

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 plash 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

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veranda the climbing white china roses had already unfurled their little crumpled rosette-like blossoms to the balmy wind. It was spring in Southern Italy—spring in the land where, above all other lands, spring is lovely—sudden and brilliant in its beauty as might be the smile of a happy angel. Gran Dio!—talk of angels! Had I not a veritable angel for my companion at that moment? What fair being, even in Mohammed's Paradise of Houris, could outshine such charms as those which it was my proud privilege to gaze upon without rebuke—dark eyes, rippling golden hair, a dazzling and perfect face, a form to tempt the virtue of a Galahad, and lips that an emperor might long to touch—in vain? Well, no!—not altogether in vain: if his imperial majesty could afford a bribe large enough—let us say a diamond the size of a pigeon's egg—he might possibly purchase one, nay!—perhaps two kisses from that seductive red mouth, sweeter than the ripest strawberry. I glanced at her furtively from time to time when she was not aware of my gaze; and glad was I of the sheltering protection of the dark glasses I wore, for I knew and felt that there was a terrible look in my eyes—the look of a half-famished tiger ready to spring on some long-desired piece of prey. She herself was exceptionally bright and cheerful; with her *riante* features and agile movements, she reminded me of some tropical bird of gorgeous plumage swaying to and fro on a branch of equally gorgeous blossom.

"You are like a prince in a fairy tale, Cesare," she said, with a little delighted laugh; "everything you do is superbly done! How pleasant it is to be so rich—there is nothing better in all the world."

"Except love!" I returned, with a grim attempt to be sentimental.

Her large eyes softened like the pleading eyes of a tame fawn.

"Ah, yes!" and she smiled with expressive tenderness, "except love. But when one has both love and wealth, what a paradise life can be!"

"So great a paradise," I assented, "that it is hardly worth while trying to get into heaven at all! Will you make earth a heaven for me, *Nina mia*, or will you only love me as much—or as little—as you loved your late husband?"

She shrugged her shoulders and pouted like a spoiled child.

"Why are you so fond of talking about my late husband, Cesare?" she asked, peevishly; "I am so tired of his name! Besides, one does not always care to be reminded of dead people—and he died so horribly too! I have often told you that I

did not love him at all. I liked him a little, and I was quite ill when that dreadful monk, who looked like a ghost himself, came and told me he was dead. Fancy hearing such a piece of news suddenly, while I was actually at luncheon with Gui—Signor Ferrari! We were both shocked, of course, but I did not break my heart over it. Now I really *do* love you——"

I drew nearer to her on the couch where she sat, and put one arm around her.

"You really *do*?" I asked, in a half-incredulous tone; "you are quite sure?"

She laughed and nestled her head on my shoulder.

"I am quite sure! How many times have you asked me that absurd question? What can I say, what can I do—to make you believe me?"

"Nothing," I answered, and answered truly, for certainly nothing she could say or do would make me believe her for a moment. "But *how* do you love me—for myself or for my wealth?"

She raised her head with a proud, graceful gesture.

"For yourself, of course! Do you think mere wealth could ever win *my* affection? No, Cesare! I love you for your own sake—your own merits have made you dear to me."

I smiled bitterly. She did not see the smile. I slowly caressed her silky hair.

"For that sweet answer, *carissima mia*, you shall have your reward. You called me a fairy prince just now—perhaps I merit that title more than you know. You remember the jewels I sent you before we ever met?"

"Remember them!" she exclaimed. "They are my choicest ornaments. Such a *parure* is fit for an empress."

"And an empress of beauty wears them!" I said, lightly. "But they are mere trifles compared to other gems which I possess, and which I intend to offer for your acceptance."

Her eyes glistened with avarice and expectancy.

"Oh, let me see them!" she cried. "If they are lovelier than those I already have, they must be indeed magnificent! And are they all for me?"

"All for you!" I replied, drawing her closer, and playing with the small white hand on which the engagement-ring I had placed there sparkled so bravely. "All for my bride. A little hoard of bright treasures; red rubies, ay—as red as blood—diamonds as brilliant as the glittering of crossed daggers—sapphires as blue as the lightning—pearls as pure as the little folded hands of a dead child—opals as dazzlingly changeable as woman's love! Why do you start?" for she had moved rest-

lessly in my embrace. "Do I use bad similes? Ah, *cara mia*, I am no poet! I can but speak of things as they seem to my poor judgment. Yes, these precious things are for you, *bellissima*; you have nothing to do but to take them, and may they bring you much joy!"

A momentary pallor had stolen over her face while I was speaking—speaking in my customary hard, harsh voice, which I strove to render even harder and harsher than usual—but she soon recovered from whatever passing emotion she may have felt, and gave herself up to the joys of vanity and greed, the paramount passions of her nature.

"I shall have the finest jewels in all Naples!" she laughed, delightedly. "How the women will envy me! But where are these treasures? May I see them now—immediately?"

"No, not quite immediately," I replied, with a gentle derision that escaped her observation. "To-morrow night—our marriage night—you shall have them. And I must also fulfill a promise I made to you. You wish to see me for once without these," and I touched my dark glasses—"is it not so?"

She raised her eyes, conveying into their lustrous depths an expression of melting tenderness.

"Yes," she murmured; "I want to see you as you are!"

"I fear you will be disappointed," I said, with some irony, "for my eyes are not pleasant to look at."

"Never mind," she returned, gayly. "I shall be satisfied if I see them just once, and we need not have much light in the room, as the light gives you pain. I would not be the cause of suffering to you—no, not for all the world!"

"You are very amiable," I answered, "more so than I deserve. I hope I may prove worthy of your tenderness! But to return to the subject of the jewels. I wish you to see them for yourself and choose the best among them. Will you come with me to-morrow night? and I will show you where they are."

She laughed sweetly.

"Are you a miser, Cesare?—and have you some secret hiding-place full of treasure like Aladdin?"

I smiled.

"Perhaps I have," I said. "There are exceptional cases in which one fears to trust even to a bank. Gems such as those I have to offer you are almost priceless, and it would be unwise, almost cruel, to place such tempting toys within the reach of even an honest man. At any rate, if I have been something of a miser, it is for your sake; for your sake I have per-

sonally guarded the treasure that is to be your bridal gift. You cannot blame me for this?"

In answer she threw her fair arms round my neck and kissed me. Strive against it as I would, I always shuddered at the touch of her lips—a mingled sensation of loathing and longing possessed me that sickened while it stung my soul.

"*Amor mio!*" she murmured. "As if I could blame you! You have no faults in my estimation of you. You are good, brave, and generous—the best of men; there is only one thing I wish sometimes—" Here she paused, and her brow knitted itself frowningly, while a puzzled, pained expression came into her eyes.

"And that one thing is?" I inquired.

"That you did not remind me so often of Fabio," she said, abruptly and half angrily. "Not when you speak of him, I do not mean that. What I mean is, that you have ways like his. Of course I know there is no actual resemblance, and yet—" She paused again, and again looked troubled.

"Really, *carina mia*," I remarked, lightly and jestingly, "you embarrass me profoundly! This fancy of yours is a most awkward one for me. At the convent where I visited you, you became quite ill at the contemplation of my hand, which you declared was like the hand of your deceased husband; and now—this same foolish idea is returning, when I hoped it had gone, with other morbid notions of an over-sensitive brain, forever. Perhaps you think I *am* your late husband?"

And I laughed aloud! She trembled a little, but soon laughed also.

"I know I am very absurd," she said, "perhaps I am a little nervous and unstrung; I have had too much excitement lately. Tell me more about the jewels. When will you take me to see them?"

"To-morrow night," I answered, "while the ball is going on, you and I will slip away together—we shall return again before any of our friends can miss us. You will come with me?"

"Of course I will," she replied, readily, "only we must not be long absent, because my maid will have to pack my wedding-dress, and then there will be the jewels also to put in my strong box. Let me see! We stay the night at the hotel, and leave for Rome and Paris the first thing in the morning, do we not?"

"That is the arrangement, certainly," I said, with a cold smile.

"The little place where you have hidden your jewels, you droll Cesare, is quite near, then?" she asked.

"Quite near," I assented, watching her closely.

She laughed and clapped her hands.

"Oh, I must have them," she exclaimed. "It would be ridiculous to go to Paris without them. But why will you not get them yourself, Cesare, and bring them here to me?"

"There are so many," I returned, quietly, "and I do not know which you would prefer. Some are more valuable than others. And it will give me a special satisfaction—one that I have long waited for—to see you making your own choice."

She smiled half shyly, half cunningly.

"Perhaps I will make no choice," she whispered, "perhaps I will take them *all*, Cesare. What will you say then?"

"That you are perfectly welcome to them," I replied.

She looked slightly surprised.

"You are really too good to me, *caro mio*," she said; "you spoil me."

"Can you be spoiled?" I asked, half jestingly. "Good women are like fine brilliants—the more richly they are set the more they shine."

She stroked my hand caressingly.

"No one ever made such pretty speeches to me as you do!" she murmured.

"Not even Guido Ferrari?" I suggested, ironically.

She drew herself up with an inimitably well-acted gesture of lofty disdain.

"Guido Ferrari!" she exclaimed. "He dared not address me save with the greatest respect! I was as a queen to him! It was only lately that he began to presume on the trust left him by my husband, and then he became too familiar—a mistake on his part, for which *you* punished him—as he deserved!"

I rose from my seat beside her. I could not answer for my own composure while sitting so close to the actual murderess of my friend and her lover. Had she forgotten her own "familiar" treatment of the dead man—the thousand nameless wiles and witcheries and tricks of her trade, by which she had beguiled his soul and ruined his honor?

"I am glad you are satisfied with my action in that affair," I said, coldly and steadily. "I myself regret the death of the unfortunate young man, and shall continue to do so. My nature, unhappily, is an oversensitive one, and is apt to be affected by trifles. But now, *mia bella*, farewell until to-morrow—happy to-morrow!—when I shall call you mine indeed!"

A warm flush tinted her cheeks; she came to me where I stood, and leaned against me.

"Shall I not see you again till we meet in the church?" she inquired, with a becoming bashfulness.

"No. I will leave you this last day of your brief widowhood alone. It is not well that I should obtrude myself upon your thoughts or prayers. Stay!" and I caught her hand and toyed with the flower in my button-hole. "I see you still wear your former wedding-ring. May I take it off?"

"Certainly." And she smiled while I deftly drew off the plain gold circlet I had placed there nearly four years since.

"Will you let me keep it?"

"If you like. I would rather not see it again."

"You shall not," I answered, as I slipped it into my pocket.

"It will be replaced by a new one to-morrow—one that I hope may be the symbol of more joy to you than this has been."

And as her eyes turned to my face in all their melting, perfidious languor, I conquered my hatred of her by a strong effort, and stooped and kissed her. Had I yielded to my real impulses I would have crushed her cruelly in my arms, and bruised her delicate flesh with the brutal ferocity of caresses born of bitterest leaching, not love. But no sign of my aversion escaped me—all she saw was her elderly looking admirer, with his calmly courteous demeanor, chill smile, and almost parental tenderness; and she judged him merely as an influential gentleman of good position and unlimited income, who was about to make her one of the most envied women in all Italy.

The fugitive resemblance she traced in me to her "dead" husband was certainly attributed by her to a purely accidental likeness common to many persons in this world, where every man, they say, has his double, and for that matter every woman also. Who does not remember the touching surprise of Heinrich Heine when, on visiting the picture-gallery of the Palazzo Durazzo in Genoa, he was brought face to face with the portrait, as he thought, of a dead woman he had loved—"Maria la morte." It mattered not to him that the picture was very old, that it had been painted by Giorgio Barbarelli centuries before his "Maria" could have lived; he simply declares: "*Il est vraiment d'une ressemblance admirable, ressemblant jusqu'au silence de la mort!*"

Such likenesses are common enough, and my wife, though my resemblance to myself (!) troubled her a little, was very far from imagining the real truth of the matter, as indeed how should she? What woman, believing and knowing, as

far as anything can be known, her husband to be dead and fast buried, is likely to accept even the idea of his possible escape from the tomb! Not one!"—else the inconsolate widows would indeed have reason to be more inconsolable than they appear!

When I left her that morning I found Andrea Luziani waiting for me at my hotel. He was seated in the outer entrance hall; I bade him follow me into my private salon. He did so. Abashed at the magnificence of the apartment, he paused at the doorway, and stood, red cap in hand, hesitating, though with an amiable smile on his sunburned merry countenance.

"Come in, *amico*," I said, with an inviting gesture, "and sit down. All this tawdry show of velvet and gilding must seem common to your eyes, that have rested so long on the sparkling pomp of the foaming waves, the glorious blue curtain of the sky, and the sheeny white of the sails of the 'Laura' gleaming in the gold of the sun. Would I could live such a life as yours, Andrea!—there is nothing better under the width of heaven."

The poetical temperament of the Sicilian was caught and fired by my words. He at once forgot the splendid appurtenances of wealth and the costly luxuries that surrounded him; he advanced without embarrassment, and seated himself on a velvet and gold chair with as much ease as though it were a coil of rough rope on board the "Laura."

"You say truly, *eccellenza*," he said, with a gleam of his white teeth through his jet-black mustache, while his warm southern eyes flashed fire, "there is nothing sweeter than the life of the *marinaro*. And truly there are many who say to me, 'Ah, ah! Andrea! *buon amico*, the time comes when you will wed, and the home where the wife and children sit will seem a better thing to you than the caprice of the wind and waves.' But I—see you!—I know otherwise. The woman I wed must love the sea; she must have the fearless eyes that can look God's storms in the face—her tender words must ring out all the more clearly for the sound of the bubbling waves leaping against the 'Laura' when the wind is high! And as for our children;" he paused and laughed, "*per la Santissima Madonna!* if the salt and iron of the ocean be not in their blood, they will be no children of mine!"

I smiled at his enthusiasm, and pouring out some choice Montepulcian, bade him taste it. He did so with a keen appreciation of its flavor, such as many a so-called connoisseur of wines does not possess.

"To your health, *eccellenza!*" he said; "and may you long enjoy your life!"

I thanked him; but in my heart I was far from echoing the kindly wish.

"And are you going to fulfill the prophecy of your friends, Andrea?" I asked. "Are you about to marry?"

He set down his glass only partly emptied, and smiled with an air of mystery.

"*Ebbene! chi sa!*" he replied, with a gay little shrug of his shoulders, yet with a sudden tenderness in his keen eyes that did not escape me. "There is a maiden—my mother loves her well—she is little and fair as Carmelo Neri's Teresa—so high," and he laid his brown hand lightly on his breast, "her head touches just here," and he laughed. "She looks as frail as a lily, but she is hardy as a seagull, and no one loves the wild waves more than she. Perhaps, in the month of the Madonna, when the white lilies bloom—perhaps!—one can never tell—the old song may be sung for us—

*"Chi sa fervente amar
Solo è felice!"*

And humming the tune of the well-known love-ditty under his breath, he raised his glass of wine to his lips and drained it off with a relish, while his honest face beamed with gayety and pleasure. Always the same story, I thought, moodily. Love, the tempter—Love, the destroyer—Love, the curse! Was there *no* escape possible from this bewildering snare that thus caught and slew the souls of men?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HE soon roused himself from his pleasant reverie, and drawing his chair closer to mine, assumed an air of mystery.

"And for your friend who is in trouble," he said, in a confidential tone, then paused and looked at me as though waiting permission to proceed.

I nodded.

"Go on, *amico*. What have you arranged?"

"Everything!" he announced, with an air of triumph. "All is smooth sailing. At six o'clock on Friday morning the 'Rondinella,' that is the brig I told you of, *eccellenza*, will weigh anchor for Civita Vecchia. Her captain, old Antonio Bardi, will wait ten minutes or even a quarter of an hour if necessary for the—the——"

"Passenger," I supplemented. "Very amiable of him, but