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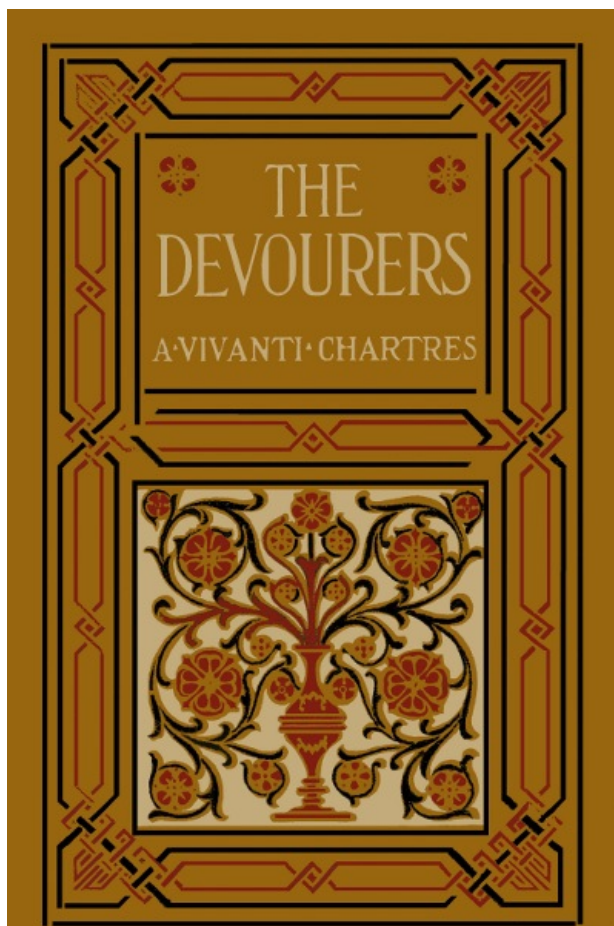
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The Devourers By A. Vivanti Chartres

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A. VIVANTI CHARTRES.

TO MY WONDERCHILD

VIVIEN

TO READ WHEN SHE HAS WONDERCHILDREN
OF HER OWN

PREFACE

There was a man, and he had a canary. He said, "What a dear little canary! I wish it were an eagle." God said to him: "If you give your heart to it to feed on, it will become an eagle." So the man gave his heart to it to feed on. And it became an eagle, and plucked his eyes out.

There was a woman, and she had a kitten. She said: "What a dear little kitten! I wish it were a tiger." God said to her: "If you give your life's blood to it to drink, it will become a tiger." So the woman gave her life's blood to it to drink. And it became a tiger, and tore her to pieces.

There was a man and a woman, and they had a child. They said: "What a dear little child! We wish it were a genius." ...

BOOK I

I-I

The baby opened its eyes and said: "I am hungry."

Nothing moved in the silent, shadowy room, and the baby repeated its brief inarticulate cry. There were hurrying footsteps; light arms raised it, and a laughing voice soothed it with senseless, sweet-sounding words. Then its cheek was laid on a cool young breast, and all was tepid tenderness and mild delight. Soon, on the wave of a light-swinging breath, it drooped into sleep again.

Edith Avory had hurried home across the meadow from the children's party at the vicarage, her pendant plaits flying, her straw hat aslant, and now she entered the dining-room of the Grey House fluttered and breathless.

"Have they come?" she asked of Florence, who was laying the cloth for tea.

"Yes, dear," answered the maid.

"Where are they? Where is the baby?" and, without waiting for an answer, the child ran out of the room and helter-skeltered upstairs.

In front of the nursery she stopped. It was her own room, but through the closed door she had heard a weak, shrill cry that plucked at her heart. Slowly she opened the door, then paused on the threshold, startled and disappointed.

Near the window, gazing out across the verdant Hertfordshire fields, sat a large, square-faced woman in pink print, and on her lap, face downward, wrapped in flannel, lay a baby. The nurse was slapping it on the back with quick, regular pats. Edith saw the soles of two little red feet, and at the other end a small, oblong head, covered with soft black hair.

"Oh dear!" said Edith. "Is *that* the baby?"

"Please shut the door, miss," said the nurse.

"I thought babies had yellow hair, with long muslin dresses and blue bows," faltered Edith.

The square-faced nurse did not answer, but continued pat—pat—pat with her large hand on the small round back.

Edith stepped a little nearer. "Why do you do that?" she asked.

The woman looked the little girl up and down before she answered. Then she said, "Wind," and went on patting.

Edith wondered what that meant. Did it refer to the weather? or was it, perhaps, a slangy servant's way of saying, "Leave me alone" or "Hold your tongue"?

"Has the baby's mother come too?" she asked.

"Yes," said the nurse; "and when you go out, will you please shut the door behind you?"

Edith did so.

She heard voices in her mother's room, and looked in. Sitting near her mother on the sofa was a girl dressed in black, with black hair, like the baby's. She was crying bitterly into a small black-edged handkerchief.

"Oh, Edith dear," said her mother, "that's right! Come here. This is your sister Valeria. Kiss her, and tell her not to cry."

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"But where is the baby's mother?" said Edith, glad to gain time before kissing the wet, unknown face.

The girl in mourning lifted her eyes, dark and swimming, from the handkerchief. "It is me," she said, with a swift, shining smile, and one of her tears rolled into a dimple and stopped there. "What a dear little girl for my baby to play with!" she added, and kissed Edith on both cheeks.

"That size baby cannot play," said Edith, drying her face with the back of her hand. "And the woman was hitting it!"

"Hitting it!" cried the girl in black, jumping up.

"Hitting it!" cried Edith's mother.

And they both hurried out.

Edith, left alone, looked round the familiar room. On her mother's bed lay a little flannel blanket like the one the baby was wearing, and a baby's cap, and some knitted socks, and a rubber rattle. On a chair was a black jacket and a hat trimmed with crape and dull black cherries. Edith squeezed one of the cherries, which broke stickily. Then she went to the looking-glass and tried the hat on. Her long small face looked back at her gravely under the caliginous head-dress, as she shook her head from side to side, to make it totter and tilt. "When I am a widow I shall wear a thing like this," she said to herself, and then dropped it from her head upon the chair. She quickly squeezed another cherry, and went out to look at the baby.

It was in the nursery in its grandmother's arms, being danced up and down; its fist was in its mouth, and its large eyes stared at nothing. Its mother, the girl in black, was on her knees before it, clapping her hands and saying: "Cara! Cara! Cara! Bella! Bella! Bella!" Wilson, the nurse, with her back to them, was emptying Edith's chest of drawers, and putting all Edith's things neatly folded upon the table, ready to be taken to a little room upstairs that was henceforth to be hers. For the baby needed Edith's room.

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The little girl soon tired of looking, and went down to the garden. Passing the verandah, she could hear the gardener laughing and talking with Florence. He was saying:

"Now, of course, Miss Edith's nose is quite put out of joint."

Florence said: "I'm afraid so, poor lamb!"

Edith ran to the shrubbery, and put her hand to her nose. It did not hurt her; it felt much the same as usual. Still, she was anxious and vaguely disturbed. "I must tell the Brown boy," she said, and went to the kitchen-garden to look for him.

There he was, on his knees, patting mould round the strawberry-plants; a good deal of earth was on his face and in his rusty hair.

"Good-evening," said Edith, stopping near him, with her hands behind her.

"Hullo!" said the gardener's boy, looking up.

"They've come," said Edith.

"Have they?" and Jim Brown sat back on his heels and cleaned his fingers on his trousers.

"The baby is black," said Edith.

"Sakes alive!" said Jim, opening large light eyes that seemed to have dropped into his face by mistake.

"It has got black hair," continued Edith, "and a red face."

"Oh, Miss Edith, you are a goose!" said the Brown boy. "That's all right. I thought you meant it was all black, because of its mother being a foreigner."

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Edith shook her head. "It's not all right. Babies should have golden hair."

"What is the mother like?" asked Jim.

"She's black, too; and the nurse is horrid. And what is the matter with my nose?"

"Eh?" said Jim Brown.

"Yes. Look at my nose. What's wrong with it?"

The Brown boy looked at it. Then he looked closer. Little by little an expression of horror came over his face. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Oh my! Just think of it!"

"What? What is it?" cried Edith. "It was all right just now." And as the boy kept staring at her nose with growing amazement, she screamed: "Tell me what it is! Tell me, or I'll hit you!"

Then the Brown boy got up and danced round her in a frenzy of horror at what was the matter with her nose; so she took a small stone and threw it at him. Whereupon he went back to his strawberry-plants, and declined to speak to her any more.

When he saw her walking forlornly away with her hand to her nose, and her two plaits dangling despondently behind, he felt sorry, and called her back.

"I was only larking, Miss Edith. Your nose is all right." So she was comforted, and sat down on the grass to talk to him.

"Valeria speaks Italian to the baby, and they have come to stay always," she said. "The baby is going to have my room, and I am going to be upstairs near Florence. We are all going to dress in black, because of my brother Tom having died. And mamma has been crying about it for the last four days. And that baby is my niece." [Pg 6]

"Your brother, Master Tom, was the favourite with them all, wasn't he?" said Jim.

"Oh, yes," said Edith. "There were so many of us that, of course, the middle ones were liked best."

"I don't quite see that," said Jim.

"Oh, well," explained Edith, "I suppose they were tired of the old ones, and did not want the new ones, so that's why. Anyhow," she added, "it doesn't matter. They're all dead now."

Then she helped him with the strawberry-plants until it was time for tea.

Her grandfather came to call her in—a tall, stately figure, shuffling slowly down the gravel path. Edith ran to meet him, and put her warm fingers into his cool, shrivelled hand. Together they walked towards the house.

"Have you seen them, grandpapa?" she asked, curvetting round him, as he proceeded at gentle pace across the lawn.

"Seen whom, my dear?" asked the old gentleman.

"Valeria and the baby."

"What baby?" said the grandfather, stopping to rest and listen.

"Why, Tom's baby, grandpapa," said Edith. "You know—the baby of Tom who is dead. It has come to stay here with its mother and nurse. Her name is Wilson."

"Dear me!" said the grandfather, and walked on a few steps.

Then he paused again. "So Tom is dead." [Pg 7]

"Oh, you knew that long ago. I told you so."

"So you did," said the old gentleman. He took off his skullcap, and passed his hand over his soft white hair. "Which Tom is that—my son Tom or his son Tom?"

"Both Toms," said Edith. "They're both dead. One died four days ago, and the other died six years ago, and you oughtn't to mix them up like that. One was my papa and your son, and the other was his son and the baby's papa. Now don't forget that again."

"No, my dear," said the grandfather. Then, after a while: "And you say his name is Wilson?"

"Whose name?" exclaimed Edith.

"Why, my dear, how should I know?" said the grandfather.

Then Edith laughed, and the old gentleman laughed with her.

"Never mind," said Edith. "Come in and see the baby—your son Tom's son's baby."

"Your son's Tom's sons," murmured the grandfather, stopping again to think. "Tom's sons your son's Tom's sons ... Where do I put in the baby?"

Edith awoke in the middle of the night, listening and alert. "What is that?" she said, sitting up in bed.

Florence's voice came from the adjoining room: "Go to sleep, my lamb. It's only the baby."

"Why does it scream like that?"

"It must have got turned round like," explained Florence sleepily.

"Then why don't they turn it straight again?" asked Edith.

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"Oh, Miss Edith," replied Florence impatiently, "do go to sleep. When a baby gets 'turned round,' it means that it sleeps all day and screams all night."

And so it did.

II

A gentle blue February was slipping out when March tore in with screaming winds and rushing rains. He pushed the diffident greenness back, and went whistling rudely across the lands. The chilly drenched season stood still. One morning Spring peeped round the corner and dropped a crocus or two and a primrose or two. She whisked off again, with the wind after her, but looked in later between two showers. And suddenly, one day, there she was, enthroned and garlanded. Frost-spangles melted at her feet, and the larks rose.

Valeria borrowed Edith's garden-hat, tied it under her chin with a black ribbon, and went out into the young sunshine across the fields. Around her was the gloss of recent green, pushing upwards to the immature blue of the sky. And Tom, her husband, was dead.

Tom lay in the dark, away from it all, under it all, in the distant little cemetery of Nervi, where the sea that he loved shone and danced within a stone's-throw of his folded hands.

Tom's folded hands! That was all she could see of him when she closed her eyes and tried to recall him. She could not remember his face. Try as she would, shutting her eyes with concentrated will, the well-known features wavered and slipped away; and nothing remained before her but those dull white hands as she had seen them last—terrible, unapproachable hands!

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Were those the hands Tom was so particular about and rather vain of—the hands she had patted and laid her cheek against? Were those hands—fixed, cessated, all-relinquishing—the hands that had painted the Italian landscapes she loved, and the other pictures she hated, because in them all stood Carlotta of Trastevere, rippling-haired, bare, and deliberate? Were those the hands that had rowed her and Uncle Giacomo in the little boat *Luisa* on the Lake Maggiore?—the hands that had grasped hers suddenly at the Madonna del Monte the day she had put on her light blue dress, with the sailor collar and scarlet tie? She seemed to hear him say, with his droll English accent: "Volete essere sposina mia?" And she had laughed and answered him in the only two English words she knew, and which he himself had taught her across the table d'hôte: "Please! Thank you!" Then they had both laughed, until Zio Giacomo had said that the Madonna would punish them.

The Madonna had punished them. She had struck him down in his twenty-sixth year, a few months after they were married, shattering his youth like a bubble of glass. Valeria had heard him, day after day, night after night, coughing his life away in little hard coughs and clearings of his throat; then in racking paroxysms that left him breathless and spent; then in a loose, easy cough that he scarcely noticed. They had gone from Florence, where it was too windy, to Nervi, where it was too hot; from Nice, where it was too noisy, to Airolo, where it was too dull; then, with a rush of hope, with hurried packing of coats and shawls, of paint brushes and colours, of skates and snowshoes, they had journeyed up to Davos. And there the sun shone, and the baby was born; and Tom Avory went skating and bob-sleighting, and gained six pounds in eight weeks.

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Then one day an American woman, whose son was dying, said to Valeria: "It is bad for your baby to stay up here. Send her away, or when she is fifteen she will start coughing too."

"Send her away!" Yes, the baby must be sent away. The deadly swarm of germs from all the stricken lungs seemed to Valeria to envelope her and her child like a cloud—the cloud of death. She could feel it, see it, taste it. The smell of it was on her pillow at night; the sheets and blankets exhaled it; her food was impregnated with it. She herself was full-grown, and strong and sound; but her baby—her fragile, rose-bud baby—was Tom's child, too! All Tom's brothers and sisters, except one little girl called Edith, who was in England, had died in their adolescence—one in Bournemouth; one in Torquay; one in Cannes; one, Tom's favourite sister, Sally, in Nervi—all fleeing from the death they carried within them. Now Davos had saved Tom. But the baby must be sent away.

They consulted three doctors. One said there was no hurry; another said there was no danger; the third said there was no knowing.

Valeria and Tom determined that they would not take risks. One snowy day they travelled down to Landquart. There Tom was to leave them and return to Davos. But the baby was crying, and Valeria was crying; so Tom jumped into the train after them, and said he would see them as far as Zürich, where Uncle Giacomo would be waiting to take them to Italy.

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"Then you will be all right, helpless ones," he said, putting his arm round them both, as the little train carried them down towards the mists. And he gave his baby-girl a finger to clutch.

But Tom never reached Zürich. What reached Zürich was stern and awful, with limp, falling limbs and blood-stained mouth. The baby cried, and Valeria cried, and crowds and officials gathered round them. But Tom could help his helpless ones no more.

His will was found in his breast-pocket. "Sposina mia, with all my worldly goods I thee endow. Take our baby to England. Bury me in Nervi, near Sally. I have been very happy.—Tom."

These things Valeria Avory remembered as she walked in the soft English sunshine, crying under Edith's garden-hat. When she reached a little bridge across an angry stream, she leaned over the parapet to look at the water, and the borrowed hat fell off and floated away.

Valeria ran down the bank after it, but it was in midstream, resting lightly against a protruding stone. She threw sticks and pebbles at it, and it moved off and sailed on, with one black ribbon, like a thin arm, stretched behind it. Valeria ran along the sloping bank, sliding on slippery grass and wet stones; and the hat quivered and curtsied away buoyantly on the miniature waves. When the stream elbowed off towards the wood, the hat bobbed along with it, and so did Valeria. As she and the stream and the hat turned the corner, she heard an exclamation of surprise, and, raising her flushed face, she saw a young man, in grey tweeds, fishing on the other side of the water.

The young man said: "Hang it all! Good-bye, trout!" And Valeria said: "Can you catch my hat?"

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He caught it with great difficulty, holding it with the thick end of his rod, and flattering it towards him with patient manœuvres.

"My trout!" he murmured. "I had been after that fat fellow for three days." Then he dragged the large splashing hat out of the water and held it up. "Here's your hat." It had never been a beautiful hat; it was a dreary-looking thing that Edith had had much wear out of. It had not the appearance of a hat worth fishing three days for.

"Oh, thank you so much! How shall I reach it?" said Valeria, extending a small muddy hand from her side of the stream.

"I suppose I must bring it across," said the young man, still holding the dripping adornment at arm's length.

"Oh no!" said Valeria. "Throw it."

The young man laughed, and said: "Don't try to catch! It will give you a cold." He flung the hat across, and it fell flat and sodden at Valeria's feet.

"Oh dear!" she said, picking it up, with puckered brows, while the black tulle ruffles fell from it, soft and soaking. "What shall I do with it now? I can't put it on. And I don't think I can carry it, walking along these slippery banks."

"Well, throw it back again," said the young man, "and I'll carry it for you."

So she threw the heavy melancholy thing at him, and they walked along, with the water between them, smiling at each other. On the bridge they met, and shook hands.

"I am sorry about your fishes," she said.

"My fishes?" He laughed. "Oh, never mind them. I am sorry about your hat." Then, noting the damp ringlets on her forehead and the dimple in her cheek, he added: "What will you put on when you come to-morrow?"

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"To-morrow?" she asked, raising simple eyes.

"Yes; will you?" he said, blushing a little, for he was very young. "At this time"—he looked at his watch—"about eleven o'clock?"

Valeria blushed, too—a sudden crimson flush that left her face white and waxen. "Is it eleven o'clock?" she exclaimed. "Are you sure?"

"Yes; what is the matter?"

"The baby!" gasped Valeria. "I had forgotten the baby!" And she turned and ran down the bridge and across the fields, her black gown flying, the wet hat flapping at her side.

She reached home breathless. The nurse was on the verandah, waiting. "Am I late, Wilson?" she panted.

"Yes, madam," said the nurse, with tight and acid lips.

"How is baby?" gasped Valeria.

"The baby," said the woman, gazing at her, sphinx-like and severe, "is hungry."

III

The young man went to fish in the little stream every day, but he only caught his fat trout. The dimpled girl in mourning did not come again. His holiday was ended, and he returned to his

rooms in London, but he left a love-letter for Valeria on the bank, pinned to the crumpled black ruffle that had fallen off her hat, and with a stone on it to keep it down.

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Valeria found the love-letter. She had stayed indoors a week, repenting. Then Spring and her youth joined hands, and drew her out of doors and across the fields again. She went, blushing and faltering, with a bunch of violets pinned at her belt. No one saw her but a tail-flicking, windy-haired pony in a meadow, who frisked suddenly after her and made her shiver.

Close to the stream her eye caught the tattered black ruffle and the note pinned to it. The young man wrote that his name was Frederick Allen; that he was reading for the Bar and writing for newspapers. He said that she had haunting eyes, and that they would probably never meet again. He wondered whether she had found the baby, and where she had forgotten it, and what baby it was. And she *might* have turned round just once to wave him farewell! He hoped she would not be displeased if he said that he loved her, and would never forget her. Would she tell him her name? Only her name! Please, please! He was hers in utter devotion, FREDERICK.

Valeria went back in a dream and looked up the word "haunting" in her English-Italian Dictionary. She did not remember his eyes: they were blue, she thought, or perhaps brown. But his face was clear and sunburnt, and his smooth-parted hair was bright when he took off his hat on the bridge.

She thought she would simply return his letter. Then she decided that she would add a few words of rebuke. Finally one rainy day, when everybody had seemed cross, and Edith had answered rudely, and the baby had screamed for Wilson who was not there, Valeria, with qualms and twinges, took a sheet of paper and wrote her name on it. The paper had a black border. Valeria suddenly fell on her knees and kissed the black border, and prayed that Tom might forgive her. Then she burned it, and went to her baby, who was quarrelling with everything and trying to kill an India-rubber sheep.

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Yet one day in April—an April swooning with soft suggestions, urging its own evanescence and the fleeting sweetness of life—Mr. Frederick Allen, in his London lodgings, received two letters instead of one. Hannah, the pert maid who brought them to his room, lingered while he opened them. In the first was a cheque for six guineas from a periodical; in the other was a visiting-card:

VALERIA NINA AVORY.

"Who the dickens ...?" he said, turning the card over. "Here!" and he threw it across to Hannah. "Here's a French modiste, or something, if you want falals!"

Then, as he had received six guineas when he had only expected four, he shut up his law-book, pinched Hannah's cheek en *passant*, and went out for a day up the river with the man next door.

The card was thrown into the coal-box, and the kitchen-maid burnt it. And that is all.

April brought the baby a tooth.

May brought it another tooth, and gave a wave to its hair. June took away its bibs, and gave it a smile with a dimple copied from Valeria's. July brought it short lace frocks and a word or two. August stood it upright and exultant, with its back to the wall; and September sent it tottering and trilling into its mother's arms.

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Its name was Giovanna Desiderata Felicita.

"I cannot remember that," said the grandfather. "Call him Tom."

"But, grandpapa, it is a girl," said Edith.

"I know, my dear. You have told me so before," said the old gentleman testily. He had become very irritable since there had been so much noise in the house.

"Well, what girl's name can you remember?" asked Mrs. Avory, patting her old father's hand, and frowning at her daughter, Edith.

"None—none at all," said the old man.

"Come now, come now, dear!" said Mrs. Avory. "Can you remember Annie, or Mary?"

"No, I cannot," said her father.

Then Edith suggested "Jane," and Valeria "Camilla." And Florence, who was laying the cloth, said: "Try him with 'Nellie' or 'Katy.'" But the old gentleman peevishly refused to remember any of those names.

And for months he called the baby Tom.

One day at dinner he said: "Where is Nancy?"

Mrs. Avory and Edith glanced at each other, and Valeria looked up in surprise.

"Where is Nancy?" repeated the grandfather impatiently.

Mrs. Avory coughed. Then she laid her hand gently on his sleeve. "Nancy is in heaven," she said

softly.

"*What!*" cried the old gentleman, throwing down his table-napkin and glaring round the table.

"Your dear little daughter Nancy died many, many years ago," said Mrs. Avory.

The old gentleman rose. "It is not true!" he said with shaking voice. "She was here this morning. I saw her." Then his lips trembled, and he began to cry. [Pg 17]

Valeria suddenly started up and ran from the room. In a moment she was back again, with her baby in its pink nightdress, kicking and crowing in her arms.

"Here's Nancy!" she said, with a little break in her voice.

"Why, of course!" cried Edith, clapping her hands. "Don't cry, grandpapa. Here's Nancy."

"Yes," said Mrs. Avory. "See, father dear, here's Nancy!"

The old man looked up, and his dim blue eyes met and held the sparkling eyes of the child. Long and deeply he looked into the limpid depths that returned his unwavering gaze.

"Yes, here's Nancy," said the old man.

So the baby was Nancy ever after.

IV

When Nancy had three candles round her birthday-cake, and was pulling crackers with her eyes shut, and her mother's hands pressed tightly over her ears, Edith put her elbows on the table, and said:

"What is Nancy going to be?"

"Good," answered Nancy quickly—"veddy good. Another cwacker."

So she got another cracker, and Edith repeated her question.

Mrs. Avory said: "What do you mean?"

"Well," said Edith, whose two plaits had melted into one, with a large black bow fastened irrelevantly to the wrong end of it, "you don't want her to be just a girl, do you?"

Valeria blushed, and said: "I have often thought I should like her to be a genius."

Edith nodded approval, and Mrs. Avory looked dubiously at the little figure, now discreetly dragging the tablecloth down in an attempt to reach the crackers. Nancy noted the soft look, and sidled round to her grandmother. [Pg 18]

"Hold my ears," she said, "and give me a cwacker."

Mrs. Avory patted the small head, and smoothed out the blue ribbon that tied up the tuft of black curls.

"Why do you want me to hold your ears?"

"Because I am afwaid of the cwackers."

"Then why do you want the crackers?"

"Because I like them."

"But why do you like them?"

"Because I am afwaid of them!" and Nancy smiled bewitchingly.

Everybody found this an astonishingly profound reply, and the question of Nancy's genius recurred constantly in the conversation.

Edith said: "Of course, it will be painting. Her father, poor dear Tom, was such a wonderful landscape-painter. And I believe he did some splendid figures, too."

Mrs. Avory concurred; but Valeria shook her head and changed colour. "Oh, I hope not!" she said, instant tears gathering in her eyes.

Mrs. Avory looked hurt. "Why not, Valeria?" she said.

"Oh, the smell," sobbed Valeria; "and the models ... and I could not bear it. Oh, my Tom—my dear Tom!" And she sobbed convulsively, with her head on Mrs. Avory's shoulder, and with Edith's arm round her.

Nancy screamed loud, and had to be taken away to the nursery, where Fräulein Müller, the German successor of Wilson, shook her. [Pg 19]

"Could it not be music?" said Valeria, after a while, drying her eyes dejectedly. "My mother was a great musician; she played the harp, and composed lovely songs. When she died, and I went to

live in Milan with Uncle Giacomo, I used to play all Chopin's mazurkas and impromptus to him, although he said he hated music if anyone else played.... And, then, when I married ..."—Valeria's sobs burst forth again—"dear Tom ... said ..."

Edith intervened quickly. "I certainly think it ought to be music;" and she kissed Valeria's hot face. "The kiddy sings 'Onward, Christian Soldiers,' and 'Schlaf, Kindchen' in perfect tune. Fräulein was telling me so, and said how remarkable it was."

So Nancy was sent for again, and was brought in by Fräulein, who had a scratch on her cheek.

Nancy was told to sing, "Schlaf, Kindchen, schlaf, da draussen steht ein Schaf," and she did so with very bad grace and not much voice. But loud and servile applause from everyone, including Fräulein, gratified her, and she volunteered her entire repertoire, comprising "There'll be razors a-flyin' in the air," which she had learned incidentally from the attractive and supercilious gardener's boy, Jim Brown.

So it was decided that Nancy should be a great musician, and a piano with a small keyboard was obtained for her at once. A number of books on theory and harmony were bought, and Edith said Valeria was to read them carefully, and to teach Nancy without letting her notice it. But Nancy noticed it. And at last she used to cry and stamp her feet as soon as she saw her mother come into the room.

Fräulein, with much diplomacy, and according to a German book on education, taught her her notes and her alphabet at the same time; but the result was confusion. Nancy insisted on spelling words at the piano, and could find no "o" for dog, and no "t" for cat, and no anything; while the Italian Valeria added obscurity and bewilderment by calling "d" *re*, and "g" *sol*, and "b" *c*. Nancy became sour and suspicious. In everything that was said to her she scented a trap for the conveying of musical knowledge, and she trusted no one, and would speak to no one but Jim Brown and the grandfather.

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At last she lit upon a device that afflicted and horrified her tormentors. One day, when her mother was drawing little men, that turned out to be semibreves, Nancy, speechless with anger, put her hand to her soft hair, and dragged out a handful of it. Valeria gave a cry; she opened the little fist, and saw the soft black fluff lying there.

"Oh, baby, baby! how could you!" she cried. "What a dreadful thing! How can you grieve your poor mother so!"

That ended the musical education. Every time that a note lifted its black head over Nancy's horizon, up went her hand, and she pulled out a tuft of her hair. Then she opened her fist and showed it. Books on harmony were put away; the piano was locked. No more Beethoven or Schumann was sung to her in the guise of lullabies by Fräulein at night; but her old friend, "Baby Bunting," returned, and accompanied her, as of old, when she sailed down the stream of sleep, afloat on the darkness.

"Bye, Baby Bunting,
Father's gone a-hunting,
To shoot a rabbit for its skin,
To wrap little Baby Bunting in."

... Nancy sat on the grass, nursing her doll, and watching three small rampant feathers on Fräulein Müller's hat, nodding, like little plumes on a hearse, in time with something she was reading.

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"What are you reading?" asked Nancy.

Fräulein Müller went on nodding, and read aloud: "'Shine out, little het, sunning over with gurls.'"

"*What?*" said Nancy.

"Shine out, little het, sunning over with gurls," repeated Fräulein Müller.

"What does mean 'sunning over with girls'?" cried Nancy, frowning.

"Gurls, gurls—hair-gurls!" explained Fräulein.

"*Curls!* Are you sure it is curls?" said Nancy, dropping her doll in the grass, and folding her hands. "Read it again. Slowly."

"Shine out, little het," repeated Fräulein. And Nancy said it after her. "'Shine out, little head, shine out, little head ... sunning over with curls.'"

Then she said to her governess: "Say that over and over and over again, until I tell you not to;" and she shut her eyes.

"Aber warum?" asked Fräulein Müller.

Nancy did not open her eyes nor answer.

"Komische Kleine," said Fräulein; and added, in order to practise her English, "Comic small!" Then she did as she was told.

That night Nancy quarrelled with "Baby Bunting." She sat up in bed with flushed cheeks and small, tight fists, and said to Fräulein Müller: "Do not tell me that any more."

Fräulein, who had been droning on in the dusk over her knitting, and thinking that at this hour in Düsseldorf her sister and mother were eating *belegte Brödchen*, looked up in surprise. [Pg 22]

"What it is, mein Liebchen?"

"Do not tell me any more about that rabbit. I cannot hear about him any more. You keep on—you keep on till I am ill."

Fräulein Müller was much troubled in suggesting other songs. She tried one or two with scant success.

Nancy sat up again. "All those silly words tease me. Sing without saying them."

So Fräulein hummed uncertain tunes with her lips closed, and she was just drifting into Beethoven, when Nancy sat up once more:

"Oh, don't do that!" she said. "Say words without those silly noises. Say pretty words until I go to sleep."

So Fräulein, after she had tried all the words she could think of, took Lenau's poems from her own bookshelf, and read Nancy to sleep. On the following evenings she read the "Waldlieder," and then "Mischka," until it was finished. Then she started Uhland; and after Uhland, Körner, and Freiligrath, and Lessing.

Who knows what Nancy heard? Who knows what visions and fancies she took with her to her dreams? In the little sleep-boat where Baby Bunting used to be with her, now sat a row of German poets, long of hair, wild of eye, fulgent of epithet. Night after night, for months and years, little Nancy drifted off to her slumber with lyric and lay, with ode and epic, lulled by cadenced rhythm and resonant rhyme. On one of these nights the poets cast a spell over her. They rowed her little boat out so far that it never quite touched shore again.

And Nancy never quite awoke from her dreams. [Pg 23]

V

In Milan the cross-grained old architect, Giacomo Tirindelli, Valeria's "Zio Giacomo," stout of figure and short of leg, got up in the middle of the night and went to his son Antonio's room.

The room was empty. He had expected this, but he was none the less incensed. He went to the window and threw the shutters open. Milan slept. Silent and deserted, Via Principe Amedeo lay at his feet. Every alternate lamp already extinguished showed that it was past twelve o'clock; and a dreary cat wandered across the road, making the street emptier for its presence.

Zio Giacomo closed the window, and walked angrily up and down his son's room. On the walls, on the mantelpiece, on the desk, were photographs—Nunziata Villari as Theodora, in stiff regal robes; Nunziata Villari as Cleopatra, clad in jewels; Nunziata Villari as Marguerite Gautier, in her nightdress, or so it appeared to Zio Giacomo's angry eyes; Villari as Norah; Villari as Sappho; Villari as Francesca. Then, in a corner, in an old frame, the portrait of a little girl: "*My Cousin Valeria, twelve years old.*" Zio Giacomo stopped with a short angry sigh before the picture of his favourite niece, whom he had hoped one day to call his daughter. "Foolish girl," he grumbled, "to marry that idiotic Englishman instead of my stupid, disobedient son—" Then another profile of Nunziata Villari caught his eye, and then again Nunziata Villari, all hair and smile.... Zio Giacomo had time to learn the strange, strong face by heart before he heard the street-door fall to, and his son's footsteps on the stairs. [Pg 24]

Antonio, who from the street had seen the light in his room, entered with a cheerful smile. "Well, father," he said, "why are you not asleep?" He received the inevitable counter-question with a little Latin gesture of both hands (the gesture that Theodora specially liked!). "Well, father dear, I am twenty-three, and you are—you are not;" and he patted his father's small shoulder and laughed (his best laugh—the laugh that Cleopatra could not resist).

"Jeune homme qui veille, vieillard qui dort, sont tous deux près de la mort," quoted his father, in deep stern tones.

"Eh! father mine, if life is to be short, let it be pleasant," said Antonio, lighting a cigarette.

Giacomo sat very straight; his dressing-gown was tight, and his feet were chilly. His good-looking, good-tempered son irritated him.

"Are you not ashamed?" he said, pointing a dramatic forefinger at the row of portraits. "She is an old woman of fifty!"

"Thirty-eight," said Antonio, seating himself in the armchair.

"An actress! a masquerading mountebank, whom every porter with a franc in his pocket can see when he will; a creature whose husband has run away from her to the ends of the earth—"

"To South America," interpolated Antonio.

—"With the cook." And Zio Giacomo snorted with indignation.

"I am afraid her cooking *is* bad," said Antonio; and he blew rings of smoke and puckered up his young red mouth in the way that made Phædra flutter and droop her passion-shaded lids.

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"I have enough of it," said his father, "and we leave for England to-morrow."

"For England? To-morrow?" Antonio started up. "You don't mean it! You can't mean it, father! Why to England?"

"I telegraphed yesterday to Hertfordshire. I told your cousin Valeria we should come to see them; and she has answered that she is delighted, and her mother is delighted, and everybody is delighted." Zio Giacomo nodded a stubborn head. "We shall stay in England three months, six months, until you have recovered from your folly."

"Ah! because of Cousin Valeria. I see!" and Antonio laughed. "Oh, father, father! you dear old dreamer! Are you at the old dream again? It cannot be, believe me; it was a foolish idea of yours years ago. Valeria was all eyes for her Englishman then, and is probably all tears for him now. Stay here and be comfortable, father!"

But his father would not stay there, and he would not be comfortable. He went away shaking his head, and losing his slipper on the way, and dropping candle-grease all over the carpet in stooping to pick it up. A sore and angry Zio Giacomo got into bed, and tried to read the *Secolo*, and listened to hear if the street-door banged again.

It banged again.

One o'clock struck as Antonio turned down Via Monte Napoleone, and when he rang the bell at No. 36, the *portinaio* kept him waiting ten minutes. Then Marietta, the maid, kept him waiting fifteen minutes on the landing before she opened the door; and then the Signora kept him waiting fifteen eternities until she appeared, white-faced and frightened, draped in white satin, with her hair bundled up anyhow—or nearly anyhow—on the top of her head.

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Antonio took both her hands and kissed them, and pressed them to his eyes, and told her he was leaving to-morrow—no, to-day—to-day! In a few hours! For ever! For England! And what would she do? She would be false! She would betray him! She was infamous! He knew it! And would she die with him now?

She gave the little Tosca scream, and turned from him with the second act "Dame aux Camelias" shiver, and stepped back like Fedora, and finally flung herself, like Francesca, upon his breast. Then she whispered five words to him, and sent him home.

She called Marietta, who loosened her hair again, and plaited it, and put away what was not wanted, and gave her the lanoline; and she greased her face and went to bed like Nunziata Villari, aged thirty-eight.

But Antonio went through the nocturnal streets, repeating the five words: "London. In May. Twelve performances." And this was March.

Enough! He would live through it somehow. "Aber fragt mich nur nicht wie," he said to himself, for he knew enough German to quote Heine's "Buch der Lieder," and he had read "Die Jungfrau von Orleans" in the original, in order to discuss it with La Villari.

La Villari liked to discuss her rôles with him. She also practised her attitudes and tried her gestures on him without his knowing it. He always responded, as a violin that one holds in one's hand thrills and responds when another violin is played. When she was studying Giovanna d'Arco, he felt that he was le Chevalier Bayard, and he dreamed of an heroic life and an epic death. When she was preparing herself for the rôle of Clelia, and practising the attitudes of that famous adventuress, he became a sceptic and a *noceur*, and gave Zio Giacomo qualms for three weeks by keeping late hours and gambling all night at the Patriottica. When she took up the rôle of Messalina, and for purposes of practice assumed Messalina attitudes and expounded Messalina views, he drifted into a period of extreme demoralization, and became perverted and blasphemous. But during the six weeks in which she arrayed her mind in the candid lines of La Samaritana, he became once more spiritual and pure: he gave up the Patriottica and the Café Biffi, and went to early Mass every morning.

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"You funny boy!" said Villari to him one day. "You will do foolish things in your life. Why don't you work?"

"I don't know," said Antonio. "I am in the wrong set, I suppose. And, besides, there is no time. After a canter on the Bastioni in the morning, it is lunch-time; and after luncheon one reads or goes out; and then it is visiting-time—the Marchesa Adda expects one every Monday, and the Della Rocca every Tuesday, and somebody else every Wednesday.... Then it is dinner-time and theatre-time and bed-time. And there you are!"

"It is a pity," said La Villari, kindly maternal, forgetting to be Messalina, or Giovanna, or anyone else. "You have no character. You are nice; you are good to look at; you are not stupid. But your nose is, as one would say, a nose of putty—yes, of putty! And anyone can twist it here and there. Take care! You will suffer much, or you will make other people suffer. Noses of putty," she added

Zio Giacomo was one whose nose was not of putty. Much as he hated journeys, many as were the things that he always lost on them, sorely as his presence was needed in his office, where the drawings for a new town hall were lying in expectant heaps on his desk, he had made up his mind to start for England, and start they should. He packed off his motherless daughter, the tall and flippant Clarissa, to a convent school in Paris, bade good-bye to his sister Carlotta and to his niece Adèle, and scrambled wrathfully into the train for Chiasso, followed by the unruffled Antonio.

Antonio seemed to enjoy the trip; and soon Zio Giacomo found himself wondering why they had taken it. Was the tale that his niece Adèle had told him about Antonio's infatuation for the actress all foolish nonsense? Adèle was always exaggerating.

Zio Giacomo watched his son with growing anger. Antonio was cheerful and debonair. Antonio slept when his father was awake; Antonio ate when his father was sick. By the time they reached Dover Giacomo, who knew no word of English but *rosbif* and the *Times*, was utterly broken. But Antonio twisted up his young moustache, and ran his fingers through his tight black curls, and made long eyes at the English girls, who smiled, and then passed hurriedly, pretending they had not seen him.

VI

At Charing Cross to meet them were Valeria and Edith—both charming, small-waisted, and self-conscious. Valeria flung herself with Latin demonstrativeness into her old uncle's arms, while Edith tried not to be ashamed of the noise the Italian new-comers made and of the attention they attracted. When, later, they were all four in the train on their way to Wareside, she gave herself up entirely to the rapture of watching Uncle Giacomo's gestures and Cousin Antonio's eyes. Cousin Antonio, whom Valeria addressed as Nino, spoke to her in what he called "banana-English," and was so amusing that she laughed until she coughed, and coughed until she cried; and then they all said they would not laugh any more. And altogether it was a delightful journey.

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When they alighted at the peaceful country station, there was Mrs. Avory and little Nancy and the grandfather awaiting them; and there were more greetings and more noise. And when the carriage reached the Grey House, Fräulein stood at the door step, all blushes and confusion, with a little talcum-powder sketchily distributed over her face, and her newly-refreshed Italian vocabulary issuing jerkily from her.

They were a very cheerful party at tea; everybody spoke at once, even the old grandfather, who kept on inquiring, "Who are they—who are they?"—addressing himself chiefly to Zio Giacomo—at intervals during the entire afternoon. Towards evening Nancy became excited and unmanageable, and Mrs. Avory went to bed with a headache. But Fräulein entertained Zio Giacomo, and Nino sat at the piano and sang Neapolitan songs to Valeria and Edith, who listened, sitting on one stool, with arms interlaced.

Then followed days of tennis and croquet, of picnics and teas with the Vicar's pretty daughters and the Squire's awkward sons. Mrs. Avory had only brief glimpses of Valeria and Edith darting indoors and out again; running up to their rooms to change their skirts; calling through the house for their racquets. Zio Giacomo walked about the garden, giving advice to Fräulein about the cultivation of tomatoes, and wondering why English people never ate macaroni.

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"Nor *Knodel*," said Fräulein.

"Nor *risotto*," said Zio Giacomo.

"Nor *Leberwurst*," said Fräulein.

"Nor *cappelletti al sugo*," said Zio Giacomo.

"It is so as with the etucation," said Fräulein. "The etucation is again already quite wrong; not only the eating and the cooking of the foot...." And so they rambled along. And Zio Giacomo was homesick.

Suddenly Valeria was homesick too. It began on the first day of the tennis tournament—a resplendent light-blue day. Nino said that the sky matched Edith's dress and also her eyes, which reminded him of Lake Como. Their partnership was very successful; Edith, airy and swift, darted and flashed across the court, playing almost impossible balls. In the evening, as she lay back in the rocking-chair, pale and sweet, with her shimmering hair about her, Nino called her a tired butterfly, and sang "La Farfalla" to her. Valeria was miserable. She said it was homesickness. She felt that she was homesick for the sun of Italy and the language of Italy; homesick for people with loud voices and easy gesticulations and excitable temperaments; homesick for people with dark eyes and dark hair.

On the second day of the tournament, at tea on the Vicar's lawn, she became still more homesick. Her partner was offering her cress-sandwiches, and telling her that it was very warm for April, and that last year in April it had been much colder. Meanwhile, she could see Nino at the other side of the lawn tuning a guitar that had been brought to him; he was laughing and playing chords on it with his teaspoon. Edith and two other girls stood near him; their three fair heads

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shone in the sunlight. Suddenly Valeria felt as if she could not breathe in England any more. She said to herself that it must be the well-bred voices, the conversation about the weather, the trimness, the tidiness, the tea, the tennis, that were insufferable to her chagrined heart. Meanwhile her dark eyes rested upon Nino and upon the three blonde heads, inclined towards him, and glistening in different sheens of gold. She felt hot tears pricking her eyes.

That evening in her room, as they were preparing for bed, Edith talked to her sister-in-law through the open door. "What fun everything is, Val, isn't it?" she said, shaking out her light locks, and brushing them until they crackled and flew, and stood out like pale fire round her face. "Life is a delightful institution!"

As no answer came from Valeria's room, Edith looked in. Valeria was lying on her bed, still in her pink evening dress, with her face hidden in the pillow.

"Why? What has happened, dear?" asked Edith, bending over the dark bowed head.

"Oh, I hate everything!" murmured Valeria. "That horrid tennis, and those horrid girls, always laughing, always laughing, always laughing."

Edith sat down beside her. "But we laughed, too—at least, I know *I* did! And as for Nino, he laughed all the time."

"That is it," cried Valeria, sitting up, tearful and indignant. "In Italy Nino never laughed. In Italy we do not laugh for nothing, just to show our teeth and pretend we are vivacious."

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Edith was astonished. She sat for a long while looking at Valeria's disconsolate figure, and thinking matters over. Quite suddenly she bent down and kissed Valeria, and said: "Don't cry." So Valeria, who had left off crying, began to cry again. And still more she cried when she raised her head and saw Edith's shower of scintillant hair, and the two little Lakes of Como brimming over with limpid tears. They kissed each other, and called themselves silly and goose-like; and then they laughed and kissed each other again, and went to bed.

Valeria fell asleep.

But Edith lay thinking in the dark.

She got up quite early, and took little Nancy primrosing in the woods; so Nino and Valeria went to the tennis tournament alone. A fat, torpid girl took Edith's place, and Valeria laughed all the morning.

Edith and Nancy came in from the woods late for luncheon. When they appeared, Nino looked up at Edith in surprise. Mrs. Avory said: "Edith, my dear, what have you done? You look a sight!"

"Do I?" said Edith. "Why, this is the famous North-German coiffure Fräulein has made me."

Valeria's face had flushed. "You ought not to have let her drag your hair back so tight," she said. And Mrs. Avory added: "I thought you had given that ugly brown dress away long ago."

Then Nancy spoke of the primroses and Nino of the tennis; and Edith kept and adopted the North-German coiffure. She dropped out of the tournament because it gave her a pain in her shoulders, and she went for long walks with Nancy.

Nancy was good company. Edith grew to look for ward to the walks and to the warm clasp of Nancy's little hand in hers, and the sound of Nancy's treble voice beside her. Nancy asked few questions. She preferred not to know what things were. She had never liked fireworks after she had seen them in the day-time packed in a box. What! they were not baby stars? All Fräulein's definitions of things and of phenomena were painful to her mind as to her ear. But the seventeen years of Edith and the eight springtimes of the child kept step harmoniously. Nancy's dawning spirit, urged by a presaging flame, pressed forward to its morning; while Edith's early day, chilled by an unseen blight, turned back, and stopped before its noon. Her springtide faded before its flowering.

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Thus the two girl-souls met, and their love bloomed upwards in concord like two flames.

On Easter Sunday Fräulein entered late for luncheon, and Nancy did not come at all. Fräulein apologized for her: "Nancy is in the summer-house writing a poetry. She says she will not have any lunch."

Mrs. Avory laughed, and Nino said: "What is the poetry about?"

"I think," replied Fräulein, shaking out her table-napkin, and tucking it carefully into her collar, "it is about her broken doll and her dead canary."

"Is the canary dead?" exclaimed Valeria. "Why did you not tell me?"

"She shall have a new doll," said Mrs. Avory, "at once."

"But it isn't—she hasn't—they are not!" explained Fräulein, much confused. "Only she says she cannot write a poetry about things that are not broken and dead."

The old grandfather, who now rarely spoke, raised his head, and said mournfully, "Broken and dead—broken and dead," and went on repeating the words all through lunch, until he was coaxed and scolded into silence.

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There was much excitement over Nancy's poem that afternoon. It was read aloud by Edith, and then by Valeria, and then by Fräulein, and then again by Edith. Valeria improvised a translation of it into Italian for Zio Giacomo and Nino; and then it was read aloud once more by Edith. Everybody laughed and wept; and then Valeria kissed everybody. Nancy was a genius! They had always known it. Zio Giacomo said that it was in his brother's family; whereupon Mrs. Avory said, "Indeed?" and raised her eyebrows and felt hurt. But how—said Valeria—had it come into Nancy's head to write a poem? And what if she were never to be able to write another? Such things had happened. Could she try again and write something else? Just now! Oh, anything!... Saying how she wrote this poem, for instance!

So little Nancy, all flushed and wild and charming, extemporized in Fräulein's note-book:

"This morning in the orchard
I chased the fluttering birds:
The winging, singing things I caught—
Were words!

"This morning in the garden
Where the red creeper climbs,
The vagrant, fragrant things I plucked—
Were rhymes!

"This morning in the...."

Nancy looked up and bit her lip. "This morning—in the what?"

"In the garden," suggested Valeria.

"I have already said that," frowned Nancy.

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Zio Giacomo suggested "kitchen," and was told to keep quiet. Edith said "woodlands," and that was adopted. Then Nancy found out that she wanted something quite different, and could they give her a rhyme for "verse"?

"Curse," said Nino.

"Disburse," said Fräulein.

"Oh, that is not poetic, but rather the reverse!" cried Nancy.

"Terse," said Edith.

"Purse," said Nino.

"Hearse," said the old grandfather gloomily.

Nancy laughed. "We go from bad to worse," she exclaimed, dimpling and blushing. "Wait a minute."

"And if I cage the birdlings...."

"What birdlings?" said Fräulein.

"Why, the words that I caught in the orchard," said Nancy hurriedly.

Everybody looked vague. "Why do you want to cage them?" asked Fräulein, who had a tidy mind.

"Because," said Nancy excitedly, making her reasons while she spoke, "words must not be allowed to fly about anyhow as they like—they must be caught, and shut in lines; they must be caged by the—by the—"

"The rhythm," suggested Edith.

"What is that?" said Nancy.

"The measure, the time, as in music."

"Yes, that's it!" said Nancy.

"And if the flowers I nurse...."

"The flowers are the rhymes, of course," explained Nancy, flourishing her pencil triumphantly.

"And if the flowers I nurse,
The rambling, scrambling things I write—
Are verse!"

"Beautiful! wonderful!" cried everybody; and Uncle Giacomo and Nino clapped their hands a long time, as if they were at the theatre. [Pg 36]

When they left off, Mrs. Avory said: "I do not quite like those last lines. They are not clear. But, of course, they are quite good enough for poetry!" she added. And everyone agreed. Mrs. Avory said she thought they ought to have somebody, some poet, down from London at once to teach the child seriously. And Fräulein went into long details about publishers in Berlin, and how careful one must be if one prints a volume of poems not to let them cheat you.

From that day onward the spirit of Nancy's inspiration ruled the house. Everybody was silent when she came into the room, lest her ideas should be disturbed; meals must wait until Nancy had finished thinking. When Nancy frowned and passed her hand across her forehead in a little quick gesture she often used, Edith would quietly shut the windows and the doors, so that nothing should disturb the little poetess, and no butterfly-thought of hers should fly away. Valeria hovered round, usually followed by Nino; and Fräulein, in the library, read long chapters of Dante to Zio Giacomo, whether he slept or not, in order, as she put it in her diary: "(a) To practise my Italian; (b) to keep in the house the atmosphere of the Spirit of Poetry."

But the grandfather, who could not understand the silence and the irregular meals, thought that somebody had died, and wandered drearily about, opening doors to see if he could find out who it was. And he frequently made Mrs. Avory turn sick and chilly by asking her suddenly, when she sat at her work, "Who is dead in the house?"

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VII

Meanwhile Nunziata Villari in Milan was flustering the maid Marietta over the packing of her trunks, and getting ready to leave for her twelve performances in England.

Nino had written to her twice a day during the first week of his absence; every two days during the second week; only once in the third week; and in this, the fourth week, not at all. "Some stupid English girl has turned his nose of putty from me," mused La Villari, and scolded Marietta for what she had packed, and for what she had not packed, and for how she had packed it. But La Villari was mistaken. No stupid English girl had turned Nino's nose of putty from her. Edith, who might have done so had she willed, had chosen to stab his nascent passion with the hairpins that fixed the North-German coiffure at its most unbecoming angle half-way up her head. She had left him to himself, and gone off primrosing with Nancy, whose love—the blind, far-seeing love of a child—depended not on a tendril of hair, or the tint of a cheek, or the glance of an eye.

Nino, standing alone, looking vaguely round for adoration, met Valeria's deep eyes fixed on him; and, suddenly remembering that this little cousin of his had been destined to his arms since both their childhood, he let his heart respond to her timid call. As she bent her head over a letter to her cousin Adèle, Nino watched her with narrowing eyes. Had Fate not sent Tom Avory, the tall and leisurely Englishman, bronzed and fair, sauntering into her life and his years ago, painting pictures, quoting poets, rowing her and Zio Giacomo about the lake, this dark, graceful head, thought Nino would have found its resting-place against his own breast; the little dimpled hand, the slender shoulders—all would belong to him. Had he not always loved her? He asked himself the question in all sincerity, quite forgetting his brief and violent fancy for Cousin Adèle, and his longer and more violent passion for Nunziata Villari. True, he would never have noticed Adèle had she not sighed at him first. And he would certainly never have loved La Villari had she not looked at him first. But now—Adèle was nowhere; and La Villari was in Milan packing her trunks; and here was Valeria, with her dark head and her dimples.

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"Valerietta!" he said; and she raised her eyes. "It is May-day. Come out into the fields."

So Valeria put away her letter, and went to look for her hat. As she passed the schoolroom she heard voices, and peeped in. There was her little Nancy, pen in hand, wild-eyed and happy, and Edith bending over her, reading half-aloud what the inspired child-poet had just written.

"I am going into the fields with Nino," said Valeria. "Edith dear, won't you come, too?"

"Oh no! It is too windy," said her sister-in-law. "The wind takes my breath away and makes me cough. Besides, Nancy could not spare me."

"No!" said Nancy, laying her pink cheek against Edith's arm and smiling, "I could not spare her!"

Valeria laughed, and blew a kiss to them both. Then she ran upstairs for her hat, and went out across the fields with Nino.

Adjoining the schoolroom was the drawing-room where Mrs. Avory and the grandfather were sitting together in silence. "Sally's cough is worse," said the grandfather suddenly.

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(The Fates were spinning. "*Here is a black thread,*" said One. "*Weave it in,*" said the Other. And the Third sharpened her scissors.)

"Sally's cough is worse," said the grandfather again.

Mrs. Avory looked up from her crocheting. "Hush, father dear!" she said.

"I said Sally's cough is worse," repeated the old man. "I hear it every night."

"No, dear; no, dear," said Mrs. Avory. "Not poor Sally. Sally has been at rest many years. Perhaps you mean Edith. She has a little cold."

"I know Sally's cough," said the old man.

Mrs. Avory put her work down and folded her hands. A slow, icy shiver crept over her and enveloped her like a wet sheet.

"Sally is my favourite grandchild," continued her father, shaking his white head. "Poor little Sally

—poor little Sally!"

Mrs. Avory sat still. Terror, heavy and cold, crawled like a snake into her heart. "Edith! It is Edith!" she said.

"*It is Sally!*" cried the old man, rising to his feet. "I remember Sally's cough, and in the night I hear it."

There was a moment's silence. Then in the schoolroom Edith coughed. The grandfather came close to his daughter. "There," he whispered, "that is Sally. And you told me she was dead."

Mrs. Avory rose tremblingly to her feet. In her eyes was the vision of her tragic children, all torn to death by the shuddering and insidious Ill that crouched in their breasts and clutched at their throats, and sprang upon them and strangled them when they reached the threshold of their youth. And now Edith, too? Edith, her last-born!

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She raised her eyes of Madre Dolorosa to her father's face. Then she fell fainting before him, her grey head at his feet.

Out in the fields, that were alight with daisies, Nino took Valeria's hand and drew her arm through his. "Little cousin," he said, "do you remember how I loved you when you were twelve years old, and scorned me?"

"Yes," laughed Valeria; "and how I loved you when you were sixteen, and had forgotten me."

"But, again," said Nino, "how I loved you when you were eighteen, and refused me."

Valeria looked at him with timorous eyes. "And now I am twenty-seven and a half, and you are only twenty-three."

"True," said Nino. "How young you are! The woman I love is thirty-eight years old."

Valeria's face paled; then it flushed rose-pink, and she laughed. "Thirty-eight! Nearly forty? I don't believe it!" All her pretty teeth shone, and the dimple dipped in her cheek.

"I hardly believe it myself," said Nino, laughing.

"Perhaps it is not true, after all."

Did Zio Giacomo in the library hear with his astral ear his son's gratifying assertion? Fräulein certainly thought that she saw him smile in his sleep, while through her careful lips "Conte Ukolino," in the thirty-third canto of the "Inferno," gnawed noisomely at the Archbishop's ravaged skull.

"Are you sure that she is not seventeen?" asked Valeria, biting a blade of grass, and glancing up sideways at her cousin's face.

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Nino stopped. "'She?' Who? Why? Who is seventeen?" he asked.

"Edith," breathed Valeria.

Nino shook his head. "No, not Edith, poor little thing!" Then he bent forward and kissed Valeria decisively and authoritatively long before she expected it.

"Why did you call Edith a poor little thing?" asked Valeria, when she had forgiven him, and been kissed again.

Nino looked grave, and tapped his chest with his finger. "*È tisica!*" he said.

Valeria started back, and dragged her hands from his. "Tisica!" Her heart stopped beating, and then galloped off like a bolting horse. "Tisica!" In the terrible half-forgotten word the memory of Tom and the tragic past flamed up again. Yes; Edith had a cough. But everybody in England coughed. Edith—Edith, with her fair hair and pink cheeks! It was not true! It could not be true. Sweet, darling Edith, with the hideous North-German coiffure that she had made for Valeria's sake! Edith, little Nancy's best friend! Ah, *Nancy!* ... Valeria's thought, like some maddened quarry, darted off in another direction. Nancy! Nancy! She was with Edith now! She was always with Edith, laughing, talking, bending over the same book, kissing her good-night and good-morning.

"I must go back," said Valeria suddenly, with a face grown pinched and small. Nino held her tight.

"What is it, love of mine?" he said.

"The baby!" gasped Valeria, with a sob. Nancy was the baby again. The baby that had to be taken away from danger—from Tom first, and now from Edith. It was the baby for whom she had run across these fields one morning years ago, tripping and stumbling in her haste, leaving what perhaps was love behind her, lest the baby should be hungry, lest the baby should cry. And now again she ran, tripping and stumbling in her haste, leaving what perhaps was love behind her. Nancy must be saved. What if it were too late! What if Nancy had already breathed the blight? If Nancy, too, were soon to begin to cough ... to cough, and clear her throat, and perspire in the night, and have her temperature taken twice a day, and then one day—one day her eyes frightened, her fists clenched, and her mouth full of blood.... Valeria held her hands to her

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cheeks, crying aloud, as she tottered and ran across the flowering fields.

When she reached the garden there was Nancy, standing on the swing, alone—swinging and singing, with her curls all ablow.

"Fräulein came out and called Edith away," said the child, with a little pout. "She said I was not to come. Perhaps somebody has arrived. Could it be the poet from London?"

"Not yet, dear," said Valeria, voiceless, and with hammering heart. She embraced the little black legs standing on the swing, and laid her throbbing temple against the child's pinafore. "Ave Maria, Mater Dei, Ora pro nobis," she murmured.

"Go out of the way, mother dear, and see how high I swing," said Nancy. Valeria stepped aside; then she saw Fräulein's face appear at the drawing-room window and Fräulein's hand beckoning to her to come in.

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"I must go indoors for a moment. Don't swing too high, darling," cried Valeria, and hurried into the house.

When she entered the drawing-room her heart stood still. Mrs. Avory was on the sofa, with grey lips and trembling hands. Fräulein stood by her, holding smelling-salts and a saucer of vinegar; while Edith, kneeling beside her, was crying: "Mother darling! mother darling! are you better?" In a corner stood the grandfather and Zio Giacomo, looking bewildered and alarmed.

"What has happened?" cried Valeria.

"She fainted," whispered Edith, with a sob, as she kissed and chafed the cold hands. Then her mother's arm went round her neck, and her mother's tears rained on her.

"Edith, my little girl, my own little girl!" she cried.

Valeria wept with her, and Edith wept too, little knowing the reason of her mother's tears.

... Out in the garden Nancy was alone, swinging and singing, with her curls all ablow, when the German poet's spell came over her.

"Die linden Lüfte sind erwacht,
Sie säuseln und wehen Tag und Nacht,
Sie kommen von allen Enden...."

The poets murmured it in her ear. Through the darkening trees beyond the lawn she could see a gilt line where the sunset struck its light in the sky.

"Die Welt wird schöner mit jeden Tag,
Man weiss nicht was noch werden mag,
Das Blühen will nicht enden!"

Nancy slipped from the swing. The poets were whispering and urging. Had not Fräulein in yesterday's lessons taught her the wonderful fact that the world was a round star, swinging in the blue, with other stars above it and below it? If one walked to the edge of the world, just to where it curves downward into roundness, and if one bent forward—holding to a tree, perhaps, so as not to fall—surely one would be able to look down into the sky and see the stars circling beneath one's feet! Nancy felt that she must go to the edge of the world and look down. The edge of the world! She could see it! It was behind the trees beyond Millpond Farm, where the sun had dipped down and left the horizon ablaze. So Nancy went out of her garden to go to the edge of the world.

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When Mrs. Avory had been tenderly helped to a seat in the garden, and had had a footstool and a pillow, and some eau de Cologne, Edith said:

"Where is Nancy?"

"Where is Nancy?" said Valeria.

Fräulein called through the garden and through the house. Then Valeria called through the house and through the garden, and Edith ran upstairs, and through all the rooms and into the attics, and down again into the garden and to the summer-house and the shrubbery. Nino came in, and was sent to the village to see if Nancy was there. But Nancy was not there, nor had anyone seen her. Zio Giacomo and the stable-boy set out in one direction, and Jim Brown in another. Nino went across the fields towards the station—you could hear his call and his whistle for miles—and Florence went out and past the chapel along the road to Fern Glen. Valeria, wringing her hands, ran out after Florence, telling Edith to stay in, and mind and take care of Mrs. Avory and the grandfather.

But Edith put on her hat, and said to Mrs. Avory: "I shall be back directly. Stay here quite quietly, mother dear, and mind you get Fräulein to look after you and grandfather."

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But her mother would not let her go alone. No, no; she would go, too! So they both started out towards Baker's End, telling Fräulein to mind and stay indoors, and look after grandfather.

But Fräulein, who had recently read "Misunderstood," was suddenly seized by a horrible thought regarding the water-lilies on Castlebury Pond, and she went out quickly, just stopping to tell the cook to prepare dinner and to mind and look after the grandfather. But the cook ran across to

Smith's Farm, and the scullery-maid went with her.

The grandfather remained alone in the silent house.

(The Fates were spinning. *"Here is a black thread. Weave it in."*)

The grandfather was alone in the silent house. He called his daughter; he called Valeria, and Edith, and Nancy. Then he remembered that Nancy was lost. He called Sally; he called Tom; he rang the bells. Nobody came; nobody answered. Then again he remembered that Nancy was lost, and that everyone had gone to look for her. He opened the front-door and walked down the avenue; he opened the gate and looked up and down the deserted road. Then he stepped out and turned to the left, away from the village, and went towards the cross-roads at Heather's Farm; but before he reached them he crossed the field to the left, and went past Wakeley's Ditch towards the heath.

The sun had dropped out of sight, and night, soft-footed and grey, was stealing like a cat across the meadows; and Jim Brown had found Nancy on Three Cedars Hill when the old grandfather left the heath and turned his slow footsteps into the dark and silent fields. He saw something waving and moving against the sky.

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"That is Nancy," he said, and called her. But it was a threshing-machine, covered with black cloths that moved in the wind. And the grandfather hurried a little when he passed it. He said aloud: "I am eighty-seven years old." He felt that nothing would hurt him that knew this, and the threshing-machine let him pass, and did not follow with its waving rags, as he had feared. Then some sheep penned in a fold startled him, running towards him with soft hoofs, bleating and standing still suddenly, with black faces turned towards him. As he tottered on something started up and ran away from him, and then it ran after him and darted past him. He was chilled with fear.

"I am eighty-seven years old. It is not right that I should be alone in the night," he said; and he began to cry whiningly like a little child. But nobody heard him, and he was afraid of the noises he made.

He turned to go home, and passed the shrouded machine again, and then in a field to the right he saw someone standing and moving.

"Have you seen Nancy?" he cried. "Hullo! Good-evening! Is Nancy there?"

The figure in the field beckoned to him, and he went stumbling in the ruts. When he got near, he said: "I am eighty-seven years old."

The figure waved both arms, greatly impressed; and the grandfather sat down on the ground, for he was tired.

Nancy had reached home, and the lights were lit and voices rang through the house; but the grandfather sat on the hill-side in the dark, and talked to the scarecrow.

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"When you go home, sir, I shall go with you," said the grandfather, and the scarecrow made no objection. "You will tell me when you are ready to go."

But as the figure waved to him to wait, the grandfather tried not to be cross. "All right, all right," he said. "I am in no hurry." But it was very cold.

Suddenly across the hill, with long light steps, came Tom, and Tom's son Tom; and all his dead grandchildren came down the hill with long, light steps and sat around him. And the darker it grew the closer they sat. Sally, who was the favourite, laid her head against his arm, and he could touch her cool face with his hand.

He asked if they had seen Nancy, but they had not; and he asked Sally how her cough was. But they all laughed softly, and did not answer. The threshing-machine passed, waving its wings, and his dead children sat with him through the night. Before dawn they rose up and left him, crossing the hill again with light, long steps.

But the scarecrow stayed with him till he slept.

(*"Cut the thread,"* said Fate.)

I-VIII

A fortnight after the funeral Nino twisted up his moustache and went to London. His father had made no objection; indeed, Zio Giacomo himself found everything exaggeratedly doleful, and Valeria, in her black dress, going about the house with the expression of a hunted cat, annoyed him exceedingly. She was always jumping up in the midst of any conversation, and running out to look for Nancy.

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What if Fräulein happened to be busy with Mrs. Avory or with the servants? said her uncle angrily. Surely there was Edith always with the child, petting her and spoiling her. Valeria need not worry so! But Valeria worried. She paid no attention to Zio Giacomo, never even gave him the promised *minestrone freddo* on his birthday, and Nino might have ceased to exist so far as she was concerned. She seemed to be always looking at Nancy or looking at Edith. When the two sat

happily together, reading or talking, she would call Nancy with a rough strained voice, hurriedly sending the child on some useless errand, or keeping her by her side and making long foolish talk with her. Edith sometimes looked up in surprise when Valeria called the child away from her so suddenly and so sternly; but seeing Valeria's pale and anxious face, then glancing over to Nino, who usually looked bored and absent-minded, Edith thought of lovers' quarrels, and asked no questions.

But there was no lovers' quarrel between Nino and Valeria. In Valeria's terror-stricken heart maternal love had pushed all else aside, and only one thought possessed her—the thought of keeping Nancy out of danger, out of reach of Edith's light breath, out of reach of Edith's tender kisses; while Nino, seeing her with little Nancy on her lap or at her side all day, gradually grew to look upon her in the light of Valeria the mother, and lost sight of her as Valeria the betrothed. A child on its mother's breast forbids and restrains passion.

One evening he took up a paper and improved his English by reading the news. The news interested him. It was on the following day that he twisted up his moustache and went to London. He had dinner at Pagani's. There he met Carlo Fioretti, an old fellow-student of his at Pavia, who was dining with a golden-haired Englishwoman at a table near to his. They invited him to drink coffee and *pousse-café* with them, and Fioretti told Nino that he was doctor to the Italian colony in London, and getting on splendidly. And would he join them at the comedy later on? Nino was sorry—he was really desolated!—but he could not. He was going to the Garrick.

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"Oh," cried the fair lady, "to be sure! La Villari is playing there to-night, isn't she? Wonderful creature!" Then she shook an arch forefinger at Fioretti. "Why did you not think of taking me to hear her?"

Fioretti promised to take her the next day, and the day after, and every day, and for ever! Then Nino took his leave with much bowing and hand-kissing, and Fioretti accompanied him as far as the door.

"Who is she?" said Nino.

"A lady of title," said Fioretti. "Divorced."

"*Deliziosa*," said Nino.

"*Milionaria*," said Fioretti. And having quickly shaken hands with Nino, he hurried back to her.

The seven mourning women in Cossa's tragedy were already chanting their woes when Nino entered the theatre and took his seat in the fourth row of the stalls. His heart opened to the swing and cadence of the Italian words, to the loud sweetness of the Italian voices, to the graceful violence of the Italian gestures. His Latin blood thrilled in understanding and response.

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Suddenly Villari was on the stage, and no one else existed. Fervid and lovely, keen and lithe, soon she held in her small, hot hands the hearts of the cool English audience, tightening their nerves, swaying and drawing them into paths of unaccustomed passion. Nino sat still with quick heart-beats, wondering if she would see him.

He remembered the first time that her eyes had met his at the Manzoni in Milan four years ago. She was playing Sappho. He was with his cousin Adèle and Aunt Carlotta in one of the front rows, and they were laughing at the vehemence of the love-scene in the second act, when suddenly he saw that Villari was looking at him. Yes, at him! She gazed at him long and deliberately, while Jean was sobbing at her feet, and she said Daudet's famous words, "Toi tu ne marchais pas encore, que moi déjà je roulais dans les bras des hommes," with her deep and steadfast eyes fixed on Nino's face. She had said the words in French in the midst of the Italian play, for she was whimsical and wilful, and did as she pleased. Then she had turned away, and gone on with her part without noticing him any more. Cousin Adèle had been acid and sarcastic all the evening. The next day—how well he remembered it all!—he had sent Villari flowers, as she intended that he should, and a week after that he had sent her a bracelet, having sold Aunt Carlotta and Adèle's piano during their absence in order to do so.

Now she was before him once more, fervid and lovely, keen and lithe, and Nino sat motionless, with quick heart-beats, wondering if she would see him.

Suddenly she looked straight at him, with long and deliberate gaze—so long, indeed, that he thought everyone must notice it, and he could hardly breathe for the violence of his rushing veins. When the curtain fell he sent his card to her dressing-room, but she did not receive him, nor did she do so at the end of the play. The next day he sent her flowers, as she had intended that he should, but when he called at her hotel she was out. He sat through nine of her twelve performances, and still she would not see him, for she was thirty-eight and wily, and knew men's hearts. She also knew her own, and had more than once thought that she detected symptoms of what she called a *grande passion*, a *toquade*, for this curly-headed, vehement young Nino with the light laugh and the violent eyes. Nunziata Villari dreaded her grand passions. She knew of old how disastrous they were, how unbecoming to her complexion, how ruinous to her affairs, how gnawing during their process, how painful at their end. And she especially dreaded a grand passion for Nino, remembering that he was one who had a nose of putty, and would probably be a fountain of grief. So night after night Nino sat in his stall and watched her, and counted the days that remained before she would go away again. Every night she was different—she was Sappho and Magdalen; she was Norah and Fedora; she was Phædra and Desdemona. Every night she was

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before him, laughing or weeping, loving or hating, dying delicate deaths. She was terrible and sweet, fierce and alluring; she embraced and she killed; she was resplendent Purity, she was emblazoned Sin; she was das *Ewig Weibliche*, the immortal mistress of all lovers, the ever-desiring and the ever-desired.

When, after her tenth performance, he was allowed to see her in her dressing-room, he could not speak. Without a word of greeting, without responding to her smile, he dropped into a chair and hid his face in his hands, to the great amusement of Marietta the maid. [Pg 52]

But Nunziata Villari was not amused. She suddenly realized that she had been acting for this Nino every night, that especially for him she had sobbed and raved, she had laughed and languished; and as she saw him sitting there with his face in his hands, she felt in her heart the intermittent throb that she recognized and dreaded. It was the *grande passion*; it was the *toquade*. "Ça y est!" she said. "Now I am in love again."

And she was.

IX

In Wareside Fräulein still read Dante to the unwitting Uncle Giacomo. The apple-blossoms fluttered and the sun shone. Butterflies, like blow-away flowers, flitted past Edith as she lay on a couch in the sunshine, too lazy to move, and too peaceful to read; while little Nancy ruffled up her hair and puckered her brow, frightened and gladdened at once by the luxuriance of words and ideas that sang in her brain, that romped out in lines and paired off in rhymes, like children dancing.

And the two mothers sat in the shade and watched.

When Edith called Nancy, and the child ran to her, Valeria's lips tightened, and soon she would call the little girl to her side and keep her. Then Mrs. Avory's face grew hard, and her heart was bitter with grief. She would rise quickly and go to Edith, trying to divert her thoughts by some futile question about her crochet, or a book, or the colour of the sky. Edith would answer, wondering a little, and shut her eyes, too lazy to think. [Pg 53]

Over their children's heads the two mothers' glances met, hostile and hard, each shielding her own, each defending and each accusing.

"Edith is ill," said Valeria's eyes. "Nancy must not be near her."

"Edith is ill," said Mrs. Avory's eyes, "but she must not know it."

"Nancy must not be endangered."

"Edith must not be hurt."

"Mother," pipes up Nancy's treble voice suddenly, "do you think May is a girl?"

"Who is May, dear?"

"Why, the month of May. Do you think it is a girl with roses in her arms, dancing across the lands, and touching the hedges into flower?"

"Yes, dear; I think so."

"Or do you think it is a boy, with curls falling over his eyes, wilful and naughty, who drags the little leaves out from the trees, and tosses the birds across the sky, whirling and piping?"

"Yes, I think so, dear."

"Oh, mother, you are not listening!" cries Nancy, and scampers off, improvising as she goes:

"Says May: 'I am a girl!
May is short for Margaret,
Margaret or Daisy.
The petals of a jessamine
No boy's hand could unfurl!'
Says May: 'I am a girl.'"

"Says May: 'I am a boy!
May is short for ...'"

"For what?" thinks Nancy, frowning impatiently at the word that will not come. Then she skips gaily on across the grass: [Pg 54]

"Says May: 'I am a boy!
May is short for Marmaduke,
As all the world should know!
I taught the birds their trills and shakes,
No girl could whistle so!'"

"So May the girl, and May the boy, they quarrel all day long;

While the flowers stop their budding, and the birds forget their song.
And God says: 'Now, to punish you, I'll hang out the new moon
And take and bundle both of you into the month of June.'

"Of course, May is *not* short for Marmaduke," muses Nancy, "but that cannot be helped."

... On her couch on the lawn Edith opened her eyes and said: "Nancy? Where is Nancy?"

Valeria sprang up. "Is there anything you want, Edith dear?"

"No; I should like Nancy. I love to see her, and I am too lazy to run after her."

"I will call her," said Valeria.

At this unexpected reply Mrs. Avory raised eyes shining with gratitude to her daughter-in-law's face.

Valeria found her little girl declaiming verses to the trees in the orchard. She knelt down on the grass to fasten the small button-shoe, and said, without raising her face: "Nancy, you are to go to Edith; but, Nancy, *you are not to kiss her.*"

"Oh, mother! has she been naughty?"

"No." Valeria remained on her knees, and put her arm round the child. "Edith is ill," she said slowly.

"Then I will kiss her double," cried Nancy, flushing.

"Nancy, Nancy, try to understand," said Valeria. "Edith is ill, as your father was, and he died; and as her sisters were, and they died. And if you kiss her, you may get ill, too, and die. And every time you kiss her—oh, Nancy, Nancy, child of mine, it is a sword struck into your mother's heart!"

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There was a long pause. "And if I refuse to kiss her, will that not be a sword struck into her heart?" asked Nancy.

"Yes," said Valeria.

"And if a sword is in Edith's heart, there will be a sword in grandmother's heart, too?"

"Yes," said Valeria.

A long pause; then Nancy said: "There is a sword for every heart... I could make a beautiful poetry about that." Her eyes were large, and saw nothing—not her mother, not Edith who was ill—but the bleeding heart of the world, sword-struck and gigantic, and in her ears the lines began to swing and flow.

"Mother of God, help us!" sighed Valeria, shaking her head. "Go to Edith."

Nancy went; and she kissed Edith, because she had forgotten all that her mother had said.

Presently Zio Giacomo came out to them with an open letter in his hand. It was a letter from Nino, and Zio Giacomo's wrath knew no bounds. He called Nino a perfidious traitor and a foolish viper, and an imbecile and the son of an imbecile. He called Valeria a blundering and insensate one, who might have stopped Nino, and kept Nino, and married Nino, and made him behave himself; and Nino was an angel, and no husband would ever be such an angel as Nino would have been as a husband to Valeria. And now the triple extract of insensate imbecility had gone off with an actress, a perfidious, senile snake, who had followed him to England, and it was all Valeria's fault, and Fräulein's fault. Yes, Fräulein was an absurd, moon-struck, German creature, who had turned him, Zio Giacomo, into a preposterous, doddering idiot by reading preposterous, senseless, twaddling Dante's "Inferno" to him all day long.

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Fräulein wept, and Valeria wept; but that did not help Zio Giacomo. Nor did it bring back Nino from San Remo, where he was strolling under palm-trees with La Villari; and La Villari was smiling and sighing and melting in the throes of her new *toquade*.

X

Nino, before leaving London, had borrowed some money from Fioretti, who had borrowed it from the lady of title; then he had written to Nunziata Villari's impresario, and cancelled all her engagements; then he wrote to his father, and said he was sorry, and to Valeria, and said he was a miserable hound. After that he started for the Riviera with Nunziata, who was meek and docile and lovely in her incredible hats and unverisimilar gowns.

They were happy in San Remo; but as May was ended, and the weather was hot, Nino suggested spending June in Switzerland; so they went to Lucerne and up to Bürgenstock.

The large hotel was already filled with English-speaking people, and the striking Italian couple was much looked at and discussed. At luncheon their table was set next to a family of Americans—father, mother, and three lovely daughters with no manners. The three girls shook their curls, and laughed in their handkerchiefs, and made inaudible remarks to each other about the new arrivals. In the evening they all three appeared in rose-silk dresses, low-necked and tight-waisted

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—even the youngest, who looked scarcely fourteen. They carried three Teddy-bears to table with them, and were noisy and giggling and ill-mannered; but their beauty was indescribable. The two eldest wore their red-gold curls pinned on the top of their heads with immense black bows, whereas the youngest had her flowing hair parted in the middle, and it fell like a sheet of gilt water to her waist.

Nino, who sat facing them, twisted up his moustache, and forgot to offer sweets to Nunziata; and Nunziata laughed and talked, and was charming, biting her red lips until they were scarlet, and turning her rings round and round on her delicate fingers.

Then she said—oh, quite casually!—that she had received a letter from Count Jerace that afternoon. Count Jerace? The name of the handsome Neapolitan *viveur* always grated upon Nino, and he became angry, and made many stinging remarks; whereupon Nunziata, still sweet and patient, biting her red lips until they were scarlet, and turning her rings round and round on her delicate fingers, said that Jerace thought of coming to Bürgenstock towards the end of the week.

Nino pushed his plate aside, and said he would leave the place to-morrow. Then Nunziata laughed and said: "So will I!" and Nino called her an angel, and finished his dinner peacefully.

They left the next day.

They went to Engelberg. In Engelberg there were golf-links and tennis-courts, and English girls in shirt-waists and sailor hats—laughing girls, blushing girls, twittering girls. Engelberg was full of them. Nunziata soon got a letter to say that the Count was thinking of coming to Engelberg, and Nino took her on to Interlaken.

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But all Switzerland was a-flower with girlhood. Everybody in the world seemed to be seventeen or eighteen years old. Nunziata would say nervously a hundred times a day:

"What a lovely girl!"

And Nino would ask: "What girl?"

"Why, the girl that just passed us."

Nino had not seen her.

"But you must have seen her," insisted Nunziata.

No; Nino had not seen anybody. He never did. But Nunziata saw everyone. Every uptilted profile, every golden head, every flower-like figure, every curve of every young cheek, struck thorns and splinters into her hurting heart. She wore her incredible gowns and her unverisimilar hats, but they seemed strange and out of place in Switzerland; and the brief-skirted, tennis-playing girls, passing in twos and threes in the cruel June sunshine, with their arms round each other's waists, would turn and look after her and smile.

Soon Nunziata felt that what had been a caprice for four years, while she had had her rôles and her audiences, her impresarios and her critics, her adorers and her enemies to distract her, was a caprice no longer. What had been merely a *toquade*, to laugh at and to talk about, was no more a *toquade*. The fire had flamed up, and was a conflagration; it was, indeed, *la grande passion*. And Nino was alone in her world. Nino was not Nino to her any more. He was youth itself, he was love, he was life, he was all that she had had in the fulness of her past, all that would soon slip from her for ever. And her heart grew bitter, as does the heart of every woman who is older than the man she loves. Her thirty-eight years were to her as a wound of shame. Sometimes, when he looked at her, she would bend forward and put her hands over his eyes. "Don't look at me! don't look at me!" And when he laughed and drew her hands aside, she murmured: "Your eyes are my enemies. I dread them." For she knew that his eyes would gaze upon and desire all the beauty and the youthfulness of the world.

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Late one afternoon they sat on their balcony, while an Italian orchestra in the gardens beneath them played some Sicilian music that they loved.

Nunziata spoke her thought. "Are you not tiring of me, Nino? Oh, Nino! are you sure you are not tiring of me yet?"

"Yet?" exclaimed Nino. "I shall never tire of you—never!"

"Ils faisaient d'éternels serments!..." murmured Nunziata, with a bitter smile.

Nino grasped her white helpless hands. "Why will you not be happy?" he said; for he knew her heart.

"I do not know," said Nunziata.

"You are unhappy. I feel it—I feel it all through the day, even when you laugh," said Nino. "Would you be happier without me?"

"Neither with you nor without you can I live," said Nunziata.

The orchestra was playing Lola's song, and her soul was filled with the hunger of the unattainable and the thirst of death; then, as it was late, she got up with a little sigh, and having powdered her face and patted her hair, and said a little prayer to the Madonna, she slipped her arm through his, and they went down to dinner together.

"I promise I shall not be so foolish again!" she said. "It is absurd; it is morbid!"

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But after dinner a girl from Budapest was asked if she would dance. The girl laughed and hesitated; then she vanished for a few minutes, during which time Nunziata turned faint and sick. The girl reappeared, barefooted and lightly draped; then she danced. She danced like the incarnation of spring, and she looked like a blossom blown from the almond-tree. And Nunziata was morbid again.

Nino was in despair. He looked gloomy, and sighed, and quoted Verlaine:

"Mourons ensemble, voulez-vous?"

She laughed a little broken laugh, and quoted the succeeding line:

"Oh! la folle idée!"

And she did not quite mean her laugh, as he did not quite mean his sigh.

Thus the two lovers toyed lightly with thoughts of the grave, while far away, at the Grey House, Death had uncovered his face, and was knocking at the door.

Mrs. Avory had awakened one morning to find the last of her daughters pale, with blood-stained lips, fighting for breath. A doctor, summoned in haste, had said: "Davos!" A knighted specialist from London had repeated: "Davos!"

In less than a week the house was dismantled, the trunks packed, the servants dismissed. Fräulein, all tears, had migrated into an American family staying in the neighbourhood; Valeria, pale and trembling, and little Nancy, sobbing, and clinging to Edith's neck, had said "Good-bye, good-bye!" and had left for Italy with Uncle Giacomo. The tragic mother and daughter turned their steps to the mountains alone.

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XI

Davos glistened clear and keen-cut in the winter sunshine, and Edith lay on the southern terrace of the Belvedere, with a rug tucked round her and a parasol over her head. She was happy. Her mother had just brought her a letter from Nancy. Her little niece Nancy, waiting in Italy—waiting just for a short time until Edith should be quite well again—wrote a letter of love and longing, and told Edith to get well quickly. Life without Edith, she wrote, was a horrid nightmare. Italy without Edith was a green splash and a name on the map, but did not really exist at all. Aunt Carlotta and Cousin Adèle were very kind people with loud voices, but she did not understand them, and did not want to understand them. All she wanted was to be with Edith again. She had written two poems in Italian, which her mother said were better than anything she had ever written before. And good-bye—and oh! let Edith get well quickly, and let them be together in England again. There was a tender postscript from Valeria telling her to be good and get well quickly.

Yes, yes; Edith felt that she would get well quickly. Her temperature was up, and the slight prickle of fever in her blood gave her a sensation of eagerness, almost of hurry, as if she were hastening through illness to health, and she felt gladly and intensely alive. She pressed little Nancy's letter to her lips, and lay back in her chair.

Hers was the last but one of a long row of couches on the southern terrace of the Belvedere. On either side of her were other reclining figures. Next to her on the right was a Russian girl, a few years older than herself, with a pinched and hectic face. On her left was Fritz Klasen, a German, twenty-four years old, ruddy and broad-shouldered. His blue eyes were open when Edith turned her face towards him.

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"How do you like Davos?" he said.

Edith answered: "Very much," and the young man nodded and smiled.

The Russian girl opened her black eyes and looked at Edith. "Have you just come up?" she asked.

Edith said: "Yes; we arrived three days ago. How long have you been here?"

"Four years," said the girl, and shut her eyes again.

Edith turned her head to the young German, and exchanged with him a pitying glance.

"And you?" she asked him.

"I have been here eight months. I am quite well. I am going home in May."

The Russian opened her dark eyes again, but did not speak.

"Are you going to the dance to-night?" said the young man after a while.

"A dance? Where?" asked Edith.

"Here, in the hotel—in the big ball-room. We have a dance here every Wednesday, and the Grand Hotel has one every Saturday. Great fun." And he cleared his throat and hummed "La Valse

Bleue."

Edith went into the ball-room that evening, and although she did not dance, she enjoyed herself very much. Mrs. Avory repeatedly asked her if she was tired. "No, mother—no." There was a wild feverish excitement all round her that she felt and shared without understanding it—the excitement of the *danse macabre*.

Fritz Klasen came to where she sat, and, striking his heels together, introduced himself to her and to her mother. [Pg 63]

"I had no idea Davos was so gay," said Mrs. Avory, raising her light gentle eyes to the young man's face.

"Gayest place in the world," he said. "No time to mope."

A girl in strawberry silk came rushing to him. "Lancers," she said, and took his arm. They went off hurriedly, sliding like children on the polished floor.

"He does not look ill," said Mrs. Avory.

"Nor does she," said Edith.

"No one does." And the mother gazed at the laughing, dancing crowd, and wondered if they all had within them the gnawing horror that she knew was shut in her daughter's fragile breast.

"Have you noticed," she said, "that nobody coughs?"

"It is true," said Edith. "Nobody coughs."

After a short silence Mrs. Avory said: "Probably most of them are here for the winter sports."

For a long time she believed this. Young faces with pink cheeks and vivid eyes, and laughter, much laughter, surrounded her. There were balls and concerts, routs and bazaars, and everywhere the vivid eyes, and the pink cheeks, and the laughter. The only strange thing that Mrs. Avory noticed about her new friends was that when she said good-night to them, and shook hands with them, their hands were strange to the touch, and gave her a little shock.

They were not like the hands of other people that one clasps and thinks not of. "Good-night," to one. "What a hot hand!" she would think. "Good-night," to another. "What a cold, moist hand!" Hands of fire, and hands of ice; arid hands, that felt brittle to the touch; humid hands, which made her palms creep; weak, wet hands, from which her own recoiled. Each told their tragic tale. But the faces laughed, and the feet danced, and nobody coughed. [Pg 64]

Edith soon stopped coughing, too. The doctor had forbidden it. She coughed in the night, when no one except her mother heard. The months swung past, promising and not fulfilling, but promising again, and Edith went to her fate submissive, with light tread.

One thing only tore at her soul—the longing to see Nancy. Nancy, Nancy, Nancy! She would say the name to herself a hundred times a day, and close her eyes to try and picture the little face, and the tuft of black curls on the top of the buoyant head. Her feverish hands felt vacant and aching for the touch of the soft, warm fingers she had held. Mrs. Avory comforted her. In the spring, or at latest in the summer, Edith should see Nancy again. Edith would be quite well in a month or two if she ate many raw eggs and was brave.

So Edith ate raw eggs and was brave.

Spring climbed up the five thousand feet and reached Davos at the end of May. Fritz Klasen was leaving. He was going back to Leipzig.

"Good-bye, good-bye."

He walked round the verandah at the resting-hour, shaking hands with everyone, saying, "Gute Besserung," and "Auf wiedersehen in Deutschland," to two or three Germans.

When he reached the Russian girl she was asleep. But Edith said: "Good-bye; I am so glad—I am so glad for you!" [Pg 65]

When he had passed she saw that the Russian girl's eyes were open, and fixed on her.

"Did you speak?" said Edith.

"No," said the Russian in her strange, empty voice; "I thought."

Edith smiled. "What did you think?"

"I thought, why do you lie?"

Edith sat up, flushing, and her breath went a little shorter. "What?" she said.

Rosalia Antonowa kept her deep eyes on Edith's face.

"You said you were glad that he was going. Perhaps you meant it," she said. "You are here so short a time; but in a year, in two years, or four years, your lips will not be able to say that, and your heart will turn sick when another goes away, and you know that you will never go—never."

Her bistre lids closed.

Edith tried to find something comforting to say to her.

"Davos is so beautiful, one ought not to mind. Surely you must love all this blue and white loveliness—the mountains, and the snow, and the sun."

"Oh, the mountains!" murmured Rosalia, with clenched teeth. "The mountains, weighing on my breast, and the snow freezing and choking me, and the sun blazing and blinding me. Oh!"—she raised her thin fist to the towering immensity round her—"oh, this unspeakable, this monstrous prison of death!"

Just then a Belgian girl passed, with pale lips and a tiny waist. She stopped to ask Antonowa how she was.

"Ill," said the Russian curtly.

When the girl had passed she spoke again to Edith. "And you will know what they mean when they ask you how you are. It is not the '*comment ça va?*' of the rest of the world. No; here they mean it. They want to know. 'How are you? Are you better? Are you getting better more quickly than I am? Surely you are worse than I am! What! no hæmorrhage for a month? No temperature? That is good.' And then you see the hatred looking out of their eyes."

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"Oh, I don't think so," said Edith.

The Russian kept silent for a while; then she said: "Klasen will come back again. He is not cured. The doctor told him not to go. He will soon come back again."

He came back four months later. Edith was pained to see how grey and dull his face looked. Now he would have to stay two or three years more. But he said he did not mind; he was happy.

He had been married a month, and his wife was with him. He introduced his girl-wife to Edith and to Mrs. Avory on the day following his arrival. She was a gentle blonde of nineteen, a blue-blooded flower of German aristocracy, who had married Klasen against her parents' will.

"I shall cure him," she said.

The summer was magnificent. She went out a great deal for long walks and steep climbs, and she sang at all parties and concerts, for she had a lovely young voice, all trills and runs like a lark's. She would sit on the verandah at resting-time beside her husband, and near Edith, for he had his old place again, and then after a while she would kiss his forehead and run off to pay calls, or to practise, or to drive down to Klosters.

Klasen's bright blue eyes would follow her. The Russian from her couch looked at him and read his thoughts. She read: "I married that I might not be alone—alone with my ill and my terror in the night and in the day—but I am still alone. When my wife is with me, and I cough, she says: 'Poor darling!' When in the night I choke and perspire, she turns in her sleep, and says: 'Poor darling!' and goes to sleep again. And I am alone with my ill and my terror."

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The Russian girl thought that Klasen's blue eyes burned with something that was not all love.

After a time the girl-wife practised less, and paid fewer calls. She said she had lost weight, and one day with her husband she went to see the doctor.

Yes, there was something—oh, very slight, very slight!—at the apex of the left lung. So a couch was brought out for her on the terrace near her husband, and she rested in the afternoons with a rug tucked round her and a parasol over her head.

Fritz held the little hand with the new wedding-ring still bright upon it. When she coughed he said: "Poor darling!" And he was no more alone. In the day-time they laughed, and were very cheerful; in the night Fritz slept better; but his wife lay awake, and thought of her sister and her two little brothers safely at home with her father and mother in Berlin.

Sometimes holiday-makers and sport-lovers came up to Davos for a fortnight or a month, especially in the winter. Mrs. Avory noticed that they laughed much less than the invalids did. When they hurried through the lounge with their skates and skis, Klasen would say:

"See how they overdo things. They wear themselves out skiing, skating, curling, bobsleighing. Yes," he would add, nodding to his wife and to Edith, "almost everyone who comes here as a sportsman returns here as an invalid."

His little laugh made Edith shiver. Sometimes the girl-wife would bend forward.

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"See, Fritz; two more have arrived to-day!"

"Do you think they are tourists?"

"Oh no, no; they are ill." And in the young eyes that gazed upon the new-comers was no sorrow.

The months and the years swung round, and Edith passed along them with light and ever lighter tread. And still and always the longing for Nancy tore at her heart with poisoned teeth. Every hour of her day was bitter with longing for the sound of the childish voice, the touch of the soft, warm hand. She sometimes thought: "If I were dying, Valeria would let Nancy come here to say

good-bye." Then again she thought:

"If Nancy came I should recover. I cannot eat enough now to get strong because I am so often near to crying; but if Nancy were here I should not cry. I should eat much more; I should not feel so sad; I should go out for walks with her. I know I should recover...."

But Nancy was in Italy in the house of Aunt Carlotta and Cousin Adèle, and Edith's letters were not given to her, lest the paper over which Edith had bent should carry poison in its love-laden pages.

Nancy now spoke Italian and wrote Italian poems. She went out for walks with Adèle, and Adèle held the soft, warm hand and heard the sweet treble voice. Adèle kept the house quiet and the meals waiting when Nancy was writing; and when Nancy frowned and passed her hand across her forehead with the little quick gesture she often used, Adèle laughed her loud Milanese laugh that drove all the butterfly-thoughts away. Adèle tidied Nancy's things and threw away the dried primroses Edith had picked with her in the Hertfordshire woods, and gave the string of blue beads Edith had put round Nancy's neck the day she left for Davos to the hall-porter's child, and she tore up all the poems Nancy had written in England, because they were old things that nobody could understand.

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Thus, as the months and the years swung round, Edith went from Nancy's memory. Softly, slowly, with light tread, the girl-figure passed from her recollection and was gone; for children and poets are forgetful and selfish, and a child who is a poet is doubly selfish, and doubly forgetful.

When Nancy was fifteen, Zardo, the Milan publisher, accepted her first book—"A Cycle of Lyrics." By the post that brought the first proofs to the little poet came also a letter, black-edged, from Switzerland, for her mother.

"Mother, mother!" cried Nancy, drawing the printed pages from the large envelope, and shaking them out before her, "Look, the proofs, the proofs! This is my book, my own book!"

And she lifted all the rough sheets to her face and kissed them.

But Valeria had opened the black-edged letter, and was gazing at it, pale, with tears in her eyes.

"Nancy," she said, "Edith is dead."

"Oh, mother dear!" exclaimed Nancy, "I am so sorry!" And she bent over her mother and kissed her. Then she went back to her proofs and turned over the first page.

"She died on Thursday morning," sobbed Valeria. "And oh, Nancy, she loved you so!"

But Nancy had not heard. Before her lay her first printed poem. The narrow verses on the wide white sheet looked to her like a slender pathway.

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And along this pathway went Nancy with starry matutinal eyes, beyond the reach of love and the call of Death, leading her dreams far out past the brief arch of Fame, into the shining plains of Immortality.

XII

So Valeria had her wish. Her child was a genius, and a genius recognized and glorified as only Latin countries glorify and recognize their own. Nancy stepped from the twilight of the nursery into the blinding uproar of celebrity, and her young feet walked dizzily on the heights. She was interviewed and quoted, imitated and translated, envied and adored. She had as many enemies as a Cabinet Minister, and as many innamorati as a *première danseuse*.

To the Signora Carlotta's tidy apartment in Corso Venezia came all the poets of Italy. They sat round Nancy and read their verses to her, and the criticisms of their verses, and their answers to the criticisms. There were tempestuous poets with pointed beards, and successful poets with turned-up moustaches; there were lonely, unprinted poets, and careless, unwashed poets; there was also a poet who stole an umbrella and an overcoat from the hall. Aunt Carlotta said it was the Futurist, but Adèle felt sure it was the Singer of the Verb of Magnificent Sterility, the one with the red and evil eyes.

Soon came a letter from Rome bearing the arms of the royal house. Her Majesty the Queen desired to hear Giovanna Desiderata read her poems at the Quirinal at half-past four o'clock of next Friday afternoon. The house was in a flutter. Everywhere and at all hours, in the intervals of packing trunks, Aunt Carlotta, Adèle, Valeria, and Nancy practised deep curtseying and kissing of hand, and wondered if they had to say "Your Majesty" every time they spoke, or only casually once or twice. They started for Rome at once. A gorgeous dress and plumed hat was bought for Nancy, a white veil was tied for the first time over her childish face, and in very tight white gloves, holding the small volume of her poems, she went with trembling heart—accompanied by Valeria, Carlotta, and Adèle in large feather boas—to the Quirinal.

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A gentle-voiced, simply-gowned lady-in-waiting received them, and smiled a little as she explained that only Nancy was expected and could be received. Nancy was then told to remove her veil and her right-hand glove. Carlotta, Valeria, and Adèle embraced her as if she were

leaving them for a week, and made the sign of the cross on her forehead; then the lady-in-waiting conducted her through a succession of yellow rooms, of blue rooms, of red rooms, into the white and gold room where the Queen awaited her.

More gentle-voiced and more simply gowned than her lady-in-waiting, the Queen, standing beside a table laden with flowers, moved to meet the little figure in the huge plumed hat. Nancy forgot the practised curtsey and the rehearsed salute. She clasped and held the gracious hand extended to her, and suddenly, as the awed, childish eyes filled with tears, the Queen bent forward and kissed her....

It was late and almost dark when Nancy returned, dream-like, with pale lips, to her mother, her aunt, and her cousin, who were having a nervous meal of sand wiches and wines with a gentleman in uniform standing beside them, and two powdered footmen waiting on them. They all three hurriedly put on their boas as soon as Nancy appeared, and they left, escorted and bowed out by the gentleman in uniform. "Probably the Duke of Aosta," said Aunt Carlotta vaguely. Another powdered footman conducted them to the royal automobile in which they returned to the hotel.

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Nancy was disappointing in her description of everything. She sat in the dusky carriage with her eyes shut, holding her mother's hand. She could not tell Aunt Carlotta what she had eaten. Tea? Yes, tea. And cakes? Yes, cakes. But what kind of cakes, and what else? She did not remember. And she could not tell Adèle how the Queen was dressed. In white? No, not in white. Was it silk? She did not know. What rings did the Queen wear, and what brooch? Nancy could not remember. And had she said "Your Majesty" to her, or "Signora"? Nancy did not know. Neither, she thought. Then her mother asked timidly: "Did she like your poems?" And Nancy tightened the clasp on her mother's hand and said, "Yes."

Carlotta and Adèle were convinced that Nancy had made a fiasco of the visit and of the reading. She had blundered over the greeting, and had forgotten to say "Maestà." But they talked to everybody in the hotel about their afternoon at the Quirinal, and pretended not to be surprised when the hall-porter brought to them at the luncheon-table a packet containing three pictures of the Queen with her signature, one for each; and for Nancy a jewel-case, with crown and monogram, containing a brooch of blue enamel with the royal initial in diamonds.

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Nancy bought a diary, and wrote on the first page the date and a name—the name of a flower, the name of the Queen.

They returned to Milan in a dream. A crowd of friends awaited them at the station, foremost among them Zio Giacomo, shorter of breath and quicker of temper than ever, and beside him the returned prodigal, Nino, who had never been seen and seldom been heard of for the past eight years. Adèle turned crimson, and Valeria turned white as the well-remembered dark eyes smiled at them from the handsome, sunburnt face; and Nino turned up his moustache and helped them to alight from the train, and kissed them all loudly on both cheeks. Nancy did not remember him at all. She looked at him gravely while he rapidly described to her a pink pinafore she used to wear in England eight years ago, and a Punch-and-Judy show, stage-managed by a Fräulein Something or other, and a dimple just like her mother's that she then possessed. Immediately the dimple reappeared, dipping sweetly in the young curved cheek, and Valeria smiled with tears in her eyes and kissed Nancy. Then Nino kissed Valeria and kissed Nancy, and then he kissed Adèle, too, who was acidly looking on. At last Zio Giacomo, growing very impatient, hurried them off the crowded platform and into cabs and carriages. They drove home, Nino crushing in at the last moment with Valeria, Carlotta, and Nancy. He did not ask about the Queen, nor did he tell them anything about his own long absence; but he quoted Baudelaire and Mallarmé to them all the way home in a low resonant voice broken by the jolts of the carriage. He did not quote Nancy's poems. "They are sacro sanct," he said. "My lips are unworthy." Then he drifted into Richepin:

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"Voici mon sang et ma chair,
Bois et mange!"

he said, looking straight before him at Valeria. And Valeria turned pale again, uselessly, hopelessly; for the eyes that looked at her did not see her.

Zio Giacomo and Nino stayed with them to dinner, and two of the poets, a successful one and an unwashed one, came later in the evening.

"What do you think of D'Annunzio?" asked Nino of Nancy, when the poets had stopped a moment to take breath.

"I have not read him. I have read nobody and nothing," said Nancy.

"That is right," cried Marvasi, the unwashed, nodding his rusty head and clapping his dusty fingers. "Read nothing, and retain your originality."

"Read everything," cried Cesare Raffaelli, "and cultivate form."

During the discussion that followed, the din of the two poets' voices built a wall of solitude round Nino and Nancy.

"How old are you?" asked Nino, looking at her mild forehead, where the dark eyebrows lay over her light grey eyes like quiet wings.

"Sixteen," said Nancy; and the dimple dipped.

Nino did not return her smile. "Sixteen!" he said. And because his eyes were used to the line of a fading cheek and the bitterness of a tired mouth, his heart fell, love-struck and conquered, before Nancy's cool and innocent youth. It was inevitable.

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"Sixteen!" he repeated, looking at her, grave and wondering. "Is anybody in the world sixteen?"

And it was not the inspired author of the poems over which half Italy raved, but the little girl with the wing-like eyebrows, that his wonder went to; and it was the chilly little hand of the maiden, not the pulse of the poet, that shook his heart loose from those other white, well-remembered hands, where the blue veins, soft and slightly turgid, marked the slower course of the blood—those sad blue veins which moved his pity and strangled his desire.

"May I call you by your right name?" he asked. "'Nancy' seems so—geographical."

Nancy laughed. "Call me as you will."

"*Desiderata*" he said slowly, and the colour left his face as he pronounced it.

That evening Nancy wrote on the second page of her diary the date, and a name; then she scratched the name out again, and the Queen remained in the book alone.

Every morning since the visit to the Quirinal Nancy's chocolate and her letters were brought in to her at eight o'clock by Adèle herself, who regarded it now as an office of honour to wait on the little Sappho of Italy. She came in, in dressing-gown and slippers, with her long black hair in a plait, and placed the dainty tray by Nancy's bed; then she opened the shutters and came back to sit beside Nancy, and open her correspondence for her. Nancy the while, like a lazy princess, sipped her chocolate, with her little finger in the air. Newspaper cuttings about Nancy were read first; requests for autographs were carefully put aside for Adèle to answer. Adèle said that she could write Nancy's auto graph more like Nancy than Nancy herself. Then poems and love-letters were read and commented upon with peals of laughter—and business letters were put aside and not read at all.

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So many people came and spoke to Nancy of what she had written that she had no time to write anything new. But her brain was stimulated by all the modernists and symbolists and futurists who recited their works to her; and in the long lamp-lit evenings, while Aunt Carlotta was playing briscola with Zio Giacomo, Nino read Carducci's "Odi Barbare" to the three listening women—Valeria, Adèle, and Nancy—who sat in their large armchairs with drooping lids and folded hands, like a triptichi of the seasons of love.

Valeria always sat a little apart in the shadow, and if anyone spoke to her she replied softly and smiled wanly. Valeria's dimple had slipped into a little line on her cheek. Valeria herself was not Valeria any more. She was Nancy's mother. She had moved back into the shadow, where mothers sit with kind eyes that no one gazes into, and sweet mouths that no one kisses, and white hands that bless and renunciate. The baby had pushed her there. Gently, inexorably, with the first outstretching of the tiny fist, with the first soft pressure of the pink fragile fingers against the maternal breast, the child had pushed the mother from her place in the sunlight—gently, inexorably, out of love, out of joy, out of life—into the shadow where mothers sit with eyes whose tears no one kisses away, with heart-beats that no one counts. Nancy sooner than others had taken her own high place in the sun; for if most children are like robin redbreasts, slayers of their old, Genius, the devourer, is like an eagle that springs full-fledged, with careless, devastating wings, from the nest of a dove.

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"Nancy," cried Adèle, bursting into her cousin's room one afternoon, "here is an Englishman to see you. Come quickly. I cannot understand a word he says."

"Oh, send mother to him," said Nancy. "I have forgotten all my English. Besides, I must read this noxious Gabriele to the end."

"Your mother has gone out. Do come!" And Adèle gave Nancy's hair a little pull on each side and a pat on the top, and hurried her to the drawing-room, where the Englishman was waiting. He rose, a stern-looking, clean-shaven man, with friendly eyes in a hard face.

Nancy put out her hand and said: "Buon giorno."

He answered: "How do you do? My Italian is very poor. May I speak English?"

Nancy dimpled. "You may speak it, but I may not understand it," she said.

But she understood him. He had written a critical essay on her book, with prose translations of some of the lyrics, and wished to close the article with an *aperçu* of her literary aims and intentions. What work was she doing at present! What message—?

"Nothing," said Nancy, with a little helpless Latin gesture of her hands. "I am doing nothing."

"*Peccato!*" said the Englishman. And he added: "I mean your Italian word in both senses—a pity and a sin."

Nancy nodded, and looked wistful.

"Why are you not working?" asked her visitor severely.

Nancy repeated the little helpless gesture. "I don't know," she said; then she smiled. "In Italy we talk so much. We say all the beautiful things we might write. That is why Italian literature is so poor, and Italian cafés so interesting. As for our thoughts, when we have said them they are gone—blown away like the fluff of the dandelions I used to tell the time by when I was a little girl in England."

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That childish reminiscence brought her very near to him, and he told her about his mother and his younger sister, who lived in Kent, in an old-fashioned house in the midst of a great garden.

"You make me homesick for England," said Nancy.

Mr. Kingsley looked pleased. "Do you remember England?" he asked.

"No," said Nancy; "I am always homesick for things that I have forgotten, or for things that I never have known." And she smiled, but in her eyes wavered the nostalgic loneliness of the dreamer's soul.

The Englishman cleared his throat, and said in a practical voice: "I hope that you will work very hard, and do great things."

She tried to. She got up early the next morning, and wrote in her diary, "*Incipit vita nova!*" and she made an elaborate time-table for every hour of the day; then she made a list of the things she intended to write—subjects and ideas that had stirred in her mind for months past, but had been scattered by distracting visits, dispersed in futile conversations. She felt impatient and happy and eager. On the large white sheet of paper which lay before her, like a wonderful unexplored country full of resplendent possibilities, she traced with reverent forefinger the sign of the cross.

Some one knocked at the door. It was Clarissa della Rocca, Nino's married sister, tall, trim, and sleek in magnificent clothes.

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"*Mes amours!*" she exclaimed, embracing Nancy, and pressing her long chin quickly against Nancy's cheek. "Do put on your hat and come for a drive with me. Aldo has come from America. He is downstairs in the stanhope. He is trying my husband's new sorrels, and so, of course, I insisted on going with him. Now I am frightened, and I have nobody to scream to and to catch hold of."

"Catch hold of Aldo, whoever he may be," said Nancy, laughing.

"He is my brother-in-law. But I can't," said Clarissa, waving explanatory mauve-gloved hands; "he is driving. Besides, he is horribly cross. Have you never seen him? He is Carlo's youngest brother. Do come. He will be much nicer if you are there."

"But he does not know me," said Nancy, still with her pen in her hand.

"That's why. He is always nice to people he does not know. Come quickly, *ma chérie*. He is *ravissant*. He has been to America on a wild and lonely ranch in Texas. He speaks English and German, and he sings like an angel. Make yourself beautiful, *mon chou aimé*."

Nancy slipped into a long coat, and pinned a large hat on her head without looking in the glass.

Clarissa watched her from out of her long careful eyelids, and said: "Mon Dieu!" Then she asked suddenly: "How young are you?"

"Nearly seventeen," said Nancy, looking for her gloves.

"What luck!" sighed Clarissa. "And you are sure you won't mind if I pinch you? I must! The near horse rears."

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Then they ran downstairs together, where Aldo della Rocca sat, holding the two impatient sorrels in with shortened reins. He was flicking at their ears and making them plunge with curved, angry necks and frothing mouths. He was certainly *ravissant*. His profile, as Nancy saw it against the blue June sky, was like Praxiteles' Hermes. His glossy hair gleamed blue-black as he raised his hat with a sweeping gesture that made Nancy smile. Then they were seated behind him, and the puissant horses shot off down the Corso and towards the Bastioni at a magnificent pace. Clarissa shrieked a little now and then when she remembered to, but Aldo did not seem to hear her, so she soon desisted.

"Is he not seraphically beautiful?" she said to Nancy, pointing an ecstatic forefinger at her brother-in-law's slim back. "I often say to Carlo: 'Why, why did I meet you first, and not your Apolline brother?'"

Nancy smiled. "But surely he is rather young."

"He is twenty-four, you little stinging-nettle," said Clarissa; "and he has been so much petted and adored by all the women of Naples that he might be a thousand."

"How horrid!" said Nancy, looking disdainfully at the unwitting back before her, at the shining black hair above the high white collar, and at the irreproachable hat sitting correctly on the top of it all.

"Oh yes, he is horrid," said Clarissa; "but how visually delectable!"

Aldo della Rocca turned his profile towards them. "I shall take you along the Monza road," he said.

"Oh," cried Clarissa, "such an ugly old road, where no one will see us."

"I am driving the horses out to-day," said her brother-in-law, "not your Paris frocks." And he turned away again, and took the road towards Monza at a spanking gait.

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"Il est si spirituel!" laughed Clarissa, who bubbled over into French at the slightest provocation. The straight, white, dusty road, bordered with poplars, stretched its narrowing line before them, and the sorrels went like the wind. Suddenly, as they were nearing the first ugly-looking houses of Sesto, the driver checked suddenly, and the ladies bent forward to see why. A hundred paces before them, struggling and swaying, now on the side-walk, now almost in the middle of the road, were two women and a man. Some children standing near a door shrieked, but the struggling, scuffling group uttered no sound. Nancy stood up. The man, whose hat had fallen in the road—one could see his dishevelled hair and red face—had wrenched one arm loose from the clutch of the women, and with a quick gesture drew from his pocket something that the sun glanced on.

"He has a knife or a pistol!" gasped Nancy.

The struggling women had seen it, too, and now they shrieked, clutching and grappling with him, and screaming for help.

Nancy thrust her small, strong hands forward. "I can hold the horses," she said, and seized the reins from Della Rocca's fingers.

He turned and looked at her in surprise. "Why, what——?" And he stopped.

She read the doubt in his face, and read it wrong.

"I can—I can!" she cried. "Go quickly! We shall be all right!"

He twisted his mouth in curious fashion; then he jumped from his seat, and ran in light leaps across the road. The man was holding the revolver high out of the women's reach, while they clung to him and held him frantically, convulsively, crying: "Help! Madonna! Help!"

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Della Rocca reached him in an instant, and wrenched the short revolver away. With a quick gesture he opened the barrel and shook the cartridges out upon the ground. He tossed the weapon to one of a dozen men who had now come hurrying out of a neighbouring wine-shop, and, running lightly across the dusty road, he was back at the side of the carriage in an instant. He glanced up at Nancy, and raised his hat again with the exaggerated sweep that had caused her to smile before.

"Pardon me for keeping you waiting," he said.

"Ah, *quel poseur!*" cried Clarissa, who had sat with her eyes shut, holding her ears during the excitement.

Della Rocca smiled, and, jumping into his place, took the reins from Nancy's strained and trembling hands. She dropped back in her seat feeling faint and excited. The horses plunged and started forward again.

"What courage!" said Clarissa, taking Nancy's fingers in her own.

"Yes," said Nancy, looking with approval at the straight, slim shoulders and the black hair and the irreproachable hat. "I like a brave man."

Clarissa gave one of her little Parisian shrieks.

"*Ouiche!* it is not Aldo—it is you who are brave! Aldo is as cautious as a hare, but, being a preposterous *poseur*, he would not miss an effect for worlds!" And Clarissa flourished an imaginary hat in the Della Rocca style.

Nancy laughed, and believed not a word about the hare.

When they left her at her door she answered his sweeping salutation with a serious little nod; she ran up the stairs hurriedly, and into her room. On her writing-table lay an unopened letter from Nino; he wrote to her every morning and called on her every afternoon.

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Nancy did not glance at it. She ran out on to the balcony. But the stanhope had already turned out of sight.

Nancy stepped back into her room and slowly drew off her gloves. For some unexplained reason she was glad that her wrists still ached, and that her fingers were bruised by the dragging of the hard, stiff reins.

From the open balcony the wind blew into the room, and scattered the papers on her writing-table. It blew away Nino's letter; it blew away the elaborate time-table she had drawn up and the lists of the work she was to do; it blew away the large white sheet of paper—the fair sheet full of resplendent possibilities—on which she had traced with reverent finger the sign of the cross.

When the Englishman called again to bring her a copy of the *Fortnightly* with the article on "An Italian Lyrist," he found that she had not worked at all; she looked as sweet and helpless and idle as ever, and the room was full of visitors. He was introduced to her mother, whom he found gentle and subdued, and to the vigorous, loud-voiced Aunt Carlotta, and to all the poets.

"I am afraid, mother dear," said Nancy, leaning her billowy head against her mother's arm and looking up at her new friend with May-morning eyes, "that Mr. Kingsley will think I have no character."

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"You have a complexion," interposed Aunt Carlotta. "That is enough for a girl."

Valeria laughed. "It is true. Italian girls must not have characters until they marry. Then their husbands make it for them, according to their own tastes."

Mr. Kingsley smiled down at Nancy. "Why should I think you have no character?"

"Because you told me to work. And I promised; and I have not," said Nancy.

"Have you done nothing at all since I saw you?" he asked.

Nancy shook her head.

"And have you no thoughts, no ideas that urge for expression?"

"Oh yes!" said Nancy, waving eloquent, impatient fingers. "Ideas and thoughts grow and bloom and blow in my mind like flowers in a garden. Then all these people come and talk to me.... Alas," she sighed, looking round the murmuring, laughing room, "in the evening my garden is barren, for I have cut all my flowers and given them away."

The Englishman forgot that he was English, and said what he thought:

"I wish I could carry you off, and lock you up for a year, with nothing but books and a table and an inkstand," he said.

"I wish you could," laughed Nancy, clasping eager hands. "I should love it. Not a soul would be allowed to speak to me. And I should have my meals passed in through the window."

The Englishman laughed the sudden laugh of one who laughs seldom. "And I should walk up and down outside with a gun."

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Nancy looked at him, and a quick, shy thought, like a bird darting into an open window, entered her mind for an instant. Surely it would be good to have this strong, kind sentinel between herself and the world; to feel the light firmness of his touch on her shoulder keeping her to her work—to the work she loved, and yet was willing to neglect at the call of every passing voice. This stern, fair countenance would face the world for her; these strong shoulders would carry her burdens; these candid eyes would look into her soul and keep it clear and bright.

Then the bird-thought flew out of the window of her mind, for the door opened and love and destiny came in. It was Aldo della Rocca, more than ever visually delectable.

With him came his sister-in-law Clarissa, and Nino. Nino looked depressed and dreary; La Villari was writing to him; his conscience was harassing him; Aldo della Rocca's self-confident beauty irritated him.

"What, Nino! Here again?" said Nancy, with a laugh. "You said last night that henceforward you would never come to see us more than twice a week."

"That's right," said Nino. "Yesterday was the last visit of last week, and this is the first visit of this week. Besides, Della Rocca told me he was coming, so I felt that I had to come too. Of course, I did all I could to shake him off, but he is as persistent and adhesive as one of his compatriot cab-drivers in Santa Lucia. So that is why I could not come alone."

"How confusing!" said Nancy, turning to greet Della Rocca.

Della Rocca smiled; and his smile was sudden and brilliant, as if a row of lights had been lit at the back of his eyes.

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He bent over Nancy's proffered hand. "Signora—your slave!" he said in ceremonious Southern fashion.

Clarissa's high voice rang out. "He has been reading your poems day and night, Nancy. And he has put them to music. Glorious! Quite à la Richard Strauss or Tosti or Hugo Wolff! He must sing them to you."

Then she sailed round, greeting the poets, many of whom she knew. The Englishman was introduced as the Signor Kingsley, and Clarissa asked him many questions about London, and did not wait to hear what he answered, but went off with Adèle and Aunt Carlotta to a French lecture on "Napoléon et les Femmes." The poets, as soon as they had had vermouth and biscottini di Novara, also went away.

Then Della Rocca seated himself at the piano, and, precluding softly, strayed from harmony to harmony into the songs he had composed for Nancy. He played with his head bent forward and his soft hair falling darkly over half his face, making him look like a younger brother of

Velasquez's Christ. He had the musical talent of a Neapolitan street-boy and the voice of an angel who had studied singing in Germany. Nancy felt happy tears welling into her eyes, and Della Rocca's clear-cut, down-curving profile wavered before her gaze.

The Signor Kingsley sat silent in his corner near the window. Valeria was in the shadow with some quiet work in her hand, and Nino, who was sulky and bored, smoked cigarette after cigarette and yawned.

Nancy bent forward with clasped hands, listening to her own words, the lovelier for their garb of music as children are more lovely when clothed in shimmering robes and crowned with roses. She had sent her thoughts out into the world, in their innocent and passionate immaturity, bare and wild. And, behold, he brought them back to her veiled in silver minor keys, borne on palanquins of rhythmic harmonies, regal, measured, stately, like the young sisters of a queen. [Pg 87]

Mr. Kingsley's mouth tightened as he watched the back of the singer's black head nodding to the music, and listened to the soft tenor voice rolling over the "r's" and broadening on the mellow "a's" of the tender Italian words. He felt his own good English baritone contracting in his throat, and he wondered what made "these Latin idiots" sing as they did. Then he glanced at Nancy, who had closed her eyes, and at Nino, who was in the rocking-chair staring at the ceiling; and suddenly he felt that he must take his leave. He rose at the end of the cycle of songs, and Nancy turned to him with vague eyes to say good-bye. His kind clear gaze rested on her face.

"Do not cut all your flowers," he said.

Nancy shook her head. "No, no!" she said. "I won't. I really won't."

"Remember that your masterpiece is before you, and the little poems are done with. Lock your doors. Shut out the world, and start on a new work to-morrow."

Nancy said, "Yes, yes, I will." Then an absent look stole over her light eyes. "Ah! *der Musikant!*" she cried, turning to Della Rocca, who was singing in German, and pronouncing as if it were Genovese. "I remember that. Is it not Eichendorff?"

"Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts," said Della Rocca.

"Oh, do you really speak German? I love people who speak German," cried Nancy, on whom the German poet's spell still rested. [Pg 88]

"I learned it at Göttingen," said Della Rocca, with his illuminating smile.

"Ach, de Stadt die am schönsten ist wenn man sie mit dem Rücken ansieht," quoted Nancy, laughing.

Della Rocca laughed too, although he did not understand what she had said; then he turned to the piano again.

Nancy felt happy and inclined to kindness. "Do not go yet," she said to Mr. Kingsley. "Sit down and talk to me."

But Mr. Kingsley knew better. Della Rocca's melting notes were drawing the girl's thoughts away again, and he could notice the little shiver creep round her face, leaving it slightly paler, as the silver tenor voice took a high A in falsetto and held it long and pianissimo.

"I will come again some day, if I may," he said. "But I almost hope that I shall find your doors locked."

Again the bird-thought came fluttering into the window of Nancy's mind, as the Englishman's strong hand closed firm and warm round hers.

Then the door was shut on Mr. Paul Kingsley, and the thought flew away and was gone.

"Who is that conceited fool of an Englishman?" said Nino, who felt cross and liked to show it.

Nancy flushed. "Please don't speak like that about Englishmen. My father was English." Then she added, with a little toss of her head: "And he was not a bit of a conceited fool."

"I never said he was," said Nino.

"Oh!" gasped Nancy, "you did!"

"I said nothing of the kind," declared Nino. "Your father was a good and noble man."

"You know I was not talking of my father," said Nancy. [Pg 89]

"No more was I," said Nino.

Nancy turned to Della Rocca, who was precluding carelessly with smooth fingers and all his smiles alight.

"Nino always cavils and confuses until one does not know what one is talking about!"

Della Rocca nodded. "That is just what his celebrated friend, Nunziata Villari, said about him when I saw her in Naples. By the way, Nino,"—he ran up a quick scale of fourths and let them fall in a minor arpeggio like tumbling water—"they say La Villari tried to commit suicide last month. Locked herself up with a brazier of coke, like a love-sick grisette. Did you hear about it?"

"No," said Nino, "I did not." Then he looked long, mildly, fixedly at Della Rocca, who after a moment got up and said good-bye.

When he had left, Nancy said to Nino: "Who is La Villari? And why did she try to kill herself? La Villari! I thought that was an actress who had died a hundred years ago."

Nino took her hand. "You don't know anything, Nancy," he said. "You don't even know that you are a vulture and a shark."

Nancy laughed. "Yes, but who is La Villari?"

"She is someone you have devoured," said Nino.

And, remembering the brazier of coke, he left for Naples by the next train; for, though he had a nose of putty, he had a heart of gold.

XIV

During the long, dreary journey in an empty carriage of the slow train Nino fought his battles and chastened his soul. He set his conscience on the empty seat before him and looked it in the face. The desires of his heart sat near him, and took his part. His conscience had a dirty face that irritated him; his desires were fair as lilies and had high treble voices that spoke loud. His conscience said nothing, only sat there showing its dirty face and irritating him.

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By the time Bologna was reached the lilies had it all their own way. After all he was young—well, comparatively young; thirty-one is young for a man—and he had his life before him, while Nunziata—well, she had lived her life. And she had had eight years of his: the eight best years, for after all at thirty-one a man is not young—well, not so young. His conscience was staring at him, so he changed argument. Nunziata did not really love him any more, she had told him so a hundred times during the last two years; it was a burden, a chain of misery to them both. She had herself begged him to leave her after one of those well-remembered, never-ending scenes that were always occurring since she had finally abandoned the theatre for his sake.

She had said: "Go! I implore you to go! I cannot live like this any longer! For my sake, go!" So it was really in order to please her that he had gone.

The face of his conscience opposite him was looking dirtier than ever. But the treble voices of his desires rang shrill: "He must not forget his duties to himself and to others. He had a duty to his father, who longed to have him near him, settled happily and normally; he had a duty to Valeria, who—" Here he quickly changed argument again. "He had a duty to Nancy, to little, innocent, wonderful Nancy, who understood nothing of the world; she must be saved from designing knaves, from struggling *littérateurs* and poets who would like to marry her and use her vogue in order to scramble up to a reputation, from the professional *beau jeune homme* like Aldo, who would break her heart.... It really was his duty—" The train slowed, shivered, and stopped. He was glad to get out, and rush to a hurried supper in the buffet, because the ugly face opposite him was more than he could stand.

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All through the night in the slow train to Rome he fought his battles and chastened his soul, and the little ugly face said not a word, but looked at him.

When day dawned he had broken the lilies, and they lay, whiter than before, at his feet. And the face of his conscience was clean. When Rome was reached, where he had three hours to wait for the Naples express, he hurried into the telegraph-office and sent a message to Nunziata:

"Arriving this evening at nine. Forgive. Yours for ever, NINO."

Then, just as he was getting into the hotel omnibus, he learned that a special excursion train was leaving for Naples at once. He could arrive four hours sooner. He hastened back into the station, caught the train, and was already approaching Naples when La Villari received his telegram.

La Villari had just begun her luncheon, and the *spaghetti al burro e formaggio* lay in a goodly heap of pale gold on her plate. She had just put her fork into them and begun to turn it round and round, when Teresa came in excitedly.

"A telegram, Illustrissima," she said.

La Villari opened the telegram. "Misericordia!" she said. "He is coming back."

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Teresa cleaned her hands on her apron. What? The Signorino? He was returning?

"Yes, to-night. At nine o'clock," sighed La Villari.

Well, let the Illustrissima not allow the spaghetti to get cold. And Teresa sighed also, as she left the room and hustled the telegraph-boy off without giving him a tip.

They had been so happy without the Signorino. They had had such quiet, comfortable meals. The Illustrissima had had no nerves, no convulsions, but a good appetite and a pleasant temper. Now it would all begin again: the excitements, the tempers of the Illustrissima; the dinner left to get cold while the Illustrissima and the Signorino quarrelled; the rushings out of the Signorino; the

tears of the Illustrissima; the telephone messages; the visitors and relations to argue with and console the Illustrissima; then the returnings of the Signorino; and supper for everybody in the middle of the night. It was not a life.

Teresa brought in the auburn cutlet a la Milanese. There! already it was beginning. The Illustrissima had not eaten the spaghetti!

"Do not bother me with the spaghetti," said the Illustrissima, who already had the nerves. "Let us think about this evening."

"Yes," said Teresa. "Shall we have vol-au-vent that His Excellency likes?"

"Oh, do not bother me with vol-au-vent!" cried the Illustrissima. "Do you not understand that he must not find us like this?"

"Vossignoria will put on the blue crêpe-de-chine gown," said Teresa; "and I will order the coiffeuse for six o'clock."

Yes, yes; but that was not sufficient. Nino must not find her sitting there waiting for him, as if she had no one in the world but him. [Pg 93]

"Go away, Teresa, go away! I must think," she said. And Teresa went to her kitchen grumbling.

La Villari's views of life and her manner of dealing with situations were according to Sardou, Dumas, or D'Annunzio. Nino must either find her supine in a darkened room, with etiolated cheeks and blue shadows under her spent eyes; or then, after his arrival, she must enter, coming from some brilliant banquet, rose-crowned and laughing. She sees him! She vacillates. Her jewelled hand clutches at her heart. "*Nino!*"—and he is at her feet.... Then he makes her a scene of jealousy. Where has she been? With whom? Where was she when his telegram arrived? Who sends her all these flowers? Pah! He throws them out of the window—and all is as it should be.

As it happened, there were no flowers in the room. So La Villari rang the bell and told Teresa to order fifty francs worth of white roses and tuberose from the florist, to be brought as soon as possible, and the hair-dresser for six o'clock, and the brougham for seven.

"And, Teresa!..."

Teresa turned back with a dreary face.

"Remember that it was you who opened the telegram. I was out. I am always out. With many people, you understand."

Yes, Teresa understood. And with callous back and shuffling shoes she went away to order the flowers, and the brougham, and the hair-dresser.

La Villari unpinned her hair, put the greater part of it neatly on the dressing-table in readiness for the coiffeuse, rubbed a little lanoline round her eyes, and settled herself with Matilde Serao's "*Indomani*" to one more peaceful afternoon. [Pg 94]

Love was not peaceful, it was agitating and uncomfortable; and keeping up the pretence of being twenty-eight when one is forty-five is a labour and a toil. Of course, she adored Nino; the mere thought of his ever tiring of her, or leaving her, brought visions of despair and vengeance, of vitriol and dagger to her mind. But oh! how she envied those placid women who surrender their youth submissively, and slip serenely into gentle middle-age as a ship glides into quiet waters. With her, because her lover was young, she must grasp and grapple with the engulfing years. She must clutch at her youth as a child clutches a wild bird fluttering to escape. Alas! when the child opens its fingers the prisoner is dead. Better let it fly when it will.

So thought Nunziata Villari. The feathers and the wings still lay in her hand, but youth, the bird, was dead.

She took up the book, and stifled thought under the blanket of Matilde Serao's warm prose.

The excursion train ran into Naples at five o'clock, just as a florist in the Strada Caracciolo was threading a wire into the green throat of the last white rose for the Illustrissima. Fifty francs worth of roses in Naples in the month of June are enough to consummate the perfumed death in Freiligrath's "*Blumenrache*," and then enough to cover the maiden's coffin from wider to narrowest end. It took two men to carry them, tied in huge bunches, along the Strada Caracciolo to the Palazzo Imperato.

Nino from his cab saw two men bearing white flowers far ahead of him, and wondered vaguely for whom they might be.

Then he thought of Nunziata's face as he had last seen it—pallid, with a tortured smile, as she said good-bye. But now he would see her smile again, that pretty tilted smile that was still young.... [Pg 95]

(The men with the flowers had turned a corner. Nino's cab turned it, too, and there were the men again, marching before him.)

He had been a brute and a hound, but he would atone. He would do the right thing. Nunziata should not be left in tears again, nor again be driven to the little brazier of coke, like a love-sick grisette....

(The men with the white flowers were alongside. Now they were left behind.)

And now the carriage stopped at the door of the Palazzo Imperato. The driver handed the luggage down, and a waiting lazzarone grabbed and shouldered it. While Nino was paying the fare the men with the flowers came up, and Nino turned to glance at them as they passed. *But they did not pass.* They turned into the Palazzo Imperato and vanished in the shadow of the gateway.

Nino's heart leaped up, and stood still. The lazzarone, watching him, saw tragedy in his face, and was satisfied that the tip would be a large one; for the lazzarone knew that despair is as generous as happiness.

Nino ran, blind with his terrors, up the wide flights of stairs. On Nunziata's landing the men with the flowers stood waiting.

Teresa opened the door, and saw behind the roses Nino's wild, white face.

"The Signorino! Santa Vergine!"

In an instantaneous vision she thought of the Illustrissima, unpowdered, unprepared, reading Matilde Serao, her tresses lying on the dressing-room table. The servant's stupefied, stricken face confirmed Nino's fears. He stumbled forward, and, dropping into a seat in the hall, covered his face with his hands.

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The Illustrissima, who had heard the noise, opened the drawing-room door. At a glance she saw it all, and quietly closed the door again.

When, an instant later, Nino rushed in, the room was darkened, the shutters closed; Nunziata lay on the couch with etiolated face, a soft shimmering scarf was wound becomingly round her head, but no blue shadows were under her eyes, for there had been no time to make them.

Then all began over again; for although she was peaceful and comfortable when Nino was away, as soon as he was present she felt that all things depended upon his love, and that his absence would end her life. Tighter and tighter she grasped the little dead bird in her white, ringed hands, and louder and louder she told her tired heart that youth was living and singing still.

Nino was kind and considerate. He also wrote letters to the Italian Consulates in Rio and Buenos Ayres, asking them to make sure that Eduardo Villari was really dead—as his cook, who had returned with a good deal of money and had married a baron, declared he was.

If the thought of Nancy knocked with light fingers at Nino's heart, he never opened the door.

XV

Clarissa in her villa on Lake Maggiore was bored, so she wrote to Nancy to come and stay with her.

"I am weary of my sweet blue lake and of my sour blue husband. Come and stay with me a month. You shall have a large room at the top of the house, with a huge table and an inkstand large enough to drown in, and before you the view that inspired Manzoni. Come and write your masterpiece."

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By the same post she sent a note to her brother-in-law:

"Aldo, *mon joli*, do come. Carlo is insufferable. He growls all day and snores all night. Why did I marry him? This is the fourth time I invite you this year, and you never come. Last year it was different.

"Yours,
"CLARISSA.

"P.S.—The little *poetessa* is going to stay here for a month."

He arrived next day. After greetings, he asked: "Where is Sappho, the violet-haired?" Clarissa explained that Nancy had not arrived, and he sulked and played the piano all the evening, while Carlo on the sofa snored. Clarissa looked from one to the other, uncertain which of the two was insulting her most.

Nancy arrived the following day. She had brought her notebooks with her and a broken ivory pen that she always wrote with; she was full of the masterpiece. She was going to work immediately.

Driving up from the landing-place to the Villa Solitudine she told her plans to Clarissa, who nodded and smiled as she whipped up the fat cob. She was going to write a book—*The Book!*—a great, noble piece of work, not a little volume of flyaway poems that one reads and forgets in a day. She was going to think of and dream of The Book; to live for The Book; to breathe and walk for it, to eat and sleep for it. In Milan, with people always round her, talking and distracting, it was impossible; but here in the large bare room at the top of the house—How sweet and dear of Clarissa to think of it! Never, never could Nancy thank her enough.... Clarissa nodded and smiled, and the fat cob turned into the chestnut drive of Villa Solitudine.

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Down the steps, with a couple of dogs barking and leaping at his heels, came Aldo to meet them, clad in Neapolitan fashion in white flannels and scarlet sash. His uncovered head gleamed darkly in the sun.

"Behold Endymion awakened!" said Clarissa, laughing, to Nancy. "Charmides, Adonais, Narcissus! The gods have cast upon him all the beauty of the world!" As Nancy did not answer, Clarissa turned to look at her. "Oh, what a stern face, *ma chérie!* You are quite white. What are you thinking of?"

"The Book," said Nancy; and she felt as if it were a child of hers that was to die unborn.

"You shall write it, *mon ange!* Aldo shall not disturb you." And she threw the reins to the little stiff groom; then, daintily raising her fluffy skirts, she alighted in Aldo's uplifted arms. Nancy put her foot on the step, but Aldo raised her lightly and lifted her down. His red, smiling mouth was close to her face. She thanked him, and he kissed her hand with the ceremonious Southern salute, "Signora, I am your slave."

Nancy went to her room—the large, bare room with the beautiful view—and stayed there all the afternoon. She put her notes in order; she placed the large sheets of paper before her; and she dipped the broken ivory pen into the huge inkstand. Then she sat and looked out of the window. She could hear the dogs barking in the garden and Clarissa's trilling laugh. On the sweet blue lake a tiny sail, like a pocket handkerchief, dipped and curtsied away, and through the open windows of the drawing-room Aldo could be heard playing a Valse Triste. Nancy dipped the pen into the inkstand again—and looked at the view.

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Now she heard the music wander off in modulating chords which resolved themselves into the rippling accompaniment of Hugo Wolff's "Musikant."

"Wenn wir zwei zusammen wären
Würd' das Singen mir vergeh'n."

She could hear the soft tenor voice, and felt it drawing at her heart. She closed the window and sat down again. She dipped the ivory pen into the inkstand, and wrote at the top of the white sheet, "Villa Solitudine," and the date. Under it, as she had not thought of a title yet, she wrote in large letters:

"THE BOOK."

Then she jumped up and ran downstairs.

At sunset they went out in a sailing-boat. Clarissa held the rudder, and Aldo stood in easy attitudes of beauty at the sail. The glow of the west was on his pure young face, and the wind of the *tramontana* raised his waved hair and blew it lightly across his forehead. He was silent, satisfied to know that the two women could see him, and that the red-gold sky was a good background for his profile. Clarissa talked and laughed, twittered and purred; but Aldo never spoke. And it was his silence that enraptured Nancy.

"Ed io che intesi ciò che non dicevi,
M'innamorai di te perchè tacevi."

Stecchetti's words sang in her brain with new meaning, and in the days that followed the two smooth lines were always in her mind.

Aldo knew little, but he knew the value of silence. He knew the lure of the *hortus conclusus*—the Closed Garden into which one has not stepped. Nancy stood outside its gates and dreamed of its unseen roses, of fountains and shadowy paths and water-liliated lakes. For Aldo was a closed garden.

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Aldo also knew the value of his eyes—deep, passion-lit eyes, that looked, Clarissa said, as if he had rubbed the lids with burnt cork to darken them. When he raised them suddenly, and looked straight at Nancy, she felt a little shock of pleasure that took her breath away. Little by little, day by day, those eyes drew Nancy's spirit to their depths—she leaned over them as over an abyss. In them she sunk and drowned her soul.... Then, when from his eyes her own passionate purity gazed back at her, she thought she saw his soul and not her own.

The Book cried in her now and then, but she stifled its voice and whispered: "Wait!"

And The Book waited.

One day in the garden Aldo spoke to Clarissa. She was in the hammock pretending to read.

"Clarissa, I am twenty-five years old."

"Vlan! ça y est!" said Clarissa, dropping her book. Then she drew a deep breath, and her nostrils turned a little pale; but the superposed roses of her cheeks bloomed on, independent of her ebbing blood and sickening heart.

"I am penniless," continued Aldo, picking a piece of grass and chewing it; "and Carlo has given me to understand that he can exist without me if he tries very hard."

Clarissa sat up. "When? What did he say? Does he ... has he ... did he mean anything?"

Aldo shook his comely head. "Carlo never means anything. But I shall have to go back to—to the Texas ranch, or marry."

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The Texas ranch was a romantic invention of Clarissa's, the only foundation for which was a three weeks' holiday which Aldo had once spent in the city of New York.

Clarissa bit her red, narrow lips. "Yes," she said.

During the long pause that followed Aldo picked another piece of grass and chewed it.

"I suppose," said Clarissa, looking at him sideways through her long lids, "you will marry some affectionate old thing with money."

"No. I know them," said Aldo. "They demand the affection, and keep the money."

After a pause, in which he felt Clarissa's angry eyes on his face, he said: "I am going to marry the little Sappho."

Clarissa laughed suddenly and loud. "You do that for your pleasure! *Farceur, va!*" Aldo lifted his perfect eyebrows and did not reply. "She has nothing, not a little black sou!" And Clarissa stuck her long pointed thumbnail behind her long pointed teeth and jerked it forward.

"Oh! I dare say she has something," said Aldo, pretending to yawn carelessly. "Besides, she is a genius, and can earn what she will."

"You are the perfect Neapolitan pig," said Clarissa, and closed her eyes.

The perfect Neapolitan pig rose with an offended air and left her. He strolled into the house and took his hat and stick, then he strolled out again and through the garden into the hot street and down to the landing-place. A boat was leaving for Intra, so he went on board, and at Intra took the train for Milan. He dined at Biffi's, feeling happy.

"They will be miserable," he said. "That will teach them." Then he went to his furnished rooms on the Corso, and slept well. [Pg 102]

In Villa Solitudine they were miserable, and it taught them.

It taught Nancy that the Closed Garden she had had a glimpse of for so brief an hour was the only garden in the world that she ever wanted to enter; and that all the words Aldo had not said were the only words she ever wanted to hear; that perfect goodness and unwavering strength must lie behind his portentous beauty, white and immovable like marble lions at a palace gate.

It taught Clarissa that one must accept the inevitable—that half a loaf was better than no bread, and that a married Aldo was better than no Aldo at all. It made her look at Nancy with closer eyes, and say to herself that she was a little creature one would easily tire of, in spite of—or because of—her intellectuality. Aldo was not a closed garden for Clarissa; she knew the feeble flowers that bowed behind its gates.

A hot, dreary week passed with no news from Aldo. Then Clarissa telegraphed to him at Milan. She said she had told Carlo about their conversation regarding his wish to marry Nancy, and Carlo approved. Would he come back?

Yes; Aldo would come back. He waited another day or two, and at the close of a sultry afternoon he sauntered in, just as he had sauntered out, across the sleepy, bee-droning lawns of the Villa Solitudine. He stopped at the entrance of the summer-house, where Nancy sat reading a letter—a long letter. Already two of the blue sheets had fallen at her side. Before her on the table was the inkstand and the ivory pen and The Book. As his shadow passed the threshold she looked up; she drew a quick breath, and her face turned milky white, with a pallor that gripped at Aldo's nerves. [Pg 103]

Once more, and for the last time, he bent his head over her hand. "Signora, I am your slave," he said. But as he raised his eyes she knew that he had said: "Nancy, I am your master."

"Who writes to you?" he asked.

She drooped submissive lashes, and the colour ran into her cheeks. "Mr. Kingsley, the English friend," she said. "Do you remember him?"

Aldo took her hand and with it the letter in his own.

"What does he want?"

Her dimples fluttered. "He wants me to be good," she said, laughing, with wistful eyes. "And to write."

Aldo pressed the little fist with the crumpled blue letter in it to his lips. "Well, write," he said. "Write at once."

He took the ivory pen and dipped it in the ink and put it in her hand; then he pulled the sheet of white paper which was to be The Book before her.

"Write: 'Dear Englishman, I am going to marry Aldo della Rocca. He adores me.'"

And Nancy, with her hair almost touching the paper, wrote: "Dear Englishman, I am going to marry Aldo della Rocca. I adore him."

The Englishman never got the letter. But he heard of it afterwards; and his English fists closed tight.

XVI

Nancy walked among asphodels and morning glory; and her soul was plunged in happiness and her eyes were washed with light. The Book waited.

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They went out in the little boat at sunset. Aldo stood at the sail, and the red sky was a background for his profile.

"Oh," sighed Nancy, looking at him and clasping puerile hands, "your beauty *aches* me!"

Aldo quite understood it, and was pleased.

They went for long walks to Premeno and San Salvatore; as Clarissa refused to accompany them, Carlo chaperoned them, blandly bored.

Soon Valeria arrived. Nancy went down to meet her at the landing-place, looking ethereal and pink as a spray of apple-blossom. Valeria kissed her with hot tears. "Oh! my baby, my baby!" she said, and wished that the seventeen years were a dream, and that her child's small head were still safely nestling at her breast. In Nancy's young love she lived the days of her own betrothal over again, and Tom arose in her memory and was with her day and night. On this same silky blue lake Tom had so often rowed her with Zio Giacomo, in a little boat called *Luisa*. She tearfully begged Nancy and Aldo to come with her and see if they could not find that very self-same boat.

They found, indeed, three *Luisas*, but Valeria could not recognize them; still, all three of the boatmen declared that they remembered her perfectly, and got the expected tip.

"Of course," said Valeria, deeply moved, "it cannot have been all three of them."

And Aldo said: "You should not have given them anything. They were none of them more than twenty-five years old." Whereupon Valeria sighed deeply.

Then it was decided that they should go in reverent pilgrimage to the Madonna del Monte, where Nancy's father had asked Nancy's mother to marry him. The road was lined with beggars: shouting cripples, exhibiting sores and stumps.

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"Some of these are very old," sighed Valeria. "I am sure they were here that day, and must have seen me."

"I shall give a franc to every one of them," said Nancy, taking out her small fat purse, as the first one-armed mendicant held out his greasy hat.

"My dear Nancy, what nonsense!" said Aldo. "There are about a hundred of them!"

"Well?" and Nancy raised clear, questioning eyes to his.

"Oh, *I* don't mind," said Aldo, with a little Neapolitan shrug.

Valeria looked at the handsome figure and impeccable profile of her future son-in-law, as he strolled beside them up the steep wide road. Her heart was heavy with recollections. Up this road she had walked in her blue dress and scarlet tie with Tom beside her—Tom, broad and careless in his slouchy brown suit, who had given the beggars all his coppers and silver, just as Tom's daughter was doing to-day. Again she looked at Aldo's slim, straight shoulders and sighed. "I wish it had been an Englishman!" she thought. Then, as her memory took her to England, she saw someone else. "Or, then, poor dear Nino." And she sighed again; but not altogether for Nancy's sake.

She wrote to Nino that evening, and, almost without knowing it, began her letter, "Poor dear Nino!"

Nino was out interviewing Consuls about the presumably deceased Eduardo Villari when the letter arrived. So Nunziata opened the letter.

In it Valeria told Nino that Nancy, "our little Nancy," was betrothed to Aldo della Rocca, and could Nino not do anything to prevent it? And why, oh why, had his sister Clarissa invited them both to stay at the Villa Solitudine, so that, as Fräulein Müller or was it Heine?—used to say, "Wie könnte es anders sein," for how could anyone see Nancy in the resplendency of her seventeen Aprils and not fall in love with her? And oh, she was so sorry for poor, dear Nino, for she knew the secret of his heart. And how true it was what he had said about Nancy's eyes being so pure that they seemed never to have gazed at aught but the sky; and she understood him and his sufferings, for had she not herself suffered dreadfully through him, years ago—but never mind, that was nothing. And it had never been dear, dear Nino's fault at all; it was her own foolish fault and Fate.... And she hoped Nino did not think that she had really suffered, for she had not, and now she never, never thought of it any more! And if he came quickly he might still be in time; and oh, she knew he must be heart-broken, but he was not to mind, because it could not be helped. And she was ever his unhappy Valeria.

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Nunziata read the rambling letter three times before she understood it. The letter opened her

eyes.

When her eyes were open Nunziata saw well. She saw the chain of desire stretching out ring on ring: from Valeria's heart to Nino; from Nino's heart to Nancy; from Nancy's heart to Aldo, as in a children's game; and Love passing down from one to the other, stopping before each with gift of passion, of pain, of joy. She saw that her years placed her behind Valeria—far back, far back, out of the game; and she knew that Love had passed her, and would not stop before her any more. Then she remembered that she had had her gifts; that Love had heaped roses at her feet, and that she had moved through passions as through a field of flowers.

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Nunziata decided that she would play the game.

She went with her newly-opened eyes to her room and threw the shutters back. She looked at her tired pink face in the glass, at her crimson lips and complicated hair. She went on her knees beside her bed and said three *Paters* and three *Aves*. Then she opened her reluctant hands and gave her dead youth back to God.

She washed her face with warm water and soap, and unpinned her elaborate curls. She wound her own soft hair round her head, and put on a plain black gown. Then, looking, although she did not think so, twenty years younger and twenty times sweeter than she did before, she went downstairs to wait for Nino.

That same evening she sent him back to his father. His luggage was packed and the brougham was waiting for him at the door, and still he declared he would not go. He would not leave her. Her face was whiter than any *poudre de lys* could ever make it as she kissed his forehead, and blessed it with the sign of the cross, and told him that he must indeed go, and not return again.

At last, before his stubborn refusal, she took the weapon that hurt her most, and used it to pierce her own heart. "Think of Nancy!" she said. "You may still be in time to prevent her from marrying an adventurer."

Nino looked into the pale, kind face, from which every trace of triviality had been washed by the warm water and the tears. And, being a man, he did not wait, and refuse, and then catch a later train; but with candid cruelty he said: "You are right. You are an angel. May the saints bless you!"

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... She stood on the balcony and watched the carriage drive away into the night; it turned up Corso Umberto and was gone. With it the lights went out in Nunziata Villari's life.

Youth, love, hope, desire—Fate blew all the candles out, and left her in the dark.

XVII

Aldo's curved red lips under his very young moustache opened to words as well as to kisses under Nancy's impelling, eager love. During the long hours they spent together she spoke and he must answer. His splendid, silent eyes urged her to quick questionings, and his kisses did not still the thirst of her soul for his soul. Little by little she pushed back the gates of the Closed Garden; gently, day by day, she ventured a step farther adown the mysterious paths. Where are the arbours of roses? Where the fountains and the deep, water-lilied lakes? She tiptoed down the narrow paths that Clarissa and many others had trodden before her, and when she had come to the end she said: "I am mistaken. I have not entered the Garden yet."

They were to be married almost at once. Aldo was impatient, and Nancy was in love; and The Book was waiting. So Valeria left for Milan to prepare the trousseau, and Nancy must follow a week later. On the eve of her journey Clarissa went up to say good-night to Nancy in her room—the large, bare room in which the masterpiece had not been written. Nancy's trunks were packed. The ivory pen and The Book were put away. The large inkstand stood alone on the large table.

Nancy was leaning out of the window looking at the stars. Clarissa came and stood behind her and looked up into the cobalt depths.

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"I hate the stars," said Nancy; "I am afraid of them."

"Why?" said Clarissa, to whom a star was a star.

"Oh, I want to be sure that somewhere they leave off," said Nancy. "It terrifies me to think of fabulous nothingness behind unending space, of perpetual neverness beyond unceasing time. I should like a wall built round the universe, a wall that would shut me safely in, away from the terrible infinity."

Clarissa laughed. "Perhaps when you are married you will feel less little and lonely."

"Perhaps," said Nancy. And she added: "Aldo must be the wall."

"Oh, my dear," said Clarissa, "Don't try to make poor Aldo anything that he isn't. He is sweet; he is lovely; he is full of talent. But he is no more a wall than this is." And she waved her filmy gossamer scarf that blew lightly in the air.

That evening Carlo said to his wife: "I feel like a brute, letting that good-for-nothing brother of

mine marry the nice little girl. He will make her miserable."

"Not at all," said Clarissa, putting out the candle with her book, a thing Carlo could not bear. "She will write poems on his profile and be perfectly happy, until she gets tired of him for not being something that he isn't."

"Oh, well," growled Carlo. "I suppose you know her best. Women are cackling cats."

"Mixed metaphor," murmured Clarissa, and went to sleep comfortably, feeling that Carlo was a wall.

Nancy was married in Rome. All the poets of Italy came with poems, and Nino brought a necklet of pearls. From the Quirinal came a pendant, with a picture of a boy's face set in diamonds. [Pg 110]

After the wedding-breakfast all the guests left, passing to their carriages down the red carpet that stretched from the door to the edge of the pavement. Then Nancy, in her mouse-grey travelling-gown, kissed Valeria, and wept and said good-bye. And kissed Nino, and wept and said good-bye. And she went with her husband down the red carpet to the carriage. Carlo and Clarissa, Aunt Carlotta and Adèle followed to the station, where there were great crowds waiting to see them off.

Valeria and Nino remained alone in the desolate room. Valeria's face was hidden in her hands. She was looking down the days of the future, and saw them lonely, dark and desolate. Nino gazed through tear-blurred eyes at the bowed figure before him, and his thoughts went back through the years. Bending forward, he took her hand and kissed it. She smiled wanly.

"What are you thinking of?" she said.

"I was thinking of Nancy, and of the past," said Nino. "Of her father, poor Tom, who died so suddenly——"

"It was to save Nancy," said Valeria.

"And of the old grandfather who died alone on the hill-side——"

"We had to find Nancy," said Valeria.

"And of little Edith and her poor mother, forsaken in their darkest hour by those they loved——"

"But it was to safeguard Nancy," said Valeria.

Hearing her words, he realized the puissance of all-conquering, maternal love. Nothing mattered but Nancy, though Nancy herself, with gentle, unconscious hands, had taken all things from her. Had not he himself, the lover of Valeria's girlhood, turned from her, heart-stricken for Nancy? [Pg 111]

There was a pause.

"And I am thinking of you, Valeria, over whose heart I have trampled, ..." said Nino, with a break in his voice.

"You could not help it. You loved Nancy," said Valeria. "And now"—her pitying eyes filled with tears—"your hope is shipwrecked and your heart broken, too."

Nino did not answer. He turned away and gazed out of the window. He was thinking of Nancy, so mild and sweet-voiced, with eyes like blue hyacinths under the dark drift of her hair. And once more he realized how Nancy in her dove-like innocence had absorbed and submerged the existence of those around her. Her sweet helplessness itself had wrecked and shattered, had devastated and destroyed. The lives of all those who loved her had gone to nourish the clear flame of her genius, the white fire of her youth.

Nino gazed down at the red wedding-carpet that stretched its scarlet line to the pavement's edge like a narrow path of blood.

"Behold," he said, "the trail of the dear devourer—the course of the dove of prey!"

As the train glided out of the station, and shook and ran, and the cheers and the waving handkerchiefs were left behind, Nancy raised her eyes, tender and tear-lit, to Aldo's face. Her white wedded hand was to open the gates of the Closed Garden.

Now the bowers of roses, and the fountains, and the water-lilied lakes! [Pg 112]

XVIII

They had chosen to go to Paris, because Aldo said he had had enough of landscapes to last him a lifetime. Also Clarissa had remarked to Nancy: "If you want to have a clear vision of life, and a well-balanced brain, always be properly dressed. And you cannot be dressed at all unless you are dressed by Paquin."

"But I have my work to think about," said Nancy. "I do not mind much about clothes."

"Very well," said Clarissa, "if you want to be a dowdy genius and quarrel with your husband before you have been married two months, go your own way, and wear coats and skirts."

So they went to Paris, and soon Paquin's gible-gabbling demoiselles were busy sewing cloudy blues and faint mauves to save Nancy from quarrelling with Aldo two months afterwards.

At Aldo's suggestion they took rooms in a small hotel in Rue Lafayette, for, as he said, they were not millionaires, and one could use one's money better than in spending it at grand hotels. Nancy said he was quite right, and wondered at his wisdom. Indeed, he knew many things. He knew the prices of everything one ate, and he pounced on the waiters as soon as there was any attempt at overcharging, or if they absent-mindedly reckoned in the date written at the top of the bill in a line with the francs.

Nancy rather dreaded that moment in the brilliant restaurant when Aldo opened and inspected the neatly-folded bill, while the solemn-nosed waiter looked down sarcastically at his smooth, well-brushed head. Nancy noticed that, whenever they entered a place, everyone ran to meet them, opening doors for them with obsequious bows, showing them places with flourish of arm and of table-napkin. Aldo's hat was taken from him with reverential hand, and her cloak was carried tenderly from her. But when, after settling the bill, they got up to go, nobody seemed to pay much attention to them. Aldo had to fetch his own hat and look for the cloak, and even to open the heavy glass doors himself, for the small boy would be absent, or looking another way and making faces at the head-waiter. Cabs also had a way of being all smiles and hat-touchings and little jokes when they were hailed, and all sullenness and loud monologue when they were dismissed.

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"They think that because we are on our honeymoon we must be fools. Money is money," said Aldo.

He had learnt the phrase from his grandfather, who had kept a shop in Via Caracciolo. The grandfather's wife—who in her radiant girlhood in Piedigrotta had sat for English and German painters—had said: "Yes; but education is education," and had sent her three sons to school in Modena and Milan. The eldest son, who was the father of Carlo and Aldo, had then learnt to say: "A gentleman is a gentleman." And on the strength of this he would have nothing more to do with his shopkeeping parents in Naples. When he died Carlo, who was twenty, went and hunted up the old people. They did not need him, and were afraid of him, and called him "Eccellenza." But Aldo, who was thirteen, and unverisimilarly beautiful, they called "l'Amorino"; they petted and spoiled him, and let him count the money in the till. And he liked them and their shop. And he learnt that money was money. The phrase always struck Nancy mute. Aldo, strolling beside her along the boulevard, continued: "It is people like Carlo that spoil things. Carlo is a perfect idiot with his money."

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"Oh, but he is very kind," said Nancy; and Aldo wondered whether she knew that Carlo was paying all their expenses—made out with fanciful additions by Aldo—and had promised to do so for a year after their marriage.

"After that, not one penny. Never as long as I live," Carlo had said to his young brother a week before the wedding. "So hustle and do something useful."

But Aldo did not intend to hustle. Rude, unæsthetic word! A man with his physique could not hustle. Carlo lacked all sense of the fitness of things. Clarissa said so, too. But on this occasion Aldo did not consult Clarissa, because she had once said: "I understand adoring a man, but I do not understand paying his debts."

Nancy soon found that Aldo's knowledge extended further than accounts and prices. He knew places in Paris, and he knew people—such places and such people as she had never heard of, read of, or dreamt of. He always said to Nancy: "Now you shall see things that will make you laugh." But Nancy laughed little, then less; until one day she could not laugh at all. She felt as if she would never laugh any more. Everything was horrible, everything made her shrink and weep.

"It is life, my dear," said Aldo, with his habitual little gesture of both hands outwards and upwards. "How can you write books if you do not know what is life?"

Oh, but she did not want to know what is life. She could write books without knowing. And oh, she wished that Aldo did not know either. And let them go away quickly, and forget, and never, never remember it any more.

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So Aldo, who was not unkind, and who had not found the enlightening of Nancy as amusing as he had expected, called for the hotel bill, said it was preposterous, got the proprietor to deduct twelve per cent., and then told him they were leaving the next day.

The next day they left. They went to the Villa Solitudine, which Clarissa and Carlo were not using, and for which it was arranged that Aldo should pay rent to Clarissa. Clarissa let him off the rent; and Carlo, not knowing, paid it back to him. So that, on the whole, it was not an unprofitable arrangement for Aldo.

Nancy tried to forget what life was, and smiled and blossomed in tenuous sunrise beauty. And because of all she knew, and was trying to forget, and because she wore trailing Parisian gowns and large, plumed hats, Aldo burned with volcanic meridional love for her.

The Book waited.

One evening, when Aldo was at the piano, improvising music and words on Nancy's loveliness, and she sat on a stool beside him, she asked suddenly: "When shall we begin to work?"

"Oh, never!" said Aldo, putting his right arm round her neck without interrupting the chords he was playing with his left hand.

Nancy laughed, and laid her head against his arm.

"Oh, but we must, Aldo. I want to write my book. It is to be a great book."

Aldo nodded, and went on playing.

"And you, Aldo. You cannot pass your life saying that you adore me."

"Oh yes, I can," said Aldo.

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Nancy laughed softly and kissed his sleeve. Then suddenly a strange feeling came over her—a feeling of loneliness and fear. She felt as if she were alone in the world, and small and helpless, with no one to take care of her. She felt as if Aldo were younger and weaker and more helpless than she. And the terror of the Infinite fell upon her soul. Aldo was singing softly, meltingly, with his head bent forward and his dark hair falling over his face. Suddenly Nancy thought that it would be good to be safely locked in a large light room with nothing but books and an inkstand, and someone walking up and down outside with a gun.

"The wall!" she said to herself as the Englishman's light eyes and stalwart figure came before her mind. Then she said: "Work shall be my wall." And she went to her room and unpacked her ivory pen.

XIX

Four months before the year of Carlo's bounty was up, Aldo made up his mind that he must hustle after all. They had settled in Milan; then nothing had happened. Carlo would never change his mind. Valeria had shown him her banking account, and proved to him that there was nothing Nancy could have beyond her skimpy forty thousand francs; Lady Sainsborough, the elderly English person in Naples who had taken such a fancy to him, had not answered his last two letters, and had probably altered her will; so there was nothing to do or to hope for. He must hustle.

He did so. He wrote a third letter to Lady Sainsborough. Then he decided to ask Carlo to make room for him in his silk mills, which Carlo refused to do.

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Then he looked up Nancy's publishers, and asked them if they would advance a substantial sum on the unwritten book, which they also refused to do. So having done all he could, he decided not to hustle any more, but to let events take their course.

Nancy did not help him at all. She was selfishly engrossed in her book, and sat in her room all day, with hair pinned tightly back and wild and lucent eyes. Whenever he came into the room she put up her hand without turning round—a gesture he could not bear—and went on with her writing. If he disregarded the gesture, she looked up at him with those wild, light eyes, and he felt hurried, and forgot what he wanted to say. So he muddled along with her forty thousand francs, and read the papers, played the piano, and went out to the Caffè Biffi every evening until it was time to go to the Patriottica for a game of billiards.

There he frequently saw Nino sitting glumly with the corners of his mouth turned down; and they turned down further when Aldo came in, so that Aldo positively hated the sight of him. Besides, Carlo, who had refused to do anything for Aldo, had actually taken Nino into partnership; and, just to irritate and show off, Nino was working vulgarly, like a nigger, twelve or fourteen hours a day. The gratified Carlo was to be seen with Nino in the evenings walking through the Galleria arm-in-arm with him as if they were brothers, with that absurd Zio Giacomo trotting alongside, grinning like an old hen, while he, Aldo, Carlo's own brother, had to mooch about alone, smoking cheap cigarettes, or else to run alongside of Giacomo like an outsider, and listen for the thousandth time to the recital of the prodigal Nino's reform and rehabilitation.

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He went to Clarissa and complained; but she was unsympathetic. She rubbed her left-hand nails against her right-hand palm and looked out of the window. He had expected her to pass a white, jewelled hand lightly over his bowed head and say, "*Povero bello!* Poor beauteous one!" as she had sometimes done a year or so ago; but when he bowed his head she continued rubbing the nails of her left hand against her right-hand palm and looking out of the window.

He felt that a great deal depended upon her friendship, and it was almost out of a sense of duty to Nancy that he grasped her hand and kissed it in his best and softest manner. "Oh, don't be a snail, Aldo," said Clarissa, taking her hand away. Then she looked down at him and shook her head: "I *am* thankful I married Carlo."

This was untrue, of course, said Aldo to himself; but, added to the other things, it rankled. When he left her he understood that Clarissa considered him as much Nancy's property as the pair of antique silver candle-sticks she had given to Nancy for a wedding-present, and that never would she take them back or light the candles in them again.

Nancy had written one-third of *The Book*. It was a great book—a book the world would speak of. Like the portent of Jeanne of Orleans, a vision had fallen upon her young, white heart and set it aflame. She felt genius like an eagle beating great wings against her temples. Inspiration, nebulous and wan, stretched thin arms to her, and young ideas went shouting through her brain. Then the phrase, like a black-and-white flower, rolled back its thundering petals, and the masterpiece was born.

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XX

Aldo was not allowed to play the piano any more, because it disturbed Nancy's thoughts. He also stayed at home to see anyone who called, so that Nancy should not be interrupted. He himself brought her meals into her room when she did not wish to break her train of thought by going to table, and when the loud-footed, cheerful servant annoyed and distracted her.

A reverential hush was on the house.

The Rome publisher, Servetti, heard of *The Book*, and came to Milan to ask if he could have it. Zardo, the publisher of the "Cycle of Lyrics," who had omitted to pay for the last two editions of that distinguished and fortunate volume, sent, unasked, an unverisimilarly large cheque; and suggested for her new work a special *édition de luxe*. Nancy replied to no one, heeded no one. *The Book* held her soul.

It was a winter evening, and the lamps were lit, when Nancy wrote at the summit of a candid page, "Chapter XVII." She wrote the heading carefully, reverentially, painting over the Roman numbers with loving pen. This was the culminating chapter of *The Book*. It had been worked up to in steep and audacious ascent, and after it and from it the story would flow down in rushing, inevitable stream to its portentous close. But this chapter was the climax and the crown.

Nancy passed a quick hand across her forehead and pushed back her ruffled hair. Then she looked across at Aldo. He was sitting at the opposite side of the table with some sheets of music-paper before him. The shine of the lamp fell blandly on his narrow head. He looked dejected and dull.

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"What is it, Aldo?" she asked, stretching her hand affectionately across the table to him. In the joy and the overflowing ease of inspiration she felt kind and compassionate.

"Oh, nothing," sighed Aldo. "I was thinking of writing a symphony; but I cannot do anything without trying it at the piano. And that disturbs you. Never mind! Don't worry about me."

"Oh, but I do worry," said Nancy, getting up and going round to his side. She bent over him with her arm on his shoulder. Before him on the sheet was half a line of breves and semibreves, which Nancy remembered from her childhood as little men getting over stiles.

"You know," said Aldo, with his pen going over and over the face of one of the little men and making it blacker and larger than the others, "Ricordi is publishing those songs of mine; but I believe it is only because they have your words. So I thought I would try a symphony which will be all my own. But I ought to be able to try it at the piano."

"I know, dear," said Nancy, smoothing his soft, thick hair. "I know I am a horrid, selfish thing, upsetting everything and everybody. But never mind!" And she glanced across to the large "Chapter XVII" at the top of the fair sheet, and the wet ink of the "XVII" glistened and beckoned to her upside down at the other side of the table. "Wait till I have finished my book. Then you shall do all you want; and we shall go and pass blue days in the country and be as happy as sandboys, and"—she added for him—"as rich as Cræsus."

He raised his dark eyes to her, and she thought that he looked like Murillo's Saint Sebastian.

"Your writing has swallowed up all your love for me," he said.

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"Oh no!" said Nancy, and she caressed the beautiful brow. "It is you, your presence, your beauty, that inspires me and helps me to write."

Aldo sighed. "I suppose I am a nonentity. And I must be grateful if the fact of my having a straight nose has helped you to write your book."

Nancy felt conscience-stricken. "Don't be bitter, dear heart," she said. "I must be selfish! If I do not sit there and write, I feel as if I had a maniac shut up in my brain, beating and shrieking to get out. And oh, Aldo, when I do write, coolly and quickly and smoothly, I feel like a mountain-spring gushing out my life in glad, scintillant waters."

Aldo drew her face down and kissed her. "Nothing shall interfere with your book," he said.

"No, nothing," said Nancy—"nothing!"

As she spoke a strange, quivering sensation passed over her, a quick throb shook her heart, and the roots of her hair prickled. Then it was past and gone. She stepped back to her place at the table and stood looking down at Chapter XVII. The wet ink still glistened on it. She was waiting.... She knew she was waiting for that strange throb to clutch at her heart again. She looked across at Aldo. He was thoughtfully painting the face of another semibreve and making it large and

black. She sat down and dipped the ivory pen into the gaping mouth of the inkstand.

Ah, *again!* the throb! the throb! like a soft hand striking at her heart. And now a flutter as of an imprisoned bird!

"Aldo! Aldo!" she cried, falling forward with her face hidden on her arm. And her waving hair trailed over Chapter XVII, and blurred the waiting page. [Pg 122]

XXI

Nancy stirred, sighed, and awoke.

In the room adjoining, Valeria was sobbing in Zio Giacomo's arms, and Aunt Carlotta was kissing Adèle, and Aldo was shaking hands with everybody.

Nancy could hear the whispering voices through the half-open door, and they pleased her. Then another sound fell on her ear, like the ticking of a slow clock—click, click, a gentle, peaceful, regular noise that soothed her. She turned her head and looked. It was the cradle. The Sister sat near it, dozing, with one elbow on the back of the chair and her hand supporting her head; the other hand was on the edge of the cradle. With gentle mechanical gesture, in her half sleep, she rocked it to and fro. Nancy smiled to herself, and the gentle clicking noise lulled her near to sleep again.

She felt utterly at peace—utterly happy. The waiting was over; the fear was over. Life opened wider portals over wider, shining lands. All longings were stilled; all empty places filled. Then with a soft tremor of joy she remembered her book. It was waiting for her where she had left it that evening when futurity had pulsed within her heart. The masterpiece that was to live called softly and the folded wings of the eagle stirred.

In the gently-rocking twilight of the cradle the baby opened its eyes and said: "I am hungry." [Pg 123]

BOOK II

I

When eighteen thousand of the forty thousand francs were gone, Aldo said: "I must do something." And when eighteen thousand of the forty thousand francs were left, he said: "Something must be done." Carlo had washed his hands of him; all that Lady Sainsborough had sent him was her portrait, one "taken on the lawn with Fido," and another, "starting for my morning ride with Baron Cucciniello." "Flighty old lunatic!" said Aldo, throwing the pictures into the fire and digging at them with the poker. Then he called Nancy and told her how matters stood.

Nancy did not seem to realize that it made much difference. She crawled under the table and hid behind the green table-cloth. "Peek-a-boo!" The baby crawled after her and pulled her hair.

"Well, what are we going to do?" said Aldo.

"As soon as the baby can walk," replied Nancy, looking up at him from under the table, "I shall start my work again. As long as it is such a teeny, weeny, helpless lamb"—and she kissed the small, soft head on which the hair grew in yellow tufts here and there—"its mother is not going to be such a horrid (kiss), naughty (kiss), ugly (kiss) tigress (kiss, kiss) as to leave a poor little forlorn (kiss)—"

Aldo left the room, and nobody under the table noticed that he had gone. [Pg 124]

He went to Zio Giacomo, who for Nancy's sake took him into his office to make architectural drawings and plans at a salary of two hundred francs a month.

At the end of the third week Aldo looked round the room where four other men were drawing plans, and observed them meditatively. Two were sallow and thin, one was sallow and fat, and one was red and fat. The sallow, thin ones had little hair, the sallow, fat one had no hair; the red, fat one wore glasses. They had all been here drawing plans for four, six, and twelve years at salaries between two hundred and six hundred and fifty francs a month.

Aldo made a calculation on his blotting-paper. Say he stayed five years. He would get 200 francs a month for the first two years = 4,800 francs; 300, or say 350, for the next two years = 8,400 francs; 400, or perhaps 450, for the following year = 5,400 francs. Total: 18,600 francs.

Eighteen thousand six hundred francs! So that, supposing he spent nothing, but went on living on what remained of Nancy's *dot* for five years (which was out of the question, of course, as it was not enough), at the end of five years he would find himself exactly where he was to-day, and just five years older. Probably thin and sallow; or fat and sallow; or red and fat, with glasses. It was preposterous. It was out of the question. Here he was to-day, with the eighteen thousand francs and the five years still before him.

He took his hat and walked out of the office.

He wrote to Zio Giacomo, who said he was an addlepated and clot-headed imbecile. Aldo explained the situation mathematically to Valeria and Nancy, who looked vague, and said that it seemed true.

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"Eighteen thousand francs," said Aldo, "cleverly used, might set us on our feet. Now, what shall we do with it?"

Valeria folded gentle hands; and Nancy said: "Peek-a-boo." So the baby, at Aide's request, was sent out for a walk with the sour-faced thing chosen by Aunt Carlotta to be its nurse.

"You could go into partnership with someone," said Nancy sweetly, with her head on one side, to show that she took an interest.

Valeria nodded, and said: "Mines are a good thing."

Aldo was silent. "Eighteen thousand francs," he said thoughtfully. "It is not much." Then he said: "Of course, one could buy a shop."

In his deep, dreaming eyes passed the vision of his grandfather's nice little *negozio* in the Strada Caracciolo at Naples, with its strings of coral hanging row on row; tortoise-shell combs and brushes with silver initials; brooches of lava and of mosaic, that were sold for a franc each; shells of polished mother-of-pearl; pictures of Vesuvius by night, reproduced on convex glass; and booklets of photographs, that English people would always come to look at. He could see his grandfather now, stepping in front of the counter with a booklet of views in his hand, and shaking it out suddenly, br-r-r ... in front of his English customers. Also he could see his grandfather tying up neat little parcels, giving change, bowing and smiling with still handsome eye and gleaming smile, and accompanying people to the door, waving an obsequious and yet benevolent hand. Aldo would have liked a little shop in Naples, and easy-going, trustful English customers who would not haggle and bargain, but pass friendly remarks about the weather, and pay their good money. Ah, the good little money coming in that one can count every evening, and put away, and look at, and count again; not this vague, distant "salary," that one does not see, or count, or have, with no surprises and no possibilities.

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But Valeria was speaking. "A shop! My dear Aldo! What a dreadful idea! How can you say such a thing?"

And Nancy, who thought he was joking, said, with all her dimples alight: "That's right, Aldo. We shall have a toy-shop—five hundred rattles for the baby, eight hundred rubber dolls for the baby, ten thousand woolly sheep and cows that squeak when you squeeze them. Let us have a toy-shop, there's a dear boy." She jumped up and kissed his straight, narrow parting on the top of his shining black head. "And if all the toys are broken by the baby, and have the paint licked off, and the woolliness pulled out," she added, with her cheek against his, "I shall give away an autograph poem with each of the damaged beasts, and charge two francs extra."

The allusion to the autograph poem made Aldo realize that it was impossible that his wife, the celebrated author, could keep a shop, so he sighed, and said: "I have a good mind to try Monte Carlo. I have never been there, but my friend Delmonte once gave me a system."

"Why doesn't he play it himself?" said Nancy. "He looks as if he needed it."

"He has played it," said Aldo; "but he is a man lacking the strength of character that one needs to play a system. A system is a thing one has to stick to and go through with, no matter how one may be tempted to do something else. This is really a rather wonderful system."

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And Aldo took out a pencil and a note-book, and showed the system to Valeria and Nancy.

"You see, N. is black and R. is red." Then he made rows of little dots irregularly under each initial. "You see, I win on all this."

"Do you?" said Nancy and Valeria, bending over the table with heads close together.

"Yes; I win on the intermittences."

"What are they?"

"Oh, never mind what they are," said Aldo. "And I win on all the twos, and the threes, and the fives."

"And the fours," said Nancy, who did not understand what he was saying, but wanted to show an interest.

"No, I don't win on the fours," said Aldo. "I lose on the fours. But I win on the fives and sixes, and everything else. And, of course, fours come seldom."

"Of course," echoed Nancy and Valeria, looking vacantly at the little dots under the N. and the R.

"I could make the game cheaper," said Aldo thoughtfully, "by waiting, and letting the intermittences pass, and only starting my play on the twos."

"Perhaps that would be a good plan," said Nancy, with vacant eyes.

"But," said Valeria, "I thought you won on the intermittences."

"I do," said Aldo, frowning, "if they *are* intermittences. But supposing they are fours?"

This closed the door on all comprehension so far as Nancy was concerned. But Valeria, who had been to Monte Carlo for four days on her wedding-tour, said decisively: "Then I think I should wait and see. If they *are* fours, then play only on the fives and sixes." [Pg 128]

"There is something in that," said Aldo, rubbing his chin. "But I must try it. Now you just say 'black' or 'red' at random, as it comes into your head."

Nancy and Valeria said "black" and "red" at random, and Aldo staked imaginary five-franc pieces, and doubled them, and played the system. After about fifteen minutes he had won nearly two thousand francs.

So it was decided that he should quietly go to Monte Carlo and try the system, starting as soon as possible.

"Do not speak about it to anyone," he said. "Delmonte made a special point of that. If too many people knew of a thing like this, it would spoil everything."

So no one was told, but they set about making preparations for Aldo's departure.

"I shall not stay more than a month at a time," said Aldo. "One must be careful not to arouse suspicions that one is playing a winning game."

"Of course," said Valeria.

And Nancy said: "Is it not rather mean to go there when you know that you *must* win?"

Aldo explained that the administration was not a person, and added that the few thousand francs that he needed every year would never be missed by such a wealthy company.

Then Nancy said: "I know Monte Carlo is a dreadful place. Full of horrid women. I hope—oh dear —!"

Aldo kissed her troubled brow. "Dear little girl, I am going there to make money, and nothing else will interest me."

"I know that," said Nancy, with a little laugh and a little sigh. "But the nasty creatures are sure to look at you." [Pg 129]

"That cannot be helped," said Aldo, raising superior eyebrows.

Nancy kissed him and laughed. "Such a funny boy!" she said. "I believe your Closed Garden, your *hortus conclusus*, is nothing but a potato patch! But I like to sit in it all the same."

II

May brought the baby a tooth. June brought it another tooth and a golden shine for its hair. August brought it a word or two; September stood it, upright and exultant, with its back to the wall; and October sent it tottering and trilling into its mother's arms.

Its names were Lilien Astrid Rosalynd Anne-Marie.

"Now baby can walk," said Valeria to her daughter, "you ought to take up your work again."

"Indeed I must," said Nancy, lifting the baby to her lap. "Have you seen her bracelets?" And she held the chubby wrist out to Valeria, showing three little lines dinting the tender flesh. "Three little bracelets for luck." And Nancy kissed the small, fat wrist, and bit it softly.

"Where has your manuscript been put?" said Valeria.

"Oh, somewhere upstairs," said Nancy, pretending to eat the baby's arm. "Good, good! Veddy nice! Mother, this baby tastes of grass, and cowslips, and violets. Taste!" And she held the baby's arm out to Valeria.

"Tace," said the baby. So the grandmother tasted and found it very nice. Then she had to taste the other arm, and then a small piece of cheek. Then the baby stuck out her foot in its white leather shoe, but grandmamma would not taste it, and called it nasty-nasty. And the other foot was held up and called nasty-nasty. But the baby said "Tace!" and the corners of her mouth drooped. So grandmamma tasted the shoe and found it very nice, and then the other shoe, and it was very nice. And then Nancy had to taste everything all over again. [Pg 130]

Thus the days passed busily, bringing much to do.

Aldo wrote that "the system" was incomparable. His only fear was that the administration might notice it. He now played with double stakes. A few days later he wrote again. There was a flaw in the system. But never mind. He had found another one, a much better one. He had bought it for a hundred francs from a man who had been shut out of the Casino because the administration was afraid of his system. Of course, he had promised to give the man a handsome present before he left. He had won eight hundred francs in ten minutes with the new system last night. Of course,

he had to be very careful, because the flaw of the other system had been disastrous.

A third letter came. After winning steadily for four days, he had had the most incredible *guigne*: a run of twenty-four on black when he was doubling on red. But he would stick to the system; it was the only way. People that pottered round and skipped about from one thing to another were bound to lose. Love to all.

Then came a postcard. "Have discovered that all previous "s's" were wrong. Have made friends with a 'cr,' who will put things all right again."

Valeria and Nancy puzzled over the "cr." The "s's" of course meant "systems," but what could a "cr" be? Valeria felt anxious, and sent a messenger for Nino. Nino left Carlo's office at once, and hurried to Via Senato, where, since Aldo's departure, Valeria was staying with Nancy and the baby. All three were on the balcony, and waved hands to him as he crossed the Ponte Sant' Andrea, and hurried across the Boschetti to No. 12.

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"How do you do, Valeria?" and he kissed her cheek. "How do you do, Nancy?" and he kissed her hand. "How do you do, Anne-Marie?" and he kissed the baby on the top of the head. "What is the matter? What has Aldo done?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Nancy. "How could you guess that it was about Aldo?"

Nino smiled.

Valeria held the postcard out for him to see, and covering everything but the last line, said: "What does 'cr' mean?"

Nino looked, and said: "Where does he write from?"

Nancy and Valeria exchanged glances, and decided that they could trust Nino. He would not use the system or give it to other people. Besides, the system had a flaw.

"Monte Carlo," they said in unison.

Nino made a mouth as if to whistle, and did not whistle. The baby sitting on the rug watched him and wished he would do it again.

"I suppose 'cr' is croupier," said Nino. Then there was silence. After a while Nino said: "How much did he take with him?"

"Everything," said Valeria.

Then Nino made the mouth again, and the baby was pleased.

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"You had better go and fetch him. Quick!" said Nino, looking at Nancy.

"Oh!" gasped Nancy, "must I? Is it bad?"

"Quite bad," said Nino. "He has probably lost half of your forty thousand francs already."

"He only had eighteen," said Nancy, with a twinkle in her grey eye.

"That's better," said Nino. "But go and fetch him all the same."

Nancy was greatly excited and rather pleased. The baby should see the Mediterranean. Valeria, "grandmamma," must come too, of course.

"No, dear," said Valeria, "I cannot. I have promised Aunt Carlotta to help her with her reception to-morrow evening. But I will take you part of the way—as far as Alessandria or Genoa."

"But I am sure Nino could come," said Nancy, looking up at him interrogatively.

"Yes," said Nino, and then quickly said no, he was sorry, he could not possibly leave Carlo's office. Besides, she would manage Aldo better without him.

The next morning he went to the station to see them off. Valeria had Anne-Marie in her arms, and Nancy walked beside them, looking like the baby's elder sister. They had no luggage but a small valise, for Valeria was returning to Milan in the afternoon, and Nancy was sure that she would come back with Aldo the day after to-morrow.

Nino found comfortable places for them, and then stepped down and stood in front of the window, looking up with that vacant half-smile that everyone has who, having said good-bye, stands waiting for the train to start. Nancy was looking down at him with sweet eyes. There was something blue in her hat that made her eyes look bluer. Behind her the baby, held up by Valeria, was waving a short arm up and down as the spirit of Valeria's hand moved it. The bell rang, the whistle blew, and as the train passed him slowly, Nino suddenly jumped on to the step at the end of the carriage, turned the stiff handle, and went in. "I will come as far as Valeria does," he said. He was greeted with delight, but the baby continued irrelevantly to wave good-bye to him for a long time. They passed Alessandria and Genoa, and went on to Savona. The baby looked at the Mediterranean, and Nancy looked at the baby, and Nino looked at Nancy, and Valeria looked at them all, and loved them all with an aching maternal love. At Savona Valeria and Nino got out. They had half an hour to wait for the return train that would take them back to Milan.

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They stood on the platform in front of the carriage window, and looked up at Nancy with that

vacant half-smile that people have when they have said good-bye.... Nancy leaned out of the window and looked down tenderly at her mother's upturned face, and then at Nino, and then at her mother again. The baby stood on the seat beside her, waving its short arm up and down, with yellow curls falling over its eyes.

"In vettura!" called the guard.

"We shall be back the day after to-morrow," said Nancy for the fourth time; "or perhaps to-morrow."

"Perhaps to-morrow," echoed the baby, who always repeated what other people said. Nino went close to the window, and put up his hand to touch the baby's.

"You don't know what 'to-morrow' means," he said. Anne-Marie let him take her hand. He felt the small, warm fist closed in his. "When is to-morrow, Anne-Marie?" [Pg 134]

"To-morrow is ... to-morrow is when I am to have evlything," explained Anne-Marie.

"That sounds like a long time away," said Nancy, laughing.

"Yes, indeed," said Valeria.

"Yeth, indeed," echoed the baby.

"Pronti, partenza?" said the guard.

"Good-bye, Nancy! Good-bye, baby!" The bell sounded and the whistle blew.

"Good-bye, mother dear." The train moved slightly and Nancy waved her hand.

"Good-bye, Nancy! Good-bye, baby! Good-bye, my two darlings!"

The train was moving swiftly away.

"Perhaps to-morrow," cried Nancy, waving again. Then she drew back, lest a spark should fly into the baby's eyes.

Valeria stood like a statue looking after them. "Good-bye, Nancy! Good-bye, baby!"

They were gone.

And to-morrow was a long time away.

III

When the leisurely Riviera train drew into the station at Monte Carlo, Nancy looked out of the window to see Aldo, to whom she had telegraphed. He was not there. A group of laughing women in light gowns, two Englishmen with their hands in their pockets, and a German honeymoon-couple were on the platform. No one else. A handsome, indolent porter helped Nancy and the baby to descend, and, taking their valise, walked out in front of them, and handed it to the omnibus-driver of the Hôtel de Paris. [Pg 135]

"Non, non," said Nancy. "J'attends mon mari."

"Ah!" said the porter; "elle attend son mari." Then he and the omnibus-driver grinned, and spat, and looked at her.

"Donnez-moi ma valise," said Nancy.

"Donnez-lui sa valise," said the porter.

"J'vas la lui donner," said the omnibus-driver, climbing slowly up the little ladder, and taking the valise down again.

"Voilà la valise." And he put it on the ground. Nancy told the porter to take it. The omnibus-driver looked astonished. "Quoi? Et moi donc? Pas de pourboire?" And the porter spat and grinned, and said to Nancy: "Faut lui donner son pourboire."

So Nancy gave the omnibus-driver fifty centimes, and told the porter to take the valise to the Hôtel des Colonies. He shouldered the small portmanteau, and stepped briskly and lightly up the flight of steps that leads to the Place du Casino. Nancy followed, with Anne-Marie holding on to her skirts. An old woman sitting with her basket at the foot of the stairs offered them oranges. Nancy said, "Non, merci," and hurried on. But Anne-Marie wanted one. She was tired and hungry, and began to cry. So Nancy stopped and bought an orange. Then she lifted Anne-Marie in her arms, and hurried up the steps after the porter. At the top of the winding flight Nancy looked round. It was a light June evening. Where the sky was palest the new moon looked like a little gilt slit in the sky, letting the light of heaven show through. [Pg 136]

The street was deserted. The porter had vanished. Anne-Marie began to cry because she wanted her orange peeled, and Nancy, after hurrying forward a few steps, stopped, lifted the child on to the low wall, sat down beside her, and peeled the orange. Nancy was convinced that her portmanteau was gone for ever, but nothing seemed to matter much, so long as Anne-Marie did

not cry. She looked at the light sky, the palm-trees, and the smooth pearl-grey sea. She wondered where the Hôtel des Colonies was, and whether Aldo had not received the telegram. The legends of Monte Carlo murders and suicides traversed her mind for an instant. Then Anne-Marie, who had never sat on a wall eating oranges, lifted her face, smudged with tears and juice, and said: "Nice! Nice everything. I like." So Nancy liked too.

They found the Hôtel des Colonies after many wanderings, and there was the porter with the valise waiting for them. Did Monsieur della Rocca live here? Yes. Had he received a telegram? No; here was the telegram waiting for monsieur. Did they know where was monsieur?

"Eh! you will find him at the Casino," said the stout proprietress.

Nancy asked to be shown to her husband's room, but as it turned out to be a very small *mansarde* at the top of the house, Nancy took another room, and there Anne-Marie went to bed under the mosquito-netting, and was asleep at once. Nancy went downstairs. The salon was dark. Madame la Propriétaire sat in the garden with an old lady and a little fat boy.

"If you want to go to the Casino," she said, "I will look after the little angel upstairs!"

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But Nancy said: "Oh no, thank you."

Then the old lady said: "Allez donc! Allez donc! Vous savez bien les hommes!... Ça pourrait ne pas rentrer." Then she added: "I have been here twelve years. This, my little grandson, was born here. You can go, tranquillement. The petit ange will be all right."

Nancy went upstairs for her hat. Anne-Marie was asleep and never stirred. So Nancy went through the little garden again with hesitant feet, and turned her face to the Casino. The streets were almost empty. She was in her dark travelling-dress, and nobody noticed her. As she passed the Hôtel de Paris she saw the people dining at the tables with the little red lights lit. In the square round the flower-beds other people sat in twos and threes; and over the way, in the Café de Paris, the Tziganes in red coats were playing "Sous la Feuillée."

Nancy suddenly felt frightened and sad. What was she doing here, all alone, at night in this unknown place, and little Anne-Marie sleeping in that large bed all alone in a strange hotel? She felt as if she were in a dream, and hurried on, dizzy and scared. A man, passing, said: "Bonsoir, mademoiselle;" and Nancy ran on with a beating heart, up the steps and into the brilliantly lighted atrium. Two men in scarlet and white livery stopped her, and asked what she wanted; then they showed her into an open room on the left, where men that looked like judges and lawyers sat in two rows behind desks waiting for her.

She stepped uncertainly up to one of them—he was bald with a pointed beard—and said: "Pardon ... I am looking for Monsieur della Rocca."

"Ah, indeed," said the man with the beard. "I have not the pleasure of his acquaintance." And a fair man sitting near him smiled.

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"Have you no idea where I can find him?" said Nancy, blushing until tears came to her eyes.

"What is he? What does he do?" asked the fair man.

"He—he came here three weeks ago. He—has a system," stammered Nancy. "I telegraphed, but he did not receive my telegram. And the lady of the hotel said I should find him here."

A few people who had entered and stood about were listening with amused faces.

"Ha, ha! You say monsieur has a system?" said the man with a beard in a loud voice. And he nodded significantly to someone opposite him whom Nancy could not see. She felt that by mentioning the system she had ruined her husband's chances for ever. But nothing seemed to matter except to find him, and not to be alone any more.

"At what hotel are you staying, mademoiselle?" asked the fair man.

"Hôtel des Colonies," said Nancy, in a trembling voice.

"And your name, mademoiselle?"

"Giovanna Desiderata Felicita della Rocca," said Nancy. And the whole row of men smiled, while the one before whom she stood wrote her name in a large book.

"Your profession?"

Nancy had read "Alice in Wonderland" when she was a child, and now she knew that she was asleep. Otherwise, why should she be telling these people that she wrote poems?

She told them so. And they pinched their noses and pulled their moustaches, because they were laughing—they were *pouffant de rire*—and they did not want to show it.

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"And ... she did nothing else but write poems? Nothing else at all?"

"No, nothing." And as the man with the beard seemed suddenly to be staring her through and through, she added nervously: "Except ... I have begun a book ... a novel. But it is not finished."

The fair man suddenly handed her a little piece of blue cardboard, and requested her to write her name on it. She said, "Why?" and the man made a gesture with his hand that meant, "It has

nothing to do with me. Do not do so if you do not wish."

All the others smiled and bent their heads down, and pretended to write.

Nancy looked round her with the expression of a hunted rabbit. A man was coming in, sauntering along with his hand in his pocket. He was English, Nancy saw at a glance. He reminded her a little of Mr. Kingsley. Tom Avory's daughter went straight towards the new-comer, and said:

"You are English?"

"I am," said the Englishman.

"Will you please help me? My father was English," said Nancy, with a little break in her voice. "They ... they want me to write my name. Shall I do it?"

The Englishman smiled slightly under his straight-clipped, light moustache. "Do you want to go into the gaming-rooms?"

"Yes," said Nancy.

"Well, write your name, then," he said, and walked back to the desk beside her. "You will see me do it too," he added, smiling, as he gave up a card and got another one in return, on the back of which he wrote "Frederick Allen." [Pg 140]

All the employés were quite serious again, and seemed to have forgotten Nancy's existence. She signed her card, and entered the atrium at the Englishman's side.

"I am looking for my husband," she explained, and told him the story of the system, and the telegram, and the hotel. "I feel as if I had been telling all this over and over and over again, like the history of the wolf." She smiled, and the dimple dipped sweetly in her left cheek. She was flushed, and her dark hair had twisted itself into little damp ringlets on her forehead. Mr. Allen looked at her curiously.

"I am sure I have seen you before," he said. But he could not remember where. Nancy said she thought not.

"Oh, I am sure of it," said Mr. Allen. "I remember your smile."

But the smile he remembered had belonged to Valeria, when she stood on a little bridge in Hertfordshire, and took from his hands a garden hat that had fallen into the water.

They went through the rooms, and the chink, chink, of the money, and the heavy perfume, made Nancy dizzy and bewildered. Aldo was nowhere to be seen. They went from table to table—the season was ended, and one could see each player at a glance—then into the *trente-et-quarante* rooms, which were hushed and darkened; then through the "buffet," and out into the atrium again.

Nancy looked up at her companion, and tears gathered in her eyes. "I cannot imagine where he is! You do not think—you do not think——" And in her wide, frightened eyes passed the vision of Aldo, lifeless under a palm-tree in the gardens, his divine eyes broken, his soft hair clotted with blood. [Pg 141]

"I think he is all right enough," said the Englishman. "We can look in the Café de Paris."

They left the atrium and went down the steps and out into the square again. The "Valse Bleue" was swaying its hackneyed sweetness across the dusk. Nancy started—surely that was Aldo! There, coming out of the Café de Paris, with a fat woman in white walking beside him. That was Aldo! Nancy hurried on, then stopped. The Englishman stood still beside her, and stared discreetly at the trees on his right-hand side. Aldo and the woman had sauntered off to the left, and now sat down on a bench facing the Crédit Lyonnais.

"Will you wait a minute?" said Nancy. And she ran off towards the bench, while Mr. Allen waited and gazed into the trees.

Yes, it was Aldo. She heard him laugh. Who could that fat woman be? She hurried on, and stopped a few paces from them.

Aldo, turning round, saw her. He was motionless with astonishment for one moment. Then he bent forward, and said a word or two to his companion. She nodded, and he rose and came quickly forward to Nancy.

"What is it?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, Aldo!" she said, tears of relief filling her eyes. "At last! I have looked for you everywhere."

"What is it?" repeated Aldo, in an impatient whisper. "Not—not Anne-Marie? She is all right?"

"Oh yes, dear," said Nancy, drying her eyes. "Poor little sweet thing! She is fast asleep at the hotel. Come along! Come and thank an English gentleman who——" She was about to slip her arm through his when he drew back. [Pg 142]

"Don't!" he said. "Go back to the hotel at once! I shall be there in five minutes. You don't want to spoil everything, do you?"

"Spoil what?" said Nancy.

"Everything," said Aldo. "Our prospects, our future, everything."

"Why? How? What do you mean?" Nancy looked across at the broad figure in white sitting on the bench; she had turned round, and seemed to be looking at Nancy through a *lorgnon*. Nancy could discern a large face and golden hair under a white straw hat. "Who is that?"

"Oh, she's all right," said Aldo. "I have no time to explain now. Go home, and do as I tell you. If you don't," he added, as he saw indignant protest rising to Nancy's lips, "you and the child will have to bear the consequences. Remember what I tell you—you and the child."

Then he raised his hat, and went back to the bench where the woman was awaiting him. Nancy, paralyzed with astonishment, saw him sit down, saw his plausible back and explanatory gestures, while the woman still looked at her through her long-handled *lorgnon*.

She walked slowly back in stupefaction. The Englishman stood where she had left him, at the foot of the Casino steps, facing the trees. He had lit a cigarette. He turned, when she was near him, and threw the cigarette away. He said:

"Are you coming into the rooms again?"

"No," said Nancy.

"Shall I see you to your hotel?"

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"No," said Nancy; and stood there, dull and ashamed.

"Well," said the Englishman, putting out his hand in a brisk, matter-of-fact way, "good-night." He shook her chilly hand. Then he ventured consolation. "All the same a hundred years hence," he said, and turned quickly into the Casino.

He did not stay. He came out a moment afterwards, and followed the dreary little figure in its grey travelling dress that went slowly up the street, and round to the right. When he had seen her safely enter the garden of the hotel he turned back.

"Poor little girl!" he said. "I wonder where I met her before?"

Aldo entered the hotel half an hour later, and went to Nancy's room, armed with soothing and diplomatic explanations. But Nancy was on her knees by Anne-Marie's bed, with her face buried in the mosquito-netting, and did not move when he entered.

"Why, Nancy, what's the matter?"

"Don't wake her, please," said Nancy.

"But I wanted to tell you——"

"Hush!" said Nancy, with her finger on her lips and her eyes on Anne-Marie.

"Then come to my room. I want to speak to you," said Aldo.

"No," said Nancy.

"Well," said Aldo, "I think I ought to explain——"

"Hush!" said Nancy again. Then she sat on a chair near the child's bed, and put her face down again in the mosquito-netting.

Aldo stood about the room for a time. He called her name twice, but she did not answer. Then he went upstairs to his little room feeling injured.

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IV

Early next morning Aldo went out to buy a doll for Anne-Marie. He got it at the Condamine, where things are cheaper. It went to his heart to spend seven francs fifty centimes—a *mise* and a half—but the cheaper ones were really too hideous to buy peace with. For one mad moment he thought of buying a doll with real eyelashes that cost twenty-eight francs. But considerations of economy were stronger than his fears, and he took the one for seven francs fifty, whose painted eyelashes remained irrelevantly at the top of the eyelids even when they were closed.

Anne-Marie was delighted.

Nancy was a pale and chilly statue. Aldo sent Anne-Marie and the Condamine doll to play in the garden, while he in the *salon de lecture* explained.

The systems were rank and rotten. All of them. Rank—and—rotten. Grimaux, the croupier, had told him so. There was only one way of winning, and that was——

"I know all that," said Nancy. "Who was that woman?"

Aldo raised reproachful, nocturnal eyes to her face. She looked smaller than usual, but very stern.

"Nancy," he said. "Tesoro mio! My treasure!..."

But Nancy ignored the eyes and the outstretched hand. "Who is she?"

"She is nobody—absolutely nobody! An old thing with a yellow wig. Her name is Doyle. How can you go on like that, my love?"

But Nancy could go on, and did. "She is English?"

"No, no; American. A weird old thing from the prairies." And Aldo laughed loudly, but alone.

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"Well?" said Nancy, with tight lips, when Aldo had quite finished laughing.

"Well, Grimaux, who has been here sixteen years, said to me: 'The mistake everyone makes is to double on their losses. When you lose——'"

Aldo's slim hands waved, his shoulders shrugged, his long eyes turned upward. Nancy watched him, cold and detached. "He looks like the oyster-sellers of Santa Lucia!" she said to herself. "How could I ever think him beautiful?" Then she saw Anne-Marie in the garden kissing the Condamine doll, and she forgave him.

"When you lose," Aldo was saying, "you run after your losses—you double, you treble, you go on, *et voilà! la débâcle*—whereas when you win you go carefully, staking little stakes, satisfied with a louis at a time, and when you have won one hundred francs, out you go, saying: 'That is enough for to-day!' Now that is wrong, quite wrong. What you ought to do is to follow up your wins, so that when the streak of luck *does* come—"

"I have heard quite enough about that," said Nancy. "Tell me the rest."

"Well," said Aldo sulkily, "I wish you would not jump at a fellow. The rest is merely this: The good old prairie-chicken—he went off into another peal of laughter, and left off again when he had finished—"she was—she was just promising to put up the money when you came along. And you know what women are. They—they hate families," said Aldo.

Nancy raised her eyes to his face without moving.

"I do not know why you look at me like that," said Aldo sulkily.

Nancy got up. "There is a train at one o'clock," she said; "we will take it."

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She went upstairs; Aldo went out into the garden and played with Anne-Marie and the Condamine doll.

At twelve Nancy looked out of the window. She called Anne-Marie, who came unwillingly, dragging the doll upstairs, and followed by Aldo.

"We are ready," said Nancy, tying the white ribbons of a floppy straw hat under Anne-Marie's chin. Anne-Marie sat on the bed kicking her feet in their tan travelling-boots up and down. Aldo sat near the table, and drummed on it with his fingers.

"Who is going to pay the hotel bill?" he said.

Nancy looked up. "Have you no money?"

"I have eighty-two francs and forty centimes," said Aldo.

"Where is the rest?"

"Gone."

Nancy sat down on the bed near Anne-Marie. There was a long silence.

Aldo fidgeted, and said: "I told you the systems were all wrong."

Nancy did not answer. She was thinking. She understood nothing about money, but she knew what this meant. How were they to go back to Milan? How were they to live? With her mother? Her mother had had to scrape and be careful since the forty thousand francs had been given to Aldo. She had brought smaller boxes of chocolate to Anne-Marie. She took no cabs, and was wearing a last year's cloak of Aunt Carlotta's. Aunt Carlotta herself was always grumbling that when she wanted to spend five francs she turned them over three times, and then put them into her purse again, and that Adèle could not find a husband because her dot was small, and men asked for nothing but money nowadays. There was Zio Giacomo, dear, grumpy old man. But he had all Nino's old debts to pay, and everybody was always borrowing from him. Distant relations and seedy old friends visited and wrote to him periodically; and Zio Giacomo was enraged, and always vowed that this would be the last time.... The only wealthy person connected with the family was Aldo's brother, Carlo. But Nancy knew that Aldo had exhausted all from that source. What would happen? What were they going to do? She looked at Aldo, who sat in the arm-chair, with his head thrown back and his eyes on the ceiling. He knew she had likened him to San Sebastian, and now to move her pity as much as possible he assumed the expression of the adolescent saint pierced with arrows.

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Nancy turned her eyes from him. The sight of him irritated her beyond endurance. She looked at Anne-Marie, sitting good and happy beside her, playing with the doll. She bent and kissed the child's cool pink cheek.

Aldo sat up, and said: "I had better go."

"Where to?" said Nancy.

"To the Casino, of course," said Aldo. "I promised to be there at twelve-thirty."

"To meet that woman?"

"Yes," said Aldo sulkily.

"Oh!" gasped Nancy, and her hands clasped in deepest shame for him. "What blood is in your veins?"

It was the blood of many generations of Neapolitan lazzaroni—beautiful, lazy animals, content to lie stretched in the sun—crossed and altered by the blood of the economical shopkeeping grandfather, who sold corals and views of Vesuvius in the Via Caracciolo.

Aldo felt that it was time to hold his own. "It is easy enough for you to talk," he said. "But what else can I do?" [Pg 148]

Anne-Marie lifted the Condamine doll to her mother. "Kiss," she said. Then she stretched it out towards her father. "Kiss," she said. Aldo jumped up, and fell on his knees before them both. He kissed the doll, and he kissed Anne-Marie's little coat, and Nancy's knees, and then he put his head on Anne-Marie's lap and wept. Anne-Marie screamed and cried, and Nancy kissed them both, and comforted them.

"Never mind—never mind! It will all come right. Don't cry, Aldo! It is dreadful! I cannot bear to see you cry."

Aldo sobbed, and said he ought to go and shoot himself. And after Nancy had forgiven, and comforted, and encouraged him, he raised his reddened eyes and blurred face. "Well, then, shall I go?" he said.

Nancy turned white. It was hopeless. He did not understand. He was what he was, and did not know that one could be anything else.

"No," she said. And he sat down and sighed, and looked out of the window.

Nancy went to the stout proprietress and asked for the bill. While it was being made out, the kindly woman said: "Are you leaving to-day, madame?"

Nancy blushed, and said: "I do not know until I have seen the bill."

The proprietress, who had heard the noise upstairs—for Aldo cried loud like a child—and was slightly anxious in regard to her money, said: "Has monsieur already had the *viatique*?" Nancy did not understand. "The *viatique* of the Casino. If monsieur has played and lost, the administration will give him something back. Let him go and ask for it. And," she added, glancing at the brooch at Nancy's neck, "if perhaps madame should wish to know it, the Mont de Piété is not far—just past the Crédit Lyonnais." [Pg 149]

The bill was one hundred and twenty-three francs. Nancy told Aldo about the *viatique*, and he said, with a hang-dog air, he would go and ask for it.

"How much do you think it will be?" asked Nancy.

"I don't know," said Aldo, who felt that he must be glum.

"Two or three thousand francs?"

"I suppose so," said Aldo.

"You will accept nothing from that woman. You promise!"

"I promise," said Aldo, laying flabby fingers in her earnest, outstretched hand.

So he went, and when he was out of sight of the hotel he hurried.

Nancy packed his trunk for him, and felt pity and half remorse as she folded his limp, well-known clothes, his helpless coats and defenceless waistcoats, and put them away. He had no character. It was not his fault. She ought not to have allowed him to come here. He was not a wall; Clarissa had told her so long ago. He was weak, and limp, and foolish. Well, Nancy would be the wall. Already she knew what to do. Say the Casino gave them back three or four thousand francs. They would go back to Milan, give up the home in Via Senato, and take a cheaper apartment in the Quartieri Nuovi. She would write. She would work again. Ah! at the thought of her work her blood quickened. The baby should stay with Valeria, because it was impossible to do any serious work with Anne-Marie tugging at one's skirts and at one's heart-strings. She would go and see the baby every evening after she had written five or six hours. Aldo would return to Zio Giacomo's office. Good old Zio Giacomo would be glad to take him back for Valeria's and Nancy's sake, and they would live quietly and modestly. Aldo should superintend the household expenses, and squabble over the bills with the servant—he loved to do that; and by the time the three, or four, or five thousand francs that the Casino had given them were finished The Book would be out. "The Cycle of Lyrics" had brought her in twenty thousand francs, and it was only a slender volume of verse. This book would make a great stir in Italy—she knew it—and it would be [Pg 150]

translated into all languages. She wished she had the manuscript here. She felt that she could start it again at once.

She closed her eyes and remembered. All the people she had created, bound together by the scarlet thread of the conception, rushed out from the neglected pages, and entered her heart again. She felt like Browning's lion; you could see by her eye, wide and steady, she was leagues in the desert already....

Suddenly Anne-Marie, who had been playing like a little lamb of gold on the balcony, gave a scream: the doll had gone. The doll had fallen over the balcony. It was gone! It was dead! Nancy looked over the ledge. Yes, there lay the Condamine doll on the gravel-path in the garden. And it was dead. Half of its face had jumped away and lay some distance off.

Aldo, entering the garden at that moment, saw it, and picked it up. Then he looked up at the balcony, and saw Nancy's troubled face and the distracted countenance of his little daughter.

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He waved his hand, and went out again, taking the dead doll with him. He hailed a carriage, and told the driver to drive quickly to the Condamine. He bought the doll with the real eyelashes for twenty-two francs—he made them knock off six francs—and returned with clatter of horses and cracking of whip to the hotel.

When Anne-Marie saw the doll, and when Nancy saw Anne-Marie's face, Aldo knew he was forgiven and reinstated.

"What have they given you back at the Casino?" asked Nancy.

"I don't know. I am to go again in two hours," said Aldo. "Let us have luncheon."

They had an excellent luncheon, for, confronted with a desperate situation in which the economizing of fifty centimes meant nothing, the ancestral shopkeeper in Aldo's veins bowed, and left room for the lazzarone, who ate his spaghetti to-day, and troubled not about the morrow.

"If they give you five or six thousand francs, I suppose we must not complain. We cannot expect to get back the entire eighteen thousand," said Nancy.

"No," said Aldo, with downcast eyelids. He knew something about *viatiques*, but he would not let this knowledge spoil their lunch. After all, the luncheon cost twelve francs. It must not be wasted.

"Did you see her?" asked Nancy, tying a table-napkin round the doll's neck at Anne-Marie's request.

"Whom?" said Aldo, with his mouth full.

"The—the prairie-chicken," said Nancy, to make him feel that he was quite forgiven.

"Oh yes; I saw her," said Aldo.

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Nancy put down her knife and fork, and felt faint. "Well?"

Aldo cleared his throat, took a sip of wine, and said, "She is an old beast."

There was a pause, then he continued: "I made a clean breast of it. I told her who you were, and about Anne-Marie; and when I had finished she called me a—a—oh, some vulgar American name, and off she walked."

Nancy reached across the table and patted his hand. "That's right, Aldo."

"I told you," he said, nodding his head, "that that kind of woman cannot stand the idea of a fellow having a family."

"Perhaps," suggested Nancy, dimpling, "she could not stand the idea of the way the fellow treated his family."

"Well, never mind," said Aldo. "She's done with."

But she wasn't.

At four o'clock Aldo, Nancy, Anne-Marie, and the doll went out, and down to the square in front of the Casino. Nancy and the child sat on a bench facing the Casino, and Aldo went in to get the *viatique*. He came out a few minutes later looking flushed and angry.

"The *canailles*! The thieves! The robbers!"

"What is it?" said Nancy.

"They have given me one hundred and fifty francs!" and he held out the three fifty-franc notes contemptuously.

"A hundred—and—fifty francs!" gasped Nancy.

"Nancy, there is only one thing to do," said Aldo. "Go in and play them. Plank them down on a number, and if they go, let them go, and be done with."

"Do it," said Nancy, for nothing mattered.

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"I can't," said Aldo. "I can't go in—not until this miserable dole is paid back. You must go. They

will let you in. Go on."

Nancy rose, flushed and trembling. "What do I do? How do I play it?"

"Oh, anyhow. It makes no difference," said Aldo, with his face in his hands, suddenly realizing that they three possessed in the world one hundred and ninety francs, and a debt of one hundred and twenty-three. He turned to the child.

"Say a number, Anne-Marie! Any old number!"

Anne-Marie did not understand.

"You know your numbers, darling," said Nancy, "that grandmamma taught you."

"Oh, yeth," said Anne-Marie. "One, two, three, four."

"Stop. All right," said Aldo. "Nancy, go in and play—at any table you like—the *quatre premiers* and *quatre en plein*. That gives you zero, too. Go ahead! *Les quatre premiers* and *quatre en plein*. Remember. Tell the croupier to do it for you."

Nancy went straight in, and to the left, where the men sat who had laughed at her the night before. They recognized her, and gave her a card at once.

She went into the rooms. Chink, chink; chink, chink. She went to the table on the left. A red-haired croupier sat at the end of the table nearest her, and she went to him, and gave him one of the fifty-franc notes.

"Les quatre premiers et quatre en plein," she said.

But it was too late. "Rien ne va plus," said the man in the centre. "Trente-deux, noir, pair et passe."

The croupier handed her back the note. "You're lucky," he said. "You would have lost." She repeated her phrase, and he put the note on the top of his rake and passed it across the table. "Quatre premiers," he said, and the man in the middle placed it. [Pg 154]

"Et quoi encore?" said the croupier, looking at Nancy.

"Quatre premiers et quatre en plein," repeated Nancy, mechanically.

"Combien à l'en plein?" said the man, holding out his hand.

Nancy gave him the second fifty-franc note, and he passed it up on his rake. "Quatre en plein."

"Quatre en plein. Tout va aux billets," said the man in the centre; and the ball whizzed round. Nancy's heart was thumping; it shook her; it beat like a drum. The little ball dropped, ran along awhile, stopped, clattered and clicked, and fell into a compartment.

"Trois."

Everybody looked at Nancy as she was paid, and she collected the gold and silver with clumsy hands. "Encore," she said, giving the croupier the remaining bill and some louis.

"Quoi?" said the croupier.

"Encore la même chose." The ball was running round.

"Mais ça y est," said the croupier, for the fifty-franc note that had won still lay at the corner of the top line.

"Mais non, mais non," said Nancy, who was very much confused, "premier quatre"—the man placed the note on the other note still lying there—"et quatre en plein." But for this last it was too late.

"Rien ne va plus. Zéro!"

"Voilà! ça y est!" said the croupier, returning the gold to her, and waiting with the rake on the table for the eight hundred francs to be paid.

What is the secret of luck? How shall it be forced? How explained? Whatever Nancy did, she won. [Pg 155]
Wherever her money lay there the ball went. When she thought she had enough—her hands were full, her place at the table was piled up with louis and silver and notes—and she was withdrawing her remaining stake and the gold paid on it with clumsy rake, she moved it away from the numbers, and left it on "pair" while she put down the rake. A minute was lost while a woman said something to her, and before she could take the money up the ball had fallen. "Vingt. Pair et passe." It was doubled.

When she at last tremblingly collected it all in her hands, and put gold and notes as best she could into her pocket, she rose, and could hardly see. Her cheeks were flaming. She passed out of the rooms, into the atrium, and down the steps. Aldo sat on the bench with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands and the doll in his arms. Anne-Marie was running up and down in front of him.

"Aldo," said Nancy, and sat down weakly at his side.

"Gone?" asked Aldo, raising a miserable face.

"No!" Nancy had a little hysterical laugh. She piled the money into his hands, then into her lap, while he counted it quickly, deftly. People passing looked at them, and smiled.

"Seven thousand eight hundred francs," said Aldo, very pale.

"Oh, but there is more;" and Nancy dived into her pocket again. There was over fourteen thousand francs.

"Come into the Café de Paris," said Aldo.

They drank coffee and *crème de menthe*, and Anne-Marie had strawberry ice and cakes. The band played "Sous la Feuillée."

"Oh what a lovely world it is!" said Nancy, with a little sob. "Oh, what a glorious place! I love it all! I love everybody!" [Pg 156]

"I love evlybody," said Anne-Marie, taking a third cake with careful choice. Aldo and Nancy laughed.

The Englishman passed, and Nancy called him. She introduced him to Aldo, and Aldo thanked him for being kind to Nancy the evening before. Nancy told him about the fourteen thousand francs she had won, and they all laughed, and the band played, and the sun shone and went down.

"The best train for Italy," said Mr. Allen suddenly, "is at six-twenty. You have just an hour. It's a splendid train. You get to Milan at eleven."

Aldo looked at Nancy, and Nancy looked at the sky. It was light and tender, and the air was still. The Tsiganes were playing "Violets," and in the distance lay the sea.

"We must take that train," said Aldo, getting up and rapping his saucer for the waiter.

"Oh no!" said Nancy. "Please not! Let us stay here and be happy."

"Stay here and be happy," said Anne-Marie, with a bewitching smile.

They stayed.

V

Aldo repaid the *viatique* and went into the gambling-rooms with Nancy. The proprietress of the hotel got them a *bonne* from Vintimille, who walked up and down in the gardens with Anne-Marie, and carried the doll. She cost nothing—only fifty francs a month! They arranged to take *pension* at the hotel. That also cost nothing—twelve francs a day each. They took drives that cost nothing—sixteen francs to La Turbie, twenty francs to Cap Martin. Nothing cost anything. Ten minutes at the tables, and Nancy had won enough to pay everything for a month. [Pg 157]

She sent a cloak to her mother, which Valeria vowed was much too beautiful to wear. She sent presents to Aunt Carlotta and Zio Giacomo, to Adèle and to Nino, to Carlo and to Clarissa. And she remembered a man with no legs, who sat in a little cart on the Corso in Milan, and she sent her mother one hundred francs to give him. Anne-Marie was dressed in a white corded silk coat, and a white-plumed hat. The *bonne* had a large Scotch bow with streamers.

This lasted ten days. On the eleventh day it was ended. Nancy played gaily, and lost. She played carefully, and lost. She played tremblingly, and lost. She played recklessly, and lost. Aldo, who did not trust his own luck, followed her from table to table, saying: "Be careful!... Don't!... Do!... Why did you? Why didn't you? I told you so!" And at each table *la guigne* was waiting for them, pushing Nancy's hand in the wrong direction, whispering the wrong numbers in her ear. Ten times they made up their minds to stop, and ten times they decided to try just once more. "We have about nine thousand francs left. With that we are paupers for the rest of our lives. With luck we might recoup."

This lasted two days. On the third day they had one thousand and eighty francs left. "Play the eighty," said Aldo, "and we will keep the thousand." They lost the eighty, and then four hundred francs more. "What is the good of six hundred francs," said Aldo, and they played on. [Pg 158]

Their last two louis Aldo threw on a *transversale*. They won. "Let us leave it all on," said Aldo. They won again.

"Shall we risk it again?" said Nancy, with flushed cheeks and galloping heart.

Aldo's lips were dry and pale; he could not speak. He nodded. And a third time they won. The croupier flattened the notes out on the table and knocked the little pile of gold lightly over with his rake. He counted, and paid five times the already quintupled stake.

Aldo bent forward and picked up a rake to draw in his winnings. A man sitting near the centre of the table put out his hand, and took the piled-up notes and gold.

"Ah, *pardon!*" cried Aldo, striking the rake down on the notes and holding them; "that is mine."

"Pardon! pardon! pardon!" said the man, laying his hand firmly on the notes. "C'est ma mise à moi! Voilà déjà trois coups que je l'y laisse—"

Aldo was incoherent with excitement, and Nancy joined in, very pale. "It is ours, monsieur."

"Ah, mais c'est par trop fort," cried the other, who was French, and had a loud voice. He pushed Aldo's rake aside, and took the money.

Aldo appealed to the croupiers, and to the people near him, and to the people opposite him. They shrugged their shoulders and raised their eyebrows. They had not seen, they did not know.

"Faites vos jeux, messieurs," said the croupier.

The ball whizzed; the game went on. Aldo, burning with rage, and Nancy pale and dazed, left the table.

"Oh, Aldo! Let us go away. This is a horrible place. Let us go away."

Aldo did not answer.

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They went out into the sunshine. Laughing women lifting light dresses and showing their high heels came hurrying across the square. The warm air was heavy with the scent of flowers. They turned into the gardens, and before them was the dancing sea; and Anne-Marie, looking like an Altezza Serenissima, tripped up and down in her white corded silk coat, her brief curls bobbing under her white-plumed hat.

Behind her walked the Vintimille servant with the Scotch silk bow on her head, and carried the doll with the real eyelashes.

VI

NEW YORK.

MOTHER DEAR,

I shall send you this letter when nothing that I have written in it is true any more. If we ever live through and out of it, you shall know; if not—but, of course, we shall. We must. One cannot die of poverty, can one? One does not really, actually suffer real hunger, does one, mother dear? "Zu Grunde gehen!" The sombre old German words keep rumbling in my head like far-away thunder. "Zu Grunde gehen!"

I do not suppose one really does go "*zu Grunde*." But when one has forty-five dollars in the world, and a funny little bird with its beak open expecting to be fed—and fed on chocolates and bonbons when it wants them—one becomes demoralized and frightened, and pretends to think that one might really starve.

Do not think it unkind that I did not come to Milan to kiss you and say good-bye. I had not the heart to do so. Aldo, too, said we could not afford it, and, indeed, our combined *viatiques* and our jewellery only just enabled us to come here.

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We landed three days ago. Yesterday morning I sent you a postcard: "Arrived happily." Happily! Oh, mother dear, I think there must be a second higher and happier heaven for those who are brave enough to tell untruths of this kind. Enough; we landed, Anne-Marie looking like a spoilt princess; I with my Monte Carlo hat and coat, and high-heeled, impertinent shoes; and Aldo, a pallid Antinous, with forty-five dollars in his pocket-book.

Then came the Via Crucis of looking for rooms. Mother, did I ever stay at the Hôtel Nazionale in Rome, and descend languidly the red-carpeted stairs to the royal automobile that was to drive me to the Quirinal? Did I ever sit at home in Uncle Giacomo's large arm-chair and listen benignly to moon-struck poets reading their songs? Did I ever with languid fingers ring bells for servants, and order what I wanted?

"Cio avvenne forse ai tempi
D'Omero e di Valmichi—"

That was another Nancy. This Nancy trudged for hours through straight and terrible streets called avenues, with a dismal husband and a tired baby at her side. Third Avenue, Fourth Avenue, then quickly across Fifth Avenue, which had nothing to do with us, and again across to Sixth Avenue ... and everywhere dirty shops, screaming children, jostling girls, rude men, trains rushing overhead, street-cars screeching and clanging. Then, at last, Seventh Avenue, where there were streets full of quiet, squalid boarding-houses, fewer screaming children, fewer dirty shops, and no trains. We went into a cheap, clean-looking place that a porter had told us of. A woman opened. She looked at my hat and coat, and at my shoes, and said: "What do you want?" "A room—" began Aldo. She shut the door without answering. At the next house a woman in a dirty silk dressing-gown opened the door. "Yes, they had rooms. Eight dollars a day. Meals a dollar." In the next house they took no children. In the next, no foreigners. Our expensive clothes in their cheap street made them suspicious. Aldo's handsome face made them suspicious. His Italian accent frightened them. And Anne-Marie cried every time a new face appeared at a new door.

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At last Aldo said: "I will go to the Italian consul. You wait here in a baker's shop." The consulate was at the other end of New York, and was closed when Aldo got there. When he returned, harassed and haggard, I had made friends with the baker's wife. She was German. I told her our History of the Wolf—that I was a poetess, and had met the Queen, and all about Monte Carlo. I don't think she believed or understood much, but she was sorry for me; and Anne-Marie, hearing us talk German, suddenly started piping: "Schlaf, Kindchen, schlaf!" The woman caught her up in her arms, and said: "Ach, du süßes! How does she come to know that?" And she took us all to 28th Street to the house of her sister, who gave us this room. It is clean, and the woman is kind.

And now, what?

I have bought myself a frightful pepper-and-salt coloured dress, and a black straw hat. I look like a "deserving poor." And Anne-Marie is wearing a dark blue woolly horror belonging to the woman's daughter. She must wear it, or Frau Schmidl would be offended. Frau Schmidl is the only friend we have in America.

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For the ranch is a myth of Aldo's. He never was on a ranch in his life. He met a Frenchman once with weak lungs, who had been in Texas, and who gave him all the romantic details that he used to recount to us. Do you remember, mother? On Lake Maggiore? He talked vaguely, and not much, it is true, of those bucking bronchoes he used to ride across the sweeping Western prairies, feeling the wind in his hair.... When I reproach him for his fables, he tells me that it was our fault. We insisted upon the details. We would hear all about it! He says Clarissa started the ranch legend, because she thought it sounded well. Then she left him to keep it up as best he could. Poor Aldo! He hates us in these clothes. And he hates the German things Frau Schmidl gives us to eat. He has gone to the Italian Consul for the third time to see if he can find some correspondence to do. I could give lessons, but it seems that there are many more people who want to give lessons than there are who want to take them. And then—there is Anne-Marie, who has to be taken care of. Anne-Marie! Frau Schmidl loves her because of her name. She says it is echt deutsch! She is a stout, fair woman, who speaks English strangely. When she enters the room, she says, nodding and laughing, "Now, and what makes the Anne-Marie?"

The Anne-Marie likes the sound of the language, and imitates her. I dread to think what English the Anne-Marie will learn.

Aldo has found nothing to do. The Americans will have nothing to do with an Italian, and Italians will have still less to do with an Italian. We have eight dollars left.

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If I write to you for money you will send it. And then? A few weeks hence we shall be where we are now. We must fight our battles alone.

We have nothing left.

Mr. Schmidl says he will let us keep the room—"for another week or two," he added gruffly; but his wife is not to feed us. "At least—not all of you," he added still more gruffly. "Only you—and the Anne-Marie." He is a poor man. He is quite right. But what about Aldo?

We have sold the Monte Carlo clothes for twelve dollars. We feel that we are rehabilitated. And what have I been dreaming of? I can write. I shall send an article to the *Giornale Italo-Americano*. Unsigned, of course. I shall write it to-night.

It is done.

It is accepted.

It is printed.

It seems that that is all. They have told Aldo that they never pay for articles that are sent to them from the outside—even if they are as brilliant and original as this one. They only pay their own staff. Have they room on their staff for a brilliant and original writer? Plenty of room. But no money.

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Aldo is living on dates and a little rice. He speaks less than ever. I do not know what his thoughts are. I am afraid for him.

To-day as I was taking Anne-Marie for a run in front of the house I met a man whom we knew in Italy, a Dr. Fioretti. He was an old friend of Nino's. Do you remember? He looked at me, and past me, blankly, unrecognizing. I thanked the fates. My knees ached with fear lest he should stop and say: "You here! What are you doing? Where do you live?" Where do I live? In this vile street near the negro quarter. What am I doing? Starving. Are we dreaming, mother? Oh, mother! mother! when did I fall asleep? I should like to wake up a little girl again in England. Was there not another little girl called Edith, with yellow hair? Surely I remember her. What became of her?... Or was she the girl who died?...

Aldo will not leave the house any more. He will not speak to us any more. He sits and stares at us. I am afraid of him. I shall telegraph to you if I can find the money to do so. Mrs. Schmidl

keeps Anne-Marie downstairs in her kitchen. But she is afraid of Aldo, too. I think they will turn us out. But they will keep the child, and take care of her.

I shall go out. I shall ask everybody, anybody, to help me....

I have been to the Italian Church, to the Italian Consul, to the Italian Embassy. They will see. They will do what they can. There are many pitiable cases. Are we a "pitiable case"? How strange! They would not give me any money to send a telegram. They said they would telegraph themselves, after they had come to see us, and made inquiries....

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I stopped a woman in the street, and said, "I beg your pardon. Will you——" and then my courage failed and I asked where West 28th Street was. She directed me, and I turned back and walked in the direction I had come from.

I came to Fifth Avenue, and walked up it in my shabby clothes. I passed rows of large houses. One of them had the windows open, and someone inside was playing "Der Musikant" of Hugo Wolff. And a woman's voice was singing:

"Wenn wir zwei zusammen wären
Würd' das Singen mir vergeh'n."

I stopped. I turned back, and walked up the wide stone steps. I rang the visitors' bell, and a manservant in ornate livery opened at once.

"I wish to speak to the lady who is singing," I said.

"Oh," said the man. I knew he thought me a beggar, and was going to send me away.

"Tell her—tell her quickly," I said, "that—that Hugo Wolff told me I might come."

Something in my face—oh, my despairing face, mother!—touched something human in the pompous automaton. He went straight into the drawing-room and gave my message. There was a basket of Easter lilies on the hall-table.

The music stopped, and almost at once on the threshold of the drawing-room a lady appeared. She was young—hardly older than I—and beautiful, dressed in soft mauve cloth. She looked at me curiously, and then said suddenly:

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"Will you come in?"

I went into the large, luxurious drawing-room. Titian's "Bella" looked down at me blandly with her reddened eyelids.

"What message was that you sent?" she asked, with her graceful head on one side.

My voice had almost left me. "I said Hugo Wolff told me to come in. I heard you singing 'Der Musikant'...."

She laughed, and said: "Are you a musician?"

I said: "No." And I thought of telling her the History of the Wolf. But I feared she might know my name, and tell the Italians in New York. And the Italo-Americano would print an article about it—and the Corriere della Sera in Milan would reprint it....

"Is there anything I can do for you?" she said.

I nodded.

"Money?" she asked softly.

I nodded.

"How much do you need?"

"Five dollars," I said.

She smiled, and said: "Is that all? I should willingly do more for a friend of Hugo Wolff's!"

She went out of the room, and closed the door behind her. She left me in my shabby clothes, in my black straw hat and my need of five dollars, in her gorgeous drawing-room, scattered with priceless ornaments in silver and gold, jewelled frames and trinkets lying all about the tables. I covered my face with my hands, and the tears rolled through my fingers. She came back a few minutes afterwards with a gold twenty-dollar piece in her hand. She gave it to me, and said, "For luck!" and added:

"Is there nothing else I can do?"

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I nodded, with my eyes full of tears. "Yes!" and I looked at the piano.

She smiled and sat down. She sang for me. I know she sang her very best. She had a lovely voice.

When I went through the hall to the door two men-servants bowed me out as if I were a princess. And I went down the stairs weeping bitterly.

I went along the street, crying and not caring who saw me. Then I sat down in Madison Square.

Suddenly someone came and sat beside me. A woman. I felt her eyes fixed on me for a long time, and I turned and looked at her. There, under a turquoise toque, sat the golden hair and the large face of the prairie chicken.

"How do you do, Mrs. Doyle?" I said.

"What?" She turned quickly. "How do you know my name?" And she added, frowning: "What are you crying for?"

"For love of a woman who has been kind to me," I said.

"There are lots of kind women," she answered. "I'm kind. What do you want?"

"I want you to come and talk to my husband," I said. "You know him. You met him in Monte Carlo. His name is Aldo della Rocca."

"What? Della Rocca? That lovely Italian creature? That Apollo of Belvedere? Of course I remember him. Where is he? What is he doing here?"

"Come and see," I said.

And she came up to Mrs. Schmidl's house in 28th Street.

That evening we dined with the prairie chicken, or rather, she invited herself to dine with us. She said "Poison!" when she tasted the Knödelsuppe, and "Poison!" when she tasted the Blutwurst and Kraut. She is probably a very great lady, judging by her bad behaviour.

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In my heart hope opens timid eyes.

VII

Mrs. Doyle was a very great lady. Her husband had been a political "boss"; her sister had married an English baronet; and her daughter, Marge, eighteen years old, "a mere infant," as she said, had married Herbert van Osten, the Congressman.

She was full of good ideas. "Now, you two might be the rage of New York in no time," she said, at the end of the dinner. "You are a Count, aren't you?" And she looked confidently at Aldo. "'Della Rocca'! That sounds like a Count."

"Oh yes," said Aldo, with his shining white smile, humorously remembering his grandfather's name, "Esposito," which means a foundling, and the "Della Rocca" added to it because the little Esposito had been left on a rock near Posilippo.

"Well, let me see. You must have an atelier of some kind. Ateliers are all the rage. And your wife ——" Mrs. Doyle raised her sepia eyebrows and pinched her large chin pensively.

"My wife is a great poetess," said Aldo.

"Is she?" said Mrs. Doyle. "Well—let me see. She must—she must dress a little differently—red scarves and things—and look picturesque, and read her poems in salons here. Poetry is all the rage. And if it is Eyetalian, you know," she added encouragingly to Nancy, "no one will understand it. I shall discover you. I shall give an At Home. 'Eyetalian poetry' in a corner of the cards. That's an elegant idea!"

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But Nancy was refractory. She said she would not wear red scarves, nor recite her poetry; and what was Aldo going to do in an atelier?

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Doyle, "faces like his are not met with every day on Broadway. I don't know how it is in your country, but his looks alone are enough to make him the rage here."

Aldo nodded, looking at Nancy as if to say: "You see?"

"But what is the good of being the rage if one has nothing to live on? What are we to eat?" asked Nancy, feeling brutal and unlovely, and *terre à terre*.

"Oh, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Doyle. "If once you are the rage in a place like New York!" ... And she raised her round blue eyes to Frau Schmidl's ceiling, where languid flies walked slowly.

But Nancy assured her that it was impossible. Could she not find some work for Aldo to do?

"What work?" said Mrs. Doyle, resting an absent-minded blue gaze on the lustrous convolutions of Aldo's hair, on his white, narrow forehead, on his intense and violent eyes, and the scarlet arcuation of his vivid lips. "What work can he do?"

"Oh!" Nancy said vaguely, "what work do men do? He has been to the University and taken a degree. He has studied law, but has not practised. I am sure he could do anything. He is very clever."

"Oh yes," assented Mrs. Doyle dreamily.

She was thinking. She was thinking of something her married daughter had been saying to her that very morning. Suddenly, she got up and said good-bye. She let Aldo help her into her long

turquoise coat, and find her gloves; and then she sent him off to fetch a motor-cab. Alone with Nancy, she was about to open her large silver-net reticule when she saw Nancy's straight gaze fixed upon her. So she refrained, and kissed her instead.

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"Ta-ta, Apollo," she said, shaking a fat, white-gloved hand out of the carriage window to Aldo, who stood on the side-walk, bare-headed and deferential. Then, leaning back as the carriage slid along 7th Avenue and turned into 66th Street, she mused: "He will do—he will do elegantly. Won't Marge be delighted! That will teach Bertie to sit up. Elegant idea! Bertie will have to sit up."

Bertie was not sitting up. His wife, Mrs. Doyle's daughter, was. And very straight she sat, with defiant, frizzy head and narrow lips, when she heard the front door open and close. But it was not to her husband's insubordinate footsteps. It was the indulgent swish of her mother's silken skirts that rustled slowly upwards.

Bertie's wife sprang up and opened the door.

"'Mum'? At this hour? What has happened?"

"Nothing, Marge—nothing. Is Bertie at home?" said Mrs. Doyle.

"No," and the young pink lips narrowed again. "It is only eleven o'clock at night. Why should he be at home?"

"Marge, I have an elegant idea," said Mrs. Doyle, seating herself resolutely in an armchair opposite her daughter. "I have found the very thing we need. The bo ideel, my lambkin."

When Mrs. Doyle rose to go at midnight they were both wreathed in smiles.

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"You will have to be very careful, dear," said Mrs. Doyle. "Don't be rash, and unlikely, and over-generous. The wife is a stubborn creature who spells things with a capital letter: you know what I mean—Work and Art and Dignity, and all that kind of thing. She must not be rubbed up the wrong way. Besides, it will answer just as well if he does not know what he is doing."

"That's so," said her daughter. "Mum, you're a daisy."

The unsuspecting Bertie came home that night a little before one o'clock, keyed up for the usual withering sarcasm and darkling reproach. He found his wife asleep, lamb-like and dove-like, her frizzy head foundered contentedly in the pillows, a book of Gyp on the coverlet, and a mild smile—was it of indulgence or of treason?—playing on her soft half-open lips.

The next day Mrs. Doyle called on Aldo and Nancy. Anne-Marie was introduced and patted on the head, and sent down into the kitchen.

"I have a secretaryship for you," said Mrs. Doyle to Aldo. "You can start at once. Twenty dollars a week. They won't give more."

Aldo was graciously complacent, and Nancy looked anxious.

"His English is very imperfect," she said.

"Oh, the English is chiefly copying; he can do that, can't he?"

"Of course," said Aldo, frowning at Nancy.

Nancy asked for particulars, and Mrs. Doyle folded her fat hands and gave them. It was a confidential post. He was to be "secretary to her daughter"—catching Nancy's steady grey eye, Mrs. Doyle added—"s husband, Mr. Van Osten;" and the work was chiefly of a political character. He would have to—er—copy speeches, and ... etcetera. He would have a study, not in the Van Osten's house, but—er—in the same street a few doors off, opposite. He was not to talk about his work, because it was of a very—er—private character.

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"Mr. Van Osten is a peculiar man," added Mrs. Doyle. "But you will understand all that in time, when you get to know him. When can you start?"

"Now," said Aldo.

Mrs. Doyle laughed. "Well, I think next Monday will do. Meanwhile"—and she coughed—"the Van Ostens are very—oh, very much for appearance, you know. You had better go to Brooks and get him to rig you out. I shall drive round and speak to Brooks about you at once."

Nancy flushed and protested. "You can pay it back to me," said Mrs. Doyle. "Don't bother me so."

So Nancy flushed, and was silent; and Aldo went to Brooks, and was rigged out.

He also had some visiting-cards with "Count Aldo della Rocca" printed on them, but not his address, which was near the nigger quarter, and probably would continue to be so for a long time to come.

On the following Monday, at half-past eleven, he arrived at the Van Osten house in 66th Street. Mrs. Doyle had particularly impressed upon him that he was not to come earlier than half-past eleven. Mrs. Doyle was waiting for him in the drawing-room, and introduced him to her daughter. Mr. Van Osten was not in. The Count was to do his work alone for these first few days, as Mr. Van

Osten was very busy in Washington. The two ladies had their hats on, and accompanied him across the street to No. 59. They had a latchkey which they gave to him, and went with him to the room that was to be his study on the top-floor. It was a large, light, almost empty, room. A wide desk stood in front of the window; there were a few chairs and tables, and a half-empty book-case. On the desk was a pile of papers, newspapers, and manuscripts. A typewriting machine stood on the table.

"Oh," said Aldo blankly, "I do not know how to use a typewriter."

"Never mind," said the ladies in unison.

"We put it there in case you could," said Mrs. Doyle.

Then Mrs. Doyle showed him his work. "All this has to be copied," she said, showing him the tidy manuscript sheets. "And then you ought to make extracts from these papers."

She pointed to the newspapers—they were of the preceding week. He was to mark and cut out everything referring to the Congo, and underline with red ink Mr. Van Osten's name every time he came across it.

"And everything that Mr. Van Osten himself says has to be copied in this large book."

"Would it not be better to cut out the speeches in print and paste them in?" said Aldo.

"Oh no," said Mrs. Doyle. "He wants them copied. Doesn't he, Marjorie?"

Her daughter turned from the window and said:

"Oh yes!" She had fluttering green eyes and a funny smile. Her frizzy, light hair came down to the bridge of her small freckled nose, and she had a manner of throwing back her head in order to look from under her hair that was peculiar to her. She was dressed like an expensive French doll. [Pg 174]

"Oh yes," she repeated, with her head thrown back, and in her high childish voice. "I guess he wants it all copied." Her smile flickered, and she turned to the window again.

The ladies left him, and he sat down to work. He copied steadily in his beautiful *commis voyageur* handwriting until two o'clock. Then he went out and had a hasty lunch. At four o'clock Mrs. Doyle rustled in and asked him how he was getting on. He was getting on splendidly. At six he went home.

This went on for three days, and on Wednesday afternoon he had nothing left to copy, or to cut out, or to paste in. He looked out of the window. He took a book from the book-case—they were almost all French novels. After reading an hour, he decided to go across to No. 8, the Van Ostens' house, and ask for instructions. He had not yet seen his employer, and, as all men who are sure of their tailor and their physique, he liked new acquaintances.

The butler who opened the door looked at his clothes, then took his hat, and divested him of his overcoat. He presented a silver tray, on which Aldo, after a moment's hesitation, deposited his visiting-card. The man looked at it, opened the drawing-room door, and pronounced: "Count Aldo della Rocca." A subdued sound of voices and tea-cups subsided into silence, and Aldo entered the room.

He bowed low, his secretary bow, standing at the door, for he did not want to offend his employers. When he raised his head, Mrs. Van Osten's light green flutter of a smile was greeting him from the sofa. His quick eye saw that she was nervous. She put out her hand and said: [Pg 175]

"Oh, Count della Rocca, how do you do? Just in time for a cup of tea."

He stepped past the four or five ladies and an old gentleman who sat near her, and kissed her hand in Southern fashion. He was not to be the secretary? *Benissimo!* He was not the secretary. He was the Count.

"But perhaps," continued his hostess, "you don't like tea? Vermouth or Campari is what you take in your country at this hour, is it not?" And she held out a cup of tea to him, with her head thrown back and slightly on one side.

"Oh, Madame! All what is taken from so fair a lady's hand is nectar!" said Aldo, with his best smile; and the ladies tittered approval.

"Ah, Latin flattery, Count," said his hostess, and introduced him to her friends.

Once or twice he noticed that she glanced anxiously at him, as if dreading what he might do or say; but Aldo, remembering the political and private character of his work, did not mention it. The ladies left one by one. And the old gentleman left. Then Mrs. Van Osten turned her little dry, hard face to Aldo.

"Why did you come?" she asked.

"I have finished my work," said Aldo, feeling himself very much the secretary again. "I knew not what I was to do."

"Oh, I see. I will tell my mother—I mean my husband—about it." And at this moment Mrs. Doyle entered. Her daughter drew her to the window, and spoke to her in a whisper for some time. Mrs.

Doyle replied: "Oh, all the better. I did not know how we should ever begin it." She turned to Aldo, standing stiff and secretarial in the middle of the room.

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"I am glad you took Mrs. Van Osten's cue," she said. Aldo wondered what "cue" meant, but did not ask. "Do so, always. It is of the greatest importance. And now about Mr. Van Osten. *Never* speak to him about your work. He does not like it. Unless he mentions it to you, never speak about it at all. Let him see that you are absolutely discreet. Now you may stay till he comes."

He stayed and made flat general conversation. Mrs. Van Osten looked bored. Mrs. Doyle answered him nervously and absentmindedly.

The bell rang loud, and the butler opened the hall-door to admit his master. Aldo stood up. Suddenly he felt a hand on his sleeve. It was little Mrs. Van Osten's jewelled hand that pulled him down into his chair. She leaned forward, with her chin on her hand, and smiled.

"I am sure you are musical," she said, smiling into his eyes, as through the open door Mr. Van Osten entered, large, leisurely, and good-looking.

"Hulloa!" he said to his wife. "Well, mother?" to Mrs. Doyle. Then he looked at Aldo, who very slowly, wondering what he was to do, got up from his seat.

"Bertie," said his wife, looking up at him with a look that was at once the look of a cat and of a mouse, "this is Count della Rocca whom I was telling you about."

Van Osten put out his large hand. "Glad to meet you," he said. Then Mrs. Doyle sat down and talked to him.

"You are musical?" said Mrs. Van Osten, lifting her small chin, and twinkling her eyes at Aldo.

Aldo suddenly remembered what Dr. Fioretti, a friend of Nino's who had travelled in England and the United States, used to say about American women. He seemed to hear Fioretti speaking in his impressive manner, as if each word he said were three times underlined: "I tell you this about the American woman: as man and as doctor, my dear friend..." And Aldo decided that Fioretti was right.

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He found himself seated at the piano, while his hostess's tiny figure was thrown forward listening to him with rapt attention. Suddenly—while her husband was laughing loud at something Mrs. Doyle had said—she put out her hand and said: "Good-bye. Come next Saturday. Now go. Go quick." And he rose and took his leave.

He described his visit to Nancy, who was so much astonished that he thought it wise to omit the reference to next Saturday. On the following morning another pile of papers lay on the desk for him, and he worked on conscientiously. On Saturday a mauve envelope containing twenty dollars was placed on the top of his papers; and on a slip of paper was written: "Come at six."

At six he went to No. 8, and found Mrs. Van Osten alone. She scarcely spoke to him until her husband came in. Then she seemed suddenly to wake up, and was all smiles and pretty gestures; when Aldo spoke to her she drooped her lashes and played with her long chiffon scarf. He left her a little later, feeling dense and bewildered.

A fortnight afterwards he was invited to dinner. "I am sure Van Osten feels that he can trust me now," said Aldo to Nancy, adjusting a faultless tie at the summit of an impeccable shirt-front. "And to-day he will probably speak to me of our work."

"I am afraid Anne-Marie is going to have measles," said Nancy, sitting drearily on the old green armchair, while Anne-Marie pulled some of the stuffing out of it with languid feverish hand. "Seventh Avenue is full of it."

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"It is a beastly neighbourhood," said Aldo, buttoning his waistcoat, and fixing a sham gold chain into his watch-pocket with a safety-pin. "We must get out of it as soon as we can."

"Did those people you met at Mrs. Van Osten's ask where we lived?" asked Nancy.

"Yes. And on the spur of the moment I said Number 59 in the same street. That is where the office is, you know. I hope they won't make inquiries."

Nancy sighed. Aldo kissed her, and carefully patted Anne-Marie, who had dirty hands and a tearful face. Then he ran down and got on a car that took him up town.

No reference was made during dinner to politics or to the work. There were a dozen people present, and once—to try him, Aldo felt it!—his host said, looking straight at him: "And what are you doing in New York, Mr. Della Rocca?"

With the corner of his eye Aldo had seen Mrs. Van Osten's small head start up like a disturbed snake at the end of the table. He answered imperturbably, looking Van Osten in the face:

"Some literary work. I find it *very interesting*."

He said this markedly, and Van Osten only said: "Oh, indeed?" But Aldo knew that he was pleased. Van Osten must now indeed feel that Aldo was absolutely discreet and intelligent.

After dinner, when the men joined the ladies in the drawing-room, Mrs. Van Osten called him to her with her eyes. He sat down at her side, and talked about Italy. She drooped her head as if she

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were blushing, and he wondered why. He glanced round, and saw that her husband was looking at her.

A tall thin woman stood near him, and Aldo heard her say: "What a splendid-looking man! Quite like that Somebody's Hyperion in that—er—what-do-you-call-it gallery."

"Yes," said Van Osten. "Nice sleek animal." And he continued to look at his wife.

To Aldo's astonishment, she suddenly smiled and put her hand into his own, palm upwards. He felt the little chilly hand trembling lightly on his. Her words were as astonishing as her gesture. She said:

"Well, then, Count Aldo, if you insist, tell my fortune."

He had not insisted; but he told her fortune, following the little crinkly lines in her palm with the light touch of his forefinger. She shivered and she laughed, and she threw her head back.

Van Osten sauntered up to them with his hands in his pockets; he looked large and powerful. Aldo felt like a fool, with the little chilly hand still lying in his. He went on, however: "This is the line of the intellect—" Van Osten laid his hand casually on his wife's slim shoulder, and kept it there. She glanced up at him, and again in her eyes was the look of a cat, and also of a mouse.

"... That is what I read in this hand," continued Aldo.

Van Osten moved and put forward a large patent-leather shoe. "And what is it you read in this foot?" he said. "Kicks?"

His wife burst into a ripple of laughter and withdrew her hand from Aldo's. Aldo also was much amused. The only one who did not seem to find the joke funny was Van Osten himself.

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A few days later in the study, when Aldo had copied four columns out of a newspaper, he leaned back in his chair. He was irritated and tired. There was not enough ink in the inkstand, and he had to dip in his pen at every second word. He felt exasperated and on edge. Little Mrs. Van Osten was getting on his nerves. What did she mean? What did she want? She was in love with him, of course. That was not surprising. But what was surprising was her behaviour when they were alone. Either she left the room at once, or she looked at him with green, far-away, wintry eyes as if he were a wall or a window.

The night after the dinner-party he had been greatly agitated. This woman loved him. This very wealthy woman seemed to be willing to compromise herself for his sake. What should he do? For a moment the thought of running away with her crossed his mind. She was a plain little thing, but enormously rich. He might be able to be of more solid use to Nancy and his child by such a step than by slaving for them thirty years at twenty dollars a week. In a year perhaps, he might be able to return to Nancy, comfortably well off. These erratic American women were extravagant and generous, he knew.

He had walked home that night with his head in the clouds, dreaming of automobile trips across Europe, of staying at the best hotels and not paying any bills. He had found Frau Schmidl awake, and Nancy in tears, and Anne-Marie with the measles. He had stayed at home three days, sitting in the darkened, stuffy little room, heating malted milk and Nestlé's food on a spirit-lamp, and singing arias from grand operas to Anne-Marie, who liked nothing else.

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When he had gone back to the room in 66th Street nobody had been to ask after him, and his work lay as he had left it. He had gone across to the Van Osten's house, and had heard Mrs. Van Osten say in a high treble voice: "I am not at home." And he had felt she was looking at him behind the curtains as he crossed the road.

He dipped his pen in the half-empty inkstand, and then impatiently leaned it up against a pen-box. It fell over, and was emptier than before. He looked round the room for an ink-bottle. He thought of ringing the bell, but the old servant that appeared on the rare occasions when he wanted her, had, after the first week, looked so ill-tempered that he dreaded asking for anything. He looked about, and opened drawers and closets. In a cupboard in the wall, on the top shelf, pushed far back, he saw a packet of papers which he seemed to recognize. He pulled them out and looked. It was his work of the week before—182 pages, neatly written. What were they doing up there?

He gazed at them for a long time; then he put them back. He resolved to make an experiment. He rang the bell, and asked the untipped and unamiable old servant to bring him some ink.

When he had a full inkstand before him, he dipped in his pen and wrote: "The debate concluded with the usual majority for the Government. *La donna è mobile qual piuma al vento.* I wonder whether anyone will notice that I am writing rubbish. *Sul mare luccica l'astro d'argento Santa Lucia, Santa Lucia.*"

He finished the page, and put it on the others. Then he smoked cigarettes, and read "Autour du Mariage" until it was lunch-time. While he was at lunch a note was left for him.

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"Come this evening at eight, sharp."

His finished sheets had been taken away as usual, and a new pile placed on the desk for him to copy. He went to the cupboard in the wall, and looked on the top shelf. Yes; the pile of papers at the back was larger. He pulled it out; on the top lay the page with the jumble of Italian words on

it. He took a little heap of the sheets at random from the pile, placed them on his desk, and left them there. Then he lay back in his chair, and reflected.

For three weeks he had been copying things out of old newspapers seven hours a day. He had been paid twenty dollars a week for it. Why? Was Mrs. Doyle a charitable angel who wished to help him and his family without being thanked? No. He felt that was not it. His eye fell on the note. "Come this evening." A light went up in his mind as he recognized the fact that he was paid for the hours he spent in No. 8, not for those he passed in No. 59.

It probably meant that Mrs. Van Osten loved him, and must see him when she wanted to. The work was but a pretext to keep him near her, within call, away from others, perhaps. "Poor little woman!" he said. "How she must suffer!" Then he reflected that twenty dollars a week was not much.

At a quarter past eight that evening he turned into 66th Street, and crossed Mr. Van Osten, who had just come out of his house. Aldo saluted him respectfully, but Van Osten stood still and lit his cigar without appearing to notice the greeting.

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He found Mrs. Van Osten alone, bare-shouldered, in black and diamonds. She was agitated and angry.

"You are late!" she cried.

"Forgive!" he said, kissing her hand.

She dragged it from him. "Did you meet my husband?"

"Yes," said Aldo.

"Did he see you?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure? Are you sure?" And she breathed quickly.

"Yes."

"He saw you? He saw you coming here and did not turn back——?" She stopped, and the narrow lips closed tightly. Aldo looked at her, and thought her positively ugly. She looked like a small, tight, thin, crumpled edition of Mrs. Doyle.

"Little young prairie-chicken," said Aldo to himself. But the butler came in with the coffee on a large silver tray, and the under-butler followed with the cream and sugar on another large silver tray. And the riches, the atmosphere of calm, powerful wealth, overcame Aldo's soul; his senses swam in satisfaction, and he felt that, however thin and small and crumpled she might be, he yet could return the prairie-chicken's love.

When the servants had left the room Aldo felt that he ought to speak. After a while he remembered what, once or twice, he had done with acceptable success in Italy when alone with a comparatively unknown woman. In a low voice he said:

"What is your name?"

Mrs. Van Osten raised glassy eyes. He repeated: "I do not yet know your name."

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She took a sip of coffee, and said, very slowly and very clearly:

"Mrs.—Van—Osten."

"No—not that name," he said. "Your own name—your little name——"

There was a slight noise in the hall, and the outer door closed. Mrs. Van Osten heard it, and answered Aldo quickly with excited eyes.

"Marjory," she said.

Aldo bent forward over his coffee-cup. "Marjory?" he repeated softly.

It succeeded. It succeeded far better than he had expected, or than it usually did.

"Say it again!" she said quickly. "I like to hear it. Say it again. Quick!"

"Marjory!" exclaimed Aldo, bending nearer, just as the door opened and her husband came in.

She turned to him at once. "Oh, Bertie! You have come back?" and she laughed. Aldo looked at her. There was something in her voice and in her laugh that he knew. He had heard it in women's voices before. It was love. And love was in her eyes as she raised them to her husband's frowning face.

Then Aldo understood what he was there for. And more than ever, as he looked at Mr. Van Osten's powerful frame, did he realize that twenty dollars was little.

He stayed only a short time, during which he was sad, and silent, and bitter. And Mrs. Van Osten was pleased with his attitude. As he took his leave, he suddenly decided to show her that he had understood.

"Would you honour me by seeing 'Tannhäuser' from my box at the opera to-morrow night?"

A gleam shot at him from Mrs. Van Osten's sly eye. Her husband laid his large hand on his wife's bare shoulder. [Pg 185]

"We are engaged," he said.

Mrs. Van Osten put her head against his arm.

"Indeed, we are more than that, Bertie," she said, looking up at him with an enamoured and rapturous smile.

Aldo bowed and withdrew.

The next day was Saturday. On his desk lay the mauve envelope, and in it was a hundred-dollar bill.

"I shall not need you now for a month or two, I believe," said Mrs. Van Osten wistfully. She had come over to his "office" early on the Monday morning. "But"—and she sighed deeply—"I do not suppose the effect you have had upon my husband will last for ever."

"Nothing does last for ever," said Aldo sententiously, seated before his desk.

"Then I shall send for you to come to the house again. Meanwhile, you might hang round a little in a general way," said Mrs. Van Osten. "You can send me flowers if you like. See that they are expensive ones. But don't come over often. If he once kicks you out, it will make everything impossible."

"Yes," said Aldo.

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Van Osten; "why are such things necessary. Why are men such beasts?"

After a short pause Aldo spoke respectfully in a subdued voice: "May I ask who *she* is?"

"You are impertinent," said Mrs. Van Osten, "but I may as well tell you. Everyone knows. It is Madeline Archer, that dancing minx. She has made half the wives in New York miserable!"

Aldo made a little sympathizing, clucking sound with his tongue. Meanwhile his thoughts were quick and definite. [Pg 186]

"If," he said, as she rose to go, "any friend of yours, one of the wives you have just mentioned, wanted—er—would like—er—thought that I could assist...."

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Van Osten, clasping her hands with peals of laughter, "you *are* a daisy! Oh, you take the pumpkin-pie! Upon my word! You are the greatest ever!" And she laughed and laughed, rocking to and fro.

Aldo laughed too, glad to think he was so funny.

"Before you know where you are, you'll be opening a bureau—'First Aid for Neglected Wives.' 'Perfect jealousy-arouser of the careless or the cooling husband. Diploma. References. Moderate tariff. Success guaranteed.'"

"Good idea!" said Aldo, laughing. And in a way he meant it.

She stopped laughing suddenly. "You won't turn out to be a blackmailer, will you?"

"No," said Aldo, looking at her straight from out of his beautiful eyes.

"I believe you," she said, putting out her hand. "Besides, Mum, who knows a thing or two about human nature, said that you were a good, soft old thing. And now," she added, with solemnity, "for what you have done for me, and the way you've scared Bertie into good behaviour, you may give me a kiss."

She put up her narrow mouth, and Aldo, laughing a little, kissed it.

"... I'm glad I have kissed a Count," said Mrs. Van Osten, as she went down the stairs. [Pg 187]

VIII

It was a bright autumn day when Valeria in Milan received Nancy's letter from New York, telling her about those first weeks of misery.

Valeria had an income of two hundred francs a month, which Uncle Giacomo, who kept her securities for her, paid to her punctually; and which she as punctually paid over to Aunt Carlotta for her board and lodging, reserving apologetically thirty or forty francs for her own small needs. On the day the letter arrived, Valeria locked herself in her room, and went on her knees before Guido Reni's gipsy-faced Madonna. The Madonna must help Nancy. She, Valeria, must help Nancy.

Uncle Giacomo would give nothing that might fall into Aldo's hands; Carlo less than nothing; he would only reproach and recriminate. As for Nino, he had nothing to give. Aunt Carlotta would possibly lend five hundred francs with great difficulty and many warnings. So Valeria decided

that she would raise some money from her own investments, and arrange to have a smaller income for a few years. Nancy must have money. So Valeria put on her hat and her black silk bolero coat with the lace jabot down the front, and brown kid gloves, and went out to face a stormy interview with Zio Giacomo.

The interview was stormy. Giacomo's temper shortened with his breath, and Valeria was wrung with anguish lest his anger should harm him, and was rent with remorse when she had succeeded in obtaining what she wanted. She would not say what the money was for, because she knew that Zio Giacomo would oppose it, so she was mysterious and wilful, hinted at tragic possibilities, wept and warned, and finally left Zio Giacomo convinced that she had got herself into some serious financial scrape. "Ah, these silly women," said Zio Giacomo, watching Valeria tripping across the road, holding her violet leather handbag, her umbrella and her long skirts in confused hands. At one moment she was right under a horse's nose, but the driver pulled up suddenly, and the swerving carriage went on, carrying on its box a red-faced, head-shaking, remark-making, driver. "Silly women!" said Uncle Giacomo again, and returned wrathfully to his desk.

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Valeria went to a bank, where, after much confusionary explanation, and a quarter of an hour's waiting, she emerged with five thousand francs, and some silver and pence. Her violet bag was fat with it all. "Now," said Valeria to herself, "I will go to Cook's in the Via Manzoni, and change it into American money. Or perhaps they can send it over in some other way." Then she went along Piazza del Duomo, thinking of Nancy. Poor, penniless Nancy! Poor little helpless mother of the still more helpless Anne-Marie! "I wish Tom were here to look after us all!" she said, stepping off the pavement to cross into Via Manzoni.

If Tom had been there he would have stopped her. He would have caught hold of her elbow, in the masterful way he always did when they crossed a street together, saying: "Wait a minute." Tom would have seen the tram-car coming rapidly from the right, and a carriage driving up from the left, and behind the carriage—oh, quite a distance off—a motor coming along smoothly and quickly. But Tom, or what was left of Tom, lay in Nervi with folded hands, and nobody told Valeria to wait a minute. So she stepped lightly off the pavement, holding her violet bag tightly in one hand, and her umbrella and her skirts in the other. She saw the tram-car coming from the right on the far side of the street, and thought she would run across and pass in front of it. She ran two steps, and then saw the carriage close to her, coming from the left. It was impossible to cross before it, so she stepped back quickly, very quickly, and the carriage passed. The driver's face was turned to her: was that anger in his face? What a mad, terrible face! He was screaming and gesticulating. What tempers people had in Italy, thought Valeria, for thought is rapid.... Then something struck her in the back, and she thought no more. A moment's maddening roar and clamour and confusion, then utter stillness.

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... Valeria felt a cadenced, gently oscillating movement, and opened her eyes. She could see nothing. A grey linen roof was above her, grey linen walls around her. Ah, the walls undulated, parted slightly, and let some light through. Valeria could see parts of shops, and of houses, and people passing.... She was being carried through the streets. What was the matter with her mouth? She raised her hand in its brown kid glove and touched her mouth, and down along one side of it where she felt something unusual; her glove seemed not to touch her cheek but her teeth; then something hot and viscid ran into the palm of her hand and down her arm. A hand—was it hers?—fell on her breast. Suddenly she remembered her violet bag, fat with money. Where was it? She tried to say, "Where is it? Where is it? It is Nancy's." She cried it out loud, but could hear only a muffled bubbling and blowing through her mouth. Then oblivion.

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... Now she was in a small, light room. Everything round her was light and white; she saw the ceiling first. It was of glass—white frosted glass. Everything was white; the people were white, except their faces, which looked dark and yellow over their white clothes. One of the faces looked at her very near, then another. Then a lighter face came with white wings round its head. Valeria knew what that was, but could not remember. She thought she would smile at that face, and did so, but the face did not smile back. It continued looking at her closely, and she felt a hand touch her forehead and smooth back her hair.

Another face came, red, with bloodshot eyes, and someone took hold of her head and turned it. A voice said: "Useless. But we can try." Then a sound of running water. Valeria put out her hand to stop it. Immediately the winged face was bending over her. "Yes, dear? Yes, dear?" Valeria thought she told her to stop the running water. But the winged face only nodded and smiled, and said: "That is a good, brave dear! We shall soon be better—soon be better." Another face and a voice: "Shall I wash this?" Then something gushed over Valeria's cheek and trickled, warm and salt, down her throat. Something choked. Then there was a pain, a pain somewhere in the room, a burning, maddening pain. A man's voice said: "Leave alone. That's no use. Look at this." Valeria's head was turned round again, and she heard a crepitant sound as if her hair were being cut. Running water again.... Valeria's head lay sideways, and she could see the white-gowned back of a man washing his hands under a silver tap. She liked watching him. He turned round, shaking his wet hands in the air with his sleeves rolled back. It was he who had the red face and the bloodshot eyes, and a clipped grey moustache. He nodded to Valeria as he saw her eyes open, and said: "That's good, that's right. A little patience." Valeria smiled at him; she felt that her mouth did not move, so she blinked with her eyes, and the red face nodded back in friendly manner.

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Someone held her wrist, and for a while everything was silent. Again, again, a shooting,

maddening pain. An exclamation, and then a word: "Useless." Valeria opened her eyes. She saw the white-winged woman's face with her eyes fixed on the red face, which was bending forward, and the two other faces were also bending over, looking down at something Valeria could not see, for it was on her own pillow. Then the red-faced man said: "Useless," again. And the white-winged face moved its lips.

"Useless!" The word conveyed nothing clear to Valeria's mind, but something in her body responded to the word. Thump, thump, thump, her heart began to beat, loud and quick, louder and quicker, until it could be heard all over the room. Thump, thump, thump, it rolled like a drum, and Valeria turned her frightened eyes to the red face above her. She said to him: "Stop my heart. Stop my heart from beating like this." But the three men and the sister did not seem to hear. They stood quite still listening to it, and then Valeria knew that she had not spoken. Thud, thump; thud, thump; quicker and quicker, and Valeria's eyes rolled wildly, imploring help. Then the Sister said to the surgeon: "Oh, try! try, poor thing!" And again water rushed, and something was rolled stridently across the marble floor.

"Ether," said the surgeon.

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One of the yellow faces bent over her, and he had a dark net mask in his hand. He held it over her face.

Suddenly Valeria was wide awake. She sat up with a shriek, and struck out at the yellow face and the mask. She saw the two doctors and the old surgeon, and the Sister of Charity. She spoke and her voice came. She wanted to say: "Save me! Save me!" but she heard herself saying: "I have time to cross!" Then she tried to explain about the violet bag, and the money, but what she cried was: "Nancy! Nancy!" Then the surgeon was angry with the man who held the mask, and turned on him with impatient words. But the Sister stood over Valeria, and made the sign of the cross above her. "Lie down, dear, lie down," she said. So Valeria lay down.

Thud, thump; thud, thump; thud, thump, rolled the drum of her heart.

"Now," said the surgeon, "you must be good. Don't move! Count! Count to twenty."

Valeria struggled to get up. The black mask was near her face again.

"Now, dear, now!" said the Sister's voice. "Count: one—two—three—"

"Breathe deeply," said someone, and Valeria did as she was told.

Then she remembered that she was to count. But she had lost time, so she felt she must begin further on. "... Nine," she said, breathing deeply; "ten." She was on a swing—a large, wild swing in the air that swung her out in the sky and back through the wide, white air. "Eleven, twelve," Valeria felt that she must say thirteen quickly because—unlucky number—"thirteen ... fourteen...."

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The swing swung her out, flying through the air with a swoop and a sweep beyond all the mountains. The people around her seemed to be left far away, down in the little white room. They would never hear her voice from so far away. "FIFTEEN!" she cried, shouting loud, loud, from afar. Then the sweep of a gigantic wave swung her out into Eternity.

"I knew it was useless," said the Surgeon angrily. The face was covered, and the stretcher was wheeled away.

An hour later Zio Giacomo, Nino, and Aunt Carlotta came hurrying in, red-eyed and white-faced. It was over. Aunt Carlotta wrung her hands, and the Sister consoled her, and assured her that there had been no suffering.

"I want to see her," said Aunt Carlotta, sobbing.

"No, no," said the Sister. "Don't."

"Don't!" said Giacomo brokenly, the tears streaming down his face. Nino said not a word, but went with one of the young doctors into the large bare room where two stretchers stood, each with a shrouded burden.

"This one," said the doctor, he who had held the mask. Nino saw, gasped, and turned away.

Aunt Carlotta was being led in, supported by the Sister. Nino grasped her hand.

"Come away," he whispered; "come away at once."

Carlotta shook her head, her face buried in her handkerchief. "My sister's child! My sister's only child! I must close her eyes." Nino went out.

Carlotta was led to the farther of the two stretchers. The cloth was lifted from Valeria's face. Then shriek after shriek resounded through the bare chill room, echoing through the wide corridors, reaching the patients lying selfish and sad in their wards. Shriek after shriek. But the two quiet figures on the stretchers were not disturbed.

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Valeria was buried in Nervi near Tom.

IX

When Nancy in New York received the news of her mother's death she wore black instead of brown, and wept, and wept, and wept, as children weep for their mothers. Then she wore brown again, and went on living for Anne-Marie, as mothers live for their children.

They had left Mrs. Schmidl's kindly, dingy roof, and moved a little further away from the niggers, into a small flat in 82nd Street. Mrs. Schmidl's niece, Minna, came and did the housework, and took Anne-Marie for walks. Anne-Marie loved Minna. Anne-Marie watched her with entranced gaze when she spoke to the tradesmen, and followed her from room to room when she swept and did the beds. Minna wore low-necked collars, and a little black velvet ribbon round her neck, and pink beads. She was beautiful in Anne-Marie's sight, and Anne-Marie imitated as much as possible her manner, her walk, and her language. Nancy could hear them talking together in the kitchen. Minna's voice: "What did you have for your tea? A butter-bread?" And Anne-Marie's piping treble: "Yes, two butter-breads mit sugar." Minna: "That's fine! To-morrow Tante Schmidl makes a cake, a good one. We eat it evenings." "A cake—a good one!" echoed Anne-Marie.

Nancy's soul crumbled with mortification. She had taken out her manuscript, and it lay before her on the table once more. Its broad pages were dear to her touch. They felt thick and solid. The tingling freshness of thought, the little thrill that always preceded the ripple and rush of inspiration, caught at her, and the ivory pen was in her hand. [Pg 195]

"A cake—a good one," repeated in the next room Anne-Marie, who liked the substantial German sound of that phrase.

"Oh, my little girl! My little girl! How will she grow up?" And Nancy the mother took the ivory pen from Nancy the poet's hand, and Anne-Marie was called and kept, and taught, for the rest of the day.

During the months that followed, Nancy played a game with her little daughter which, to a certain extent, was successful.

"We will play that you are a little book of mine, that I have written. A pretty little book like Andersen's 'Märchen,' with the pictures in it. And in this book that I love——"

"What colour is it?" asked Anne-Marie.

"Pink, and white, and gold," said Nancy, kissing the child's shining hair.

"Well, in it, in the midst of the loveliest fairy-tale, somebody has come and written dreadfully silly, ugly words, like—like 'butter-bread.' I must take all those out, mustn't I? And put pretty words and pretty thoughts in instead. Otherwise nobody will like to read the book."

"No," said Anne-Marie, looking slightly dazed. "And will you put pictures in it?"

"Oh yes," said Nancy. "And I wish I could put rhymes into it too."

But that was not to be. Long explanations about boy and toy—rain and pain—fly and cry—far and star—left Anne-Marie bewildered and cross. [Pg 196]

Nancy coaxed and petted her. "Just you say a rhyme! Only one. Now what rhymes with *day*?"

No. Anne-Marie did not know what rhymed with day.

"*Play*, of course, my goosie dear! Now what rhymes with *dear*?"

"Play," said Anne-Marie.

"No; do think a little, sweetheart. With *dear!*—*dear*?"

"Vegetables?" asked Anne-Marie, who had spent many hours in Frau Schmidl's kitchen.

Nancy groaned. "*Dear!*" she repeated again.

"*Darling!*" cried Anne-Marie triumphantly, and was lifted up and embraced.

"I wish you were a poet, Anne-Marie!" said her mother, pushing the fair locks from the child's level brow.

"What for?" said Anne-Marie, wriggling.

"Poets never die," said Nancy, thus placing a picture in the fairy-tale book.

"Then I'll be," said Anne-Marie, who knew death from having buried a dead kitten in the Schmidl's yard, and dug it up a day or two after to see what it was like.

But Anne-Marie was not to be a poet. In the little pink and white books that mothers think they create, the Story is written before ever they reach the tender maternal hands. And Anne-Marie was not to be a poet.

But Nancy herself could not forget that Fate had printed the seal of immortality upon her own girlish brow. She thought: "I cannot finish The Book now. The Book must wait until later on, when Anne-Marie does not need me every moment. But now, now I can write a cycle of child-poems on Anne-Marie." [Pg 197]

So she watched her little daughter through narrowed eyelids, throwing over the unconscious blonde head the misty veil of imagery, searching in the light blue eyes for the source of word and symbol, standing Anne-Marie like a little neoteric statue on the top of a sonnet, trying to fix her in some rare, archaic pose. But Anne-Marie was the child of her surroundings; Anne-Marie wore clothes of Minna's cutting and fitting, and on her yellow head a flat pink cotton hat like a lid. Anne-Marie had spoken Italian like a royal princess, but her German-American English was of 7th Avenue and 82nd Street. And Anne-Marie's pleasures were, as are those of every child, taken where she found them; for her no wandering in a shady garden, nursing an expensive, mellifluously-named doll. Since the Monte Carlo "Marguerite-Louise," whose eyes, attached to two small lumps of lead now lay in a box on a shelf, Anne-Marie's dolls had been numerous but unloved. At Mrs. Schmidl's suggestion, and for economic motives, Nancy had gone down town one day to a wholesale shop in Lower Broadway, where she had been able to buy "one dozen dolls, size nine, quality four, hair yellow, dress blue," for two dollars and seventy cents.

The first of the dozen was the same evening presented to Anne-Marie. It was rapturously kissed; it was christened Hermina—Minna's name; its clotted yellow hair was combed; attempts were made to undress it, but as it did not undress, it was put to sleep as it was, and Anne-Marie went to bed carefully beside it. In due time Hermina broke and died. What unbounded joy was Anne-Marie's when Hermina herself, with the self-same azure eyes, clotted yellow hair, blue dress, angel smile, reappeared before her. She was rapturously kissed. In due time also this second Hermina, legless, and with pendulous, dislocated head, was taken away from Anne-Marie's fond arms, and a new stiff Hermina was produced, with clotted hair and angel smile renewed. Anne-Marie's eyes opened large and wide, and she drew a deep breath. With more amazement than love she accepted the third Hermina, and did not kiss her. That Hermina died quickly, and Nancy, with a triumphant smile, produced a fourth. With a shriek of hatred Anne-Marie took her by the well-known painted boots, and hit the well-known face against the floor.

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The other eight were given to her at once, and were hit, and hated, and stamped upon. For many nights Anne-Marie's dreams were peopled with dead and resuscitated Herminas—placid, smiling Herminas with no legs; booted Herminas with large pieces broken out of their cheeks; fearful Herminas all right in the back, but with darksome voids where their faces ought to be under the clotted yellow hair.

She would have no more dolls, and her pleasures were taken where she found them mainly in the kitchen. She liked to wash dishes, because she was not allowed to; and she could be seen whisking a kitchen-towel under her arm in the brisk, important manner of Minna. She liked to see the butcher's man slap a piece of steak down on the table; and the laugh of the "coloured lady" who brought the washing was sweet in her ears. She also liked the piano that was played in the adjoining flat—the piano that drove Nancy to distraction and despair whenever she tried to work.

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"Rose of my spirit, Fountain of my love,
Lilial blue-veined flower of my desire—"

wrote Nancy, trying not to hear the climper next door.

"Minna! Minna! What is that tune?" called Anne-Marie, jumping from her chair. "Is it 'Eastside, Westside,' or 'Paradise Alley'?"

"No, it ain't. It's 'Casey would waltz.'"

"Oh, is it? Sing it. Do sing it, Minna."

And from the kitchen came Minna's voice, a loud soprano:

"Casey would waltz with the strawberry blonde,
And the band—played—on."

Then Anne-Marie's childish falsetto:

"Casey would waltz with the strawberry blonde,
And the band—play—don."

Alas! even the cycle of child poems must wait until Nancy could afford a larger apartment, and a governess for the "lilial blue-veined flower of her desire." There was no "Stimmung" for lyrics in the left-top flat in 82nd Street.

Aldo was at home a good deal during the day-time, yawning, reading the interminable Sunday papers that lay about all the week, smoking cigarettes, and wishing they could afford this and that.

In the evenings he went out. His work, it seemed, was to be done more in the evening than in the day-time, so he explained to Nancy. He explained very little to Nancy. Once he had brought home one hundred dollars instead of twenty, but she had been so startled and aghast, so nervous and impatient to know how he had got it, and, above all, it had been so impossible to make her understand the subtleties of his duties to Mrs. Van Osten, that he had finally declared it was simply a present for an extra important piece of work he had had to do. And the next time he received a hundred dollars—about three months afterwards, when more arduous duties once more developed upon him—he took eighty to the Dime Savings-Bank, and brought the usual twenty dollars home.

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As soon as the little savings-bank book was placed in his hand, the Caracciolo grandfather awoke in him again, and murdered the lazzarone who cared not for the morrow. He became heedful of little things, grudging of little expenses. The dingy flat was run on the strictest principles of economy, and when a dollar could be taken up the steps of the savings-bank and put away, he was happy. He had learned that by making deep, grateful eyes at Minna over the accounts, she would keep expenses down to please him; and many were the lumps of sugar and bits of butter taken from Mrs. Schmidl's larder by Minna's fat, pink hand and placed, sacrificial offerings, on the Della Roccas' shabby table.

Anne-Marie's pink hats and Minna-made frocks had to last through the seasons long after the "coloured lady" had washed every vestige of tint and vitality out of them, and they were a thorn in Nancy's eye. Nancy wore her pepper-and-salt dress day after day; it turned, and it dyed—black, and when it was no more, she got another like it.

The days passed meanly and quickly. And Nancy learned that one can be dingy, and sordid, and poverty-stricken, and yet go on living, and gently drift down into the habit of it, and hardly remember that things were ever otherwise.

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The evenings only were terrible. When Minna had gone home, and Anne-Marie slept, and Aldo had sauntered out to meet some Italians, or had hurried in full evening-dress to his work, Nancy sat drearily in the "parlour." From mantelpiece, shelf, and what-not photographs of unknown people, friends of Mrs. Johnstone, the landlady, gazed at her with faded faces and in obsolete attire; actresses in boy's clothes, and large-faced children; chinless young men in turned-down collars; Mr. and Mrs. Johnstone in bridal attire; their first-born baby with no clothes on, now a clerk at Macy's. Hanging on the wall, with whitish eyes that followed Nancy about, was the enlarged photograph of dead Mr. Johnstone, and Nancy, in her loneliness, feared him. She covered him one evening with a table-cloth, but it was worse. When, on her arrival months ago, she had collected all these photographs and hidden them away in a closet, Mrs. Johnstone, who liked to drop in suddenly, had arrived, and looked round with a red face.

"You don't want to do that," she had said, taking all the pictures out again and setting them up in their places. She also would not allow the large ornamental piano-lamp, that took up half the stuffy little room, to be moved. It had cost thirty-two dollars. So it stood there in the dark-carpeted, obscure parlour, and its yellow silk shade with the grimy white silk roses pinned on it was an outrage to Nancy's pained gaze.

One evening at bed-time Anne-Marie said to her mother: "I like the girl next door."

"You do not know her, darling," said Nancy.

"Oh yes, I do. I talked to her from the back-window."

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"What is her name?" said Nancy, unfastening strings and buttons on her daughter's back.

"Oh, she told me—I don't know. A little dry name like a cough."

Nancy laughed and kissed the nape of Anne-Marie's neck, which was plump, and fair, and sweet to smell. At that moment the girl-neighbour knocked and came in, with a bear made of chocolate for Anne-Marie. Her name—the dry name like a cough—was Peggy.

"I've just come in because I thought you seemed kind of lonesome," she said, looking round the parlour after Anne-Marie had been tucked in and left in the adjoining bedroom with the door ajar.

She then told Nancy that she worked in a hairdresser's shop down Broadway, "mostly fixing nails." "Sickening work," she added. "All those different hands I have to keep holding kind of turns me. Especially women's!"

Nancy laughed. Peggy offered to fix her nails for nothing, and after some hesitation Nancy allowed her to do so.

"My! you have hands quite like a lady," said Peggy; and the cup of Nancy's bitterness was full. Nancy quickly changed the subject.

"Is it you who play the piano?" she asked.

"No, my brother. He works in a shipping office. But he is great on music."

At this point Anne-Marie's voice was heard from the adjoining room: "What is that piece that was lovely?"

Peggy laughed, but could not say which piece Anne-Marie meant. After a while she went to call her brother, who came in, lanky and diffident, and was introduced as "George." Anne-Marie kept calling from her room about the piece that was lovely, and finally the young man went back to his flat, leaving the doors open, and played all the pieces of his repertoire.

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But "the piece that was lovely" was not among them. Peggy and Nancy said: "She probably dreamt it." But Anne-Marie cried "No, no, no!" at the first note of every piece that was started. At last she wept, and was naughty and rude, and the bear's hindlegs, which she had not yet eaten, were taken away from her.

Peggy and George were very friendly, and promised to call again. They lived alone. Their parents had a sheep ranch in Dakota.

"Rotten place," said George. "New York is good enough for me." And they shook hands and left.

After that, when Mr. Johnstone frightened Nancy more than usual, she knocked at the wall in Anne-Marie's room with a hair-brush, and Peggy came in, and spent a friendly evening with her. Sometimes George came, too, and read the magazine supplements of the Sunday papers aloud. George read all the poems.

"He's a great one for poetry," said his sister.

George passed his manicured fingers through his thin hair, and looked self-conscious.

"I guess all the real poets are dead long ago," he said.

"I fear so," said Nancy.

"Mamma!" came Anne-Marie's voice, distinct and wide-awake, through the half-open door.

"Yes, dear," said Nancy. "Good-night."

"Mamma!" cried Anne-Marie. "Come here."

Nancy rose and went to her. Anne-Marie was sitting up in bed.

"What did he say?"

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Nancy did not know.

"He said the poets were dead. All the real ones. You said poets could never die."

Nancy sat down on the bed, and pressed the little fair head to her heart.

"I will tell you about that to-morrow," she said. "And you must not listen to what is said in another room. It is not honourable." After a long explanation of what "honourable" meant, Nancy rose and kissed her.

"You had better shut the door," said Anne-Marie. "One can't be honourable if one can be not."

So the door was closed.

Early next morning Anne-Marie inquired about the poets.

"Well," said Nancy, who had forgotten about it, and was taken unawares. She spoke slowly, making up her story as she went on, and trying to put another picture in the little book of Anne-Marie's mind. "Once the world was full of roses, and poets lived for ever."

"Yes," said Anne-Marie.

"Then one day some people said to God: 'There are too many useless things in the world. Roses, for instance. We could do without them, and have vegetables instead.' So God took away the roses. And all the poets died."

"What of?"

"Of silence," said Nancy. "They died because they had nothing more to say."

Anne-Marie looked very sad. Nancy made haste to comfort her.

"Then God put a few roses back, for little Anne-Maries who don't like vegetables (which is very naughty of them, because they do one good), and so also a few poets came back into the world."

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"But not the real ones?"

"Well, not quite real ones, perhaps," said Nancy.

"Then what is the good of them?" asked Anne-Marie.

Nancy could not say. Nancy could not say what was the good of not quite real poets. But for that matter, what was the good of the real ones? What was the good of anything? Nancy's thoughts went in drooping file to her own work. What was the good of writing a Book? "I need not have written any story at all," she said to herself.

Perhaps that is what God will say when the dead worlds come rolling in at his feet, at the end of Eternity.

X

Poverty and loneliness pushed Nancy along the dreary year, and she went in her brown dress, with her heels worn down at the side, through the autumn and the winter. Aldo was away for weeks at a time, and although he seemed in good humour when he was at home, and dressed elaborately, he was always parsimonious in the house, warning against rashness and expense.

Anne-Marie went to a kindergarten, where the grocer's children, and the baker's children, and the milkman's children went, and she liked them, and they liked her.

And now April was here. Where it could, it pushed and penetrated; through the trestles of the

elevated railroads it spilt its sunshine on the ground. And it ran into the open window of the 82nd Street flat, and stretched its sweetness on the faded yellow silk of the hated lampshade.

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To Nancy, who was moping in her dingy brown dress, April said: "Go out." So she put on her hat, and went out. And, having no reason to turn to the right, she turned to the left, and after a few blocks, having no reason to turn to the left, she turned to the right, and ran straight into a little messenger-boy, who was coming round the corner carrying some flowers in tissue-paper, and whistling.

Some trailing maidenhair escaping from the paper caught in her dress, and broke off. "I am sorry," she said.

"Can't yer use yer eyes!" said the boy rudely.

Then April said to Nancy: "Smile!" And she smiled, dimpling, and said again: "I am sorry."

The boy looked at her, and turned his tongue round in his mouth; then he sniffed, and said: "Here you are! This is for you."

He pushed the bunch of flowers into Nancy's hand, then turned back, and went round the corner again, whistling. Nancy ran after him, but he ran quicker, looking round every now and then and laughing at her. When he turned another corner Nancy stood with the flowers in her hand, wondering.

She opened the paper a little at the top, and looked in. Mauve orchids and maidenhair—a bouquet for a queen. She walked slowly back to her house, carrying the flowers in front of her with both hands, and their idle beauty and extravagant loveliness lifted her prostrate spirit above the dust around her.

She went to her room with them, avoiding Minna, who was clattering dishes in the kitchen, and, locking her door, sat down near the bed. She drew the tissue-paper away, and the fairy-like flowers, scintillant and bedewed, nodded at her.

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In their midst lay a letter, with the crest of a Transatlantic steamship on the envelope. She opened it with timid hands.

"DEAR UNKNOWN IN THE PALE BLUE DRESS,

"I am sending this to you as a child sends a walnut-shell boat sailing down a river. Where will it go to? Whom will it reach? I am leaving America to-day. By the time you read this—are you smiling with wondering eyes? or is your mouth grave, and your heart subdued?—I shall be throbbing away to Europe on board the *Lusitania*, and we shall probably never meet. But I am superstitious. As I drove down to the steamer just now the words that are often in my mind when I travel sprang with loud voices to my ear:

"Dort wo du nicht bist, dort ist dein Glück.'

"Do you know German?

"There *where thou art not*, is thy happiness.'

"I am leaving America because I hate it, and have never been happy here; probably my happiness was meanwhile in Europe, or Asia, or Australia. But what, now that I am going to Europe, if my happiness were in America after all? What if I were driving away from it, taking ships and sailing from it, catching trains and leaving it behind? I stopped the cab, and got these flowers on chance.

"The steward has called a messenger, an impish boy with a crooked mouth. He stands here waiting.

"I look at him, and like to think that you will see him too. But you? How shall we find you, the flowers, and my heart, and the messenger-boy?

"I shall tell him to stop the first girl he meets who is dressed in light blue. That is you. And I reason that if you wear a light blue dress you must be young; and if you are young you are happy; and if you are happy you are kind; and if you are kind you will write to me, who am a lonely, crabbed, and crusty man.

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"My address is the Métropole, London.

"ROBERT BEAUCHAMP LEESE."

Nancy placed the letter on the bed beside the flowers; she sat a long time, with folded hands, looking at them. They brought but one message to her eyes that were vexed with shabbiness, to her soul that was shrunk by privation—riches.

They belonged to another sphere. They had come up the wrong street, into the wrong house. If they could have life and motion they would rise quickly—Nancy could imagine them—lifting dainty skirts and tripping hurriedly out from the sordid flat.

Nancy laid her cheek near to the delicate petals, and her hand on the letter. Her fancy played with an answer—an answer that should startle him, surprise him.

"How shall I hold you, fix you, freeze you,
Break my heart at your feet to please you!..."

Yes, she could quote Browning to him, and Heine; she could paint a fantastic picture of her light blue gown, against which the mauve orchids melted in divine dissonance of colour; she would be wearing with it a large black hat, with feathers curving over a shading velvet brim....

She sighed, and went to the rickety bamboo-table, where the inkstand stood on a cracked plate, and the ivory pen lay in demoralized familiarity, with a red wooden penholder belonging to Anne-Marie. On the cheap notepaper which she used when she wrote to borrow a saucepan from Mrs. Schmidl, or to ask Mrs. Johnstone to wait until next week, she wrote:

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"DEAR SIR,

"The wrong girl got your letter. I was dressed in *brown*."

She did not sign her name, but she read his letter over again, and, seeing that he was lonely, and crabbed, and crusty, she added her address.

He answered to "Miss '*brown*'" at the address she had given him, and he began his letter: "Dear wrong girl, write to me again." And she wrote back to say that indeed she would not dream of writing to him.

He replied thanking her, and asking if she were not the Miss Brown he had met on board ship sixteen years ago, who had been so kind and maternal to him, and had then had smallpox so badly. He hoped and believed she was that Miss Brown.

Nancy felt that she must tell him she was not that Miss Brown. And she did so. And there the correspondence ended. At least, so she told herself as she ran up the stairs after posting her letter at the corner of the street.

She was alone that evening, as so often. The piano-lamp was lit. The little china clock on the mantelpiece ticked time away like a hurrying heart, and Nancy suddenly realized that life was passing quickly, and that she was not living. She was shut up in the dusky little flat with Mr. Johnstone, and was as dead as he. A fierce excitement overcame her suddenly, like a gust of wind, like a flame of fire—regret for her wasted talents, resentment against her fate, hatred of the poverty that was crippling and maiming and crushing her. What was she doing? Was she asleep? was she drugged? was she dreaming? What had come over her that she could let herself drift down into the nameless obscurity, the sullen ignominy of despair?

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When midnight struck, Nancy leaped from her chair as one who is called by a loud voice. Life was rushing past her; she would wake, and go too. Some old French verses came into her head about "la belle" who wanted to enter the "blue garden"; who passed it in the morning, and looked in through the open gates.

"La belle qui veut,
La belle qui n'ose,
Cueillir les roses
Du jardin bleu."

And she passed at noon, and looked in through the open gates:

"La belle qui veut,
La belle qui n'ose,
Cueillir les roses
Du jardin bleu."

In the evening she said: "Now I will enter." But she found that the gates were closed.

"La belle qui veut,
La belle qui n'ose,
Cueillir les roses
Du jardin bleu."

Some characters evolve slowly, by imperceptible gradations, as a rose opens or a bird puts on its feathers. But Nancy broke through her chrysalis-shell in an hour. From one day to the next the gentle, submissive Nancy was no more; the passive, childlike soul clothed in the simplicity of genius died that night—for no other reason but that her hour had come—drifted off, perhaps, in the little dreamboat of her childhood, where Baby Bunting sat at the helm waiting for her. And together they went back, afloat on the darkness, to the Isle of What is No More.

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"DEAR UNKNOWN,

"You are very persistent. Is it not enough to know who I am not, that you needs must want to know who I am? What's in a name? A woman by any other name would be as false.

"Then call me, if call me you will, by the sweeping, impersonal, fragile name of Eve. And picture me as Eve, with the serpent coiled round her neck like a boa, and the after-glimmer of a lost Paradise in her tranquil eyes. The tranquil eyes are blue, under dark hair.

"What! more questions? Yes, I am young—not disconcertingly so. And good-tempered—not monotonously so. And almost pretty—not distractingly so.

"And I write to you, not because I am temerarious, but because the month is April and the time is twilight. And you are the Unknown."

The Unknown answered. And she wrote to him again. She put all her fancies and all her phrases into the letters. She wrote him lies and truth. She described herself to him as she thought she was not—but as perhaps she really was. In her letters she was a spoilt butterfly, whirling through life with vivid wings.

As she wrote she grew to resemble the girl she wrote about. She borrowed money from Peggy and from George, who had fallen in love with her. She would pay it back some day. She bought clothes, and ran up debts, and signed notes, and resorted to expedients. All the cleverness that should have gone into her book she used in her everyday life to wrench herself free from the poverty that was choking her. "Nothing matters! Nothing matters!" Only to get out of the mire and the mud—to lift little Anne-Marie out of the hideous surroundings, to stand her up safe and high in the light, out of reach of the sordid struggle.

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One day—a chilly afternoon in May—Aldo did not come home. Minna had gone to fetch Anne-Marie from school, when a messenger rang and gave Nancy a sealed letter.

In it Aldo said the chance of his life had come, and that he could not throw it aside—no! for her own sake, and for the child's, he would not do so. He thought not of himself. His thwarted ambitions, his warped talents, his stifled nature, had cried for a wider horizon. But not for this was he taking so grave a step. One day she would know how he was sacrificing himself for her sake. And he would open his arms, and she would fall on his breast and thank him. (Here was a blur—where Aldo's tear had fallen.) And he enclosed five hundred dollars. She was to be careful, as five hundred dollars was a large sum—two thousand five hundred francs. And she might take a smaller flat, and pay Minna eight dollars a month instead of ten. And she had better not write about this to Italy, as probably in a few months' time everything would be explained, and now farewell, and the Saints protect them! And she was to pray for him. And he was for ever her unhappy Aldo.

The messenger had darted off as soon as she had signed his receipt, and Nancy sat down, rigid and dazed, with her letter and the five-hundred-dollar bill in her hand.

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Aldo was not coming back. Aldo had left her and the child to struggle through life alone. All that day she carried her heart cold and stern as a rock in her delicate breast.

In the evening she went into his room. True, it was a mean and miserable room. Everything in it—from the small window that looked out on a dark, damp wall to the torn carpet, from the crooked folding-bedstead to the broken piece of mirror leaning against the wall on the narrow mantelpiece—everything was horrible, everything was good to get away from. Nancy looked round, and pity drove the stinging tears to her eyes. Poor Aldo! What had Aldo had, after all, to come home to? Not love. For the love that would have carried them through and over such wretchedness was not in Nancy's heart. Her love for him had been all for his beauty; her love had been a delicate, sensitive, blow-away creature, half ghost, half angel, whom to wound was to kill. And Fate had amused itself by throwing bricks and bats at it, choking it under mountains of ugliness, kicking it through crowded streets, dragging it up squalid stairs.... When Nancy drew the sheet from its face, she saw that it had been dead a long time. And she was sorry for Aldo.

She pulled his trunk out from under the bed, and remorsefully and compassionately put all his things into it—his books, his broken comb and cheap brushes, his old patent-leather shoes that he wore about the house instead of slippers, some packets of cigarettes. When she opened his dark cupboard, and saw that all the new clothes had been taken away, she smiled with a little sigh, and remembered how pale he had looked when he said good-bye that morning.

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How had he got those five hundred dollars to give her? She knelt down suddenly beside the open trunk, and said a prayer for him, as he had wished her to do. When she rose and shut the trunk, she shut in it the memory of Aldo, that was not to be with her any more.

Anne-Marie hardly noticed her father's absence, talking of him occasionally in the airy, detached manner of children; but Minna went for a week with red eyes and swollen face. And after a while the accounts rose with a rush.

Nancy paid all her debts, bought some clothes, and gave Mrs. Johnstone notice. She engaged a suite in a fashionable boarding-house on Lexington Avenue. Peggy and George stayed with her the last day in the flat, and helped her with her packing; but in the evening they went back to their rooms, for they were expecting a friend—Mr. Markowski, a Pole—who was to come and make music with George.

Anne-Marie was asleep, and Nancy sat down in the denuded room where everything belonging to her had already been put away. The dead Mr. Johnstone looked sadly at her, and even the piano-lamp was bland and dulcet, shining on the roses that George had brought her.

The postman's double knock startled her, and she received from his hand a letter. Aldo? No. It came from England, and was addressed to "Miss Brown." She called the grinning postman in, and gave him half a dollar. Thank you. He would see that all them "Miss Brown" letters and any

others were brought to her new address. She opened the letter; the large, well-known handwriting was pleasant to her eyes. The little crest of the Grand Hotel spoke to her of cheerful, well-remembered things. She seemed to look through its round gold ring as through an opera-glass, that showed her far-away things she knew and loved. "Hotel Métropole." She imagined the brilliantly lit lounge, the gaily-gowned, laughing women rustling past with the leisurely, well-groomed men; the soft-footed, obsequious waiters; the ready, low-bowing porter; the willing, hurrying pageboys; and beyond the revolving glass doors London, bright, brilliant, luxurious, rolling to its pleasures.

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She sat down and answered the Unknown's letter:

"The room is closed and warm and silent. The lamp and the fire give a mellow glow to the heavy old-rose curtains, and to the soft-tinted arabesques on the carpet. Some large pale roses are leaning drowsily over their vase, and dreaming their scented souls away.

"I am smoking a Russian cigarette (with a *souçon* of white heliotrope added to its fragrance), and writing to you.

"My unknown friend! Are you worthy of companionship with the scent of my roses and the smoke of my cigarette—such delicate, unselfish things?..."

A piercing cry from the adjoining room made Nancy leap from her chair. Penholder in hand, she rushed into Anne-Marie's room. The child, a slip of white, was standing on her bed, pale of cheek, wild of eye, one hand extended towards the wall. Her tumbled hair stood yellow and flame-like round her head.

"Listen!" she gasped—"listen!" And Nancy stopped and listened.

Clearly and sweetly through the wall came the voice of a violin. Then the piano struck in, accompanying the "Romance" of Svendsen. Anne-Marie stood like a little wild prophetess, with her hand stretched out. Then she whispered: "It is the lovely piece—the lovely piece that he could not remember!"

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"It is a violin, darling," said Nancy, and sat down on the bed.

But Anne-Marie was listening, and did not move. Nancy drew the blanket over the little bare feet, and put her arm round the slight, nightgowned figure.

The last long-drawn note ended; then Anne-Marie moved. She covered her face with her hands and began to cry.

"Why do you cry, darling—why do you cry?" asked Nancy embracing her.

Anne-Marie's large eyes gazed at Nancy. "For many things—for many things!" she said. And Nancy for the first time felt that her child's spirit stood alone, beyond her reach and out of her keeping.

"Is it the music, dear?"

Anne-Marie held her tight, and did not answer. Nancy coaxed her back to bed, and soon tucked her up and left her. But the door between them was kept wide open, and the sound of Grieg's "Berceuse" and Handel's "Minuet" reached Nancy at her table, and helped her to add fantastic details to her letter.

The next morning they moved to the boarding-house in Lexington Avenue. They did not see George, who had already gone down-town to his shipping office; but Peggy helped them into the carriage, and with Minna ran up and down the stairs after forgotten parcels.

"What's wrong with the kiddy? She don't look festive," said Peggy, handing a hoop and a one-legged policeman, survivor of the Schmid's Punch-and-Judy show, into the carriage to Anne-Marie.

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"Your music yesterday excited her very much," said Nancy. "She liked the violin."

"Oh, that was Markowski. He's a funny old toad," said Peggy; and she got on to the carriage-step to kiss Anne-Marie. But Anne-Marie covered her face, and turned her head away. She seemed to be crying, and Peggy winked at Nancy, and said; "She's a queer little kid." And Nancy said, "She does not like good-byes." Then Minna got into the carriage with the cage of Anne-Marie's waltzing mice, for she was going to the boarding-house with them to help unpack.

"Good-bye! Au revoir! Come and see us soon!" ... The carriage rumbled off. Minna had counted and recounted on her fingers how many things they had, and how many things they had forgotten, when Anne-Marie raised her red face from her hands.

"I *do* like good-byes," she said. "But why did she say an old toad did the music?"

Nancy comforted her, and said it did not matter, and they were going to a nice, nice, nice new house.

The nice new house was expecting them, and a cheeky, pimply German page-boy took their packages up. He was rough with the hoop and the policeman, and held his nose as he carried up the waltzing mice. But the room they were to have was large and sunny, and everything was bright.

They went down to luncheon, and sat down at a table with many strangers. Anne-Marie, who thought it was a party, was very shy in the beginning and very noisy at the end of the meal. The boarders were the kith and kin of all boarding-house guests. There was the silent old gentleman and the loud young man; the estimable couple that kept themselves to themselves; and the lady with the sulphur-coloured hair who did not keep herself to herself. There was the witty man and the sour woman; there were the ill-behaved children, that quarrelled all day and danced skirt-dances in the drawing-room at night; and their ineffectual mother and harassed father. There was also the Frenchman, the two Swedish girls, and the German lady.

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The German lady sat opposite Nancy, and, having looked at her and at Anne-Marie once, continued to do so at intervals all during lunch. Every time Nancy raised her eyes she met those of the German lady fixed upon her. They were kindly, inquisitive brown eyes behind glasses. Nobody spoke to Nancy at luncheon, the sulphur-haired lady and the witty man talking most of the time of their own affairs and their opinion of Sarah Bernhardt. Nancy was kept busy telling Anne-Marie in Italian not to stare at the two little girls, who seemed to fascinate her by their execrable behaviour.

In the evening Nancy went down to dinner alone. After the soup the German lady spoke to her.

"I hope the little girl is quite well," she said, nodding towards the empty place near Nancy.

"Oh yes, thank you. She has early supper and goes to bed."

"That is English habit," said the German lady. "Were you in England?"

"When I was a child," said Nancy.

Then the fish came; and always Nancy felt the brown eyes behind the glasses fixed on her face. At the mutton the German lady spoke again:

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"I heard you speak Italian," she said. "Are you from *il bel paese ove il sì suona?*"

Nancy laughed and said: "My mother was Italian. My father was English. I was born in Davos, in Switzerland." For some unaccountable reason the German lady flushed deeply. She did not speak again until the sago pudding had gone round twice and the fruit once—very quickly.

"You speak German?" she said.

"I had a German governess," said Nancy.

Again the German lady's smooth cheeks flushed. Then every one rose and went into the drawing-room, and Nancy went to her room and wrote to the Unknown.

"You ask me to talk about myself. Nothing pleases me better; for I am selfish and subjective.

"I am a gambler. I went to Monte Carlo some time ago. Oh, golden-voiced, green-eyed Roulette! I gambled away all my money and all the money of everyone else that I could lay hands on. I laid hands on a good deal. I have rather pretty hands.

"I am a dreamer. I have wandered out in deserted country roads dreaming of you, my unknown hero, and of Uhland's mysterious forests, and of Maeterlinck's lost princesses, until I could feel the warmth welling up at the back of my eyes, which is the nearest approach to tears that is vouchsafed me.

"I am a heathen. I have a hot, unruly worship for everything beautiful, man, woman, or thing. I believe in Joy; I trust in Happiness; I adore Pleasure.

"I am a savage—an overcivilized, hypercultivated savage with some of the growls and the hankering after feathers still left in him. I adore jewels. I have some diamonds—diamonds with blue eyes and white smiles—as large as my heart. No, no! larger! I wear them at all seasons and everywhere; round my throat, my arms, my ankles, all over me! I like men to wear jewels. If ever I fall in love with you, I shall insist upon your wearing rings up to your finger-tips. Do not protest, or I will *not* fall in love with you.

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"I am feminine; over-and ultra-feminine. I wear nothing but fluffinesses—trailing, lacey, blow-away fluffinesses, floppy hats on my soft hair, and flimsy scarves on my small shoulders. I have no views. I belong to no clubs. I drink no cocktails—or, when I do, I make delicious little grimaces over them, and say they burn. They *do* burn! I smoke Russian cigarettes scented with white heliotrope, because surely no man would dream of doing such a sickening thing.

"I am careless; I am extravagant; I am lazy—oh, exceedingly lazy. I envy La Belle au Bois dormant, who slept a hundred years. Until Prince Charming....

"Good-bye, Prince Charming.

"EVE."

XI

The next day at luncheon the German lady stared again, and looked away quickly.

Anne-Marie asked her mother: "What is Irish stew when he is alive?" Nancy smiled and dimpled. Then the German lady, who had seen the dimple and the smile, said in a sudden, loud voice, over which she had no control: "Is your name Nancy?"

Nancy looked up with a start. "Yes!" she said. And everyone was silent.

"My name is Fräulein Müller," said the German lady, taking a pink-edged handkerchief from her pocket and making ready for tears. [Pg 221]

"Fräulein Müller! Fräulein Müller!" said Nancy dreamily. "You read Uhland to me, and Lenau, and ... 'shine out little head sunning over with curls.'"

Then Fräulein Müller wept in her handkerchief, and Nancy rose from her seat and went round and kissed her. Then it was Fräulein Müller's turn to get up and go round and kiss Anne-Marie; whereupon the sulphur-haired lady remarked how small the world was; and the witty man said they would next discover that he and she were brother and sister, and had she not a strawberry mark on her left shoulder?

After lunch Fräulein Müller asked Nancy to her room, and she held Anne-Marie on her lap, and had to say the baby rhyme, "Da hast du 'nen Thaler, geh' auf den Markt" about fifty times, with the accompanying play on Anne-Marie's pink, outstretched palm, before she was allowed to talk to Nancy. Then she told them all about the years she had passed in an American family after leaving the Grey House, and about the little house she had just rented on Staten Island—a tiny little house in a garden, where she was going to live for the rest of her life. She was furnishing it now, and it would be ready next week.

"You must come to see it. You must stay with me there," said Fräulein Müller, looking for a dry spot on the sodden handkerchief. "Oh, meine kleine Nancy! My little Genius! Und was ist mit der Poesie?"

The following week Fräulein Müller left Lexington Avenue for her "Gartenhaus," as she called it, and three days later Nancy and Anne-Marie went to stay with her for a fortnight. [Pg 222]

"What for an education has the child?" inquired the old governess, when Anne-Marie had been put to bed after a day of wonders. What? Strawberries grew on plants? Anne-Marie had always thought they came in baskets.

"She seems to know nothing," said Fräulein Müller. "I tried her with a little arithmetic. Did she know the metric system? Oh yes, she said she did, and wanted to speak about something else. But I kept her to it," said Fräulein sternly, "and asked her: 'What are millimetres?' Do you know what the child said? She said that she supposed they were relations of the centipedes!"

Nancy laughed, and told Fräulein Müller about the Sixth Avenue School. Fräulein clasped horrified hands.

"I will educate her myself. I suppose she is also a genius."

"No, I am afraid not," said Nancy, shaking her head regretfully. "I wish she were!"

The two women were silent; and from the little bedroom upstairs, through the open window, came Anne-Marie's voice, like tinkling water.

"She is singing," said Fräulein Müller.

"Oh yes; she always sings herself to sleep. She likes music." And Nancy told her about the violin.

"We shall buy her a violin to-morrow," said Fräulein Müller.

And so she did. The violin was new and bright and brown; it was labelled "Guarnerius," and cost three dollars. Anne-Marie pushed the bow up and down on it with great pleasure for a short time. Then she became very impatient, and took it out into the garden, and looked for a large stone.

"...It made ugly voices at me," she said, standing small and unrepentant by the broken brown pieces, while Fräulein Müller and Nancy shook grieved heads at her. [Pg 223]

"I do not think that music is her vocation after all," said Fräulein Müller. "But we shall see."

XII

"Good-morning, my tenebrious Unknown. I am in the country, perched up on a stone wall with nothing in sight but vague, distant hills and sleepy fields. Queer insects buzz in the sun, and make me feel pale. I dread buzzing insects with a great shivery dread.

"Why are you not here? I am wearing a large straw hat with blue ribbons, and a white dress and a blue sash, like the *ingénue* in a drawing-room comedy. And there is no one to see me. And the fields are full of flowers, and I pick them, and have no one to give them to. Surely it is the time in all good story-books when the heroine in a white dress and blue sash is sitting on a wall for Prince Charming to pass and see her, and stop suddenly.... But life is a badly constructed novel; uninteresting people walk in and walk out, and all is at contra-tempo, like a Brahms Hungarian Dance.

"Prince Charming, why have you gone three thousand miles away?"

"Good-morning again.

"This is a divine day—cool winds and curtseying grasses.

"I am still here, living on herbs and sunsets and memories of things that have not been. You are a thing that has not been. Perhaps that is why you are so much in my thoughts. I have many friends whom I seldom think of. I have a few lovers whom I never think of. And I have you who are nothing, and whom I always think of. It is absurd and wonderful.

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"My lovers! You ask me who they are and why I have them. I have them because they make me look pretty. I look pretty when I laugh. A woman's beauty depends entirely upon how much she is loved. Did you not know that? The best 'fard pour la beauté des dames' is other people's adoration.

"My lovers therefore have their use, but they are not entertaining. They are uniformly sad or angry. Yet I am good to my lovers. I let them trot in and out of their tempers like nice tame animals that nobody need mind. I do not require them to perform in public; I sit and watch their innocent tricks with kind and wondering eyes.

"Et vous, mon Prince Charmant? What of you? Who are you making to look prettier? Whose cheeks are you tinting? Whose eyes are you brightening? Whose heart are you making to flutter by the hurry of yours? Who smiles and dimples and blushes for your sake? I suppose you are falling in love with your fair countrywomen—tall, tennis-playing English girls, with cool, un-kissed mouths and white, inexperienced hands. Ah, Prince Charming, whom do you love?

"Eve."

He replied: "You have spoken. Whom do I love? Eve."

She was glad. She lived a life of fevered joy. She was not Nancy. She was the Girl in the Letters; and the Girl in the Letters was a wild, unfettered, happy creature. Nothing seemed sweeter to her than this subtle *amor di lontano*—this love across the distance. Ah, how modern and piquant and recherché! And, again, how thirteenth-century! Was it not Jaufré Rudel, the Poet-Prince, who had loved the unseen Countess Melisenda for so many years?

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"Amore di terra lontana,
Per voi tutto il core mi duol,"

and who at last, coming to her, had died at her feet? Could they not also love each other across the distance, wildly and blindly, without the aid of any one of their senses? Surely that was the highest, the divinest, the most perfect way of love!

So Nancy lived her dream, and tossed the tender little love-letters across the ocean with light hands.

"CHER INCONNU,

"I write to you because it is raining and the sky is of grey flannel. You will say that I wrote to you yesterday because the weather was fine and the sky was of blue silk.

"Ah, dear Unknown! It is true. You have grown into my life, like some strange, startling modern flower, out of place, out of season, yet sweet to my unwondering eyes. You are a black and white flower of words, growing through your brief wild letters into the garden of my heart.

"What a garden, mon ami! What a growth of weeds! what a burst of roses! what a burgeoning of cabbages! An unnatural, degenerate garden, where the trees carry *marrons glacés* and the flowers are scented with patchouli.

"Into this luxuriance of perversity, this decadent brilliance of vegetation, you have blossomed up, strange and new, for the delight of my soul. That you should say you love me, you who have never seen me, is sweeter perfume to my sated senses than the incense of all the thousand seraph-flowers that bow and swing at my feet.

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"Good-bye. My name is Nancy."

To this letter he replied by cable: "Nancy, come here at once."

"'Come here at once!' The arrogant words go with a shock of pleasure to my heart. I am unused to the imperative; nobody has ever bullied me or told me to do this and that. I think I like it. I like being meek and frightened, and having to obey.

"'Come here at once!' I find myself timidly looking round for my hat and gloves, and wondering whether I shall wear my blue or my grey dress on the journey. I am nice on journeys. I am good-tempered, and wear mousie-coloured clothes that fit well, and I have a small waist. All this is very important in travelling, and makes people overlook and forgive the many, many small packages I carry into the compartment, and the hatboxes I lose, and the umbrellas I forget. When I am tired

I can put my head down anywhere and go to sleep; I sleep nicely and quietly and purrily, like a cat.

"I am really very nice on journeys. Also I am very popular with useful people, like conductors and porters and guards. They take care of me and give me advice, and open and shut my windows, and lock my compartments even when it does not matter; and they bring me things to eat, and run after all the satchels and parcels I leave about.

"Your last letter says you are going to Switzerland. How nice! I should like to be with you, throbbing away on excitable little Channel steamers, puffing along in smoky, deliberate Continental trains, driving the bell-shaking horses slowly up the wide white roads that coil like wind-blown ribbons round the swelling breasts of the Alps; table-d'hôte at St. Moritz; tennis-playing at Maloya; clattering and rumbling over the covered bridges near Splügen; wandering through the moonlike sunshine of Sufer's pine-forest, where beady-eyed squirrels stop and look, and then scuttle, tail flourishing, up the trees. I am friends with every one of those squirrels. Greet them from me.

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"NANCY."

NEW YORK.

"AMOR MIO DI LONTANO,

"I am in the city again the horrible, glaring, screaming city, all loud and harsh in the uncompromising July sun. How I long to-day for the shade of the closed Italian houses, the friendly, indrawn shutters, the sleeping silence of the empty streets, and, far-off, the cerulean sweep of the Mediterranean!

"And a new lover at my side! A brand-new lover, whose voice would sound strange to my ears, whose eyes I had not fathomed, whose feelings I did not understand, whose thoughts I could only vaguely and wrongly guess at, whose nerves would respond strangely, like an unknown instrument, to the shy touch of my hand.

"Your letter is brought to me. Written at the Hotel Bellevue, Andermatt. *Andermatt!* How cool and buoyant and scintillant it sounds. It falls on my heart like a snowflake in the humid heat of this town.

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"I have opened the letter. What? Only three words!

"Again: 'Come at once.' Again the words, with their brief, irresistible imperiousness, thrill my lazy soul.

"If you write it a third time ... by all that is sweet and unlikely, I shall come!

"Will you be glad? Will you kiss my white hands gratefully? Shall we be simple and absurd and happy? Or shall we fence and be brilliant, antagonistic, keen-witted? No matter! No matter! The fever of my heart will be stilled. My eyes will see you and be satisfied."

A cablegram to Andermatt. Reply paid. (Money borrowed from Fräulein Müller.)

"Dreamt that you had long black beard. Tell me that not true.—NANCY."

Reply from Andermatt:

"Not true. Come at once."

Nancy did not go at once. She had no money to go with; and, of course, she never intended to go at all.

He wrote: "Will you meet me in Lucerne?" and she replied: "Impossible."

He: "I shall expect you in Interlaken."

She: "Out of the question."

He: "I shall be in London in October. After that I am off to Peru."

So in September she wrote to him again.

"I lay awake last night dreaming of our first meeting. It will be framed in the conventional luxury of a little sitting-room in a Grand Hotel. It will be late in the afternoon—late enough to have the pretty pink-shaded lights lit, like shining fairy-tale flowers, all over the room. Then a knock at the door. And you will come into my life. What then, what then, dear Unknown? My hands will lie in yours like prisoned butterflies; my wilfulness and my courage, my flippancy and effrontery will throb away, foolishly, weakly, before your eyes. What then? Will Convention guide the steed of our Destiny gently back into the well-kept stables of the common-place? or shall we take the reins into our own hands, and lash it rearing and foaming over the precipice of the Forbidden, down into the flaming depths of passionate happiness?

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"Good-bye. Of course I shall not come."

XIII

Fräulein Müller came to town three times a week and taught Anne-Marie arithmetic and geography. Of arithmetic Anne-Marie understood little; of geography no word. She pointed vaguely with a ruler at the map, and said: "Skagerrack and Kattegat," which were the words whose sounds pleased her most.

"The child is not at all a genius," said Fräulein Müller, much depressed.

One day George and Peggy came to visit them at the boarding-house. And with them they brought Mr. Markowski and his violin.

In the drawing-room after tea Nancy asked the shy and greasy-looking Hungarian to play: and the fiddle was taken tenderly out of its plush-lined case. Markowski was young and shabby, but his violin was old and valuable. Markowski had a dirty handkerchief, but the fiddle had a clean, soft white silk one. Markowski placed a small black velvet cushion on his greasy coat-collar, and raised the violin to it; he adjusted his chin over it, raised his bow, and shut his eyes. Then Markowski was a god.

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Do you know the hurrying anguish of Grieg's F dur Sonata? Do you know the spluttering shrieks of laughter of Bazzini's "Ronde des Lutins"? The sobbing of the unwritten Tzigane songs? The pattering of wing-like feet in Ries's "Perpetuum Mobile?"

Little Anne-Marie stood in the middle of the room motionless, pale as linen, as if the music had taken life from her and turned her into a white statuette. Ah, here was the little neoteric statue that Nancy had tried to fix! The child's eyes were vague and fluid, like blue water spilt beneath her lashes; her colourless lips were open.

Nancy watched her. And a strange dull feeling came over her heart, as if someone had laid a heavy stone in it. What was that little figure, blanched, decolorized, transfigured? Was that Anne-Marie? Was that the little silly Anne-Marie, the child that she petted and slapped and put to bed, the child that was so stupid at geography, so brainless at arithmetic?

"Anne-Marie! Anne-Marie! What is it, dear? What are you thinking about?"

Anne-Marie turned wide light eyes on her mother, but her soul was not in them. For the Spirit of Music had descended upon her, and wrapped her round in his fabulous wings—wrapped her, and claimed her, and borne her away on the swell of his sounding wings.

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XIV

"Fräulein, I have no more money—not one little brown cent in the wide world," said Nancy, sitting on the lawn of the Gartenhaus, and drinking afternoon tea out of Fräulein's new violet-edged cups.

"So?" said Fräulein. For a long time her lips moved in mental calculation. Then she said: "I could let you have forty-seven dollars."

Nancy put down the cup, and, bending forward, kissed Fräulein's downy cheek.

"Dear angel!" she said; "and then?"

"What is to be done?" said Fräulein, drying her lips on her new fringed serviette, and folding it in a small neat square.

"*Mah!*" said Nancy, raising her shoulders, swayed back into Italian by the stress of the moment.

"No news from your husband?"

"Bah!" said Nancy, shrugging her shoulders again, and waving her hand from the wrist downwards in a gesture of disdain.

Fräulein sighed, and looked troubled. Then she said:

"You must come and live here, you and Anne-Marie. I will send Elisabeth away—anyhow, she has broken already three lamp-glasses and a plate—and we must live with economy." Fräulein, who had lived with that lean and disagreeable comrade all her life, then coughed and looked practical. "Yes, I shall be glad to get rid of that clumsy girl, Elisabeth."

Nancy put one arm round her neck and kissed her again. Then she said: "I have only one hope."

"What is that?" asked Fräulein.

It was Nancy's turn to cough. She did so, and then said: "There is ... there are ... some ... some people in England who are interested in me—in my writings. I think ... they might help ... I ought to go over and see them."

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"Certainly," said Fräulein, "you must go. And I will keep Anne-Marie here with me. Then she need not interrupt her violin-lessons."

"Yes," said Nancy. "You could keep Anne-Marie...." She sighed deeply. "Of course she must not

interrupt her lessons. I suppose you think I *ought* to go?"

"Of course," said Fräulein, who was practical. "A firm like that won't do anything without seeing you and talking business. But mind, mind they do not cheat! Authoresses are always being cheated."

Nancy smiled. "I shall try not to let them."

"Being English, perhaps they will not. In Berlin——" And here Fräulein repeated a discourse she had made many, many years ago in Wareside when Nancy's first poem had been read aloud. Fräulein remembered that day, and spoke of it now with tearful tenderness. She also believed she remembered bits of the poem:

"This morning in the garden
I caught the little birds;
This morning in the orchard
I picked the little words."

"What!" said Nancy. "Why did I 'pick the little words'?"

"Perhaps it was 'plucked,'" said Fräulein, looking vague.

"This morning in the garden
I caught the little words;
This morning in the orchard
I plucked ... or picked the little birds——"

—"or caught them," continued Fräulein, much moved.

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"I cannot say that that sounds very beautiful," said Nancy.

"Oh, but it was. It may have been a little different. But it was lovely. And you were a little tiny thing, like Anne-Marie!"

"Listen to Anne-Marie," said Nancy.

Anne-Marie had insisted upon bringing her violin to the Gartenhaus, and was now practising on it in the dining-room. The windows were open. She was playing a little cradle-song very softly, very lightly, in perfect tune.

"That is indeed a Wonderchild," said Fräulein.

Markowski had called her a Wonderchild directly. When he had seen her weeping convulsively after he had played, he had exclaimed: "This is a Wonderchild. I will teach her to play the fiddle."

And sure enough he had come to the house on the following day, with a little old half-sized fiddle, like a shabby reproduction of the dead Guarnerius, and had given Anne-Marie her first lesson. The lesson had been long, and Anne-Marie had emerged from it with feverish eyes and hot cheeks, and with anger in her heart. For the Bird, or the Fairy, or the Sorcerer, or the Witch that made music in other violins, did not seem to be inside the little shabby fiddle Markowski had brought her.

"Be gentle, be gentle! and do what I say," said Markowski, with his stringy black hair falling over his vehement eyes. "One day the Birds and the Witches will be in it, and they will sing to you. Now, practise scale of C."

And Anne-Marie had practised scale of C—to Nancy's amazement, for she thought that in one lesson no one could have learnt so much. In ten lessons Anne-Marie had learnt fifteen scales and a cradle-song. In two months she had learnt what other children learn in two years. So said Markowski, who got more and more excited, and gave longer and longer lessons, and came every day instead of twice a week.

"What do I owe you?" Nancy asked him. "I can't keep count of the lessons. You seem to be always coming."

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"Never mind! never mind!" said Markowski, waving excited, unwashed hands. And as he had heard about their financial position from George and Peggy, he added, "You will pay me ... when she plays you the Bach Chaconne!"

"Very well," said Nancy, who thought that that meant in a week or two. "Just as you please, Herr Markowski."

And then she thought he must be insane, because he was bent with laughter as he packed away his violin.

Fräulein Müller made accounts in a little black book all one day and half one night, and in the morning she went to Lexington Avenue to see Nancy.

"I can give you eighty dollars. Will that pay your journey to England to see the firm of publishers?"

Oh yes, Nancy thought so. And how good of her! And how could Nancy ever thank her?

"Of course, those people will be glad to advance you something at once, even if the manuscript is

not quite ready," said Fräulein, who was romantic besides being practical.

"I suppose so," said Nancy.

"See that you have a proper contract. You had better ask a barrister to make it for you." And Nancy promised that she would.

So Fräulein hurried off to the Deutsche Bank, and drew out eighty dollars and a little extra, because Anne-Marie would have to have puddings and good soups while she was with her. The thought of giving puddings to Anne-Marie made her hurriedly take her handkerchief from her pocket and blow her nose.

"One day it shall be sago, one day it shall be rice, and one day it shall be tapioca, with *Konfitüre*." [Pg 235]
And Fräulein Müller hurried with her eighty dollars to Nancy.

But then a strange thing happened. Nancy would not go. Day after day passed, and Nancy always had some excuse for not having packed her trunk or taken her berth. Surely it was not so difficult to pack the little things she wanted for a short business journey. Her new navy-blue serge, observed Fräulein, was very good, and the brown straw hat for autumn would do nicely.

"You must dress sensibly in a business-like way to go and see those people," said Fräulein. "It would never do if you went looking like a flimsy fly-away girl."

"No, indeed," said Nancy, smiling with pale lips. That evening she wrote to George. He came up to town at the lunch-hour next day, and asked to see her. She left Anne-Marie at table eating stewed steak, to go and speak to him.

"George," she said, keeping in hers the cool damp hand he held out, "I want money. I want a lot of money."

George slowly withdrew his hand, and pulled at a little beard he had recently and not very successfully grown on his receding chin.

"Then I guess you must have it," he said.

"But I want a great deal. Two or three hundred dollars," said Nancy. "Or four——"

"Stop right there," said George. "Don't go on like that, or I can't follow." And he pulled his beard again. [Pg 236]

"Oh, George, how sweet of you! how dear of you!" And she clasped his moist left hand, which he left limply in hers.

"The bother of it is, I don't know how I shall get it," said George. "I'm just thinking that"——

"Oh, don't tell me—please don't tell me!" said Nancy. "I—I'd rather not know! I know you won't steal, or murder anyone, but get it, George! Oh, thank you! thank you so much! Good-bye!"

And Nancy, as she looked out of the window after him, at his cheap hat and his sloping shoulders, and saw him board a cable-car going down-town, felt that she was a vulture and a harpy.

"The Girl in the Letters has demoralized me," she said.

He brought her four hundred dollars on the following Monday, and she wept some pretty little tears over it, and covered her ears with her hands, and dimpled up at him, when he began to tell her how he had got them. She was the Girl in the Letters. She was practising. And with George it answered very well—too well! She had to stop quickly and be herself again. Then he went away.

And she went out and bought dresses. She bought drooping, trailing gowns and flimsy fly-away gowns, and an unbusiness-like hat, and shoes impossible to walk in. She bought *Crème des Crèmes* for her face, and *Crème Simon* for her hands, and liquid varnish for her nails, and violet unguent for her hair.

Then she waited for the Unknown's next letter, saying

"Come." [Pg 237]

The letter did not arrive. A day passed, and another. And he did not write. A week passed, and another, and he did not write. Nancy sat in the boarding-house with her dresses and her hats and her *Crème des Crèmes*. The entire four hundred dollars of George, and fifteen dollars out of Fräulein's eighty, were gone.

Nancy sat and looked out of the window, and thought her thoughts. Could she write to the Unknown again? No. Hers had been the last letter. He had not answered it. Should she telegraph? Where to? And to say what? He had gone to Peru. She knew, she felt, he had gone to Peru. The pretty, silly, romantic story was ended—ended as she had wished it to end, without the banal *dénouement* of their meeting. Better so. Much better so. Nancy was really very glad that things were as they were.

And now what was going to happen to her? She said to herself that she must have been insane to borrow all that money and buy those crazy dresses, those idiotic hats. What should she do? The terror of life came over her, and she wished she were safely away and asleep in the little Nervi cemetery between her father and her mother, cool and in the dark, with quiet upturned face.

Oh yes, she was really exceedingly glad that things were as they were!

Half-way through the third week a telegram was brought to her. It came from Paris.

"Why not dine with me next Thursday at the Grand Hôtel?"

To-day was Thursday.

She cabled back.

"Why not? At eight o'clock.—NANCY."

Oh, the excitement, the packing, the telegraphing to Fräulein, the hurry, the joy, the confusion! The stopping every minute to kiss Anne-Marie; the sitting down suddenly and saying, "Perhaps I ought not to go!" And then, the jumping up again at the thought of the boat that left to-morrow at noon.

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Fräulein came to fetch Anne-Marie at ten in the morning. She arrived joyful and agitated, bringing a fox-terrier pup in her arms, a present for Anne-Marie, to prevent her crying.

"Why should I cry?" said Anne-Marie, with the hardness of tender years.

"Why, indeed!" said Nancy, buttoning Anne-Marie's coat, while quick tears fell from her eyes. "Mother will come back very soon—very soon."

"Of course," said Anne-Marie, holding the puppy tightly round the neck, and putting up a shoe to have it buttoned.

"Don't let her catch cold, Fräulein," sobbed Nancy, bending over the shoe; and when it was fastened, she kissed it.

"No," said Fräulein, beaming. "She shall wear flannel pellipands that I am making for her."

The second shoe was buttoned and kissed. Her hat was put on with the elastic in front of her ears. Her gloves? Yes, in her coat-pocket. Handkerchief? Yes. The mice? Yes; Fräulein had them, and the violin, and the music-roll, and the satchel. The box was already downstairs in the carriage. They were ready.

"Let me carry down the puppy," said Nancy on the landing, with a break in her voice. "Then I can hold your dear little hand."

"Oh no!" said Anne-Marie. "I'll carry the puppy. You can hold on to the bannisters."

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So Nancy walked down behind Anne-Marie and the puppy. Fräulein was in front, dreading the moment of leave-taking, and thinking with terror of the possibility of travelling all the way to Staten Island with a loud and tearful Anne-Marie. So she started a new topic of conversation.

"You shall have pudding every day," she said, trying to turn round on the second landing to Anne-Marie, close behind her, and nearly dropping the satchel and the mice, as the violin-case caught in the bannisters. "One day it shall be sago, another day tapioca...."

"I don't like tapioca," said Anne-Marie, walking down the stairs. "I don't like nothing of all that."

They were at the door. By request of Nancy, nobody was there to speak to them. But all the boarders who were in the house were looking at them from behind the drawing-room curtains.

"Then what do you like for dessert?" said Fräulein, going down the stone steps by Anne-Marie's side, while Nancy still followed.

"I like peppermint bullseyes," said Anne-Marie, "and pink jelly." And she added: "Nothing else," while the pimply boy and the maid hoisted her into her carriage. Fräulein got in after her, with the many packages. And the puppy barked at the mice.

"Good-bye, Anne-Marie! Good-bye, darling!" cried Nancy, kissing her with great difficulty through the carriage-window across Fräulein, and the violin, and the mice, that were on Fräulein's lap. "God bless you! God bless you and keep you, my own darling!"

The puppy barked deafeningly. The pimply boy nodded to the cabman, and off they were.

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Nancy walked slowly back into the house, and up the stairs, and into the desolate rooms.

XV

Peggy and George accompanied her to the boat, Peggy excited and talkative, George depressed and silent. In his murky down-town office George had felt himself of late more poet than clerk, and now he was all elegy. She was leaving! She was going away with his heart, and she might perhaps never return! She might perhaps never return the four hundred dollars either. They belonged to a friend of George's—a mean and sordid soul. George stifled the unlovely thought, born of the clerk, and surrendered his spirit to the grief of the poet.

Farewell! Farewell! The ship turned its cruel side, and hid the little waving figure from his sight. It throbbed away like a great, unfaithful heart, abandoning the land. Farewell! What were four

hundred dollars, belonging to a friend, compared with the torn and quivering heart-strings of a lover?

The ship heaved forward towards the east, rising and sinking as ships rise and sink, carrying Nancy and her dresses, and her hats, and her little pots of cream, to the Unknown. And the nearer they got to him, the more frightened was Nancy. What if she should reach Paris, with the fourteen dollars she still possessed, and he were not there? What if he turned out to be a brute and a beast? What—oh, terrible thought!—if he were to think her not as pretty as he had expected? She was not really pretty. Oh, why had she not the pale sunshiny hair of the American girl opposite her at table? Why not the youth-splashed eyes of the little girl from the West, who was going to Paris to study art? Why not the long, up-curling lashes of her light and starry glance?

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Nancy comforted herself by hoping that he himself might be hideous. But if he were? How should she smile at him and talk to him if he were a repugnant, odious monster? Then she reasoned that if he were a monster, he would not have asked her to come. "Why not dine with me on Thursday?" is not the kind of telegram a monster would send. No, he was not a monster.

What would he say to her when they met? Everything depended on the first moment. She pictured it in a thousand different ways. The pictures always began in the same manner. She arrived in Paris; she drove from the Gare du Nord, not to the Grand Hôtel where he was staying, but to the Continental. She engaged a gorgeous suite of rooms. What! with fourteen dollars? Exactly so! What did it matter? It was Rouge or Noir. If Rouge came up, all was well. If Noir—*la débâcle! le déluge!* Fifty francs more or less made absolutely no difference. A few hours' rest. An hour or two for an elaborate toilette; all the creams used, all the details perfect. Then she would send a messenger, at a quarter to eight, to his hotel:

"Dear Unknown, I am here!"

Then—ah! then, what? He arrives, he enters, he sees her. Then she must say something. Ah! what? What are her first words to be? "*How do you do?*" Dreadful! No, never that! "*Here I am!*" Worse, worse still. In French, perhaps? "*Me voilà!*" Ridiculous! No; she will say nothing. He must speak first.

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Then she imagines his opening phrases. After a long silence his voice, deep and trembling with emotion: "Yes, you are the Woman of my Dreams!" That would be very nice. Or, then: "Ah! Eve! Eve! How I have longed for you!" That would strike the right note at once. Or, then, with both hands outstretched: "So *this* is Nancy!" That would be rather nice. But perhaps he will say something more original: "Why did you not tell me you had a dimple in your chin?"

Ah, how long Nancy lay awake thinking of those First Words! Nancy tossed in her little berth, and turned her pillow's freshest side to her hot cheek; and she palpitated and trembled, smiled and feared, repented and defied, until the huge boat creaked against the landing stage of the Havre dock.

She arrived at the Gare du Nord at three o'clock. She drove to the Continental, and engaged a suite of rooms that cost eighty francs a day: a sitting-room, all tender greens and delicate greys, looking as if it were seen through water, and adjoining it a gorgeous scarlet bedroom, with a dozen mirrors a-shine, all deferentially awaiting the Elaborate Toilette.

Sleep was out of the question. By four o'clock the note that was to be sent at half-past seven was written, and Nancy began her elaborate toilette. She thought of ordering the coiffeur, but she remembered that coiffeurs had always dressed her hair in wonderful twists and coils and rolls, until her head looked like a cake to which her face did not in any way belong. So she did her hair *à la Carmen*, parted on one side. It seemed the style of hair-dress that the Girl in the Letters would adopt. But when it was done it looked startling and impertinent. So she unpinned it again and decided in favour of a simple, unaffected coiffure. She parted her hair in the middle, plaited it, and pinned it round her head. It *was* unaffected and simple. She looked like the youngest of the two Swedish girls in the boarding-house. She did not look at all like the Girl in the Letters. So once more she unpinned it, and did it *à la pierrot*—a huge puff in the middle, waving down over her forehead, and two huge puffs, one on each side. It looked pretty and unladylike.

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By this time it was six o'clock. The creams! First a little cold cream; then *Crème Impératrice*; then—she remembered the directions given her by the person in the shop perfectly—a tiny amount of Leichner's rouge, mixed with a little *Crème des Crèmes* in the palm of the hand, gently rubbed into the cheeks and chin; then powder—rose-coloured and Rachel. Now a *souçon* of rouge on the lobes of the ears and in the nostrils. This, the person in the shop said, was very important. Then the eyebrows brushed with an atom of *mascaro*, a touch of Leichner on the lips, an idea of shadow round the eyes—and behold!

Nancy beheld. Her face looked mauve, and her nostrils suggested a feverish cold. Her eyes looked large, and tired, and intense, like the eyes of the prairie chickens at Monte Carlo.

Seven o'clock! She had forgotten her nails! For twenty minutes she painted her nails with the pink varnish, which was sticky, and, once on, would not wash off. Her fingers looked as if she had dipped them in blood.

Half-past seven! She must send the note. She rang the bell, and a waiter came. He had been a nice, well-behaved German waiter, as he had shown her respectfully to her expensive rooms.

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When he saw her as she now appeared—she had hastily slipped into the lightest of the three trailing dresses—the waiter stared; he stared rudely, with raised eyebrows, at her, and took the note from her hand.

He read the address, nodded, and said: "Jawohl! All right. C'est bon!" And then he smiled. He smiled—at her!—and went down the passage whistling softly.

Nancy shut her door. She took off the trailing dress, and went to her bathroom. She turned on the hot water and washed her face. She washed off the shades and *soupons*, the *crèmes* and the *mascaro* from her eyebrows and her chin, her ears and her nostrils. Then she pinned her hair loosely on the top of her head, as she always did, and put on the darkest of the three trailing gowns. But her nails she scrubbed in vain. They remained aggressively rose-coloured, and Nancy blushed hotly every time she saw them. She decided to put her hat and gloves on. She did so. Then she sat down in her sitting-room and waited. She waited fifteen minutes.

Then somebody knocked.

Nancy started to her feet as if she had been shot. With beating heart she ran back into the bedroom and shut the door after her. No, it was not quite shut; it swung lightly ajar, and Nancy left it so. She heard the knock repeated more loudly at the outer door; she heard the door open, and someone enter. Then the door closed, and steps—the waiter's steps—went back along the hall.

Somebody was in that room. Somebody! A man! A man whom she had never seen. A man to whom she had written forty or fifty letters, whom she had called "mon ami" and "mes amours," "Prince Charming," and "my unknown lover!"

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Nancy stood motionless, petrified with shame, her face hidden in her white-gloved hands. She would never go in—never! Not if she had to stand here for years! She could not face that silent man next door.

The situation was becoming ridiculous. The silence was tense in both rooms. Ah, when three thousand miles had separated them, how near she had felt to him! And now, with a few feet of carpet and an open door between them, he was far away—incommensurably far away! A stranger, an intruder, an enemy!

Utter silence. Was he there? Yes. Nancy knew he was there, waiting.

Suddenly Nancy was frightened. The one idea possessed her to get away from that unseen, silent man. She would slip through the bathroom, and out into the passage and away! She took a step forward. Her trailing dress rustled. Her high-heeled boots creaked. And in the next room the man coughed.

Nancy stood still again, transfixed—turned to stone.

Another long silence, ludicrous, untenable. Then in the next room the First Words were spoken. He spoke them in a calm and well-bred voice.

"Our dinner will be cold."

Nancy laughed suddenly, softly, convulsively. Her voice was treble and sweet as she replied:

"What have you ordered?"

The man in the next room said: "Fillet of sole."

"Fried?" asked Nancy earnestly; and, knowing that unless she slid in on that fillet of sole she would never do so, she passed quickly under the draped portière and entered the room.

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They looked each other in the face. She saw a large and stalwart figure, a hard mouth, and a strong, curved nose in a sunburnt face, two chilly blue eyes under a powerful brow, and waving grey hair. He looked down at her, and was satisfied. His cool blue gaze took her in from the top of her large black feathered hat to the tips of her Louis XV. shoes.

"Come," he said, offering his arm. And they went out together.

The dinner was not cold. Nancy hardly spoke at all. She was nervous and charming. She sipped Liebfraunmilch, and dimpled and rippled while he told her that he had mines in Peru, and that he had been away from civilization for twenty years.

"I went down to the mines when I was twenty, and came back when I was forty. That is four years ago. I have been fighting my way ever since, trying to keep clear of the wrong woman. I am afraid of women."

"So am I," said Nancy, which was not true.

He laughed, and said: "And of what else?"

"Spiders," said Nancy, with her head on one side.

"And what else?"

"Lions," said Nancy.

"And what else?"

"Thunderstorms." And, as he seemed to be waiting, she added: "And of you, of course."

He did not believe it. But she was.

After dinner he took her to the Folies Bergères and then to the Boîte à Fursy; and he watched her narrowly, and was glad that she did not laugh. Then he took her back to the hotel. They went up together in the lift, and along the red-carpeted, boot-adorned corridor to her green and grey salon. He did not ask permission, but walked in and sat down—large and long—in the small brocaded armchair. [Pg 247]

"Are you tired?" he said.

Nancy said, "No," and remained standing.

He said, "Sit down," and she obeyed him.

He sat staring before him for a while, with his underlip pushed up under his upper-lip, making his straight, short-cut moustache stand out. He was a strong, large, ugly man. Nancy suddenly remembered that she had called him "toi," and said, "adieu, mes amours" to him in her letters, and she felt faint with shame. He made a little noise, something between a cough and a growl, and looked up at her.

"What are you thinking?" he said.

She laughed. "I am thinking that I called you Prince Charming, whereas you really are the Ogre."

"Yes," he said, and stared at her a long time. Then he got up suddenly and put out his large hand. "Good-night, Miss Brown," he said. He took his hat and stick, and went out, shutting the door decidedly behind him.

The next morning at half-past eleven he came; he had a small bunch of lilies of the valley in his hand.

"Will you invite me to lunch?" he said.

Yes, Nancy would be very pleased. She thought of the twenty-two francs in her purse; but nothing mattered.

They lunched in the dining-room, and he was very silent. Nancy spoke of music, but he did not respond.

"Do you sing?" she asked at last.

He looked up at her like an offended wild beast. "Do I look as if I could sing?"

"No, you don't," she said. "You look as if you could growl."

He smiled slightly under his clipped moustache, and did not answer. Nancy gave up all attempt at conversation. Her heart beat fast. Things were going wrong. He was tired of her already. He looked bored—well, no, not bored, but utterly indifferent and hard, as if he were alone. After their coffee he got up—every time he rose Nancy wondered anew at his breadth and length—and led the way out. Nancy trotted after him with short steps. He went into the lounge and took a seat near a table in the window, pushing a chair forward for Nancy. [Pg 248]

"May I smoke?" he said, taking a large cigar-case from his pocket.

Nancy nodded. He chose his cigar carefully, clipped the end off, and lit it. Nancy could not think of a word to say. All her pretty, frivolous conversation, all the bright remarks and witty repartee, wavered away from her mind. She had not prepared herself for monologues.

After the first puff he said: "You don't smoke, do you?"

"Oh no!" said Nancy.

As soon as she had said it a wave of crimson flooded her face. She remembered writing that she smoked Russian cigarettes perfumed with heliotrope. He had not believed her. How could she have written such an idiotic thing? And suddenly she realized that she was not the Girl in her Letters at all, and that he must be bored and disappointed. But no more was he the Man of his Letters; at least, she had imagined him quite different, with fair hair and droopy grey eyes, and a poet's soul. Then she remembered that he had never spoken about himself in his letters at all.

At this point he looked up and said: "I like a woman who can keep quiet. You have not spoken for half an hour." And she laughed, and was glad. [Pg 249]

When he had finished his cigar, he said: "I hope you have not left any valuables in your room. It is not safe."

"Oh no," said Nancy; "I haven't."

"Have you given them to the office?"

"No," said Nancy—"no;" and suddenly she remembered that she had told him in her letters that she wore jewels all over her.

Without looking up, he said: "Will you give me your purse? I will take care of it."

Nancy felt that if she went on flushing any more her hair would catch fire. She drew out her purse and handed it to him. He opened it slowly and deliberately. He took out the three sous and the two francs, and put them into his pocket. Then he opened the middle division, and looked at the twenty-franc piece. He took it out and placed it on the table. Then he went through all the other compartments, gazing pensively at an unused tramway ticket and at a medal of the Madonna del Monte. He put those back again, and handed Nancy the purse. The twenty-franc piece he put into a purse of his own, and into his pocket.

"Now let us go for a drive," he said.

Nancy, feeling dazed, rustled away, and took the lift to her room. She pinned on her hat, took her coat and gloves, and just caught the lift again as it was passing down. When he saw her, he said "That was quick," and they went out together. A victoria was waiting for them. The porter was profusely polite, and the horses started off at a loose trot down the Boulevards and towards the Étoile. He asked her many questions during the drive, and in her answers she was as much as possible the Girl of the Letters.

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He sounded her about Monte Carlo, and she was glad that she was quite *au courant*, and could mention systems and the Café de Paris.

"Would you like to go there again?" he asked.

"Yes—oh yes!" she said, clasping her mauve kid gloves. Then she fell into a reverie, and she kept her hands clasped in her lap, for she was saying an *Ave* and a *Pater* for Anne-Marie.

The carriage was turning into the Bois when her companion said:

"Where do you want to go?"

Nancy said: "This is very nice. The Bois is lovely."

"I mean where do you want to go to to-morrow, or the day after, or next week. You do not want to stay in Paris for ever, do you?"

She drew a little quick breath, and said, "Oh!" and then again, "Oh, really?" and looked up at him with uncertain eyes.

"Do not look at me as if I were the spider, or the lion, or the thunderstorm. Tell me if there is any place on earth that you have longed to go to. And when. And with whom."

Nancy's eyes filled quickly with glowing tears. "I should like to go to Italy," she said, "to a little village tip-tilted over the sea, called Porto Venere."

The Ogre, who had read "Elle et Lui," nodded, and said: "I know. Anywhere else?"

"I should like to stay a few days in Milan—to see some people who are dear."

"Et après?"

"I should like to go to Switzerland. Only to one or two little places there—the Via Mala, Splügen, Sufers—"

"H'm—h'm," said he, and waited to hear more.

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"And then—and then—yes, perhaps to Monte Carlo—and oh, to Naples and to Rome! But I want to stay longest in Porto Venere."

He nodded, and said: "When do you want to start?"

"To-morrow," said Nancy.

"And how? In a train? Or by motor? Or by boat?"

"I don't mind," said Nancy, hiding her face in her handkerchief and beginning to weep.

"And with whom?" There was a pause. "What about a maid?"

"Oh, no maid!" said Nancy. Then she looked up. "With you," she said, because the Girl in the Letters would have said it, and also because she wanted him to come.

"All right. Don't take much luggage," he said.

XVI

They went. They went through Switzerland. They drove down the wide white roads that coil like wind-blown ribbons round the swelling breasts of the Alps; they went up the barren Julier Pass, and through the shuddering Via Mala, breakfasting at St. Moritz, table d'hôteing at Maloya, wandering through the moonlike sunshine of Splügen's pine-forests, clattering and rumbling over the covered bridges of Sufers. The snow-tipped pine-trees, like regiments of monks with nightcaps on, nodded at them in stately gravity; the squirrels stopped with quick, beady glances, and scuttled away, tail-flourishing, up the branches, while the bland Helvetian cows stood in the

Every evening they went together down boot-adorned passages to the door of Nancy's room. And there he said, "Good-night, Miss Brown," and left her.

They went on into Italy—straight down to Naples without stopping in Milan, for Nancy would not see anyone she loved after all; for she could not explain anything, and did not know what to say, and did not want to think of anything just now. She would think afterwards. They clambered up the Vesuvius; they wandered through Pompei; they went to Spezia, and remembered Shelley; they went on to Porto Venere, and trembled to think that the sharks might have eaten Byron when he swam across the bay; they rowed about the Golfo, and ate *vongole* and other horrible, ill-smelling *frutti di mare*. And every evening, in the boot-adorned passages of the hotels, he took her to the door of her room, and said, "Good-night, Miss Brown."

In Spezia a little steamer that was coasting northwards took them on board. They were sliding on blue waters into Genoa, when Nancy, seated on a basket of oranges, felt the touch of the Ogre's hand on her shoulder. She looked up and smiled. He sat down on another basket beside her. It creaked and groaned under his weight, so he got up and fetched a heavy wooden case, dragging it along the deck to Nancy's side.

"Now what?" he said.

Nancy had grown to understand him well. Not for an instant did she think that he was talking of the moment, or the next hour, as she had thought when they had driven in the Bois, now more than a month ago. She knew that he looked at life in large outlines, and seldom spoke of small, immediate things.

"Now what?" she echoed. He put his large brown hand on her small one, and it was his first caress. It thrilled Nancy to the heart. His chilly blue eyes watched her face, and saw it paling slowly under his gaze.

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"Now you must go home," he said.

"Yes," said Nancy, "now I must go home." And she wondered vaguely whether home was the boarding-house in Lexington Avenue or Mrs. Johnstone's flat in 82nd Street. She decided that it was the flat, where the bunch of orchids and maidenhair had come and lived almost a week. Peggy and George would be her friends again, and the dead Mr. Johnstone, and the naked baby, and the chinless young man would be with her in the evenings. And Anne-Marie must leave Fräulein Müller's *Gartenhaus*, and go back to school on Sixth Avenue.

"What are your thoughts," said the Ogre.

"...I was wondering what made you send that messenger-boy with the flowers and the letter—the letter to the girl in blue.... It was not a bit like you," she said. And, looking into the hard face, she added: "You are not at all like that."

"I know I'm not," he said. Then he added, with a laugh, "Thank God! But we all do things that are not like ourselves now and then. Don't we?" She did not answer. "Don't you?" he insisted.

Nancy sighed and wondered. "I don't know. What is like me, and what is not like me? I do not know at all. I do not know myself."

"I do," said the Ogre. And there was another long silence. He had the aggravating habit of stopping short after a sentence that one would like to hear continued.

"Speak," said Nancy. "Say more."

"It was not like me to send those useless and expensive flowers out into the world to nobody, and to write a crazy letter *in's Blaue hinein*—into space. But we all have mad moments in our lives when we do things that are quite unlike us." A pause again. "It was not like you to write me those letters describing your old-rose curtains—afterwards they were blue velvet—and your scented cigarettes, and your jewels, and your lovers. And it was not like you to cross the Atlantic and come to Paris and to supper with a man you had never met, in order to see whether you could get money out of him."

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Nancy covered her face. "Oh!" she said, "have you thought that?"

"Oh!" he said, "have you done that?" And there was silence.

The Captain passed and remarked on the fine weather, adding that they would arrive in less than an hour. Then he went by.

"I liked your first letter—poor little truthful letter on the cheap paper. You said you were the wrong girl. You were dressed in brown. I could see you in your shabby brown dress—I knew it must be shabby—and I liked the idea of doing something unexpected with a little money. Then I was amused at your letter saying you were not Miss Brown. After that the lies began."

Nancy quivered. The houses of Quarto were coming into sight; the red hotel of Quinto was gliding past.

"How could you think that I would believe in the old-rose curtains in the 300's of East 82nd Street, I who have lived five or six years in New York? That showed me that you were a foreigner,

or you would have known that street numbers in New York tell their own tale. Then your letters told me that you were a fanciful creature, and they told me that you were lonely, or you would not have found time to write so much—a cultivated, little fibber, who quoted every poet under the sun, especially the out-of-the-way ones. Then, when I found out that you had a child—"

"Oh!" gasped Nancy, and the tears welled over. "You know about Anne-Marie!"

"I know about Anne-Marie. I even have a picture of her." He unbuttoned his coat, and drew out his pocket-book, and from it a little snapshot photograph, which he handed to Nancy. It was herself and Anne-Marie in front of a toy-shop. They were in the act of turning from it, and Anne-Marie's foot was lifted in the air. They were both laughing, and neither of them looking their best.

"Oh, but that's hideous of her," said Nancy. "She is quite different from that."

He smiled, and put the picture back into his pocket-book, and the pocket-book into his breast-pocket.

"When I had found out that you had a child, and that your husband"—he hesitated—"was—er—Neapolitan, I understood what you were after, and decided that I would—walk into it—que je marcherais, as the French say. Et j'ai marché." A long silence, and then he said: "And now, what do you want?"

But Nancy was crying, and could not answer. "Do you want to go on living in America?" Nancy shook her head.

"What are you crying for?" and he took her wrist, and pulled one hand from her face.

Nancy raised her reddened eyes. "I am crying," she said brokenly, "because all the—the prettiness has been taken out of everything. Yes, I was poor—yes, I was miserable, and I was inventing things in my letters; but I thought you believed them—and I thought you—you loved me, like Jaufré Rudel. And I have never, never been so happy as when—as when—I loved you across the distance—and you were the Unknown—and now it is all broken and spoilt—and all the time you thought I wanted money—I mean you knew I wanted money, and you had that hideous picture, and"—here Nancy broke into weak, wild sobs—"you thought I looked like that!"

"That's so," said Jaufré Rudel.

And he let her cry for a long time.

Quarto had slipped back into the distance, and San Francesco D'Albaro was moving smoothly into view.

"I can't go on crying for ever," said Nancy, raising her face with a quivering smile, "and the Captain will think you are a huge, horrid, scolding English Ogre."

They were nearly in. "Get your little bag and things," he said to her, and she rose quickly and complied. Everybody was standing up waiting to land. Oh, how good it was to be taken care of and ordered about, to be told to do this and that! She stood behind him small and meek, holding her travelling-bag in one hand, and in the other the umbrellas and sticks strapped together. His large shoulders were before her like a wall. She raised the bundle of umbrellas to her face and kissed the curved top of his stick. And now, what?

They drove to the hotel. Then they had dinner. In the evening they sat on the balcony, and watched the people passing below them. Handsome Italian officers, moustache-twisting and sword-clanking, passed in twos and threes, eyeing the hurrying modistes and the self-conscious *signorine* that walked beside their portly mothers and fathers. The military band was playing in the Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, and the music reached the balcony faintly. Then Nancy told him about her work. About the first book of verse that had set all Italy aflame, about the second, *The Book*, the work of her life, that had been interrupted.

He listened, smoking his cigar, and making no comment. Then he spoke.

"There is a boat from here on Wednesday. The *Kaiser Wilhelm*. A good old boat. Go over and fetch the child." Then he halted, and said: "Or do you like her to be brought up in America?"

"Oh no!" said Nancy.

"Well, fetch her," he said. "And fetch the old Fräulein across too, if she likes to come. Then go to Porto Venere, or to Spezia, or anywhere you like, and take a house, and sit down and work."

She could not speak. She saw Porto Venere white in the sunshine, tip-tilted over the sea, and she saw *The Book* that was to live, to live after all.

As she did not answer he said: "Don't you like it?"

She took his hand, and pressed it to her lips, and to her cheek, and to her heart. She could not answer. And his chilly blue eyes grew suddenly lighter than usual. "Dear little Miss Brown," he said; "dear, dear, foolish, little Miss Brown." And, bending forward, he kissed her forehead.

The *Gartenhaus* on Staten Island in the twilight, with lamplight and firelight gleaming through its casements, and a little hat of snow on its roof, looked like a Christ mas-card, when Nancy hurried through the narrow garden-gate, and ran up the tiny gravel-path. She had left all her belongings at the dock in order not to lose an instant. Anne-Marie's pink fingers were dragging at her heart.

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Fräulein, foggy as to time-tables and arrivals of boats, had thought it wisest not to attempt a meeting at the crowded, draughty, New York landing-station. She had kept Anne-Marie indoors for the last three days, saying: "Your mother may be here any moment." After the first thirty-six hours of poignant expectancy and frequent runnings to the gate, Anne-Marie had silently despised Fräulein for telling naughty untruths, and had whispered in the hairy ear of Schopenhauer that she would never again believe a word Fräulein ever said again. Schopenhauer—whose name had been chosen by Fräulein for educational purposes, namely (as she wrote in her diary), "to enlarge the childish mind by familiarity with the names of authors and philosophers"—was sympathetic and equally sceptical when Fräulein Müller sibilantly urged him: "Schoppi, Schoppi, mistress is coming. Go seek mistress! Seek mistress, sir." But Schoppi, who had searched and sniffed every corner of the hedge, and dug rapid holes round the early cabbages and in the flower-bed, knew that "mistress" was a pleasurable exciting, but merely delusive and empty sound. And so nobody expected Nancy as she ran up the path in the twilight, and saw the lights shining through the casement.

Her heart beat in trepidant joy. She had been so anxious about Anne-Marie. During the last few hours of the journey she had had ghostly and tragic imaginings. What if Anne-Marie had been running about the island, and had fallen into the sea? What if a motor-car—her heart had given a great leap, and then dropped, like a ball of lead, turning her faint with reminiscent terror. She would not think about it. No, she would not think of such things any more. But what if Anne-Marie had scarlet fever? Yes! suddenly she felt convinced that Anne-Marie had scarlet fever, that she would see the little red flag of warning hanging out over the *Gartenhaus* door....

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Nancy made ready to knock; then, before doing so, she dropped quickly to her knees on the snowy doorstep, and folded her hands in a childlike attitude of prayer: "O God! let me find Anne-Marie safe and happy!"

Almost in answer a sound struck her ear—a chord of sweetness and harmony, then a long, lonely note, and after it a quick twirl of running notes like a ripple of laughter. The violin!

Nancy sprang from the doorstep, and ran under the window that was lit up. She scrambled on to the rockery under it, and, scratching her hand against the climbing rose-branches, she grasped the ledge and looked in through the white-curtained glass. It was Anne-Marie. Standing in the circle of light from the lamp, with the violin held high on her left arm, and her cheek resting lightly against it, she looked like a little angel musician of Beato Angelico.

Her eyes were cast down, her floating hair rippled over her face. Nancy's throat tightened as she looked. Then Nancy's brain staggered as she listened. For the child was playing like an artist. Trills and arpeggios ran from under her fingers like clear water. Now a full and sonorous chord checked their springing lightness, and again the bubbling runs rilled out, sprinkling the twilight with music.

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Nancy's hand slipped from the sill, and a rose-branch hit the window. Then the fox-terrier's sharp bark rang through the house; there were hurrying feet in the hall; the door was opened by the smiling Elisabeth—and Fräulein was exclaiming and questioning, and Anne-Marie was in her mother's arms. Warm, and living, and tight she held her creature, thanking God for the touch of the fleecy hair against her face, for the fresh cheek that smelt of soap, and the soft breath that smelt of grass and flowers.

"Anne-Marie! Anne-Marie! Have you missed me, darling?"

Anne-Marie was sobbing wildly. "No! No! I haven't! Only now! Only now!"

"But now you have me, my own love."

"But now I miss you! Now I miss you," sobbed Anne-Marie, incoherent and despairing. And her mother understood. Mothers understand.

"Anne-Marie! I shall never go away from you again! I promise!"

Anne-Marie looked up through shimmering tears. "Honest engine?" she asked brokenly, putting out a small damp hand.

"Honest engine," said Nancy, placing her hand solemnly in the hand of her little daughter. Schopenhauer, squirming with barks, was patted and admired, and made to sit up leaning against the leg of the table; and Fräulein told the news about Anne-Marie having *doch gegessen* the tapioca-puddings, but never the porridge, and seldom the vegetables. Then, as it was late, Anne-Marie was conducted upstairs by everybody, including Schopenhauer, and while Elisabeth unfastened buttons and tapes, Fräulein brushed and plaited the golden hair, and Nancy, on her knees before the child, laughed with her and kissed her.

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When she was in bed Elisabeth and Schopenhauer had to sit in the dark beside her until she slept.

"But, Fräulein, that will never do!" said Nancy, as they went down the little staircase together

arm-in-arm. "You spoil her shockingly."

"Hush!" said Fräulein. And as they entered the cheerful drawing-room, where the violin lay on the table, and the bow on a chair, and a piece of rosin on the sofa, Fräulein stopped, and said impressively, "You do not know that that child is a Genius!"

In Fräulein's voice, as she said the word "genius," was awe and homage, service and genuflection. Nancy sat down, and looked at the little piece of rosin stuck on its green cloth on the sofa. "A Genius!" The word and the awestruck tone brought a recollection to her mind. Years ago, when she had stepped into the dazzling light of her first success, and all the poets of Italy had come to congratulate and to flatter, One had not come. He was the great and sombre singer of revolt, the Pagan poet of modern Rome. He was the Genius, denounced, anathematized and exalted in turn by the hot-headed youth of Italy. He lived apart from the world, aloof from the clamour made around his name, shunning both laudators and detractors, impassive alike to invective and acclamation. To him, with his curt permission, Nancy herself had gone. A disciple and apostle of his, long-bearded and short of words, had come to conduct her to the Poet's house in Bologna. It was an old house on the broad, ancient ramparts of the city, where an armed sentinel marched, gun on shoulder, up and down. Nancy remembered that she had laughed, and said frivolously: "I suppose the Poet has the soldier on guard to prevent his ideas being stolen." The apostle had not smiled. Then she had entered the house alone, for the apostle was not invited.

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The Spirit of Silence was on the cold stone staircase. The door had been opened by a pale-faced, stupid-looking servant, whose only mission in life seemed to be not to make a noise. Three hushed figures, the daughters of the Poet, had bidden her in a half-whisper to sit down. They all had a look about them as if they lived with something that devoured them day by day. And they looked as if they liked it. They lived to see that the Genius was not disturbed. Then the Genius had entered the room—a fierce and sombre-looking man of sixty, with a leonine head and impatient eyes. And she, seeing him, understood that one should be willing to tiptoe through life with subdued gesture and hushed voice, so that he were not disturbed. She understood that he had the right to devour.

He carried her little book in his hand, and spoke in brief, gruff tones. "Three women," he said, his flashing eyes looking her up and down as if he were angry with her, "have been poets: Sappho, Desbordes Valmore, Elizabeth Browning. And now—you. Go and work."

That was all. But it had been enough to send Nancy away dazed with happiness. The Devoured Ones had opened the door for her, and silently shown her out; and as she went tremblingly down the steps she had heard a heavy tread above her, and had stopped to look back. He had come out on to the landing, and was looking after her. She stood still, with a beating heart. And he had spoken again. Three words: "Aspetto e confido—I wait and trust."

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She had replied, "Grazie," and then had gone running down the stairs, trembling and stumbling, knowing that his eyes were upon her.

"*Aspetto e confido.*" He had waited and trusted in vain. She had never written another book. And now he would never read what she might write, for he was dead.

Nancy still stared at the little piece of rosin stuck on its dentelated green cloth—stared at it vaguely, unseeing. What? Anne-Marie was a Genius? The little tender, wild-eyed birdling was one of the Devourers? Yes, already in the *Gartenhaus* there was the atmosphere of hushed reverence, the attitude of sacrifice and waiting. Fräulein spoke in whispers; Elisabeth and the fox-terrier sat in the dark while the Genius went to sleep. Her violin possessed the table, her bow the armchair, her rosin the sofa. Fräulein had all the amazed stupefaction of one of the Devoured.

"The child is a Genius," she was repeating. "She will be like Wagner. Only greater."

Then she seemed to awake to the smaller realities of life. "What did the Firm say? When does your book appear? My poor dear, you must be tired! you must be hungry! But, hush! the child's room is just overhead, so, if you do not mind, I will give you your supper in the back-kitchen. Anne-Marie, when she is not eating, does not like the sound of plates."

XVIII

So Nancy did not go to Porto Venere after all. Nor to Spezia. For there was no great violin teacher in either of those blue and lovely places.

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There were only balconied rooms, with wide views over the Mediterranean Sea, where Nancy could have written her Book, and seen visions and dreamed dreams; but surely, as Fräulein said, she could write her book in any nice quiet room, with a table in it, and pen and ink, while Anne-Marie must cultivate her gift and her calling. Anne-Marie must study her violin. So Nancy wrote, and explained this to the Ogre, and then she went with Anne-Marie and Fräulein to Prague, where the greatest of all violin-teachers lived, fitting left hands with wonderful technique, and right hands with marvellous pliancy; teaching slim fingers to dance and scamper and skip on four tense strings, and supple wrists to wield a skimming, or control a creeping, bow. And this greatest of teachers took little Anne-Marie to his heart. He also called her the *Wunderkind*, and set her eager feet, still in their white socks and button shoes, on the steep path that leads up the Hill of Glory.

Nancy unpacked her manuscripts in an apartment in one of the not very wide streets of old Prague; opposite her window was a row of brown and yellow stone houses; she had a table, and pen and ink, and there was nothing to disturb her. True, she could hear Anne-Marie playing the violin two rooms off, but that, of course, was a joy; besides, when all the doors were shut one could hardly hear anything, especially if one tied a scarf or something round one's head, and over one's ears.

So Nancy had no excuse for not working. She told herself so a hundred times a day, as she sat at the table with the scarf round her head, staring at the yellow house opposite. Through the open window came the sound of loud, jerky Czech voices. The strange new language, of which Nancy had learned a few dozen words, rang in her ears continuously: Kavarna ... Vychod ... Lekarna ... the senseless words turned in her head like a many-coloured merry-go-round. Even at night in her dreams she seemed to be holding conversations in Czech. But that would pass, and she would be able to work; for now she had no anxieties and no preoccupations. Fräulein looked after Anne-Marie, body and soul, with unceasing and agitated care, deeming it as important that she should have her walk as that she should play the "Zigeunerweisen," that she should say her prayers as that she should eat her soup. And Nancy had no material preoccupations either. She had decided to accept gratefully, and without scruple, all that she needed for two years from her friend the Ogre. Long before then The Book would be out, and she could repay him. And what mattered repaying him? All he wanted was that she should be happy, and live her own life for two years. He would have to go back to Peru, and stay there for about that period of time. Let her meanwhile live her own life and fulfil her destiny—thus he wrote to her. And the Prager Bankverein had money for her when she needed it.

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So Nancy sat before her manuscripts and lived her own life, and tried not to hear the violin, and not to mind interruptions. In her heart was a great longing—the longing to see the Ogre again before he left Europe, a great, aching desire for the blue chilliness of his eyes, for his stern manner, and his gruff voice, and for the shy greatness of his heart that her own heart loved and understood.

And besides this ache was the yearn and strain and sorrow of her destiny unfulfilled. For once again the sense of time passing, of life running out of her grasp, bit at her breast like an adder.

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"La belle qui veut,
La belle qui n'ose
Cueillir les roses
Du jardin bleu."

She sat down and wrote to him. "I cannot work. I cannot work. I am swept away and overwhelmed by some chimeric longing that has no name. My soul drowns and is lost in its indefinite and fathomless desire. Will you take me away before you go, away to some rose-lit, jasmine-starred nook in Italy, where my heart may find peace again? I feel such strength, such boundless, turbulent power, yet my spirit is pinioned and held down like a giant angel sitting in a cave with huge wings furled...."

"You have unclosed the sweep of heaven before me; I will bring the sunshot skies down to your feet...."

The door opened, and Fräulein's head appeared, solemn and sibylline, with tears shining behind her spectacles.

"Nancy, to-day for the first time Anne-Marie is to play Beethoven. Will you come?"

Yes, Nancy would come. She followed Fräulein into the room where Anne-Marie was with the Professor and his assistant.

The Professor did not like to play the piano, so he had brought the assistant with him, who sat at the piano, nodding a large, rough black head in time to the music. Anne-Marie was in front of her stand. The Professor, with his hands behind him, watched her. The Beethoven Romance in F began.

The simple initial melody slid smoothly from under the child's fingers, and was taken up and repeated by the piano. The willful crescendo of the second phrase worked itself up to the passionate high note, and was coaxed back again into gentleness by the shy and tender trills, as a wrathful man by the call of a child. Martial notes by the piano. The assistant's head bobbed violently, and now Beethoven led Anne-Marie's bow, gently, by tardigrade steps, into the first melody again. Once more, the head at the piano bobbed over his solo. Then, on the high F, down came the bow of Anne-Marie, decisive and vehement.

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"That's right!" shouted the Professor suddenly. "Fa, mi, sol—play that on the fourth string."

Anne-Marie nodded without stopping. Eight accented notes by the piano, echoed by Anne-Marie.

"That is to sound like a trumpet!" cried the master.

"Yes, yes; I remember," said Anne-Marie.

And now for the third time the melody returned, and Anne-Marie played it softly, as in a dream, with a *gruppetto* in *pianissimo* that made the Professor push his hands into his pockets, and the assistant turn his head from the piano to look at her. At the end the slowly ascending scales

soared and floated into the distance, and the three last, calling notes fell from far away.

No one spoke for a moment; then the Professor went close to the child and said:

"Why did you say, 'I remember' when I told you about the trumpet notes?"

"I don't know," said Anne-Marie, with the vague look she always had after she had played.

"What did you mean?"

"I meant that I understood," said Anne-Marie.

The Professor frowned at her, while his lips worked.

"You said, 'I remember.' And I believe you remember. I believe you are not learning anything new. You are remembering something you have known before." [Pg 268]

Fräulein intervened excitedly. "Ach! Herr Professor! I assure you the child has never seen that piece! I have been with her since the first day she *überhaupt* had the violin, and—"

The Professor waved an impatient hand. He was still looking at Anne-Marie. "Who is it?" and he shook his grey head tremulously. "Whom have we here? Is it Paganini? Or Mozart? I hope it is Mozart." Then he turned to the man at the piano, who had his elbows on the notes, and his face hidden in his hands. "What say you, Bertolini? Who is with us in this involucrum?"

"I know not. I am mute," said the black-haired man in moved tones.

"Thank the Fates that you are not deaf," said the Professor, looking vaguely for his hat, "or you would not have heard this wonder."

Then he took his leave, for he was a busy man. Bertolini remained to pack up the Professor's precious Guarnerius del Gesù, dearer to him than wife and child, and his music, and his gloves, and his glasses, and anything else that he left behind him, for the Professor was an absent-minded man.

Then Nancy said to the assistant: "Are you Italian?"

"Sissignora," said Bertolini eagerly.

"So am I," said Nancy. And they were friends.

Bertolini came the next day to ask if he might practise with "little Wunder," as he called her. He also came the next day, and the day after, and then every day. He was a second-rate violinist, and a third-rate pianist; but he was an absolutely first-rate musician, an extravagant, impassioned, boisterous musician, whose shouts of excitement, after the first half-hour of polite shyness, could be heard all over the house. [Pg 269]

Anne-Marie loved to hear him vociferate. She used to watch his face when she purposely played a false note; she liked to see him crinkle up his nose as if something had stung him, and open a wild mouth to shout. Once she played through an entire piece in F, making every B natural instead of flat. "Si bemolle! B flat!" said Bertolini the first time. "*Bemolle!*" cried Bertolini the second time. "BEMOLLE!" he roared, trampling on the pedals, and with his hand grasping his hair, that looked like a curly black mat fitted well over his head.

"What is the matter with Bemolle?" asked Fräulein, raising bland eyes from her needlework.

Anne-Marie laughed. "I don't know what is the matter with him. I think he's crazy." And thus Signor Bertolini was christened Bemolle for all time.

Bemolle, who was a composer, now composed no more. He soon became one of the Devoured. His mornings were given up to the Professor; his afternoons he gave to Anne-Marie. He would arrive soon after lunch, and sit down at the piano, tempting the child from playthings or story-book by rippling accompaniments or dulcet chords. And because the Professor had said: "With this child one can begin at the end," Bemolle lured her long before her ninth birthday across the ditches and pitfalls of Ernst and Paganini, over the peaks and crests of Beethoven and Bach.

On the day that Nancy was called from her writing to hear Anne-Marie play Bach's "Chaconne," Nancy folded up the scarf that she had used to cover her ears with, and put it away. Then she took her manuscripts, and kissed them, and said good-bye to them for ever, and put them away. [Pg 270]

Soon afterwards the Ogre came to Prague. He had received Nancy's letter about Italy, and had come to answer it in person. It was good to see him again. His largeness filled the room, his mastery controlled and soothed the spirit. He was the "wall" that Clarissa had spoken of in the Villa Solitudine long ago.

Lucky is the woman who belongs to a wall. When she has bruised and fretted herself in trying to push through it, and get round it, and jump over it, let her sit down quietly in its protecting shadow and be grateful.

An hour after his arrival the imperious Anne-Marie was subjugated and entranced, Fräulein was a-bustle and a-quiver with solicitude as to his physical welfare, and Nancy sat back in a large armchair, and felt that nothing could hurt, or ruffle, or trouble her any more.

In the evening, when Fräulein had taken Anne-Marie to bed, the Ogre smoked his long cigar, and said to Nancy:

"There is no jasmine in this season in Italy. And not many roses. But the place that you asked for is ready. It has a large garden. When I have settled you there, I am going to Peru."

"Oh, must you?" said Nancy. "Must you really?"

"The Mina de l'Agua needs looking after. Something has gone wrong with it. I ought to have gone three months ago, when I first wrote to you that I should," said the Ogre. "But enough. That does not concern you."

Nancy looked very meek. "I am sorry," she said apologetically.

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"Very well," said the Ogre "Now let us talk about your work and Italy. When do you start?"

Those four words thrilled Nancy with indescribable joy. "When do you start?" What a serene, what an attractive phrase!

"Can you be ready on Thursday?" Again the balm and charm of the question ran into Nancy's veins. She felt that she could listen to questions of this kind for ever. But he stopped questioning, and expected an answer. It was a hesitant answer. She said:

"What about Anne-Marie's violin?"

He waited for her to explain, and she did so. Anne-Marie was going to be a portentous virtuosa. The great master had said so. It would never do to take her away from Prague. Nowhere would she get such lessons, nowhere would there be a Bemolle to devote himself utterly and entirely to her.

The Ogre listened with his eyes fixed on Nancy.

"Well? Then what?"

"Ah!" said Nancy. "Then what!" And she sighed.

"Do you want to leave her here?" asked the Ogre.

"No," said Nancy.

"Do you want to take her with you?"

"N-no," said Nancy.

"Then what?" said the Ogre again.

Nancy raised her clouded eyes under their wing-like eyebrows to his strong face. "Help me," she said.

He finished smoking his cigar without speaking; then he helped her. He looked in her face with his firm eyes while he spoke to her.

He said: "You cannot tread two ways at once. You said your genius was a giant angel sitting in a cave, with huge wings furled."

"Yes; but since then the genius of Anne-Marie has flown with clarion wings into the light."

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"You said that your unexpressed thoughts, your unfulfilled destiny, hurt you."

"Yes; but am I to silence a singing fountain of music in order that my silent, unwritten books may live?"

He did not speak for some time. Then he said: "Has it never occurred to you that it might be better for the little girl to be just a little girl, and nothing else?"

"No," said Nancy. "It never occurred to me."

"Might it not have been better if you yourself, instead of being a poet, had been merely a happy woman?"

"Ah, perhaps!" said Nancy. "But Glory looked me in the face when I was young—Glory, the sorcerer!—the Pied Piper!—and I have had to follow. Through the days and the nights, through and over and across everything, his call has dragged at my heart. And, oh! it is not his call that hurts; it is the being pulled back and stopped by all the outstretched hands. The small, everyday duties and the great loves that hold one and keep one and stop one—they it is that break one's heart in two. Yes, *in two*, for half one's heart has gone away with the Piper." She drew in a long breath, remembering many things. Then she said: "And now he is piping to Anne-Marie. She has heard him, and she will go. And if her path leads over my unfulfilled hopes and my unwritten books, she shall tread and trample and dance on them. And good luck to her!"

"Well, then—good luck to her!" said the Ogre.

And Nancy said: "Thank you."

"Now you are quite clear," he said after a pause; "and you must never regret it. If you want your child to be an eagle, you must pull out your own wings for her."

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"Every feather of them!" said Nancy.

"And when you have done so, then she will spread them and fly away from you."

"I know it," said Nancy.

"And you will be alone."

"Yes," said Nancy.

And she closed her eyes to look into the coming years.

XIX

The Ogre remained in Prague a week, and took Anne-Marie on the Moldau and to the White Mountain, to the Stromovka and the Petrin Hill. Bemolle was frantic. For six days Anne-Marie had not touched the violin. He had looked forward to long hours of music with Anne-Marie, and had prepared her entire repertoire carefully in contrasting programmes for the English visitor's pleasure. But the English visitor would have none of it, or very little, and that little not of the best. Not much Beethoven, scarcely any Bach, no Brahms! Only Schubert and Grieg. Short pieces! Then the large man would get up and shake hands, first with Anne-Marie, then with Bemolle, and say "Thank you, thank you," and the music was over.

On the last day of his stay he came before luncheon, and went to the valley of the Sarka alone with "Miss Brown"—he never called Nancy anything else, and she loved the name. It was a clear midsummer day. The country was alight with poppies, like a vulgar summer hat. The heart of Miss Brown was sad.

"I leave this evening," he said, "at 8.40."

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"You have told me that twenty times," said Miss Brown.

"I like you to think of it," he said; and she did not answer. "I am going back to the mines, back to Peru—"

"You have said that two hundred times," said Miss Brown pettishly.

He paid no attention. "To Peru," he continued, "and I may have to stay there a year, or two years ... to look after the mine. Then I return." He coughed. "Or—I do not return."

No answer.

"You have not changed your mind about going to Italy and writing your book?"

"No," said Nancy, with little streaks of white on each side of her nostrils.

"I thought not."

Then they walked along for a quarter of an hour in silence. The wind ran over the grasses, and the birds sang.

"Nancy!" he said. It was the first time he had called her by her name. She covered her face and began to cry. He did not attempt to comfort her. After a while he said, "Sit down," and she sat on the grass and went on crying.

"Do you love me very much?" he asked.

"Dreadfully," said Nancy, looking up at him helplessly through her tears.

He sat down beside her.

"And do you know that I love you very much?"

"Yes, I know," sobbed Nancy.

There was a short silence. Then he said:

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"In one of your letters long ago you wrote: 'This love across the distance, without the aid of any one of our senses, this is the Blue Rose of love, the mystic marvel blown in our souls for the delight of Heaven.' Shall we pluck it, Nancy, and wear it for our own delight?"

The grasses curtseyed and the river ran. He took her hand from her face. Nancy looked at him, and the tears brimmed over.

"Then," she said brokenly, "it would not be the Blue Rose any more."

"True," he said.

"Then it would be a common, everyday, pink-faced flower like every other."

"True," he said again.

She withdrew her hand from his. Then his hand remained on his knee in the sunshine, a large brown hand, strong, but lonely.

"Oh, dear Unknown!" said Nancy; and she bent forward and kissed the lonely hand. "Do not let us throw our blue dream-rose away!"

"Very well," he said—"very well, dear little Miss Brown." And he kissed her forehead for the second time.

That evening he went back to his mines.

XX

The following winter, when Nancy had been in Prague nearly a year, the Professor said:

"Next month Anne-Marie will give an orchestral concert."

"Oh, Herr Professor!" gasped Nancy. "Was giebt's?" asked the Professor.

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"Was giebt's?" asked Anne-Marie.

"She is only nine years old."

"Well?" said the Professor.

"Well?" said Anne-Marie.

Who can describe the excitement of the following days? The excitement of Bemolle over the choice of a programme! The excitement of Fräulein over the choice of a dress! The excitement of Nancy, who could close no eye at night, who pictured Anne-Marie breaking down or stopping in the middle of a piece, or beginning to cry, or refusing to go on to the platform, or catching cold the day before! Everyone was febrile and overwrought except Anne-Marie herself, who seemed to trouble not at all about it.

She was to play the Max Bruch Concerto? *Gut!* And the Fantasia Appassionata? All right. And the Paganini variations on the G string? Very well. And now might she go out with Schop? For Schopenhauer, long-bodied and ungainly, had come with them to Europe, and was now friends with all the gay dogs of Prague.

"I will order the pink dress," said Fräulein.

"Oh no! Let it be white," said Nancy.

"I want it blue," said Anne-Marie.

So blue it was.

One snowy morning Anne-Marie went to her first rehearsal with the orchestra. There was much friendly laughter among the strings and wind, the brass and reeds, when the small child entered through the huge glass doors of the Rudolfinum, followed by Bemolle carrying the violin, Nancy carrying the music, Fräulein carrying the dog, and the Professor in the rear, with his hat pulled down deeply over his head, and a large unlit cigar twisting in his fingers. Anne-Marie was introduced to the Bohemian chef d'orchestre, and was hoisted up to the platform by Fräulein and the Professor. Violins and violas tapped applause on their instruments.

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And now Jaroslav Kalas raps his desk with the bâton and raises his arm. Then he remembers something. He stops and bends down to Anne-Marie. Has she the A? Yes, thank you. And the little girl holds the fiddle to her ear and plucks lightly and softly at the strings. She raises it to her shoulder, and stands in position.

Again the conductor taps and raises his arms. B-r-r-r-r roll the drums. Re-do-si, re-do-si, re-e, whisper the clarinets. A pause. Anne-Marie lifts her right arm slowly, and strikes the low G—a long vibrating note, like the note of a 'cello. Then she glides softly up the cadenza, and ends on the long pianissimo high D. Bemolle, who has been standing up, sits down suddenly. The Professor, who has been sitting down, stands up. Now Anne-Marie is purling along the second cadenza. Fräulein, beaming in her lonely stall in the centre of the empty hall, nods her head rapidly and continuously. Nancy has covered her face with her hands. But the little girl, with her cheek on the fiddle, plays the concerto and sees nothing. Only once she gives a little start, as the brass instruments blare out suddenly behind her and she turns slightly towards them with an anxious eye. Then she forgets them; and she carries the music along, winding through the andante, gliding through the adagio, tearing past the allegro, leaping into the wild, magnificent finale.

Perfect silence. The orchestra has not applauded. Kalas folds his arms and turns round to look at the Professor. But the Professor is blowing his nose. So Kalas steps down from his desk, and, taking Anne-Marie's hand, lifts it, bow and all, to his lips. Then, stepping back briskly to the desk, he raps for silence. "Vieuxtemps' Fantasie," he says, and the music-sheets are fluttered and turned.

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All Prague sat expectant—rustling and murmuring and coughing—in the stalls and galleries of the Rudolfinum, on the night of the concert. The Bohemian orchestra were in their seats. Kalas stepped up to his desk, and an overture was played.

A short pause. Then, in the midst of a tense silence, Anne-Marie appeared, threading her way through the orchestra, with her violin under her arm. Now she stands in her place, a tiny figure in a short blue silk frock, with slim black legs and black shoes, and her fair hair tied on one side with a blue ribbon. Unwondering and calm, Anne-Marie confronted her first audience, gazing at the thousand upturned faces with gentle, fearless eyes. She turned her quiet gaze upwards to the gallery, where row on row of people were leaning forward to see her. Then, with a little shake of her head to throw back her fair hair, she lifted her violin to her ear, plucked lightly, and listened, with her head on one side, to the murmured reply of the strings. Kalas, on his tribune, was looking at her, his face drawn and pale. She nodded to him, and he rapped the desk. B-r-r-r-r-r-rolled the drums.

In the artists' room at the close of the concert people were edging and pressing and pushing to get in and catch a glimpse of Anne-Marie. The Directors and the uniformed men pushed the crowd out again, and locked the doors. The Professor, who had listened to the concert hidden away in a corner of the gallery, elbowed his way through the crush and entered the artists' room. The doors were quickly locked again behind him.

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The Professor had his old black violin-case in his hands. He went to the table, and, pushing aside a quantity of flowers that lay on it, he carefully put down his violin-case. It looked like a little coffin in the midst of the flowers. Anne-Marie was having her coat put on by Kalas, and a scarf tied round her head by Nancy, who was white as a sheet. The Professor beckoned to her, and she ran to him, and stood beside him at the table. He opened his violin-case and lifted out the magnificent blond instrument that he had treasured for thirty years. He turned the key of the E string, and drew the string off. Then he drew the A string off; then the D. The violin, now with the single silver G string holding up its bridge, lay in the Professor's hands for a moment. He turned solemnly to the little girl.

"This is my Guarnerius del Gesù. I give it to you."

"Yes," said Anne-Marie.

"You will always play the Paganini Variations for the G string on this violin. Put no other strings on it."

"No," said Anne-Marie.

The Professor replaced the violin in the case, and shut it. "I have taught you what I could," he said solemnly. "Life will teach you the rest."

"Yes," said Anne-Marie, and took the violin-case in her arms. The Professor looked at her a long time. Then he said:

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"See that you put on warm gloves to go out; it is snowing." He turned away quickly and left the room.

Nancy put her arm round Anne-Marie.

"Oh, darling, you forgot to thank him!" she said.

Anne-Marie raised her eyes. She held the violin-case tightly in both her arms. "How can one thank him? What is the good of thanking him?" she said. And Nancy felt that she was right.

"Where are my gloves?" said Anne-Marie. "He told me to put them on. And where is Fräulein?"

Fräulein had gone. She had been sent home in a cab after the second piece, for she had not a strong heart. Bemolle, who had been weeping copiously in a corner, stepped forward with the other violin-case in his hand.

Now they were ready. Anne-Marie was carrying the Guarnerius and the flowers, so Nancy could not take her hand. The men in uniform saluted and unlocked the doors, throwing them wide open. Then Anne-Marie, who had started forward, stopped. Before her the huge passage was lined with people, crowded and crushed in serried ranks, with a narrow space through the middle. At the end of the passage near the doors they could be seen pushing and surging, like a troubled sea. Anne-Marie turned to her mother.

"Mother, what are the people waiting for?" she asked.

Nancy smiled with quivering lips. "Come, darling," she said.

"No," said Anne-Marie; "I will not come. I am sure they are waiting to see something, and I want to wait, too."

As the crowd caught sight of her and rushed forward, she was lifted up by a large policeman, who carried her on his shoulder and pushed his way through the tumult. Anne-Marie clutched her flowers and the violin-case, which knocked against the policeman's head with every step he took. Nancy followed in the crush, laughing and sobbing, feeling hands grasping her hands, hearing voices saying: "Gebenedeite Mutter! glückliche Mutter!" And she could only say: "Thank you! Thank you! Oh, thank you!"

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Then they were in the carriage. The door was shut with a bang. Many faces surged round the windows.

"Wave your hand," said Nancy. And Anne-Marie waved her hand. Cheers and shouts frightened the plunging horses, and they started off at a gallop through the nocturnal streets. Nancy put her arm round Anne-Marie, and the child's head lay on her shoulder. The Guarnerius was at their feet. The flowers fell from Anne-Marie's hand on to the Professor's old black case, that was like a shabby little coffin. So they drove away out of the noise and the lights into the dark and silent streets, holding each other without speaking. Then Anne-Marie said softly:

"Did you like my concert, Liebstes?"

She had learned the tender German appellative from Fräulein.

"Yes," whispered Nancy.

"Did I play well, Liebstes?"

"Yes, my dear little girl."

A long pause. "Are you happy, Liebstes?"

"Oh yes, yes, yes! I am happy," said Nancy.

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XXI

Before a week had passed Nancy had discovered how difficult a thing it was to be the mother of a wonderchild, and had grown thin and harassed by the stream of visitors and the deluge of letters that overwhelmed their modest apartment in the Vinohrady. As early as eight o'clock in the morning rival violinists walked beneath the windows to hear if Anne-Marie was practising, and how she was practising, and what she was practising. As they did not hear her, they concluded that she practised on a mute fiddle, and were wrathful and disappointed. By ten o'clock Lori, the smiling maid, had introduced a reporter or two, an impresario or two, a mother or two with a child or two, and none of them seemed to need to go home to luncheon. Questions were asked, and advice was tendered. "How long did the child practise every day?" "Two or three hours," said Nancy. "Too much," cried the mothers. "Too little," said the impresarios. "At what age did she begin?" "When she was between seven and eight." "Too young," said the mothers. "Too old," said the impresarios. "How does she sleep?" asked the mothers. "What fees do you expect?" asked the impresarios. "Why do you dress her in blue?" asked the mothers. "Why not in white or in black velvet?" "Why don't you cut her hair quite short and dress her in boy's clothes, and say she is five years old?" asked the impresarios. "How old is she *really*?" "Does her father beat her?" There seemed to be no restraint to the kind and the quantity of questions people were prepared to ask.

Meanwhile the fame of Anne-Marie had flashed to Vienna, and she was invited to play in the Musikverein Saal. They said good-bye to the Professor with tears of gratitude, and left—taking away with them his best violin and his only assistant, for Bemolle was to go with them and carry the violin, and run the messages, and see after the luggage, and attend to the business arrangements. This last duty neither Fräulein nor Anne-Marie, and least of all Nancy, was capable of undertaking. Bemolle himself was nervous about it, but the Professor (who knew as much about business as Anne-Marie) had coached him.

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"All you have to do is to count the tickets they give you, and the money they give you. And there must be no discrepancy. Do you see?"

Yes, Bemolle saw. And so that was what he did, everywhere and after each concert. He counted the tickets, and he counted the money that was given him very carefully and lengthily, while the smiling manager stood about and smoked, or went out and refreshed himself; and it was always all right, and there was never any discrepancy anywhere. So *that* was all right.

The great hall of the Musikverein was filled for Anne-Marie's first concert. It was crowded and packed for her second, and third, and fourth. A blond Archduchess asked her to play to her children, and Anne-Marie's lips were taught to frame phrases to Royal Highnesses, and her little black legs were trained to obeisance and curtsy. Then Berlin telegraphed for the Wonderchild, and the Wonderchild went to Berlin and played Bach and Beethoven in the Saal der Philharmonic. Two tall, white-haired gentlemen came into the artists' room at the end of the concert. Solemnly they kissed the child's forehead, and invoked God's blessing upon her. When they had left, Nancy saw Bemolle running after them and shaking their hands. Nancy said: "What are you doing, Bemolle?" The emotional Bemolle, who, since Anne-Marie's *début*, passed his days turning pale and red, and always seemed on the verge of tears, exclaimed: "I have shaken hands with Max Bruch and with Joachim. I do not care if now I die."

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And always at the end of the concerts crowds waited at the doors for the child to appear. Anne-Marie passed through the cheering people with her arms full of flowers, nodding to the right, nodding to the left, smiling and thanking and nodding again, with Nancy nodding and smiling and thanking close behind her. Sometimes the crowd was so great that they could not pass, and Anne-Marie had to be lifted up and carried to the carriage buoyantly, laughing down at everybody and waving her hands. Then there was a rush round the carriage door. Nancy, crushed and breathless, tearful and laughing, managed to get in after her, the door banged, and off they were, Anne-Marie still nodding first at one window then at the other, and rapping her fingers against the glass in farewell.... At last the running, cheering crowds were left behind, and she would drop her head with a little sigh of happiness against Nancy's arm.

"Did you like my concert, mother dear? Did I play well, Liebstes?"

That was the hour of joy for Nancy's heart. The concerts themselves turned her into a statue of terror, enveloped her with fear as with a sheet of ice. While Anne-Marie played, swaying slightly like a flower in a breeze, her spirit carried away on the wing of her own music, Nancy sat in the audience petrified and blanched, her hands tightly interlaced, her heart thumping dull and fast in her throat and in her ears. If the blue dream-light of Anne-Marie's eyes wandered round and found her, and rested on her face, Nancy would try to smile—a strained, panic-stricken smile, which made Anne-Marie, even while she was playing, feel inclined to laugh. Especially if she were at that moment performing something very difficult, spluttering fireworks by Bazzini, or a romping, breakneck bravura by Vieuxtemps, she would look fixedly at her mother, while an impish smile crept into her eyes, and her fingers rushed and scampered up and down the strings, and her bow swept and skimmed with the darting flight of a swallow.

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Nancy, watching her and trying, with ashen lips, to respond to her smile, would say to herself: "She will stop suddenly! She will forget. She cannot possibly remember all those thousands and thousands of notes. She will let her bow drop. The string will break. Something will happen! And if my heart goes on hammering like this, I shall fall down and die." But nothing happened, and she did not die, and the piece ended. And the applause crackled and crashed around them. And the concert ended, and soon they were alone together in the flower-filled, fragrant penumbra of the moving carriage.

"Are you happy, mother dear?"

"Yes, yes, yes! I am so happy, my own little girl!"

In the gentle month of May they went to London.

London! Nancy's father's home! London! Close to Hertfordshire, where Nancy had lived the first eight years of her life.

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On board the Channel steamer Nancy, with beating heart, full of tenderness and awe, pointed out the white cliffs to Anne-Marie. "That is England."

"Yes," said Anne-Marie, "I know."

"You must love England, darling," said Nancy.

"We shall see," said the Wonderchild, who was not prepared to love by command. Fräulein was bubbling over with reminiscences. It was in Dover that Nancy's mother had come to meet her twenty-four years ago. They had had tea and sponge-cakes in the train. They had bought an umbrella somewhere, because she had left hers on the boat, and it was raining.

So it was to-day, raining drearily, heavily on the sad green landscapes as the train ran through Kent and towards London.

They went to a hotel, close to the hall where Anne-Marie was to play. And all the way driving to it Bemolle wept, with emotion at being in London, and with emotion at not being in Italy; for in a little village at the foot of the Appenines, his old mother still lived, following him with anxious letters while he rushed across Europe carrying the violin for Anne-Marie.

The first London concert was to be the week after their arrival. The manager, pink-faced and blue-eyed, came to the hotel to talk about the programme.

"England is not Berlin. Don't make it too heavy," he said. So the Beethoven Concerto was taken out, and the Vieuxtemps Concerto put in its stead. The Chaconne was taken out, and the Faust Phantasie put in its stead. The manager said, "That's right," and went out to play golf.

The London audience and the London critics came *en masse* to hear Anne-Marie. The London audiences clapped and shouted. The London critics carped and reproved. How sad it was, said they, that a child with such a marvellous gift should waste her genius on music of the cheap virtuoso kind! What a responsibility on the shoulders of parents and masters who withheld from her the classic glories of Beethoven and Bach!

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The manager, coming for the programme of the second concert, said: "Pile it on. Give it to them heavy. It's the heavy stuff they want." Then he went out and played golf.

So Anne-Marie played the Beethoven Concerto and the Beethoven Romance, the Bach Chaconne and Fugue, Prelude and Sarabande. And the audience shouted and clapped.

But the critics carped and reproved. How can a mere child understand Beethoven and Bach? How wrong to overweight the puerile brain with the giants of classic composition! It is almost a sacrilege to hear a little girl venturing to approach the Chaconne. Let her play Handel and Mozart.

So in the third concert Anne-Marie played Handel and Mozart, and the audience shouted and clapped.

But the critics said that, though she played the easy, simple music very nicely for her age, still, in a London concert hall one expected to hear something more puissant and authoritative. And why did she give concerts at all? Why not do something else? Study composition, for instance?

"That's England all over," said the manager, and went out and played golf.

Nancy was bewildered and unhappy. Bemolle danced about in helpless Latin rage, and Fräulein sat down and wrote a long letter to the *Times*. But it is uncertain whether the *Times* printed it. [Pg 288]

Anne-Marie, who did not know that critics existed, nor care what critics said, was happy and cheerful, and bought a dog in Regent Street, to replace the quarantined Schopenhauer. He was a young and thin and careless dog, and answered to the name of Ribs. Then Anne-Marie decided that she loved England very much.

Many people called at the hotel to ask for autographs, and to express their views. One elderly musician was very stern with Anne-Marie, and sterner still with Nancy. He began by asking Nancy what she thought her child was going to be in the future.

"I do not know," said Nancy. "I am grateful for what she is now."

"Ah! but you must think of the future. You want her to be a great artist—"

"I don't know that I do," said Nancy. "She is a great artist now. If she degenerates"—and Nancy smiled—"into merely a happy woman, she will have had more than her share of luck."

"Take care! The prodigy will kill the artist!" repeated the stern man. "You pluck the flower and you lose the fruit."

Nancy laughed. "It is as if you said: 'Beware of being a rose-bud lest you never be an apple!' I am content that she should bloom unhindered, and be what she is. Why should she not be allowed to play Bach like an angel to-day, lest she should not be able to play him like Joachim ten years hence?"

"Yes, why not!" piped up Anne-Marie, who had paid no attention to the conversation, but who liked to say "Why not?" on general principles. [Pg 289]

The stern man turned to her. "Bach, my dear child——" he began.

Anne-Marie gave a little laugh. "Oh, I know!" she said cheerfully.

"What do you know?" asked the gentleman severely.

"You are going to say, '*Always* play Bach; nothing else is worthy,'" said Anne-Marie, regretting that she had joined in the conversation.

"I was not going to say anything of the kind," said the stern man.

"Oh, then you were going to say the other thing: 'Do not *attempt* to play Bach—no child can understand him.' Professors always say one or the other of those two things. Much stupid things are said about music."

"It is so," said the gentleman severely. "You cannot possibly understand Bach."

Anne-Marie suddenly grasped him by the sleeve.

"What do *you* understand in Bach? I want to know. You must tell me what you understand. Exactly what it is that you understand and I don't. Bemolle!" she cried, still holding the visitor's sleeve. "Give me the violin!"

Bemolle jumped up and obeyed with beaming face.

"Anne-Marie, darling!" expostulated Nancy.

But Anne-Marie had the violin in her hand and wildness in her eye.

"Stay here," she said to the visitor, relinquishing his sleeve with unwilling hand, and hastily tuning the fiddle. "Now you have got to tell me what you understand in Bach." She played the first five of the thirty-two variations of the Chaconne; then she stopped. [Pg 290]

"What does Bach mean? What have you understood?" she cried. The English musician leaned back in his chair and smiled with benevolent superiority.

"And now—now I play it differently." She played it again, varying the lights and shades, the *piani* and the *forti*. "What different thing have you understood?"

"And now—now I play it like Joachim. So, exactly so, he played it for me and with me ...

"...Now what have you understood that I have not? What has Bach said to you, and not to me, you silly man?"

Nancy took Anne-Marie's hand. "Hush, Anne-Marie! For shame!"

"I will not hush!" cried Anne-Marie, with flaming cheeks. "I am tired of hearing them always say the same stupid things."

The visitor, smiling acidly, stood up to go. "I am afraid too much music is not good for a little girl's manners," he said.

"Mother," said Anne-Marie, with her head against her mother's breast. "Tell him to wait. I want to say a thing that I can't. Help me."

"What is it, dear?"

"When we were to have gone to a country that you said was hot and pretty—and dirty—where was that?"

"Spain?"

"Yes, yes, yes! You said something about the little hotels there ... the funny little hotels. What did you say about them?"

Nancy thought a moment. Then she smiled and remembered. "I said: 'You can only find in them what you bring with you yourself.'"

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"Yes, yes!" cried Anne-Marie, raising her excited eyes. "Now say that about music."

And Nancy said it. "You will only find in music what you bring to it from your own soul."

"Yes," said Anne-Marie, turning to the visitor; "how can you know what I bring? How can you know that what you bring is beautifuller or gooder? How can you know that Bach meant what *you* think and not what I think?"

"Don't get excited, you funny little girl," said the visitor; and he took his leave with dignity.

But Anne-Marie was excited, and did not sleep all night.

XXII

"Anne-marie, the King wants to hear you play!"

"The King? The real King?"

"Yes."

"Not a fairy-tale king?"

"No."

"The King who was ill when I had a birthday-cake long ago?"

"Yes."

"And that I made get well again?"

"Oh, did you, dear?" laughed Nancy. "I did not know that."

"I did it," said Anne-Marie, with deep and serious mien. "I made him get well. Do you remember the seven candles round my cake?"

"I heard of them. You were seven when you were at the *Gartenhaus*; and I was away from you." And Nancy sighed.

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"And you know about the birthday wishes?" asked the eager Anne-Marie. "The Poetry says:

"The heart must be pure,
The Wish must be sure,
The blow must be one—
The magic is done!"

"What terrible lines!" said Nancy.

"Fräulein did them, from the German," said Anne-Marie.

"What is the blow?"

"The blowing-out of the candles. You may only blow once. And 'the Wish must be sure.' You must not change about, and regret, and wish you hadn't. Fräulein told me it would be safest to make a list of all my wishes beforehand. So I made a list days and days before my birthday. They were to be seven things—one for each candle. There was a white pony, and a kennel for Schopenhauer, and a steamer to go and fetch you home in, and a lovely dress for Fräulein, and a gold watch for you, and something else for Elisabeth, and another dog for me, and to go to the theatre every day, and—"

"There seem to be more than seven things already," said Nancy.

"Well, they were most beautiful. Especially the pony and the steamer.... And then you wrote about the King."

"I remember," said Nancy.

"You said he was ill, and that he was your papa's King, and that he was good and forgave everybody: whole countries-full of bad people! And you wrote that I was to say a prayer, and ask God to make him well."

"I remember."

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"Well, I didn't, I said to God: 'Wait a minute!' because next day was my birthday, and I had the cake with the seven Wishes. I thought first I would just give up the kennel, and wish *once* for the King to get well. So I did it, and blew out one candle; then I gave up the present for Elisabeth, and wished for the King again. Then I thought I could do without the dress for Fräulein. And without the theatre.... And then I let the steamer and the pony go too. And I blew out all seven candles for the King!" Anne-Marie folded her hands in her lap. "So that's how I made him get well."

"How nice," said Nancy.

"And now I am going to see him, and to play to him," said Anne-Marie dreamily. "It is very strange." She raised her simple eyes to her mother. "Do you think I ought to tell him about my having saved him?"

"I think not," said Nancy. "It is much nicer to have saved him without his knowing it."

So Anne-Marie did not tell him.

... But he knew. "I know that he knew!" sobbed Anne-Marie in the evening of the great day, trembling with emotion in her mother's arms. "I saw it in the kindness of his eyes. And mother! mother! I think that was why he kissed me."

XXIII

The Piper piped tunes into Anne-Marie's ear, tunes that she had to hum, and to sing, and to play; tunes that enraptured her when she created them, and hurt her when she forgot them. So Bemolle had to write them down. Everything she heard wandered off into melodies, melted into harmonies, divided itself up into rhythms. Mother Goose rhymes and Struwwelpeter were put to music, and all the favourites in Andersen's Märchen—the Princess and the Mermaid, the Swineherd and the Goblins—corresponded to some special bars of music in Anne-Marie's mind. "She has the sense of the Leitmotiv," said Bemolle, with awestruck eyes and oracular forefinger.

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It had been arranged that Bemolle should have his mornings to himself for his own compositions. He had, two years before, by dint of much scraping, paid five hundred francs to secure a good libretto for his much-dreamed-of opera, of which he had already composed the principal themes when he first went with the Professor to play for Anne-Marie; he was also half-way through a tone-poem on Edgar Allan Poe's "Eldorado." He played it occasionally to Anne-Marie; frequently to Nancy:

"Gaily bedight, a gallant Knight,
In sunshine and in shadow——"

"Do you hear?" he would say, playing with much pedal, while his rough black head bounced and dipped. "Do you hear the canter and gallop and thump? It is the Horse, and the Heart, and the Hope of the Knight!"

Yes; Nancy could hear the Horse, and the Heart, and the Hope quite clearly.

"Now!" Bemolle's curly black mat would swoop over the keys and stay there quite near to his fingers, "Now—the Hag appears! Do you hear the Hag murmur and mumble? This is the Hag murmuring and mumbling."

"I should make her mumble in D flat," said Anne-Marie airily. And then she trotted out of the room, leaving in Bemolle's heart a vague sense of dissatisfaction with his Hag, because she was mumbling in A natural.

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Soon, as there was much to do, programmes to prepare, letters to answer, engagements to accept, tours to refuse, and they were all four rather unbusiness-like and confusionary, Bemolle had to put aside his opera and his tone-poem, and dedicate himself exclusively to the business arrangements of the party.

They frequently got confused in their dates. "The Costanzi in Rome has telegraphed, asking for three concerts in February, and I have accepted!" cried Bemolle triumphantly, when Nancy and Anne-Marie returned from one of the dreaded and inevitable afternoon receptions given in their honour.

"I thought we had accepted Stockholm for February," said Nancy, with troubled brow.

"So we had!" exclaimed Bemolle. "Oh dear! Now we must cancel it."

"Oh, don't cancel Rome! Cancel Stockholm," said Nancy.

And so they cancelled Stockholm with great difficulty, promising Stockholm a date in March, immediately after Rome, and immediately before Berlin, where Anne-Marie was to play for the Kaiserfest the Max Bruch Concerto, accompanied by the great composer himself.

A week later, Nancy, looking at Bemolle's little book of dates and engagements, said: "How can we get from Rome to Stockholm, and from Stockholm to Berlin in six days, and give three concerts in between?"

"We cannot do so," said Fräulein. "From Berlin to Warnemünde—"

"Oh, never mind details, Fräulein," sighed Nancy. "It cannot be done."

"We must cancel Rome," said Fräulein.

"No, you can't do that," said Bemolle.

"Well, then, we must cancel Berlin," said Nancy.

"Impossible!"

"Then I suppose we must cancel Stockholm again."

So they cancelled Stockholm again, by telegrams that cost one hundred and fifty francs, and by paying damages to the extent of two thousand francs, and by swallowing and ignoring threats of lawsuits and acrimonious letters.

"I think we ought to have an impresario," said Nancy. "We do not seem to manage our business affairs well."

So they decided to have an impresario. After wavering for a long time between a little black man from Rome, who had followed them all over the Continent, and a great Paris impresario who had only telegraphed twice, they decided on a nice-looking man in Vienna, who had seemed honest, and had promised them many things. He was telegraphed for—nobody ever wrote letters if it could be helped; indeed, the correspondence which flowed in on them from all parts of the world was only half read and a quarter answered. The impresario from Vienna replied, asking for two hundred kronen for travelling expenses. These were sent to him by telegraph. And then he did not come. "We must not put up with it," said Fräulein. So they did not put up with it. They went to a solicitor, who asked for the correspondence and ten pounds for preliminary expenses, which were given to him. And that was all—except that about a year afterwards, when they had forgotten all about it, a bill from the solicitor for four pounds two shillings followed them across Europe, and finally reached them in St. Petersburg. And they paid it.

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But meanwhile they decided upon the Paris impresario. He was a great man, and had "launched" everybody who was anybody in the artistic world. He needed no travelling expenses. He arrived, gorgeous of waistcoat, resplendent of hat. He said he had already fixed up two Colonne concerts in Paris for Anne-Marie. He was none of your slow, sleepy, impresarios. Here was a contract in duplicate ready for them to sign. His bright brown eye wandered critically over Bemolle. Then he took Fräulein in at a glance, and looking at Nancy's helpless and bewildered face he seemed to be satisfied with Anne-Marie's surroundings. To Anne-Marie herself he paid no attention. He had heard her play twice. That was enough. Anne-Marie, as Anne-Marie, interested him not at all. Anne-Marie as artist still less. Anne-Marie was a musical-box, ten years old, with yellow hair, whom he had wanted to get hold of for the last six months.

Here was the contract. No father? Well, Nancy could sign it in the father's stead.

Nancy, Bemolle, and Fräulein read the contract over very carefully, while the impresario drank claret and smoked cigarettes. He had a way of sniffing the air up through his nostrils, and of swallowing with his lips turned up at the corners in an expectant, self-satisfied manner that distracted Nancy, and interfered with her understanding of the contract.

There were fourteen clauses. "It seems all right," said Nancy softly to Bemolle. Bemolle frowned a businesslike frown, and Fräulein said, "Sprechen wir Deutsch," which they did, to the placid amusement of the Paris impresario, who was born in Klagenfurt.

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After much reading and considering, Bemolle turned with his business frown to the impresario. "You say forty per cent to the artist?"

The impresario sniffed and swallowed. "That's right," he said. "I have the risks and the expenses."

"Of course," said Nancy.

Bemolle touched her arm lightly and warningly.

"Forty per cent of the *gross* receipts?" asked Bemolle suspiciously.

"Of the *net* receipts," said the impresario.

"Ah, that is better!" said the unenlightened Fräulein. And Bemolle put out his foot gently and kicked her.

"Now, what is this clause about three years?"

"That's right," said the impresario. "You do not think I am to have all the trouble of launching her for you to take her away after six months, while I sit sucking my fingers."

"Gemeiner Kerl!" said Fräulein to Nancy.

But Nancy said: "She is already launched."

"Is she?" said the impresario. "I don't think so." And he sniffed and swallowed. "She must make about two million francs in the next two years. Otherwise she may as well quit."

"Zwei Millionen!" gasped Fräulein, under her breath.

Bemolle kicked her again. "And what does this mean? Clause eight. 'The party of the second part agrees to give a minimum of one hundred and forty concerts per year for three years?'"

"That is a matter of form," said the impresario. "We put that into all contracts lest we should feel inclined to sit about with our hands in our pockets doing nothing. Now, if you don't like it, you can leave it. I've not come over for this. I have a contract with the biggest star singer in Europe to sign here to-day. That is what I came for. Look at it." And he pulled out a contract made in the name of a world-famed tenor, and dotted over with tens of hundreds of pounds as a field is with daisies.

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Fräulein was much impressed. "Better take him quick," she said in German. "He might go." So they took him quick, and signed the contract. And Bemolle was careful to have it stamped.

"Und nun ist Alles in Ordnung," said the "gemeiner Kerl," grinning at Fräulein. And then he sniffed and swallowed.

They soon found out what Clause eight meant. The party of the second part was bound to give a minimum of one hundred and forty concerts a year—and the party of the second part was Anne-Marie. Anne-Marie was certainly not to be allowed to sit about with her hands in her pockets. In sixteen days she gave twelve concerts with eleven journeys between. She went from town to town, from platform to platform, looking like a little dazed seraph playing in its dreams. Fräulein broke down on the sixth journey, and was left behind, half-way between Cologne and Mainz. Bemolle said nothing. He could only look at Anne-Marie dozing in the train, and great tears would gather in his round black eyes, linger and roll down, losing themselves in his dark moustache, that drooped over his mouth like a seal's. When the impresario travelled with them, smoking cigarettes in their faces, and going to sleep with his hands in his pockets, and his long legs stretched across the compartment, there was murder—black and scarlet murder—in Bemolle's eyes, and his gaze would wander from the impresario's flowered waistcoat to his blond, pointed beard, searching for a place.

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During the concerts the impresario was everywhere to be seen, with his hands in his pockets and his legs wide apart. Between the pieces he sat in the artists' room and talked to everyone who came in to see Anne-Marie, scenting out the journalists with the *flair* of a dog. Nancy could hear him inventing startling anecdotes about Anne-Marie. He talked to the enthusiastic musicians and the tearful ladies that came to congratulate, and always could Nancy hear him recounting the same untrue and unlikely anecdotes. Yes, this child he had discovered playing the piano when she was three years old. When she was five she had, with the aid of her little brother, built a violin out of a soap-box. She had been kidnapped by some Nihilists in Russia, and had been kept by them three weeks in a kind of vault, where she had to play to them for hours when they asked her to. She had jewels and decorations worth ten thousands pounds. She had three Strads; one of them had belonged to Wagner and the other to the Tsar.

At the end of the concerts the impresario got into the carriage with them. The impresario bore Anne-Marie through the clapping crowds. The impresario carried her flowers and her violin, and waved his hand out of the window to the people when Anne-Marie was too tired to do so. Anne-Marie sat in her corner of the carriage and fell asleep. Nancy bit her lips and tried not to cry. And Bemolle sat outside on the box, thinking evil Italian thoughts, and murmuring old Italian curses that had never been known to fail.

This lasted just a fortnight. On the fifteenth day Anne -Marie said: "I don't want to see that man any more. And I want to have a picnic in the grass," she added, "with things to eat in parcels, and milk in a bottle."

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"Very well, dear," said Nancy. "You shall have it." And they had it. And it was very nice.

When the impresario came that evening Anne-Marie was not to be seen. She was in bed and asleep, rosy and worn out by her long day in the open air.

"Are you ready?" said the impresario, looking round. Nancy said: "Anne-Marie cannot play to-night. She is tired. I did not know where to find you, or I should have let you know before."

"Oh, indeed!" said the impresario. And he sniffed and swallowed.

"And really," said Nancy. "I have come to the conclusion that this won't do. Anne-Marie must play only when she wants to. One or two concerts in a month, if she feels like it, and not more. She shall not play because she must, but because she loves to."

"Gelungen!" said the impresario, sitting down and taking out his cigarette case.

"So I think you had better just pay for the concerts she has given, and let us go."

The impresario laughed long and loud. His shoulders shook with amusement.

"Na, gelungen!" he said again, leaving off laughing to light his cigarette, and stretching out his long legs. "How much did you say I was to pay?" And he shook with laughter again.

"Well, our share, I suppose," said Nancy timidly.

"That's right," said the impresario, and he stopped laughing suddenly, and looked at his watch. "Now hurry up and come along. It is time to start."

"Anne-Marie is asleep," said Nancy.

"Then wake her," said the impresario.

Nancy felt herself turning pale.

"Get on," said the impresario; "it won't kill her to play to-night. And the concert-hall is sold out."

"I am sorry," said Nancy; "but Anne-Marie never plays when she is tired."

"That is foolish, my dear woman," said the impresario, getting up. "I shall be obliged to wake her myself if you don't." And he took a step towards the closed door which led into the room where Anne-Marie was sleeping.

Now Anne-Marie's sleep was a sacred thing. A thing watched over and hallowed, approached on tip of toe, spoken of with finger on lip and bated breath. If Anne-Marie slept perfect silence was kept, and the world must stop. If Bemolle chanced to open a door or creak a careless shoe, he was frowned at with horrified brows. Anne-Marie's sleep was a thing inviolate and sacrosanct.

Bemolle had been standing near the window looking out into the darkness while the impresario spoke to Nancy; but with the first step in the direction of the closed door Bemolle darted forward with a growl like that of an angry dog. Bemolle was short and stout, but his long accumulated anger and hatred stood him in lieu of height and muscles. He jumped at the impresario, he pulled his beard, he scratched his face, he pummelled him in the chest, and with short, excited legs he kicked him. When the big man recovered from the amazement caused by this unexpected onslaught, he lifted Bemolle off his legs and sat him on the floor. Then he took his hat and his umbrella and walked out of the room, and out of the hotel.

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"Has he gone?" said Bemolle, after a while, sitting up, with papery cheeks and a reddened eye.

"Yes, he has gone," said Nancy. "Poor Bemolle! Did he hurt you?"

Bemolle did not rise from the floor. He shook his head, and muttered hoarsely:

"He wanted to wake Anne-Marie. He actually wanted to wake Anne-Marie!"

... It cost them twenty-five thousand francs to annul the contract, and five hundred francs in legal expenses. But they considered that it was cheap for the joy of having got rid of the impresario.

They had picnics and played about until Fräulein was well enough to join them again, and then they went to Rome, where they arrived with a fortnight to spare before the orchestral concerts at the Teatro Costanzi.

Thither from Milan came Aunt Carlotta, bent and wrinkled, and Zio Giacomo, trembling and slow; and Adèle and Nino and Carlo and Clarissa in a noisy and affectionate group. Many tender tears were shed in memory of Valeria, who had not lived to see her little grandchild's fame. "But she saw *your* glory, Nancy," said Nino.

They lived again in memory Nancy's visit to the Queen with her little volume of poems, as they all went one sunshiny afternoon up the hill of the Quirinal and past the Palace. Nino, whose hair was quite grey, and who, according to Aunt Carlotta, was rather difficult to please and easy to irritate, walked in front of them, and Anne-Marie trotted beside him, holding his hand. He told her interesting tales about a pink pinafore her mother had worn when she was eight years old, and what Fräulein looked like when she was apple-cheeked and twenty-five. Fräulein, who really did not show the twenty years' difference very much, walked beside them, deeply moved by these reminiscences; and Bemolle, who was to go and visit his lonely old mother as soon as the Costanzi concerts were over, walked behind them all, tearful on general principles.

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"By the way," said Nino to Nancy, "I saw the dear old Grey House again. I went to England on Carlo's affairs two months ago. I ran down to Hertfordshire and looked at it. It seemed to be empty."

"Oh," said Fräulein, "what a beautiful place it was! Don't you remember it, Nancy?"

"I remember the garden," said Nancy, with vague eyes, "and the swing——"

"What swing?" said Anne-Marie, taking an interest.

Nancy told her about the swing in the orchard of that far-away home, where she had stood swinging and singing in the placid English sunshine when she was a little girl.

... After a very few days the well-remembered envelope with the golden arms of the Royal House was put into Anne-Marie's small hands. On the following evening, Adèle, Carlotta, and Clarissa were in a flutter preparing Nancy and Anne-Marie for their audience at the Quirinal. Bemolle was fevered with excitement, for he was to play Anne-Marie's accompaniments on the piano. He walked, pale and happy, carrying the violin and the music, behind Nancy and Anne-Marie, as they passed, with right hands bared, through the red room, and the yellow room, and the blue room, and at last into the white and gold room where the King and the Queen and many officers and ladies were waiting for them. The Queen was not the same Queen whom Nancy had known, and whose name—the name of a flower—was written on the first page of her old diary. But the little boy whose picture, framed in diamonds, Nancy had received on her wedding-day, was King.

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The Queen embraced Anne-Marie many times, and laughed when Anne-Marie talked, and wept

when Anne-Marie played. Anne-Marie gazed at the tall, dark-eyed Queen with adoration, sparing a glance or two for a gorgeous man in scarlet tunic, with many decorations, whom she took to be the King.

As the Adagio of Mendelssohn's concerto ended, a stern-faced man in plain evening-dress, sitting slightly apart from the others, said: "I do not care much for music, but this music I love." The Queen turned to him with a smile on her beautiful face—a smile that startled Anne-Marie. Anne-Marie followed the track of that shining smile, and her eyes fastened on the face of the stern man. Where had she seen that face before? Why was it so dear and familiar? Why did it make her think of New York, and her mother weeping over letters from home. Stamps! She had seen it on stamps! *He* was the King of Italy! How could she have looked at that silly, yellow-haired man in the red tunic! Anne-Marie's small loyal heart prostrated itself in penitence before him who did not care for music. And as she played, he smiled back at her with piercing, friendly eyes.

Bemolle, who had made his deep obeisance on entering the door, and had then stopped beside the piano, bent under the awful joy of the majestic presence, never straightened himself out again, but sat down and stood up when spoken to, in a tense curvilinear posture that was painful to look upon. He also played many wrong notes in the accompaniments, and could feel the anger of Anne-Marie flashing upon him, even though her small blue back was turned. Nancy sat beside the Queen, smiling through tear-lit eyes, replying to the many intimate and kindly questions the beautiful lips asked. The Queen addressed her by her maiden name that was famous, and quoted her poems to her with softly cadenced voice; and the past and the present melted into one in Nancy's heart, and she could not separate their beauty.

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They drove back to the hotel in moved and grateful spirit. Anne-Marie, fluffy and feathery in her mother's arms, chatted all the way home, for she had much to say.

XXIV

A year of dream-like travels from triumph to triumph, from success to success, scattered roses and myrtles at the feet of Anne-Marie. She went through life as a child wanders through a fairy-tale garden, alight with flowers that bow and bend to her hand. The concerts were her joy. Music filled her soul to overflowing, and, like a pure and chosen vessel, Anne-Marie poured it forth again upon the listening world. When she played she was fulfilling her destiny, as a lark must sing.

One day in Genoa she was taken to see Paganini's violin, hanging mute and sealed in its glass case at the town hall. She looked at it silently and turned away.

"What are you thinking, dear heart?" said Nancy. "You look so sad."

"I am thinking," said Anne-Marie, with solemn eyes, "how it must hurt that violin and ache it, to be kept locked up, and not be allowed to sing!"

The remark was heard, and repeated, and reached the ears of the Mayor of Genoa. One afternoon, with great pomp, Anne-Marie was invited to the palace of the Municipio, and, before a few invited guests, the seals were broken, and the hallowed instrument of the immortal Nicolò was placed in the little girl's hands. Anne-Marie had not slept for three nights thinking of that moment, imagining the joy of the imprisoned voice when her hands should let it loose.

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She drew a new E string quickly over the tarnished bridge. Now she plucked lightly at it, bending her head to listen. Then, raising her bow, she struck the bonds of silence from the quivering strings. The chord in D minor rippled out, hoarse and feeble. Anne-Marie struck a second chord, pressing down her fingers with a vehement vibrato. Again the reply came—muffled, quavering, weak. Anne-Marie's face grew white and tense. She removed the violin from her shoulder with a little sob.

"It is dead," she said.

Years after, if ever Nancy thought that it might have been better had Anne-Marie been held back, and not been allowed to play her heart out to the world, the memory of the Silent Violin, locked in its glass case, came back to her—the violin that had died of its own silence. And she was glad that her little skylark had been allowed to sing.

And sing it did, in many climes and under many skies. Was it in Turin that the horses were taken from the carriage, and Anne-Marie and Nancy drawn in triumph through the cheering, waving streets? Was it in Bern that the police had to hold the crowd back, and clear the squares for their plunging horses to pass? Where was it that she was serenaded and called to the balcony twenty times by a crowd that seemed to have gone mad? Where did men lift little children up that they might touch her dress, and women, jostled in the crowd, with hats awry, fight for a glimpse of the fair nodding head, for a touch of the little gloved hand? Was it at Naples that they called her *la bambino, assistita*, and thought her possessed by a spirit, and begged her to predict to them the winning numbers of the following Saturday's lottery?

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Yes, that was in Naples. In the confused glory of the shifting scenes some memories stood out clearly, and held Nancy's recollection. It was in Naples that no seat had been reserved for her in the immense and crowded concert-hall, and that the manager had told her of a lady who would give her a seat in her own box: box 5, tier 2—Nancy remembered it still. And when Anne-Marie,

duly kissed and blessed, stepped out, violin in hand, upon the platform, Nancy was still running along the empty corridors of tier 2, looking for box 5. Here it was! There was a lady in it alone. Nancy bowed to her and took her seat, murmuring: "Grazie." Then, with tightly folded hands, she had whispered the little prayer she always said for God to help Anne-Marie. And, as always, the prayer was answered, for Anne-Marie played grandly and suavely, never even dreaming that help could be needed.

Nancy sat in the box, tense and terrified as usual, waiting for the tranquil eyes of Anne-Marie to wander round the auditorium and find her. There! They found her, and shone and twinkled. Then the Spirit of Music dropped its great wings between them, and carried away little Anne-Marie, swinging and singing her out of reach—out of reach of her mother's love, farther than Nancy could follow.

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The lady in black took her pocket-handkerchief and pressed it to her eyes. Nancy was used to the gesture, but it always moved her. She put her hand lightly on the arm of the unknown woman whose heart her little girl's music had wrung.

The last piece was ended, and the well-known cries of applause were starting from all corners of the house, when Nancy rose quickly to go back to Anne-Marie. The woman in black put back her veil, and said:

"My name is Villari."

Nancy remembered the name. All that Aldo had told, all that Nino had not told, years ago swept into her mind. She looked curiously into the tired face, under its helmet of dark-red tinted hair. There were many lines in the face. Nancy thought it looked like a map, and along the many little lines Nancy's eyes seemed to travel into a sad and distant country. She put out her hand.

"I know your name well," said Nancy. "I salute the great artist."

The woman sighed deeply. "I salute the happy mother," she said. Then she pulled down her veil and turned away.

Nancy hastened along the crowded corridors, where people in groups were discussing her little daughter, and the words, "wonderful! marvellous! incredible!" beat with their accustomed soft wing on her ears.

"Happy mother!" Oh yes, she was a happy mother! She said it over and over again, and repeated it to herself as she tied the soft woollen scarf round Anne-Marie's head, and again as they made their way through the cheering crowd, and the outstretched hands, and the waving hats. She repeated it as she sat in the motor open to the balmy Neapolitan night, and held Anne-Marie tightly as she stood up on the seat, waving both small hands to the surrounding throng. The little standing figure swayed as the carriage moved swiftly down the street. Soon the shouting people were left behind, and Anne-Marie slid down to her place near her mother. Beyond the Gulf, Vesuvius breathed its glowing rhythmic breath, and the waters glittered. Nancy remembered that this was Aldo's birthplace; and then she forgot it in the lilt of the usual dulcet words:

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"Did you like my concert, mother dear?"

The phrase had now become a formula which they repeated laughingly like the refrain of a song. Of all the hours of the rushing turbulent day, this was the hour of joy for Nancy. Anne-Marie, who was elfish and impish, made strange by her music, and made wild by the worship of many people, in this one hour became a little tender child again, softer and sweeter than the day-time Anne-Marie, nearer and more human than the concert Anne-Marie, who was a strange, inaccessible being that Nancy sometimes thought could not really belong to her.

Fräulein and Bemolle followed them in another carriage. No one since the impresario had ever dared to intrude upon this sacred starlit hour of their love.

Did Nancy's heart ever regret her own hopes of glory? Did she remember her unwritten Book? Did she feel the wounded place of the wings that she had torn out? Never! She lived for Anne-Marie and in Anne-Marie. Little by little the chimera of inspiration drew away from her. She forgot that she had once clasped Fame to her own breast. No words, no visions, no dreams haunted her any more. She breathed in the music Anne-Marie played. She dreamed the music Anne-Marie composed. The Pied Piper had passed her; his call dragged at her soul no more. The eagle of her genius no more shook and shattered her with the wild beating of his wings. She was like the Silent Violin—the music that her soul had not sung was dead.

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XXV

It was in Paris that what Nancy had so often vaguely dreaded and expected happened at last. She was alone in the hotel in her own quiet sitting-room when the lift-boy knocked at the door, and on her careless response a visitor was ushered in. It was Aldo—Aldo with a square beard and a dangling eyeglass, hat in hand, and faultlessly attired.

He stood before her, gazing at her face. Then he put his hat on a chair, extended both hands, and said in a deep, fervent voice:

"Nancy!"

Nancy had risen with quick, indrawn breath, and stood, slim and pale, in her soft-tinted dressing-

gown. He took another step towards her, still with both hands outstretched. Nancy put out a diffident hand, and her husband clasped it fervently in both his own. On his little finger was a diamond ring. He bent his sleek black head over Nancy's hand and kissed it.

"Thank God!" he murmured, and sank into a chair.

Nancy wondered what he was thanking God for. Aldo himself was not very clear about it, but it seemed an appropriate thing to say. And he had nothing else ready. The embarrassing silence was broken by Aldo. He said:

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"Nancy, I have returned!"

Nancy said, "Yes," and thought disconnected thoughts about his beard and his diamond ring.

"You have thought cruel thoughts of me during all this time?"

No, Nancy had not thought cruel thoughts.

"You have left off loving me?"

Nancy looked at him with vague, dazed eyes, and smiled without knowing why. Aldo tried not to notice the smile. He said:

"Will you never forgive me?"

"Oh yes, I suppose so," said Nancy; and she smiled again.

She thought it funny that this strange man with the square beard and the dangling eyeglass should be asking her to forgive him, and questioning her about love. Nothing about him seemed in the least familiar. His hair, that used to be parted in the middle, now waved back from his forehead; his fan-shaped beard altered his face and made him look like a Frenchman; even his hat, square and high and narrow-rimmed, lying on her chair, had in it an element of utter strangeness.

"What are you laughing at?" said Aldo. And some tone of offended vanity in his voice startled her memory, and suddenly it was up and awake.

"I am not laughing," said Nancy, and she began to cry. That was the attitude that Aldo had expected, and knew how to cope with. A cold, light-eyed woman with an ambiguous smile was an uncomfortable and uncertain thing. But a woman in tears was a sight he had often seen, and he understood the meaning of the bowed head and the significance of the hidden face. He was beside her, his arm round her narrow shoulders. "Nancy, don't cry, don't cry! I have been a brute. But I will atone. I will repay you in happiness a thousandfold for all that you have suffered!"

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Still she wept with her face hidden in her hands.

"I am rich. I have more money than we shall know how to spend."

The heaving shoulders stopped heaving. They seemed to be waiting, listening. There was distrust in those waiting shoulders, so he hurried out:

"It is all right. I have not gambled or done anything disreputable. The money has been left to me"—still the shoulders waited—"by a—by—an old person whom I befriended. She has died and left me her money. I deserved it. I was very good to her—"

The shoulders heaved again in a deep sigh. Relief? Despair? Aldo was uncertain.

"So all your troubles are at an end, Nancy. I have settled enough on you and the child, so that you need no more exploit Anne-Marie."

Nancy started up and away from him. "Exploit Anne-Marie!" ... Exploit Anne-Marie! Was that what he thought? Was that what other people thought?—that she was *exploiting Anne-Marie*?

Nancy covered her face again and burst into wild, uncontrollable sobs of grief. She cried loud, like a child, and Aldo felt that these were not the tears that he was used to and understood.

In these tears were all Nancy's broken hopes and lost aspirations, all that she had sacrificed and stifled and tried with prayers and fastings, for Anne-Marie's sake, not to regret. Her work, her Book, her hopes of Fame, her dreams of Glory, all that she had given up for love of Anne-Marie, laid down for Anne-Marie's little feet to trample on, stood up in her memory like murdered things. She remembered the beating wings of her own genius that she had torn out in order not to impede Anne-Marie in her flight, and the wounds burned and bled again.

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"I have not been exploiting Anne-Marie," she said, raising her tear-merged eyes to Aldo. "All that she has earned in her concerts has been put away for her. It is sacrosanct. No one has touched it."

"Then how have you lived?" he said.

"I have borrowed money," she said defiantly and angrily. "A lot of money, which I shall repay when I can."

"From whom?" asked Aldo. Nancy did not answer.

"You can repay it now," said Aldo, frowning. And then he was silent.

The frivolous hotel clock struck four in tinkling chimes.

"Where is Anne-Marie?" asked Aldo, in a low voice.

"She is out." And Nancy's face grew hard as stone. "I do not want her to see you. She is not to be excited and upset."

"Nancy!"—and Aldo's nostrils went white—"you must let me see her. I have longed for her day and night for the past three years. I have thought of nothing else. I have lain awake hours every night planning the meeting with her. When I should be free, when I should be rich"—Nancy flinched and shivered—"I thought of finding you struggling and in need. And I planned our meeting. I was going to send something to her—with no name—every day for a week beforehand, every day something better than the day before. The first day only a box of sweets, or of toys. Then a cageful of singing birds. Then a bank book with money, and the last day"—Aldo's eyes were full of tears now, but Nancy's were dry and hard—"it was to be a pony-carriage with two white ponies and a stiff little groom sitting behind"—Aldo's voice broke—"and that was to fetch you both away, away from poverty, and misery, and loneliness, and bring you back to me!"

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Aldo covered his face with his hands, and his tears fell over the diamond ring.

"Then I heard ... I read ... about Anne-Marie ... and I would not go to hear her. I could not go, I could not sit alone ... and see my own little girl ... standing there ... playing to a thousand strangers ... while I, her father—" He became incoherent with grief.

"And I have never heard her, never heard her," he sobbed.

Nancy's lips were shut, and her heart was shut. She did not speak.

Aldo looked at her through his swimming orbs, and wished that she would weep too. He spoke in a broken whisper.

"Am I not to be forgiven? Can we not all be happy again?"

"No," said Nancy.

"Do you mean never?" asked Aldo, and his beard worked strangely.

"Never," said Nancy, and a shudder of dislike tightened her elbows to her side.

Then Aldo raved and wept. He had dreamed of this meeting for three years; he had always loved her; he had always loved Anne-Marie; he had done what he had done for her sake and for Anne-Marie; he had saved, and skimped, and schemed for her and for Anne-Marie; he could not have lived but for the thought of her and of Anne-Marie; and he would not live a day longer unless it were with her and with Anne-Marie!

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As he spoke thus it was truth, and became truer while he said it, and while he saw her and felt that she would never be anything in his life again.

"Oh, Nancy! Nancy! Nancy!" He grasped her cold, limp hand, and crushed it in his own. "You will let me see Anne-Marie. You cannot refuse it! I shall abide by what she says. If she does not want me I will go away. But if she wants me—if she remembers me and says that I may stay—promise me that you will let me! Promise! promise! I will not leave you—I will not leave you until you promise!"

Nancy would not promise.

"Nancy, remember how we loved each other! Remember the days on Lake Maggiore! Remember when you were writing your Book, and you used to read it to me in the evening with your head against my arm. Remember everything, Nancy, and promise that I may see Anne-Marie, and that if she is willing you will let me stay. Promise, Nancy, promise!"

But Nancy would not promise.

"Nancy, have you forgotten the hard times in New York? The hunger and the misery we went through together? For the sake of those dark days, the days in the old Schmidts' house, and in the little flat; for the sake of my dreary little dark room, that I have since so often longed for and regretted, because I could see you and the child asleep through the open door ... will you not promise, Nancy?"

No; Nancy could not promise.

"Do you remember when Anne-Marie had the measles?" sobbed Aldo. "And she would only eat the food I cooked?... And she would only go to sleep if she held my finger and I sang, 'Celeste Aïda!' to her?... Will you remember that, and will you promise?"

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Nancy remembered that. And she promised.

They sat waiting for Anne-Marie to come back from her walk. Neither spoke; but Aldo took a little picture-postcard of Anne-Marie with her violin that lay on the table, and held it in his hand, gazing at it with his elbow on his knee. Then his head drooped, and he sat with his forehead pressed against the little picture.

The unconscious Arbiter of Destinies came running along the hotel passage with a balloon from

the Bon Marché tied to her wrist. It was a large red balloon with the words "Bon Marché" in gold letters on it, and it had caused Fräulein intense mortification as she had walked beside it down the Boulevard des Italiens to the hotel.

"People will recognize you," she had said to Anne-Marie in the street, "and they will not take you and your music seriously any more. It is not for a great artist to walk about with a stupid balloon."

"It is not stupider than any other balloon," said Anne-Marie, slapping its red inflated head, and watching it ascend slowly to the length of its string. Then she pulled it down again, and a slight puff of wind made it knock lightly against Fräulein's cheek.

Fräulein was exceedingly vexed. "I cannot imagine how any one who plays the Beethoven Sonata _"

"Which Sonata?" asked Anne-Marie, who was an adept at changing the conversation. "The Kreutzer or the Frühling? I prefer the Kreutzer."

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Then she forcibly inserted her fingers under Fräulein's hard and resisting arm, and trotted gaily beside her. The balloon bumped lightly against Fräulein's hat, but Fräulein did not mind; she merely said that she would have preferred if "Louvre" had been written on it instead of "Bon Marché," which looked so cheap.

Anne-Marie now entered the sitting-room, balloon in hand. Fräulein, seeing a visitor there, withdrew to her room.

Anne-Marie was used to people calling on her and waiting for her. She put out a small warm hand to the stranger, who had started to his feet, and was looking at her with vehement, tearful eyes.... Anne-Marie had seen many strangers and many tearful eyes. She was not moved or surprised.

"Bon jour," she said, judging by the beard.

Then she went to her mother. "Look at my balloon, Liebstes," she said, slipping the string off her wrist. The balloon rose quickly and gently, and before it could be stopped it was knock-knocking against the ceiling. Anne-Marie's despairing eyes followed it. The room was high. The piece of string hung beyond human reach. Then the man with the beard took her hand, and said:

"Anne-Marie!"

Anne-Marie drew her hand away, rubbing it lightly against her dress.

He again said: "Anne-Marie!" in a hoarse voice, with his hands clasped together. "Look at me," he said, and the blue eyes obediently left the ceiling and rested on his face. "Do you remember me?"

"Yes," said Anne-Marie promptly and unreservedly. She had often been chided by Fräulein for saying an abrupt "no" on these occasions. "It is rude to say 'no' and it hurts people's feelings. You must say: 'I am not sure ... I think I remember ...' Fräulein had admonished. "Oh, if I must not say no, I had better say yes," said Anne-Marie, who believed in being brief. And so she did on this occasion.

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The hot blood had rushed like a flame to Aldo's face. He dropped upon his knee and took her hands, pressing them to his eyes, and to his forehead, and to his lips. "My little girl! My little girl!" he said, and the quick southern tears flowed. Anne-Marie said to herself: "He must be a German musician." Only German musicians had been as demonstrative as this. And she looked round to her mother, but her mother's face was turned away.

"May I stay—may I stay, Anne-Marie? You don't want me to go away again, do you? Tell your mother that you want me to stay with you and take care of you!"

Now it was for Anne-Marie to be bewildered.

"I don't want to be taken care of, thank you," she said, as politely as she could.

Aldo laughed through his tears. "Dear, funny little child of mine," he cried, kissing her hand and her sleeve.

Anne-Marie was matter-of-fact. "Good-bye," she said decisively. "If you want an autograph, I will give you one."

Aldo caught her by both arms, gazing into her face with blurred eyes. "Anne-Marie! Anne-Marie! you said you remembered me! Don't you know who I am? Don't you remember your father, Anne-Marie, who used to sing 'Celeste Aïda, forma divina' to you when you were ill, and who took you to see the squirrels in the park? Anne-Marie, don't you remember me?"

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Anne-Marie's underlip trembled. She shook her head. Aldo rose from his knees. He turned away and hid his face in his hands.

Anne-Marie tiptoed to her mother's side, and nestled in her encircling arm. Then her eyes wandered upwards in search of the balloon. There it was, close to the ceiling. Anne-Marie thought that it looked smaller than it was before. She wondered how she would ever get it down again.

Nancy had turned her face—a pinched white face that also looked smaller, thought Anne-Marie—

towards her, and spoke in a low voice.

"Anne-Marie, he is your father."

"Is he?" said Anne-Marie, glancing at the tall figure with the sloping shoulders and the hidden face, and then at the hat on the chair.

"Shall he stay with us?" questioned Nancy under her breath.

"With us two?" asked Anne-Marie, with round, troubled eyes, and remembering the impresario.

"With us two."

"For always?" and Anne-Marie's eyes were larger and more troubled.

"For always," said Nancy.

Anne-Marie glanced at the man again and at the hat again. Then she put her cheek against her mother's arm, as she always did, when she asked a favour. "Rather not, Liebstes," she whispered.

The Arbiter had spoken.

Aldo said only a few words more to Nancy. He placed his hands on Anne-Marie's head, and looked at her a long time. Then he turned suddenly, took up his square hat, and left the room. [Pg 321]

"That was a strange man," said Anne-Marie. "Was he really my father?"

Nancy, with pale lips, said: "Yes."

"Are you sure?" questioned Anne-Marie, raising her eyes to the balloon.

"Yes, dear," said Nancy; and her tears fell.

Suddenly Anne-Marie flew to the door. "Father!" she cried in a shrill treble voice.

Aldo, on the stairs, heard and stood still. His hand gripped the bannisters, his heart leaped to his throat.

"Father!"

He turned slowly, doubtfully.

"Father!" came the treble voice again; and he mounted the steps, and went trembling and stumbling along the passage. Anne-Marie was standing at the door.

"Do you think," she said, "you could catch my balloon before you go?"

He caught her balloon. Then he went—out of the room, out of their lives, out of the story.

XXVI

"MINA DE L'AGUA.

"NANCY,—The years and the yearning are over. I am leaving for Europe. You will come to meet me in Genoa; and we shall sit on the balcony where three years ago you told me of your Book, which you feared would die like a babe unborn in your breast.

"I am coming to take you to Porto Venere, 'white in the sunshine—tip-tilted over the sea'; and the Book shall live at last. [Pg 322]

"And we, also, shall live. Oh, Nancy, Nancy! I have been a silent and a lonely man so long, that my love has no words, my happiness no language. Even now I can hardly believe that the years of exile and solitude are over. But I know that you, having loved me once, still love me and will love me. I know that your heart is not a heart that changes, and that the words that drew you to me across the ocean three years ago will bring you to me again. Nancy, come to me. To my empty arms, to my sad and solitary heart, Nancy, come at once. And for ever."

"DEAR OGRE, dear friend and love of mine, your call has shaken my soul. All my longings, all my dreams, have joined their voices with yours, crying to me to go to you. Alas! a little prayer that Fräulein used to make me say when I was a child whispers to me, and its small voice drowns the cry of my desires. It is the prayer of the Three Angels that stand round one's bed in the night:

"One holds my hands, One holds my feet,
And the Third One holds my heart.'

"Can I come to you when I am thus bound—bound hands and feet by Law and Church? My small conventional soul shrinks from the unlawful and the forbidden.

"But, believe me, were I free as air, were my hands unbound to lie in yours, my feet unloosed to fly to you, the Third Angel remains. 'And the Third One holds my heart.' Anne-Marie is the Third Angel. Anne-Marie holds my heart. How could I bring her with me? Think and reply for me. How [Pg 323]

could I leave her? Think and reply. Dear Ogre, I am one of the Devoured. Little Anne-Marie has devoured me, and it is right that it should be so; she has absorbed me, and I am glad; she has consumed me, and I am grateful. For it is in the nature of things that to these lives given to us, our lives should be given. What matter that I fall back into the shadow—my course not run, my goal not reached, my mission unfulfilled? Anne-Marie will have what I have missed; Anne-Marie will reach the completeness that has failed me; for her will be the heights I have not conquered, the Glory I have not attained.

"Oh, lover and friend of mine, understand and forgive me. There is no room for love in my life. My life is full of haste and turmoil, full of Kings and Queens, full of rushing trains, and shouting voices, and clapping hands....

"Can you not see it all as in a picture—the Pied Piper whistling and dancing on ahead; little Anne-Marie, Fame-drunken, music-struck, whirlwinding after him; and I following them in breathless, palpitant haste, leaving all that was once mine behind me—my Books, my Dreams, my Love?... Love in the picture is not a rose-crowned god of laughter and passion. Love is a lonely figure, lonely and stern and sad. Oh, love, forgive me, and understand! And say good-bye—good-bye to Nancy!"

He forgave her, and understood, and said good-bye to Nancy.

[Pg 324]

XXVII

The days swung on. And they swung Anne-Marie from triumph to triumph. And they poured sunshine into her hair, and sea-shine into her eyes. And they reared her into fulgent maidenhood, as a white lily is reared on a fragile stem.

They swung Nancy back into the shadow where mothers sit with gentle hands folded, and eyes whose tears no one counts. She learned to forget that she had even known a poem about "La belle qui veut, la belle qui n'ose, ceuillir les roses du jardin bleu!" The blue garden of youth closed its gates silently behind her, and the roses that Nancy's hand had not gathered would bloom for her no more.

But for Anne-Marie, when the time was ripe, the Pied Piper tossed his flute to another Player. Anne-Marie stood still and listened to the new call—the far-away call of Love. Soon she faltered, and turned and followed the silver-toned call of Love.

XXVIII

The carriage that was to take the bride and bridegroom to the station was waiting in the Tuscan sunlight, surrounded by the laughing, impatient crowd. As Anne-Marie appeared—her rose-lit face half hidden in her furs, her travelling-hat poised lightly at the back of her shining head—the crowd shouted and cheered, just as it had always done after her concerts. And she smiled and nodded, and said, "Good-bye! Good-bye! Thank you, and good-bye!" just as she always did at the close of her concerts. The bridegroom, tall and serious beside her, would have liked to hurry her into the carriage, but she took her hand from his arm and stopped, turning and smiling to the right and to the left, shaking hands with a hundred people who knew her and loved and blessed her. With one foot on the carriage-step, she still nodded and smiled and waved her hand. Then the young husband lifted her in, jumped in beside her, and shut the carriage-door. Cheers and shouts and waving hats followed them as the horses, striking fire from their hoofs, broke into a gallop, and carried them down the street and out of sight.

[Pg 325]

... Nancy had not left the house. She had not gone to the window. She could hear the cheers and the laughter, and for a moment she pictured herself with Anne-Marie in the carriage, driving home after the concerts—Anne-Marie still nodding, first out of one window, then out of the other, laughing, waving her hand; then falling into her mother's arms with a little sigh of delight. At last they were alone—alone after all the crowd—in the darkness and the silence, after all the noise and light. And Anne-Marie's hand was in hers; Anne-Marie's soft hair was on her breast. Again the well-known dulcet tones: "Did you like my concert, Liebstes? Are you happy, mother dear?" Then silence all the way home—home to strange hotels, no matter in what town or in what land. It was always home, for they were together.

Nancy stepped to the window, both hands held tightly to her heart. The road was empty. The house was empty. The world was empty. Then she cried, loud and long—cried, stretching her arms out before her, kneeling by the window: "Oh, my little girl! My own child! What shall I do? What shall I do?"

[Pg 326]

But there was nothing left for Nancy to do.

Now it was late. Her Book was dead. Her child had left her. And the blue garden was closed.

[Pg 327]

BOOK III

I

Anne-Marie stirred, sighed, and awoke.

The room was dim and silent. But soon a gentle, rhythmical sound fell on her ears, and pleased her. It was a soft, regular sound, like the ticking of a clock, like the beating of a heart—it was the rocking of a cradle.

Anne-Marie smiled to herself, and her soul sank into peacefulness. The gentle clicking sound lulled her near to sleep again. She was utterly at peace—utterly happy. Life opened wider portals over wider shining lands.

Then, with the awakening of memory, came the thought of her violin. With a soft tremor of joy, she realized that the brief silence of the past year was over. Music would stream again from her hands over the world.

Her violin! Under her closed lashes she thought of it. She could see the gold-brown curves of the volute, the soft swing of the F's, the tense, sensitive strings resting on the lithe, slim bridge—all waiting for her, waiting for the touch of her wild young fingers to spring into life and song again.

The tears welled into her closed eyes. How she would work! What songs, what symphonies she would create! How much she would say that nobody had yet said.... Already Inspiration, nebulous and wan, laid soft hands upon her—drawing faint harmonies, like floating ribbons, through her brain. Then joy rushed through her like a living thing, and she saw her life before her.

[Pg 328]

She would ascend the wide white road of Immortality with Love upholding her, with Genius burning and exalting her like a flaming star that had fallen into her soul....

In the shadowy cradle the baby opened its eyes and said: "I am hungry."

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