

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.

"Dead!" she exclaimed. "Not possible! Dead! You have killed him?"

I bent my head gravely. "I killed him—yes! But in open combat, openly witnessed. Last night he insulted me grossly; we fought this morning. We forgave each other before he died."

She listened attentively. A little color came back into her cheeks.

"In what way did he insult you?" she asked, in a low voice I told her all, briefly. She still looked anxious.

"Did he mention my name?" she said.

I glanced at her troubled features in profound contempt. She feared the dying man might have made some confession to me! I answered:

"No; not after our quarrel. But I hear he went to your house to kill you! Not finding you there, he only cursed you."

She heaved a sigh of relief. She was safe now, she thought!

Her red lips widened into a cruel smile.

"What bad taste!" she said, coldly. "Why he should curse me I cannot imagine! I have always been kind to him—too kind."

Too kind indeed! kind enough to be glad when the object of all her kindness was dead! For she *was* glad! I could see that in the murderous glitter of her eyes.

"You are not sorry?" I inquired, with an air of pretended surprise.

"Sorry? Not at all! Why should I be? He was a very agreeable friend while my husband was alive to keep him in order, but after my poor Fabio's death, his treatment of me was quite unbearable."

Take care, beautiful hypocrite! Take care! Take care lest your "poor Fabio's" fingers should suddenly nip your slim throat with a convulsive twitch that means death! Heaven only knows how I managed to keep my hands off her at that moment! Why, any groveling beast of the field had more feeling than this wretch whom I had made my wife! Even for Guido's sake—such are the strange inconsistencies of the human heart—I could have slain her then. But I restrained my fury; I steadied my voice and said, calmly:

"Then I was mistaken? I thought you would be deeply grieved, that my news would shock and annoy you greatly, hence my gravity and apparent coldness. But it seems I have done well?"

She sprung up from her chair like a pleased child and flung her arms round my neck.

"You are brave, you are brave!" she exclaimed, in a sort of exultation. "You could not have done otherwise! He insulted you and you killed him. That was right! I love you all the more for being such a man of honor!"

I looked down upon her in loathing and disgust. Honor! Its very name was libeled coming from *her* lips. She did not notice the expression of my face—she was absorbed, excellent actress as she was, in the part she had chosen to play.

"And so you were dull and sad because you feared to grieve me! Poor Cesare!" she said, in child-like caressing accents, such as she could assume when she chose. "But now that you see I am not unhappy, you will be cheerful again? Yes? Think how much I love you, and how happy we will be! And see, you have given me such lovely jewels, so many of them too, that I scarcely dare offer you such a trifle as this; but as it really belonged to Fabio, and to Fabio's father, whom you knew, I think you ought to have it. Will you take it and wear it to please me?" and she slipped on my finger the diamond signet—my own ring!

I could have laughed aloud! but I bent my head gravely as I accepted it.

"Only as a proof of your affection, *cara mia*," I said, "though it has a terrible association for me. I took it from Ferrari's hand when——"

"Oh, yes, I know!" she interrupted me, with a little shiver; "it must have been trying for you to have seen him dead. I think dead people look so horrid—the sight upsets the nerves! I remember when I was at school here they *would* take me to see a nun who died; it sickened me and made me ill for days. I can quite understand your feelings. But you must try and forget the matter. Duels are very common occurrences, after all!"

"Very common," I answered, mechanically, still regarding the fair upturned face, the lustrous eyes, the rippling hair: "but they do not often end so fatally. The result of this one compels me to leave Naples for some days. I go to Avellino to-night."

"To Avellino?" she exclaimed, with interest. "Oh, I know it very well. I went there once with Fabio when I was first married."

"And were you happy there?" I inquired, coldly.

I remembered the time she spoke of—a time of such unreasoning, foolish joy!

"Happy? Oh, yes; everything was so new to me then. It

was delightful to be my own mistress, and I was so glad to be out of the convent."

"I thought you liked the nuns?" I said.

"Some of them—yes. The reverend mother is a dear old thing. But Mère Marguerite, the *Vicaire* as she is called—the one that received you—oh, I do detest her!"

"Indeed! and why?"

The red lips curled mutinously.

"Because she is so sly and silent. Some of the children here adore her; but they *must* have something to love, you know," and she laughed merrily.

"Must they?"

I asked the question automatically, merely for the sake of saying something.

"Of course they must," she answered, gayly. "You foolish Cesare! The girls often play at being one another's lovers, only they are careful not to let the nuns know their game. It is very amusing. Since I have been here they have what is called a '*crase*' for me. They give me flowers, run after me in the garden, and sometimes kiss my dress, and call me by all manner of loving names. I let them do it because it vexes *Madame la Vicaire*; but of course it is very foolish."

I was silent. I thought what a curse it was—this necessity of loving. Even the poison of it must find its ways into the hearts of children—young things shut within the walls of a secluded convent, and guarded by the conscientious care of holy women.

"And the nuns?" I said, uttering half my thoughts aloud. "How do they manage without love or romance?"

A wicked little smile, brilliant and disdainful, glittered in her eyes.

"Do they always manage without love or romance?" she asked, half indolently. "What of Abelard and Heloise, or Fra Lippi?"

Roused by something in her tone, I caught her round the waist, and held her firmly while I said, with some sternness:

"And you—is it possible that *you* have sympathy with, or find amusement in, the contemplation of illicit and dishonorable passion—tell me?"

She recollected herself in time; her white eyelids drooped demurely.

"Not I!" she answered, with a grave and virtuous air; "how can you think so? There is nothing to my mind so horrible as deceit; no good ever comes of it."

I loosened her from my embrace.

"You are right," I said, calmly; "I am glad your instincts are so correct! I have always hated lies."

"So have I!" she declared, earnestly, with a frank and open look; "I have often wondered why people tell them. They are so sure to be found out!"

I bit my lips hard to shut in the burning accusation that my tongue longed to utter. Why should I damn the actress or the play before the curtain was ready to fall on both? I changed the subject of converse.

"How long do you propose remaining here in retreat?" I asked. "There is nothing now to prevent your returning to Naples."

She pondered for some minutes before replying, then she said:

"I told the superioress I came here for a week. I had better stay till that time is expired. Not longer, because, as Guido is really dead, my presence is actually necessary in the city."

"Indeed! May I ask why?"

She laughed a little consciously.

"Simply to prove his last will and testament," she replied. "Before he left for Rome, he gave it into my keeping."

A light flashed on my mind.

"And its contents?" I inquired.

"Its contents make *me* the owner of everything he died possessed of!" she said, with an air of quiet yet malicious triumph.

Unhappy Guido! What trust he had reposed in this vile, self-interested, heartless woman! He had loved her, even as I had loved her—she who was so unworthy of any love! I controlled my rising emotion, and merely said with gravity:

"I congratulate you! May I be permitted to see this document?"

"Certainly; I can show it to you now. I have it here," and she drew a Russia-leather letter-case from her pocket, and opening it, handed me a sealed envelope. "Break the seal!" she added, with childish eagerness. "He closed it up like that after I had read it."

With reluctant hand, and a pained piteousness at my heart, I opened the packet. It was as she had said, a will drawn up in perfectly legal form, signed and witnessed, leaving everything *unconditionally* to "Nina, Countess Romani, of the Villa Romani, Naples." I read it through and returned it to her.

"He must have loved you!" I said.

She laughed.

"Of course," she said, airily. "But many people love me—that is nothing new; I am accustomed to be loved. But you see," she went on, reverting to the will again, "it specifies, '*everything he dies possessed of*;' that means all the money left to him by his uncle in Rome, does it not?"

I bowed. I could not trust myself to speak.

"I thought so," she murmured, gleefully, more to herself than to me; "and I have a right to all his papers and letters." There she paused abruptly and checked herself.

I understood her. She wanted to get back her own letters to the dead man, lest her intimacy with him should leak out in some chance way for which she was unprepared. Cunning devil! I was almost glad she showed me to what a depth of vulgar vice she had fallen. There was no question of pity or forbearance in *her* case. If all the tortures invented by savages or stern inquisitors could be heaped upon her at once, such punishment would be light in comparison with her crimes—crimes for which, mark you, the law gives you no remedy but divorce. Tired of the wretched comedy, I looked at my watch.

"It is time for me to take my leave of you," I said, in the stiff, courtly manner I affected. "Moments fly fast in your enchanting company! But I have still to walk to Castellamare, there to rejoin my carriage, and I have many things to attend to before my departure this evening. On my return from Avellino shall I be welcome?"

"You know it," she returned, nestling her head against my shoulder, while for mere form's sake I was forced to hold her in a partial embrace. "I only wish you were not going at all. Dearest, do not stay long away—I shall be so unhappy till you come back!"

"Absence strengthens love, they say," I observed, with a forced smile. "May it do so in our case. Farewell, *cara mia*! Pray for me; I suppose you *do* pray a great deal here?"

"Oh, yes," she replied, naïvely; "there is nothing else to do."

I held her hands closely in my grasp. The engagement-ring on her finger, and the diamond signet on my own, flashed in the light like the crossing of swords.

"Pray then," I said; "storm the gates of heaven with sweet-voiced pleadings for the repose of poor Ferrari's soul! Remember he loved you, though *you* never loved him. For *your* sake he quarreled with me, his best friend—for *your* sake he died! Pray for him—who knows," and I spoke in thrilling tones of earnestness—"who knows but that his too hastily de-

parted spirit may not be near us now—hearing our voices, watching our looks!"

She shivered slightly, and her hands in mine grew cold.

"Yes, yes," I continued, more calmly; "you must not forget to pray for him—he was young and not prepared to die."

My words had some of the desired effect upon her—for once her ready speech failed—she seemed as though she sought for some reply and found none. I still held her hands.

"Promise me!" I continued; "and at the same time pray for your dead husband! He and poor Ferrari were close friends, you know; it will be pious and kind of you to join their names in one petition addressed to Him 'from whom no secrets are hid,' and who reads with unerring eyes the purity of your intentions. Will you do it?"

She smiled, a forced, faint smile.

"I certainly will," she replied, in a low voice; "I promise you."

I released her hands—I was satisfied. If she dared to pray thus I felt—I *knew* that she would draw down upon her soul the redoubled wrath of Heaven; for I looked beyond the grave! The mere death of her body would be but a slight satisfaction to me; it was the utter destruction of her wicked soul that I sought. She should never repent, I swore; she should never have the chance of casting off her vileness as a serpent casts its skin, and, reclothing herself in innocence, presume to ask admittance into that Eternal Gloryland whither my little child had gone—never, never! No church should save her, no priest should absolve her—not while *I* lived!

She watched me as I fastened my coat and began to draw on my gloves.

"Are you going now?" she asked, somewhat timidly.

"Yes, I am going now, *cara mia*," I said. "Why! what makes you look so pale?"

For she had suddenly turned very white.

"Let me see your hand again," she demanded, with feverish eagerness, "the hand on which I placed the ring!"

Smilingly and with readiness I took off the glove I had just put on.

"What odd fancy possesses you now, little one?" I asked, with an air of playfulness.

She made no answer, but took my hand and examined it closely and curiously. Then she looked up, her lips twitched nervously, and she laughed a little hard, mirthless laugh.

"Your hand," she murmured, incoherently, "with—that—signet—on it—is exactly like—like Fabio's!"

And before I had time to say a word she went off into a violent fit of hysterics—sobs, little cries, and laughter all intermingled in that wild and reasonless distraction that generally unnerves the strongest man who is not accustomed to it. I rang the bell to summon assistance; a lay-sister answered it, and seeing Nina's condition, rushed for a glass of water and summoned *Madame la Vicaire*. This latter, entering with her quiet step and inflexible demeanor, took in the situation at a glance, dismissed the lay-sister, and possessing herself of the tumbler of water, sprinkled the forehead of the interesting patient, and forced some drops between her clinched teeth. Then turning to me she inquired, with some stateliness of manner, what had caused the attack?

"I really cannot tell you, madame," I said, with an air of affected concern and vexation. "I certainly told the countess of the unexpected death of a friend, but she bore the news with exemplary resignation. The circumstance that appears to have so greatly distressed her is that she finds, or says she finds, a resemblance between my hand and the hand of her deceased husband. This seems to me absurd, but there is no accounting for ladies' caprices."

And I shrugged my shoulders as though I were annoyed and impatient.

Over the pale, serious face of the nun there flitted a smile in which there was certainly the ghost of sarcasm.

"All sensitiveness and tenderness of heart, you see!" she said, in her chill, passionless tones, which, icy as they were, somehow conveyed to my ear another meaning than that implied by the words she uttered. "We cannot perhaps understand the extreme delicacy of her feelings, and we fail to do justice to them."

Here Nina opened her eyes, and looked at us with piteous plaintiveness, while her bosom heaved with those long, deep sighs which are the finishing chords of the *Sonata Hysteria*.

"You are better, I trust?" continued the nun, without any sympathy in her monotonous accent and addressing her with some reserve. "You have greatly alarmed the Count Oliva."

"I am sorry——" began Nina, feebly.

I hastened to her side.

"Pray do not speak of it!" I urged, forcing something like a lover's ardor into my voice. "I regret beyond measure that it is my misfortune to have hands like those of your late husband! I assure you I am quite miserable about it. Can you forgive me?"

She was recovering quickly, and she was evidently conscious

that she had behaved somewhat foolishly. She smiled, a weak pale smile; but she looked very scared, worn, and ill. She rose from her chair slowly and languidly.

"I think I will go to my room," she said, not regarding *Mère Marguerite*, who had withdrawn to a little distance, and who stood rigidly erect, immovable features, with her silver crucifix glittering coldly on her still breast.

"Good-bye, Cesare! Please forget my stupidity, and write to me from Avellino."

I took her outstretched hand, and bowing over it, touched it gently with my lips. She turned toward the door, when suddenly a mischievous idea seemed to enter her mind. She looked at *Madame la Vicaire* and then came back to me.

"*Addio, amor mio!*" she said, with a sort of rapturous emphasis, and throwing her arms round my neck, she kissed me almost passionately.

Then she glanced maliciously at the nun, who had lowered her eyes till they appeared fast shut, and breaking into a low peal of indolently amused laughter, waved her hand to me, and left the room.

I was somewhat confused. The suddenness and warmth of her caress had been, I knew, a mere monkeyish trick, designed to vex the religious scruples of *Mère Marguerite*. I knew not what to say to the stately woman who remained confronting me with downcast eyes and lips that moved dumbly as though in prayer. As the door closed after my wife's retreating figure, the nun looked up; there was a slight flush on her pallid cheeks, and, to my astonishment, tears glittered on her dark lashes.

"Madame," I began, earnestly, "I assure you——"

"Say nothing, signor," she interrupted me, with a slight deprecatory gesture; "it is quite unnecessary. To mock a *religieuse* is a common amusement with young girls and women of the world. I am accustomed to it, though I feel its cruelty more than I ought to do. Ladies like the Countess Romani think that we—we, the sepulchers of womanhood—sepulchers that we have emptied and cleansed to the best of our ability so that they may more fittingly hold the body of the crucified Christ; these *grandes dames*, I say, fancy that *we* are ignorant of all they know—that we cannot understand love, tenderness, or passion. They never reflect—how should they?—that we also have had our histories—histories, perhaps, that would make angels weep for pity! I, even I——" and she struck her breast fiercely, then suddenly recollecting herself, she continued coldly: "The rule of our convent, signor permits no visitor to

remain longer than one hour—that hour has expired. I wish to summon a sister to show you the way out.”

“Wait one instant, madame,” I said, feeling that to enact my part thoroughly I ought to attempt to make some defense of Nina’s conduct; “permit me to say a word! My *fiancée* is very young and thoughtless. I really cannot think that her very innocent parting caress to me had anything in it that was meant to purposely annoy you.”

The nun glanced at me—her eyes flashed disdainfully.

“You think it was all affection for you, no doubt, signor? A very natural supposition, and—I should be sorry to undeceive you.”

She paused a moment and then resumed:

“You seem an earnest man—may be you are destined to be the means of saving Nina; I could say much—yet it is wise to be silent. If you love her do not flatter her; her overweening vanity is her ruin. A firm, wise, ruling master-hand may perhaps—who knows?” She hesitated and sighed, then added, gently, “Farewell, signor! *Benedicite!*” and making the sign of the cross as I respectfully bent my head to receive her blessing, she passed noiselessly from the room.

One moment later, and a lame and aged lay-sister came to escort me to the gate. As I passed down the stone corridor a side door opened a very little way, and two fair young faces peeped out at me. For an instant I saw four laughing bright eyes; I heard a smothered voice say, “Oh! *c’est un vieux papa!*” and then my guide, who though lame was not blind, perceived the opened door and shut it with an angry bang, which, however, did not drown the ringing merriment that echoed from within. On reaching the outer gates I turned to my venerable companion, and laying four twenty-franc pieces in her shivering palm, I said:

“Take these to the reverend mother for me, and ask that mass may be said in the chapel to-morrow for the repose of the soul of him whose name is written here.”

And I gave her Guido Ferrari’s visiting-cards adding in lower and more solemn tones:

“He met with a sudden and unprepared death. Of your charity, pray also for the man who killed him!”

The old woman looked startled, and crossed herself devoutly; but she promised that my wishes should be fulfilled, and I bade her farewell and passed out, the convent gates closing with a dull clang behind me. I walked on a few yards, and then paused, looking back. What a peaceful home it seemed; how calm and sure a retreat, with the white Noisette

roses crowning its ancient gray walls! Yet what embodied curses were pent-up in there in the shape of girls growing to be women; women for whom all the care, stern training, and anxious solicitude of the nuns would be unavailing; women who would come forth from even that abode of sanctity with vile natures and animal impulses, and who would hereafter, while leading a life of vice and hypocrisy, hold up this very strictness of their early education as proof of their unimpeachable innocence and virtue! To such, what lesson is learned by the daily example of the nuns who mortify their flesh, fast, pray, and weep? No lesson at all—nothing, save mockery and contempt. To a girl in the heyday of youth and beauty the life of a *religieuse* seems ridiculous. “The poor nuns!” she says, with a laugh; “they are so ignorant. Their time is over—mine has not yet begun.” Few, very few, among the thousands of young women who leave the scene of their quiet school-days for the social whirligig of the world, ever learn to take life in earnest, love in earnest, sorrow in earnest. To most of them life is a large dress-making and millinery establishment: love a question of money and diamonds; sorrow a solemn calculation as to how much or how little mourning is considered becoming or fashionable. And for creatures such as these we men work—work till our hairs are gray and our backs bent with toil—work till all the joy and zest of living has gone from us, and our reward is—what? Happiness?—seldom. Infidelity?—often. Ridicule?—Truly we ought to be glad if we are only ridiculed and thrust back to occupy the second place in our own houses; our lady-wives call that “kind treatment.” Is there a married woman living who does not now and then throw a small stone of insolent satire at her husband when his back is turned? What, madame? You, who read these words—you say with indignation: “Certainly there *is*, and I am that woman!” Ah, truly? I salute you profoundly!—you are, no doubt, the one exception!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AVELLINO is one of those dreamy, quiet, and picturesque towns which have not as yet been desecrated by the Vandal tourist. Persons holding “through tickets” from Messrs. Cook or Gaze do not stop there—there are no “sights” save the old sanctuary called Monte Vergine standing aloft on its rugged hill, with all the memories of its ancient days clinging to it like a wizard’s cloak, and wrapping it in a sort of mysterious, meditative silence. It can look back through a vista