

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 parolella 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.

purse, which, as I before stated, had been left to me, together with my keys and card-case, by the terrified persons who had huddled me into my coffin with such scant ceremony. It contained two twenty-francs pieces and some loose silver. Enough to buy a decent costume of some sort. But where could I make the purchase, and how? Must I wait till evening and slink out of this charnel-house like the ghost of a wretched criminal? No! come what would, I made up my mind not to linger a moment longer in the vault. The swarm of beggars that infest Naples exhibit themselves in every condition of rags, dirt, and misery; at the very worst I could only be taken for one of them. And whatever difficulties I might encounter, no matter!—they would soon be over.

Satisfied that I had placed the brigand coffin in a safe position, I secured the pearl and diamond pendant I had first found, to the chain round my neck. I intended this ornament as a gift for my wife. Then, once more climbing through the aperture, I closed it completely with the logs and brushwood as it was before, and examining it narrowly from the outside, I saw that it was utterly impossible to discern the smallest hint of any entrance to a subterranean passage, so well and cunningly had it been contrived. Now, nothing more remained for me to do but to make the best of my way to the city, there to declare my identity, obtain food and clothes, and then to hasten with all possible speed to my own residence.

Standing on a little hillock, I looked about me to see which direction I should take. The cemetery was situated on the outskirts of Naples—Naples itself lay on my left hand. I perceived a sloping road winding in that direction, and judged that if I followed it it would lead me to the city suburbs. Without further hesitation I commenced my walk. It was now full day. My bare feet sunk deep in the dust that was hot as desert sand—the blazing sun beat down fiercely on my uncovered head, but I felt none of these discomforts; my heart was too full of gladness. I could have sung aloud for delight as I stepped swiftly along toward home—and Nina! I was aware of a great weakness in my limbs—my eyes and head ached with the strong dazzling light; occasionally, too, an icy shiver ran through me that made my teeth chatter. But I recognized these symptoms as the after effects of my so nearly fatal illness, and I paid no heed to them. A few weeks' rest under my wife's loving care, and I knew I should be as well as ever. I stepped on bravely. For some time I met no one, but at last I overtook a small cart laden with freshly gathered grapes. The driver lay on his seat asleep, his pony meanwhile

cropped the green herbage by the road-side, and every now and then shook the jingling bells on his harness as though expressing the satisfaction he felt at being left to his own devices. The piled-up grapes looked tempting, and I was both hungry and thirsty. I laid a hand on the sleeping man's shoulder; he awoke with a start. Seeing me, his face assumed an expression of the wildest terror; he jumped from his cart and sunk down on his knees in the dust, imploring me by the Madonna, St. Joseph, and all the saints to spare his life. I laughed; his fears seemed to me ludicrous. Surely there was nothing alarming about me beyond my paucity of clothing.

"Get up, man!" I said. "I want nothing of you but a few grapes, and for them I will pay." And I held out to him a couple of francs. He rose from the dust, still trembling and eying me askance with evident suspicion, took several bunches of the purple fruit, and gave them to me without saying a word. Then, pocketing the money I proffered, he sprung into his cart, and lashing his pony till the unfortunate animal plunged and reared with pain and fury, rattled off down the road at such a break-neck speed that I saw nothing but a whirling blot of wheels disappearing in the distance. I was amused at the absurdity of this man's terror. What did he take me for I wondered? A ghost or a brigand? I eat my grapes leisurely as I walked along—they were deliciously cool and refreshing—food and wine in one. I met several other persons as I neared the city, market-people and venders of ices—but they took no note of me—in fact, I avoided them all as much as possible. On reaching the suburbs I turned into the first street I saw that seemed likely to contain a few shops. It was close and dark and foul-smelling, but I had not gone far down it when I came upon the sort of place I sought—a wretched tumble-down hovel, with a partly broken window, through which a shabby array of second-hand garments were to be dimly perceived, strung up for show on pieces of coarse twine. It was one of those dirty dens where sailors, returning from long voyages, frequently go to dispose of the various trifles they have picked up in foreign countries, so that among the forlorn specimens of second-hand wearing apparel many quaint and curious objects were to be seen, such as shells, branches of rough coral, strings of beads, cups and dishes carved out of cocoa-nut, dried gourds, horns of animals, fans, stuffed parakeets, and old coins—while a grotesque wooden idol peered hideously forth from between the stretched-out portions of a pair of old nankeen trousers, as though surveying the miscellaneous collection in idiotic

amazement. An aged man sat smoking at the open door of this promising habitation—a true specimen of a Neapolitan grown old. The skin of his face was like a piece of brown parchment scored all over with deep furrows and wrinkles, as though Time, disapproving of the history he had himself penned upon it, had scratched over and blotted out all records, so that no one should henceforth be able to read what had once been clear writing. The only animation left in him seemed to have concentrated itself in his eyes, which were black and bead-like, and roved hither and thither with a glance of ever-restless and ever-suspicious inquiry. He saw me coming toward him, but he pretended to be absorbed in a profound study of the patch of blue sky that gleamed between the closely leaning houses of the narrow street. I accosted him—and he brought his gaze swiftly down to my level, and stared at me with keen inquisitiveness.

“I have had a long tramp,” I said, briefly, for he was not the kind of man to whom I could explain my recent terrible adventure, “and I have lost some of my clothes by an accident on the way. Can you sell me a suit? Anything will do—I am not particular.”

The old man took his pipe from his mouth.

“Do you fear the plague?” he asked.

“I have just recovered from an attack of it,” I replied, coolly.

He looked at me attentively from head to foot, and then broke into a low chuckling laugh.

“Ha! ha!” he muttered, half to himself, half to me. “Good—good! Here is one like myself—not afraid—not afraid! We are not cowards. We do not find fault with the blessed saints—they send the plague. The beautiful plague!—I love it! I buy all the clothes I can get that are taken from the corpses—they are nearly always excellent clothes. I never clean them—I sell them again at once—yes—yes! Why not! The people must die—the sooner the better! I help the good God as much as I can.” And the old blasphemer crossed himself devoutly.

I looked down upon him from where I stood drawn up to my full height, with a glance of disgust. He filled me with something of the same repulsion I had felt when I touched the unnameable *Thing* that fastened on my neck while I slept in the vault.

“Come!” I said, somewhat roughly, “will you sell me a suit or no?”

“Yes, yes!” and he rose stiffly from his seat; he was very short of stature, and so bent with age and infirmity that he

looked more like the crooked bough of a tree than a man, as he hobbled before me into his dark shop. “Come inside, come inside! Take your choice; there is enough here to suit all tastes. See now, what would you? Behold here the dress of a gentleman, ah! what beautiful cloth, what strong wool! English make? Yes, yes! He was English that wore it; a big, strong milord, that drank beer and brandy like water—and rich—just heaven!—how rich! But the plague took him; he died cursing God, and calling bravely for more brandy. Ha, ha! a fine death—a splendid death! His landlord sold me his clothes for three francs—one, two, three—but you must give me six; that is fair profit, is it not? And I am old and poor. I must make something to live upon.”

I threw aside the tweed suit he displayed for my inspection. “Nay,” I said, “I care nothing for the plague, but find me something better than the cast-off clothing of a brandy-soaked Englishman. I would rather wear the motley garb of a fellow who played the fool in carnival.”

The old dealer laughed with a crackling sound in his withered throat, like the rattling of stones in a tin pot.

“Good, good!” he croaked. “I like that, I like that! Thou art old, but thou art merry. That pleases me; one should laugh always. Why not? Death laughs; you never see a solemn skull; it laughs always!”

And he plunged his long lean fingers into a deep drawer full of miscellaneous garments, mumbling to himself all the while. I stood beside him in silence, pondering on his words, “Thou art *old*, but merry.” What did he mean by calling *me* old? He must be blind, I thought, or in his dotage. Suddenly he looked up.

“Talking of the plague,” he said, “it is not always wise. It did a foolish thing yesterday—a very foolish thing. It took one of the richest men in the neighborhood, young too, strong and brave; he looked as if he would never die. The plague touched him in the morning—before sunset he was nailed up and put down in his big family vault—a cold lodging, and less handsomely furnished than his grand marble villa on the heights yonder. When I heard the news I told the Madonna she was wicked. Oh, yes! I rated her soundly; she is a woman, and capricious; a good scolding brings her to reason. Look you! I am a friend to God and the plague, but they both did a stupid thing when they took Count Fabio Romani.”

I started, but quickly controlled myself into an appearance of indifference.

"Indeed!" I said, carelessly. "And pray who was he that he should not deserve to die as well as other people?"

The old man raised himself from his stooping attitude, and stared at me with his keen black eyes.

"Who was he? who was he?" he cried, in a shrill tone. "Oh, he! One can see you know nothing of Naples. You have not heard of the rich Romani? See you, I wished him to live. He was clever and bold, but I did not grudge him that—no, he was good to the poor; he gave away hundreds of francs in charity. I have seen him often—I saw him married." And here his parchment face screwed itself into an expression of the most malignant cruelty. "Pah! I hate his wife—a fair, soft thing, like a white snake! I used to watch them both from the corners of the streets as they drove along in their fine carriage, and I wondered how it would all end, whether he or she would gain the victory first. I wanted *him* to win; I would have helped him to kill her, yes! But the saints have made a mistake this time, for he is dead, and that she-devil has all. Oh, yes! God and the plague have done a foolish thing for once."

I listened to the old wretch with deepening aversion, yet with some curiosity too. Why should he hate my wife? I thought, unless, indeed, he hated all youth and beauty, as was most probably the case. And if he had seen me as often as he averred he must know me by sight. How was it then that he did not recognize me now? Following out this thought, I said aloud:

"What sort of looking man was this Count Romani? You say he was handsome—was he tall or short—dark or fair?"

Putting back his straggling gray locks from his forehead, the dealer stretched out a yellow, claw-like hand, as though pointing to some distant vision.

"A beautiful man!" he exclaimed; "a man good for the eyes to see! As straight as you are!—as tall as you are!—as broad as you are! But your eyes are sunken and dim—his were full and large and sparkling. Your face is drawn and pale—his was of a clear olive tint, round and flushed with health; and his hair was glossy black—ah! as jet-black, my friend, as yours is snow-white!"

I recoiled from these last words in a sort of terror; they were like an electric shock! Was I indeed so changed? Was it possible that the horrors of a night in the vault had made such a dire impression upon me? My hair *white?—mine!* I could hardly believe it. If so, perhaps Nina would not recognize me—she might be terrified at my aspect—Guido himself

might have doubts of my identity. Though, for that matter, I could easily prove myself to be indeed Fabio Romani—even if I had to show the vault and my own sundered coffin. While I revolved all this in my mind the old man, unconscious of my emotion, went on with his mumbling chatter.

"Ah, yes, yes! He was a fine fellow—a strong fellow. I used to rejoice that he was so strong. He could have taken the little throat of his wife between finger and thumb and nipped it—so! and she would have told no more lies. I wanted him to do it—I waited for it. He would have done it surely, had he lived. That is why I am sorry he died."

Mastering my feelings by a violent effort, I forced myself to speak calmly to this malignant old brute.

"Why do you hate the Countess Romani so much?" I asked him, with sternness. "Has she done you any harm?"

He straightened himself as much as he was able and looked me full in the eyes.

"See you!" he answered, with a sort of leering laugh about the corners of his wicked mouth. "I will tell you why I hate her—yes—I will tell you, because you are a man and strong. I like strong men—they are sometimes fooled by women, it is true—but then they can take revenge. I was strong myself once. And you—you are old—but you love a jest—you will understand. The Romani woman has done me no harm. She laughed—once. That was when her horses knocked me down in the street. I was hurt—but I saw her red lips widen and her white teeth glitter—she has a baby smile—the people will tell you—so innocent! I was picked up—her carriage drove on—her husband was not with her—he would have acted differently. But it is no matter—I tell you she laughed—and then I saw at once the likeness."

"The likeness!" I exclaimed, impatiently, for his story annoyed me. "What likeness?"

"Between her and my wife," the dealer replied, fixing his cruel eyes upon me with increasing intensity of regard. "Oh, yes! I know what love is. I know too that God had very little to do with the making of women. It was a long time before even He could find the Madonna. Yes—yes, I know! I tell you I married a thing as beautiful as a morning in spring-time—with a little head that seemed to droop like a flower under its weight of sunbeam hair—and eyes! h—like those of a tiny child when it looks up and asks you for kisses. I was absent once—I returned and found her sleeping tranquilly—yes! on the breast of a black-browed street-singer from Venice—a handsome lad enough and brave as a young lion. He saw me

and sprung at my throat—I held him down and knelt upon his chest—*she* woke and gazed upon us, too terrified to speak or scream—she only shivered and made a little moaning sound like that of a spoiled baby. I looked down into her prostrate lover's eyes and smiled. 'I will not hurt you,' I said. 'Had *she* not consented, you could not have gained the victory. All I ask of you is to remain here for a few moments longer.' He stared, but was mute. I bound his hand and foot so that he could not stir. Then I took my knife and went to her. Her blue eyes glared wide—imploringly she turned them upon me—and ever she wrung her small hands and shivered and moaned. I plunged the keen bright blade deep through her soft white flesh—her lover cried out in agony—her heart's blood welled up in a crimson tide, staining with a bright hue the white garments she wore; she flung up her arms—she sunk back on her pillows—dead. I drew the knife from her body, and with it cut the bonds of the Venetian boy. I then gave it to him.

"Take it as a remembrance of her," I said. "In a month she would have betrayed you as she betrayed me."

He raged like a madman. He rushed out and called the gendarmes. Of course I was tried for murder—but it was not murder—it was justice. The judge found extenuating circumstances. Naturally! He had a wife of his own. He understood my case. Now you know why I hate that dainty jeweled woman up at the Villa Romani. She is just like that other one—that creature I slew—she has just the same slow smile and the same child-like eyes. I tell you again, I am sorry her husband is dead—it vexes me sorely to think of it. For he would have killed her in time—yes!—of that I am quite sure!"

CHAPTER VI.

I LISTENED to his narrative with a pained feeling at my heart, and a shuddering sensation as of icy cold ran through my veins. Why, I had fancied that all who beheld Nina must, perforce, love and admire her. True, when this old man was accidentally knocked down by her horses (a circumstance she had never mentioned to me), it was careless of her not to stop and make inquiry as to the extent of his injuries, but she was young and thoughtless; she could not be intentionally heartless. I was horrified to think that she should have made such an enemy as even this aged and poverty-stricken wretch; but

I said nothing. I had no wish to betray myself. He waited for me to speak and grew impatient at my silence.

"Say now, my friend!" he queried, with a sort of childish eagerness, "did I not take a good vengeance? God himself could not have done better!"

"I think your wife deserved her fate," I said, curtly, "but I cannot say I admire you for being her murderer."

He turned upon me rapidly, throwing both hands above his head with a frantic gesticulation. His voice rose to a kind of muffled shriek.

"Murderer you call me—ha! ha! that is good. No, no! *She* murdered *me*! I tell you I died when I saw her asleep in her lover's arms—she killed me at one blow. A devil rose up in my body and took swift revenge; that devil is in me now, a brave devil, a strong devil! That is why I do not fear the plague; the devil in me frightens away death. Some day it will leave me"—here his smothered yell sunk gradually to a feeble, weary tone; "yes, it will leave me and I shall find a dark place where I can sleep; I do not sleep much now." He eyed me half wistfully.

"You see," he explained, almost gently, "my memory is very good, and when one thinks of many things one cannot sleep. It is many years ago, but every night I see *her*; she comes to me wringing her little white hands, her blue eyes stare, I hear her short moans of terror. Every night, every night!" He paused, and passed his hands in a bewildered way across his forehead. Then, like a man suddenly waking from sleep, he stared as though he saw me now for the first time, and broke into a low, chuckling laugh.

"What a thing, what a thing it is, the memory!" he muttered. "Strange—strange! See, I remembered all that, and forgot you! But I know what you want—a suit of clothes—yes, you need them badly, and I also need the money for them. Ha, ha! And you will not have the fine coat of Milord Inglese! No, no! I understand. I will find you something—patience, patience!"

And he began to grope among a number of things that were thrown in a confused heap at the back of the shop. While in this attitude he looked so gaunt and grim that he reminded me of an aged vulture stooping over carrion, and yet there was something pitiable about him too. In a way I was sorry for him; a poor half-witted wretch, whose life had been full of such gall and wormwood. What a different fate was his to mine, I thought. *I* had endured but one short night of agony; how trifling it seemed compared to *his* hourly remorse and

suffering! He hated Nina for an act of thoughtlessness; well, no doubt she was not the only woman whose existence annoyed him; it was most probable that he was at enmity with all women. I watched him pityingly as he searched among the worn-out garments which were his stock-in-trade, and wondered why Death, so active in smiting down the strongest in the city, should have thus cruelly passed by this forlorn wreck of human misery, for whom the grave would have surely been a most welcome release and rest. He turned round at last with an exulting gesture.

"I have found it!" he exclaimed. "The very thing to suit you. You are perhaps a coral-fisher? You will like a fisherman's dress. Here is one, red sash, cap and all, in beautiful condition! He that wore it was about your height; it will fit you well as it fitted him; and, look you! the plague is not in it; the sea has soaked through and through it; it smells of the sand and weed."

He spread out the rough garb before me. I glanced at it carelessly.

"Did the former wearer kill *his* wife?" I asked, with a slight smile.

The old rag-picker shook his head and made a sign with his outspread fingers expressive of contempt.

"Not he! He was a fool. He killed himself."

"How was that? By accident or design?"

"*Chè! Chè!* He knew very well what he was doing. It happened only two months since. It was for the sake of a black-eyed jade; she lives and laughs all day long up at Sorrento. He had been on a long voyage; he brought her pearls for her throat and coral pins for her hair. She had promised to marry him. He had just landed; he met her on the quay; he offered her the pearl and coral trinkets. She threw them back and told him she was tired of him. Just that—nothing more. He tried to soften her; she raged at him like a tiger-cat. Yes, I was one of the little crowd that stood round them on the quay; I saw it all. Her black eyes flashed, she stamped and bit her lips at him, her full bosom heaved as though it would burst her laced bodice. She was only a market-girl, but she gave herself the airs of a queen. 'I am tired of you!' she said to him. 'Go! I wish to see you no more.' He was tall and well-made, a powerful fellow; but he staggered, his face grew pale, his lips quivered. He bent his head a little—turned—and before any hand could stop him he sprang from the edge of the quay into the waves; they closed over his head, for he did not try to swim; he just sunk down, down, like a stone.

Next day his body came ashore, and I bought his clothes for two francs; you shall have them for four."

"And what became of the girl?" I asked.

"Oh, *she!* She laughs all day long, as I told you. She has a new lover every week. What should *she* care?"

I drew out my purse. "I will take this suit," I said. "You ask four francs, here are six, but for the extra two you must show me some private corner where I can dress."

"Yes, yes. But certainly!" and the old fellow trembled all over with avaricious eagerness as I counted the silver pieces into his withered palm. "Anything to oblige a generous stranger! There is the place I sleep in; it is not much, but there is a mirror—*her* mirror—the only thing I keep of hers; come this way, come this way!"

And stumbling hastily along, almost falling over the disordered bundles of clothing that lay about in all directions, he opened a little door that seemed to be cut in the wall, and led me into a kind of close cupboard, smelling most vilely, and furnished with a miserable pallet bed and one broken chair. A small square pane of glass admitted light enough to see all that there was to be seen, and close to this extemporized window hung the mirror alluded to, a beautiful thing set in silver of antique workmanship, the costliness of which I at once recognized, though into the glass itself I dared not for the moment look. The old man showed me with some pride that the door to this narrow den of his locked from within.

"I made the lock and key, and fitted it all myself," he said, "Look how neat and strong! Yes; I was clever once at all that work—it was my trade—till that morning when I found her with the singer from Venice; then I forgot all I used to know—it went away somehow I could never understand why. Here is the fisherman's suit; you can take your time to put it on; fasten the door; the room is at your service."

And he nodded several times in a manner that was meant to be friendly, and left me. I followed his advice at once and locked myself in. Then I stepped steadily to the mirror hanging on the wall, and looked at my own reflection. A bitter pang shot through me. The dealer's sight was good, he had said truly. I was old! If twenty years of suffering had passed over my head, they could hardly have changed me more terribly. My illness had thinned my face and marked it with deep lines of pain; my eyes had retreated far back into my head, while a certain wildness of expression in them bore witness to the terrors I had suffered in the vault, and to crown all, my hair was indeed perfectly white. I understood now

the alarm of the man who had sold me grapes on the highway that morning; my appearance was strange enough to startle any one. Indeed, I scarcely recognized myself. Would my wife, would Guido recognize me? Almost I doubted it. This thought was so painful to me that the tears sprang to my eyes. I brushed them away in haste.

"Fy on thee, Fabio! Be a man!" I said, addressing myself angrily. "Of what matter after all whether hairs are black or white? What matter how the face changes, so long as the heart is true? For a moment, perhaps, thy love may grow pale at sight of thee; but when she knows of thy sufferings, wilt thou not be dearer to her than ever? Will not one of her soft embraces recompense thee for all thy past anguish, and suffice to make thee young again?"

And thus encouraging my sinking spirits, I quickly arrayed myself in the Neapolitan coral-fisher's garb. The trousers were very loose, and were provided with two long deep pockets, convenient receptacles, which easily contained the leathern bags of gold and jewels I had taken from the brigand's coffin. When my hasty toilet was completed I took another glance at the mirror, this time with a half smile. True, I was greatly altered; but after all I did not look so bad. The fisherman's picturesque costume became me well; the scarlet cap sat jauntily on the snow-white curls that clustered so thickly over my forehead, and the consciousness I had of approaching happiness sent a little of the old fearless luster back into my sunken eyes. Besides, I knew I should not always have this care-worn and wasted appearance; rest, and perhaps a change of air, would infallibly restore the roundness to my face and the freshness to my complexion; even my white locks might return to their pristine color, such things had been; and supposing they remained white? well!—there were many who would admire the peculiar contrast between a young man's face and an old man's hair.

Having finished dressing, I unlocked the door of the stuffy little cabin and called the old rag-picker. He came shuffling along with his head bent, but raising his eyes as he approached me, he threw up his hands in astonishment, exclaiming,

"Santissima Madonna! But you are a fine man—a fine man! Eh, eh! Holy Joseph! What height and breadth! A pity—a pity you are old; you must have been strong when you were young!"

Half in joke, and half to humor him in his fancy for mere muscular force, I rolled up the sleeve of my jacket to the shoulder, saying, lightly,

"Oh, as for being strong! There is plenty of strength in me still, you see."

He stared; laid his yellow fingers on my bared arm with a kind of ghoulish interest and wonder, and felt the muscles of it with childish, almost maudlin admiration.

"Beautiful, beautiful!" he mumbled. "Like iron—just think of it! Yes, yes. You could kill anything easily. Ah! I used to be like that once. I was clever at sword-play. I could, with well-tempered steel, cut asunder a seven-times-folded piece of silk at one blow without fraying out a thread. Yes, as neatly as one cuts butter! You could do that too if you liked. It all lies in the arm—the brave arm that kills at a single stroke."

And he gazed at me intently with his small bleary eyes as though anxious to know more of my character and temperament. I turned abruptly from him, and called his attention to my own discarded garments.

"See," I said, carelessly; "you can have these, though they are not of much value. And, stay, here are another three francs for some socks and shoes, which I dare say you can find to suit me."

He clasped his hands ecstatically, and poured out a torrent of thanks and praises for this additional and unexpected sum, and protesting by all the saints that he and the entire contents of his shop were at the service of so generous a stranger, he at once produced the articles I asked for. I put them on—and then stood up thoroughly equipped and ready to make my way back to my own home when I chose. But I had resolved on one thing. Seeing that I was so greatly changed, I determined not to go to the Villa Romani by daylight, lest I should startle my wife too suddenly. Women are delicate; my unexpected appearance might give her a nervous shock which perhaps would have serious results. I would wait till the sun had set, and then go up to the house by a back way I knew of, and try to get speech with one of the servants. I might even meet my friend Guido Ferrari, and he would break the joyful news of my return from death to Nina by degrees, and also prepare her for my altered looks. While these thoughts flitted rapidly through my brain, the old rag-picker stood near me with his head on one side like a meditative raven, and regarded me intently.

"Are you going far?" he asked at last, with a kind of timidity.

"Yes," I answered him, abruptly; "very far."

He laid a detaining hand on my sleeve, and his eyes glittered with a malignant expression.

"Tell me," he muttered, eagerly, "tell me—I will keep the secret. Are you going to a woman?"

I looked down upon him, half in disdain, half in amusement. "Yes!" I said, quietly; "I am going to a woman."

He broke into silent laughter—hideous laughter that contorted his visage and twisted his body in convulsive writhings.

I glanced at him in disgust, and shaking off his hand from my arm, I made my way to the door of the shop. He hobbled quickly after me, wiping away the moisture that his inward merriment had brought into his eyes.

"Going to a woman!" he croaked. "Ha, ha! You are not the first, nor will you be the last that has gone so! Going to a woman! that is well—that is good! Go to her, go! You are strong; you have a brave arm! Go to her; find her out, and—*kill her!* Yes, yes—you will be able to do it easily—quite easily! Go and kill her!"

He stood at his low door mouthing and pointing, his stunted figure and evil face reminding me of one of Heinrich Heine's dwarf devils who are depicted as piling fire on the heads of the saints. I bade him "Good-day" in an indifferent tone, but he made me no answer. I walked slowly away. Looking back once, I saw him still standing on the threshold of his wretched dwelling, his wicked mouth working itself into all manner of grimaces, while with his crooked fingers he made signs in the air as if he caught an invisible something and throttled it. I went on down the street and out of it into the broader thoroughfares, with his last words ringing in my ears, "*Go and kill her!*"

CHAPTER VII.

THAT day seemed very long to me. I wandered aimlessly about the city, seeing few faces that I knew, for the wealthier inhabitants, afraid of the cholera, had either left the place together or remained closely shut within their own houses. Everywhere I went something bore witness to the terrible ravages of the plague. At almost every corner I met a funeral procession. Once I came upon a group of men who were standing in an open doorway packing a dead body into a coffin too small for it. There was something truly revolting in the way they doubled up the arms and legs and squeezed in the shoulders of the deceased man—one could hear the bones crack. I

watched the brutal proceedings for a minute or so, and then I said aloud:

"You had better make sure he is quite dead."

The *beccamorti* looked at me in surprise; one laughed grimly and swore. "By the body of God, if I thought he were not I would twist his accursed neck for him! But the cholera never fails, he is dead for certain—see!" And he knocked the head of the corpse to and fro against the sides of the coffin with no more compunction than if it had been a block of wood. Sickened at the sight, I turned away and said no more. On reaching one of the more important thoroughfares, I perceived several knots of people collected, who glanced at one another with eager yet shamed faces, and spoke in low voices. A whisper reached my ears, "The king! the king!" All heads were turned in one direction; I paused and looked also. Walking at a leisurely pace, accompanied by a few gentlemen of earnest mien and grave deportment, I saw the fearless monarch, Humbert of Italy—he whom his subjects delight to honor. He was making a round of visits to all the vilest holes and corners of the city, where the plague raged most terribly; he had not so much as a cigarette in his mouth to ward off infection. He walked with the easy and assured step of a hero; his face was somewhat sad, as though the sufferings of his people had pressed heavily upon his sympathetic heart. I bared my head reverently as he passed, his keen kind eyes lighted on me with a smile.

"A subject for a painting, yon white-haired fisherman!" I heard him say to one of his attendants. Almost I betrayed myself. I was on the point of springing forward and throwing myself at his feet to tell him my story. It seemed to me both cruel and unnatural that he, my beloved sovereign, should pass me without recognition—me, to whom he had spoken so often and so cordially. For when I visited Rome, as I was accustomed to do annually, there were few more welcome guests at the balls of the Quirinal Palace than Count Fabio Romani. I began to wonder stupidly who Fabio Romani was; the gay gallant known as such seemed no longer to have any existence—a "*white-haired fisherman*" usurped his place. But though I thought these things I refrained from addressing the king. Some impulse, however, led me to follow him at a respectful distance, as did also many others. His majesty strolled through the most pestilential streets with as much unconcern as though he were taking his pleasure in a garden of roses; he stepped quietly into the dirtiest hovels where lay both dead and dying; he spoke words of kindly encouragement to the grief-stricken