

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.

"Hush, I pray you! This is no place for a hysterical *scena*. Consider where you are! You have guessed aright—this is a vault—your own mausoleum, fair lady!—if I mistake not—the burial-place of the Romani family."

At these words her sobs ceased, as though they had been frozen in her throat; she stared at me in speechless fear and wonder.

"Here," I went on with methodical deliberation, "here lie all the great ancestors of your husband's family, heroes and martyrs in their day. Here will your own fair flesh molder. Here," and my voice grew deeper and more resolute, "here, six months ago, your husband himself, Fabio Romani, was buried."

She uttered no sound, but gazed at me like some beautiful pagan goddess turned to stone by the Furies. Having spoken thus far I was silent, watching the effect of what I had said, for I sought to torture the very nerves of her base soul. At last her dry lips parted—her voice was hoarse and indistinct.

"You must be mad!" she said, with smothered anger and horror in her tone.

Then seeing me still immovable, she advanced and caught my hand half commandingly, half coaxingly. I did not resist her.

"Come," she implored, "come away at once!" and she glanced about her with a shudder. "Let us leave this horrible place; as for the jewels, if you keep them here, they may stay here; I would not wear them for the world! Come."

I interrupted her, holding her hand in a fierce grasp; I turned her abruptly toward a dark object lying on the ground near us—my own coffin broken asunder. I drew her close to it.

"Look!" I said in a thrilling whisper, "what is this? Examine it well: it is a coffin of flimsiest wood, a cholera coffin! What says the painted inscription? Nay, do not start! It bears your husband's name; he was buried in it. Then how comes it to be open? *Where is he?*"

I felt her sway under me; a new and overwhelming terror had taken instant possession of her, her limbs refused to support her, she sunk on her knees. Mechanically and feebly she repeated the words after me—

"*Where is he? Where is he?*"

"Ay!" and my voice rang out through the hollow vault, its passion restrained no more. "*Where is he?*—the poor fool, the miserable, credulous dupe, whose treacherous wife played the courtesan under his very roof, while he loved and blindly trusted her! *Where is he?* Here, here!" and I seized her

hands and forced her up from her kneeling posture. "I promised you should see me as I am! I swore to grow young to-night for your sake— Now I keep my word! Look at me, Nina!—look at me, my twice-wedded wife!—Look at me!—do you not know your *husband?*"

And throwing my dark habiliments from me, I stood before her undisguised! As though some defacing disease had swept over her at my words and look, so her beauty suddenly vanished. Her face became drawn and pinched and almost old—her lips turned blue, her eyes grew glazed, and strained themselves from their sockets to stare at me; her very hands looked thin and ghost-like as she raised them upward with a frantic appealing gesture; there was a sort of gasping rattle in her throat as she drew herself away from me with a convulsive gesture of aversion, and crouched on the floor as though she sought to sink through it and thus avoid my gaze.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she moaned, wildly, "not Fabio!—no, it cannot be—Fabio is dead—dead! And you! you are mad!—this is some cruel jest of yours—some trick to frighten me!"

She broke off breathlessly, and her large, terrified eyes wandered to mine again with a reluctant and awful wonder. She attempted to arise from her crouching position; I approached, and assisted her to do so with ceremonious politeness. She trembled violently at my touch, and slowly staggering to her feet, she pushed back her hair from her forehead and regarded me fixedly with a searching, anguished look, first of doubt, then of dread, and lastly of convinced and hopeless certainty, for she suddenly covered her eyes with her hands as though to shut out some repulsive object, and broke into a low wailing sound like that of one in bitter physical pain. I laughed scornfully.

"Well, do you know me at last?" I cried. "'Tis true I have somewhat altered. This hair of mine was black, if you remember—it is white enough now, blanched by the horrors of a living death such as you cannot imagine, but which," and I spoke more slowly and impressively, "you may possibly experience ere long. Yet in spite of this change I think you know me! That is well. I am glad your memory serves you thus far!"

A low sound that was half a sob and half a cry broke from her.

"Oh, no, no!" she muttered, again, incoherently—"it cannot be! It must be false—it is some vile plot—it cannot be true! True! Oh, Heaven! it would be too cruel, too horrible!"

I strode up to her. I drew her hands away from her eyes and grasped them tightly in my own.

"Hear me!" I said, in clear, decisive tones. "I have kept silence, God knows, with a long patience, but now—now I can speak. Yes! you thought me dead—you had every reason to think so, you had every proof to believe so. How happy my supposed death made you! What a relief it was to you!—what an obstruction removed from your path! But—I was buried alive!" She uttered a faint shriek of terror, and looking wildly about her, strove to wrench her hands from my clasp. I held them more closely. "Ay, think of it, wife of mine!—you to whom luxury has been second nature, think of this poor body straightened in a helpless swoon, packed and pressed into yonder coffin and nailed up fast, shut out from the blessed light and air, as one would have thought, forever! Who could have dreamed that life still lingered in me—life strong enough to split asunder the boards that inclosed me, and leave them shattered, as you see them now!"

She shuddered and glanced with aversion toward the broken coffin, and again tried to loosen her hands from mine. She looked at me with a burning anger in her face.

"Let me go!" she panted. "Madman! liar!—let me go!"

I released her instantly and stood erect, regarding her fixedly.

"I am no madman," I said, composedly; "and you know as well as I do that I speak the truth. When I escaped from that coffin I found myself a prisoner in this very vault—this house of my perished ancestry, where, if old legends could be believed, the very bones that are stored up here would start and recoil from *your* presence as pollution to the dead, whose creed was *honor*."

The sound of her sobbing breath ceased suddenly; she fixed her eyes on mine; they glittered defiantly.

"For one long awful night," I resumed, "I suffered here. I might have starved—or perished of thirst. I thought no agony could surpass what I endured! But I was mistaken: there was a sharper torment in store for me. I discovered a way of escape; with grateful tears I thanked God for my rescue, for liberty, for life! Oh, what a fool was I! How could I dream that my death was so desired!—how could I know that I had better far have died than have returned to *such* a home!"

Her lips moved, but she uttered no word; she shivered as though with intense cold. I drew nearer to her.

"Perhaps you doubt my story?"

She made no answer. A rapid impulse of fury possessed me.

"Speak!" I cried, fiercely, "or by the God above us I will *make* you! Speak!" and I drew the dagger I carried from my vest. "Speak the truth for once—'twill be difficult to you who love lies—but this time I must be answered! Tell me, do you know me? *Do* you or do you *not* believe that I am indeed your husband—your living husband, Fabio Romani?"

She gasped for breath. The sight of my infuriated figure—the glitter of the naked steel before her eyes—the suddenness of my action, the horror of her position, all terrified her into speech. She flung herself down before me in an attitude of abject entreaty. She found her voice at last.

"Mercy! mercy!" she cried. "Oh, God! you will not kill me? Anything—anything but death; I am too young to die! Yes, yes; I know you are Fabio—Fabio, my husband, Fabio, whom I thought dead—Fabio—oh!" and she sobbed convulsively. "You said you loved me to-day—when you married me! Why did you marry me? I was your wife already—why—why? Oh, horrible, horrible! I see—I understand it all now! But do not, do not kill me, Fabio—I am afraid to die!"

And she hid her face at my feet and groveled there. As quickly calmed as I had been suddenly furious, I put back the dagger. I smoothed my voice and spoke with mocking courtesy.

"Pray do not alarm yourself," I said, coolly. "I have not the slightest intention of killing you! I am no vulgar murderer, yielding to mere brute instincts. You forget: a Neapolitan has hot passions, but he also has *finesse*, especially in matters of vengeance. I brought you here to tell you of my existence, and to confront you with the proofs of it. Rise, I beg of you, we have plenty of time to talk; with a little patience I shall make things clear to you—rise!"

She obeyed me, lifting herself up reluctantly with a long, shuddering sigh. As she stood upright I laughed contemptuously.

"What! no love words for me?" I cried, "not one kiss, not one smile, not one word of welcome? You say you know me—well!—are you not glad to see your husband?—you, who were such an inconsolable widow?"

A strange quiver passed over her face—she wrung her hands together hard, but she said no word.

"Listen!" I said, "there is more to tell. When I broke loose from the grasp of death, when I came *home*—I found my

vacant post already occupied. I arrived in time to witness a very pretty pastoral play. The scene was the ilex avenue—the actors, you, my wife, and Guido, my friend!”

She raised her head and uttered a low exclamation of fear. I advanced a step or two and spoke more rapidly.

“You hear? There was moonlight, and the song of nightingales—yes; the stage effects were perfect! I watched the progress of the comedy—with what emotions you may imagine. I learned much that was news to me. I became aware that for a lady of your large heart and sensitive feelings *one* husband was not sufficient”—here I laid my hand on her shoulder and gazed into her face, while her eyes, dilated with terror, stared hopelessly up to mine—“and that within three little months of your marriage to me you provided yourself with another. Nay, no denial can serve you! Guido Ferrari was husband to you in all things but the name. I mastered the situation—I rose to the emergency. Trick for trick, comedy for comedy! You know the rest. As the Count Oliva you cannot deny that I acted well! For the second time I courted you, but not half so eagerly as *you* courted *me*? For the second time I have married you! Who shall deny that you are most thoroughly mine—mine, body and soul, till death do us part!”

And I loosened my grasp of her: she writhed from me like some glittering wounded serpent. The tears had dried on her cheeks, her features were rigid and wax-like as the features of a corpse; only her dark eyes shone, and these seemed preternaturally large, and gleamed with an evil luster. I moved a little away, and turning my own coffin on its side, I sat down upon it as indifferently as though it were an easy-chair in a drawing-room. Glancing at her then, I saw a wavering light upon her face. Some idea had entered into her mind. She moved gradually from the wall where she leaned, watching me fearfully as she did so. I made no attempt to stir from the seat I occupied.

Slowly, slowly, still keeping her eyes on me, she glided step by step onward and passed me—then with a sudden rush she reached the stairway and bounded up it with the startled haste of a hunted deer. I smiled to myself. I heard her shaking the iron gate-way to and fro with all her feeble strength; she called aloud for help several times. Only the sullen echoes of the vault answered her, and the wild whistle of the wind as it surged through the trees of the cemetery. At last she screamed furiously, as a savage cat might scream—the rustle of her silken robes came swiftly sweeping down the steps, and

with a spring like that of a young tigress she confronted me, the blood now burning wrathfully in her face, and transforming it back to something of its old beauty.

“Unlock that door!” she cried, with a furious stamp of her foot. “Assassin! traitor! I hate you! I always hated you! Unlock the door, I tell you! You dare not disobey me; you have no right to murder me!”

I looked at her coldly; the torrent of her words was suddenly checked, something in my expression daunted her; she trembled and shrunk back.

“No right!” I said, mockingly. “I differ from you! A man *once* married has *some* right over his wife, but a man *twice* married to the same woman has surely gained a double authority! And as for ‘*dare not!*’ there is nothing I ‘dare not’ do to-night.”

And with that I rose and approached her. A torrent of passionate indignation boiled in my veins; I seized her two white arms and held her fast.

“You talk of murder!” I muttered, fiercely. “*You*—you who have remorselessly murdered two men! Their blood be on your head! For though I live, I am but the moving corpse of the man I was—hope, faith, happiness, peace—all things good and great in me have been slain by *you*. And as for Guido—”

She interrupted me with a wild sobbing cry.

“He loved me! Guido loved me!”

“Ay, he loved you, oh, devil in the shape of a woman! he loved you! Come here, here!” and in a fury I could not restrain I dragged her, almost lifted her along to one corner of the vault, where the light of the torches scarcely illuminated the darkness, and there I pointed upward. “Above our very heads—to the left of where we stand—the brave strong body of your lover lies, festering slowly in the wet mold, thanks to you!—the fair, gallant beauty of it all marred by the red-mouthed worms—the thick curls of his hair combed through by the crawling feet of vile insects—the poor frail heart pierced by a gaping wound—”

“You killed him; you—you are to blame,” she moaned, restlessly, striving to turn her face away from me.

“I killed him? No, no, not I but *you*! He died when he learned your treachery—when he knew you were false to him for the sake of wedding a supposed wealthy stranger—my pistol-shot but put him out of torment. You! you were glad of his death—as glad as when you thought of mine! *You* talk of murder! Oh, vilest among women! if I could murder you

twenty times over, what then? Your sins outweigh all punishment!"

And I flung her from me with a gesture of contempt and loathing. This time my words had struck home. She cowered before me in horror—her sables were loosened and scarcely protected her, the richness of her ball costume was fully displayed, and the diamonds on her bosom heaved restlessly up and down as she panted with excitement, rage and fear.

"I do not see," she muttered, sullenly, "why you should blame *me*! I am no worse than other women!"

"No worse! no worse!" I cried. "Shame, shame upon you that thus outrage your sex! Learn for once what *men* think of unfaithful wives—for may be you are ignorant. The novels you have read in your luxurious, idle hours have perhaps told you that infidelity is no sin—merely a little social error easily condoned, or set right by the divorce court. Yes! modern books and modern plays teach you so: in them the world swerves upside down, and vice looks like virtue. But *I* will tell you what will seem to you a strange and wonderful thing! There is no mean animal, no loathsome object, no horrible deformity of nature so utterly repulsive to a true man as a faithless wife! The cowardly murderer who lies in wait for his victim behind some dark door, and stabs him in the back as he passes by unarmed—he, I say, is more to be pardoned than the woman who takes a husband's name, honor, position, and reputation among his fellows, and sheltering herself with these, passes her beauty promiscuously about like some coarse article of commerce, that goes to the highest bidder! Ay, let your French novels and books of their type say what they will—infidelity is a crime, a low, brutal crime, as bad if not worse than murder, and deserves as stern a sentence!"

A sudden spirit of defiant insolence possessed her. She drew herself erect, and her level brows knitted in a dark frown.

"Sentence!" she exclaimed, imperiously. "How dare you judge me! What harm have I done? If I am beautiful, is that my fault? If men are fools can *I* help it? You loved me—Guido loved me—could *I* prevent it? I cared nothing for him, and less for you!"

"I know it," I said, bitterly. "Love was never part of *your* nature! Our lives were but cups of wine for your false lips to drain; once the flavor pleased you, but now—now, think you not the dregs taste somewhat cold?"

She shrunk at my glance—her head drooped, and drawing near a projecting stone in the wall, she sat down upon it, pressing one hand to her heart.

"No heart, no conscience, no memory! I cried. "Great Heaven! that such a thing should live and call itself woman! The lowest beast of the field has more compassion for its kind! Listen: before Guido died he knew me, even as my child, neglected by you, in her last agony knew her father. She being innocent, passed in peace; but he!—imagine if you can, the wrenching torture in which he perished, knowing all! How his parted spirit must curse you!"

She raised her hands to her head and pushed away the light curls from her brow. There was a starving, hunted, almost furious look in her eyes, but she fixed them steadily on me.

"See," I went on—"here are more proofs of the truth of my story. These things were buried with me," and I threw into her lap as she sat before me the locket and chain, the card-case and purse she herself had given me. "You will no doubt recognize them. This"—and I showed her the monk's crucifix—"this was laid on my breast in the coffin. It may be useful to you—you can pray to it presently!"

She interrupted me with a gesture of her hand; she spoke as though in a dream.

"You escaped from this vault?" she said, in a low tone, looking from right to left with searching eagerness. "Tell me how—and—where?"

I laughed scornfully, guessing her thoughts.

"It matters little," I replied. "The passage I discovered is now closed and fast cemented. I have seen to that myself! No other living creature left here can escape as I did. Escape is impossible."

A stifled cry broke from her; she threw herself at my feet, letting the things I had given her as proofs of my existence fall heedlessly on the floor.

"Fabio! Fabio!" she cried, "save me, pity me! Take me out to the light—the air—let me live! Drag me through Naples—let all the crowd see me dishonored, brand me with the worst of names, make of me a common outcast—only let me feel the warm life throbbing in my veins! I will do anything, say anything, be anything—only let me live! I loath the cold and darkness—the horrible—horrible ways of death!" She shuddered violently and clung to me afresh. "I am so young! and after all, am I so vile? There are women who count their lovers by the score, and yet they are not blamed; why should I suffer more than they?"

"Why, why?" I echoed, fiercely. "Because for once a husband takes the law into his own hands—for once a wronged man insists on justice—for once he dares to punish the treach-

ery that blackens his honor! Were there more like me there would be fewer like you! A score of lovers! 'Tis not your fault that you had but one! I have something else to say which concerns you. Not content with fooling two men, you tried the same amusement on a supposed third. Ay, you wince at that! While you thought me to be the Count Oliva—while you were betrothed to me in that character, you wrote to Guido Ferrari in Rome. Very charming letters! here they are," and I flung them down to her. "I have no further use for them—I have read them all!"

She let them lie where they fell; she still crouched at my feet, and her restless movements loosened her cloak so far that it hung back from her shoulders, showing the jewels that flashed on her white neck and arms like points of living light. I touched the circlet of diamonds in her hair—I snatched it from her.

"These are mine!" I cried, "as much as this signet I wear, which was your love-gift to Guido Ferrari, and which you afterward returned to me, its rightful owner. These are my mother's gems—how dared you wear them? The stones I gave you are your only fitting ornaments—they are stolen goods, filched by the blood-stained hands of the blackest brigand in Sicily! I promised you more like them; behold them!"—and I threw open the coffin-shaped chest containing the remainder of Carmelo Neri's spoils. It occupied a conspicuous position near where I stood, and I had myself arranged its interior so that the gold ornaments and precious stones should be the first things to meet her eyes. "You see now," I went on, "where the wealth of the supposed Count Oliva came from. I found this treasure hidden here on the night of my burial—little did I think then what dire need I should have for its usage! It has served me well; it is not yet exhausted; the remainder is at your service!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

At these words she rose from her knees and stood upright. Making an effort to fasten her cloak with her trembling hands, she moved hesitatingly toward the brigand's coffin and leaned over it, looking in with a faint light of hope as well as curiosity in her haggard face. I watched her in vague wonderment—she had grown old so suddenly. The peach-like bloom and delicacy of her flesh had altogether disappeared—her skin appeared drawn and dry as though parched in tropical heat. Her hair was disordered, and fell about her in clustering

showers of gold—that, and her eyes, were the only signs of youth about her. A sudden wave of compassion swept over my soul.

"Oh, wife!" I exclaimed—"wife that I so ardently loved—wife that I would have died for indeed, had you bade me!—why did you betray me? I thought you truth itself—ay! and if you had but waited for one day after you thought me dead, and *then* chosen Guido for your lover, I tell you, so large was my tenderness, I would have pardoned you! Though risen from the grave, I would have gone away and made no sign—yes; if you had waited—if you had wept for me ever so little! But when your own lips confessed your crime—when I knew that within three months of our marriage-day you had fooled me—when I learned that my love, my name, my position, my honor, were used as mere screens to shelter your intrigue with the man I called friend!—God! what creature of mortal flesh and blood could forgive such treachery? I am no more than others—but I loved you—and in proportion to my love, so is the greatness of my wrong!"

She listened—she advanced a little toward me—a faint smile dawned on her pallid lips—she whispered:

"Fabio! Fabio!"

I looked at her—unconsciously my voice dropped into a cadence of intense melancholy softened by tenderness.

"Ay—Fabio! What wouldst thou with the ghost of him? Does it not seem strange to thee—that hated name?—thou, Nina, whom I loved as few men love women—thou who gavest me no love at all—thou, who hast broken my heart and made me what I am!"

A hard, heavy sob rose in my throat and choked my utterance. I was young; and the cruel waste and destruction of my life seemed at that moment more than I could bear. She heard me, and the smile brightened more warmly on her countenance. She came close to me—half timidly yet coaxingly she threw one arm about my neck—her bosom heaved quickly.

"Fabio," she murmured—"Fabio, forgive me! I spoke in haste—I do not hate thee! Come! I will make amends for all thy suffering—I will love thee—I will be true to thee, I will be all thine! See! thou knowest I have not lost my beauty!"

And she clung to me with passion, raising her lips to mine, while with her large inquiring eyes she searched my face for the reply to her words. I gazed down upon her with sorrowful sternness.

"Beauty? Mere food for worms—I care not for it! Of