

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

of eventful years to the eleventh century, when it was erected, so the people say, on the ruins of a temple of Cybele. But what do the sheep and geese that are whipped abroad in herds by the drovers Cook and Gaze know of Monte Vergine or Cybele? Nothing—and they care less; and quiet Avellino escapes from their depredations, thankful that it is not marked on the business map of the drovers' "runs." Shut in by the lofty Apennines, built on the slope of the hill that winds gently down into a green and fruitful valley through which the river Sabato rushes and gleams white against cleft rocks that look like war-worn and deserted castles, a drowsy peace encircles it, and a sort of stateliness, which, compared with the riotous fun and folly of Naples only thirty miles away, is as though the statue of a nude Egeria were placed in rivalry with the painted waxen image of a half-dressed ballet-dancer. Few lovelier sights are to be seen in nature than a sunset from one of the smaller hills round Avellino—when the peaks of the Apennines seem to catch fire from the flaming clouds, and below them, the valleys are full of those tender purple and gray shadows that one sees on the canvases of Salvator Rosa, while the town itself looks like a bronzed carving on an old shield, outlined clearly against the dazzling luster of the sky. To this retired spot I came—glad to rest for a time from my work of vengeance—glad to lay down my burden of bitterness for a brief space, and become, as it were, human again, in the sight of the near mountains. For within their close proximity, things mean, things mean, seem to slip from the soul—a sort of largeness pervades the thoughts, the cramping prosiness of daily life has no room to assert its sway—a grand hush falls on the stormy waters of passion, and like a chidden babe the strong man stands, dwarfed to an infinite littleness in his own sight, before those majestic monarchs of the landscape whose large brows are crowned with the blue circlet of heaven.

I took up my abode in a quiet, almost humble lodging, living simply, and attended only by Vincenzo. I was tired of the ostentation I had been forced to practice in Naples in order to attain my ends—and it was a relief to me to be for a time as though I were a poor man. The house in which I found rooms that suited me was a ramblingly built, picturesque little place, situated on the outskirts of the town, and the woman who owned it was, in her way, a character. She was a Roman, she told me, with pride flashing in her black eyes—I could guess that at once by her strongly marked features, her magnificently molded figure, and her free, firm tread—that step which is swift without being hasty, which is the manner born of

Rome. She told me her history in a few words, with such eloquent gestures that she seemed to live through it again as she spoke: her husband had been a worker in a marble quarry—one of his fellows had let a huge piece of the rock fall on him, and he was crushed to death.

"And well do I know," she said, "that he killed my Tonio purposely, for he would have loved me had he dared. But I am a common woman, see you—and it seems to me one cannot lie. And when my love's poor body was scarce covered in the earth, that miserable one—the murderer—came to me—he offered marriage. I accused him of his crime—he denied it—he said the rock slipped from his hands, he knew not how. I struck him on the mouth, and bade him leave my sight and take my curse with him! He is dead now—and surely if the saints have heard me, his soul is not in heaven!"

Thus she spoke, with flashing eyes and purposeful energy, while with her strong brown arms she threw open the wide casement of the sitting-room I had taken, and bade me view her orchard. It was a fresh green strip of verdure and foliage—about eight acres of good land, planted entirely with apple-trees.

"Yes, truly!" she said, showing her white teeth in a pleased smile as I made the admiring remark she expected. "Avellino has long had a name for its apples—but, thanks to the Holy Mother, I think in the season there is no fruit in all the neighborhood finer than mine. The produce of it brings me almost enough to live upon—that and the house, when I can find *signori* willing to dwell with me. But few strangers come hither; sometimes an artist, sometimes a poet—such as these are soon tired of gayety, and are glad to rest. To common persons I would not open my door—not for pride, ah, no! but when one has a girl, one cannot be too careful."

"You have a daughter, then?"

Her fierce eyes softened.

"One—my Lilla. I call her my blessing, and too good for me. Often I fancy that it is because she tends them that the trees bear so well, and the apples are so sound and sweet! And when she drives the load of fruit to market, and sits so smilingly behind the team, it seems to me that her very face brings luck to the sale."

I smiled at the mother's enthusiasm, and sighed. I had no fair faiths left—I could not even believe in Lilla. My landlady, Signora Monti as she was called, saw that I looked fatigued, and left me to myself—and during my stay I saw very little of her, Vincenzo constituting himself my major-

domo, or rather becoming for my sake a sort of amiable slave, always looking to the smallest details of my comfort, and studying my wishes with an anxious solicitude that touched while it gratified me. I had been fully three days in my retreat before he ventured to enter upon any conversation with me, for he had observed that I always sought to be alone, that I took long, solitary rambles through the woods and across the hills—and, not daring to break through my taciturnity, he had contented himself by merely attending to my material comforts in silence. One afternoon, however, after clearing away the remains of my light luncheon, he lingered in the room.

"The eccellenza has not yet seen Lilla Monti?" he asked, hesitatingly.

I looked at him in some surprise. There was a blush on his olive-tinted cheeks and an unusual sparkle in his eyes. For the first time I realized that this valet of mine was a handsome young fellow.

"Seen Lilla Monti!" I repeated, half absently; "oh, you mean the child of the landlady? No, I have not seen her. Why do you ask?"

Vincenzo smiled. "Pardon, eccellenza! but she is beautiful, and there is a saying in my province: Be the heart heavy as stone, the sight of a fair face will lighten it!"

I gave an impatient gesture. "All folly, Vincenzo! Beauty is the curse of the world. Read history, and you shall find the greatest conquerors and sages ruined and disgraced by its snares."

He nodded gravely. He probably thought of the announcement I had made at the banquet of my own approaching marriage, and strove to reconcile it with the apparent inconsistency of my present observation. But he was too discreet to utter his mind aloud—he merely said:

"No doubt you are right, eccellenza. Still one is glad to see the roses bloom, and the stars shine, and the foam-bells sparkle on the waves—so one is glad to see Lilla Monti."

I turned round in my chair to observe him more closely—the flush deepened on his cheek as I regarded him. I laughed with a bitter sadness.

"In love, *amico*, art thou? So soon!—three days—and thou hast fallen a prey to the smile of Lilla! I am sorry for thee!"

He interrupted me eagerly.

"The eccellenza is in error! I would not dare—she is too innocent—she knows nothing! She is like a little bird in the nest, so soft and tender—a word of love would frighten her; I should be a coward to utter it."

Well, well! I thought, what was the use of sneering at the poor fellow! Why, because my own love had turned to ashes in my grasp, should I mock at those who fancied they had found the golden fruit of the Hesperides? Vincenzo, once a soldier, now half courier, half valet, was something of a poet at heart; he had the grave meditative turn of mind common to Tuscans, together with that amorous fire that ever burns under their lightly worn mask of seeming reserve.

I roused myself to appear interested.

"I see, Vincenzo," I said, with a kindly air of banter, "that the sight of Lilla Monti more than compensates you for that portion of the Neapolitan carnival which you lose by being here. But why you should wish me to behold this paragon of maidens I know not, unless you would have me regret my own lost youth."

A curious and perplexed expression flitted over his face. At last he said firmly, as though his mind were made up:

"The eccellenza must pardon me for seeing what perhaps I ought not to have seen, but——"

"But what?" I asked.

"Eccellenza, you have not lost your youth."

I turned my head toward him again—he was looking at me in some alarm—he feared some outburst of anger.

"Well!" I said, calmly. "That is your idea, is it? and why?"

"Eccellenza, I saw you without your spectacles that day when you fought with the unfortunate Signor Ferrari. I watched you when you fired. Your eyes are beautiful and terrible—the eyes of a young man, though your hair is white."

Quietly I took off my glasses and laid them on the table beside me.

"As you have seen me once without them, you can see me again," I observed, gently. "I wear them for a special purpose. Here in Avellino the purpose does not hold. Thus far I confide in you. But beware how you betray my confidence."

"Eccellenza!" cried Vincenzo, in truly pained accents, and with a grieved look.

I rose and laid my hand on his arm.

"There! I was wrong—forgive me. You are honest; you have served your country well enough to know the value of fidelity and duty. But when you say I have not lost my youth, you are wrong, Vincenzo. I *have* lost it—it has been killed within me by a great sorrow. The strength, the suppleness of limb, the brightness of eye, these are mere outward things;

but in the heart and soul are the chill and drear bitterness of deserted age. Nay, do not smile; I am in truth very old—so old that I tire of my length of days; yet again, not too old to appreciate your affection, *amico*, and”—here I forced a faint smile, “when I see the maiden Lilla, I will tell you frankly what I think of her.”

Vincenzo stooped his head, caught my hand within his own, and kissed it, then left the room abruptly, to hide the tears that my words had brought to his eyes. He was sorry for me, I could see, and I judged him rightly when I thought that the very mystery surrounding me increased his attachment. On the whole, I was glad he had seen me undisguised, as it was a relief to me to be without my smoked glasses for a time, and during all the rest of my stay at Avellino I never wore them once.

One day I saw Lilla. I had strolled up to a quaint church situated on a rugged hill and surrounded by fine old chestnut-trees, where there was a picture of the Scourging of Christ, said to have been the work of Fra Angelico. The little sanctuary was quite deserted when I entered it, and I paused on the threshold, touched by the simplicity of the place and soothed by the intense silence. I walked on tiptoe up to the corner where hung the picture I had come to see, and as I did so a girl passed me with a light step, carrying a basket of fragrant winter narcissi and maiden-hair-fern. Something in her graceful, noiseless movements caused me to look after her; but she had turned her back to me and was kneeling at the shrine consecrated to the Virgin, having placed her flowers on the lowest step of the altar. She was dressed in peasant costume—a simple, short blue skirt and scarlet bodice, relieved by the white kerchief that was knotted about her shoulders; and round her small well-shaped head the rich chestnut hair was coiled in thick shining braids.

I felt that I must see her face, and for that reason went back to the church door and waited till she should pass out. Very soon she came toward me, with the same light timid step that I had before noticed, and her fair young features were turned fully upon me. What was there in those clear candid eyes that made me involuntarily bow my head in a reverential salutation as she passed? I know not. It was not beauty—for though the child was lovely I had seen lovelier; it was something inexplicable and rare—something of a maidenly composure and sweet dignity that I had never beheld on any woman's face before. Her cheeks flushed softly as she modestly returned my salute, and when she was once outside the

church door she paused, her small white fingers still clasping the carven brown beads of her rosary. She hesitated a moment, and then spoke shyly yet brightly:

“If the eccellenza will walk yet a little further up the hill he will see a finer view of the mountains.”

Something familiar in her look—a sort of reflection of her mother's likeness—made me sure of her identity. I smiled.

“Ah! you are Lilla Monti?”

She blushed again.

“Si, signor. I am Lilla.”

I let my eyes dwell on her searchingly and almost sadly. Vincenzo was right: the girl was beautiful, not with the forced hot-house beauty of the social world and its artificial constraint, but with the loveliness and fresh radiance which nature gives to those of her cherished ones who dwell with her in peace. I had seen many exquisite women—women of Juno-like form and face—women whose eyes were basilisks to draw and compel the souls of men—but I had never seen any so spiritually fair as this little peasant maiden, who stood fearlessly yet modestly regarding me with the innocent inquiry of a child who suddenly sees something new, to which it is unaccustomed. She was a little fluttered by my earnest gaze, and with a pretty courtesy turned to descend the hill. I said gently:

“You are going home, *fauciulla mia*?”

The kind protecting tone in which I spoke reassured her. She answered readily:

“Si, signor. My mother waits for me to help her with the eccellenza's dinner.”

I advanced and took the little hand that held the rosary.

“What!” I exclaimed, playfully, “do you still work hard, little Lilla, even when the apple season is over?”

She laughed musically.

“Oh! I love work. It is good for the temper. People are so cross when their hands are idle. And many are ill for the same reason. Yes, truly!” and she nodded her head with grave importance, “it is often so. Old Pietro, the cobbler, took to his bed when he had no shoes to mend—yes; he sent for the priest and said he would die, not for want of money—oh, no! he has plenty, he is quite rich—but because he had nothing to do. So my mother and I found some shoes with holes, and took them to him; he sat up in bed to mend them, and now he is as well as ever! And we are careful to give him something always.”

She laughed again, and again looked grave.

"Yes, yes!" she said, with a wise shake of her little glossy head, "one cannot live without work. My mother says that good women are never tired, it is only wicked persons who are lazy. And that reminds me I must make haste to return and prepare the eccellenza's coffee."

"Do you make my coffee, little one?" I asked, "and does not Vincenzo help you?"

The faintest suspicion of a blush tinged her pretty cheeks.

"Oh, he is very good, Vincenzo," she said, demurely, with downcast eyes; "he is what we call *buon' amico*, yes, indeed! But he is often glad when I make coffee for him also; he likes it so much! He says I do it so well! But perhaps the eccellenza will prefer Vincenzo?"

I laughed. She was so naïve, so absorbed in her little duties—such a child altogether.

"Nay, Lilla, I am proud to think you make anything for me. I shall enjoy it more now that I know what kind hands have been at work. But you must not spoil Vincenzo—you will turn his head if you make his coffee too often."

She looked surprised. She did not understand. Evidently to her mind Vincenzo was nothing but a good-natured young fellow, whose palate could be pleased by her culinary skill; she treated him, I dare say, exactly as she would have treated one of her own sex. She seemed to think over my words, as one who considers a conundrum, then she apparently gave it up as hopeless, and shook her head lightly as though dismissing the subject.

"Will the eccellenza visit the Punto d'Angelo?" she said, brightly, as she turned to go.

I had never heard of this place, and asked her to what she alluded.

"It is not far from here," she explained, "it is the view I spoke of before. Just a little further up the hill you will see a flat gray rock, covered with blue gentians. No one knows how they grow—they are always there, blooming in summer and winter. But it is said that one of God's own great angels comes once in every month at midnight to bless the Monte Vergine, and that he stands on that rock. And of course wherever the angels tread there are flowers, and no storm can destroy them—not even an avalanche. That is why the people call it the Punto d'Angelo. It will please you to see it, eccellenza—it is but a walk of a little ten minutes."

And with a smile, and a courtesy as pretty and as light as a flower might make to the wind, she left me, half running, half dancing down the hill, and singing aloud for sheer happi-

ness and innocence of heart. Her pure lark-like notes floated upward toward me where I stood, wistfully watching her as she disappeared. The warm afternoon sunshine caught lovingly at her chestnut hair, turning it to a golden bronze, and touched up the whiteness of her throat and arms, and brightened the scarlet of her bodice, as she descended the grassy slope, and was at last lost to my view amid the foliage of the surrounding trees.

CHAPTER XXIX.

I SIGHED heavily as I resumed my walk. I realized all that I had lost. This lovely child with her simple fresh nature, why had I not met such a one and wedded *her* instead of the vile creature who had been my soul's undoing? The answer came swiftly. Even if I *had* seen her when I was free, I doubt if I should have known her value. We men of the world who have social positions to support, we see little or nothing in the peasant type of womanhood; we must marry "ladies," so-called—educated girls who are as well versed in the world's ways as ourselves, if not more so. And so we get the Cleopatras, the Du Barrys, the Pompadours, while unspoiled maidens such as Lilla too often become the household drudges of common mechanics or day-laborers, living and dying in the one routine of hard work, and often knowing and caring for nothing better than the mountain-hut, the farm-kitchen, or the covered stall in the market-place. Surely it is an ill-balanced world—so many mistakes are made; Fate plays us so many apparently unnecessary tricks, and we are all of us such blind madmen, knowing not whither we are going from one day to another! I am told that it is no longer fashionable to believe in a devil—but I care nothing for fashion! A devil there is I am sure, who for some inscrutable reason has a share in the ruling of this planet—a devil who delights in mocking us from the cradle to the grave. And perhaps we are never so hopelessly, utterly fooled as in our marriages!

Occupied in various thoughts, I scarcely saw where I wandered, till a flashing glimmer of blue blossoms recalled me to the object of my walk. I had reached the Punto d'Angelo. It was, as Lilla had said, a flat rock bare in every place save at the summit, where it was thickly covered with the lovely gentians, flowers that are rare in this part of Italy. Here then the fabled angel paused in his flight to bless the venerable sanctuary of Monte Vergine. I stopped and looked around me. The view was indeed superb—from the leafy bosom of