

"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

the valley, the green hills like smooth, undulating billows rolled upward, till their emerald verdure was lost in the dense purple shadows and tall peaks of the Apennines; the town of Avellino lay at my feet, small yet clearly defined as a miniature painting on porcelain; and a little further beyond and above me rose the gray tower of the Monte Vergine itself, the one sad and solitary-looking object in all the luxuriant *riante* landscape.

I sat down to rest, not as an intruder on the angel's flower-embroidered throne, but on a grassy knoll close by. And then I bethought me of a packet I had received from Naples that morning—a packet that I desired yet hesitated to open. It had been sent by the Marquis D'Avencourt, accompanied by a courteous letter, which informed me that Ferrari's body had been privately buried with all the last religious rites in the cemetery, "close to the funeral vault of the Romani family," wrote D'Avencourt, "as, from all we can hear or discover, such seems to have been his own desire. He was, it appears, a sort of adopted brother of the lately deceased count, and on being informed of this circumstance, we buried him in accordance with the sentiments he would no doubt have expressed had he considered the possible nearness of his own end at the time of the combat."

With regard to the packet inclosed, D'Avencourt continued—"The accompanying letters were found in Ferrari's breast-pocket, and on opening the first one, in the expectation of finding some clew as to his last wishes, we came to the conclusion that you, as the future husband of the lady whose signature and handwriting you will here recognize, should be made aware of the contents, not only for your own sake, but in justice to the deceased. If all the letters are of the same tone as the one I unknowingly opened, I have no doubt Ferrari considered himself a sufficiently injured man. But of that you will judge for yourself, though, if I might venture so far in the way of friendship, I should recommend you to give careful consideration to the inclosed correspondence before tying the matrimonial knot to which you alluded the other evening. It is not wise to walk on the edge of a precipice with one's eyes shut! Captain Ciabatti was the first to inform me of what I now know for a fact—namely, that Ferrari left a will in which everything he possessed is made over unconditionally to the Countess Romani. You will of course draw your own conclusions, and pardon me if I am guilty of *trop de zèle* in your service. I have now only to tell you that all the unpleasantness of this affair is passing over very smoothly and without scandal—I have taken care of that. You need not prolong your absence

further than you feel inclined, and I, for one, shall be charmed to welcome you back to Naples. With every sentiment of the highest consideration and regard, I am, my dear conte,

"Your very true friend and servitor,
"PHILIPPE D'AVENCOURT."

I folded this letter carefully and put it aside. The little package he had sent me lay in my hand—a bundle of neatly folded letters tied together with a narrow ribbon, and strongly perfumed with the faint sickly perfume I knew and abhorred. I turned them over and over; the edges of the note-paper were stained with blood—Guido's blood—as though in its last sluggish flowing it had endeavored to obliterate all traces of the daintily penned lines that now awaited my perusal. Slowly I untied the ribbon. With methodical deliberation I read one letter after the other. They were all from Nina—all written to Guido while he was in Rome, some of them bearing the dates of the very days when she had feigned to love *me*—me, her newly accepted husband. One very amorous epistle had been written on the self-same evening she had plighted her troth to me! Letters burning and tender, full of the most passionate protestations of fidelity, overflowing with the sweetest terms of endearment; with such a ring of truth and love throughout them that surely it was no wonder that Guido's suspicions were all unawakened, and that he had reason to believe himself safe in his fool's paradise. One passage in this poetical and romantic correspondence fixed my attention: it ran thus:

"Why do you write so much of marriage to me, Guido *mio*? It seems to my mind that all the joy of loving will be taken from us when once the hard world knows of our passion. If you become my husband you will assuredly cease to be my lover, and that would break my heart. Ah, my best beloved! I desire you to be my lover always, as you were when Fabio lived—why bring commonplace matrimony into the heaven of such a passion as ours?"

I studied these words attentively. Of course I understood their drift. She had tried to feel her way with the dead man. She had wanted to marry me, and yet retain Guido for her lonely hours, as "her lover always!" Such a pretty, ingenious plan it was! No thief, no murderer, ever laid more cunning schemes than she; but the law looks after thieves and murderers. For such a woman as this, law says, "Divorce her—that is your best remedy." Divorce her! Let the criminal go scot-free! Others may do it that choose—I have different ideas of justice!

Tying up the packet of letters again, with their sickening perfume and their blood-stained edges, I drew out the last graciously worded missive I had received from Nina. Of course I heard from her every day—she was a most faithful correspondent! The same affectionate expressions characterized her letters to me as those that had deluded her dead lover—with this difference, that whereas she inveighed much against the prosiness of marriage to Guido, to me she drew the most touching pictures of her desolate condition: how lonely she had felt since her “dear husband’s” death, how rejoiced she was to think that she was soon again to be a happy wife—the wife of one so noble, so true, so devoted as I was! She had left the convent and was now at home—when should she have the happiness of welcoming me, her best-beloved Cesare, back to Naples? She certainly deserved some credit for artistic lying; I could not understand how she managed it so well. Almost I admired her skill, as one sometimes admires a cool-headed burglar, who has more skill, cunning, and pluck than his comrades. I thought with triumph that though the wording of Ferrari’s will enabled her to secure all other letters she might have written to him, this one little packet of documentary evidence was more than sufficient for *my* purposes. And I resolved to retain it in my own keeping till the time came for me to use it against her.

And how about D’Avencourt’s friendly advice concerning the matrimonial knot? “A man should not walk on the edge of a precipice with his eyes shut.” Very true. But if his eyes are open, and he has his enemy by the throat, the edge of a precipice is a convenient position for hurling that enemy down to death in a quiet way, that the world need know nothing of! So for the present I preferred the precipice to walking on level ground.

I rose from my seat near the Punto d’Angelo. It was growing late in the afternoon. From the little church below me soft bells rang out the Angelus, and with them chimed in a solemn and harsher sound from the turret of the Monte Vergine. I lifted my hat with the customary reverence, and stood listening, with my feet deep in the grass and scented thyme, and more than once glanced up at the height whereon the venerable sanctuary held its post, like some lonely old god of memory brooding over vanished years. There, according to tradition, was once celebrated the worship of the many-breasted Cybele; down that very slope of grass dotted with violets had rushed the howling, naked priests beating their discordant drums and shrieking their laments for the loss of Aty, the

beautiful youth, their goddess’s paramour. Infidelity again!—even in this ancient legend, what did Cybele care for old Saturn, whose wife she was? Nothing, less than nothing!—and her adorers worshiped not her chastity, but her faithlessness; it is the way of the world to this day!

The bells ceased ringing; I descended the hill and returned homeward through a shady valley, full of the odor of pines and bog-myrtle. On reaching the gate of the Signora Monti’s humble yet picturesque dwelling, I heard the sound of laughter and clapping of hands, and looking in the direction of the orchard, I saw Vincenzo hard at work, his shirt-sleeves rolled up to the shoulder, splitting some goodly logs of wood, while Lilla stood beside him, merrily applauding and encouraging his efforts. He seemed quite in his element, and wielded his ax with a regularity and vigor I should scarcely have expected from a man whom I was accustomed to see performing the somewhat effeminate duties of a *valet-de-chambre*. I watched him and the fair girl beside him for a few moments, myself unperceived.

If this little budding romance were left alone it would ripen into a flower, and Vincenzo would be a happier man than his master. He was a true Tuscan, from the very way he handled his wood-ax; I could see that he loved the life of the hills and fields—the life of a simple farmer and fruit-grower, full of innocent enjoyments, as sweet as the ripe apples in his orchard. I could foresee his future with Lilla beside him. He would have days of unwearying contentment, rendered beautiful by the free fresh air and the fragrance of flowers—his evenings would slip softly by to the tinkle of the mandolin, and the sound of his wife and children’s singing.

What fairer fate could a man desire?—what life more certain to keep health in the body and peace in the mind? Could I not help him to his happiness, I wondered? I who had grown stern with long brooding upon my vengeance—could I not aid in bringing joy to others! If I could, my mind would be somewhat lightened of its burden—a burden grown heavier since Guido’s death, for from his blood had sprung forth a new group of Furies, that lashed me on to my task with scorpion whips of redoubled wrath and passionate ferocity. Yet if I could do one good action now—would it not be as a star shining in the midst of my soul’s storm and darkness? Just then Lilla laughed—how sweetly!—the laugh of a very young child. What amused her now? I looked, and saw that she had taken the ax from Vincenzo, and lifting it in her little hands, was endeavoring bravely to imitate his strong and telling stroke;

he meanwhile stood aside with an air of smiling superiority, mingled with a good deal of admiration for the slight active figure arrayed in the blue kirtle and scarlet bodice, on which the warm rays of the late sun fell with so much amorous tenderness. Poor little Lilla! A penknife would have made as much impression as her valorous blows produced on the inflexible, gnarled, knotty old stump she essayed to split in twain. Flushed and breathless with her efforts, she looked prettier than ever, and at last, baffled, she resigned her ax to Vincenzo, laughing gayly at her incapacity for wood-cutting, and daintily shaking her apron free from the chips and dust, till a call from her mother caused her to run swiftly into the house, leaving Vincenzo working away as arduously as ever. I went up to him; he saw me approaching, and paused in his labors with an air of slight embarrassment.

"You like this sort of work, *amico*?" I said, gently.

"An old habit, *eccellenza*—nothing more. It reminds me of the days of my youth, when I worked for my mother. Ah! a pleasant place it was—the old home just above Fiesole." His eyes grew pensive and sad. "It is all gone now—finished. That was before I became a soldier. But one thinks of it sometimes."

"I understand. And no doubt you would be glad to return to the life of your boyhood?"

He looked a little startled.

"Not to leave *you*, *eccellenza*!"

I smiled rather sadly. "Not to leave *me*? Not if you wedded Lilla Monti?"

His olive cheek flushed, but he shook his head.

"Impossible! She would not listen to me. She is a child."

"She will soon be a woman, believe me! A little more of your company will make her so. But there is plenty of time. She is beautiful, as you said; and something better than that, she is innocent—think of that, Vincenzo! Do you know how rare a thing innocence is—in a woman? Respect it as you respect God; let her young life be sacred to you."

He glanced upward reverently.

"*Eccellenza*, I would as soon tear the Madonna from her altars as vex or frighten Lilla!"

I smiled and said no more, but turned into the house. From that moment I resolved to let this little love-idyl have a fair chance of success. Therefore I remained at Avellino much longer than I had at first intended, not for my own sake, but for Vincenzo's. He served me faithfully, he should have his reward. I took a pleasure in noticing that my efforts to

promote his cause were not altogether wasted. I spoke with Lilla often on indifferent matters that interested her, and watched her constantly when she was all unaware of my observant gaze. With me she was as frank and fearless as a tame robin; but after some days I found that she grew shy of mentioning the name of Vincenzo, that she blushed when he approached her, that she was timid of asking him to do anything for her; and from all these little signs I knew her mind, as one knows by the rosy streaks in the sky that the sunrise is near.

One afternoon I called the Signora Monti to my room. She came, surprised, and a little anxious. Was anything wrong with the service? I reassured her housewifely scruples, and came to the point at once.

"I would speak to you of your child, the little Lilla," I said, kindly. "Have you ever thought that she may marry?"

Her dark bold eyes filled with tears and her lips quivered.

"Truly I have," she replied, with a wistful sadness; "but I have prayed, perhaps foolishly, that she would not leave me yet. I love her so well; she is always a babe to me, so small and sweet! I put the thought of her marriage from me as a sorrowful thing."

"I understand your feeling," I said. "Still, suppose your daughter wedded a man who would be to you as a son, and who would not part her from you?—for instance, let us say Vincenzo?"

Signora Monti smiled through her tears.

"Vincenzo! He is a good lad, a very good lad, and I love him; but he does not think of Lilla—he is devoted to the *eccellenza*."

"I am aware of his devotion," I answered. "Still I believe you will find out soon that he loves your Lilla. At present he says nothing—he fears to offend you and alarm her; but his eyes speak—so do hers. You are a good woman, a good mother; watch them both, you will soon tell whether love is between them or no. And see," here I handed her a sealed envelope, "in this you will find notes to the amount of four thousand francs." She uttered a little cry of amazement. "It is Lilla's dowry, whoever she marries, though I think she will marry Vincenzo. Nay—no thanks, money is of no value to me; and this is the one pleasure I have had for many weary months. Think well of Vincenzo—he is an excellent fellow. And all I ask of you is, that you keep this little dowry a secret till the day of your fair child's espousals."

Before I could prevent her the enthusiastic woman had seized

my hand and kissed it. Then she lifted her head with the proud free-born dignity of a Roman matron; her broad bosom heaved, and her strong voice quivered with suppressed emotion.

"I thank you, signor," she said, simply, "for Lilla's sake! Not that my little one needs more than her mother's hands have toiled for, thanks be to the blessed saints who have had us both in their keeping! But this is a special blessing of God sent through your hands, and I should be unworthy of all prosperity were I not grateful. Eccellenza, pardon me, but my eyes are quick to see that you have suffered sorrow. Good actions lighten grief! We will pray for your happiness, Lilla and I, till the last breath leaves our lips. Believe it—the name of our benefactor shall be lifted to the saints night and morning, and who knows but good may come of it!"

I smiled faintly.

"Good will come of it, my excellent signora, though I am all unworthy of your prayers. Rather pray," and I sighed heavily, "for the dead, *that they may be loosed from their sins.*"

The good woman looked at me with a sort of kindly pity mingled with awe, then murmuring once more her thanks and blessings, she left the room. A few minutes afterward Vincenzo entered. I addressed him cheerfully.

"Absence is the best test of love, Vincenzo; prepare all for our departure! We shall leave Avellino the day after to-morrow."

And so we did. Lilla looked slightly downcast, but Vincenzo seemed satisfied, and I augured from their faces, and from the mysterious smile of Signora Monti, that all was going well. I left the beautiful mountain town with regret, knowing I should see it no more. I touched Lilla's fair cheek lightly at parting, and took what I knew was my last look into the sweet candid young face. Yet the consciousness that I had done some little good gave my tired heart a sense of satisfaction and repose—a feeling I had not experienced since I died and rose again from the dead.

On the last day of January I returned to Naples, after an absence of more than a month, and was welcomed back by all my numerous acquaintance with enthusiasm. The Marquis D'Avencourt had informed me rightly—the affair of the duel was a thing of the past—an almost forgotten circumstance. The carnival was in full riot; the streets were scenes of fantastic mirth and revelry; there was music and song, dancing and masquerading and feasting. But I withdrew from the tumult

of merriment, and absorbed myself in the necessary preparations for—my marriage.

CHAPTER XXX.

LOOKING back on the incidents of those strange feverish weeks that preceded my wedding-day, they seemed to me like the dreams of a dying man. Shifting colors, confused images, moments of clear light, hours of long darkness—all things gross, refined, material, and spiritual were shaken up in my life like the fragments in a kaleidoscope, ever changing into new forms and bewildering patterns. My brain was clear; yet I often questioned myself whether I was not going mad—whether all the careful methodical plans I formed were but the hazy fancies of a hopelessly disordered mind? Yet no; each detail of my scheme was too complete, too consistent, too business-like for that. A madman may have a method of action to a certain extent, but there is always some slight slip, some omission, some mistake which helps to discover his condition. Now I forgot nothing—I had the composed exactitude of a careful banker who balances his accounts with the most elaborate regularity. I can laugh to think of it all now; but *then*—then I moved, spoke, and acted like a human machine impelled by stronger forces than my own—in all things precise, in all things inflexible.

Within the week of my return from Avellino my coming marriage with the Countess Romani was announced. Two days after it had been made public, while sauntering across the Largo del Castello, I met the Marquis D'Avencourt. I had not seen him since the morning of the duel, and his presence gave me a sort of nervous shock. He was exceedingly cordial, though I fancied he was also slightly embarrassed. After a few commonplace remarks he said, abruptly:

"So your marriage will positively take place?"

I forced a laugh.

"*Ma! certamente!* Do you doubt it?"

His handsome face clouded and his manner grew still more constrained.

"No; but I thought—I had hoped——"

"*Mon cher,*" I said, airily, "I perfectly understand to what you allude. But we men of the world are not fastidious—we know better than to pay any heed to the foolish love-fancies of a woman *before* her marriage, so long as she does not trick us afterward. The letters you sent me were trifles, mere trifles! In wedding the Contessa Romani I assure you I believe