

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTER some little time the doctor's genial voice, slightly tremulous from kindly emotion, roused me from my grief-stricken attitude.

"Monsieur, permit me to persuade you to come away. Poor little child! she is free from pain now. Her fancy that you were her father was a fortunate delusion for her. It made her last moments happy. Pray come with me—I can see this has been a shock to your feelings."

Reverently I laid the fragile corpse back on the yet warm pillows. With a fond touch I stroked the flaxen head; I closed the dark, upturned, and glazing eyes—I kissed the waxen cheeks and lips, and folded the tiny hands in an attitude of prayer. There was a grave smile on the young dead face—a smile of superior wisdom and sweetness, majestic in its simplicity. Assunta rose from her knees and laid her crucifix on the little breast—the tears were running down her worn and withered countenance. As she strove to wipe them away with her apron, she said, tremblingly:

"It must be told to madama." A frown came on the doctor's face. He was evidently a true Britisher, decisive in his opinions, and frank enough to declare them openly. "Yes," he said, curtly, "madama, as you call her, should have been here."

"The little angel did not once ask for her," murmured Assunta.

"True!" he answered. And again there was silence. We stood round the small bed, looking at the empty casket that had held the lost jewel—the flawless pearl of innocent childhood that had gone, according to a graceful superstition, to ornament the festal robes of the Madonna as she walked in all her majesty through heaven. A profound grief was at my heart—mingled with a sense of mysterious and awful satisfaction. I felt, not as though I had lost my child, but had rather gained her to be more entirely mine than ever. She seemed nearer to me dead than she had been when living. Who could say what her future might have been? She would have grown to womanhood—what then? What is the usual fate that falls to even the best women? Sorrow, pain, and petty worry, unsatisfied longings, incompleting aims, the disappointment of an imperfect and fettered life—for say what you will to the contrary, woman's inferiority to man, her physical weakness,

her inability to accomplish any great thing for the welfare of the world in which she lives, will always make her more or less an object of pity. If good, she needs all the tenderness, support, and chivalrous guidance of her master, man—if bad, she merits what she receives, his pitiless disdain and measureless contempt. From all dangers and griefs of the kind my Stella had escaped—for her, sorrow no longer existed. I was glad of it, I thought, as I watched Assunta shutting the blinds close, as a signal to outsiders that death was in the house. At a sign from the doctor I followed him out of the room—on the stairs, he turned round abruptly, and asked:

"Will you tell the countess?"

"I would rather be excused," I replied, decisively. "I am not at all in the humor for a scene."

"You think she will make a scene?" he said with an astonished uplifting of his eyebrows. "I dare say you are right though! She is an excellent actress."

By this time we had reached the foot of the stairs.

"She is very beautiful," I answered evasively.

"Oh, very! No doubt of that!" And here a strange frown contracted the doctor's brow. "For my own taste, I prefer an ugly woman to *such* beauty."

And with these words he left me, disappearing down the passage which led to "madama's" boudoir. Left alone, I paced up and down the drawing-room, gazing abstractedly on its costly fittings, its many luxurious knickknacks and elegancies—most of which I had given to my wife during the first few months of our marriage. By and by I heard the sound of violent hysterical sobbing, accompanied by the noise of hurrying footsteps and the rapid whisking about of female garments. In a few moments the doctor entered with an expression of sardonic amusement on his face. "Yes!" he said in reply to my look of inquiry, "hysterics, lace handkerchiefs, *eau-de-Cologne*, and attempts at fainting. All very well done! I have assured the lady there is no fear of contagion, as under my orders everything will be thoroughly disinfected. I shall go now. Oh, by the way, the countess requests that you will wait here a few minutes—she has a message for you—she will not detain you long. I should recommend you to get back to your hotel as soon as you can, and take some good wine. *A rivederci!* Anything I can do for you pray command me!"

And with a cordial shake of the hand he left me, and heard the street door close behind him. Again I paced wearily up and down, wrapped in sorrowful musings. I did not hear a stealthy tread on the carpet behind me, so that when I turned

round abruptly, I was startled to find myself face to face with old Giacomo, who held out a note to me on a silver salver, and who meanwhile peered at me with his eager eyes in so inquisitive a manner that I felt almost uneasy.

"And so the little angel is dead!" he murmured in a thin, quavering voice. "Dead! Ay, that is a pity, a pity! But my master is not dead—no, no! I am not such an old fool as to believe that."

I paid no heed to his rambling talk, but read the message Nina had sent to me through him.

"I am *broken-hearted!*" so ran the delicately penciled lines. "Will you kindly telegraph my *dreadful* loss to Signor Ferrari? I shall be much obliged to you." I looked up from the perfumed missive and down at the old butler's wrinkled visage; he was a short man and much bent, and something in the downward glance I gave him evidently caught and riveted his attention, for he clasped his hands together and muttered something I could not hear.

"Tell your mistress," I said, speaking slowly and harshly, "that I will do as she wishes. That I am entirely at her service. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes! I understand!" faltered Giacomo, nervously. "My master never thought me foolish—I could always understand him—"

"Do you know, my friend," I observed, in a purposely cold and cutting tone, "that I have heard somewhat too much about your master? The subject is tiresome to me! Were your master alive, he would say you were in your dotage! Take my message to the countess at once."

The old man's face paled and his lips quivered—he made an attempt to draw up his shrunken figure with a sort of dignity as he answered:

"Eccellenza, my master would never speak to me so—never, never!" Then his countenance fell, and he muttered, softly—"Though it is just—I am a fool—I am mistaken—quite mistaken—there is no resemblance!" After a little pause he added, humbly, "I will take your message, eccellenza." And stooping more than ever, he shambled out of the room. My heart smote me as he disappeared; I had spoken very harshly to the poor old fellow—but I instinctively felt that it was necessary to do so. His close and ceaseless examination of me—his timidity when he approached me—the strange tremors he experienced when I addressed him, were so many warnings to me to be on my guard with this devoted domestic. Were he, by some unforeseen chance, to recognize me, my plans would

all be spoiled. I took my hat and left the house. As I crossed the upper terrace, I saw a small round object lying in the grass—it was Stella's ball that she used to throw for Wyvis to catch and bring to her. I picked up the poor plaything tenderly and put it in my pocket—and glancing up once more at the darkened nursery windows, I waved a kiss of farewell to my little one lying there in her last sleep. Then fiercely controlling all the weaker and softer emotions that threatened to overwhelm me, I hurried away. On my road to the hotel I stopped at the telegraph-office and dispatched the news of Stella's death to Guido Ferrari in Rome. He would be surprised, I thought, but certainly not grieved—the poor child had always been in his way. Would he come back to Naples to console the now childless widow? Not he!—he would know well that she stood in very small need of consolation—and that she took Stella's death as she had taken mine—as a blessing, and not a bereavement. On reaching my own rooms, I gave orders to Vincenzo that I was not at home to any one who might call—and I passed the rest of the day in absolute solitude. I had much to think of. The last frail tie between my wife and myself had been snapped asunder—the child, the one innocent link in the long chain of falsehood and deception, no longer existed. Was I glad or sorry for this? I asked myself the question a hundred times; and I admitted the truth, though I trembled to realize it. I was *glad*—yes—*glad!* Glad that my own child was dead! You call this inhuman perhaps? Why? She was bound to have been miserable; she was now happy!

The tragedy of her parents' lives could be enacted without embittering and darkening her young days; she was out of it all, and I rejoiced to know it. For I was absolutely relentless; had my little Stella lived, not even for her sake would I have relaxed in one detail of my vengeance—nothing seemed to me so paramount as the necessity for restoring my own self-respect and damaged honor. In England I know these things are managed by the Divorce Court. Lawyers are paid exorbitant fees, and the names of the guilty and innocent are dragged through the revolting slums of the low London press. It may be an excellent method—but it does not tend to elevate a man in his own eyes, and it certainly does not do much to restore his lost dignity. It has one advantage—it enables the criminal parties to have their way without further interference—the wronged husband is set free—left out in the cold—and laughed at by those who wronged him. An admirable arrangement no doubt—but one that would not suit *me*. *Chacun à son goût!* It would be curious to know in matters of this kind whether

divorced persons are really satisfied when they have got their divorce—whether the amount of red tape and parchment expended in their interest has done them good and really relieved their feelings. Whether, for instance, the betrayed husband is glad to have got rid of his unfaithful wife by throwing her (with the full authority and permission of the law) into his rival's arms? I almost doubt it! I heard of a strange case in England once. A man, moving in good society, having more than suspicions of his wife's fidelity, divorced her—the law pronounced her guilty. Some years afterward, he, being free, met her again, fell in love with her for the second time and remarried her. She was (naturally!) delighted at his making such a fool of himself—for henceforth, whatever she chose to do, he could not reasonably complain without running the risk of being laughed at. So now the number and variety of her lovers is notorious in the particular social circle where she moves—while he, poor wretch, is perforce tongue-tied, and dare not consider himself wronged. There is no more pitiable object in the world than such a man—secretly derided and jeered at by his fellows, he occupies an almost worse position than that of a galley slave, while in his own esteem he has sunk so low that he dare not, even in secret, try to fathom the depth to which he has fallen. Some may assert that to be divorced is a social stigma. It used to be so perhaps, but society has grown very lenient nowadays. Divorced women hold their own in the best and most brilliant circles, and what is strange is that they are very generally petted and pitied.

"Poor thing!" says society, putting up its eyeglass to scan admiringly the beautiful heroine of the latest aristocratic scandal—"she had such a brute of a husband! No wonder she liked that *dear* Lord So-and-So! Very wrong of her, of course, but she is so young! She was married at sixteen—quite a child!—could not have known her own mind!"

The husband alluded to might have been the best and most chivalrous of men—anything but a "brute"—yet he always figures as such somehow, and gets no sympathy. And, by the way, it is rather a notable fact that all the beautiful, famous, or notorious women were "*married at sixteen.*" How is this managed? I can account for it in southern climates, where girls are full-grown at sixteen and old at thirty—but I can not understand its being the case in England, where a "miss" of sixteen is a most objectionable and awkward *ingénue*, without any of the "charms wherewith to charm," and whose conversation is always vapid and silly to the point of absolute exhaustion on the part of those who are forced to listen to it. These

sixteen-year-old marriages are, however, the only explanation frisky English matrons can give for having such alarmingly prolific families of tall sons and daughters, and it is a happy and convenient excuse—one that provides a satisfactory reason for the excessive painting of their faces and dyeing of their hair. Being young (as they so nobly assert), they wish to look even younger. *A la bonne heure!* If men cannot see through the delicate fiction, they have only themselves to blame. As for me, I believe in the old, old, apparently foolish legend of Adam and Eve's sin and the curse which followed it—the curse on man which is inevitably carried out to this day. God said; "*Because*" (mark that *because!*) "thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife" (or thy *woman*, whoever she be), "and hast eaten of the tree of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it" (the tree or fruit being the evil suggested *first* to man by woman), "cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life!"

True enough! The curse is upon all who trust woman too far—the sorrow upon all who are beguiled by her witching flatteries. Of what avail her poor excuse in the ancient story—"The serpent beguiled me and I did eat!" Had she never listened she could not have been beguiled. The weakness, the treachery, was in herself, and is there still. Through everything the bitterness of it runs. The woman tempts—the man yields—and the gate of Eden—the Eden of a clear conscience and an untrammelled soul, is shut upon them. Forever and ever the Divine denunciation re-echoes like muttering thunder through the clouds of passing generations; forever and ever we unconsciously carry it out in our own lives to its full extent till the heart grows sick and the brain weary, and we long for the end of it all, which is death—death, that mysterious silence and darkness at which we sometimes shudder, wondering vaguely—Can it be worse than life?

CHAPTER XIX.

MORE than ten days had passed since Stella's death. Her mother had asked me to see to the arrangements for the child's funeral, declaring herself too ill to attend to anything. I was glad enough to accede to her request, for I was thus able to avoid the Romani vault as a place of interment. I could not bear to think of the little cherished body being laid to molder in that terrific place where I had endured such frantic horrors. Therefore, informing all whom it concerned that I acted under the countess's orders, I chose a pretty spot in the open ground