

CHAPTER XVI.

TIME flew swiftly on—a month, six weeks, passed, and during that short space I had established myself in Naples as a great personage—great, because of my wealth and the style in which I lived. No one in all the numerous families of distinction that eagerly sought my acquaintance cared whether I had intellect or intrinsic personal worth; it sufficed to them that I kept a carriage and pair, an elegant and costly equipage, softly lined with satin and drawn by two Arabian mares as black as polished ebony. The value of my friendship was measured by the luxuriousness of my box at the opera, and by the dainty fittings of my yacht, a swift trim vessel furnished with every luxury, and having on board a band of stringed instruments which discoursed sweet music when the moon emptied her horn of silver radiance on the rippling water. In a little while I knew everybody who was worth knowing in Naples; everywhere my name was talked of, my doings were chronicled in the fashionable newspapers; stories of my lavish generosity were repeated from mouth to mouth, and the most highly colored reports of my immense revenues were whispered with a kind of breathless awe at every *café* and street corner. Tradesmen waylaid my reticent valet, Vincenzo, and gave him *douceurs* in the hope he would obtain my custom for them—“tips” which he pocketed in his usual reserved and discreet manner, but which he was always honest enough to tell me of afterward. He would most faithfully give me the name and address of this or that particular tempter of his fidelity, always adding—“As to whether the rascal sells good things or bad our Lady only knows, but truly he gave me thirty francs to secure your excellency’s good-will. Though for all that I would not recommend him if your excellency knows of an honester man!”

Among other distinctions which my wealth forced upon me, were the lavish attentions of match-making mothers. The black spectacles, which I always wore, were not repulsive to these diplomatic dames—on the contrary, some of them assured me they were most becoming, so anxious were they to secure me as a son-in-law. Fair girls in their teens, blushing and ingenuous, were artfully introduced to me—or, I *should* say, thrust forward like slaves in a market for my inspection—though, to do them justice, they were remarkably shrewd and sharp-witted for their tender years. Young as they were,

they were keenly alive to the importance of making a good match—and no doubt the pretty innocents laid many dainty schemes in their own minds for liberty and enjoyment when one or the other of them should become the Countess Oliva and fool the old black-spectacled husband to her heart’s content. Needless to say their plans were not destined to be fulfilled, though I rather enjoyed studying the many devices they employed to fascinate me. What pretty ogling glances I received!—what whispered admiration of my “beautiful white hair! *so distingué!*”—what tricks of manner, alternating from grave to gay, from rippling mirth to witching languor! Many an evening I sat at ease on board my yacht, watching with a satirical inward amusement, one, perhaps two or three, of these fair schemers, ransacking their youthful brains for new methods to entrap the old millionaire, as they thought me, into the matrimonial net. I used to see their eyes—sparkling with light in the sunshine—grow liquid and dreamy in the mellow radiance of the October moon, and turn upon me with a vague wistfulness most lovely to behold and—most admirably feigned! I could lay my hand on a bare round white arm and not be repulsed—I could hold little clinging fingers in my own as long as I liked without giving offense—such are some of the privileges of wealth!

In all the parties of pleasure I formed, and these were many—my wife and Ferrari were included as a matter of course. At first Nina demurred, with some plaintive excuse concerning her “recent terrible bereavement,” but I easily persuaded her out of this. I even told some ladies I knew to visit her and add their entreaties to mine, as I said, with the benignant air of an elderly man, that it was not good for one so young to waste her time and injure her health by useless grieving. She saw the force of this, I must admit with admirable readiness, and speedily yielded to the united invitations she received, though always with a well-acted reluctance, and saying that she did so merely “because the Count Oliva was such an old friend of the family and knew my poor dear husband as a child.”

On Ferrari I heaped all manner of benefits. Certain debts of his contracted at play I paid privately to surprise him—his gratitude was extreme. I humored him in many of his small extravagances—I played with his follies as an angler plays the fish at the end of his line, and I succeeded in winning his confidence. Not that I ever could surprise him into a confession of his guilty *amour*—but he kept me well informed as to what he was pleased to call “the progress of his attachment,” and

supplied me with many small details which, while they fired my blood and brain to wrath, steadied me more surely in my plan of vengeance. Little did he dream in *whom* he was trusting!—little did he know into *whose* hands he was playing! Sometimes a kind of awful astonishment would come over me as I listened to his trivial talk, and heard him make plans for a future that was never to be. He seemed so certain of his happiness—so absolutely sure that nothing could or would intervene to mar it. Traitor as he was, he was unable to foresee punishment—materialist to the heart's core, he had no knowledge of the divine law of compensation. Now and then a dangerous impulse stirred me—a desire to say to him point-blank:

"You are a condemned criminal—a doomed man on the brink of the grave. Leave this light converse and frivolous jesting—and, while there is time, prepare for death!"

But I bit my lips and kept stern silence. Often, too, I felt disposed to seize him by the throat, and, declaring my identity, accuse him of his treachery to his face, but I always remembered and controlled myself. One point in his character I knew well—I had known it of old—this was his excessive love of good wine. I aided and abetted him in this weakness, and whenever he visited me I took care that he should have his choice of the finest vintages. Often after a convivial evening spent in my apartments with a few other young men of his class and caliber, he reeled out of my presence, his deeply flushed face and thick voice bearing plain testimony as to his condition. On these occasions I used to consider with a sort of fierce humor how Nina would receive him—for though she saw no offense in the one kind of vice she herself practiced, she had a particular horror of vulgarity in any form, and drunkenness was one of those low failings she specially abhorred.

"Go to your lady-love, *mon beau Silenus!*" I would think, as I watched him leaving my hotel with a couple of his boon companions, staggering and laughing loudly as he went, or singing the last questionable street-song of the Neapolitan *bas-people*. "You are in a would-be riotous and savage mood—her finer animal instincts will revolt from you, as a lithe gazelle would fly from the hideous gambols of a rhinoceros. She is already afraid of you—in a little while she will look upon you with loathing and disgust—*tant pis pour vous, tant mieux pour moi!*"

I had of course attained the position of *ami intime* at the Villa Romani. I was welcome there at any hour—I could examine and read my own books in my own library at leisure (what a privilege was mine); I could saunter freely through

beautiful gardens accompanied by Wyvis, who attended me as a matter of course; in short, the house was almost at my disposal, though I never passed a night under its roof. I carefully kept up my character as a prematurely elderly man, slightly invalidated by a long and arduous career in far-off foreign lands, and I was particularly prudent in my behavior toward my wife before Ferrari. Never did I permit the least word or action on my part that could arouse his jealousy or suspicion. I treated her with a sort of parental kindness and reserve, but she—trust a woman for intrigue!—she was quick to perceive my reasons for so doing. Directly Ferrari's back was turned she would look at me with a glance of coquettish intelligence, and smile—a little mocking, half-petulant smile—or she would utter some disparaging remark about him, combining with it a covert compliment to me. It was not for me to betray her secrets—I saw no occasion to tell Ferrari that nearly every morning she sent her maid to my hotel with fruit and flowers and inquiries after my health—nor was my valet Vincenzo the man to say that he carried gifts and similar messages from me to her. But at the commencement of November things were so far advanced that I was in the unusual position of being secretly courted by my own wife!—I reciprocating her attentions with equal secrecy! The fact of my being often in the company of other ladies piqued her vanity—she knew that I was considered a desirable *parti*—and—she resolved to win me. In this case I also resolved—to be won! A grim courtship truly—between a dead man and his own widow! Ferrari never suspected what was going on; he had spoken of me as "*that poor fool Fabio, he was too easily duped;*" yet never was there one more "easily duped" than himself, or to whom the epithet "*poor fool*" more thoroughly applied. As I said before, he was *sure*—too sure of his own good fortune. I wished to excite his distrust and enmity sometimes, but this I found I could not do. He trusted me—yes! as much as in the old days I had trusted *him*. Therefore, the catastrophe for him must be sudden as well as fatal—perhaps, after all, it was better so.

During my frequent visits to the villa I saw much of my child Stella. She became passionately attached to me—poor little thing!—her love was a mere natural instinct, had she but known it. Often, too, her nurse, Assunta, would bring her to my hotel to pass an hour or so with me. This was a great treat to her, and her delight reached its climax when I took her on my knee and told her a fairy story—her favorite one being that of a good little girl whose papa suddenly went away,

and how the little girl grieved for him till at last some kind fairies helped her to find him again. I was at first somewhat afraid of old Assunta—she had been *my* nurse—was it possible that she would not recognize me? The first time I met her in my new character I almost held my breath in a sort of suspense—but the good old woman was nearly blind, and I think she could scarce make out my lineaments. She was of an entirely different nature to Giacomo the butler—she thoroughly believed her master to be dead, as indeed she had every reason to do, but strange to say, Giacomo did not. The old man had a fanatical notion that his “young lord” could not have died so suddenly, and he grew so obstinate on the point that my wife declared he must be going crazy. Assunta, on the other hand, would talk volubly of my death and tell me with assured earnestness:

“It was to be expected, *eccellenza*—he was too good for us, and the saints took him. Of course our Lady wanted him—she always picks out the best among us. The poor Giacomo will not listen to me, he grows weak and childish, and he loved the master too well—better,” and here her voice would deepen into reproachful solemnity, “yes, better actually than St. Joseph himself! And of course one is punished for such a thing. I always knew my master would die young—he was too gentle as a baby, and too kind-hearted as a man to stay here long.”

And she would shake her gray head and feel for the beads of her rosary, and mutter many an Ave for the repose of my soul. Much as I wished it, I could never get her to talk about her mistress—it was the one subject on which she was invariably silent. On one occasion when I spoke with apparent enthusiasm of the beauty and accomplishments of the young countess, she glanced at me with sudden and earnest scrutiny—sighed—but said nothing. I was glad to see how thoroughly devoted she was to Stella, and the child returned her affection with interest—though as the November days came on apace, my little one looked far from strong. She paled and grew thin, her eyes looked preternaturally large and solemn, and she was very easily wearied. I called Assunta’s attention to these signs of ill-health; she replied that she had spoken to the countess, but that “*madama*” had taken no notice of the child’s weakly condition. Afterward I mentioned the matter myself to Nina, who merely smiled gratefully up in my face and answered:

“Really, my dear *conte*, you are too good! There is nothing the matter with Stella, her health is excellent; she eats too

many bonbons perhaps, and is growing rather fast, that is all. How kind you are to think of her! But, I assure you, she is quite well.”

I did not feel so sure of this, yet I was obliged to conceal my anxiety, as overmuch concern about the child would not have been in keeping with my assumed character.

It was a little past the middle of November, when a circumstance occurred that gave impetus to my plans, and hurried them to full fruition. The days were growing chilly and sad even in Naples—yachting excursions were over, and I was beginning to organize a few dinners and balls for the approaching winter season, when one afternoon Ferrari entered my room unannounced and threw himself into the nearest chair with an impatient exclamation, and a vexed expression of countenance.

“What is the matter?” I asked, carelessly, as I caught a furtive glance of his eyes. “Anything financial? Pray draw upon me! I will be a most accommodating banker!”

He smiled uneasily though gratefully.

“Thanks, *conte*—but it is nothing of that sort—it is—*gran Dio!* what an unlucky wretch I am!”

“I hope,” and here I put on an expression of the deepest anxiety, “I hope the pretty *contessa* has not played you false? she has refused to marry you?”

He laughed with a disdainful triumph in his laughter.

“Oh, as far as that goes there is no danger! She dares not play me false.”

“*Dares* not! That is rather a strong expression, my friend!”

And I stroked my beard and looked at him steadily. He himself seemed to think he had spoken too openly and hastily—for he reddened as he said with a little embarrassment:

“Well, I did not mean that exactly—of course she is perfectly free to do as she likes—but she cannot, I think, refuse me after showing me so much encouragement.”

I waved my hand with an airy gesture of amicable agreement.

“Certainly not,” I said, “unless she be an arrant coquette and therefore a worthless woman; and you, who know so well her intrinsic goodness and purity, have no reason to fear. But if not love or money, what is it that troubles you? It must be serious, to judge from your face.”

He played absently with a ring I had given him, turning it round and round upon his finger many times before replying.

“Well, the fact is,” he said at last, “I am compelled to go away—to leave Naples for a time.”

My heart gave an expectant throb of satisfaction. Going

away!—leaving Naples!—turning away from the field of battle and allowing me to gain the victory! Fortune surely favored me. But I answered with feigned concern:

“Going away! Surely you cannot mean it. Why?—what for? and where?”

“An uncle of mine is dying in Rome,” he answered, crossly. “He has made me his heir, and I am bound for the sake of decency to attend his last moments. Rather protracted last moments they threaten to be too, but the lawyers say I had better be present, as the old man may take it into his head to disinherit me at the final gasp. I suppose I shall not be absent long—a fortnight at most—and in the meanwhile——”

Here he hesitated and looked at me anxiously.

“Continue, *caro mio*, continue!” I said with some impatience. “If I can do anything in your absence, you have only to command me.”

He arose from his chair, and approaching the window where I sat in a half-reclining position, he drew a small chair opposite mine, and sitting down, laid one hand confidently on my wrist.

“You can do much!” he replied, earnestly, “and I feel that I can thoroughly depend upon you. Watch over *her*! She will have no other protector, and she is so beautiful and careless! *You* can guard her—your age, your rank and position, the fact of your being an old friend of the family—all these things warrant your censorship and vigilance over her, and you can prevent any other man from intruding himself upon her notice——”

“If he does,” I exclaimed, starting up from my seat with a mock tragic air, “*I will not rest till his body serves my sword as a sheath!*”

And I laughed loudly, clapping him on the shoulder as I spoke. The words were the very same he had himself uttered when I had witnessed his interview with my wife in the avenue. He seemed to find something familiar in the phrase, for he looked confused and puzzled. Seeing this, I hastened to turn the current of his reflections. Stopping abruptly in my mirth, I assumed a serious gravity of demeanor, and said:

“Nay, nay! I see the subject is too sacred to be jested with—pardon my levity! I assure you, my good Ferrari, I will watch over the lady with the jealous scrutiny of a *brother*—an elderly brother too, and therefore one more likely to be a model of propriety. Though I frankly admit it is a task I am not specially fitted for, and one that is rather distasteful to me, still, I would do much to please you, and enable you to leave Naples with an easy mind. I promise you”—here I took his

hand and shook it warmly—“that I will be worthy of your trust and true to it, with exactly the same fine loyalty and fidelity you yourself so nobly showed to your dead friend Fabio! History can not furnish me with a better example!”

He started as if he had been stung, and every drop of blood receded from his face, leaving it almost livid. He turned his eyes in a kind of wondering doubt upon me, but I counterfeited an air of such good faith and frankness, that he checked some hasty utterance that rose to his lips, and mastering himself by a strong effort, said, briefly:

“I thank you! I know I can rely upon your honor.”

“You can!” I answered, decisively—“as positively as you rely upon your own!” Again he winced, as though whipped smartly by an invisible lash. Releasing his hand, I asked, in a tone of affected regret:

“And when must you leave us, *carino*?”

“Most unhappily, at once,” he answered. “I start by the early train to-morrow morning.”

“Well, I am glad I knew of this in time,” I said, glancing at my writing-table, which was strewn with unsent invitation cards, and estimates from decorators and ball furnishers. “I shall not think of starting any more gayeties till you return.”

He looked gratefully at me. “Really? It is very kind of you, but I should be sorry to interfere with any of your plans——”

“Say no more about it, *amico*,” I interrupted him lightly. “Everything can wait till you come back. Besides, I am sure you will prefer to think of madama as living in some sort of seclusion during your enforced absence——”

“I should not like her to be dull!” he eagerly exclaimed.

“Oh, no!” I said, with a slight smile at his folly, as if she—Nina!—would permit herself to be dull! “I will take care of that. Little distractions, such as a drive now and then, or a very quiet, select musical evening! I understand—leave it all to me! But the dances, dinners, and other diversions shall wait till your return.”

A delighted look flashed into his eyes. He was greatly flattered and pleased.

“You are uncommonly good to me, *conte*!” he said, earnestly. “I can never thank you sufficiently.”

“I shall demand a proof of your gratitude some day,” I answered. “And now, had you not better be packing your portmanteau! To-morrow will soon be here. I will come and see you off in the morning.”

Receiving this assurance as another testimony of my friend-

ship, he left me. I saw him no more that day; it was easy to guess where he was! With my wife, of course!—no doubt binding her, by all the most sacred vows he could think of or invent, to be true to him—as true as she had been false to me. In fancy I could see him clasping her in his arms, and kissing her many times in his passionate fervor, imploring her to think of him faithfully, night and day, till he should again return to the joy of her caresses! I smiled coldly, as this glowing picture came before my imagination. Ay, Guido! kiss her and fondle her now to your heart's content—*it is for the last time!* Never again will that witching glance be turned to you in either fear or favor—never again will that fair body nestle in your jealous embrace—never again will your kisses burn on that curved sweet mouth; never, never again! Your day is done—the last brief moments of your sin's enjoyment have come—make the most of them!—no one shall interfere! Drink the last drop of sweet wine—*my hand shall not dash the cup from your lips on this, the final night of your amour!* Traitor, liar, and hypocrite! make haste to be happy for the short time that yet remains to you—shut the door close, lest the pure pale stars behold your love ecstasies! but let the perfumed lamps shed their softest artificial luster on all that radiant beauty which tempted your sensual soul to ruin, and of which you are now permitted to take your last look! Let there be music too—the music of her voice, which murmurs in your ear such entrancing falsehoods! “She will be true,” she says. You must believe her, Guido, as I did—and, believing her thus, part from her as lingeringly and tenderly as you will—part from her—*forever!*

CHAPTER XVII.

NEXT morning I kept my appointment and met Ferrari at the railway station. He looked pale and haggard, though he brightened a little on seeing me. He was curiously irritable and fussy with the porters concerning his luggage, and argued with them about some petty trifles as obstinately and pertinaciously as a deaf old woman. His nerves were evidently jarred and unstrung, and it was a relief when he at last got into his coupé. He carried a yellow paper-covered volume in his hand. I asked him if it contained any amusing reading.

“I really do not know,” he answered, indifferently, “I have only just bought it. It is by Victor Hugo.”

And he held up the title-page for me to see.

“*Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné,*” I read aloud with care.

ful slowness. “Ah, indeed! You do well to read that. It is a very fine study!”

The train was on the point of starting, when he leaned out of the carriage window and beckoned me to approach more closely.

“Remember!” he whispered, “I trust you to take care of her!”

“Never fear!” I answered, “I will do my best to replace you!”

He smiled a pale uneasy smile, and pressed my hand. These were our last words, for with a warning shriek the train moved off, and in another minute had rushed out of sight. I was alone—alone with perfect freedom of action—I could do as I pleased with my wife now! I could even kill her if I chose—no one would interfere. I could visit her that evening and declare myself to her—could accuse her of her infidelity and stab her to the heart! Any Italian jury would find “extenuating circumstances” for me. But why? Why should I lay myself open to a charge of murder, even for a just cause? No! my original design was perfect, and I must keep to it and work it out with patience, though patience was difficult. While I thus meditated, walking from the station homeward, I was startled by the unexpected appearance of my valet, who came upon me quite suddenly. He was out of breath with running, and he carried a note for me marked “*Immediate.*” It was from my wife, and ran briefly thus:

“*Please come at once. Stella is very ill, and asks for you.*”

“Who brought this?” I demanded, quickening my pace, and signing to Vincenzo to keep beside me.

“The old man, eccellenza—Giacomo. He was weeping and in great trouble—he said the little donzella had the fever in her throat—it is the diphtheria he means, I think. She was taken ill in the middle of the night, but the nurse thought it was nothing serious. This morning she has been getting worse, and is in danger.”

“A doctor has been sent for, of course?”

“Yes, eccellenza. So Giacomo said. But——”

“But *what?*” I asked, quickly.

“Nothing, eccellenza! Only the old man said the doctor had come too late.”

My heart sunk heavily, and a sob rose in my throat. I stopped in my rapid walk and bade Vincenzo call a carriage, one of the ordinary vehicles that are everywhere standing about for hire in the principal thoroughfares of Naples. I sprung

into this and told the driver to take me as quickly as possible to the Villa Romani, and adding to Vincenzo that I should not return to the hotel all day, I was soon rattling along the uphill road. On my arrival at the villa I found the gates open, as though in expectation of my visit, and as I approached the entrance door of the house, Giacomo himself met me.

"How is the child?" I asked him eagerly.

He made no reply, but shook his head gravely, and pointed to a kindly looking man who was at that moment descending the stairs—a man whom I instantly recognized as a celebrated English doctor resident in the neighborhood. To him I repeated my inquiry—he beckoned me into a side room and closed the door.

"The fact is," he said, simply, "it is a case of gross neglect. The child has evidently been in a weakly condition for some time past, and therefore is an easy prey to any disease that may be lurking about. She was naturally strong—I can see that—and had I been called in when the symptoms first developed themselves, I could have cured her. The nurse tells me she dared not enter the mother's room to disturb her after midnight, otherwise she would have called her to see the child—it is unfortunate, for now I can do nothing."

I listened like one in a dream. Not even old Assunta dared to enter her mistress's room after midnight—no! not though the child might be seriously ill and suffering. I knew the reason well—too well! And so while Ferrari had taken his fill of rapturous embraces and lingering farewells, my little one had been allowed to struggle in pain and fever without her mother's care or comfort. Not that such consolation would have been much at its best, but I was fool enough to wish there had been this one faint spark of womanhood left in her upon whom I had wasted all the first and only love of my life. The doctor watched me as I remained silent, and after a pause he spoke again.

"The child has earnestly asked to see you," he said, "and I persuaded the countess to send for you, though she was very reluctant to do so, as she said you might catch the disease. Of course there is always a risk——"

"I am no coward, monsieur," I interrupted him, "though many of us Italians prove but miserable panic-stricken wretches in time of plague—the more especially when compared with the intrepidity and pluck of Englishmen. Still there are exceptions——"

The doctor smiled courteously and bowed. "Then I have no more to say, except that it would be well for you to see my

little patient at once. I am compelled to be absent for half an hour, but at the expiration of that time I will return."

"Stay!" I said, laying a detaining hand on his arm. "Is there any hope?"

He eyed me gravely. "I fear not."

"Can nothing be done?"

"Nothing—except to keep her as quiet and warm as possible. I have left some medicine with the nurse which will alleviate the pain. I shall be able to judge of her better when I return; the illness will have then reached its crisis." In a couple of minutes more he had left the house, and a young maid-servant showed me to the nursery.

"Where is the contessa?" I asked in a whisper, as I trod softly up the stairs.

"The contessa?" said the girl, opening her eyes in astonishment. "In her own bedroom, eccellenza—madama would not think of leaving it; because of the danger of infection."

I smothered a rough oath that rose involuntarily to my lips. Another proof of the woman's utter heartlessness, I thought!

"Has she not seen her child?"

"Since the illness? Oh, no, eccellenza!"

Very gently and on tiptoe I entered the nursery. The blinds were partially drawn as the strong light worried the child, and by the little white bed sat Assunta, her brown face pale and almost rigid with anxiety. At my approach she raised her eyes to mine, muttering softly:

"It is always so. Our Lady *will* have the best of all, first the father, then the child; it is right and just—only the bad are left."

"Papa!" moaned a little voice feebly, and Stella sat up among her tumbled pillows, with wide-opened wild eyes, feverish cheeks, and parted lips through which the breath came in quick, uneasy gasps. Shocked at the marks of intense suffering in her face, I put my arms tenderly round her—she smiled faintly and tried to kiss me. I pressed the poor parched little mouth and murmured, soothingly:

"Stella must be patient and quiet—Stella must lie down, the pain will be better so; there! that is right!" as the child sunk back on her bed obediently, still keeping her gaze fixed upon me. I knelt at the bedside, and watched her yearningly—while Assunta moistened her lips, and did all she could to ease the pain endured so meekly by the poor little thing whose breathing grew quicker and fainter with every tick of the clock.

"You *are* my papa, are you not?" she asked, a deeper flush

crossing her forehead and cheeks. I made no answer—I only kissed the small hot hand I held. Assunta shook her head.

"*Ah, poverinetta!* The time is near—she sees her father. And why not? He loved her well—he would come to fetch her for certain if the saints would let him."

And she fell on her knees and began to tell over her rosary with great devotion. Meanwhile Stella threw one little arm round my neck—her eyes were half shut—she spoke and breathed with increasing difficulty.

"My throat aches so, papa!" she said, pitifully. "Can you not make it better?"

"I wish I could, my darling!" I murmured. "I would bear all the pain for you if it were possible!"

She was silent a minute. Then she said:

"What a long time you have been away? And now I am too ill to play with you!" Then a faint smile crossed her features. "See poor To-to!" she exclaimed, feebly, as her eyes fell on a battered old doll in the spangled dress of a carnival clown that lay at the foot of her bed. "Poor dear old To-to! He will think I do not love him any more, because my throat hurts me. Give him to me, papa!"

And as I obeyed her request she encircled the doll with one arm, while she still clung to me with the other, and added:

"To-to remembers you, papa; you know you brought him from Rome, and he is fond of you, too—but not as fond as I am!" And her dark eyes glittered feverishly. Suddenly her glance fell on Assunta, whose gray head was buried in her hands as she knelt.

"Assunta!"

The old woman looked up.

"Bambinetta!" she answered, and her aged voice trembled.

"Why are you crying?" inquired Stella with an air of plaintive surprise. "Are you not glad to see papa?"

Her words were interrupted by a sharp spasm of pain which convulsed her whole body—she gasped for breath—she was nearly suffocated. Assunta and I raised her up gently and supported her against her pillows; the agony passed slowly, but left her little face white and rigid, while large drops of sweat gathered on her brow. I endeavored to soothe her.

"Darling, you must not talk," I whispered, imploringly; "try to be very still—then the poor throat will not ache so much."

She looked at me wistfully. After a minute or two she said, gently:

"Kiss me, then, and I will be quite good."

I kissed her fondly, and she closed her eyes. Ten, twenty, thirty minutes passed and she did not stir. At the end of that time the doctor entered. He glanced at her, gave me a warning look, and remained standing quietly at the foot of the bed. Suddenly the child woke, and smiled divinely on all three of us.

"Are you in pain, my dear?" I softly asked.

"No!" she answered in a tiny voice, so faint and far away that we held our breath to listen to it; "I am quite well now. Assunta must dress me in my white frock again now papa is here. I knew he would come back!"

And she turned her eyes upon me with a look of bright intelligence.

"Her brain wanders," said the doctor, in a low, pitying voice; "it will soon be over."

Stella did not hear him; she turned and nestled in my arms, asking in a sort of babbling whisper:

"You did not go away because I was naughty, did you, papa?"

"No, darling!" I answered, hiding my face in her curls.

"Why do you have those ugly black things on?" she asked, in the feeblest and most plaintive tone imaginable, so weak that I myself could scarcely hear it; "has somebody hurt your eyes? Let me see your eyes!" I hesitated. Dare I humor her in her fancy? I glanced up. The doctor's head again was turned away, Assunta was on her knees, her face buried in the bed-clothes, praying to her saints; quick as thought I slipped my spectacles slightly down, and looked over them full at my little one. She uttered a soft cry of delight—"Papa! papa!" and stretched out her arms, then a strong and terrible shudder shook her little frame. The doctor came closer—I replaced my glasses without my action being noticed, and we both bent anxiously over the suffering child. Her face paled and grew livid—she made another effort to speak—her beautiful eyes rolled upward and became fixed—she sighed—and sunk back on my shoulder—dying—dead! My poor little one! A hard sob stifled itself in my throat—I clasped the small lifeless body close in my embrace, and my tears fell hot and fast. There was a long silence in the room—a deep, an awe-struck, reverent silence, while the Angel of Death, noiselessly entering and departing, gathered my little white rose for his Immortal Garden of flowers.