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Captain Mayne Reid

"The Finger of Fate"

"A Romance"

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### Chapter One.

#### The Half-Brothers.

In a wood, within ten miles of Windsor, two youths are seen, gun in hand, in pursuit of game. A brace of thoroughbred setters, guarding the cover in front, and a well-equipped keeper, walking obsequiously in the rear, precludes any suspicion of poaching; though the personal appearance of the young sportsmen needs no such testimony.

The wood is only an extensive pheasant-cover, and their father is its owner. They are the sons of General Harding, an old Indian officer, who, with a hundred thousand pounds, garnered during twenty years' active service in the East, has purchased an estate in the pleasant shire of Bucks, in the hope of restoring health to a constitution impaired upon the hot plains of Hindostan.

A fine old Elizabethan mansion, of red brick, now and then visible through the openings of the cover, tells that the General has laid out his lacs with considerable taste, while five hundred acres of finely timbered park, a "home farm," and half-a-dozen others rented out—to say nothing of the wood-covers and cottage tenements—prove that the *ci-devant* soldier has not carefully collected a hundred thousand pounds in India to be carelessly squandered in England.

The two young sportsmen, already introduced as his sons, are his only sons; in short, the only members of his family, with the exception of a maiden sister, who, being sixty years old, and otherwise extremely uninteresting, will not figure conspicuously in our tale, however true it is.

Looking at the two youths, as they step through the pheasant-cover, you perceive there is but slight difference in their size; there is in their age, and still more in their personal appearance. Both are what is termed *dark*; but there is a difference in the degree. He who is the elder, and who bears the baptismal name Nigel, has a complexion almost olive, with straight black hair, that under the sunlight exhibits a purplish iridescence.

Henry, the younger, with fair skin and ruddier cheek, has hair of an auburn brown, drooping down his neck like clusters of Spanish chestnuts.

So great is their dissimilarity in personal appearance, that a stranger would scarce believe the two young sportsmen to be brothers.

Nor are they so in the exact signification of the word. Both can call General Harding father; but if the word "mother" be mentioned, their thoughts would go to two different personages, neither any longer on the earth. Nigel's should stray back to Hyderabad, to a tomb in the environs of that ancient Indian city; Henry's to a grave of later date, in the quiet precinct of an English country churchyard.

The explanation is easy. General Harding is not the only man, soldier or civilian, who has twice submitted his neck to the matrimonial yoke, though few ever wedded two wives so different in character as were his. Physically, mentally, morally, the Hindoo lady of Hyderabad was as unlike her Saxon successor as India is to England.

Looking at Nigel Harding and his half-brother, Henry, one could not help perceiving that the dissimilarity had in both cases been transmitted from mother to son, without any great distraction caused by the blood of a common father. An incident, occurring in the cover, gives evidence of this.

Though especially a pheasant preserve, the young sportsmen are not in pursuit of the bird with strong whirring

wings. The setters search for smaller game. It is mid-winter. A week ago the youths might have been seen, capped and gowned, loitering along the aisles of Oriel College, Oxford. Now home for the holidays, what better than beating the home-covers? The frost-bound earth forbids indulgence in the grand chase; but it gives rare sport by driving the snipes and woodcocks—both migratory birds among the Chilterns—to the open waters of the running rivulet.

Up the banks of one—a brook that, defying the frost, gurgles musically among the trees—the young sportsmen are directing their search. This, with the setters, tells that woodcock is their game. There are two dogs, a white and a black, both of good breed, but not equally well trained. The black sets steady as a rock; the white quarters more wildly, runs rash, and has twice *flushed* the game, without *setting* it.

The white dog belongs to Nigel; the black to his half-brother.

A third time the setter shows his imperfect training, by flushing a cock before the sportsmen are nigh enough to obtain a fair shot.

The blood sprung from Hyderabad can stand it no longer. It is hot even under the shadows of a winter wood in the Chilterns.

“I’ll teach the cur a lesson!” cries Nigel, leaning his gun against a tree, and taking a clasp-knife out of his pocket. “What you should have taught him long ago, Doggy Dick, if you’d half done your duty.”

“Lor, Muster Nigel,” replies the gamekeeper, to whom the apostrophe has been addressed, “I’ve whipped the animal till my arms ached. ‘Tain’t no use. The steady ain’t in him.”

“I’ll put it into him, then!” cries the young Anglo-Indian, striding, knife in hand, towards the spaniel. “See if I don’t!”

“Stay, Nigel!” interposed Henry. “You are surely not going to do the dog an injury?”

“And what is it to you, if I am? He is *mine*—not *yours*.”

“Only, that I should think it very cruel of you. The fault may not be his, poor dumb brute. As you say, it may be Dick who is to blame, for not properly training him.”

“Thank’ee, Muster Henry! ‘Bleeged to ye for yer compliment. In coorse it be all my doin’; tho’ not much thanks for doin’ my best. Howsoever, I’m obleeged to ye, Muster Henry.”

Doggy Dick, who, though young, is neither graceful nor good-looking, accompanies his rejoinder with a glance that bespeaks a mind still more ungraceful than his person.

“Bother your talk—both!” vociferates the impatient Nigel. “I’m going to chastise the cur as he deserves, and not as you may like it, Master Hal. I want a twig for him.”

The twig, when cut from its parent stem, turns out to be a stick, three-quarters of an inch in diameter.

With this the peccant animal is brutally belaboured, till the woods for a mile around re-echo its howlings.

Henry begs his brother to desist.

In vain. Nigel continues the cudgelling.

“Gi’e it him!” cries the unfeeling keeper. “Do the beggar good.”

“You, Dick,” interposes Henry, “I shall report you to my father.”

An angry exclamation from the half-brother, and a sullen scowl from the savage in gaiters, is the only notice taken of Henry’s threat. Nigel, irritated by it, only strikes more spitefully.

“Shame, Nigel! Shame! You’ve beaten the poor brute enough—more than enough. Have done!”

“Not till I’ve given him a mark to remember me!”

“What are you going to do to him? What more?” hurriedly asks Henry, seeing that Nigel has flung away the stick, and stands threateningly with his knife. “Surely you don’t intend—”

“To split his ear! That is what I intend doing!”

“For shame! You shall not!”

“Shall not? But I shall, and will!”

“You shall split my hand first!” cries the humane youth, flinging himself on his knees, and with both hands covering the head of the setter.

“Hands off, Henry! The dog is my own; I shall do what I please to him. Hands off, I say!”

“I won’t!”

“Then take the consequences.”

With his left hand Nigel clutches at the animal's ear, at the same time lunging out recklessly with the knife blade. Blood spurts up into the faces of both, and falls in crimson spray over the flax-like coat of the setter.

It is not the blood of Nigel's dog, but his brother's—the little finger of whose left hand shows a deep, longitudinal cut traversing all the way from knuckle to nail.

"You see what you've got by your interference!" cries Nigel, without the slightest show of regret. "Next time you'll keep your claws out of harm's way."

The unfeeling observation, more than the hurt received, at length stirs the Saxon blood of the younger brother.

"Coward!" he cries. "Throw your knife away, and stand up. Though you *are* three years older than I, I don't fear you. You shall pay for this."

Nigel, maddened by the challenge from one whom he has hitherto controlled, drops the knife; and the half-brothers close in a fisticuff, fight with anger as intense as if no kindred blood ran in their veins.

As already stated, there is but slight difference in their size. Nigel the taller, Henry of stouter build. But in this sort of encounter the Saxon sinews soon show their superiority over the more flaccid frame of the Anglo-Indian; and in ten minutes' time the latter appears but too well pleased, when the keeper interferes to prevent his further punishment. Had it gone the other way, Doggy Dick would have allowed the combat to continue.

There is no thought of further sport. For that day, the woodcocks are permitted to remain undisturbed in their shrubby cover.

Henry, binding up his wounded hand in a kerchief, strides direct homewards, followed by the black setter. Nigel stalks moodily behind, with Doggy Dick by his side, and the blood-besprinkled animal skulking cowed-like at his heels.

General Harding is astonished at the early return of the sportsmen. Is the stream frozen up, and the woodcocks gone to more open quarters?

The blood-stained kerchief comes under his eye, and the split finger requires explanation. So, too, a purple ring around the eye of his eldest born. The truth has to be told, each giving his version.

The younger brother is at a disadvantage: for the testimony is two to one—the keeper declaring against him. For all that, truth triumphs in the mind of the astute old soldier, and although both his sons are severely reprimanded, Nigel receives the heavier share of the censure.

It is a sad day's sport for all—the black setter alone excepted.

For Doggy Dick does not escape unscathed. Ere parting from the presence of the General, the licence is taken from his pocket; the velveteen shooting jacket stripped from his shoulders; and he receives his discharge, with a caution never to show himself again in the Beechwood preserves, under the penalty of being treated as a poacher.

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## Chapter Two.

### Doggy Dick.

Doggy Dick, on being discharged by General Harding, in a short time succeeded in obtaining another and similar situation. It was on an estate bordering that of the General, whose cover came within a field or two of meeting with those of his neighbour. This gentleman was a city magnate, by name Whibley, who, having accumulated a fortune by sharp trading on the Stock Exchange, had purchased the estate in question, and commenced playing squire on an extensive scale.

Between the old officer and the newcomer there was no cordiality; on the contrary, some coolness. General Harding had an instinctive contempt for the vulgar ostentation usually exhibited by these social upstarts, who must needs ride to the parish church in a carriage and pair, though their residence be but three hundred yards from the churchyard gate. Of this class was the gentleman in question.

In addition to the dissimilarity of tastes between a retired officer and a retired stockbroker, a dispute had early occurred between them, about rights of game belonging to a strip of waste that stretched triangularly between their respective properties.

It was a trifling affair, but well calculated to increase their mutual coolness; which at length ended in a hostility—silent, but understood. To this, perhaps, more than any professional merit, was Doggy Dick indebted for his promotion to be head keeper of the Whibley preserves; just the course which a *parvenu* would take for the satisfaction of his spite.

On that same year, when the shooting season came round, the young Hardings discovered a scarcity of game in their father's preserves. The General did not often go gunning himself, and would not have noticed this falling off; neither, perhaps, would Nigel; but Henry, who was passionately fond of field sports, at once perceived that there was a thinner stock of pheasants than on the preceding season. All the more surprising to him, because it was a good year for game generally, and pheasants in particular. The Whibley covers were swarming with them; and they were reported plentiful in the country around.

It became a question whether General Harding's gamekeeper had properly attended to his trust. No poaching had

been reported, except some trifling cases of boys, who had been detected stealing eggs in the hatching season. But this had not occurred on a scale sufficient to account for the scarcity of the game.

Besides, the new gamekeeper, who was reported one of the best, had been provided with a full set of watchers; and, on the Whibley side, there was a staff not so strong, with Doggy Dick at their head.

While reflecting on this, it occurred to Mr Henry Harding that something might have been done to attract the pheasants across to the Whibley covers. Perhaps a better lay of feed had been there provided for them?

He knew that neither Doggy Dick nor his master owed any good-will towards him or his father; and a trick of this kind would be compatible with the character of the stockbroker.

Still, there was nothing in it—beyond a certain discourtesy; and it only made it necessary that some steps should be taken to create a counter attraction for the game. Patches of buck wheat were sown here and there, and other favourite pheasant's food was liberally laid through the covers.

On the following season the result was the same, or worse—the strong, whirring wing was sparingly heard among the Harding preserves. Even partridges had become scarce in the Swedes and stubble; while on the Whibley property both were in abundance.

The General's gamekeeper, when taken to task, admitted that, during the breeding season, he had found several pheasants' nests rifled of their eggs. He could not account for it. There was no one ever seen in the covers, except occasionally the keepers from the neighbouring estate. But of course *they* would not do such a thing as steal eggs.

"Indeed," thought Henry Harding, "I'm not so sure of that. On the contrary, it appears to be the only way to account for our scarcity of game."

He communicated these thoughts to his father; and Whibley's keepers were forbidden the range. It was deemed discourteous, and widened the breach between the *ci-devant* soldier and the retired stockbroker.

Another breeding season came round, and the young Hardings were at home for the Easter holidays. It was at this time of the year that the chief damage appeared to have been done to the game on the estate.

No amount of winter poaching can cause such havoc in a preserve, as that arising from the destruction, or abstraction, of the eggs. A farmer's boy may do greater damage in one day than the most incorrigible gang of poachers in a month, with all their nets, traps, guns, and other appliances to boot.

Knowing this, the Harding covers were this year still more carefully watched—additional men being employed. A goodly number of nests was noted, and a better produce expected.

But although the future seemed fair, Henry Harding was not satisfied with the past. He chafed at his disappointment on the two preceding seasons, and was determined on discovering the cause. For this purpose he adopted an expedient.

On a certain day a holiday was given to the keepers on the Harding estate, which included the watchers as well. It was fixed for the date of some races, held about ten miles off. The General's drag was granted for taking them to the race-course. The holiday was promised a week in advance; so that the fact might become known to the keepers of the adjoining estate.

The race day came; the drag rattled off, loaded with half a score of men in coats of velveteen. They were the keepers and watchers. For that day the Harding preserves were left to take care of themselves—a fine opportunity for poachers.

So a stranger might have thought, but not Henry Harding. Just before the drag drove off, he was seen to enter the covers, carrying a Malacca cane, and take his way towards their farther side, where they were bounded by the estate of the stockbroker. He walked quietly, almost stealthily, through the copses. A poacher could not have proceeded with greater caution. Between the two preserves there was a strip of common land—the waste already alluded to as having caused contention. Near its edge stood an ancient elm, swathed in ivy. In its first fork, amidst the green festoons, Henry Harding ensconced himself; took a cigar out of his case; lit it; and commenced smoking.

The position he had chosen was excellent for his purpose. On one side it commanded a view of the waste. No one could cross from Whibley to Harding without being seen. On the other, it overlooked a broad expanse of the Harding covers—known to be a favourite haunt of pheasants, and one of their noted places of nesting.

The watcher kept his perch for a considerable time, without discovering anything to reward him for his vigilance. He smoked one cigar, then another, and was half-way through the third. His patience was becoming exhausted, to say nothing of the irksomeness of his seat on the corrugated elm. He began to think that his suspicions—hitherto directed against Doggy Dick—were without foundation. He even reasoned about their injustice. After all, Doggy might not be so bad as he had deemed him.

Speak of the fiend, and he is near; think of him, and he is not far off. So was it in the case of Doggy Dick. As the stump of Henry's third cigar was burnt within an inch of his teeth, Whibley's head keeper hove in sight. He was first seen standing on the edge of the Whibley cover, his ill-favoured face protruding stealthily through a screen of "witheys." In this position he stood for some time, reconnoitring the ground. Then, stepping out, silent and cat-like, he made his way across the neutral territory, and plunged into the Harding preserves.

Henry scanned him with the eye of a lynx, or detective. There was now the prospect of something to reward him for his long watching, and the strain of sitting upon the elm.

As was expected, Doggy took his way across the open expanse, where several nests had been “noted.” He still kept to his cat-like tread—crouching, and now and then looking suspiciously around him.

This did not hinder him from flushing a pheasant. One rose with a sonorous whirr; while another went fluttering along the sward as if both its wings had been broken.

The hen looked as if Doggy might have covered her with his hat, or killed her with a stick. He did not attempt to do either; but, bending over the forsaken nest, he took out the eggs, and carefully deposited them in his game-bag!

Out of the same bag he took something, which Henry saw him scatter over the ground in the neighbourhood of the nest. This done, he walked on in search of another.

“Come,” thought Henry, “one brood is enough to be sacrificed in this sort of way—enough for my purpose.”

Throwing away the stump of his cigar, he dropped down from the tree, and rushed after the nest-robber.

Doggy saw him, and attempted to escape to the Whibley covers. But before he could cross the fence, the fingers of his pursuer were tightly clutched upon the collar of his velveteen coat; and he came to the ground, crushing the eggs within his game-bag. This being turned inside out, the spilt yolks and shattered shells gave proof of the plunder he had committed.

Henry Harding was at this time a strapping youth, with strength and spirit inherited from his soldier father. Moreover, he was acting with right on his side.

The keeper had neither his weight nor his inches, and was further enfeebled by his sense of wrong-doing. Under these circumstances, he saw the absurdity of making resistance. He made none; but permitted the irate youth to cudgel him with the Malacca cane until every bone in his body seemed about to be shattered like the egg-shells late carried in his game-bag.

“Now, you thief!” cried young Harding, when his passion was nearly spent. “You can go back to Mr Whibley’s covers, and hatch whatever plot may suit you and your snob of a master, but no more of my pheasants’ eggs.”

Doggy did not dare to make reply, lest it should tempt a fresh application of the cudgel. Clambering over the fence, he hobbled back across the common, and hid himself among the hazels of the Whibley preserves.

Turning towards the plundered nest, Henry Harding examined the ground in its proximity. He discovered a scattering of buckwheat, that had been steeped in some sweet-smelling liquid. It was the same he had seen Doggy distribute over the sward.

He collected a quantity in his kerchief, and carried it home. On analysis it proved to be poison!

Though there was no trial instituted, the story, with all its details, soon became known in the neighbourhood. Doggy Dick knew better than to bring an action for assault; and the Hardings were satisfied with the punishment that had been already administered to their disgraced keeper.

As for the retired stockbroker, he had no alternative but discharge his ill-conditioned servant, who from that time became notorious as the most adroit poacher in the parish.

The submissiveness with which he had received the castigation administered by Henry Harding seemed afterwards to have been a source of regret to him: for in future encounters of a similar kind he proved himself a desperate and dangerous assailant—so dangerous that, in a conflict with one of General Harding’s watchers, occurring about a year from that time, he inflicted a severe wound upon the man, resulting in his death. He saved his own neck from the halter by making his escape out of the country; and though traced to Boulogne, and thence to Marseilles—in the company of some jockeys who were taking English horses to Italy—he finally eluded justice by hiding himself in some corner of that classic land, then covered by a network of petty states; most of them not only obstructive to justice, but corrupt in their administration.

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## **Chapter Three.**

### **The Archery Fête.**

Three years had elapsed, and the half-brothers were again home from college. They had both passed beyond the boundaries of boyhood. Nigel was of age, and Henry full grown.

Nigel had become noted for sedateness of conduct, economy in expenditure, and close application to his studies.

Henry, on the other hand, had won a very different character. If not considered an absolute scapegrace, he was looted upon as a young gentleman of somewhat loose habits,—hating books, loving all sorts of jollity, and scorning economy, as if, instead of a virtue, it were the curse of life.

In reality, Nigel was only restrained by an astute, secretive, and selfish, nature; while Henry, with a heart of more generous inclinings, gave way to the seductions of pleasure, with a freedom that would be tempered by time. The General, however satisfied with the conduct of his elder son, was not pleased with the proclivities of the younger; more especially as his heart, like Jacob’s, had a yearning for his last born.

Although struggling against any preference, he could not help thinking at times, how much happier it would have

made him if Henry would but imitate the conduct of Nigel—even though their *rôles* should be reversed! But it seemed as if this desire was not to be gratified. During their sojourn within college walls, the rumours of *diableries*, of which his younger son had been the hero, were scarce compensated by the reports of scholastic triumphs on the part of the elder.

It is true that Nigel himself had been habitually the herald to proclaim these mingled insinuations and successes, for Henry was but an indifferent correspondent. His letters, when they did come, were but too confirmatory of the contents of those written by his brother, being generally solicitations for a little more cash. The *ci-devant* soldier, himself generous to a fault, had never failed to forward the cheque, caring less for the money than the way in which it was spent.

The education of the Harding youths was now considered complete. They were enjoying that pleasant interval of idleness, when the chrysalis of the school or college is about to burst forth into a butterfly, and wing its way through the world.

If the old rancour existed it showed no outward sign. A stranger would have seen nothing between the half-brothers beyond a fair fraternal friendship. Henry was frank and outspoken, Nigel reserved and taciturn; but this was their natural disposition, and no one remarked upon it. In all matters of parental respect, the elder brother was the more noticed. He was implicit in his obedience to the wishes of his father; while Henry, on the other hand, was prone to neglect this duty—though only in matters of minor consequence, such as keeping late hours, lavish expenditure, and the like. Still, by such acts the father's heart was often sorely grieved, and his affection terribly tested.

At length came a cause that tried the temper of the half-brothers towards one another—one before which the strongest fraternal affection has oft changed into bitter hostility. It was love. Both fell in love, and with the same woman—Belle Mainwaring.

Miss Belle Mainwaring was a young lady, whose fair face and fascinating manners might have turned wiser heads than those of the two ex-collegians. She was older than either; but if not in its first blush, she was still in the bloom of her beauty. Like her baptismal name, she was a belle in her own county, which was that inhabited by the Hardings. She was the daughter of an Indian officer, a poor colonel, who, less fortunate than the General, had left his bones in the Punjaub, and his widow just sufficient to maintain her in a simple cottage residence that stood outside, and not far from, the palings of Beechwood Park.

It was a dangerous proximity for two youths just entering on manhood, and with very little business before them beyond making love, and afterwards settling down with a wife. Both would be amply provided for without troubling their heads about a profession. The paternal estate, under the hammer, would any day have realised a clear hundred thousand; and he who cannot live upon half of this is not likely to increase it by a calling.

That the property would be equally divided there was no reason to doubt. There was no entail; and General Harding was not the man from whom an act of partiality might be expected. The old soldier was not without traits of eccentricity; not exactly crotchets or caprices, but a certain dogmatism of design, and an unwillingness to be thwarted in his ways, derived no doubt from his long exercise of military authority. This, however, was not likely to influence him in matters of a paternal character; and, unless some terrible provocation should arise, his sons, at his death, would no doubt have an equal share in the earnings of his life.

So thought the social circle in which the Hardings moved, or such part of it as took this much interest in their movements. With such fair presumption of being provided for, what could the young Hardings do but look out for something to love, and, in looking out, upon whom should the eyes of both become fixed but on Belle Mainwaring? They did, with all the ardent admiration of youth; and as she returned their respective glances with that speaking reciprocity which only a coquette can give, both fell in love with her. The inspiration came on the same day, the same hour, perhaps in the same instant.

It was at a grand archery *fête*, given by the General himself, to which Miss Mainwaring and her mother had been invited. The archer god was also present at the entertainment, and pierced the hearts of General Harding's two sons with a single arrow.

There was a remarkable difference in their way of showing it. To Miss Mainwaring, Henry was all assiduity, lavish of little attentions, ran to recover her arrows, handed her her bow, held her sunshade while she bent it, and stood ready to fling himself at her feet. Nigel, on the other hand, kept himself aloof, affected indifference to her presence, tried to pique her by showing partiality to others, with many like manoeuvres suggested by a calculating and crafty spirit. In one thing the elder brother succeeded—in concealing his new-sprung passion from the spectators.

The younger was not so fortunate. Before the archery practice was over, every guest upon the ground could tell that, at least, one arrow had been shot home to the mark, and that mark was the heart of young Henry Harding.

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## Chapter Four.

### A Coquette.

I have often wondered what the world would be without woman: whether, if it were without her, man would care longer to live in it; or whether he would then find it just the place he has been all his life longing for, and would wish never to leave it. I have wondered and pondered upon this point, until speculation became lost in obscurity. It is, perhaps, the most interesting philosophical question of our existence—its most important one; and yet no philosopher, as far as I know, has given a satisfactory answer to it.

I am aware of the two theories that have been propounded—to one another opposite as are the poles. One makes woman the sole object of, our existence—her smile its only blessing. For her we work and watch, we dig and delve, we fight and write, we talk and strive. Without her we would do none of these things; in short, do nothing, since there would be no motive for doing. “What then?” say the advocates of this theory. “Would existence be tolerable without a motive? Would it be possible?” For our part we can only give the interrogative answer of the phlegmatic Spaniard, “*Quien sabe?*”—no answer at all. The other theory is, that woman, instead of being life’s object and blessing, is but its distraction and curse. The supporters of this hypothesis make no pretence to gallantry, but simply point to experience. Without her, say they, the world would be happy, and they triumphantly add, “what is it?”

Perhaps the only way to reconcile the two theories is to steer midway between them; to regard both as wrong, and both as right; to hold woman in this world as being alike a blessing and a bane; or rather that there are two sorts of women in it, one born to bless, the other to curse—mankind.

It grieves me to class Belle Mainwaring with the latter: for she was beautiful, and might have belonged to the former. I knew her myself—if not well, at least sufficiently to give her correct classification. Perhaps I, too, might have fallen under her fascinations, had I not discovered that she was false, and this discovery protected me.

I made my discovery just in time, though by accident. It was in a ball-room. Belle liked dancing, as do most young ladies of the attractive kind; and there were but few balls in the county, public or private, civilian or military, where you might not see her. I met her at the hunt ball of B—. It was the first time I had seen her. I was introduced by one of the stewards who chanced to have an impediment in his speech. It was of the nasal kind, caused by a split lip. In pronouncing the word “captain” the first syllable came out sounding as “count.” There was then a break, and the second, “ain,” might have been taken, or *mis-taken*, for the prefix “von.” My Christian and baptismal names, slurred together as they were by the stammering steward, might have passed muster as Germanic; at all events, for some time afterwards—before I could find an opportunity to rectify the error—I was honoured by Miss Mainwaring with a title that did not belong to me. I was further honoured by having it inscribed upon her dancing card much oftener than I, in my humility, had any right to expect. We danced several measures together, round and square. I was pleased, flattered—something more—charmed and delighted. Who would not, at being so signalled by one of the belles of the ball-room? And she was one.

I began to fancy that it was all up with me—that I had found not only an agreeable partner for the night, but for life. I was all the better satisfied to see scowling faces around me, and hear whispered insinuations, that I was having more than my share of the charming creature. It was the pleasantest hunt ball I had ever attended.

So far up to a certain hour. Then things became less agreeable. I had deposited my partner on a couch, alongside a stately dame, introduced to me as her mother. I saw that this lady did not take kindly to me; but, on the contrary, sat stiff, frigid, and uncommunicative. Failing to thaw her, I made my bow and sauntered off among the crowd, promising to return to Miss Mainwaring for still another dance, for which I had succeeded in engaging her. Not being able to find any comfort apart from her, I soon returned, and sat down on a chair close to the couch occupied by mother and daughter. As they were engaged in close conversation, neither of them saw me, and of course I did not intrude. But, as their voices were above a whisper, I could not help hearing them; and the mention of my own name made it difficult for me to withdraw.

“A count!” said the mother; “you are beside yourself, my child.”

“But Mr Southwick introduced me to him as such, and he has all the air of it.”

All the air of it!—I liked that.

“Count Fiddlestrings. Mr Southwick is a fool and an ass. He’s only a paltry captain—on half-pay at that, without the shadow of an expectation. Lady C— has been telling me all about him.”

“Indeed!”

I thought there was a sigh, but I could not be sure of it. I should have liked it very much; but then what came after would, or should, have rendered me indifferent to it.

“And you’ve engaged yourself to him for another dance, while young Lord P— has been twice here to ask for you—absolutely on his knees for me to intercede for him!”

“What’s to be done?”

“Done! throw him over. Tell him you forgot that you had a previous engagement with Lord P—.”

“Very well, mamma, if you say so, I’ll do that. I’m so sorry it should have happened.”

There was no sigh this time, else I might have held my peace, and stolen quietly away. But I found I could not retreat without being discovered. In fact, I was at that moment discovered, and determined on making a clean breast of it.

“I should be sorry, Miss Mainwaring,” I said, addressing myself directly to the daughter, and without heeding the confusion of herself or her mother, “to stand in the way of a previous engagement, and rather than Lord P— should get on his knees for the third time, I beg to release you from that you have made with a paltry captain.”

With a bow, which I considered suitable to the circumstances, I parted from the Mainwarings, and did my best to get rid of my chagrin by dancing with any girl who would accept for her partner a captain on half-pay! Fortunately, before the ball was over, I found one who caused me to forget my *contretemps* with Miss Belle Mainwaring. I often met this lady afterwards, but never spoke to her, except by that silent speech of the eyes that may sometimes say a good

deal.

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## Chapter Five.

### Two Strings to the Bow.

It might have been well for young Henry Harding, and perhaps his brother Nigel, too, in their first essay at love-making with Miss Mainwaring, had they met with a similar mischance to that which had befallen me, and taken it in the same spirit. As it was, they were either more or less fortunate. Neither was a half-pay captain, without expectations; and, instead of a discouragement almost amounting to dismissal, for a long time both were permitted to bask in the smiles of the beautiful Belle.

There was a marked difference in the way the two brothers respectively pressed their suit. Henry essayed to carry Belle Mainwaring's heart by storm. Nigel, as his nature dictated, preferred making approach by sap and trenching. The former made love with the boldness of the lion; the latter with the insidious stealth of the tiger. When Henry believed himself successful he made no attempt to conceal his gratification. When the chances seemed to go against him, with equal openness did he exhibit his chagrin. The reverse with Nigel. When fortune appeared to smile upon his suit he showed no sign of being conscious of it. He appeared alike impassable under her frown. So little demonstrative was he in his affection for Miss Mainwaring that there were few people believed in it, though among this few was the lady herself.

From what I could learn, and sometimes by the evidence of my own eyes, she played her cards to perfection—her mother acting as *croupier* to the game. It was not long before she knew that she could take her choice of the two, though some time before she declared it. Now one appeared to be the favourite, anon the other—until the most intimate of her associates were puzzled as to her partiality, or whether she even cared for either. It was at least a question; for the beautiful Belle did not restrict herself to receiving the admiration of the half-brothers Harding. There were other young gentlemen in the neighbourhood, who at balls and other gatherings were favoured with an occasional smile; and Miss Mainwaring's heart was considered still doubtful in its inclinings. There was a time, however, when it was supposed to have become decided. At all events, there was a reason for its doing so. An incident occurred in the hunting-field that should have entitled Henry Harding to the hand of Belle Mainwaring—that is, supposing it to be true that the brave deserve the fair. It was an incident so rare as to be worth recording, irrespective of its bearing upon our tale.

The hunt was with the staghounds, and the "meet" had taken place close to a pond of considerable size, upon one of the open commons not rare among the Chiltern Hills. As the stag bounded away from the cart, his eye had caught the gleam of water, and in his hour of distress he remembered it. Being a lazy brute, he did not run far; but, guided by instinct, soon turned back towards the pond. He arrived at it, before the carriages that had come to the meet had cleared away from the ground. Among them was the pony-phaeton that contained Mrs Mainwaring and her daughter Belle; the latter looking as roseate on that crisp winter's morning as if her cheeks had taken their colour from the scarlet coats of the huntsmen around her. The *attelage* to which she belonged was drawn up close to the edge of the pond, parallel with its bank. The stag, on returning, shaved close past the pony's nose, and plunged into the water. The consequence was that the latter became alarmed even to frenzy; and, instead of turning towards the road, it wheeled round in the opposite direction, and rushed into the pond after the stag, dragging the phaeton along with it. It did not stop until the water was up over the steps of the carriage, and the ladies' feet were immersed in the chilly flood. But then the stag had stopped too, at bay; and, believing the "trap" to be its cruel pursuer, the bayed animal turned and charged upon the pony carriage and its contents. The pony was knocked down in the traces; and then came the boy in buttons, who was perched conspicuously on the seat behind. On the antlers of the enraged animal he was hoisted skyward, and fell with a plunge into the water. Next came the turn of the two ladies, or would have come, had relief not been near. The smock-frocks had gone away from the ground, following the chase; and it was not they who rushed to the rescue. Nor was it Nigel Harding, who was first by the edge of the pond, having got there through being last in the field. But there stayed he, sitting irresolute in his saddle; and Miss Mainwaring might have had a stag's antler through her delicate skin, but for Nigel's brother coming up at the moment. He, instead of reining up by the water's edge, dashed in through it, till his horse stood by the side of the carriage. Next moment he sprang out of the saddle, and took the stag by the horns.

The struggle that ensued might have ended ill for him; but by this time a smock-frock, in the shape of a hedger, up to his armpits in the water, drew his chopper across the throat of the stag, and the conflict came to an end.

The pony, but slightly injured, was got upon its feet; the page, half-drowned, was hoisted back to his pinnacle; and the carriage, with its frightened occupants, conducted safely to the shore.

Everybody left the ground with the belief that Miss Belle Mainwaring would at some day, not far distant, become Mrs Henry Harding. More especially did the country people believe it, and were delighted with the idea; for with them—is generally the case—the younger brother was the favourite.

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## Chapter Six.

### The Gathering Cloud.

At Beechwood Park there was comfort of every kind; but not that perfect tranquillity which its owner had counted upon, on retiring to this fair residence to pass the remainder of his days.

With his property all was well. Since his purchase of the estate—like other lands around—it had nearly doubled in



value; and, so far as fortune was concerned, there was no source of uneasiness. But there was something else—something dearer to him than his houses and lands. Anxiety had arisen from the conduct of his sons. Notwithstanding their apparent cordiality in his presence, on both sides assumed, he had found reasons for believing there was no fraternal affection, but, instead, a tacit enmity between them. This was more openly exhibited on the part of the younger, but it was deep-rooted in the heart of his first-born. Henry, of a generous, forgiving nature, could at any time during college days have been induced to forego it, had his brother met him but half-way in any measure of reconciliation. But this Nigel never desired to do; and the early estrangement had now deepened into hostility—the cause, of course, being their rivalry in love.

It was a long time before the General knew of the dangerous cloud that was looming up on the horizon of his tranquil life. He had taken it for granted that his sons, like most of the young men so circumstanced, before thinking of marriage, would want to see something of the world. It did not occur to him that, in the eyes of an ardent youth, beautiful Belle Mainwaring was a world in herself, after seeing whom, all earth besides might present but a dull, prosaic aspect.

It was not this, however, that at first troubled the spirit of the retired officer, but only the behaviour of his boys. With Nigel's he was contented enough. Than it, nothing could be more satisfactory, except in the estrangement towards his brother, and an occasional exhibition of ill-feeling which the father could not fail to perceive. It was Henry's conduct that formed the chief source of the General's anxiety—his extravagant habits, his proneness to dissipation, and once an apparent disobedience of paternal orders, which, though only in some trivial affair of expenditure, had been exaggerated by the secret representations of his elder brother into a matter of momentous importance. The counsels of the parent, not having been seriously taken to heart, soon became chidings; and these, in their turn, being alike unheeded, assumed the form of threats and hints about disinheritance.

Henry, who now deemed himself a man, met such reminders with a spirit of independence that only irritated his father to a still greater degree. In this unhappy way were things going on, when the General was made aware of a matter more affecting the future welfare of his son than all the dissipations and disobediences of which he had been guilty. It was his partiality for Miss Mainwaring. Of Nigel's inclining toward the same quarter, he knew nothing; nor, indeed, did others; though almost everybody in the neighbourhood had long been aware of her conquest over Henry.

It was shortly after the incident at the stag-hunt that the General became apprised of it. That affair had led him to reflect; and, although proud of the gallantry his son had displayed, the old soldier saw in it a danger far greater than that of the struggle through which he had so conspicuously passed.

He was led to make inquiries, which resulted in a discovery giving him the greatest uneasiness. This arose from the fact, that he knew the antecedents of Mrs Mainwaring. He had known both her husband and herself in India; and this knowledge, so far from inspiring him with respect for the relict of his late brother-officer, had impressed him with the very opposite opinion. With the character of the daughter, he was, of course, less acquainted. The latter had grown up during a long period of separation; but from what he had seen and heard of her, since his arrival in England, and from what he was every day seeing and hearing, he had come to the conclusion, that it was a case of "like mother, like daughter."

And, if so, it would not suit his views, that she should become daughter-in-law to him.

The thought filled him with serious alarm; and he at once set about concocting some scheme to counteract the danger. How was he to proceed? Deny his son the privilege of keeping company with her? Lay an embargo on his visits to the villa-cottage of the widow, which he now learned had been of late suspiciously frequent? It was a question whether his commands would be submitted to, and this thought still further irritated him.

Over the widow herself he had no authority, in any way. Though her cottage stood close to his park, it was not his property; her landlord was a lawyer, of little respect in the neighbourhood; and it would have served no purpose even could he have, himself, given her notice to quit. Things had already gone too far for such strategy as that.

As for the damsel herself, she was not going to hide her beautiful face from the gaze of his son, solely to accommodate him. It might not appear any more in his own dining, or drawing-room; but there were other places where it could be seen in all its bewitching beauty—in the church, or the hunting-field,—in the ball-room, and every day along the green lanes that encompassed Beechwood Park; there might it be seen, smiling coquettishly under the rim of a prettily-trimmed hat.

The old soldier was too skilled a tactician to believe, that any benefit could be obtained from an attack so open to repulses, and these of the most humiliating character. Some stratagem must be resorted to; and to the conception of this he determined to devote all the energies of his nature.

He had already, in his mind, the glimmering of a scheme that promised success; and this imparted a ray of comfort, that kept him from going quite out of his senses.

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## Chapter Seven.

### Plotters for Fortune.

The stag-hunt, at which Henry Harding had exhibited such gallant courage, had been the very last of the season; and, soon after, spring stole over the shire of Bucks, clothing its beechen forests and grassy glades in a new livery of the gayest green. The crane had come into the cornfield, the cuckoo winged her way across the common, uttering her soft monotonous notes, and the nightingale had once more taken possession of the coppice, from whence, through the livelong night, pealed forth its incomparable song. It was the month of May—that sweet season when all nature

seems to submit itself to the tender inclinations of love; when not only the shy birds of the air, but the chased creatures of the earth—alike tamed and emboldened by its influence—stray beyond the safety of their coverts in pursuit of those pleasures at other seasons denied them.

Whether the love-month has any influence on the passions of the human species, is a disputed question. Perhaps, in man's primitive state, such may have been the case, and Nature's suggestiveness may have extended also to him. But at whatever season affection may spring up between two young hearts, surely this is the time of the year that Nature has designed it to reach maturity.

It seemed so in the case of Henry Harding. In the month of May his passion for Belle Mainwaring had reached the point that should end in a declaration; and upon this he had determined. With the outside world it was still a question whether his love was reciprocated, though it was generally thought that the coquette had been at length captured, and by Henry Harding. The eligibility of the match favoured this view of the case, though, to say the truth, not more than the personal appearance of the man.

At this time the younger son of General Harding was just entering upon manhood, and possessed a face and figure alike manly and graceful. The only blemish that could be brought against him was of a moral nature—as already mentioned, a proneness to dissipation. But time might remedy this; and even as things stood it did not so materially damage him in the eyes of his lady acquaintances—more than one of whom would have been willing to take Miss Mainwaring's chances. The light in which Belle regarded him may be best learnt from a conversation that, about this time, took place. It was over the breakfast-table in her mother's cottage, the speakers being her mother and herself.

"And you would marry him?" interrogated Mrs Mainwaring, after some remark that had introduced the name of Henry Harding.

"I would, mamma; and, with your leave, I will."

"What about *his* leave?"

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Belle with a confident air. "I think I may count upon that. He has as good as given it."

"Already! But has he really declared himself—in words I mean?"

"Not exactly in words. But, dear ma, since I suppose you will insist upon knowing my secrets before giving your consent, I may as well tell you all about it. He intends to declare himself soon; this very day if I am not astray in my chronology."

"What reason have you for thinking so?"

"Only his having hinted that he had something important to say to me—time fixed for a call he is to make this afternoon. What else could it be?"

Mrs Mainwaring made no reply, but sat thoughtful, as if not altogether pleased with the communication her daughter had made.

"I hope, dear mamma, you are contented?"

"With what, my child?"

"With—with—well, to have Henry Harding for your son-in-law. Does it satisfy you?"

"My dearest child," answered the Indian officer's widow, with that cautious air peculiar to her country—she was Scotch. "It is a serious question this; very serious, and requires careful consideration. You know how very straitened are our circumstances—how your poor dear father left little to support us—having but little to leave?"

"I should think I do know," peevishly interposed Belle. "Twice turning my ball dresses, and then dyeing them into wearing silks, has taught me all that. But what has it to do with my marrying Henry Harding? All the more reason why I should. He, at all events, is not likely to be troubled with straitened circumstances."

"I am not so sure of that, my child."

"Ah! you know something about his expectations then? Something you have not told me? Is it so, mamma?"

"I know very little. I wish it were otherwise, and I could be sure."

"But his father is rich. There are but two sons; and you have already told me that the estate is not entailed, or whatever you call it. Of course he will divide it equally between them. Half would satisfy me."

"And me too, child, if we were sure of half. But there lies the difficulty. It is the fact of the estate not being entailed that makes it. Were that done, there would be none."

"Then I could marry Henry?"

"No, Nigel."

"Oh, mamma! what do you mean?"

"The estate would then be Nigel's by the simple law of entail. As it is now, it is all uncertain how they will inherit. It will depend on the will. It may go by a caprice of their father—and I know General Harding well enough to believe him

capable of such caprice.”

In her turn Belle became silent and thoughtful.

“There is reason to fear,” continued the match-making, perhaps match-spoiling, mother, “that the General may leave Henry nothing, or at most only a maintenance. He is certainly very much dissatisfied with his conduct, and for a long time has been vainly endeavouring to change it. I won’t say the young man is loose in his habits; if he were, I would not hear of him for your husband. No, my child, poor as we are, it needn’t come to that.”

As the widow said this she looked half interrogatively towards her daughter, who replied with a smile of assenting significance.

“Henry Harding,” continued the cautious mother, “is too generous—too profuse in his expenditures.”

“But, mamma, would not marriage cure him of that? He would then have me to think of, and take better care of his money.”

“True, true; supposing him to be possessed of it. But therein lies the doubt—the difficulty, I may call it—about the prudence of your accepting him.”

“But I love him; I do indeed!”

“I am sorry for that, my child. You should have been more cautious, until better assured about his circumstances. You must leave it to time. You will, if you love me.”

“And if, as I have told you—this afternoon—what answer?”

“Evasive, my dear. Nothing easier. You have me to fall back upon. You are my only child; my consent will be necessary. Come, Belle! you need no instructions from me. You will lose nothing by a little procrastination. You have nothing to fear from it, and everything to gain. Without it, you may become the wife of one poorer than ever your father was; and, instead of having to turn your silk dresses, you may have none to turn. Be prudent, therefore, in the step you are about to take.”

Belle only answered with a sigh; but it was neither so sad or so deep as to cause any apprehension to her counsellor; while the sly look that accompanied it told, that she determined upon being *prudent*.

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## Chapter Eight.

### Father and Son.

General Harding was accustomed to spend much time in his studio, or library it might be called—since it contained a goodly number of books. They were mostly volumes that related to Oriental subjects, more especially works upon India and its campaigns; but there were also many devoted to science and natural history, while scattered here and there upon tables were odd numbers of the *Oriental Magazine*, the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society*, and the *Calcutta Englishman*. There were also large pamphlets in blue parliamentary covers, that related only to the affairs of the Hon. E.I.C.

In poring over these volumes, the retired *militaire* was accustomed to pass much of his time. The subjects, with the descriptions attached, recalled scenes in his past life, the souvenirs of which gave him pleasure, enabling him to while away many an hour that, amidst the seclusion of the Chiltern Hills, might have otherwise hung rather heavily on his hands. Each new book about India was sure to find its way into the General’s library, and, though never a very keen sportsman, he could enjoy the descriptions of hunting scenes to be found in the pages of “Markham” and the “Old Shikaree,” since in both there is something to interest not only the sportsman but the student of Nature.

On a certain morning he had entered his studio, but with no intention of devoting himself to the tranquil study of his books. On the contrary, he did not even seat himself, but commenced pacing the floor with a quick step; while his clouded brow denoted agitation of mind. Every now and then he would stop, strike his clenched hand against his forehead, mutter a few words to himself, and then move on again. Among his mutterings could be distinguished some words that guided to the subject of his thoughts. The names “Nigel” and “Henry” constantly occurring, told that both his sons had a share in his cogitations, though chiefly the latter, whose cognomen was most frequently pronounced.

“This boy Henry has half driven me mad with his wild ways. And now, worse than all, his affair with this girl. From what I have heard, there can be no doubt that she’s entangled him; no doubt of its having become serious. It won’t do; must be broken off, cost what it will. She’s not the stuff to make an honest man’s wife out of. I’d care less if it were Nigel. But no, she won’t do for either—for no son of mine. I knew her mother too well. Poor Mainwaring! Many a dog’s day he spent with her in India. Like mother, like daughter. By heavens, it won’t do; and I shall put a stop to it! I think I know how,” continued he reflectingly. “If he’s mad, she isn’t; and therein I may find my means for saying the poor lad from the worst of all misfortunes—a wicked wife.”

The General made several turns in silence, as if maturing some plan.

“Yes; that’s the way to save him!” he at length joyfully exclaimed; “perhaps the only way. And there’s no time to be lost about it. While I’m thinking he may be acting—may have gone too far for me to get him out of the scrape. I shall see him at once—see and question him.”

The General stooped over the table; pressed upon a spring-bell; and then resumed his pacing.

The bell brought up the butler, a portly individual, who so far as could be judged by appearance, was as respectable as the General himself.

"Williams! I wish to see my son Henry;—find out if he's upon the premises."

"He's on the premises, General. He's down at the stables. Groom says he's going to mount the brown filly."

"The brown filly? Why she's never been ridden before!"

"She never has, General. I think it very dangerous; but that's just what Master Henry likes. I tried to persuade him against it, but then Master Nigel told me to mind my own business."

"Send quick to the stable; tell him I forbid his riding the filly. Tell him to come hither. Haste, Williams, haste!"

"Ever running into danger, as if he loved it," said the General, continuing his soliloquy; "so like what I was myself. The brown filly! Ah! I wish this was all. The Mainwaring damsel's a worse danger than that."

At this moment Henry made his appearance, breeched, booted, and spurred, as if for the hunting-field.

"Did you send for me, father?"

"Of course I did. You were going to mount the brown filly?"

"I am going. Have you any objection to my doing so?"

"Do you want your neck broken?"

"Ha, ha, ha! There's not much fear of that. I think you make light of my horsemanship, papa."

"You carry too much confidence, sir—far too much. You mount a vicious mare without consulting me. You do other and more important things without consulting me. I intend putting a stop to it."

"What other things do you refer to, father?"

"Many other things. You spend money foolishly—like a madman; and, like a maniac, you are now rushing upon a danger of a still graver kind—upon destruction, sir—rank, absolute destruction."

"Of what are you speaking, father? Do you mean by my mounting the filly?"

"No, sir. You may back her, and break your neck, for aught I care. I'm speaking of what's far wickeder—a woman."

The word woman caused the youth to turn pale. He had thought that, to his father at least, his love for Miss Mainwaring was still a secret. No other woman could be meant.

"I do not understand you, papa," was his evasive response.

"But you do, sir—perfectly. If I gave you the name of this woman, you wouldn't be any the wiser than you are now; you know it too well. I'll tell you, for all that. I refer to Miss Belle Mainwaring."

Henry made no reply, but stood blushing in the presence of his parent.

"And now, sir, about this woman I have only a few words to say—*you must give her up.*"

"Father!"

"I won't listen to any of your love-sick appeals. Don't make them—they'll only be wasted on me. I repeat, sir, you must give Belle Mainwaring up—at once, absolutely, and for ever!"

"Father," said the youth, in a firm tone, within his breast love pleading for justice, "you ask me to do what's not in my power. I acknowledge that between myself and Miss Mainwaring there is something more than the affection of friendship. It has gone further than mere feeling. There have been words—I may say promises—between us. To break them, requires the consent of both parties; and for me to do so, without first consulting her, would be a cruel injustice, to which I cannot lend myself. No, father; not even with the alternative of incurring your displeasure."

General Harding stood for a moment silent; pretending to reflect, but furtively contemplating his son. A superficial observer could have seen only anger at this filial defiance, where one clever in reading faces might have detected something like admiration mingling with the sentiment. If there was such, however, in his heart, his speech did not show it.

"Enough, sir! You have made up your mind to disobey me? Very well. Understand what this disobedience will cost you. I suppose you know the meaning of an entailed estate?"

The General paused, as if for an answer.

"I know nothing about it, papa. Something connected with a will, I believe."

"The very reverse. An entailed estate has nothing to do with a will. Now, my estate is *not* entailed, and *is* connected

with a will. It is about that I am going to talk to you. I can make one, giving my property to whomsoever I please; either to your brother Nigel or yourself. Marry Miss Mainwaring, and it shall be Nigel's. Still, to you I shall leave just enough to carry you out of the country—that is one thousand pounds sterling. Now, sir, you hear what I have to say."

"I hear it, father; and with sorrow. I shall be sorry to lose the inheritance I had reason to expect, but far more your esteem. Both, however, must be parted with, if there be no other consideration for my retaining them. Whether I am to marry Miss Mainwaring or not, must depend upon Miss Mainwaring herself. I think, father, you understand me?"

"Too well, sir—too well; and I answer by telling you that I have passed my word, and it shall be kept. You may go and mount the filly, and thank God she don't do with your neck what you are likely to do with your father's heart—break it. Begone, sir!"

Without saying a word, Henry walked out of the room, slowly and sadly.

"The image of his mother! Who could not help liking the lad, in spite of his rebellious spirit, and with all his wasteful habits? It won't do to have such a noble heart sacrificed upon a worthless jade of a woman. He must be saved."

Once more the General pressed upon the spring-bell, this time more violently than before. It brought the butler back in double quick time.

"Williams!"

"General?"

"My carriage, as soon as the horses can be put to?"

Williams disappeared to cause execution of the order.

A few more turns to and fro across the Turkey carpet, a few muttered soliloquies, and the carriage wheels grated upon the gravel outside.

Williams helped the General to his hat and gloves; saw him down-stairs; handed him into the carriage; and watched it rolling away, just as Henry, on the back of the brown filly, was fighting her across the green sward of the park, endeavouring to keep her head in the opposite direction.

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## Chapter Nine.

### The Checkmate.

Mr Woolet sat in his office, which was separated from that of his solitary clerk by a thick wall and a narrow doorway between. But there was another wall of slighter dimensions, alongside Mr Woolet's room, partitioning off a kind of cupboard enclosure, into which, when Mr Woolet required it, the said clerk could introduce himself, and there, standing cat-like and silent, hear what passed between his employer and any client whose conversation it was deemed necessary to make note of.

After this it is scarce necessary to add that Mr Woolet was an attorney; and though the scene of his practice was a quiet country town, in the shire of Bucks, this practice was carried on with as much sharpness and trickery, as if it lay among the low courts surrounding Newgate, or the slums of Clerkenwell.

The great city does not monopolise the plant called *pettifoggery*. It thrives equally as strong in the county town. Even the village knows it to its cost; and the poor cottager, in his leaky shed at three shillings a week, is too often encompassed by its toils.

Of such small fry Mr Woolet had hooked his hundreds, and had prospered by their capture to the keeping of a carriage and pair; but, as yet, none of the big fish had entered his net—the largest being the widow Mainwaring, who had been caught while taking from him a lease of her cottage. The carriage had, therefore, been kept to no purpose, or less than none: since not being in accord with his position it only brought him ridicule. This, however, could not last for ever. The gentry could not always hold out against such a glittering attraction. Some swell must in time stand in need of Mr Woolet's peculiar services, and enable him to achieve the much wished-for position. And so it seemed to turn out, as one day a carriage much grander than Mr Woolet's own, with a coachman nearly a quarter of a ton in weight, and a powdered footman beside him, drove through the street of the little town in which Mr Woolet lived, and pulled up opposite his office.

Perhaps the lawyer was never more delighted in his life, than when his clerk protruded his phiz inside the office-door, and announced *sotto voce* the arrival of General Harding. In a moment after the same individual ushered the General into his presence. A masonic sign communicated to the clerk caused his disappearance; and the instant after that pale-faced familiar was skulking like a ghost within the cupboard enclosure.

"General Harding, I believe?" said the obsequious attorney, bowing to the lowest button of his visitor's surtout.

"Yes," bluffly responded the old soldier. "That is my name. Yours is—"

"Woolet, General; E. Woolet, at your service."

"Well, I want some service from you—if you're not otherwise engaged."

"Any engagement, General, must stand aside for you. What can I do to oblige you?"

"To oblige me, nothing. I want your services as an attorney. You are one, I believe?"

"My name is in the Law List, General. You can see it here."

Mr Woolet took up a small volume, and was handing it to the General.

"Never mind about the Law List," bluntly interrupted the soldier, "I see it on your sign; that's enough for me. What I'm in search of is an attorney who can make a will. I suppose you can do that?"

"Well, General, although I cannot boast of my professional abilities, I think I can manage the making of a will."

"Enough said; sit down and set about it."

Considering that he kept a carriage himself, Mr Woolet might have felt a little offended by this brusque behaviour on the part of his new client. It was the first time he had ever been so treated in his own office; but then it was the first time he had ever had a client of such a class, and he knew better than to show feeling under the infliction.

Without saying another word, he sat down before his table, the General taking a seat on the opposite side, and waited for the latter to proceed.

"Write now as I dictate," said the General, without even prefixing the word "please."

The lawyer, still obsequious, signified assent, at the same time seizing a pen, and placing a sheet of blue foolscap before him.

*"I hereby will and bequeath to my eldest son, Nigel Harding, all my real and personal estate, comprising my houses and lands, as also my stock in personal securities, excepting one thousand pounds, to be sold out of the last, and paid over to my other and youngest son, Henry Harding, as his sole legacy left from my estate."*

To this extent the lawyer finished the writing, and waited for his client to proceed.

"You have done, have you?" asked the General.

"So far as you dictated, General, I have."

"Have you written down the date?"

"Not yet, General."

"Then put it in."

Woolet took up his pen, and complied.

"Have you a witness at hand? If not, I can bring in my footman."

"You need not do that, General. My clerk will do for one witness."

"Oh! it wants two, does it?"

"That is the law, General; but I myself can be the second."

"All right, then; let me sign."

And the General rose from his seat, and leaned towards the table.

"But, General," interposed the lawyer, thinking the will a somewhat short one, "is this all? You have two sons?"

"Of course I have. Haven't I said so in my will?"

"But, surely—"

"Surely what?"

"You are not going to—"

"I am going to sign my will, if you will allow me; if not, I must get it made elsewhere."

Mr Woolet was too much a man of business to offer any further opposition. It was no affair of his beyond giving satisfaction to his new client; and to accomplish this he at once pushed the paper before the General, at the same time presenting him with the pen.

The General signed; the lawyer and his clerk—summoned from the cupboard—attested; and the will was complete.

"Now make me a copy of it," demanded the General. "The original you may keep till called for."

The copy was made; the General buttoned it up in the breast of his surtout; and then, without even cautioning the lawyer to secrecy, stepped back into his carriage, and was soon rolling along the four miles of road lying between the village and his own residence.

"There's something queer about all this," soliloquised the pettifogger, when left alone in his office. "Queer he should come to me, instead of going to his own solicitor; and queerer still he should disinherit the younger son—or next thing to it. His property cannot be worth less than a cool hundred thousand pounds, and all to go to that half-negro, while the other, as most people thought, would have a half share of it. After all, it's not so strange. He's angry with the younger son; and in making this will he comes to me instead of going to Lawson, who he knows might say something to dissuade him from his purpose. I have no doubt he will stick to it, unless the young scamp leaves off his idle ways. General Harding is not a man to be trifled with, even by his own son. But whether this will is to remain good or not, it's my duty to make it known to a third party, who for certain reasons will be deeply interested in its contents; and who, whether she may ever be able to thank me for communicating them, will, at all events, keep the secret of my doing so. She shall hear of it within the hour."

"Mr Robson!"

The pale face of the unarticled clerk appeared within the doorway—prompt as a stage spirit summoned through a trap.

"Tell the coachman to clap the horses into my carriage—quick as tinder."

The spirit disappeared without making any reply, and just as his invoker had finished the folding of the lately attested will, and made a minute of what had transpired between him and the testator, carriage wheels were heard outside the door of the office.

In six seconds after Mr Woolet was in his "trap"—as he used condescendingly to call it—and rattling along a country road, the same taken ten minutes before by the more ostentatious equipage of the retired Indian officer.

Although driving the same way, the destination of the two vehicles was different. The chariot was bound for Beechwood Park, the "trap" for a less pretentious residence outside its enclosure—the villa-cottage occupied by the widow Mainwaring.

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## Chapter Ten.

### The Bait Taken.

The relict of the late colonel, who had left his hones in the Punjaub and herself with only a slight maintenance, had nevertheless sufficient to maintain a "turn-out." True it was but a pony and phaeton; but the pony was spirited, the phaeton a neat one, and with the charming Belle in it, hat on head, whip and ribbons in hand, it might have been termed stylish. The appearance was improved by a boy in buttons, who sat upon the back seat, well trained to sustain the dignity of the situation.

This choice little tableau of country life might have been seen at the gate of Mrs Mainwaring's villa at eleven o'clock of that same day, on which the conversation already reported had passed between herself and her daughter in the breakfast-room.

It was an early hour for a drive; but it was to be a journey upon business to her lawyer. It was never made; for just as the sprightly Belle had taken her seat in the phaeton, adjusted her drapery, and commenced "catching flies" with her whip, what should appear coming up the road, and at a spanking pace, but the two-horse trap of that lawyer himself, Mr Woolet.

The trap was evidently *en route* for the widow's residence, where more than once it had brought its owner upon matters of business. Its approach was a fortunate circumstance; so thought Mrs Mainwaring, so thought her daughter, neither of whom on that particular day desired to go to the town. It was not one that had been set apart for shopping; more important matters were on the *tapis*, and these could be arranged with Mr Woolet on the spot. The phaeton was at once abandoned, "Buttons" receiving orders to keep the pony by the gate, and the ladies, followed by the lawyer, returned into the cottage. The attorney was received in the drawing-room; but, as the business could have nothing to do with the beautiful Belle, her presence was excused, and she sauntered out again, leaving her mother alone with Mr Woolet.

Though there was still a certain obsequiousness about the lawyer's manner, it was very different from that he had exhibited when dealing with General Harding. There was a vast distinction between a live General, possessed of a clear hundred thousand pounds, and a defunct colonel's widow, with scarce so many pence. Still, Mrs Mainwaring was a lady of acknowledged social position, with a daughter who might at no distant day have the *control* of a gentleman who had a hundred thousand pounds, and who might become a profitable client of whoever chanced at the time to be her mother's solicitor. Mr Woolet was a sharp, far-seeing individual, and this forecast had not escaped him. If he showed himself more at ease in the presence of the colonel's widow than he had done in that of the General, it was simply because he recognised in the lady a nature like his own—less scrupulous upon points of honour or etiquette.

"Have you any business with me, Mr Woolet?" asked the lady, without making known the fact that she was about going on business to him.

"Well, Mrs Mainwaring, scarce enough to make it worth while my calling on you—at all events, interrupting your drive. What I have to say may be of no importance—but five minutes will suffice for saying it."

"Take what time you please, Mr Woolet; our drive had no object—a little shopping affair of my daughter's, that can be disposed of at any hour. Please be seated."

The lawyer took a chair; the lady sank into a couch.

"Something, I suppose, connected with the cottage?" she continued in a tone of studied indifference. "I think the rent is paid up to—"

"Oh, nothing of that," interrupted the lawyer. "You are too punctual in your payments, Mrs Mainwaring, to need reminding from me. I have come upon an affair that, indeed, now that I think of it, may look like interference on my part. But it is one that may be of importance, and, studying your interest as my client, I deem it my duty to interfere. I hope, if in error, you will not be offended by my apparent over-zeal."

The widow opened her eyes, once beautiful enough, but now only expressive of surprise. The manner of the attorney, his tone of confidence—of an almost friendly assurance—led her to look for some pleasant revelation. What could it be?

"Over-zeal on your part can never be offensive, Mr Woolet—at least, not to me. Please let me know what you have to communicate. Whether it concern me or not, I promise you it shall have my full consideration, and such response as I can give."

"First, Mrs Mainwaring, I must ask a question that from any other might be deemed impertinent. But you have done me the honour to trust me as your legal adviser, and that must be my excuse. There is a rumour abroad—indeed, I might say, something more than a rumour—that your daughter is about to be—to contract an alliance with one of the sons of General Harding. May I ask if this rumour has any truth in it?"

"Well, Mr Woolet, to you I shall answer frankly: there is some truth in it."

"May I further ask which of the General's sons is to be the fortunate, and, I may say, happy individual?"

"Really, Mr Woolet! But why do you want to know this?"

"I have a reason, madam—a reason that also concerns yourself, if I am not mistaken."

"In what way?"

"By reading this, you will learn."

A sheet of bluish foolscap, with the ink scarce dried upon it, was spread out before the eyes of the widow. It was the will of General Harding.

She coloured while reading it. With all the coolness of her Scotch blood; with all the steadiness of nerve produced by an eventful life—in long accompaniment of her husband in his campaigns—she could not conceal the emotion called forth by what she read upon the sheet of foolscap. It was like the echo of her own thoughts—a response to the reflections that, scarce an hour before, had been not only passing through her mind, but forming the subject of her conversation.

Adroitly as woman could—and Mrs Mainwaring was not the most simple of her sex—she endeavoured to make light of the knowledge thus communicated. She was only sorry that General Harding should so far forget his duties as a parent, to make such a distinction between his two sons. Both were equally of his own blood; and, though the younger might have been of better behaviour, still he was the younger, and time might cure him of those habits which appeared to have given offence to his father. For herself, Mrs Mainwaring was very sorry indeed; and, although it did not so essentially concern her, she could not do otherwise than thank Mr Woolet for his disinterested kindness in letting her know the terms of this strange testament. In fine, she would always feel grateful to him for what he had done.

The last clause of her speech was delivered in a tone not to be misunderstood by such an astute listener as Mr Woolet; and at its conclusion he folded up the will, and prepared to take his departure. To repeat excuses, and say that he had only done what he deemed his duty, were empty words, and were so understood by both.

A glass of sherry, with a biscuit, and the interview came to an end. Mr Woolet returned to his trap, and was soon rolling back to the town; while Buttons was commanded to take back the pony to its stable. The sauntering Belle was summoned into the drawing-room.

"What did he want, mamma?" was her inquiry on entering. "Anything that concerns me?"

"I should think so. If you marry Henry Harding you will marry a *pauper*. I have seen the will. His father has disinherited him."

Miss Mainwaring sank upon the couch, with a cry that told rather of disappointment than despair.

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## Chapter Eleven.

### Awaiting the Proposal.

In the afternoon of that day Belle Mainwaring sat upon the couch in a state of expectation not easily described. The more difficult, from its being so rare—that is, the circumstances under which she was placed. She was in the position of a young lady who expects a proposal of marriage to be made to her, and who has already determined upon declining it. She was strong in this determination; though her strength came not from her own inclinations. She was



but acting under the commands of her mother.

She was not without some sinking of spirits as to the course she was about to take. In reality she loved the man she was going to reject—more than she imagined then, more than she knew until long afterwards. Flirt as she had been, and still was, conqueress of many a heart, she was not without one herself,—it might not be of the purest and truest; but, such as it was, Henry Harding appeared to have won it.

For all that, he was not to wear it; unless he could surround her with all the adornments of wealth, and the costliest luxuries of social life. She now knew he could not do this; and, though her heart might still be his, her hand must go to some other. To his brother Nigel, perhaps, she may have whispered to herself. She was a beautiful woman, Belle Mainwaring—tall, large, and exquisitely moulded—a figure that becomes the reclining attitude required by a couch; and, as she so reclined upon ordinary occasions, the coldest observer might well have been excused for admiring her gracefulness.

On the day in question her attitude was not graceful. It was not even easy, nor befitting her figure. She sat bolt upright, now and then starting to her feet; pacing the room in quick, hurried strides; stopping a moment by the window, and scanning the road outside; and then returning to the couch, and staying upon it for a short time, as if a prey to terrible unrest and anxiety.

At times she would sit reflecting on the answer she should give; how it might be shaped, so as to make it least unpalatable to him who was to receive it. She had no doubt about its bitterness; for she felt confident in having the heart of the man about to offer her his hand. She did not wish to unnecessarily give him pain; and she studied the style of her intended refusal, until she fancied she had most cunningly arranged it. But then would come a spasm of her own heart's pain; for to say "No!" was costing it an effort; and at this the whole structure would give way, leaving her intended answer still unshaped.

Once she was on the point of changing her purpose; and, prompted by the nobility of love, she came near giving way to her better nature. She had almost made up her mind to accept Henry Harding spite his adverse fortune—spite the counsels of her mother.

But the noble resolve remained but one moment in her mind. It passed like a flash of lightning, only showing more distinctly the dark clouds that would surround such a destiny. Henry disinherited—a thousand pounds alone left him! It would scarce be enough to furnish the feast, with the trousseau she might expect upon the day of her marriage. Preposterous! Her mother was right; she would yield to the maternal will.

There was another thought that held her to this determination. She felt confident in her conquest; and if at any future time she might see fit to give way to her predilection, it would still be possible to do so. General Harding would repent the disinheritance of his younger son, and revoke the will he had made, perhaps in a moment of spite or passion. Neither the lawyer who made it, nor her own mother, had any idea of the General's doing so. It was not in keeping with his character. But Belle believed differently. She saw through the eyes of hope, lighted by the light of love.

In such frame of mind did Miss Mainwaring await the expected visit of Henry Harding. Nor was there any change, when the boy in buttons announced his arrival, and the moment after ushered him into the room. Perhaps, just at that moment, at the sight of his handsome face and manly form, her heart may have faltered in its resolution. But only for an instant. A thought of his disinheritance, and it was again firm.

She was right as to the object of his coming. Indeed, he had all but declared it at their last interview—all but accomplished it. Words had already passed between them, that might have been construed as on his side a proposal, and on hers an acceptance. He now came in all the confident expectation of formally closing the engagement by the terms of a betrothal.

Frank, loyal, and without thought of trick or deception, he at once declared his errand.

The answer went like an arrow through his heart—its poison but little subdued by the fact of its being conditional. The conditions were "the consent of mamma."

Henry Harding could not understand this. She, the imperious belle, who in his eyes seemed armed with all power and authority, to have her happiness dependent on the will of a mother, and that mother known to be at the same time selfish and capricious! It was a rebuff unexpected, and filled him with forebodings, as to what might be the decision of Mrs Mainwaring. He was not the man long to endure the agony of doubt; and at once demanded to see her.

His wishes were readily complied with; and, in less than five minutes after, the couch lately graced by the fair, frivolous daughter, was occupied by the staid, serious mother—the daughter absenting herself from the interview.

In the frigid face of the widow Henry Harding read his fate. His forebodings were confirmed. Mrs Mainwaring was sensible of the honour he would have conferred by becoming her son-in-law, and deeply thankful for the offer; but the position in which she and her daughter were placed made such a union impossible. Mr Harding must know that, by the sudden death of her late dear husband, she had been left in straitened circumstances—that Belle would therefore be without fortune; and that as he, Mr Harding, was in the same position, a union between the two would not only be impolitic, but absolute insanity. Though poor, her child had always been accustomed, if not to the luxuries, at least to the comforts of a home. What would be her condition as the mother of a family, with a husband struggling to maintain them? Mrs Mainwaring could not speculate on such a fate for her dear child; and, although Mr Harding was young, and had the world all before him, he had not been brought up to any profession promising a maintenance, nor yet to those habits likely to lead to it. For these reasons she, Mrs Mainwaring, must firmly, but respectfully, decline the offered alliance.

Throughout the speech, which partook somewhat of the nature of a lecture, Henry Harding sat listening in silence, but with astonishment strongly depicted in his features. This had reached its climax, long before the last sentence was delivered.

"Surely, madam," said he, giving vent to his surprise, "you cannot mean this?"

"Mean what, Mr Harding?"

"What you have said of my inability to support a—your daughter. I know nothing of the struggle you speak of. I admit I have no profession; but my expectations are not so poor as to make it necessary I should have one. Half of my father's estate is sufficient to provide against such a future as you allude to. And there are but two of us to share it."

"If that be your belief, Mr Harding," rejoined the widow, in the same cold, relentless tone, in which she had all along been speaking, "I am sorry to be the first to disabuse you of it. The estate you speak of will not be so equally divided. Your share in it will be a legacy of a thousand pounds. Such a trifling sum would not go far towards the maintenance of an establishment."

Henry Harding stayed not to answer the last remark, made half interrogatively. In those that preceded it he had heard enough to satisfy him, that he had no longer any business in the drawing-room of Mrs Mainwaring; and hurriedly recovering his hat and cane, he bade her an abrupt good morning.

He did not deign to address the same scant courtesy to her daughter. Between him and Belle Mainwaring was now opened a gulf so wide, that it could never be bridged over—not even to save him from a broken heart.

As the rejected lover strode away from the cottage that contained what he so lately looked upon as his *fiancée*, black clouds came rolling over the sky, as if to symbolise the black thoughts in his heart.

In all his youthful life it was the first great shock he had received; a shock both to soul and body—for in the announcement made by Mrs Mainwaring there was a blow aimed at both. His love blighted, his fortune gone—both, as it were, in the same instant! But the bitterest reflection of all was that the love had gone with the fortune. The loss of the latter he could have endured; but to think that the sweet speeches that had been exchanged between him and Belle, the tender glances, and the soft, secret pressure of hands that more than once had been mutually imparted—to think that, on her side, all these had been false, heartless, and hollow, was enough to wound something more than the self-esteem of a nature noble as was his. He could frame no excuse for her conduct. He tried, but without success. It was too clear, the cause of her refusal; too clear were the conditions on which she would have accepted his love, and had led him to believe in its acceptance. Her words and acts had been all pretence—the very essence of coquetry. It was over now, and with a bitter vow he resolved to expel her from his heart—from his thoughts, if that were possible. It was youth entering upon a hard struggle; but to a nature like his, and under such temptation to continue it, there was a chance of success. The woman he had hitherto looked upon as the type of all that was innocent and angelic, had proved herself not only capricious, but cunning, selfish, mean, less deserving of love than contempt. If he could but bear this impression upon his mind, there would be a hope of his recovering the heart he had so inconsiderately sacrificed. He registered a mental vow to do this, and then turned his thoughts towards his father. Against him he was all anger. He had no doubt the threat had been carried out; the will had been made that very morning. The minuteness of Mrs Mainwaring's information, even to the exact amount of his own legacy, left him no room to question its correctness. How she had obtained it he neither knew nor cared. She was sharp-witted enough to have placed herself in communication with his father's solicitor, whom he supposed to have made the will. But he did not stay to speculate upon this. His thoughts were all turned upon the testator himself, who by that single stroke had deprived him at once of his love and his living.

In the agony of his soul he could not see how his father had befriended him—how he had saved him from a fate far worse than disinheritance. His contempt for the cruel coquette was not yet decided enough for this.

His father's threat had been only conditional. He might look forward to a chance of the will being revoked. He might not be restored to full favour. There would be some punishment for his disobedience, which was as complete as if his suit had succeeded. But such a grand penalty would scarce be exacted. It was not compatible with the indulgence he had already experienced.

A meaner spirit would have reasoned thus. Nigel Harding would have done so, and sought restoration to the paternal favour he had forfeited. Not so Henry. His pride had been touched—stung to the quick; and in the midst of his mortification, with his soul suffering from its thwarted passion, while pursuing the path homeward he resolved that his father's house should know him no more.

And he kept this resolution. On reaching the park-gates, instead of entering, he walked on to the nearest inn, and thence took a fly to the nearest railway station.

In another hour he was in the midst of the great metropolis, with no thought of ever again returning to the green Chiltern Hills, or the shire of Buckingham.

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## Chapter Twelve.

### Self-Exiled.

On that same evening, as usual, there were four chairs placed at the dinner-table of General Harding. One was empty—that which should have been occupied by his younger son.

"Where is he?" asked the General, drawing the napkin across his breast.

Nigel knew not. Of course the maiden aunt could not tell. With her the scapegrace was not a favourite, and she took no heed of his movements. The butler was questioned, but did not know where Master Henry had gone. Nigel could only say he had seen him take the path towards the cottage of the Mainwarings; and a frown darkened his brow as he imparted the intelligence.

"He may have stayed for dinner," added the elder brother; "Mrs Mainwaring makes him so welcome."

"She won't after awhile," said the General, with a smile that to some extent relieved the frown also visible in his face.

Nigel looked at his father, but forbore asking for an explanation. He seemed to divine something that gave him relief, for the shadow upon his brow became sensibly lighter.

Upon that subject the conversation dropped; nor would it have been resumed again during dinner, but that before the meal ended a communication came into the room, through the medium of the butler. It was in the shape of a note, evidently scrawled in haste, and upon paper that could only have come from the *escritoire* of a cottage or a country inn. From the latter it had issued—the "Hare and Hounds," a hostelry that stood not far from the gates of General Harding's park, on the high road to London. There was no postmark—the letter having been hand-carried.

Hurried as was the scrawl of the superscription, the General recognised it as the handwriting of his son Henry. The shadow returned to his countenance as he tore open the envelope. It grew darker as he deciphered the contents of the note enclosed therein. They were as follows:—

"Father,—

"I say 'father,' since I cannot dissimulate my real thoughts by prefixing the epithet 'dear,'—when this reaches you I shall be on the road to London, and thence heaven knows where; but never more to return to a house which, by your own decreeing, can no longer be a home for me. I could have borne my disinheritance, for perhaps I deserve it; but the consequences to which it has led are too cruel for me to think of you otherwise than with anger. The deed is now done, and let that be an end of it. I write to you only to say that, since by the terms of your will I may some day become the fortunate recipient of a thousand pounds, perhaps you will have no objection to pay it to me now, deducting, if you please, the usual interest—which I believe can be calculated according to the rules of the Insurance societies. A thousand pounds at your death—which I hope may be far distant—would scarce be worth waiting for. Now, it would serve my purpose, since I am determined to go abroad and seek fortune under some more propitious sky than that which extends over the Chiltern Hills. But if I do not find the sum at your London lawyer's within three days, subject to my order, I shall make my way abroad all the same. I am not likely ever to ask for it again. So, father, you may choose in this matter, whether to oblige me or not; and perhaps my kind brother Nigel, whose counsels you are so ready to take, may help you in determining the choice.

"Henry Harding."

The General sprang from his chair, long before he had finished reading the letter. He had read it by fits and starts, while striding about the room, and stamping his feet upon the floor, until the glasses jingled upon the table.

"My heavens!" he at length ejaculated, "what is the meaning of this?"

"Of what, dear father?" asked the obsequious Nigel. "You have received some unpleasant news?"

"News! news! worse than news!"

"From whom, may I ask?"

"From Henry—the scamp—the ungrateful—Here, read this!"

Nigel took the note and read. "It is indeed an unpleasant communication; unfeeling of Henry—insulting, I should say. But what does it all mean?"

"No matter what it means. Enough for *me* to know that. Enough to think that he is gone. I know the boy well. He will keep his word. He's too like myself about that. Gone! O God—gone!"

The General groaned as he traversed the Turkey carpet. The maiden aunt said nothing, but sat by the table, quietly sipping port wine and munching walnuts. The storm raged on.

"After all," put in Nigel, with the pretence of tranquillising it, "he means nothing with this strange talk. He's young—foolish—"

"Means nothing!" roared the General in a fresh burst of excitement. "Does it mean nothing to write such a letter as this—in which every word is a slight to my authority—a defiance?"

"True enough," said Nigel, "I know not what can have possessed him to speak as he has done. He's evidently angry about something—something I don't understand. But he'll get over it in time, though one cannot forgive him so easily."

"Never! I will never forgive him. He has tried my temper too often; but this will be the last time. Disobedience such as his shall be overlooked no longer—to say nothing of the levity, the positive defiance, that accompanies it. By my

faith, he shall be punished for it!"

"In that regard," interposed the unctuous elder son, "since he has spoken of my giving you advice, it would be to leave him to himself—at least for a time. Perhaps after he has passed some months without the extravagant support you have hitherto so generously afforded him, he may feel less independent, and more prone to penitence. I think the thousand pounds he speaks of your having promised him, and which I know nothing about, should be kept back."

"He shan't have a shilling of it—not till my death."

"For your sake, dear father, a long time, I hope; and for his, perhaps, it may be all the better so."

"Better or worse, he shan't have a shilling of it—not a shilling. Let him starve till he comes to his senses."

"The best thing to bring him to his senses," chimed in Nigel; "and take my word for it, father, it will do that before long—you'll see."

This counsel seemed to tranquillise the perturbed spirit of the irate General, at least for a time. He returned to the table and to his port; over which he sat alone, and to a much later hour than was his usual custom. The mellow wine may have made him more merciful; but whether it was this or not, before going to bed he returned to his studio, and wrote, in a somewhat unsteady hand, a letter to his London lawyer—directing the latter to pay to his son Henry, on demand, a cheque for the sum of 1,000 pounds.

He despatched the letter by a groom, to be in time for the morning post; and all this he did with an air of caution, as if he intended to do good by stealth. But what appears caution to the mind of a man obfuscated with over a bottle of port, may seem carelessness to those who are around him. There was one who looked upon it in this light. Nigel knew all about the writing of the letter, guessed its contents, and was privy to its despatch for the post. Outside the hall-door it was taken from the hands of the groom to whom it had been intrusted, and transferred to the charge of another individual, who was said to be going past the village post-office. It was Master Nigel who caused the transference to be made. And from him the new messenger received certain instructions, in consequence of which the letter never reached its destination.

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## Chapter Thirteen.

### London Thugs.

On arriving in London, Henry Harding put up at a West-end hotel, which he had allowed his cabman to select, for he knew very little of London or its life. He had only paid two or three transient visits to it, and but few of his father's acquaintances resided in the metropolis. Upon these he did not think of calling. He supposed that the affair with his father might have become known to them—perhaps his rejection by Belle Mainwaring—and he had resolved upon keeping out of sight, to avoid the necessity of concealing his chagrin. Henry Harding had a proud spirit, and could neither have brooked ridicule nor accepted sympathy. For this reason, instead of hunting out any old college acquaintances he might have found in London, he rather avoided the chances of meeting them.

Besides the note written to his father, he had addressed one to the footman, simply directing this individual to pack up his clothes, guns, canes, and other impedimenta, and send them on to Paddington station, "till called for." This was done; and the luggage, in due time, arrived at the hotel where he was staying. Some eight or ten pounds of loose money, that chanced to be in his pocket on leaving home, was all the cash he commanded; and this was out of his pocket before he had been half that number of days in London.

For the first time in his life he began to find what an inconvenient thing it is to be without cash, especially in the streets of a large city—though he yet only knew it as an inconvenience. He expected his father would accede to the request he had made, and send an order for the payment of the thousand pounds. To allow time for the transaction, he kept away from the solicitor's office for nearly a week. He then called to make the inquiry. It was simply whether any communication relating to him had been received from his father. In case there had been none, he did not wish the lawyer to be any wiser about the affair. None had been—not any. This was the answer given him.

In three days he called again, and reiterated his former inquiry almost word for word. Almost word for word was the answer he had—not from the solicitor himself, but the head clerk of his office. General Harding had written no letter lately to Messrs Lawson and Son (the name of the firm), either in reference to him or any other matter. "He's not going, to send it," bitterly soliloquised Henry as he left the solicitor's office. "I suppose I'm not punished enough—so he thinks, with my precious brother to back him. Well, he can keep it. I shall never ask another shilling from him, if I have to starve."

There is a sort of pleasure in this self-abnegation—at least, during the incipient stages of it. But it is a pleasure traceable rather to revenge than virtue, and often dies out before the passion that has given it birth.

With Henry Harding it was not so short-lived. His spirit had been sorely chafed by the treatment he had received both from his sweetheart and his father. He could not separate them in his mind; and his resentment, directed against both, was strong enough to lead him to almost any resolution. He formed that of not going back to the office of the solicitor, and he kept it. It cost him a struggle, to which, perhaps, a less proud spirit would have yielded, for he was soon suffering from want of cash. His spendthrift life had suddenly come to an end, since he had no means of continuing it; and he was forced to the reflection how he could find the means of a mere living. He had changed his quarters to a cheaper hotel, but even this would require cash to pay for it, so that his circumstances were approaching desperation. What was he to do? Enlist in the army? Offer himself on board a merchant ship? Drive a cab? Carry a sandwich? Or sweep a crossing? None of these occupations were exactly suited to his taste. Better than

any or all of them—go abroad. There, if it come to the worst, he could try one or the other.

But there were other chances to be found abroad; and abroad he determined upon going. Fortunately he had sufficient left to carry him across the sea, even the great Atlantic Ocean; for, if his coin had been all spent, he had still something in the shape of a valuable watch, pins, rings, and other *bijouterie*, that could be converted into currency. These would yield enough to pay his passage to any part of the New World—for he intended going there, or to some distant land, far away from his father and Belle Mainwaring.

He had converted his chattels into cash—a thing that can be done in London in an incredibly short space of time, if we are not particular about the price. He had made a visit to the West India Docks, for the purpose of inspecting an advertised ship, and was returning home not over-satisfied either with himself or his fortunes. The berth offered him was shabby, and not cheap, and he had hesitated about accepting it. He had gone afterwards to Greenwich Park—the Elysian fields of the humble excursionist—and there, of course, partaken of tea and shrimps. It was nearly twelve at night as he dismounted from the knife-board of a Holborn 'bus, and turned down Little Queen Street on the way to his quarters in Essex Street, Strand. He had taken a Paddington omnibus as the only one plying westward at that late hour.

As he stepped into the little street his eye fell upon an oyster-shop, usually open to the latest hours of the night, and some of the earliest of the morning. Not satisfied with the Greenwich diet of tea and shrimps—long since digested—he entered the oyster-shop, and gave an order for a dozen of those delicious bivalves to be opened for him. There was another guest standing before the bar—a young man who having gone in before him, had given a similar order, and was already engaged in swallowing the shell-fish.

With the appearance of this young man Henry Harding was strangely impressed. He was handsome, of a complexion almost olive, dark curling hair, a full round eye, and an aquiline nose—features that at once proclaimed him a foreigner. The few words to which he gave utterance confirmed it. They were spoken in very imperfect English, with an accent which appeared to be Italian. Notwithstanding a somewhat threadbare suit of clothes, his bearing told either of birth or breeding; in short, one could not have made much of a mistake in supposing him to have been brought up a gentleman.

If Henry Harding had been asked why the young man interested him, he, perhaps, could not have told. But it was his well-bred air, coupled with garments that scarce corresponded; and, above all, the idea that he was looking upon a stranger in a strange land, alone, perhaps friendless—a foreshadowing of his own future. These were the thoughts passing in his mind, which at the moment made him look with a friendly eye upon his fellow oyster-eater at the bar.

He was in the mood to have addressed him; but a certain air of seriousness in the young man's countenance, coupled with the fact of his speaking English so imperfectly, with a fear that the intrusion might be mistaken, hindered the young ex-squire of the Chilterns from taking this liberty.

The other merely glanced at him, and noticing an aristocratic face, with a Bond Street style of dress, supposed, no doubt, that he was standing beside some "swell," who had stepped out of the Casino close by. Such a character would be no company for him; and with this reflection he finished his oysters, paid for them over the counter, and passed out into the street.

The young Englishman saw him depart with a reflection just bordering on pain. There was a face that had strangely interested him. It was not likely in the great world of London he would ever see it again. Besides, he would soon himself be beyond the confines of that world, still further lessening the chances of a re-encounter. With this thought he dismissed the stranger from his mind, paid the reckoning at the oyster-bar, and made a fresh start for his lodgings in the Strand.

He had cleared Little Queen Street, and entered the sister street of similar name. The night was a dark one, and not a soul was to be seen or met: for he was now outside the meretricious circle of which at that hour the Holborn Casino is the centre.

He had turned his face towards Lincoln's Inn Fields, as along the western edge of this square was the shortest route to Essex Street. The ponderous arch was before him, and he was proceeding quietly towards it, when, under the long, low passage, dimly lit, he perceived what appeared to be the figures of three men. One of them was apparently tipsy, the other two taking care of him.

He didn't much relish squeezing past this group; but there was no help for it, so he kept on. When close up to them he saw that the drunken man was absolutely helpless, his legs refusing to do him the slightest service, and he was only prevented from sinking down on the pavement by the support of his companions, one on each side of him. They halted under the shadow of the archway, and did not show any signs of moving onward. Perhaps they had had a long walk since leaving their "public," and wanted a little rest. That was no business of Henry Harding's, and he was quite contented to pass on without interfering—the more so as the countenance of one of the sober parties of the trio, turned for a moment towards him as he came up, clearly counselled the shunning of its owner.

He was passing on, and had already got beyond the group, when curiosity prompted him to glance back. The face of a man so helplessly intoxicated as the one supported between the other two could not be other than a curious spectacle.

Henry Harding looked upon it. There was a lamplight near that enabled him to do so, and further to distinguish the countenance of the inebriate. It was not without an exclamation of surprise that he recognised the features which had so strangely interested him—those of the stranger late seen in the oyster-shop!

"What's this?" he exclaimed, suddenly turning upon his heel, and facing the trio. "This gentleman drunk?"

"Drunk as Bacchis!" answered one of the men. "We're tryin' to get 'im home, an' ha' been at it for the best part o' an hour."

"Indeed!"

"Yis, sir. He's had a drop too much, as ye see. He's a friend of ours, and we don't want the perlice to take him to the station."

"Of course you don't," said the young sprig of Beechwood Park, now fully comprehending the case. "Well, that's kind of you both, but, as I am also a friend of this gentleman, you had better leave him in my charge, and save yourselves any farther trouble. Do you agree to it?"

"Agree be blowed! What do you mean?"

"This!" shouted Henry, who could no longer restrain his indignation. "This!" he repeated, delivering a blow of his stout Buckinghamshire stick upon the head of one of the supporters—"and this!" he cried thrice in rapid succession, as the stick descended on the skull of the second scoundrel, and all three, garrotters and garrotted, sank together upon the pavement.

By the merest accident in the world, a policeman appeared upon the spot. In Lincoln's Inn Fields there are no area safes, and a great scarcity of rabbit-pie. As a consequence, the guardians of the night may be seen occasionally upon their beat; and, as good-luck would have it, one, sauntering along Great Queen Street, heard the scuffle in the archway, and hastened towards the spot.

He came up in time to assist Henry Harding in securing the two garrotters, and stripping them of the spoils they had taken from the person of the stranger, of which they had already possessed themselves. All went together to the police-station, the stranger having by this time partially recovered from his intoxication—of *chloroform*—whence, in a cab, he was taken by Henry Harding to his own lodgings, and left there—with a promise on the part of his rescuer to return to him on the following day.

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## Chapter Fourteen.

### Turned Artist.

A slight incident—the dropping of a pin, or the turning of a straw—may affect the whole current of a man's life. There may be a fixed fate: but if so, it often seems to be brought about, or depend upon, circumstances purely accidental. Had Henry Harding not gone home by Holborn Bars; had he not got down at the corner of Little Queen Street; had he not taken a fancy for shell-fish; had he not that day done a hundred other things, all of which may have indirectly conducted to the encounter described;—his after life might have been as different from what is to be chronicled, as if it were that of some other man.

In a week from that time he might have been on his way to the West Indies, or some part of the great American continent, perhaps never to come back; whereas in a week from that time he was sitting in a studio, with a palette on his left thumb, a brush in his right hand, and an easel in front of him, while the classic blouse of brown holland and the embroidered smoking-cap told that he had turned artist.

The change in his life's programme can be easily explained. The gentleman he had rescued from the garrotters had become his patron; and, listening to the counsels of the young Italian artist—for such was he—he had himself taken to painting as a means of procuring his livelihood. Nor was it such a despairing adventure. He had already displayed taste in his school-drawings, and was, moreover, gifted with that aptitude for the art that usually leads to success. Almost from the first day spent in the studio he was enabled to produce sketches that could be sold; and these were followed by those "furniture pictures" which have given not only practice but material support to many a struggling artist afterwards eminent in his profession, and who otherwise might never have been heard of.

The young Italian painter—Luigi Torreani by name—was himself but a beginner; but with that talent both of conception and execution, which distinguishes the countrymen of Titian, he was rapidly rising in his profession. He had got beyond the point of painting for mere bread, and was receiving a price for his pictures that promised something more than a subsistence.

It was upon the strength of his own success that he had given counsel to his new acquaintance. He had done so, after ascertaining something of the situation and prospects of the strong, gallant youth who had done him such an essential service. Henry at the time had told him but little of his antecedents. This was not needed to a mind generous as that of Luigi Torreani, and a heart at the same time touched with a sense of gratitude. On discovering the young Englishman's project of self-banishment from his native land, he combated the idea with his counsel, and proposed, in the event of his abandoning it, to instruct him in his own art. In fine, his proposal was accepted, and Henry Harding adopted the profession of painter.

From acquaintances thus strangely introduced to each other, the two young men, not greatly differing in years, became fast friends, sharing apartments, table, studio together, and for many months the friendly association was continued. It was interrupted only by the advice of Luigi, who, deeply interested in the success of his brother artist, became desirous that the latter should spend some time in Rome, to perfect himself in his art by contemplating those classic forms so plentiful in the ancient metropolis of the world. For himself, the young Italian needed no such suggestive models. A Roman by birth, he had commenced his studies in their midst, and had ended by transferring his practice to that metropolis where the painting of them was sure to be best paid for. The education of his pupil, then, was to be the reverse of his own. The young English gentleman accepted the advice, less from any profound

love of his art or ambition to excel in it, than from a longing, such as most youths feel, to look upon Italy. Italy! the classic land of our school-boy exercises! the land of bright skies and soft summer scenes! the land of Tasso, of Ariosto, Byron, Boccaccio, and the brigands! Who does not desire to behold such a country, classically poetical in its past, romantically picturesque in its present, and, it is hoped, to be free and prosperous in its future?

Henry Harding longed to look upon this land; and mingled with his longings was a hope he might there find *Lethe*, or at least some solace for his spirit, still suffering sorely from the cruel treatment he had received—from a double disappointment to his affection and his love. So long as he remained in England amid its *souvenirs* and scenes, these sad memories would ever remain fresh. Perhaps in a foreign land, with strange objects under his eye, strange voices sounding in his ear, he might be enabled to realise the truth of the oft-quoted adage, "Absence conquers love."

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## Chapter Fifteen.

### A Sketcher Surprised.

On the road to Rome, leading out into the Campagna, a young man might have been seen wending his way towards the hill country where shoot down the spurs of the Apennines. At a glance he was not an Italian. A fine open face, with cheeks of ruddy hue, curls caressing them, of a rich auburn colour; but, above all, a frame of strong, almost herculean, build, borne forward by a free unfettered step, pronounced a son of the north—a Saxon! A portfolio under his arm, a palette carried in his left hand alongside, some half-dozen camel's-brushes, clearly proclaimed his profession—a painter in search of a subject.

There was nothing in all this to attract the attention of those he met or passed upon the route—neither the personal appearance of the painter nor the paraphernalia that declared his calling. An artist on the roads around Rome is an entity that may be often encountered—though perhaps not so often as a bandit.

If any one took notice of the individual in question, it was merely to remark that he was a stranger—*un Inglese*—and perhaps wonder why he was trudging out towards the hills, while he might be enjoying himself ten times better in the cabarets and inns of the Eternal City.

That the artist in question was "*Inglese*," no one who saw him doubted; nor will the reader, when told that he was no other than Henry Harding.

Why he was upon a Roman instead of an English road is already known. Flung upon his own resources in the great city of London—too proud to return to his father's home, stung by what he fancied to have been a refusal to his last request—he had, under the tutelage of his Italian friend, now taken to painting as his profession. He had not stained canvas without some success—enough to justify him in following the advice of Luigi Toreani, and completing his studies under the bright skies of Italy, and amid the classic scenes of the seven-hilled city. Thither had he found his way, with no other support than the precarious earnings of his pencil. This was fully evidenced by his threadbare coat and chafed *chaussure*, as he trudged afoot along the dusty road of the Romagna.

Whither was he going? He was far enough out to have almost lost sight of the Eternal City, and those classic monuments that only give proof of its decay. These, one would think, should have been the objects of his study—the subjects upon which to perfect it. And so they had been. He had painted them one after another—portal and palace, sculptured figure and fresco, Capitol and Coliseum—till his head was tired with such art delineation; and he was now on his way to the hills, to drink from the pure fountain of Nature—to fling rock and stream and tree upon the canvas, under the light of an Italian sun, and the canopy of an azure sky.

It was his first journey to the Campagna; he was going without a guide, only inquiring now and then for Valdiorno, a small mountain town lying near the Neapolitan frontier. To the "*sindico*" of this place he carried a letter of introduction, obtained from his son, who was the young Italian artist he had left behind him in London. But the chief object of this country excursion was to find some scene *paintable*, and worthy of being painted.

He had not made many miles along his route before he was tempted to stop, and this more than once. Every turn of the road presented him with a landscape; every peasant would have made a picture. He resisted these allurements with the thought, that these landscapes, so near to the city, might all have been sketched before; while the peasants could be caught at any time, in the streets of Rome itself, and there painted in all their picturesqueness.

On towards some shaggy hills he saw looming out in the distance; and on went he, until near the close of the day he found himself toiling up a steep ravine, whose every turn gave him a tableau worthy of being transferred to canvas, framed, and conspicuously suspended against the walls of the Royal Academy.

After a slight repast drawn from his wallet, and a smoke from his meerschaum pipe, he set about painting a scene, he had at length selected. He fought against the fatigue of his journey, for the sake of catching a magnificent mellow sunset that had welcomed his approach to the place. He had no need to add to the "composition" of his picture. Rocks, trees, cliffs, torrents foaming over them, points of *chiaro* and *oscuro*, abruptly contrasted—all were under his eye. If there was aught wanting to give life to the landscape, it was only a few figures—animal or human—and these he could fill in according to his fancy.

"Ah," he reflected aloud, "just the scene for a band of brigands. I'd give something to have a half-dozen of them in the foreground. I could then make a picture of these fantastic Turpins drawn from real life—a thing, I take it, which has never been done before. That would be something to hang up in the Royal Academy—something worth wasting colour and canvas on. I'd give—"

"How much?" answered a voice that seemed to issue out of the rocks behind him. "How much would you give, Master

Painter, for that you speak o'? If you bid high enough, I dare say I mout find the means o' accommodatin' you."

Along with the voice came the footsteps of a man—not in soft, stealthy tread, as of one approaching unawares, but with a quick thump, as the man himself dropped down from a rock above upon the little platform where the artist had planted his sticks. The latter looked up, at first in surprise, then rather in pleased admiration. He was thinking only of his art, and before him stood the very model of his imagination—a man clad in a complete suit of plush and coloured velvet, breeched, bandaged, and belted, with a plumed hat upon his head, and a short carbine across his arms—in costume and caparison the beau-ideal of a brigand. Two things alone hindered him from appearing the true heroic type of stage representation, such as we are accustomed to see in "Mazzaroni" and the "Devil's Brother." There was a broad Saxon face, and a tongue unmistakably from the shire of Somerset. Both were so marked, that but for the velveteen knee-breeches, the waist-belt, the elaborately buttoned vest, and the plumed hat upon his head, Henry Harding might have thought himself at home, and in the presence of a man he had met before.

Ere the young artist had sufficiently recovered from his surprise to respond to the unexpected salutation, the picturesque stranger continued—

"Want to paint brigands, do ye? Well, there's a chance for ye now. The band's close by. Jess wait a bit; I'll call 'em down. Hey, there, captin!" he cried, changing his English to Italian, "ye may come on. It's only one o' them poor devils o' daubers from the city. He wants to take our likenesses. I s'pose you've no objection to his doin' it?"

Before the painter could make response, or remove his paraphernalia out of the way, the ledge he had selected for his "point of view" was crowded with figures—one and all of them so picturesquely attired, that had they stood in the Corso, or elsewhere within police protection, he would have been only too delighted to have painted them with the most Pre-Raphaelitish detail. As it was, all thoughts of art were chased out of his mind. He saw that he was encircled by banditti!

To attempt to retreat was out of the question. They were above, below, on all sides of him. Even had he been swifter than any of the gang, their carbines were slung handy *en bandoulière*; and a volley from these would certainly have checked his flight. There was no alternative but to resign himself to his fate—which was now to be made a captive.

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## Chapter Sixteen.

### Empty Pockets.

If he who had surprised the painter at his task did not present the exact classic type of the stage bandit, there was one upon the ground who did. This man stood a little in advance of the others with that easy air that betokened authority. There was no mistaking his position. He was the chief. His dress did not differ, in cut or fashion, so materially from that of his followers; it was only more costly in the material. Where their breeches were velveteen, his was of the finest silk velvet. Besides, there was a glitter about his arms and a sparkle on the clasp which held the plume in his Calabrian hat that bespoke real jewellery. His face, moreover, was not of the common cast; it was of the true Roman type, the nose and chin of exceeding prominence, with a broad oval jaw-bone indicative of determination. He might have been deemed handsome but for an expression of ferocity—animal, almost brutal—that gleamed and sparkled in his coal-black eyes. If not handsome, he was sufficiently striking, and Henry Harding might have fancied himself confronted by the renowned Fra Diavolo. Had he stepped from behind the proscenium of the scenic stage, or come bounding from a "back flat," the Transpontine spectators would have hailed him as the hero they had come to the theatre to see.

For some seconds there was silence. The first spokesman had slunk into the rear of the band; and all stood waiting for the chief to commence speech or action. The latter stood looking at the young artist, scanning him from head to foot. The scrutiny seemed to give him no great pleasure. There was not much booty to be expected in the pockets of such a threadbare coat; and a grin passed over his dark features as he pronounced, in a contemptuous tone, the word—

"*Artista?*"

"*Si, Signore,*" replied the artist, with as much *sang froid* as if he had been answering an ordinary question. "At your service, if you wish to sit or stand for your portrait."

"Portrait? Bah! What care I for your chalks and ochres, signor painter? Better if you'd been a pedlar with a good fat pack. That's the sort of toys for such as we. You're from the *cittada*? What's brought you up here?"

"My legs," replied the young Englishman, thinking that a bold front might be best under the circumstances.

"*Cospetto!* I can tell that without asking. Such boots as yours don't look much like the stirrup. But come, declare yourself. What have you got in your pockets; a scudi or two, I suppose. How much, signore?"

"Three scudi."

"Hand them over."

"Here they are—you are welcome to them."

The brigand took the three coins, with as much nonchalance as if he had been receiving them in liquidation for some service rendered.

"This all?" he asked, again surveying the artist from head to foot.



"All I have got upon me."

"But you have more in the *cittada*?"

"A little more."

"How much?"

"About four score scudi."

"*Corpo di Bacco!* a good sum; where is it lying?"

"At my lodgings."

"Your landlord can lay hands upon it?"

"He can by breaking open my box."

"Good! now write out an order giving him authority to break open the box and send you the money. Some paper, Giovanni. Your ink-horn, Giacomo. Here, signor *artista*, write."

Seeing that it would be useless to make objection, the artist consented.

"Stay!" cried the brigand, arresting his pen; "you have something besides money at your lodgings? You Ingleses always carry about a stock of loose property. I include them in the requisition."

"There is not much to include. Another suit of clothes, but a trifle better than these you see on my back. A score or two of sketches—half-finished paintings—which you wouldn't value even if the last touch had been given them."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the brigand, his comrades joining in the laugh. "You're a good judge of character, signor *artista*. You can keep your sketches and your spare suit too, neither of which commodities would be likely to suit our market. Write, then, for the scudi."

Again the artist was about to use the pen.

"Hold!" once more exclaimed the bandit. "You have friends in the *cittada*. What a mistake I was making not to think of them! They can give something towards your ransom."

"I have not a friend in Rome; at least not one who would pay five scudi to rescue me from a rope."

"Bah! you are jesting, signore."

"I am speaking the simple truth."

"If that be so," said the brigand, who seemed to melt a little at mention of the rope, "If that be so," he added reflectingly, "then—ah, we shall see. Hark you, signor painter, if what you say be true, you may sleep in your own lodgings to-night. If false, you will spend your night here in the hills, and perhaps minus your ears, you understand me!"

"I should be dull not to do so."

"*Buono—buono!* And now one word of warning. Let there be no trickery in what you write—no deception in what you say. The messenger who carries your letter to the *cittada* will learn all about you—even to the quality of your spare suit and the value of your pictures. If you have friends he will find them out. If not, he will know it. And, by the Virgin, if it turn out that you are playing with us, your ears shall answer for it!"

"So be it. I accept the conditions."

"Enough! Write on."

As dictated, the requisition was written. The sheet of paper was folded, sealed with a piece of pitch, and directed to the landlord of the lodgings in which the English artist had set up his studio.

A man, in the garb of a peasant of the Campagna, was selected from the band; and, charged with the strange missive, at once despatched along the road that led towards the Eternal City.

After kicking down the temporary easel which our artist had erected, and pitching his slight sketch into the torrent below, the brigands commenced their march up the mountain—their captive keeping them company, with no very pleasant anticipation in regard to the treatment that might be in store for him.

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## Chapter Seventeen.

### An Unlucky Recognition.

You are astonished at the young Englishman taking things so coolly? To be captured by Italian bandits, famed for their ferocity, is not a trifling affair. And yet so Henry Harding seemed to consider it.

The explanation is simple, and easily intelligible. At any other period he might not only have chafed at his captivity, but felt fear for the consequences. Just then he was suffering from two other sorrows, that made this seem light—to be scarcely considered at all. His disinheritorship by his father was still fresh in his mind—still bitter; but far more bitter the rejection by his sweetheart.

Tortured by these cruel memories of the past, he recked less of what befell him either in the present or the future. There was even a time when he would have courted such a distraction—during the first few weeks after his departure from home. Twelve months had since elapsed, and close application to his art had to some extent consoled him. Perhaps absence had done more than art—of which he was by no means passionately fond; for he was not one of the thorough enthusiasts who prate about the divine inspiration of painters. Chance alone had guided him to this profession, as the only means he could devise for earning his daily bread—chance, partly directed by taste, and partly by some previous study of his school-days. So far it had served his purpose, and, enabling him to visit Rome, he had there imbibed a certain ambition to excel in it—enough to soften, though not obliterate, the memory of his misfortunes. This was still keen enough to make him reckless of what might turn up; hence his cool demeanour in the presence of the bandits, at which you may have felt surprise.

Up the mountains they marched him, by one of those execrable roads common in the Papal States, kept, no doubt, in better condition in the time of the Caesars than at the present day.

He speculated but little on whither he was being taken. Of course to some forest lair, some mountain cavern, used as a bandits' den. He was not without curiosity to see such a place; and perhaps it was passing through his thoughts, that at some future day he might avail himself of his present experience to paint a bivouac of brigands from real life.

He was very much surprised when a good-sized village came in sight; still more so on seeing the bandits march boldly into it; but his surprise became astonishment when he saw them unsling their carbines, rest them against the walls of the houses, and make other preparations denoting their intention to pass the night in the place!

The villagers appeared to have little dread of them. On the contrary, many of the men joined them in their wine-drinking, while some of the women rather encouraged than resented their rude sallies. Even the long-robed priest of the village passed to and fro amongst them, distributing crosses and benedictions; for all of which the brigands paid him in coin, that had no doubt been taken from the pockets of some unfortunate traveller—perhaps one of his own sacred cloth!

It certainly was a scene of sufficient originality to interest the eyes of a stranger, that stranger an artist; and the young Englishman, as he gazed upon it, for a time forgot that he was a captive. Of this he was reminded as night drew near. Hitherto his captors had not even taken the precaution to tie him. His frank acceptance of the situation, with his apparent indifference to it, had led the chief to think lightly about his making an attempt to escape. Besides, it could not much matter. Before he could reach Rome the sham peasant would have been to his lodgings and rifled the chest of its contents. The scudi would, at all events, be safe; and beyond these the brigand had formed no very sanguine expectations. It was not likely there were rich friends, or any chance of a ransom. The well-worn wardrobe of the painter spoke against such an hypothesis.

Rather in obedience to habit and usage, than for any other reason, did his captors determine to tie him up for the night; and just as the sun was sinking into the Tyrrhenian sea, two men were seen approaching the place where he had been left, provided with a rope for this purpose. In one of these he recognised the man who had first saluted him on the platform. He had not forgotten the conversation that had passed between them, nor the tongue in which it had been carried on. That being English, the bandit himself must be an Englishman, as was also evident from his bright skin, hay-coloured hair, and broad blank face, so unlike the sharp-featured, dark-visaged gentry who surrounded him.

Though at first not a little astonished at encountering a countryman in such a place, and especially in such showy guise, so different from the dull smock-frock the man had once evidently worn, he had ceased for a time to think of him. Since their first meeting he had not come in contact with him. The fellow appeared to be amongst the least considered of the band, only permitted prominence when called up by his chief, and since the capture his services had not been required. He was just such a man as one could hardly see without thinking of rope; and armed with a coil of this, he now approached to execute the order of the "captin." So said he as he stopped in front of the prisoner, and commenced uncoiling the cord.

It was the first time Henry Harding had been threatened with the degradation of being bound. To an Englishman, these is something disagreeable in the very idea of it; but to a young gentleman lately the presumed heir to 50,000 pounds, and who had never known a more irksome restriction than the statutes of Eton and Oxford, there was something repulsive in the prospect. At first he indignantly refused to submit to his wrists being corded, protesting that there was no need for it. He had no intention of attempting to escape. He would stay with the brigands till morning, or the morning after that—any time till the messenger returned. Besides, they had promised him liberty, on conditions that would be kept on his side, and he hoped on theirs.

His remonstrances were in vain.

"Damn conditions," roughly replied the man occupied in getting ready the rope; "we know nothin' 'bout them. Our business is to bind ye; them's the orders of the captin."

And so saying, he proceeded to carry them out.

It looked hopeless enough; but still there might be a chance in an appeal to the feelings of a countryman. The captive determined on making trial of it.

"You are an Englishman?" he said in his most conciliatory tone.

"I've beed one," gruffly answered the bandit.

"I hope you still are."

"I'deed, do ye? What matters that to you?"

"I am one myself."

"Who the devil says you ain't? D'ye take me for a fool not to see it in yer face, and hear it in the cursed lingo that I'd hope never to lissen to again?"

"Come, my good fellow; it's not often that an Englishman—"

"Stash yer palaver, dang yer! an' don't 'good fellow' me! Spread yer wrists now, an' get 'em ready for the rope. Just because you're English I'll tie 'em all the tighter—daang me if I don't!"

Perceiving that remonstrance was thrown away upon the renegade ruffian, and that resistance would only lead to ill-treatment, the young Englishman extended his hands to be tied. The bandit seized hold of him by both wrists, and commenced twisting them so as to turn them back to back. The moment his eyes rested on the left hand—upon the little finger showing a red longitudinal scar—he dropped both as if they had been bars of hot iron, at the same time starting backwards with a cry. It was a cry that betokened recognition, mingled with malignant joy!

The surprise which this occasioned to the captive was followed by another springing from a different cause. He, too, had effected a recognition. In the brutal brigand before him, he identified the ex-gamekeeper, poacher, and murderer—Doggy Dick!

"Ho! ho!" cried the latter, dancing over the ground like one who had gone frantic from receiving news of some unexpected fortune. "Ho! ho! You it be, Muster Henry Hardin'! Who would 'a expected to find you here among the mountains o' Italy i'stead o' the Chiltern Hills, where ye were so snug an' comfortable! An' wi' such a poor coat upon yer back! Why, what ha' become o' the old General, an' his big property—the park, the farms, the woods, the covers, and the pheasants? Ah! the pheasants! You remember them, don't ye? And so do I too. So do Doggy Dick—daangd well!"

As the renegade said this, a grin of diabolical significance made itself perceptible on his otherwise inexpressive features. Henry Harding perceived it, but made no remark. He knew that words would be of no use.

"I dar' say Nigel, that sweet half-brother o' yours, has got 'em all—the park, and the farms, and the woods, and the covers, and the pheasants. Ah! and I'd take my affedavy o' 't he's got that showy gal—she you were so sweet upon, Muster Henry. She warn't likely to cotton to a man wi' such a coat on his back as you have on yourn. Why, it look like it had come out o' a pawn-shop!"

By this time the blood of the Hardings had got up to boiling point. Despite his stupidity, Doggy Dick perceived it. He saw that he had gone too far in his provocation, and regretted having done so, before making fast the hands of him he had provoked. He would have retreated, but it was too late. Before he could turn, Henry Harding's left hand was upon his throat, the scarred finger pressing upon his larynx, and with the right he received a blow on his skull that felled him to the ground, like an ox under the stroke of a pole-axe.

In an instant the young Englishman was surrounded by the bandits and their wine-bibbing associates. Half-a-score flung themselves simultaneously upon him. He was soon overpowered, bound hand and foot, and then beaten in his bonds—some of the village damsels clapping their hands, and by their cries applauding the conquest of brute strength over injured innocence.

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## Chapter Eighteen.

### A Sympathiser.

There was one who witnessed the scene with a sympathising heart. It is almost superfluous to say that it was a woman; for no man in that community would have dared to take side against the brigands. While in it, these ruffians were complete masters of the place, and out of it their authority was little less. Their den was not distant, and on any day they could descend upon the unprotected town, and vent it with the torch of destruction.

The woman who sympathised with the young Englishman was still only a girl; and although a daughter of the *sindico*, or chief magistrate, of the place, she could do nothing to rescue him from his persecutors. Even the intermittent authority exercised by her father would have been unavailing; and her sympathy for the stranger only existed in the secret recesses of her heart.

Standing in a balcony of what appeared the best house in the village, she presented a picture that may be seen only in a town of the Roman Campagna—a combination of those antique classic graces which we associate with the days of Lucretia. Beauty of the most striking type, innocence of aspect that betokened the most perfect purity, and below, a street crowded with striding Tarquins!

She looked like a solitary lamb in the midst of a conglomeration of wolves, feebly shepherded by her father and the village priest—by the Law and the Church, both on the last legs of a decadent authority.

It was a singular picture to contemplate; nor had it escaped the notice of the young Englishman.

The girl had been observed in the balcony ever since his arrival; and as her position was not very far from the place where the brigands had permitted him to take a seat, he had a fair view of her, and could note her every action. He could see that she was not accosted like the commoner maidens of the village; but, for all this, bold glances were occasionally given to her, and brutal jests uttered within her hearing. She had looked towards the captive, and he at her, until more than once their eyes had met; and he fancied that in hers he could read signs of a sympathetic nature. It may have been but pity for his forlorn situation, but it was pity that expressed itself in a most pleasing way.

While gazing on that dark Italian girl, he thought of Belle Mainwaring; but never, during the whole period of his self-exile, had he thought of her with less pain. As he continued to gaze he felt a strange solace stealing over his thoughts, and which he could only account for by the humiliation caused by his captivity—by a sorrow of the present expelling a sorrow of the past. Something whispered him that the relief might be more than temporary, he could not tell why. He only knew, or thought, that if he could be permitted to look long enough into the eyes of that Roman maiden he might think of Belle Mainwaring with a calmer spirit—perhaps forget her altogether. In that hour of imprisonment he was happier than he had been for the past twelve months of free, unfettered life. From the contemplation of that fair form, posed in the balcony above him, he had, in one hour, drawn more inspiration than from all the statues seen in the Eternal City.

One thing interfered with his newly-sprung happiness. He observed that the girl only looked upon him with glances of stealth; that the moment their eyes met, hers were quickly withdrawn. This might have gratified him all the more, but that he had discovered the cause. He saw that she was under surveillance. Had it been her father who was watching her there would have been nothing to cause him pain. But it was not. The eyes that seemed so vigilantly bent upon, her were those of the bandit chief; who, wine-cup in hand, sat outside the little inn, with his face constantly turned towards the house of the *sindico*.

The young girl seemed uneasy under his glances, and at length retired from the balcony. She came out again at the noise caused by the binding of the captive.

In the midst of the *mêlée* Henry Harding had his eyes upon her even after he was bound and beaten. He bore all this the better from the glances she gave him. They seemed to say—

“I would spring down into the street and rush to your rescue, but my doing so might be the sealing of your doom.”

So construed he the expression upon her face—a construction that imparted pleasure, but was also accompanied by a painful reflection.

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The shadows of night descended over the town. There were no street lamps, and the graceful shape in the balcony, gradually blending with the gloom, became lost to Henry Harding’s eyes. The bandits had entered the inn, where they were joined by the more *bizarre* of the village belles. Soon came forth the sound of stringed instruments, the violin and the mandolin, mingled with the treading and shuffling of feet. Occasionally loud talking could be heard, along with the clinking of cups; then came cursing and quarrels, one of which terminated in a street-fight and the shedding of blood.

All this the young Englishman heard or saw from the place where he had been left bound—outside the open window of the inn. He was not there alone. Two bandits stood sentry over him, watching him with a vigilance in strange contrast with the negligence before displayed. The captive took note of this change in the behaviour of the brigands towards him. Still more when the chief, staggering past at a late hour, addressed some words to the two men who had him in charge. He could hear what was said. It was in the form of an injunction, terminating in a threat to the effect, that if he, the prisoner, should not be forthcoming the next day, they, the sentries, might expect punishment of the severest kind—in short, they would be shot. So hiccuped out their intoxicated chief, as he went reeling away in company of one of the flaunting belles who had taken part in the bandits’ ball.

That it was no empty threat made under the influence of drink became evident to the captive, in the increased vigilance with which he was tended. As soon as their chief was out of sight, the two sentries made a fresh examination of his fastenings, re-tightened the cords wherever they had become loose, and added others for greater security. Skilled in this peculiar craft by long practice, their prisoner was left but little chance of releasing himself, had he been ever so much inclined towards making the attempt.

And now he was, if he had not been before, not only inclined, but eagerly desirous, of making his escape. The stringent orders of the chief, with the elaborate precautions taken by the two sentries, had naturally awakened within him a degree of apprehension. Such pains would scarce have been taken for the sake of merely keeping him all night and letting him free in the morning. Moreover, the messenger who had been sent to the city had already returned. He had seen the man go into the inn while the dance was in progress, and no doubt he had delivered his fourscore scudi to the chief. It could not be this that was waited for to obtain his delivery.

There was to be another chapter added to his imprisonment—perhaps some cruel torture in store for him. He could easily imagine this after the incident that had occurred while he was being bound. The knock-down blow given to Doggy Dick would be looked upon as an insult to the whole band, and little as that English renegade might be esteemed by his Italian comrades, he would still have sufficient influence to instigate them to hostility against their captive. This was the cause to which Henry Harding ascribed the altered treatment he was receiving, and he now regretted having given it.

Could he have guessed the true reason he might have spared himself all self-recrimination. The prolonged imprisonment before him—and such in reality there was—had for motive a scheme far deeper than the hostility of Doggy Dick—either on account of the conflict that had occurred between them, or that of older and earlier date. It was a scheme likely for a long time not only to keep the captive from being restored to liberty, but that might deprive him of his life.

Though apprehensive of receiving some severe castigation at the hands of the brigands, he still did not believe himself to be in any great danger; and he was hindered from sleeping less by the prospect of punishment, than the pain caused by the cords too tightly drawn around his limbs. Despite this, despite his hard couch, which was the stone pavement of the street, he at length fell asleep; and slept on till the crowing of the village cocks, aided by a kick from one of the brigand sentries, aroused him once more to a consciousness of his uncomfortable situation.

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## Chapter Nineteen.

### On the March.

At daybreak the brigands were upon the march. The town where they had spent the night was not one of their safe places. They might halt there for a day, or a night, and refresh or amuse themselves; but a prolonged stay in it might subject them to a surprise by the Papal troops, when these chanced to be on the alert. This was only upon occasions when some unusual outrage committed by the bandits called the troops forth to make a *feint* at chastising them.

Something of the kind was just then reported upon the *tapis*. He who had gone to rifle the chest of the poor artist had brought back word of it. Hence their quick decampment.

When the villagers made their appearance upon the street, they could congratulate one another on a happy riddance of their ruffian guests; though there were some among them to whom this would be no satisfaction—the keepers of the wine-shops for example. To them robbers' gold was as good as any other.

The band proceeded through the hills, evidently making homeward. They were already laden with booty, captured before they had fallen in with the artist. It was, in fact, the report of this foray that was tempting the troops to pursue them.

They had no prisoners—only plunder, in the shape of plate, jewellery, trinkets, and other light personal effects. The *villa di campagna* of some old Roman noble had been the scene of their late raid, and they were carrying the spoils to their den.

That this was in some secluded part of the country was evident from the road taken to reach it. Now it was a rough causeway traversing a ridge; anon a mere *scorzo*, or cattle-track, zigzagging through the hills, or following the bed of a rivulet.

Long before reaching the end of their journey, the captive was fatigued and footsore. His shoes, none of the strongest, had yielded to the abrasion of the sharp stones; while the long tramp of the preceding day, with a half sleepless night on the street pavement, to say nothing of the beating the brutes had given him, had but ill prepared him for such an irksome march. His hands, too, were tied behind his back; and this, spoiling his balance, made progress still more difficult and disagreeable. The terrible depression of his spirits also detracted from his strength.

He had good reason for being dispirited. The rigorous watch, kept upon him all along the route, told him that he was not going to be easily let off. Already the brigands had broken faith with him; for he knew that the courier had come back, and of course brought back the scudi along with him.

Once only had he an opportunity of talking to the chief, just before starting away from the village. He reminded him of his promise.

"You have released me," cried the ruffian, with a savage oath.

"In what way?" innocently asked the young Englishman.

"*Hola!* how simple you are, *Signor Inglese!* You forget the blow you gave to one of my band."

"The renegade deserved it."

"I shall be judge of that. By our laws your life is forfeit. With us it is blow for blow."

"In that case I should be absolved. Your fellows gave me twenty for one—good measure, as I can tell by my aching ribs."

"Bah!" contemptuously rejoined the bandit, "be satisfied that it is no worse with you. Thank the Virgin you're still alive; or perhaps you may come nearer the mark by thanking that scar upon your little finger."

The look with which these last words were accompanied spoke of some secret meaning. The captive could not tell what it was; but it gave him food for reflection that lasted him for some time after. Taken in connection with the close watch kept upon him, he could forbode no good from it. On the contrary, there was evil in the innuendo, though of what sort it was beyond his intelligence to discover.

On the second day from their leaving the town, the march continued on through a mountainous country, most of it covered with forest. The track was rougher and more difficult to travel—at times ascending slopes almost precipitous, at others winding through clefts of rock so narrow as only to admit the passage of one at a time.

Both brigands and captive suffered from thirst; which they were at length enabled to quench with the snow found upon the colder exposure of the ridges.

Just before sunset a halt was made, and one of the bandits was sent forward as a scout. A mountain summit, shaped like a truncated cone, was seen a short distance in front, and towards this the path appeared tending.

About twenty minutes after the scout had disappeared from view, the howl of a wolf came back from the direction in which he had gone, while another similar cry was heard still farther off. Following this, there was the bleating of a goat; on hearing which the brigands once more resumed their march.

Bounding an angle of rock, the face of the conical hill was seen from base to top, scarred by a deep ravine that led to its summit. Up this lay the path, until the highest point was reached; then a strange picture lay spread before the eye of the captive. He was looking down into a cup-like hollow, nearly circular in shape, with sloping sides, covered with a thin growth of timber, in places packed into groves. At the bottom there was a pond of water, and not far from its edge, through the trees, some patches of grey wall, with smoke rising above, declared the presence of human habitation. It was the rendezvous of the bandits, which they reached just before the going down of the sun.

Their home, then, was no cave, no mere lair, but something that more resembled a hamlet or village. Two or three of the houses were substantial structures of stone; the rest were simple *pagliatti*, or straw huts, such as are common in the remote mountain districts of the Italian peninsula. A forest of beech trees overshadowed the group, while the ridges around were covered with a thick growth of ilex and pine. A deep, dark tarn glistened in the centre, looking like some long-extinct crater, that acted as a reservoir for the rain and melted snow from the surrounding slope.

The stone houses could never have been built by the bandits. The straw cabins may have been erected to afford them additional accommodation; but the more substantial dwellings told of times long gone by, before the enervating influence of a despotic government had brought decay upon the territory of Italia. Some miner, perhaps, who extracted ore from the neighbouring mountains, had found here a convenient smelting-place in proximity to the tarn.

Around, the land sloped up into a circular ridge—a sort of amphitheatre, with apparently two passes leading outward—one to the north, the other to the south. By both of these passes was a peak that rose bald and herbless above the fringe of the forest, and on each of these, close to the extreme summit, could be seen the figure of a man, visible only from the valley below. They were the bandits' pickets upon their post. Now and then, as they changed attitude, their accoutrements and carbine-barrels could be seen glancing in the golden sunset.

The young Englishman noted all this as he stood in the open piazza of the robber quarters. It recalled the song of the famed Fra Diavolo, and a night at Her Majesty's Theatre—his box shared by Belle Mainwaring.

He was not long allowed to indulge in such reminiscences—at least in the open air. Acting under orders from the chief, two of his captors conducted him into a dark chamber in one of the stone houses; and, giving him a push that almost sent him face forward upon the floor, closed the door behind him.

There was the harsh grating of a bolt, and then all was silence. For the first time in his life, Henry Harding felt the sensation of being inside a prison!

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## Chapter Twenty.

### Writing to Dictation.

These was at least relief in being left alone. The captive artist felt it so much, that his gaolers had scarcely drawn the key from out the lock, when he stretched himself along the floor and fell fast asleep. Some fern-leaves strewn over the stones served him for a couch, though he was too tired to care much for this.

He did not wake until sunlight, shooting in through the window, fell slanting upon his face. Then he rose to his feet, and took a survey of his chamber. A glance convinced him that he was inside the cell of a prison; for whatever may have been the original design of the room, its adaptability to this purpose was at once apparent. The window was high above the level of the floor, and so narrow that a cat could barely have passed through it. Besides, there was a strong bar set vertically into the sill, that rendered egress absolutely impossible. The door was alike forbidding; and ten minutes' contemplation of the place told the prisoner there was no chance of escape—save in the corruptibility of his gaolers.

To Henry Harding there was no hope of this, and he did not even think of it. He saw no alternative but to wait the development of events.

He was hungry, and would have eaten anything. He listened, in hopes of hearing a footstep—the tread of a brigand bringing him his breakfast. He could hear a step; but it was that of the sentry outside his door. It came and went, and came and went again, but no sound of drawing bolt, or key turning in the lock. An hour was passed in this hungry uncertainty, and then the tread of the sentry became commingled with other footsteps. A short parley outside, the key was inserted, the bolt clicked back, and the door stood open.

“Good mornin', Muster Hardin'. I hope ye ha' passed a pleasant night o't. Compliments o' Captin, an' wants ye to come an' see him.”

Without further speech Doggy Dick seized the prisoner by the collar. Then, with a spiteful shake, such as might have been given by an irate policeman, dragged him out of the cell, and on toward the quarters of the bandit chief. As a matter of course, these were in the best house of the place; but the young artist was not prepared to witness such splendour inside. Not only was the furniture well made, but there were articles of *luxé* in abundance—plate, pictures, looking-glasses, clocks, girandoles, *épergnes*, and the like, not very artistically arranged, but plenteous everywhere. It was a somewhat grotesque admixture of the ancient and modern, such as may be seen in a curiosity-shop, or the

chambers of a London money-lender.

In the apartment to which the prisoner was introduced, there were two individuals seated amidst the glittering confusion. One was the brigand chief, whose name he now knew for the first time to be "Corvino." He knew it from hearing him so addressed by the other occupant of the chamber, who was a woman, and who in her turn was called by the chief "Cara Popetta"—the "Cara" being merely a prefix of endearment.

Corvino, the chief, has been already delineated. Popetta, as being his spouse, also deserves a word. She was a large woman, nearly as tall as Corvino himself, and quite as picturesquely attired. Her dress was glittering with beads and bugles; and with her dark, almost chestnut-coloured skin and crow-black hair, she would have passed muster among the belles of an Indian encampment. She had once been beautiful, and her teeth were still so, when displayed in a smile; otherwise, they resembled the incisors of a tigress preparing to spring upon her prey. The beauty that had once shone in her countenance might still to some extent have remained—for Cara Popetta was scarce turned thirty—but for a scar of cadaverous hue, that traversed the left cheek. This turned what was once a fair face into one disfigured, even to ugliness. And if her eyes spoke truth, many a cicatrice had equally deformed her soul, for as she sat eyeing the prisoner on his entrance, there was that in her aspect that might have caused him to quail.

Just then he had no opportunity for scanning her very minutely. On the instant of his stepping inside the room he was accosted by the chief, and commanded in a hard tone to take a seat by the table.

"I need not ask you if you can write, signor *artista*," said the bandit, pointing to the "materials" upon the table. "Such a skilled hand as you with the pencil cannot fail to be an adopt with the pen. Take hold of one of these, and set down what I indite—translating it, as I know you can, into your native tongue. Here is a sheet of paper that will serve for the purpose."

As he said this, the brigand stretched forth his hand, and pointed to some letter-paper already spread out upon the table.

The prisoner took up the pen, without having the least idea of what was to be the subject of his first essay at secretaryship. Apparently it was to be a letter, but to whom was it to be written? He was not long kept in ignorance.

"The address first," commanded the brigand.

"To whom?" asked the young Englishman making ready to write.

"*Al Signor Generale Harding!*" dictated the bandit.

"To General Harding!" translated Henry, dropping the pen and starting up from his seat. "My father! What know you of him?"

"Enough, signor *pittore*, for my purpose. Sit down again, and write what I dictate. That is all I want of you."

Thus commanded, the artist resumed his seat; and once more taking up the pen, wrote the address thus dictated. As he did so, he thought of the last time he had penned the same words, when directing that angry letter from the roadside inn near to his father's park. He had no time to give way to reminiscences, for the bandit exhibited great impatience to have the letter completed.

"*Padre caro!*" was the next phrase that required translation.

Again the secretary hesitated. Again went his memory back to the writing from the English inn, where he had commenced that letter without the prefix "Dear." Was he now to use it at the dictation of a brigand?

The command was peremptory. The bandit, chafing at the delay, repeated it with a menace. His captive could only obey, and down went the words "Dear Father."

"And now," said Corvino, "continue your translation; don't stop again. Another interruption may cost you your ears."

This was said in a tone that told the speaker was in earnest. Of course, in the face of such a terrible alternative, the young artist could do no less than continue the writing of the letter to its end. When translated into his own tongue, it ran as follows:—

"Dear Father,—

"This is to inform you that I am a prisoner in the mountains of Italy, about forty miles from the city of Rome, and upon the borders of the Neapolitan territory. My captors are stern men, and, if I be not ransomed, will kill me. They only wait till I can hear from you; and for this purpose they send a messenger to you, *upon whose safety while in England my life will depend*. If you should cause him to be arrested, or otherwise hindered from returning here, they will retaliate upon me by a torture too horrible to think of. As the amount of my ransom, they demand thirty thousand scudi—about five thousand pounds. If the bearer bring this sum back with him in gold—a circular note on the Bank of Rome will do—they promise me my liberty; and I know they will keep their promise, for these men, although forced to become bandits by cruel persecution on the part of their government, have true principles of honesty and honour. If the money be not sent, then, dearest father, I can say with sad certainty, that you will never more see your son."

"Now sign your name to it," said the brigand, as the writing was completed.

Henry Harding once more started from his chair, and stood irresolute, still holding the pen in his hand. He had written the letter as dictated, and, while occupied in translating it into his native tongue, he had given but little heed to its

true signification. But now he was called upon to append his name to this piteous appeal to his father. With the remembrance still vivid in his mind of the defiant epistle he had last penned to him, he felt something more than reluctance—he felt shame, and almost a determination to refuse.

“Sign your name!” commanded the brigand, half rising from his seat. “Sign it, I say!”

The young Englishman still hesitated.

“Lay down the pen again, without putting your *firma* to that letter, and, by the Holy Virgin, before the ink become dry, your blood will redden the floor at your feet. *Cospetto!* to be crossed by a poor devil of a *pittore*—a cur of an *Inglese!*”

“O signor,” interposed the brigand’s wife, who up to that moment had not spoken a word, “do as he bids you, *buono cavalière!* It is only his way with every one who strays here from the great city. Sign it *caro*, and all will be well. You will be free again, and can return to your friends.”

While delivering this appeal, Popetta had risen up from her chair, and laid her hand upon the Englishman’s shoulder. The tone in which she spoke, with a certain expression detectable in her fiery eyes, did not seem altogether to please her *sposo*, who, rushing round the table, seized hold of the woman and swung her to the farthest corner of the room.

“Stay there!” he shouted, “and don’t interfere with what’s no concern of yours.”

Then suddenly turning upon his prisoner, and drawing a pistol from his belt, he once more vociferated, “Sign!”

The obstinacy that would have resisted such an appeal could be only true foolhardiness—a reckless indifference to life. There could be no mistaking the intent of the robber, for the click of his cocked pistol sounded sharp in the captive’s ear. For an instant the young Englishman, whose hands were for the time untied, thought of flinging himself upon his fierce antagonist and trying the chances of a struggle. But then outside there was Doggy Dick, with a score of others, ready to shoot him down in his first effort to escape. It was sheer madness to think of it. There was no alternative but to sign—at least none except dying upon the spot. The young artist was not inclined for this; and, stooping over the table, he added to what he had already written, the name “Henry Harding.”

Doggy Dick, styled “Signor Ricardo,” was called in and asked if he could read.

“I beant much o’ a scholard,” replied the renegade, “but I dar’ say I can make out that bit o’ scribble.”

The letter was slowly spelt over and pronounced “All right.” It was then enveloped and directed, Doggy Dick giving the correct address. After which, the next duty this Amphitryon was called upon to perform was the retying of his captive, and transporting him back to his cell.

That same night the epistle, that had come so near costing Henry Harding his life, was despatched by the peasant messenger to Rome, thence to be forwarded by a postman of a different character and kind.

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## Chapter Twenty One.

### Under the Cedar.

The world had become just one year older from the day that Belle Mainwaring “refused” the young son of General Harding. The crane had returned to the cornfield, the cuckoo to the grove, and the nightingale once more filled the dells with its sweet nocturnal music.

As a tourist straying among the Chiltern Hills—with me almost an annual habit—I could perceive no change in their aspect. Nor did I find that much change had taken place in the “society” introduced in the early chapters of our story.

I met Miss Mainwaring at a private ball, that concluded an out-door archery meeting. She was still the reigning belle of the neighbourhood, though there were two or three young sprouts that promised soon to dispossess her. There was less talk of her becoming a bride than had been twelve months before; though she was followed by a train of admirers that appeared to have suffered but slight diminution—Henry Harding being the only one missing from the muster. I heard that his place had been supplied by his brother Nigel; though this was only whispered to me in conjecture by one that was present at the gathering, where was also Nigel Harding himself. Knowing somewhat of the nature of this young gentleman, I did not believe it true, but, strange enough, before leaving the ground I had convincing evidence that it was so.

These summer fêtes, when extended into the night, afford wonderful opportunities for flirtation—far more than the winter ball-room. The promenade which occurs during the intervals of the dance may be extended out of doors, along the gravelled walks, or over the soft grassy turf of the shrubbery. It is pleasant thus to escape from the heated air of the drawing-room—improvised for the night into a ball-room—especially pleasant when you take along with you your partner of the dance.

Strolling thus with one of the aforementioned maidens, I had halted by the side of a grand *Deodara*, whose drooping branches, palmately spread, swept the grass at our feet, forming around the trunk of the tree a tentlike canopy by day, by night a shadow of amorphous darkness. All at once a thought seemed to strike my companion.

“By the way,” said she, “I was wondering what I had done with my sunshade. Now I remember having left it under this very tree. You stay here,” she continued, disengaging herself from my arm, “while I go under and see if I can find it.”



"No," said I, "permit me to go for it."

"Nonsense," replied my agile partner—she had proved herself such in the galop just ended—"I shall go myself. I know the exact spot where I laid it—on one of the great roots. Never mind; you stand here."

Saying this, she disappeared under the shadow of the *Deodara*.

I could not think of such a young creature venturing all alone into such a dismal-looking place; and, not heeding her remonstrance, I bent under the branches, and followed her in.

After groping about for some time, we failed to find the parasol.

"Some of the servants may have taken it into the house?" she said. "No matter. I suppose it will turn up along with my hat and cloak."

We were about returning to the open lawn, when we saw coming, through the same break in the branches under which we had entered, a pair of promenaders like ourselves. *Their* errand we could not guess. Though ours had been innocent enough, it occurred to me that it might have a compromising appearance.

I cannot tell if my companion had the same thought; but, whether or no, we stood still, as if by a mutual instinct, waiting for the other pair to pass out again. We supposed they had stepped under the tree actuated by curiosity, or some other caprice that would soon be satisfied.

In this we were mistaken. Instead of immediately returning into the light, faint as it was, and only springing from the glimmer of a starlit sky, they stopped and entered into a conversation that promised to be somewhat protracted. At the first words, I could tell it was only the resumption of one that had already made some progress between them.

"I know," said the gentleman, "that you still bear *him* in your mind. It's no use telling me you never cared for him. I know better than that, Miss Mainwaring."

"Indeed, do you? What a wonderful knowledge you have, Mr Nigel Harding! You know more than I ever did myself, and more than your brother, did too; else why should I have refused him. Surely that might convince you there was nothing between us—at least, on my side there wasn't."

There was a short pause, as if the suitor was reflecting on what the lady had just said. My companion and I were puzzled as to what we should do. I knew it by the trembling of her arm, that spoke irresolution. By a similar sign I felt that we were agreed upon keeping silent, and hearing this strange dialogue to its termination. We had already heard enough to make discovering ourselves exceedingly awkward—to say nothing of our own compromising position. We kept our place then, standing still like a couple of linked statues.

"If that be true," rejoined Nigel Harding, who appeared to have brought his reasoning process to a satisfactory conclusion, "and if also true that no other has your heart, may I ask, Miss Mainwaring, why you do not accept the offer I have laid before you? You have told me—I think you have said as much—that you could like me for a husband. Why not go farther, and say you will have me?"

"Because—because—Mr Nigel Harding,—do you really wish to know the reason?"

"If I did not, I should not have spent twelve months in asking—in pressing for it."

"If you promise to be a good boy, then I will tell you."

"I will promise anything. If it be a reason that I can remove, you may command me, and all the means in my power. My fortune—I won't speak of that—my life, my body, my soul, are all at your service."

The suitor spoke with a passionate enthusiasm I had not deemed him capable of.

"I shall be candid, then," was the response, half-whispered, "and tell you the exact truth. Two things stand between you and me, either of which may prevent us becoming man and wife. First, there is my mother's consent to be obtained; and without that I will not marry. To my dear mother I have given that promise—sworn it. Second, there is *your father's consent*; without it I *cannot* marry you. I have equally sworn to that—my mother exacting the oath. Much, therefore, as I may like you, Nigel Harding, you know I cannot perjure myself. Come! we have talked of this too often. Let us return to the dancing, or our absence may be remarked."

Saying this, she swept out from beneath the branches.

The foiled suitor made no attempt to detain her. The conditions could not be answered, at least not then; and with a vague hope of being able at some future time to obtain better terms, he followed her back into the ball-room.

My companion and I, as soon as released, sauntered the same way. Not a word passed between us, as to what we had heard. To me it did not throw much new light either on the ways of the world or the character of Miss Mainwaring; but I could not help regretting the lesson of deception thus unavoidably communicated to the young creature on my arm, who might afterwards think of practising it on her own particular account!

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## Chapter Twenty Two.

### A Queer Traveller.

The swells who diurnally take their departure for Windsor and the West were one afternoon, in the year 18—, called upon to use their eye-glasses upon a somewhat strange-looking traveller, who, coming from heaven knows where, made his appearance on the platform of the Paddington Station.

And yet there was nothing so very remarkable about the man—except on the Paddington platform. At London Bridge you might there have seen his like any day in the year: a personage of dark complexion, dressed in black, with a loose poncho-like garment hanging from his shoulders, and a hat upon his head, half wide-awake, but tending toward a steeple-crown—in short, a “Calabrian.”

Such was the costume of the individual who had caused the raising of eye-glasses on the Paddington platform. In an instant they were down again, the object of supercilious attention having dissipated scrutiny by diving into the interior of a second-class carriage.

“Demmed queer-looking fella!” was the remark, and with this he was forgotten.

At Slough he appeared again upon that gloomiest of platforms, commanded by a station-master possessing the loudest voice upon all the G.W.R. line. The strange traveller did not show himself until the swells, such of them as stopped, at Slough, had given up their tickets, and passed through the gate. Then, tumbling out of the carriage, the queer traveller, with a small portmanteau in his hand, placed himself in communication with the great Boanerges who directs the startings and departures at the Slough Station.

Between the two individuals thus accidentally coming together there was a contrast so striking that the most careless loungee on the platform could not have restrained himself from giving them attention. As they stood, *en rapport*, the very types of extremes—the negative and positive—the one a grand colossal form of true Saxon physiognomy, the other a diminutive specimen of Latinic humanity—for such the cloaked traveller appeared to be.

At the time, I myself chanced to be on the down platform, waiting for a down train. I was so struck with the tableau that I involuntarily drew nigh, to hear what the little dark man in the *capote* had to say to the giant in green frock and gilt buttons.

The first word that fell upon my ears was the name of General Harding! It was not pronounced in the ordinary way, but with an accent plainly foreign, and which I could easily tell to be Italian.

Listening a little longer, I could hear that the stranger was inquiring the direction to General Harding’s residence. I should have myself volunteered to give it him; but from the station-master’s reply I perceived that this functionary was directing him; and just then the down train, gliding alongside, admonished me to look out for myself.

Not till then did it occur to me, that I had stupidly forgotten to take my ticket, and I hastened into the office to procure one. As I came out again upon the platform I saw the strange traveller disappear within the doorway of a hackney coach; the driver of which, giving the whip to his horse, trundled off from the station.

In ten seconds after, I had taken my seat in the railway-carriage—an empty one—when an incident occurred that drove the queer traveller as completely out of my head as if he had never been in it.

The whistle had already screamed, and the train was about to move off, when the door was opened by the Titanic station-master, who was saying at the same time—

“This way ladies!”

The rustle of silk, with some hurried exclamation outside, told of the late arrival of at least two feminine passengers; and, the moment after, they entered the carriage, and took their seats nearly opposite me.

I had been cutting open the pages of *Punch*, and did not look up into their faces as they entered. But on finishing my inspection of the cartoon, I raised my eyes to see of what style were my two travelling companions, and beheld—Belle Mainwaring and her mother!

It was just about as awkward a position as I ever remembered occupying in my life. But I managed to sustain it, by appealing once more to the pages of *Punch*. Not even so much as a nod was exchanged between us; and had there been a stranger in the carriage he could not have told that Miss Mainwaring and I had ever met—much less danced together. I did *Punch* from beginning to end; and then, turning my attention to the advertisements on the back of the title-page, made myself acquainted with the qualities of “Gosnell’s Soap” and the mysteries of the “Sansflectum Crinoline.” Despite these studies, I found time to give an occasional side-glance at Miss Mainwaring, which I saw she was returning by a similar slant. What she may have seen in my eye I cannot tell, but in hers I read a light that, had my heart not been of the dulness of lead, might have set it on fire. It had at one time come very near melting under that same glance; but, after the cooling process experienced, it had become hardened to the temper of steel, and now passed through the crucible unscathed. When I had finished reading *Punch*’s three columns of advertisements, and for the hundredth time made an examination of Toby, with the procession of nymphs, dancing buffoons, and bacchantes, the train stopped at Reading.

Here my travelling companions got out. So did I. I had been asked to a park fête to be held at a gentleman’s residence in the neighbourhood—the same mentioned in a previous chapter. I suspected the Mainwarings were also bound for the place; and from the direction taken by the fly in which they drove off, I was made sure of it.

On arriving at my friend’s residence I found them upon the lawn; Miss Belle, as usual, surrounded by simpering swells, among whom, not to my surprise, I recognised Mr Nigel Harding. I noticed that, during the progress of the game of croquet which they were playing, he refrained from showing her any marked attention, leaving this for the others. For all that he was evidently uneasy, and stealthily watched her every glance and movement. Once or twice

when they were apart, I could hear him say something to her in a low tone, with the green of jealousy in his eyes, and its pallor upon his lips.

On leaving the place, which the company did at an early hour, I saw that he accompanied her and her mother to the railway station. The three rode back in the same fly. We all returned to Slough in the same train; I going on to London. From the carriage in which I sat I could see Miss Mainwaring's pony-phaeton, with the page at the pony's head, and close by a dog-cart with a groom in the Harding livery. Before the train started I saw the ladies step into the phaeton, Nigel Harding climbing to the seat behind them, while "buttons" was dismissed to take his seat in the dog-cart. With their freight thus assorted, the two vehicles drove off, just as the train was slipping out of the station.

From what I had seen that day, and what I had heard under the great cedar tree, and, more than all, from what I knew of both parties to the suit, I had made up my mind before reaching London, that Belle Mainwaring was booked to be the better-half of Nigel Harding—if *consent* could be squeezed out of his father either by fraud or by force.

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## Chapter Twenty Three.

### Dissimulation.

On that same night, as upon almost every other of the year, General Harding was seated in his dining-room with a decanter of crusted port on his right hand, a glass a little nearer, and a Phillipine cheroot between his teeth. His maiden sister was on his left, round a corner of the table, upon which stood before her another wine-glass, with an épergne of flowers, and a hand-dish containing fruit. It was the hour after dinner, the cloth had been removed, the dessert decanters set upon the table, and the butler and footmen had retired.

"It's just nine," said the General, consulting his chronometer-watch, "Nigel should be back by this. He wasn't to stop for dinner—only luncheon—and the train leaves Reading at 7:16. I wonder if those Mainwarings were there?"

"Pretty sure to be," replied the ancient spinster, who was shrewd at conjectures.

"Yes," thoughtfully soliloquised the General, "pretty sure, I suppose. Well, it don't much matter, I've no fear for Nigel; he's not the sort to be humbugged by her blandishments, like that hot-headed simpleton, Hal. By my word, sister! it is very strange we've not heard a word from the lad since he left us."

"You will, when he's spent the thousand pounds you gave him. When that comes to an end, he'll not be so sparing of his correspondence."

"No doubt. Strange, though—not a scrape of his pen since that nasty epistle from the inn—not even to acknowledge the receipt of the money. I suppose he got it all right. I've not looked into my bank-book since I don't know when."

"Oh, you may be certain of his having got it. If he hadn't you'd have heard from him long ago. Henry isn't one to go without money, where money can be had. You've good reason to know that. I should say you needn't trouble about him, brother; he's not been living all this time upon air."

"I wonder where he is? He said he was going abroad. I suppose he has done so."

"Doubtful enough," rejoined the spinster, with a shake of her head; "London will be the place for him, so long as his money lasts. When it is spent you'll hear from him. He'll write for a fresh supply. Of course, brother, you'll send it?"

The interrogatory was spoken ironically and in a taunting tone, intended to produce an effect the very opposite to what it might seem to serve.

"Not a shilling!" said the General, determinedly setting his wine-glass down on the table with an emphatic clink. "Not a single shilling. If within twelve months he has succeeded in dissipating a thousand pounds, he shall go twelve years before he gets another thousand. Not a shilling before my death; and then only enough to keep him from starvation. No, Nelly dear, I've made up my mind about that. Nigel shall have all except a little something which will be left to yourself. I gave Hal every chance. He should have had half. Now, after what has happened— There are wheels upon the gravel. Nigel with the dog-cart, I suppose."

It was; and in ten seconds more Nigel, without the dog-cart, stepped softly into the room.

"You're a little late, Nigel?"

"Yes, papa. The train was behind time."

This was a lie. The delay was caused by stoppage nearer home—at the widow Mainwaring's cottage.

"Well, I hope you have had a pleasant party?"

"Passable."

"That all? And such weather. Who was there?"

"Oh, for that matter, there was company enough—half of Bucks and Berkshire, I should think, to say nothing of a score of snobs from London."

"Any of our neighbours?"

"Well—no—not exactly."

"It's a wonder the widow Mainwaring—"

"Oh, yes, she was there. I didn't think of her."

"The daughter, of course, along with her?"

"Yes, the daughter was there, too. By the way, aunt," continued the young man, with the design of changing the subject, "you haven't asked me to join you in a glass of wine. And I'd like to have a morsel of something to eat. I feel as if I'd had nothing at all. I think I could eat a raw steak if I had it."

"There was a roast duck for dinner," suggested the aunt; "but it is cold now, dear Nigel, and so is the asparagus. Will you wait until it is warmed up, or perhaps you would prefer a slice of the cold boiled beef, with some West Indian pickles?"

"I don't care what, so long as it's something to eat."

"Have a glass of port wine, Nigel," said the General, while his sister was directing Williams as to the arrangement of the tray. "From what you say, I suppose you don't want a nip of cognac to give you an appetite?"

"No, indeed. I've got that already. How late is it, father? Their clocks appear to be all wrong down the road, or else the trains are. It's always the way with the Great Western. It's a bad line to depend on for dining."

"Ah, and a worse for dividends," rejoined the General, the smile at his own pun being more than neutralised by a grin that told of his being holder of shares in the G.W.R.

With a laugh Nigel drank off his glass of port; and then sat down to his cold duck, boiled beef, and pickles.

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## Chapter Twenty Four.

### A Strange Visitor.

General Harding's butler, with the assistance of the footman had just carried out the supper-tray when there came a ring at the hall-door bell, succeeded by a double knock. Neither were of the kind which the butler would have called "obtrapolous," but rather bashful and subdued. For all that they were heard within the room where the General sat.

"Very odd, at this hour of night," remarked the General. "Ten o'clock," he said, consulting his chronometer. "Who can it be?"

No one made a reply, as all were engrossed in listening. They heard the opening of the door, and then a parley between Williams upon the step, and somebody outside in the porch. It lasted some time longer than need have been necessary for a visitor who was a friend of the family. The voice, too, answering the butler's, was evidently that of a stranger, and, as the occupants of the dining-room thought, one who spoke with a foreign accent.

The General bethought him, whether it might not be some of his old chums freshly arrived home from India, and who had come down *sans cérémonie* by a late train. But, then, he could think of none of them with a foreign accent.

"Who is it, Williams?" asked he, as the latter appeared in the doorway of the dining-room.

"That I can't tell, General. The gentleman, if I may so call 'im, will neither give his name nor his card. He says he has most important business, and must see you."

"Very odd! What does he look like?"

"Like a furraner, and a rum 'un at that. Certain, General, he arn't a gentleman; that can be seen plain enough."

"Very odd!" again repeated the General. "Very odd! Says he must see me?"

"Sayed it over and over, that it's important more to you than him. Shall I show him in, General, or will you speak to him at the door?"

"Door be damned!" testily replied the old soldier. "I'm not going out there to accommodate a stranger, without either name or card. May be some begging-letter impostor. Tell him I can't see him to-night. He may come back in the morning."

"I've told him so, General, already. He says no; you must see him to-night."

"Must! The devil!"

"Well, General, if I'd be allowed to speak my opinion, he looks a good bit like that same gentleman you've mentioned."

"Who the deuce can it be, Nigel?" said the old soldier, turning to his son.

"I haven't the slightest idea myself," was Nigel's reply. "It wouldn't be that Lawyer Woolet? He answers very well to the description Williams gives of his late intruder."

"No, no, Master Nigel, it's not Mr Woollet. It's an article of humankind even uglier than him; though certain he has got something of a lawyer's look about him. But then he is a furriner; I can swear to that."

"By Jove!" exclaimed the General, using one of his mildest asseverations. "I can't think of any foreigner that can have business with me; but whether or no, I suppose I must see him. What say you, my son?"

"Oh, as for that," answered the latter, "there can be no harm in it. I'll stay in the room with you; and if he becomes troublesome, I suppose, with the help of Williams here and the footman, we may be able to eject him."

"Lor, Master Nigel, he isn't bigger than our page-boy. I could take him up in my arms, and swing him hallway across the shrubberies. You needn't have no fear 'bout that."

"Come, come, Williams," said the General, "none of this idle talking. Tell the gentleman I'll see him. Show him in."

Then, turning to his sister, he added—

"Nelly dear, you may as well go up to the drawing-room. Nigel and I will join you as soon as we've given an interview to this unexpected guest."

The spinster, gathering up some crochet-work that she had made a commencement on, sailed out of the room—leaving her brother and nephew to receive the nocturnal caller, who would not be denied.

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## Chapter Twenty Five.

### An Uncourteous Reception.

The old soldier and his son stood in silent expectation; for the oddity of an interview thus authoritatively demanded had summoned both to their feet. Outside they could hear the resumed exchange of speech between Williams and the stranger, and their two sets of footsteps sounding along the flagged pavement of the hall. Some seconds after, the stranger was shown inside the room, and the three were left alone—Williams retiring at a sign from the General.

A more singular specimen of the *genus homo*, or one less in keeping with the place, had never made appearance inside the dining-hall of an English country gentleman.

As Williams had asserted, he was not much bigger than a page-boy; but for all that, he could not be less than forty years of age. In complexion he was dark as a gipsy, with long straight hair of crow's-wing blackness, and eyes scintillating like chips of fresh-broken coal.

His face was of the Israelitish type, while his dress, with the exception of a sort of capote, which he still kept upon his shoulders, had something of a professional cut about it, such as might be seen about men of the law in the Latinic countries of Europe. He might be an *avvocato*, or notary. In his hand he held a hat, a sort of wide-awake, or Calabrian, which on entering the dining-room he had the courtesy to take off. Beyond this there was not much politeness shown by him, either in aspect or action; for notwithstanding his diminutive person, he appeared the very picture of pluck—of that epitomised kind seen in the terrier or weasel. It showed itself not so much in swagger as in an air of self-reliance, that seemed to say, "I have come here on an errand that will be its own excuse, and I know you won't send me back without giving me a satisfactory answer."

"What is it?" asked the General, as if this very thought had just passed through his own mind.

The stranger looked towards Nigel, as much as to say, "Do you wish this young gentleman to be present?"

"That is my son," continued the old soldier. "Anything you have to say need not be kept secret from him."

"You have *another* son?" asked the stranger, speaking in a foreign accent, but in English sufficiently intelligible. "I think you have another son, Signor General."

The question caused the General to start, while Nigel turned suddenly pale. The significant glance that accompanied the interrogatory told that the stranger knew something about Henry Harding.

"I have—or should have," replied the General. "What do you want to say of him, and why do you speak of him?"

"Do you know where your other son is, Signor General?"

"Well, not exactly, at present. Do *you* know where he is? Who are you? and whence do you come?"

"Signor General, I shall be most happy to answer all three of your questions, if you only allow me to do it in the order, inverse to that in which you have put them."

"Answer them in what order you please; but do it quickly. The hour is late, and I've no time to stand here talking to an entire stranger."

"Signor General, I shall not detain you many minutes. My business is of a simple nature, and my time, like yours, is precious. First, then, I come from the city of Rome, which I need not tell you is in Italy. Second, I am *un procuratore*—an attorney you call it in English. Thirdly, and lastly, I *do* know where your other son is."

The General again started, Nigel growing paler.

"Where is he?"

"This, Signor General, will inform you."

As he spoke, the *procuratore* drew a letter from under his *capote*, and presented it to the General. It was that which had been written by Henry Harding in the mountains, under the dictation of Corvino, the bandit chief.

Putting on his spectacles, and drawing the light nearer to him, General Harding read the letter with a feeling of astonishment, tinctured with incredulity.

"This is nonsense!" said he, handing the document to Nigel. "Sheer nonsense! Read it, my son."

Nigel did as he was desired.

"What do *you* make of it?" asked the General, addressing himself in an undertone to his son.

"That it's just what you say, father—nonsense; or perhaps something worse. It looks to me like a trick to extort money."

"Ah! But do you think, Nigel, that Henry has any hand in it?"

"I hardly know what to think, father," answered Nigel, continuing the whispered conversation. "It grieves me to say what I think; but I must confess it looks against him. If he has fallen into the hands of brigands—which I cannot believe, and I hope is not true—how should they know where to send such a letter? How could they tell he has a father capable of paying such a ransom for him, unless he has put them up to it? It is probable enough that he's in Rome, where this fellow says he has come from. That may all be. But a captive in the keeping of brigands! The thing is too preposterous!"

"Most decidedly it is. But what am I to make of this application?"

"To my mind," pursued the insinuating councillor, "the explanation is easy enough. He's run through his thousand pounds, as might have been expected, and he now wants more. I am sorry to believe such a thing, father, but it looks as if this is a tale got up to work upon your feelings, and get a fresh remittance of cash. At all events, he has not stinted himself in the sum asked for."

"Five thousand pounds!" exclaimed the General, again glancing over the letter. "He must think me crazy. He shall not have as many pence—no, not if it were even true what he says about being with brigands."

"Of course that part of the story is all stuff—although it's clear he has written the letter. It's in his own hand, and that's his signature."

"Certainly it is. My God! to think that this is the first I should hear from him since that other letter. A pretty way of seeking a reconciliation with me! Bah! the trick won't take. I'm too old a soldier to be deceived by it."

"I'm sorry he should have tried it. I fear, papa, he has not yet repented of his rash disobedience. But what do you mean to do with this fellow?"

"Ay, what?" echoed the General, now remembering the man who had been the bearer of the strange missive. "What would you advise to be done? Send over for the police, and give him in charge."

"I don't know about that," answered Nigel reflectively. "It seems hardly worth while, and might lead to some unpleasantness to ourselves. Better the public should not know about the unfortunate affair of poor Henry. A police case would necessarily expose some things that you, father, I'm sure, don't wish to be made public."

"True—true. But something should be done to punish this impudent impostor. It's too bad to be so bearded—almost bullied in one's own home; and by a wretch like that."

"Threaten him, then, before dismissing him. That may bring out some more information about the scheme. At all events, it can do no harm to give him a bit of your mind. It may do good to Henry, to know how you have received his petition so cunningly contrived."

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## Chapter Twenty Six.

### An Unceremonious Dismissal.

The side conversation between General Harding and his son was at length suspended by the old soldier facing abruptly towards the stranger, who all the while had been standing quietly apart.

"You're an impostor, sir!" exclaimed the General. "An impostor, I say!"

"*Molte grazie*, Signor General!" replied the man, without making other movement than a mock bow. "Rather an uncomplimentary epithet to apply to one who has come all the way from Italy to do you a service, or rather your son. Is this all the answer I'm to take back to him?"

"If you take any back to him, that's it," interposed Nigel. "Do you know, sir," he continued in a threatening manner; "do you know that you've placed yourself within the power of our laws; that you can be arrested, and thrown into prison for an attempt to extort money under false pretences?"

"His excellence, the General, will not have me arrested. First, because there are no false pretences; and, second, that to do so would be certainly to seal your son's doom. The moment the news should reach those who have him in their keeping, that I've been arrested or otherwise molested here in England, that moment will he be punished far more than you can punish *me*. You must remember that I am only a messenger, who have taken upon me the delivery of this letter. I know nothing of those who sent it, except in the way of my profession, and in the cause of humanity. I am as much your son's messenger as theirs. I can only assure you, Signor General, that it is a serious mission; and that your son's life depends on my safety, and the answer you may vouchsafe to send back."

"Bah!" exclaimed the old soldier, "don't tell a cock-and-bull tale to an Englishman. I don't believe a word of it. If I did, I'd take a different way of delivering my son from such a danger. Our government would soon interfere on my behalf, and then instead of five thousand pounds, your beautiful brigands would get what they deserve, and what I wonder they haven't had long ago—six feet of rope around each of their necks."

"I fear, Signor General, you are labouring under a false delusion. Allow me to set you right on this question. Your government can be of no service to you in this affair, nor all the governments of Europe to boot. It is not the first time such threats have been used against the freebooters in question. Neither the Neapolitan Government, in whose land they live, nor that of his Holiness, upon whose territory they occasionally intrude, can coerce them, if ever so inclined. There is but one way to obtain the release of your son—by paying the ransom demanded for him."

"Begone, wretch!" shouted the General, losing all patience at the pleading of the *procuratore*. "Begone! out of my house! Off my premises instantly, or I shall order my servant to drag you to the horse-pond. Begone, I say!"

"And you would rue it if you did," spitefully rejoined the little Italian, as he edged off towards the door. "*Buona notte*, Signor General! Perhaps by the morning you will have recovered your temper, and think better of my errand. If you have any message to send to your son—whom it is not very likely you will ever see again—I shall take it upon myself to transmit it for you, notwithstanding the uncourteous treatment, of which, as a gentleman, I have the right to complain. I stay at the neighbouring inn all night, and will not be gone before twelve o'clock tomorrow. *Buona notte! buona notte!*"

So saying the swarthy little stranger backed out of the room, and, conducted by the butler, was not very courteously shown into the night.

The General stood still, his beard bristling with passion. For a time he seemed irresolute, as to whether he should have the stranger detained, and punished in some summary way. But he thought of the family scandal, and restrained himself.

"You won't write to Henry?" asked Nigel, in a tone that said, "don't."

"Not a line. If he has got into a scrape for want of money, let him get out of it again, the best way he can. As to this story about brigands—"

"Oh, that's too absurd," insinuated Nigel; "the brigands into whose hands he has fallen are the gamblers and swindlers of Rome. They have no doubt employed this lawyer, if he be one, to carry out their scheme—certainly a cunningly-contrived one, whoever originated it."

"Oh, my son! my wretched son!" exclaimed the General; "to think he has fallen into the hands of such associates! To think he could lend himself to a conspiracy like this, and against his own father! Oh, God!"

And the old soldier uttered a groan of agony, as he sank down upon the sofa.

"Had I not better write to him, father?" asked Nigel. "Just a line to say how much his conduct is grieving you? Perhaps a word of counsel may yet reclaim him."

"If you like—if you like—though after such an experience as this I feel there is little hope of him. Ah, Lucy! Lucy! it is well you are not here, and that God has taken you to himself. My poor wife! my poor wife! this would have killed you!"

The apostrophe was spoken in a low, muttered tone, and after Nigel had left the room—the latter having gone out apparently with the intention of writing the letter intended to reclaim his erring brother.

It was written that night, and that night reached the hands of the strange procurator, to whom it was entrusted for delivery; and who, next day, true to his word, remained at the roadside inn till the hour of twelve, to receive any further communication. After midday he was seen driving off in the inn "fly" toward the Slough Station; thence to be transported by rail and steam to his home in the Seven-hilled City.

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## Chapter Twenty Seven.

### Brigand Domestic Life.

For several days Henry Harding was kept confined in his cell, without seeing a face, except that of the brigand who brought him his food—always the same individual.

This man was a morose wretch, and as uncommunicative as if he had been an automaton. Twice a day he would bring in the bowl of *pasta*—a sort of macaroni porridge boiled in bacon fat, and seasoned with salt and pepper. He would place the vessel upon the floor, take away the empty one that had contained the previous meal, and then leave the captive to himself, without saying a word to him.

The repeated attempts of the young Englishman to bring him to a parley were met either by complete inattention or rude repulse. Seeing this, they were abandoned; and the captive ate his *pasta*, and drank his cold water in silence.

Only at night was there quiet in his cell. All day long, through the slender-slit window, came noise enough. Just in front of it seemed to be the favourite loitering place of the brigands, where they passed most of their time. This was spent almost exclusively in gambling, except during intervals when quarrelling took the place of playing. Those intervals were not rare. Scarce an hour elapsed without some dispute, ending either in a fight between two individuals, or a general row, in which more than half the band appeared to take part. Then would be heard the voice of the *capo*, thundering in authoritative tones, as he delivered curses and cudgel blows right and left among the quarrellers.

Once there was a report of a pistol, followed by groans. The young Englishman believed that a summary punishment had been inflicted on some offender: for after the groans there was an interval of solemn stillness, such as might be observed in the presence of death. If such were the dread impression upon the scoundrels it did not last long: for soon after they were heard resuming play, and the cries, "*Cinque y cinque o capo*," and "*Vinti y vinti croce!*" the game being that common among the Italian peasantry called, "*Croce o capo*" and which differs but little from the English "Heads or tails."

By standing on tiptoe, the prisoner could see them playing at it. The gaming-table was simply a level spot of turf in front of his cell, and nearly opposite the window. The brigands knelt or squatted in a ring: one held an old hat from which the lining had been torn out. In this were placed a number of coins, odd—usually three. These were first rattled about the hat, and then thrown down upon the turf; the hat, as a dice-box, still covering them. The bets were then made upon *capo* or *croce* (head or cross), and the raising of the hat determined who were winners or losers.

It is in this game that the bandits find their chief source of distraction, from a life that would otherwise be unendurable, even to such ruffians as they. *Capo o croce*, with an occasional quarrel over it; plenty of *pasta*, *confetti*, fat mutton, cheeses, *roccate*, and *rosolio*; a *fiesta* when wine and provisions are plenty; songs usually of the most vulgar kind; now and then a dance, accompanied by some coarse flirting with the half-dozen women who usually keep company with a *banda*—these, and long hours of listless basking in the sun, compose the joys of the Italian brigand's domestic life.

When on a foray to the peopled plains, he finds excitement of an altogether different character. The surprise, the capture, the escape from pursuing soldiers, perhaps an occasional skirmish while retreating to his hill fortress—these are the incidents that occur to him on a plundering expedition: and they are sufficiently stirring to keep his spirit from suffering *ennui*.

This last only steals upon him when the divided plunder, which is generally in the shape of *denaro di riscatta* (ransom money), has by the inexorable chances of the *capo o croce* become consolidated in a few hands—the universal result of the game.

Then does the bandit become dissatisfied with listless idleness, and commences to plan new surprises; the sack of some rich villa, or what is much more to his mind, the capture of some *galantuomo*, or gentleman, by whose ransom his purse may be again replenished, again to be staked upon "Heads or tails."

Unseen himself, the young Englishman had an excellent opportunity of studying the life of these lawless men.

Between them and their chief there appeared to be but slight distinction. As a general rule the spoils were shared alike, as also the chances of the game; for Corvino could at any time be seen in the ring, along with the rest, staking his *piastres* on the *capo* or *croce*.

His authority was only absolute in the administration of punishment. His kick and cudgel were never disputed; for, if they had been, it was well understood these modes of castigation would be instantly changed for a stab of his stiletto, or a shot from his pistol.

His chieftainship may have been derived from his being the originator of the band, but it was kept up and sustained by his being its bully. A chief of low courage, or less cruelty, would soon have been dispossessed, as not unfrequently happens among the *banditi*.

One thing caused Henry Harding much wonder, as, standing on tiptoe, he looked out of the little window—the women, the *bandite*.

In the band there was nearly a score of these ladies. He had at first taken them for boys—beardless members of the gang! There was but little in their dress to distinguish them from the men. They wore the same polka jacket, vest, and pantaloons, only with a greater profusion of ornaments around their necks, and a larger number of rings upon their fingers.

Some of them were absolutely loaded with jewels of all kinds—pearls, topazes, rubies, turquoise-stones, even diamonds sparkling among the rest—the spoils drawn from the delicate fingers of many a rich *signorina*.

The hair of all was close cropped, like that of the men; while several carried poignards or pistols, so that only by a certain rotundity of form could they be distinguished from their male companions, and not all of them by this. They were not allowed to take part in the gaming, as they never got share of the *riscatta*. For all that, most of them shared in the perils of every enterprise, accompanying the men on their expeditions.

At home they laid aside the carbine to take up the needle; though they were seldom called upon to wet their fingers in the washing-tub. That is regarded as an occupation beneath the dignity of a *bandita*; and is left to the wives of those peasants in communication with the band, and who are termed *manutangoli*, or "helpers." These are well paid



for the labour of the laundry—a clean shirt costing the bandit almost the price of a new one! It was not often that any of Corvino's band cared to incur the expense; only its *damerini* or dandies, and they only upon the occasion of a *fiesta*.

Most of these observations were made by the English captive, during the first few days of his captivity. He saw many strange scenes through the little window of his cell. He might have seen more, had the window been lower in the wall; but, high up as it was, he was obliged to stand on tiptoe, and this becoming tiresome after a time, he only assumed the irksome attitude when some scene more exciting than common summoned him from his lair of dried fern-leaves.

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## Chapter Twenty Eight.

### Unpleasant Information.

Several days had elapsed without any change either in the prisoner's prospects or situation. He had come to the conclusion that his capture was no longer a farce, nor his imprisonment likely soon to terminate. The stories of brigand life he had heard told during his short sojourn in Rome, and which like others of his incredulous countrymen he had been loth to believe, were no longer doubted. He was himself a sad example of their reality, and could almost feel angry at his friend Luigi for having given him that letter of introduction, which had introduced him to such a pitiful dilemma. It was still upon his person; for, beyond robbing him of his slender purse and other metallic movables, the brigands had left everything untouched.

By way of passing the time, he took the letter out and re-read it. One paragraph, which he had scarcely noticed before, now particularly impressed him. "I suppose my sister Lucetta will by this time be a big girl. Take good care of her till I come back, when I hope I shall be able to carry all of you out of that danger we dreaded."

When Henry Harding first read these words on his way to Rome—for the letter of introduction was an open one—he thought nothing of their signification. He supposed it could only refer to the straitened circumstances of his family which the young artist expected at some time to relieve, by the proceeds of his successful pencil. Besides, Belle Mainwaring was too much in his mind to leave room for more than a passing thought of anything else, even for the little sister of Luigi, big as she might be at the writing of the letter—since still unknown.

Now, however, reflecting in his lone cell, with the image of that fair face first seen on the day of his captivity, and since constantly recurring to his thoughts, he began to shape out a different interpretation to the ambiguous phrase. What if the danger spoken of was less of poverty than peril—such, in short, as appeared to threaten that young girl, the daughter of the village *sindico*? To reflect even upon this gave the captive pain. How much more would he have been pained to think that the sister of his dear friend, Luigi Torreani was in like peril.

Sunset, declaring itself by the increasing gloom of his cell, caused him to refold the letter, and return it to his pocket. He was still pondering upon its contents, when voices outside the window attracted his attention. He listened—anything to vary the monotony of his prison life—even the idle talk of a brace of bandits; for it was two of these who were speaking outside. In less than ten seconds after he was listening with all his ears; for in the midst of their conversation he fancied he heard a name that was known to him.

He had just been thinking of Luigi Torreani. This was not the name that passed from the lips of the bandit; but one of like signification—Lucetta. He knew it was the name of Luigi's sister, of which he had just been reminded by the letter.

Henry Harding had often heard his friend speak of this sister—his only one. It was not strange, therefore, he should listen with quickened attention; and so did he, grasping the solitary bar of his window, and placing his ear close up to the sill. True there might be scores of Lucettas in that part of the country; but, for all this, he could not help listening with eager interest.

"She'll be our next *riscatta*," said the brigand who had pronounced the name; "you may make up your mind to that."

"*E por che?*" inquired the other. "The old *sindico*, with all his proud name and his syndicate to boot, hasn't enough to pay ransom for a rat. What would be the object of such a capture?"

"Object! Ah, that concerns the capo, not us. All I know is that the girl has taken his fancy. I saw it as we passed through the town the other night. I believe he'd have then carried her off, only for fear of Popetta. She's a she-devil, is the signora; and, though generally she takes kindly to her kicks and puffings, she wouldn't if there was a woman in the case. Don't you remember when we had the dancing-bout down in the valley of Main? What a row there was between our captain and his *cara sposa*!"

"I remember. What was it all about? I never heard?"

"About a bit of kissing. Our capo was inclined upon a girl; that coquettish little devil, the daughter of the old charcoal-burner Poli. The girl seemed kindly. He had slipped a charm round her neck, and I believe had kissed her. Whether he did that or no, I won't be certain, but the charm was seen and recognised by the signora. She plucked it from the girl's neck; as she did so almost dragging her off her feet. Then came the scene with the *capo*."

"She drew a stiletto upon him, did she not?"

"Ay, and would have used it, too, if he had not made some excuse, and turned the thing into a laugh. That pacified her. What a fury she was while the fit was on her. *Cospetto*! Her eyes glittered like hot lava from Vesuvius."

"The girl stole away, I think?"

"That did she, and a good thing for her she did; though if she had stayed I don't think Corvino would have dared look at her again that night. I never saw him cowed before. He lost both his sweetheart and his gold charm; for his Cara Popetta appropriated that to herself, and wears it regularly whenever he holds festa among the peasant girls, by way of reminder, I suppose."

"Did the captain ever see Poli's daughter again?"

"Well, some of us think he did. But you remember, after you left us we moved away from that part of the country? The soldiers became too troublesome about there, and there was a whisper that the signora had something to do with making the place too hot for us. After all, I don't think Corvino cared for the *carbonero's* daughter. It was only a short-lived fancy, because the girl showed sweet upon him. This of the sindaco's chicken is a very different affair; for I know he's fond of going in that direction, and shouldn't wonder if we get into danger by it. Danger or no danger, he'll have her sooner or later, take my word for it."

"I don't wonder at his fancy; she a sweet-looking girl. One likes her all the better for being so proud upon it."

"Her pride will have a fall, once Corvino gets her in his clutches. He's just the man to tame such shy damsels as she."

"*Povera!* it is a pity, too."

"Bah, you're a fool, Thomasso. Your sojourn in the Pope's prison has spoilt you for our life, I fear. What are we poor fellows to do, if we don't have a sweetheart now and then? Chased liked wolves, why shouldn't we take a slice of lamb when we can get it? Who can blame the *capo* for liking a little bit of tender chick? And such a sweet bit as Lucetta Torreani."

Henry Harding, who had been all this time listening with disgust to the dialogue between the two brigands, felt as if a huge stone had struck him. The presentment that had just commenced shaping itself in his mind appeared all at once to be circumstantially confirmed. The young girl spoken of was Lucetta Torreani. It could be no other than the sister of Luigi, whom he had seen standing in the balcony at Val di Orno, and who so often since had been occupying his thoughts.

It was a singular collocation or coincidence of circumstances, and painful as singular. Under the blow, he relaxed his hold of the bar, and staggering back, sank down upon the floor of his cell.

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## Chapter Twenty Nine.

### Painful Conjecturing.

For some time the young Englishman sat, where he had sunk down, in a state of mind not far removed from bewilderment. His captivity, if irksome before, was now changed to torture. Of his own misfortunes he no longer thought, nor cared. His soul was absorbed in contemplating the perils that beset the sister of his friend—that fair young girl—that although seen, but for a moment, and then looked upon in the light of a stranger, had made such an impression upon his heart; and, even without knowing that she was Luigi's sister, what he had just heard was of itself sufficient to make him unhappy in her behalf. He knew the terrible power exercised by these bandits. He had proofs of it in his own experience. A power all the more dangerous, since to men with lives already forfeit, there can be no restraint arising from fear of the law. One crime more could not further compromise them; and to commit such crime there needed only the motive and opportunity. In this case both appeared to be present. He had himself seen something of the first, in the behaviour of the brigands on the night of their bivouac in the village. Perhaps he might have seen more, but for the presence of Popetta, who in their late maraud had made one of the band. What he had now listened to placed the thing beyond doubt. The eyes of Corvino had turned longingly on the sister of Luigi Torreani. What must be the sequel when the wolf thus looks upon the lamb? Only destruction!

About the opportunity there was not much left to conjecture. It appeared like a sheep-fold without either watch-dog or shepherd. The behaviour of the bandits, while occupying the town, told that they could re-occupy it at any moment they had the mind. They might not be allowed long to remain there; but the shortest flying visit would be sufficient for a purpose like that. Such *razzia* and rapine were but the ordinary incidents of their life, the tactics of their calling, and they were accustomed to execute them with the most subtle skill and celerity. Corvino and his band could at any moment carry off Lucetta Torreani with half the damsels of Val di Orno—the captive artist now knew this to be the name of the village—without danger of either resistance or interruption. After such an outrage they *might* be pursued by the Papal gendarmes or soldiery, and they might not. That would depend upon circumstances—or whether the *manutangoli* willed it. There would be a show of pursuit, perhaps; and perhaps with this it would end.

In his own land the young Englishman would not have given credit to such a state of things. He could not, nor would his country men until a late period, when it was brought home to them by testimony too substantial to be discredited. Besides, since his arrival in Rome he had become better informed about the status of Italian social life and the behaviour of these banditti. He had no doubt, therefore, about the danger in which stood the sister of Luigi Torreani. There seemed but one who could save her from the fearful fate that hung over her head, and that one a woman—if this word can be used in speaking of such a creature as Cara Popetta.

To the brigand's wife, companion, or whatever she was, the thoughts of the captive turned as he sat reflecting, and devising schemes for the protection of Lucetta Torreani. If he were only free himself, knowing what he now did, the thing might have been easy enough, without appealing to such a protector. But his freedom was now out of the question. He felt convinced that from that prison he would never go forth, but to be carried to one equally secure—

until the messenger should return from England bearing the ransom for which he had written. And now, for the first time, did he feel satisfied at having written as he had done. Had he known what he now knew, it would have needed no dictation of the bandit chief to strengthen that appeal to his father. He earnestly hoped that the appeal he had made would receive a favourable response, and the money arrive in time to make liberty worth regaining. He had fixed upon the purpose to which he would devote it.

What if it came not at all? There was too much probability in this. Formerly he had felt reckless, from the curse that had been resting upon him; that is, the remembrance of Belle Mainwaring, and the disinheritance he had deemed so cruel. And there was the still later act of paternal harshness, in his father's refusal to advance the inconsiderable legacy he had promised to leave him. In like manner his father might refuse to pay the ransom demanded by the brigands.

All that night the captive remained in his cell without sleep. Now and then he paced the fern-covered floor, by the movement hoping to stimulate his thoughts into the conception of some plan that would ensure, less his own safety than that of Lucetta Torreani. But daylight glimmered through the little window, and he was still without any feasible scheme. He had only the slender hope, that the ransom might arrive in time; this and the equally slender expectation of assistance from "Cara Popetta."

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## Chapter Thirty.

### Brigandage and its Cause.

Brigandage, as it exists in the southern countries of Europe, is only beginning to receive its full measure of credence. There was always a knowledge, or supposition, that there were robbers in Spain, Italy, and Greece, who went in bands, and now and then attacked travellers, plundering them of their purses, and occasionally committing outrages on their persons. People, however, supposed these cases to be exceptional, and that the stage representations of brigand life to which in Transpontine theatres we are treated, were exaggerations, both, as regards the power and picturesqueness of these banded outlaws. There were banditti, of course, conceded every one; but these were few and far between, confined to the fastnesses of the mountains, or concealed in some pathless forest—only showing themselves by stealth and on rare occasions upon the public highways, or in the inhabited districts of the country.

Unhappily, this view of the case is not the correct one. At present, and for a long time past, the brigands of Italy, so far from skulking in mountain caves or forest lairs, openly disport themselves in the plains, even where thickly peopled; not unfrequently making themselves masters of a village, and retaining possession of it for days at a time. You may wonder at the weakness of the Italian governments, that permit such a state of things to exist. But it does exist, sometimes in spite of the governments, but sometimes also with their secret support and connivance—notably in the territories of Rome and Naples. To explain why they connive at it would be to enter upon a religio-political question which we do not care to discuss—since it might be deemed out of place in the pages of a mere romantic tale.

The motive of these governments for permitting brigandage was similar to that which elsewhere gives "comfort and support" to many an association almost as despicable as brigandage. It is the old story of despotism all over the world, *Divide et impera*; and prince or priest, if they cannot govern a people otherwise, will even rule them through the scourge of the robber.

Were there two forms of religion in Italy, as in Ireland, there would be no brigands. Then there would be no need of them: since in aspiring to political liberty the two parties would satisfactorily checkmate one another, as they have done and still do in Ireland—each preferring serfdom for itself rather than to share freedom with its hated rival.

Since in Italy there is but one religion, some other means was required to check and counteract the political liberty of the people. Despotism had hit upon the device of brigandage, and this is the explanation of its existence.

The nature of this hideous social sore is but imperfectly understood outside Italy. It might be supposed an irksome state of existence to dwell in a country where robbers can ramble about at will, and do pretty much as they please. And so it would be to any one of sensitive mind or educated intelligence; but where the bandits dwell, there are few of this class, the districts infected with them having been long since surrendered to small tenant-farmers and peasantry. A landed proprietor does not think of residing on his own estate. If he did, he would be in danger every day of his life—not of being assassinated, for that would be a simple act of folly on the part of the brigands—but hurried away from his home to some rendezvous in the mountains, and there held captive till his friends could raise a ransom sufficient to satisfy the cupidity of his captors. This refused—supposing it possible of being obtained—then he would certainly be assassinated—hanged or shot—without further hesitancy or equivocation.

Knowing this, from either his own or his neighbour's experience, the owner of an Italian estate takes the precaution to reside in the towns, where there is a garrison of regular soldiers, or some other form of protection for his person. And only *inside* such a town is he safe. A single mile beyond the boundary of their suburbs, sometimes even within them, he runs the risk of getting picked up and carried off, before the very faces of his friends and fellow-citizens. To deny this would be to contradict facts of continual occurrence. Scores of such instances are annually reported, both in the Roman States and in the late Neapolitan territory—now happily included in a safer and better *régime*, though still suffering from this chronic curse.

But it may be asked of the peasantry themselves—the small farmers, shopkeepers, artificers, labourers, shepherds, and the like—how they live under such an abnormal condition of things?

That is what the world wonders at, more especially the public of England; which is not very intelligent on any foreign matter, and dull at comprehending even that which concerns itself. Have we ever heard of one of our own farmers

raising his voice against a war, however cruel or unjust, against the people of another country, provided it increased the price of bacon in his own? And in this we have the explanation why the peasant people of Italy bear up so bravely against brigandage. When a village baker gets a *pezzo* (in value something more than a dollar) for a loaf of bread weighing less than three pounds, the real price in the nearest town being only threepence; when a labourer gets a similar sum for his brown bannock of like weight; when his wife has another *pezzo* for washing a brigand's shirt—the brigandesses being above such work; when the shepherd asks and obtains a triple price for his goat, kid, or sheep; and when every other article of bandit clothing or consumption is paid for at a proportionate famine rate, one need no longer be astonished at the tolerance of the Italian peasantry towards such generous customers.

But how about the insults, the annoyances, the dangers to which they are subject at the hands of these outlaws?

All nonsense. They are not in any danger. They have little to lose, but their lives; and these the brigands do not care to take. It would be to kill the goose, and get no more eggs. In the way of annoyances the English labourer has to submit to quite as many, if not more, in the shape of heavy taxation, or the interference of a prying policeman; and when it comes to the question of insult, supposing it to be offered to a wife or pretty daughter, the Italian peasant is in this respect not much worse off than the tradesman of many an English town annually abandoned to the tender mercies of a maudlin militia.

Brigandage, therefore, in the belief of the Italian peasant, is not, at all times, so very unendurable.

Notwithstanding, there are occasions when it is so, and people suffer from it grievously. Scenes of cruelty are often witnessed—episodes and incidents absolutely agonising. These usually occur in places that have either hitherto escaped the curse of brigandage, or have been for a long time relieved from it; where owners of estates, deeming themselves safe, have ventured to reside on their properties, in hopes of realising an income—more than a moiety of which, under the robber *régime*, goes into the pockets of their tenantry, the peasant cultivators. And to prevent this residence of the proprietors on their estates is the very thing desired by their proletarian retainers, who benefit by their absence—this begetting another motive, perhaps the strongest of all, for the toleration of the bandits.

When, in districts for a time abandoned by them, the brigands once more make appearance, either on a running raid or for permanent occupation, then scenes are enacted that are truly deplorable. Owners for a time remain, either hating to break up their households, or unable to dispose of the property in hand, such as stock or chattels, without ruinous sacrifice. They live on, trusting to chance, sometimes to favour, and not unfrequently to a periodical bleeding by black mail, that gains them the simple indulgence of non-molestation. It is at best but a precarious position, painful as uncertain.

In just such a dilemma was the father of Luigi Torreani, *sindico*, or chief magistrate, of the town in which he dwelt, owning considerable property in the district. Up to a late period he had felt secure from the incursions of the bandits. He had even gone so far as to gain ill-will from these outlaws, by the prosecution of two of their number at a time when there was some safety in the just administration of the laws. But times had changed. The Pope, occupied with his heretical enemies outside his sacred dominions, gave little heed to interior disturbances; and as for Cardinal Antonelli, what cared he for complaints of brigand outrages daily poured into his ears? Rather, had he reason for encouraging them—this true descendant of the Caesars and type of the Caesar Borgias.

It was to this peril in which his father was placed that the paragraph in Luigi's letter referred. Henry Harding, reflecting within his prison cell, had hit upon its correct interpretation.

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## Chapter Thirty One.

### The Torreanis.

On that same night in which the brigands had strayed into the town of Val di Orno, the *sindico* had learned something which caused him more than ever to fear for the future. The bold, bullying behaviour of the men was itself sufficient to tell him of his own impotence, in case they had chosen to violate the laws of hospitality. But he had been told of something more, something personal to himself, or rather to his family—that family consisting solely of his daughter Lucetta. She and Luigi were his only children, and they had been motherless for many years.

What he had learned is already known to the reader—that Corvino had been seen to cast longing looks upon his child. This is the Italian parlance when speaking of a preference of the kind supposed to exist in the bosom of a brigand. Francesco Torreani knew its significance. He was well aware of the personal attractions possessed by his daughter. Her great beauty had long been the theme, not only of the village of Val di Orno, but of the surrounding country. Even in the city itself had she been spoken of; and once, while on a visit there with her father, she had been beset by blandishments in which counts and cardinals had taken part; for these red-legged gentry of the Church are not callous to the smiles of witching woman.

It was the second time Corvino had seen Lucetta Torreani; and her father was admonished that he had perhaps seen her twice too often, as that once more he might bring misery to his house, leaving it with a desolate hearth. There was no insinuation against the girl—no hint that she had in any way encouraged the bold advances of the brigand chief. On the contrary, it was known that she hated the sight of him, as she should do. It had been simply a warning, whispered in the father's ear, that it would be well for her to be kept out of Corvino's way. But how was this to be done?

On the day after the visit of the band, Francesco Torreani noticed something strange in his daughter's manner. There was an air of dejection not usual to her, for the pretty Lucetta was not given to gravity. Why should she be low-spirited at such a crisis? Her father inquired the cause.

"You are not yourself to-day, my child," he said, observing her dejected air.

"I am not, papa; I confess it."

"Has anything occurred to vex you?"

"To vex *me*! No, not quite that. It is thinking of another that gives me unhappiness."

"Of another! Who, *cara figlia*?"

"Well, papa, I've been thinking of that poor young *Inglese*, who was carried away by those infamous men. Suppose it had been brother Luigi?"

"Ay, indeed!"

"What do you think they will do with him? Is his life in danger?"

"No, not his life—that is, if his friends will only send the money that will be demanded for his ransom."

"But if he have no friends? He might not. His dress was not rich; and yet for all that he looked a *galantuomo*. Did he not?"

"I did not take much notice of him, my child. I was too busy with the affairs of the town while the ruffians were here."

"Do you know, papa, what our girl Annetta has heard? Some one told her this morning."

"What?"

"That the young *Inglese* is an artist, just like our Luigi. How strange if it be so?"

"'Tis probable enough. Many of these English residents in Rome are artists by profession. They come here to study our old paintings and sculptures. He *may* be one, and very likely is. 'Tis a pity, poor fellow, but it can't be helped. Perhaps if he were a great *milord* it would be all the worse for him. His captors would require a much larger sum for his ransom. If they find he can't pay, they'll be likely to let him go."

"I do hope they will; I do indeed."

"But why, child? Why are you so much interested in this young man? There have been others. Corvino's band took three with them, the last time they passed through. You said nothing about them."

"I did not notice them, papa: and he—think of his being a *pittore*! Suppose brother Luigi was treated so in his country?"

"There is no danger of that. I wish we had such a country to live in; under a government where everything is secure, life, property, and—"

The *sindico* did not say what besides. He was thinking of the admonition he had recently received.

"And why should we not go to England? Go there and live with Luigi. He said in his last letter, he has been successful in his profession, and would like to have us with him. Perhaps this young *Inglese* on his return may stop at the inn; and, if you would question him, he could tell us all about his country. If it be true what you say of it, why should we not go there to live?"

"There, or somewhere else. Italy is no longer a home for us. The Holy Pontiff is too much occupied with his foreign affairs to find time for the protection of his people. Yes, *cara figlia*, I've been thinking of leaving Val di Orno—this day more than ever. I've almost made up my mind to accept the offer Signor Bardoni has made for my estate. It's far below its value; but in these times—what's all that noise in the street?"

Lucetta ran to the window, and looked out.

"*Che vedette?*" inquired her father.

"Soldiers," she replied. "There's a great long string of them coming up the street. I suppose they're after the brigands?"

"Yes. They won't catch them for all that. They never do. They're always just in time to be too late! Come away from the window, child. I must go down to receive them. They'll want quartering for the night, and plenty to eat and drink. What's more, they won't want to pay for it. No wonder our people prefer extending their hospitality to the brigands, who pay well for everything. Ah, me! it's no sinecure to be the *sindico* of such a town. If old Bardoni wishes it, he can have both my property and place. No doubt he can manage better than I. He's better fitted to deal with banditti."

Saying this, the *sindico* took up his official staff; and, putting on his hat, descended to the street, to give official reception to the soldiers of the Pope.

"A grand officer!" said Lucetta, glancing slyly through the window-bars. "If he were only brave enough to go after those brutes of brigands, and rescue that handsome young *Inglese*. Ah! if he'd only do that. I'd give him a smile for his pains. *Povero pittore*! Just like brother Luigi. I wonder now if he has a sister thinking of him. Perhaps he may have a—"

The girl hesitated to pronounce the word "sweetheart," though, as the thought suggested itself, there came a slight shadow over her countenance, as if she would have preferred knowing he had none.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, once more looking out of the window. "The grand officer is coming home with papa; and there's another—a younger one—with him. No doubt they will dine here; and I suppose I must go and dress to receive them."

Saying this, she glided out of the room; which was soon after occupied by the *sindico*, and his two soldier-guests.

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## Chapter Thirty Two.

### Captain Count Guardioli.

The town of Val di Orno was now in military possession, and there was no longer any fear of a revisit from the bandits.

The soldiers, in all about a hundred, were distributed by billet into the best houses while the officers took possession of the inn.

The captain, however, not contented with such shelter as the humble hostelry afforded contrived to insinuate himself into more comfortable quarters, in the house of the chief magistrate of the town, who, as already known, was the *sindico* himself.

It was a hospitality somewhat reluctantly offered; and, under other circumstances, the offer might not have been made. But the times were troublous, the brigands were "abroad," and people could not well act with churlishness towards their professed protectors.

Besides, Francesco Torreani, on his own account, had need to show courtesy, or pretend it, to the soldiers of the Pope. It was suspected that he sympathised with that party of liberal views, fast growing in influence, and who, under the inspiration of Mazzini, was threatening an Italian republic.

Compromised by this suspicion, the *sindico* of Val di Orno required to act with circumspection in the presence of the Pope's officer.

The proposal for quarters in his house had come from the latter. It was made deferentially, and under some trifling excuse, but in a way to make refusal a delicate and difficult matter. The *sindico* was constrained to give consent; and the officer brought his luggage, along with his body servant, from the inn, leaving more room for his subalterns.

The *sindico* thought it strange, but said nothing. The explanation he gave to himself was not very consolatory. "To act as a spy upon me, I suppose. No doubt he has his orders from Antonelli."

Though plausible to him who made it, the conjecture was not true. Captain Count Guardioli had received no orders of the kind; though, likely enough, he had given the Vatican some hints of the political proclivities of the *sindico* of Val di Orno.

His desire to share the hospitality of the magistrate's mansion was a thought that came, after his entering the house on that first merely official visit. The cause was simple enough. He had caught sight of the *sindico's* fair daughter as she was crossing one of the corridors, and Captain Count Guardioli was not the man to close his eyes against such attractions as Lucetta possessed.

Poor girl! To be assailed on every side—on one by a *capo* of bandits, on the other a captain of Papal soldiers. In truth, was she in danger? Fortunately for her peace of mind, she knew nothing of the designs of Corvino; though she was not long in discovering the inclinations of Captain Count Guardioli.

His countship was one of those men who believe themselves irresistible—a true Italian lady-killer, with a semi-piratical aspect, eyes filled with intellectual fire, teeth of snowy whiteness, and coal-black moustaches, turning spirally along his cheeks. A maiden must have her mind powerfully preoccupied who could withstand his amorous assaults. So was he accustomed to declare in the ears of his military associates—boasting his irresistibility.

No doubt, in the corrupt circles of the Apostolic city, he had had his successes. Count, captain, and cavalier, above all, an ardent pursuer of love adventures, it could scarce be otherwise.

At first sight of Lucetta Torreani the Captain Count experienced a sensation akin to ecstasy. It was like one who has discovered a treasure, hitherto unseen by the eyes of man. What a triumph there would be in revealing it! To obtain it could be no great difficulty. A village damsel, a simple country girl, she would not be likely to resist the fascinations of one who brought along with him the accomplishments of the court, backed by the prestige of title and position.

So reasoned Captain Count Guardioli; and, from that moment, commenced to lay siege to the heart of Lucetta Torreani. But, although from the city of Caesars, he could not say, as the first Caesar had done, "*Veni—vidi—vici!*" he came, and saw; but, after residing a week under the same roof with the "simple village damsel," he was so far from having subdued her heart, that he had not made the slightest impression upon it; on the contrary, he had himself become enslaved by her charms. He had grown so enamoured of the beautiful Lucetta, that his passion was apparent to every one in the place, his own soldiers and subalterns included.

Blinded by his ill-starred idolatry, he had abandoned even the dignity of concealing it; and followed his *ignis fatuus* about—constantly forcing his company upon her in a manner that rendered him ridiculous.

All this the father saw with chagrin, but could not help it. He consoled himself, however, with the reflection that Lucetta was safe, so far as her heart was concerned. And yet every one did not believe this. In the character of the *sindico's* daughter there was nothing that could be called coquetry. It was rather an amiability, that hesitated about giving pain; and, influenced by this, she listened to the solicitations and flatteries of the Captain Count almost as if she relished them. It was only her father who thought otherwise. Perhaps he might be mistaken.

As usual, the soldiers did but little service—none at all that was of any avail towards clearing the country of the bandits. They made occasional excursions to the neighbouring valleys, where the outlaws had been heard of, but where they could never be found. In these expeditions they were never accompanied by their *commandante*. He could not tear himself away from the side of Lucetta Torreani, and the field duty was left to his lieutenants. By night the soldiers strayed about the town, got drunk in the liquor-shops, insulted the townsmen, took liberties with their women, and made themselves so generally disagreeable, that before a week had elapsed, the citizens of Val di Orno would have gladly exchanged their military guests for Corvino and his cut-throats.

About ten days after their entry into the place, there came a report, which by the townspeople was received with secret satisfaction, not the less from their having heard a whisper as to the cause. The soldiers were to be recalled to Rome, to protect the Holy See from the approaches of the Republic.

Even to that secluded spot had rumours reached, that a change was coming, and there were men in Val di Orno—where it might be supposed such an idea could scarce have penetrated—men ready to vociferate, "*Eviva la Repubblica!*" Its *sindico* would have been among the foremost to have raised this regenerating cry.

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## Chapter Thirty Three.

### Improved Prison Fare.

A week elapsed from the day the brigands had got back to their mountain den. The plunder had all been appropriated by three or four, to whom fortune had been most favourable. These were already the richest individuals in the band; for amid the mountains of Italy, as in the towns of Homburg and Baden, the banker in the end is sure to sweep in the stakes of the outsiders. Dame Fortune may give luck for a run; but he who can afford to lose longest will outrun her in the end.

Among the winners was the brigand chief, and Cara Popetta put fresh rings upon her fingers, new brooches upon her breast, and additional chains around her neck.

Another expedition began to be talked about, to provide fresh stakes for the game of *capo* or *croce*. It was not to be either a grand or distant one—only a little spurt into one of the neighbouring valleys—the capture, if chance allowed it, of some petty proprietor, who might have ventured from the great city to have a look at his estates, or the seizure of such chattels as might be found in a country village. It was chiefly intended to fill up the time, until the return of that secret messenger who had been despatched to England, and from whose mission much was expected.

Their English *confrère* had given the brigands a hint of the great wealth of their captive's father, and all were hopeful of receiving the grand ransom that had been demanded by the *capo*. With five thousand pounds (nearly thirty thousand *pezzos*), they might play for a month, and go to sleep for another, without troubling themselves about the soldiers in pursuit.

The little expedition, that was to form the interlude while this was being waited for, was soon organised—only about three-fourths of the band being permitted to take part in it. On this occasion the women were also left behind, Cara Popetta among the rest.

The captive, inside his cell, only knew of its having started by the greater tranquillity that reigned around the place. There were still quarrels occurring at short intervals; but these appeared to be between the women, whose voices, less sonorous, were not less energetic in their accents of anger, or more refined in their mode of expressing it. Like their short-cropped hair, their vocabulary appeared to have been shorn of all its elegance—both, perhaps, having been parted with at the same time. Had Henry Harding been in a mind for amusement, he might have found it in witnessing their disputes, that oft occurred right under his window. But he was not. On the contrary, it but disgusted him to think of the degradation to which the angel woman may reach, when once she has strayed from the path of virtue.

And many of these women were beautiful, or had been before they became vicious. No doubt more than one had been the fond hope of some dotting parent, perhaps the stay of an aged mother, and the solace of her declining days, and who, having one day strayed beyond the confines of her native village, like the daughter of Pietro, returned "home sad and slow," or never returned at all!

The heart of the young Englishman was lacerated as he reflected upon their fate. It was torture, when he thought of them in connection with Lucetta Torreani. To think of that pure, innocent girl—the glance he had had of her convinced him that she was this—becoming as one of those feminine fiends who daily jarred and warred outside his window! Surely it could never be. And yet what was there to hinder it? This was the inquiry that now occupied his attention, and filled him with dread forebodings.

Since the departure of the expedition a ray of hope had shone into his cell. It was bright as the sunbeam that there entered. For the mind of the captive, quickened by captivity, like a drowning man, will catch even at straws; and one seemed to offer itself to the imprisoned artist.

In the first place, he perceived that there was a chance of corrupting his gaoler. This was no longer the morose,

taciturn fellow, who had hitherto attended upon him, but one who, if not cheerful, was at least talkative. On hearing his voice the prisoner could at once recognise it as that of one of the brigands who had held conversation under his window. It was the one whose sentiments showed him the less hardened of the two, and whom the other had called Tommaso. The captive fancied something might be done with this man. From what he had heard him say, Tommaso did not appear altogether dead to the dictates of humanity. True, he had made confession to having spent some time in a Papal prison. But many a martyr had done that—political and otherwise. The worst against him was his being where he now was; but this might have come from a like cause.

So reflected Henry Harding; and the more did he think of it, after his new gaoler had held converse with him. But he had found something else to reflect upon, also of a hopeful character. The breakfast brought by Tommaso—which was his first meal after the departure of the band—was altogether different from those of former days. Instead of the macaroni *pasta*, often unseasoned and insipid, there were broiled mutton, sausages, *confetti*, and a bottle of *rosolio*!

“Who sent these delicacies?” was the interrogatory of him who received them. He did not put it until after eating his dinner, which in a like way differed from the dinners of previous days. Then he asked the question of his new attendant.

“*La signora*,” was the answer of Tommaso, speaking in such a courteous tone, that but for the small chamber and the absence of furniture the captive might have fancied himself in an hotel, and especially cared for by one of its waiters.

Throughout the day did this solicitude show itself; and at night the signora herself brought him his supper, without either the intervention or attendance of Tommaso. Shortly after the sun had gone down the young Englishman started at seeing a woman make her way inside his cell; for it was an apparition strange as unexpected.

The small chamber in which he was imprisoned was but the adjunct of a larger apartment—a sort of storeroom, where the brigands kept the bulkier articles of their plunder, as also provisions. In this last was a large window, through which the moon was shining; and it was only on the door of his cell being thrown open that he perceived his feminine visitor. Though she was but dimly seen in the borrowed light of the outer chamber, he could tell that it was a woman.

Who was she?

Only for a second was he in doubt; her large form, as she stood outlined in the doorway, as also the drapery of her dress, told him it was the wife of the chief. He had observed that only she, of all the women belonging to the band, affected female habiliments.

Yes, his visitor was Cara Popetta. He wondered what she could want with him; all the more as she came stealing in apparently in fear of being watched, or followed by some one outside. She had noiselessly opened the outer door, as noiselessly closed it behind her, and in the same way opened and closed that communicating with his cell.

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### End of Volume One.

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## Chapter Thirty Four.

### Popetta.

The prisoner had started up, and was standing in the centre of his cell.

“Don’t be alarmed, *Signor Inglese*,” said his strange visitor, in a half whisper.

While speaking she had groped her way through the gloom, and was now so near that he felt her breath upon his cheek, while her hand was laid gently upon his shoulder.

“What is it?” he asked, starting at her touch, and slightly recoiling, though not through fear.

“Do not be alarmed,” she said soothingly: “I am not a man come to do you an injury. Only a woman. It is I, Popetta,—you remember me?”

“I do, signora; you are the wife of the chief Corvino.”

“Wife! Ah! if you’d said *slave*, it would be nearer the truth. No matter about that. It can signify nothing to you.”

A sigh, distinctly audible in the still darkness, accompanied the speech.

The captive remained silent, wondering what was to come next. She had taken her hand from off his shoulder, or rather it had slipped from it as he drew back.

“You’ll be surprised at my coming here,” she continued, speaking in the tongue and tone of a lady. “From what you have seen you will think there can be no compassion in a heart like mine. You may well think so.”

“No, no,” asseverated the captive, now really feeling surprise; “no doubt, you have been unfortunate.”

“That’s true,” she hurriedly rejoined, as if not caring to dwell upon some recollection called up by his speech. “Ignore, I am here, not to talk of the past—my past—but of *your* future.”



"Mine!"

"Yes, yours. Oh, it is fearful!"

"In what way fearful?" asked the young Englishman. "Surely, I shall soon be set free? Why need I care for a few days, or even weeks, of imprisonment?"

"*Caro signore*, you deceive yourself! It is not imprisonment, though you may find that hard enough; and harder still when *he* comes back again—brute that he is!"

Strange language for a wife to use towards her husband, thought Henry Harding.

"Yes, harder," continued she, "if the letter you have written receive no response—I mean if it bring no ransom. Tell me, signore, what did you say in that letter? Tell me all."

"I thought you were acquainted with its contents. It was dictated in your hearing, and penned in your presence."

"I know, I know; but was that all? I saw that you were unwilling to sign it. You had a reason?"

"I had."

"Some difference with your family? You are not friends with your father—am I right?"

"Something of that," answered the young Englishman, knowing no reason why he should conceal a quarrel—so far away from those whom it might concern.

"I thought so," said the woman. "And this," she continued, changing her tone to one of greater earnestness, "this quarrel may prevent your father from sending the *riscatta*."

"Possibly it may."

"Possibly it may! You treat the matter lightly; you have done so all along. I have noticed it. One cannot help admiring your courage; I cannot. Perhaps that is why I am here."

Again there was something like a sigh, which added to the surprise of the captive, something of embarrassment.

"You know not," continued Popetta, "the fate that is before you if the *riscatta* should not come."

"What fate, signora?"

"As I have said, a fearful one."

"Tell me what it is. By your words it seems to be already determined upon."

"It is determined—always determined. It is the decree of Corvino."

"Explain yourself, signora."

"First, your ears will be cut off; they will be enclosed in a letter, and sent to your father. The letter will be a renewed demand for money. And then—"

"Then?" demanded the captive, with some impatience—for the first time giving credence to the threat that had already been twice spoken by Corvino himself.

"If the money be not sent, you will be still further mutilated."

"How?"

"Signore, I cannot tell you. There are many ways. I may not mention them. Better for you if your father's answer leave no hope of a ransom. You would then escape torture, by being immediately shot!"

"Surely, signora, you are jesting with me?"

"Jesting! Ah! it is no jest. I have witnessed it once—twice—often. It is the invariable custom among these wretches with whom I have the misfortune to be associated. It is one of their laws; and will be carried out to a certainty!"

"You come to me as a friend?" inquired the captive, as if to test the sincerity of his visitor.

"I do! You may believe me."

"You have some advice to give me, signora? What is it?"

"It is that you should write again—write to your friends. You must have some friends—you the son of a great *galantuomo*, as your countryman, Ricardo, tells us you are. Write to these friends—tell them to see your father, and urge upon him the necessity of sending the ransom demanded. It is your only chance of escaping from the fate I have told you of—that is, from being fearfully mutilated, first tortured and then shot."

"Surely, there is another?" said the captive, for the first time speaking in—a tone of appeal to his strange counsellor.

"Another! If you think so, tell me what it is."

"Your favour, signora!"

"How?"

"*You* can find me the means of escaping from this prison."

"Ah! that is just possible, but not so easy. If I succeeded, it could only be by giving my life for yours! Would you wish me to do that, signora?"

"No—no!"

"Such a sacrifice would be certain. You know not how I am watched. 'Tis only by stealth, and a bribe to Tommaso, I've been able to enter here. Corvino's jealousy—ah, *Signor Inglese*, I have been deemed handsome!—*you* may not think so."

Her hand once more rested on the young Englishman's shoulder—once more to be repelled, but this time with greater gentleness. He feared to wound her self-esteem, and stir the tigress that slumbered in that darkened Italian heart. He made reply as he best could, without committing himself.

"Even were he to know of this interview," she continued, still speaking of Corvino, "by the law of our band my life would be forfeited. You see that I am ready to serve you!"

"You would have me write, then? How is it to be done? Can a letter be sent?"

"Leave that to me. Here are some sheets of paper, ink, and a pen. I have brought them with me. You can have no light now; I dare not give it you. Corvino's captives must not be made too comfortable—else they would be less urgent for their friends to set them free. When the morning sun shines in through your window, then write. Tommaso will bring you your breakfast, and take your letter in exchange. It will be my care to see that it be sent."

"Oh, thanks, signora!" exclaimed the grateful captive, seizing hold of the offered gift with an eagerness he had not hitherto shown. A new idea had come suddenly into his mind. "A thousand thanks!" he repeated; "I shall do as you say."

"*Buono notte!*" said the brigandess, putting the writing materials into his hand, at the same time pressing it with a fervour that betrayed something more than pity. "*Buono notte, galantuomo!*" she added. "Sleep without fear. If it should come to that, you may command even the life of her you have heard called *Cara Popetta.*"

Henry Harding was but too happy when she permitted him to disengage himself from her clasp; which, though scarce understood, filled him with a feeling somewhat akin to repulsion. He was happier still, when she stole silently out of his cell, and he heard the door, closing behind her.

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## Chapter Thirty Five.

### Writing under Difficulties.

As soon as the captive became convinced that his visitor was gone for good, he lay down upon the fern leaves and gave way to profound reflection—the subject, of course, being what had just passed between him and Popetta. What could be her motive for the advice thus voluntarily given? Was it a trap to betray him? It could hardly bear this construction—for what was there to betray? He was already in the power of the bandits, for life as for death. What more could they want?

"Ah!" thought he, "I see through it now! After all, it may be Corvino's doing. He may have put her up to this, to make more sure of getting the money for my ransom. He thinks that her counsel, given in this side way, will terrify me, and make me write in stronger terms to my father."

But the answer to these self-asked questions did not quite satisfy him. What need was there for any scheme of the kind on the part of the bandit chief? He had dictated the letter sent. If stronger terms had seemed necessary, he would have insisted on their insertion. The former conjecture fell through.

Then, supposing Popetta's counsel to him had been loyal, what could be her motive?

Henry Harding was yet young, and but little experienced in the ways of woman's heart. He could count but one experience, and that of a different kind. Only by some ill-understood whisperings of Nature was he guided to a suspicion of what this strange woman meant; and he cared not to continue the reflection.

For all that he eagerly seized at her suggestion. It promised to assist him in a design he had already half conceived, though without much prospect of being able to carry it into execution. It was to write to Luigi Torreani in London, and warn him of the peril in which his sister was placed. He could write to his own father all the same, and in more pressing terms—as he had been counselled; for he had now become sensible of a dread impending danger.

The behaviour of the brigands—which for more than a week he had been witnessing—had produced upon him a serious impression—altogether effacing that imbibed by contemplating the stage bandit of picturesque habiliments and courteous carriage. However he might have felt about the representative robber looking at him from the stall of a theatre, he could see there would be no trifling with the real personage, when contemplated by one completely in his power upon the summit of an Italian mountain. Everything around proclaimed the seriousness of his situation. It had become too critical for him to affect further indifference, or feel in any way contented. No longer able to sleep,

he watched anxiously for the light of morning.

No sooner did daybreak show itself through the window of his cell, than he spread out the paper with which Popetta had provided him, and commenced writing his letters. His table was the stone-paved floor; his chair the same. He wrote lying flat along the flags. There were two separate epistles. When finished they were as follows—the first to his father:—

“Dear Father,—

“By this time, I presume, you will have received a letter, which I wrote to you eight days ago, and which I have reason to believe was carried to you by special messenger. I have no doubt that its contents will have surprised and perhaps pained you. It was an appeal which, I must confess, I was very little inclined to make; but it was done at the dictation of a brigand, with a pistol held to my head, so there was no help for it. I am writing this one under different circumstances—on the floor of the cell where I am imprisoned; and without being overlooked by my jailers. I can add little to what I have said before—only that I am not now speaking under compulsion. From what I’ve lately learnt, I can assure you that my former communication—though I thought so at the time—contained no idle words. The threat made in it by the brigand chief, he means most surely to execute; and if the sum named be not sent to him, he will. The first part of his performance is to be the cropping off my ears, and forwarding them to your address. The latter he has learned from a strange source, of which I may as well inform you—from our old discharged gamekeeper, Doggy Dick, who happens to be one of his band. How the scoundrel came to be here, I cannot tell. I only know that he is here; and the most hostile to me of the whole fraternity. He remembers the thrashing I gave him, and takes care to keep me constantly in mind of it.

“Now, dear father, I have told you all about how I am situated; and if you deem it worth while to extract your unworthy son from his dangerous dilemma, send on the money. You may think 5,000 pounds rather a high figure to pay for such a life as mine. So do I; but unfortunately I am not permitted to name my own price. If it appear too much, perhaps you would not object to send the 1,000 pounds you promised I should have at your death. Then I shall make the best bargain I can with the rogues who’ve got me in pawn.

“Hoping to hear from you by return of post—this, I believe, is to go by post—I remain your closely guarded son,—

“Henry Harding.

“To General Harding,

“Beechwood Park, Bucks, England.”

Such was the letter from Henry Harding to his father. That to his friend Luigi was shorter, though perhaps more impressive in its suggestions. It ran as follows:—

“Dear Luigi,

“I have only time to say three words to you. I am a prisoner to a band of brigands—the band of Corvino, of whom, if I mistake not, I have heard you speak. The place is in the Neapolitan mountains, about forty miles from Rome, and twenty from your native town. I saw your sister while on my way through it as a captive. I did not know her at the time; but I have since learnt something I almost hesitate to tell you. It must be told, however; and it is for that I write you this letter. *Lucetta is in danger—the brigand chief has designs upon her!* I learnt it by a conversation between two of the band, whom I chanced to overhear. I need not add more. You will best know how to act; and there is no time to be lost. God speed and guide you!

“Yours,

“Henry Harding.”

The letters were ready for the *post*, long before Tommaso brought in the breakfast.

Without saying a word he slipped them into the breast pocket of his coat, and carried them away with him.

That same night they were on board the mail steamer on the way from Civita Vecchia to Marseilles.

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## Chapter Thirty Six.

### A Short Trial.

The brigands returned from their raid two days earlier than they had been expected.

The captive became aware of their arrival by the increased clamour outside. On peering through his cell window, he saw the men who had been upon the expedition. They were all in ill-humour, looking sulky, and cursing beyond their usual quantity. They had been unsuccessful in the raid—having found *soldiers* in the district into which it had been made. They had, moreover, heard a rumour, that a combined force, both from the Roman and Neapolitan territory, was marching upon their mountain retreat.

The captive could hear them talking of treason. He caught sight of Corvino in front of his window. Something special seemed to have enraged the chief. He was swearing at Popetta, and calling her foul names in presence of his

followers.

One of the other women—a sort of rival in the regards of the ruffian—was standing by, and appearing to act as instigator. She talked as if she was bringing some accusation against the *sposa* of the *capo*.

The prisoner could see that Popetta was in trouble, though he had no clue to the cause. They talked so fast—several clamouring at the same time—that it was impossible for him, with his slight knowledge of Italian, to make out much of what was said.

Soon the colloquy assumed a different phase, Corvino separating from the crowd, and, along with two or three others, coming towards the cell. In an instant the door was dashed open, and the brigand chief stepped inside the dismal apartment.

“So, signore,” he cried, hissing the words through his teeth, “I understand you’ve been very comfortable during my absence—plenty to eat and drink—*rocatti*, *confetti*, cordials—the best of everything! Ah! and a companion, too, in your solitude! No doubt, a pleasant companion? I hope you both enjoyed yourselves. Ha, ha, ha!”

The laugh fell upon the ears of the captive with a fearful significance. It boded evil either to himself, or Popetta, or both.

“May I ask what do you mean, Captain Corvino?” coolly inquired the young Englishman.

“Oh! how innocent you are, my beardless lamb—my smooth-faced Adonis. What do I mean? Ha, ha, ha!”

And again the cell resounded with his fierce, exultant laughter.

“*Cospetto!*” cried the chief, suddenly changing tone, as his eye fell upon a white object lying in the corner of the cell; “what’s this? *Una lettera!* And *carta bianca!* And here, pen and ink! So, so, signore! you’ve been carrying on a correspondence? Bring him out to the light!” he vociferated. “Bring everything!”

And with a fierce oath he rushed into the open air, one of his followers dragging the captive after him. Another carried the sheet of paper—surplus of the supply left by Popetta—as also the ink-horn and pen.

The whole band had by this time gathered upon the ground.

“Comrades!” cried the *capo*, “there’s been treason in our absence. See what we’ve found. Paper, pen, and ink, in the cell of our prisoner. And, look—on his fingers the stain! He’s been writing letters! What could they have been about but to betray us? Examine him. See if they be still upon his person!”

The search was instantly made—extending to every pocket of the prisoner’s dress, every fold where a letter might be concealed. One was brought to light, but evidently not of recent writing. It was the letter of introduction to the father of Luigi Torreani.

“To whom is it addressed?” asked the chief, snatching it from the hands of his satellite.

“*Diavolo!*” he exclaimed, on reading the superscription. “Here’s a correspondence unexpected!”

Without further delay he pulled the epistle out of its envelope, and commenced making himself master of the contents. He did not communicate them to the bystanders; but the expression that passed over his countenance told them that the letter contained something that strangely interested him. It was like the grim smile of the tiger, who feels that the prey has been already secured, and lies helpless within reach of his claws.

“So, signore!” he exclaimed, once more bending his eyes upon the young Englishman. “You told me you had no friends in Italy. *Una menzogna* that was. Rich friends you have—powerful friends. The chief magistrate of a town, with,” he satirically whispered, placing his lips close to the captive’s ear, “with a very pretty daughter! What a pity you did not have an opportunity to present your letter of introduction. Never mind; you may make her acquaintance yet—soon, perhaps, and here among the mountains. That will be all the more romantic, *signor pittore.*”

The whispered insinuation, as also the satirical tone in which it was made, passed like a poisoned shaft through the heart of Henry Harding. Every hour, since the first of his captivity, his interest conceived for the sister of Luigi Torreani had been growing stronger, while that hitherto felt for Belle Mainwaring had passed altogether out of his mind.

Stung by the speeches of the brigand, he made no reply. Anything he could have said would have served no purpose, even had there been opportunity to say it. But there was not. The tormentor thought not of listening to any response from his prisoner; and, without waiting for one, he continued:—

“*Compagnos!*” cried he, addressing himself to his band, “you have here before you the proofs of treason. No wonder the soldiers are gathering upon our track. It remains for you to discover who have been the traitors.”

“Yes, yes!” cried a score of voices. “The traitors! Who are they? Let us know that, and we’ll settle the score with them!”

“Our prisoner here,” continued the chief, “has written a letter—as you can all see for yourselves. It has been despatched, too: since it is not upon his person. To whom has it been sent? Who carried it? Who supplied him with pen, ink, and paper? These are the questions to be considered.”

“Who was left to keep guard over him?” inquired one of the men.

"Tommaso!" answered several.

"Where is Tommaso?" shouted a score of voices.

"I am here!" responded the brigand who bore that name.

"Answer us then. Did you do this?"

"Do what?"

"Furnish the writing materials to our prisoner?"

"No," firmly replied Tommaso.

"You need not waste your time questioning him," interposed a voice, recognised as that of Popetta. "It was I who furnished them."

"Yes," said the rival brigandess, speaking aside to several members of the band, "not only found them, but carried them to the cell herself."

"*Tutti!*" cried the chief, in a voice of thunder, that stilled the murmurs produced by this communication. "For what purpose did you supply them, Cara Popetta?"

"For the common good," replied the woman, seemingly with the intent to give justification for what she had done.

"How?" shouted a score of voices.

"*Cospetto!*" exclaimed the accused, "the thing is simple enough."

"Explain it! Explain it!"

"*Buono! buono!* Listen, and I will. Well, like yourselves, I want to procure the *riscatta*. I didn't think the *Inglese* would get it for us. The letter directed by him wasn't strong enough. While you were gone, having nothing else to think of, I prevailed upon the *galantuomo* to write another. What harm was there in that?"

"It was to his father, then?" asked one of the spokesmen.

"Of course it was," replied Popetta, with a scornful inclination of the head.

"How was it sent?"

"To the *posta* at Rome. The young man knew how to address it."

"Who carried it to Rome?"

To this question there was no answer. Popetta had turned aside, and pretended not to hear.

"*Compagnos!*" cried the chief, "make inquiry, and find out who of those left behind has been absent while we were gone."

A man was pointed out by the accuser of Popetta. He was a greenhorn—one of the recent recruits of the band, not yet admitted to the privileges of the "*giro*." The cross-questioning to which he was submitted soon produced its effect. Notwithstanding the promise of secrecy given to her who had selected him for a messenger, he confessed all. Unfortunately for Popetta, the fellow had been taught to read, and knew enough arithmetic to tell that he carried *two* letters instead of *one*. He was able to say that one was for the father of the prisoner. So far, Popetta had spoken the truth. It was the second letter that condemned her. That had been directed to Signor Torreani.

"Hear that!" cried several of the brigands, as soon as the name was announced, and without listening to the address. "The Signor Torreani! Why, it is the *sindico* of Val di Orno! No wonder we're being beset with soldiers! Every one knows that Torreani has never been our friend!"

"Besides," remarked the brigandess who had started the accusation, "why such friendship to a prisoner? Why has he had all the *confetti*, *rosalio*, the best things in the place—to say nothing of the company of the signorina herself? Depend upon it, *compagnos*, there has been treasonable conspiracy!"

Poor Popetta! her time was come. Her husband—if such he was—had found the opportunity long wanted—not to protect, but get rid of her. He could now do so with perfect impunity—even without blame. With the cunning of a tiger he had approached the dread climax; with the ferocity of a tiger he seized upon the opportunity.

"*Compagnos!*" appealed he, in a tone pretended to be sad; "I need not tell you how hard it is to hear these charges against one who is dear to me—my own wife. And it is harder to think they have been proved. But we are banded together by a law that cannot be broken—the law of self-preservation. That must be mutual among us. To infringe this law would lead to our dissolution—our ruin—and we have sworn to one another, that he, or she, who does aught contrary to it, shall suffer death! Death, though it be brother, sister, wife, or mistress. I, whom you have chosen for your chief, shall prove myself true. By this may you believe me."

While in the act of speaking the last words, the brigand sprang forward, until he stood by the side of his accused wife—Popetta. Her cry of terror was quickly succeeded by one of a different intonation. It was a shrill scream of agony, gradually subdued to the expiring accents of death, as the woman sank back upon the grass, with a poniard

transfixed in her heart!

The scene that followed calls for no description. There was sign of neither weeping, nor woe, in that savage assemblage. There may have been pity; but if there was, it did not declare itself. The murderous chieftain strode quietly away to his quarters, and there sought concealment. He was too hardened to have remorse. Some of his subordinates removed from the spot the ghastly evidence of his crime—burying the body of the brigandess in a ravine close by. But not until they had stripped it of its glittering adornments—the spoils of many a fair maiden of the Campagna.

The prisoner was carried back to his cell, and there left to reflect on the tragedy just enacted—on the fate of poor Popetta. To his excited imagination it appeared but the foreshadowing of a still more fearful fate in store for himself.

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## Chapter Thirty Seven.

### A Tough Amputation.

During three days succeeding the tragical event recorded, there was tranquillity in the bandit quarters—that gloomy quiet that succeeds some terrible occurrence, alike telling that it has occurred.

So far as Henry Harding saw, the chief kept himself indoors—as if doing decent penance for the brutal crime he had committed.

On the fourth day there transpired an event which roused the rendezvous to its usual activity. There was an excitement among the men, under which the late sanguinary scene was likely to be buried in oblivion.

A little before sunrise, the signals of the sentinel announced the approach of a messenger; and shortly afterwards a man came into the quarters. He was in peasant garb—the same who had carried the requisition on the landlord of the lodgings, and brought back the three-score scudi. This time he was the bearer of a dispatch of somewhat portentous appearance—a large envelope, enclosing a letter, with still another inside. It was addressed to the brigand chief, and to him delivered direct. The captive knew of the arrival of the messenger by much excited talking outside, which also proclaimed it to be an event of importance. He only learned that there was a letter, when the brigand chief burst angrily into his cell, holding the opened epistle in his hand.

“So!” cried the latter in fierce vociferation. “So, *Signor Inglese*, you’ve quarrelled with your father, have you? Well, that won’t help you. It only shows, that for being such an undutiful son you deserve a little punishment. If you’d been a better boy, your worthy parent might have acted differently, and saved you your ears. As it is, you are about to lose them. Console yourself with the thought that they are not going out of the family. They shall be cropped off with the greatest care, and sent under cover to your father. Bring him out, comrades! Let us have light for this delicate amputation.”

Doggy Dick was ordered by the chief to go into the house for a knife; while two others retained the captive in their grasp, holding him as if to keep him steady for an operation. A third knocked his hat from his head, while a fourth pulled his long brown curls up over his crown, leaving his ears naked for the knife. All seemed to take delight in what they were doing, the women as well as the men—more especially she who had been instrumental in causing the death of Popetta. There was anger in the eyes of all; they were spited at not receiving the *riscatta*. The renegade had told an exaggerated story of the wealth of the captive’s father, and they had founded high hopes upon it. They charged their disappointment to the prisoner, and were paying him for it by gibes and rough usage. They could see his ears cut off without a single sentiment of pity or remorse.

In a few seconds the knife-blade was gleaming against his cheek. It was raised to the left ear, which in another instant would have been severed from his head, when the captive, by a superhuman wrench, released his left hand, and instinctively applied it over the spot. It was a mere convulsive effort, caused by the horror of his situation. It would have been utterly unavailing, and he knew it. He had only made the movement under the impulse of a physical instinct. And yet it had the effect of preserving the threatened member.

Corvino, who stood near superintending the amputation, uttered a loud shout, at the same time commanding the amputator to desist. The cry was called forth at sight of the uplifted hand, or rather the little finger.

“*Diavolo!*” he exclaimed, springing forward and seizing the captive by the wrist. “You’ve done yourself a service, signore—you’ve saved your ears, at least for this time. Here’s a present for your father much more appropriate. Perhaps it will point out to him the line of his duty, which he has shown himself so inclined to neglect. ‘The hand to guard the head’—that’s the motto among us. We shall permit you to adopt it to a proportionate extent, by allowing your little finger to be the protector of your ears. Ha! ha! ha!”

The brigands echoed the laughter of their chief, without exactly comprehending the witticism that had called it forth. They were soon enlightened as to the significance of the jest. The scarred finger was before their eyes. They saw it was an old cicatrice, sure to be recognised by any father who had taken the slightest interest in the physical condition of his son. This was the explanation of Corvino’s interference to stay the cutting off of their captive’s ears.

“We don’t wish to be unnecessarily cruel,” continued the chief in a tone of mock mercy; “no more do we wish to spoil such a pretty countenance as that which has made conquest of Popetta, and might have done the same for,”—here he leant close to his captive, and hissed spitefully into his ear—“*Lucetta.*”

The cutting off of one ear, of both of them, would not have given Henry Harding so much pain as the sting of that cruel whisper. It thrilled him to his heart’s core. Never in all his life had he felt, as at that moment, the despair, the

absolute horror of helplessness. His tongue was still free, and he could not restrain it. He would speak, though he knew the words might cost him his life.

“Brute!” he vociferated, fixing his eye full upon the brigand chief; “if I had you upon fair ground, I’d soon change your sham exultation to an appeal for mercy. You dare not give me the chance. If you did, I would show these ruffians around you that you’re not fit to be their captain. You killed your wife to make way for another. Not you, madame,” he continued, bowing derisively to the betrayer of Popetta, “but another, whom God preserve from ever appearing in your place. You may kill me—cut me into pieces, if you will—but, depend upon it, my death will not go unavenged. England, my country, shall hear of it. Though you now fancy yourselves secure, you will be tracked into the very heart of your mountain fastnesses—hunted up, and shot down like dogs—like wolves, as you are—That’s what will come to every one of you.”

Ha was not allowed to proceed. Three-score angry voices breaking in upon his impetuous speech put an end to it.

“What care we for your country,” cried they. “England, indeed!”

“Damn England!” shouted Doggy Dick. “*Inglaterra al inferno!*” vociferated others. “France and Italia the same! The Pope, too, if you choose to throw him in. What can they do to us? We are beyond *their* power; but you are in *ours*, signore. Let us prove it to him!”

A score of stiletos, suddenly and simultaneously drawn, were gleaming in the eyes of the captive as he listened to these words. He had half repented his hasty speech—believing it would be his last—when he saw the brigand chief interfering. He saw this with surprise: for Corvino had quailed before his challenge with a look of the most resentful malice. His surprise was of short duration. It ended on hearing what the chief had to say.

“Hold!” shouted he, in a voice of thunder. “Simpletons that you are, to care for the talk of a cur like this. Your own captive, too! Would you kill the goose that is to lay us golden eggs—a nest of them worth thirty thousand scudi? You’re mad, *compagnos*. Leave me to manage the matter. Let us first get the eggs, which, by the grace of God and the help of the Madonna, we shall yet extract from the parental bird, and then—”

“Yes, yes!” cried several, interrupting this figurative speech of their leader; “let’s get the eggs! Let’s make the old bird lay them! Our comrade Ricardo here says he’s rich as King Croesus.”

“That do I,” interposed Doggy Dick. “And I should know something about the eggs he’s got, since once on a time I was his gamekeeper.”

At this *jeu d’esprit*, which seemed rather dull to his Italian audience, though better understood by the captive, the renegade laughed immoderately.

“Enough,” cried Corvino; “we’re wasting our time, and perhaps,” he added, with a ferocious leer, “the patience of our friend the artist. Now, signore! we shall leave that handsome head unshorn of its auricular appendages. The little finger of your left hand is all we require at present. If it don’t prove strong enough to extract the eggs we’ve been speaking of, we shall try the whole hand. If that too fail, we must give up the idea of having an omelette.”

A yell of laughter hailed this sally.

“Then,” continued the jocular ruffian, “we shan’t have done with you. To prove to the grand *Inglese*, your father, that we are not spiteful, and how far we Italians can outdo him in generosity, we shall send him a calf’s head, with skin, ears, and everything attached to it.”

Boars of laughter succeeded this fearful speech, and the stiletos were returned to their respective sheaths.

“Now,” commanded the chief, once more calling the knife into requisition, “off with his finger. You needn’t go beyond the second joint. Cut off by the knuckle, which I’ve heard is in great request among his countrymen. Don’t spoil such a pretty hand. Leave him a stump to fill out the finger of his glove; when that is on, no one will be the wiser of what’s wanting. You see, signore,” concluded the wretch, in a taunting tone, “I don’t wish to damage your personal appearance any more than is absolutely necessary for our purpose. I know you are proud of it; and considering what has happened with Popetta, I should be sorry at any mutilation that might debar you from a like success with Lucetta.”

The last speech was delivered in a satanic whisper, again hissed into the ear of the captive. It elicited no reply; nor did the young Englishman make either remark, or resistance, when the cruel executioner caught hold of his hand, and severed from it the little finger by a clean cut of the knife-blade!

The amputation was the cue for terminating this strange scene. As soon as it was over, the captive was conducted back to his gloomy chamber, and left to the contemplation of a hand rendered unsymmetrical for life.

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## Chapter Thirty Eight.

### The Family Solicitor.

Though living but an hour, by rail, from London, General Harding rarely visited the metropolis more than once a year. Once, however, it was his custom to go—less to keep up his acquaintance with the great world, than with his old Indian associates met at the “Oriental.” He would stay at some hotel for a couple of weeks—spending most of his time in the streets or at the club—and then return to his retirement among the Chilterns, with *souvenirs* sufficient to last him for the remainder of the year. During this annual sojourn in the city, he did not waste his time in mere

gossiping with his ancient comrades in arms. He gave some portion of it to the management of affairs connected with his estate; which, of course, included a call upon his solicitors in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The time of his annual visit to the metropolis was in the "season," when all London, and a goodly number of its "country cousins" are in town. The "House" is then sitting, concerts are the rage, and the "Row" affords its varied attractions. It was not any of these allurements, however, that called the old Indian officer from his country seat; but simply because he would then meet, men in London who, like himself, could not be encountered there at any other period of the year.

It was on one of the earliest days of the London season, when the dark-visaged messenger—who declared himself to have come from the dominions of the Pope—had made his appearance at Beechwood Park; and a few days later General Harding made his annual trip to London. This visit to the metropolis had nothing to do with the strange communication he had received through that very strange individual. It remained in his mind only from the painful impression it had made. He grieved that his son could be capable of practising such deception. Otherwise he thought very little about the matter, or, if so, it was not with a belief that there was any truth in the story about brigands. He believed it to be a very skilful concoction; and it was this that gave him pain—revealing on the part of his son a singular talent for chicanery.

How Henry had spent his time during the twelve months that had elapsed he had not the slightest idea. He had not heard a word of him, or from him. He had written once to his solicitor to make an inquiry; but it was simply whether the lawyer had seen him. The answer had been "Yes." Henry Harding had called at the solicitor's office, some twelve months before. There was nothing said about the payment of the thousand pounds; for the question had not been asked in the General's letter; and the formal old lawyer, habituated to laconic exactness, had limited the terms of his response to such inquiries as had been made.

Henry, in his parting letter, had spoken of going abroad. This would to some extent account for his not being heard of in London; and there was no reason why he should not find his way to Rome, or any other Continental capital. The General had the idea that it would serve him for a tour of travel, and, perhaps, keep him out of worse company at home. He would have been satisfied enough to hear of his son being in Rome, but for the contents of that strange letter that brought the information. In it there was proof that, if not actually in the hands of brigands, he had fallen into company almost, if not altogether, as bad.

Such were the reflections of the General as he meandered through the streets of the metropolis; reminded of his son's existence only by knowing that he had been there; but not with any expectation of meeting him. Henry, he no longer doubted, was in the city of Rome, and not among the Neapolitan mountains, as the letter alleged. The supposed falsehood also much embittered his father's remembrance of him.

After having made the rounds of the clubs, the General, as usual, called on his solicitors—"Lawson and Son," Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"Have you heard anything of my son since I last wrote you?" he asked. The question was put after his other business had been transacted.

"No," said Lawson the elder, to whom the inquiry was directed, Lawson the younger having gone out of the way.

"I have had a singular letter from him—there it is—you are at liberty to read it; you may put it among my papers. It's a document that has a good deal grieved me. I don't wish it lying in my own desk."

Mr Lawson adjusted his spectacles; and perused the epistle that had been dictated by the brigand chief.

"This *is* strange, General! How did it reach you?" he asked on finishing. "There does not appear to be a postmark."

"That is perhaps the strangest part of it; it came *by hand*, and was delivered to me in my own house."

"By whom?"

"An odd-looking creature of a Jew, or Italian, or something of the kind. He proclaimed himself to be one of your own craft, Mr Lawson. A *procuratore*, he said; which I believe in the Italian lingo means an attorney, or solicitor."

"What answer did you send your son?"

"I sent no answer at all; I didn't believe a word of what was in the letter. I saw, and so did my son Nigel, that it was a scheme to extract money. Nigel, I believe, answered it."

"Ah! your son Nigel answered this letter. What did he write, General? You will excuse me for asking the question."

"Of course, I'll excuse you. But I can't tell you for all that. I don't know what was in my eldest son's letter; something, I think, to the effect, that I saw through his deception, and also a word to reproach him for the attempt at playing such a trick upon his own father. Nigel thought this might have some effect on him—perhaps shame him, if there is any shame left; though I fear, poor fellow, he has fallen into bad hands, and it will take a more severe lesson to reclaim him."

"You don't believe, then, that he has fallen into the hands of brigands?"

"Brigands! Bah! Surely, Mr Lawson, you're not serious in thinking such a thing possible—with your experience?"

"It's just my experience, General, that suggests not only its *possibility*, but its *probability*. It is now some years since, during one of my vacations, I made what is usually called the Italian tour. I learnt, while in Italy, some strange facts about the bandits of Naples and Rome. I could not have believed what I heard, but for a circumstantial testimony almost equal to the evidence of my own eyes. It was about a gentleman having fallen into their clutches, and who



had to pay ransom to get clear. Indeed, it was by the merest accident I escaped myself being taken prisoner at the same time. I owed the immunity to the lucky break-down of a post-chaise, in which I was travelling over the horrid roads of the Romagna. The trouble caused my return to Rome; whereas, had I gone five miles farther, the house of Lawson and Son, Lincoln's Inn Fields, might have had to pay ransom for my person—just as this that is now demanded for that of your son."

"Demanded for my son! Pooh! pooh! Demanded *by* my son, you mean!"

"I do not believe it, General. I am sorry to say I have reason to differ with you."

"But I do believe it. I have not told you how he left home—in a 'huff' about a girl he wanted to get married to. I was determined he shouldn't, and made use of a trick to prevent it. I shall some day tell you of this trick. It deceived a very tricky party—a pair of them for that matter. It was then I wrote to you to give him the *thousand pounds*. He's spent it, I suppose, upon idle vagabonds like himself, who have put him up to this thing to get money. It's a cunning scheme, but it won't succeed."

"Wrote to me to give him a thousand pounds!" exclaimed the old solicitor, half starting from his chair, and pulling the spectacles from his nose. "What do you mean, General Harding?"

"What *should* I mean, Mr Lawson? I mean the thousand pounds I directed you to draw from the bank, and pay over to my son Henry, whenever he should call for it."

"When?"

"When! About twelve months ago. Let me see. Yes. Just twelve months ago. It was only a week or so after I saw you on my last visit to London. You told me in your letter, that he had been to your office about that time."

"I did, and so he had—twice, I think, he called—but not to receive a thousand pounds, or money of any amount. He did not ask for it. If I remember aright, he only called to inquire if there was any message sent him by you. I did not see him myself—my head clerk did. He can tell what passed with your son. Shall I summon him?"

"Do so," said the General, almost beside himself with astonishment. "Damme! it's very strange—very strange, damme!"

A hand-bell was touched, and in an instant the head clerk came into the room.

"Jennings," said the solicitor, "do you remember General Harding's son—his younger son, Henry—you know him, I believe—having called here about twelve months ago?"

"Oh, yes!" responded the clerk; "I remember it very well. It is just twelve months ago. I can find the entry if you wish. He called twice—the second time a day or two after the first. Both visits were entered in the 'call book.'"

"Bring in the call book," commanded Mr Lawson.

The clerk hurried off into the front office, leaving General Harding once more alone with his solicitor.

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## Chapter Thirty Nine.

### The Call Book.

The General could no longer keep his seat. At the unexpected information communicated by Mr Lawson, he had started up, and commenced pacing the floor in short irregular strides, at intervals exclaiming, "Strange, damme!"

"If I had known this," he said more continuously—"If I had known this, all might yet have been well. Never got the thousand pounds, you say?"

"Never a penny of it, from me."

"I'm so glad to hear it—so glad!"

"True, you should be. It's no doubt so much money saved; that is, if you think it might have been spent foolishly."

"Nothing of that kind, sir; nothing of the sort!"

"Pardon me, General, I did not mean—"

The lawyer's apology was interrupted by the re-entrance of his clerk carrying a large volume, on whose covering of vellum were the words "Call Book."

Mr Lawson took hold of the book, glad to escape from further explanation.

"There it is," said he, after turning over a number of pages. "Two entries of different dates, both relating to your son. The first on the 4th day of April; the other on the 6th. Shall I read them, General, or will you look at them yourself?"

"Read them to me."

The solicitor, readjusting his spectacles, read aloud—

"April 4th, half-past 11 a.m.—Called at office, Mr Henry Harding, son of General Harding, of Beechwood Park, county Bucks. Business—to ask if any communication had been received from his father intended for self. Answer—None received."

"April 6th, half-past 11 a.m.—Called again, Mr Henry Harding. Same question put, same answer given, as on April 4th. Young gentleman said nothing, but went away dissatisfied."

"Of course, General," said the lawyer apologetically, "we are obliged to make these remarks in the way of our profession. Are these the only entries, Mr Jennings—I mean that have reference to Mr Henry Harding?"

"There are no others in the book, sir—except one made six months ago, relating to a letter received from Mr Harding's father. Shall I find it, sir?"

"No, that is not necessary; you can take the book away."

"And so you never paid my son Henry that thousand pounds?" interrogated the General, after the clerk had gone out.

"Never—not a thousand pence; no money of any kind, as you see by the memoranda. He never asked for any. Of course, if he had done so, I should have been obliged to refuse him until I received your order. A thousand pounds, General, is too large a sum to be handed over to a young man—a minor, as your son then was—simply at his own request."

"But, Mr Lawson, you astonish me still more. Do you mean to tell me you never received any letter authorising you to give him a cheque for that amount?"

"Never heard of such a letter. Never, until this moment."

"Damme, this *is* strange! He may be among the brigands, after all."

"I should be sorry if it were so."

"And I should be glad of it."

"Oh! General?"

"No, Lawson; you don't understand me. I'd be glad of it for a good reason. It would prove that the boy might not be so bad, after all. I thought he had spent the thousand pounds. Is it possible there can be any truth in this letter from Rome? Damme, I hope it *is* true—every word of it!"

"But, General; you would not wish it true that your son is a captive in the hands of banditti?"

"Of course I would. Better that than the other. I hope he is. I'd willingly pay the five thousand pounds to think so. How shall we find it out? What's to be done?"

"What became of the messenger—my professional brother from the dominions of the Pope?"

"Oh, him! He's gone back, I suppose, to those who sent him—brigands, or whatever they were. I came nigh kicking him out of the house. I should have done so, or else given him in charge to the police, but refrained—solely to avoid creating a scandal. Think, Mr Lawson, what's to be done. I suppose there's no immediate danger?"

"I'm not so sure of that," answered the lawyer reflectingly; "these Italian bandits are cruel ruffians. There is no knowing how far they may go in execution of their threat. Did the man leave no clue by which he could be communicated with—no address?"

"None whatever. He only said I should hear from my son again, as the letter says. My God! they surely don't mean to carry out the threat it contains?"

"Let us hope not."

"But what had I better do? Apply to the Foreign Secretary; get him to write to Rome, and make a demand on the Pope's Government—that is, if the story of my boy's captivity be true?"

"Certainly, General; of course. But would all that not be too late? When did you get the letter?"

"Eight days ago. You will see by the date, that it has been written more than two weeks."

"Then I fear that any interference of the Government—either ours or that of Rome—would be too late to anticipate the steps that may have been taken, in the event of their having received your answer—I mean that sent by your son Nigel. There appears to be no alternative but wait till you get another communication from them. That will, at least, give you the means of writing to your son, and forwarding the ransom required. You could proceed with the other matter, all the same. Lay your case before the Government, and see what can be done."

"I shall set about it this very day," said the General. "This very day shall I go down to Downing Street. Can you go with me, Mr Lawson?"

"Of course," replied the solicitor, rising from his desk and putting his spectacles into their case. "I'm at your service, General," he added, as they walked towards the door; "I hope, after all, we shall not be called upon to have any dealings with brigands."

"And I hope we *shall*," returned the General, striking his Malacca cane upon the pavement; "better my boy be a captive of brigands than the plotter of a deception, such as I have been reproaching him with. May God forgive me, but I'd rather see his ears in the next letter sent me, than believe him capable of that."

To this fervent speech from a father's heart the solicitor made no answer; and the two walked side by side in silence.

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## Chapter Forty.

### A Furniture Picture.

The man who can make his way out of Lincoln's Inn Fields—whether to the east, west, north, or south—without travelling through some intricate courts and passages, must do it by mounting up into the air on wings, or ascending by means of a balloon. A splendid square—one of the largest and finest in the metropolis—gay with green trees, and showing some worn *façades* that might shame much of our modern architecture, it is nevertheless inaccessible, except by the dirtiest lanes in all London. Almost exclusively inhabited by lawyers who have attained to the highest eminence in their profession, these shabby approaches are emblematic of the means by which some of them have reached it.

In the purlieus that surround this great square, art struggles feebly for existence. Here and there is a picture shop, where the artist finds immortality in a cob-webbed window, or *al fresco* on stone flags outside the door. There is a particular passage where his works may be seen displayed with a conspicuousness, that if granted them by the rulers of the Royal Academy, fortune would be sure to follow.

Through this passage General Harding and his solicitor had to make their way, for the purpose of reaching the Strand, *en route* to Downing Street.

In this passage there is a woman, whose sharp glance and sharper voice has a tendency to keep it clear. On seeing the one, or hearing the other, the wayfarer will be disposed to hurry on. She is the proprietress of a furniture shop, of which the pictures in question are an adjunct—being usually what are called in the trade "furniture pictures."

Neither General Harding, nor his solicitor had any idea of stopping to examine them. They were hurrying on through the passage, when one, so conspicuously placed that it could not escape observation, caught the attention of the old officer, causing him to halt with a suddenness that not only surprised his staid companion, but almost jerked the lawyer off his legs.

"What is it, General?" asked Mr Lawson. "Good God!" gasped the General. "Look there! Do you see that picture?"

"I do," answered the astonished solicitor; "a sporting scene—two young fellows out shooting, accompanied by a gamekeeper. What do you see in it to surprise you?"

"Surprise me!" echoed the General; "the word is not strong enough. *It astounds me!*"

"I do not understand you, General," said the lawyer, glancing towards the old soldier's face to see whether he was still in his senses.

"The picture appears to be of very moderate merit—painted by some young hand, I take it; though certainly there is spirit in the conception, and the scene—what is it? One sportsman has his knife in his hand, and looks as if he intended to stab the dog with it; while the other seems protecting the poor brute. I can't make out the meaning."

"*I can*," said the General, with a sigh, deeply breathed, while his frame seemed convulsed by some terrible agitation. "My God!" he continued, "it cannot be a coincidence; and yet how could that scene be here—here upon canvas? Surely I am dreaming!"

Once more Mr Lawson looked into the General's face, doubtful whether he was not dreaming—either that or demented.

"No!" exclaimed the old soldier, bringing his cane down upon the pavement with an emphatic stroke. "There can be no mistake about it; it is the same scene. Alas! too real. Those figures, Mr Lawson, are portraits, or intended to be so. The costumes alone would enable me to recognise them. He, holding the knife, is my eldest son, Nigel, just as he was some five years ago; the other is Henry. The man in the background is, or was, my gamekeeper—since become a poacher and escaped convict. What can it mean? Who can have heard of the occurrence? Who painted the picture?"

"Perhaps," suggested the solicitor, "this person can tell us something about it. I say, my good woman, how came you by this?"

"That picture ye mean? How should I come by it, but by buyin' it? It's a first-class paintin'; only thirty shillin', an' 'ud look spicy set in a frame. Dirt cheap, gentlemen."

"Do you know who you bought it from?"

"In course I do. Oh, you needn't be afeerd of its bein' honestly come by, if that's what you're drivin' at. I know all about its pedigree, for I know the painter as painted it; he's a regular artist, he is."

"What sort of a man is he?"

"He's a young un; they're both young uns, for there be two on 'em. One appear to be a furrener—a Italyin, I think.

The other ain't so old—he's English, I should say. Don't know which paints the pictures. Maybe both takes a hand at it, for both brings 'em to sell. I had some more o' them, but they're sold. I dare say the old un's the one as is the artist."

"Do you know his name?" asked the General, with an eagerness that caused the woman to look suspiciously at him, and hesitate about making reply. "I am interested," he continued, "in whoever painted this picture. I admire it, and will buy it from you. I'll take more from the same hand, if you can furnish me with the name and address."

"Oh, that's it. Well, then, the black complected chap—that is the old un—his name is a furren' one, an' I've heard it, but don't recollect it. The other's name I never heard, an' as for him, I 'spect he's gone away. I ha'n't seen him here lately—not for months."

"Do you know the address of either—where do they live?"

"In course I do. I've gone there to fetch away some pictures. It's close by here—just the other side of the Fields. I can give it you on one of my bill-heads."

"Do so," said the General. "Here is the thirty shillings for the picture. You can send it round to Messrs Lawson and Son, Number —, Lincoln's Inn Fields."

The woman took the money, praising the picture throughout the transaction, by characterising it as "dirt cheap," and worth twice as much as she asked for it. Then scratching out with an indifferent pen upon a soiled scrap of paper the promised address, she handed it to her purchaser, who, folding it between his fingers, hurried off out of the passage, dragging Mr Lawson along with him. Instead of going on towards Downing Street, he turned sharply round, and re-traversed the court in the opposite direction.

"Where now, General?" inquired the solicitor.

"To see the painter," was the reply. "He may throw some light on this strange, this mysterious affair. It still appears to me like a dream. Perhaps he can interpret it."

He could have done so, had he been found. But he was not. The address, as given by the woman, was correct enough. The General and his companion easily found the place—a mean-looking lodging-house in one of the back streets of High Holborn. Three days before they would have found the artist in it—whose description answered to that given by the picture-dealer, and was recognised by the keeper of the lodging-house. Three days before he had gone off in a great hurry—altogether out of London, as his former landlady supposed. She came to this conclusion, from the fact that he had sold off all his pictures and things to a Jew dealer at a great sacrifice. She did not know his name, or where he had gone to. He had settled his account, and that was all she seemed to care about.

Had she ever had another lodger, and associate of the one she spoke of? Yes, there had been another—also a painter—a younger one. He was English; but she did not know his name either, as the foreigner paid the bill for both. The young one had gone off long ago—several months—and the foreigner had since kept the apartments himself. This was all the woman could tell, beyond giving a description of the younger artist.

"My son Henry!" said General Harding, as he stepped forth into the street. "He has been living in these wretched rooms, when I thought he was running riot on that thousand pounds! I fear, Mr Lawson, I have been outrageously wronging him."

"It is not too late to make reparation, General."

"I hope not—I hope not. Let us hasten on to Downing Street."

The Foreign Office was reached; the Foreign Secretary seen; and the usual promises given to interfere with all despatch in an affair of such evident urgency.

Nothing more could be done for the time; and General Harding set out for his country seat, to prepare for any eventuality that might arise. He was now ready to send the ransom, if he only knew where to send it; and in hopes that a Roman letter might have arrived during his absence, he had hurried home directly after his visit to Downing Street. In this hope he was not disappointed. On reaching Beechwood he found several letters upon his table that had been for several days there awaiting him. There were two that bore the Roman postmark, though of different dates. One he recognised in the handwriting of his son Henry. He opened and read it.

"Thank heaven!" he exclaimed, as he came to its close. "Thank heaven, he is safe and well."

The second foreign letter was conspicuous, both in size and shape. It carried a multiplicity of stamps, required by its greater weight. The General trembled as he took hold of it. Its "feel" told that it contained an enclosure. His hands felt feeble as he tore open the envelope. There was still another wrapper with something substantial inside—something in the shape of a packet. The covering was at length stripped off, and revealed to the sight an object of ashen colour, somewhat cylindrically shaped, and nearly two inches in length. It was a finger cut off at the second joint, and showing an old scar that, ran longitudinally to the end of the nail.

A cry escaped from the lips of the horrified father, as in the ghastly enclosure he recognised the *finger of his son!*

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## Chapter Forty One.

### A Terrible Threat.

It would be impossible to depict the expression on General Harding's face, or the horror that thrilled through his heart, as he stood holding his son's finger in his hand. His eyes looked as if about to start from their sockets, while his frame shook as though he had become suddenly palsied. Not for long did he keep hold of the ghastly fragment; and as he attempted to lay it on the table, it dropped out of his now nerveless grasp.

It was some time before he could command sufficient calmness to peruse the epistle that had accompanied the painful present. He at length took it up, and spreading it before him, read:—

“Signore,—

“Enclosed you will find the finger of your son. You will easily recognise it by the scar. If, however, you still continue to doubt, and refuse to send the ransom by next post, the whole hand shall be remitted to you, and you can see whether the finger fits. You shall have ten days allowed for your answer. If, at the end of that time, it does not reach Rome, and 30,000 scudi along with it, the next post after will take the hand to you. If that fails to open your *borsa* we shall conclude you have no heart, and that you decline to negotiate for your son's life. Do not, therefore, charge cruelty upon us, who, by unjust laws, have been forced to war with mankind. Tracked like wild beasts, we are compelled to adopt extreme means for obtaining a livelihood. In fine, and to close the correspondence, should the negotiation thus fall through, unsatisfactorily, we promise that your son's body shall have Christian burial. As a reminder of your inhumanity, the head shall be cut off, and sent you by the next steamer that touches at Civita Vecchia. We have paid the post on the finger; we shall do the same with the hand; but we shall expect you to pay carriage on the head.

“And now, Signor General, in respect to the advice already given you. Don't mistake what is herein written for an idle menace—it has no such meaning. Continue incredulous, and the threat will be carried out to the letter, as stated. Refuse the ransom, and, as sure as you are living, your son will be put to death.

“Il Capo (for himself and *compagnos*).

“*Postscriptum*.—If you send the money by post, direct to Signor Jacopi, Number 9, Strada Volturmo. If by messenger, he can find our agent at the same place. Beware of treason: it cannot avail you.”

Such was the singular communication that had come into General Harding's hands.

“My God! my God!” was his exclamation as he finished reading it—the same he had uttered before commencing.

He had no doubt about the truth of its contents. Lying on the table before his face was the fearful voucher—still apparently fresh—the gore scarce congealed upon it, as it came out of the wrapper in which it had been carefully enfolded.

With a trembling hand the General touched the table bell.

“My son Nigel!” he said to the footman who answered; “send him to me instantly.”

The servant went off wondering.

“My God!” once more ejaculated the sorrowing father, “this is terrible—horrible—who would have believed it? *Who would* have believed it? It is true—true beyond a doubt. My God!”

And bending down over the table, with eyes that showed the agony of his spirit, he once more scrutinised the ghastly object, as if afraid to take it up or touch it. Nigel came in.

“You sent for me, father?”

“I did. Look here—look at that!”

“That—what is it? An odd-looking object. What is it, papa?”

“Ah! *you* should know, Nigel.”

“What—why it looks like part of a finger! *Is* it that?”

“Alas, yes!”

“But whose? How did it come here?”

“Whose, Nigel!—whose!” said the General, his voice vibrating with emotion. “You should remember it. You have reason.”

Nigel turned pale as his eyes rested upon the cicatrice, showing like a whitish seam through the slight coating of blood. He *did* remember it, but said nothing.

“*Now* do you recognise it?” asked his father.

“As a human finger,” he answered evasively; “nothing more.”

“Nothing more! And you cannot tell to whom it once belonged.”

“Indeed I cannot—how should I know?”

"Better than anybody else. Alas, it is—it was—your brother's!"

"My brother's!" exclaimed Nigel, pretending both surprise and emotion—neither of which he felt.

"Yes; look at that scar. You surely remember that?"

Another pretended surprise, another feigned emotion, was all the answer.

"I do not wish to reproach you for it," said the General, speaking of the scar; "it is a thing that should be forgotten, and has nothing to do with the misfortune now threatening us. What you see there was once poor Henry's finger."

"But how do you know, father? How came it here? How has it been cut off? And who—"

"Read these letters; they will tell you all about it."

Nigel took up the bandit's letter, and ran through its contents—at intervals giving utterance to ejaculations that might be construed either as expressions of sympathy, surprise, or indignation. He then glanced at the other.

"You see," said his father, as soon as he had finished, "it turns out to be true—too true. I had my fears when I read Henry's first, poor lad. But, Nigel, you—How could any one have supposed such a thing as this?"

"Why, papa, it appears yet impossible."

"Impossible!" echoed the General, glancing almost angrily at his son. "Look there upon that table! Look on the truth itself—the finger that points to it. Poor Henry! what will he think of his father—his hardhearted, cruel, unfeeling father? My God! Oh my God!"

And giving himself up to a paroxysm of self-reproach, the General commenced pacing to and fro in an excited manner.

"This epistle appears to have come from Rome," said Nigel, examining the letter with as much coolness as if it had contained some ordinary communication.

"Of course it came from Rome," replied the General, surprised, almost angered, at the indifference with which his son seemed to speak of it. "Don't you see the Roman postmark upon it? And haven't you read what's inside? Perhaps you still think it a trick to extort money?"

"No, no, father!" hastily rejoined Nigel, perceiving that he had committed himself; "I was only thinking how it had best be answered."

"There's but one way for that; the letter itself tells how."

"What way, papa?"

"Why send the money at once; that's the only way to save him. I can tell by the talk of the scoundrel—what's his name?"

"He here signs his name 'Il Capo.' That is only his title as chief of the band."

"It's clear, from what the ruffian writes, that he cares for no government—no law, human or divine. This, lying upon the table, is proof sufficient that nothing will deter the scoundrels from carrying out their threat. Clearly nothing will prevent them but the payment of the money."

"Five thousand pounds!" muttered Nigel; "it is a large sum."

"A large sum! And if it were ten thousand, should we hesitate about sending it? Is your brother's life not worth that? Ay, one finger of his hand is. Poor boy!"

"Oh! I did not mean that, papa. Only it occurred to me that if the money should be sent, and, after all done, the brigands should refuse to give him up. There will needs be caution in dealing with such fellows."

"What caution can there be? There is no time. Within ten days the answer is required. My God! what if the post has been delayed? Look—what is the date of the postmark on the letter?"

"Roma, 12th," said Nigel, reading from the stamp on the envelope. "It is now the 16th; there are still six days to the good."

"Six days!—six days are nothing to send a messenger all the way to Rome. Besides, there is everything to be arranged—the money—though, I thank heaven, that need not cause any delay. But there is the going to London, to see Lawson, who may not be at home. There's not a moment to be lost; I must start at once. Quick, Nigel, give orders for the carriage to be got ready without delay."

Nigel, pretending an alacrity he was far from feeling, rushed out of the door, leaving his father alone.

"Where's 'Bradshaw'?" the General asked of himself, glancing around the library in search of the well-known "guide." Then, laying his hand upon it, he commenced a traverse of its puzzling pages, in search of the Great Western Railway.

The carriage, not very speedily brought to the door, was yet ready before he had become quite certain about the

exact time of a suitable train. This was at length ascertained; and then, flinging aside the book, and permitting the old butler to array him in proper travelling habiliments—not forgetting to put into his large pocket-book the strange epistle, with its still stranger enclosure—he stepped inside the chariot, and was driven towards Slough.

The General's carriage had scarce cleared the gates of Beechwood Park, when a pedestrian appeared upon the gravelled drive going in the same direction.

It was his son, Nigel. He also seemed in a state of agitation; though its cause was very different from that which had taken his father in such haste along the road to the railway station.

Nigel had no intention of going so far; nor was he at the moment even thinking of the peril in which his brother was placed.

His thoughts were given to one nearer home—one far dearer to him than that brother. He was simply proceeding to the residence of the Widow Mainwaring, where for three months—partly owing to a taboo which his father had placed on it—he had been but an occasional and clandestine visitor.

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## Chapter Forty Two.

### An Unknown Correspondent.

After the atrocious cruelty that deprived him of a finger, two days more of gloomy imprisonment was passed by Henry Harding in his prison. The coarse fare by day and hard couch by night, even the loss he had sustained, were not to be compared with the anguish of his spirit.

In this lay the pangs of his captivity. The chagrin caused by his father's refusal to ransom him was bitter to bear. His brother's letter had placed the refusal in its worst light. He felt as if he had no friend—no father.

He suffered from a reflection less selfish, and yet more painful—an apprehension for the safety of his friend's sister. There could be no mistaking what Corvino meant by the words whispered in his ear during that fearful scene; and he knew that the savage tragedy then enacted was but by way of preparation for the still more distressing episode that was to follow.

Every hour, almost every minute, the captive might have been seen standing by the window of his cell, scrutinising what might transpire outside—listening with keen ear, apprehensive that in each new arrival at the rendezvous, he might discover the presence of Lucetta Torreani.

Himself a prisoner, he was powerless to protect, even to give her a word of warning. Could he have sent her but one line to apprise her of the danger, he would have sacrificed not only another finger, but the hand by which it was written. He blamed himself for not having thought of writing to her father, at the time that he sent the letter to Luigi. It was an opportunity not likely to occur again. He could only hope that his letter to Luigi might be received in time—a slender reed to depend upon. He thought of trying to effect escape from his prison. Could he succeed in doing this, all might be well. But he had been thinking of it from the first—every hour during his confinement—thinking of it to no purpose. He made no attempt, simply because there was no means of making it. He had well examined the structure of his cell. The walls were stout masonwork of stone and stucco; the floor was a pavement of rough flags; the window a mere slit; the door strong enough to have withstood the blows of a trip-hammer. Besides, at night a brigand slept transversely across the entrance; while another kept sentry outside.

A bird worth 30,000 scudi was too precious to be permitted the chance of escaping from its cage. His eyes had often turned upwards. In that direction seemed the only chance of escape at all possible. It might have been practicable had he been but provided with two things—a knife in his hand and a stool to stand upon. Strong beams stretched horizontally across. Over these was a sheeting of roughly-hewn planks, as if there was a second story above. But he knew it could only be a garret; for the boards were damp and mildewed, from the leaking of the roof over them. They looked rotten enough to have been easily cut through, if there had been but a chisel or knife to accomplish it. There was neither. Right and left, behind and before, below and above, egress appeared impracticable.

On the second night after losing his little finger, he had ceased to think of it; and, with his mutilated hand wrapped in a rag, torn from the sleeve of his shirt—the only surgical treatment it received—he lay upon the floor, endeavouring in sleep to find a temporary respite from his wretchedness.

He had to some extent succeeded; and was beginning to lose consciousness of his misery, when something striking him on the forehead startled him to fresh wakefulness. It was a hard substance that had hit him; and the blow caused pain, though not enough to draw from him any exclamation. He only raised himself on his elbow, and waited for a repetition of the stroke, or something that might explain it. While listening attentively, he heard a sound, as if some light missile had been flung through the window, and fallen on the floor, not far from where he lay.

He looked to see what it could have been. There was no light, save what came from a star-lit sky—sent still more sparingly through the narrow aperture in the wall—so, of course, the floor of the chamber was in deep obscurity. Notwithstanding this, an object of oblong shape was revealed upon it, distinguishable by its white colour. The captive, on clutching it, could tell it was a piece of paper, folded in the form of a letter. Supposing it to be one, he was hindered for the time from perusing it; and he remained holding it in his hand, but without making any movement. Meanwhile he kept his eye upon the window, through which it had evidently come, to see whether anything else should enter by the same aperture.

He watched for a full half hour; and, as nothing more seemed likely to be thrown in to him, he turned his attention to

that which had at first startled him, and which he now imagined might be something projected into his cell after the fashion of the folded sheet. Groping over the floor, he became convinced of it. His hand came in contact with a knife! He felt that its blade was in a sheath, a covering of goat-skin, such as he had seen carried by the brigands. Without comprehending the intent of the unexpected presents, or from whom they had come, he could not help thinking there was a purpose in them; and, after watching the window another hour or so, he began conjecturing what this purpose might be.

He was not very successful. A variety of hypotheses came before his mind, but none that satisfied him. Under the circumstances the gift of a keen-bladed knife suggested suicide; but that could hardly be the intent of the donor. At all events, the recipient, wretched as he was, did not feel himself reduced to quite such a state of despair. No doubt there was writing on the paper, and no doubt, could he have read it, it would have enlightened him. But there was no chance to do so, nor would there be until morning. His sense of touch was not sufficiently delicate to enable him to decipher it in the darkness, and there was no help for it but to wait for the dawn.

He did wait till dawn, but not one instant after. As the first rays of the aurora came stealing through the aperture, he stood close to it, spreading the unfolded sheet upon the sill. There was writing. The words were Italian, and, fortunately, written in a bold, clerkly hand, though evidently in haste. In the translation it ran thus:—

“You must make your escape *upwards*, towards the zenith. There is no chance towards the horizon on any side. The knife will enable you to cut your way through the roof. And take care to slide off the back of the house, the sentry being in front. Once out, make for the pass by which you came up. You should remember it. It lies due north. If you need guiding, look for the Polar star. At the head of the gorge there is a picket. You may easily steal past him. If not—you have the knife! But, with proper caution, there need be no occasion for your using it. His duty is not much by night. He has only to listen to any signal that may be given from below. And his post is not in the gorge, but on the summit—to one side. You may easily creep into the ravine, and past, without his seeing you. At the mountain foot it is different. The sentry placed there is only for the night. In daytime he would be of no use—as the place can be seen from above in time to give warning of any approach. This man will be awake, as his life would be forfeited by his being found asleep. He would be concealed upon the edge of the ravine. You cannot pass, without his seeing you; and you must then use the knife. Don’t try to pass; he would have the advantage of seeing you first. Instead, conceal yourself in the ravine, and remain there till morning. At daybreak he will leave his post—as it is then no longer necessary to keep it. He comes up to the rendezvous. Wait till he has passed you; and also till he has got to the head of the gorge—longer if you like. Then make your way off as you best can. Go with all speed, for you will be seen and pursued. Make for the house where you stopped on your way hither. Save yourself! Save Lucetta Torreani!”

The astonishment caused by this strange epistle hindered the reader from perceiving that there was a postscript. He saw it at length. It ran as follows:—

“If you would also save the writer, *swallow this note as soon as you have read it.*”

Having run it over again, to make sure of its meaning—and to memorise the instructions it contained—the postscript was almost literally complied with; and when the jailer entered the cell, bearing the usual breakfast of boiled macaroni, not a scrap of paper could be seen, nor anything to create suspicion. The prisoner only spoke of hunger; and began masticating the macaroni as though the tasteless stuff was the most savoury of dishes.

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## Chapter Forty Three.

### Cutting a Way Skyward.

His jailer once gone out of the cell, the captive was left undisturbed to consider the plan of escape so unexpectedly proposed to him. The first question that occurred was: Who could the unknown writer be? It was evidently some one of a refined intelligence; the writing proved this, but more the method in which the instructions were conveyed. These were so cunningly conceived, and so clearly expressed, as to be quite intelligible to him for whom they were intended.

At first he thought of its being some plot on the part of Corvino—a *ruse* to give the chief a chance of recapturing him, and so taking him in the act of attempting to escape.

Then came the reflection, *Cui bono?* Corvino could not want an excuse for taking his life. On the contrary, he had every reason for preserving it—at least until some definite answer about the ransom. If the demand should be again refused, the captive knew this would be plea sufficient for putting him to death. The threat of the brigand had been backed by the assurance given him in his conversation with the unfortunate Popetta. He no longer doubted of its being in earnest.

It could not be Corvino who had furnished him with the means of escape. Who then? Certainly not his own countryman. The renegade was his bitterest enemy—ever foremost in persecuting him. Of all the band, his thoughts now turned to Tommaso, simply because there was no other who had shown him the slightest sign of sympathy. Tommaso had done so, during the two days of his attendance; but then he presumed it to be at the instance of the signorina. She was dead; and her influence must have perished along with her. What further interest could the man have in him?

True, he seemed something different from his outlawed associates. He at least appeared less brutal than they—as if he had seen better days, and had not fallen so far below the normal condition of humanity. Henry Harding had noticed this during the slight communication held with him. Beside, there was evidence of it in the conversation he



had heard under his window—in relation to the vile designs on Lucetta Torreani. But then—Tommaso's motive for assisting him? And at such risk to himself! Death would be the reward of any of the band who might aid him in escape, or even connive at it—death sure and cruel. Why should Tommaso place himself in peril? What had he, Henry Harding, done to deserve the sympathy of this man? Nothing.

The last word in the letter of instruction now occurred to him—not the postscript, but the closing sentence of the epistle itself—“*Save Lucetta Torreani!*”

Was this the explanation? Could this be a clue to Tommaso's conduct? If so, Tommaso was indeed the writer.

It was at all events an injunction calculated to stimulate the prisoner to action. The thought of the girl's danger was never for a moment out of his mind. Now that this scheme was brought before him, he ceased his conjectures, and gave himself up to considering how he should carry out the design suggested in such a mysterious manner.

Plainly he could do nothing before night. Any attempt during daylight might be detected by his jailer, coming in with his food. The last meal having been brought him would be the cue for commencement.

During the day he was not idle. He made careful survey of his cell, chiefly the woodwork overhead. The boards appeared in a dilapidated condition, as if they would easily give way to the blade of a knife. His chagrin was great in discovering that the ceiling was too high to be reached—nearly a foot beyond the tips of his fingers, held aloft to their fullest stretch. This was indeed something to disconcert him.

He looked despairingly around the cell. There was nothing on which he could stand—neither stool nor stone—nothing to give him the necessary elevation. The chapter of instructions had been written in vain; the writer had not contemplated this difficulty in their fulfilment.

For a moment the captive believed he would have to abandon the scheme. It seemed impossible of execution.

Ingenuity becomes quickened under circumstances of dire necessity. In Henry Harding's case this truth was illustrated. Once more scanning the floor of his cell, he perceived the litter of fern leaves that formed his styelike couch. It might be possible to collect them into a lump, and so obtain the standpoint he required. In his mind he made a calculation of the quantity, and the probable height to which they would elevate him. He did not experiment practically, by massing the litter and so making a trial. Any disturbance of things might excite suspicion. That would be a task easily accomplished, and could be left to the last moment.

And to the last moment it was left. As soon as the morose attendant took his departure for the night—though without even the salutation “*Buono notte*”—the captive set about carrying out his design.

The fern leaves were collected into a heap and placed near the middle of the floor. He took great care in packing them, so as to form a firm cushion, and confining them within a small space, to increase the elevation. He had also observed the precaution, to select a spot under that part of the ceiling that appeared most assailable.

The stage erected, he mounted on it, knife in hand. He could just reach the boards with his blade; but this appeared enough, and he commenced making an incision. As he conjectured, the wood was half decayed with damp, or dry rot, and gave way before the knife, which by good luck was a sharp one. But he had not worked long, when he found his support sinking gradually beneath him; and, before he had accomplished the tenth part of his task, the fern footstool had become so flattened that he was unable to proceed. He descended to the floor, rearranged it, and then recommenced his cutting and carving. All in silence, or with the least noise possible; for there was his knowledge of a sharp-eared sentry in the ante-chamber, and another keeping guard close by the window of his cell.

Again the cushion sank, with only another fraction of the task accomplished. Again was it repadded; and the work proceeded for another short spell.

A new idea now helped him to keep on continuously. He took off his coat, folded it into a thick roll, placed it on the summit of the fern heap, and then set his feet upon it. This gave him a firmer pedestal to stand upon, enabling him to complete the task he had undertaken. In fine, he succeeded in cutting a trap-like hole through the floor-boards, big enough for his body to be passed through.

It was done before twelve o'clock. He could tell this by the brigands still keeping up their carousal outside. Hitherto the sound of their voices had favoured him, drowning any noise he might have made, otherwise audible to the sentries. Moreover, these were less on the alert during the earlier hours.

About midnight all sounds ceased, and the band seemed to have gone to sleep. It was time for him to continue the attempt at escape. Putting on his coat, he caught hold of one of the joists, and drew himself up through the hole he had cut. Above, as anticipated, he found himself in a sort of garret-loft.

He commenced groping around for some means of egress. At first he could find none, and supposed the space to be enclosed without any aperture. His head coming in contact with the roof, he perceived it to be a thatch of either straw or rushes. He was planning how he should cut his way through it, when a glimmer of light came under his eye, falling faintly along the floor.

Approaching the aperture where it was admitted, he discovered a sort of dormer window, without glass, but closed by a dilapidated shutter. There was no bar, and the shutter turned open to the outside. He looked cautiously through, and scanned the ground beneath, as also the premises adjoining. He saw that it was the back of the house, and that there were no others in the rear. There was no light, or anything, to show that human beings were astir.

He could perceive a clump of trees standing a short distance off, and others straggling up the sides of the mountain.

If he could succeed in getting under this cover, without disturbing the men who kept guard over his cell, he would stand a good chance of escape, at least so far as the first line of sentries was concerned. As to those keeping the pass, that would be an enterprise altogether distinct. To get clear of his prison was the thing now to be thought of; and he proceeded to take his measures. How to creep through the dormer window and let himself down outside were naturally the first questions that suggested themselves.

The night was dark, though with a sky grey and starry. It was the sombre gloom that in all its obscurity shrouded the extinguished crater. He could not see the ground beneath; but, knowing how high he had climbed into the garret, the descent could not be a very deep one, unless indeed the house stood on the edge of some scarped elevation. The thought of this caused him to hesitate; and, once more craning his neck over the sill, he endeavoured to penetrate the obscurity below. But he could not see the ground, and as it would not do to remain any longer, he turned face inwards, and, backing through the window, let his legs drop down the wall. A wooden bar placed transversely across the sill, seemed to offer the proper holding place for his hands. He grasped it to balance his body for the fall; but the treacherous support gave way, and he fell in such fashion as to throw him with violence on his shoulder.

He was stunned, and lay still—in what appeared to be the bottom of a drain or trench. Fortunate for him his having done so. The crack of the breaking bar had been heard by the sentries, who came running round to discover the cause.

“I’m sure I heard something,” said one of the two.

“Bah! nothing of the kind. You must have been mistaken.”

“I could swear to it—a noise like a blow with a stick, or the fall of a bundle of fagots.”

“Oh, that was it! there’s the cause then, over your head; that window-shutter flapping in the wind.”

“Ah! like enough it was. To the devil with the rickety old thing! What good does it do there, I wonder?”

And the satisfied alarmist, following his less suspicious comrade, returned to the front. By the time they regained their respective posts, the prisoner had crept out of the dark ditch, and was skulking cautiously towards the cover—which he succeeded in reaching without further interrupting the tranquillity of their watch.

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## Chapter Forty Four.

### Again in Prison.

About two weeks had elapsed since the Papal soldiers first quartered themselves in the village of Val di Orno.

The sun had sunk quietly down into the blue bosom of the Tyrrhenian Sea, and the villagers were most of them indoors. They were not desirous to encounter their military guests upon the streets by night, lest in the darkness the latter should mistake them for the enemy, and make free with any little pocket cash they might have, acquired during the tradings of the day.

The captain of the protecting force was at the time seated in the best sitting-room of the *sindico’s* house, making himself as agreeable as he could to the *sindico’s* daughter—the father himself being present.

The conversation, that had been carried on upon various themes, at length reverted to the brigands—as may be supposed, a stock topic in the village of Val di Orno. On this occasion it was special, relating to the captive *Inglese*; of whom, as a matter of course, Captain Count Guardiola had heard—having been officially furnished with the particulars of the affair on his first arrival in the town.

“*Povero!*” half soliloquised Lucetta; “I wonder what has happened to him. Do you think, papa, they have set him free?”

“I fear not, *figlia mia*. They will only do so when the *riscatta* reaches them.”

“Ah, me! How much do you think they will require?”

“You speak, signorina,” interposed the Captain Count, “as if you had a mind to send the ransom yourself.”

“Willingly—if I were able. That would I.”

“You seem greatly interested in the *Inglese*. *Uno povero pittore!*”

The last words were uttered in a tone of sneering contempt.

“*Uno povero pittore!*” repeated the girl, her eyes kindling with indignation. “Know, Signor Count Guardiola, that my brother is *uno povero pittore*; and proud of it too, as so am I, his sister.”

“A thousand pardons, signorina; I did not know that your brother was an artist. I only meant that this poor devil of an *Inglese* after all may be no artist, but a spy of that monster Mazzini! The thing isn’t at all improbable. Our last news tell us, that the arch-impostor has arrived in Genoa, whither he has come almost direct from England. This fellow may be one of his pilot fish, sent in advance to spy out the land. Perhaps he’s been rather fortunate in having fallen into the hands of the brigands. Should he come into my clutches, and I find any trace of the spy about him, I won’t wait for any *riscatta* before consigning his neck to a halter.”

The indignation which was rising still higher in the breast of Lucetta Torreani, became more perceptible in the pallor of her cheeks and the quick flashing of her eyes. She was hindered from declaring it in speech. Before she could reply, a voice was heard outside the door, accompanied by a knock, as of some one seeking admission. This was granted; less by the host of the house than his military guest, who had by this this grown to regard himself as its master.

The door was opened, and a sergeant stepped into the room, saluting as he did so. He was the orderly of the troop.

"What is it?" inquired the officer.

"A prisoner," replied the man, making a second obeisance.

"One of the bandits?"

"No, signor captain; on the contrary, a man who pretends to have been their prisoner, and who says he has just escaped from them."

"What sort of man?"

"A young fellow in the dress of a *citiadino*—*un Inglese*, I take him to be; though he speaks our tongue as well as myself."

The *sindico* rose from his chair. Lucetta had already started from hers, with a joyous exclamation, at the word *Inglese*. The escaped captive could be no other than he of whom they had been lately speaking, and of whom also she had been long thinking.

"Signor Torreani," said the captain, turning towards his host with an air which showed that he too was gratified by the announcement, "I do not wish to disturb you in the performance of my duty. I shall go down-stairs to examine this prisoner my men have taken."

"It is not necessary," said the *sindico*; "you are welcome to bring him up here."

"Oh, do!" added Lucetta. "Let him come in here. If you wish, I shall retire."

"Certainly not, signorina; that is, if you are not afraid to look upon one who has been a prisoner among banditti. If I mistake not, this is the *povero pittore* in whom you have expressed yourself so much interested. Shall I order him to be brought in here?"

It was evident that Guardiola wished it; so did Lucetta, from a different motive. The former intended to display his power in the presence of a prisoner, degraded by double captivity; the latter was inspired with an instinct for the stranger's protection, and a secret partiality which she herself scarce understood.

It ended by the sergeant conducting his prisoner into the room, who proved to be Henry Harding.

The young Englishman seemed little surprised at the company to which he was introduced. But having just escaped from the keeping of brigands, he could ill comprehend why he should again be taken prisoner. That it was so, he had already been made aware by some rough treatment received at the hands of his new captors, who gave no heed either to his story or protestations.

He saw that he was now in the presence of their commander. No doubt the interview would end in his being released.

At a glance he had recognised the other occupants of the apartment. The *sindico* he had seen when passing through as the captive of the brigands. He well remembered him; but still better his daughter.

And she remembered the captive. His bare head, for he was hatless, the brown locks tossed over his temples, the tattered surtout and trousers, his small feet almost shoeless—all this *délabrement* of dress and person did not conceal from the eyes of Lucetta Torreani the handsome face and manly form she had once before looked upon, and with an interest that had made a lasting impression upon her memory. Even in his rags he looked noble as ever. The very scantiness of his garments displayed the fine symmetry of his figure; while his face, flushed with defiant indignation, gave him the look of a young lion chafing at the toils once more cast around him. He was not tied, but he was not at liberty.

At the same time he might have had reason to suppose himself in the presence of friends. He knew that the gentleman in civilian costume was the father of his friend Luigi; that the young lady was Luigi's sister—that "little Lucetta," of the increase in whose stature the letter had conjecturally spoken. And truly was she well grown, stately, statuesque—a fully-developed woman.

Of course neither father nor daughter could know him. They had but seen him as a stranger—a captive to banditti.

In presence of such company it was not the time to declare himself; though in a glance exchanged with Lucetta as he entered the room, he felt gratified to think that the sympathy once silently shown for him had not passed away.

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## Chapter Forty Five.

### Consequential Swagger.

Quickly and surreptitiously as was that glance exchanged between them—Henry Harding and the *sindico's* daughter

—it did not escape the notice of Captain Guardiola. Warned by the conversation that had passed, he was watching for it. It gave him the cue for a swaggering exercise of his authority.

“Where have you taken this ragged fellow?” asked he of the sergeant, nodding superciliously towards the prisoner.

“We found him skulking into the town.”

“Skulking!” cried the young Englishman, turning upon the man a look that caused him to quail. “And if I am a ragged fellow,” he continued, directing his speech to the officer, “it is not to your credit—much less that you should taunt me for it. If you and your valiant followers were to perform your duty a little more efficiently, there would have been less chance of my getting my clothes torn.”

“Zitti! zitti!” hissed out the officer. “We don’t want such talk from you, fellow. Reserve your speech till you are questioned.”

“It is my place to ask the first question. Why am I here a prisoner?”

“That remains to be seen. Have you a passport?”

“A rational interrogatory to put to a man who has just escaped out of the clutches of brigands!”

“How are we to know that, signore?”

“Well,” said the young man, “I assert it. And,” he continued, looking quizzically towards his own person, “I think my appearance should corroborate the assertion. But, if not, I shall make my appeal to the signorina here; whom, if I mistake not, I have had the honour of seeing before. She, perhaps, may remember me, since for some hours I had the misfortune to furnish her with a melancholy spectacle while stretched upon the pavement underneath her balcony.”

“I do remember you!—I do, signore! Yes, papa, it is the same.”

“And I also saw him, Captain Guardiola. He was carried through here by the bandits. He is the English artist of whom we have been just speaking.”

“That may be,” rejoined Guardiola, with an incredulous smile. “Englishman, artist, and prisoner to the banditti—all these in one. But the gentleman may still have another character, not yet declared.”

“What other?” demanded the gentleman in question. “*Una spia.*”

“Spy!” echoed the prisoner. “For whom—and what purpose?”

“Ah! that is just the question!” sarcastically rejoined Guardiola. “It is for me to discover it. If you’ll be frank, and declare yourself, you may perhaps get better treatment; besides, it may shorten the term of your imprisonment.”

“My imprisonment! By what right, sir, do you talk to me of imprisonment? I am an Englishman; and you, I take it, are an officer in the Pope’s army—not a captain of banditti. Make me a prisoner, and it shall cost you dear.”

“Cost what it may, signore, you are my prisoner; and shall remain so till I can ascertain in what character you have been travelling through these parts. Your story is suspicious. You have passed yourself off for an artist.”

“I have not passed myself off for one, though I am so—in a humble sense. What has that to do with the affair?”

“Much. Why should you, *‘un povero pittore’*—this was said sneeringly—“be straying out here in the mountains? If you are an English artist, as you say, you must have come to Italy to paint ruins and sculptures, not rocks and trees. What then is your errand up here? Answer me that, signore!”

The young artist hesitated. Should he make a clean breast of it, and declare his errand? Had the time come? Why should he not? He was in a dilemma, out of which he might escape more easily than he had done from the brigands’ den. Why should he prolong the continuance of his second captivity?—for it was clear that the officer intended continuing it. A word would release him—so, at least, he presumed. There seemed no reason why it should not be spoken. After a moment’s reflection, he determined on speaking it.

“Signor Captain,” said he, “if in the execution of your duty you must necessarily know why I am here, you shall be welcome to the information. Perhaps my answer may give surprise to the Signor Francesco Torreani, and also to the Signorina Lucetta!”

“What! *Signor Inglese!*” exclaimed the *sindico*’s daughter, “you know our names then?”

“I do, signorina.”

“From whom have you heard them?” inquired the father.

“From your son.”

“My son! He is in London.”

“Just so; and it was there I first heard of the Signor Francesco Torreani and his daughter, the Signorina Lucetta.”

“You astonish us. You know Luigi then?”

"As well as one man may know another who for twelve months has been his daily companion; who has shared his apartment and his studio, who—"

"Saved his purse—perhaps his life," interrupted the *sindico*, approaching the Englishman, and warmly grasping his hand. "If I mistake not, you are the young gentleman who rescued my son from thieves, London bandits. It is you of whom Luigi has often written to us. Am I right in my conjecture, signore?"

"Oh yes!" exclaimed Lucetta, also coming nearer, and contemplating the stranger with renewed interest. "I'm sure it is, papa. He is so like the description brother Luigi has given of him."

"Thanks, signorina," answered the young artist, with a smile. "I hope you except my habiliments. As for my identity, Signor Torreani, I might have been better able to establish that, but for my kind friend Corvino; who, not satisfied with taking the little cash I had, has also stripped me of the letter of introduction I brought from your son. I intended to have presented it in person, but have been hindered by the circumstances of which you are already aware."

"But why did you not make yourself known to me while you were here?"

"I did not then know you, signore. I was even ignorant of the name of the town into which my captors had carried me. I had not then the slightest idea that its chief magistrate was the father of Luigi Torreani—much less that the fair young lady I saw standing in a balcony was the sister of my dearest friend."

At the conclusion of this complimentary speech, Lucetta's cheek showed a slight tinge of red—as if from some souvenir of that balcony scene.

"What a pity," said the *sindico*, "I did not know this before! I might have done something to get you off."

"Thanks, Signor Torreani. But it would have cost you dearly—at least 30,000 scudi."

"Thirty thousand scudi!" exclaimed the company.

"You put a high price upon yourself, *signor pittore*?" sneeringly insinuated the officer.

"It is the exact sum fixed by Corvino."

"He must have mistaken you for some *milord*. I suppose he has discovered his error, and let you off scot free?"

"Yes; and finger free too," rejoined the escaped captive in a jovial tone—as he said so presenting his left hand to the gaze of the company.

Lucetta screamed; while her father leant forward, and examined the mutilated hand with a compassionate air.

"Yes," he said; "this is indeed a proof that I could have done little for you. But tell us, signore! How did you escape from those cruel wretches?"

"Time enough for that to-morrow," interposed Guardiola, who seemed stung with the sympathy the stranger was receiving. "Sergeant!" he continued, turning to the soldier, "this interview has lasted long enough, and to little profit. You can take your prisoner back to the guard-house. I shall examine him more minutely in the morning."

"Prisoner still?" was the surprised interrogatory of the *sindico* and his daughter.

"I warn you against what you are doing," said the Englishman, addressing himself to the officer. "You will find that even your master, the Pope, will not be able to screen you from punishment for this outrage on a British subject."

"And your master, Giuseppe Mazzini, will not be able to protect you for acting as a revolutionary spy, Signore Inglese."

"Mazzini! Revolutionary spy! What do you mean?"

"I think, Captain Guardiola," interposed the *sindico*, "you are altogether mistaken about this young man. He is no spy; but an honest English *galantuomo*—the friend of my son, Luigi. I shall be answerable for him."

"I must do my duty, Signor Torreani. Sergeant! do yours. Take your prisoner back to the guard, and see that you bring him before me in the morning."

The order was obeyed. The prisoner offered no resistance to it. There were other soldiers outside the door; and, as any attempt to escape would have been idle, Henry Harding had to submit to this additional degradation. He did not leave the room before exchanging a look with Lucetta that consoled him for the insult, and another with Captain Count Guardiola, that disturbed his countship's equanimity for the remainder of the evening.

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## Chapter Forty Six.

### Alone with Lucetta Torreani.

Next morning Captain Guardiola was in a somewhat different frame of mind. On examination of the prisoner, he could find no proof of the latter being a spy; on the contrary, there was ample evidence of his story being true. A score of the townsmen could identify him as having been in the hands of the banditti. Indeed, this was not doubted by any one; and the fact of his being an *Inglese* was in his favour. Why should an Englishman be meddling in the political

affairs of the country?

The commandant saw that to detain him might end in trouble to himself. He was too intelligent not to understand the power of the English Government, even in the affairs of Italy; and, looking forward to future events, thought it safe upon the whole to release the artist; which he at length did, under pretence of doing an act of grace to the *sindico*, who had renewed his intercession on the young Englishman's behalf.

Henry Harding was once more free. Not a little to the disgust of Guardiola, he became the *sindico's* guest. But there was no help for it, unless by an act of authority too arbitrary to be passed over without investigation; and the Captain Count was compelled to swallow his chagrin with the best grace he could.

By chance there was a spare suit of clothes, left by Luigi on his setting out for England. They were of the *cacciatore* cut, too fantastic for the streets of London; for this reason they had been left behind. They were just the sort for the mountains of the Romagna, and of a size to suit the young Englishman, fitting him as if he had been measured for them by the Italian tailor who made them.

The Signor Torreani insisted upon his receiving them. He could not well refuse, considering the state of dilapidation to which his own had been reduced, and the necessity of making a decent appearance as guest of the donor. An hour after his release from the guard-house he was seen in velvet jacket, buttoned breeches, and gaiters of *cacciatore* cut, with a plumed Calabrian hat upon his head—bearing resemblance in almost everything, except physiognomy, to a brigand!

The costume became him. Lucetta smiled at seeing him in his new dress. She was pleased with his appearance. He reminded her of brother Luigi. And then he was called upon for the story of his adventures among the bandits—from the date of his capture to that of his second arrival in the town. Of course only such details were given as were fitted for the ear of a young lady. The mode of his escape from the cell was particularly inquired into, and related. Some expressions in the destroyed letter of Tommaso, and which Henry Harding intended soon to communicate to the *sindico* himself, were kept back—along with that other intelligence which had been his chief motive for making escape.

His auditors—there were both father and daughter present at this interview—were strangely interested when he spoke of the mysterious interference on his behalf. Who could have helped him to the knife? Who could have written the letter of instructions? He did not say anything to assist them in their conjectures, nor even mention the name of Tommaso. All that was for the ears of the *sindico* himself, and at another time.

He merely described the cutting his passage through the floor above his cell—his dropping from the dormer window—the alarm caused to the sentinels, and its instant subsidence. He told them, too, how he had succeeded in passing the first vidette, stationed at the top of the gorge, by crawling on his hands and knees; how he had got so close to the other as to perceive that passing him in the same way would be impossible; how, knife in hand, he had stood for a time half determined to take the man's life; how he had recoiled from the shedding of blood; how, concealing himself in some bushes, he had remained wakeful till daylight; had seen the second sentry pass up the hill; and then, unseen himself, had continued his retreat. As good luck would have it, a filmy haze was hanging over the valley, under the curtain of which he had escaped. Otherwise he would have been seen, either by the vidette above, or the night-sentinel on his return to the rendezvous. He could not tell whether he had been pursued—of course he had been, though not immediately. It was not likely he was missed till an advanced hour in the morning, and then he was far on his way. Fortunately, he remembered the road by which the brigands had taken him, and kept along with eager celerity, inspired not only by the peril of his own situation, but that of those to whom he was now describing his escape. He had finally reached the skirts of the town a little after nightfall, once more to be made a prisoner. And, once more released, he was in a fair way of again getting into chains, somewhat less irksome to endure. This, however, did not form part of his confession.

The conversation now turned upon Luigi; but this was in a dialogue between the young Englishman and Lucetta—the *sindico* having gone out on business of the town.

Need we say that Lucetta Torreani was very fond of her only brother? How was Luigi in health? How did he like *Inglaterra*? Was he making much progress in his profession? These, with a score of like questions, were rapidly asked and answered; and then a detailed description had to be given of that episode which had introduced the two young men to one another, with something of their after association. And then there was a sly inquiry as to what Luigi thought of the English ladies, with their blonde complexions and bright golden hair, so different from the daughters of *Italia*. And there was a hint about a young lady in Rome, a sort of semi-cousin of the Torreanis to whom Luigi *ought* to be true. Would it be right for a young man to marry away out of his own country? And did the signore believe that there was any sin in marriages between people of his own faith—he had confessed himself a Protestant—and those of Holy Church?

These and other topics—perhaps few so pleasant—were talked of; the young Italian girl asking questions, and giving answers, with that *naïveté* so charming to the listener.

It so charmed Henry Harding, that, before he had passed a single day in her company, he could look back on Buckinghamshire and Belle Mainwaring without a shadow of regret. He was in a fair way of forgetting both.

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That same night the escaped prisoner completed the revelation he had to make to the *sindico* alone; first telling him what he had learnt about the designs of Corvino upon his daughter, as also how he had learnt it; then of the letter he had himself written to Luigi, urging the latter to hasten home.

The *sindico*, though pained, was not much surprised by the first part of this strange communication. As is known, he had already received warning. It was the letter to his son, written under such circumstances, that filled him alike with

surprise and gratitude. With warm words, he thanked the young Englishman for his generous and thoughtful interference.

During the explanation, a point that had hitherto puzzled the escaped captive found a presumptive solution. He had all along wondered who could have been his mysterious protector. Who had furnished the knife, with the chapter of instructions that accompanied it? At the mention of the name of Tommaso, the *sindico* started, as if having guessed the hidden hand that had interfered in their favour. On a further description of the man, he felt sure of it. An old retainer of the Torreanis, who had held service in the Pontifical army; had fallen into evil ways; had been thrown into a Roman dungeon from which he had escaped; and no doubt had afterwards found an asylum among the mountain bands. This was the probable explanation of Tommaso's conduct—a long-remembered gratitude for services the *sindico* had rendered him.

The latter now acknowledged the danger in which his daughter was placed, and the necessity of steps being taken to avert it. He had already determined on removing from the place, and taking his *penates* along with him. In truth, he had that very day concluded the sale of his estate; and was now free to go in quest of a new home—to whatever part of the world where it might be found.

Meanwhile, there was no immediate danger; the Papal soldiers intended staying some time in the town. The *sindico* could retain his situation of chief magistrate, and await the arrival of his son, who, if the post kept true to time, might be expected in a day or two.

To hear that Luigi was coming home was news to his sister. How had her father heard it? There had been no letter from London—no message from Rome. It was a mystery to Lucetta; and for reasons was permitted to remain so. But why need she care to unravel it, so long as he was coming home? And so soon too! And the time would not seem long, since his friend was there, and she could talk to him about Luigi. It had become pleasant to converse about her dear brother, with her dear brother's friend; and once again were the same questions asked, as to how Luigi looked, and lived, and prospered at his painting; and whether he was given to admiring the English girls; and would it be wrong for him, a Catholic, to marry one, or would it be wrong the other way? and so were the artless interrogatories repeated.

These were pleasant conversations, but it was not pleasant to have them interrupted, as they usually were, by Captain Guardiola. Why should the officer force himself into their company—as he daily, hourly did? Why did he not take his soldiers—as he ought to have done—and go after the brigands? He could easily have found their hiding-place among the hills. Their late captive, still burning with indignation at the treatment he had endured—frantic when he looked at his left hand—would have gladly guided him to the spot. He proposed doing this. His proposal was not only received with coldness, but repelled with an insolence that kept the blood warm and bad between Guardiola and himself. From that time there was no communication between them—even when brought together in attendance upon Lucetta.

Both were with her, upon the ridge that rose directly over the town. There was a cave upon the summit of the hill, that had once been the abode of an anchorite. It was one of the curiosities of the neighbourhood; and the young lady, at her father's suggestion, had invited her father's English guest to go up with her and see it. The invitation was not extended to the other guest—the Captain Count. For all that he invited himself, under pretence of lending his protection to the signorina. His escort, though not asked for, could not well be refused; and the three proceeded to climb the hill.

Guardiola was beside himself with jealousy. In his heart he was cursing the young Englishman; and could he have found an excuse for pushing him over a cliff, or running him through with the sword that hung by his side, he would have done either on the instant.

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## Chapter Forty Seven.

### Wolves in Sheep's Clothing.

The excursionists had reached the summit, and looked into the cave. Lucetta related the legend of the hermit: how he had sojourned there for several years—never descending to the town, but trusting to the shepherds, and others who strayed over the mountains, to furnish him with his frugal fare; how he had at last mysteriously disappeared from the place, no one knowing where he had gone. But there was a story of his having been carried off by the brigands; and another that he was a brigand himself, having kept this post for purposes of observation.

“What did the shepherds say?” asked the Captain Count, by way of showing his superior intelligence. “They should have known something of the fellow's daily avocations; since, as you say, they provided him with his daily food. But, perhaps, his doings, like those of many others, were in the dark.”

“Suppose you ask them, Signor Captain,” said Lucetta, with a languid smile at the somewhat cloudy insinuation. “There they are, coming up the mountain.”

The young lady pointed to a ravine scarring the hill on the side opposite to that on which lay the town. Along its bed five men were seen driving before them a flock of sheep, as if bringing them up to browse on the mountain. They were already within a hundred yards of the summit upon which stood the spectators.

The men were all dressed in coarse *frezadas* hanging down to their thighs, with the usual straw hat upon their heads, and sandals upon their feet. They carried long sticks, which they occasionally used in conducting their charge up the ravine. One of them wore the *capuce*, hooded over his head, a thing that seemed strange under the hot noonday sun.

The officer had promised to respond to the challenge of the signorina as soon as the shepherds should be near enough for conversation. They were coming direct towards the spot where the pleasure party awaited their approach.

"How very odd," said the young Englishman, addressing himself to the sister of Luigi, "are some of the customs of your country—at least they seem so to me. Your countrymen appear to lack economy in the distribution of labour. For example, with us, in England, one man will easily manage a flock of five hundred sheep, having only a dog to assist him; while here you see five men driving less than a fifth of the number, and not very skilfully, as it appears to me."

"Oh!" rejoined Lucetta, in defence of the native industry, "our shepherds usually have a much larger flock. No doubt these have more, and have left them on the mountains opposite—perhaps because there would not be enough pasture—"

The explanation was interrupted by the approach of the sheep, whose tinkling bells drowned the discourse. Soon after the shepherds strode up, leaving their charge to go scattering over the summit. Instead of waiting for the Captain Count to begin the conversation, one of the *pastores* took the initiative, bluntly opening with the salutation—"Buono giorno, signori. Molto buono giorno, signora bella." (Good day, gentlemen. A fair good day, beautiful lady.)

The speech was complimentary; but the manner seemed to have a different meaning. There was something in the tone of voice that jarred on the ears of the young Englishman.

"Free speakers, these Italian *pastores*," was the reflection he was making to himself, when the spokesman continued —

"We've been seeking one of our sheep," said he, "and have been hitherto unable to find it. We fancy it has strayed to this mountain. Have you seen anything of it?"

"No, my good friends," answered the officer smilingly, and in a tone intended to conciliate the inquirers, whose rude style of address could no longer be mistaken.

"Are you sure, signore? Are you quite sure of what you say?"

"Oh, quite sure. If we had seen the animal we should be most happy—"

"Your sheep is not here," interrupted the young Englishman, who could no longer stand the *pastore's* impertinence. "You know it is not. Why do you repeat your questions?"

"You lie!" cried one of the shepherds, who had not yet spoken—he who wore the red hood. "It *is* here. You, *Signor Inglese*, are the stray we are in search of. Thank our gracious Virgin, we've found you in such goodly company. We shall take back to our flock three sheep instead of one; and one of them such a beautiful young ewe—just the sort for our charming mountain pastures!"

Before the man had done speaking, Henry Harding recognised him. The voice was sufficient; but the *capuce*, now thrown back upon his shoulders, revealed the sinister countenance of Corvino!

"Corvino!" was the exclamation that passed mechanically from the lips of his late captive; and before its echo could reverberate from the adjoining cave, he was seized by two of the disguised bandits—the other two flinging themselves on the officer, while the chief himself laid hold of Lucetta.

With a desperate effort the young Englishman wrenched his arms free. But he had no weapon; and of what use would be his fists against the two assailants, who had now drawn their daggers, and were again advancing upon him? The young lady was still struggling in the embrace of the brigand chief—her cries loud enough to be heard all over the town. Meanwhile Guardiola was making no resistance, not even to the drawing of his sword, which was still dangling uselessly by his side.

With a quick eye Henry Harding perceived it; and, dashing between the two brigands who were closing upon him, he caught the weapon by the guard. Plucking it out of its sheath, he turned like a tiger upon his special opponents. The cowards shrank back; as they did so drawing their pistols, and firing at random. Neither of their shots took effect; and, in another instant, the swordsman was by the side of Corvino.

With a cry the brigand chief let go his struggling prize, and turned to receive the attack—flinging off his *frezada* and drawing a revolver—for this weapon had found its way into the hands of the Italian banditti. As good luck would have it, the first cap missed fire; and, before he could draw trigger upon a second, the sword of Guardiola, wielded by a more skilful hand than that of its owner, had rendered the brigand's arm idle, and the revolver dropped to the ground.

Alas! it was to no purpose. Before Henry Harding could follow up the thrust with one more deadly, he was assailed from behind by four fresh adversaries: for the two in charge of Guardiola had let him loose, and the Captain Count was now running down the mountain slope as fast as his scared legs could carry him.

With the young Englishman it was now one against five, or rather one to four; for the brigand chief, on seeing his four satellites engaged with a single adversary, threw his left arm around Lucetta, and, raising her aloft, hurried off towards the ravine, up which, as a shepherd, he had ascended.

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## Chapter Forty Eight.

### Four to One.



Half frenzied by the sight of Lucetta borne off in the brigand's arms, Henry Harding would have rushed instantly after, but the way was barred by two of the band while the other two assailed him from behind. He had enough on hand to defend himself from their quadrilateral attack; and only by the activity of an ape, borrowed from an excellence in athletic sports, often displayed at Eton and Oxford, was he enabled to show front to all four. Fortunately, they had all emptied their pistols upon him, without doing him any serious injury. By good luck, too, these were not revolvers, their chief alone being thus provided. They now assailed him with their less dangerous daggers; and, but for their number, he might have fought them with success. He struggled to reduce it, but the bandits were as active as he, and his sword thrusts and lunges were spent upon the air. Full five minutes did the desperate strife continue. He was fast losing breath, and must in the end have succumbed. So was he thinking, when his eye fell on the hermit's cave, towards which the strife had been tending. By an effort he broke through the circle of his assailants, and placed himself in its entrance. A simultaneous cry of disappointment escaped from the brigands as they saw the advantage he had thus gained. With his sword he might now defend himself against a score of stiletos.

As if by instinct, one and all resheathed their daggers, and commenced loading their pistols. It was a fearful crisis; and the young Englishman felt that his time was soon to come. The four men were in front of him, guarding the only pass by which he might retreat. It was a narrow gorge leading up to the entrance of the cave. He could not possibly penetrate through the line without encountering their stiletos, ready to be regrasped. Their pistols once charged, and his doom would be sealed; for the cave was a mere alcove in the rock, where he was placed like a statue in its niche. He had given himself up for lost, but he would not be tamely slaughtered.

He was about to spring upon his assailants, and run the gauntlet of their daggers, when shots and shouts came ringing from below, accompanied by a shower of bullets that struck the rocks around him. Startled by this unexpected volley, the four robbers turned quickly round; and, without waiting to complete the loading of their pistols, ran like scared hinds away from the cave.

The young Englishman saw that he was no longer in danger from their bullets, but from those of the soldiers now seen coming up the slope. Regardless of this, he rushed out, and started after the retreating brigands. They had already entered the ravine at the back of the mountain; and far away, scaling the steep on the opposite side, he could see Corvino, with a white shape lying over his left arm. He knew Lucetta Torreani. She was motionless, no longer making any struggle, the skirt of her dress trailing on the loose stones that strewed the mountain path. No cry came back—was she fainting, or dead?

The soldiers came up, with Guardiola at their head. They halted at the top of the pass, reloading and firing at the few retreating brigands, now far beyond the carry of their antiquated carbines. Already Corvino was out of sight, carrying his captive along with him; and the others soon after disappeared among the rocks.

Surely the soldiers would follow them? Who thought of asking this question? It was Henry Harding, who wondered at the long halt they were making by the head of the ravine. In a loud voice he repeated it. Still there was no reply, and the pause continued. For the third time he made the appeal in frenzied tones, addressing himself to Captain Guardiola.

"You are mad, *Signor Inglese*," replied the officer, with a coolness that came only from his cowardice. "I can understand your folly. As a foreigner you cannot know the ways of these Neapolitan bandits. All you have seen may be an artifice to draw us into a trap. As likely as not, over yonder," he pointed to the pass through which the brigands had disappeared, "there are two hundred of the rascals lying ready to receive us. I am not such a fool as to have my followers sacrificed in such an unequal encounter. We must wait for reinforcements from the city."

By this time the *sindico* had come up; too late to see his daughter as she was carried in Corvino's arms over the crest of the opposite hill—perhaps fortunate in being spared the spectacle. With agonised heart he urged on the pursuit, joining his appeal to that already made by the young Englishman. Appeals and reproaches were uttered in vain. The cowardly commissary of the Pope—false lover that he had proved himself—thought more of his own safety than that of the maiden to whom he had dared to address his perjured speeches. With grief and disappointment the father was beside himself; whilst those of his acquaintances who had come up along with him were endeavouring to comfort him. The young Englishman added his word of encouragement, with an appeal to the townsmen that sounded strange in their ears.

"There are enough of you," he cried, "to pursue them to their lair! Have you not spirit to go after these brigands, and rescue the daughter of your *sindico*?"

The proposal, thus plainly made, was new to them. It caught like an electric spark, and was hailed with a chorus of *evvivas*. For the first time in their lives were these citizens inspired with an idea of making resistance to banditti.

"Let the town be consulted," was their rejoinder; "let us first speak to our fellow-citizens."

And, with this intent, they turned down the hill, headed by the *sindico*; while Captain Guardiola and his troops continued gazing across the ravine at the rocks and trees that concealed the retiring foe—feared even in his retreat!

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## Chapter Forty Nine.

### Evviva Ella Republica!

On returning to the town, a surprise awaited the *sindico* and his friends. Men, women, and children were running to and fro; the children screaming, the men and women giving utterance to loud shouts and exclamations. There had been a similar *fracas* on the first alarm of the brigands, but it had subsided as the soldiers started off to ascend the hill. What had caused it to break forth afresh? This was the question hurriedly exchanged between the returning

townsmen. Could it be the robbers who had entered from the opposite side, and taken possession of the place? Was the skirmish on the hill only a feint to draw the soldiers out of the town? If so, it had succeeded; and the shouts now heard, with the rushing to and fro, were signs of a general pillage.

With sad hearts, they hastened on into the streets. They soon came in sight of the piazza. A crowd was collected in front of the *sindico's* house—another by the albergo. Both were composed of armed men, not in any uniform, but in costumes of varied kind: peasants, proprietors, and men in broad-cloth habiliments of city life, all carrying guns, swords, and pistols. They were not citizens of Val di Orno; they were strangers, as could be seen at a glance. Neither did they appear banditti, though several of the soldiers who had lagged behind were now seen standing in the piazza, guarded as their prisoners! What could it mean? Who could the strangers be?

These questions were answered as the returning townsmen came near enough to distinguish the cries: "*Evviva ella Republica! Abasso tyranni! Abasso il Papa!*" At the same time a tricoloured flag shot up on its staff, proclaiming to the citizens of Val di Orno that their town was in possession of the Republicans! And so, too, was Rome at that moment. The Pope had fled, and the triumvirate—Mazzini, Saffi, and Aurelli—held rule in the Holy City.

A fresh surprise awaited the *sindico* on reaching his own house; his son Luigi stood in front of it—one of those who was vociferating the watchword of *Liberty*.

A hurried greeting passed between father and son. With a quick glance, the latter caught the expression of grief on his father's countenance.

"What is wrong?" he asked. "There have been brigands here—where is my sister?"

A groan was the answer; this, and a hand raised in the direction of the hills.

"O God!" exclaimed the young man; "too late! Have I come too late? Speak, father! Tell me what has happened—where is Lucetta?"

"*Poverina!*—*mia povera figlia!*—gone, Luigi! Borne off by the brigand Corvino!"

The words were gasped out with the choking utterance of grief. The bereaved parent could say no more. He sank into the arms of his son.

"Friends!" cried Luigi Torreani to those who stood around listening; "comrades, I may call you! But for absence in a foreign land, I should have been one of you. I am one of you now, and henceforth. Here is my father, Francesco Torreani, the *sindico* of this town. You heard what he has said. His daughter—my sister—carried off by the brigands! And that with a hundred soldiers supposed to be protecting the place! This is the protection we get from the valiant defenders of the Holy Faith!"

"Defenders of the devil!" came a voice from the crowd.

"Worse than the brigands themselves," added another. "I believe they've been in league with them all along. That's why the scoundrels have so often escaped."

"Quite true!" cried a third. "We know it. They're in the pay of the Pope and his Majesty of Naples. That's one of the ways by which our tyrants have controlled us."

"You will stand by me, then?" said the young artist, his face brightening with hope. "You will help me to recover my sister? I know you will."

"We will! we will!" answered a score of earnest voices.

"You may depend upon that, Signor Torreani," said a man of imposing aspect, who was evidently the leader of the Republican troop. "The brigands shall be pursued, and your sister saved, if it be in our power. Nothing shall be left undone. But first we must dispose of these hirelings. See! they are coming down the hill. Into the houses, *compagnos!* Let us take them by surprise. Here, Stramoni, Giugletta, Paoli! On to the end of the street. Shoot down any one who attempts to go out and give them warning! Inside, *compagnos!*—in, in!"

In a score of seconds the piazza was cleared of the crowd, the strangers hurrying inside the houses, forcing along with them the soldier-prisoners whom they had taken. Half-a-dozen men hastened towards the suburbs, to cut off any communication that might be attempted between the citizens and soldiery, who were now returning *en masse* down the mountain slope, their captain at their head. Such of the townsmen as chose were allowed to remain in the streets, with a warning that any attempt at treason, made either by word or sign, would draw the fire of the Republicans upon them. Few of them stood in need of it. Under the administration of such a *sindico*, there were not many of the inhabitants of Val di Orno who did not secretly exult at the new order of things. They had already hailed with acclamation their deliverers from the city, and were joyed at the prospect of a Republic.

On came Guardiola at the head of his troop. The soldiers were marching in straggling disorder. The captain was not himself in the best of spirits. False as his love had been, he felt bitter chagrin at the girl having been carried away. His own recreance too, there was something to regret about that. Now that the excitement was over, he could not help thinking of it. With soiled shield and trailing pennon, he was returning into the town. He cared little for the sentiment of the citizens; less now that *she* was no longer among them. But his own followers had been witnesses of his cowardly conduct, and he would hear of it perhaps at headquarters. Captain, subalterns, and troop tramped back towards the town, observing neither rank nor caution. Little did they dream of the trap into which they were advancing. The measures of the Republican leader had been well taken. On each of the four sides of the piazza he had placed a portion of his force—distributed into nearly equal parts. Hidden by the blinds inside, they commanded

the whole square, and could rake it with their fire through the windows and doors. The soldiers would have no chance. Once within the piazza they would be at the mercy of the Revolutionists. And into the piazza they came, utterly unconscious of the fate that awaited them. They had noticed the silence pervading the place, and wondered that their comrades, left behind, came not forth to greet them.

They were reflecting on the strangeness of these things when a loud voice, issuing from the inn, summoned them to surrender.

*"Rendate, Capitano! Yield up your sword to the soldiers of the Republic!"*

"What's the meaning of this impertinence?" cried Guardiola, facing the albergo, and endeavouring to discover from whom proceeded the voice. "Sergeant," he continued, "drag that man out into the street, and see that he has a score of blows upon the back—heavily laid on."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the voice, while the laughter was loudly echoed from the four sides of the square, and again the demand was repeated.

The carabinieri unslung their firelocks, and faced in different directions, ready to make havoc among the jeering citizens, as they supposed them to be. They only waited for the word to fire into the windows and doors.

"We don't want to spill your blood," said the same stentorian voice, speaking from the albergo; "but if you insist upon it, we shall. Soldiers of the Pope! you are surrounded by soldiers of a higher power—the Republic. Your master is no longer in Rome. He has fled to Gaeta. Mazzini rules in the city, and we intend to rule here. You are completely in our power. The first of you that draws a trigger will be answerable for the sacrifice of your whole troop; for we shall not leave a man of you standing. Be wise, then, and surrender, as we tell you. Put down your arms, and we shall treat you as prisoners of war. Use them, and you shall have the treatment you more deserve—that accorded to hirelings and brigands!"

Guardiola and his troop were astounded. What could it mean—this summons so impudently and yet so confidently spoken? They stood irresolute.

*"Compagnos!"* cried the voice from the albergo, speaking as if from the interior of some Delphian shrine, and loud enough to reach the four sides of the square; "these worthy gentlemen seem to hesitate, as if they doubted the truth of my words. Convince them of it by showing the muzzles of your guns. When they have counted those, perhaps they will be less incredulous."

Quick following upon this speech came the clanking noise of gun-barrels brought in collision; and, to the consternation of Guardiola and his carabinieri, a score of windows around the piazza glistened with dark iron tubes that could not be mistaken for aught else than what they were. There appeared to be at least two hundred. One-fourth of the number would have been sufficient.

The soldiers saw that they were in an ambushade—that the Revolution, long threatened, had at length come; and, without waiting for the sanction of Captain Guardiola or his subalterns, they flung their carbines to the ground, and declared themselves agreeable to a surrender.

In ten minutes after they were standing under the tricolour flag, and crying *"Evviva ella Repubblica!"* while their captain, swordless and looking very uncomfortable, was pacing a chamber floor in the albergo, to which but three days before he had consigned Henry Harding as a prisoner.

He was now himself a prisoner to the soldiers of the Republic.

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## Chapter Fifty.

### The Abduction.

Half carrying, half dragging the girl with him, Corvino kept on through the mountain passes. When he thought himself safe from immediate pursuit, he stopped to await the coming up of his comrades. He had heard shots on the other side of the hill, and knew the soldiers were on the alert. But he had little fear of being overtaken by them. He calculated the time it would take them to ascend the slope. Before they could reach the summit his own men would have secured their captive and retreated down the ravine. Four to one—for he had witnessed the cowardly abandonment by the officer—there could be no fear of their failing. He had hurried ahead to gain a sufficient start, knowing that he would be impeded in the transporting of his new-made captive in the event of pursuit. Before leaving the ground he had shouted *"Dagli! dagli!"* but coupling it with a caution to take the prisoner alive, if possible. It was this that prevented the men from first making use of their pistols. By Henry Harding's death they would sacrifice the *riscatta* they had been long counting upon.

After giving the order, Corvino had hurried off, taking his captive with him. The young girl made no resistance; she had swooned, and in an unconscious state was carried away.

On recovering her senses, she saw that she was no longer on Hermit's Hill, but in a wild spot surrounded by trees and rocks, the brigand captain standing close beside her. She neither screamed nor attempted to escape. She saw it would be idle, as she was helplessly in the power of her captor. Her thoughts were still scattering and confused; she felt as if just waking from some disagreeable dream, with its scenes still vivid before her fancy. She remembered the approach of the shepherds, their rude address, the throwing aside their disguises, the cry "Corvino!" as it came from the lips of his late captive; the face of the brigand chief suddenly showing from under the *capuce*, and which she

herself recognised; the seizure of all three; the struggle; a sword gleaming in the hand of Henry Harding; his rushing upon her captor; a shot fired by Corvino; the angry exclamations of the pseudo-shepherds; the glancing of their stilettos; the scampering of the scared sheep; the quick, confused tinkling of their bells; and finally Captain Guardiola fleeing from the spot. All these she remembered like the incidents of a disturbed dream. She remembered Corvino once more coming up to her; once more laying hold, and hurrying her from the spot. After that she became unconscious—her senses only returning to tell her she was alone with the brigand.

On opening her eyes, she saw blood on the bandit's dress, and that the skirt of her own robe was sprinkled with it. It appeared to proceed from a wound in his right arm, and she now recalled the sword in the grasp of the young Englishman, and the gallant use he was making of it. What had been the result of the unequal combat? Had Henry Harding succumbed? Had he been killed? Or was he, like herself, a captive? She had heard the command for him to be taken *alive* if possible, shouted back by Corvino. She hoped they had obeyed it; but trembled to think he might be dead. It was her first anxiety.

Fully recovering her senses, she looked around, but there was no one near—only the chief standing by, busied in binding up his wound. He had cut open the sleeve of his velvet coat, and was stanching the blood with strips from his shirt. She made no offer to assist him; she could only regard him with horror. His savage aspect, heightened to hideousness by the crimson streaks of blood on his hands, arms, and face, was sufficient to inspire both fear and aversion. She trembled as she lay watching him: for she was still lying upon the ground, where she had been placed like a parcel of goods.

"Be still, signorina," said her captor, on perceiving she had come to herself. "Have patience till I get my arm slung, and then I shall take you to a softer couch. *Sangue de Cristo!* The Inglese shall pay for this with the loss of his ears and double the ransom. Now!" he said, having finished slinging his arm; "*Alza! Alza!* we mustn't tarry, or that valiant captain may be after us with his soldiers. Come along, signorina. You can walk the rest of the way. *Corpo di Bacco!* I've carried you far enough."

As he said this, he stretched out his left hand; seized the young girl by the wrist; raised her to her feet; and was about to proceed along the path, when he heard his four comrades coming up behind. He stayed to await their approach.

Presently they appeared filing through the rocks. There was no prisoner along with them!

He waited till the last was in sight; then, letting go his hold upon the captive, he rushed back towards the men, fiercely vociferating as he went.

"*Dio Santo!*" he exclaimed. "Where is the Inglese? Not with you? *Maladitto!* What have you done? Killed him?"

With a palpitating heart Lucetta listened for the reply. The men were slow to make answer—as if unwilling to tell the truth. She did not draw hope from this. They might be afraid to confess they had killed him. She remembered the command to take him alive. She trembled as she stood listening.

Another string of mingled oaths and interrogations was terminated by the same demand—

"Have you killed the Inglese? I heard the reports of your pistols; after that a volley from the soldiers. You were firing at him then, I suppose?"

"We were, *capo,*" answered one of the men.

"Well?"

"He succeeded in taking shelter under the cave, and we could not get at him. His long blade defended the entrance. Of course we could not surround him. If it had been a question of killing, we could have done that long before, but your orders were against it."

"And you've left him alive, unscathed, free?"

"No, *capo,* we think he must have fallen at our fire. We could not stay to see, for the bullets were raining round us thick as sleet. No doubt he is dead by this."

By the look and tone, the young girl could tell they were prevaricating. There was still a hope he might yet be alive. The chief equally perceived their evasion, and broke out in a paroxysm of fury. Forgetful of his injured arm, and almost wrenching it from its sling, he rushed upon his defeated followers.

"*Cowards! imbeciles!*" he cried, striking with his left hand now one, now the other, and tearing the hats from their heads. "*Sangue di bacco!* four of you conquered by one man—a boy—with the loss of thirty thousand scudi! *Vada en Malora!*" he exclaimed in agony, as he felt the pain of his disabled arm. "Take hold of the *giovinetta,* and bring her along. See that she does not escape you as well. *Su via!*"

Saying this, he strode off, leaving his companions to conduct the *giovinetta* after him. One of these, roughly seizing her by the wrist, and repeating the words "*Su via!*" hurried her off after the chief, the other three following sullenly.

The young girl offered no resistance. Any attempt to escape would have been hopeless. Her savage captors had freely flashed their daggers before her eyes, threatening to use them if she resisted; and she accompanied them with a sort of mechanical acquiescence springing from despair. Her thoughts were not with herself; they were directed to the Hermit's Hill, though she had little hope of rescue from that quarter. Having witnessed the cowardly desertion of her by Captain Guardiola, she knew he would be equally backward in any pursuit; and indeed her captors showed not the slightest apprehensions of it.

As they wound their way slowly and deliberately through the defiles of the mountain, it might have quickened their steps had they known of the change that had taken place in the garrison of Val di Orno.

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## Chapter Fifty One.

### On the Trail.

It is scarce necessary to say that the appeal made by the brother and father of the abducted girl found a ready response in the hearts of the Republican *volontieri*. It came upon them with the force of a double call; for in addition to dictates of humanity, the men looked upon brigandage as a part of the despotic government they had just overthrown. The *sindico* too had claims upon them; for it was known to their leaders that he had long secretly sympathised with their cause, his oath of office keeping him from any open demonstrations in their favour. Besides, his son, encountered by mere accident as they were issuing from the gates of Rome, had declared along with them, and was now one of themselves. Under such circumstances there could be no desire to withhold assistance from their newly-enrolled comrades. Nor was there any such, but, on the contrary, an enthusiasm coupled with a unanimous determination to take steps for the rescue of his sister.

As soon, therefore, as Guardiola and his troop were disposed of, by being disarmed and placed in charge of a detailed guard, preparations were entered upon for the pursuit of Corvino and his bandits. Luigi Torreani, a prey to the agony of a terrible apprehension, would have started off after them at once, and so too the young Englishman. But the leader of the Republican battalion—Rossi by name—was a man of more prudent impulses, and saw that such a step would only defeat the purpose they had in view. He had been himself an officer in the Neapolitan army, and had plenty of experience in the chasing of banditti. He well knew that any open pursuit of these watchful outlaws could end only in a ridiculous failure. The brigands themselves often witnessing such a result from the crest of some inaccessible cliff, will hail it with taunts and scornful laughter. It is true that in the present case there was an advantage. The rendezvous of the robbers was known. Their late captive could guide the pursuing party to the spot—a chance not often obtained. So far all seemed well; but not to the experienced pursuer of banditti.

“The advantage will be lost,” argued Signor Rossi, “if any attempt be made to approach by daylight. Their vedettes would see us from afar, and give them time to decamp. We must make our march in the night; and now that we know their den, there is some chance of our being able to entrap them.”

Some chance! The phrase fell harshly on the ears of Luigi Torreani, his father, and his friend. It was torture to think of any delay—to contemplate starting only after nightfall, with twenty miles of mountain road between them and the dearest object of their affections, perhaps at that moment struggling in the embrace of a bandit! To the three individuals most interested the suspense was simply agonising; and, to speak the truth, there were many of the others who only affected it, both townsmen and *volontieri*. Could nothing be done in the way of an immediate pursuit?

All knew well that to follow the five who had carried off the *sindico's* daughter would be an idle chase; for much time had elapsed, and with the knowledge the bandits possessed of the mountain passes, they must long since have placed themselves in security. The only hope was in finding them at the rendezvous described by their escaped captive.

Was there no way by which this might be clandestinely approached during the daylight? No. It would be night before the brigands themselves would reach it. It was now midday, and the distance was at least twenty miles. Night would be the time for attack, and it also needed this to cover their approach throughout the intervening twenty miles. Otherwise surprise would be impossible; there would be vedettes along the line—if not brigands themselves, their *manutengoli*—peasants or shepherds. So said the leader, Rossi, and with reason. Was there any way out of the dilemma—any plan by which the brigands' nest might be captured that night, and before another crime could be committed? The thought of another crime was in the minds of all—not more the relatives of the abducted girl than those who had volunteered to assist in her rescue?

Who could suggest a feasible plan?

“I,” said a man, stepping forward into the midst of the council, which was held in the open piazza. “If you'll follow my advice, and accept my guidance, I think I can put you in the way you want. Besides rescuing the daughter of the worthy *sindico* here, you may capture the whole of Corvino's band—with whom for many months I have been unwillingly compelled to associate.”

“Tommaso!” exclaimed the *sindico*, recognising his old retainer.

“*Dio Santo!*” cried the leader of the Revolutionists, seeing before him a man known as having suffered in the good cause—a victim of the Vatican, who had preferred brigandage to rotting in a Roman prison. “Signor Tommaso, is it you?”

“It is I, Captain Rossi; thank heaven, no longer compelled to skulk away among the hills and conceal myself from the sight of old friends, herding, as I have done, with the vilest scum of mankind; thank heaven and Giuseppe Mazzini! Long live the Republic!”

A general shaking of hands between Tommaso and the *volontieri* succeeded, many of the latter being old acquaintances, who had known him during his residence in the city of Rome.

Not less friendly was the grasp given by the young Englishman, who was now certain that his mysterious correspondent, the donor of the knife, was no other than Tommaso. But there was no time to be wasted in idle

congratulations. It was not the occasion for them, with a cloud still hanging over their hearts, and Tommaso was not the man to need prompting.

"Follow me," he said, speaking to Rossi, the *sindico*, and his son. "I know a way by which we can reach the place without being seen, and before sunset if need be. But they will not get home until midnight; and, by that time, we shall have them all in a trap—completely surrounded, and leaving no loophole of escape. Now, we must start at once. There is no time to linger; for the path we are to take is long and difficult."

None hesitated to accept his proposal, or sought further explanation; and in less than ten minutes after, the Republican *volontieri*, leaving sufficient of their number to guard their soldier-prisoners, marched out of Val di Orno. They took their way towards the Neapolitan frontier, under the guidance of Tommaso, still wearing the garb of a brigand.

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## Chapter Fifty Two.

### A Suffocating Drink.

It wanted an hour of midnight when the brigand vedette stationed at the mountain foot heard the howl of the Apennine wolf three times repeated.

"*Il capo*, I suppose," he muttered, as after answering the signal, he stood up to take note of who was making approach. Himself concealed, he could see any one coming, time enough to sound another signal to the sentry on the summit of the hill. This would communicate the character of the approaching party—whether friendly or hostile; which by him above would in turn be telegraphed on to the quarters of the band.

The vedette soon perceived that his conjecture was correct. The chief came up, stopping only to mutter some inquiry, and then passed on. He was closely followed by a woman, whose fine silken skirt, seen under the coarse *frezada* that hung down from her shoulders, told she was richly robed; while her drooping head and slow unwilling step proclaimed her a captive. The *capuce* drawn over her head concealed her face from the eyes of the sentinel, who could tell, however, by her dress, and the small white hand grasping the folds of the *frezada*, that she was a *signorina*. Four other men—bandits in the disguise of shepherds—going in single file, followed after. The wolf-howl was uttered as they passed; its notes preceding them up the gorge, and receiving a response from the sentry at the summit. And then silence succeeded, broken only by an occasional rumbling noise, as some fragments of rock, detached by the feet of the ascending bandits, came rolling back down the declivity.

"That's the new wife, I take it," soliloquised the sentry, as soon as the party had gone past. "I should have liked a squint at her face. No doubt it's a pretty one, or our dainty *capo* wouldn't have taken all this trouble to secure her. His arm in a sling, too! The bird hasn't been caught without a scuffle. I wonder if it be that *sindico's* daughter there's been such talk about. Like enough it is. *Enfedi mia!* Corvino strikes at high game. Well, after all, what's better than to be the *cara sposa* of a brigand? Plenty of jewellery, rings, chains, lockets, and bracelets; plenty of confetti and kisses. What more can a woman want? And plenty of cuffing if she don't properly deport herself." Chuckling at his coarse jest, the vedette once more resumed his seat upon the rock; and, folding his *frezada* around him, relapsed into silence.

About an hour after, he was again startled from his sedentary attitude by the well-known wolf-howl. As before, the signal came from the outside—from the *scorza* that led toward the Roman frontier.

"*E cosi!*" he muttered; "what others are abroad to-night? I only remember the *capo* and his party. Now I think of it, Tommaso went out in the morning—on some fool's errand. I wonder the *capo* trusts Master Tommaso, after that ugly disclosure about his *cara Popetta*. *Poverina!* if she were alive to see what's going on, wouldn't there be trouble in the camp! *Corpo di Bacco!* there again! Don't be in such an infernal hurry, Signor Tommaso. Let me gather my breath for the answer. *Wah-wah-ouah!*" he howled out in response, giving the lugubrious signal; "now you may come on."

Shortly after, a figure was seen stealthily approaching through the darkness, but with a step that showed a thorough acquaintance with the path.

"*Chi e' la?*" hailed the sentry, as if some presentiment had increased his caution.

"*Amico!*" responded the person approaching; "why do you hail? I am Tommaso."

"Ah! Signor Tommaso! I had forgotten that you were out. I thought you had gone in along with the others."

"What others?" inquired Tommaso, with interest he endeavoured to conceal under a pretence of ill-humour.

"What others?" echoed the unreflecting sentinel; "why, Corvino himself, to be sure, and the party of *pastores* that went abroad with him. You were at the rendezvous when they left?"

"Ah, true," carelessly remarked Tommaso. "But I thought they had got back before night. How long since they passed up?"

"About an hour ago."

"Well, have they made anything by their sheep-driving?"

"A lamb. A young ewe, I take it, from what I could see of her wool. *Dio Santo!* there must have been sharp horns in the flock from which they have separated her. Our *capo* has had a thrust from some old ram. I could see blood upon

his shirt."

"Wounded, you think. Where?"

"In the right, arm. He was nursing it in a sling. There must have been a fight, I suppose. Did you hear nothing of it outside?"

"How could I? I've been too busy, and in a different direction."

"I hope you've not been so busy as to hinder you from filling your flask, Signor Tommaso."

"*Por Bacco*, no!" answered the latter, evidently more pleased than offended by the reminder. "I always find time for that. You want a pull, I suppose?"

"You're right there, *compagno*; it's a bit chilly upon post to-night, and a gill of *rosolio* would give me an infinite amount of comfort."

"You shall have it. I can't accommodate you with a cup. Can I trust the bottle in your hands?"

"*Che demonio!* yes. You don't suppose, signor, I am going to rob you? A single pull will content me."

"Here, then," said Tommaso, handing over the leather bottle. "I'll give you a good chance. You can swig away while I am counting twenty. Will that suffice?"

"*Mille grazie!* yes. You are very generous, Signor Tommaso."

The man, laying aside his carbine, caught hold of the proffered flask, from which Tommaso had already removed the stopper. Then, with the exclamation, "*Oh me felice!*" he took the neck between his lips. Turning his countenance skywards, he commenced imbibing the delicious liquor in long, copious draughts.

Tommaso had watched for this opportunity; and, suddenly stepping forward, he seized hold of the flask with his right hand, while with his left he grasped the brigand by the back of the neck. Then kicking his feet from under him, he flung the fellow back downwards on the grass, at the same time falling on top of him.

The vedette, thus taken aback, was hindered from resisting through sheer astonishment. He at first supposed it to be a joke, and that Tommaso was too generous of his liquor. Then he became doubtful about the designs of such rough handling; and then angry. He would have called out, but the bottle filling the whole cavity of his mouth, and the *rosolio* running down his throat, put a stopper to his speech. A few choking sounds escaped him; but, before he could free himself to give a good shout, or utter the oaths he would have done, four other assailants—already summoned by a low whistle from Tommaso—came quickly upon the ground. These, flinging themselves upon the prostrate body of the vedette, soon put an end to his struggles. It ended in their inserting a piece of stick between his teeth, and pinioning his arms to his sides; so that he was not only gagged and speechless, but powerless to stir from the spot.

A large body of men—for whom Tommaso had gone back some distance along the *scorza*—now came filing past; and, led by the *ci-devant* brigand, climbed quickly but silently up the gorge—their demeanour showing them bent upon an enterprise requiring the utmost caution.

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## Chapter Fifty Three.

### Courtship with a Captive.

By this time, Corvino, his captive, and four followers had passed up the ravine, crossed the ridge, and descended into the crater.

On nearing the cluster of houses, they had been again challenged; this time by the regular sentinel of the rendezvous—of which there were two, one on each side. There was not much fear of these being found asleep. They had been lately taught a lesson well calculated to keep them on the alert, having seen two of their comrades summarily shot for neglect of watch-duty. They were the two who had suffered the English captive to escape. These had been tried, condemned, and executed, all within an hour's time, after Henry Harding had been missed. Such is the code of the banditti—its stringency being their best safeguard against surprise and capture. A member of the band, placed over a prisoner, answers for the keeping of him with his own life. No wonder the escapes of *riscattati* are so rare—scarcely ever occurring.

No dog's bark hailed the chief's return; only the wolf-howl of the sentinel, three times repeated. Nobody came forth to welcome him. One of his followers opened the door of the *capo's* house, entered, and struck a light, which he left burning in the chamber. The man then came out, and the four sham shepherds scattered off to their respective *pagliattas*.

Corvino was alone with his captive.

"Now, signorina," he said, pointing to the house; "behold your future home! I regret I have not a grander mansion to receive you in; but such as it is, you are its mistress. Allow me to conduct you to your chamber."

With an air of assumed courtesy, he offered his arm, which the captive made no movement to take.

"*E così!*" he exclaimed, taking hold of her wrist, and drawing her up the stone steps. "Don't be so shy, lady. Step

inside! You'll not find it so uncomfortable. There's a chamber specially fitted up for you with a sofa. You must be fatigued after your long march over the mountains. Be seated, while I find something sweet to refresh you. Can you drink *rosolio*? Stay, here's better: a bottle of sparkling *Capri*."

As he was talking, with his back turned to the door, a third individual entered the apartment—a woman of considerable beauty, but with that bold, fierce look that tells a sad tale. She had walked into the room without noise, stealthily and catlike; and, still remaining silent, she stood just inside the door—her glance fixed upon Lucetta Torreani, her eyes scintillating, as though at each moment they emitted sparks of fire. It was the woman who had betrayed Popetta, with the ambitious aim of being her successor. At the sight of this new arrival, her hopes seemed extinguished, and the look of concentrated rage with which she regarded the young girl was fearful to behold. It caused the latter to utter a cry of alarm.

"*Chi senti?*" asked the brigand, turning suddenly around, and for the first time perceiving the intruder. "Ah! you it is! *Che tu sia maladetta!* Why are you here? Off to your own apartment! Off, I say! *Largo! Largo!* This instant, or you shall feel the weight of my arm!"

The woman, awed by the threatening gesture, backed slowly out of the room; but as she passed into the shadow of the corridor, the fierce flashing of her eyes, accompanied by some words, low muttered, might have told Corvino that there was danger in what he was doing. He was too much engrossed with his evil design to think of it.

"Only one of my domestics, signorina," he said, turning once more towards his captive. "She should have been to bed hours ago. 'Tis for that I have scolded her. Don't let our little home-troubles make you unhappy. Drink this—it will refresh you."

"I have no need of it," replied the girl, scarce knowing what to say, at the same time pushing aside the proffered cup.

"But you have, signorina. Come, my fair girl—drink! Then for some supper. You must be hungry, as well as fatigued."

"I cannot drink. I am not hungry. I cannot eat."

"What would you then? To bed? There's a couch in the next room. I am sorry I have no maids to help undress you. She whom you have just seen is not used to that kind of duty. You would prefer at once going to rest? Is that it, signorina?"

There was no reply. The young girl sat on the sofa with her head drooping down, till the chin touched her snow-white bosom. This was partially exposed—the buttons having been torn from her bodice as she was dragged along in the company of her captors.

There had been tears upon her cheek; but they were now dried, their traces only remaining. She could not again weep. She had reached that crisis of agony no longer to be relieved by tears.

"Come!" said the brigand, affecting an air of sympathy, like some cunning serpent in the act of fascinating its victim. "Cheer up, signorina! I acknowledge the rude fashion by which I have made you my guest; but who could resist the temptation of having so beauteous a damsel under his roof? Ah, Lucetta! though you knew it not, I have long been your admirer; long been enslaved by your charms—that are celebrated far beyond the mountains of the Romagna. I've myself heard speak of them in the *salons* of the Holy City. Ah! fair lady! being your captive, can you blame me for making you mine?"

"What would you, signor? Why have you brought me here?"

"What would I, signorina? What but have you love me as I love you? Why have I brought you here? Only to make you my wife!"

"*Madonna mia!*" murmured the girl, scarce listening to what he had said. "*O Madonna santissima!* What have I done to deserve this?"

"To deserve what?" asked the bandit, suddenly changing his tone. "To deserve becoming the wife of Corvino! You speak proudly, signorina. 'Tis true I am no grand *sindico* like your father; nor yet a *povero pittore* like the cur from whose company I have snatched you. But I am master of the mountains—and of the plains too! Who dares dispute my will? You will find it law, my lady—ay, to the very gates of Rome."

After this outburst, the brigand paced for some seconds over the floor—his step proud, strong, exultant.

"I love you, Lucetta Torreani," he continued after a time. "I love you with a passion that does not deserve such cold repulse. You may not like the idea of becoming a bandit's wife; but remember, you become also a bandit's queen. There is not a plume in all the mountain land that won't bend to you—nor a hat that shall not be taken off in your presence. Throw aside your shyness, then, my pretty damsel! Don't have any fear of losing caste by becoming wife to the chieftain Corvino!"

"Your wife! Never!"

"Call it by another name, then—if you prefer stickling about terms. We don't have much formality in our mountain marriages, though we can get a priest when we want one. If you prefer the ceremony in a simpler way, I, for my part, shall have no objections to doing without the intervention of the *curato*. About that you shall have your choice."

"Death, then, shall it be! I shall choose that."

"*Eh giusta!* I like your spirit, signorina. It pleases me, almost as much as your personal appearance. Still it wants



taming—just a little. Twenty-four hours in my company will accomplish that; perhaps less. But I give you the full allowance of twenty-four. If at the end of that time you do not consent to have our nuptials celebrated by the *curato*—there is one convenient—why, then we must get married without him. You understand that?”

“*Madonna mia!*”

“No use calling upon her. She cannot save you, immaculate as she is said to have been; nor any one else. No rescuing hand can reach you here—not even the hand of his Holiness. Among these mountains, the chieftain Corvino is master, as Lucetta Torreani shall be mistress.”

Before the boast had fairly parted from his lips, a sound from without caused the brigand to start—changing, as if by electricity, his air of triumph to one of alarm.

“*Chi senti?*” he muttered, gliding towards the door, and placing himself in an attitude to listen.

The howling of the Apennine wolf—“*wah, wah, oouah!*”—responded to by some one coming along the *scorza*. Almost at the same time, it was uttered on the other side—by the sentinel set towards the south, and soon after answered in that direction.

What could be the meaning of this? Which of the band had been abroad? He could think only of Tommaso, whom he had that morning despatched on a particular errand. There could not be two Tommasos coming home—simultaneously from the north and from the south!

He was not allowed much time for conjecture. Almost on the instant of his taking his stand in the doorway a struggle was heard on both sides of the house, followed by shots and shouts, amid which he could distinguish the voices of his own sentries, loudly vociferating the cry, “*Tradimento!*”

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## Chapter Fifty Four.

### A Terrible Tableau.

And treason it was—treason and surprise—almost instantaneously followed by the capture of the whole band of brigands!

First the *pagliatta* huts were surrounded, and then the house of the chief himself. There was a crowd of men, upon whose persons, despite the darkness, could be seen the bright glitter of arms. There was light enough from the stars and the chamber he had lately quitted to show Corvino that his quarters were completely enfiladed by dark shadowy forms, each holding in his hand a gun, pistol, or sword.

At the same instant was the strife going on among the *pagliatta*—stray shots and groans, mingled with, profane exclamations that came from the mouths of men dragged suddenly out of their beds, and scarce conscious of the cause of their quick awakening. It was a strife soon brought to its close—even before their chief could take part in it.

During a long career of crime, it was the first time Corvino had ever suffered surprise—the first for him to feel something like despair. And at the very moment, too, when he was indulging in a delightful dream of triumph!

Who could have brought this calamity upon him? Who was the traitor? There must have been treason, else how could his sentinels have been cheated? Who could have had acquaintance with the secret wolf-signal?

There was no time for him to reflect. Thoughts of vengeance must be postponed. It was a question of self-preservation; for the brigand chief found himself reduced to this.

His first impulse was to rush out, and take part in the fight raging between his band and those who had so mysteriously assailed it. But the conflict was scarce entered upon before it was over. It was less a strife than a capture; a seizing of men in their shirts, who surrendered without striking a blow. Even the thundering voice of their chief could not arouse his yawning partisans to the spirit required for a struggle.

It was but an ordinary instinct that impelled him to shut the door, and rush back to the room he had quitted, determined to defend himself to the death.

His first thought was putting out the light. His second, how could the darkness avail him? Sooner or later other lights would be procured—candles or torches; or, if not, his assailants need only wait till morning—now near at hand. It could only be a suspension of his fate—at best, a respite of two or three hours. All at once came an idea, offering a chance, not for triumph, but safety. There was a way by which he might still save his life. Let the light burn! Let his assailants see inside the house! Let them look upon the tableau that had just suggested itself to his imagination!

Quick as thought that tableau was formed, in the centre of the room already illuminated. It consisted of two figures—himself and Lucetta Torreani.

The young girl was in front; the brigand, as a background, behind her. His left arm encircled her waist, with his hand clutching a stiletto, whose point was turned towards her heart! His right arm, still resting in the sling, was powerless to hold her. But he had contrived a strange way of keeping her in her place. His teeth were seen closed upon a coil of her hair!

Outside were the spectators of this singular picture, excited, angry, two of them almost mad. One was the brother of her who formed the female figure in it—the other Henry Harding. Either would have rushed through the window, but

the bars forbade them; and although both carried guns and pistols, they dared not discharge them. They stood with a score of others, almost within touching distance of the outlaw; and yet dared not stretch forth a hand, either for his capture or destruction. They were compelled to listen to the parley, which at that moment he had commenced making.

“Signori,” he said, taking his teeth out of the young girl’s hair, but still keeping the plait close to his lips, “I’m not going to make a long speech. I see you’re impatient, and might not care to listen to it. You want my blood; you are thirsting for it. I am in your power, and you can take it. But if I am to die, so shall Lucetta Torreani. Yes; she dies along with me. Stir but a finger, any one of you; either draw a trigger, or make a movement to come inside, and that moment my poniard pierces her breast!”

The spectators stood silent, their breathing suppressed, and their eyes angrily gleaming upon the speaker.

“Don’t mistake what I’ve said for an idle threat,” he continued. “’Tis no time for talking nonsense. I know that my life is forfeit to the laws, and that you would show me about as much mercy as you would a trapped wolf. Be it so; but in killing your wolf, you won’t save your lamb. No! *Sangue di Madonna!* She shall suffer along with me. If I can’t have her in life, I shall in death!”

The expression upon the brute’s face, as he gave utterance to the threat, was revolting in its very earnestness. No one, who saw it, doubted his intention to do as he said. In fact, a movement at that instant made by him caused a vivid apprehension that he was about to carry out his threat; and the spectators stood transfixed, as if the blood had become frozen in their veins. But no; he was only preparing for further parley.

“What do you want us to do?” inquired Rossi, the leader of the victorious Revolutionists. “I suppose you know who we are. You see we are not the soldiers of the Pope?”

“*Cospetto!*” exclaimed the bandit, with a scornful toss of the head, “a child could have told that. I had no fear of seeing the brave *bersaglieri* of his Holiness here. They don’t relish the air of these remote mountains! That’s how you’ve been able to surprise us. Enough, *signori*. I know who you are; and now for my proposal.”

“Well, what is it?” demanded several of the spectators, chafing with impatience at the continued talk, and indignant at seeing the young lady still trembling in the bandit’s embrace. “Let us hear what you have to propose.”

“Absolute freedom for myself, and such of my men as you have captured. Those you have killed may remain with you; and I hope you will give them Christian burial. And if any have escaped, they can take their chances; I don’t stipulate for them. For myself and comrades, who are your prisoners, I demand release, and a promise that we shall not be pursued. Do you agree to it?”

The leaders outside turned to one another, and commenced discussing the proposal. It was painful to think of accepting such terms, letting the red-handed criminals escape. They had long been the terror of the district, committing outrages of every conceivable kind. Now that they were captured, and could be rooted out, it would be a shame, a disgrace to the Revolutionists—whose natural enemies the bandits had always been—to let them go free again, afterwards to recommence their depredations. Thus spoke several of the party.

On the other side, there was the danger in which stood the young lady—the absolute certainty that she would be sacrificed.

It is needless to say that Luigi Torreani, Henry Harding, and several others, urged the acceptance of the proposal, as also the chief Rossi.

“And if we comply with your demands, what then?” asked the latter.

“What then! Why, the signorina shall be given up. That is all you want, I suppose?”

“Are you ready to give her up now?”

“Oh no!” returned the brigand with a scornful laugh; “that would be delivering up the goods before they are paid for. We bandits don’t make such loose bargains.”

“Then what do you require us to do?”

“You must withdraw your men to the top of the ridge, where the pass leads out northward. Mine, set free, shall go up to that on the south. We can then see one another. You, signor, can yourself remain here with me, and receive the captive. You have nothing to fear, seeing that I have but one hand, and that a lame one. On your part I must have a promise that there shall be no treason.”

“I am willing to give it,” responded Rossi, the *signor* addressed, and who felt he was speaking the sentiment of his followers. “It must be in the form of an oath.”

“Agreed. I am ready to take it, now.”

“No; not till we have daylight. We must postpone it till the morning. It is near, and you won’t have long to wait.”

This was true enough. The scheme could not be carried out in the darkness, without risking treason on one side or the other. Both parties could perceive this.

“Meanwhile,” continued the bandit, “I must put out the light inside here, else you may contemplate stealing a march on me by trying to get in from behind. I don’t intend to let you surround me; and in the darkness I shall be safe. So,

*buono notte, signori!"*

A fresh thrill of apprehension ran through the veins of the spectators. More especially was this felt by Luigi Torreani and his English friend. The thought of the young girl being left alone in the darkness—alone with the brutal ruffian, even though they were themselves close by—filled them with horrible fears. Once more they were racking their brains for some plan to prevent such a perilous compromise. But they could not think of any that did not also compromise the safety of Lucetta. They had their guns cocked, ready to shoot Corvino down, had a chance presented itself. But there came none; his body was screened by that of the girl—a shot ill-aimed, and she only might receive it.

Half frantic, they saw the bandit stoop towards the lamp, with the intention of extinguishing it. Before he could succeed, a third personage appeared upon the scene—a form that darted quickly through the door behind.

It was a woman of wild aspect, in whose hand could be seen a stiletto glittering under the dim light. With a spring like that of an enraged tigress, she placed herself close behind the bandit; and, uttering a quick angry cry, plunged the poniard into his side.

Relaxing his grasp upon the girl, he turned round to defend himself; but almost on the instant staggered back against the wall.

His captive, finding herself released, glided instinctively towards the window. But it was not the intention of the murderess she should escape; and with the bloody poniard still grasped in her hand, she sprang quickly after.

Fortunately her intended victim had got close up to the bars, and was protected by a score of gun-barrels and sword-blades thrust through—among them the sword that had been snatched from Guardiola.

A volley was succeeded by an interval of deep silence inside the room. When the smoke cleared away, two dead bodies were seen lying upon the floor; which, under the light of the lamp, could be distinguished as those of Corvino and his murderess.

Lucetta Torreani was saved!

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## Chapter Fifty Five.

### The Roman Republic.

“Long live the Roman Republic!”

Such was the cry resounding through the streets of Rome in the year 1849; and among the voices vociferating it were those of Luigi Torreani and Henry Harding.

But while the young Englishman was helping the cause of freedom abroad, older Englishmen at home were plotting its destruction. At that time a Secret Convention was sitting *en permanence*, composed of representatives from most of the crowned heads in Europe; its purpose being to arrange ways and means by which the spark of Liberty should be trodden out, wherever it should show itself.

In Hungary it had flared up into a brilliant flame: short-lived; for by the aid of Russian bayonets it was soon stifled. The same result had followed in France—the ends and means being slightly different. Diplomacy again exerted its influence; and backed by British gold—secretly but profusely spent—succeeded in placing upon the Presidential chair a man foresworn to change that chair into a throne. And with this same corrupting metal, and the sinister influence derived from a great historic name, he was but too sure of success. Then a President in name—an Emperor in embryo—encouraged by the secret assistance of the other crowned heads, he was soon to have France at his feet.

It only required a trick to disfranchise the two millions of Houses, and then the French Assembly would be sufficiently conservative to transform the Republic into an Empire! There was still danger to be apprehended from the *blouses*.

How was this grand disfranchisement to be effected?

An astute diplomacy easily supplied the answer: “Let England snub the French ambassador. Let France recall him. Let there be a pretended attitude of mutual hostility, and while that is maintained the Assembly can take its measures.”

The counsel was followed. The minister was snubbed and recalled. Then while the British bull-dog was barking at Dover, and the Gallic cock crowing at Calais, the betrayed *blouses*, with angry faces turned towards England, instead of having their eyes upon their own National Assembly, were by this packed parliament speedily stripped of the privilege of voting.

In Hungary the game had been more open; though there, as in France, Liberty fell by the basest of all betrayals.

And again, in Baden the same foul play, though there the Secret Convention decided to settle it by the sword. The perjured King of Prussia was the man called upon to wield it, and his hireling soldiers proved too strong for the patriots of the Schwarzwald.

Once more, at the eleventh hour, another spark of that eternal flame of freedom appeared in an unexpected quarter—the very hotbed of despotism, political and religious—in the ancient city of Rome. And again sat the Secret Convention: an eminent English diplomat the most active of its members—he of all others the most successful cajoler of peoples—he whose long career had been a succession of betrayals. He has gone hence without witnessing their exposure. For all that, history will one day expose them.

Once more then sat the Secret Conclave; and once more went forth the edict for this fresh spark of Liberty, that had sprung up in agonised Italy, to be stifled like the rest. There was no need to use artifice. Slight strategy would suffice for an enemy so insignificant.

It was merely a graceful concession to Catholic Christendom, to make it a pretence of restoring the Pope. The Republic would have been crushed all the same if the Pope had gone to purgatory. The sword was again invoked, and it became a question of who was to wield it. English soldiers could not be sent, for England was a Protestant country, and the thing would have looked queer. But English gold was easily convertible into French soldiers, whose sovereign had no such scruples; and these hirelings were selected to restore the Pope. By them it was ostensibly done; but the act was equally due to the other crowned heads; and its direction specially to the British, diplomate of whom we have spoken. History holds the indisputable proof.

Poor Mazzini, and Saffi, and Aurelli! If there had not been a voice in all Rome against you—in all Italy—you could not have triumphed!

The decree had gone forth for your destruction. Your doom had been pre-ordained, and was pronounced in the very hour of your victory; even while the streets of Rome, cleared of the rotten rubbish of despotism, were ringing with that regenerating shout, "Long live the Republic!" For three months did it resound through the *stradi* of the classic city—the city of the Caesars and Colonnas. It was heard upon bastion and battlement, from behind battery and barricade, amidst scenes of heroic strife that recalled the days of Horatius. It was heard in the eloquent speeches of Mazzini—in the exciting war-cry of Garibaldi!

All in vain! Three short months—and it was heard no more. The Republic was overthrown, less by bayonets than by betrayal; but the rule of the bayonet succeeded, and *Chasseur* and *Zouave*, *Spahi* and *Turco*—all ruffians of the truest type—from that day to this have stood guard over the fettered limbs of Roman liberty.

In these troublous times, of three months' duration, Luigi Toreani took part with the Republic. So did his friend, the young Englishman. So, too, did Luigi's father; for the *sindico*, shortly after the affair with the brigands, had transferred his household gods to the city, which then promised a safe retreat from the insecurity he had long experienced.

But with the Republic at an end, and despotism once more triumphant, Rome itself was only safe for the foes of freedom. As Francesco Toreani was not one of these, another move became necessary. In what direction was it to be made? There was no part of Italy that offered an asylum. The Austrians still held Venice. Carlo Alberto had been beaten in the north, and the brigand's king ruled the Neapolitans with a rod of iron. Turn which way he would, there was no home on Italian soil for a suspected patriot.

Like men similarly situated, his thoughts turned towards the New World; and, not long after, a bark sailed down the Tyrrhenian Sea, and on through the Straits of Gades, bearing him and his to the shores of a far western land.

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## Chapter Fifty Six.

### Number Nine, Strada Volturno.

General Harding was not slow in transacting the business that carried him to London. It was too important to admit of delay. Even the old lawyer acknowledged this, after reading the quaint letter of the brigand, and scrutinising its still more quaint enclosure.

Mr Lawson's Italian tour had given him experience to comprehend the case—peculiar as it was—as also enabling him to recommend the steps necessary to be taken.

Five thousand pounds could not well be entrusted to the post; nor yet the management of such a delicate affair—in reality, not a matter of mere fingers and hands, but of life and death. Even a confidential clerk seemed scarce fit for the occasion; and after a short conference between the lawyer and his client, it was determined that the son of the former—Lawson fits—should go to Rome and place himself en rapport with "Signor Jacopi." Who Signor Jacopi was could only be guessed at: in all likelihood, that strange specimen of humanity who had presented himself at Beechwood Park, with a reckless indifference either to kicking or incarceration.

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The first train for Dover carried young Lawson en route for Rome, with a portmanteau containing five thousand pounds in gold coin, stamped with the graceful head of England's young Queen.

He thus went fully armed for an interview with Signor Jacopi.

Rome was reached, in due course, by rail and steam; and, within the ten days stipulated for in the letter of the brigand, the Lincoln's Inn lawyer might have been seen with a heavy bag in hand perambulating the streets of the Eternal City, and inquiring for the *Strada Volturno*.

He found the place in some disorder. Instead of the cowed monks and sleek silken-robed cardinals usually seen there—instead of grand *galantuomos* and gaily-dressed ladies—with here and there a sprinkling of impertinent *sbirri* and *gendarmierie*—he met men brave, of bold aspect—honest withal—bearded, belted, in costumes half civic, half military, armed to the teeth, and evidently masters of the situation.

He was not astonished to hear from these men the occasional cry, "Long live the Roman Republic!" He had been prepared for this before leaving England; and it was only by a well-attested passport that he had been enabled to

pass their lines and set foot upon the pavement of the seven-hilled city, at that moment threatened with siege.

Once in its streets, however, he no longer met any obstruction; and, without loss of time, he commenced searching for Signor Jacopi.

He had very little difficulty in finding the *Strada Volturmo*, and still less the domicile numbered 9. The men with long beards, and pistols stuck in their belts, were not morose, nor yet ill-disposed to the answering of his questions. They seemed rather to take a pleasure in directing him, with that hearty readiness that marks the intercourse of those who have been engaged in a successful revolution. He did not ask for the residence of Signor Jacopi; only for the street and the number. Once at the door, it would be time enough to pronounce the name of the mysterious individual to whom he was about to deliver a load of golden coins. He had been constantly changing them from arm to arm, and they had almost dragged his elbows out of joint. Without further difficulty than this, he at length reached the *Strada Volturmo*—a paltry street as it proved—and discovered at Number 9 the residence of Signor Jacopi.

He needed not to inquire. There could be no mistake as to the owner of the domicile. His name was lettered upon the door, "Signor Jacopi." The door was close shut and bolted, as if Signor Jacopi could only be seen with some difficulty. The London solicitor knocked, and waited for its opening.

He was, not without some curiosity to make the acquaintance of a member of the fraternity whose practice was of such a peculiar kind; who could demand payment of five thousand pounds, and get it without any appeal to a court—either to judge or jury. So unlike the practice of Lincoln's Inn!

The door was at length opened—not until the knock was repeated; a hag, who appeared at least seventy years old, being the tardy janitrix. But this need not dismay a solicitor of Lincoln's Inn Fields. She was no doubt the housekeeper of the premises.

"Does Signor Jacopi live here?" asked the young English lawyer; who, having accompanied his father on the Italian tour, was able to make his inquiries comprehensible.

"No," was the laconic response.

"No! His name is on the door."

"Ah, true!" responded the old woman, with something like a sigh. "They haven't taken it off yet. It's no business of mine. I'm only here to take care of the house."

"Do you mean that the Signor Jacopi doesn't live here any longer?"

"*E cos!* What a question to ask! You are jesting, signor."

"Jesting! No; I am in earnest—never more so in my life. I have important business with him."

"Business with Signor Jacopi! *Madonna Virgine!*" added the old woman, in a tone of consternation, and making the sign of the Cross.

"Certainly I have. And what is there strange in it?"

"Business with a dead man! That's strange, is it not?"

"Dead! Do you mean to say that Signor Jacopi is dead?"

"*Sì*, signor; surely you know that? Don't everybody know that he was killed in the outbreak—the very first day; knocked down, and then taken up again, and then hanged upon a lamp, because they said he was one of the—Oh, signor, I can't tell you what they said about him. I only know they killed him; and he's dead; and I've been put here to keep the house. That's all I know about it."

The young Lincoln's Inn lawyer let his bag of gold drop heavily upon the doorstep. He felt that he had come to Rome upon an idle errand.

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And an idle errand it proved. All he could learn of the Signor Jacopi was, that this individual was an Algerine Jew, who had settled in the Holy City and embraced the Holy Faith; that he had practised law—that department of it which in London would have entitled him to the appellation of a "thieves' lawyer;" that, furthermore, he was accustomed to long and mysterious absences from his office; but where, or wherefore, there was none to tell, since no one could be found who professed intimacy with him.

In consequence of some unexplained act, he had made himself obnoxious to the mob—during the first hours of the revolutionary outbreak—and had fallen a victim to their fury. These, and a few other like facts, were all that the London lawyer could learn about his professional brother of Rome. But not one item of information to assist him in the errand upon which he had been sent to the Eternal City.

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## Chapter Fifty Seven.

### A Fruitless Search.

What was the next thing to be done? This was the inquiry which Lawson junior put to himself, as he sat reflecting in

his *locanda*.

Should he go back to London, carrying his bag of sovereigns untouched, and along with it the news of the failure of his mission? This course might be fatal in its consequences. The letter of the brigand chief, which of course he had brought with him, plainly stated the conditions. After ten days from its date the hand of Henry Harding would be sent to his father, enclosed as had been the finger. Nine of these had already elapsed. Only one intervened. And now that the go-between, Jacopi, was no longer in existence, how was he to communicate with those who had threatened the horrible amputation? "A band of brigands on the Neapolitan frontier—about fifty miles from Rome." This extract from Henry Harding's first letter was all the clue he had to guide him to the whereabouts of the bandits. But the description might apply to the whole frontier, from the Tyrrhenian to the north-western angle of the Abruzzi—a line that, from all that he could learn, contained as many bands of brigands as there were leagues in its extent. For the Lincoln's Inn lawyer to make a tour along it, discover the locality of each band, and ascertain which of them held his young countryman in captivity, might possibly have been done at the hourly risk of being made captive himself. But even if successful in the search, it could not be accomplished in time.

In thinking it over, Lawson junior felt himself in a dilemma. Never in his life had his father's firm undertaken such a case. It bristled with difficulties, or, to speak more correctly, impossibilities.

What was he to do? He bethought himself of the application that had been made to the Foreign Office in Downing Street, and the promises there given to communicate with the Papal Government. Had these promises been kept? Had any action been taken in the matter? He rushed to the Vatican to inquire. But the Vatican was now a thing of the past—the *régime* of Rome was now in Republican hands. And, to his inquiries made in official quarters, he could only obtain the answer, that nothing was known of the matter.

Besides, the new rulers were too busy with their own affairs to take any interest in his. What was the liberty of one person to that of a whole nation, threatened by the approach of the two allied armies—Neapolitan and French—now hastening towards Rome for the destruction of the Republic? Every one was busy upon the barricades. There was no time to spare for the chastisement of a score or two of brigands.

The representative of Lawson and Son was terribly perplexed as to his course of action. It would be no use writing to London for instructions. His communication could not reach in time. Perhaps by the same steamer that would carry his letter, another might be despatched with a packet containing the bloody hand of Henry Harding. It would be a fearful consummation. But how was it to be shunned? He could think of no means; and to wait for a return letter of advice from England seemed like abandoning the captive to his fate. Still there was no help for it; and he commenced writing the letter—in firm belief that the return post would bring him the sad news of the brigands having carried out their atrocious threat. It was less with the hope of hindering this, than the other menace of a still more terrible event, that induced him to indite the letter. Before he had finished writing it, a new idea came into his mind, causing him to desist. What if his letter should be miscarried? In such times could the post be relied upon? Besides, why write at all? Why not go himself? He would reach London as soon as a letter could; and a matter of such importance should not be entrusted to chance. Further reflection convinced him that he had best go back; and, tearing up the unfinished despatch, he at once set out on his return to London.

He had some difficulty in getting through the lines set against the approach of the hostile forces, that were every hour expected to arrive before the gates of Rome. But gold, with a good English passport, smoothed the way; and he at length succeeded in reaching Civita Vecchia, from which the steamer transported him to Marseilles.

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Not much was gained by the return of the emissary to England. Fresh inquiries were made at the lodgings formerly occupied by the Italian artist; but no new facts were elicited. Of his later residence there was nothing known.

There could be nothing done but to despatch the junior partner once more to Rome; and to Rome he went. But not to enter it. The Holy City was now besieged by the hireling host of France, acting under Oudinot; and the London lawyer had to stay outside. He was thus deprived of the chance of prosecuting his inquiries. Twice were the invaders repulsed, amidst scenes of carnage, in which the streets of Rome ran blood—the blood of her gallant Republican defenders, led by that now world-renowned chief, Garibaldi, who in this struggle first made himself conspicuous on the page of European history.

But the unequal conflict could not last; the Republicans were defeated by a base betrayal. When at length the French took possession of the city, the London solicitor became free to renew his search. He then succeeded in discovering that a young Englishman had been captured by a band of brigands under a noted chief named Corvino; that he had afterwards made his escape from them; that the band had been nearly annihilated, and its chief killed by a party of Republican volunteers; that his late captive, acting along with the latter, had returned with them to the town of Val di Orno, and thence proceeded to Rome, in the defence of which city he was supposed to have taken part. Whether he fell, among the slain Revolutionists in the carnage that ensued, there was no one who could tell. This appeared to have been his fate; since, beyond the fact of his having returned to Rome along with the Revolutionists, no trace of him could be discovered.

Even thus far General Harding did not live to learn the history of his son. From the day on which that epistle had been put into his hands—the one containing the hideous enclosure—his life had been one continuous misery. It became intensified on the return of young Lawson to announce the failure of his first attempt. From that hour the General lived in a state of excitement bordering upon insanity. He trembled at each post, expecting by it an epistle with more painful details—and a still more horrible packet. He even fancied that the second parcel might have miscarried, and the third would be that containing his son's head!

The ghastly apprehension, acting upon his excited imagination, threw him into a brain fever. From this he only recovered to linger a few days in a state of bodily prostration, and die accusing himself of having killed his son. With

this self-reproach he departed from life. It could hardly have been a conviction, since the last words spoken by him were instructions to his solicitor, Mr Lawson, that the search was to be continued, regardless of cost, until his son's fate should be ascertained; and, if dead, that the body should be sought for, brought home, and buried beside his own.

What were to be the conditions if he were found living no one knew, except Mr Lawson; but that there were conditions might well be supposed.

The solicitor faithfully carried out the instructions of the deceased General; and expended a large sum, that had been left him for prosecuting the search, both upon agents and advertisements.

It was all to no purpose. Beyond what had already been discovered at Rome, Mr Lawson could get no further intelligence of Henry Harding—whether living or dead—and in due time the emissaries were dismissed, and the advertising abandoned.

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## Chapter Fifty Eight.

### The New Squire of Beechwood.

On the death of General Harding, his son Nigel became master of Beechwood, and soon after—almost indecently soon—the husband, though not the master, of Belle Mainwaring.

To the former, no one thought of questioning his claim. He was the eldest son; and, as most people now believed, the only one. The report that the younger had met his death among the Revolutionists of Rome soon got abroad, and was generally credited. But even had it been supposed that he was living, one-half the world knew no better than that General Harding's estate was entailed; and that, therefore, Nigel was entitled as the heir. If the other half wanted to know better, and would take the trouble to inquire of Mr Woolet—the new solicitor to the estate—that gentleman could assure them of the soundness of his client's title, by reference to a document of a certain date, which he kept in a large tin case conspicuously lettered. The case itself had the honour of the most conspicuous position upon his shelves; so that no client could commune with Mr Woolet without seeing that he was alongside the solicitor who had in his custody the title deeds, and other legal documents, of Nigel Harding, Esq, Beechwood Park, Bucks. So said the lettering on the case. About the ownership of the property, then, there was no question or dispute. In times past there had been a talk about its having been divided between the brothers. Afterwards came out the will, leaving all to the elder; and, now that the younger had disappeared, and was deemed dead, the point was no longer discussed.

Indeed, remembrance of the latter was almost dead. He had been already more than twelve months out of sight; and, with such associates as he used to keep, out of sight is soon out of mind. He was remembered as a generous, somewhat reckless youth, not likely to make much way in the world—either to fame or fortune.

But he was now dead; that was an end of him; and his brother Nigel was looked upon as one of the luckiest fellows in England, as also one of the most prosperous squires in the shire of Buckingham.

He was, at all events, likely to be one of the most conspicuous; for the husband of Belle Mainwaring could not be hidden under a cloud. If he should choose to lead an unsocial life, she was not the lady to become the companion of his solitude; and it was not long before he made this discovery. The tranquillity of Beechwood Park ceased upon the same day that Miss Belle Mainwaring became the mistress of its mansion; and the drowsy solemnity of its old trees, hitherto disturbed only by the cawing of the rook, or the soft cooing of the wood-quest, was now constantly assailed by the sound of human voices, gay and jocund.

Under the rule of its new mistress—for *she* ruled—Beechwood Park became the centre of festivities; while the *élite* of the neighbourhood were only too happy to accept of its hospitalities, as they would those of a retired knacker, provided he could dispense them with sufficient profuseness.

But neither in the host nor hostess of the Beechwood was there any question of retired knacker; and everything was therefore *en règle*: select parties for out-door sports—archery in summer—hunting spreads in winter—dining and dancing at all seasons of the year.

Belle Mainwaring had obtained the reward of her great beauty, as her mother the recompense of her consummate skill; for the widow of the Indian colonel had found a snug corner in the establishment of her son-in-law. It was not shared either by the sister of the late proprietor. The spinster aunt had disappeared previous to the nuptials of Nigel. She was still knitting that eternal stocking; but in a humble abode proportioned to the allowance left by her brother's will. Her chair was now occupied by the widow Mainwaring, though not set in a corner.

And so for a period of years passed the gay, grand life at Beechwood Park; while the outside world took part in it, or looked on admiringly—not a few feeling envy. How could it be otherwise, where two young people, both gifted with good looks—for Nigel Harding was far from being personally plain—lived in the enjoyment of so many advantages—property, position—in short, everything that should make life desirable?

The world is not very discriminative; else it might have seen, under all this apparent joy, something that resembled sorrow.

I did, though not at Beechwood Park, since after my unfortunate *contretemps* at the county ball, I was not likely to have the opportunity. But there were other houses still open to me; and at these I not unfrequently came in contact with the distinguished couple, as also the interesting individual to whom I had been indebted for getting my name *scratched* from the dancing-card. And the more I now saw, the more I felt thankful for that lucky deliverance. Perhaps

but for it, I should have been one of the broken-hearted bees who, with scorched and shrivelled wings, still continued to buzz around Belle Mainwaring—long after she became a wife.

It may have been some thought connected with these that caused the cloud I observed on the brow of Nigel Harding—as now and then a fierce flashing in his eyes, that betrayed his semi-oriental origin. I could not tell; nor did I indeed care, as I had never much respect for the man. I was, perhaps, more observant of his wife; and speculated a little more profoundly as to the cause of the cloud on her brow, to me equally apparent. Amidst her gaiety I observed traces of abstraction—even when flattery was being poured into her ear. On her part there appeared to be no jealousy. On the contrary, the presence of her husband only seemed to give *dégoût* to her, his absence relief. All this I could easily perceive, and guess at the reason. That short conversation I had heard under the *Deodara* was sufficiently expletive; and I knew that Nigel Harding had married a woman who, in the true sense of the word, would never be his wife. Love him she certainly could not, and did not. But it was not certain that she could not and did not love another. On the contrary, I was certain that she *did*. Who that other was I cannot confidently say, though I had many and varied surmises. At times I thought it might be the man she had so cruelly jilted; at other times I fancied it one who, with less cruelty, but like firmness, would have rejected *her*.

The last time I saw Miss Belle Mainwaring—I forget, she was then Mrs Nigel Harding—was under circumstances that might be called peculiar. It was at the close of a quiet dinner party, given by a country squire, on the borders of Bucks. I had repossessed myself of my night-wrapper, and stood upon the doorstep, to await the coming up of the carriage that was to transport me to the railway station, and which the squire's hall-porter had already summoned upon the "Sweep." As I stood awaiting my turn, there drew up before me an equipage of elegant appearance: two splendid horses in front, a splendid coachman on the box, and an equally resplendent footman beside him. Gold glittered on the liveries of the lacqueys, while a coat of arms glistened on the panel of the door. It was a turn-out in striking contrast with my own modest "trap" that had closed up behind it.

"Whose carriage?" was the mental inquiry I was making, when the stentorian voice of the hall-porter undesignedly gave me the answer. It was the carriage of Nigel Harding.

At the same instant this gentleman came out, closely followed by his wife.

I stood aside to give them passage.

He entered the carriage first, as if forced in by command. The lady, resplendent in sable robes—it was winter—placed her foot upon the step to follow. At that moment the horses, already pawing the gravel with impatience, made a false start forward. They were suddenly checked by the coachman; but the lady staggering, would have gone to the ground, but for my person interposed to prevent her. By a mere mechanical act of politeness, I had stretched forth my arms, between which sank Mrs Nigel Harding.

"You of all men!" muttered she, in a tone I could not easily forget, and which conveyed to my ear less of gratitude than reproach. Then breaking off, and transferring her spleen to the peccant Jehu, she flounced into the carriage, and was whirled off out of my sight.

What astonished me still more was the behaviour of her husband. I saw his face, as the carriage drove off, projected out of its open window. By the light of the lamp I could perceive that there was a black look upon it; but, instead of on the coachman, his eyes appeared to be directed towards myself, as though I had been the cause of the accident! Certainly he did not seem grateful for my voluntary act of politeness.

It was five years before I saw either again. I had almost, if not altogether, forgotten them, when a circumstance, occurring many thousand miles away, returned to my recollection the young squire of Beechwood Park, and of course along with him his wife.

The circumstance to which I allude was not only strange, but of serious consequence to several of the characters who have figured in this tale; among others, to Nigel Harding and his lady. Better for these last if it had never occurred.

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## Chapter Fifty Nine.

### In the Campo.

Five years spent in foreign travel, confined to the continent of America, found me in the southern division of it—on the banks of the River La Plata.

Choice and chance combining—a little business with the prospect of a large amount of pleasure—had conducted me into the Argentine Republic; and the same had carried me into one of its upper provinces, bordering upon the Parana.

I was journeying through the *campo* about twenty miles north of Rosario, from which place I had taken my departure. My object was to reach the *estancia* of an English colonist—an old college friend—who had established himself as a cattle-breeder and wool-grower some fifty miles from Rosario.

I went on horseback, and alone. I had failed in engaging a guide; but, knowing that my friend's house stood near the banks of the river, I fancied there could be no difficulty in finding it. There were other *estancias* along the route; sparsely scattered, it is true; but still thick enough to give me a chance of inquiring the way. Besides, the river itself should guide me to a certain extent; at all events, it would keep me from going many miles astray. My horse was an excellent roadster; and I was expecting to do the fifty miles—a mere bagatelle to a South American steed—before sunset. And in all likelihood I should have succeeded, if in the kingdom of animated nature there had been no such creature as a *biscacha*. But, unluckily, there is—an animal whose habit is to honeycomb the *campo* with holes, in



places forming most treacherous traps for the traveller's horse. In one of these, while traversing a stretch of *pampa*, my steed was imprudent enough to plant his hoof; when first sinking, and then stumbling, he rolled over upon the plain; and, of course, his rider along with him. The rider was but slightly injured, but the horse very seriously. On getting him upon his feet, I found he could scarce stand—much less carry me the thirty miles that still separated us from my friend's *estancia*. He had injured one of his forelegs, and was just able to limp after me as I led him from the spot. I felt that I had got into a dilemma, and would have to walk the rest of the way, besides making a second day of it. Perhaps not, I reflected, on seeing before me, at no great distance, some signs of a habitation.

There was a clump of trees, most of which appeared to be peaches. This of itself would not have proved the proximity of a dwelling, for in many parts of the Argentine territory the peach-trees grow wild. But I saw something more;—a bit of white wall gleaming through the green foliage, with something like smoke ascending. Around all was a stretch of stockade fence, indicating an enclosure.

Turning directly towards it, I led on my lame horse, in the hope of the chance to exchange him for one better able to bear me to the end of the journey.

Even if I could not make such an exchange, it would be wiser to leave him, and proceed onward afoot.

On approaching a little nearer to the place, I could see that it promised at least a shelter for my crippled quadruped; and getting still closer, I began to indulge the hope of being able to obtain a remount.

The house gradually becoming disclosed, through the shrubbery by which it was beset, if not a grand mansion, had all the appearance of a well-to-do *estancia*. There was a comfortable dwelling, with verandah in front, in style not unlike an Italian villa; and at the back were out-buildings, apparently in good repair, standing inside an enclosure. There were enough of these to predicate a stable containing a spare horse.

With the one belonging to me, I was soon standing before a gate. It was that of a railed *parterre* that fronted the dwelling.

I made my presence known by striking the butt-end of my whip against the rails.

Whilst waiting for an answer to my summons, I took a survey of the place.

It did not exactly resemble the dwelling of a *Criollo*, or native. There was evidence of care about the garden and the rose-trellised verandah, that bespoke European culture. The owner might be English, French, German, or Italian; for, in the Argentine Provinces, all are allowed to colonise without prejudice or distinction. Which nationality would respond to my summons? With curious interest I awaited to see.

I was not kept very long. A man, who appeared to issue from behind the house, came forward to the gate. His thick black head and eagle glance, with white teeth, and nose prominently aquiline, were all Italian. An organ upon his abdomen, and a monkey upon his shoulder, would not more unquestionably have declared his national origin. I knew it before he opened his lips to put the interrogatory, "*Chi è, signore?*"

Despite the man's blackness, there was nothing forbidding in his aspect. On the contrary, the impression made upon me was that I had fallen among good Samaritans. As the luck would have it, I could talk Italian, or at least "smatter" it, so as to be understood.

"My horse!" I said, pointing to the quadruped, which stood with his forefoot suspended six inches from the ground; "he has had an accident, as you see; and can carry me no further. I am desirous of leaving him in your care until I can send for him. I shall pay you for the trouble, and perhaps," I continued, nodding towards the buildings at the back, "you would have no objection to lend me a nag in his place? Anything capable of carrying me to the house of a friend farther on."

The man looked at me for a moment with a puzzled air—then at my horse—and then back at myself—and at length turned his eyes toward the house, as if from it he designed drawing the inspiration of his answer.

He could scarce have sought it at a shrine more like the celestial.

As I stood to catch his reply, the door of the dwelling was opened from within, and a woman stepped forth into the verandah—a creature who might have been mistaken for an angel; but still only a woman, and for that not the less beautiful. Coming forward to the trellis, and looking through the roses, that appeared to form a chaplet around her brow, she repeated the question already asked by the man, adding to it his own name—for to him was the interrogatory directed—" *Chi è, Tommaso?*"

Tommaso in answer gave a literal translation of what I had said to him; and then waited for instructions.

"Tell the stranger," responded the sweet voice from the verandah, "tell him he can leave his horse, and have another to continue his journey. But if he will come inside, and wait till my husband returns home, he is welcome. Perhaps that would be the best thing, Tommaso!"

Tommaso thought it would; and, I need scarce say, I quite agreed with him.

The man took the horse out of my hands, and led him towards the stable.

I was left free to enter the house; and, availing myself of the gracious invitation, I stepped straight across the threshold, and was soon seated inside—in converse with one of the most charming creatures it had ever been my privilege to speak with.

## Chapter Sixty.

### Pleasant Hospitality.

I sat enraptured with my fair hostess; rejoicing at the accident that had thrown me into such pleasant company.

Who was she? Who could she be? An Italian, she had told me at first; and in this language we conversed. But she could also speak a little English, which was soon explained by her telling me that her husband was an *Inglese*.

"He will be so glad to see you," she said, "for it is not often he meets any of his own countrymen, as most of the English live further down. Henry will soon be home. It can't be long now. He only went over to the other *estancia*—I mean papa's. I fancy he and brother Luigi are gone ostrich-hunting. But that must be over now, as they don't chase the birds after midday, on account of the shadows. I am sure he will soon be back. Meanwhile, how are you to be amused? Perhaps you will look at these pictures? They are landscapes of the country here. Some of them are by my husband—some by brother Luigi. Try if you can kill a little time over them while I go look after something for you to eat."

"Pray don't think of that. I do not feel in any need of eating."

"That may be, signore; but then there are the ostrich-hunters. Likely enough Luigi will come along with my husband, and won't *they* have an appetite! I must see and have dinner ready for them."

So saying, my fair hostess glided out of the room; leaving me to an impatience, that had very little to do with the return of the ostrich-hunters.

To "kill time," as I had been requested, I commenced an inspection of the pictures. There were about a dozen of them, hanging against the walls of the apartment, otherwise but sparsely furnished—as might be expected of a country house in a remote province on the Parana. As she had said, they were all scenes of the country, and for this reason to me more interesting. Most of them related to the chase or some act of native industry. There were pictures of jaguar-hunting, flamingo-shooting, running wild horses, and capturing them with *bolas* or *lazo*.

I was at first only struck with the remarkable truthfulness of their details—the faithfulness displayed in regard of both scenery and costumes. How like to reality were the gigantic thistles, the *ombu-trees*, the wide-stretching pampas, the ostriches, the wild horses and other animals, the *gauchos* and their costumes—in short, everything delineated. This was all evident at a glance. But I was not prepared for what I discovered on closer examination—that the pictures, at least a large number of them, were paintings of high art—fit for any exhibition in the world! It would have been a surprise to me meeting with such paintings upon the remote plains of the Parana; it was something more, to know that they had been painted there.

Before I had ceased wondering at this unexpected discovery, cheerful voices heard outside caused me to suspend the examination, and walk up to the window. On looking forth, I had before me a real scene similar to the painted ones I had just been scrutinising. Under the shadow of a gigantic *ombu-tree*, standing near, four horsemen had made halt, and were in the act of dismounting.

I could have no doubt as to who they were—clearly the ostrich-hunters, as a large cock *rhea* appeared upon the croup of one of the saddles, and a hen-bird on the other. A third spoil of the chase was seen, in the spotted skin of a jaguar, strapped behind one of the horsemen, who still kept his saddle.

Two of the party were *gauchos*, evidently attendants—the other two as evidently the husband and brother of my fair hostess.

The latter—easily distinguished by his Italian face—seemed undecided about dismounting, as if half inclined to go further; while the Englishman was urging him to stay. Just then the beautiful mistress of the mansion stepped out into the verandah, and gliding on to the gate, added her solicitations, intimating to her brother that there was a stranger in the house. Yielding to these, the young man sprang out of the stirrup, and surrendered the rein to Tommaso, who had come round from the stables, and who, with the *gauchos*, at once led the horses away.

The two gentlemen having entered, the lady of the house introduced them as her husband and brother. Beyond this, no name was pronounced; and before I could give my own, she had commenced explaining my presence and the nature of the request I had made.

"Most certainly," exclaimed the Englishman, as soon as he had heard the explanation. "We can lend you a horse, sir, and welcome. But why not stay with us a day or two? Perhaps by that time your own will have recovered sufficiently to carry you on to the end of your journey."

"It is very kind of you," I answered, feeling very much inclined to accept the invitation. On second thoughts, however, it occurred to me that the hospitality proffered might be of the character common in South American countries, "*mia casa a su disposicion, señor*," a mere expression of courtesy; which I was about declining under some colourable excuses, when a second solicitation from my host—in which he was joined by his young wife—convinced me of its sincerity. I could hold out no longer, and declared my willingness to remain the "day or two."

I made it three—and of the pleasantest days I ever spent in my life. They were not all passed under the roof of my countryman and his brother-in-law. The latter had a house of his own—an *estancia* on a larger scale, of which that of my host was only an offshoot. Into this I was also introduced; finding in it another fair hostess, a young South American lady, who had lately become its mistress; as also Luigi's own father, a venerable Italian gentleman, who was in reality the head of the whole circle. The two establishments were but half a mile apart; and what with passing

between one and the other, breakfasting and dining alternately at both—with an ostrich chase at intervals—the time passed so pleasantly I could scarce believe the days to be twenty-four hours in length.

I was rather displeased with Tommaso for having so speedily cured my horse. An odd-looking creature this same Tommaso appeared to me. Had I met him on the mountains of Italy, instead of by the banks of the Parana, I should certainly have taken him for a brigand. Not that the resemblance went beyond mere personal appearance; that picturesqueness we attach, to the Italian bandit. Otherwise, the man looked honest; was certainly cheerful; and, above all, faithfully devoted to the *signore* and *signora*, in whose service he lived.

I confess to some chagrin when Tommaso pronounced my steed once more sound. But there was no concealing the fact; and, although still urged, both by host and hostess, to prolong my stay, I felt there should be some limit to such trusting hospitality, and prepared to continue my journey. I was the less loath at leaving these new friends, from an understanding, that on my return towards Rosario I was to take their house on the way. Only on this promise would they consent to my going so soon; and I need scarce say that the prospect of renewing such a pleasant intercourse rendered it less painful to take my departure.

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## Chapter Sixty One.

### An Unknown Host.

Up to the hour of leaving, I had never once heard the name of my host. That of his father-in-law had been often mentioned. He was Signor Francesco Torreani, a native of the Papal States, who some years before had come to the Argentine Republic—as many others of his countrymen—to better his condition. This, and not much more, of him or his had I learnt. To say the truth, our daily life during my short stay had been too much taken up with the pleasures of the present to dwell upon memories of the past—often painful.

In my case they were of this character, and appeared the same in that of my new acquaintances. Who, breathing the free, fresh air of the pampas, or bounding over them on the back of a half-wild horse, would care to remember the petty joys and sorrows of an effete and corrupt civilisation? Rather should one wish to forget them.

So was it with me; and so, too, I fancied with these emigrants from the classic land of Italy. I sought not to know the history of their past. Why should they have any interest in communicating it? They did not, any more than the few facts already stated, and these were revealed by chance, in the course of conversation. Little, however, as I had learnt of the Torreanis, still less was I informed of the antecedents of my own countryman. I stood upon the threshold of his house, about to bid him adieu, without even knowing his name!

This may appear strange, and requiring explanation. It is this. Among the people of Spanish America, the surname is but seldom heard—only the Christian cognomen, or, as they term it, *apellido*. This was all I had heard of my host—Henry being his baptismal appellation.

But for some reason, into which I had no right to inquire, I found him reticent whenever chance led us to converse upon English affairs; and, though he showed no prejudice against his native country, he appeared to take little interest in it—at times, as I thought, shunning the subject.

In my own mind, I had shaped out a theory to account for this indifference. Want of success in early life—perhaps something of social exclusion—though I could not put it upon that score. His manners and accomplishments proved, if not high birth, at least the training that appertains to it; and in our intercourse there had more than once cropped out the masonic signs of Eton and Oxford. I wondered who he could be, or whence he had sprung. Fearing it might not be relished, I had forborne asking the question.

It was only at the last moment, when I stood upon his doorstep, and was about bidding him adieu, that the thought of inquiring his name came into my head.

“You will excuse me,” I said, “if after having been for three days the recipient of a very pleasant and very undeserved hospitality, I am somewhat desirous to know the name of my host. It is not a matter of mere curiosity; but only that I may know to whom I am so largely indebted.”

“How very odd!” he said, answering me with a peal of laughter. “But is it really the fact that you have not yet learnt my name? I took it as a matter of course you had. Now I remember it, I have never heard you call me except by my Italian title of *signore*! What uncourteous negligence on my part! Three days in a man’s house without knowing his name! How very amusing, is it not? Altogether un-English. To make the best amends in my power, I shall adopt the English fashion of giving you my card. I think I have some left in an old card case. Let me see if there are.”

My host turned back into the house, leaving me to laugh over the circumstance with his sweet wife Lucetta.

Presently he came out again, the card case in his hand; as he approached, drawing out of it several enamelled cards that appeared spotted and mouldy with age. Selecting one, he placed it in my hand.

There was no need for scrutinising it just then; and merely glancing at the piece of cardboard, without staying to decipher the name, I bade him good-bye—I had already made my adieux to the lady—mounted my horse, and rode off.

I had not gone far before curiosity prompted me to acquaint myself with the name of my hospitable entertainer.

Taking out the card, I read—“*Mr Henry Harding.*”

A very good English name it was; and one I had reason to remember, though it then never occurred to me that the young *estanciero* of the Pampas could be any connection of the Hardings of Beechwood Park, in the county of Bucks, England. And without making any further reflection, I gave the spur to my horse, and continued my long-delayed journey.

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## Chapter Sixty Two.

### A Lost Legatee.

The reader may perhaps think it strange—the fact of my not recognising Mr Henry Harding as an old acquaintance. But in reality he was not so. I had seen him only once, when a beardless youth, home from his college vacation. But even had I known him more intimately, it is not likely that, sun-browned and bearded as he now was—speaking and looking Italian much better than he either spoke or looked English—I should have remembered the young collegian, unless some circumstance had occurred to recall him to my memory. Had I learnt his name sooner, such might have been the case. As it was, I went my way—simply reflecting what a fine young fellow was my late host, and how fortunate in having such a treasure of a wife.

As to the others of my late entertainers, the reader must remember that he is already acquainted with much more of their history than I was then. All I knew of them was what I had learnt during the three days' intercourse just ended; and in it nothing had occurred in any way to connect them in my mind with the personages of English nationality who have figured in this tale.

The name "Mr Henry Harding" on a card gave me no other thought than that of his being a fellow-countryman of whom I might feel proud, and to whom I did feel grateful.

On reaching the *estancia* of my friend, I found him somewhat anxious about my tardy arrival. He had, of course, expected me three days sooner; and but that the "thistles" were not yet sufficiently advanced in growth, he would have supposed that I had either lost my way among those gigantic weeds, or fallen into the hands of robbers, who are to be apprehended only after this singular herbage has attained full height. On explaining the cause of my delay—telling him where I had spent the intervening time, as also how pleasantly I had spent it—my friend suddenly interrupted me with the question—

"Did you ever know a General Harding, of the county of Bucks?"

"A General Harding, of Bucks?"

"Yes. I know you've been a good deal down in that part of England. The General Harding I speak of died some five or six years ago."

"I knew a General Harding, of Beechwood Park, not a great way from Windsor. I had only a slight acquaintance with him. He died about the time you say. Would he be the man you mean?"

"By Jove! the very same. Beechwood! That I think is the name; but we shall soon see. It's very odd," continued my friend, rising from his seat, and going towards a secretary that stood in a corner of the room. "Very odd, indeed. I have been myself half in the mind of riding over to the *estancia*, where you have been so well entertained. I should have done so this very day, but that I was waiting for you. I may as well tell you what would have been my errand. I know very little of my English neighbour, Mr Harding. His intercourse is mostly among Italians and Argentines; so that we English don't see much of him. He's said to be a first-rate fellow, for all that."

"I'm glad to hear him so spoken of. It's just the impression he has made upon me. But what has this to do with your inquiries about General Harding?"

I need hardly say that, by this time, my own curiosity was aroused—so much so, that I had once more taken the card out of my pocket, and was submitting it to a fresh scrutiny.

"Well," said my friend, returning to the original subject of discourse, "while looking out for you, I could not well leave the house; and having no other way of amusing myself, I took to reading some old English newspapers. We don't have them very new here at any time. These were dated several years ago, and one of them was a *Times*. Now, if you'd lived as long upon the pampas as I have, you'd not turn up your nose at a *Times*, however ancient its date; nor would you leave a paragraph unread, even to the advertisements. I was poring over these, when my eye fell upon one, which I leave you to read for yourself. There it is."

I took the paper handed me by my friend, and read the advertisement he had pointed out. It ran thus:—

"Henry Harding.—If Mr Henry Harding, son of the late General Harding, of Beechwood Park, in the county of Buckingham, will apply to Messrs Lawson and Sons, solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, he will hear of something to his advantage. Mr Harding was last heard of in Rome, at the time of the revolutionary struggle, and is supposed to have taken part in the defence of that city by Garibaldi. Any one giving information of his present address, or, if dead, stating the time and circumstances of his death, will be handsomely rewarded."

"What do you think of it?" asked my friend, as soon as I had finished reading the advertisement.

"I remember having seen it before," was my reply. "It was inserted in the papers repeatedly, several years ago, and at the time caused much talk. Of course, everybody knew that young Harding had gone away from home—no one knowing where. That was some time before his father's death. There was some story afloat about his having been jilted by a girl. I knew something of the young lady myself. Also, of his having gone to Italy, and fallen into the hands

of brigands, or joined the partisans of Mazzini. No one knew the truth, as General Harding was a man in the habit of keeping his family secrets to himself. It was after his death that the talk was. When these advertisements appeared, the young fellow had been a considerable time out of sight; and for that reason they attracted less attention. It was said that the father had left him a legacy, and that was why the solicitor was advertising for him."

"Just what I thought. But do you think he ever turned up?"

"That I can't tell. I never heard the result. About that time I left England myself, and have been abroad ever since."

"Does it not occur to you," inquired my friend, "that this Henry Harding of the *Times* advertisement, and the gentleman who has been entertaining you, may be one and the same man?"

"It is quite possible—indeed, it seems probable. This states that Henry Harding was last heard of at Rome. Now the family into which this gentleman has married came from Rome. That much they told me. He may be the same. He may have answered the advertisement too, and got the *something* to his *advantage*, whatever it was; though I am under the impression it was not much. It was generally known that the bulk of General Harding's property was willed to his eldest son Nigel; and that Henry, the youngest, was left a bare thousand pounds. If my late host be he, in all likelihood he has had the money before now. Might it not have been with it he has so comfortably established himself?"

"No; I can answer for that," said my friend. "He was settled here long before the date of this advertisement, and has never been out of the country since—certainly never so far as England."

"It would not be necessary for him to go to England to obtain the legacy of a thousand pounds. All that might have been transacted by letter of attorney."

"True, but I have good reason to know that he is only a tenant of the *estancia* you found him in. His Italian father-in-law is the real owner of both properties; and this was the state of affairs from the first—long before the advertisement could have appeared. In my opinion, he has never seen it; and if he be the individual referred to, it might be worth his while to know of it. As I've said, I had thoughts of riding over and asking him myself. Although we've had very little intercourse, I've heard a very good account of him—though not as a very successful sheep-keeper. He's too fond of hunting for that; and I fancy he hasn't added much to his wife's dowry or his father-in-law's fortune. Indeed, I've heard say that he is himself a little sore about this; and if there should be a legacy for him, still unlifted, it might be very welcome and very convenient to him. A thousand pounds isn't much in London, but it would go a long way out upon the pampas here."

"True," I replied mechanically, absorbed in reflecting whether the rejected lover of Miss Belle Mainwaring was the man whom I had met—now married to a wife worth ten thousand of her sort.

"I'll tell you what you can do," said my friend; "you say they've invited you to stop there on your way back to Rosario?"

"I am under a promise to do so."

"Lucky fellow! to have made such a brace of beautiful acquaintances; for the Argentine lady is not thought so far behind her Italian sister-in-law. All by the stumbling of a horse, too! By Jove, I'd risk the breaking of my neck every day in the year for such a chance! You were always fortunate in that sort of thing."

It was rather amusing to hear my friend talk in such a fashion. He, a confirmed old bachelor, who, I verily believe, would not have surrendered even to the charms of the lovely Lucetta! Such was the name I had heard given to my late hostess.

"What were you going to propose?" I asked.

"That you take back with you this old *Times*, and show the advertisement to Mr Harding himself. I'll ride so far with you, if you wish. But since you have made their acquaintance, and know more about this matter than I, it will be better for you to introduce it. What say you to that course?"

"I have no objection to it."

"All right then. And now to see how I can entertain you. No doubt, my bachelor quarters will be dull enough to you, coming from such company. A dose of Purgatory after Paradise! Ha! ha! ha!"

I could not help thinking there was some truth in what my friend said; though I did all I could to conceal my thoughts, by joining heartily in his laughter.

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## Chapter Sixty Three.

### "Something to his Advantage."

The entertainments provided for me by my old college acquaintance were far from being dull, and I kept his company for nearly a week. At the end of this time I was on my way back to Rosario, intending to stop, as promised, at the *estancia* of Mr Henry Harding; who, if he should prove to be the son of the old Indian General, I could no longer look upon in the light of a stranger.

As proposed, my friend accompanied me, and I had the pleasure of promoting an intimacy between two of my

countrymen who were worthy to know one another better than they had hitherto done.

The Signora Lucetta was beautiful and amiable as ever; and we had soon assembled under one roof the two kindred families. For several days we were entertained with a hospitality that became rather difficult to escape from; and my bachelor friend, I believe, went back to his own solitary *estancia* with strong resolutions of not letting much time elapse before becoming a Benedict.

For my part, I was no longer treated as a stranger. My South American host *was* the son of General Harding, of Beechwood Park—the very man who had been advertised for; and, as I now learnt, up to that hour in vain.

In a conversation that occurred during my second visit I was made acquainted with his whole history, as detailed in these pages.

“And this?” I said, pointing to the advertisement in the *Times*—the paper lying upon the table before us.

“Never saw it; never heard of it till now!” was his reply.

“You heard of your father’s death, I suppose?”

“Oh yes; I saw that in the papers shortly after it occurred. My poor father! Perhaps I acted rashly and wrongly. But it is too late to talk of it now.”

I saw that it pained him to speak of his father, and I passed on to another subject.

“Your brother’s marriage—you heard also of that, I suppose?”

“No!” he answered, to my surprise. “Is he married?”

“Long since. It was also in the papers; and somewhat conspicuously. Strange you didn’t see it.”

“Oh! the papers! I never looked at an English newspaper since that containing the account of my father’s death. I hated the sight of them, and everything else that was English. I have not even associated with my own countrymen here, as you may have learnt. And upon whom has Mr Nigel Harding bestowed his name? You know the lady, I suppose?”

“He married a Miss Belle Mainwaring,” I answered, with a counterfeit air of innocence, and not without some fear that the communication might give pain.

I watched his countenance for the effect, but could discover no indication of the sort.

“I knew something of the lady,” he said, with just the shadow of a sneer; “she and my brother ought to make each other very happy. Their dispositions, I think, were suitable.”

I did not say how thoroughly I understood the meaning of his remark.

“But,” I said, returning to the subject of the advertisement, “what do you intend doing about this? You see, it speaks of *something to your advantage?*”

“*Not* much, I fancy. I think I know all about it. It is a question of a thousand pounds, which my father promised to leave me at his death. It was so stated in his will—that will—” Here a bitter expression came quickly over his features. “Well,” he continued, his countenance as suddenly clearing again, “I ought rather to rejoice at it, though it did disinherit me. But for that, signore,” he said, forgetting that he was talking to a countryman, “I might never have seen my dear Lucetta; and I think you will say, that never to have seen her would be the greatest misfortune a man could have.”

It was an odd appeal to me—a stranger; but I could not help responding to it.

He would have gone on conversing upon this pleasant theme; but the time was drawing nigh for us to join the ladies—Lucetta herself being one; and I re-directed his attention to the subject that had taken us apart.

“Even a thousand pounds,” I said, “it is worth looking after.”

“Quite true,” he replied, “and I had several times thoughts of doing so—that is, lately. At first, I was too angry with all that had happened at home; and had made up my mind to refuse even the paltry pittance that had been left for me. But to tell the truth, I have not made much money here; and I begin to feel myself rather a pensioner upon my worthy father-in-law. With a thousand pounds of my own money, I should stand a little higher in my own estimation.”

“What will you do then? Come with me to England and get it?”

“Not for ten thousand! No; I wouldn’t leave this happy home, and forsake my free South American life, for ten times the amount! It will not be necessary to go to England. If there be a thousand pounds lying for me in the hands of Messrs Lawson and Son, which I suppose there is, I must extract it from them by a lawyer’s letter or something of the sort. By the way, you are soon going home, are you not?”

“I intend taking this next steamer for England.”

“Well then, why—But I am asking too much. You have your own affairs to attend to.”

“My affairs are not so very onerous. I can find time to attend to any business you may choose to entrust me with; if

you will only allow me to consider as my commission the hospitality, for which I feel myself your debtor.”

“Oh, don’t talk of hospitality! Besides, it is not mine. It was Lucetta who first received you. If I’d been at home myself, seeing you were an Englishman, I should, perhaps, have lent you a horse and let you ride on. And, being myself an Englishman, in all likelihood I should have jockeyed you out of that fine steed of yours, and given you a screw in exchange! Ha! ha! ha!”

I joined him in the laugh, well knowing that his sardonism was but slightly felt.

“But to be serious,” he continued; “you can do me this service, better than any scamp of a lawyer! Go to Mr Lawson, of Lincoln’s Inn Fields—I know something of the old fellow, and his son, too. They are not a bad sort—that is, for solicitors. If there be money left for me, in their hands, I shall likely get it. Let me give you a letter to receive it, and you can send it to some bank in Buenos Ayres. Then it may reach me through the bank agency at Rosario. You can do this for me, and will?”

“With pleasure.”

“Enough! The ladies are longing for us to rejoin them. You are fond of the guitar, I believe. I hear Lucetta tuning the strings. Luigi can sing like a second Mario; and the *señorita*, as he calls his South American wife, is a perfect nightingale. Hear! They are calling for us! Come!”

It needed no pressing on his part. I was but too eager to respond to the silvery voices commanding our presence in the adjoining apartment.

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## Chapter Sixty Four.

### A Hundred Thousand Pounds.

Two months later, and I was under a sky unlike to that which canopies the region of Parana as lead to shining sapphires—in a room as different from that pleasant *quarto* in the South American *estancia*, as a Newgate cell to an apartment in Aladdin’s palace. I stood in the dingy office of a Lincoln’s Inn lawyer, by name Lawson, the firm Lawson and Son. It was the senior partner who received me; a gentleman with all the appearance, and, as I afterwards discovered, all the claims to respectability in his profession.

“What is the nature of your business?” he politely asked, after examining the card which I handed him to introduce myself.

“You will find it there,” I answered, placing before him an old *Times* newspaper, and pointing to an advertisement marked in pencil. “I presume it is your firm, Mr Lawson, to which this application is to be made?”

“It is,” he said, starting up from his office chair, as if I had presented a pistol at his head. “It is very long ago, but no matter for that. Do you know anything of the gentleman to whom it refers?”

“Yes, something,” I replied, cautiously—not knowing how far I might be committing the interests of my South American friend.

“He is still alive, then? I mean Mr Henry Harding?”

“I have reason to think so. He was alive two months ago.”

“By —!” exclaimed the lawyer, using a phrase evidently forced from him by the importance of the occasion. “This is serious, indeed. But, sir, are you quite sure? You will excuse me if I ask on which side you come. I know your name, sir. I believe I can trust you to speak candidly. Are you here as a friend of Mr Nigel Harding?”

“If I had been, Mr Lawson, it is not likely I should have given you the information it has just been my pleasure to impart. From all I’ve heard, Mr Nigel Harding would be the last man to be gratified by learning that his brother is alive.”

My speech had a magical effect on Mr Lawson. I could see at once he was upon our side, as he saw that I was upon his. Out of doors I had already heard, that he was no longer the trusted attorney of the Beechwood estate.

“And you assure me he *is* alive?” was the question again put with an emphasis that showed its importance.

“The best proof I can give you is this.”

I handed over the letter written by Henry Harding, containing a requisition upon him for the legacy of a thousand pounds.

“A thousand pounds!” exclaimed the lawyer, as soon as he had read. “A thousand pounds! A hundred thousand, every shilling of it! Yes! and the accumulated interest, and the mortgage already obtained, and the waste by that scoundrel Woolet! Ah! here’s a penalty for Mr Nigel Harding to pay, and his sweet spendthrift of a wife!”

I was not prepared for this explosion; and as soon as it had to some extent subsided, I asked Mr Lawson to explain.

“Explain!” he said, putting on his spectacles, and turning towards me with a businesslike air. “To you, sir, I shall have much pleasure in explaining. This letter tells me I can trust you. Thank God, the lad still lives!—the true son of my old friend Harding: as he told me on his dying-bed, and with his last breath. Thank God, he is still alive; and we shall yet

be able to punish the usurpers, and that pettifogging Woolet as well! Oh, this is good news—a glorious revelation—a resurrection, one may call it!”

“But what does it all mean, Mr Lawson? I came to you at the request of my friend, Mr Henry Harding, whom by chance I met while travelling in South America, on the Parana—as you will see by his letter. He has commissioned me, as you will also perceive, to call upon you, and make certain inquiries. He is under the impression that you hold in your hands a legacy of one thousand pounds left him by his father. If so, he has given me the authority to receive it.”

“A thousand pounds! A thousand pence! Is Beechwood estate worth only a thousand pounds? Read this, sir—just run your eye over that document!”

A grand sheet of parchment, pulled from out a tin case, was flung before me. I saw it was lettered as a will. I took it up, and spreading it upon the table, read what was written. I need not give its contents in detail. It stated that General Harding had revoked the terms of a former will, which left the whole of his estate to his eldest son, Nigel, with a legacy of one thousand pounds to his youngest, Henry; that this second will exactly transposed the conditions, leaving the estate to Henry, and the thousand-pound legacy to Nigel! It also contained ample instructions for the administration, Mr Lawson and his son being the appointed administrators. It was not to be made known to Nigel Harding himself, unless it should be ascertained that Henry was still alive. To determine this point, all due diligence was to be used, by advertisements in the papers, and such other means as the administrators should see fit. Meanwhile, Nigel was to retain possession of the estate, as by the terms of the former testament; and in the event of Henry’s death being proved, he was not only to be left undisturbed, but kept ignorant of the existence of the second will—which would then be null and void. There was a codicil—similar to one in the former will—by which the General’s sister was to have a life-interest out of the estate, amounting to two hundred pounds per annum. Such were the terms of the testament which the solicitor had laid before me.

It is scarce necessary to say, that I perused the document containing these singular conditions with no slight astonishment, and certainly with a feeling of gratification. My hospitable host—the young *estanciero* on the Parana—need no longer feel under any obligation to his worthy father-in-law; and, little as he professed to love England, I could not help thinking that possession of this fine paternal estate would do much to modify his prejudices against his native land.

“By this will,” I said, addressing myself to the solicitor, “it appears that Henry Harding becomes the sole inheritor of the Beechwood property?”

“It is certain,” answered he; “all but the thousand-pound legacy, and the life-annuity.”

“It will be a surprise for Mr Nigel.”

“Ah! and Mr Woolet too. They did all they could to keep me from advertising for the lost legatee. Of course, they supposed I did so in order to pay him the paltry thousand pounds. Mr Nigel may now have that, and see how far it will cover Woolet’s costs. My word! it will be an explosion! And now for the first steps towards bringing it about.”

“How do you intend to proceed?”

The lawyer looked at me, as if hesitating to answer the question.

“Excuse me,” I said; “I asked rather out of curiosity than otherwise.”

“There you are wrong, good sir. Pardon me for being plain with you. You have the legal authority to act for him.”

“That,” I said, “was only under the supposition that he was to receive a legacy of a thousand pounds. With an estate, as you say, worth a hundred thousand pounds, the affair takes a different shape, and clearly goes beyond my discretionary powers. Though I cannot act as a principal in the matter, I am willing to help you every way I can. I feel sufficiently indebted to your client to do so.”

“And that is just what I intended asking you. Hence my hesitation in replying to your question. I am glad to know that we can count on your assistance. No doubt, we shall need it. Men don’t yield up possession of a hundred thousand without showing fight. We may expect all that, and some questionable strategy besides, from such a fellow as Woolet—a thorough scoundrel—without one jot of principle!”

“But how can they dispute this will?” I asked. “It seems clear enough, and of course you know it to have been the latest and last.”

“Signed by General Harding the day before he died. Regularly and carefully attested—you see the names upon it. They cannot dispute the document.”

“What then?”

“Ah! what then? That is just the point I think it will turn upon the *identity* of our claimant. By the way, what does the young fellow look like? Is he much altered in appearance since he left England?”

“That question I cannot answer.”

“Indeed! It is but two months since you have seen him.”

“True; but I may almost say I then saw him for the first time. I had met him six years before, but only on one or two occasions, and had lost all remembrance of his looks.”



"He was very young," pursued the solicitor in soliloquy,—“a mere boy when that unfortunate affair occurred. After all, perhaps, not so unfortunate! No doubt, he will be much changed. A captivity among brigands—fighting on barricades—a beard—the tan of a South American sun—to say nothing of getting married—no doubt, the Henry Harding of to-day is entirely unlike the Henry Harding who left home six years ago. My word! there might be a difficulty in identifying him, and we may dread the worst. People nowadays can be had to swear anything—that black's blue, or even white, if it's wanted—and money enough to pay for the perjury. In this case there will be both money and a determination to use it. Woolet won't stick at anything; nor will Mr Nigel Harding either—to say nothing of Mrs Nigel and her amiable mother. We're sure to have a fight, sir—sure of it.”

“You don't appear to have much fear about the result?”

I said this, noticing that the lawyer talked with an air of triumphant confidence, besides having used the conditional tense when speaking of the chances of his client being identified.

“Not the slightest—not the slightest. I don't apprehend any difficulty. There might have been; but I fancy I have a scheme to set all right. Never mind, sir; you shall be told of it in good time. And now for citing all parties into Court.”

“But do you mean to do that now?”

“Of course not; oh no. I was only speaking figuratively. The first thing is to get Mr Henry Harding here,—he must be sent for immediately. Let me see: *Estancia Torreani, Rosario*. Up the Parana River, you say. With your kind directions, sir, my own son shall start for South America at once. It's a long way, but no matter for that. A hundred thousand pounds is worth going round the world for more than once. And now, sir, I will make request for two favours: one, that you will write to your friend, Mr Henry Harding, telling him what you have learnt. My son can carry your letter along with other instructions. The other favour I would ask is, that you give your word to keep this affair a secret until—well, until Mr Henry Harding himself appears upon the ground.”

Of course the promise was given—as also the directions to serve Lawson junior on his Transatlantic itinerary; and leaving my address, so that Lawson senior could at any time communicate with me, I took my departure from Lincoln's Inn Fields, rejoiced, as well as surprised, at the discovery I had made.

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## Chapter Sixty Five.

### The Finger of Fate.

In less than six months from the date of my interview with the Lincoln's Inn lawyer, there occurred in the London courts a trial of more than usual interest.

It was a case of contested will—no very uncommon thing. But in that to which I refer, there were circumstances of a peculiar, I might say very peculiar, kind. These, with the position of the parties concerned, rendered the suit worthy of being placed among the records of *causes célèbres*.

It was the case of “Harding *versus* Harding;” the defendant being Nigel Harding, Esq, of Beechwood Park, Buckinghamshire; the plaintiff, a Mr Henry Harding, who claimed to be his half-brother.

The matter in dispute was an estate, valued at one hundred thousand pounds, of which defendant was in possession. He held it by a will—that of General Harding, his father, and former owner of the property—made some twelve months before the General's death, and at the same time duly signed and attested.

It had been drawn up by a country attorney, named Woolet; and signed by himself and his clerk, acting as witnesses to the testator.

It gave the whole of General Harding's estate to his elder son, Nigel, with the exception of one thousand pounds, to his other and younger son, Henry, and an annuity of two hundred to the General's sister.

So far the document seemed quite correct—except in the strangeness of the unequal distribution. But there were reasons for this; and no one disputed the genuineness of the instrument. The question was one of an alleged later testament; which, if also proved genuine, would have the effect of setting aside Woolet's will, by a complete change of terms. By the second will, the estate was bestowed on the younger son, and the one thousand pounds given to the elder!

The strange transposal was, however, coupled with a condition also strange. It appeared, by the citing of the second will, that the younger brother was abroad when it was made, and not only abroad, but supposed to be dead.

A doubt of his death must have been in the testator's mind, leading him to insert the condition: which was to the effect, that in the event of his younger son's return he was to enter upon quiet possession of the property—all of it, excepting the aforesaid legacy of one thousand pounds!

He had returned; at least, so alleged the plaintiff, who claimed to be Henry Harding, the legatee of the second will.

But he was not admitted into “quiet possession,” according to the words of the will. On the contrary the case was going to be contested with all the legal strength and strategy that on both sides could be brought to bear upon it.

On the part of the defence, there was no attempt to disprove the genuineness of the second will. It had been made by a lawyer of the highest respectability, who was ready to prove it.

The point turned upon the question of identity; the defendant denying that the plaintiff was his half-brother, or in any way entitled to relationship.

There was no proof that Henry Harding was dead—only the presumption; and to strengthen this, the defendant's counsel—imprudently, as it afterwards turned out—exhibited certain letters written by the real Henry Harding as he called him—showing that he had been captive to a band of Italian brigands, who threatened to take his life, unless a ransom should be paid for him.

It was proved that this ransom was *not* paid; that it had been sent; but, as the defence alleged, too late. The plaintiff's own witnesses were compelled to testify to this.

The presumption, therefore, was that the bandits, speaking through their chief, Corvino, had carried out their threat.

This was the impression produced upon "twelve men, good and true," after an eloquent speech made by an eminent counsel, to whom the defendant's solicitors had entrusted the conduct of their case.

On the plaintiff's side, a story had been told that appeared altogether incredible. It was preposterous to suppose—as thought twelve English tradesmen—that the son of an English gentleman of wealth and standing should voluntarily take to the profession of painting pictures, and afterwards exile himself to such a country as South America: there to stay, forgetting his fine estate at home, till the merest accident gave him cause to remember it! They could have believed in such self-banishment in one of their own sons; but the son of a general, a county squire, the owner of a large landed estate—the thing was not to be credited!

They could give credence to the brigand part of the tale, though that too seemed queer to them. But the story of the self-exile—leaving an estate unclaimed! The plaintiff's counsel might tell that to the marines!

So stood the case, after several days spent in the questioning and cross-questioning of witnesses, and the trial was approaching its termination.

All the testimony which the plaintiff's counsel could produce was not sufficient to establish his identity. It could not convince a British jury, that the sun-embrowned and bearded young man, set forth as the claimant of Beechwood Park, was the son of its former proprietor; while the pale, silent gentleman, who now held possession of it, undoubtedly was.

Possession has been said to be nine points of the law. Coupled with wealth, it is generally so in the eyes of legal gentlemen, and often of juries.

The plaintiff's case appeared hopeless. Notwithstanding all that is known to the reader, it trembled on the edge of being decreed an attempt at usurpation, and he himself declared an attempted usurper and defrauder.

The trial had reached this crisis, and was expected soon to terminate.

But before the end came, the plaintiff's counsel begged leave to call a witness, one who had already stood upon the stand, but on the side of the defendant. Then, he had been a witness against his own will—having to give testimony that seemed favourable to the plaintiff's opponent.

The witness was Mr Lawson, of the firm of Lawson and Son, solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn. It was the senior partner, Mr Lawson himself, who was called. As he took his place in the box, there was a twinkle in the old lawyer's eye; that, although comical, seemed to have meaning of mischief in it. The "twelve good men and true" could not guess at what it meant, though they understood it before the examining counsel had done with him.

"You say General Harding received another letter from Italy?" questioned the latter, after Lawson senior had kissed the Book, and been put through the usual preliminaries of examination.

"I do."

"I don't mean either of those already submitted to the jury. The letter I refer to is one written, not by his son, but by the bandit chief, Corvino. Did General Harding receive such a letter?"

"He did."

"You can prove that?"

"I can prove it; from his having told me he did, and placed it in my hands for safe keeping."

"When did this occur?"

"Shortly before the General's death. In fact, on the same day he made the will."

"Which will?"

"The one under which the plaintiff claims."

"You mean that was the date when he placed the letter in your hands?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell when the General received it?"

"I can. The postmark will show that: as also whence it came."

"Can you produce this letter?"

"It is here."

The witness took an epistle out of his pocket, and handed it to the examining counsel; who, in turn, passed it up to the judge.

It was a dingy-looking document, blotched over with postmarks, stained by travel, and a good deal embrowned by being kept several years in the atmosphere of a London law-office.

"My Lord," said the plaintiff's counsel, "I have to request that that letter be read to the gentlemen of the jury."

"Certainly, let it be read," was the response of his Lordship.

It was read. It was the letter which the chief Corvino had addressed to the father of his captive, conveying the terrible threat and still more fearful enclosure.

The reading caused "sensation in the court."

"Mr Lawson," pursued the same questioner, after the excitement had a little subsided, "may I ask you to state to the jury what you know about the enclosure spoken of in this letter? Tell us all about it."

"I shall tell you what General Harding told me. He said he received in it a finger, which was that of his son. He recognised it by a scar well known to him: it was the scar of a cut given him by his elder brother, when they were boys out shooting together."

"Can you tell what became of that finger?"

"I can. It is here. General Harding placed it in my hands, along with the letter in which it had been enclosed."

The witness then handed up the finger spoken of. It was a ghastly confirmation of his testimony, and produced a tremendous sensation in court; which continued, long after Mr Lawson had been noticed to leave the witness-box.

"My Lord!" called out the plaintiff's counsel, "I have one more witness to examine, and then we shall be done. This is Mr Henry Harding."

"The gentleman who so calls himself!" interposed one of the barristers who had been briefed by the party for the defence.

"And who will so prove himself!" confidently retorted the plaintiff's counsel.

By consent of the judge, the claimant was put upon the stand, and became emphatically the cynosure of every eye in the crowded court.

He was elegantly, though not foppishly dressed, wearing upon his hands a pair of stout dogskin gloves.

"May I ask you, sir," said his counsel, "to draw off your gloves? The left-hand one will be enough."

The request was complied with, the witness making no other answer.

"Now, sir, have the goodness to hold out your hand, so that the jury may see it."

The hand was stretched forth. *It wanted the little finger!*

Increased sensation in the court!

"My Lord, and gentlemen of the jury, you perceive there is a finger missing? *It is here.*"

As the counsel said this, he stepped towards the witness-box, holding the strange object in his hand. Then, quietly raising the hand of his client, he placed the missing finger in juxtaposition with the stump, from which it had long ago been so cruelly severed.

There could be no doubt about the correspondence. The white cartilaginous seam that indicated the scar, commencing upon the back of the hand, and running longitudinally, was continued to the finger's tip. The jury could not help being convinced. *The claimant was Henry Harding.*

The sensation in court had now come to its climax; and so had the trial to its end.

The case of "Harding *versus* Harding" was by an unanimous verdict decided in plaintiff's favour—defendant "to pay costs in the suit!"

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## Chapter Sixty Six.

### What Became of Them.

Six months after the trial I received an invitation to spend a week at Beechwood Park, and take a share in its

shootings.

Start not, reader! My host was not Nigel Harding, nor my hostess his wife, *née* Belle Mainwaring. The new master and mistress of the mansion were both better people, and both old acquaintances, whom I had encountered in the *campo* of the Parana. They were Henry Harding and his fair Italian *sposa*, now fully put in possession of their English estate.

I was not the only guest they were entertaining. The house was full of company, among whom were the *ci-devant sindaco* of the Val di Orno, his son, and South American daughter-in-law.

If Henry Harding had lost one of his fingers, he had recovered all his old friends, and added a host of others, while Lucetta was surrounded by her own kindred.

In the mansion of Beechwood Park there was as much cheer, and perhaps far more contentment, than when the unamiable Nigel and his equally unamiable wife had the ordering of its entertainments.

I never met either of them again; nor were they ever after seen in that neighbourhood. But I have heard of them: their life since then, though dark—compared with the splendour that had for a time surrounded it—has not been one that should be deemed unendurable.

The generous Henry did not prove resentful for the wrong his half-brother had done him. Though of different mothers, they were sons of the same father; and for that father's sake, Henry abstained from any act of revenge. Not only this, but he behaved towards Nigel with a noble generosity. To the thousand pounds left to the latter, in the second will, he added several other thousands—giving Nigel enough to keep him and his wife from want, even in England.

But England was no longer a land to Nigel's liking. No more did it suit the taste of Belle Mainwaring. No more that of Belle Mainwaring's match-making mother, who had signally failed in her schemes.

India was the country for them, and to India they went—Nigel to become a resident magistrate, and perhaps mete out injustice to the talookdars—his wife to distribute bewitching smiles to various subalterns, captains, and colonels; while the mother would find solace in dealing out Oriental scandal.

Of most of the other characters who have been conspicuous in our tale I am able to record something of later date.

Mr Woolet is still pettifogging—still robbing a poor *clientèle*, out of sufficient to keep a carriage at their expense; but not enough to tempt being employed by the rich. Of these, General Harding was his first client, his son Nigel the last.

Doggy Dick in due time gave up being a bandit; not from any repentance, but because the life was to him a hard one. He had found brigandage in Italy not quite so safe, nor even so pleasant, as poaching in England.

He was stupid enough to return both to the country and the practice, now and then varying the latter with a job of burglary or garotting. The consequence was, getting his own neck into a noose as tight as ever he had twined for any of his victims. It was a halter he had already earned—by the deed of blood done before going abroad.

From the contemplation of such a dark character, let us turn to those of lighter and pleasanter complexion.

Tommaso—the wronged, misguided Tommaso—is no more either wronged or misguided. As head groom at Beechwood, he may be seen every day about the yard, or the stables, of that splendid establishment—faithful as ever to the man he rescued from captivity, and to the woman he was instrumental in saving from dishonour. To him is the writer of this tale indebted for a knowledge of much of the brigand life it has depicted.

Through the influence of his new client—the squire of Beechwood Park—Lawson *père* has succeeded in obtaining a seat in Parliament, and Lawson *fils* expects some day to tread in the footsteps of his father.

It is an agreeable task to record the after-fate of those who have agreeably interested us when we can speak only of their prosperity. And we can testify to this in the case of Luigi Torreani, his pretty wife, and his worthy father.

The three, after a prolonged sojourn among the Chiltern Hills, returned once more to their home upon the Parana—their home not only by adoption, but from choice. There they are still residing; the old Italian *sindico* playing patriarch, on his *estancia*; his son still living a life, part planter, part painter; while his daughter-in-law keeps house for both.

It is not improbable that, some day, his son-in-law and daughter may seek them there, for more than once has Henry Harding been heard to say—Lucetta joyfully listening to it—that he was never so happy as in his South American home!

And this, too, in the midst of wealth, power, and splendour! To the true heart, there is no wealth to compare with contentment—no power so enjoyable as that of free physical strength—no splendour of our so-called civilisation comparable to the savage charm of an American scene—be it forest, prairie, or pampa!

There lies the future of Freedom! There points the "Finger of Fate!"

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**The End.**

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