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

and terrified mourners, who stared through their tears at the monarch with astonishment and gratitude; silver and gold were gently dropped into the hands of the suffering poor, and the very pressing cases received the royal benefactor's personal attention and immediate relief. Mothers with infants in their arms knelt to implore the king's blessing—which to pacify them he gave with a modest hesitation, as though he thought himself unworthy, and yet with a parental tenderness that was infinitely touching. One wild-eyed black-haired girl flung herself down on the ground right in the king's path; she kissed his feet, and then sprung erect with a gesture of triumph.

"I am saved!" she cried; "the plague cannot walk in the same road with the king!"

Humbert smiled, and regarded her somewhat as an indulgent father might regard a spoiled daughter; but he said nothing, and passed on. A cluster of men and women standing at the open door of one of the poorest-looking houses in the street next attracted the monarch's attention. There was some noisy argument going on; two or three *beccamorti* were loudly discussing together and swearing profusely—some women were crying bitterly, and in the center of the excited group a coffin stood on end as though waiting for an occupant. One of the gentlemen in attendance on the king preceded him and announced his approach, whereupon the loud clamor of tongues ceased, the men bared their heads, and the women checked their sobs.

"What is wrong here, my friends?" the monarch asked, with exceeding gentleness.

There was silence for a moment; the *beccamorti* looked sullen and ashamed. Then one of the women, with a fat good-natured face and eyes rimmed redly round with weeping, elbowed her way through the little throng to the front and spoke.

"May the Holy Virgin and saints bless your majesty!" she cried, in shrill accents. "And as for what is wrong, it would soon be right if those shameless pigs," pointing to the *beccamorti*, "would let us alone. They would kill a man rather than wait an hour—one little hour! The girl is dead, your majesty—and Giovanni, poor lad! will not leave her; he has his two arms round her tight—Holy Virgin!—think of it! and she a cholera corpse—and do what we can, he will not be parted from her, and they seek her body for the burial. And if we force him away, *poverino*, he will lose his head for certain. One little hour, your majesty, just one, and the reverend father will come and persuade Giovanni better than we can."

The king raised his hand with a slight gesture of command—the little crowd parted before him—and he entered the miserable dwelling wherein lay the corpse that was the cause of all the argument. His attendants followed; I, too, availed myself of a corner in the doorway. The scene disclosed was so terribly pathetic that few could look upon it without emotion—Humbert of Italy himself uncovered his head and stood silent. On a poor pallet bed lay the fair body of a girl in her first youth, her tender loveliness as yet untouched even by the disfiguring marks of the death that had overtaken her. One would have thought she slept, had it not been for the rigidity of her stiffened limbs, and the wax-like pallor of her face and hands. Right across her form, almost covering it from view, a man lay prone, as though he had fallen there lifeless—indeed he might have been dead also for any sign he showed to the contrary. His arms were closed firmly round the girl's corpse—his face was hidden from view on the cold breast that would no more respond to the warmth of his caresses. A straight beam of sunlight shot like a golden spear into the dark little room and lighted up the whole scene—the prostrate figures on the bed—the erect form of the compassionate king, and the grave and anxious faces of the little crowd of people who stood around him.

"See! that is the way he has been ever since last night when she died," whispered the woman who had before spoken; "and his hands are clinched round her like iron—one cannot move a finger!"

The king advanced. He touched the shoulder of the unhappy lover. His voice, modulated to an exquisite softness, struck on the ears of the listeners like a note of cheerful music.

"*Figlio mio!*"

There was no answer. The women, touched by the simple endearing words of the monarch, began to sob, though gently, and even the men brushed a few drops from their eyes. Again the king spoke.

"*Figlio mio!* I am your king. Have you no greeting for me?"

The man raised his head from its pillow on the breast of the beloved corpse and stared vacantly at the royal speaker. His haggard face, tangled hair, and wild eyes gave him the appearance of one who had long wandered in a labyrinth of frightful visions from which there was no escape but self-murder.

"Your hand, my son!" resumed the king, in a tone of soldier-like authority.

Very slowly—very reluctantly—as though he were forced to

the action by some strange magnetic influence which he had no power to withstand, he loosened his right arm from the dead form it clasped so pertinaciously, and stretched forth the hand as commanded. Humbert caught it firmly within his own and held it fast—then looking the poor fellow full in the face, he said with grave steadiness and simplicity,

"There is no death in love, my friend!"

The young man's eyes met his—his set mouth softened—and wresting his hand passionately from that of the king, he broke into a passion of weeping. Humbert at once placed a protecting arm round him, and with the assistance of one of his attendants raised him from the bed, and led him unresistingly away, as passively obedient as a child, though sobbing convulsively as he went. The rush of tears had saved his reason, and most probably his life. A murmur of enthusiastic applause greeted the good king as he passed through the little throng of persons who had witnessed what had taken place. Acknowledging it with a quiet, unaffected bow, he left the house, and signed to the *beccamorti*, who still waited outside, that they were now free to perform their melancholy office. He then went on his way attended by more heartfelt blessings and praises than ever fell to the lot of the proudest conqueror returning with the spoils of a hundred battles. I looked after his retreating figure till I could see it no more—I felt that I had grown stronger for the mere presence of a hero—a man who indeed was "every inch a king." I am a royalist—yes. Governed by such a sovereign, few men of calm reason would be otherwise. But royalist though I am, I would assist in bringing about the dethronement and death of a mean tyrant, were he crowned king a hundred times over! Few monarchs are like Humbert of Italy—even now my heart warms when I think of him—in all the distraction of my sufferings, his figure stands out like a supreme embodied Beneficent Force surrounded by the clear light of unselfish goodness—a light in which Italia suns her fair face and smiles again with the old sweet smile of her happiest days of high achievement—days in which her children were great, simply because they were *earnest*. The fault of all modern labor lies in the fact that there is no heart in anything we do—we seldom love our work for work's sake—we perform it solely for what we can get by it. Therein lies the secret of failure. Friends will scarcely serve each other unless they can also serve their own interests—true, there are exceptions to this rule, but they are deemed fools for their pains.

As soon as the king disappeared I also left the scene of the

foregoing incident. I had a fancy to visit the little restaurant where I had been taken ill, and after some trouble I found it. The door stood open. I saw the fat landlord, Pietro, polishing his glasses as though he had never left off; and there in the same corner was the very wooden bench on which I had lain—where I had—as was generally supposed—died. I stepped in. The landlord looked up and bade me good-day. I returned his salutation, and ordered some coffee and rolls of bread. Seating myself carelessly at one of the little tables, I turned over the newspaper, while he bustled about in haste to serve me. As he dusted and rubbed up a cup and saucer for my use, he said, briskly,

"You have had a long voyage, *amico?* And successful fishing?"

For a moment I was confused and knew not what to answer, but gathering my wits together, I smiled and answered readily in the affirmative.

"And you?" I said, gayly. "How goes the cholera?"

The landlord shook his head dolefully.

"Holy Joseph! do not speak of it. The people die like flies in a honey-pot. Only yesterday—body of Bacchus!—who would have thought it?"

And he sighed deeply as he poured out the steaming coffee, and shook his head more sorrowfully than before.

"Why, what happened yesterday?" I asked, though I knew perfectly well what he was going to say; "I am a stranger in Naples, and empty of news."

The perspiring Pietro laid a fat thumb on the marble top of the table, and with it traced a pattern meditatively.

"You never heard of the rich Count Romani?" he inquired.

I made a sign in the negative, and bent my face over my coffee-cup.

"Ah, well!" he went on, with a half groan, "it does not matter—there is no Count Romani any more. It is all gone—finished! But he was rich—as rich as the king, they say—yet see how low the saints brought him? Fra Cipriano of the Benedictines carried him in here yesterday morning—he was struck by the plague—in five hours he was dead,"—here the landlord caught a mosquito and killed it—"ah! as dead as that *zinzara!* Yes, he lay dead on that very wooden bench opposite to you. They buried him before sunset. It is like a bad dream!"

I affected to be deeply engrossed with the cutting and spreading of my roll and butter.

"I see nothing particular about it," I said, indifferently "That he was rich is nothing—rich and poor must die alike."

"And that is true, very true," assented Pietro, with another groan, "for not all his poverty could save the blessed Cipriano."

I started, but quickly controlled myself.

"What do you mean?" I asked, as carelessly as I could. "Are you talking of some saint?"

"Well, if he were not canonized he deserves to be," replied the landlord; "I speak of the holy Benedictine father who brought hither the Count Romani in a dying condition. Ah! little he knew how soon the good God would call him himself!"

I felt a sickening sensation at my heart.

"Is he dead?" I exclaimed.

"Dead as the martyrs!" answered Pietro. "He caught the plague, I suppose, from the count, for he was bending over him to the last. Ay, and he sprinkled holy water over the corpse, and laid his own crucifix upon it in the coffin. Then up he went to the Villa Romani, taking with him the count's trinkets, his watch, ring, and cigar-case—and nothing would satisfy him but that he should deliver them himself to the young contessa, telling her how her husband died."

My poor Nina!—I thought. "Was she much grieved?" I inquired, with a vague curiosity.

"How do I know?" said the landlord, shrugging his bulky shoulders. "The reverend father said nothing, save that she swooned away. But what of that? Women swoon at everything—from a mouse to a corpse. As I said, the good Cipriano attended the count's burial—and he had scarce returned from it when he was seized with the illness. And this morning he died at the monastery—may his soul rest in peace! I heard the news only an hour ago. Ah! he was a holy man! He has promised me a warm corner in Paradise, and I know he will keep his word as truly as St. Peter himself."

I pushed away the rest of my meal untasted. The food choked me. I could have shed tears for the noble, patient life thus self-sacrificed. One hero the less in this world of unheroic, uninspired persons! I sat silent, lost in sorrowful thought. The landlord looked at me curiously.

"The coffee does not please you?" he said at last. "You have no appetite?"

I forced a smile.

"Nay—your words would take the edge off the keenest appetite ever born of the breath of the sea. Truly Naples affords

but sorry entertainment to a stranger; is there naught to hear but stories of the dying and the dead?"

Pietro put on an air that was almost apologetic.

"Well, truly!" he answered, resignedly—"very little else. But what would you, *amico?* It is the plague and the will of God."

As he said the last words my gaze was caught and riveted by the figure of a man strolling leisurely past the door of the *café*. It was Guido Ferrari—my friend! I would have rushed out to speak to him—but something in his look and manner checked the impulse as it rose in me. He was walking very slowly, smoking a cigar as he went; there was a smile on his face, and in his coat he wore a freshly gathered rose—a *Gloire de France*, similar to those that grew in such profusion on the upper terrace of my villa. I stared at him as he passed—my feelings underwent a kind of shock. He looked perfectly happy and tranquil, happier indeed than ever I remembered to have seen him, and yet—and yet, according to *his* knowledge, I, his best friend, had died only yesterday! With this sorrow fresh upon him, he could smile like a man going to a *festa*, and wear a coral-pink rose, which surely was no sign of mourning! For one moment I felt hurt; the next, I laughed at my own sensitiveness. After all, what of the smile, what of the rose! A man could not always be answerable for the expression of his countenance, and as for the flower, he might have gathered it *en passant*, without thinking, or what was still more likely, the child Stella might have given it to him, in which case he would have worn it to please her. He displayed no badge of mourning? True!—but then consider—I had only died yesterday! There had been no time to procure all those outward appurtenances of woe which social customs rendered necessary, but which were no infallible sign of the heart's sincerity. Satisfied with my own self-reasoning I made no attempt to follow Guido in his walk—I let him go on his way unconscious of my existence. I would wait, I thought, till the evening—then everything would be explained.

I turned to the landlord. "How much to pay?" I asked.

"What you will, *amico*," he replied—"I am never hard on the fisher folk—but times are bad, or you would be welcome to a breakfast for nothing. Many and many a day have I done as much for men of your craft, and the blessed Cipriano who is gone used to say that St. Peter would remember me for it. It is true the Madonna gives a special blessing if one looks after the fishers, because all the holy apostles were of the trade; and I would be loth to lose her protection—yet——"

I laughed and tossed him a franc. He pocketed it at once and his eyes twinkled.

"Though you have not taken half a franc's worth," he admitted, with an honesty very unusual in a Neapolitan—"but the saints will make up it to you, never fear!"

"I am sure of that!" I said, gayly. "*Addio*, my friend! Prosperity to you and our Lady's favor!"

This salutation, which I knew to be a common one with Sicilian mariners, the good Pietro responded to with amiable heartiness, wishing me luck on my next voyage. He then betook himself anew to the polishing of his glasses—and I passed the rest of the day in strolling about the least frequented streets of the city, and longing impatiently for the crimson glory of the sunset, which, like a wide flag of triumph, was to be the signal of my safe return to love and happiness.

CHAPTER VIII.

It came at last, the blessed, the longed-for evening. A soft breeze sprung up, cooling the burning air after the heat of the day, and bringing with it the odors of a thousand flowers. A regal glory of shifting colors blazed on the breast of heaven—the bay, motionless as a mirror, reflected all the splendid tints with a sheeny luster that redoubled their magnificence. Pricked in every vein by the stinging of my own desires, I yet restrained myself; I waited till the sun sunk below the glassy waters—till the pomp and glow attending its departure had paled into those dim, ethereal hues which are like delicate draperies fallen from the flying forms of angels—till the yellow rim of the round full moon rose languidly on the edge of the horizon—and then keeping back my eagerness no longer, I took the well-known road ascending to the Villa Romani. My heart beat high—my limbs trembled with excitement—my steps were impatient and precipitate—never had the way seemed so long. At last I reached the great gate-way—it was locked fast—its sculptured lions looked upon me frowningly. I heard the splash and tinkle of the fountains within, the scents of the roses and myrtle were wafted toward me with every breath I drew. Home at last! I smiled—my whole frame quivered with expectancy and delight. It was not my intention to seek admission by the principal entrance—I contented myself with one long, loving look, and turned to the left, where there was a small private gate leading into an avenue of ilex and pine, interspersed with orange-trees. This was a favorite walk of mine, partly on account of its pleasant

shade even in the hottest noon—partly because it was seldom frequented by any member of the household save myself. Guido occasionally took a turn with me there, but I was more often alone, and I was fond of pacing up and down in the shadow of the trees, reading some favorite book, or giving myself up to the *dolce far niente* of my own imaginings. The avenue led round to the back of the villa, and as I now entered it, I thought I would approach the house cautiously by this means and get private speech with Assunta, the nurse who had charge of little Stella, and who was moreover an old and tried family servant, in whose arms my mother had breathed her last.

The dark trees rustled solemnly as I stepped quickly yet softly along the familiar moss-grown path. The place was very still—sometimes the nightingales broke into a bubbling torrent of melody, and then were suddenly silent, as though overawed by the shadows of the heavy interlacing boughs, through which the moonlight flickered, casting strange and fantastic patterns on the ground. A cloud of *lucciole* broke from a thicket of laurel, and sparkled in the air like gems loosened from a queen's crown. Faint odors floated about me, shaken from orange boughs and trailing branches of white jasmine. I hastened on, my spirits rising higher the nearer I approached my destination. I was full of sweet anticipation and passionate longing—I yearned to clasp my beloved Nina in my arms—to see her lovely lustrous eyes looking fondly into mine—I was eager to shake Guido by the hand—and as for Stella, I knew the child would be in bed at that hour, but still, I thought, I must have her wakened to see me; I felt that my happiness would not be complete till I had kissed her little cherub face, and caressed those clustering curls of hers that were like spun gold. Hush—hush! What was that? I stopped in my rapid progress as though suddenly checked by an invisible hand. I listened with strained ears. That sound—was it not a rippling peal of gay sweet laughter? A shiver shook me from head to foot. It was my wife's laugh—I knew the silvery chime of it well! My heart sunk coldly—I paused irresolute. She could laugh then like that, while she thought me lying dead—dead and out of her reach forever! All at once I perceived the glimmer of a white robe through the trees; obeying my own impulse, I stepped softly aside—I hid behind a dense screen of foliage through which I could see without being seen. The clear laugh rang out once again on the stillness—its brightness pierced my brain like a sharp sword! She was happy—she was even merry—she wandered here in the moonlight joyous-hearted, while I—I had expected