

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

what avail is a fair body tenanted by a fiendish soul? Forgiveness?—you ask too late! A wrong like mine can never be forgiven.”

There ensued a silence. She still embraced me, but her eyes roved over me as though she searched for some lost thing. The wind tore furiously among the branches of the cypresses outside, and screamed through the small holes and crannies of the stone-work, rattling the iron gate at the summit of the stairway with a clanking sound, as though the famous brigand chief had escaped with all his chains upon him, and were clamoring for admittance to recover his buried property. Suddenly her face lightened with an expression of cunning intensity—and before I could perceive her intent—with swift agility she snatched from my vest the dagger I carried!

“Too late!” she cried, with a wild laugh. “No; not too late! Die—wretch!”

For one second the bright steel flashed in the wavering light as she poised it in act to strike—the next, I had caught her murderous hand and forced it down, and was struggling with her for the mastery of the weapon. She held it with a desperate grip—she fought with me breathlessly, clinging to me with all her force—she reminded me of that ravenous unclean bird with which I had had so fierce a combat on the night of my living burial. For some brief moments she was possessed of supernatural strength—she sprung and tore at my clothes, keeping the poniard fast in her clutch. At last I thrust her down panting and exhausted, with fury flashing in her eyes—I wrenched the steel from her hand and brandished it above her.

“Who talks of murder *now*?” I cried, in bitter derision. “Oh, what a joy you have lost! What triumph for you, could you have stabbed me to the heart and left me here dead indeed! What a new career of lies would have been yours! How sweetly you would have said your prayers with the stain of my blood upon your soul! Ay! you would have fooled the world to the end, and died in the odor of sanctity! And you dared to ask my forgiveness—”

I stopped short—a strange, bewildered expression suddenly passed over her face—she looked about her in a dazed, vague way—then her gaze became suddenly fixed, and she pointed toward a dark corner and shuddered.

“Hush—hush!” she said, in a low, terrified whisper. “Look! how still he stands! how pale he seems! Do not speak—do not move—hush! he must not hear your voice—I will go to him and tell him all—all—” She rose and stretched out her arms with a gesture of entreaty:

“Guido! Guido!”

With a sudden chilled awe at my heart I looked toward the spot that thus riveted her attention—all was shrouded in deep gloom. She caught my arm.

“Kill him!” she whispered, fiercely—“kill him, and then I will love you! Ah!” and with an exclamation of fear she began to retire swiftly backward as though confronted by some threatening figure. “He is coming—nearer! No, no, Guido! You shall not touch me—you dare not—Fabio is dead and I am free—free!” She paused—her wild eyes gazed upward—did she see some horror there? She put up both hands as though to shield herself from some impending blow, and uttering a loud cry she fell prone on the stone floor insensible. Or dead? I balanced this question indifferently, as I looked down upon her inanimate form. The flavor of vengeance was hot in my mouth, and filled me with delirious satisfaction. True, I had been glad, when my bullet whizzing sharply through the air had carried death to Guido, but my gladness had been mingled with ruthfulness and regret. *Now*, not one throb of pity stirred me—not the faintest emotion of tenderness. Ferrari’s sin was great, but *she* tempted him—her crime outweighed his. And now—there she lay white and silent—in a swoon that was like death—that might be death for aught I knew—or cared! Had her lover’s ghost indeed appeared before the eyes of her guilty conscience? I did not doubt it—I should scarcely have been startled had I seen the poor pale shadow of him by my side, as I musingly gazed upon the fair fallen body of the traitress who had wantonly wrecked both our lives.

“Ay, Guido,” I muttered, half aloud—“dost see the work? Thou art avenged, frail spirit—avenged as well as I—part thou in peace from earth and its inhabitants!—haply thou shalt cleanse in pure fire the sins of thy lower nature, and win a final pardon; but for her—is hell itself black enough to match *her* soul?”

And I slowly moved toward the stairway; it was time, I thought, with a grim resolve—to *leave her*! Possibly she was dead—if not—why then she soon would be! I paused irresolute—the wild wind battered ceaselessly at the iron gate-way, and wailed as though with a hundred voices of aerial creatures, lamenting. The torches were burning low, the darkness of the vault deepened. Its gloom concerned me little—I had grown familiar with its unsightly things, its crawling spiders, its strange uncouth beetles, the clusters of blue fungi on its damp walls. The scurrying noise made by bats and owls,

who, scared by the lighted candles, were hiding themselves in holes and corners of refuge, startled me not at all—I was well accustomed to such sounds. In my then state of mind, an emperor's palace were less fair to me than this brave charnel-house—this stone-mouthed witness of my struggle back to life and all life's misery. The deep-toned bell outside the cemetery struck *One!* We had been absent nearly two hours from the brilliant assemblage left at the hotel. No doubt we were being searched for everywhere—it mattered not! They would not come to seek us *here*. I went on resolutely toward the stair—as I placed my foot on the firm step of the ascent, my wife stirred from her recumbent position—her swoon had passed. She did not perceive me where I stood, ready to depart—she murmured something to herself in a low voice, and taking in her hand the falling tresses of her own hair she seemed to admire its color and texture, for she stroked it and restroked it, and finally broke into a gay laugh—a laugh so out of all keeping with her surroundings, that it startled me more than her attempt to murder me.

She presently stood up with all her own lily-like grace and fairy majesty; and smiling as though she were a pleased child, she began to arrange her disordered dress with elaborate care. I paused wonderingly, and watched her. She went to the brigand's chest of treasure and proceeded to examine its contents—laces, silver and gold embroideries, antique ornaments, she took carefully in her hands, seeming mentally to calculate their cost and value. Jewels that were set as necklaces, bracelets and other trinkets of feminine wear, she put on, one after the other, till her neck and arms were loaded—and literally blazed with the myriad scintillations of different-colored gems. I marveled at her strange conduct, but did not as yet guess its meaning. I moved away from the staircase and drew imperceptibly nearer to her.—Hark! what was that? A strange, low rumbling like a distant earthquake, followed by a sharp crackling sound; I stopped to listen attentively. A furious gust of wind rushed round the mausoleum, shrieking wildly like some devil in anger, and the strong draught flying through the gateway extinguished two of the flaring candles. My wife, entirely absorbed in counting over Carmelo Neri's treasures, apparently saw and heard nothing. Suddenly she broke into another laugh—a chuckling, mirthless laugh such as might come from the lips of the aged and senile. The sound curdled the blood in my veins—it was the laugh of a madwoman! With an earnest, distinct voice I called to her:

“Nina! Nina!”

She turned toward me still smiling—her eyes were bright, her face had regained its habitual color, and as she stood in the dim light, with her rich tresses falling about her, and the clustering gems massed together in a glittering fire against her white skin, she looked unnaturally, wildly beautiful. She nodded to me, half graciously, half haughtily, but gave me no answer. Moved with quick pity I called again:

“Nina!”

She laughed again—the same terrible laugh.

“*Sì, sì! Son' bella, son' bellissima!*” she murmured. “*E tu, Guido mio? Tu ma' mi?*”

Then raising one hand as though commanding attention, she cried:

“*Ascolta!*” and began to sing clearly though feebly:

“*Ti saluto, Rosignuolo!
Nel tuo duolo—ti saluto!
Sei l'amante della rosa
Che morendo si fa sposa!*”

As the old familiar melody echoed through the dreary vault, my bitter wrath against her partially lessened; with the swiftness of my southern temperament a certain compassion stirred my soul. She was no longer quite the same woman who had wronged and betrayed me—she had the helplessness and fearful innocence of madness—in that condition I could not have hurt a hair of her head. I stepped hastily forward—I resolved to take her out of the vault—after all I would not leave her thus—but as I approached, she withdrew from me, and with an angry stamp of her foot motioned me backward, while a dark frown knitted her fair brows.

“Who are you?” she cried, imperiously. “You are dead, quite dead! How dare you come out of your grave!”

And she stared at me defiantly—then suddenly clasping her hands as though in ecstasy, and seeming to address some invisible being at her side, she said, in low, delighted tones:

“He is dead, Guido! Are you not glad?” She paused, apparently expecting some reply, for she looked about her wonderingly and continued—“You did not answer me—are you afraid? Why are you so pale and stern? Have you just come back from Rome? What have you heard? That I am false?—oh, no! I will love you still.—Ah! I forgot! you also are dead, Guido! I remember now—you cannot hurt me any more—I am free—and quite happy!”

Smiling, she continued her song:

“*Ti saluto, Sol di Maggio!
Col tuo raggio ti saluto!*”

*Sei l'Apollo del passato
Sei l'amore incoronato!*"

Again—again!—that hollow rumbling and cracking sound overhead. What could it be?

"*L'amore incoronato!*" hummed Nina fitfully, as she plunged her round, jeweled arm down again into the chest of treasure. "*Sì, sì! Che morendo si fa sposa—che morendo si fa sposa—ah!*"

This last was an exclamation of pleasure; she had found some toy that charmed her—it was the old mirror set in its frame of pearls. The possession of this object seemed to fill her with extraordinary joy, and she evidently retained no consciousness of where she was, for she sat down on the upturned coffin, which had held my living body, with absolute indifference. Still singing softly to herself, she gazed lovingly at her own reflection, and fingered the jewels she wore, arranging and rearranging them in various patterns with one hand, while in the other she raised the looking-glass in the flare of the candles which lighted up its quaint setting. A strange and awful picture she made there—gazing with such lingering tenderness on the portrait of her own beauty—while surrounded by the moldering coffins that silently announced how little such beauty was worth—playing with jewels, the foolish trinkets of life, in the abode of skeletons, where the password is death! Thinking thus, I gazed at her, as one might gaze at a dead body—not loathingly any more, but only mournfully. My vengeance was satiated. I could not wage war against this vacantly smiling mad creature, out of whom the spirit of a devilish intelligence and cunning had been torn, and who therefore was no longer the same woman. Her loss of wit should compensate for my loss of love. I determined to try and attract her attention again. I opened my lips to speak—but before the words could form themselves, that odd rumbling noise again broke on my ears—this time with a loud reverberation that rolled overhead like the thunder of artillery. Before I could imagine the reason of it—before I could advance one step toward my wife, who still sat on the upturned coffin, smiling at herself in the mirror—before I could utter a word or move an inch, a tremendous crash resounded through the vault, followed by a stinging shower of stones, dust, and pulverized mortar! I stepped backward amazed, bewildered—speechless—instinctively shutting my eyes—when I opened them again all was darkness—all was silence! Only the wind howled outside more frantically than ever—a sweeping gust whirled through the vault, blowing some dead leaves against my

face, and I heard the boughs of trees creaking noisily in the fury of the storm. Hush!—was that a faint moan? Quivering in every limb, and sick with a nameless dread, I sought in my pocket for matches—I found them. Then with an effort, mastering the shuddering revulsion of my nerves, I struck a light. The flame was so dim that for an instant I could see nothing. I called loudly:

"Nina!" There was no answer.

One of the extinguished candles was near me; I lighted it with trembling hands and held it aloft—then I uttered a wild shriek of horror! Oh, God of inexorable justice, surely Thy vengeance was greater than mine! An enormous block of stone, dislodged by the violence of the storm, had fallen from the roof of the vault; fallen sheer down over the very place where *she* had sat a minute or two before, fantastically smiling! Crushed under the huge mass—crushed into the very splinters of my own empty coffin, she lay—and yet—and yet—I could see nothing, save one white hand protruding—the hand on which the marriage-ring glittered mockingly! Even as I looked, that hand quivered violently—beat the ground—and then—was still! It was horrible. In dreams I see that quivering white hand now, the jewels on it sparkling with derisive luster. It appeals, it calls, it threatens, it prays! and when my time comes to die, it will beckon me to my grave! A portion of her costly dress was visible—my eyes lighted on this—and I saw a slow stream of blood oozing thickly from beneath the stone—the ponderous stone that no man could have moved an inch—the stone that sealed her awful sepulcher! Great Heaven! how fast the crimson stream of life trickled!—staining the snowy lace of her garment with a dark and dreadful hue! Staggering feebly like a drunken man—half delirious with anguish—I approached and touched that small white hand that lay stiffly on the ground—I bent my head—I almost kissed it, but some strange revulsion rose in my soul and forbade the act!

In a stupor of dull agony I sought and found the crucifix of the monk Cipriano that had fallen to the floor—I closed the yet warm finger-tips around it and left it thus; an unnatural, terrible calmness froze the excitement of my strained nerves.

"'Tis all I can do for thee!" I muttered, incoherently. "May Christ forgive thee, though I cannot!"

And covering my eyes to shut out the sight before me, I turned away. I hurried in a sort of frenzy toward the stairway—on reaching the lowest step I extinguished the torch I carried. Some impulse made me glance back—and I saw what I

see now—what I shall always see till I die! An aperture had been made through the roof of the vault by the fall of the great stone, and through this the fitful moon poured down a long ghostly ray. The green glimmer, like a spectral lamp, deepened the surrounding darkness, only showing up with fell distinctness one object—that slender protruding wrist and hand, whiter than Alpine snow! I gazed at it wildly—the gleam of the jewels down there hurt my eyes—the shine of the silver crucifix clasped in those little waxen fingers dazzled my brain—and with a frantic cry of unreasoning terror, I rushed up the steps with a maniac speed—opened the iron gate through which *she* would pass no more, and stood at liberty in the free air, face to face with a wind as tempestuous as my own passions. With what furious haste I shut the entrance to the vault! with what fierce precaution I locked and double-locked it! Nay, so little did I realize that she was actually dead, that I caught myself saying aloud—“Safe—safe at last! She cannot escape—I have closed the secret passage—no one will hear her cries—she will struggle a little, but it will soon be over—she will never laugh any more—never kiss—never love—never tell lies for the fooling of men!—she is buried as I was—buried alive!”

Muttering thus to myself with a sort of sobbing incoherence, I turned to meet the snarl of the savage blast of the night, with my brain reeling, my limbs weak and trembling—with the heavens and earth rocking before me like a wild sea—with the flying moon staring aghast through the driving clouds—with all the universe, as it were, in a broken and shapeless chaos about me; even so I went forth to meet my fate—and left her!

* * * * *

Unrecognized, untracked, I departed from Naples. Wrapped in my cloak, and stretched in a sort of heavy stupor on the deck of the “Rondinella,” my appearance apparently excited no suspicion in the mind of the skipper, old Antonio Bardi, with whom my friend Andrea had made terms for my voyage, little aware of the real identity of the passenger he recommended.

The morning was radiantly beautiful—the sparkling waves rose high on tiptoe to kiss the still boisterous wind—the sunlight broke in a wide smile of spring-tide glory over the world! With the burden of my agony upon me—with the utter exhaustion of my overwrought nerves, I beheld all things as in a feverish dream—the laughing light, the azure ripple of waters—the receding line of my native shores—everything was blurred, indistinct, and unreal to me, though my soul, Argus-eyed, incessantly

santly peered down, down into those darksome depths where *she* lay, silent forever. For now I knew she was dead. Fate had killed her—not I. All unrepentant as she was, triumphing in her treachery to the last, even in her madness, still I would have saved her though she strove to murder me.

Yet it was well the stone had fallen—who knows!—if she had lived—I strove not to think of her, and drawing the key of the vault from my pocket, I let it drop with a sullen splash into the waves. All was over—no one pursued me—no one inquired whither I went. I arrived at Civita Vecchia unquestioned; from thence I traveled to Leghorn, where I embarked on board a merchant trading vessel bound for South America. Thus I lost myself to the world; thus I became, as it were, buried alive for the second time. I am safely sepulchered in these wild woods, and I seek no escape.

Wearing the guise of a rough settler, one who works in common with others, hewing down tough parasites and poisonous undergrowths in order to effect a clearing through these pathless solitudes, none can trace in the strong stern man, with the care-worn face and white hair, any resemblance to the once popular and wealthy Count Oliva, whose disappearance, so strange and sudden, was for a time the talk of all Italy. For, on one occasion when visiting the nearest town, I saw an article in a newspaper, headed “Mysterious Occurrence in Naples,” and I read every word of it with a sensation of dull amusement. From it I learned that the Count Oliva was advertised for. His abrupt departure, together with that of his newly-married wife, formerly Contessa Romani, on the very night of their wedding, had created the utmost excitement in the city. The landlord of the hotel where he stayed was prosecuting inquiries—so was the count’s former valet, one Vincenzo Flamma. Any information would be gratefully received by the police authorities. If within twelve months no news were obtained, the immense properties of the Romani family, in default of existing kindred, would be handed over to the crown.

There was much more to the same effect, and I read it with the utmost indifference. Why do they not search the Romani vault?—I thought gloomily—they would find some authentic information there! But I know the Neapolitans well; they are timorous and superstitious; they would as soon hug a pestilence as explore a charnel-house. One thing gladdened me; it was the projected disposal of my fortune. The crown, the Kingdom of Italy, was surely as noble an heir as a man could have! I returned to my woodland hut with a strange peace on my soul.

As I told you at first, I am a dead man—the world, with its busy life and aims, has naught to do with me. The tall trees, the birds, the whispering grasses, are my friends and my companions—they, and they only, are sometimes the silent witnesses of the torturing fits of agony that every now and then overwhelm me with bitterness. For I suffer always. That is natural. Revenge is sweet!—but who shall paint the horrors of memory? My vengeance now recoils upon my own head. I do not complain of this—it is the law of compensation—it is just. I blame no one—save Her, the woman who wrought my wrong. Dead as she is I do not forgive her; I have tried to, but I cannot! Do men ever truly forgive the women who ruin their lives? I doubt it. As for me, I feel that the end is not yet—that when my soul is released from its earthly prison, I shall still be doomed in some drear, dim way to pursue her treacherous flitting spirit over the black chasms of a hell darker than Dante's—she in the likeness of a wandering flame—I as her haunting shadow; she, flying before me in coward fear—I, hasting after her in relentless wrath—and this forever and ever!

But I ask no pity—I need none. I punished the guilty, and in doing so suffered more than they—that is as it must always be. I have no regret and no remorse; only one thing troubles me—one little thing—a mere foolish fancy! It comes upon me in the night, when the large-faced moon looks at me from heaven. For the moon is grand in this climate; she is like a golden-robed empress of all worlds as she sweeps in lustrous magnificence through the dense violet skies. I shut out her radiance as much as I can; I close the blind at the narrow window of my solitary forest cabin; and yet do what I will, one wide ray creeps in always—one ray that eludes all my efforts to expel it. Under the door it comes, or through some unguessed cranny in the wood-work. I have in vain tried to find the place of its entrance.

The color of the moonlight in this climate is of a mellow amber—so I cannot understand why that pallid ray that visits me so often, should be green—a livid, cold, watery green; and in it, like a lily in an emerald pool, I see a little white hand on which the jewels cluster thick like drops of dew! The hand moves—it lifts itself—the small fingers point at me threateningly—they quiver—and then—they beckon me slowly, solemnly, commandingly onward!—onward!—to some infinite land of awful mysteries where Light and Love shall dawn for me no more!

THE END.

