

my own rooms. Calling Vincenzo, who was now resigned and even eager to go to Avellino, I gave him his final instructions, and placed in his charge the iron cash-box, which, unknown to him, contained 12,000 francs in notes and gold. This was the last good action I could do: it was a sufficient sum to set him up as a well-to-do farmer and fruit-grower in Avellino with Lilla and her little dowry combined. He also carried a sealed letter to Signora Monti, which I told him she was not to open till a week had elapsed; this letter explained the contents of the box and my wishes concerning it; it also asked the good woman to send to the Villa Romani for Assunta and her helpless charge, poor old paralyzed Giacomo, and to tend the latter as well as she could till his death, which I knew could not be far off.

I had thought of everything as far as possible, and I could already foresee what a happy, peaceful home there would be in the little mountain town guarded by the Monte Vergine. Lilla and Vincenzo would wed, I knew; Signora Monti and Assunta would console each other with their past memories and in the tending of Lilla's children; for some little time, perhaps, they would talk of me and wonder sorrowfully where I had gone; then gradually they would forget me, even as I desired to be forgotten.

Yes; I had done all I could for those who had never wronged me. I had acquitted myself of my debt to Vincenzo for his affection and fidelity; the rest of my way was clear. I had no more to do save the *one thing*, the one deed which had clamored so long for accomplishment. Revenge, like a beckoning ghost, had led me on step by step for many weary days and months, which to me had seemed cycles of suffering; but now it paused—it faced me—and turning its blood-red eyes upon my soul said, "Strike!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE ball opened brilliantly. The rooms were magnificently decorated, and the soft luster of a thousand lamps shone on a scene of splendor almost befitting the court of a king. Some of the stateliest nobles in all Italy were present, their breasts glittering with jeweled orders and ribbons of honor; some of the loveliest women to be seen anywhere in the world flitted across the polished floors, like poets' dreams of the gliding sylphs that haunt rivers and fountains by moonlight.

But fairest where all were fair, peerless in the exuberance of

her triumphant vanity, and in the absolute faultlessness of her delicate charms, was my wife—the bride of the day, the heroine of the night. Never had she looked so surpassingly beautiful, and I, even I, felt my pulse beat quicker, and the blood course more hotly through my veins, as I beheld her, radiant, victorious, and smiling—a veritable queen of the fairies, as dainty as a drop of dew, as piercing to the eye as a flash of light. Her dress was some wonderful mingling of misty lace, with the sheen of satin and glimmering showers of pearl; diamonds glittered on her bodice like sunlight on white foam; the brigand's jewels flashed gloriously on her round white throat and in her tiny shell-like ears, while the masses of her gold hair were coiled to the top of her small head and there caught by a priceless circlet of rose-brilliant—brilliant that I well remembered—they had belonged to my mother. Yet more lustrous than the light of the gems she wore was the deep, ardent glory of her eyes, dark as night and luminous as stars; more delicate than the filmy robes that draped her was the pure, pearl-like whiteness of her neck, which was just sufficiently displayed to be graceful without suggesting immodesty.

For Italian women do not uncover their bosoms for the casual inspection of strangers, as is the custom of their English and German sisters; they know well enough that any lady venturing to wear a *décolleté* dress would find it impossible to obtain admittance to a court ball at the Palazzo Quirinale. She would be looked upon as one of a questionable class, and no matter how high her rank and station, would run the risk of ejection from the doors, as on one occasion did unfortunately happen to an English peeress, who, ignorant of Italian customs, went to an evening reception in Rome arrayed in a very low bodice with straps instead of sleeves. Her remonstrances were vain; she was politely but firmly refused admittance, though told she might gain her point by changing her costume, which I believe she wisely did.

Some of the *grandes dames* present at the ball that night wore dresses the like of which are seldom or never seen out of Italy—robes sown with jewels, and thick with wondrous embroidery, such as have been handed down from generation to generation through hundreds of years. As an example of this, the Duchess of Marina's cloth of gold train, stitched with small rubies and seed-pearls, had formerly belonged to the family of Lorenzo de Medici. Such garments as these, when they are part of the property of a great house, are worn only on particular occasions, perhaps once in a year; and then they are laid carefully by and sedulously protected from dust and moths

and damp, receiving as much attention as the priceless pictures and books of a famous historical mansion. Nothing ever designed by any great modern tailor or milliner can hope to compete with the magnificent workmanship and durable material of the *fiesta* dresses that are locked preciously away in the old oaken coffers of the greatest Italian families—dresses that are beyond valuation, because of the romances and tragedies attached to them, and which, when worn, make all the costliest fripperies of to-day look flimsy and paltry beside them, like the attempts of a servant to dress as tastefully as her mistress.

Such glitter of gold and silver, such scintillations from the burning eyes of jewels, such cloud-like wreaths of floating laces, such subtle odors of rare and exquisite perfume, all things that most keenly prick and stimulate the senses were round me in fullest force this night—this one dazzling, supreme and terrible night, that was destined to burn into my brain like a seal of scorching fire. Yes; till I die, that night will remain with me as though it were a breathing, sentient thing; and after death, who knows whether it may not uplift itself in some tangible, awful shape, and confront me with its flashing mock-luster, and the black heart of its true meaning in its menacing eyes, to take its drear place by the side of my abandoned soul through all eternity! I remember now how I shivered and started out of the bitter reverie into which I had fallen at the sound of my wife's low, laughing voice.

"You must dance, Cesare," she said, with a mischievous smile. "You are forgetting your duties. You should open the ball with me!"

I rose at once mechanically.

"What dance is it?" I asked, forcing a smile. "I fear you will find me but a clumsy partner."

She pouted.

"Oh, surely not! You are not going to disgrace me—you really must try and dance properly just this once. It will look so stupid if you make any mistake. The band was going to play a quadrille; I would not have it, and told them to strike up the Hungarian waltz instead. But I assure you I shall never forgive you if you waltz badly—nothing looks so awkward and absurd."

I made no answer, but placed my arm round her waist and stood ready to begin. I avoided looking at her as much as possible, for it was growing more and more difficult with each moment that passed to hold the mastery over myself. I was consumed between hate and love. Yes, love!—of an evil kind, I own, and in which there was no shred of reverence—filled

me with a sort of foolish fury, which mingled itself with another and manlier craving, namely, to proclaim her vileness then and there before all her titled and admiring friends, and to leave her shamed in the dust of scorn, despised and abandoned. Yet I knew well that were I to speak out—to declare my history and hers before that brilliant crowd—I should be accounted mad, and that for a woman such as she there existed no shame.

The swinging measure of the slow Hungarian waltz, that most witching of dances, danced perfectly only by those of the warm-blooded southern temperament, now commenced. It was played *pianissimo*, and stole through the room like the fluttering breath of a soft sea wind. I had always been an excellent waltzer, and my step had fitted in with that of Nina as harmoniously as the two notes of a perfect chord. She found it so on this occasion, and glanced up with a look of gratified surprise as I bore her lightly with languorous, dream-like ease of movement through the glittering ranks of our guests, who watched us admiringly as we circled the room two or three times.

Then—all present followed our lead, and in a couple of minutes the ball-room was like a moving flower-garden in full bloom, rich with swaying colors and rainbow-like radiance; while the music, growing stronger, and swelling out in marked and even time, echoed forth like the sound of clear-toned bells broken through by the singing of birds. My heart beat furiously, my brain reeled, my senses swam as I felt my wife's warm breath on my cheek; I clasped her waist more closely, I held her little gloved hand more firmly. She felt the double pressure, and, lifting her white eyelids fringed with those long dark lashes that gave such a sleepy witchery to her eyes, her lips parted in a little smile.

"At last you love me!" she whispered.

"At last, at last," I muttered, scarce knowing what I said. "Had I not loved you at first, *bellissima*, I should not have been to you what I am to-night."

A low ripple of laughter was her response.

"I knew it," she murmured again, half breathlessly, as I drew her with swifter and more voluptuous motion into the vortex of the dancers. "You tried to be cold, but I knew I could make you love me—yes, love me passionately—and I was right." Then with an outburst of triumphant vanity she added, "I believe you would die for me!"

I bent over her more closely. My hot quick breath moved the feathery gold of her hair.

"I *have* died for you," I said; "I have killed my old self for your sake."

Dancing still, encircled by my arms, and gliding along like a sea-nymph on moonlighted foam, she sighed restlessly.

"Tell me what you mean, *amor mio*," she asked, in the tenderest tone in the world.

Ah, God! that tender seductive cadence of her voice, how well I knew it!—how often had it lured away my strength, as the fabled siren's song had been wont to wreck the listening mariner.

"I mean that you have changed me, sweetest!" I whispered, in fierce, hurried accents. "I have seemed old—for you to-night I will be young again—for you my chilled slow blood shall again be hot and quick as lava—for you my long-buried past shall rise in all its pristine vigor; for you I will be a lover, such as perhaps no woman ever had or ever will have again!"

She heard, and nestled closer to me in the dance. My words pleased her. Next to her worship of wealth her delight was to arouse the passions of men. She was very panther-like in her nature—her first tendency was to devour, her next to gambo' with any animal she met, though her sleek, swift playfulness might mean death. She was by no means exceptional in this; there are many women like her.

As the music of the waltz grew slower and slower, dropping down to a sweet and persuasive conclusion, I led my wife to her *fauteuil*, and resigned her to the care of a distinguished Roman prince who was her next partner. Then unobserved, I slipped out to make inquiries concerning Vincenzo. He had gone; one of the waiters at the hotel, a friend of his, had accompanied him and seen him into the train for Avellino. He had looked in at the ball-room before leaving, and had watched me stand up to dance with my wife, then "with tears in his eyes"—so said the vivacious little waiter who had just returned from the station—he had started without daring to wish me good-bye.

I heard this information of course with an apparent kindly indifference, but in my heart I felt a sudden vacancy, a drear, strange loneliness. With my faithful servant near me I had felt conscious of the presence of a friend, for friend he was in his own humble, unobtrusive fashion; but now I was alone—alone in a loneliness beyond all conceivable comparison—alone to do my work, without prevention or detection. I felt, as it were, isolated from humanity, set apart with my victim on some dim point of time, from which the rest of the world receded, where the searching eye of the Creator alone could be

hold me. Only she and I and God—these three were all that existed for me in the universe; between these three must justice be fulfilled.

Musingly, with downcast eyes, I returned to the ball-room. At the door a young girl faced me—she was the only daughter of a great Neapolitan house. Dressed in pure white, as all such maidens are, with a crown of snow-drops on her dusky hair, and her dimpled face lighted with laughter, she looked the very embodiment of early spring. She addressed me somewhat timidly, yet with all a child's frankness.

"Is not this delightful? I feel as if I were in fairy-land! Do you know this is my first ball?"

I smiled wearily.

"Ay, truly? And you are happy?"

"Oh, happiness is not the word—it is ecstasy! How I wish it could last forever! And—is it not strange?—I did not know I was beautiful till to-night."

She said this with perfect simplicity, and a pleased smile radiated her fair features. I glanced at her with cold scrutiny.

"Ah! and some one has told you so."

She blushed and laughed a little consciously.

"Yes; the great Prince de Majano. And he is too noble to say what is not true, so I *must* be '*la più bella donzella*,' as he said, must I not?"

I touched the snow-drops that she wore in a white cluster at her breast.

"Look at your flowers, child," I said, earnestly. "See how they begin to droop in this heated air. The poor things! How glad they would feel could they again grow in the cool wet moss of the woodlands, waving their little bells to the wholesome, fresh wind! Would they revive now, think you, for your great Prince de Majano if he told them they were fair? So with your life and heart, little one—pass them through the scorching fire of flattery, and their purity must wither even as these fragile blossoms. And as for beauty—are you more beautiful than *she*?"

And I pointed slightly to my wife, who was at that moment courtesying to her partner in the stately formality of the first quadrille.

My young companion looked, and her clear eyes darkened enviously.

"Ah, no, no! But if I wore such lace and satin and pearls, and had such jewels, I might perhaps be more like her!"

I sighed bitterly. The poison had already entered this child's soul. I spoke brusquely.

"Pray that you may never be like her," I said, with somber sternness, and not heeding her look of astonishment. "You are young—you cannot yet have thrown off religion. Well, when you go home to-night, and kneel beside your little bed, made holy by the cross above it and your mother's blessing—pray—pray with all your strength that you may never resemble in the smallest degree that exquisite woman yonder! So may you be spared her fate."

I paused, for the girl's eyes were dilated in extreme wonder and fear. I looked at her, and laughed abruptly and harshly.

"I forgot," I said; "the lady is my wife—I should have thought of that! I was speaking of—another whom you do not know. Pardon me! when I am fatigued my memory wanders. Pay no attention to my foolish remarks. Enjoy yourself, my child, but do not believe all the pretty speeches of the Prince de Majano. *A rivederci!*"

And smiling a forced smile I left her and mingled with the crowd of my guests, greeting one here, another there, jesting lightly, paying unmeaning compliments to the women who expected them, and striving to distract my thoughts with the senseless laughter and foolish chatter of the glittering cluster of society butterflies, all the while desperately counting the tedious minutes, and wondering whether my patience, so long on the rack, would last out its destined time. As I made my way through the brilliant assemblage, Luziano Salustri, the poet, greeted me with a grave smile.

"I have had little time to congratulate you, conte," he said, in those mellifluous accents of his which were like his own improvised music, "but I assure you I do so with all my heart. Even in my most fantastic dreams I have never pictured a fairer heroine of a life's romance than the lady who is now the Countess Oliva."

I silently bowed my thanks.

"I am of a strange temperament, I suppose," he resumed. "To-night this ravishing scene of beauty and splendor makes me sad at heart, I know not why. It seems too brilliant, too dazzling. I would as soon go home and compose a dirge as anything."

I laughed satirically.

"Why not do it?" I said. "You are not the first person who, being present at a marriage, has, with perverse incongruity, meditated on a funeral!"

A wistful look came into his brilliant poetic eyes.

"I have thought once or twice," he remarked in a low tone,

"of that misguided young man Ferrari. A pity, was it not, that the quarrel occurred between you?"

"A pity indeed!" I replied, brusquely. Then taking him by the arm I turned him round so that he faced my wife, who was standing not far off. "But look at the—the—*angel* I have married! Is she not a fair cause for a dispute even unto death? Fy on thee, Luziano!—why think of Ferrari? He is not the first man who has been killed for the sake of a woman, nor will he be the last!"

Salustri shrugged his shoulders, and was silent for a minute or two. Then he added with his own bright smile:

"Still, *mi*, it would have been much better if it had ended in coffee and cognac. Myself, I would rather shoot a man with an epigram than a leaden bullet! By the by, do you remember our talking of Cain and Abel that night?"

"Perfectly."

"I have wondered since," he continued half merrily, half seriously, "whether the real cause of their quarrel has ever been rightly told. I should not be at all surprised if one of these days some *savant* does not discover a papyrus containing a missing page of Holy Writ, which will ascribe the reason of the first bloodshed to a love affair. Perhaps there were wood nymphs in those days, as we are assured there were giants, and some dainty Dryad might have driven the first pair of human brothers to desperation by her charms! What say you?"

"It is more than probable," I answered, lightly. "Make a poem of it, Salustri; people will say you have improved on the Bible!"

And I left him with a gay gesture to join other groups, and to take my part in the various dances which were now following quickly on one another. The supper was fixed to take place at midnight. At the first opportunity I had, I looked at the time. Quarter to eleven!—my heart beat quickly, the blood rushed to my temples and surged noisily in my ears. The hour I had waited for so long and so eagerly had come! At last! at last!

* * * * *

Slowly and with a hesitating step I approached my wife. She was resting after her exertions in the dance, and reclined languidly in a low velvet chair, chatting gayly with that very Prince de Majano whose honeyed compliments had partly spoiled the budding sweet nature of the youngest girl in the room. Apologizing for interrupting the conversation, I lowered my voice to a persuasive tenderness as I addressed her.

"*Cara sposina mia!* permit me to remind you of your promise."

What a radiant look she gave me!

"I am all impatience to fulfill it! Tell me when—and how?"

"Almost immediately. You know the private passage through which we entered the hotel this morning on our return from church?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, meet me there in twenty minutes. We must avoid being observed as we pass out. But," and I touched her delicate dress, "you will wear something warmer than this?"

"I have a long sable cloak that will do," she replied, brightly.

"We are not going far?"

"No, not far."

"We shall return in time for supper, of course?"

I bent my head.

"Naturally!"

Her eyes danced mirthfully.

"How romantic it seems! A moonlight stroll with you will be charming! Who shall say you are not a sentimental bridegroom? Is there a bright moon?"

"I believe so."

"*Cosa bellissima!*" and she laughed sweetly. "I look forward to the trip! In twenty minutes then I shall be with you at the place you name, Cesare; in the meanwhile the Marchese Gualdro claims me for this mazurka."

And she turned with her bewitching grace of manner to the marchese, who at that moment advanced with his courteous bow and fascinating smile, and I watched them as they glided forward together in the first figure of the elegant Polish dance, in which all lovely women look their loveliest.

Then, checking the curse that rose to my lips, I hurried away. Up to my own room I rushed with feverish haste, full of impatience to be rid of the disguise I had worn so long.

Within a few minutes I stood before my mirror, transformed into my old self as nearly as it was possible to be. I could not alter the snowy whiteness of my hair, but a few deft quick strokes of the razor soon divested me of the beard that had given me so elderly an aspect, and nothing remained but the mustache curling slightly up at the corners of the lip, as I had worn it in past days. I threw aside the dark glasses, and my eyes, densely brilliant, and fringed with the long lashes that had always been their distinguishing feature, shone with all the luster of strong and vigorous youth. I straightened myself

up to my full height, I doubled my fist and felt it hard as iron; I laughed aloud in the triumphant power of my strong manhood. I thought of the old rag-dealing Jew—"You could kill anything easily." Ay, so I could!—even without the aid of the straight swift steel of the Milanese dagger which I now drew from its sheath and regarded steadfastly, while I carefully felt the edge of the blade from hilt to point. Should I take it with me? I hesitated. Yes! it might be needed. I slipped it safely and secretly into my vest.

And now the proofs—the proofs! I had them already to my hand, and gathered them quickly together; first the things that had been buried with me—the gold chain on which hung the locket containing the portraits of my wife and child, the purse and card-case which Nina herself had given me, the crucifix the monk had laid on my breast in the coffin. The thought of that coffin moved me to a stern smile—that splintered, damp, and moldering wood must speak for itself by and by. Lastly I took the letters sent me by the Marquis D'Aven-court—the beautiful, passionate love epistles she had written to Guido Ferrari in Rome.

Now, was that all? I thoroughly searched both my rooms, ransacking every corner. I had destroyed everything that could give the smallest clew to my actions; I left nothing save furniture and small valuables, a present respectable enough in their way to the landlord of the hotel.

I glanced again at myself in the mirror. Yes; I was once more Fabio Romani, in spite of my white hair; no one that had ever known me intimately could doubt my identity. I had changed my evening dress for a rough, every-day suit, and now over this I threw my long Almagiva cloak, which draped me from head to foot. I kept its folds well up about my mouth and chin, and pulled on a soft slouched hat, with the brim far down over my eyes. There was nothing unusual in such a costume; it was common enough to many Neapolitans who have learned to dread the chill night winds that blow down from the lofty Apennines in early spring. Thus attired, too, I knew my features would be almost invisible to her, more especially as the place of our rendezvous was a long dim *entresol* lighted only by a single oil-lamp, a passage that led into the garden, one that was only used for private purposes, having nothing to do with the ordinary modes of exit and entrance to and from the hotel.

Into this hall I now hurried with an eager step; it was deserted; she was not there. Impatiently I waited—the minutes seemed hours! Sounds of music floated toward me from the

distant ball-room—the dreamy, swinging measure of a Viennese waltz. I could almost hear the flying feet of the dancers. I was safe from all observation where I stood—the servants were busy preparing the grand marriage supper, and all the inhabitants of the hotel were absorbed in watching the progress of the brilliant and exceptional festivities of the night.

Would she never come? Suppose, after all, she should escape me! I trembled at the idea, then put it from me with a smile at my own folly. No, her punishment was just, and in her case the Fates were inflexible. So I thought and felt. I paced up and down feverishly; I could count the thick, heavy throbs of my own heart. How long the moments seemed! Would she never come? Ah! at last! I caught the sound of a rustling robe and a light step—a breath of delicate fragrance was wafted on the air like the odor of falling orange-blossoms. I turned, and saw her approaching. With swift grace she ran up to me as eagerly as a child, her heavy cloak of rich Russian sable falling back from her shoulders and displaying her glittering dress, the dark fur of the hood heightening by contrast the fairness of her lovely flushed face, so that it looked like the face of one of Correggio's angels framed in ebony and velvet. She laughed, and her eyes flashed saucily.

“Did I keep you waiting, *caro mio!*” she whispered; and standing on tiptoe she kissed the hand with which I held my cloak muffled about me. “How tall you look in that *Almaviva!* I am so sorry I am a little late, but that last waltz was so exquisite I could not resist it; only I wish *you* had danced it with me.”

“You honor me by the wish,” I said, keeping one arm about her waist and drawing her toward the door that opened into the garden. “Tell me, how did you manage to leave the ball-room?”

“Oh, easily. I slipped away from my partner at the end of the waltz, and told him I should return immediately. Then I ran upstairs to my room, got my cloak—and here I am.”

And she laughed again. She was evidently in the highest spirits.

“You are very good to come with me at all, *mia bella!*” I murmured as gently as I could; “it is kind of you to thus humor my fancy. Did you see your maid? does she know where you are going?”

“She? Oh, no, she was not in my room at all. She is a great coquette, you know; I dare say she is amusing herself with the waiters in the kitchen. Poor thing! I hope she enjoys it.”

I breathed freely; we were so far undiscovered. No one had as yet noticed our departure—no one had the least clew to my intentions. I opened the door of the passage noiselessly, and we passed out. Wrapping my wife's cloak more closely about her with much apparent tenderness, I led her quickly across the garden. There was no one in sight—we were entirely unobserved. On reaching the exterior gate of the inclosure I left her for a moment, while I summoned a carriage, a common fiacre. She expressed some surprise on seeing the vehicle.

“I thought we were not going far?” she said.

I reassured her on this point, telling her that I only desired to spare her all possible fatigue. Satisfied with this explanation, she suffered me to assist her into the carriage. I followed her, and calling to the driver, “A la Villa Guarda,” we rattled away over the rough uneven stones of the back streets of the city.

“La Villa Guarda!” exclaimed Nina. “Where is that?”

“It is an old house,” I replied, “situated near the place I spoke to you of, where the jewels are.”

“Oh!”

And apparently contented, she nestled back in the carriage, permitting her head to rest lightly on my shoulder. I drew her closer to me, my heart beating with a fierce, terrible joy.

“Mine—mine at last!” I whispered in her ear. “Mine forever!”

She turned her face upward and smiled victoriously; her cool fragrant lips met my burning, eager ones in a close, passionate kiss. Yes, I kissed her now—why should I not? She was as much mine as any purchased slave, and merited less respect than a sultan's occasional female toy. And as she chose to caress me, I let her do so: I allowed her to think me utterly vanquished by the battery of her charms. Yet whenever I caught an occasional glimpse of her face as we drove along in the semi-darkness, I could not help wondering at the supreme vanity of the woman! Her self-satisfaction was so complete, and, considering her approaching fate, so tragically absurd!

She was entirely delighted with herself, her dress, and her conquest—as she thought—of me. Who could measure the height of the dazzling visions she indulged in; who could fathom the depths of her utter selfishness!

Seeing one like her, beautiful, wealthy, and above all—society knows I speak the truth—*well-dressed*, for by the latter virtue alone is a woman allowed any precedence nowadays—would not all the less fortunate and lovely of her sex feel some-

what envious? Ah, yes; they would and they do; but believe me, the selfish feminine thing, whose only sincere worship is offered at the shrines of Fashion and Folly, is of all creatures the one whose life is to be despised and never desired, and whose death makes no blank even in the circles of her so-called best friends.

I knew well enough that there was not a soul in Naples who was really attached to my wife—not one who would miss her, no, not even a servant—though she, in her superb self-conceit, imagined herself to be the adored beauty of the city. Those who had indeed loved her she had despised, neglected, and betrayed. Musingly I looked down upon her as she rested back in the carriage, encircled by my arm, while now and then a little sigh of absolute delight in herself broke from her lips—but we spoke scarcely at all. Hate has almost as little to say as love!

The night was persistently stormy, though no rain fell—the gale had increased in strength, and the white moon only occasionally glared out from the masses of white and gray cloud that rushed like flying armies across the sky, and her fitful light shone dimly, as though she were a spectral torch glimmering through a forest of shadow. Now and again bursts of music, or the blare of discordant trumpets, reached our ears from the more distant thoroughfares where the people were still celebrating the feast of Giovedì Grasso, or the tinkle of passing mandolines chimed in with the rolling wheels of our carriage; but in a few moments we were out of reach of even such sounds as these.

We passed the outer suburbs of the city and were soon on the open road. The man I had hired drove fast; he knew nothing of us, he was probably anxious to get back quickly to the crowded squares and illuminated quarters where the principal merriment of the evening was going on, and no doubt thought I showed but a poor taste in requiring to be driven away, even for a short distance, out of Naples on such a night of feasting and folly. He stopped at last; the castellated turrets of the villa I had named were faintly visible among the trees; he jumped down from his box and came to us.

"Shall I drive up to the house?" he asked, looking as though he would rather be spared this trouble.

"No," I answered, indifferently, "you need not. The distance is short, we will walk."

And I stepped out into the road and paid him his money.

"You seem anxious to get back to the city, my friend," I said, half jocosely.

"Sì, davvero!" he replied, with decision, "I hope to get many a good fare from the Count Oliva's marriage ball to-night."

"Ah! he is a rich fellow, that count," I said, as I assisted my wife to alight, keeping her cloak well muffled round her so that this common fellow should not perceive the glitter of her costly costume; "I wish I were he!"

The man grinned and nodded emphatically. He had no suspicion of my identity. He took me, in all probability, for one of those "gay gallants" so common in Naples, who, on finding at some public entertainment a "dama" to their taste, hurry her off, carefully cloaked and hooded, to a mysterious nook known only to themselves, where they can complete the romance of the evening entirely to their own satisfaction. Bidding me a lively *buona notte*, he sprung on his box again, jerked his horse's head violently round with a volley of oaths, and drove away at a rattling pace. Nina, standing on the road beside me, looked after him with a bewildered air.

"Could he not have waited to take us back?" she asked.

"No," I answered, brusquely; "we shall return by a different route. Come."

And passing my arm round her, I led her onward. She shivered slightly, and there was a sound of querulous complaint in her voice as she said:

"Have we to go much further, Cesare?"

"Three minutes' walk will bring us to our destination," I replied, briefly, adding in a softer tone, "Are you cold?"

"A little," and she gathered her sables more closely about her and pressed nearer to my side. The capricious moon here suddenly leaped forth like the pale ghost of a frenzied dancer, standing tiptoe on the edge of a precipitous chasm of black clouds. Her rays, pallidly green and cold, fell full on the dreary stretch of land before us, touching up with luminous distinctness those white mysterious mile-stones of the Campo Santo which mark where the journeys of men, women, and children began and where they left off, but never explain in what new direction they are now traveling. My wife saw and stopped, trembling violently.

"What place is this?" she asked, nervously.

In all her life she had never visited a cemetery—she had too great a horror of death.

"It is where I keep all my treasures," I answered, and my voice sounded strange and harsh in my own ears, while I tightened my grasp of her full, warm waist. "Come with me, my

beloved!" and in spite of my efforts, my tone was one of bitter mockery. "With me you need have no fear! Come!"

And I led her on, too powerless to resist my force, too startled to speak—on, on, on, over the rank dewy grass and unmarked ancient graves—on, till the low frowning gate of the house of my dead ancestors faced me—on, on, on, with the strength of ten devils in my arm as I held her—on, on, on, to her just doom!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE moon had retreated behind a dense wall of cloud, and the landscape was enveloped in semi-darkness. Reaching the door of the vault, I unlocked it; it opened instantly, and fell back with a sudden clang. She whom I held fast with my iron grip shrunk back, and strove to release herself from my grasp.

"Where are you going?" she demanded, in a faint tone. "I—I am afraid!"

"Of what?" I asked, endeavoring to control the passionate vibrations of my voice and to speak unconcernedly. "Because it is dark? We shall have light directly—you will see—you—*you*," and to my own surprise I broke into a loud and violent laugh. "You have no cause to be frightened! Come!"

And I lifted her swiftly and easily over the stone step of the entrance and set her safely inside. *Inside* at last, thank Heaven! I shut the great gate upon us both and locked it! Again that strange undesired laugh broke from my lips involuntarily, and the echoes of the charnel-house responded to it with unearthly and ghastly distinctness. Nina clung to me in the dense gloom.

"Why do you laugh like that?" she cried, loudly and impatiently. "It sounds horrible."

I checked myself by a strong effort.

"Does it? I am sorry—very sorry! I laugh because—because, *cara mia*, our moonlight ramble is so pleasant—and amusing—is it not?"

And I caught her to my heart and kissed her roughly.

"Now," I whispered, "I will carry you—the steps are too rough for your little feet—dear, dainty, white little feet! I will carry you, you armful of sweetness!—yes, carry you safely down into the fairy grotto where the jewels are—*such* jewels, and all for you—my love, my wife!"

And I raised her from the ground as though she were a young, frail child. Whether she tried to resist me or not I can-

not now remember. I bore her down the moldering stairway, setting my foot on each crooked step with the firmness of one long familiar with the place. But my brain reeled—rings of red fire circled in the darkness before my eyes; every artery in my body seemed strained to bursting; the pent-up agony and fury of my soul were such that I thought I should go mad or drop down dead ere I gained the end of my long desire. As I descended I felt her clinging to me; her hands were cold and clammy on my neck, as though she were chilled to the blood with terror. At last I reached the lowest step—I touched the floor of the vault. I set my precious burden down. Releasing my clasp of her, I remained for a moment inactive, breathing heavily. She caught my arm—she spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"What place is this? Where is the light you spoke of?"

I made no answer. I moved from her side, and taking matches from my pocket, I lighted up six large candles which I had fixed in various corners of the vault the night previously. Dazzled by the glare after the intense darkness, she did not at once perceive the nature of the place in which she stood. I watched her, myself still wrapped in the heavy cloak and hat that so effectually disguised my features. What a sight she was in that abode of corruption! Lovely, delicate, and full of life, with the shine of her diamonds gleaming from under the folds of rich fur that shrouded her, and the dark hood falling back as though to display the sparkling wonder of her gold hair.

Suddenly, and with a violent shock, she realized the gloom of her surroundings—the yellow flare of the waxen torches showed her the stone niches, the tattered palls, the decaying trophies of armor, the drear shapes of worm-eaten coffins, and with a shriek of horror she rushed to me where I stood, as immovable as a statue clad in coat and mail, and throwing her arms about me clung to me in a frenzy of fear.

"Take me away, take me away!" she moaned, hiding her face against my breast. "'Tis a vault—oh, Santissima Madonna!—a place for the dead! Quick—quick! take me out to the air—let us go home—home—"

She broke off abruptly, her alarm increasing at my utter silence. She gazed up at me with wild wet eyes.

"Cesare! Cesare! speak! What ails you? Why have you brought me here? Touch me—kiss me! say something—anything—only speak!"

And her bosom heaved convulsively; she sobbed with terror.

I put her from me with a firm hand. I spoke in measured accents, tinged with some contempt.