

words sped along the telegraph wires that stilled my impatience, roused my soul, and braced every nerve and muscle in my body to instant action. They were plain, clear, and concise:

"From Guido Ferrari, Rome, to Il Conte Cesare Oliva, Naples.—Shall be with you on the 24th inst. Train arrives at 6:30 P. M. Will come to you as you desire without fail."

CHAPTER XXII.

CHRISTMAS-EVE! The day had been extra chilly, with frequent showers of stinging rain, but toward five o'clock in the afternoon the weather cleared. The clouds, which had been of a dull uniform gray, began to break asunder and disclose little shining rifts of pale blue and bright gold; the sea looked like a wide satin ribbon shaken out and shimmering with opaline tints. Flower girls trooped forth making the air musical with their mellow cries of "*Fiori? chi vuol fiori?*," and holding up their tempting wares—not bunches of holly and mistletoe such as are known in England, but roses, lilies, jonquils, and sweet daffodils. The shops were brilliant with bouquets and baskets of fruits and flowers; a glittering show of *étrennes*, or gifts to suit all ages and conditions, were set forth in tempting array, from a box of bonbons costing one franc to a jeweled tiara worth a million, while in many of the windows were displayed models of the "Bethlehem," with babe Jesus lying in His manger, for the benefit of the round-eyed children—who, after staring fondly at His waxen image for some time, would run off hand in hand to the nearest church where the usual Christmas *crèche* was arranged, and there kneeling down, would begin to implore their "dear little Jesus," their "own little brother," not to forget them, with a simplicity of belief that was as touching as it was unaffected.

I am told that in England the principal sights on Christmas-eve are the shops of the butchers and poulterers hung with the dead carcasses of animals newly slaughtered, in whose mouths are thrust bunches of prickly holly, at which agreeable spectacle the passers-by gape with gluttonous approval. Surely there is nothing graceful about such a commemoration of the birth of Christ as this? nothing picturesque, nothing poetic?—nothing even orthodox, for Christ was born in the East, and the Orientals are very small eaters, and are particularly sparing in the use of meat. One wonders what such an unusual display of vulgar victuals has to do with the coming of the Saviour, who arrived among us in such poor estate that even a decent

roof was denied to Him. Perhaps, though, the English people read their gospels in a way of their own, and understood that the wise men of the East, who are supposed to have brought the Divine Child symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, really brought joints of beef, turkeys, and "plum-pudding," that vile and indigestible mixture at which an Italian shrugs his shoulders in visible disgust. There is something barbaric, I suppose, in the British customs still—something that reminds one of their ancient condition when the Romans conquered them—when their supreme idea of enjoyment was to have an ox roasted whole before them while they drank "wassail," till they groveled under their own tables in a worse condition than overfed swine. Coarse and vulgar plenty is still the leading characteristic at the dinners of English or American *parvenus*; they have scarcely any idea of the refinements that can be imparted to the prosaic necessity of eating—of the many little graces of the table that are understood in part by the French, but that perhaps never reach such absolute perfection of taste and skill as at the banquets of a cultured and clever Italian noble. Some of these are veritable "feasts of the gods," and would do honor to the fabled Olympus, and such a one I had prepared for Guido Ferrari as a greeting to him on his return from Rome—a feast of welcome and—farewell!

All the resources of the hotel at which I stayed had been brought into requisition. The *chef*, a famous *cordons bleus*, had transferred the work of the usual *table d'hôte* to his underlings, and had bent the powers of his culinary intelligence solely on the production of the magnificent dinner I had ordered. The landlord, in spite of himself, broke into exclamations of wonder and awe as he listened to and wrote down my commands for different wines of the rarest kinds and choicest vintages. The servants rushed hither and thither to obey my various behests, with looks of immense importance; the head waiter, a superb official who prided himself on his artistic taste, took the laying-out of the table under his entire superintendence, and nothing was talked of or thought of for the time but the grandeur of my proposed entertainment.

About six o'clock I sent my carriage down to the railway station to meet Ferrari as I had arranged; and then, at my landlord's invitation, I went to survey the stage that was prepared for one important scene of my drama—to see if the scenery, side-lights, and general effects were all in working order. To avoid disarranging my own apartments, I had chosen for my dinner-party a room on the ground-floor of the

hotel, which was often let out for marriage-breakfasts and other purposes of the like kind; it was octagonal in shape, not too large, and I had had it most exquisitely decorated for the occasion. The walls were hung with draperies of gold-colored silk and crimson velvet, interspersed here and there with long mirrors, which were ornamented with crystal candelabra, in which twinkled hundreds of lights under rose-tinted glass shades. At the back of the room, a miniature conservatory was displayed to view, full of rare ferns and subtle perfumed exotics, in the center of which a fountain rose and fell with regular and melodious murmur. Here, later on, a band of stringed instruments and a choir of boys' voices were to be stationed, so that sweet music might be heard and felt without the performers being visible. One, and one only, of the long French windows of the room was left uncurtained, it was simply draped with velvet as one drapes a choice picture, and through it the eyes rested on a perfect view of the Bay of Naples, white with the wintery moonlight.

The dinner-table, laid for fifteen persons, glittered with sumptuous appointments of silver, Venetian glass, and the rarest flowers; the floor was carpeted with velvet pile, in which some grains of ambergis had been scattered, so that in walking the feet sunk, as it were, into a bed of moss rich with the odors of a thousand spring blossoms. The very chairs wherein my guests were to seat themselves were of a luxurious shape and softly stuffed, so that one could lean back in them or recline at ease—in short, everything was arranged with a lavish splendor almost befitting the banquet of an eastern monarch, and yet with such accurate taste that there was no detail one could have wished omitted.

I was thoroughly satisfied, but as I know what an unwise plan it is to praise servants too highly for doing well what they are expressly paid to do, I intimated my satisfaction to my landlord by a mere careless nod and smile of approval. He, who waited on my every gesture with abject humility, received this sign of condescension with as much delight as though it had come from the king himself, and I could easily see that the very fact of my showing no enthusiasm at the result of his labors, made him consider me a greater man than ever. I now went to my own apartments to don my evening attire; I found Vincenzo brushing every speck of dust from my dress-coat with careful nicety—he had already arranged the other articles of costume neatly on my bed ready for wear. I unlocked a dressing-case and took from thence three studs, each one formed of a single brilliant of rare clearness and luster,

and handed them to him to fix in my shirt-front. While he was polishing these admiringly on his coat-sleeve I watched him earnestly—then I suddenly addressed him:

"Vincenzo!" He started.

"Eccellenza?"

"To-night you will stand behind my chair and insist in serving the wine."

"Yes, eccellenza."

"You will," I continued, "attend particularly to Signor Ferrari, who will sit at my right hand. Take care that his glass is never empty."

"Yes, eccellenza."

"Whatever may be said or done," I went on quietly, "you will show no sign of alarm or surprise. From the commencement of dinner till I tell you to move, remember your place is fixed by me."

The honest fellow looked a little puzzled, but replied as before:

"Yes, eccellenza."

I smiled, and advancing, laid my hand on his arm.

"How about the pistols, Vincenzo?"

"They are cleaned and ready for use, eccellenza," he replied. "I have placed them in your cabinet."

"That is well!" I said with a satisfied gesture. "You can leave me and arrange the salon for the reception of my friends."

He disappeared, and I busied myself with my toilet, about which I was for once unusually particular. The conventional dress-suit is not very becoming, yet there are a few men here and there who look well in it, and who, in spite of similarity in attire, will never be mistaken for waiters. Others there are who, passable in appearance when clad in their ordinary garments, reach the very acme of plebeianism when they clothe themselves in the unaccommodating evening-dress. Fortunately, I happened to be one of the former class—the sober black, the broad white display of starched shirt-front and neat tie became me, almost too well, I thought. It would have been better for my purposes if I could have feigned an aspect of greater age and weightier gravity. I had scarcely finished my toilet when the rumbling of wheels in the court-yard outside made the hot blood rush to my face, and my heart beat with feverish excitement. I left my dressing-room, however, with a composed countenance and calm step, and entered my private salon just as its doors were flung open and "Signor Ferrari" was announced. He entered smiling—his face was alight with

good humor and glad anticipation—he looked handsomer than usual.

“*Eccomi qua!*” he cried, seizing my hands enthusiastically in his own. “My dear conte, I am delighted to see you! What an excellent fellow you are! A kind of amiable Arabian Nights genius, who occupies himself in making mortals happy. And how are you? You look remarkably well!”

“I can return the compliment,” I said, gayly. “You are more of an Antinous than ever.”

He laughed, well pleased, and sat down, drawing off his gloves and loosening his traveling overcoat.

“Well, I suppose plenty of cash puts a man in good humor, and therefore in good condition,” he replied. “But my dear fellow, you are dressed for dinner—*quel preux chevalier!* I am positively unfit to be in your company! You insisted that I should come to you directly on my arrival, but I really must change my apparel. Your man took my valise; in it are my dress-clothes—I shall not be ten minutes putting them on.”

“Take a glass of wine first,” I said, pouring out some of his favorite Montepuiciano. “There is plenty of time. It is barely seven, and we do not dine till eight.” He took the wine from my hand and smiled. I returned the smile, adding, “It gives me great pleasure to receive you, Ferrari! I have been impatient for your return—almost as impatient as—” He paused in the act of drinking, and his eyes flashed delightedly.

“As *she* has? *Piccinina!* How I long to see her again! I swear to you, *amico*, I should have gone straight to the Villa Romani had I obeyed my own impulse—but I had promised you to come here, and, on the whole, the evening will do as well”—and he laughed with a covert meaning in his laughter—“perhaps better!”

My hands clinched, but I said with forced gayety:

“*Ma certimente!* The evening will be much better! Is it not Byron who says that women, like stars, look best at night? You will find her the same as ever, perfectly well and perfectly charming. It must be her pure and candid soul that makes her face so fair! It may be a relief to your mind to know that I am the only man she has allowed to visit her during your absence!”

“Thank God for that!” cried Ferrari, devoutly, as he tossed off his wine. “And now tell me, my dear conte, what bacchanalians are coming to-night? *Per Dio*, after all I am more in the humor for dinner than love-making!”

I burst out laughing harshly. “Of course! Every sensible

man prefers good eating even to good women! Who are my guests you ask? I believe you know them all. First, there is the Duca Filippo Marina.”

“By heaven!” interrupted Guido. “An absolute gentleman, who by his manner seems to challenge the universe to disprove his dignity! Can he unbend so far as to partake of food in public? My dear conte, you should have asked him that question!”

“Then,” I went on, not heeding this interruption, “Signor Frascchetti and the Marchese Giulano.”

“Giulano drinks deep!” laughed Ferrari, “and should he mix his wines, you will find him ready to stab all the waiters before the dinner is half over.”

“In mixing wines,” I returned, coolly, “he will but imitate your example, *caro mio*.”

“Ah, but I can stand it!” he said. “He cannot! Few Neapolitans are like me!”

I watched him narrowly, and went on with the list of my invited guests.

“After these, comes the Capitano Luigi Freccia.”

“What! the raging fire-eater?” exclaimed Guido. “He who at every second word raps out a pagan or Christian oath, and cannot for his life tell any difference between the two!”

“And the illustrious gentlemen Crispiano Dulci and Antonio Biscardi, artists like yourself,” I continued.

He frowned slightly—then smiled.

“I wish them good appetites! Time was when I envied their skill—now I can afford to be generous. They are welcome to the whole field of art as far as I am concerned. I have said farewell to the brush and palette—I shall never paint again.”

True enough! I thought, eying the shapely white hand with which he just then stroked his dark mustache; the same hand on which my family diamond ring glittered like a star. He looked up suddenly.

“Go on, conte! I am all impatience. Who come next?”

“More fire-eaters, I suppose you will call them,” I answered, “and French fire-eaters too. Monsieur le Marquis D’Avencourt, and *le beau* Capitaine Eugène de Hamal.”

Ferrari looked astonished. “*Per Bacco!*” he exclaimed. “Two noted Paris duelists! Why—what need have *you* of such valorous associates? I confess your choice surprises me.”

“I understood them to be *your* friends,” I said composedly. “If you remember, *you* introduced me to them. I know nothing of the gentlemen beyond that they appear to be pleas-

ant fellows and good talkers. As for their reputed skill I am inclined to set that down to a mere rumor, at any rate, my dinner-table will scarcely provide a field for the display of swordmanship."

Guido laughed. "Well, no! but these fellows would like to make it one—why, they will pick a quarrel for the mere lifting of an eyebrow. And the rest of your company?"

"Are the inseparable brother sculptors Carlo and Francesco Respetti, Chevalier Mancini, scientist and man of letters, Luziano Salustri, poet and musician, and the fascinating Marchese Ippolito Gualdro, whose conversation, as you know, is more entrancing than the voice of Adelina Patti. I have only to add," and I smiled half mockingly, "the name of Signor Guido Ferrari, true friend and loyal lover—and the party is complete."

"*Altro!* Fifteen in all including yourself," said Ferrari, gayly, enumerating them on his fingers. "*Per la madre di Dio!* With such a goodly company and a host who entertains *en roi* we shall pass a merry time of it. And did you, *amico*, actually organize this banquet, merely to welcome back so unworthy a person as myself?"

"Solely and entirely for that reason," I replied.

He jumped up from his chair and clapped his two hands on my shoulders.

"*A la bonne heure!* But why, in the name of the saints or the devil, have you taken such a fancy to me?"

"Why have I taken such a fancy to you?" I repeated, slowly. "My dear Ferrari, I am surely not alone in my admiration for your high qualities! Does not every one like you? Are you not a universal favorite? Did you not tell me that your late friend the Count Romani held you as the dearest to him in the world after his wife? *Ebbene!* Why underrate yourself?"

He let his hands fall slowly from my shoulders and a look of pain contracted his features. After a little silence he said:

"Fabio again! How his name and memory haunt me! I told you he was a fool—it was part of his folly that he loved me too well—perhaps. Do you know I have thought of him very much lately?"

"Indeed?" and I feigned to be absorbed in fixing a star-like japonica in my button hole. "How is that?"

A grave and meditative look softened the usually defiant brilliancy of his eyes.

"I saw my uncle die," he continued, speaking in a low tone. "He was an old man and had very little strength left

—yet his battle with death was horrible—horrible! I see him yet—his yellow convulsed face—his twisted limbs—his claw-like hands tearing at the empty air—then the ghastly grin and dropped jaw—the wide-open glazed eyes—pshaw! it sickened me!"

"Well, well!" I said in a soothing way, still busying myself with the arrangement of my button-hole, and secretly wondering what new emotion was at work in the volatile mind of my victim. "No doubt it was distressing to witness—but you could not have been very sorry—he was an old man, and, though it is a platitude not worth repeating—we must all die."

"Sorry!" exclaimed Ferrari, talking almost more to himself than to me. "I was glad! He was an old scoundrel, deeply dyed in every sort of social villainy. No—I was not sorry, only as I watched him in his frantic struggle, fighting furiously for each fresh gasp of breath—I thought—I know not why—of Fabio."

Profoundly astonished, but concealing my astonishment under an air of indifference, I began to laugh.

"Upon my word, Ferrari—pardon me for saying so, but the air of Rome seems to have somewhat obscured your mind! I confess I cannot follow your meaning."

He sighed uneasily. "I dare say not! I scarce can follow it myself. But if it was so hard for an old man to writhe himself out of life, what must it have been for Fabio? We were students together; we used to walk with our arms round each other's necks like school-girls, and he was young and full of vitality—physically stronger, too, than I am. He must have battled for life with every nerve and sinew stretched to almost breaking." He stopped and shuddered. "By Heaven! death should be made easier for us! It is a frightful thing!"

A contemptuous pity arose in me. Was he coward as well as traitor? I touched him lightly on the arm.

"Excuse me, my young friend, if I say frankly that your dismal conversation is slightly fatiguing. I cannot accept it as a suitable preparation for dinner! And permit me to remind you that you have still to dress."

The gentle satire of my tone made him look up and smile. His face cleared, and he passed his hand over his forehead, as though he swept it free of some unpleasant thought.

"I believe I am nervous," he said with a half laugh. "For the last few hours I have had all sorts of uncomfortable presentiments and forebodings."

"No wonder!" I returned carelessly, "with such a spectacle as you have described before the eyes of your memory.

The Eternal City savors somewhat disagreeably of graves. Shake the dust of the Cæsars from your feet, and enjoy your life, while it lasts!"

"Excellent advice!" he said, smiling, "and not difficult to follow. Now to attire for the festival. Have I your permission?"

I touched the bell which summoned Vincenzo, and bade him wait on Signor Ferrari's orders. Guido disappeared under his escort, giving me a laughing nod of salutation as he left the room. I watched his retiring figure with a strange pitifulness—the first emotion of the kind that had awakened in me for him since I learned his treachery. His allusion to that time when we had been students together—when we had walked with arms round each other's necks, "like school-girls," as he said, had touched me more closely than I cared to realize. It was true, we had been happy then—two careless youths with all the world like an untrodden race-course before us. *She* had not then darkened the heaven of our confidence; she had not come with her false fair face to make of *me* a blind, doting madman, and to transform *him* into a liar and hypocrite. It was all her fault, all the misery and horror; she was the blight on our lives; she merited the heaviest punishment, and she would receive it. Yet, would to God we had neither of us ever seen her! Her beauty, like a sword, had severed the bonds of friendship that after all, when it *does* exist between two men, is better and braver than the love of woman. However, all regrets were unavailing now; the evil was done, and there was no undoing it. I had little time left me for reflection; each moment that passed brought me nearer to the end I had planned and foreseen.

CHAPTER XXIII.

At about a quarter to eight my guests began to arrive, and one by one they all came in save two—the brothers Respetti. While we were awaiting them, Ferrari entered in evening-dress with the conscious air of a handsome man who knows he is looking his best. I readily admitted his charm of manner; had I not myself been subjugated and fascinated by it in the old happy foolish days? He was enthusiastically greeted and welcomed back to Naples by all the gentlemen assembled, many of whom were his own particular friends. They embraced him in the impressionable style common to Italians, with the exception of the stately Duca di Marina, who merely bowed courteously, and inquired if certain families of distinction

whom he named had yet arrived in Rome for the winter season. Ferrari was engaged in replying to these questions with his usual grace and ease and fluency, when a note was brought to me marked "Immediate." It contained a profuse and elegantly worded apology from Carlo Respetti, who regretted deeply that an unforeseen matter of business would prevent himself and his brother from having the inestimable honor and delight of dining with me that evening. I thereupon rang my bell as a sign that the dinner need no longer be delayed; and, turning to those assembled, I announced to them the unavoidable absence of two of the party.

"A pity Francesco could not have come," said Captain Freccia, twirling the ends of his long mustachios. He loves good wine, and better still, good company."

"Caro Capitano!" broke in the musical voice of the Marchese Gualdro, "you know that our Francesco goes nowhere without his beloved Carlo. Carlo *cannot* come—altrò! Francesco *will not*. Would that all men were such brothers!"

"If they were," laughed Luziano Salustri, rising from the piano where he had been playing softly to himself, "half the world would be thrown out of employment. You, for instance," turning to the Marquis D'Avencourt, "would scarce know what to do with your time."

The marquis smiled and waved his hand with a deprecatory gesture—that hand, by the by, was remarkably small and delicately formed—it looked almost fragile. Yet the strength and suppleness of D'Avencourt's wrist was reputed to be prodigious by those who had seen him handle the sword, whether in play or grim earnest.

"It is an impossible dream," he said, in reply to the remarks of Gualdro and Salustri, "that idea of all men fraternizing together in one common pig-sty of equality. Look at the differences of caste! Birth, breeding and education make of man that high-mettled, sensitive animal known as *gentleman*, and not all the socialistic theories in the world can force him down on the same level with the rough boor, whose flat nose and coarse features announce him as plebeian even before one hears the tone of his voice. We cannot help these things. I do not think we *would* help them even if we could."

"You are quite right," said Ferrari. "You cannot put race-horses to draw the plow. I have always imagined that the first quarrel—the Cain and Abel affair—must have occurred through some difference of caste as well as jealousy—for instance, perhaps Abel was a negro and Cain a white man, or

vice versa; which would account for the antipathy existing between the races to this day."

The Duke di Marina coughed a stately cough, and shrugged his shoulders.

"That first quarrel," he said, "as related in the Bible, was exceedingly vulgar. It must have been a kind of prize-fight. *Ce n'était pas fin.*"

Gualdro laughed delightedly.

"So like you, Marina!" he exclaimed, "to say that! I sympathize with your sentiments! Fancy the butcher Abel piling up his reeking carcasses and setting them on fire, while on the other side stood Cain the green-grocer frizzling his cabbages, turnips, carrots, and other vegetable matter! What a spectacle! The gods of Olympus would have sickened at it! However, the Jewish Deity, or rather, the well-fed priest who represented him, showed his good taste in the matter; I myself prefer the smell of roast meat to the rather disagreeable odor of scorching vegetables!"

We laughed—and at that moment the door was thrown open, and the head-waiter announced in solemn tones befitting his dignity—

"Le dîner de Monsieur le Comte est servi!"

I at once led the way to the banqueting-room—my guests followed gayly, talking and jesting among themselves. They were all in high good humor, none of them had as yet noticed the fatal blank caused by the absence of the brothers Respetti. I had—for the number of my guests was now thirteen instead of fifteen. Thirteen at table! I wondered if any of the company were superstitious? Ferrari was not, I knew—unless his nerves had been latterly shaken by witnessing the death of his uncle. At any rate, I resolved to say nothing that should attract the attention of my guests to the ill-omened circumstance; if any one should notice it, it would be easy to make light of it and of all similar superstitions. I myself was the one most affected by it—it had for me a curious and fatal significance. I was so occupied with the consideration of it that I scarcely attended to the words addressed to me by the Duke di Marina, who, walking beside me, seemed disposed to converse with more familiarity than was his usual custom. We reached the door of the dining-room, which at our approach was thrown wide open, and delicious strains of music met our ears as we entered. Low murmurs of astonishment and admiration broke from all the gentlemen as they viewed the sumptuous scene before them. I pretended not to hear their eulogies, as I took my seat at the head of the table, with Guido

Ferrari on my right and the Duke di Marina on my left. The music sounded louder and more triumphant, and while all the company were seating themselves in the places assigned to them, a choir of young fresh voices broke forth into a Neapolitan "madrigale"—which as far as I can translate it ran as follows:

"Welcome the festal hour!
Pour the red wine into cups of gold!
Health to the men who are strong and bold!
Welcome the festal hour!
Waken the echoes with riotous mirth—
Cease to remember the sorrows of earth
In the joys of the festal hour!
Wine is the monarch of laughter and light,
Death himself shall be merry to-night!
Hail to the festal hour!"

An enthusiastic clapping of hands rewarded this effort on the part of the unseen vocalists, and the music having ceased, conversation became general.

"By Heaven!" exclaimed Ferrari, "if this Olympian carouse is meant as a welcome to me, *amico*, all I can say is that I do not deserve it. Why, it is more fit for the welcome of one king to his neighbor sovereign!"

"*Ebbene!*" I said. "Are there any better kings than honest men? Let us hope we are thus far worthy of each other's esteem."

He flashed a bright look of gratitude upon me and was silent, listening to the choice and complimentary phrases uttered by the Duke di Marina concerning the exquisite taste displayed in the arrangement of the table.

"You have no doubt traveled much in the East, conte," said this nobleman. "Your banquet reminds me of an Oriental romance I once read, called 'Vathek.'"

"Exactly!" exclaimed Guido. "I think Oliva must be Vathek himself!"

"Scarcely!" I said, smiling coldly. "I lay no claim to supernatural experiences. The realities of life are sufficiently wonderful for me."

Antonio Biscardi the painter, a refined, gentle-featured man, looked toward us and said modestly:

"I think you are right, conte. The beauties of nature and of humanity are so varied and profound that were it not for the inextinguishable longing after immortality which has been placed in every one of us, I think we should be perfectly satisfied with this world as it is."

"You speak like an artist and a man of even temperament,"

broke in the Marchese Gualdro, who had finished his soup quickly in order to be able to talk—talking being his chief delight. “For me, I am never contented. I never have enough of anything! That is my nature. When I see lovely flowers, I wish more of them—when I behold a fine sunset, I desire many more such sunsets—when I look upon a lovely woman——”

“You would have lovely women *ad infinitum!*” laughed the French Capitaine de Hamal. “*En vérité*, Gualdro, you should have been a Turk!”

“And why not?” demanded Gualdro. “The Turks are very sensible people—they know how to make coffee better than we do. And what more fascinating than a harem? It must be like a fragrant hot-house, where one is free to wander every day, sometimes gathering a gorgeous lily, sometimes a simple violet—sometimes——”

“A thorn?” suggested Salustri.

“Well, perhaps!” laughed the Marchese. “Yet one would run the risk of that for the sake of a perfect rose.”

Chevalier Mancini, who wore in his button-hole the decoration of the Legion d’Honneur, looked up—he was a thin man with keen eyes and a shrewd face which, though at a first glance appeared stern, could at the least provocation break up into a thousand little wrinkles of laughter.

“There is undoubtedly something *entraînant* about the idea,” he observed, in his methodical way. “I have always fancied that marriage as we arrange it is a great mistake.”

“And that is why you have never tried it?” queried Ferrari, looking amused.

“*Certissimamente!*” and the chevalier’s grim countenance began to work with satirical humor. “I have resolved that I will never be bound over by the law to kiss only one woman. As matters stand, I can kiss them all if I like.”

A shout of merriment and cries of “Oh! oh!” greeted this remark, which Ferrari, however, did not seem inclined to take in good part.

“All?” he said, with a dubious air. “You mean all except the married ones?”

The chevalier put on his spectacles, and surveyed him with a sort of comic severity.

“When I said *all*, I meant all,” he returned—“the married ones in particular. They, poor things, need such attentions—and often invite them—why not? Their husbands have most likely ceased to be amorous after the first months of marriage.”

I burst out laughing. “You are right, Mancini,” I said;

“and even if the husbands are fools enough to continue their gallantries they deserve to be duped—and they generally are! Come, *amico!*” I added, turning to Ferrari, “those are your own sentiments—you have often declared them to me.”

He smiled uncomfortably, and his brows contracted. I could easily perceive that he was annoyed. To change the tone of the conversation, I gave a signal for the music to recommence, and instantly the melody of a slow, voluptuous Hungarian waltz-measure floated through the room. The dinner was now fairly on its way; the appetites of my guests were stimulated and tempted by the choicest and most savory viands, prepared with all the taste and intelligence a first-rate *chef* can bestow on his work, and good wine flowed freely.

Vincenzo, obediently following my instructions, stood behind my chair, and seldom moved except to refill Ferrari’s glass, and occasionally to proffer some fresh vintage to the Duke di Marina. He, however, was an abstemious and careful man, and followed the good example shown by the wisest Italians, who never mix their wines. He remained faithful to the first beverage he had selected—a specially fine Chianti, of which he partook freely without its causing the slightest flush to appear on his pale aristocratic features. Its warm and mellow flavor did but brighten his eyes and loosen his tongue, inasmuch that he became almost as elegant a talker as the Marchese Gualdro. This latter, who scarce had a *scudo* to call his own, and who dined sumptuously every day at other people’s expense for the sake of the pleasure his company afforded, was by this time entertaining every one near him by the most sparkling stories and witty pleasantries.

The merriment increased as the various courses were served; shouts of laughter frequently interrupted the loud buzz of conversation, mingling with the clinking of glasses and clattering of porcelain. Every now and then might be heard the smooth voice of Captain Freccia rolling out his favorite oaths with the sonority and expression of a *primo tenore*; sometimes the elegant French of the Marquis D’Avencourt, with his high, sing-song Parisian accent, rang out above the voices of the others; and again, the choice Tuscan of the poet Luziano Salustri rolled forth in melodious cadence as though he were chanting lines from Dante or Ariosto, instead of talking lightly on indifferent matters. I accepted my share in the universal hilarity, though I principally divided my conversation between Ferrari and the duke, paying to both, but specially to Ferrari, that absolute attention which is the greatest compliment a host can bestow on those whom he undertakes to entertain.

We had reached that stage of the banquet when the game was about to be served—the invisible choir of boys' voices had just completed an enchanting *stornello* with an accompaniment of mandolines—when a stillness, strange and unaccountable, fell upon the company—a pause—an ominous hush, as though some person supreme in authority had suddenly entered the room and commanded “Silence!” No one seemed disposed to speak or to move, the very footsteps of the waiters were muffled in the velvet pile of the carpets—no sound was heard but the measured plash of the fountain that played among the ferns and flowers. The moon, shining frostily white through the one uncurtained window, cast a long pale green ray, like the extended arm of an appealing ghost, against one side of the velvet hangings—a spectral effect which was heightened by the contrast of the garish glitter of the waxen tapers. Each man looked at the other with a sort of uncomfortable embarrassment, and somehow, though I moved my lips in an endeavor to speak and thus break the spell, I was at a loss, and could find no language suitable to the moment. Ferrari toyed with his wine-glass mechanically—the duke appeared absorbed in arranging the crumbs beside his plate into little methodical patterns; the stillness seemed to last so long that it was like a suffocating heaviness in the air. Suddenly Vincenzo, in his office of chief butler, drew the cork of a champagne-bottle with a loud-sounding pop! We all started as though a pistol had been fired in our ears, and the Marchese Gualdro burst out laughing.

“*Corpo di Bacco!*” he cried. “At last you have awakened from sleep! Were you all struck dumb, *amici*, that you stared at the table-cloth so persistently and with such admirable gravity? May Saint Anthony and his pig preserve me, but for the time I fancied I was attending a banquet on the wrong side of the Styx, and that you, my present companions, were all dead men!”

“And that idea made *you* also hold your tongue, which is quite an unaccountable miracle in its way,” laughed Luziano Salustri. “Have you never heard the pretty legend that attaches to such an occurrence as a sudden silence in the midst of high festivity? An angel enters, bestowing his benediction as he passes through.”

“That story is more ancient than the church,” said Chevalier Mancini. “It is an exploded theory—for we have ceased to believe in angels—we call them women instead.”

“Bravo, *mon vieux gaillard!*” cried Captain de Hamal. “Your sentiments are the same as mine, with a very trifling

difference. You believe women to be angels—I know them to be devils—*mais il n'y a qu'un pas entré les deux!* We will not quarrel over a word—*à votre santé, mon cher!*”

And he drained his glass, nodding to Mancini, who followed his example.

“Perhaps,” said the smooth, slow voice of Captain Freccia, “our silence was caused by the instinctive consciousness of something wrong with our party—a little inequality—which I dare say our noble host has not thought it worth while to mention.”

Every head was turned in his direction. “What do you mean?” “What inequality?” “Explain yourself!” chorused several voices.

“Really it is a mere nothing,” answered Freccia, lazily, as he surveyed with the admiring air of a *gourmet* the dainty portion of pheasant just placed before him. “I assure you, only the uneducated would care two *scudi* about such a circumstance. The excellent brothers Respetti are to blame—their absence to-night has caused—but why should I disturb your equanimity? I am not superstitious—*ma, chi sa!*—some of you may be.”

“I see what you mean!” interrupted Salustri, quickly. “We are thirteen at table!”

CHAPTER XXIV.

At this announcement my guests looked furtively at each other, and I could see they were counting up the fatal number for themselves. They were undeniably clever, cultivated men of the world, but the superstitious element was in their blood, and all, with the exception perhaps of Freccia and the ever-cool Marquis D'Avencourt, were evidently rendered uneasy by the fact now discovered. On Ferrari it had a curious effect—he started violently and his face flushed. “*Diavolo!*” he muttered, under his breath, and seizing his never-empty glass, he swallowed its contents thirstily and quickly at one gulp as though attacked by fever, and pushed away his plate with a hand that trembled nervously. I, meanwhile, raised my voice and addressed my guests cheerfully:

“Our distinguished friend Salustri is perfectly right, gentlemen. I myself noticed the discrepancy in our number some time ago—but I knew that you were all advanced thinkers, who had long since liberated yourselves from the trammels of superstitious observances, which are the result of priestcraft, and are now left solely to the vulgar. Therefore I said noth-