—suddenly I came in contact with something soft and clammy to the touch like moss or wet velvet. Fingering this with a kind of repulsion, I soon traced out the oblong shape of a coffin. Curiously enough, I was not affected much by the discovery. I found myself monotonously counting the bits of raised metal which served, as I judged, for its ornamentation. Eight bits lengthwise—and the soft wet stuff between—four bits across; then a pang shot through me, and I drew my hand away quickly, as I considered—*whose* coffin was this? My father's? Or was I thus plucking, like a man in delirium, at the fragments of velvet on that cumbrous oaken casket wherein lay the sacred ashes of my mother's perished beauty? I roused myself from the apathy into which I had fallen. All the pains I had taken to find my way through the vault were wasted; I was lost in the profound gloom, and knew not where to turn. The horror of my situation presented itself to me with redoubled force. I began to be tormented with thirst. I fell on my knees and groaned aloud.

“God of infinite mercy!” I cried. “Saviour of the world! By the souls of the sacred dead whom Thou hast in Thy holy keeping, have pity upon me! Oh, my mother! if indeed thine earthly remains are near me—think of me, sweet angel in that heaven where thy spirit dwells at rest—plead for me and save me, or let me die now and be tortured no more!”

I uttered these words aloud, and the sound of my wailing voice ringing through the somber arches of the vault was strange and full of fantastic terror to my own ears. I knew that were my agony much further prolonged I should go mad. And I dared not picture to myself the frightful things of which a maniac might be capable of, shut up in such a place of death and darkness, with moldering corpses for companions! I remained on my knees, my face buried in my hands. I forced myself into comparative calmness, and strove to preserve the equilibrium of my distracted mind. Hush! What exquisite far-off floating voice of cheer was that? I raised my head and listened, entranced!

“Jug, jug, jug! lodola, lodola! trill-lil-lil! sweet, sweet, sweet!”

It was a nightingale. Familiar, delicious, angel-throated bird! How I blessed thee in that dark hour of despair! How I praised God for thine innocent existence! How I sprang up and laughed and wept for joy, as, all unconscious of me, thou didst shake out a shower of pearly warblings on the breast of the soothed air! Heavenly messenger of consolation!—even now I think of thee with tenderness—for thy sweet sake all birds possess me as their worshiper; humanity has grown hideous in my sight, but the singing-life of the woods and hills—how pure, how fresh!—the nearest thing to happiness on this side heaven!

A rush of strength and courage invigorated me. A new idea entered my brain. I determined to follow the voice of the nightingale. It sung on sweetly, encouragingly—and I began afresh my journeyings through the darkness. I fancied that the bird was perched on one of the trees outside the entrance of the vault, and that if I tried to get within closer hearing of its voice, I should most likely be thus guided to the very staircase I had been so painfully seeking. I stumbled along slowly. I felt feeble, and my limbs shook under me. This time nothing impeded my progress; the nightingale's liquid notes floated nearer and nearer, and hope, almost exhausted, sprang up again in my heart. I was scarcely conscious of my own movements. I seemed to be drawn along like one in a dream by the golden thread of the bird's sweet singing. All at once I caught my foot against a stone and fell forward with some force, but I felt no pain—my limbs were too numb to be sensible of any fresh suffering. I raised my heavy, aching eyes in the darkness; as I did so I uttered an exclamation of thanksgiving. A slender stream of moonlight, no thicker than the stem of an arrow, slanted downward toward me, and showed me that I had at last reached the spot I sought—in fact I had fallen upon the lowest step of the stone stairway. I could not distinguish the entrance door of the vault, but I knew that it must be at the summit of the steep ascent. I was too weary to move further just then. I lay still where I was, staring at the solitary moon-ray, and listening to the nightingale, whose rapturous melodies now rang out upon my ears with full distinctness. *One!* The harsh-toned bell I had heard before clanged forth the hour. It would soon be morning; I resolved to rest till then. Utterly worn out in body and mind, I laid down my head upon the cold stones as readily as if they had been the softest cushions, and in a few moments forgot all my miseries in a profound sleep.

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I must have slumbered for some time, when I was suddenly awakened by a suffocating sensation of faintness and nausea, accompanied by a sharp pain on my neck as though some creatures were stinging me. I put my hand up to the place—God! shall I ever forget the feel of the *Thing* my trembling fingers closed upon! It was fastened in my flesh—a winged, clammy, breathing horror! It clung to me with a loathly persistency that nearly drove me frantic, and wild with disgust and terror I screamed aloud! I closed both hands convulsively upon its fat, soft body—I literally tore it from my flesh and flung it as far back as I could into the interior blackness of the vault. For a time I believe I was indeed mad—the echoes rang with the piercing shrieks I could not restrain! Silent at last through sheer exhaustion I glared about me. The moonbeam had vanished; in its place lay a shaft of pale gray light, by which I could easily distinguish the whole length of the staircase and the closed gateway at its summit. I rushed up the ascent with the feverish haste of a madman—I grasped the iron grating with both hands and shook it fiercely. It was firm as a rock, locked fast. I called for help. Utter silence answered me. I peered through the closely twisted bars. I saw the grass, the drooping boughs of trees, and straight before my line of vision a little piece of the blessed sky, opal-tinted and faintly blushing with the consciousness of the approaching sunrise. I drank in the sweet fresh air; a long trailing branch of the wild grape vine hung near me; its leaves were covered thickly with dew. I squeezed one hand through the grating and gathered a few of these green morsels of coolness—I eat them greedily. They seemed to me more delicious than anything I had ever tasted; they relieved the burning fever of my parched throat and tongue. The glimpse of the trees and sky soothed and calmed me. There was a gentle twittering of awaking birds; my nightingale had ceased singing.

I began to recover slowly from my nervous terrors, and leaning against the gloomy arch of my charnel-house, I took courage to glance backward down the steep stairway up which I had sprung with such furious precipitation. Something white lay in a corner on the seventh step from the top. Curious to see what it was, I descended cautiously, and with some reluctance; it was the half of a thick waxen taper, such as are used in the Catholic ritual at the burial of the dead. No doubt it had been thrown down there by some careless acolyte, to save himself the trouble of carrying it after the service had ended. I looked at it meditatively. If I only had

a light! I plunged my hand half abstractedly into the pockets of my trousers—something jingled! Truly they had buried me in haste. My purse, a small bunch of keys, my card-case—one by one I drew them out and examined them surprisedly—they looked so familiar, and withal so strange! I searched again; and this time found something of real value to one in my condition—a small box of wax vestas. Now, had they left me my cigar-case? No, that was gone. It was a valuable silver one—no doubt the monk, who attended my supposed last moments, had taken it, together with my watch and chain, to my wife.

Well, I could not smoke, but I could strike a light. And there was the funeral taper ready for use. The sun had not yet risen. I must certainly wait till broad day before I could hope to attract by my shouts any stray person who might pass through the cemetery. Meanwhile, a fantastic idea suggested itself. I would go and look at my own coffin! Why not? It would be a novel experience. The sense of fear had entirely deserted me; the possession of that box of matches was sufficient to endow me with absolute hardihood. I picked up the church-candle and lighted it; it gave at first a feeble flicker, but afterwards burned with a clear and steady flame. Shading it with one hand from the draught, I gave a parting glance at the fair daylight that peeped smilingly in through my prison door, and then went down—down again into the dismal place where I had passed the night in such indescribable agony.

#### CHAPTER IV.

NUMBERS of lizards glided away from my feet as I descended the steps, and when the flare of my torch penetrated the darkness I heard a scurrying of wings mingled with various hissing sounds and wild cries. I knew now—none better—what weird and abominable things had habitation in this store-house of the dead, but I felt I could defy them all, armed with the light I carried. The way that had seemed so long in the dense gloom was brief and easy, and I soon found myself at the scene of my unexpected awakening from sleep. The actual body of the vault was square-shaped, like a small room inclosed within high walls—walls which were scooped out in various places so as to form niches in which the narrow caskets containing the bones of all the departed members of the Romani family were placed one above the other like so many bales of goods arranged evenly on the shelves of an ordinary warehouse. I held the candle high above my head and looked about me

with a morbid interest. I soon perceived what I sought—my own coffin.

There it was in a niche some five feet from the ground, its splintered portions bearing decided witness to the dreadful struggle I had made to obtain my freedom. I advanced and examined it closely. It was a frail shell enough—unlined, unornamented—a wretched sample of the undertaker's art, though God knows I had no fault to find with its workmanship, nor with the haste of him who fashioned it. Something shone at the bottom of it—it was a crucifix of ebony and silver. That good monk again! His conscience had not allowed him to see me buried without this sacred symbol; he had perhaps laid it on my breast as the last service he could render me; it had fallen from thence, no doubt, when I had wrenched my way through the boards that inclosed me. I took it and kissed it reverently—I resolved that if ever I met the holy father again, I would tell him my story, and as a proof of its truth, restore to him this cross, which he would be sure to recognize. Had they put my name on the coffin-lid? I wondered? Yes, there it was—painted on the wood in coarse, black letters, "FABIO ROMANI"—then followed the date of my birth; then a short Latin inscription, stating that I had died of cholera on August 15, 1884. That was yesterday—only yesterday! I seemed to have lived a century since then.

I turned to look at my father's resting-place. The velvet on his coffin hung from its sides in moldering remnants—but it was not so utterly damp-destroyed and worm-eaten as the soaked and indistinguishable material that still clung to the massive oaken chest in the next niche, where *she* lay—she from whose tender arms I had received my first embrace—she in whose loving eyes I had first beheld the world! I knew by a sort of instinct that it must have been with the frayed fragments on *her* coffin that my fingers had idly played in the darkness. I counted, as before, the bits of metal—eight bits lengthwise and four bits across—and on my father's close casket there were ten silver plates lengthwise and five across. My poor little mother! I thought of her picture—it hung in my library at home; the picture of a young, smiling, dark-haired beauty, whose delicate tint was as that of a peach ripening in the summer sun. All that loveliness had decayed into—what? I shuddered involuntarily—then I knelt humbly before those two sad hollows in the cold stone, and implored the blessing of the dead and gone beloved ones to whom, while they lived, my welfare had been dear. While I occupied this kneeling position the flame of my torch fell directly on some small

object that glittered with remarkable luster. I went to examine it; it was a jeweled pendant composed of one large pear-shaped pearl, set round with fine rose brilliants! Surprised at this discovery, I looked about to see where such a valuable gem could possibly have come from. I then noticed an unusually large coffin lying sideways on the ground; it appeared as if it had fallen suddenly and with force, for a number of loose stones and mortar were sprinkled near it. Holding the light close to the ground, I observed that a niche exactly below the one in which I had been laid was empty, and that a considerable portion of the wall there was broken away. I then remembered that when I had sprung so desperately out of my narrow box I had heard something fall with a crash beside me. This was the thing, then—this long coffin, big enough to contain a man seven feet high and broad in proportion. What gigantic ancestor had I irreverently dislodged?—and was it from a skeleton throat that the rare jewel which I held in my hand had been accidentally shaken?

My curiosity was excited, and I bent close to examine the lid of this funeral chest. There was no name on it—no mark of any sort, save one—a dagger roughly painted in red. Here was a mystery! I resolved to penetrate it. I set up my candle in a little crevice of one of the empty niches, and laid the pearl and diamond pendant beside it, thus disembarassing myself of all incumbrance. The huge coffin lay on its side, as I have said; its uppermost corner was splintered; I applied both hands to the work of breaking further asunder these already split portions. As I did so a leathern pouch or bag rolled out and fell at my feet. I picked it up and opened it—it was full of gold pieces! More excited than ever, I seized a large pointed stone, and by the aid of this extemporized instrument, together with the force of my own arms, hands, and feet, I managed, after some ten minutes' hard labor, to break open the mysterious casket.

When I had accomplished this deed I stared at the result like a man stupefied. No moldering horror met my gaze—no blanched or decaying bones; no grinning skull mocked me with its hollow eye-sockets. I looked upon a treasure worthy of an emperor's envy! The big coffin was literally lined and packed with incalculable wealth. Fifty large leathern bags tied with coarse cord lay uppermost; more than half of these were crammed with gold coins, the rest were full of priceless gems—necklaces, tiaras, bracelets, watches, chains, and other articles of feminine adornment were mingled with loose precious stones—diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and opals, some of unusual

size and luster, some uncut, and some all ready for the jeweler's setting. Beneath these bags were packed a number of pieces of silk, velvet, and cloth of gold, each piece being wrapped by itself in a sort of oil-skin, strongly perfumed with camphor and other spices. There were also three lengths of old lace, fine as gossamer, of matchless artistic design, in perfect condition. Among these materials lay two large trays of solid gold workmanship, most exquisitely engraved and ornamented, also four gold drinking-cups, of quaint and massive construction. Other valuables and curious trifles there were, such as an ivory statuette of Psyche on a silver pedestal, a waistband of coins linked together, a painted fan with a handle set in amber and turquois, a fine steel dagger in a jeweled sheath, and a mirror framed in old pearls. Last, but not least, at the very bottom of the chest lay rolls upon rolls of paper money amounting to some millions of francs—in all far surpassing what I had myself formerly enjoyed from my own revenues. I plunged my hands deep in the leathern bags; I fingered the rich materials; all this treasure was *mine!* I had found it in my own burial vault! I had surely the right to consider it as my property? I began to consider—how could it have been placed there without my knowledge? The answer to this question occurred to me at once. Brigands! Of course!—what a fool I was not to have thought of them before; the dagger painted on the lid of the chest should have guided me to the solution of the mystery. A red dagger was the recognized sign-manual of a bold and dangerous brigand named Carmelo Neri, who, with his reckless gang, haunted the vicinity of Palermo.

"So!" I thought, "this is one of your bright ideas, my cut-throat Carmelo! Cunning rogue! you calculated well—you thought that none would disturb the dead, much less break open a coffin in search of gold. Admirably planned, my Carmelo! But this time you must play a losing game! A supposed dead man coming to life again deserves something for his trouble, and I should be a fool not to accept the goods the gods and the robbers provide. An ill-gotten hoard of wealth, no doubt; but better in my hands than in yours, friend Carmelo!"

And I meditated for some minutes on this strange affair. If, indeed—and I saw no reason to doubt it—I had chanced to find some of the spoils of the redoubtable Neri, this great chest must have been brought over by sea from Palermo. Probably four stout rascals had carried the supposed coffin in a mock solemn procession, under the pretense of its containing the

body of a comrade. These thieves have a high sense of humor. Yet the question remained to be solved—How had they gained access to my ancestral vault, unless by means of a false key? All at once I was left in darkness. My candle went out as though blown upon by a gust of air. I had my matches, and of course could easily light it again, but I was puzzled to imagine the cause of its sudden extinction. I looked about me in the temporary gloom and saw, to my surprise, a ray of light proceeding from a corner of the very niche where I had fixed the candle between two stones. I approached and put my hand to the place; a strong draught blew through a hole large enough to admit the passage of three fingers. I quickly re-lighted my torch, and examining this hole and the back of the niche attentively, found that four blocks of granite in the wall had been removed and their places supplied by thick square logs cut from the trunks of trees. These logs were quite loosely fitted. I took them out easily one by one, and then came upon a close pile of brushwood. As I gradually cleared this away a large aperture disclosed itself wide enough for any man to pass through without trouble. My heart beat with the rapture of expected liberty; I clambered up—I looked—thank God! I saw the landscape—the sky! In two minutes I stood *outside* the vault on the soft grass, with the high arch of heaven above me, and the broad Bay of Naples glittering deliciously before my eyes! I clapped my hands and shouted for pure joy! I was free! Free to return to life, to love, to the arms of my beautiful Nina—free to resume the pleasant course of existence on the gladsome earth—free to forget, if I could, the gloomy horrors of my premature burial. If Carmelo Neri had heard the blessings I heaped upon his head—he would for once have deemed himself a saint rather than a brigand. What did I not owe to the glorious ruffian! Fortune and freedom! for it was evident that this secret passage into the Roman vault had been cunningly contrived by himself or his followers for their own private purposes. Seldom has any man been more grateful to his best benefactor than I was to the famous thief upon whose grim head, as I knew, a price had been set for many months. The poor wretch was in hiding. Well! the authorities should get no aid from me, I resolved; even if I were to discover his whereabouts. Why should I betray him? He had unconsciously done more for me than my best friend. Nay, what friends will you find at all in the world when you need substantial good? Few, or none. Touch the purse—test the heart!

What castles in the air I built as I stood rejoicing in the

morning light and my newly acquired liberty—what dreams of perfect happiness flitted radiantly before my fancy! Nina and I would love each other more fondly than before, I thought—our separation had been brief, but terrible—and the idea of what it might have been would endear us to one another with tenfold fervor. And little Stella! Why—this very evening I would swing her again under the orange boughs and listen to her sweet shrill laughter! This very evening I would clasp Guido's hand in a gladness too great for words! This very night my wife's fair head would lie pillowed on my breast in an ecstatic silence broken only by the music of kisses. Ah! my brain grew dizzy with the joyful visions that crowded thickly and dazzlingly upon me! The sun had risen—his long straight beams, like golden spears, touched the tops of the green trees, and roused little flashes as of red and blue fire on the shining surface of the bay. I heard the rippling of water and the measured soft dash of oars; and somewhere from a distant boat the mellifluous voice of a sailor sung a verse of the popular *ritornello*—

“*Sciore d'amenta  
Sta parollella mia tieul' ammenta  
Zompa llarì llirà!  
Sciore limone!  
Le voglio fa morì de passione  
Zompa llarì llirà!*”\*

I smiled—“*Mori de passione!*” Nina and I would know the meaning of those sweet words when the moon rose and the nightingales sung their love-songs to the dreaming flowers! Full of these happy fancies, I inhaled the pure morning air for some minutes, and then re-entered the vault.

#### CHAPTER V.

THE first thing I did was to repack all the treasures I had discovered. This work was easily accomplished. For the present I contented myself with taking two of the leathern bags for my own use, one full of gold pieces, the other of jewels. The chest had been strongly made, and was not much injured by being forced open. I closed its lid as tightly as possible, and dragged it to a remote and dark corner of the vault, where I placed three heavy stones upon it. I then took the two leathern pouches I had selected, and stuffed one in each of the pockets of my trousers. The action reminded me of the scantiness of attire in which I stood arrayed. Could I be seen in the public roads in such a plight? I examined my

\* Neapolitan dialect.