

my commands in silence and evident embarrassment. Finally he said:

"Do I also travel with the eccellenza?"

"Why, no!" I answered, with a forced sad smile. "Do you not see, *amico*, that I am heavy-hearted, and melancholy men are best left to themselves. Besides—remember the carnival—I told you you were free to indulge in its merriment, and shall I not deprive you of your pleasure? No, Vincenzo; stay and enjoy yourself, and take no concern for me."

Vincenzo saluted me with his usual respectful bow, but his features wore an expression of obstinacy.

"The eccellenza must pardon me," he said, "but I have just looked at death, and my taste is spoiled for carnival. Again—the eccellenza is sad—it is necessary that I should accompany him to Avellino."

I saw that his mind was made up, and I was in no humor for argument.

"As you will," I answered, wearily, "only believe me, you make a foolish decision. But do what you like; only arrange all so that we leave to-night. And now get back quickly—give no explanations at the hotel of what has occurred, and lose no time in sending on my carriage. I will wait alone at the Villa Romani till it comes."

The vehicle rumbled off, bearing Vincenzo seated on the box beside the driver. I watched it disappear, and then turned into the road that led me to my own dishonored home. The place looked silent and deserted—not a soul was stirring. The silken blinds of the reception-rooms were all closely drawn, showing that the mistress of the house was absent; it was as if some one lay dead within. A vague wonderment arose in my mind. *Who* was dead? Surely it must be I—I, the master of the household, who lay stiff and cold in one of those curtained rooms! This terrible white-haired man who roamed feverishly up and down outside the walls was not *me*—it was some angry demon risen from the grave to wreak punishment on the guilty. *I* was dead—I could never have killed the man who had once been my friend. And he also was dead—the same murderess had slain us both—and *she* lived! Ha! that was wrong—she must now die—but in such torture that her very soul shall shrink and shrivel under it into a devil's flame for the furnace of hell!

With my brain full of hot whirling thoughts like these I looked through the carved heraldic work of the villa gates. Here had Guido stood, poor wretch, last night, shaking these twisted wreaths of iron in impotent fury. There on the mosaic

pavement he had flung the trembling old servant who had told him of the absence of his traitress. On this very spot he had launched his curse, which, though he knew it not, was the curse of a dying man. I was glad he had uttered it—such maledictions cling! There was nothing but compassion for him in my heart now that he was dead. He had been duped and wronged even as I; and I felt that his spirit, released from its grosser clay, would work with mine and aid in her punishment.

I paced round the silent house till I came to the private wicket that led into the avenue; I opened it and entered the familiar path. I had not been there since the fatal night on which I had learned my own betrayal. How intensely still were those solemn pines—how gaunt and dark and grim! Not a branch quivered—not a leaf stirred. A cold dew that was scarcely a frost glittered on the moss at my feet. No bird's voice broke the impressive hush of the woodland's morning dream. No bright-hued flower unbuttoned its fairy cloak to the breeze, yet there was a subtle perfume everywhere—the fragrance of unseen violets whose purple eyes were still closed in slumber.

I gazed on the scene as a man may behold in a vision the spot where he once was happy. I walked a few paces, then paused with a strange beating at my heart. A shadow fell across my path—it flitted before me—it stopped—it lay still. I saw it resolve itself into the figure of a man stretched out in rigid silence, with the light beating full on its smiling, dead face, and also on a deep wound just above his heart, from which the blood oozed redly, staining the grass on which he lay. Mastering the sick horror which seized me at this sight, I sprung forward—the shadow vanished instantly—it was a mere optical delusion, the result of my overwrought and excited condition. I shuddered involuntarily at the image my own heated fancy had conjured up; should I always see Guido thus, I thought, even in my dreams?

Suddenly a ringing, swaying rush of sounds burst joyously on the silence—the slumbering trees awoke, their leaves moved, their dark branches quivered, and the grasses lifted up their green lilliputian sword-blades. Bells!—and *such* bells!—tongues of melody that stormed the air with sweetest eloquence—round, rainbow bubbles of music that burst upon the wind, and dispersed in delicate broken echoes.

"Peace on earth, good-will to men! Peace—on—earth—good—will—to—men!" they seemed to say over and over again, till my ears ached with the repetition. Peace! What

had I to do with peace or good-will? The Christ Mass could teach me nothing. I was as one apart from human life—an alien from its customs and affections—for me no love, no brotherhood remained. The swinging song of the chimes jarred my nerves. Why, I thought, should the wild, erring world, with all its wicked men and women, presume to rejoice at the birth of the Saviour?—they, who were not worthy to be saved! I turned swiftly away; I strode fiercely past the kingly pines that, now thoroughly awakened, seemed to note me with a stern disdain as though they said among themselves: “What manner of small creature is this that torments himself with passions unknown to *us* in our calm converse with the stars?”

I was glad when I stood again on the high-road, and infinitely relieved when I heard the rapid trot of horses and rumbling of wheels, and saw my closed brougham, drawn by its prancing black Arabians, approaching. I walked to meet it; the coachman, seeing me, drew up instantly. I bade him take me to the Convento dell' Annunziata, and entering the carriage, I was driven rapidly away.

The convent was situated, I knew, somewhere between Naples and Sorrento. I guessed it to be near Castellamare, but it was fully three miles beyond that, and was a somewhat long drive of more than two hours. It lay a good distance out of the direct route, and was only attained by a by-road, which from its rough and broken condition was evidently not much frequented. The building stood apart from all other habitations in a large open piece of ground, fenced in by a high stone wall spiked at the top. Roses climbed thickly among the spikes, and almost hid their sharp points from view, and from a perfect nest of green foliage, the slender spire of the convent chapel rose into the sky like a white finger pointing to heaven. My coachman drew up before the heavily barred gates. I alighted, and bade him take the carriage to the principal hostelry at Castellamare, and wait for me there. As soon as he had driven off, I rang the convent bell. A little wicket fixed in the gate opened immediately, and the wrinkled visage of a very old and ugly nun looked out. She demanded in low tones what I sought. I handed her my card, and stated my desire to see the Countess Romani, if agreeable to the superioress. While I spoke she looked at me curiously—my spectacles, I suppose, excited her wonder—for I had replaced these disguising glasses immediately on leaving the scene of the duel—I needed them yet a little while longer. After peering at me a minute or two with her bleared and aged eyes she shut the wicket in my face with a smart click and disappeared.

While I awaited her return I heard the sound of children's laughter and light footsteps running trippingly on the stone passage within.

“Fi donc, Rosie!” said the girl's voice in French; “la bonne Mère Marguerite sera très très fâchée avec toi.”

“Tais-toi, petite sainte!” cried another voice more piercing and silvery in tone. “Je veux voir qui est la! C'est un homme je sais bien—parceque la vieille Mère Laura a rougi!” and both young voices broke into a chorus of renewed laughter.

Then came the shuffling noise of the old nun's footsteps returning; she evidently caught the two truants, whoever they were, for I heard her expostulating, scolding, and apostrophizing the saints all in a breath, as she bade them go inside the house and ask the good little Jesus to forgive their naughtiness. A silence ensued, then the bolts and bars of the huge gate were undone slowly—it opened, and I was admitted. I raised my hat as I entered, and walked bare-headed through a long, cold corridor, guided by the venerable nun, who looked at me no more, but told her beads as she walked, and never spoke till she had led me into the building, through a lofty hall glorious with sacred paintings and statues, and from thence into a large, elegantly furnished room, whose windows commanded a fine view of the grounds. Here she motioned me to take a seat, and without lifting her eyelids, said:

“Mother Marguerite will wait upon you instantly, signor.”

I bowed, and she glided from the room so noiselessly that I did not even hear the door close behind her. Left alone in what I rightly concluded was the reception-room for visitors, I looked about me with some faint interest and curiosity. I had never before seen the interior of what is known as an educational convent. There were many photographs on the walls and mantel-piece—portraits of girls, some plain of face and form, others beautiful—no doubt they had all been sent to the nuns as souvenirs of former pupils. Rising from my chair I examined a few of them carelessly, and was about to inspect a fine copy of Murillo's Virgin, when my attention was caught by an upright velvet frame surmounted with my own crest and coronet. In it was the portrait of my wife, taken in her bridal dress, as she looked when she married me. I took it to the light, and stared at the features dubiously. This was she—this slim, fairy-like creature clad in gossamer white, with the marriage veil thrown back from her clustering hair and child-like face—this was the *thing* for which two men's lives had been sacrificed! With a movement of disgust I replaced the frame in its former position; I had scarcely done so when the

door opened quietly and a tall woman, clad in trailing robes of pale blue, with a nun's band and veil of fine white cashmere, stood before me. I saluted her with a deep reverence; she responded by the slightest possible bend of her head. Her outward manner was so very still and composed that when she spoke her colorless lips scarcely moved, her very breathing never stirred the silver crucifix that lay like a glittering sign-manual on her quiet breast. Her voice, though low, was singularly clear and penetrating.

"I address the Count Oliva?" she inquired.

I bowed in the affirmative. She looked at me keenly: she had dark brilliant eyes, in which the smoldering fires of many a conquered passion still gleamed.

"You would see the Countess Romani, who is in retreat here?"

"If not inconvenient or out of rule——" I began.

The shadow of a smile flitted across the nun's pale, intellectual face; it was gone almost as soon as it appeared.

"Not at all," she replied, in the same even monotone. "The Countess Nina is, by her own desire, following a strict *régime*, but to-day being a universal feast-day all rules are somewhat relaxed. The reverend mother desires me to inform you that it is now the hour for mass—she has herself already entered the chapel. If you will share in our devotions, the countess shall afterwards be informed of your presence here."

I could do no less than accede to this proposition, though in truth it was unwelcome to me. I was in no humor for either prayers or praise; I thought moodily how startled even this impassive nun might have been, could she have known what manner of man it was that she thus invited to kneel in the sanctuary. However, I said no word of objection, and she bade me follow her. As we left the room I asked:

"Is the countess well?"

"She seems so," returned *Mère Marguerite*; "she follows her religious duties with exactitude, and makes no complaint of fatigue."

We were now crossing the hall. I ventured on another inquiry.

"She was a favorite pupil of yours, I believe?"

The nun turned her passionless face toward me with an air of mild surprise and reproof.

"I have no favorites," she answered, coldly. "All the children educated here share my attention and regard equally."

I murmured an apology, and added with a forced smile:

"You must pardon my apparent inquisitiveness, but as the

future husband of the lady who was brought up under your care, I am naturally interested in all that concerns her."

Again the searching eyes of the *religieuse* surveyed me; she sighed slightly.

"I am aware of the connection between you," she said, in rather a pained tone. "Nina Romani belongs to the world, and follows the ways of the world. Of course, marriage is the natural fulfillment of most young girls' destinies; there are comparatively few who are called out of the ranks to serve Christ. Therefore, when Nina married the estimable Count Romani, of whom report spoke ever favorably, we rejoiced greatly, feeling that her future was safe in the hands of a gentle and wise protector. May his soul rest in peace! But a second marriage for her is what I did not expect, and what I can not in my conscience approve. You see I speak frankly."

"I am honored that you do so, madame!" I said, earnestly, feeling a certain respect for this sternly composed yet patient-featured woman; "yet, though in general you may find many reasonable objections to it, a second marriage is, I think, in the Countess Romani's case almost necessary. She is utterly without a protector—she is very young, and how beautiful!"

The nun's eyes grew solemn and almost mournful.

"Such beauty is a curse," she answered, with emphasis; "a fatal—a fearful curse! As a child it made her wayward. As a woman it keeps her wayward still. Enough of this, signor!" and she bowed her head; "excuse my plain speaking. Rest assured that I wish you both happiness."

We had by this time reached the door of the chapel, through which the sound of the pealing organ poured forth in triumphal surges of melody. *Mère Marguerite* dipped her fingers in the holy water, and signing herself with the cross, pointed out a bench at the back of the church, as one that strangers were allowed to occupy. I seated myself, and looked with a certain soothed admiration at the picturesque scene before me. There was the sparkle of twinkling lights—the bloom and fragrance of flowers. There were silent rows of nuns blue-robed and white-veiled, kneeling and absorbed in prayer. Behind these a little cluster of youthful figures in black, whose drooped heads were entirely hidden in veils of flowing white muslin. Behind these again, one woman's slight form arrayed in heavy mourning garments; her veil was black, yet not so thick but that I could perceive the sheeny glitter of golden hair—that was my wife, I knew. Pious angel! how devout she looked! I smiled in dreary scorn as I watched her; I cursed her afresh in the

name of the man I had killed. And above all, surrounded with the luster of golden rays and incusted jewels, the uncovered Host shone serenely like the gleam of the morning star. The stately service went on—the organ music swept through and through the church as though it were a strong wind striving to set itself free—but amid it all I sat as one in a dark dream, scarcely seeing, scarcely hearing—inflexible and cold as marble. The rich plaintive voice of one of the nuns in the choir, singing the *Agnus Dei*, moved me to a chill sort of wonder. “*Qui tollis peccata mundi*”—“Who takest away the sins of the world.” No, no! there are some sins that cannot be taken away—the sins of faithless women, the “*little*” sins as they are called nowadays—for we have grown very lenient in some things, and very severe in others. We will imprison the miserable wretch who steals five francs from our pockets, but the cunning feminine thief who robs us of our prestige, our name, and honorable standing among our fellow-men, escapes almost scot-free; she cannot be put in prison, or sentenced to hard labor—not she! A pity it is that Christ did not leave us some injunction as to what was to be done with such women—not the penitent Magdalenes, but the creatures whose mouths are full of lies even when they pretend to pray—they who would be capable of trying to tempt the priest who comes to receive their last confessions—they who would even act out a sham repentance on their death-beds in order to look well. What can be done with devils such as these? Much has been said latterly of the wrongs perpetrated on women by men; will no one take up the other side of the question? We, the stronger sex, are weak in this—we are too chivalrous. When a woman flings herself on our mercy we spare her and are silent. Tortures will not wring her secrets out of us; something holds us back from betraying her. I know not what it can be—perhaps it is the memory of our mothers. Whatever it is, it is certain that many a man allows himself to be disgraced rather than he will disgrace a woman. But a time is at hand when this foolish chivalry of ours will die out. *On changera tout cela!* When once our heavy masculine brains shall have grasped the novel idea that woman has by her own wish and choice resigned all claim on our respect or forbearance, we shall have our revenge. We are slow to change the traditions of our forefathers, but no doubt we shall soon manage to quench the last spark of knightly reverence left in us for the female sex, as this is evidently the point the women desire to bring us to. We shall meet them on that low platform of the “equality” they seek for, and we shall treat them with

the unhesitating and regardless familiarity they so earnestly invite!

Absorbed in thought, I knew not when the service ended. A hand touched me, and looking up I saw Mère Marguerite, who whispered:

“Follow me, if you please.”

I rose and obeyed her mechanically. Outside the chapel door she said:

“Pray excuse me for hurrying you, but strangers are not permitted to see the nuns and boarders passing out.”

I bowed, and walked on beside her. Feeling forced to say something, I asked:

“Have you many boarders at this holiday season?”

“Only fourteen,” she replied, “and they are children whose parents live far away. Poor little ones!” and the set lines of the nun’s stern face softened into tenderness as she spoke. “We do our best to make them happy, but naturally they feel lonely. We have generally fifty or sixty young girls here, besides the day scholars.”

“A great responsibility,” I remarked.

“Very great indeed!” and she sighed; “almost terrible. So much of a woman’s after life depends on the early training she receives. We do all we can, and yet in some cases our utmost efforts are in vain; evil creeps in, we know not how—some unsuspected fault spoils a character that we judged to be admirable, and we are often disappointed in our most promising pupils. Alas! there is nothing entirely without blemish in this world.”

Thus talking, she showed me into a small, comfortable-looking room, lined with books and softly carpeted.

“This is one of our libraries,” she explained. “The countess will receive you here, as other visitors might disturb you in the drawing-room. Pardon me,” and her steady gaze had something of compassion in it, “but you do not look well. Can I send you some wine?”

I declined this offer with many expressions of gratitude, and assured her I was perfectly well. She hesitated, and at last said, anxiously:

“I trust you were not offended at my remark concerning Nina Romani’s marriage with you? I fear I was too hasty?”

“Not so, madame,” I answered, with all the earnestness I felt. “Nothing is more pleasant to me than a frank opinion frankly spoken. I have been so accustomed to deception—” Here I broke off and added hastily, “Pray do not think me capable of judging you wrongly.”

She seemed relieved, and smiling that shadowy, flitting smile of hers, she said:

"No doubt you are impatient, signor; Nina shall come to you directly," and with a slight salutation she left me.

Surely she was a good woman, I thought, and vaguely wondered about her past history—that past which she had buried forever under a mountain of prayers. What had she been like when young—before she had shut herself within the convent walls—before she had set the crucifix like a seal on her heart? Had she ever trapped a man's soul and strangled it with lies? I fancied not—her look was too pure and candid; yet who could tell? Were not Nina's eyes trained to appear as though they held the very soul of truth?

A few minutes passed. I heard the fresh voices of children singing in the next room:

*"D'ou vient le petit Gesù?
Ce joli bouton de rose
Qui fleurit, enfant cheri
Sur le cœur de notre mère Marie."*

Then came a soft rustle of silken garments, the door opened, and my wife entered.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHE approached with her usual panther-like grace and supple movement, her red lips parted in a charming smile.

"So good of you to come!" she began, holding out her two hands as though she invited an embrace; "and on Christmas morning too!" She paused, and seeing that I did not move or speak, she regarded me with some alarm. "What is the matter?" she asked, in fainter tones; "has anything happened?"

I looked at her. I saw that she was full of sudden fear. I made no attempt to soothe her, I merely placed a chair.

"Sit down," I said, gravely. "I am the bearer of bad news."

She sunk into the chair as though unnerved, and gazed at me with terrified eyes. She trembled. Watching her keenly, I observed all these outward signs of trepidation with deep satisfaction. I saw plainly what was passing in her mind. A great dread had seized her—the dread that I had found out her treachery. So indeed I had, but the time had not yet come for her to know it. Meanwhile she suffered—suffered acutely with that gnawing terror and suspense eating into her

soul. I said nothing, I waited for her to speak. After a pause, during which her cheeks had lost their delicate bloom, she said, forcing a smile as she spoke—

"Bad news? You surprise me! What can it be? Some unpleasantness with Guido? Have you seen him?"

"I have seen him," I answered, in the same formal and serious tone; "I have just left him. He sends you *this*," and I held out my diamond ring that I had drawn off the dead man's finger.

If she had been pale before, she grew paler now. All the brilliancy of her complexion faded for the moment into an awful haggardness. She took the ring with fingers that shook visibly and were icy cold. There was no attempt at smiling now. She drew a sharp quick breath; she thought I knew all. I was again silent. She looked at the diamond signet with a bewildered air.

"I do not understand," she murmured, petulantly. "I gave him this as a remembrance of his friend, my husband; why does he return it?"

Self-tortured criminal! I studied her with a dark amusement, but answered nothing. Suddenly she looked up at me and her eyes filled with tears.

"Why are you so cold and strange, Cesare?" she pleaded, in a sort of plaintive whimper. "Do not stand there like a gloomy sentinel; kiss me and tell me at once what has happened."

Kiss her! So soon after kissing the dead hand of her lover! No, I could not and would not. I remained standing where I was, inflexibly silent. She glanced at me again, very timidly, and whimpered afresh.

"Ah, you do not love me!" she murmured. "You could not be so stern and silent if you loved me! If there is indeed any bad news, you ought to break it to me gently and kindly. I thought you would always make everything easy for me—"

"Such has been my endeavor, madame," I said, interrupting her complaint. "From your own statement, I judged that your adopted brother Guido Ferrari had rendered himself obnoxious to you. I promised that I would silence him—you remember!—I have kept my word. He *is* silenced—forever!"

She started.

"Silenced? How? You mean—"

I moved away from my place behind her chair, and stood so that I faced her as I spoke.

"I mean that he is dead."

She uttered a slight cry, not of sorrow but of wonderment.