

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

I secure the most virtuous as well as the most lovely woman in Europe!" And I laughed again heartily.

D'Avencourt looked puzzled; but he was a punctilious man, and knew how to steer clear of a delicate subject. He smiled.

"*A la bonne heure,*" he said—"I wish you joy with all my heart! You are the best judge of your own happiness; as for me—*vive la liberté!*"

And with a gay parting salute he left me. No one else in the city appeared to share his foreboding scruples, if he had any, about my forthcoming marriage. It was everywhere talked of with as much interest and expectation as though it were some new amusement invented to heighten the merriment of carnival. Among other things, I earned the reputation of being a most impatient lover, for now I would consent to no delays. I hurried all the preparations on with feverish precipitation. I had very little difficulty in persuading Nina that the sooner our wedding took place the better; she was to the full as eager as myself, as ready to rush on her own destruction as Guido had been. Her chief passion was avarice, and the repeated rumors of my supposed fabulous wealth had aroused her greed from the very moment she had first met me in my assumed character of the Count Oliva. As soon as her engagement to me became known in Naples, she was an object of envy to all those of her own sex who, during the previous autumn, had laid out their store of fascinations to entrap me in vain—and this made her perfectly happy. Perhaps the supremest satisfaction a woman of this sort can attain to is the fact of making her less fortunate sisters discontented and miserable! I loaded her, of course, with the costliest gifts, and she, being the sole mistress of the fortune left her by her "late husband," as well as of the unfortunate Guido's money, set no limits to her extravagance. She ordered the most expensive and elaborate costumes; she was engaged morning after morning with dress-makers, tailors, and milliners, and she was surrounded by a certain favored "set" of female friends, for whose benefit she displayed the incoming treasures of her wardrobe till they were ready to cry for spite and vexation, though they had to smile and hold in their wrath and outraged vanity beneath the social mask of complacent composure. And Nina loved nothing better than to torture the poor women who were stinted of pocket-money with the sight of shimmering satins, soft radiating plushes, rich velvets, embroidery studded with real gems, pieces of costly old lace, priceless scents, and articles of *bijouterie*; she loved also to dazzle the eyes and bewilder the brains of young girls, whose finest toilet was a

garb of simplest white stuff unadorned save by a cluster of natural blossoms, and to send them away sick at heart, pining for they knew not what, dissatisfied with everything, and grumbling at fate for not permitting them to deck themselves in such marvelous "arrangements" of costume as those possessed by the happy, the fortunate future Countess Oliva.

Poor maidens! had they but known all they would not have envied her? Women are too fond of measuring happiness by the amount of fine clothes they obtain, and I truly believe dress is the one thing that never fails to console them. How often a fit of hysterics can be cut short by the opportune arrival of a new gown!

My wife, in consideration of her approaching second nuptials, had thrown off her widow's crape, and now appeared clad in those soft subdued half-tints of color that suited her fragile, fairly-like beauty to perfection. All her old witcheries and her graceful tricks of manner and speech were put forth again for my benefit. I knew them all so well! I understood the value of her light caresses and languishing looks so thoroughly! She was very anxious to attain the full dignity of her position as the wife of so rich a nobleman as I was reputed to be, therefore she raised no objection when I fixed the day of our marriage for Giovedì Grasso. Then the fooling and mumming, the dancing, shrieking, and screaming would be at its height; it pleased my whim to have this other piece of excellent masquerading take place at the same time.

The wedding was to be as private as possible, owing to my wife's "recent sad bereavements," as she herself said with a pretty sigh and tearful, pleading glance. It would take place in the chapel of San Gennaro, adjoining the cathedral. We were married there before! During the time that intervened, Nina's manner was somewhat singular. To me she was often timid, and sometimes half conciliatory. Now and then I caught her large dark eyes fixed on me with a startled, anxious look, but this expression soon passed away. She was subject, too, to wild fits of merriment, and anon to moods of absorbed and gloomy silence. I could plainly see that she was strung up to an extreme pitch of nervous excitement and irritability, but I asked her no questions. If—I thought—if she tortured herself with memories all the better—if she saw, or fancied she saw, the resemblance between me and her "dear dead Fabio," it suited me that she should be so racked and bewildered.

I came and went to and from the villa as I pleased. I wore my dark glasses as usual, and not even Giacomo could follow

me with his peering, inquisitive gaze; for since the night he had been hurled so fiercely to the ground by Guido's reckless and impatient hand, the poor old man had been paralyzed, and had spoken no word. He lay in an upper chamber, tended by Assunta, and my wife had ready written to his relatives in Lombardy, asking them to send for him home.

"Of what use to keep him?" she had asked me.

True! Of what use to give even roof-shelter to a poor old human creature, maimed, broken, and useless for evermore? After long years of faithful service, turn him out, cast him forth! If he die of neglect, starvation, and ill-usage, what matter?—he is a worn-out tool, his day is done—let him perish. I would not plead for him—why should I? I had made my own plans for his comfort—plans shortly to be carried out; and in the meantime Assunta nursed him tenderly as he lay speechless, with no more strength than a year-old baby, and only a bewildered pain in his upturned, lack-luster eyes. One incident occurred during these last days of my vengeance that struck a sharp pain to my heart, together with a sense of the bitterest anger. I had gone up to the villa somewhat early in the morning, and on crossing the lawn I saw a dark form stretched motionless on one of the paths that led directly up to the house. I went to examine it, and started back in horror—it was my dog Wyvis shot dead. His silky black head and fore paws were dabbled in blood—his honest brown eyes were glazed with the film of his dying agonies. Sickened and infuriated at the sight, I called to a gardener who was trimming the shrubbery.

"Who has done this?" I demanded.

The man looked pityingly at the poor bleeding remains, and said, in a low voice:

"It was madama's order, signor. The dog bit her yesterday; we shot him at day-break."

I stooped to caress the faithful animal's body, and as I stroked the silky coat my eyes were dim with tears.

"How did it happen?" I asked in smothered accents. "Was your lady hurt?"

The gardener shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

"Ma!—no! But he tore the lace on her dress with his teeth and grazed her hand. It was little, but enough. He will bite no more—*povera bestia!*"

I gave the fellow five francs.

"I liked the dog," I said briefly, "he was a faithful creature. Bury him decently under that tree," and I pointed to

the giant cypress on the lawn, "and take this money for your trouble."

He looked surprised but grateful, and promised to do my bidding. Once more sorrowfully caressing the fallen head of perhaps the truest friend I ever possessed, I strode hastily into the house, and met Nina coming out of her morning-room, clad in one of her graceful trailing garments, in which soft lavender hues were blended like the shaded colors of late and early violets.

"So Wyvis has been shot?" I said, abruptly.

She gave a slight shudder.

"Oh, yes! is it not sad? But I was compelled to have it done. Yesterday I went past his kennel within reach of his chain, and he sprung furiously at me for no reason at all. See!" And holding up her small hand she showed me three trifling marks in the delicate flesh. "I felt that you would be so unhappy if you thought I kept a dog that was at all dangerous, so I determined to get rid of him. It is always painful to have a favorite animal killed; but really Wyvis belonged to my poor husband, and I think he has never been quite safe since his master's death, and now Giacomo is ill——"

"I see!" I said, curtly, cutting her explanation short.

Within myself I thought how much more sweet and valuable was the dog's life than hers. Brave Wyvis—good Wyvis! He had done his best—he had tried to tear her dainty flesh; his honest instincts had led him to attempt rough vengeance on the woman he had felt was his master's foe. And he had met his fate, and died in the performance of duty. But I said no more on the subject. The dog's death was not alluded to again by either Nina or myself. He lay in his mossy grave under the cypress boughs—his memory untainted by any lie, and his fidelity enshrined in my heart as a thing good and gracious, far exceeding the self-interested friendship of so-called Christian humanity.

The days passed slowly on. To the revelers who chased the flying steps of carnival with shouting and laughter, no doubt the hours were brief, being so brimful of merriment; but to me, who heard nothing save the measured ticking of my own time-piece of revenge, and who saw naught save its hands, that every second drew nearer to the last and fatal figure on the dial, the very moments seemed long and laden with weariness. I roamed the streets of the city aimlessly, feeling more like a deserted stranger than a well-known and envied nobleman, whose wealth made him the cynosure of all eyes. The riotous

glee, the music, the color that whirled and reeled through the great street of Toledo at this season bewildered and pained me. Though I knew and was accustomed to the wild vagaries of carnival, yet this year they seemed to be out of place, distracting, senseless, and all unfamiliar.

Sometimes I escaped from the city tumult and wandered out to the cemetery. There I would stand, dreamily looking at the freshly turned sods above Guido Ferrari's grave. No stone marked the spot as yet, but it was close to the Romani vault—not more than a couple of yards away from the iron grating that barred the entrance to that dim and fatal charnel-house. I had a drear fascination for the place, and more than once I went to the opening of that secret passage made by the brigands to ascertain if all was safe and undisturbed. Everything was as I had left it, save that the tangle of brushwood had become thicker, and weeds and brambles had sprung up, making it less visible than before, and probably rendering it more impassable. By a fortunate accident I had secured the key of the vault. I knew that for family burial-places of this kind there are always two keys, one left in charge of the keeper of the cemetery, the other possessed by the person or persons to whom the mausoleum belongs, and this other I managed to obtain.

On one occasion, being left for some time alone in my own library at the villa, I remembered that in an upper drawer of an old oaken *escritoire* that stood there, had always been a few keys belonging to the doors of cellars and rooms in the house. I looked, and found them lying there as usual; they all had labels attached to them, signifying their use, and I turned them over impatiently, not finding what I sought. I was about to give up the search, when I perceived a large rusty iron key that had slipped to the back of the drawer; I pulled it out, and to my satisfaction it was labeled "Mausoleum." I immediately took possession of it, glad to have obtained so useful and necessary an implement; I knew that I should soon need it. The cemetery was quite deserted at this festive season—no one visited it to lay wreaths of flowers or sacred mementoes on the last resting-places of their friends. In the joys of the carnival who thinks of the dead? In my frequent walks there I was always alone; I might have opened my own vault and gone down into it without being observed, but I did not; I contented myself with occasionally trying the key in the lock, and assuring myself that it worked without difficulty.

Returning from one of these excursions late on a mild afternoon toward the end of the week preceding my marriage, I bent my steps toward the Molo, where I saw a picturesque

group of sailors and girls dancing one of those fantastic, graceful dances of the country, in which impassioned movement and expressive gesticulation are everything. Their steps were guided and accompanied by the sonorous twanging of a full-toned guitar and the tinkling beat of a tambourine. Their handsome, animated faces, their flashing eyes and laughing lips, their gay, many-colored costumes, the glitter of beads on the brown necks of the maidens, the red caps jauntily perched on the thick black curls of the fisherman—all made up a picture full of light and life, thrown up into strong relief against the pale gray and amber tints of the February sky and sea; while shadowing overhead frowned the stern dark walls of the Castel Nuovo.

It was such a scene as the English painter Luke Fildes might love to depict on his canvas—the one man of to-day who, though born of the land of opaque mists and rain-burdened clouds, has, notwithstanding these disadvantages, managed to partly endow his brush with the exhaustless wealth and glow of the radiant Italian color. I watched the dance with a faint sense of pleasure—it was full of so much harmony and delicacy of rhythm. The lad who thrummed the guitar broke out now and then into song—a song in dialect that fitted into the music of the dance as accurately as a rosebud into its calyx. I could not distinguish all the words he sung, but the refrain was always the same, and he gave it in every possible inflection and variety of tone, from grave to gay, from pleading to pathetic.

*"Che bella cosa è de morire acciso,
Nnanze a la porta de la mmamorata!"**

meaning literary—"How beautiful a thing to die, suddenly slain at the door of one's beloved!"

There was no sense in the thing, I thought half angrily—it was a stupid sentiment altogether. Yet I could not help smiling at the ragged, barefooted rascal who sung it: he seemed to feel such a gratification in repeating it, and he rolled his black eyes with lovelorn intensity, and breathed forth sighs that sounded through his music with quite a touching earnestness. Of course he was only following the manner of all Neapolitans, namely, acting his song; they all do it, and cannot help themselves. But this boy had a peculiarly roguish way of pausing and crying forth a plaintive "Ah!" before he added "*Che bella cosa*," etc., which gave point and piquancy to his absurd ditty. He was evidently brimful of mischief—his expression betokened it; no doubt he was one of the most

* Neapolitan dialect.

thorough little scamps that ever played at "morra," but there was a charm about his handsome dirty face and unkempt hair, and I watched him amusedly, glad to be distracted for a few minutes from the tired inner workings of my own unhappy thoughts. In time to come, so I mused, this very boy might learn to set his song about the "beloved" to a sterner key, and might find it meet, not to be slain himself, but to slay her! Such a thing—in Naples—was more than probable. By and by the dance ceased, and I recognized in one of the breathless, laughing sailors my old acquaintance Andrea Luziani, with whom I had sailed to Palermo. The sight of him relieved me from a difficulty which had puzzled me for some days, and as soon as the little groups of men and women had partially dispersed, I walked up to him and touched him on the shoulder. He started, looked round surprised, and did not appear to recognize me. I remembered that when he had seen me I had not grown a beard, neither had I worn dark spectacles. I recalled my name to him; his face cleared and he smiled.

"Ah! *buon giorno*, eccellenza!" he cried. "A thousand pardons that I did not at first know you! Often have I thought of you! often have I heard your name—ah! what a name! Rich, great, generous!—ah! what a glad life! And on the point of marrying—ah, Dio! love makes all the troubles go—so!" and taking his cigar from his mouth, he puffed a ring of pale smoke into the air and laughed gayly. Then suddenly lifting his cap from his clustering black hair, he added, "All joy be with you, eccellenza!"

I smiled and thanked him. I noticed he looked at me curiously.

"You think I have changed in appearance, my friend?" I said.

The Sicilian looked embarrassed.

"*Ebbene!* we must all change," he answered, lightly, evading my glance. "The days pass on—each day takes a little bit of youth away with it. One grows old without knowing it!"

I laughed.

"I see," I observed. "You think I have aged somewhat since you saw me?"

"A little, eccellenza," he frankly confessed.

"I have suffered severe illness," I said, quietly, "and my eyes are still weak, as you perceive," and I touched my glasses. "But I shall get stronger in time. Can you come with me for a few moments? I want your help in a matter of importance."

He nodded a ready assent and followed me.

CHAPTER XXXI.

WE left the Molo, and paused at a tired street corner leaving from the Chiaja.

"You remember Carmelo Neri?" I asked.

Andrea shrugged his shoulders with an air of infinite com-miseration.

"Ah! *povero diavolo!* Well do I remember him! A bold fellow and brave, with a heart in him too, if one did but know where to find it. And now he drags the chain! Well, well, no doubt it is what he deserves; but I say, and always will maintain, there are many worse men than Carmelo."

I briefly related how I had seen the captured brigand in the square at Palermo and had spoken with him. "I mentioned you," I added, "and he bade me tell you Teresa had killed herself."

"Ah! that I well know," said the little captain, who had listened to me intently, and over whose mobile face flitted a shadow of tender pity, as he sighed. "*Poverinetta!* So fragile and small! To think she had the force to plunge the knife in her breast! As well imagine a little bird flying down to pierce itself on an uplifted bayonet. Ay, ay! women will do strange things—and it is certain she loved Carmelo."

"You would help him to escape again if you could, no doubt?" I inquired with a half smile.

The ready wit of the Sicilian instantly asserted itself.

"Not I, eccellenza," he replied, with an air of dignity and most virtuous honesty. "No, no, not now. The law is the law, and I, Andrea Luziani, am not one to break it. No, Carmelo must take his punishment; it is for life they say—and hard as it seems, it is but just. When the little Teresa was in the question, look you, what could I do? but now—let the saints that choose help Carmelo, for I will not."

I laughed as I met the audacious flash of his eyes; I knew, despite his protestations, that if Carmelo Neri ever did get clear of the galleys, it would be an excellent thing for him if Luziani's vessel chanced to be within reach.

"You have your brig the 'Laura' still?" I asked him.

"Yes, eccellenza, the Madonna be praised! And she has been newly rigged and painted, and she is as trim and trim a craft as you can meet with in all the wide blue waters of the Mediterranean."

"Now you see," I said, impressively, "I have a friend, a

relative, who is in trouble : he wishes to get away from Naples quietly and in secret. Will you help him? You shall be paid whatever you think proper to demand."

The Sicilian looked puzzled. He puffed meditatively at his cigar and remained silent.

"He is not pursued by the law," I continued, noting his hesitation. "He is simply involved in a cruel difficulty brought upon him by his own family—he seeks to escape from unjust persecution."

Andrea's brow cleared.

"Oh, if that is the case, *eccellenza*, I am at your service. But where does your friend desire to go?"

I paused for a moment and considered.

"To Civita Vecchia," I said at last; "from that port he can obtain a ship to take him to his further destination."

The captain's expressive face fell—he looked very dubious.

"To Civita Vecchia is a long way, a very long way," he said, regretfully; "and it is the bad season, and there are cross currents and contrary winds. With all the wish in the world to please you, *eccellenza*, I dare not run the 'Laura' so far; but there is another means——"

And interrupting himself he considered awhile in silence. I waited patiently for him to speak.

"Whether it would suit your friend I know not," he said at last, laying his hand confidentially on my arm, "but there is a stout brig leaving here for Civita Vecchia on Friday morning next——"

"The day after Giovedì Grasso?" I queried, with a smile he did not understand. He nodded.

"Exactly so. She carries a cargo of *Lacrime Cristi*, and she is a swift sailer. I know her captain—he is a good soul; but," and Andrea laughed lightly, "he is like the rest of us—he loves money. You do not count the francs—no, they are nothing to you—but we look to the *soldi*. Now, if it please you I will make him a certain offer of passage money, as large as you shall choose, also I will tell him when to expect his one passenger, and I can almost promise you that he will not say no!"

This proposal fitted in so excellently with my plans that I accepted it, and at once named an exceptionally munificent sum for the passage required. Andrea's eyes glistened as he heard.

"It is a little fortune!" he cried, enthusiastically. "Would that I could earn as much in twenty voyages! But one should not be churlish—such luck cannot fall in all men's way."

I smiled.

"And do you think, *amico*, I will suffer you to go unrewarded?" I said. And placing two twenty-franc pieces in his brown palm I added, "As you rightly said, francs are nothing to me. Arrange this little matter without difficulty, and you shall not be forgotten. You can call at my hotel to-morrow or the next day, when you have settled everything—here is the address," and I penciled it on my card and gave it to him; "but remember, this is a secret matter, and I rely upon you to explain it as such to your friend who commands the brig going to Civita Vecchia. He must ask no questions of his passenger—the more silence the more discretion—and when once he has landed him at his destination he will do well to straightway forget all about him. You understand?"

Andrea nodded briskly.

"Si, si, signor. He has a bad memory as it is—it shall grow worse at your command! Believe it!"

I laughed, shook hands, and parted with the friendly little fellow, he returning to the Molo, and I slowly walking homeward by way of the Villa Reale. An open carriage coming swiftly toward me attracted my attention; as it drew nearer I recognized the prancing steeds and the familiar liveries. A fair woman clad in olive velvets and Russian sables looked out smiling, and waved her hand.

It was my wife—my betrothed bride, and beside her sat the Duchess di Marina, the most irreproachable of matrons, famous for her piety not only in Naples but throughout Italy. So immaculate was she that it was difficult to imagine her husband daring to caress that upright, well-dressed form, or venturing to kiss those prim lips, colder than the carven beads of her jeweled rosary. Yet there was a story about her too—an old story that came from Padua—of how a young and handsome nobleman had been found dead at her palace doors, stabbed to the heart. Perhaps—who knows—he also might have thought—

*"Che bella cosa è de morire acciso,
Nnanze a la porta de la innamorata!"*

Some said the duke had killed him; but nothing could be proved, nothing was certain. The duke was silent, so was his duchess: and Scandal herself sat meekly with closed lips in the presence of this stately and august couple, whose bearing toward each other in society was a lesson of complete etiquette to the world. What went on behind the scenes no one could tell. I raised my hat with the profoundest deference as the

carriage containing the two ladies dashed by; I knew not which was the cleverest hypocrite of the two, therefore I did equal honor to both. I was in a meditative and retrospective mood, and when I reached the Toledo the distracting noises, the cries of the flower-girls, and venders of chestnuts and *confetti*, the nasal singing of the street-rhymers, the yells of *punchinello*, and the answering laughter of the populace, were all beyond my endurance. To gratify a sudden whim that seized me, I made my way into the lowest and dirtiest quarters of the city, and roamed through wretched courts and crowded alleys, trying to discover that one miserable street which until now I had always avoided even the thought of, where I had purchased the coral-fisher's clothes on the day of my return from the grave. I went in many wrong directions, but at last I found it and saw at a glance that the old rag-dealer's shop was still there, in its former condition of heterogeneous filth and disorder. A man sat at the door smoking, but not the crabbed and bent figure I had before seen—this was a younger and stouter individual, with a Jewish cast of countenance, and dark, ferocious eyes. I approached him, and seeing by my dress and manner that I was some person of consequence, he rose, drew his pipe from his mouth, and raised his greasy cap with a respectful yet suspicious air.

"Are you the owner of this place!" I asked.

"Si, signor!"

"What has become of the old man who used to live here?"

He laughed, shrugged his shoulders, and drew his pipe-stem across his throat with a significant gesture.

"So, signor!—with a sharp knife! He had a good deal of blood, too, for so withered a body. To kill himself in that fashion was stupid: he spoiled an Indian shawl that was on his bed, worth more than a thousand francs. One would not have thought he had so much blood."

And the fellow put back his pipe in his mouth and smoked complacently. I heard in sickened silence.

"He was mad, I suppose?" I said at last.

The long pipe was again withdrawn.

"Mad? Well, the people say so. I for one think he was very reasonable—all except that matter of the shawl—he should have taken that off his bed first. But he was wise enough to know that he was of no use to anybody—he did the best he could! Did you know him, signor?"

"I gave him money once," I replied, evasively; then taking out a few francs I handed them to this evil-eyed, furtive-looking son of Israel, who received the gift with effusive gratitude.

"Thank you for your information," I said, coldly. "Good-day."

"Good-day to you, signor," he replied, resuming his seat and watching me curiously as I turned away.

I passed out of the wretched street feeling faint and giddy. The end of the miserable rag-dealer had been told to me briefly and brutally enough—yet somehow I was moved to a sense of regret and pity. Abjectly poor, half crazy, and utterly friendless, he had been a brother of mine in the same bitterness and irrevocable sorrow. I wondered with a half shudder—would my end be like his? When my vengeance was completed should I grow shrunken, and old, and mad, and one lurid day draw a sharp knife across my throat as a finish to my life's history? I walked more rapidly to shake off the morbid fancies that thus insidiously crept in on my brain; and as before, the noise and glitter of the Toledo had been unbearable, so now I found it a relief and a distraction. Two maskers bedizened in violet and gold whizzed past me like a flash, one of them yelling a stale jest concerning *la innamorata*—a jest I scarcely heard, and certainly had no heart or wit to reply to. A fair woman I knew leaned out of a gayly draped balcony and dropped a bunch of roses at my feet; out of courtesy I stooped to pick them up, and then raising my hat I saluted the dark-eyed donor, but a few paces on I gave them away to a ragged child. Of all flowers that bloom, they were, and still are, the most insupportable to me. What is it the English poet Swinburne says—

I shall never be friends again with roses!"

My wife wore them always; even on that night when I had seen her clasped in Guido's arms, a red rose on her breast had been crushed in that embrace—a rose whose withered leaves I still possess. In the forest solitude where I now dwell there are no roses—and I am glad! The trees are too high, the tangle of bramble and coarse brushwood too dense—nothing grows here but a few herbs and field flowers—weeds unfit for wearing by fine ladies, yet to my taste infinitely sweeter than all the tenderly tinted cups of fragrance, whose colors and odors are spoiled to me forever. I am unjust, say you? the roses are innocent of evil? True enough, but their perfume awakens memory, and—I strive always to forget!

I reached my hotel that evening to find that I was an hour late for dinner, an unusual circumstance, which had caused Vincenzo some disquietude, as was evident from the relieved expression of his face when I entered. For some days the

honest fellow had watched me with anxiety; my abstracted moods, the long solitary walks I was in the habit of taking, the evenings I passed in my room writing, with the doors locked—all this behavior on my part exercised his patience, I have no doubt, to the utmost limit, and I could see he had much ado to observe his usual discretion and tact, and refrain from asking questions. On this particular occasion I dined very hastily, for I had promised to join my wife and two of her lady friends at the theater that night.

When I arrived there, she was already seated in her box looking radiantly beautiful. She was attired in some soft, sheeny, clinging primrose stuff, and the brigand's jewels I had given her through Guido's hands, flashed brilliantly on her uncovered neck and arms. She greeted me with her usual child-like enthusiasm as I entered, bearing the customary offering—a costly bouquet, set in a holder of mother-of-pearl studded with turquois, for her acceptance. I bowed to her lady friends, both of whom I knew, and then stood beside her watching the stage. The *comediotta* played there was the airiest trifle—it turned on the old worn-out story—a young wife, an aged, doting husband, and a lover whose principles were, of course, of the “noblest” type. The husband was fooled (naturally), and the chief amusement of the piece appeared to consist in his being shut out of his own house in dressing-gown and slippers during a pelting storm of rain, while his spouse (who was particularly specified as “pure”) enjoyed a luxurious supper with her highly moral and virtuous admirer. My wife laughed delightedly at the poor jokes and the stale epigrams, and specially applauded the actress who successfully supported the chief rôle. This actress, by the way, was a saucy, brazen-faced jade, who had a trick of flashing her black eyes, tossing her head, and heaving her ample bosom tumultuously whenever she hissed out the words *Vecchiaccio maladetto** at her discomfited husband, which had an immense effect on the audience—an audience which entirely sympathized with her, though she was indubitably in the wrong. I watched Nina in some derision as she nodded her fair head and beat time to the music with her painted fan. I bent over her.

“The play pleases you?” I asked, in a low tone.

“Yes, indeed!” she answered, with a laughing light in her eyes. “The husband is so droll! It is all very amusing.”

“The husband is always droll!” I remarked, smiling coldly.

* Accursed, villainous old monster.

“It is not a temptation to marry when one knows that as a husband one must always look ridiculous.”

She glanced up at me.

“Cesare! You surely are not vexed? Of course it is only in plays that it happens so!”

“Plays, *cara mia*, are often nothing but the reflex of real life,” I said. “But let us hope there are exceptions, and that all husbands are not fools.”

She smiled expressively and sweetly, toyed with the flowers I had given her, and turned her eyes again to the stage. I said no more, and was a somewhat moody companion for the rest of the evening. As we all left the theater one of the ladies who had accompanied Nina said, lightly:

“You seem dull and out of spirits, conte?”

I forced a smile.

“Not I, signora! Surely you do not find me guilty of such ungallantry? Were I dull in *your* company I should prove myself the most ungrateful of my sex.”

She sighed somewhat impatiently. She was very young and very lovely, and, as far as I knew, innocent, and of a more thoughtful and poetical temperament than most women.

“That is the mere language of compliment,” she said, looking straightly at me with her clear, candid eyes. “You are a true courtier! Yet often I think your courtesy is reluctant.”

I looked at her in some surprise.

“Reluctant? Signora, pardon me if I do not understand!”

“I mean,” she continued, still regarding me steadily, though a faint blush warmed the clear pallor of her delicate complexion, “that you do not really like us women; you say pretty things to us, and you try to be amiable in our company, but you are in truth averse to our ways—you are sceptical—you think we are all hypocrites.”

I laughed a little coldly.

“Really, signora, your words place me in a very awkward position. Were I to tell you my real sentiments——”

She interrupted me with a touch of her fan on my arm, and smiled gravely.

“You would say, ‘Yes, you are right, signora. I never see one of your sex without suspecting treachery.’ Ah, Signor Conte, we women are indeed full of faults, but nothing can blind our instinct!” She paused, and her brilliant eyes softened as she added gently, “I pray your marriage may be a very happy one.”

I was silent. I was not even courteous enough to thank her for the wish. I was half angered that this girl should have

been able to probe my thoughts so quickly and unerringly. Was I so bad an actor after all? I glanced down at her as she leaned lightly on my arm.

"Marriage is a mere *comediotta*," I said, abruptly and harshly. "We have seen it acted to-night. In a few days I shall play the part of the chief buffoon—in other words, the husband."

And I laughed. My young companion looked startled, almost frightened, and over her fair face there flitted an expression of something like aversion. I did not care—why should I?—and there was no time for more words between us, for we had reached the outer vestibule of the theater.

My wife's carriage was drawn up at the entrance—my wife herself was stepping into it. I assisted her, and also her two friends, and then stood with uncovered head at the door wishing them all the "*felicissima notte*." Nina put her tiny jeweled hand through the carriage window—I stooped and kissed it lightly. Drawing it back quickly, she selected a white gardenia from her bouquet and gave it to me with a bewitching smile.

Then the glittering equipage dashed away with a whirl and clatter of prancing hoofs and rapid wheels, and I stood alone under the wide portico of the theater—alone, amid the pressing throngs of the people who were still coming out of the house—holding the strongly scented gardenia in my hand as vaguely as a fevered man who finds a strange flower in one of his sick dreams.

After a minute or two I suddenly recollected myself, and throwing the blossom on the ground, I crushed it savagely beneath my heel—the penetrating odor rose from its slain petals as though a vessel of incense had been emptied at my feet. There was a nauseating influence in it; where had I inhaled that subtle perfume last? I remembered—Guido Ferrari had worn one of those flowers in his coat at my banquet—it had been still in his button-hole when I killed him!

I strode onward and homeward; the streets were full of mirth and music, but I heeded none of it. I felt, rather than saw, the quiet sky bending above me dotted with its countless millions of luminous worlds; I was faintly conscious of the soft splash of murmuring waves mingling with the dulcet chords of deftly played mandolines echoing from somewhere down by the shore; but my soul was, as it were, benumbed—my mind, always on the alert, was for once utterly tired out—my very limbs ached, and when I at last flung myself on my bed,

exhausted, my eyes closed instantly, and I slept the heavy, motionless sleep of a man weary unto death.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"*Tout le monde vient à celui qui sait attendre.*" So wrote the great Napoleon. The virtue of the aphorism consists in the little words *qui sait*. All the world comes to him who *knows how* to wait. I knew this, and I had waited, and my world—a world of vengeance—came to me at last.

The slow-revolving wheel of Time brought me to the day before my strange wedding—the eve of my remarriage with my own wife! All the preparations were made—nothing was left undone that could add to the splendor of the occasion. For though the nuptial ceremony was to be somewhat quiet and private in character, and the marriage breakfast was to include only a few of our more intimate acquaintances, the proceedings were by no means to terminate tamely. The romance of these remarkable espousals was not to find its conclusion in bathos. No; the bloom and aroma of the interesting event were to be enjoyed in the evening, when a grand supper and ball, given by me, the happy and much-to-be-envied bridegroom, was to take place in the hotel which I had made my residence for so long. No expense was spared for this, the last entertainment offered by me in my brilliant career as the successful Count Cesare Oliva. After it, the dark curtain would fall on the played-out drama, never to rise again.

Everything that art, taste, and royal luxury could suggest was included in the arrangements for this brilliant ball, to which a hundred and fifty guests had been invited, not one of whom had refused to attend.

And now—now in the afternoon of this, the last of my self-imposed probation—I sat alone with my fair wife in the drawing-room of the Villa Romani, conversing lightly on various subjects connected with the festivities of the coming morrow. The long windows were open—the warm spring sunlight lay like a filmy veil of woven gold on the tender green of the young grass, birds sung for joy and flitted from branch to branch, now poising hoveringly above their nests, now soaring with all the luxury of perfect liberty into the high heaven of cloudless blue—the great creamy buds of the magnolia looked ready to burst into wide and splendid flower between their large, darkly shining leaves, the odor of violets and primroses floated on every delicious breath of air, and round the wide