

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 Cavalier 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-

ing. The silly notion of any misfortune attending the number thirteen arose, as you are aware, out of the story of the Last Supper, and children and women may possibly still give credence to the fancy that one out of thirteen at table must be a traitor and doomed to die. But we men know better. None of us here to-night have reason to put ourselves in the position of a Christ or a Judas—we are all good friends and boon companions, and I cannot suppose for a moment that this little cloud can possibly affect you seriously. Remember also that this is Christmas-eve, and that according to the world's greatest poet, Shakespeare,

“Then no planet strikes,
No fairy tales, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is the time.”

A murmur of applause and a hearty clapping of hands rewarded this little speech, and the Marchese Gualdro sprang to his feet—

“By Heaven!” he exclaimed, “we are not a party of terrified old women to shiver on the edge of a worn-out omen! Fill your glasses, *signori!* More wine, *garçon!* *Per bacco!* if Judas Iscariot himself had such a feast as ours before he hanged himself, he was not much to be pitied! *Hola amici!* To the health of our noble host, Conte Cesare Oliva!”

He waved his glass in the air three times—every one followed his example and drank the toast with enthusiasm. I bowed my thanks and acknowledgments—and the superstitious dread which at first had undoubtedly seized the company passed away quickly—the talking, the merriment, and laughter were resumed, and soon it seemed as though the untoward circumstances were entirely forgotten. Only Guido Ferrari seemed still somewhat disturbed in his mind—but even his uneasiness dissipated itself by degrees, and heated by the quantity of wine he had taken, he began to talk with boastful braggartism of his many successful gallantries, and related his most questionable anecdotes in such a manner as to cause some haughty astonishment in the mind of the Duke di Marina, who eyed him from time to time with ill-disguised impatience that bordered on contempt. I, on the contrary, listened to everything he said with urbane courtesy—I humored him and drew him out as much as possible—I smiled complacently at his poor jokes and vulgar witticisms—and when he said something that was more than usually outrageous, I contented myself with a benevolent shake of my head, and the mild remark:

“Ah! young blood! young blood!” uttered in a bland *sotto voce*.

The dessert was now served, and with it came the costly wines which I had ordered to be kept back till then. Priceless “Chateau Yquem,” “Clos Vougeot,” of the rarest vintages, choice “Valpucello” and an exceedingly superb “Lacrime Cristi”—one after the other, these were tasted, criticised, and heartily appreciated. There was also a very unique brand of champagne costing nearly forty francs a bottle, which was sparkling and mellow to the palate, but fiery in quality. This particular beverage was so seductive in flavor that every one partook of it freely, with the result that the most discreet among the party now became the most uproarious. Antonio Biscardi, the quiet and unobtrusive painter, together with his fellow-student, Crispiano Dulci, usually the shyest of young men, suddenly grew excited; and uttered blatant nothings concerning their art. Captain Freccia argued the niceties of sword-play with the Marquis D’Avencourt, both speakers illustrating their various points by thrusting their dessert-knives skilfully into the pulpy bodies of the peaches they had on their plates. Luziano Salustri lay back at ease in his chair, his classic head reclining on the velvet cushions, and recited in low and measured tones one of his own poems, caring little or nothing whether his neighbors attended to him or not. The glib tongue of the Marchese Gualdro ran on smoothly and incessantly, though he frequently lost the thread of his anecdotes and became involved in a maze of contradictory assertions. The rather large nose of the Chevalier Mancini reddened visibly as he laughed joyously to himself at nothing in particular—in short, the table had become a glittering whirlpool of excitement and feverish folly, which at a mere touch, or word out of season, might rise to a raging storm of frothy dissension. The Duke di Marina and myself alone of all the company were composed as usual—he had resisted the champagne, and as for me, I had let all the splendid wines go past me, and had not taken more than two glasses of a mild Chianti.

I glanced keenly round the riotous board—I noted the flushed faces and rapid gesticulations of my guests, and listened to the Babel of conflicting tongues. I drew a long breath as I looked—I calculated that in two or three minutes at the very least I might throw down the trump card I had held so patiently in my hand all the evening.

I took a close observation of Ferrari. He had edged his chair a little away from mine, and was talking confidentially to his neighbor, Captain de Hamal—his utterance was low and thick, but yet I distinctly heard him enumerating in somewhat coarse language the exterior charms of a woman—*what woman*

I did not stop to consider—the burning idea struck me that he was describing the physical perfections of my wife to this De Hamal, a mere *spadaccino*, for whom there was nothing sacred in heaven or earth. My blood rapidly heated itself to boiling point—to this day I remember how it throbbed in my temples, leaving my hands and feet icy cold. I rose in my seat, and tapped on the table to call for silence and attention—but for some time the noise of argument and the clatter of tongues were so great that I could not make myself heard. The duke endeavored to second my efforts, but in vain. At last Ferrari's notice was attracted—he turned round, and seizing a dessert knife beat with it on the table and on his own plate so noisily and persistently that the loud laughter and conversation ceased suddenly. The moment had come—I raised my head, fixed my spectacles more firmly over my eyes, and spoke in distinct and steady tones, first of all stealing a covert glance toward Ferrari. He had sunk back again lazily in his chair and was lighting a cigarette.

"My friends," I said, meeting with a smile the inquiring looks that were directed toward me, "I have presumed to interrupt your mirth for a moment, not to restrain it, but rather to give it a fresh impetus. I asked you all here to-night, as you know, to honor me by your presence and to give a welcome to our mutual friend, Signor Guido Ferrari." Here I was interrupted by a loud clapping of hands and ejaculations of approval, while Ferrari himself murmured affably between two puffs of his cigarette, "*Tropp' onore, amico, tropp' onore!*" I resumed, "This young and accomplished gentleman, who is, I believe, a favorite with you all, has been compelled through domestic affairs to absent himself from our circle for the past few weeks, and I think he must himself be aware how much we have missed his pleasant company. It will, however, be agreeable to you, as it has been for me, to know that he has returned to Naples a richer man than when he left it—that fortune has done him justice, and that with the possession of abundant wealth he is at last called upon to enjoy the reward due to his merits!"

Here there was more clapping of hands and exclamations of pleasure, while those who were seated near Ferrari raised their glasses and drank to his health with congratulations, all of which courtesies he acknowledged by a nonchalant, self-satisfied bow. I glanced at him again—how tranquil he looked!—reclining among the crimson cushions of his chair, a brimming glass of champagne beside him, the cigarette between his lips, and his handsome face slightly upturned, though his eyes rested

half drowsily on the uncurtained window through which the Bay of Naples was seen glittering in the moonlight.

I continued: "It was, gentlemen, that you might welcome and congratulate Signor Ferrari as you have done, that I assembled you here to-night—or rather, let me say it was *partly* the object of our present festivity—but there is yet another reason which I shall now have the pleasure of explaining to you—a reason which, as it concerns myself and my immediate happiness, will, I feel confident, secure your sympathy and good wishes."

This time every one was silent, intently following my words.

"What I am about to say," I went on, calmly, "may very possibly surprise you. I have been known to you as a man of few words, and, I fear, of abrupt and brusque manners"—cries of "No, no!" mingled with various complimentary assurances reached my ears from all sides of the table. I bowed with a gratified air, and when silence was restored—"At any rate you would not think me precisely the sort of man to take a lady's fancy." A look of wonder and curiosity was now exchanged among my guests. Ferrari took his cigarette out of his mouth and stared at me in blank astonishment.

"No," I went on, meditatively, "old as I am, and a half-blind invalid besides, it seems incredible that any woman should care to look at me more than twice *en passant*. But I have met—let me say with the Chevalier Mancini—an angel—who has found me not displeasing to her, and—in short—I am going to marry!"

There was a pause. Ferrari raised himself slightly from his reclining position and seemed about to speak, but apparently changing his mind he remained silent—his face had somewhat paled. The momentary hesitation among my guests passed quickly. All present, except Guido, broke out into a chorus of congratulations, mingled with good-humored jesting and laughter.

"Say farewell to jollity, conte!" cried Chevalier Mancini; "once drawn along by the rustling music of a woman's gown, no more such feasts as we have had to-night!"

And he shook his head with tipsy melancholy.

"By all the gods!" exclaimed Gualdro, "your news has surprised me! I should have thought you were the last man to give up liberty for the sake of a woman. *One woman, too!* Why, man, freedom could give you twenty!"

"Ah!" murmured Salustri, softly and sentimentally, "but he one perfect pearl—the one flawless diamond——"

"Bah! Salustri, *caro mio*, you are half asleep!" returned

Gualdro. "Tis the wine talks, not you. Thou art conquered by the bottle, *amico*. You, the darling of all the women in Naples, to talk of *one!* *Buona notte, bambino!*"

I still maintained my standing position, leaning my two hands on the table before me.

"What our worthy Gualdro says," I went on, "is perfectly true. I have been noted for my antipathy to the fair sex. I know it. But when one of the loveliest among women comes out of her way to tempt me—when she herself displays the matchless store of her countless fascinations for my attraction—when she honors me by special favors and makes me plainly aware that I am not too presumptuous in venturing to aspire to her hand in marriage—what can I do but accept with a good grace the fortune thrown to me by Providence? I should be the most ungrateful of men were I to refuse so precious a gift from Heaven, and I confess I feel no inclination to reject what I consider to be the certainty of happiness. I therefore ask you all to fill your glasses, and do me the favor to drink to the health and happiness of my future bride."

Gualdro sprang erect, his glass held high in the air; every man followed his example. Ferrari rose to his feet with some unsteadiness, while the hand that held his full champagne glass trembled.

The Duke di Marina, with a courteous gesture, addressed me: "You will, of course, honor us by disclosing the name of the fair lady whom we are prepared to toast with all befitting reverence?"

"I was about to ask the same question," said Ferrari, in hoarse accents—his lips were dry, and he appeared to have some difficulty in speaking. "Possibly we are not acquainted with her?"

"On the contrary," I returned, eying him steadily with a cool smile. "You all know her name well! *Illustrissimi Signori!*" and my voice rang out clearly—"to the health of my betrothed wife, the *Contessa Romani!*"

"*Liar!*" shouted Ferrari—and with all a madman's fury he dashed his brimming glass of champagne full in my face! In a second the wildest scene of confusion ensued. Every man left his place at table and surrounded us. I stood erect and perfectly calm—wiping with my handkerchief the little runlets of wine that dripped from my clothing—the glass had fallen at my feet, striking the table as it fell and splitting itself to atoms.

"Are you drunk or mad, Ferrari?" cried Captain de Hamal, seizing him by the arm—"do you know what you have done?"

Ferrari glared about him like a tiger at bay—his face was flushed and swollen like that of a man in apoplexy—the veins in his forehead stood out like knotted cords—his breath came and went hard as though he had been running. He turned his rolling eyes upon me. "Damn you!" he muttered through his clinched teeth—then suddenly raising his voice to a positive shriek, he cried, "I will have your blood if I have to tear your heart for it!"—and he made an effort to spring upon me. The Marquis D'Avencourt quietly caught his other arm and held it as in a vise.

"Not so fast, not so fast, *mon cher!*" he said, coolly. "We are not murderers, we! What devil possesses you, that you offer such unwarrantable insult to our host?"

"Ask *him!*" replied Ferrari, fiercely, struggling to release himself from the grasp of the two Frenchmen—"he knows, well enough! Ask *him!*"

All eyes were turned inquiringly upon me. I was silent.

"The noble conte is really not bound to give any explanation," remarked Captain Freccia—"even admitting he were able to do so."

"I assure you, my friends," I said, "I am ignorant of the cause of this *fracas*, except that this young gentleman had pretensions himself to the hand of the lady whose name affects him so seriously!"

For a moment I thought Ferrari would have choked.

"Pretensions—pretensions!" he gasped. "*Gran Dio!* Hear him!—hear the miserable scoundrel!"

"Ah, *basta!*" exclaimed Chevalier Mancini, scornfully—"is that all? A mere *bagatelle!* Ferrari, you were wont to be more sensible! What! quarrel with an excellent friend for the sake of a woman who happens to prefer him to you! *Ma che!* Women are plentiful—friends are few."

"If," I resumed, still methodically wiping the stains of wine from my coat and vest—"if Signor Ferrari's extraordinary display of temper is a mere outcome of natural disappointment, I am willing to excuse it. He is young and hot-blooded—let him apologize, and I shall freely pardon him."

"By my faith!" said the Duke di Marina with indignation, "such generosity is unheard of, conte! Permit me to remark that it is altogether exceptional, after such ungentlemanly conduct."

Ferrari looked from one to the other in silent fury. His face had grown pale as death. He wrenched himself from the grasp of D'Avencourt and De Hamal.

"Fools! let me go!" he said, savagely. "None of you are

on my side—I see that!” He stepped to the table, poured out a glass of water and drank it off. He then turned and faced me—his head thrown back, his eyes blazing with wrath and pain.

“Liar!” he cried again, “double-faced, accursed liar! You have stolen *her*—you have fooled *me*—but, by G—d, you shall pay for it with your life!”

“Willingly!” I said, with a mocking smile, restraining by a gesture the hasty exclamations of those around me who resented this fresh attack—“most willingly, *caro* signor! But excuse me if I fail to see wherein you consider yourself wronged. The lady who is now my *fiancée* has not the slightest affection for you—she told me so herself. Had she entertained any such feelings I might have withdrawn my proposals—but as matters stand, what harm have I done you?”

A chorus of indignant voices interrupted me. “Shame on you, Ferrari!” cried Gualdro. “The count speaks like a gentleman and a man of honor. Were I in his place you should have had no word of explanation whatever. I would not have condescended to parley with you—by Heaven I would not!”

“Nor I!” said the duke, stiffly.

“Nor I!” said Mancini.

“Surely,” said Luziano Salustri, “Ferrari will make the *amende honorable*.”

There was a pause. Each man looked at Ferrari with some anxiety. The suddenness of the quarrel had sobered the whole party more effectually than a cold *douche*. Ferrari’s face grew more and more livid till his very lips turned a ghastly blue—he laughed aloud in bitter scorn. Then, walking steadily up to me, with his eyes full of baffled vindictiveness, he said, in a low, clear tone:

“You say that—you say she never cared for me—you! and I am to apologize to you! Thief, coward, traitor—take *that* for my apology!” And he struck me across the mouth with his bare hand so fiercely that the diamond ring he wore (*my* diamond ring) cut my flesh and slightly drew blood. A shout of anger broke from all present! I turned to the Marquis D’Avencourt.

“There can be but one answer to this,” I said, with indifferent coldness. “Signor Ferrari has brought it on himself. Marquis, will you do me the honor to arrange the affair?”

The marquis bowed, “I shall be most happy!”

Ferrari glared about him for a moment and then said, “Freccia, you will second me?”

Captain Freccia shrugged his shoulders. “You must posi-

tively excuse me,” he said. “My conscience will not permit me to take up such a remarkably wrong cause as yours, *caro mio*! I shall be pleased to act with D’Avencourt for the count, if he will permit me.” The marquis received him with cordiality, and the two engaged in earnest conversation. Ferrari next proffered his request to his quondam friend De Hamal, who also declined to second him, as did every one among the company. He bit his lips in mortification and wounded vanity, and seemed hesitating what to do next, when the marquis approached him with frigid courtesy and appeared to offer him some suggestions in a low tone of voice—for after a few minutes’ converse, Ferrari suddenly turned on his heel and abruptly left the room without another word or look. At the same instant I touched Vincenzo, who, obedient to his orders, had remained an impassive but evidently astonished spectator of all that passed, and whispered—“Follow that man and do not let him see you.” He obeyed so instantly that the door had scarcely closed upon Ferrari when Vincenzo had also disappeared. The Marquis D’Avencourt now came up to me.

“Your opponent has gone to find two seconds,” he said. “As you perceived, no one here would or could support him. It is a most unfortunate affair.”

“Most unfortunate,” chorused De Hamal, who, though not in it, appeared thoroughly to enjoy it.

“For my part,” said the Duke di Marina, “I wonder how our noble friend could be so lenient with such a young puppy. His conceit is insufferable!”

Others around me made similar remarks, and were evidently anxious to show how entirely they were on my side. I however remained silent, lest they should see how gratified I was at the success of my scheme. The marquis addressed me again:

“While awaiting the other seconds, who are to find us here,” he said, with a glance at his watch, “Freccia and I have arranged a few preliminaries. It is now nearly midnight. We propose that the affair should come off in the morning at six precisely. Will that suit you?”

I bowed.

“As the insulted party you have the choice of weapons. Shall we say—?”

“Pistols,” I replied briefly.

“*A la bonne heure!* Then, suppose we fix upon the plot of open ground just behind the hill to the left of the Casa Ghirlande—between that and the Villa Romani—it is quiet and secluded, and there will be no fear of interruption.”

I bowed again.

"Thus it stands," continued the marquis, affably—"the hour of six—the weapons pistols—the paces to be decided hereafter when the other seconds arrive."

I professed myself entirely satisfied with these arrangements, and shook hands with my amiable coadjutor. I then looked round at the rest of the assembled company with a smile at their troubled faces.

"Gentlemen," I said, "our feast has broken up in a rather disagreeable manner—and I am sorry for it, the more especially as it compels me to part from you. Receive my thanks for your company, and for the friendship you have displayed toward me! I do not believe that this is the last time I shall have the honor of entertaining you—but if it should be so, I shall at any rate carry a pleasant remembrance of you into the next world! If on the contrary I should survive the combat of the morning, I hope to see you all again on my marriage-day, when nothing shall occur to mar our merriment. In the meantime—good-night!"

They closed round me, pressing my hands warmly and assuring me of their entire sympathy with me in the quarrel that had occurred. The duke was especially cordial, giving me to understand that had the others failed in their services, he himself, in spite of his dignity and peace-loving disposition, would have volunteered as my second. I escaped from them all at last and reached the quiet of my own apartments. There I sat alone for more than an hour, waiting for the return of Vincenzo, whom I had sent to track Ferrari. I heard the departing footsteps of my guests as they left the hotel by twos and threes—I heard the equable voices of the marquis and Captain Freccia ordering hot coffee to be served to them in a private room where they were to await the other seconds—now and then I caught a few words of the excited language of the waiters who were volubly discussing the affair as they cleared away the remains of the superb feast at which, though none knew it save myself, death had been seated. Thirteen at table! One was a traitor and one must die. I knew which one. No presentiment lurked in my mind as to the doubtful result of the coming combat. It was not my lot to fall—my time had not come yet—I felt certain of that! No! All the fateful forces of the universe would help me to keep alive till my vengeance was fulfilled. Oh, what bitter shafts of agony Ferrari carried in his heart at that moment, I thought. *How* he had looked when I said she never cared for him! Poor wretch! I pitied him even while I rejoiced at his torture. He suffered now as I had suffered—he was duped as I had been duped—and each

quiver of his convulsed face and tormented frame had been fraught with satisfaction to me! Each moment of his life was now a pang to him. Well! it would soon be over—thus far at least I was merciful. I drew out pens and paper and commenced to write a few last instructions, in case the result of the fight should be fatal to me. I made them very concise and brief—I knew, while writing, that they would not be needed. Still—for the sake of form I wrote—and sealing the document I directed it to the Duke di Marina. I looked at my watch—it was past one o'clock and Vincenzo had not yet returned. I went to the window, and drawing back the curtains, surveyed the exquisitely peaceful scene that lay before me. The moon was still high and bright—and her reflection made the waters of the bay appear like a warrior's coat of mail woven from a thousand glittering links of polished steel. Here and there, from the masts of anchored brigs and fishing-boats, gleamed a few red and green lights burning dimly like fallen and expiring stars. There was a heavy, unnatural silence everywhere—it oppressed me, and I threw the window wide open for air. Then came the sound of bells chiming softly. People passed to and fro with quiet footsteps—some paused to exchange friendly greetings. I remembered the day with a sort of pang at my heart. The night was over, though as yet there was no sign of dawn—and—it was Christmas morning!

CHAPTER XXV.

THE opening of the room door aroused me from my meditations. I turned—to find Vincenzo standing near me, hat in hand—he had just entered.

"*Ebbene!*" I said, with a cheerful air—"what news?"

"Eccellenza, you have been obeyed. The young Signor Ferrari is now at his studio."

"You left him there?"

"Yes, eccellenza,"—and Vincenzo proceeded to give me a graphic account of his adventures. On leaving the banquetting-room, Ferrari had taken a carriage and driven straight to the Villa Romani—Vincenzo, unperceived, had swung himself on to the back of the vehicle and had gone also.

"Arriving there," continued my valet, "he dismissed the fiacre—and rang the gate-bell furiously six or seven times. No one answered. I hid myself among the trees and watched. There were no lights in the villa windows—all was darkness. He rang it again—he even shook the gate as though he would break it open. At last the poor Giacomo came, half undressed