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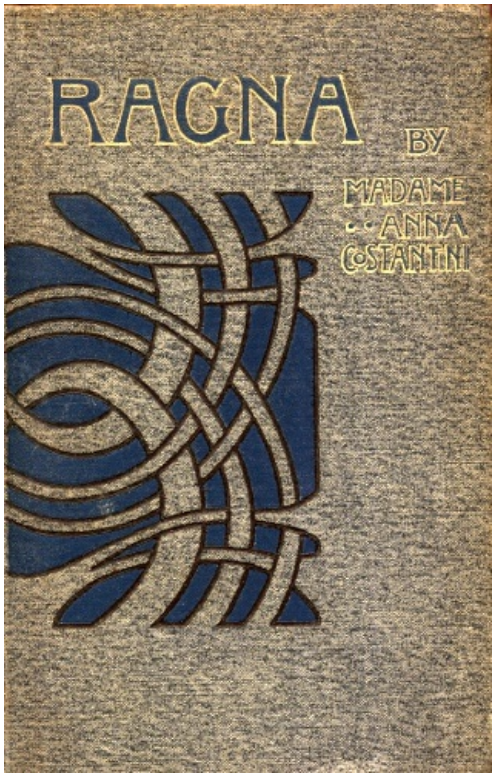

RAGNA

A NOVEL

By MADAME ANNA COSTANTINI

New York
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RAGNA

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

We see her first, a tall child with wind-blown hair standing on the rocky point of a barren promontory where fjord and ocean meet, wild as the sea-birds that circle about her head—indeed at this time wildness was the keynote of her nature. The household tasks and lessons disposed of, she spent the rest of the day in rambles over the rugged country side, or in exploits that kept the older members of the family in breathless suspense. It was she who mounted bareback the unbroken horses in the pasture, she who sailed her boat down the foaming fjord in the teeth of the storm. Danger heightened her enjoyment, and true descendant of the vikings of old, she looked her best, lithe and straight, breasting the gale, the joy of the struggle gleaming in her sea-blue eyes, flushing her cheeks, her long golden hair flung out on the wind like a triumphal banner.

Her home was a long, low, timber house, sheltering amid pines and firs, under the lee of a high rocky hill, a home built for the long northern winters, the long months when the country lay snow-bound. The winter afternoons and evenings were spent in sewing or embroidery, when the father or the mother read aloud, or grandmother told tales of the Old Times, and of the family. The favourite was that of brave young Uncle Olaf, who had sailed to the frozen North in his whaler, never to return. Grandmother always wept at the end of this tale, and father would wipe his spectacles and gaze intently into the fire, but to the children it was a splendid myth, and on clear days they would climb to the bare headland to the north of the house, and stand looking out to sea, watching for Uncle Olaf with his ship, bringing home treasure untold.

To Ragna especially, Uncle Olaf was an embodiment of the spirit of adventure and of the sea; he became in her imagination a sort of "Flying Dutchman," doomed to sail forever and ever the Northern Seas, passing the fjord and his old home in the whirling storm, doomed never to bring his ship into port, never to rest in the haven where he fain would be. She loved him, the tall, beautiful young sailor, with the waving fair hair and deep-set blue eyes, and she imagined him amongst his grey-bearded seamen,—they would grow old, but he, never. Some days when she took her boat out in the open water, beyond the sheltering fjord, she would imagine that far away against the dark horizon, against the gathering storm-clouds, she saw the phantom vessel, flying before the wind, all sails set, half veiled in the blowing scud. Her two sisters would talk of when Uncle Olaf should come home, of the riches he would bring, and the wonderful tales of adventure in far countries he would tell, but only Ragna knew that he would never come, that his mysterious doom was to sail on and on till the Judgment Day, longing for peace and home, family and joy, but never to find them; seeing his comrades grow old and grey, and die—but himself, always young, always stretching longing arms toward the happiness and rest he might never attain to—and so on and on for ever, till the end of the world.

Ragna, as you may see, was impulsive and visionary, and while her sisters both became capable little housewives, she took but little interest in homely duties. Eagerly she read whatever fell in her way, but especially she loved the old Sagas, with their great fierce women, and strong, terribly human men. She heard the call of the Valkyries in the wind, saw their shapes in the battling clouds; the Aurora Borealis to her, lighted the feasting of heroes in Valhalla. Naturally, she wrote verses herself, but in secret, hiding her copy-book deep in her clothes press. There her sister Lotte found it one fateful day, and produced it, in a fit of childish mischief, after supper in the family circle. Poor Ragna, all confusion and blushes, fearing the inevitable reprimand for foolish waste of time, tried to snatch her darling, but the father held up his hand.

"Give that book to me, Lotte," he said, and when she had complied, he locked it up in his desk, and nothing further was said.

A week passed, and still Ragna trembled for the fate of her treasure, but dared not inquire. She stood in awe of her father, and would as soon have bearded a lion in his den, as question him. When he finally summoned her to his study, and bade her close the door behind her, she entered timidly, not daring to look him in the face. If he was secretly amused by her air of conscious guilt, he gave no sign.

"My daughter," he said, in calm judicial tones, "your mother and I have read the writings in the little book, the good grandmother also has seen them. It is all nonsense, of course—what could a child like you write but nonsense? But it is not such bad nonsense, after all," he added kindly. Then he bade her sit by him, and she fetched a low stool, and sat by his knee—up to now she had been standing as a dutiful child should.

He laid his hand on her shining plaits of hair, and bent her head back so that he might look into her eyes.

"True eyes," he said dreamily, half to himself, "Andersen eyes, and you have the Andersen face, child. Lotte is of your mother's race, but Ingeborg and you are Andersens through and through—and you look like your Uncle Olaf." He paused awhile, apparently immersed in thought. Ragna burned with excitement and curiosity, what could it mean? What could he be going to say? Her head moved under his hand, and recalled to him the fact of her presence.

"Ragna, your mother and I have decided that you must go away; you must go to a school where you can learn more than is possible here. Fru Bjork, a relative of your mother's, is taking her daughter to a convent in Paris, and I have written to her asking her to take you also, and to place you in the convent with Astrid. You are sixteen—two years in Paris will do more for you than a lifetime here. The mother and I shall miss you—but an Andersen must have the best, and I believe I can trust you to make the most of this opportunity. Now, my child, I have said what I had in my mind, there is nothing more, only this: remember always that an Andersen must have the best and be worthy of it!"

Ragna had listened to him, her colour coming and going, her eyes shining. Two years in Paris! It was too wonderful almost to be believed. She rose from her stool, and made motion to kiss her father's hand, as was her custom, but he took her into his arms, and kissed her forehead.

"You are too old now to kiss my hand," he said smiling. She flung her arms about his neck and clung to him, sobbing with excitement and joy, till her father loosed her arms and putting her copy-book into her hand, led to the door saying:

"There, there! Control yourself my dear, recollect that you are almost a woman now!" And he closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER II

The next few weeks passed as in a dream, and at length the day of departure came. Ragna set off with her father in the stulkjarre, her modest box well corded and tied on behind. Grandmother, mother and sisters, even the old nurse, waving a tearful farewell, disappeared behind the clustering trees.

Travel in those days was not the easy affair it is now, and three days posting lay between the travellers and Molde. They were to meet Fru Bjork at Bergen. When, in due time they arrived, Ragna found her chaperone to be a matronly woman, arrayed in brown silk with a heavy gold chain round her neck; her crab's eyes looked good-naturedly out on the world, and her ample curves bore witness to her naturally placid temperament—relieved, however, by a surface fussiness. She at once took Ragna to her arms and heart with such pattings and caressings as made the girl feel quite uncomfortable, unused as she was to such a demonstrative show of affection.

Astrid, the daughter, fair and pretty, sprightly and capricious of character, also welcomed the newcomer with enthusiasm.

"How delightful it will be!" she carolled. "We shall be just like sisters, and tell one another all our secrets—shan't we, dear?" She linked her arm in Ragna's, and gazed soulfully into her face. Ragna could not help wondering what secrets she might ever find it possible to confide to such a little linnet. At first awkward and constrained, she soon thawed, however, in the friendly atmosphere, and in a few minutes was chattering away with a gaiety and freedom, quite surprising to her father, who had always known her timidly reserved. This was not to be wondered at, as he had never encouraged any other attitude in his children.

As this is not to be a chronicle of a young lady's school-days, little need be told concerning the journey to Paris, and the years at the Sacré Cœur, suffice it to say that Ragna, under the care of the good Sisters, improved both in mind and body. As her skin lost its coating of sunburn and tan, and her body its abrupt and boyish movements, so her mind, trained in the study of the French classics, took on polish, and she acquired a nice discrimination of taste, and a distinction of manner rarely met with in so young a girl. So much for externals, at heart she was the same old Ragna, impulsive, dreamy, and of a childlike credulity, splendidly loyal to those she loved. One instance of this will suffice.

Astrid, in whom vanity and the indulgence of her mother had developed a thirst for admiration and romance, soon found the monotonous round of convent life unbearably dull. She confided the yearnings of her lonely heart to her bosom friend Ragna, and for a time these confidences, the daily bulletins as to the state of her soul scribbled in pencil on scraps of paper, and passed from one to the other as the girls met going to and from chapel, or in recreation hours, sufficed.

Shortly after their arrival, they had been sent to separate dormitories and tables, and kept apart during recreation, the Convent discipline not permitting of too close an intimacy between two young girls, and there being the added reason of the more rapid progress made in acquiring the language when neither had the occasion to use her mother tongue.

Astrid considered it suitable to the arid state of her heart that she should pine away, and to that end consumed bits of chalk from the class-room blackboard, scrapings of slate pencils, and all the vinegar within reach at meals. As may be imagined, she soon displayed an interesting pallor, and was accordingly dosed with iron pills and quince wine. Her heavy sighs and melancholy demeanour so impressed her fellow pupils, that it was generally rumoured she was dying of a broken heart. The broken heart soon mended, however, when early in the second year at the convent, her discerning eye perceived the burning glances of a most romantic looking youth. "Long hair, my dear, velveteen clothes, and the most beautiful soulful eyes you ever saw," she told Ragna.

The girls were on their way, with a group of selected pupils under the guardianship of an assistant mistress, to see a picture gallery. The young man turned in behind the procession and followed. The next time it was the same, and Astrid's romantic little soul thrilled at the thought of so devoted an admirer. It was easy for the man to slip a folded note into the girl's hand one day, as the little group straggled up the stairway of the Louvre, and during the rest of the afternoon Astrid's hand strayed constantly to her pocket to assure herself of the safety of the precious paper. With eyelids lowered over shining eyes, she listened to the droning explanations of the teacher, longing to be alone, to be free to read the note.

This was the beginning of a correspondence, for Astrid answered the letter and an obliging day-scholar posted the little envelope addressed to M. Jules Gauthiez. So the two exchanged perfervid epistles, and wrote such impassioned, if confused, outpourings, that Astrid's little soul was consumed within her. The secret feeling of importance it gave her betrayed itself in the brightness of her eyes and in the self-consciousness of her voice and manner. The regimen of chalk and vinegar fell into abeyance.

Ragna, at first amused, began to be alarmed at the situation; Astrid keyed to the highest pitch of romantic sentimentality, was capable of any folly, and the immediate consequences of discovery, public reprimand and expulsion from the school, spelled unthinkable disaster to her more serious mind. She begged Astrid to give the whole thing up, but the girl would listen to no argument that her friend could put forward. "My love is my life, can you ask me to tear my heart out?" she demanded.

The most Ragna could obtain, was that Astrid should be more prudent—which meant exactly nothing.

Naturally, the Sisters could not long remain unobservant of the change in Astrid's demeanour, and from awakened attention to discovery there lay but a step.

Ragna was making a water colour drawing in the assembly room, when a Sister brought her the order to go at once to the Reverend Mother. She put by her brushes with trembling hands, and the black-robed Sister observed her emotion curiously, but kindly.

"There, there, my child!" she said, "Reverend Mother will do you no harm; she wishes to ask you a question, nothing more. If your conscience is good, what do you fear?"

Ragna followed her without answering, her mind intent on the pending interview.

The Superior's sitting-room was a comfortable apartment; a table stood in the middle, and at one window a large writing desk. One of the walls was occupied by a bookcase, another by a large carved *prie-dieu* over which hung an ivory crucifix and a silver holy-water stoup with its twig of box.

Mother Marie Sacré Cœur, sat in a large carved armchair by the table. She was a tall, slender woman, and her face, though unlined and delicate as a piece of carved ivory, bore the imprint of long years of responsibility, and conveyed the impression of a wonderful degree of will power. It was not altogether an ascetic face, however, the grey eyes, though keen, were human, and the strong firmly modelled mouth had a humorous twist. The hands, long, slender and white with rather thick thumbs, were lightly clasped over a Book of Hours bound in velvet and silver.

By her side stood the Mère in charge of Astrid's dormitory, Mère Perpétua, a severe, sour-looking woman, yellow under her white guimpe and black veil. Astrid cowered beside her, looking like a prisoner in the grasp of a gendarme; she had been crying, but her eyes had a furtive expression and her weak, pretty mouth was set in obstinate lines. She looked like a trapped animal, badly frightened, but feebly at bay. On the table lay a little pile of crumpled papers, and the ribbon that had bound them.

They all looked eagerly at Ragna as she entered, followed by Sœur Angélique; she glanced at them each in turn, and from Astrid's eyes caught such an agonized appeal for help that her back

straightened, and it was with a calm, almost defiant consciousness of definite purpose that she met the Superior's interrogating gaze.

"Ragna," said the Reverend Mother, "we have called you here to ascertain how much you know of this disgraceful affair. Mère Perpétua has found these letters," she indicated the little heap on the table, "hidden in Astrid's mattress. I have read them, they are letters such as no young girl should receive from any man, even her fiancé. Our Rule has been broken by this clandestine correspondence, and our sense of propriety outraged; we are profoundly shocked and grieved."

"Such deceit! Such disgraceful effrontery! She brazenly denies they are hers!" broke in Mère Perpétua, her lean face working.

"Silence!" cried the Superior. "Mère Perpétua, you forget yourself. I had not desired you to speak." She paused a moment, then addressed Ragna.

"You will tell us, my child, all that you know about this; it is your duty to your companion, to us, and to yourself. On your frankness depends to a large extent the punishment I shall deem it necessary to impose; you may lighten it very appreciably, by telling the truth—but if you hesitate, if I understand that you are withholding anything, it will be the worse for both of you."

Mère Perpétua's interruption had been brief, but illuminating. Ragna felt that her way was made clear, it was with a steady eye and a firm, if slightly unnatural voice, that she answered:

"Reverend Mother, the letters are mine; I gave them to Astrid to keep for me."

The effect was electrical. Astrid gasped and her jaw dropped; Mère Perpétua stared at Ragna with the expression of one who has cherished a viper in her bosom, and only just found it out. Sœur Angélique gave a cry that was almost a sob. Ragna was her favourite, and she could have wept with disappointment. Only the Superior showed no surprise; her hands clasped the Book of Hours a little more tightly, and her keen eyes fixed on Ragna's face seemed trying to penetrate her very soul, that was all. Ragna returned her gaze without wavering.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Three months."

"Why did you not keep the letters yourself?"

"I was afraid of being found out!"

"Oh!" said the Reverend Mother, and laughed a little.

Her eyes went from Ragna, straight and proud, to Astrid, trembling violently, and gazing anxiously at her friend.

"And did you answer the letters?"

"Yes."

"Who posted them for you?" Silence.

"Come, who posted them for you?"

"I will not tell," said Ragna. "I will tell anything that I have done myself, but I refuse to tell on others—besides, the blame is mine in any case."

The Superior nodded her head. "I shall not press the point now, we can return to it later if need be. Are you aware of the result of this, of what you have done? No punishment can be too severe for the girl who deceives her friends and teachers so disgracefully, who sets so deplorable an example to her fellow-pupils. What will your parents say to this?"

Ragna went pale: "Oh Reverend Mother," she pleaded, "do anything to me you like, but don't let them know of it! Oh, I know I have done wrong, punish me as much as you please, but don't tell them!"

Astrid gathered herself together for a supreme effort; her cowardly little soul, shamed by her friend's generosity, rose to her lips. With tightly clasped hands, she stepped forward and began:

"Reverend Mother!"—but Ragna interrupted her quickly. She must do the thing thoroughly or not at all; having put her hand to the plough, she would not turn back.

"Reverend Mother, it has been very wrong of me, and I am sorry and ashamed. Punish me however you like. I am to blame, but don't punish Astrid, or hurt my parents; it is no fault of theirs."

The Superior laid her book on the table; her eyes, as she looked at Ragna were full of kindly amusement, and also of respect.

"Sœur Angélique," she said, "take these girls to their dormitories, and keep them till Benediction, afterwards I shall tell them what I have decided upon."

As the door closed on the three, she turned to Mère Perpétua smiling.

"Well?" she said.

"What will you do with them, Reverend Mother? Shall they be publicly expelled?"

"Ragna, as she has confessed, will be 'excused' from further walks outside the Convent; Astrid, for having concealed the letters will be kept at home also. You, ma Mère, will see that no word of this business gets about among the girls—I wish no one to speak of it, *no one*."

Mère Perpétua was a study in pained amazement.

"What!" she burst forth. "No adequate punishment? Nothing to put that brazen girl to shame for her indecent conduct? She stands here in your presence and admits to having received the letters, and answered them, to having corrupted her companion, as she might say: 'I have said thirty Aves'! Oh Reverend Mother, you are too lenient! It is unjust!"

"So that is how you understand it, ma Mère? Has life taught you nothing?"

"Life has taught me that sin requires punishment," she rejoined grimly.

"Ma Mère, I see that I must open your eyes; those letters were not written to Ragna."

"Not written to her! Why she confessed that they were hers!"

"So she did, to save Astrid."

"Well, that only makes it worse, she has lied outrageously, and so has Astrid—and you let them go unpunished!"

"I consider that Ragna's lie is a good lie, ma Mère. A generous lie is better than a mean truth. I make a pretence of punishing her so that she may not know I understand; vicarious punishment, if suffered voluntarily, is good for the soul. As for Astrid, she is weak and foolish, she has been thoroughly frightened, and is not likely to fall again in the same direction—for the present at least. The sight of Ragna, bearing the blame that should be hers, will do more for her than any punishment you or I might inflict."

Mère Perpétua gazed at her Superior in amazement; though still disapproving, she had a dim perception of the other's greatness of soul, and the insight into human nature, that had made her, while still young in years, the Head of the Community.

"You may go, ma Mère, and after Benediction you will bring our two black sheep here."

So dismissed, Mère Perpétua took her departure, shaking her head.

The Superior remained alone, leaning her head on her hand. She thought of the many young lives under her care, of the many girls she had seen come and go. She thought of the many natures hopelessly warped by a mistaken or untimely severity, shut in upon themselves, black-frosted, as it were, in the very hour when they most need drawing out, training and guiding by a sympathetic hand. She loved Ragna, her whole heart was drawn to the girl in admiration for her generous assumption of the other's fault. "She is too ready to take up others' burdens," she thought; "God send that her own be not too heavy for her shoulders!"

The bell for Benediction interrupted her meditation. As she walked along the passages to the Chapel the same thought pursued her, and when from her carved stall she recognized Ragna's fair head, bowed among her fellows, she seemed to see the halo of future suffering about it.

Ragna bending over her prayer-book, was wondering what the punishment would be; and half defiantly she squared her shoulders to meet it. She thought of Astrid, divided between contemptuous pity, and real sympathy for the agonized fear displayed by the butterfly creature.

Astrid was sobbing her heart out, her face hid between her hands. She despised herself for her weakness, and reproached herself for letting Ragna take the blame. Later she would resent her friend's generosity, but just now she fairly grovelled in self-abasement; she took a morbid delight in mortifying herself in her own eyes, as formerly she had exulted in the thought of her sentimental superiority over her comrades.

The level rays of sunlight tinged with the glory of Saints, touched the rows of young heads, passing over some, distinguishing others, colouring with purple and crimson the tresses, dark and fair, of the kneeling girls, and the Chaplain holding aloft the Ostensory with its symbol of the Great Sacrifice, glowed in a mystic radiance. Then the light went, and the tapers on the altar twinkled like stars in the sudden twilight.

After the concluding hymns, Ragna and Astrid were again conducted to the Superior's sitting-room, to hear her decision. The Reverend Mother had chosen a good moment, for the service of Benediction had had its effect on the impressionable girlish natures. Ragna was softened, and Astrid had found moral courage enough to overcome her selfish fear.

The Reverend Mother at once saw the change and profited by it, so that almost without their knowing it, she had soon drawn a full confession from both girls. Astrid, once fairly started, and prone as ever to exaggeration, would have known no limits to her self-abasement, luxuriating in her confession of guilt, had she not been almost sternly controlled and restrained.

Ragna, though pleased and relieved by Astrid's assumption of the misdoing, was yet secretly disappointed in surrendering her role of self-immolated victim. She would not have owned it to herself, she did not even recognize the flat feeling of generous effort rendered useless, that

chilled her. Quite unconsciously she had been admiring her action. How much self-sacrifice would there be in the world, if the self-made victim were not secretly upheld by the nobility of the pose—even if self be the sole admirer? There is, in every action, not the result of passionate impulse, a certain amount of play to the gallery, even though the gallery be only what is commonly known as conscience.

The Superior, being a wise woman, was neither too severe nor the reverse; she improved the occasion by giving the girls a lecture which they neither of them forgot, and dismissed them with a punishment sufficient to keep the matter in their minds for some time, while giving them no reason for considering themselves martyrs to discipline.

So the incident ended, and it had the effect of drawing the girls closer together, for Astrid, having vindicated her own self-respect, could appreciate Ragna's generosity and forgive it, while Ragna loved her friend the better for having assumed the role of protector to her, and could love her the more, not being obliged to despise her for cowardice.

CHAPTER III

So the time passed and the end of the second year came; Astrid was to remain at the Convent another twelve-month, but Ragna must return home.

With tears in her eyes she packed her boxes and took leave of the Sisters and her companions. She had begged in vain for another year—even six months, but her father was obdurate. He had made arrangements with a friend of his, a sea-captain, to fetch her in Paris and take her to Norway in his vessel. All was decided and Ragna must go.

She felt a strange shrinking from the journey and in later days came to regard as a premonition what was probably only reluctance to face the busy outside world after so many months of seclusion. Certain it is that with heavy heart and red eyes she left the Convent, and Captain Petersen was much concerned by the dolorous appearance of his charge.

"You look more like a virgin martyr being led to the stake than a pretty young lady just let out of her cage into the world!" he told her. "Bless my soul, if I wouldn't want to shake a loose leg after being mewed up so long!"

He was a stout, red-faced man with merry blue eyes, and a red fringe of beard round his face like a misplaced halo. There was nothing saintly about him, however, though he was a thoroughly good and honest man.

"Cheer up!" he adjured Ragna, "the sea-breezes will soon blow the cobwebs out of your brain and the colour into your cheeks—besides," he added with a jovial wink, "I've a surprise up my sleeve for you—a surprise most young ladies would give their eyes for!"

"What is it?" she asked for politeness' sake.

"It will keep! It will keep!" he answered delightedly.

He enlivened the long railway journey to the best of his ability, with a constant stream of jokes and stories at which he chuckled heartily in default of a more appreciative audience. He plied the girl with sweets and fruit, little flasks of wine and biscuits. He was so unfailing in his good-humoured and kindly attentions that she could not help but respond and presently was laughing with him as merrily as possible. He insisted on calling her "Fröken" pretending to stand in great awe of her long skirts, chignon and "young-ladyfied" manners. He teased her by constant references to his "surprise," but refused to tell her of what it consisted, so that her curiosity was thoroughly aroused and her eagerness to penetrate the mystery was only equalled by his pleasure at the success of his diplomacy.

So they journeyed to Hamburg, and Ragna forgot to regret her convent-life in the whirl of new sights and sensations. Captain Petersen found time, in spite of his other occupations, to take her boating up the Alster and to the theatre. She slept in her cabin, on the small steamer, and amused herself when the Captain was busy, by wandering through the city, visiting the market-place, the churches, or on the harbour and river in the small steamboats plying ceaselessly to and fro.

The *Norje* was to sail four days after their arrival in Hamburg. Much preparation was being made on board, unusual, even to Ragna's unaccustomed eyes—the state-rooms were being freshened and made ready, and the steward was laying in stores of chickens, fruit and other delicacies. Evidently some distinguished passengers were expected.

At last the day came, the sailing was fixed for noon, and Captain Petersen, watch in hand, stood on deck, by the gangway, looking expectantly up the wharf. Ragna, sitting aft under the awning, a book in her hand, could not keep her eyes from straying in the same direction, though she did her best to disguise her curiosity, for Captain Petersen, true to his word, had remained adamant to her enquiries and coaxings, and she wished him now to believe that she did not care so very much for his old "surprise" after all. Hence the book and the carefully detached attitude.

Down on the wharf there was a slight commotion; two carriages had stopped, and servants and

porters were hastening to and fro. Ragna saw a young man step from the first carriage, followed by another man, slightly older. Both had the military bearing and both were handsome, but the first had the air of one accustomed to precedence, and his somewhat petulant orders and gestures found instant response and acquiescence on the part of his companion. They were too far away for Ragna to catch their speech, though the sound of their voices reached her, and she wondered what language they might be using; Norwegian was out of the question; Swedish and Danish equally so; German it could not be for their appearance was anything but German—but neither did they look like Englishmen nor Frenchmen nor Russians, nor in fact anyone she had ever seen.

Meanwhile Captain Petersen had hastened down the gang-plank and cap in hand was bowing clumsily to the younger man and escorting him deferentially to the ship. As they passed up the gang-plank to the deck, the young man raised his head and his eyes met Ragna's, as leaning over the rail quite forgetful of herself, in her interested surmising, she gazed down at him. Her hat, tipped back and only held by the dark blue ribbon tied under her chin, left her hair uncovered, and the mass of gleaming braids and curls caught and reflected the sunlight; her blue eyes shaded by dark lashes looked down from out the shadow of her hair, clear, wondering and free from self-consciousness; her mouth, rather large but well-shaped and red as that of a child, too red for the Scandinavian fairness of her skin, was smiling, the lips just parted.

So their eyes met, his, large, dark, burning, different from any she had ever seen, held hers a moment, then he raised his hat and passed on, as Ragna withdrew, a flush she could not understand rising in her cheeks. One moment only, but while his eyes held hers she had felt a curious sensation, a sort of magnetic thrill drawing her to him, and as long as he looked at her she could not have withdrawn her eyes, nor lowered her lids.

It had lasted but a second, but that second, though she did not know it, was the turning point of her life.

Captain Petersen, preceding the young man had seen nothing, he was still murmuring disconnected phrases of greeting—"Most highly honoured! Such condescension! Entirely at Your Highness's disposal." As they reached the deck, the Captain stood aside to give passage to "His Highness" disclosing to view the deck, with Ragna who had retreated to a chair at some distance, and as His Highness stepped to the deck, his eyes followed the Captain's to the girl; then he raised them in inquiry to Petersen's face. The latter with a sweeping gesture and a voice unconsciously raised to quarter-deck tones answered the unspoken question.

"A fellow-passenger, Your Highness, the daughter of an old friend who I am bringing back from school. She speaks French like a Russian—Will Your Highness permit?" His Highness graciously permitted and they walked over to Ragna who rose to her feet annoyed by the blushes which came in spite of her, under the young stranger's scrutiny. Captain Petersen chuckling at her embarrassment addressed her in his genial roar:

"Ragna, His Royal Highness, Prince Mirko of Montegria has permitted me to present you, and I make you responsible for his entertainment during the trip. Didn't I tell you I had a surprise for you that would take your breath away? You can begin at once; I'm no carpet-knight, and managing this ship is about enough for me. Her name is Andersen, Your Highness, Fröken Ragna Andersen—and with your kind permission—" someone hailed him and he bustled away.

The servants were coming on board, directing the stewards with the luggage and the Prince's companion had already gone below to arrange the details of the installation.

Ragna had made her curtsey and stood in silent embarrassment until Prince Mirko broke the ice by saying smilingly:

"A kind Fate evidently presides over my destiny—but Captain Petersen was wrong in preparing you for a surprise; he should have warned me of the pleasure in store for me."

Then seeing how unsophisticated the girl was, and that his complimentary phrase only added to her confusion, he put her quite at her ease by making an ordinary remark or two about the weather, followed by a few questions as to her life in the Convent and the journey to Hamburg. They were still talking, standing by the rail, when the young man who had accompanied Prince Mirko in the carriage, approached and stopped within a few paces of them.

"Oh," said the Prince, "Mademoiselle, let me present my friend and aide-de-camp, Count Angelescu. What is it, Otto?"

"Captain Petersen wishes to know if Your Highness will have luncheon served in your state-room, or if you will eat in the saloon. There are no other passengers beside your party and this young lady."

"The saloon, by all means, Otto, and tell the Captain I hope he will join us, as well as Mademoiselle, if she will do us the honour!"—He looked at Ragna who bowed.

Count Angelescu also bowed and withdrew—he had bowed to Ragna, bringing his heels together with a click, when his Prince presented him, but had seemed to give her no further attention. In reality he had observed her closely and her frank expression and fresh youthfulness pleased him. Ragna's impression of him was equally favourable; she liked his bronzed soldierly face, with the grave eyes and the firm mouth under the dark moustache. He must be thirty or over, she thought, the Prince could not be more than twenty-four or five.

The sailors had lowered the gang-plank and were casting off the hawsers which held the steamer to the wharf. A wheezy donkey-engine was lowering boxes and bales through the forward hatch; on the river side a small puffing tug was slowly warping the *Norje* into midstream. Ragna and the Prince could hear Captain Petersen on the bridge, now calling orders through the tube to the engine room, now bawling through his speaking-trumpet. His round face looked like an overgrown peony and Ragna said so, to her companion's amusement.

"Is that the botany they teach you in Paris?" he asked.

"Oh," she answered, laughing gayly, "Paris is a place where one learns many things!"

"Even in a Convent?"

"Even in a Convent."

He shot a stealthy glance at her from under dropped lids—the girl was thoroughly innocent, there could be no doubt as to that. A smile twitched his moustache—the things Paris had taught him were not subjects usually included in the curriculum of a girls' school, and the piquancy of the contrast between his experience of *la Villa Lumière* and that of Ragna amused him. He stood idly watching her—her face interested him, not from its prettiness alone—she was at the same time more and less than pretty. It was no doll's face, the cheek-bones were too high and prominent for the canons of perfect beauty, the mouth too large and the forehead too high, but there was an indescribable charm he did not seek to analyse—enough that it should be perceptible. He felt instinctively that though childlike in her mind Ragna was no fool, and that it would amuse him to draw her out. So he led her on to express her opinions on various subjects grave and gay, such as came up in their desultory conversation.

The announcement of luncheon, by means of a cracked gong, was no interruption for the Captain excused himself on the ground that his presence was required on the bridge, and Count Angelescu barely joined in the conversation from time to time in response to a direct appeal from the Prince or from Ragna.

The girl had lost all trace of shyness and was enjoying herself heartily in the highest of spirits, and Prince Mirko seemed more like a school-boy on a holiday than the heir to a kingdom on a diplomatic mission. He explained to Ragna that he was on his way to Stockholm, and from there to St. Petersburg.

"But," he said, "that is all so appallingly serious that I am cutting capers while I may—I often cut them when I should not, don't I, Otto? And old 'Long face' there, tries to keep me in order; old 'Long face' does not approve of me now!" he laughed.

Count Angelescu did not reply, nor did he even smile at the sally; he was not at all pleased by the rate at which the *camaraderie* between the Prince and Ragna was progressing. He knew his Prince for a "coureur de cotillons" and scented danger from afar. "Fortunately we land the day after to-morrow," he thought. Two days is a short time, but much can happen in them.

Ragna had listened, astonished by the bantering challenge.

"Why," she exclaimed, "Your Highness, can you be kept in order?"

The naïve question so pleased the Prince that he roared with laughter, as did also Count Angelescu who answered her.

"No, Mademoiselle, he can't, and that's the worst of it! I do my best; it's no use; I advise you to beware of him, he's dangerous."

"Now, Otto, none of that! I won't have you making me out an ogre. I assure you," he said, turning to Ragna, "that I am warranted neither to bite nor scratch. Do I really look terrible?"

"No, indeed," she laughed, looking him in the eyes, "I am not afraid of you!"

"Ah, Mademoiselle," said Angelescu, "it is when one thinks one's self safest that one is generally in the greatest danger. I was never so sure of myself as the day I fell hopelessly in love; I had the folly to think myself woman-proof, you see, and I fell!"

"So you are married, then," said Ragna.

"No, for after all she would have none of me!"

They all joined in a laugh at this, and Ragna said: "Your sermon loses its point, oh Preacher!"

So the luncheon-hour passed amid jest and laughter and they strolled out to the deck where comfortable chairs awaited them under the canvas awning. The *Norje* was passing the islands of the Elbe—the Vierländer, and Prince Mirko made much fun of the quaint dress of the peasant women with their awkward hats, stiff ribbons and clumsy petticoats.

Ragna described to him the dress of the women about her home, and was led on to talk of the many ancient customs of the country people, now fallen into disuse, such as the duel with daggers, both men bound together with the same leather belt, and of other contests, bloodless ones these, when two or more men vied with each other in improvising verse, often carrying it on far into the night. She told of the bear-hunts, of the strange tales of returning whalers, of her Uncle Olaf and his phantom ship, and of her fancy of seeing him in the storm.

As she talked, the men smoked; Count Angelescu watched her, charmed by her fresh young voice and the expressive play of her features. He thought to himself: "No, my dear friend this is no game for you. St. Petersburg will furnish you with adversaries worthy of your steel, save your efforts for them—this little girl is too good for you," and he made up his mind not to leave the Prince alone with Ragna, more than was unavoidable. Speaking to the Prince himself would do no good, very possibly it might put ideas into his head that he had not heretofore consciously entertained—or might crystallize the mere intent to please into obstinate purpose of conquest. Angelescu was thoroughly determined in his own mind that no harm should come to Ragna which he could prevent.

Prince Mirko, on his part, was listening to her chatter, the picture of lazy enjoyment, his graceful figure reclining easily in his deck-chair. He played with his cigarette while watching her with narrowed eyes. He noted the graceful poise of her head, the gleam of her heavy hair, the fresh colour coming and going under her transparent skin, the rounded contours of her slender figure, but it was her mouth that fascinated him most, sinuous, sensitive and red—too red.

"Good Lord," he reflected, "what a temperament the girl must have! I wonder what kind of a man will get her? Her husband—or lover, will be a lucky man. I shouldn't object myself, to playing Pygmalion to her Galatea." He fell to imagining what she would be like when the crude innocence of her eyes should give way to a depth of passionate feeling, when the barely perceptible circles under them should widen and darken, and her mouth—that luscious, voluptuous, childish mouth should take a man's kisses and return them. He thrilled at the thought, then pulled himself together ashamed at the direction his thoughts had taken. "You fool," he said to himself, "can't you leave that child alone? I really believe Otto was not far wrong in warning her against me—I'll show him he's wrong though, I'm not as bad as that! I may be a bit of a Don Juan, but I'm not a *mangeur de petits enfants*!"

He rose to throw his cigarette-butt over the side and lighting a fresh one strolled up and down the deck, watching the shores slip by.

Captain Petersen at that moment joined them and his presence amalgamated the discordant unities of the group. Ragna had felt, without understanding it, a sort of moral tension during the last few moments, and though the Prince's abrupt rising had relieved it, there persisted an uncomfortable undercurrent of conflicting influences. Captain Petersen's cheery red face and jovial manner came like a rush of fresh air into an overheated room. He indicated the various points of interest as they steamed by and regretted that they would pass Heligoland after dark.

"If it keeps clear, we shall see it by moonlight though," he promised them.

Ragna sought her cabin early on the plea of getting ready for dinner, and contrary to her custom spent much time over her toilette, trying her hair this way and that, and passing in review her not too extensive wardrobe. She had awakened to a sense of coquetry; she was newly conscious of a deliberate desire to please.

When she had finished she viewed with dissatisfaction the image her glass reflected: her hair seemed to her much too formal and school-girlish in its arrangement, yet had she known it, the severe lines of burnished plaits suited her small, well-shaped head and the crude youthful curves of face and slender neck far better than any more elaborate style. Her dark-blue frock opening in a point at the throat and leaving the fore-arms bare, seemed suddenly to her newborn critical sense too childish and plain—and again it suited her perfectly, throwing into relief the whiteness of her skin and the fairness of her hair, the lack of frill and furbelow emphasizing the slender waist and the rounded slimness of hip and breast. And she longed for trained ringlets and lace flounces.

Dinner was not as pleasant a meal, she thought, as luncheon; the Prince was silent, almost moody, and conversation languished.

Count Angelescu, quick to perceive the change in his Prince's manner, and as quickly guessing the cause, did his best to second so worthy a resolve by making an effort to keep up a conversation on indifferent topics and to engage Ragna's attention and interest. He was not much of a conversationalist, however, and quite unused to the society of young girls. In his part of the world girls were rarely, if ever, seen in society and the stories and small talk adapted to the married women of his acquaintance were certainly not of a type suited to present circumstances.

Ragna was disappointed; she took the Prince's bad humour for a touch of hauteur and suspected him of regretting having unbent in her society. So piqued and hurt she made no effort to second Angelescu's efforts. She ate little and refused wine until champagne was brought and Prince Mirko insisted upon filling her glass. He had been secretly amused by his aide's laborious attempts at entertainment and Ragna's very evident chagrin at his aloofness flattered his vanity. In spite of his resolution to maintain a barrier of formality between them he could not resist the temptation of making her face resume its former sunny expression. Raising his glass in which the bubbles were winking merrily he said: "Let us drink, Otto, to the health of Mademoiselle, who has turned the desert of a Norwegian ship into a garden for us!"

Ragna looked up, blushing and smiling; they both touched their glasses to hers and drank.

"Now Mademoiselle, you must answer the toast!"

"I? Oh, never!" she cried in confusion. "I have never answered a toast in my life. I don't know

how!" Then recovering herself, "You may answer it for me if you like."

"Shall I?" he asked. "Very well then, I rise, lady and gentleman—no I don't, I sit down," as a lurch of the ship threw him back into his chair and spilt half the contents of his glass—"I sit then, as the elements won't permit of my standing, to thank you for the toast just drunk, and to propose in return our newborn friendship!"

They all drank to that.

"There," said Mirko, "that is better; we have set the seal on our present relation. The Present with a capital P. is always the best life has to offer. Yesterday is dead and to-morrow is in darkness: to-day only we live. *Carpe diem* was the motto of the Ancients and it is mine!"

"Oh, no, not of all the Ancients," objected Ragna quickly, horrified at the Pagan irresponsibility of the thought, "the Stoics did not live for the pleasure of the hour, they taught themselves to forego pleasure. I think it is nobler to deny one's self," she added timidly.

"Deny one's self? What for?" demanded the Prince. "Why should I deny myself anything for the sake of others' pleasure? Am I not as good as they? And besides if I deny myself it only makes them selfish. To be really altruistic I should indulge myself on every occasion with the object of cultivating a beautiful unselfishness in others—that would be true self-sacrifice"—He stopped, laughing at the extreme bewilderment of the girl's face. She had lived entirely among serious-minded people, devoid of a sense of humour, and was unused to hear what were, to her, serious matters bandied about as subjects for jest; she rejoined gravely:

"You say, 'live only for the day,' but there is a to-morrow—someone must always bear the consequences, it can't keep on being just 'to-day' however much we may wish it."

The remark was characteristic of her, and she was one on whom life's to-morrows would fall heavily. Angelescu came to her assistance.

"Mademoiselle refuses to accept the sophistry of Your Highness's arguments," he said smiling. "Sophistry, why it is the simple truth, and the Epicureans are your true Stoics. *Carpe diem!* Let us drink to *carpe diem*!"

"Not I," said Ragna.

"Very well then, Mademoiselle la Stoique—but I shall make it my business to convert you. Let us then drink to the health of our noble selves. What do you say, in Norwegian, when you drink a health?"

"Skaal," said Ragna.

"Skaal, then," said both men raising their glasses and looking at Ragna, who half timidly raised hers to her lips, then put it down again—and Prince Mirko added under his breath as he drained his glass,

"And to your conversion, my dear."

On deck, a fresh breeze was blowing, and Ragna bound a long scarf over her head and wrapped her travelling-cloak well about her. Accompanied by the two men she paced briskly up and down the deck inhaling joyfully the strong sea air.

"Let us try the other side," she said presently, and they turned forward of the wheel-house: At the turn the wind caught the long ends of her scarf and wound them about the Prince's neck; they paused to disentangle the soft silken thing, Prince Mirko's hands delaying rather than hastening the process, when a lurch of the vessel flung Ragna against him. He steadied himself with one arm against the deck-house and with the other supported the girl, holding her firm young body close to his. He held her but a moment more than was needful, but in that moment, pressed close to him, his moustache brushing her cheek, she felt a repetition of the same thrill, half attraction, half fear, which had come over her the first time their eyes met. It was over in an instant and they were running down the deck before the wind, but Ragna felt a new and strange constraint upon her which did not wear off as the evening advanced.

She waited up long enough to see Heligoland rising up dark and forbidding on the starboard side in the half-light of the moon. The cloud-wrack behind, seemed like the wings of some monster bird of prey about to swoop down upon the island, crouching to repel the attack. As she watched, a cloud passed over the moon and a jagged line of lightning cleft the darkening mass on the horizon. The flash lasted but the fraction of a second, but she had seen a ship carrying full sail silhouetted against the storm-cloud. The ship stood out for an instant in wonderful relief, every spar and rope clear-cut against the sombre background, then was swallowed up into the night.

"It is Uncle Olaf," thought Ragna. "He has come to warn me—but of what?"

She turned to Angelescu, leaning on the rail beside her.

"Did you see the ship?"

"The ship! What ship? When?"

"Just over there, against that black cloud in the lightning flash."

As she spoke the lightning flared again but revealed nothing.

"You see there is no ship, Mademoiselle," said Angelescu, "and landsman though I be, I know that she would show some lights if she were there."

"Then," said Ragna in a low voice, "the sign is not for you—it was the ship of my Uncle Olaf."

"What are you talking about so earnestly?" asked Prince Mirko, joining them. He had been lighting a cigarette in the shelter of the companion-way. His tone was suspicious, he thought that Angelescu might have been warning the girl against him. The mere fact that he suspected such a contingency and resented it, was proof patent that his good resolution of the afternoon had fallen into abeyance.

During the brief moment when he had held her in his arms, had felt her heart beating under his hand and the stray locks of her hair blowing across his face, his pulse had given a leap, and had it not been for Angelescu's restraining presence, he would have kissed her.

Angelescu hastened to reassure him:

"Mademoiselle has seen the phantom ship of her phantom uncle—I have not, which proves that my spiritual vision is defective."

Ragna laughed.

"Should I be able to see your family ghost, I wonder?" she queried.

"What makes you think I have a family ghost, Mademoiselle?"

"Everyone has them—you, the Prince—oh, everyone!"

"If you mean a private, particular ghost, Mademoiselle, every man or woman has one after a certain age. Sometimes it is the ghost of the 'has been,' sometimes of the 'what might have been,' and sometimes of both. But you are too young for that sort of ghost—and I pray you may never have a worse one than your Uncle Olaf's."

"Oh, stow all that nonsense about ghosts," said the Prince testily. "Why should you fill up a poor girl's head with that sort of thing? Will you not walk again, Mademoiselle, and let the wind blow all these cobwebs away?"

But Ragna refused; it was late, she said, four bells had just struck, and it was time for bed. The men strolled over to the companion-way with her and each kissed her hand. Angelescu brushed it respectfully with his moustache, but the Prince set his lips upon it and the burning seal of his mouth sent a current through her veins. She snatched her hand away and fled to her cabin.

The men walked slowly up and down the lee-side of the deck, the swinging lamp grotesquely lengthening and broadening their shadows as they passed under its feeble ray.

"Otto," said the Prince suddenly, "what do you think of the girl? Is she as innocent as she appears?"

"I think," rejoined Angelescu, weighing every word, "that she is entirely too good a girl to play with and fling away. Anyone can see that she is nothing but a child at heart, and a man who can't marry her has no business to wake her up."

"Which means me? Well, calm yourself, good Otto, calm yourself, the fair maiden runs no danger that I know of. I have no foul intentions on her virtue! A little fun does no one any harm—What makes you such an old fogy any way, damn you? I don't recognize you in the role of St. Anthony, nor myself either for the matter of that!" he chuckled reminiscently.

"Your Highness knows," answered Angelescu, "that I am no saint, and I don't mind a bit of a game myself, when there is any sport in it, but in this case it would be entirely too one-sided. Wait till you find someone who knows the rules of the game—there's no glory in turning the heads of boarding-school misses!" He puffed disgustedly at his cigarette which had gone out, then threw it away and thrust his hands into his pockets.

"You're right, old man; that's the worst of you, fidus Achates, you're always right in the main—but I think this time you are just a little bit off the track. Have I not already declared my intention of respecting virtuous innocence? What more would you have? And if I throw in a lesson or two, just a kindergarten lesson in the gentle art of flirtation, what harm is there?"

Angelescu shrugged his shoulders and moved away. He knew better than to prolong a useless discussion, and he knew equally well from experience what the Prince might consider as legitimately included in his "kindergarten of flirtation." Judging from his own impression of Ragna and of the capabilities of her temperament once aroused, he realized the danger to her peace of mind which would inevitably follow the merest spark of sense awakening. "There would be the devil to pay," he thought and as before reflected that fortunately the time was short.

CHAPTER IV

Ragna, tired out by the long day of new experience, soon fell asleep in her narrow berth. It seemed to her that after a long sleep of which she was dimly conscious she awoke to find herself

in a strange country, a wide grass-covered plain running to the foot of low mountains, a rolling plain extending right and left as far as the eye could reach. The sky was heavy with thunder clouds, and against the dark heavens and the grassy knolls and bottoms ran a series of arches—white arches, some broken, some still whole and joined one to the other like an interminable bridge. She was no longer a girl but a hare, running bounding along, and after her ran a greyhound the fleetest of his kind, following her in long easy leaps. It seemed to her that though she was the hare, yet it was as if she stood at a distance and watched the chase, saw the anguished turning and doubling of the hare, saw the greyhound ever nearer and nearer, about to overtake his prey. At last the storm broke, and amid the wild lightnings and the crashing thunder, the end came—one last despairing bound, and Ragna, the hare, felt the pursuer's teeth close in her panting side. With a shriek she sat up in her berth. Above, the sailors were holy-stoning the deck, and the cabin was as she had seen it the night before, her clothes swaying to the motion from the hooks on the wall where she had hung them. Now and again a green wave washed over the closed port-hole.

She flung herself back on her pillow. Drops of perspiration beaded her forehead, and in spite of her wish to laugh at the relief of finding her dream only a dream after all, she was still dominated by the mysterious anguish with which the dream had filled her. Thinking it over, she shuddered and had need to feel the stuff curtain of her berth to assure herself that she was really awake. She looked at her watch; it was not yet six o'clock, but accustomed to the early rising at the Convent, she felt it impossible to fall asleep again, so she rose and performed her toilette, amused by the difficulty of dressing on a floor which swung up and down under her feet sending her staggering to and fro like a drunken man.

In the deserted saloon a steward brought her zwieback and coffee, and after she had eaten she went on deck carrying a handful of bread with which to feed the gulls. She was standing in the stern, looking out over the narrowing foamy wake, and throwing the bits of crust to the hungry birds, watching them wheel and plunge and seize the tempting morsel, while those who caught nothing vented their displeasure in angry squawks, when Captain Petersen joined her. He slyly stole up behind her and pinched her rosy cheek with a "Hey, now, what's our young lady doing about so early? Stealing bread, too! Dear, dear that will never do!"

Ragna turned laughing to meet the mock reproof.

"Well, what do you think of the old man now? Haven't I managed to give you pleasant company for the voyage, little one? A real prince, too, not many would have pulled that off for you! And you know how to keep him entertained!"

He shook his finger at her.

"Don't think that because I was cooped up on the bridge all day, I didn't see anything that was going on, Miss Sly-boots!"

He laughed uproariously, and Ragna glanced apprehensively back over the deck to assure herself that no one was within hearing.

"What did you see, Captain Petersen?" she asked. "I am sure there was nothing extraordinary, and it was you who asked me to entertain His Highness!"

"So I did," roared the Captain, "so I did, and the little Minx must needs set her cap at him as well—and capture him, horse, guns and foot! A little lass just out of a convent at that!"

Ragna was much embarrassed by this well-meaning banter, and in terror lest he should revive the subject in the Prince's presence—if that were to happen she would surely die of shame! "Captain Petersen," she said, "I have never set my cap at anyone, please don't say such things! The Prince is very kind to take any notice of a little girl like me, and he must find me very simple after the ladies he sees in society. Do be good, Captain Petersen, don't tease me again please, I don't like it! I think I will go down now and write some letters and my diary."

Captain Petersen shook with laughter.

"And so it is a child and not a young lady at all, in spite of its long skirts, and *it* doesn't like to be teased about Princes—and *it* thinks it will run away and write to be rid of me!"

Then as he saw tears of vexation rise in Ragna's eyes he realized that he had gone too far and like the gentleman he was, hastened to apologize.

"There, there, my dear, forgive an old sea-dog his joke! I meant nothing by it, but if you don't like it we won't say any more. I may be a bit rough and ready, my dear, and I'm not used to turning compliments and dancing on carpets, but I wouldn't hurt you for the world."

"I'm sure you wouldn't, Captain," said Ragna, laying her hand on his blue sleeve and smiling up into his kindly eyes. They stood there a few minutes longer watching the cloud of whirling white and grey gulls, and Ragna threw her last crumbs of bread; then they walked forward and the girl went to the saloon to write her letters, while the Captain returned to the bridge.

In the saloon she found Angelescu just finishing his breakfast. He rose, serviette in hand, as she entered.

"You are up early, Mademoiselle!"

"Oh," she answered, "I have been up for hours; I have been on deck feeding the gulls."

"And now you are going to have some breakfast? Let me call the steward."

"Thank you, Monsieur, I breakfasted before I went on deck. I have come down to write a little. Please don't let me interrupt your breakfast."

As she spoke, she moved over to a small table set across the end of the saloon, and laid upon it her writing case and travelling inkstand.

Angelescu resumed his seat and silence reigned except for the usual noises of the ship and the scratching of Ragna's pen.

The Count having finished his repast went on deck, where he was hailed by Captain Petersen and invited to the bridge, where the good Captain set forth at some length the principles of navigation, and enjoyed himself thoroughly, not often having had the fortune to meet with so considerate a listener; for the Count, though more bored than otherwise by the Captain's disquisition, sprinkled as it was by innumerable technical details, maintained throughout an air of courteous interest. So delighted was Captain Petersen that he actually sent for his private bottle of "schnapps" and insisted on his visitor's partaking thereof to close the interview.

Ragna had settled herself on deck with a rug and a book, and evidently expected Count Angelescu to join her as he descended from the bridge, but he only bowed—it seemed that he also had some writing to do. Much as he felt inclined to sit down by her, he realized that after what had passed between him and the Prince, it would not be wise for him to appear to devote more time or attention to her than courtesy required. And moreover he felt that it would not be easy for him to remain too long alone with Ragna without falling to a certain extent victim to the charm which she unquestionably exerted.

Ragna therefore spent the long morning between her book and short constitutionals up and down the deck. Part of the time she lay lazily watching the changing cloud shapes, the spray dashing up to catch the sunlight and falling again like a shower of diamonds, the ceaseless march onward of the white crested waves. Leaning on the rail, she followed the churning lines of foam, swirling deep down in the marble like water and rising again to the surface in a lacy pattern of tiny bubbles.

So the time passed until shortly after eleven the Prince appeared followed by Angelescu. They drew up chairs, and after the first salutations were over, Ragna bantered the Prince on his late rising.

"Ah, but my dear young lady," he answered, "you do not know the night I spent. In the first place, your charming image held sleep at bay for hours, and then a less romantic reason kept me awake. My bed was made like a jam-roll, and it did roll—it rolled off three times, and each time I had to get up and put it back."

Ragna laughed; the Norwegian fashion of bed making was one to which she was well accustomed and she had never thought of the effect it might have on a stranger.

"Ah, you may well laugh," continued Mirko, "but if you had seen me taming that wild beast of a bed, and at the same time trying to keep my balance on that see-saw floor you would have wept tears of compassion."

"Crocodile tears, I fear," said Angelescu drily.

"Then they began holy-stoning the deck just as I had fallen asleep, and I had to begin all over again. I am convinced, Mademoiselle, that I was not born to sail the seas!"

Ragna laughed and sparkled; in the clear morning light, the vague distrust and fear of him, which had assailed her the evening before, seemed a ridiculous trick of the imagination and of a piece with her foolish dream. The man was simple, gay and straightforward enough now, in all conscience! His eyes, whose magnetic power had so troubled her the day before, now reflected nothing but merry good humour, as he gave his whimsical account of his night's experiences. He rattled along in a cheerful way, making them all laugh at his nonsense and merry conceits.

Captain Petersen lunched with the party, his jolly red face beaming like a rising sun. Ragna thought she had never laughed so much in all her life. When they had finished she fed the gulls again with the help of the Prince and Angelescu, who vied with each other in seeing who could toss the crumbs farthest. One large gull, an old white fellow, either stronger or more masterful than the others, was getting more than his share; he would wait until another bird had caught a crumb and would then bear down on him, wings spread, legs extended, and with wild squawks oblige the poor thing to drop the coveted morsel, whereupon he would pounce upon it and devour it, only to begin all over again. Ragna pointed him out to the men and the Prince nicknamed him "Napoleon."

It was very pleasant there in the stern. Ragna seated herself on a coil of rope in the shadow of a life-boat, and the men leaned lazily on the rail watching the exploits of "Napoleon." Angelescu had always a certain soldierly stiffness about him from his clear-cut face to his trim feet, suggestive of an uncompromising attitude of mind where honour or principle were involved. Prince Mirko was a picture of lazy, rather feline grace; not to be characterized as effeminate, he yet did not convey an impression of masculine supremacy, in spite of his broad shoulders and the

insolent lift of his moustache; his eyes were too large, his hands and feet too small, his hair too silky, the symmetry of his shape too perfect. He looked more like some handsome arrogant animal than a man born to command men—yet there was no denying his distinction, he was undoubtedly a thoroughbred.

Presently they returned to the shade of the awning and the deck chairs, and the Prince drawing a notebook from his pocket, made little sketches of Ragna.

"I shall carry something of you with me when our ways part," he said.

Ragna felt much flattered and regretted that her list of accomplishments did not include drawing.

"But," she said, turning to Angelescu, who had sat a silent spectator, "you can draw, I am sure, will you not make me a little sketch?"

Angelescu would be delighted; he went to his cabin and returned with sketch book and pencil, and without more ado began work. Ragna wished to look over his shoulder, but he would not hear of it.

"You must be patient till I have finished, Mademoiselle, I am not as accomplished a draughtsman as the Prince, and I could not do anything if you watched me."

Finally he produced a very pretty little sketch, representing the rail at the stern, with the slender figure of a girl silhouetted against it, one arm flung out in the act of scattering crumbs. The action was spirited, the whole thing suggested by a few clear decisive strokes of the pencil. Ragna was delighted with it and begged leave to inspect the Count's sketch book; he refused in an embarrassed way, and the Prince, seeing an occasion to tease his friend, made as if to snatch at the book crying—

"Fie, how can you refuse a lady. What have you drawn that is so very, very naughty that it can't be seen? Out with it!"

As he spoke, his hand touched the book, and in his haste to withdraw it, Angelescu seized the upper cover. The book opened and two loose leaves fluttered out and fell at Ragna's feet. She picked them up to return to him, glancing at them involuntarily as she did so, and her attention was arrested. The first sketch was a portrait of herself, idealized, but an excellent likeness; the other was the Prince, also an admirable likeness, but conveying an impression of evil—not conscious evil, however, rather the face of a faun through whose eyes looked out a laughing fiend. Ragna shivered unconsciously and turned to the Prince, in whose good humoured countenance she failed to detect the slightest expression similar to that in the drawing.

"So," said Mirko, "our dear Otto has been exercising his talents at our expense! very clever indeed. The sketch of Mademoiselle is charming, but, my dear fellow, what has induced you to lend my humble features to your conception of the Devil? You flatter me, you do indeed!"

Angelescu visibly annoyed, made answer,

"I am sorry, I did not wish Mademoiselle to see that I had taken the liberty of attempting her likeness without her permission, and I can only beg that she will accept the little sketch as a token that she bears me no ill will. As for the other, Your Highness, it was only an idle fancy of mine, and it is only by accident that it may seem to resemble you."

Ragna looked at the little sketches thoughtfully and said, "Count Angelescu, you were wrong in sketching me without my permission, but I will forgive that—especially as you have made me so pretty. As the Prince has some sketches of me, I will let you keep this, if you wish it, and I will keep the other."

But the Prince would have none of that.

"What, Mademoiselle, you wish to keep me before your eyes as a devil? Never in the world; I won't have it!"

In the end, Angelescu was persuaded to draw another portrait of the Prince with which to redeem the "Devil Sketch" which Ragna insisted on holding as hostage until it should be replaced by a better.

More than once, in the course of the afternoon, Angelescu pleaded that he had writing that must be attended to, official papers and reports that must be prepared, but Mirko refused to let him go.

"You can do all that later," he would say.

Ragna caught Angelescu glancing anxiously at him from time to time, as though suspecting him of some ulterior motive. The aide could hardly insist, however, especially after the episode of the sketches—indeed he had an uneasy feeling that the last word had not been said with regard to them, and that the Prince meant to turn the situation thus created to his own personal advantage. So the afternoon wore on, the Prince keeping the ball of conversation gaily rolling, nothing in his appearance giving the slightest hint that he thought of anything beyond the careless enjoyment of the passing hour.

The sun was nearing the horizon as they went below to prepare for dinner. A few light clouds flecked the sky, looking like the fleeces of wandering lambs.

"It will be a perfect evening," said Mirko, "and we shall have a full moon."

Ragna put on the same frock she had worn the evening before—it was her best—but to-night she turned it in a little more at the neck and bosom, and pinned on a piece of lace given her by her mother when she left home. Her skin showed white in the opening and her delicate throat rose from its frame like the stalk of a flower.

The Captain came to the saloon for dinner and sat at the head of the table, having Prince Mirko on his right and Angelescu on his left; Ragna sat by the Prince. All had good appetites and did full justice to the excellent fare provided.

The Prince had given orders that champagne be served from the very beginning and he made it his care to replenish Ragna's glass as often as she emptied it.

Captain Petersen, busy with his dinner and in entertaining his distinguished passengers to the best of his ability, noticed nothing, but Angelescu's eyes were grave as he observed the girl's flushed cheeks, and unnaturally bright eyes. He even ventured so far as to ask her whether she were fond of champagne, to which she answered innocently that she liked it very much but had never drunk much wine of any kind whatever.

Captain Petersen broke in with his genial roar. "So you like the champagne, Fröken Ragna? So do I! So do I! Not but what a little 'schnapps' in season, has its merits—still I suppose champagne is better for a young lady than 'schnapps'!"

Angelescu relapsed into silence; if the captain, who was, in a way the girl's guardian, saw nothing amiss, he himself would do no more. To do the Prince justice, he had no thought of making his neighbour take more than was good for her; he had no intention of doing her the slightest harm; he wished to give her pleasure and at the same time to enjoy himself. If in filling her glass he wore a slight air of bravado it was that Angelescu's evident distrust of him and his intentions had stirred up a certain obstinacy within him, and he was possessed by the desire to outrage the would be protector's feelings. Mirko had shrewdly guessed that Angelescu entertained a warmer regard for Ragna than he was willing to admit of to himself; that the assumption of the protector's role might not be wholly the disinterested or rather uninterested attitude that the Count wished it to appear, as that, when at the close of dinner Ragna went to her cabin for a wrap, he drew Angelescu aside and said to him:

"I wish you to understand once and for all, Otto, that I will not tolerate your interference and your silent criticism. It is all very well for you to think that because you are older than I, and because we have always been comrades you have the right to control me. I am your Prince, and you will do well to remember the fact."

Angelescu, his face burning, cut to the quick, saluted and answered stiffly.

"Your Highness shall be obeyed," then turned on his heel; but Mirko called him back, already regretting the sharpness of his tone and language towards his old playmate and faithful friend.

"Hold on, old man, don't take it like that! I didn't mean what I said, at least not all. You seem to think me a sort of villain in disguise, and you arrogate to yourself the responsibility for my conduct in every direction. You sat at table glaring at me as if I were trying to poison Mademoiselle. Now what is the matter with you?"

"I thought that Your Highness did not realize the fact that she is only a child and quite unused to champagne—"

"Did you not hear the Captain?"

"The Captain is a rough old sailor, unused to young girls; I thought—"

"You think too much, Otto. Besides, it's rather new for you to play the part of 'Squire of Dames' to wandering damsels—I believe the root of the matter is that you are in love with the girl, yourself. Why don't you marry her? You could, you know."

"Your Highness knows very well that I am not free to marry," said Angelescu in a low voice, a dark flush spreading over his face. The Prince knew well, as did everyone else, that his aide was bound, and had been for years, to a married woman of high rank, whose unhappy married life had been responsible for the forming of the liaison, and that now time and custom and a quixotic sense of moral obligation continued to bind the unfortunate Angelescu to the lady's chariot wheels, though any feeling he had had for her was long since dead.

Ragna's entrance put a stop to further explanations, and Angelescu excused himself, saying that he must attend to the neglected writing of the afternoon. So the other two were left with the deck to themselves.

It was a perfect evening, the full moon hung low in an almost cloudless sky and the broad silver pathway over the water looked like a carpet laid for a procession of fairies. Ragna hung over the rail in an ecstasy of appreciative joy.

"Oh, isn't it just like Heaven!" she murmured.

"I can't say," answered Mirko, "never having been there, but it would make a good setting for a love scene. Imagine it for a honeymoon!"

"I must answer like Your Highness," laughed Ragna, "never having had a honeymoon I can't very well imagine one."

"Then look at the lovers in the moon."

"Lovers in the moon!"

"What! have you never seen them?"

"I see only the hare, with his two long ears."

"Look again, the lady is on the right, and you see her head in profile, her lover has a beard—there, do you see?"

"No," said Ragna, "I still do not see."

"That is because your eyes have not been opened; when you have had a lover, you will see the Lovers in the moon."

Ragna laughed at the idea.

"Why should having a lover improve one's eyesight?" she asked.

"It will not improve your physical eyes, Mademoiselle, but it will open your spiritual eyes to the world; just now your heart is blind."

To this Ragna found no answer; she stood silent, her face turned up to the moon, still looking vainly for the Lovers. Mirko stood gazing at her tempted by her fairness, her simplicity, and the moonlight.

"Do you realize the delightfulness of this episode?" he asked her abruptly. "It will be like an oasis in the desert to look back on. I should like you to forget this evening, that we are anything but just our two selves; there is no Prince, there is no Fröken Andersen, we are just you and I and nothing more. Yesterday we met, to-morrow we part, probably for ever, so that there can be no thought of past or future to embarrass us. There is no yesterday and no to-morrow, no time and no limitation of space; we are all the world, we are quite alone and detached from everything, you and I and the moon!"

His eyes were fastened on hers and held them; she could not have moved away had she wished.

She answered in an embarrassed way:

"You wish to stop the hands of the clock for this evening?"

"Exactly—with your help."

The romance of the situation appealed to her.

"The clock has stopped," she announced gravely.

"Thank you," he murmured raising her hand to his lips.

Ragna laughed uneasily; it seemed to her that she was living in some fairy tale.

The Prince led her to a deck chair and drew up another beside it. From where they sat they could see the moon and the light upon the water, but they were screened from the companion-way door, and indeed from most of the deck, by the ventilator of the saloon and the shadow of a life-boat. It was unusually warm for the North Sea, especially for so early in the season, and Ragna found her heavy cloak oppressive.

"Take care you do not get cold," said the Prince as he helped her to loosen the clasp at the neck. The whiteness of her throat seemed like marble in the moonlight. Her hook had caught in her lace collar, and in disentangling it the Prince's fingers brushed her bosom; they gave her a tingling sensation and she started up.

"I beg your pardon," said Mirko; "it was not intentional, but if it had been would you resent it? Where is the harm, are we not friends?"

"Friends," said Ragna, "just friends. You must not do things like that."

"Then give me your hand. Has anyone ever read your palm? No?"

He took her hand lying idly on a fold of her cloak and held it up in the moonlight.

"I cannot see the lines, it is too dark, but your hand is beautiful, so soft, so tapering!"

He drew the tips of his fingers over her palm and had the satisfaction of seeing her shiver. She tried to draw her hand away, but he kept it.

"Ragna, little Ragna, there are many things, I should like to say to you, but I am afraid you would misunderstand me. Do you know what you are? You are the Sleeping Beauty, you are asleep, no one has come yet to wake you; you are waiting for the Prince."

He paused, stroking her hand. His touch seemed to magnetise her, for her hand lay passive within his and she made no effort to withdraw it as he leaned towards her. The music of his voice seemed to hold her enthralled,—perhaps the champagne she had drunk had something to do with

it,—she had no volition, her will was asleep.

"Who will the 'Prince' be, Ragna? A fair-haired lover with cold blue eyes, or a Southerner—one who will burn you with his passion, who will reveal to you all the magic of love? Is it not worth everything to feel one's self awake, to live?"

The sense of his physical nearness almost overpowered her and she moved uneasily. Mirko's fingers had crept to her wrist and seemed to burn the tender skin.

"Are you afraid of me, Ragna?" he asked.

She answered that she was not, ashamed that he should think her timid and unsophisticated. If he talked to her in this way, it must be the way of the world, of his world. She felt that none of the men she had known would speak to her as he spoke—but then she could not imagine their doing so, without appearing extremely ridiculous. And then, she reflected the Prince and she were on the open deck,—there could be no harm, so she surrendered herself to the fascination of the moment.

"Ragna," the melodious voice at her ear murmured, "I could teach you so much, so very much that you do not know—so many things that you will never know if you marry one of your cold country men! I would teach you to live, dear, to live and to love; I could make your heart beat and your veins burn; I would hold you hard and fast in my arms,—or quite lightly, and under my caresses you would live—oh, Ragna, to see the light of Life in your sea-blue eyes, to feel your red lips learn to kiss, to feel your beautiful body quiver, as you learned the mystery of Love!"

In reality he had lost his head, he had let himself be led on by his passionate fancy,—at first only a playful desire to flatter the girl, to lead her on to graceful flirtation, but his hot blood had got the better of him, and as he proceeded, the voluptuous image called up by his words inflamed his senses and lost him to all sense of restraint or prudence. He seized the girl, for Ragna, dazed, intoxicated and fascinated by his daring speech, and by the magnetic suggestion of his desire, opposed no resistance to his encircling arms. He drew her to him, and covered her neck and bosom with burning kisses. She gasped half fainting, then he took her mouth, and her eyes opened wide at the revelation of a sensation the like of which she had never imagined.

But with the revelation came the awakening; with a frantic effort she broke from him and stumbled to the rail. The action brought him to himself and to a sense of shame.

"Oh, Ragna," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "What have I done! Pardon me! It was too much for me, your beauty, having you there, so near me! Ragna, speak to me, tell me that you forgive me!"

He moved towards her, but seeing her shrink away from him, he stopped. Ragna put out a trembling hand, and with a shaking voice said:

"Oh, why did you! Oh, you have spoiled it all!"

She turned to the rail, and hiding her face in her hands began to cry.

Mirko was really touched and concerned. He had no idea that a girl could take a kiss so seriously, it gave him the measure of her innocence. He came to her side and putting his hand on her shoulders tried to console her with awkward phrases, but she still sobbed on. At last he began to be annoyed and said rather sharply:

"What are you weeping so about anyway? Your life is not ruined, I have kissed you, but I have apologized—I would never have done so if I had known you would take it like this!"

Ragna looked up, bewilderment on her face. What! He could take it so lightly! Then it was not so terrible after all? The poor child had felt herself dishonoured for ever.

"But you will despise me for letting you kiss me!"

He was quick to seize the advantage.

"Despise you? Never in the world! What a little goose you are! What harm is there in a kiss? And don't worry about it, I took it without your consent—but you liked it—come now, be honest and admit that! I know you liked it, I felt it!"

He stopped, seeing that he was going too far. Ragna had turned away from him, her face burning. It was quite true, too true, she had felt herself respond. What right had she to be indignant, since she must acknowledge to herself that she had not resisted him, that she had not wished to.

His low vibrant voice continued:

"And one thing you can never change, never drive from your memory,—I have had your first kiss; you will never forget that. No woman ever forgets her first kiss, or her first lover:—"

He paused hearing footsteps approaching over the deck, and stepped to the girl's side.

"Someone is coming," he said; "for God's sake pull yourself together and remember that a kiss is not a crime. Come now, tell me you forgive me, quick!" His voice had an imperious note, and Ragna yielded to it; she turned to him, tears still shining on her long lashes in the moonlight.

"There, you do forgive me, it is understood?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"Pull your cloak up about your shoulders and hook it," he ordered and she obeyed.

The footsteps had by now made the tour of the deck and were approaching the sheltered nook; they rang loud in the silence. It was Captain Petersen and as he hove in sight, his cheerful voice woke the echoes:

"So here I find them as snug as you please! Well, well, a moonlight night and the deck of a good ship, and a pair of young folk to profit by it all—what more could one want?"

Mirko engaged him in conversation, and Ragna thus had time to steady her voice and regain control over her excited nerves. The effort was good for her, and she was glad of the Captain's arrival. So was the Prince, for the good man's coming tided over an awkward moment, as the "voyage de retour" is bound to be—however short the journey may have been.

"To-morrow, our journey together will be over," said the Captain. "To-morrow morning you will wake at Christiansand, after that little Ragna and I go on to Molde alone—if we pick up no other passengers. I am sorry Your Highness leaves us so soon—if ever you should wish a cruise in northern waters, the old *Norje* and I are at your service, Prince!"

"Thank you, Captain Petersen," said Mirko, "I have enjoyed this little trip exceedingly, thanks to your kind attentions and to Mademoiselle, and I wish I might promise to renew it in the near future—but I am not entirely my own master, you know."

Presently the Captain remarked that it was growing late, and Ragna, rising, said she would go to bed. The Captain wished her a hearty, if gruff "Good-night," but Mirko walked with her to the companion-way, and after kissing her hand, held it while he murmured in a low voice:

"You will never forget this evening, nor shall I—dear!"

With a final pressure he released her hand and Ragna went slowly down.

Captain Petersen grumbled to himself as he watched them.

"Pity the fellow is a Prince. Handsome couple they would make, handsome couple! After all, who knows, little Ragna is as pretty as a princess—he might do worse!"

Prince Mirko returned to him fumbling vainly in his pockets.

"Have you a match about you, Captain?" he asked, "I must have left my box below."

On a former occasion he had offered the Captain a cigarette from his case, but the old sea-dog had refused it, explaining that he would get no good out of a little paper stick, a pipe was the thing for him.

The Captain produced a box of matches and the Prince lit his cigarette. Seeing him disinclined for further conversation, the old sailor left him, and Mirko, leaning both elbows on the rail enjoyed his smoke while he reviewed the events of the evening. In his innermost heart he was a little ashamed of having given way to an impulse but then, he reflected complacently, there was no real harm done, and after all, what is a kiss? He was rather amazed at himself for giving the slightest importance to the occurrence. His thoughts turned again to Ragna.

"What a little witch it is, and as unsophisticated as a newborn babe; pretty, too, much too pretty, in the moonlight!" The fresh taste of her mouth came back to him, like a strawberry, just ripe, he thought, and the throbbing of her firm young bosom, as he had pressed her to him. What a mistress she would make! Then he laughed at himself—"What! take a mistress, a mere school girl at that, from the bosom of a respectable bourgeoise family! What a row there would be! No, my son," he admonished himself, "that game is not worth the candle!" He remembered too well the trouble subsequent to his latest escapade of the sort, and made a wry face. "No, no more luring of innocent maidens from their happy homes!" He thought of Ragna going to bed in her little cabin, and a wild desire came over him to follow her. The recollection of the kiss he had given her suddenly maddened him. His pulses beat strongly and rang in his ears. He must have her, he felt, must have her in spite of everything and he started towards the companion-way, but before he reached it shame seized him, and thrusting his hands savagely into his greatcoat pockets he strode up and down the deck, fighting the impulse.

"Am I lost to all sense of decency?" he murmured, "What has come over me?"

He walked until he was tired out, then went below and locked himself into his state-room.

Ragna, as soon as she reached her cabin, took down the oil lamp from its swinging bracket and carrying it to the small mirror studied her face. Was this creature with gleaming eyes, rosy cheeks, red mouth and loosened hair the prim little Ragna of but a few hours since? This looked more like the head of some young Bacchante, wine flushed and triumphant. Indeed the "Princess" slept no longer, the spell was broken and Ragna knew it. She replaced the lamp and undressed slowly, her thoughts running tumultuous riot. She was astonished at finding herself neither indignant nor ashamed—all that had passed. It seemed to her that she had entered upon a new life, a door had opened upon a heretofore unknown country, and many things came into

perspective, that she had not understood before. She had crossed the dividing line, she was no longer a child, Eve had tasted of the apple.

As she lay in her berth some of the Prince's sayings came into her mind, "an oasis in the desert," "there is no to-morrow and no yesterday," and for the moment she hugged the thought, little dreaming how insidious it was to prove. Who was to tell her that some day Eve's apple would prove to be an Apple of Sodom? *Carpe diem* was the Prince's avowed motto, and was she already a convert and had she forgotten her own answer, "Somebody has to bear the consequences"? She was too young though, to realise that every act, no matter how insignificant, how detached apparently from the main trend of life, has far-reaching consequences, cropping out when we least expect them, bearing in their wake the most extraordinary changes.

How was she to know that the kiss on deck in the moonlight bore in it the seed of her future life. Her lips burned, and she felt, in imagination, the pressure of Mirko's arms about her,—but at the same time she was curiously conscious that this was not love, or not yet. She felt, but could not define the distinction. Still she was not ashamed, being still borne up by the wave of elemental impulse; she had no room as yet for introspection and self blame—indeed they might never come. The timid, untried girl of yesterday had vanished, a new, passionate Ragna had taken her place.

CHAPTER V

Lars Andersen met his daughter at Molde. He seemed to have grown older, and his face had a care-worn look. "The Grandmother was ill," he said; "she had been ailing for some time, but now was bedfast and could not live long."

Though he was truly glad to welcome Ragna home again, his undemonstrative manner gave hardly a hint of it and the girl felt her joy at seeing him effectually repressed and chilled.

At dinner with her father and the Captain she sat almost silent until the old sailor rallied her on her dulness.

"You had more to say for yourself, Fröken, when the Prince was with us!"

"The Prince! What Prince?" asked Andersen.

"Prince Mirko of Montegria, who crossed with us from Hamburg to Christiansand, on his way to the Court of Russia." The Captain went on to give a roseate account of the Prince, his condescension, his amiability, and wound up with:

"Little Ragna entertained him as though she had been a court-lady, and you may well be proud of her!"

Andersen frowned; he knew more of men and of the ways of the world than did the good Captain, who in many respects was but a grown-up child, and he was displeased that his young and inexperienced daughter should have been thrown into such companionship with a strange young man, prince or no prince, as the Captain's account suggested.

Still, he did not wish to hurt the feelings of his old friend, and since it was over and done with, the less said about the matter, the better. Ragna, watching his face, guessed with newborn intuition the trend of his thoughts, and with feminine diplomacy changed the subject, leading the talk to her stay at the convent and entertaining the two men with a lively account of the nuns, and of her school-fellows.

Her father studied her with a clearing face.

"What a child it still is," he thought, "this Prince Mirko nonsense has rolled off her mind like water off a duck's back!" So he mused, and putting aside his cares, encouraged her to continue her chatter. The Captain was delighted to see his friend unbend, and joined his efforts to Ragna's to keep the ball rolling.

So the evening passed merrily enough and it was not till the girl was alone in her room that she let herself go. Rather scornfully she thought:

"Oh, yes, they all think me a child! I am nearly nineteen, and they think I have learned nothing but French verbs and embroidery. Well, let them think it, better so! But if they knew, if they could guess!"

She shook out her long golden hair—it fell nearly to her knees—she slipped out of her clothes and winding her long gauze scarf about her, looked at herself in the glass, turning this way and that. Her body, wonderfully white and firm had slight graceful curves like those of a young nymph. She played with her hair, draping it about her shoulders and bosom—truly this was a new Ragna! Then a sudden shame came over her; she put on her nightgown, and blowing out the candle, plunged into bed and lay blinking in the darkness. The thought she had had was not: "I am beautiful," but "*He* would think me beautiful."

"This must not go on," she said to herself. "You were a fool, Ragna, to let him kiss you—you are a fool to think about him at all. Why can't you let it be just an episode,—as he said? Of course he

was only playing with you. What do you suppose it meant to him to say a few complimentary things to a little country girl—and kiss her?" But she thought of the quiver in his deep voice, as he talked to her, on deck that last evening, the passionate vibration of it that had fascinated and stirred her, body and soul. She thought of his burning lips on hers and his arms straining her to him so closely that it hurt her. No, in that moment at least he had been sincere, he had loved her! The formal leave-taking under the eyes of Angelescu and the Captain had meant nothing. Oh! why could she not have been a princess—now she would never see him again! Great tears welled up in her eyes and rolled down, wetting her pillow, but she did not wipe them away. She was thinking how dull it would be at home—how unendurable after this one brief glimpse into the reality of life and emotion. Her innermost soul rebelled; she threw out her arms, then strained them to her bosom.

"I want to live, to live, to live!" she cried to herself.

When she was calmer her clear mind reasserted its power as she reflected that after all she was very young still, that the future might bring much.

"It shall," she promised herself. "I will make it! I will not, I will not be buried alive!"

She had not stopped to ask herself if she loved Prince Mirko; as a fact she did not, but he had awakened her to life, he was identical to her with Life and emotion. The mere fact of his being a stranger to her, quite outside her limited field of experience, of his being a Prince and heir to a throne, endowed him in her eyes with a halo of romance. In default of a real hero, he would become her dream-hero, the axle round which would revolve the wheel of her intimate thought.

In the morning, when dressed for the homeward journey, she joined her father in the dining-room; she presented to his eyes the same innocently childlike expression she had worn the evening before, and he kissed her smooth brow, little dreaming of the thoughts which filled her head.

As they drew nearer home, and the familiar mountains, the Trolltinder with its jagged crest, and oddly shaped Romser Horn, loomed up against the sky, Ragna felt her spirits rising. The air was cool and crisp, the little horse trotted briskly along, shaking his short stiff mane, the meadows were carpeted with flowers: forget-me-nots, pansies, and the purple swamp orchids, the pine-trees filled the air with balsam. It was home, the country of her birth. They rounded the last turn in the long road; the sun was setting and the long rays illuminated the summits of the mountains which her childish imagination had peopled with gnomes and trolls.

Now they were turning in at the wooden gateway—another few minutes and there was the long low cinnamon-coloured house, smoke rising hospitably from the chimneys, behind it the stables and sod-roofed cottages, and on the steps stood a welcoming group, mother, the sisters. "Oh, how they have grown," thought Ragna, "and there is Aunt Gitta too!" she cried. Behind them stood the servants, smiling and excited.

Almost before the *stulkjarre* had stopped, Ragna was out over the wheel, embracing them all in turn, laughing and trying to answer a dozen questions at once.

Fru Andersen held her daughter at arm's length, to see her better.

"It is my 'little' Ragna no longer," she wailed. "You are taller than I, and you have changed, dear—you went away a child, you come back a woman!"

Her husband interrupted her, calling for the servants to take in Ragna's luggage, and the good woman's further comments, if there were any, were lost in the bustle that ensued.

CHAPTER VI

The days that followed were occupied with filling in the gap of the past two years. All had much to ask, and Ragna was kept busy answering their questions. Fru Andersen and Fru Boyesen were most interested in the life at the convent, and the latter especially examined Ragna thoroughly as to the studies pursued and the accomplishments acquired.

The sisters, Lotte and Ingeborg, wished to hear about the Prince,—a Prince being to them almost as mythical a being as the old gods they had read of in their mythology; they imagined him robed in ermine, his manly brow decorated by a coronet. They never tired of returning to the subject, but were much disappointed by Ragna's matter of fact story, and the Prince lost much of his prestige in their eyes when they learned that he dressed and spoke like an ordinary mortal.

"And you talked to him just as if he were one of us?" asked Lotte in an awe-struck voice. "You really did and you were not a bit scared, not one bit?"

"Of course not, you silly little goose!" laughed Ragna, as if conversation with princes were an everyday occurrence to her. She was not above airing her recently acquired graces before these country mice.

"What did you say to him? What did he talk to you about?" chimed in Ingeborg.

"Oh, about the weather and the gulls and the moon—anything."

"I don't call that very much," said Lotte, much disappointed. "I should have thought you would talk about wars and court-balls, and things like that."

"Oh, dear, no,—one doesn't talk about those things, it would seem affected and silly."

"And didn't he make love to you? They always do in stories," queried Lotte, then seeing her sister blush. "I believe he did—and you're too mean to tell. What did you talk about anyway, that makes you blush like that?" she added with a child's terrible perspicacity.

"I'm blushing at your curiosity, that's what I'm blushing at," returned Ragna, angry at having betrayed herself. "And if you went to the Sisters they'd tell you it was ill-bred to ask so many questions and pry into what isn't your business!" Afraid of betraying herself further she got up and left them.

The three girls had been sitting on a rock, not far from the house, where they had long been accustomed to take their work on summer afternoons. The younger girls stared at each other thunderstruck, as Ragna walked away.

"Well," said Lotte, "it's rude to ask a civil question, and it's all right to get up and go off in a temper. What is the matter with her anyway? I'm sure I wish the old Prince had never spoken to her at all, it has turned her head, being taken notice of, that's what it is!"

Ingeborg said nothing; she merely bit off her thread reflectively as she followed Ragna's retreating figure with her eyes. Less impulsive than Lotte, and endowed with a finer intuition, she felt that if Ragna were keeping something from them it would be useless to try and drag it out of her, and not only that, she realized as Lotte did not, that each of us has his or her own little "Secret Garden," of memory and fancy, of which no hand, however intimate, may open the gate. But vaguely conscious of this, herself, she felt how useless it would be to explain it to Lotte, whose frank curiosity knew no such restraint.

Lotte stitched on viciously, indignant at the snub she had received, and giving vent to her feelings in intermittent monologue.

"She thinks us ninnies or children, that's what she does, but she's not so awfully grown up, after all! She's not nineteen yet, and I'm sixteen, and you're nearly fifteen. Oh, yes, we're not good enough for her Ladyship to talk to; she's used to Princes and Kings and Popes, she is! And she thinks she has come back to teach us her fine French manners!"

Ragna walked on, away from her sisters and away from the house. Her path lay some way through the woods, then across two or three pastures and out to a rocky point overlooking the fjord. She marched on, looking neither to the right nor to the left, consumed with vexation for having been so easily led on to retort. Of course Lotte had been annoying, but she had always been a bundle of curiosity. And how sharp the child was! "I must be a transparent fool," thought poor Ragna, "if any child can see through me like that!"

As she crossed the third pasture someone hailed her; she looked up, and saw, sitting on a rock under a tree, her Aunt Gitta, knitting industriously, a sheaf of flowers lying on the ground beside her. Ragna went to her, and she indicated a place on the boulder beside her.

"Sit down, Ragna," she said, "I have been wishing for a chance to talk to you alone."

Ragna obediently seated herself, and drawing the flowers to her, began sorting them and making them up into bouquets. Fru Boyesen coughed once or twice, as though in doubt how to begin. She looked at her niece in a tentative way, but the girl was seemingly intent on her flowers, and gave no assistance.

Finally in a rather embarrassed manner, she began by asking Ragna what she thought of doing.

"Doing, Aunt Gitta?" asked Ragna, lifting her head in surprise, "I had not thought of doing anything!"

"Then your father has not told you?"

"He has told me nothing,—what is there to tell?"

"You have been away for two years, and I suppose no one wished to worry you, but the fact is," Aunt Gitta lowered her voice as if about to reveal some terrible secret,—and really, to her practical mind anything connected with money-loss was terrible,—"the fact is that your father has lost money in several ways and the estate is mortgaged!"

Ragna gazed at her with wide eyes; this explained then, her father's anxious look, the small changes in the way of living, the thread-bareness, slight as yet, of things in general. She had put it down to the Grandmother's illness—but again that had not explained the fewer horses in the stables and the simpler fare.

"Oh, poor father!" exclaimed Ragna.

"Oh, yes," said Fru Boyesen, "but it is partly his own fault; he would not take my advice, he made some imprudent investments, and of course he has had bad luck with the horses, this year of all

years. Three good foals lost, and Green Hunter broke his leg and had to be shot. But that is not the point; it is this, when your Grandmother dies, and she cannot live long, poor woman, her income goes with her, and what your father and mother will do then, I do not know. Of course your father can't afford to send Ingeborg and Lotte away to school as he has sent you—and it is better for them that he can't, they can help at home and your mother need keep fewer servants. Now as to you, you are of no earthly use in the house, you know nothing about cheese and butter-making, nor of practical housekeeping. Your fine embroidery and piano playing and French and Italian won't help you here, and I know you don't want to be a burden." She paused to wipe her glasses before turning the heel in her stocking.

Ragna had listened to her, leaning her head on her hand and her elbow on her knee, the flowers quite forgotten. Being so young she was rather exhilarated than depressed by the implied suggestion that she must fend for herself.

"Don't you think, Aunt Gitta, that I might teach?"

"Teach whom? Where? One, two, three, four, um-um,—Who wants to learn,—five, six and seven,—French here? There now, I've lost count, I must begin all over again! Don't interrupt me for five minutes."

Fru Boyesen said this intentionally in order to give Ragna time to take the situation in. The girl knew that her Aunt was quite correct: who indeed, out in the country would wish to learn anything she could teach? When she was sure the five minutes were up, she spoke again, timidly.

"I meant in a town, Aunt Gitta, or I could be a governess."

"Teach in a town! Where are your certificates, my dear?"

It was true, of certificates Ragna had none but those of elementary study. The convent gave no certificates. Her face fell.

"And as for governessing,—my niece a governess? An Andersen a governess? Never."

"Well, then, Aunt Gitta, what can I do? You say yourself I can't live on here and be a burden." She had reached the point her Aunt had meant her to reach from the start.

"Listen, Ragna," she said kindly, "you know you have always been my favourite niece, you are the one who takes most after our side of the family. Now, my child, this is my proposition,"—she took Ragna's hand and held it, with a fine disregard of her knitting. "My idea is this: I have no children and I am often lonely in my house,—it is too large for one woman. Now I think the best thing would be for you to come and live with me. I should look after you and give you an allowance as if you were my own daughter, and I should consider you as such.—No, don't speak yet, let me finish. I have spoken of this plan to your parents; of course they would rather keep you with them, but I pointed out to them how foolish it would be to throw away such a chance for a purely sentimental scruple. I said to them: 'The girl is grown, she is of no use to you here, and she should marry—but who? With her new ideas she won't take up with any man from these parts, she is not the kind of a girl who can marry a farmer and be happy! With me she will have the advantages of city life, and I shall keep my eye on her and her chances.' So they said they would leave it to you; if you wish to go with me, well and good,—if not, you may stay with them and weigh them down!" She stopped, searching the girl's face, but Ragna did not answer at once, nor jump at the proposition as the good lady had expected.

Indeed, Ragna was by no means sure of her own mind; but a few days since, she had vowed that she would not submit to being buried alive, and yet before this most unexpected chance of escape from the monotony of country life she hesitated. An unaccountable repugnance to leaving home again, seized her—perhaps the mere spirit of contradiction called up by her Aunt's certainty as to her answer. Besides it seemed to her like a sort of treachery, an evidence of moral cowardice, to desert her parents at this juncture. But then, as her Aunt had said, what could she do to help them, at home? Nothing. On the other hand, if she accepted her Aunt's offer, and the arrangement proved impossible, she would be better situated to find employment in a city like Christiania. She knew Fru Boyesen's determined character, her love of ordering the lives of others, and doubted if life with her would be bearable for long. If it were not for that! Then she reproached herself for ingratitude—was this the way to receive such a generous offer?

"Well?" asked Fru Boyesen.

"Aunt Gitta," said Ragna slowly, choosing her words, "it is very, very good of you to want me, and if Father and Mother tell me they do not need me, I shall be glad to accept your offer."

"Well then, that's settled," said her Aunt cheerfully, "only you don't seem as pleased as you might. It's not every girl has such chances come her way, let me tell you!"

The girl leaned forward impulsively and kissed her Aunt who returned the embrace amply, and they sat in silence for a short time, until Fru Boyesen's lively tongue got the better of her. She launched into a lengthy description of her life in Christiania and of the neighbours and friends, but Ragna heard little; her thoughts were busy with the new life opening before her, as she mechanically finished tying up the flowers. As in a dream she heard fragments,—details of Fru Hendersen's illness that had puzzled all the doctors, and why the Klaad girls wore blue stockings with all their frocks, and how much Ole Bjornsten had paid for his new carriage—"Most extravagant I call it,"—till her Aunt finally shook out her completed stocking and rose, brushing

the moss from her skirts.

"You are a good girl, Ragna," she said commendingly, "and you have learned to talk quite interestingly."

Ragna smiled but made no comment, so they wended their way home, Aunt Gitta looming up large in front, her skirts held high displaying a well-filled pair of worsted stockings—she boasted of always knitting her own,—ending in stout elastic-sided boots. Ragna followed her, outwardly meek, but inwardly convulsed with her relative's appearance, and wondering what would happen, should the bull have been in his usual pasture, for the good lady confessed to a taste for bright colours and affected a cathedral-window style of dress, and the combination she had evolved to-day was wonderful to behold. Her dress was of royal purple, over which miniature rising suns made splotches of white, her bonnet was a deep, rich blue, while a small scarlet shawl decorated her portly shoulders.

"I hope to goodness she won't try to dress me in her own style!" thought Ragna.

As they neared the house it was evident that something had happened; there was a confusion of people rushing to and fro and a servant was officiously closing the shutters of the upper rooms.

Ingeborg, standing in the doorway flew to meet them as they reached the gate.

"Oh, Aunt Gitta! Oh, Ragna!" she exclaimed in a loud hoarse whisper, looking at the same time frightened and important. "I've been looking for you everywhere! It happened an hour ago, and where you've ever been—"

Fru Boyesen took the girl by the shoulders and shook her.

"What is it? Can't you speak out? Don't beat about the bush like a fool!"

"Grandmother's dead" said the child, boldly, and burst into tears.

Fru Boyesen pushed her aside and ran into the house and up to her mother's room. It was as Ingeborg had said, the old woman had quietly passed away. Her daughter-in-law, sitting in the room, had not seen when it happened,—she only noticed after a time that the place seemed unusually silent, as when a clock in a living-room stops its ticking, and going over to the bed, she saw that the old woman was no longer breathing. She felt for a pulse in vain, and a mirror held to the mouth remained unclouded, so she had drawn the sheet up over the still, white face and called the family.

Ragna and Ingeborg followed their Aunt up the stairs and into the room. Lars Andersen stood by the bed, holding the dead woman's hand; his sister had thrown herself upon her knees beside him; at the foot of the bed stood Lotte and her mother, and by them Ragna took her place. Ingeborg stopped in the doorway, sobbing loudly with hysterical excitement, and also with honest grief, for she sincerely loved her grandmother. Lars Andersen turned in his place and in a low, stern voice reprimanded her.

"Stop that boisterous sobbing, Ingeborg! I am ashamed of you! Go to your room until you can control yourself!"

Ragna quietly slipped out and led the weeping child away—none of the others had even turned a head.

"Oh, Ragna," sobbed Ingeborg, as they reached the little room with its dormer window, "isn't it dreadful? Only this morning I was sitting with her and she said the knitting hurt her eyes, and she would finish it to-morrow—and it was for me—and now she is de-e-ad—" her voice rose in a wail.

Ragna took her into her arms, and sitting down, drew her on her knees.

"Oh, Ingeborg," she said, "you mustn't cry so, indeed you mustn't! We ought to be glad she died peacefully like that. Of course it would have been awful if it had happened when you were alone with her this morning."

"It isn't that, it isn't that at all," said Ingeborg, in an awed voice. "It's just dreadful that she should have been alive like you or me only an hour ago,—and now she is dead like a light when it is blown out. She was here and now she is gone—she's nowhere!"

"Oh, Ingeborg, you shouldn't talk like that!" cried Ragna, shocked. "Her soul has gone to God in Heaven!"

"Do you really believe that, Ragna?" asked the child. "I don't,—I don't care what they say. When Balke, my dog, died, I wanted to bury him and put up a tombstone, but the Pastor wouldn't let me; he said animals have no souls and Christian burial is only for people. Balke knew lots more than ever so many people; he had a great deal more soul than a baby. When do babies get their souls? I know they don't have them when they are born, they're too stupid,—and so when do they get them? I said if Balke wouldn't go to Heaven I didn't believe there was one at all, so there!"

She sat up with flushed face and looked at her sister defiantly.

Ragna did not know what to answer; she had never seriously questioned any religious doctrine that had been taught her and Ingeborg's revolt both shocked her and found her unprepared.

"Aren't you ashamed to talk like that, Ingeborg Andersen?" she said indignantly. "Of course there is a Heaven and a Hell, and perhaps good dogs have a Heaven of their own—I don't know! If there is one, I'm sure Balke went there," she ended lamely.

Ingeborg was watching her with curious unchildlike eyes.

"You don't believe in Heaven any more than I do," she asserted. "If you did you'd talk about it differently. People have told you things and you have just gone on believing them to save yourself the trouble of thinking."

She slipped from Ragna's knees and crossed to the window, where she stood looking out; she left her sister thunderstruck. The child had spoken the truth—but how had she known, by what intuition had she understood? Ragna went over to her, and putting an arm about her, stood some minutes in silence before she asked:

"What made you say that, Ingeborg?"

"I don't know, but it is so and you can't deny it. Oh, I often know what people think about when they don't know themselves, and I often know, too, what is going to happen to people. Grandmother told me I was fey; you see I'm the youngest and I'm the seventh daughter and so was mother, and those people always are, Grandmother said so."

"How can you know? What do you do?"

"Oh, nothing, I just look into people's eyes, and sometimes I see things, and sometimes I don't."

"Can you tell me what will happen to me?" asked Ragna in a low voice.

Ingeborg turned and looked long into her sister's eyes. The sun had sunk below the mountains and a cool grey light pervaded the place. She stood motionless a long time, then she passed her hand over her forehead and half turned away.

"I don't want to tell you, Ragna," she said.

But Ragna insisted, she would know, she was not superstitious; she only wanted to see if it would come true.

"It will come true—it always does," said Ingeborg sadly.

"Then tell me, I'm not afraid."

Ingeborg hesitated, then seeing that Ragna was in earnest:

"I will tell some of it, but I do not see very clearly. You are going away, to begin with, I see you with Aunt Gitta and there are many people but their faces are shadows. Then you go away farther still, where the sun is hot—it dazzles you, and there is a man—or is it a greyhound?" Ragna started. "Yes, it is a man, but there is a greyhound and a hare and some stone arches, and you are very sad after that, Ragna. But the man goes away and there is another man with eyes like coals, and he hates you—he puts chains on you, and you can't break them, and you never come home any more—" Her voice died away.

Ragna stood spellbound: a greyhound and a hare—her dream! And the rest, the chains, the man with the burning eyes! She shivered; it was as though the shadow of a dark wing had passed over her, her flesh crept. Neither spoke for some time; it grew darker.

A maidservant entered the room with a light. Ragna shook herself to throw off the incubus. The maid began to speak of the Grandmother, of how good she had been, and the girls looked at one another ashamed—they had quite forgotten it all for the moment.

"Come, Ingeborg," said Ragna, "let us go down again." Hand in hand they descended the stair.

CHAPTER VII

The funeral was set for the day week and the intervening time seemed interminable, at least to the younger members of the family. Fru Boyesen was invaluable; her practical good sense which not even grief could impair, employed itself in arranging the thousand and one details incident to a death.

Ragna took her turn with her elders in watching at night in the death-chamber. She had begged to do it and had obtained permission, but when the night came and she was left alone in the terrible silent room, a single candle burning on the table beside her, casting grotesque and fitful shadows over the motionless form on the bed, and over the walls, a kind of panic seized her. She wished she had not persisted in obtaining the vigil. It was horribly lonely, more so than she could have imagined by day. She could hear the ticking of the tall clock on the landing outside the door; no other sound came from the sleeping house—it was like sitting in a funeral vault she thought. An owl was hooting dismally in a tree far off and the mournful noise had an uncanny sound in the pervading stillness. The window was partly open and occasionally a puff of air would make the candle gutter, and then the shadows moved and took on unearthly shapes.

Ragna tried to keep her mind on the book her mother had left with her, but without avail; her mind would wander, and her eyes turned continually to the bed in the corner—it was as though the dead woman called her, requiring insistently her whole attention. She was a healthy girl, not in the least morbid, but the stillness, the tension wore on her nerves until the strain became unbearable. She looked uneasily to right and left and over her shoulder as though she expected to see strange and grisly shapes emerging from the shadows. A kind of panic seized her; she felt as if she must scream. A terrible unreasoning fear overcame her, the horror of the presence of the dead body submerged her spirit, a curious stiffness possessed her limbs and seemed to bind her to her chair; she felt the roots of her hair crawl, and her fingers worked convulsively. The book she had been reading dropped to the floor with a bang. The noise broke the spell and she gave a long shuddering sigh; she raised her hand to her forehead and was surprised to find it wet.

"This will never do," she said to herself resolutely, and rising, she went to the window. There was no moon, but everything showed clearly in the light northern night. The trees near the house rose in a dark stippled mass against the sky. Everything was peaceful and quiet, only the drowsy twittering of birds broke the silence from time to time; the owl had gone. Ragna stood at the window breathing the chill night air and let the peace of the night sink into her soul. When she was quite calm she closed the window and taking the candle walked resolutely over to the bed and stood there, looking. The face of the dead woman wore an expression of ineffable peace—a repose almost inhuman in its detachment. Her white hair was brushed in smooth bandeaux over her brow, her features, ashy grey with violet shadows, appeared almost unreal, as though carved in some strange alabaster. Her hands, waxen and stiff with bluish nails lay folded on her bosom. The flickering light of the candle lent no semblance of life. Ingeborg's words came to Ragna's mind. Where indeed was the spirit that had animated this clay? And to the question she found no answer. In the actual presence of death the formally taught maxims regarding a future life—a life of reward and punishment—fell to the ground; the flimsiness of all speculation on the Life hereafter appeared naked to the girl's eyes.

"No one can know, no one can tell," she thought, "it is a mystery, but at least one may find peace—she has found peace!" She stooped and reverently kissed her grandmother's cold hands, then she returned to her seat.

The moment had been a crucial one, for in that instant of putting her conventional belief to the touchstone of reality, it had failed and she recognized the fact; the bed-rock on which her childish faith had been built fell from beneath her feet, for, if she lost her belief in part, disbelief in all must follow. A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, but the weak link in her chain was not, as she thought, the insufficient grounds for belief, rather the formality of her teaching; to her the "letter which killeth" had indeed become dead, and of the "Spirit which giveth light" she knew as yet nothing. This one thing she knew, that never again should she be afraid of the dead or of death. "It is peace," she said to herself softly, "it is like sleep when one is very, very tired."

When morning had come and they relieved her at her post, she walked out to the high rocky promontory from which she could see the sea. The day was still young and the grass and bushes were covered with dewdrops. Ragna gathered a handful of flowers as she went and pressed their wet freshness to her face. She felt grave and old; the bright sunlight seemed like an insult in the fact of the long night and the silent darkened room. She seated herself on a grey lichen-covered boulder overlooking the water. The fjord was like glass, as far as the eye could reach and it reflected the surrounding mountains like a mirror; to her tired eyes it was unreal, like a pictured scene. As she sat there, a breeze sprang up and tiny ripples ruffled the surface of the water, spreading from shore to shore. The reflections of tree and crag shivered into a thousand fragments. Up the bay a boat was putting out from the little village. Ragna idly watched the rise and fall of the oars. A girl was rowing, swaying to the rhythm of the stroke; she was standing and her red bodice stood out against the background, a vivid patch of colour. She was singing and her clear voice rose in plaintive minor notes. Smoke began to rise from the village chimneys, and a dog barked.

It was Life going on, taking no heed of those who fall by the wayside, Life, the cruel Wheel, crushing the weak, casting to one side those who would clog the onward march—life, the Life of the world to whom the individual existence, the individual pain and strife are of no importance; life continuing the same throughout the ages, no matter who dies, no matter who suffers.

"The mountains do not change, nor the sky, no matter who comes or goes," thought Ragna, "and everything goes on just the same, no one is necessary, continuity is everything. If we suffer, if we die, what does it matter? I shall die, we shall all die, and in a few years it will make no difference to anyone; there is no real change, only people come and go. That is the real eternity—just the same old round, over and over again, and on forever." She sat a long time, her chin supported in her palms, her eyes, steel blue, gazing out steadily over the New World made manifest to her.

In after years she often thought of the hours spent there by the fjord in the early morning, and the memory nearly always brought peace to her heart. Her own troubles seemed so trivial, so transient in comparison with the age old changelessness of life, her own life and destiny so unimportant in the endless chain of humanity.

CHAPTER VIII

When all was over, Ragna accompanied her aunt to Christiania. She was given a comfortable room on the first floor and soon settled into the pleasant regularity of the household. It was very quiet—there could be no entertaining until the period of mourning should be over—but intimate friends often came in the afternoon and evening, and very pleasant circles formed about the cheerful lamp. Fru Bjork was a frequent visitor and made much of Ragna. The girl had taken her fancy when they had journeyed to Paris together and moreover she was convinced that the friendship of a serious-minded girl like Ragna was excellent for Astrid. The girls kept up a lively correspondence and in a few months Astrid would be coming home. Ragna looked forward to her coming with some impatience; though they had actually but little in common, there was at least the mutual experience of school-life, and since Ragna's awakening experience, much that had been incomprehensible to her in Astrid's nature now became clear.

"She knew more than I did about things—and I was proud of my ignorance," she reflected. She was as yet unable to realize the difference between Astrid's shallow feminine coquetry and her own awakening consciousness of womanhood.

Fru Boyesen and Fru Bjork had been schoolmates and although differing as to character, were excellent friends, owing to the ties of life-long association and a common point-of-view in social matters. Each of the ladies entertained a tolerant pity for the foibles of the other, which is perhaps the most comfortable *modus vivendi* to be found.

Ragna's time was well occupied. By her own wish she continued her studies under the best professors obtainable—that part was Aunt Gitta's doing. Literature interested her more than anything else and after a time she was encouraged to try her hand at writing a series of short essays. To her great delight a well-known review accepted them, and this materially affected her relations with her aunt. The good lady had heretofore regarded her as a child to be exhaustively directed and controlled, but a niece whose writings were published was quite a different person in her estimation. In common with many people of prosaic mind she had a genuine respect for intellectual attainments, therefore, Ragna was promoted to a position of semi-independence, her working hours were held sacred, and to give her more time for her literary pursuits such household tasks as had fallen to her share were removed as incompatible. This was a mistake, for the homely work would have been a wholesome antidote to the romantic trend of the girl's mind. Withdrawn from the ordinary business of the house, she lived an unreal life made up of fanciful imaginings which her philosophical and literary studies were unable to counteract. She had no experience of actualities to control and place in their proper perspective the various social and philosophical theories which formed the greater part of her reading. Consequently with nothing to counter-balance the paramount influence of the moment, she swayed to the mental attitude of whatever author she happened to be reading, being in turn, or imagining herself a Swedenborgian, an agnostic, an atheist, and a mystic.

She was cynical with Voltaire and romantic with Byron and De Musset. For a considerable period the "categorical imperative" haunted her days and nights, and during three months at least. "Also sprach Zarathustra" was the sun whose rising and setting determined her getting up and her sitting down. But Nietsche did not last long; his doctrine was too foreign to her nature and she returned to Kant as to an old friend.

Fru Boyesen was not a little worried by these moral and spiritual waverings, but never having known anything of the kind herself, was unable to cope with the case. She took a purely material view of the situation. They were now out of mourning, but Ragna seemed to have little taste for society in general, and none for that of young men; she preferred her books, she said, when her aunt rallied her on the subject. Now Fru Boyesen had been at some pains to obtain for her niece a circle of eligible masculine acquaintances; she had made it known that she considered the girl as her adopted daughter and would make her her heiress, and there was no lack of eligible suitors; so when Ragna had sent two of the most desirable firmly but kindly about their business with no better excuse than that they did not happen to be congenial to her, her aunt felt that it was time to interfere.

She would have considered either of them a most desirable husband for her niece—was not young Nansen tall and handsome as well as the only son of wealthy parents? And was not Peter Näss a most estimable young man and well situated to make a wife comfortable and happy? What was Ragna waiting for? A white blackbird?

Ragna threw her arms about her aunt's neck.

"Dear Aunt Gitta, I am so happy with you! I don't want to marry ever, I think!"

"Not want to marry, child? You are crazy! It is a woman's duty to marry and rear children—the Bible says so. Perhaps you think you are in love with some other young man?"

No, Ragna was in love with no one.

"Well then, why did you refuse Ole Nansen?"

"Because I did not love him."

"Oh, stuff and nonsense! Not love him! Very probably you don't, but that is not essential, not one woman in a hundred 'loves' her husband until after she has married him. The important part is

that everything else should be suitable. There's nothing you dislike in him, is there?"

"No, Auntie."

Fru Boyesen raised her eyes to Heaven.

"Well, all I can say is, you'll never get such a chance again; young Nansen is a man in a thousand."

"Are you so anxious to be rid of me, Auntie dear?"

"No, of course not, goosie," she kissed the girl affectionately, "but I should like to see you married, in a home of your own. It would be much better for you, I am sure. I don't really approve of this one-sided life you are leading."

"But, Auntie dear, how could I marry a man who takes no interest in my work? These young men are very nice and all that, but we have absolutely nothing in common. I asked Peter Näss the other day what he thought of the Kantian philosophy, and he said he had never thought about it at all. These young men never like to talk about serious subjects and they refuse to take me seriously when I do."

"Ah, Ragna," said the elder woman, "when you have a home and children to look after, you will find that all your philosophy goes to the wall."

"But that is just what I am afraid of, why should I stifle all my higher instincts in a commonplace marriage?"

She had not told her aunt, however, what was the real matter with her. The fact was that try as she might, she could not rid herself of the memory of Prince Mirko and that moonlit crossing of the North Sea. His kiss remained imprinted on her lips and his idealized image on her heart. She mentally compared with him the young men of her acquaintance and weighing them in the balance, found them woefully wanting.

One evening, sitting alone with her in the drawing-room, young Nansen had kissed her—the effect had been electrical. Furiously rubbing her offended cheek, she had reprimanded him in such terms of withering scorn that the poor young man fled, never to call again. Afterwards she was ashamed of her outburst, and analysing her feelings, as she had come to do, was obliged to admit to herself that the cause of her resentment was not the temerity of her suitor, but the fact that he had failed to awake in her an answering thrill. She liked the young man, and her vanity would have been pleased by the marriage, for he was the best "parti" in Christiania, but her conscious womanhood revolted at a loveless union. Was the shadow of a kiss to spoil her life? In vain she reasoned with herself, the unconquerable memory remained; she felt it like an indelible mark on her.

Fru Boyesen in despair at her niece's obstinacy and foolishness, and after many fruitless attempts to bring the girl round to her point of view, finally betook herself to Ragna's old professor, Dr. Tommsen. She laid the case before him and begged him to use his influence with his wayward pupil—she would surely listen to him.

Dr. Tommsen had received Fru Boyesen in his study. He sat, in an old leather-covered armchair between the porcelain stove where a fire was burning, and his large, much belittered writing table, gazing at his visitor in good-humoured perplexity and twiddling his thumbs—a habit of his when not engaged in writing or reading. His spectacles were pushed up on his bulging forehead and his keen grey eyes peered out from under shaggy, grizzled eyebrows, which he had a habit of working up and down in a terrifying manner. His sanctum was not often invaded by ladies, and the presence of a portly dame arrayed in green silk trimmed with bugles and yellow lace and protected by a dead-leaf mantle, and the singularity of her coming to him, a bachelor of well-known eccentricity, in order that her niece should be prevailed upon to enter the bonds of matrimony, appealed to his sense of humour.

Therefore, when Fru Boyesen had finished her elaborate exposition of the case, the Doctor pursed up his lips and his eyes twinkled.

"My dear Madam," he said, "I fail to see how I can be of any assistance to you, I have so little experience in these matters."

"You could advise Ragna, my dear Herr Doctor—she would listen to you. She must be persuaded to take a reasonable view of life."

"Ah, that depends on what one considers a reasonable view," he said judicially, putting the tips of his fingers together. "From my standpoint your niece's objections appear quite reasonable. You may not be aware, my dear lady, though most people are, that theoretically I disapprove of marriage."

"Disapprove of marriage! Oh, Herr Doctor, you can't mean that!" cried Fru Boyesen horrified, feeling the solid ground slipping from beneath her feet, as it were.

"Precisely, Madam—or to be more exact, I disapprove of marriage as now generally practised. I regard it as a social contract, useful to humanity in general, since no better substitute has been found as yet, but I certainly do not consider it an ideal state, and it would be against my avowed principles to urge any young person—much more so one of the 'élite,' among whom I place Ragna

—to enter upon a form of contract which I personally consider both futile and degrading—an insult to the intelligence."

This was too much for Fru Boyesen; she gasped angrily, but found herself unable to give articulate utterance to her amazement and indignation. The Professor, his eyes twinkling more and more, pursued in a calm deliberate voice.

"Since you do not answer, I take it that you agree with me in the main—or perhaps your estimation of your niece is not the same as mine?"

"I most certainly do not agree with you, Dr. Tommsen," said Fru Boyesen hotly; "I am a married woman myself, and a respectable one, and I assure you I have found nothing either degrading or futile in the married state. I do not think you should use such words in connection with a divine institution."

"Ah, that is where we differ, dear Madam," returned the Professor, gently rubbing his palms together—it amused him on occasions to tease the conventionally-minded—"You consider it a divine institution and I do not—however that is not the point. I admit that some persons are obviously qualified for matrimony and find their vocation in it—you think your niece to be one of those, I do not."

Fru Boyesen interrupted him.

"But there is where you are wrong, Herr Doctor. Ragna is made for marriage, trust an old woman for that. She is not the girl to be an old maid. I am anxious for that reason—if she lets her best years go by and despises the chances that offer, she will regret it when it is too late. I love her, Herr Doctor, and old women see farther than young ones—I want to see her happy in the way that God intended her to be."

"Then for God's sake leave her alone, Madam, leave her to God. If you are right about her, and she does marry, let it be at her own time and by her own choice; nothing but harm can come of forcing her inclinations in any way."

"But, Doctor, she has already refused two of the most eligible—I think it a poor return after all I have done for her—"

"Let her refuse ten, let her refuse twenty! To show her gratitude must she sell her body to the highest bidder?"

Fru Boyesen bounded rather than rose from her chair; the very ribbons on her bonnet bristled with indignation. Her back was a study in outraged virtue as she moved majestically towards the door. The doctor was before her.

"One moment, Madam, I beg!"

"I have heard quite enough, more than enough," she said in a frozen voice.

"My dear lady, I beg your pardon if my words were too forcible; what I intended to say was that should your niece marry a man for his position, without love for him, it would be equivalent to selling herself, and you who have her ultimate happiness at heart would not wish that, I am sure." He smiled, and he had a most winning smile. "My dear Fru Boyesen, you come to discuss this matter with me; I am an old man, you are a widow, why should we mince matters?"

His tone, grave and kindly, mollified her somewhat: she wavered an instant, and answered.

"It shocked me that you could speak of my niece's selling herself—an honourable marriage—"

"Just so, Madam, an 'honourably' married woman who does not love her husband and has not loved him, who has married him because he is wealthy or of good family—" he deliberately brought his argument within the range of her comprehension—"is lower in my eyes than the woman who gives herself for love only, dispensing with ceremony, or who sells herself for hire, to get her bread."

Fru Boyesen gasped with horror.

"Society!" she murmured, "religion! morality!"

"Society, indeed, dear lady, but neither religion nor morality as I understand them."

Fru Boyesen was in deep waters, her argumentative powers were not sufficient to cope with the Doctor, and she knew it, still she tried once more.

"But Herr Doctor, I don't want her to marry without love, I only want her to make up her mind to love a man she can marry—and do it soon!"

The Doctor rubbed his hands. He had not been able to resist the temptation of shocking the good lady; he was often tempted to jolt a bourgeois mind out of its self-complacent rut. Fru Boyesen's bewildered and horrified face had amused him intensely, but he realized that to push the matter further might seriously harm Ragna's cause, so he contented himself with replying:

"I am sure, Madam, that your niece will not disappoint you in the end; but if you really desire her welfare, do not urge the matter for the present, I beg of you. Give the child time—that is a panacea for all ills, you know. She is very young, and should she marry merely to please you, her

inevitable unhappiness would be heavy on your conscience."

Fru Boyesen retied her bonnet strings but with less firm a touch than usual. The Professor had frightened her and, for the moment, shaken her conventional social beliefs; however, she made a last tentative effort.

"Then I am to understand that you positively refuse to use your influence, Herr Doctor?"

"Most decidedly, Madam—and as you value your future peace of mind and Ragna's, do not attempt to force her."

"And you advise me to do nothing, to wait?"

"Why not try a change of scene? A journey would probably drive some of the 'ologies' and 'isms' you object to out of her mind, and she would very likely come home prepared to settle down."

Fru Boyesen sighed. She was not satisfied with the result of the interview—it had been so different from what she had expected. She took her leave, thinking to herself, "Poor man, one can see that he doesn't know much of the practical side of life! How could he, being a bachelor?"

Doctor Tommsen, watching her substantial figure retreat down the street, drummed on the window and said to himself:

"What fools these women are! And the old ones who ought to know better are always trying to drag the girls into the same miserable mistakes they have made themselves." He was sorry for Ragna—"They will probably end by making a fool of her too, one girl can't stand out against the whole State of Society!"

CHAPTER IX

Fru Boyesen went to Fru Bjork for consolation and over a cup of coffee discussed the Doctor's refusal.

Fru Bjork was more at a loss than her friend to understand Ragna's indifference to the advantages of the married state, and she held up her hands in horror at Fru Boyesen's account of Dr. Tommsen's speeches—it may be said that they lost nothing in the telling. Sentence by sentence she repeated them, punctuating them with indignant sniffs, and appreciative sips at her cup.

Fru Bjork listened, her fat hands clasped on her rotund person, her cap awry over her kindly face, her eyes wide and round with dismay.

"He says," stated Fru Boyesen, "that we respectable married women sell ourselves for hire like the women on the streets. He says that marriage is immoral and irreligious."

"Perhaps," said Fru Bjork, "he is a believer in free love. Try a little of this seed-cake, my dear, I made it myself."

Fru Boyesen helped herself and continued, her mouth half-full,

"He must be,—anyway he is outrageous, and it's no longer a mystery to me where Ragna gets her absurd ideas from. If I'd known what sort of a man he was, I never should have let her study under him. But his name is so well known! He is so universally respected! I don't understand it at all!"

Fru Bjork agreed with her—she had the amiable habit of agreeing with everyone, it saved so much trouble, and Fru Boyesen went on to recount the rest of the interview. Fru Bjork approved of the suggestion of sending Ragna away for a time.

"Travelling is good for young girls," she opined, "it takes the nonsense out of them and when they have seen how things are done in other countries, they are ready enough to settle down in their own."

Astrid had returned home some months before, and was a great favourite among the young people. Her vivacity and ready, if rather shallow wit, her delicate almost affected prettiness, her coquettishness attracted the young men and her good humour and readiness to oblige made her friends among the girls. It was natural for her to try to please everyone, and she exercised her blandishments on all who came near her, from the servants in the house, to the most important personages of her social world. She was quite sincere in her desire to please; approbation was the meat and drink of her existence. She admired Ragna and rather stood in awe of her attainments, but could not understand her indifference to social pleasures. Ragna had not cared to tell her more than the barest outline of the momentous home journey, and if she had, Astrid would not have understood, for constancy to a dream-memory could form no part of her spiritual make-up. She was not one to whom any impression would be lasting; to her, lovers might come and go as butterflies to a flower,—to all she would give of her smiles, but no one of them would leave a mark on her soul. Fidelity, to her, would mean the imposed constraint of public opinion, not the keeping of herself to one, and one only. She wished to marry, and to marry well,—all things considered, one man is very like another, when it comes to matrimony, she thought.

Innumerable times she had fancied herself in love, and each time she had gone to Ragna with the tale of her infatuation. After the first time or two, when she had taken the affair seriously, Ragna would listen with an amused smile,—it was always the same story over again,—and she ceased to be surprised, when a few days or weeks later, the Star waned and a new luminary rose above the horizon. Astrid had once said to her:

"One starts out with the idea that men are all different, but when they have kissed you, you know they are all alike—if one could not see, one would swear it was always the same man." Ragna had with difficulty repressed her impulse to protest, "but what's the use?" she thought, and wisely kept her own counsel.

Finally Astrid had announced her engagement, much to her own satisfaction. It was an excellent match and her mother was pleased; she stipulated, however, for a year's delay before the marriage, as Astrid was barely twenty, and far from strong.

Fru Bjork, then, on the strength of her daughter's conventional social success, felt herself complacently superior to Fru Boyesen, in the way that an ordinary hen would feel herself comfortably above one who had hatched ducklings. She could not but gloat a little over her friend's discomfiture before she presented a proposition of her own; she therefore remained silent a few minutes and pressed Fru Boyesen's hand sympathetically.

Fru Boyesen, who in ordinary circumstances would have resented anything savouring of commiseration, but who felt too perplexed to think of anything beyond her present difficulty, presently afforded an opening, by remarking that though a few months abroad would probably benefit Ragna and bring her to a more reasonable frame of mind, yet the thing was impossible; who was there to take her? Fru Boyesen herself had no desire to set forth on a journey, too many interests and occupations kept her at home.

Fru Bjork then suggested that Ragna be entrusted to her care.

"I have been thinking," she said, "of taking Astrid to spend the winter in Italy. The doctor advises it—she is just a little delicate, you know,—and why should not Ragna come too? She would be company for Astrid and such a serious, steady girl as she is would give me no trouble—I should enjoy having her with me."

Fru Boyesen, secretly much pleased by her friend's proposition, would not seem to seize upon it at once; she agreed to think it over, and the ladies parted on that understanding.

CHAPTER X

Ragna was now almost twenty-one; she had slightly matured in appearance, the curves of her figure were rounder and fuller, but her eyes still had the expression of the idealist, the visionary; she was as prone as ever to credulity, to taking those with whom she came in contact at their own valuation.

She had resolutely tried to put the Prince Mirko episode out of her mind, but with slight success. She had locked Angelescu's sketch of him away in her writing-case, and rarely allowed herself to look at it, but she knew it was there, she felt its occult presence as at times she still felt the presence of Mirko's lips on hers. When, by chance, she came upon his name in the newspapers the blood would rush to her heart. Once an illustrated journal had published a portrait of him, accompanied by a short biographical sketch, and she cut the page out, and laid it away with her sketch. She had never heard from her dream-hero directly, but each New Year's day brought her a card from Count Angelescu—He, at least, still remembered her!

She was at a loss to explain the restlessness that often possessed her. More often than she dared confess to herself, her work and her studies bored her; in vain did she try to throw herself entirely into her serious occupations; emptiness, the vanity of it all, would in spite of her efforts, rise up and confront her.

The truth was, her physical nature was awake and clamouring for satisfaction, and the difficulty lay in the fact that having tasted the caviare of the sophisticated passion of a Don Juan, she could not content herself with the bread-and-butter of a calm, everyday affection. Had she never been awakened, even if but partially, to the possibilities of the latent passion within her, her life would have been calmer, less eventful and happier—if happiness lie in the absence of upheaving emotion. Requiring less of life she would have been more easily satisfied, or would have imagined herself so. The narrow boundaries of conventional contentment would have shut out the larger horizon of emotional experience, pain and soul discipline. She would have remained iron, Destiny was to make her steel tempered by fire.

She was writing in the living-room when her Aunt came in. The comfortable room, with its low-raftered ceiling and large porcelain stove looked very cheerful in the glow of the lamp. The heavy red curtains were drawn across the windows, and the red table-cloth threw a rosy reflection on the girl's face, as she leaned over her work. Her hair was like live gold in the strong light of the hanging lamp.

Fru Boyesen came in and seated herself heavily in an upholstered armchair. Ragna had raised

her head on her Aunt's entrance but had not interrupted her writing. Her Aunt scanned her closely; she had come to look upon the girl as her own; she enjoyed her presence in the house, and it was her proprietary feeling that was mortified by the girl's failure to take advantage of the opportunities offered her. Astrid's engagement, especially, rankled in the good woman's mind. Here was a girl not as pretty, not as clever as Ragna, and several months younger, whose mother had not the social influence and importance she herself possessed, yet this girl was making an excellent match. It was too vexatious!

Ragna looked up and meeting her Aunt's eyes, said:

"You have been out a long time, Auntie, did you enjoy yourself?"

"No," answered Fru Boyesen, "at least not very much. I don't see, Ragna, why you can't go out and enjoy yourself like other young people instead of moping here all by yourself and spoiling your looks with all your studying. Now Astrid goes about and has a good time—she is out skating with her friends now. Why can't you be more like her?"

"So you've been to Fru Bjork's," remarked Ragna quietly.

"I've been where I pleased," said Fru Boyesen, untying her bonnet-strings and smoothing them between her plump fingers. "I don't see what it has to do with you where I go. You shouldn't take me up so. I think you are a very strange girl—and Fru Bjork can't understand you any better than I do," she added.

"I do wish, Auntie, that you would not discuss me with Fru Bjork, or anyone else."

"Hoighty, toighty, Miss! I shall discuss whom I please, and if you will be so peculiar and different from other girls, you must expect people to talk."

"It's none of 'people's' business what I choose to do or not to do," returned Ragna, making little scribbles on the sheet of paper before her. When her Aunt came in, she had been asking herself if she were not really foolish in holding herself thus aloof from her fellows, but at the hint of public criticism on her actions she was up in arms again.

"Ragna, you are positively hopeless; I don't know how a niece of mine can have so little sense! If you lived in a hut in the woods or on the Desert of Sahara, you might do as you like, but here one has to consider the opinion of one's neighbours."

"Who is my neighbour?" quoted Ragna softly, smiling in spite of herself. She knew well that to her Aunt, "public opinion" consisted of the prejudices of four or five of the foremost families of Christiania; outside of that charmed circle she had a fine disregard as to what people might think, in fact she expected people of less importance to follow her example and conform to her opinions.

The smile was unwise in that it irritated the elder lady, already ruffled by the unsuccessful visit to Dr. Tommsen.

"Oh, you may well laugh in your sleeve at me, Miss Know-it-all! The day will come when you will realise that I am in the right—and it may be too late!"

Ragna made no reply; she returned to her writing and the scratching of her pen and the ticking of the clock filled the silence. Fru Boyesen, after one or two ineffectual efforts, rose from her chair and left the room.

"It's no use," she said to herself as she puffed up the stairs—she had grown very stout of late, —"she is quite impossible. I've more than half a mind to pack her off with the Bjorks. Else Bjork is not very clever, but she has brought Astrid up to be a credit to her and I think I'll let her try her hand with Ragna. I've been a fool to let her have her own way so long,—her head is full of the stuff these atheistic professors pour into it. I'll let her go; it can't do any harm, anyhow."

If she had entertained a secret hope that Ragna would elect to stay at home with her, and incidentally conform to her wishes in general, she was disappointed, for Ragna, when the proposition was broached to her, hailed it with delight. It would afford a welcome relief, she thought, from the growing monotony of her self-chosen occupations, which consistency forbade her to change of her own accord, and would at the same time remove her from her Aunt's ever more frequent innuendoes and reproaches, besides taking her to Italy, the land of her dreams. Of late the German Romanticists had formed the subject of her study and her mind was, as so many northern minds were at that time, possessed by the "*Drang nach Italien*."

There was much to be arranged for the journey, as Fru Bjork, in spite of her many travels was always flustered by a fresh start; Astrid was of no practical use and Ragna too much taken up with her personal preparations, and also too inexperienced a traveller to be of much help to her fussy chaperone. Fru Bjork was therefore glad to welcome an addition to the party in the shape of a spinster of uncertain age, Estelle Hagerup, who was expected to be the balance-wheel of the expedition.

Fru Boyesen devoted all her energies to getting Ragna ready, and supplied her with an amount of luggage remarkable for its bulk and variety, every possible contingency of sickness and health being provided for. Estelle Hagerup boldly risked the good lady's displeasure by declaring that at least half must be left behind, and herself undertook to separate the sheep from the goats by weeding out all but the indispensable articles. It was the reverse of Penelope's web, for what the

uncompromising Estelle undid by day, Fru Boyesen and Ragna restored by stealth at night, and on her next visit, Estelle would find nobby parcels and piles of books more or less skilfully concealed beneath the clothing in the boxes—and the struggle would begin again. Fru Boyesen, having never left her native country, fondly imagined that mustard-plasters, rolls of flannel, bottles of spirit and sundry other necessities would be unobtainable in a strange land. Fröken Hagerup heartlessly rejected all these things, but Fru Boyesen was not to be out-done and the very last day after the boxes were closed and locked, Estelle caught her stuffing two large parcels into the shawl-strap—one containing a goodly provision of soap, the other, two bags, one of flax-seed for poultices, the other of camomile flowers.

When, eventually, the time for starting came, Fru Boyesen wished she had never thought of letting Ragna go out from under her control. "Else Bjork is too soft, she will spoil her," she thought, "and the girl will come back worse than when she left. I have been criminally weak with her, but she'll ride roughshod over poor Else!"

As the luggage was being carried out of the house, an impulse seized her to have it brought back again; then she chid herself for her inconsistency.

"The little minx has upset me entirely! This is the first time in my life I haven't known my own mind!" Therefore to hide the sinking of heart she felt at the prospect of imminent loneliness, she assumed such a stern and forbidding aspect that half Christiania, assembled to see the party off, was certain that Ragna was being banished for some heinous offence.

Ragna kissed her Aunt good-bye with a light heart,—was she not faring forth to the land of her dreams?—And the separation would be but for a few months.

When Ingeborg received her sister's letter announcing the prospective journey, she burst into tears, much to the amazement of the family.

"Ragna is going, we shall never see her again!" she sobbed.

Lars Andersen reproved her sternly.

"Stop this nonsense, Ingeborg!" he ordered, "I will have none of this foolish superstition in my house. The future rests with God."

But though he spoke boldly, yet his heart sank. Ingeborg's predictions had a strange way of coming true.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

"Astrid," said Ragna, "do make haste! It will be luncheon time before we get out, and you can perfectly well finish your letter this evening."

Astrid looked up from her writing-board, nibbling her pen-holder reflectively. She was sitting near one window of the room, and by the other stood Ragna, pulling on her gloves impatiently. They had been in Rome a few weeks, and the first fervour of sight-seeing over, had fallen into a go-as-you-please sort of existence. Fru Bjork left the girls largely to their own devices; the long flight of stairs to be climbed after every outing so tired her legs and shortened her breath, that she declined to face them more than once a day, and she had conscientious scruples against eating in a restaurant, when her meals must be paid for, in any case, at the pension. Estelle Hagerup preferred to wander about alone; she would start out valiantly in the morning, her hat tied firmly on her sleek head, her skirt looped up in festoons by a series of flaps and buttons, displaying her sturdy broad-toed boots. The very glasses perched on her prominent nose gave an earnest inquiring expression to her face. Night-fall would see her home again, tired, dusty, radiant and quite unable to give a connected account of her peregrinations. She would blissfully say:

"I am drinking in the atmosphere, I am saturating myself with the essence of Rome!" and the word "Rome" as she said it with an awed expression and bated breath suggested a hoary cavern of antiquity, haunted by the ghosts of buried Cæsars. Her short-sighted eyes would grow round and she would clasp her large bony hands ecstatically. Good-natured Fru Bjork smiled at her enthusiasm and if the girls made fun of her at times, they did it pleasantly.

Astrid was inclined to be lazy; she enjoyed the sun and the warmth, and the picturesque figures on the Spanish Stairs, but museums and picture galleries bored her, and the churches, she declared, gave her the creeps. So it fell out that Ragna who wished to do her sight-seeing after a methodical plan, generally found herself alone. Armed with a guide book she began at the

beginning, as it were, visiting first the most ancient ruins and relics, in their order, working on down to modern times. It disconcerted her to find ancient and modern mingled—as they so often were,—and at the Pantheon she resolutely shut her eyes to the monuments of the House of Savoy, until such time as she should have reached their place in history. It will be seen that her method involved no little difficulty and much returning over the same ground. It seemed pure lunacy to Astrid, who objected to being dragged over and over again to the same place to observe some addition or later adaptation which she had been forbidden to inspect on her first visit.

"It would be so easy to see it all at once," she plaintively protested, but Ragna was adamant.

Astrid therefore pleaded her delicate health and the overfatigue caused by such strenuous sight-seeing as an excuse to remain at home, where she composed lengthy epistles to her fiancé with whom she was comfortably, if not passionately, in love.

On this particular morning she was evolving a description of her impressions during a drive on the Pincio the afternoon before. She felt lazily content with the world, herself, and things in general and had no wish to bestir herself.

"I wish you weren't so awfully energetic, Ragna," she said.

"Well, I couldn't sit down in Rome and bite my pen all day, as if there were nothing better to do,—you might as well be in Christiania! Come, get on your things!"

"What are you going to see to-day?"

"I'm not going to see anything this morning. I have some shopping to do in the Corso."

Astrid's eyes brightened, then she shook her head.

"I must finish my letter first."

"Oh, nonsense! Edvard can wait a few hours!"

"You always say that—but then you don't know what it is to be engaged," she glanced at the pretty ring decorating her hand. "You see, Edvard gets so huffy if I'm not regular in my correspondence, and I haven't written to him for three days."

Ragna shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, very well! I suppose I must wait. Do be as quick as you can, Astrid, the morning is almost all gone."

She stood drumming on the window-sill, looking down into the busy Piazza Montecitorio far below. A row of "*botti*" stretched across the sunny side, the drivers carrying on an animated conversation among themselves and with one or two flower sellers. The old woman who kept the news-stand at the corner, alternately sorted her newspapers and warmed her fingers over her scaldino, for the air was crisp, it being early in January. Through the Piazza streamed a motley procession of tourists, red-covered Baedeker in hand,—priests in cassock and beaver hat, *popolini* and girls, and some *Trasteverine* with coloured stays over white *camicie*, and strings of coral about their necks. Ragna watched them all with fascinated eyes. The variegated Roman crowds were a constant source of interest and delight to her; she could not but feel the charm of their casual, seemingly untrammelled existence. The Romans, she thought, had not a worry in the world, their happy care-free faces drew her; even in the beggar's professional whine she observed a lack of real distress—all seemed to float lightly on the surface of Life, passing the under-currents, the sunken rocks, skimming carelessly over the shallows. She remembered a boy she had seen the day before, breaking his fast on a hunch of bread and a glass of sour wine; his bare feet protruded from tattered trouser-legs, his elbows showed through rents in the sleeves of his ragged jacket. He was a flower-vendor and she had stopped to choose a bunch of flowers from his basket. When she paid him, he thanked her with a brilliant smile, displaying his white teeth, and in halting Italian she asked him what made him so happy.

"Happy, Signorina? Of course I am happy,—the sun is warm and I have my bread and wine—!"

It was little reason enough, in all conscience, thought Ragna; she wondered what made these people satisfied with the passing sensation, oblivious of ulterior good or ill, and she envied them.

Her eyes wandered to the clock on the Parliament buildings opposite,—it was almost eleven. She turned half angrily to Astrid who was gazing into space, still chewing her pen-holder.

"Haven't you finished yet?"

Astrid started and a look of contrition came over her face.

"Oh! I'm awfully sorry Ragna, but I just can't write quickly to-day. Don't wait for me, there's a dear! I'll go out with you this afternoon. I'll be ready by then, I truly will!"

Ragna pushed out her underlip, but made no answer; she merely shut the door quite firmly behind her as she left the room. She descended the long stairs and crossed the Piazza, shaking her head at the eager *vetturini* one or two of whom rattled after her cracking their whips, in hopes of a fare. She walked along resolutely, seemingly unconscious of the attention she attracted. She wore part of her thick golden hair down her back where it hung well below the waist, and the rest wreathed in massive plaits about her head. Men of the people often spoke to

her as they passed, praising her "*cappelli d'oro*," calling her "*bella biondina*" and "*simpaticona*," but she had become accustomed to it, and took no notice of them. In her heart of hearts she was flattered by the simple homage which had nothing of either insolence or rudeness.

She walked on enjoying the crisp air, for though the sun was warm, snow lay on the Albon Hills and the breath of it gave a keen edge to the breeze. She was in the Corso, standing, looking in a shop window, when she saw, reflected in the plate glass, a man who had passed her suddenly turn on his heel and come to her side; at the same moment a voice, strangely familiar, asked her in French:

"Have I not the pleasure of addressing Mdlle. Andersen?"

She turned and met the eyes of Prince Mirko. The colour left her cheeks and she felt a suffocating sensation at her heart. She could not answer him, her voice seemed strangled in her throat. The Prince continued:

"Or is it Madame Something?"

The red came back to her cheeks with a rush, and recovering the use of her tongue, she murmured,

"Your Highness! Here?"

"Yes," he answered, "I'm not a ghost, but I'm not a 'Highness' either,—I left that at home; I am plain 'Count Romanoff,' for the present. But you are still Mademoiselle Andersen?"

She nodded affirmatively.

"What shall I say? That I am glad? But that would be selfish—poor unfortunate man that you have not married!" He laughed easily.

Ragna smiled; his playful assumption of comradeship put her at her ease; the ice was broken, it was a tacit resumption of their friendly relation before the far away evening of the kiss. Perhaps he had forgotten that episode, his cheerful friendliness of manner gave no intimation of any such recollection, and Ragna felt gladly assured that such was the case. The thought completed her composure, and she replied,

"But neither have you married, Your—"

"No! No!" he interrupted, "don't call me that! In the first place I am here incognito, and then I have always liked to think that to at least one charming person in the world, I am just myself, just 'Mirko.' We were comrades on the ship—let us begin again where we left off—shall we?"

Her eyes interrogated him intently, but she still saw no sign of an embarrassing memory, so she allowed herself to smile. In point of fact, he had no distinct recollection of those days on the *Norje*, nor of their ending; many new faces had come between, in the intervening years. He merely remembered Ragna as a charming child who had helped while away the hours on the little steamer, and the finding of her here in Rome was a windfall, when he most needed distraction. His eye followed approvingly the slightly more developed curves of her figure and the shining ripples of her hair. He had been to Monte Carlo and luck had been against him, even to his father's hearing of the escapade, and it had been intimated to him that a month or so of rustication incognito before coming home, in order to give the paternal wrath time to cool, would materially aid in the restoration of peace. Ragna's emotion at his sudden appearance laid a flattering unction to his soul; her northern, and to him, unusual beauty attracted him newly, and he said to himself,

"Unlucky at cards, lucky in love—*chi lo sa?*"

"Let us move on," he said to Ragna, "we are attracting attention as well as stopping the way. You will let me walk with you, and you shall tell me how it is you happen to be here."

Ragna found herself walking beside him as in a dream. In reply to his questions she told him of her journey to Italy with Fru Bjork and Astrid; she described Fröken Hagerup and her peculiarities, to his great amusement. Something in him seemed to draw out the wit and humour in her—or perhaps it was the excitement of the unexpected meeting,—in any case she talked to him as she had never talked to anyone in her life.

So they walked on until they reached the Piazza del Popolo, and Ragna looking at her watch found, to her horror and surprise, that it was half-past twelve.

"And I never heard the midday gun!" she exclaimed.

The large square was deserted; a beggar or two sat eating in the sun by the fountains. Even the busy Corso seemed empty.

"I must hurry home at once," said Ragna, turning swiftly.

"It is a long walk,—why go back? Why not celebrate our reunion by lunching with me?" suggested Mirko.

"Oh, no!" she shook her head, "that would never do! They would all be anxious about me if I did not turn up—and think what Fru Bjork would say when she heard I had been lunching with a young man!"

"But why should she hear of it? You can say you have been sight-seeing, too far away for you to get back in time. Make any excuse you like, but do be good! Come!" His voice was like that of a spoilt child begging for a new toy.

"Astrid knows I'm not sight-seeing to-day. I told her before I went out."

He observed that she appeared not to resent the idea of a mild deception—or was it that she wished to ignore the suggestion?

"You are afraid of me!" he said teasingly. "Believe me, I am not an ogre!"

She rose at once to the bait.

"Afraid? Why should I be afraid? I say 'no' because it is impossible." Her tone was final.

Mirko laughed.

"'When a woman won't, she won't, and there's an end on't!'" he quoted. "At least one hears so. What is it, obstinacy or propriety as personified by your compatriots?"

"In this case it would amount to the same."

"Not in the least; obstinacy is hopeless, but Mrs. Grundy may be got around."

"How so?" asked Ragna.

"In the first place, there is no reason at all why Mrs. Grundy should become aware of my existence—in the second place, there are ways of placating that worthy dame. I know something of that," he smiled to himself reminiscently. "However, that is beside the point,—prevention is better than cure, besides being simpler. No, little friend," he emphasized the word, "let our friendship be free from outside interference—let us keep it to our two selves."

Ragna thought that too delicate to hint of their difference in station, he was taking this way of urging on her the private character of their acquaintanceship,—of telling her that he did not care to be thrust into a bourgeois *milieu*. That he should desire to prolong the chance renewal of their comradeship beyond the hour, flattered her, and she was too innocent-minded and too accustomed to the free intercourse between northern men and maidens to see any real harm in acceding to his suggestion. "Concealment," she told herself, "did not necessarily imply deceit, so why expose herself to the curiosity of Astrid and Estelle Hagerup, why hedge about this unexpected adventure with the formality that must of necessity follow on disclosure, when she might so easily keep it to herself?" Quite unconsciously she was actuated by a slight jealousy of Astrid; in spite of herself, the assured triumph of Astrid's career as symbolised in her engagement, the consequence it gave her in the eyes of others, rankled in Ragna's spirit. The thought that a prince sought her friendship raised her in her own eyes and gave her a sort of moral vertigo. If Mirko had shown the slightest sign of remembering that he had once kissed her, her pride would have been up in arms to defend her, but he seemed to remember her only as a merry comrade and it was as such that he sought her society. He saw her hesitation and pressed his point.

"Let me show you the charm of Italy, you will never learn it alone. Italy to be understood must be seen through two pairs of eyes—and you can always dismiss me the minute you are tired of me. I should so like to show you Rome,—the Rome I love—There is no reason why anyone should know, you have told me yourself that you go about alone. You don't know how useful I can make myself if I try!"

Ragna laughed.

"I confess you convey more the impression of a 'lily of the field,' than of an exponent of the beauty of utility!"

"Oh, but you've never seen me really hard at work! Nor has anyone else, for the matter of that," he added to himself.

"Then what is it, exactly, you expect to do for me?"

"I shall be your guide, philosopher and friend. '*Sous les remparts de Rome et sous ses vastes plaines!*'" he declaimed, drawing himself up.

Ragna's eyes sparkled mischievously,

"I believe I should make a better cicerone than you, if it comes to that!"

"Oh, that is quite beside the point! It is unspeakably barbarian to insist on guide-book accuracy. I shall supply what is much more important: the atmosphere."

"That is what Fröken Hagerup says she is absorbing."

"She will never know anything about it. Haven't I told you it takes two to see it?"

"How so? One to pour it out and one to drink it in?"

"I didn't remember you so flippant—have you lost all respect for your elders?"

"The child is ready to learn," said Ragna, assuming an expression of becoming meekness. Indeed

she hardly recognised her sedate self in this new and agreeable sensation of buoyancy.

"Now," said Prince Mirko, changing his tone, "where shall I meet you again? This afternoon—"

"Is out of the question; I must go out with Fru Bjork and Astrid."

"Then to-morrow morning meet me at the entrance to the Palatino."

"But I haven't said that I would come."

"Oh, yes, you will."

"You take too much for granted."

"I don't think so."

"Then I shan't come," said Ragna, nettled by his air of complacent certainty.

"I shall be there, and we shall see what we shall see," was his calm rejoinder.

They had reached the Piazza Colonna, and Mirko paused, hat in hand.

"I shall come no further—until to-morrow, then!" He turned and left her without waiting for a reply. Ragna watched his lithe figure as he strode easily across the open space. She felt dissatisfied with herself and angry with him for this somewhat cavalier leave-taking, and his confident assumption that she would do as he said.

"What does he take me for?" she asked herself as she sped with rapid steps towards her belated luncheon. "I shall not go to meet him, no I shall not."

She entered the dining-room of the pension, flushed and breathless from the stairs, and found it nearly empty, most of the guests having already finished. Fru Bjork, who liked to take things easily, was still busy with a slice of cold meat, and Astrid picked daintily at an orange with slender fingers.

"Wherever have you been, so long, Ragna?" she asked.

"Did you get the photographs in the Corso?"

"Yes,—or at least no," answered Ragna in some confusion. "It was such a lovely morning I went for a walk instead. I thought I would leave the photographs till you could come with me to choose them." Lying did not come easily to her, and her awkwardness would have betrayed her at once to a keen observer, but Fru Bjork was too unobservant to notice it and Astrid felt confused herself, owing to her failure to be ready to go out as she had promised.

Ragna sat down in her place, removing her gloves as she did so. She poured herself a glass of water, but her hand shook and the water streamed over the table cloth. Fru Bjork, seeing it, said kindly,

"My dear, you should not run up the stairs so fast,—it is bad for the heart. You are too young to think about such things, but when you are my age you will know."

Ragna blushed, thinking of the real reason of her excitement, and the good lady continued anxiously:

"And how flushed your face is, my dear! Oh really, really, you must be more careful!"

She was interrupted by Ragna's other neighbour, an old Swedish lady, whose long nose seemed to rest on her chin and that again on her voluminous bosom tightly sheathed in striped silk, and adorned by a cameo brooch and a frill of lace that had seen fresher days. She laid her mittened hand on Ragna's arm, and said:

"My sweet one, will you choose an orange, the very nicest one, for me? My poor eyes are so bad that I am afraid to trust them." She had drawn the fruit dish over to her and appeared to be trying the efficacy of her nose in selecting fruit.

Ragna picked out an orange at random and laid it on the lady's plate,—the interruption was not unwelcome to her.

"Ah, that is very nice indeed, my dear. Thank you so much! And are you quite sure it is the very best? Well then I know you will like to peel it for me!"

Astrid leant across the table, saying,

"I'll peel it for you while Ragna eats her luncheon."

"Thank you, my dear," said the old lady, a little stiffly.

"You are very kind, but I think the other young lady would have done it more carefully. Young folk are so apt to be inconsiderate, nowadays!" She sighed heavily. Presently she addressed herself to Fru Bjork.

"Don't you think that young people are apt to be inconsiderate nowadays?" she inquired raising her voice. Astrid winked at Ragna; the old lady was their pet antipathy; Astrid had christened her the "Old Woman of the Sea." She always came to the table first and left it last, and managed to

keep her neighbours busily employed most of the time.

Fru Bjork answered slowly, a little streamer of salad waving at the corner of her mouth.

"I don't agree with you; I have not found them inconsiderate."

"Then you have been more fortunate than I. I must say, however, that the young men are worse than the young women. Only the other day I asked a young man to give me *the* piece of chicken in a fricassee, and he gave me the neck."

Astrid stifled a wild giggle in her serviette. The old lady turned to her.

"Are you choking? Get someone to thump your back! But there has been much worse—" she again trained her eye on Fru Bjork,—"just think, last night I never closed an eye, for two thoughtless young men who had the room next to mine, were packing up to go, and they dragged their heavy boxes about and made such a noise that I couldn't sleep at all! It was most inconsiderate of them towards one so much older and so far from strong!"

Astrid's choking became violent. Her room was next to that of the young men, and they had made such a noise that at last she had knocked on the partition asking them to be quiet. They had answered, begging her pardon, explaining that they had been trying to wake the old lady whose sonorous snoring made it impossible to sleep. And in fact, the snoring had been a running accompaniment to the various thumps and bangs, and had continued on, triumphant and undiminished.

"You had better go to your room, Astrid," said her mother. She had heard the story, and in her kindness of heart was afraid of hurting the old lady's feelings.

Ragna rose also, glad of an excuse to go.

"Oh," gasped Astrid, as they left the room, "that old woman will kill me yet. 'So inconsiderate of them!'" she mocked.

"Hush," said Ragna, laughing, "she will hear you!"

"I don't care if she does!" said Astrid, "horrid old mole! She told me I looked consumptive, and that my colour was a hectic flush. If she can see that much she ought to be able to help herself at table!"

Ragna went to her room and sat down on her bed. She felt all in a whirl. The Prince in Rome! And he wished her to be his friend! She was uneasily conscious that she should have spoken of the meeting to Fru Bjork—but the Prince did not wish it. "I suppose on account of his being incognito," she told herself—but reason told her that his official presence would have rendered any intercourse impossible.

"It's like a fairy-tale come true, to have seen him again," she thought, "but I will not meet him to-morrow. Of course there would be no harm if I did. I am old enough to take care of myself,—but I shall not, it would be better not."

She was still going over in her mind the conversation of the morning, when Astrid and Fru Bjork entered, ready for the drive. Ragna started guiltily and Astrid pointed a derisive finger:

"Behold the punctual Ragna! Who's late this time, Miss?"

"I'll be ready in a second," said Ragna flying about the room, while Fru Bjork subsided to a chair, settling her bonnet strings under her double chin.

"There, there!" she said in her comfortable way, "don't hurry so, there's no harm done!"

"Now I'm ready!" cried Ragna.

"Why, my child," exclaimed Fru Bjork, "you have one grey glove and one tan one, and you have put your green coat over your blue frock!"

Astrid giggled, "The air of Rome must have gone to your head!"

Ragna, much confused, rectified her mistakes, and the party set out. They drove to the Doria Pamphilj gardens and afterwards to the Janiculum. Fru Bjork stopped the carriage and they got out and walked. Ragna loved the view from that point better than any other she had seen; the huge mass of St. Peter's, towering like a Titan above the city dwarfing all else by the symmetrical immensity of the dome, fascinated and held her. It dominated humanity, she thought even as it dominated Rome,—the Mother Church, Mistress of the World, rising triumphant on the ruins of the past.

She would willingly have stood there for hours, but the early winter dusk was falling; Astrid shivered and Fru Bjork said "Home."

The return drive through the Trastevere was a delight to Ragna, though Astrid turned up her delicate nose at the variety of smells, and Fru Bjork commented at length on the unhealthfulness of defective drainage. To Ragna it seemed a fairy world, and the hour after sunset, "blind man's holiday" brought out all the wonder and mystery of it, throwing a kindly veil over dirt and sordid details. Lights twinkled in the winding streets, and as they passed Hilda's Tower they saw the glow of the lamp in the shrine. And beneath it all, there ran as an undercurrent in Ragna's mind,

the Prince in Rome!

CHAPTER II

When Ragna opened her eyes the next morning, she had the impression of opening them to a new life, different from that of yesterday; there was something to look forward to,—just what, her sleepy memory refused to say. Then as she stirred and sat up, it came back to her, and again she declared: "I shall not go to meet him, it would be foolish!"

But she dressed with unusual care, and went to the dining-room for breakfast, afraid of finding Astrid ready to accompany her, and at the same time almost hoping for it. Astrid, however, had elected to spend the morning in bed; she had got a chill, she said, from the drive the day before, and yawning, buried her face in the sleeve of her blue flannel bed-jacket. So Ragna started out alone, and resolutely set her face towards the Vatican. She had gone but a short distance, however, when she wheeled about, and walked as rapidly in the opposite direction.

"It can do no harm if I meet him this once," she argued. Then, "I suppose I am a fool." A panic seized her, suppose he should not come, after all? As she turned the end of the Forum, she saw the graceful figure of Prince Mirko coming to meet her.

"I knew it!" he cried joyously, waving his hat like a school-boy. "I knew you would not disappoint me!"

His gaiety was infectious, and Ragna's laugh echoed his. He took the red guide-book from her hand, and held it up accusingly.

"Why have you brought this? I told you, you would not need one with me!" he cried, stuffing the offending book into his pocket.

They passed through the turnstile, and strolled up the path in the wake of the official guide. The bright Roman sunshine illuminated the Forum below, gilding the columns and casting short blue shadows in the excavations. Overhead, the sky was a deep rich blue, and the air was charged with the peculiar sweetness of approaching Spring. The guide walked slowly, his hands in his pockets, humming an air from Rigoletto: "*Questao quella per me pari sono*,"—Mirko hummed it also, then broke into "*La donno è mobile*," giving it with rollicking voice.

Ragna smiled at him.

"In the opera it is the man who is 'mobile,' in spite of what the song says!"

"Oh, no, the song is quite right—when a man is openly unfaithful, it is only in answer to a secret defection on the part of the woman. Any intelligent woman who wishes to keep a man, can do it—you can always be sure that it is really the woman's fault if a man strays in his allegiance."

"That is an extremely convenient theory," said Ragna, laughing, "but it is a poor rule that won't work both ways. Would you make the man responsible for infidelity on the part of the woman?"

"Oh, that is a very different matter!"

"Why should it be?"

"You will not pretend, I suppose, that a woman is exactly the same as a man? The difference between them alters the whole aspect of the case."

"Oh!" said Ragna, "you are incorrigible, you twist and turn so,—you will never meet me fairly!"

"The infidelity of man," continued Mirko, "is different in its very essence from that of woman,—it is quite possible for a man to be constant when he is apparently most unfaithful—the superficial change only enhances the charm of the real affection; he never tires of coming back to it,—if he were never to leave it, it would pall on him."

"Why will you be so paradoxical?"

"It is not I who am paradoxical,—it is life."

They were so absorbed in their conversation, that the guide found no way of attracting their attention; in vain did he hem and haw, and scrape his foot on the gravel.

"They are most certainly a '*viaggio di nozze*,'" he thought, "or perhaps '*fidanzati*'—as such they will be generous."

Finally, as they came to the entrance to the ruins, he stepped before them with a commanding gesture.

"This, Signori, is the gallery where the Empress sat with her ladies. You see it overlooks the street where the chariots passed up to the palace. The palace itself was built out over the way, and the people went under it as under a bridge."

"See," said Mirko, "can you not imagine it,—the beautiful gallery, with its marble balustrade, hung with woven carpets and silken draperies—there before you in the sunlight? Do you not see

the Empress, beautiful, stately, robed in purple, gems and gold-dust in her dark hair, wonderful jewels on her neck and arms? There are the ladies,—the proud dark one just behind her, the fair girl leaning over the balustrade at her side, with the gold of the sun on her hair, on her white dress, and the other three, laughing together, over there to the left? The slave-girls are holding peacock-feather fans to shield their royal mistress, and the slave-boys, beautiful, fair-haired captives, have brought baskets of fruit and sweets. And down in the street below, what a crowd, what a riot of colour! The Cæsar on his white horse with the gold trappings—do you catch the gleam of his burnished helmet, of his cuirass? He turns his head haughtily, and gathers up the reins in his hand; his short sword clatters against his thigh as his horse moves on. There, just behind him, comes the centurion of his escort, brave to see in his flaunting scarlet cloak, and the legionaries follow, like so many animated bronze statues. See—the fair waiting-maid by the Empress has dropped a rose to the centurion—he looks up and smiles—his teeth flash white—the slaves, carrying jars and baskets on their heads, have flattened themselves against the walls, to let the procession go by,—it moves like a glittering snake up the narrow way.—Hark! the salute of the palace guard, spear rattling on shield, and the shout 'Ave Cæsar!' It echoes under the vaulted way—and all Rome is in that cry!"

Mirko was flushed with enthusiasm; he threw back his head, and the clear-cut features of his classic face glowed, his dark eyes flashed, he seemed the very incarnation of that "lust of the eye and pride of life," of that "grandeur that was Rome."

As he spoke, Ragna saw the pageant of those far off days unrolled before her. She felt the throbbing of all the passionate life of old, where but a few minutes before there had been but moss-grown stone and crumbling ruins. He had laid a spell on her; she was for the moment, by virtue of his imagination, and its dramatic expression, actually living in the past, feeling its reality.

And so it continued throughout the morning. In the long paved underground passage way, Mirko showed her Cæsar, carried along in his litter, returning from his theatre. She saw the flickering light of the torches, heard the sandalled footsteps of the slaves,—their heavy breathing, the creak of the poles. And at the foot of the stairs she saw the sudden confusion,—the dark-cloaked assassins stealing from the shadow, she heard the shrieks, the cries of "Treason!" "Murder!" She saw in glimpses between the surging figures, the white-faced Emperor, struggling from his litter,—his unwieldy form leapt upon, borne back and down, then blows,—a gurgling groan. She saw the overturned litter, the crumpled body on the floor, the widening pool of blood,—then flight to the long flare of torches snatched from the trembling slaves, then darkness, and the alarm.

She saw the gay crowds, trooping into the Circus Maximus, the arrival in procession of Cæsar, æditor of the games. She watched breathless the speeding chariots, and carried out of herself, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, joined in the thunderous applause which acclaimed the victor,—the hoarse roar which must, it seemed, shake the very foundations of Rome.

When it was all over, and the guide had beamingly pocketed his *mancia* and they were in the street again, Ragna drew a long breath.

"It has been wonderful!"

"Then you are satisfied with your cicerone? You are convinced that a guide-book is unnecessary?"

"Oh," she answered, "the book makes it all into a cemetery,—or a table of dates,—but you have made Rome live.—It can never be the same now, as it was before; I have been there, I have seen it, it is part of me,—and without you I should never have known anything of it at all. How do you do it? How do you bring it all to life?"

Mirko smiled, well pleased with the result of his effort and with himself.

"I have been there."

"Been there! How?"

"I was once a Roman, I feel it, I know it!"

"Yes," she answered, "I think you must have been,—I can feel that you have been—you have made me feel it."

They were silent for a few minutes, and Ragna repeated:

"It has been wonderful!"

When they had parted, and Ragna found herself alone, the wonder of it grew on her. How blind she had been until the Prince opened her eyes! She was very glad that she had come, all her half-formulated scruples were laid at rest. How foolish she had been to imagine any possible harm!—What could be more innocent or more delightful than their informal comradeship? He was quite right too, in wishing to keep it all to themselves. Astrid would not, could not understand, still less so good, prosaic-minded Fru Bjork, and as for Estelle Hagerup! Ragna laughed scornfully, as there rose before her mental vision the grasshopper-like silhouette of that strenuous spinster.

At luncheon, looking about her at the commonplace faces of her fellow sojourners, she could not repress a secret movement of vanity.

"How many of these," she thought, "would give their eyes to spend a morning like mine,—and

with a friend like mine!" She even pitied Astrid,—poor Astrid, who had never known a Prince!

Estelle Hagerup announced a discovery—she had a voice.

"My dears," she said with pride, "what a voice! Just as clear as crystal, and very powerful—and to think I never knew of it before!"

"How did you find it out, Estelle?" asked Ragna and Astrid together.

"I was standing on the top tier of the Colosseum, and the impulse came over me to sing—so I lifted up my voice and sang. I wish you could have been there to hear! A *custode* came running at once and was much impressed. He said he had never heard anything like it in his life. I gave him a lira, and he said '*grazie Contessa*.' He refused to leave me after that, and waited till I was ready to go with the greatest deference."

"Are you thinking of the operatic stage?" asked Astrid wickedly.

"Perhaps that may come later, when I shall have acquired a repertory."

"You will have to study," said the old Swedish lady. "There was a young woman here last winter studying music, and she sang scales three hours a day; she had a room next mine. I should advise you to go to Florence—they say there are better singing-masters there."

"I shall not sing scales," said Estelle firmly.

"I thought one always had to," put in Ragna.

"Not with a voice like mine; my voice is far beyond scales."

"That is very satisfactory, dear Fröken," said the old lady. "My dear," this to Ragna, "will you give me the largest tartlet,—the one with the most jam on it?"

"I hope," remarked Fru Bjork, "that you will do nothing so silly as to train for the stage, Estelle." She was about to add, "at your age, too," but refrained.

Estelle simpered.

"Why should it be silly, Fru Bjork, if I feel it to be my vocation? Why should I not give utterance to the sacred fire that is within me? Is it not my duty to humanity?"

Fru Bjork found no answer to this, and held her peace, but Ragna was more daring.

"Do you think you have a stage presence, Estelle?" she asked.

"Why not? I am tall—besides, it is much more important to have voice and temperament. I feel it my mission to redeem the stage. Why do you ask me such a question?"

Ragna was saved from answering by the old lady.

"My dear! My dear! Pick me out something before they carry the fruit around! Last evening that man with the whiskers at the end of the table took the last banana, before I had a chance."

Ragna rose from the table in disgust. She longed to be back in the past again with Prince Mirko—all these present things seemed so vulgar and common by contrast, and yet until now, they had amused her! She looked about the dining-room and despised the men in it. A stout German with his napkin tucked in at the neck, sprawled over his plate, emitting hideous grunts and smacks, at the other end of the room, two well-nourished Englishmen sat with their families like self-satisfied roosters with their feathered following. At her own table, an anæmic and dreamy-eyed art-student played with his dessert, an Italian Commendatore with white whiskers, and a rotund waistcoat, beamed on his neighbours, and a gentleman with marvellous tight striped trousers, a still more marvellous moustache and a flamboyant necktie, was lighting a cigarette.

"How vulgar, how horrid they are!" thought Ragna.

CHAPTER III

It seemed to Ragna that she had opened her eyes on a new Heaven and a new Earth. As the days went on and lengthened into weeks, she grew so dependent on the companionship of Prince Mirko, that if a day passed without her seeing him, she felt blank and as though defrauded of a pleasure that was hers by right. A curious change, too, had taken place in her mental or rather sentimental attitude, for whereas at first, she had dreaded his recalling the, to her, unforgetable episode of the last evening on the *Norje*, she now felt secretly piqued by his lack of memory, and by his mere friendliness. It was as though she were disappointed in not having to ward off unwelcome—or too welcome—advances. The passionate impulsiveness of him, as she remembered it, but threw into greater relief the measured comradeship of his present attitude towards her. A more experienced woman would have suspected him of "parti pris," for a purpose, but Ragna saw nothing but genuine indifference, and her feminine vanity urged her to force him into recognition of the womanhood he had been instrumental in awakening. Therefore the simple almost childlike relations of the first days had insensibly given way to a state of tension which

Mirko understood and was ready to turn to his advantage, but which Ragna did not understand in the least. Here her real innocence was the weak point in her armour. Several days passed thus, each waiting for a sign. Mirko with perspicacity, and Ragna with a sort of subconscious expectation.

One afternoon towards the end of February they were standing by the balustrade of the Pincio watching the sunset. The sky was a gorgeous riot of crimson and gold, across which were flung like flaunting royal pennants, long streamers of dark purple clouds. The very air was luminous and golden, and the bells ringing for vespers in the amethyst and grey city below, filled the ear with triumphant clangour. The carriages were leaving the drive and rolled by silently under the grey-green ilexes, the noise of the horses and of the wheels drowned by the ringing of the bells. Ragna stood in ecstasy, her hands tightly clasped, looking out over the sea of roofs and towers to where the great Dome rose bubble-like, silhouetted against the glowing sky. Her face was flushed, her eyes shining, her parted lips quivered. Mirko watching her said to himself:

"She is ready."

She gave a sigh of deep enjoyment and murmured, "It is like what one would imagine Heaven to be!" Mirko echoed her sigh; she turned and her eyes met his and there was that in his glance, which caused her to lower her eyes and her heart to beat suddenly quicker.

"It is like Paradise," he said, "but the essential is lacking; it is like a beautiful woman without a soul."

Ragna made no answer and he continued dreamily as though thinking aloud:

"All is perfect—the stage is ready for the players—the outward semblance is awaiting the soul to animate it."

He paused again, but the girl still remained silent. Presently he addressed her directly:

"I told you I would unveil to you the spirit of Italy, I have done my part—the rest lies with you."

"I do not understand what you mean," she answered. "I think you have opened my eyes—what is there still to learn?"

"I have shown you the form, the outward shape, but you have not yet penetrated the spirit," he said, and his voice had the softness of a caress. "You have not guessed what is the real soul of Italy—that which makes her, though in ruins, the Soul of the World?"

"And that 'soul' is—?" she asked in a voice so faint he could hardly catch it.

"Love," he said, and taking her unresisting hand pressed it.

"Love," he repeated presently, and his musical voice aroused all the echoes in her heart. "Italy is love, and love is the spirit of Italy. That is why lovers come here; there is love magic in the air, and those who are destined to love cannot escape it. You," he said, looking into her eyes, "you were born to love and be loved, do you not feel that it is so?"

A deep blush crept over Ragna's cheeks, she drew her hand from his.

"Hush, this is folly. You must not talk to me like that!"

Now that he had spoken she wished that he had not, yet she knew now that for days past she had been waiting for him to say just this. She felt at the same time guiltily conscious of her delight that he should speak to her in this way and terrified lest he should continue.

"Ah," said Mirko, "why should you fear the awakening of your soul? A woman who has not loved, who does not love is a sweet instrument out of tune. Love brings you into harmony with the music of the Universe. Do you not want to learn all that life has to teach? The Book of Love is here for you to open, you have but to stretch forth your hand."

Ragna stood listening fascinated. No one had ever talked to her like this. The recollection of her Norwegian suitors rose to her mind and she scorned them in her heart. Who of them all could have spoken like this? This was fairyland, and the fairy Prince was at her side.

"Ragna," his voice caressed her, "Ragna, my Star of the North, tell me have you not felt it, the magic spell?"

She raised her eyes to his, and there passed from him to her a magnetic current that seized and shook her innermost being. It frightened her; with an effort she turned her eyes away and the spell was broken. She passed her hands to her heart, then stretched them out before her as though to thrust him away.

"Oh, you must not!" she cried, "indeed you must not!"

"Have I said anything that could offend you? Surely not! I would die rather than offend you, dear little friend!"

The word reassured her and soothed her conscience; how could she explain that it was far more the look than the words?

"Perhaps you misunderstood me," he continued, "but I did not think you would, I thought we

knew each other too well for that!" He spoke as though wounded by a misconstruction put upon his sincerity.

Ragna felt foolish.

"I shall try not to offend you again," he said presently, and very humbly, "but you must bear me good-will enough not to look for offence where none is intended."

The girl smiled at him by way of answer.

It was growing rapidly dark and a *guardia di pubblico sicurezza* passing by, eyed the isolated couple curiously, but also with the sympathy every Latin feels for a pair of lovers. The bells had long since ceased ringing and many lights twinkled in the city below. In the sky stood a fair large planet and Mirko drew Ragna's attention to it.

"Venus, the Star of Love," he said briefly, with no comment, but his voice emphasized the words.

Ragna turned and they walked to the Spanish Stairs. As they passed the Trinità del Monte a voice came out to them, a soprano voice marvellously clear and vibrant, the pure high notes almost startling in their passionate intensity.

"How beautiful!" said Ragna, and Mirko answered:

"But how sad! Think of a woman who can put that into her singing, eating her heart out in a cloister!"

As they descended the stairs Ragna looked up again at the white planet nearing the horizon, a whiter glow seemed to be overtaking the star, drowning it in a diffused effulgence.

"The moon is casting poor Venus in the shade."

"Ah, yes, she is wise to retire before the moon! Listen, Ragna, to-morrow the moon will be full,—you must give me the evening, we shall go to see the Colosseum by moonlight!"

"The evening? Oh, never! It would be impossible! It is bad enough for me to be out alone as late as this; Fru Bjork does not like it, I shall be scolded when I go in."

"You can manage it well enough, if you want to. Think of it! The Colosseum by moonlight—and there is no possible danger from malaria at this time of year."

"It would be lovely," she said wistfully, "but I don't see how I could—"

"Oh, easily! At dinner you say you have a headache and go to your room, and when all the people are in the drawing-room, you slip out quietly and I shall be waiting for you below."

"But how could I get in again?"

Mirko smiled at her simplicity.

"Tell the chambermaid you will give her a little present if she sits up for you."

"But will she?"

"As certainly as she is an Italian; she will love to think she is making the way easy for a pair of *innamorati*."

"Oh!" said Ragna.

"Of course," said Mirko, "we are not *innamorati*, we are friends,—but she would not understand the distinction," he smiled to himself, "and in any case how can it matter to you what she supposes?"

"I won't promise to come," declared Ragna; still the charm of such an escapade appealed to her romantic imagination—and after all, there was no real harm in it!

Mirko was satisfied and took advantage of the dusk to kiss her hand twice when he had put her in a "botte" in the Piazza di Spagna. The act had lost its significance to her since she had come to Italy and had seen how generally it was practised, but this evening the pressure of Mirko's lips sent a thrill through her fingers.

As she lay in her bed that night, Mirko's words: "I would rather die than offend you!" rang in her ears and she smiled happily.

Dinner was drawing to an end and the long Pension dining-room was filled with a hubbub of conversation in many languages. Estelle Hagerup and Astrid were having a lively discussion on the advantages of matrimony as compared with single blessedness.

"I say," declared Estelle, "that no man living is worth a woman's giving up her whole life to him. Why should she? Why should the woman always give up to the man? Then there is the monotony of it. I should be tired to death of seeing the same face across the breakfast table every day in the year, and year in, year out!"

"You needn't look at him then," said Astrid, "or you could make him sit at the side, or have your breakfast in bed. Now I think it must be such a comfort to have someone to grumble at, and who is obliged to listen to you!"

"Oh, my dear, you'll find that all the grumbling won't be on your side!"

"I hope I shall bring my husband up too well for that!" said Astrid. Estelle snorted.

"If only my dear Peter were alive!" sighed Fru Bjork, "he was such an amiable man. I never knew him to grumble."

"Ah, well, there's no telling," said Estelle, "he might have in time."

"My blessed Peter would never have grumbled," said Fru Bjork with finality. Astrid giggled.

"I should hate a man with no spirit, there would be no satisfaction in managing him."

The old Swedish lady raised her head.

"My dear, it is most unseemly for a young woman to talk of 'managing' her husband. Young people nowadays have lost the virtue of obedience."

"Obedience is for children and the feeble-minded," said Astrid. The old lady gasped and raised her mittened hand.

"My dear, my dear, a wife should always obey her husband!"

"Well, I shan't when I'm married."

Fröken Hagerup interposed:

"You'll find that you'll have to, to keep the peace."

"Keep the peace indeed! That will be Edvard's business. Ragna, why don't you say something?"

Ragna had been sitting silent; on being addressed she started and dropped her fork.

"I—I have a headache." Her cheeks flamed at the lie. Fru Bjork looked at her anxiously.

"I do hope you are not going to be ill, child! I am sure you have been tiring yourself out with all this going about alone, I don't half like it!"

"Stuff and nonsense," said Estelle, "she never looked better in her life! A night's rest and she will be all right again. You should not walk in the sun," she said to Ragna; "it is dangerous at this season of the year. It is probably that that gave you your headache."

"I believe Ragna's in love with somebody," said Astrid, "all this mooning about alone is a symptom, and she's losing her appetite, too."

"Nonsense!" said Ragna angrily. "I am a bit tired, but as Estelle says, a night's rest will set me right. I think I shall go to bed now."

"I think you are right, Ragna," said Fru Bjork. "Take some quinine and cover yourself well. I shall come a little later to see if you are comfortable."

"Oh, please don't," said Ragna. "I feel quite sleepy already. I assure you there is nothing to worry about, I had rather no one came, it might wake me up."

Fru Bjork looked hurt.

"As you like," she said, and Ragna hated herself for her ungraciousness.

"Oh, why wasn't I born diplomatic?" she thought.

Astrid was looking at her rather maliciously through her lashes. The headache had not deceived her, but she had no suspicion of the truth; she thought that absence might have played advocate for some despised Christiania swain; she wondered who it might be, and promised herself that she would find out at the first opportunity.

When they rose from the table, Ragna went to her room and ostentatiously called for hot water. The others repaired to the drawing-room, where the old Swedish lady established herself with alacrity in the most comfortable armchair. A lady of uncertain nationality opened the pianoforte and played with faultless technique and absolutely no expression, selections from Beethoven and Chopin, and the rest of the company disposed themselves about the room, some reading, some sewing, some talking in small groups. Astrid withdrew to a window-recess with the art-student, with whom she had begun a mild flirtation. Fru Bjork settled herself near the fire and took out her knitting; her brow was furrowed and she puckered up her mouth. She was more worried about Ragna than she cared to admit; certainly the girl looked the picture of health, but she had been oddly absent-minded of late, and had seemed so evidently to prefer going about alone that gradually the other members of the party had given up offering to accompany her. Then her headache of this evening—.

"I do hope the child is not going to be ill," repeated the good woman to herself; she drew out a needle at the end of the row and meditatively scratched her head with it.

Ragna, meanwhile, was devoured by a fever of excitement. Unable to sit still she paced up and down her room; her hands trembled and she felt curious nervous qualms through her body. She pinned on her hat with unsteady fingers, drew on her gloves and threw a long dark cloak about her. When enough time had elapsed for all to be well settled in the drawing-room, she cautiously opened her door and locking it behind her, stole down the passage, at the end of which a chambermaid was crocheting lace by the light of an oil lamp.

"Rosa," said Ragna in a low voice, "I am going out but I don't wish anyone to know of it. If you will let me in very quietly when I come back—I shan't be late—I will give you a present. I shall knock on the door with my knuckles three times,—like this. Do you understand?"

"*Si, Signorina*," answered the maid, showing her white teeth in a smile. It was a sly understanding smile that made Ragna hot and uncomfortable. She felt Rosa's curious eyes upon her as she went on down the passageway to the door. In another minute she was flying down the poorly-lit stairs; at the foot of the last flight a dark figure detached itself from the surrounding gloom and came towards her.

"I thought you were never coming," said Mirko. His voice had an odd triumphant note, but Ragna in her excitement failed to notice it. He drew her arm through his and hurried her out and across the shadow side of the Piazza, to where a carriage was waiting.

"*Al Coliseo!*" he said to the driver.

Ragna sat in a constrained attitude, her eyes cast down.

"Now," said Mirko, "you look as though you were embarking on a crime. I ask you what harm is there in this little escapade?"

"I do so hate to deceive them all! What would Fru Bjork say if she knew?"

"Has she never been young herself? If you knew, Ragna, the memories that half these good and prudish ladies carry under their starched fronts, you would be surprised. There is a proverb that says, 'when you are too old to give yourself to the Devil it is time to turn to God!'" Then seeing she looked shocked; "there, don't mind what I say,—I am so glad you have come that I am not half responsible. You can take my word for it that you are doing nothing very terrible. Do you think for a moment I would ask you to?"

"No," she answered.

"And you are glad you came?"

"I feel as if I were being carried off by a brigand," said Ragna.

The Prince wore a broad-brimmed soft felt hat casting the upper part of his face into deep shadow, he had thrown round him an Italian military cloak, the folds of which flung up and over his left shoulder had the grace of a toga. He really looked not unlike the gallant brigand of romance.

"Oh, indeed!" he laughed, "and supposing I were to carry you off, far away across the Campagne to a castle in the hills and hold you for ransom, what then?"

"What ransom would you set on me?"

"A ransom no one could pay but yourself—a king's ransom: your love. And the day you give it you would be free to go—if you so wished." He spoke jestingly but his voice had a deep undertone that thrilled the girl.

"Would you pay the ransom, oh, captive?"

"Even a captive lady could not love to order," laughed Ragna.

"But could you not love a man, who for love of you carried you away from all the world and made you his by force? I think you would—every woman is really a Sabine at heart!"

Ragna was spared the necessity of answering by the carriage drawing up at the entrance to the Colosseum.

"Shall we keep him?" asked Mirko, as he helped her to alight.

"No! no. Let us walk back."

Mirko dismissed the vetturino, who with much cracking of his whip, made his way to the nearest osteria there to drink the health of the mad forestieri who would risk any sort of "malanno" to see an old ruin by moonlight.

The moon rode high in the heavens and the great building stood out clear and sharp in the silvery light, the inky shadows seemed pregnant with mystery. Ragna almost looked to see the ghosts of martyrs in horrid procession, threading the gloomy archways. A shadow in the arena seemed a pool of blood. Above, in the tribunes, bloodthirsty multitudes had watched, breathless, the matchless show,—and well might the Vestal-virgins cover their faces, of what avail the fate deciding thumb when maidens and lions meet in the amphitheatre?

"Is it not wonderful?" asked Mirko.

"Wonderful, but horrible," said Ragna, "if ghosts walk anywhere on earth, surely they must walk here! Think of all these walls have looked down on!"

"Yes, the Games, the glorious Games!" he replied eagerly. "Oh, to have seen it in its pomp and pride! Think of it, Ragna,—the people, the colours in the sunlight, the purple velarium up there against the sky, the Cæsar, the Senate, the Vestals,—and the gladiators in the ring!"

"I was thinking of the martyrs," said Ragna.

"Oh, the martyrs! Poor fools! After all it was their own fault."

His slight sneer grated on the girl's mood.

"They were glorious," she said indignantly, "they had the courage of their convictions. They proved their strength,—they were stronger than Cæsar, stronger than Rome,—their death was their victory!"

Her eyes shone, and Mirko, looking at her face upturned in the moonlight, thought he had never seen her so beautiful, transfigured as she was, by her enthusiasm.

"Would you have the courage of your convictions?" he asked suddenly.

"I—I don't know. Which convictions, for instance?"

"Well, if you did not believe in marriage, would you have the courage to override public opinion?"

"But I do believe in marriage," she said simply.

"Do you believe that love can be bound with a chain, then?"

"There should be no question of binding—A marriage without love is no marriage at all in my eyes."

He smiled at her earnest simplicity.

"That is all very well—for you," he said, "but for me? I may not marry to please myself."

His voice had a caressing cadence, charged with regret, his eyes were mournful under the long lashes. Perhaps for the moment he was really a victim to self pity. Like most emotional people, he was apt to believe in the sincerity of a passing feeling, even the appropriate pose of the hour investing him with a fleeting reality of sentiment.

"No," said Ragna, "that is true. You cannot be free to follow your heart, it is part of the price you must pay."

"The price is heavy."

They stood silent a time, then Mirko spoke again in a deep voice.

"I love you, Ragna, you know it—you must have seen it. I did not mean to tell you, I have been fighting it down, but here in the moonlight it is too strong for me. I love you, and it is not within my power to marry you. I must go away, and perhaps never see you again; I have loved you ever since those days on the *Norje*"—this was untrue but he said it with conviction, even felt it—"and you love me darling, you can't deny it. Oh, *cara*, *carissima*, look at me, let me see your eyes!"

His arm had stolen round her, she raised her head, and he saw that bright drops glittered on her lashes. In a flash his mouth was on hers and she returned his kiss. She stood unresisting in his embrace, leaning against him, her whole form quivering, then after a moment, gently freed herself and walked a few paces away, her head bent, clasping and unclasping her hands. He followed her and would have taken her in his arms again but she stopped him.

"What's the use?" she asked in a hoarse voice, "we have no right,—you can't marry me. You must not—" her voice broke.

"But you love me," cried Mirko, a passionate gladness ringing in his voice. "You do love me! Surely we have the right to a little happiness!"

"No," she answered slowly, "no, it is impossible. You must go away. This is not your destiny. You will be King some day, your country, your people, claim you."

"I will give it all up for you, Ragna!" He knew that he would not, but promises come easily, by moonlight.

"No," she repeated, "you must go; we must part."

"But if you love me—"

"If I love you?"

"What need is there to part? If you loved me enough."

"Oh," she cried, suffocating, as his meaning dawned on her, "Oh! Do you take me for that?"

She sprang back, her breast heaving, tears rising to her eyes.

"Take you for what, dear? For a woman who would love me better than all the world beside? Do

you think that an insult?"

"You—you would make me your—," she could not bring herself to say the word.

Prince Mirko executed a masterly retreat.

"My child!" he cried in a horrified voice. "What do you imagine? I mean that where true love is, there can be no parting. Far or near, those who love are always united."

"Oh," said Ragna dubiously, "I thought you meant—"

Mirko fixed his mournful eyes upon her.

"Did I not tell you yesterday that I would rather die than harm you?" he asked reproachfully.

Ragna hung her head, ashamed.

"You have no confidence in me—and yet I deserve it," he said bitterly.

"I have confidence in you; it was only that I did not understand, I was afraid—"

"Do you wish to give me a proof of your confidence, dear one?"

"Yes," said Ragna, "what shall I do?" she was ashamed of her suspicion and eager to atone.

"We have so little time left to us—only a few days, then our ways part,—let us be lovers for that little time, as if we were betrothed, as if we were to marry like ordinary people. Will you, dear? It can do no harm—just a game of 'pretend' as the children say, and we shall have those days to look back on all our lives!"

He sank to one knee, holding her clasped hands in his own, the folds of his long cloak sweeping the ground. That, and the felt hat gave him the appearance of a cavalier of romance. It was splendidly theatrical—but it harmonized with the setting and the hour. His eyes, soft and burning, held hers.

Why not? thought Ragna, a little romance,—a little happiness, a gorgeous illusion, and the light would go out. Why not make the most of the golden hours—there would be enough grey ones in the future to compensate amply for the delicious fraud. Instinct warned her of hidden danger—but had he not said:

"I would rather die than harm you!"

The pressure of his hand was insistent.

"Very well," she said faintly, "I will."

He sprang to his feet and clasped her in his arms, covering her face with kisses.

"Oh!" she cried struggling, "you must not! It is not right!"

"Are you not my fiancée, my little love?" he asked in a pained voice. "What hurt can my kisses do you? Oh, Ragna!"

He kissed her again, and this time she did not resist.

When he released her she was breathless and her head swam; she could feel her heart leaping in her bosom and she pressed her hands upon it to still its wild beating. Her face was white as marble and her eyes shone strangely as though illuminated by fires within. In that moment, Mirko really loved her; her confidence appealed to all that was best in him, so realizing that he would not trust himself further he made the move to go.

"It is late *Anima mia*, I must take you home now."

He encircled her waist with his arm under cover of her cloak and they walked slowly back through the dark streets to the Piazza Montecitorio, talking as they went. Or rather it was Mirko who talked and Ragna listened, held in thrall by the musical voice of her lover. It did not occur to her that to make love with such *mæstria* presupposes a large and varied experience.

He left her with a kiss under the gloomy *portone*, and she sped up the stairs, wondering how she should explain her absence in case of discovery. There was no need, however, for Rosa promptly answered her timid knocking, and at a sign from her followed her to her room.

"Here," said Ragna, taking a little brooch from its case and tendering it to the maid, "take this, Rosa,—it is the little present I spoke of."

"*Ma Signorina, che le pare?*" exclaimed Rosa with great deprecation, "it is much too fine for me,—I will take nothing for so small a service. It is a night made by the good God for lovers, do I not understand that? I also have an *innamorato, Signorina*!"

Ragna, who two hours earlier would have felt unspeakably humiliated by such a speech, now was conscious of a fellow feeling for the girl—such is the freemasonry of love. She smiled and tucking the trinket into Rosa's hand, said:

"Then you will wear this to remember me by, and also to look well in the eyes of your *fidanzato*."

"*Grazie Signorina*, a thousand thanks! And may your *innamorato* be as faithful as you are

beautiful."

"Faithful," repeated Ragna to herself when she had closed the door behind the retreating form of the maid. "What is faithlessness,—memory? For us there can be no other."

It pleased her to think of her romance as set apart from the common lot.

"It is an oasis in the desert," she thought,—"it will be as he says, something to look back on all our lives."

For a long time she lay awake, gazing into the dark, her pulses throbbing as she thought of his kisses.

CHAPTER IV

The end of Carnival was approaching and many shops displayed dominoes, masks and various disguises and travesties in their windows. The merry madness was in the air and all Rome was keyed up to a pitch of wild gaiety, so soon to relapse into devotional gloom.

Fru Bjork had taken tickets to the *veglione* in the Costanzi Theatre, and Astrid was wild with anticipation. She raged at the indifference displayed by Ragna, who was so absorbed in her fool's Paradise that the *veglione* might as well not have existed. Her detachment was the more noticeable as even Estelle Hagerup had caught the contagion of excitement and was feverishly weighing the rival advantages of a pea-green domino and a purple one. Astrid had chosen pale blue, but Ragna when pressed decided on black.

She had promised to spend the day of the *veglione* with Prince Mirko. They were to drive out into the country, far from the noisy merry-making, and though he had not said so, she felt that it was to be their last day together—the time for separation was approaching, the end of the idyll at hand.

So on the morning of that fateful *mardi gras* she met him, as arranged, by the Pantheon. He was waiting with a *botte*, drawn by two strong little Maremmano horses with pheasant feathers stuck in their head-stalls and tinkling bells on the harness. The driver, a bronzed aquiline featured Roman, beamed on her as she approached, having often driven them on shorter excursions.

Mirko helped her in and took his place beside her, laying on her lap a huge bunch of fragrant white narcissus and violets. She buried her face in the flowers, breathing the perfume voluptuously.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Oh, quite out, over the Campagna, away from everything and everybody."

He squeezed her hand and she smiled happily.

It was warm for the season, almost sultry, as the Scirocco was blowing. The sun was comfortably hot, but heavy clouds banking the horizon promised rain before night-fall.

They drove out the Via Appia past the tomb of Cecilia Metella; the green grass springing fresh between the mortuary tablets bordering the way, and from the walls showed the rapid advance of spring, and as they left the city farther behind, the whole Campagna in new radiance of colour appeared to them as a bride arrayed for her wedding day. The pale pink of the almond blossom in delicate tracery against the deep blue of the sky, the rich dark ilexes with light green tender shoots, the silvery grey of the olives, all looked more like a fairy picture than anything that could possibly be real. This awakening of Nature, this decking out of all the Earth in bridal array, could not but have its effect on the lovers. All creation was breaking into bud and blossom, the spirit of love permeated the very air with the mysterious intoxication of the new running sap in the trees, the awakening to life of the flowers, the song of the birds. It was the mating season.

Mirko and Ragna sat in silence, his right hand closed on her left; she felt strong vibrations passing from his hand to hers, she was burning with a vague mysterious excitement too deep for expression.

Mirko's eyes were fixed on her face; he watched her colour come and go, noted the soft shadow of her lashes on her cheek; the impulse of spring flamed in his blood. The tantalising nearness of the girl was too much for his fiery southern temperament, he was rapidly losing his head.

They drove far out over the Campagna, until the city behind them was swallowed up in the undulations of the great grassy plain. Groups of people bound citywards passed them, many of them enlivening the way with snatches of song. A soft damp breeze laden with the composite spring fragrance blew up from the sea. Presently a turn of the road brought them to an old acqueduct; many of the arches lay in ruins, but here and there groups of them still intact, stood upright in the sunshine. Ragna looking at them suddenly remembered her dream on board the *Norje*, and Ingeborg's prediction. Were these the actual stone arches of her dream? She glanced at Mirko; his eyes were devouring her, they had a wolfish expression; a shiver of fear passed over her and she drew her hand from his in a quick gesture of alarm.

"Oh, don't look at me like that! You frighten me. Your eyes look like the eyes of a wild beast, as if you wanted to tear me limb from limb."

Mirko flushed and his expression changed.

"Silly!" he said, but his voice was hoarse and sounded strange in her ears. "Silly! May I not look at you? Do you know that you are very beautiful to-day? I must fill my eyes with your dear image, so that I may have you with me always,—even when you are far away."

Ragna partially reassured, glanced at him shyly through her lashes.

"You really did frighten me, you looked so fierce, so—so hungry!"

He laughed. "I am hungry—hungry for you. But that is nothing new!"

They relapsed into silence again, but there was a strange constraint upon them. The sun's rays were very hot with that sickly heat felt just before a shower. The scent of the narcissus rose insistent and too sweet. Ragna felt uneasy; although Mirko was outwardly the same as he had always been, she divined a change in him, a mysterious subtle change that set him over against her as an enemy from whom she must defend herself. She could not explain to herself this newborn antagonism, she only felt it dimly,—and at the same time there arose riotous within her the call of the springtide, urging her towards him.

The vetturino drew up jingling before the door of an *osteria*,—that of the "*Sora Nanna*," the sign proclaimed. Some deal tables and benches stood under the budding pergola, and at them a few *contadini* on their way to the festa were indulging in modest libations of "*vino dei Castelli*"—advertised at thirty, forty and fifty *centesimi* the measure, on placards hanging at the entrance.

As the *botte* drew up to the door, the hostess, a stout, wholesome looking woman appeared, bowing and wiping her hands on her apron.

"The Signori would descend? Luncheon? Most certainly,—their Excellencies should be served immediately—Maria! wring the neck of a chicken! Would their Excellencies eat in the common room, in the sala, with contadini? There was a most clean and *conveniente* chamber above, where they would be much better, *non è vero*?"

She bustled in ahead of them, shooing chickens as she went, and chattering volubly. They followed her through the brick-paved kitchen, gloomy, after the bright light outside. One end of it was taken up by an immense brick stove, in which were sunk numerous wells for charcoal. A large pot bubbled merrily on one of these and most savoury odours arose from a collection of copper stew-pans of all sizes. Hams, salami and bunches of herbs hung from the smoky rafters. A girl with large hoop earrings and a bright kerchief about her neck was sitting on a low stool peeling potatoes and singing lustily the song of the "*Ciociara*"—"*E quando la Ciociara si marita*"—she sang to the rollicking air. A ray of sunlight coming through the window gilded her hair and touched the coral beads on her round brown throat.

Sora Nanna led the way up a stone stair to a large light upper chamber. The floor like that of the kitchen was of bare brick well scrubbed, a table stood in the centre with some straight-backed chairs. On the walls hung prints of Garibaldi, King Umberto and Queen Margherita taken at the time of their marriage, and Vittorio Emanuele II with a fierce moustache and a truculent eye. A couch stood against the wall, and in the far corner a large white bed flanked by a primitive dressing-table. Ragna shrank back, but the hostess bustled cheerfully forward.

"Many *cacciatori*, Signori of Rome and *forestieri* have I entertained here," she said, throwing open the windows. "Ah, they all know the Sora Nanna's cellar and the *frittata*. A *frittata* with artichokes, that is what I shall give your Excellencies!"

"I would rather go downstairs," whispered Ragna.

"Come now," said Mirko, "you can't sit in the kitchen with the contadini! This room is clean and it will do very well."

"Can't we sit outside under the pergola?"

Mirko pointed to the clouds fast obscuring the sunshine. "It will be raining in a few minutes."

Ragna thought it would be foolish to object further, and she tried to throw off the uneasy feeling that possessed her.

"Your Excellencies shall be served in half an hour," said the hostess, as she bustled out, shaking her head at the madness of people who came out to the country when they might be enjoying the Carnival in Rome.

Ragna went to one of the windows and leaned on the sill, looking out. The vetturino was leading his horses to a shed in the rear, and Maria, the girl who had been singing in the kitchen, was displaying a generous expanse of red stocking as she pursued an elusive chicken. The contadini under the arbour below made merry at her expense and praised her well-developed charms and neat ankles.

The Campagna rolled away as far as the eye could reach, an inland sea of grass, dotted here and there with trees; far away the broken acqueduct straggled across it. The fleeting shadows chased each other over the rolling surface as the clouds gathered, and the air was damp and sultry,

charged with the sweet scent of spring, stealing over the senses like mellow wine. Mirko came up behind Ragna as she stood and kissed her neck behind the ear where the short hairs made golden tendrils. She thrilled at the touch of his lips but did not turn her head. During these days of their pseudo betrothal, she had gradually grown accustomed to various loverlike familiarities, which from day to day had become more daring, and she had come to accept as natural, liberties on the part of her lover, from which she would have recoiled, shocked and horrified, ten days earlier. In love as in everything else, it is the first step that costs.

"Why do you not take off your hat, dear?" said Mirko. "It will be so much cosier if you take off your hat. We will pretend we are on our honeymoon.—Come! let us be quite mad and gay—remember it is Carnival!"

The words suited her mood; suddenly she felt reckless, she smiled her answer.

"Wait here a minute," said Mirko and he bounded down the stair. Ragna quickly unpinned her hat, and laid it on the dressing table, she fluffed up her hair where it had been crushed, and went back to the window, watching with amused sympathy the merry party below. Her spirits had recovered from the depression of a few moments since, she felt daring, buoyed up by a strange sensation of irresponsibility—the spring was having its effect on her also.

Presently Mirko returned, followed by the bouncing Maria who set the table still humming her song. Ragna caught the words.

"*E se vuoi la robba mia, è certo che caro la devi pagar!*"

"That is a very jolly song," said Ragna.

"Si, signora," said Maria showing her even white teeth in a broad smile.—"It is sung all through Ciociaria and everywhere!" She ran down to the kitchen and reappeared bearing a large bowl of steaming *gnocchi* and two cobwebby bottles of gold-coloured wine.

"Come," said Mirko, "your Ladyship is served."

Ragna laughingly took her place at the table and they both fell to with healthy appetites. Mirko saw that Ragna's glass was kept replenished with the wine. "*Proprio di dietro i fagotti*," the hostess had declared it. After the gnocchi came stewed chicken and potatoes, then the famous *frittata* with artichokes and a salad, then cheese, and finally, Maria having asked if the Signori wished anything more, retired, closing the door after her.

The wine was singing in Ragna's ears, and her face was flushed, it seemed to her that she was in a dream in which she had become two distinct persons,—one a long way off, watching as at a play, what the other Ragna did. Mirko rose from his chair and led her to the couch where he seated himself beside her. He drew her head down on his shoulder and holding her close to him murmured his love in her ear. His nearness, his kisses and the low, passionate vibration of his voice overpowered her; she felt all power of resistance slip from her, his personality, his desire dominated her entirely; her lips parted, she closed her eyes, her senses swam. As in a dream, his lips found hers, she felt the heat of his breath scorching her face, a wild flame surged through her veins,—a brief almost unconscious struggle and she lay unresisting in his arms.

When she came to herself again a sudden gloom pervaded the place. Large drops of rain splashed on the window-sill. She watched them idly a moment, then her eyes wandered to the other window where Mirko stood leaning, pulling at his moustache, then down to herself. Suddenly a gulf of realization and shame overwhelmed her. With a hasty hand she straightened out her skirts, then flung herself down, sobbing, her burning face hidden in the cushion.

At the sound Mirko turned and came towards her, an exceedingly sheepish expression on his handsome face.

"Don't, love!" he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. She writhed away from him.

"Don't, dear," he repeated awkwardly, and as the girl paid no attention, he knelt at her side and kissed all that was visible of one ear. She sat up, wild-eyed and disheveled.

"Oh, how could you?" she sobbed, "oh, why did you do it? Oh, how can I ever look anyone in the face again!"

She flung herself down again, her voice lost in a paroxysm of grief.

Mirko bit his moustache; scenes of this kind annoyed him terribly and now that his fever had passed he could think of nothing to say. Presently Ragna faced him once more.

"You despise me, don't you?" she asked.

"Never! Never in the world, my darling!" he cried but his voice carried no conviction. "I owe you all gratitude!"

"Oh!" she said, her eyes widening, a hard look coming over her face, "oh!"

He lifted her limp hand and kissed it.

"I am your devoted slave,—you have given me the greatest proof of love—"

"What are you going to do about it?" she interrupted.

"Do about it. What is there to do? The memory of this—"

"Ah, so it is already a memory to you! To me it is dishonour."

"My dear child, nothing of the sort! We loved each other, we lost our heads,—there is no dishonour, no one need know."

His ineffectual manner struck her like a blow. Covering her face with her hands she burst into fresh sobs.

Mirko like all men, hated above all things a scene; he began to feel angry, revengeful even, the more so as his conscience reproached him. He said in a hard voice:

"Look here, Ragna, you are not a fool, you knew I could not marry you—"

Her scornful eyes stopped him; he shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear girl, if you had not wished—I have never taken a woman against her will—"

"You coward!" she said her eyes blazing.

He rose and strolling to the window carefully chose a cigarette from his case and as carefully lit it, but in spite of himself his hands trembled. Ragna sat immovable on the sofa as though turned to stone. The rain pattered softly on the window-sill and the warm heavy dampness invaded the room. Below, in the kitchen, someone was clattering pots and pans, and Maria's voice took up the refrain of the "Ciociara." The lively tune rose, a ghastly mockery, and Ragna smiled at the irony of it, then a fresh wave of despair swept over her, her shaken nerves gave way, and dropping her head on her folded hands she wept disconsolately and brokenly. The forlornness of her attitude, the bowed head with its dishevelled mass of golden hair, the slender shoulders heaving with noiseless sobs touched Mirko; he threw his cigarette out of the window with an angry gesture and paced up and down the long narrow room, tugging at his moustache and knitting his brows. The mood of brutality like that of a sated animal had passed and a reaction of something very like shame, set in—shame be it said, not for having taken advantage of a confiding girl, but for the unchivalrous cynicism of his subsequent conduct which he could see no way of glossing over. A woman may forgive passion, brutality even, but not the poisoned barb of cynicism. His vanity refused to consider the situation irretrievable notwithstanding, and he paused beside the weeping girl.

"Ragna," he said, "forgive me! I have behaved like a brute and I deserve to be kicked."

The accent of sincere regret in his voice was like balm to the girl's wounds; by his self-abasement she might recover a semblance, at least, of self-respect that would help her to tide over the present necessity. In a half subconscious way she realized that death does not come through the wishing for it, that a situation no matter how terrible must be lived through somehow,—but oh, to be alone!

"Poor child," said Mirko, stroking the silky waves of her hair, "I must have been mad! Will you not believe that I was mad, dear,—and forget all that I would have you forget?"

He knelt beside her putting one arm about her; with his free hand he forced her head up from her locked fingers and would have kissed the tears away, but she drew back with horror.

"Oh, no! Never again!"

"Ragna," he pleaded, "but you love me?"

"I did love you—once," she said in a toneless voice. "I did love you—too much."

"No, dearest, not too much—" he started but stopped silenced by the expression of her eyes.

"God knows," he said impulsively, "that I would give my life not to have hurt you! You were too beautiful,—you maddened me!"

She smiled a little scornfully, very sadly, and the smile condemned him in his own consciousness; in her eyes he saw reflected for the first time the futility of his declarations, the shallow selfishness of his nature. It seemed to him that he shrivelled morally under her gaze. To Ragna he had become a stranger, the dream hero was shattered irremediably; the scales had fallen from her eyes and with a pitilessly clear vision she had seen the paltry egoism of the man's soul. Something had snapped within her,—a light had gone out; she wondered dully if anything could matter very much again.

Mirko rose to his feet rather unsteadily and poured himself a glass of wine; as he raised it to his lips someone knocked on the door and he started, spilling half the contents of the glass. Maria's voice called cheerfully.

"The vetturino wants to know at what hour the Signori will start, it is getting late."

"Tell him we will start as soon as he is ready and send me the *addizione*," answered Mirko. He gulped down his wine, and then poured out another glass and carried it over to Ragna.

"Drink this," he ordered and she obeyed mechanically.

"Now," he said, "put on your hat and smooth your hair a little; don't let these people guess

anything."

Ragna flushed, but her pride was touched as he had meant it to be. She rose with an effort and walked lifelessly over to the dressing-table. She wet the corner of her handkerchief in the jug and dabbled it on her dark-ringed reddened eyes and tear-stained cheeks; taking out a little comb from the back of her hair she straightened up her stray locks and resettled her heavy plaits. She put on her hat and tied over it a thick blue veil she found in the pocket of her ulster. When she had finished, she walked to a chair, passing the couch with a shudder, and sat down dully.

Maria entered presently, carrying the bill on a plate; she looked curiously from the apathetic girl, shrouded in her heavy veil, to the self-possessed young man,—they were not like any lovers she had seen. "They must have quarreled," was her reflection. Mirko paid the modest bill and added a generous mancia at which the girl's eyes sparkled, and she thanked him effusively.

"Is the carriage ready?" he inquired.

"*Sissignore, eccola quà!*" As she spoke they heard the little trap rattling and jingling as it drew up outside. Mirko turned to Ragna:

"If you are ready, we will go."

She rose and avoiding his proffered hand, preceded him quickly down the stair and across the kitchen, walking head down, with a furtive air as though trying to escape observation. Maria and the hostess smiled significantly at each other as she passed.

She climbed unaided into the carriage and drew her skirts aside as Mirko entered. The hood was drawn up and a large water-proof apron covered their knees, another water-proof strip was fastened at one end to the hood and at the other to the large umbrella that sheltered the driver, so that they were almost in the dark and entirely shielded from the curious gaze of passers-by.

They sat in an oppressive silence; Ragna, her hands clasped on her knees, her eyes looking straight before her, her mouth set in a hard line, barely discernible through the thick veil. Mirko was most uncomfortable, and could think of nothing to say or do to relieve the situation. Finally, in desperation, he asked her permission to light a cigarette; she shrugged her shoulders in complete indifference and made no answer; he lit one and puffed away moodily, every now and again casting furtive glances at the girl's averted profile. She sat quite motionless, only shuddering slightly as they passed the ruined acqueduct. "The hare is run to earth," she thought bitterly. The drive seemed interminable; the carriage bumped on endlessly over the bad roads, the rain pattered unceasingly on the lowered hood, the driver urged on his steaming beasts in endless monotone—and so on and on and on. It was like a long bad dream.

As they came into the city, the rain stopped, but the air was heavy with a damp, soggy mist through which the street lamps glowed, each set in a luminous halo. The streets were full of a noisy merry crowd and the carriage made slow progress. Once it stopped altogether and a masked Pierrot climbed up on one step, a gay Harlequin on the other while a very masculine *ballerina* in draggled pink tarletan installed herself or himself beside the driver.

"*Tò!*" said the Pierrot, and blew out a long paper sausage that squeaked as it collapsed; the Harlequin emptied a shovelful of confetti over the silent pair.

"Who is the mysterious princess?" squeaked the Pierrot, "Unveil! unveil, fair one!"

As Ragna paid no attention he snatched her veil from her face and fell into a pose of ecstatic mock admiration. Ragna threw herself back, alarmed.

"Here!" said Mirko, starting up angrily, "I won't have this! Let the lady alone, will you? Get down!"

"Pray, be more courteous!" mouthed Arlecchino, "*In carnevale ogni scherzo vale.*" The crowd shrieked approval.

"Here, then," said Mirko, diving into his pocket and bestowing a gold piece on each masker, "go and drink to the health of your '*carnevale*' with this."

The *ballerina* poked a long red cardboard nose down under the hood, squeaking in high falsetto.

"And poor Colombina? Don't forget poor Colombina!"

Mirko found another gold piece for Colombina and the three masks jumped down shouting joyously.

"*Evviva gli sposi!*"

The crowd took up the cry and it rang after the retreating carriage.

Mirko looked at Ragna deprecatingly, but meeting her scornful eyes, turned his own away.

When at last they reached the Piazza Montecitorio he insisted on helping her out, and holding her fast by the hand, asked her:

"Do you really hate me then, after all?"

She drew her hand away from him, and without looking at him said "Good-bye" with a finality of

accent not to be mistaken; then the *portone* swallowed her up. Mirko, with a muttered oath clambered back into the carriage and drove to his hotel. As he entered the lobby he encountered the unexpected form of Angelescu.

"When did you come?" he asked in surprise.

"At noon, and I have been waiting for you ever since. I have a message for you from the King—" he spoke the last word in a whisper.

"The devil you have! What's up?"

"You'll know soon enough," said the other significantly.

"Am I to be restored to grace?"

"Oh, yes, but there is a certain amount of humble-pie to be eaten first. Also they are determined to clip your wings for the future—there is question of a marriage."

"Marriage—whew! Who is the lady, may I ask?"

Angelescu named a princess, Mirko's senior by several years and not renowned for her good looks. Mirko made a wry face.

"His Majesty is awfully keen on it, and if you were to upset the arrangement by any fresh escapades, I fancy your bed would not be of roses for some time to come—I hope you haven't been getting into any scrapes here?" He looked suspiciously at Mirko's tell-tale countenance.

"Come along, old man," said Mirko putting his arm through Angelescu's. "There is nothing very terrible—and nothing to be very proud of either; I'll tell you all about it presently. By the way I want you to do something for me to-night. I want you to take a message to a lady at the *veglione*."

"Why don't you go yourself?"

"I would rather not,—it might be embarrassing for both of us." He laughed uneasily. "Do you remember that little Andersen girl we met on a steamer the year we went to St. Petersburg?"

He felt Angelescu's arm stiffen under his, and had the light been stronger, he would have seen the bronzed cheek pale. They had reached Mirko's room and entered, closing the door after them.

CHAPTER V

As Ragna entered the pension Astrid came out of the drawing-room to meet her.

"Oh, Ragna, where on earth have you been all day? We have been so anxious! We were afraid you were lost or kidnapped or something. And the dominoes have come, do come and try yours on!"

"The dominoes?" asked Ragna dully.

"Why Ragna Andersen! The dominoes for the *veglione*!" She turned and looked at Ragna attentively as they passed under a swinging lamp in the passage.

"Ragna, you are ill!" she cried, "you are as white as a sheet! What has happened?"

"Nothing," said Ragna, "I got caught in the carnival crowd and pushed about—that's all, and I am tired out."

"Well, in the name of common sense, what made you stay out all day when you knew we were going to the *veglione* to-night? I believe you won't be able to go at all!"

"Oh, yes I shall," said Ragna, making a desperate effort to pull herself together—no one must know, no one guess her secret! "Astrid, do be an angel—if I rest quietly for two or three hours I shall be as fit as ever—do explain it to your mother and Hagerup, and have some dinner sent me in my room. I want to lie down, and I won't have time if I have to dress for dinner. Do now, there's a dear!"

"Very well," assented Astrid, "you do look done up, you poor thing!"

But she shook her head as she turned away from Ragna's door. "I don't like this business," she said to herself; "there's something wrong, she's not a bit like her old self!" She was thinking of Ragna's calm assurance and self-sufficiency in Christiania, so far removed from her present almost apologetic manner.

Ragna, alone at last, turned the key in the door; she swept to the floor the black domino laid on her bed, and flinging herself face-downward among the pillows, writhed in a frenzy of grief and shame, the fruit of long hours of suppression. It seemed to her that her very soul must be contaminated. "Oh, fool! Oh, blind fool that I was!" she moaned, and strained her arms till shoulder and elbow cracked. Suddenly she rose, and marching over to the dressing-table, gazed long and searchingly at herself in the glass. The redness and puffiness of her eyelids had disappeared during the long drive, but there were dark purple circles under the eyes, she was

terribly pale and her mouth and features generally, had a hard, drawn look. "Fool!" she cried again and burying her face in her hands, began to weep. It did not last long however, she soon dashed the tears away, angrily. "It's no use crying over spilt milk!" With a sort of rage she tore off her clothes, trampling them on the floor,—were they not witnesses, accomplices almost? Then she washed, and it seemed to her that she hated her beautiful white body; all that she was, all that she had become, sickened her.

She slipped on a dressing gown and lay down on the bed, quite motionless, staring miserably into space. Nothing was left to her, nothing! If only Mirko had not been so horrible—afterwards! She shuddered and ground her teeth. Oh, the shame of it, the bitter humiliation! Her eyes burned, her throat was dry as though seared by a hot iron, her head throbbed painfully.

Presently the maid knocked and when Ragna had unlocked the door, brought in a tray with dinner, which she set on the table. She surveyed Ragna with sympathy and curiosity.

"Does not the Signorina feel well? What a pity, the night of the *veglione*!"

"Thank you, Rosa, I am a little tired; I daresay I shall be quite rested in an hour or so," answered Ragna bitterly.

"Shall I not bring the Signorina a glass of Marsala?"

"No, thank you," said Ragna, but the maid had already flown off and returned very quickly with a glass of the topaz-coloured wine.

"Here, drink this, Signorina, it is very good when one is tired, it will warm you up!" She was not to be denied, and to please her Ragna drained the little glass. Rosa was right, she felt it warming her veins; a tinge of colour crept to her cheeks, and she managed to swallow a little food. Then she lay down again, and what with the wine and the fatigue fell asleep, and slept until Rosa returned to help her dress.

Rosa, as she watched the Signorina's purple shadowed eyes, said to herself.

"*Macchè fatigue!* Displeasure of love, that is what it is!" She prided herself on her perspicacity where affairs of the heart were concerned, and sighed deeply to show her sympathy.

Ragna stood apathetically while the maid hooked up her bodice. She wore a simple white frock, very youthful and girlish, and the low neck and short sleeves displayed her pretty shoulders and rounded, slender arms to advantage.

She had thought with pleasure of Mirko's seeing her in it, for she had told him by what sign to recognise her, and he was to have come masked to the ball to dance with her.

"The Signorina lacks but the veil to be a bride!" said Rosa admiringly.

Ragna shuddered and grew paler than before, if that were possible.

"The Signorina is beautiful, as she is, but if she will take my advice, she should put on a little rouge, she is too pale."

Ragna looked at herself in the mirror,—she was heavy eyed and white, far too white. The virginal whiteness of her frock, the pure pale face and pale gold hair seemed a pitiful mockery to her. She was glad when Rosa laid the black domino about her shoulders though it made her face look ghastly.

There was a sound of voices and laughter in the passage, and Ragna quickly snatched up her black mask and adjusted it as Astrid and Estelle entered the room.

"Ready, Ragna?"

"Yes," she answered, bending for Rosa to draw the domino hood over her head and fasten it with a pin.

Estelle turned herself about before the cheval-glass; her green domino, trimmed with black lace, was too short for her, and showed a good three inches of grey skirt at the hem; it was too full and made awkward bunchy folds about her and she wore a green mask with a frill of black lace, which fluttered as she breathed through her mouth,—however, she was quite satisfied with her appearance.

Astrid wore her light blue domino with coquettish grace and the small white loup hardly disguised her features; she had not yet pulled up the hood, and her fair hair curled prettily over her small head. Ragna also wore a *loup*, a black velvet one: she wished now that she had chosen a mask like Estelle's—anything to hide her, for her chin would quiver in spite of all her efforts.

Fru Bjork followed the girls into the room, very imposing in heliotrope, and grumbling at the necessity of wearing a mask.

"So hot! So stuffy! I can't breathe now, and I imagine what it will be in that place!" She was already fanning herself vigorously. "I'm quite as excited as you girls! Dear me, I hope it will be all just right—I should be more comfortable though, I admit, if we had a gentleman with us."

"You might have asked the man with the striped trousers, Mother,—I should think those stripes would carry him through anything!"

"Why should you make fun of the poor man?" asked Estelle. "I am sure he has been most polite. He has taken a great deal of trouble in inquiring about singing lessons for me, and he sings so sweetly himself. Didn't you like that song of his last evening about some '*Paese lontano dal mar*'?"

"He has a good voice," said Ragna.

"But his trousers drown it!" laughed Astrid. "Come on, all of you, it is time to start!"

Fru Bjork led the way, burly in her domino, Estelle after her, and the other two followed, Astrid keeping up a gay chatter which saved Ragna the effort of conversation. They packed themselves into the waiting carriage, and in a few minutes alighted at the Costanzi.

It was early as yet and the crowd was thin, but more people were arriving all the time, some in fancy costume, but most of them in dominoes. Fru Bjork marshalled her party to the box she had taken,—it was in the second tier, near the stage, and there was a table in it as they were to have supper served from Aragno's. Estelle and Astrid pressed to the front of the box, and Ragna sat down on the little bench at the side, behind Astrid.

"Why, Ragna, child," said Fru Bjork, "don't you want to see what's going on, now you're here?"

"I am still a little tired," she answered, "and there is not much to see now, by and by it will be more interesting."

Astrid turned her head.

"What on earth made you such a fool as to tire yourself all out in the crowd to-day?"

Ragna thought she detected a note of suspicion in the question and a wave of terror swept over her,—suppose someone were to guess? She made an effort and answered jestingly, forcing the note. Fortunately the attention of the party was soon taken up with the scene below, leaving her to her own thoughts. The boxes were rapidly filling, and on the floor below a variegated crowd surged to and fro. Near the entrance a number of young men in evening dress and without masks, scanned curiously the entering dominoes, sometimes accosting them, and sometimes being accosted in the conventional falsetto. Marguérites, Columbines, peasant-girls, flower-girls abounded, and the air seemed thick with Pierrots. All the women, without exception, were masked, and it gave them an assurance, not to say audacity of manner very different from that of ordinary occasions. They were daring, *provocantes*, insolent even, and the young men enjoyed it hugely. A babel of voices and laughter rose from the throng, almost drowning the orchestra, but as yet all was orderly and quiet. Women in dominoes walked about in pairs, stopping to talk to men, often separating, and joining other groups. It was a human kaleidescope.

Ragna leaned over Estelle's shoulder and gazed apprehensively about; she did not see the face she feared, however, and sank back into her place.

"Surely he would not have the courage to come here—now," she thought. He was to have come masked, wearing a tuberose in his button-hole and carrying one in his left hand. If he should come notwithstanding, what should she do? At least, she thought, her mask was a protection,—there would be no necessity for recognising him.

The door of the box opened and an attaché of the Swedish-Norwegian Legation entered, bowing. He was a distant connection of Fru Bjork's, and had come to offer his services to the ladies. His attentions to Astrid had long been joked about by the others, and it may be said that Astrid did not discourage them. "So convenient to have him about,—besides he is a sort of cousin," she had said to her Mother, when that lady remonstrated with her on the subject. So Count Lotten was made welcome and Fru Bjork invited him to sup with them. He promptly accepted and set about earning his salt by pointing out such well-known people as he recognised.

As the time passed the scene grew livelier, dancers filled the centre of the floor, cutting the most surprising capers, one Pierrot in particular drawing the applause of the spectators by his daring antics. No one seemed to resent the liberties he took, the whisper having gone about that he was the young Prince C—— a spoilt darling of the Roman aristocracy, Count Lotten told the ladies, and Astrid sighed.

"I do wish I knew a prince, if they are like that! It must be awfully amusing." Ragna's lip curled, but she said nothing.

Supper was being served in the boxes, and presently the waiters laid the table and set out the oysters and gallantine and the other good things Fru Bjork had ordered. Ragna could not eat, but the champagne did her good, and she clinked glasses with the others and joked in so lively a way as to set Fru Bjork's mind quite at rest on her account. Gaiety was in the air, the merry din became deafening. As the girl looked about she interpreted it to herself. "Let us eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die!" A feverish excitement seized her; her lips burned and her eyes glittered through the mask, she had unhooked her domino at the neck on account of the heat, and her white throat throbbed in its black frame. Astrid expressed a desire to walk about below and Ragna seconded her—she felt that she must get up and move about, or she must scream. Count Lotten offered himself as escort.

"It will be quite proper," he assured Fru Bjork, "I shall be responsible for the young ladies' safety,—in half an hour we shall be back here again."

He told Astrid to take his arm and let Ragna take hers,—"and be sure to stick together."

Down on the floor they pushed as best they could through the excited, perspiring crowd, laughing, shrieking, gesticulating, mad with the Carnival. Astrid laughed excitedly.

"I should like one turn, just one turn of this valse," she pleaded.

Lotten smiled down at her.

"But it is impossible, we can't leave Fröken Ragna!"

"Oh," said Ragna, "please don't stop on my account! I shall stand against the side here, under this box, and be quite safe. You can come back for me here!"

The Count hesitated but the desire for a dance with Astrid overcame his scruples and he acquiesced. Ragna took up her position under the box, as she had said, and Lotten and Astrid whirled past, then were swallowed up in the crowd.

Ragna stood watching the brilliant scene. The noise and the recurrent rhythm of the dance music aroused a certain wildness within her,—the latent savagery hidden in the hearts of all of us. As the tide rose within her she grew defiant and reckless—she had lost that which a girl holds most precious, why should she observe any restraint, had not the bonds of conventionality been snapped for her? Would she not be justified in flinging all constraint to the winds, in giving free rein to the wildest impulses of her nature? "It's of no use keeping the stable-door locked when the horse is stolen," she reflected bitterly. Her foot tapped the floor in time to the music, the whirling crowd fascinated her, drew her as to a vortex, it was a critical moment. "*He* had no scruples, why should I have any henceforward?" she asked herself. "'*Carpe diem*,' he used to say,—well, I say it now and I mean it!" She stepped out from the wall.

Suddenly a band of maskers emerged from the crowd, thrown from it like the spray from the crest of a wave, they surrounded Ragna, holding one another by the hand, forming a chain about her. One of them, a tall man disguised as Mephistopheles, stepped into the ring and the others capered about them, gibbering.

"*Bella mascherina!*" squeaked the Mephisto. Ragna smiled at the challenge and the masker thus encouraged, came close to her.

"*Ti conosco, mascherina!*" he said.

Ragna shook her head laughingly.

"Impossible!"

"What, not recognise the most beautiful mouth in Rome! Già!" The man's tone was insolent.

"Go away!" said Ragna.

"Don't be rude, *mascherina*! I won't betray you—I can keep a secret as well as anyone!"

"Go away!" repeated Ragna, her defiant feeling of a few moments earlier giving way to nervous apprehension. Why had she left the shelter of the wall, why exposed herself to the impertinence of half-tipsy maskers?

Impertinence,—her position of a young woman apparently alone at a masked ball invited it!

"You really want me to go away? Very well, my little dove,—when you have given me a kiss. A favour for a favour, you know!" He crooked his arm and minced nearer. The dancing circle of red imps burst into laughter.

Ragna turned and tried to break through the ring.

"No, you don't," said Mephisto with a leer, laying his hand on her arm, "not so fast, sweet one! You shall give me that little kiss first!"

Ragna, really frightened, threw herself away from her tormentor; he was clutching a fold of her domino and the fastenings at the neck gave way; he pulled it back baring her white shoulder and her fair head.

"Bella! Bella! give us each a kiss!" shrieked the imps, and Mephistopheles, leaning forward pressed his lips on the smooth shoulder nearest him.

At that moment a tall figure burst through the ring, scattering the imps right and left, and seizing the Mephisto by the collar dragged him back and flung him aside. The masker turned with an oath but seeing the height and strength of his assailant and realizing that discretion is sometimes the better part of valour, bowed low with a mocking laugh and disappeared into the crowd followed by his attendant demons in search of fresh amusement.

Ragna, clutching her domino about her, raised her eyes to her rescuer's face and uttered an involuntary exclamation:

"Count Angelescu! You here!"

"Mademoiselle Andersen!" he said, "I had been watching you for some time, but I was not sure, there are so many black dominoes. Then when those devils—but never mind, since I have found you. Take my arm and let me get you out of this; I must talk to you and it is impossible here!"

It was quite true, he could hardly make himself heard above the din; the fun was fast and furious, pandemonium reigned.

She took his arm and he piloted her skilfully through the crowd and round the corridor to an empty box, where he set a chair for her with its back to the house, and closed the door. She paused a moment to rearrange her hood and sat down; Angelescu took a chair facing her. There was a moment's embarrassed silence, then Angelescu moistened his lips and began.

"I do not exactly know how to put what I have to say, it is very difficult for me. A certain person asked me to come here on his behalf—"

"Then you know—all?"

"Is it true?"

She bowed her head.

"It is?"

"Yes."

A groan escaped him.

"Oh, the infernal blackguard! I would not believe it until I had heard it from your own lips. Oh, why was I not in time—I might have saved you! And now it is too late."

Ragna was silent.

"But that is not the message I was told to deliver. He wishes to offer you compensation,—any sum you care to name."

"Compensation! To me!" Ragna half rose from her chair.

"Wait! wait! I beg of you! It is an insult, I know that—but it is not from me, it is an order. I had to get it over! Oh, don't!"

Ragna had dropped her face in her hands and was weeping as though her heart were broken, but the tears were of rage rather than of grief.

"Compensation! How dare he!"

"Listen, Mademoiselle, listen! Ragna, don't cry like that! Listen to what I have to say to you! That was my official message, but this is what I really come to say." His face was pale and his eyes blazed. "Ragna I have loved you ever since we first met,—I love you still—"

She interrupted him with an hysterical laugh.

"What, you too! This is too funny!"

"Ragna, don't! I love you—"

"Don't talk to me about love, I have learned what that means!" She now sat stiffly, her head held upright.

"Poor child," he said gravely, "my love is not of that kind, I want to marry you, Ragna."

"But you don't understand," she cried, "surely you can't know, or you would not say that!"

"I do know," he said, still very gravely, "I know all, and because I realize that you are a victim, because I love you really and want to have the power to protect you, I ask you plainly: will you be my wife?"

She smiled cynically. It was too much. In the light of her terrible disillusionment she could not understand the sincerity of the man. Her whole world had fallen in ruins about her and the dust of her broken idol obscured her vision. Angelescu had made the fatal mistake of delivering Mirko's message, and Ragna having found one man so utterly vile, could not, for the moment, believe generosity or magnanimity possible in any other. "He thinks it would be convenient to have me married to his aide," she thought. "Find the girl a husband, and all is comfortably arranged!" She despised Angelescu for lending himself to such a scheme.

"I think not, thank you," she said in a hard voice.

"You are in love with him?"

"Love him? I despise him!"

"Then think well if you are doing right," he said earnestly, "in refusing a man who not only loves you but respects you, who is, above all things, anxious for your welfare."

"I see, you mean that beggars should not be choosers!"

He considered her compassionately, and it was in a very gentle voice that he said:

"I know that I have not chosen a good time for this—but I had no choice. To-morrow I must accompany the Prince," his mouth twisted as he said it, "back to Montegria, but before going I had to see you, I had to tell you that I love you, that I shall stand by you, that I am at your

disposal, to take, or to leave."

"Very kind of you," she answered in that cold, hard voice, so unlike her own.

"I see that you are determined to misconstrue me," he said sadly, "and I am sorry, for surely no man ever offered a woman a more sincere or whole-hearted devotion than that I lay at your feet. Oh, little Ragna, if only you would come to me, I should make you forget."

"I think, Count," interrupted Ragna, rising, "that I will go back to my friends. Will you be good enough—"

"One moment, let me finish," said Angelescu, rising also, "will you not, at least, hear me out?"

Ragna stopped, but did not reseat herself, so both remained standing.

"I should make it the business of my life to give you happiness, to wipe from your memory all trace—" She made an impatient gesture. "Forgive my clumsiness! You will not consider it? To-night you are tired, you are worn out, perhaps you may think differently later. At least promise me that if you change your mind you will let me know—I shall come to you anywhere, at any time. Remember, I love you,—you need only to make the sign and I will come. And if there ever is anything I can do to help you, at any time,—if ever you are in trouble, remember that I am there."

"You are very kind," she said wearily, and again moved towards the door. This time he made no effort to detain her, but giving her his arm, conducted her to the door of her own *palco*. She turned to take leave of him and gave him her hand which he raised to his lips.

"Thank you for your kindness, Count," she said, adding in a clear, hard voice: "And tell the Prince that I despise him for his message. Tell him that no proposition he might make would be accepted."

He saw that although her voice was hard, her eyes were bright with unshed tears,—another moment and he might have won his cause, or at least have broken down the barrier of ice she had built about herself,—but Ragna was afraid to trust herself further; she quickly entered the box, closing the door behind her.

"Poor child," he murmured, "poor, poor child!"

He returned to his box, the one that Mirko had engaged for the evening, and throwing on his greatcoat took his hat and hurried out.

It was drizzling but he did not call a cab; thrusting his hands into his pockets, he strode up the shining, wet street, his head sunk forward. It was true that he had loved Ragna ever since the trip on the *Norje*; her fair head had been ever before his eyes; shining like a lode star from afar, though he had had no thought of ever seeing her again. In his pocketbook he carried the little pencil sketch he had made of her, and her notes with the brief words of thanks for his New Year's cards. He was not a sentimental man, but his mind was of a rather dogged quality. Ragna's girlish innocence and charm had made a profound impression on him, and that impression persisted with a curious tenacity; she had become his ideal woman, and stood to him for all that sisters might have been, all that he desired in the wife never to be his. To think of her now, hurt and hardened, her innocence trampled and crushed, her girlhood soiled beyond remedy, to think of her morally alone, stripped of the protection of maidenhood, her wounded and suspicious pride refusing the help of his strong arm, maddened him.

He entered the hotel and went straight to Mirko's room. The Prince was lying on a couch, smoking, the picture of lazy comfort; the contrast between his appearance and the visible wretchedness of the girl he had just left added fuel to the flame of Angelescu's indignation.

"Well, Otto, what did she say?"

"She refused, as I told you she would."

"Did she? Oh, well, she'll probably console herself," he growled.

Angelescu took a step forward, his brow drawn menacingly over his blazing eyes.

"Have you no shame?"

"My good Otto, what a question! Of course, I am overcome with shame! I am glad the girl had the spirit to go to the ball and amuse herself—"

"How dare you—"

"Don't excite yourself, Otto, I beg! Let us say, then, she went to the ball without amusing herself. She shows a fine, independent spirit too, in refusing—"

"I shall forget that you are my Prince presently, and then—"

"Don't, Otto, it would be so unwise! Now what else did she have to say? Accused me all round, eh?"

"She said nothing of you except that she despised you."

"And then? I suppose you agreed with her?"

"I asked her to be my wife."

"And she jumped at the chance?"

"She refused."

"By Jove! Refused your noble offer?"

Angelescu's face was livid, a muscle worked in his thin cheeks, his eyes looked like a lion's about to spring; his hand crept to his side where the hilt of his sabre should have been, but he was not in uniform; his short hair bristled on his head; with a supreme effort he held himself in check. His impulse was to throw himself on the other and silence his sarcastic tongue forever, but his military discipline stood him in good stead; the man before him was his Prince and therefore inviolable. Mirko watched him curiously, as though measuring the strength of his endurance. When he was able to regain control of his voice it was tense and hard; he jerked out his sentences as though each one represented a struggle.

"I have known you, Prince, ever since you were a baby, I have played with you, worked with you, served you faithfully and well. I knew you to be wild, reckless, selfish—but I never thought you would sink to this; to ruin an innocent young girl and then turn it into a jest. I am older than you, at your father's wish I have been brought up like a brother to you. I have stood by you through thick and thin, no man has had a more loyal friend and servant than I have been to you—but this is the end. You are no longer my Prince, I shall wear your uniform no longer. To-night we stand here, not as Prince and subject, but as man to man."

The Prince sat up.

"Nonsense, Otto! Do you mean to say that after all these years, you would desert me on account of a girl?"

"I shall send in my papers to-morrow," said Otto, and looking the Prince in the eyes he added, "if I were wearing my sabre now, I should break it in your presence—you are not worthy of the service of a true blade!" His hands made the gesture of snapping the blade over his knee; he turned on his heel.

Mirko sprang from the couch, upsetting the little table standing by it, with its box of cigarettes, decanter and glass. The bottle crashed to the floor and a sticky stream of liqueur crept over the carpet.

"Otto!" he cried. The other turned stiffly.

"Otto, you are right, I don't deserve a friend like you,—I have behaved like a blackguard. You may believe me or not,—I didn't mean to do the girl any harm. She—she went to my head, she maddened me! Hang it all! Why didn't she keep me at arm's length?"

"She trusted you," said Angelescu accusingly.

"Now look here, Otto, as man to man, if that girl in her heart of hearts hadn't wished me—"

"You damned cur," flashed Angelescu, "*you* to lay the blame on a woman! If you say another word I shall choke you where you stand. I—"

He threw out his arm, then realizing that he could control himself no longer, he wrenched open the door and strode out, flinging it to behind him.

Mirko flushed angrily. That he should have humbled himself to meet this response!

"You'll pay for that, my friend," he snarled. He turned thinking to pour himself a glass of liqueur and the sight of the broken decanter and its wasted contents completed his discomfiture. He was furious with Angelescu, furious with Ragna, all the more so as he was distinctly conscious of having played a very ugly role.

"Damn the girl, I wish I had never seen her!"

His servant, coming in response to his furious summons, met with a most unpleasant reception; he was used, however, to acting as *souffre douleur* in his Royal Master's fits of anger and philosophically bore the storm of invective hurled at his defenceless head.

The outburst had its usual calming effect on Mirko, who to do him justice, soon felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. Most of all he regretted the estrangement of Angelescu; from boyhood up he had always depended on Otto's devotion and clear judgment, and to have lost such a friend over such a foolish affair would be much too hard luck, a punishment far in excess of his fault. The wrong done to Ragna was much less important in his eyes; like every Don Juan, he had a contempt for women, and now that his passion had subsided he wondered what had attracted him in the girl, who after all was no great beauty.

"I will see what can be done to-morrow," he promised himself; he felt even ready to humble himself if necessary, to draw Otto back to him again, never doubting that by some means he would succeed in doing so. But alas for his plans! When he awoke late the next morning and sent his valet to inquire for the aide, the man came back with the announcement that Count Angelescu had left by the early train.

CHAPTER VI

Ragna was awakened by the maid knocking at her door. She sat up holding her throbbing head between her hands, trying to marshal in her mind the fragmentary memories of yesterday, that seemed like bits of a bad dream. They fell into their places, one by one,—the drive, the terrible evening at the *veglione*, her conversation with Angelescu, the return to her box, and the joyous welcome from her party, who were growing anxious for her—especially Astrid, consumed by remorse, for having deserted her in the crowd—

"And for that fool of a Lotten, who dances like a knitting-machine, anyhow, and let me get bumped and trampled on, and dragged to pieces in the crush!" Then the sleepy return home.

"Why don't you stop knocking, Rosa? I don't want to get up yet!" she called fretfully.

"I have a letter for you, Signorina, it is marked '*urgent*.'"

Ragna rose wearily, and unlocked the door; Rosa brought in the breakfast tray and set it down, then fished an envelope out of her apron pocket, and having handed it to Ragna, left the room. She would willingly have lingered to chatter about the *veglione*, but Ragna's manner did not invite conversation.

Ragna relocked the door, and returned to bed to read her letter; it was from Angelescu, and ran as follows:

"My Dear Child,

"I shall be leaving Rome in a few hours. After what has happened. I cannot remain any longer as aide-de-camp to H. R. H. and I am returning home to resign my commission in the service, and to see that it takes effect immediately. After that, my plans are undecided.

"I meant what I said to you last evening, and I refuse to consider your answer as definite. I beg of you to take some time to think over the proposition. I shall wait patiently for your ultimate decision, which I hope may be in my favour. In any case, should you ever stand in need of a friend, remember that now and always, I shall be at your service. Unfortunately for myself, perhaps, I am not a man who changes, and ten years from now I shall still be the same towards you as I am to-day. A letter sent to the address in the lower left-hand corner will find me always.

"Believe me,

"Your devoted friend and servant,"

(here followed the signature and address.)

Ragna read the letter through twice, thoughtfully. Its intentional restraint she took for coldness. Angelescu, in his effort to suit his language to her manner of the night before, and to avoid antagonizing her by any untimely warmth of expression, had overreached himself for, with her, the inevitable reaction had set in and the formality of the letter froze the feelings in her that a greater tenderness might have called forth. She misconstrued the delicacy of his intention, taking it for the ceremonious chivalry of a man, who, while repenting of his impulsive and quixotic offer, feels that he cannot withdraw it, and is prepared to abide by it, regardless of inclination.

Going to her writing table, she answered at once.

"Dear Count Angelescu,

"I appreciate fully the kindness and generosity of your offer, but do not feel that I can accept it. I sincerely hope that you will not think of breaking off your career on my account, it would seem to me most unnecessary, as there is no real reason why you should take up the cudgels on my behalf—especially, since I desire you not to.

"Thanking you with all my heart for your kindness,

"I remain,

"Sincerely yours,

"Ragna Andersen."

She folded the sheet, put it in an envelope, which she addressed as directed in Angelescu's letter, gummed down the flap, and sealed it. She sat weighing the letter meditatively in her hand, a moment or two before she rang the bell to call Rosa. Did something tell her that she was throwing away her own chance of happiness, and wounding the one heart that could really love and understand her?

After the letter had gone, she sat on at the table, resting her cheek on the palm of her hand. It was a wet, gloomy morning, the cold light gave the shabby pension room a dreary look; on the

floor lay her clothes as she had stepped out of them the evening before; the black domino lay over the back of a chair, and the mask swung rakishly by one of its elastics, from a knob of the dressing glass.

On the mantel-shelf stood a vase of half-withered flowers, whose dropping petals littered the hearth below. Ragna took a miserable delight in the untidiness of the room; it seemed of a piece with the confusion of her life, a fit setting for her misery of mind and body.

Rosa entered quietly, with an armful of wood and a pine cone, and kneeling before the fireplace, soon had a merry little blaze. Seeing that Ragna had not touched her breakfast, she poured out a cup of coffee, and taking it over to the girl, obliged her to drink it.

"Go back to bed, Signorina, you are still tired from the *veglione*."

Ragna shook her head, but Rosa took her by the arm, and led her gently over, putting her to bed as though she were a child. This done, she proceeded to straighten up the room, folding the clothes neatly and laying them in the cupboard.

"*Ecco!*" she said, "that is better! You shall not get up for luncheon, Signorina, I will bring you a tray here."

"You are a good soul, Rosa," said Ragna, touched by the maid's kindly attentions.

Rosa smiled cheerfully, and went out, closing the door gently behind her.

The fire had given Ragna an idea; she crept out of bed and took from her writing case Angelescu's sketch of Prince Mirko, and the portraits of him she had cut from illustrated journals. She looked at them in turn, the handsome, smiling, indifferent face looked out from the slips of paper, as it always had, but to her it was changed. She saw now, as she had not before, the selfish hardness of the sensual mouth, the nonchalant boldness of the almond-shaped eyes, the impress of self-indulgence over the whole face. This, then, was her dream-hero, this! Have all idols clay feet, she wondered? It was more than love she had lost, more than innocence,—it was the ideal of all her girlhood, all her maiden hopes and dreams. Tears filled her eyes; suddenly she lifted the pictures to her lips, and kissed them passionately, then dashing the tears away, she laid them, one by one on the fire, watched them flame up and shrivel to fluttering black rags,—and crept back to bed.

"It is over," she thought, "all over. I will put the past behind me, as though nothing had been; it is destroyed, as the flames destroyed the pictures. It is idiotic to pretend that one little hour of weakness can ruin one's whole life! I shall put it behind me, I shall forget it all, I shall wipe it from my memory. It shall not influence my life—except that I shall be wiser in the future."

So said Ragna; she had yet to realize that the future is made up of the past—of a thousand pasts, that one can no more wipe a past event out of one's life, than one can discard all one's past personality, the growth of years and of circumstance, and put on a new one. Every act has it consequence, and the complex interweaving of these consequences build up what men call fate,—also we are bound as much by the consequences of the acts of others, as by those of our own,—we are bound by the acts of countless generations past. Every day that passes, we dislodge stones that shall rebound, we know not where, or when, in the years to come, stones that shall wound men and women we will never know, who will be unconscious of our existence.

CHAPTER VII

The whole party was dull as a result of the *veglione*, following in that the general relaxation in the surrounding atmosphere.

With the evening of *Mardi Gras*, the carnival gaiety had reached its highest pitch, the flame had burnt itself out with the *moccoli* and the reaction precipitated the city from an orgy of light and colour into the grey asceticism of fasting and prayer. Rome, for six weeks, turned her back on the World, the Flesh and the Devil. The gay crowds who had paraded the streets in mask and domino now flocked to the churches for early Mass, the charming sinner sought the confessional, and if, on Sundays, irrepressible Frivolity lifted a corner of the pall of Piety, giving the outer world a glimpse of twinkling eyes and flashing teeth, Monday promptly replaced the black veil. Even the sun was keeping Lent; day after day the dawn rose on grey, sodden skies. Draggled black-robed priests plodded unceasingly through the rain, and dripping multitudes thronged the churches tramping the slime of the streets in over the marble floors.

"I've had enough of this!" Astrid complained over and over again, "for Heaven's sake let us get to some place where the sun shines!"

Estelle Hagerup had lost her enthusiasm for the Eternal City, with all the pictures covered up in the churches, and the awful weather that kept one from getting about there was nothing left to do, she declared. Even listening to a sweet-voiced gentleman in striped trousers, singing "*Lontano del mar*" is apt to pall on one, especially if the said gentleman happens to know no other song.

To Ragna the penitential weeks were most irksome, as above all else she wished to forget, and

the very spirit of the season, imbued as it was with introspection, examination of conscience, and the reviewing of past days, would, in spite of her efforts, insistently present to her mental vision that which she most desired to blot from her memory. She shunned the churches for the very reiteration of the endless litanies seemed to take possession of her thoughts and drive them in a vicious circle, round and round and ever back again to the same old theme. Pagan Rome was no better; filled as it was, with painful association it could afford her no relief. It was with unfeigned joy then, that she greeted Fru Bjork's decision to leave the Eternal City for Florence.

So they packed their boxes and set their faces Northward. Estelle Hagerup had proposed a stop at Assisi and a deviation to Perugia, but Astrid yawningly declared she had seen enough churches to last her the rest of her life, and Ragna was too indifferent to care, so the proposition was overruled and it was decided to take the journey direct.

They drove to the railway station through a steady downpour, the rain dripped from the roofs, spattered up from the pavements, ran in streams from the umbrellas of the few passers-by in the streets.

"Well," said Astrid, "if this is Sunny Italy, give me Christiania!"

They had installed themselves in an empty second-class compartment and thought to keep it to themselves, but just as the guard was vociferating for the third time "*Pronti!*" and "*Partenza!*" the door was flung open and a man got in. He was of middle height, neither stout nor thin, and might have been of any age between thirty and fifty. His dark grizzled hair was brushed back from a high, rather prominent forehead, and his dark grey eyes looked out with a kindly expression from behind a gold-mounted pince-nez. He had a good nose and his mouth was firm and well modelled, though partially hid by his short moustache and dark beard. He bowed to the ladies and having bestowed a heavy valise in the rack above his head, settled himself to read a newspaper which he drew from his pocket. Ragna noticed his hands which were well-shaped and had the suppleness and delicacy of touch belonging to medical men, especially surgeons—also they were scrupulously well-kept.

The train moved out slowly over the Campagna, towards the hills, and Ragna leaned out the window, taking a last look at the city where she had left faith and innocence. As the city receded in the misty distance, the Pagan relics disappeared; the dome of St. Peter's towered mystically above the town, drawing the eye irresistibly, seeming to say: "All else passes, but I the Faith of the Ages, I remain." Then a heavy curtain of rain swept down, obscuring the view, and she sank back in her seat. The train swerved round a curve, and with the change of direction the rain blew in at the open window; Ragna tugged at the strap, trying to raise it, but it resisted her efforts.

"Allow me," said a voice over her shoulder, in French; it was the man of the newspaper. He took the strap from her hands, and with a jerk sent the refractory pane into place.

"It is a wet day," he remarked as though he felt called upon to apologise for the climate. "I regret that *ces dames* should be seeing Italy in such unfavourable circumstances."

Fru Bjork answered him. "Indeed, we cannot complain, we have had such beautiful weather until quite recently."

"Mesdames have been long in Rome?"

"Three months."

"And you enjoyed the Carnival?"

"It was great fun!" interposed Astrid.

"Too much fun," said Estelle, lowering the guide-ook she had been reading, and peering out over the rims of her spectacles. "You look a perfect rag, Astrid, and Ragna too. Too much dissipation!"

"Ah!" exclaimed the gentleman, deprecatingly, glancing from one girl to another, adjusting his pince-nez the while, "mademoiselles are tired, then—from too much sight-seeing, perhaps?"

Ragna flushed and made no reply, but Astrid, throwing an angry glance at Estelle, answered:

"Everyone is not as strong as a horse, and the stairs in Rome are simply awful."

"Mademoiselle is perhaps a little anæmic?" Then as the girl looked surprised he added, "I beg your pardon, but I am a physician and have seen too strenuous sight-seeing have that effect on many young lady travellers. Allow me to present myself: Dr. Ferrari, of Florence." He bowed in the direction of Fru Bjork who responded, naming herself, and the others of her party.

The Doctor bowed to each in turn but his eyes rested longest on Ragna—their kindly penetration could give no offence, however, one instinctively trusted the man. The girl puzzled him, her gravity seemed unnatural in one so young; she seemed consciously keyed up to a certain pitch of conduct, her smile was forced, and when the tension was relaxed owing to her thinking herself unobserved, or to a moment of forgetfulness, the corners of her mouth drooped and her eyes fixed their gaze on a point in space, as though visualizing something of ineffable sadness. In this state she would start on being spoken to and a flash, almost of fear, would pass in her eyes.

As the day passed he studied her more and more. "She has had some terrible experience," he said to himself, "but she is fighting it down, and will succeed." He also observed that whatever might be haunting her secret thoughts, it was unknown to the others of the party. He set himself to

distract her mind, to amuse her, and was rewarded by her instant response to his efforts; she brightened perceptibly under the influence of his respectfully friendly manner.

Fru Bjork was charmed by this acquaintance chance had thrown in their way; never a suspicious woman, looking for good rather than evil, she succumbed readily to her instinctive confidence in him. Before the journey was over, she had tentatively sounded him as to his opinion on Astrid's health, promising herself a regular consultation when a more favourable opportunity should offer. Astrid liked him, and even Estelle Hagerup, though in her estimation men were but poor things at best, and only deserving of consideration in proportion to their scientific or artistic attainments.

Fru Bjork offered the Doctor a share of the substantial luncheon provided for the party, and he accepted, insisting on contributing as his share in the picnic, some *fiaschetti* of *vino* d'Orveito. He filled the little travelling glasses of each in turn, and handed them about, overriding Ragna's objection that she did not care for wine, laughingly ordering her to drink it by virtue of his professional authority. She raised the glass to her lips, but as she tasted the wine, the colour left her cheeks and the glass slipping from her hand was shattered on the floor of the compartment. There was a general outcry from all but Ferrati, who watched her with a grave, almost worried expression.

"How clumsy I am!" said Ragna, blushing and laughing nervously. "I can't imagine how I came to drop it!"

The Doctor carefully gathered up the pieces of glass, wrapped them in a paper, and threw them out the window. He forebore to offer the girl another glass of wine and she was grateful to him for his intuitive consideration.

"The wine reminds her of something," he thought.

Estelle presently spoke of the singing lessons she expected to take in Florence, and Astrid also said she would like to cultivate her voice.

"Does Mademoiselle Andersen also sing?" inquired Ferrati.

Ragna shook her head.

"But you would like to take up something to pass the time?"

"Oh, yes, indeed!" said Ragna with evident eagerness.

"Why not try painting then, or drawing?"

"Oh, I do not think I could."

"All the more reason for learning, then—and you will at least gain the advantage of being able to appreciate the work of our great Masters, in a way that a person who knows nothing of painting never can."

"I should love to have drawing lessons," said Astrid, always eager for anything new. "We used to like them at the convent, do you remember, Ragna?"

"Yes, but they were so silly, nothing but set copies."

"I think it would be a good thing for both you girls," said Fru Bjork. "Perhaps Dr. Ferrati may be able to recommend me a good drawing-master for you?"

"I think I can, Madame. There is a young artist, a friend of mine, who, owing to reverses of fortune in his family, has been thrown on his own resources, and would be glad of the lessons. He is an excellent draughtsman, and I am sure the young ladies would learn more with him in a short time, than with a professor of the classic school."

"I like that idea," said Fru Bjork.

She felt that it would be good for both girls to have some interest. Astrid's light-hearted flirtations in Rome, and Ragna's long solitary rambles appeared almost equally reprehensible, besides, drawing was a harmless, ladylike pursuit. She determined to push the matter and after some further discussion it was arranged that Dr. Ferrati should bring his artist friend to meet the ladies, the second evening after their arrival in Florence.

Ragna listened to it all, taking no part in the conversation, assenting listlessly to Fru Bjork's good-natured questions; her first eagerness had passed and she had fallen again into the slough of indifference. Ferrati had not failed to notice her too eager assent to his random suggestion, and her subsequent apathy. "She needs some occupation," he thought, and urged the project more than with his habitual prudence, he would have thought advisable. "It will be an excellent thing for Valentini, too," he said to himself; "it will give him an interest and take him out of himself."

CHAPTER VIII

Egidio Valentini was a young man of about thirty, a Roman born, full of the civic pride that even now stirs the bosom of those who can say: "*Civis Romanus sum*"—flaunting the superiority conferred on her children by the Eternal City, in the face of less fortunate mortals.

Educated by the Jesuit Fathers, spoiled by an indulgent family, he knew no law but his own pleasure, no restraint but that imposed by policy or incontrovertible circumstance. Endowed with a high degree of cleverness, and with a dominant personality, he was one who would undoubtedly mould his surroundings. Of medium stature with small hands and feet, muscular and well proportioned, he yet lacked the careless grace characteristic of his countrymen. His head, well set on broad shoulders had a nobility of modelling about the forehead curiously belied by the sensual mouth and obstinate chin. His eyes were dark and of a peculiar brilliance, shaded by beetling black brows which almost met at the base of his well shaped nose—slightly twisted to the right, however. This slight crookedness of the nose gave to his face, in certain aspects, an expression of low cunning. In spite of these defects, his appearance was distinctly pleasing, and if, to the close observer, faults of character corresponding to those of feature might be apparent, the blunt bonhomie of his manner, and its too insistent sincerity conveyed to most people the impression of sturdy honesty, while his carefully timed and placed liberality gave him the reputation of open-handed generosity. He never gave or lent where the transaction would not redound to his credit or interest, but the public could not know that. He lived for the house tops and whatever his own closet may have seen of him, there was none to repeat.

People said of him: "His bark is worse than his bite," and showed him an indulgence not always accorded to brusquerie.

He had come to Florence a few months previously, his family having lost the greater part of a fortune in unsuccessful speculations. Cast on his own resources, he turned to account the decided artistic talent he possessed, and even in so short a time had succeeded in winning recognition as one of the foremost rising young artists of the time. This was not accomplished without hard work, but a love of work, and especially of his chosen profession, with a tenacity of purpose rarely equalled, were among Egidio's best qualities. One would have thought that the congenial occupation and the promise of success would have brought contentment, but Valentini never ceased to lament the change in his fortunes and his lost inheritance, which growing daily in his imagination soon increased from the modest competency it had been, to a princely fortune. He never tired of repeating the story.

"My friends, it was terrible! In one day, from being a prince to become a beggar!"

Let it be said, however, that his pride kept him from asking the assistance of any man, and if he rose, it was by his own unaided effort. It was this quality of independence that, as much as anything, had drawn to him the friendship of Enrico Ferrati. They had been at school together as boys, but for years their lives had laid apart. Ferrati, on taking his degree, had settled in Florence, where a flourishing practice rewarded his effort, and it was to Florence that Egidio also betook himself, his pride rebelling against life in Rome in the changed conditions of his fortunes. Ferrati at once seized the opportunity of renewing the old intimacy and his sympathy and respect were as balm to the wounds of Valentini. Ferrati, on his part, attributed to the severe disappointment undergone, the changes he could not fail to remark in his friend, though indeed in his company Valentini was at his best; the devoted friendship of Ferrati called out all that was best in his nature, and Enrico never saw the depths underlying the surface manner. It would, perhaps, be better to say that in the company of Ferrati, the underlying meannesses vanished; the affection Valentini had for him was the one pure, disinterested love of his selfish nature.

Valentini heard with slight enthusiasm Ferrati's plan of a course of drawing lessons to two young Norwegian girls.

"Carissimo," he said, "pot-hooks are not in my line." He was sitting with Ferrati, over a glass of wine at the end of their dinner in a modest *trattoria*.

"I think you will teach them more than pot-hooks, Egidio; one of them, at least could be taught to see and appreciate, besides you must keep the pot boiling, you know."

"It would be a loss of time. Why should I lose my time teaching girls what they should have learnt at school? Let them get a governess, or a guide-book!"

"I had thought it would interest you."

"Are they pretty, at least?"

"One is pretty, the other is something more," said Ferrati, lighting with care a black Tuscan cigar. Valentini followed suit, and they puffed away in silence some moments.

"One of them is more than pretty, you said?"

"Yes, she suggests possibilities, she has an interesting face. But I was thinking of you, really, more than of the girls. It would do you the world of good, Egidio, it would take you out of yourself. You need humanising, disinfecting, if I may say so. How do you pass your time? You paint all day, you eat a bad dinner, and sometimes work all evening, or else you go to the Circolo degli Artisti and play billiards and smoke more '*Toscani*' than is good for you—and all the time you mope. Now these lessons will give you something else to think about, they will bring in some money which is a consideration, and moreover, I believe you will be doing a good action, for I think that one of these girls has had some trouble and needs distraction quite as much as you

do."

"Is that the pretty one?" asked Valentini. "I don't mind consoling pretty girls. It is easier than teaching them to draw. They all want to do sweet things like Raphael's cherubs, and when you won't hear of it they sulk."

Ferrati drew out his watch.

"Well, will you take them on as pupils or will you not? I must be getting home."

"There's no hurry, your wife's away."

"Still, I must get back, I have some work to do. Tell me, Egidio, will you give these lessons?"

"Oh, I suppose I shall—"

"Then you will come with me to the pension to-morrow evening to be presented to the ladies?"

Egidio yawned and stretched his arms. "How insistent you are! I'll come and have a look at them, *e poi vedremo*! Understand, I reserve the right to withdraw if they don't please me."

Ferrati laughed.

"You might be the Great Mogul from the way you talk instead of a struggling painter! Your airs may impress the ladies but they don't me."

They went out into the clear, cool air, and walked up the Via Calzaioli towards the Piazza della Signoria. The street was brilliantly lit, and thronged by a mixed crowd of young men of the town, officers, tradespeople, and women. It was a good-humoured crowd, out for amusement. Groups of girls with linked arms smiled saucily at the young men they met, meeting impudent remarks with equally impudent retorts,—the *ciane* of Florence have always been celebrated for their mordant wit. Others caught up the jests and quips and bandied them about, tossed them farther afield with additions and modifications. Now and again a snatch of song rose and bands of young men of the *becero* class, a soft felt hat jammed on the back of the head, thumbs in armholes, rolled along sliding their feet and intoning a chorus, "*E se la vuoi regirar la ruota*."

Ferrati sauntered slowly up the street, absorbed in thought; Egidio's eyes wandered restlessly from side to side, scrutinizing the glances turned on him, seeking to read approval of his person in the eyes of the women, curiosity, recognition or admiration in those of the men. By the church of Orsammichele they parted, Egidio going to his little apartment consisting of a studio and a small bedroom, on the top floor of one of the grim old tower-like houses of which there are many in that part of the city. He climbed up the long stair leading to his floor and letting himself into his rooms with a cumbrous latchkey locked the door behind him. It was the studio he had entered, a large bare room, the ceiling rather lower than is usual in Italian houses, being just under the roof. The moonlight falling on a livid patch from the sky-light showed a disordered litter of sketches and painting materials, a model's throne, on which stood a lay figure, some ordinary wooden chairs, a table, and near the window, an easel with a picture on it, a chair and a small Turkish stool supporting the palette and brushes. A small doorway at the farther side opened into the bedroom.

Valentini lit the hanging lamp and drawing the upright easel under it settled himself to work. He was preparing the drawing of a water colour study of costume. He worked steadily for half an hour or so, then pushed back the easel with an expression of disgust and walked to the window, lighting a *toscano* as he did so. The moonlight lay clear and cold over the city roofs, throwing the endless variety of chimney-pots into bold relief. As he stood looking out the clocks of the city struck ten—not in unison, each striking in turn and making the most of it. The bells of S. Spirito across the river pealed the hour. A carriage rattled over the stone pavements a street or two away, but just below all was dark and silent, from the Via Calzaioli around the corner came the subdued hubbub of the promenading crowd.

The young man closed the window and went back to his seat, passing his hand wearily over his forehead.

"Another of those headaches, and this thing must be finished by to-morrow noon!" he groaned, and set resolutely to work.

At the same hour, Ragna was leaning out of her window, gazing at the silvery Arno, bordered by its golden chain of lamps and barred by its light crowned bridges.

The pension was on the Lung Arno Acciajoli between the Ponte Vecchio, and the St. Trinità bridge, so that to the right she saw the Carraja bridge, and beyond that the long sweeping curve of the river towards the Cascini, and on the other hand above the Ponte Vecchio, the cypress crowned height of S. Miniato shadowy against the star-powdered sky.

"Here I shall find peace," she said to herself.

The dark spire of S. Spirito across the river drew her gaze, and beyond and behind it, on Bellosguardo, a white house stood out softly in the moonlight. The river rippled by gently, slipping past the stained walls of the gloomy old houses opposite overhung by the mystery of their forbidding black height, and out again into the light, reflecting the brightness of moon and stars, in a thousand flickering wavelets; from the *pescaja* far below came the muffled sound of the water flowing over the dam.

Down on the street some men were playing mandolins and guitars, and singing in mellow passionate voices; the plaintive minor refrain of the *stornelli* rose in the still night, and the girl's heart ached with the beauty of it all. Then silently, slowly, tears fell from her eyes; she suddenly felt lonely, miserable, shut out from love, shorn of the illusions that should be hers by right. The hated face of Mirko interposed itself between her and the beauty of the night, and the old shame gripped her by the throat. With a choking sob she flung the casement to and crept into bed. From below the words of the song, swelling in the soft spring air, floated up to her: "*Metti anche tu, la veste bianca*—"

Ah, yes, the bride's dress of virgin white was indeed for her!

CHAPTER IX

The day had been a tiring one, for Estelle Hagerup had obliged the girls to spend it with her, sight-seeing, and the Uffizi and Pitti galleries stretched in endless dreary miles of painted canvas and chilly statuary in Ragna's tired head. Dinner was over and the motley collection of old maids, mothers with bevies of plain daughters and travelling clergymen had settled themselves for the evening in the tawdry drawing-room. Fru Bjork had taken out her knitting, Estelle was setting down in her diary the doings of the day. Astrid was deep in a book, only Ragna sat idle, her hands lightly clasped in her lap, her head resting against the back of the chair, the eyes half closed, the lips slightly parted. Ferrati nudged Valentini's arm as they entered the *salotto*.

"That is she, in that armchair in the corner."

"She is like a Botticelli," Valentini answered as they moved towards Fru Bjork, who rose to greet them. She was pleased by Valentini and delighted to see Ferrati again. Valentini drew up a chair by Ragna, on being presented, and asked her in a brusque way, what were her impressions of Italy. She felt slightly uneasy under the bold scrutiny of his eyes, but the abruptness of his manner pleased her—it was a contrast to that of Mirko! Ferrati, seeing that they both seemed interested in each other, congratulated himself on his brilliant idea.

When the men took their departure they left the most favourable impression with all the party, and the drawing lessons had been definitely arranged. They took place in Egidio's study, the girls going together, otherwise unaccompanied, as it never entered Fru Bjork's innocent mind that a chaperone might be advisable. The lessons were supplemented by visits to the galleries, and these visits opened a new world to Ragna's wondering eyes. She awoke to colour and form as with Mirko she had become aware of the life of antiquity, its fulness and beauty. Here she learned the wonders of applied imagination, of purity of vision and power in execution. Valentini led her especially to appreciate the earlier artists, Ghirlandajo, Botticelli, Pollaiuolo, Francia, Filippo and Filippino Lippi, and many were the pleasant pilgrimages taken to the various churches and galleries to see this or that example of the Master under study. The tentative charm of the Primitives had pleased Ragna, but it was the pagan spirit of Botticelli that really appealed to her, the charm of his Graces dancing their round on the flower starred grass under over-arching boughs, the nymph-like grace and free forward swing of the Flora, the wonderful sinuous outline of the Venus, light as the shell on which she stands,—all of these things, as apart from life, as truly unmoral as the flowers themselves, soothed her with the suggestion of the futility of a conventional moral standard. She found the angels of the Beato Angelico irritating; in their own way they seemed as apart from morality, as flowerlike as the nymphs, the innocence of their faces was something non-terrestrial, they were as radiant visions seen in dreams; yes that was it, they lacked the frank paganism, the pure humanity, that is the charm of Botticelli; their unsullied innocence implying a corresponding ignorance of evil, appeared to her almost an insult. How could these celestial beings, whose faces reflect the constant vision of the Crystal Sea and the Great White Throne, be fairly compared to poor mortals who bear the burthen and heat of the day? They were as incorporeal as any bodiless cherubim.

Astrid did not take much interest in these artistic pilgrimages and she soon tired of the lessons. Although unwilling to work regularly or steadily her natural aptitude soon enabled her to make pretty little sketches, in which the delicacy of colour and facility of treatment atoned to some extent for the faulty drawing. Incapable of prolonged or serious effort, she was pleased with the progress made and could see no reason for hard work. She was capricious and flighty, and Valentini, seeing her complete inability for application ceased to urge her, letting her take her own easy way, since she was so evidently satisfied with it and the results. Ragna, on the contrary, could not be satisfied with what was merely pleasing; she was both conscientious and thorough and consequently had less to show for her labours than her friend. Her drawings were almost painful in the evident struggle for exactitude, they had a grim, almost Dutch character. Her work looked "tight"—she was one who would never attain to facility of execution. Still she persevered and her work if not exactly pleasing, was interesting, and showed promise of talent.

Easter had passed with the usual quaint ceremonial of the Scoppio del Carro, and afterwards the weather grew rapidly warm—a continuous succession of soft spring days, the crown of the year in Tuscany, celebrated in earlier times with the *feste del Calendi maggio*. About this time Ragna began to suffer from headaches, as well as vague physical discomfort, and on several occasions was obliged to absent herself from the studio.

Egidio had been observing her closely. Something that Ferrati had said of her manner suggesting some unpleasant experience in the past, had stuck in his mind, and as he watched her, returned to him again and again.

That would explain the girl's fits of despondency, and her almost feverish application to her work. The more he observed her, the greater grew his curiosity. It must have been a love affair he decided, first because an Italian can imagine no other cause for the inexplicable in a woman's character, and then because she objected so unmistakably to their conversation ever taking a sentimental turn. She was curiously reticent too, he thought, as to her impressions of Rome, indeed it was impossible to get her to talk at any length about Rome at all. Now, Egidio was young and a Latin, and in spite of the self-control of which he boasted, it was clearly impossible that he should continue to be for so long and almost constantly in the company of a pretty girl, whose dazzlingly white skin and golden hair were to his Italian eyes as the fair fruit of some Garden of the Hesperides, without feeling the effects of it. His prudence forbade him, however, to make any advances of a compromising nature until he had assured himself of the material advantages to be obtained. To this end he availed himself of the opportunity offered on those occasions when Ragna was unable to come to the studio, by leading Astrid to talk of her friend. Astrid, nothing loath, chattered on in a light-hearted fashion, talking of their days together at the Paris Convent, of the life in Christiania, of Ragna's incomprehensible dislike of society in general and of men in particular, of Fru Boyesen,—and this interested Valentini most of all.

"Madame la tante must be rich to do all that she does for her niece," he observed.

"Oh, yes," answered Astrid carelessly. "They say she is the richest woman in Christiania, and she has always said she will leave her fortune to Ragna, as she has no children of her own."

Egidio flushed with pleasure, and to hide the gleam in his eyes stooped to pick up a brush that had fallen on the floor.

"Then Mademoiselle Ragna is quite an heiress?"

"Yes, Ragna will be very well off, some day, but she is such a queer girl,—I don't think she ever thinks of it at all."

"She is engaged to be married?"

"Oh, no!"

"Yet, she can have no lack of suitors?"

"She had half Christiania at her heels, but there,—I tell you she is not like other girls, I doubt if she will ever marry. Ragna is queer, sometimes you know, in Rome now,—" she stopped suddenly.

"Well, what of Rome?"

"Oh, nothing, I don't know!"

"But there must be something, since you say it in that tone of voice. I am curious, who was there in Rome?" His eyes interrogated her stealthily over his lowered palette.

It came to Astrid with a shock that perhaps she had not been altogether discreet—the man's too evident curiosity put her on her guard. She assumed an air of kittenish dignity.

"No one at all, Signor Valentini, and even if there had been, do you think I would gossip about my friend's private affairs? I only meant that in Rome Ragna was curious, more serious than ever perhaps, and very absorbed in her sight-seeing."

"I suppose you accompanied her, Mademoiselle?"

"Sometimes, other times she went alone."

"Ah!" said Egidio. He saw that Astrid either could not or would not tell him more than that, and while what might have happened to Ragna in Rome strongly aroused his curiosity, he yet considered that part as an issue of little relative importance; on the other hand, he had learned what it most concerned him to know, Ragna's future prospects.

He had not seen much of Ferrati lately, as the latter had been more than usually busy, and had had additional work at home, owing to the illness of his two children, also he did not wish to betray his half-formed intentions with regard to Ragna, and was afraid that his friend might guess something. Ferrati had seen more of Ragna, however, than he had of Egidio, as he was treating Astrid for anæmia, and from what he could see of Ragna, but principally from what Astrid told him of her and of Valentini he had a good idea as to what was in the air. He was more worried than he cared to admit, feeling that he was responsible for the situation insomuch as he had made it possible by bringing the two young people together, and his observations of the girl had forced upon him the recognition of other possibilities as well. He had guessed the position in which Ragna might probably be placed, but could not penetrate her attitude towards Valentini, and as she had not seen fit to give him her confidence he could not presume to sound the state of her feelings, or to extend a helping hand, much as he longed to do so. It seemed to him that at all costs he must manage to prolong the actual situation as long as he could, so as to allow for the development of possibilities he suspected, for he realized that the most complicated twists of circumstance have a way of unravelling themselves, and it was above all things essential to gain

time.

He was thankful at least, that Valentini had not come to him for advice, which he would find it impossible to give, but recognising that the slightest occurrence would serve as a pretext to precipitate events, and the season being far advanced, he advised Fru Bjork to take her party to Venice for the month of June, urging the sea-air of the Lido for Astrid. Fru Bjork fell in at once with this suggestion, and as Dr. Ferrati's wife and children were going to the Lido the first week in June, they agreed to take the journey together. This involved a separation with Fröken Hagerup who decided to remain on in Florence for a few weeks, and then join some friends in Switzerland. They were all sorry to part with her, as in spite of her peculiarities of dress and temperament she had been an invaluable travelling companion, always full of resource and enthusiasm. Fru Bjork, however, thought that Astrid's health should be the first consideration—and after all, they would soon see Estelle again in Christiania.

Ragna, on her part, was not sorry to leave Florence. The latter part of the time she had been feeling not quite herself, besides the headaches, she suffered from the most annoying spells of faintness, which she put down to the increasing heat and to the many hours she spent in work. Fru Bjork had suggested her consulting Dr. Ferrati, but she thought it useless to trouble him for so small a matter, quite sure that the change of air would be sufficient in itself. As to her feelings concerning Valentini, she admired his talent and his unconcealed admiration of herself was as balm to her self-respect—it reinstated her in her own eyes. She was not in the smallest degree in love with him, nor was she likely to be, her sentimental disillusion had been too thorough, and her physical awakening insufficient. It was perhaps the fact that he had never attempted to make love to her that drew her to him. His bluntness pleased her as a contrast to Prince Mirko's polish of manner, and she attributed to him, as a natural consequence, the virtues of constancy and sincerity,—the reverse of the medal shown her by the Prince. She had not thought of the possibility of his wishing to marry her, as he had told her at the beginning of their acquaintance that his actual position practically forbade him the thought of marriage. His presence helped her to drown recollection and under his guidance she was rapidly acquiring fresh interests by her increasing knowledge of the world of art. The past at times, seemed like a bad dream, and she was already congratulating herself on the ease with which she was leaving it behind her. She was sorry to break off her lessons, sorry to leave her beloved view of S. Miniato and the river, but the siren charm of Venice called to her imagination, and it was with a comparatively light heart that she packed her boxes.

Valentini was disagreeably surprised by Fru Bjork's plan; he had been counting on several weeks more to conduct his siege of the girl's heart, and this sudden departure dashed the untasted cup from his lips. In vain he tried to make an occasion for a declaration, although he was aware from Ragna's attitude that to force the situation in such a way would probably mean irremediable failure. He was willing to risk all for all, but during these last days he found no chance of speaking to her alone. Finally he went to Ferrati and poured out his hopes and disappointment. Ferrati listened judicially concealing his satisfaction that nothing definite had as yet occurred, and he counselled Egidio to be patient.

"*Mio caro*," he said, "if you were to declare yourself now, you would spoil all. The Signorina is certainly not thinking of marriage at the present moment. Wait!"

"But if I wait," objected Egidio, "she will be gone and my chance with her!"

"Is this girl the only fish in the sea, then, that you should be so set on her? Let her go, Egidio! You told me only a few weeks since that you had no thought of marrying, that women were nothing to you. Let the girl go, she is not extraordinarily beautiful, she is not rich," (Egidio has not mentioned Ragna's expectations) "after all is said and done she is a stranger—believe me, it will be far better for all concerned if you put her out of your mind."

Egidio looked at his friend suspiciously.

"If you were not already married, I should think—"

Ferrati interrupted him with a laugh.

"No, my friend, personally it is nothing to me, it is for your own sake and for the sake of the girl herself that I ask you to give up the idea."

"Why?"

"I don't think it would make for happiness."

"But I do, Rico. I want the girl, she appeals to me, I—I love her."

"Well, wait then, there is no reason for precipitating things."

"But she is going away, I shall lose my chance."

"She may be coming back to Florence, or you could go to Venice later on. In any case she is not in love with you now, and a few months may change much."

"What do you mean? Why do you talk in riddles? You know I can't run all over the country just now, that I have those orders for the London Society and as for her coming back here you know perfectly well that Fru Bjork will not return to Florence, she has said so."

"The Signora has said that she will not return, but she may change her mind, or the Signorina might come back without her—if you love me, Egidio, do nothing now, wait awhile!

"In any case, even if she were to consent, I don't think the Signorina's health would permit of her marrying just now—unless—" He broke off suddenly as if afraid to say more, and rose from the café table where they were sitting.

"Look here, Egidio, promise me that you won't force the situation now."

"*Va bene, va bene*," said Egidio, and made no effort to detain him. A light had broken in upon his mystification at Ferrati's last speech.

"So it is that, is it?" he said to himself. "Poor old Rico, he was in rather a tight place! Ah, well, if it is that she should prove amenable to reason, and grateful too, and the longer one waits—yes, perhaps Rico is right after all, about waiting. Vedremo!"

CHAPTER X

The Signora Ferrati made a pleasant travelling companion, and her two little girls were unusually quiet and well-behaved, for Italian children, who are generally allowed far more of their elders' society and privileges, especially as regards eating and sitting up until late hours, than is at all good for them.

Dr. Ferrati was unable to accompany his family, but had promised to come to Venice in a fortnight's time. The journey up was uneventful, and the two parties separated at the railway station, the Signora taking a *vaporetto* directly to the Lido, while Fru Bjork and the girls, went to a small, but comfortable, hotel on the Grand Canal.

That evening Astrid and Ragna hung over the balcony of the latter's room, gazing in ecstasy at the fairyland spread before their eyes. Nearly opposite, rose the white dome of S. Maria della Salute, gleaming shadowy pale against a star-powdered sky; the dark water below, fretted with silver ripples, flowed silently by, and over its surface sped the slim dark shapes of gondolas, the gondolier swaying to the rhythm of his oar, each gondola bearing its little lamp behind the tall steel prow. Down the canal, from the Rialto, came the *barche* full of musicians, gay with Japanese lanterns, and the high transparent emblem "S. Mareo" or the "Sirena," and surrounded by a growing flotilla of gondolas. The still air throbbed with the haunting strains of voices, mandolins and guitars. A strong, clear tenor voice, rose above the others, the notes vibrating with passion, as they rose and fell.

Astrid squeezed Ragna's hand.

"Oh, isn't it just too heavenly for words!" she murmured.

The charm of it all, in its setting of soft, luminous Italian night, penetrated both the girls, but in different ways. To Astrid, it was a delightfully romantic impression, to be recalled with pleasure; to Ragna, the poignancy of the beauty was tinged with bitterness, and the very loveliness of it was as a two-edged sword, recalling other Italian nights and their associations. Try as she would, she could not banish the past, nor had custom yet made her callous to the memory of what had happened.

The girls stood on the balcony, until the music stopped, and the boats drifted away, then they kissed one another good-night, and Astrid went to her own room.

Ragna, although tired out by the long day's journey, could not sleep; instead, she lay watching through her mosquito netting the white patch of light on the floor, and the shadow of the balcony balustrade with its fretted pattern. She was thinking of Valentini. He had been at the station that morning to see her off, and his farewell had been so loverlike as to bring a look of surprised inquiry to Fru Bjork's face. The flowers he had given her were in a vase on the balcony, as their strong perfume made it impossible to keep them in the room. She turned uneasily as she thought of his pressure of her hand, of the intensity of his dark burning eyes on hers, of the words he had said to her when, for an instant, he had managed to draw her aside from the others of the party.

"Signorina, this is not good-bye, but au revoir. You will come back, I know it, I feel it, and when you come back, it will be to *me*. Remember," he added with solemnity, "if ever you are in trouble, if ever you need a friend, I am here!"

At the time, his manner had struck her as curious, and even more so now, as she thought it over.

"If ever I should be in trouble—" she murmured, "but, why should he think of my being in trouble? Surely, my trouble is over and done with! Can he know, can he suspect?—But no, that is quite impossible. I wonder what he supposes and what he means? Go back to Florence to him? No, I am not going back."

She wondered if his words might have the virtue of a prophecy, then laughed at herself. Presently, she turned her hot pillow and threw back the sheet, for the night was close.

The change of air gave fresh energy to the whole party except Ragna, who continued pale and

languid. Fru Bjork worried over it, and longed for the coming of Dr. Ferrati whose advice she intended to ask, whether Ragna wished it or no. As the Doctor had recommended sea-bathing for Astrid, the three ladies made daily trips to the Lido, and the girls thoroughly enjoyed their dips in the warm Adriatic. Ragna had always been a strong swimmer, but here, to her surprise, found that she tired almost at once, but set it down to the heat. After the long delicious bath was over the girls wrapped themselves in bath-robes, and lay on the sands to bake, their heads shielded from the sun by broad-brimmed straw hats. The strong soft heat and the salt air made them sleepy, the sands seemed to vibrate in the sunshine, a delightful weariness weighted their limbs, a drowsy consciousness of complete physical well-being filled them. It was to Ragna the happiest moment of the day.

The atmosphere alone of Venice gave her a feeling of rest and peace; the silent gliding of gondolas through the canals, the long drawn-out sonorous cries of the gondoliers, the soft wash of the water against the richly tinted walls, all lulled her senses. She realized that afternoon is the time to see Venice, the strong light of morning throws into intolerable relief the decay of the city; the St. Martin's Summer of the glorious Republic requires the mellow haze of the hours before sunset, as a fading beauty is best seen by candle light, and often in the afternoon, she would slip away to some old church, and in solitary musing to steep herself in the wonderful atmosphere of golden autumn. Most often of all, she went to S. Maria Formosa, and would sit for hours in contemplation of Palma Vecchio's Santa Barbara. She loved the strong, voluptuous, calm woman, beautiful with the beauty of the corn-harvest, standing clear-eyed and self-possessed in her rich russet draperies. All the richness and fulness of the earth seemed symbolized in this glorious creature, this Woman of women. "Ceres," the girl called her, for in her appearance, there is nothing of the saintly, nothing of the ascetic, rather the promise of abundant voluptuous joy—not pleasure, but something deeper, graver, more fundamental, the earnest of a bounteous harvest of life.

She sought the mellow golden glow of S. Mereo, at that hour, when the level rays of the declining sun fill the air with a mystic radiance, seemingly the golden impalpable dust of centuries of prayer. The softened splendour filled her soul, and warmed it, as generous wine warms the veins, and the heavy odour of the incense drugged her restless memory to temporary oblivion. She followed from afar, the offices, and once was tempted to make the sacred sign with the holy water at the door, as she left. She dipped her fingers in the stoup, then smiled and wiped them on her handkerchief, ashamed of the impulse; did not her reason tell her that all these observances were mere foolishness? Still she could not deny the craving of her heart for some sort of mystic communion with the souls of the simple worshippers about her. She loved to watch the rays mount until they touched, with a fleeting radiance, the gold mosaics of the domes, then disappeared, carrying the glory with them. But afterwards, in the sudden darkness, the star-like tapers about the high altar gained a mystic significance, and the little floating lights in glasses, like glow-worms in the dusk, before the smaller shrines, seemed tiny beacons set for the wandering soul, or were they merely will-o'-the-wisps, luring one to a sense of false security? The spirit of it all breathed consolation and peace, but she saw it as through a glass; she longed to enter the sanctuary, but felt herself barred out by impalpable barriers. The haven seemed to lie before her eyes, but the path was hidden. "There was the door to which I found no key," she quoted to herself.

One afternoon, as she sat there in a side chapel, a girl entered, and disregarding the kneeling benches, threw herself against the altar itself, clutching the edge of the Sacred Table with straining clasped hands, her head bowed between her arms, her long, dark shawl dragging down the steps behind her, like a black trail of despair. The faint light from the tapers shone on the girl's auburn hair, following the burnished waves and tendrils. Her slender shoulders were heaving with sobs.

Ragna watched her awhile, then rose from her chair and put her hand softly on the girl's shoulder.

"What is it?" she asked. "Let me help you. Tell me what your trouble is."

The girl raised her head, and her streaming dark eyes met Ragna's. Seeing the sympathy in the fair face bent over her, she rose and let herself be led away to a corner near the entrance where there were some chairs.

"What is the matter?" asked Ragna.

"Oh, Signorina, it is very great," sobbed the girl, "but it is nothing a young lady like you could understand."

"What is it? Tell me," said Ragna gently.

"Oh, Signorina, I can't! I should be ashamed, you would despise me. What can a young lady like you know of—"

"Come, tell me, I shall not despise you," said Ragna; she was conscious already of an odd sense of fellowship. The girl raised her head, and looked at her steadily, as though testing the sincerity of the words.

"Signorina, my lover, Zuan, he is—he is going away, to America—he no longer wishes to marry me, and—" she drew aside the shawl, showing the altered lines of her figure.

"Oh!" said Ragna pitifully.

"And Signorina, my father turns me out of his house, he says I have brought disgrace on him, that no one will marry me now. I have nowhere to go. But that is nothing. I can work. It is Zuan—he doesn't love me any more, he is tired of me—" her voice trailed off into a wail. Ragna stroked her hand.

"Signorina, why should he cease to love me when I love him as much as ever? It must be another woman who has taken him from me! If I find her, I will kill her, I swear it! I will kill him too, and then I will kill myself!"

"But your child?" said Ragna, "have you thought of it?"

"The *creatura*? Poor little lamb to be wronged by its father before it is born! See you, Signorina," she turned defiantly, "it is his child, and he shall recognize it or die! No other woman shall have him!" Her eyes flashed.

Ragna tried another tack.

"If you are patient, and wait, he may come back to you; what would you gain by killing him? They will send you to prison, and your child will be born in disgrace."

"Perhaps you are right, Signorina," returned the girl doubtfully. "But how can I wait? Where can I go? My father has turned me out of his house, and no one will give me work now. No, it is better that I make an end of it."

She rose, but Ragna caught her hand, and pulled her down.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Carolina, Signorina, Carolina Manin di Guiseppe."

"Listen to me, Carolina, I will do something for you, I will see that you get work, but you must promise me to do nothing foolish. I can help you as long as you are only unfortunate, but I can't help a murderess."

"A murderess, Signorina?" The girl's eyes dilated.

"A murderess, yes, that is what you would be if you killed your lover. Would you like people to say that your child's mother was a murderess?"

"Madonna santissima, no!"

"Well, then, you will promise me?"

"I will swear it by the Madonna, Signorina."

"Take this money then," she emptied the contents of her purse into the girl's hand, "it will keep you for some days, until I can find something for you to do." She scribbled her name and address on a leaf torn from her note book. "Here, this is my address—you can come to see me—let me see, this is Monday—come to see me Sunday. You know how to find the Hotel Roma?"

"Oh, Signorina, you are an Angel of God, whom the blessed Madonna has sent me in my need!" She seized Ragna's hands, and covered them with kisses. "God will reward you, Signorina!"

"No, I am not an angel, Carolina, indeed I am very far from being one,"—she smiled sadly. "Come to see me next Sunday then, and we will see what can be done."

Interrupting the girl's protestations of gratitude and devotion, she freed herself, and walked quickly away, wondering what she should do to carry out her impulsive promise.

"I suppose I am a foolish idiot," she said to herself, "but I simply could not help it. Poor thing—I wonder what I can do for her?" Instinctively, her thoughts turned to Dr. Ferrati, he would be sure to find some way of arranging the matter. She said nothing to Fru Bjork or Astrid, they would only be shocked, and blame her for her impulsiveness. Fru Bjork was kind-hearted, but narrow-minded, and in common with many "good" women, would have shunned Carolina and her like, as she would the plague.

Dr. Ferrati arrived a week later than the day he had set. He had travelled by a night train, and chance had it, that he took the same *vaporette* that carried Fru Bjork and the girls to the Lido. When they got on at the Piazzetta, they hailed him with joy, and bade him bring his campstool to the bow, where they usually sat. When they were all comfortably settled, he put on his pince-nez, and looked at the girls in turn, noting with satisfaction Astrid's delicate bronze colour, so becoming to her fair curls and greenish eyes, but he started at Ragna's pallor, and drawn features. They were speaking of the Lido, and Ragna said:

"The bathing is delightful, especially when there is a little surf, I love to swim through it, to feel the waves buffet me about. But I get tired so soon now."

"But surely, Signorina, you are not bathing?"

"Why not?" asked Ragna, astonished, and the others echoed her.

"It is most unwise for you just now," said Ferrati, adjusting his pince-nez to hide his dismay and

embarrassment. "You are anæmic, you are not strong enough—it is most unwise."

"Yes," agreed Fru Bjork, "I have told her so, but she won't listen to me. She really is not at all well. I wish you would advise her, Doctor, indeed I do. The child worries me, what with her pale looks, and no appetite, and headaches and fainting fits."

Ragna anxiously met the Doctor's scrutinizing gaze.

"I wish you would prescribe for me; Fru Bjork is right. I am really not myself," she said simply.

Ferrati skilfully changed the subject and they chatted on gaily enough, until the Lido was reached. The little tram took them across the island, and while the others went to the dressing-rooms to change for the bath, the Doctor and Ragna walked out on to the terrace fronting the sea. They found two chairs, a little apart from the groups of smiling, chattering people, and when they had seated themselves, Ragna opened the conversation.

"Tell me the truth, Doctor, why should I not bathe?"

Ferrati met her question with a searching glance; was she in good faith, or feigning?

"Do you not know, then, Signorina, what is the matter with you?"

"You say I am anæmic, I have headaches, and dizzy spells—" a horrible doubt suddenly thrust itself upwards in her mind. "For God's sake, Doctor, tell me what it is?"

"Surely you must have an idea—" He hesitated, then in answer to the appeal for frankness in her eyes, he continued in a lower tone. "Signorina, you are *enceinte*. Is it possible that you have not guessed it?"

Ragna paled, and her head fell back against the wooden support of the awning. Ferrati hastily summoned a waiter, and bade him bring a glass of cognac, which he made the girl take. The colour slowly crept back to her lips and cheeks; she made one or two efforts to speak, but was only able to swallow convulsively; finally in a husky voice she asked:

"How long have you known, suspected—this?"

"For about two months now—suspected, I say—but when I saw you on the boat, I was sure. Of course I may be mistaken, an examination would be necessary to be quite certain—there are tumours—"

"Will you examine me then—to-day? I must know, I must be sure—Oh, my God, I never thought of this!"

He gazed at her curiously, half cynically, yet impressed by her sincerity of manner.

"But surely, you must have known? You are young, Signorina, but you are not a child."

Her eyes fell before his.

"I did not know—I never thought of this!" she repeated dully.

His doubting expression faded before the despairing misery of her pale face.

"No," he thought, "she did not know or she could not look like this."

The girl's attitude was not one of discovered shame, but that of a person felled by a sudden blow. She looked dazed, stricken. People in bright summer dress were laughing, and joking all about; some were drinking Vermouth. From the sands below came the voices of happy children, and bathers in gay costumes made merry in the sparkling blue water.

"You are sure, quite sure?" Ragna asked suddenly, in a low, terrible voice.

"I told you that there can be no absolute certainty without an examination. Do not distress yourself so, my child," he added, touched to the heart by her misery, "after all, it may be a false alarm!"

The words seemed to give Ragna strength; though still deadly pale, she rose from her chair, saying:

"Come with me now, then; let us have it over at once. Come!"

"But, Signorina," he remonstrated, "your people, what will they think?"

"I can leave a message for Fru Bjork; I shall say I felt ill, and that you took me home. See! there comes your wife—tell her and she will see the others!"

She was already moving towards the Signora, who was crossing the terrace with her little girls, all three greeting Ferrati with smiles of welcome. The children ran to him, and throwing their arms about him, shrieked with joy.

"Babbo has come! Babbo has come!"

Ferrati embraced them, and put them down; he kissed his wife who was holding Ragna's hand, and said to her,

"Virginia cara, the Signorina has a bad headache, and feels faint, so I am taking her home. Tell

the others not to be alarmed; it is only that I think the glare here is too much for her, and she ought not to go all the way home alone."

"You are pale, dear," said the Signora to Ragna. "Will you not come to my room, and lie down? You will be quite cool and quiet there."

"Thank you," said Ragna, "you are very kind, but I think I will go home—I should like to go quite to bed."

"Yes," said Ferrati, "I think you had better go home."

"Enrico is right," said the Signora, "go, cara, I will explain to the others when they come."

Ragna kissed the Signora, and moved off; the bright light dazzled her, she stumbled once or twice, and would have fallen, had not the Doctor been at her elbow. He steered her to the little tram, and at the landing found her a shady place on the vaporetto. Thinking she would be more comfortable by herself, he moved a little distance away, and lit a cigar, being careful, however, to remain within call.

To the end of her life, Ragna never forgot that trip. The little steamer rushed along through the greenish-yellow water, following an endless winding channel marked by groups of piles. The very swish of the bows through the water, seemed carrying her inexorably onward to some untoward fate. She shrank from the imminent certainty, yet longed to know, to be sure. Nothing she thought, could be worse than this horrible state of semi-suspense. A fictitious suspense it was though, for her inner consciousness was aware that Dr. Ferrati had seen the truth; still as long as there was a possibility of doubt, she felt that she must cling to it. Other boats passed, gay with people in summer dress, there were *barche* too, and gondolas with their bright summer awnings. She saw them apathetically, but between them and her, there rose distinct in her mental vision, the slender black-draped figure of Carolina, thrown in despair against the little side-altar. How she had pitied that girl—and now, here she was in like case! A bitter smile wreathed her lips.

"And I thought to forget, to put it out of my life!" she murmured.

The boat was a "diretto" and took them to the Piazzetta without intermediate stops, and there the Doctor put Ragna into a gondola for the remaining distance. The vibrating noonday heat beat down on her through the inadequate awning, she lay back dazed, but half conscious, until the hotel was reached. At last they were in the girl's cool, shaded room; the Doctor made his examination, and withdrew to the balcony, while Ragna dressed herself again; as soon as she was ready, she called him, and turning, he found her standing in the middle of the room.

"Well?" she asked.

"I am sorry, Signorina, but there is no possible doubt."

She sat down heavily; against her inner knowledge, she had been hoping against hope. The red and yellow striped awning over the balcony cast a bright glow on the floor, through the parted Venetian blinds; a bowl of late roses stood on the table, filling the air with their musky perfume, and the heavy droning of flies against the ceiling emphasized the noon silence. The girl sat like a graven image, staring straight before her with terrible dry eyes, her nerveless hands hung by her side.

Ferrati drew up a chair, and took one of the limp hands in his own.

"Will you not tell me all about it, my child? Remember a doctor is a sort of lay confessor. Perhaps I can help you?"

Thus had she offered to help the unfortunate girl in S. Mario! She laughed mirthlessly.

"I said that myself to a girl a few days ago, she is coming to-morrow for me to help her—the blind leading the blind!"

Her hardness alarmed the Doctor. "I must break this," he thought. "I must make her cry."

But she had no intention of crying; in a hard, even voice she told him the tale of Prince Mirko, and the fateful drive over the Campagna, and when she had finished, relapsed into silence.

"Poor little girl!" he said, stroking her hand. "Poor little girl!"

She looked at him wonderingly.

"Then you do not despise me?" she asked.

"God forbid! I have seen too much of the world and of men. And if you have been foolish, if you have done wrong—which you have not, in my eyes—you are paying for it heavily enough, God knows!"

"I should feel better about it, if I had really loved him—I thought I did, but I know now that I did not—"

"Many women do not love their husbands, the fathers of their children, and it is not counted sinful," he said, smiling.

"Yes, but marriage is different—If I had loved him I should not feel so humiliated.—I was foolish

and weak, I let myself go—And now—"

"And now, my dear, you pay the penalty. It is weakness, not vice, that expiates, in this world," said Ferrati grimly. "Yes, you expiate, there is no obviating that. But there is no necessity for bearing more than is unavoidable—we must consider what is to be done. The past is the past, there is no helping that, we must think of the present. Can you go home to your people?"

"Home? Oh, never!" cried Ragna, hiding her face in her hands. "They would turn me out!"

"I thought as much—the usual charity of a virtuous family. Full of self-righteousness—sends missionaries to the heathen and its own flesh and blood to perdition," he added under his breath.

"Well then, home being out of the question, we must think of something else.—Leave it to me my child. I will think it over; you shall not worry, leave it all to me. I shall not fail you."

His honest, steadfast eyes met hers, and she felt in some degree reassured and comforted.

"You are good!" she cried.

He patted her shoulder. "Go to bed now, and keep up the pretence of the headache." (Indeed, it was no pretence by this time.) "I will come to see you again later in the day, and we will talk it all over quietly. In the meantime you must rest." He took from his pocket a little bottle of pellets and gave her one—"Take this at once, it will make you sleep, and when I come back you will be rested and clear in your mind, so that we can discuss your future plans. I shall leave orders that you are not to be disturbed. Remember, above all, that you have nothing to fear, I, at least, shall stand by you, and see you through—you shall see that everything can be arranged."

She made no answer, so he passed his hand lightly over her bowed head, and left the room.

Ragna laid the pellet on the table, and sat on stupidly in her chair, her head supported by her hands. She felt blank and stunned; gradually, out of her blind chaos of misery rose terrible and concrete this thing that was upon her; it obsessed her half-paralysed brain with a sense of inevitable, unreasonable doom. She wondered dully why she had not thought of this contingency, and yet the possibility of it had never entered her mind. To bear a child of *his*, and in this way! She shivered with horror. And the shame, the disgrace of it! For this could not be hidden, this could not be passed over and buried in oblivion—the coming of the child would blazen her dishonour to the eyes of all men. Oh why could she not die? Surely things had been bad enough as they were before, but this—this was unendurable. The water sparkled there invitingly, beneath the balcony—a plunge and it would soon be over. Why should she live, why bear this shame, while *he* went scot free? What was there to compel her to tread this Via Crucis, when the way of escape lay open? The water called her; with a feverish hunted look in her eyes she staggered to the balcony, drew the awning aside. The door behind her opened silently, a strong hand grasped her shoulder.

"Doctor!" she gasped.

"Signorina," asked Ferrati sternly, "what were you about to do? Something warned me to come back, and thank Heaven I have been in time! You were about to throw yourself into the Canal, were you not?"

He forced her into a chair, and stood towering accusingly over her. She met his gaze with defiant despair.

"Yes, I was. What right have you to stop me?"

"I have the right to prevent you from adding crime to weakness. Yes, crime," he added, seeing her wince.

"Understand me, had it been a question of yourself only, I should not say this—you see my morality is not of the conventional pattern—but you have not only yourself to think of, there is the child—your child. If by your past weakness, wittingly or unwittingly, you have incurred this responsibility, you cannot repudiate it, you must bear the consequences, you cannot brush them aside. You think that this, the physical part, and the disgrace implied were a price that you could avoid paying by forfeiting your life, but you cannot forfeit for another. You are no longer alone, you have another life to consider, that of an innocent and helpless child who did not ask to be born—"

"But surely, Doctor," she interrupted, "I have a right to decide whether I shall bear this child or not; I have a right to choose death for it and me, rather than the stigma of shame!"

"My dear child, I do not consider that there is any shame. The shame would die in repudiating a fundamental law of nature, of sacrificing two lives to the fetish of conventional morality. What are the conventions, that you should immolate yourself and your child to them? Your duty is this: to bring your child into the world strong and healthy, and you owe it to him to make his life as happy as shall lie in your power—beyond that, nothing can rightly be required of you, and you can do no less. You are no longer merely a girl, a woman, you are a mother!"

Ragna lifted her head; Ferrati's words opened new vistas to her wondering gaze.

"A mother!" she echoed.

"Yes, a mother, and your first duty is to be true to your child—all the rest comes after." His voice

softened as he read the response to his call in the girl's face. "You will be brave, you must be brave, for the little one's sake. You see that now, do you not?"

"Yes, I understand that now—it was all so sudden, and so dreadful, it took me unawares. But I see that you are right, I will be brave now, I promise it."

Ferrati had touched the right chord, the chord of self-sacrifice, the battle was won, and he knew it; never again would Ragna attempt self-destruction, come what might.

"And now you will rest as I told you, until this afternoon?"

She signified "yes" with her head. Ferrati brought a glass of water from the toilet table, and she took the little pellet. Then he rang for the chambermaid, and when she had come, said to her:

"Help the Signorina into bed, she has a bad headache, and must rest. I have given her some sleeping medicine, and I leave it to you to see that she is not disturbed. You can tell the Signorina that I am coming back later, and will speak to her then."

So he left the room a second time, his heart full of pity for the wretched girl, the more so, as he had found her so readily responsive to his appeal to duty.

"Poor child!" he repeated. "Poor, poor child!"

He returned to the Lido and lunched with his wife, but was silent and preoccupied. The Signora, accustomed to these moods of her husband's, when his patients caused him anxiety, forbore to question him. When he had finished eating, he lit his *toscano*, and walked up and down the long terrace of the hotel, his brows knit, his hands joined behind his back; finally he rejoined his wife in her room, whither she had retired for the siesta. She raised her head from the pillow, as he entered, and put down the novel she had been reading.

"*Ebbene, Rico?*" she asked.

"Virginia mia, I am worried about a patient of mine, a girl who is in great trouble—and I don't know what to do to help her!"

"Ragna Andersen?" she asked quietly.

"How did you guess?"

"My dear man, you are so hopelessly transparent! Besides, I am not blind—a look at her face this morning would have been enough for anybody."

"The fact is, Virginia, I don't know what to do about it."

"Can't she go home?"

"She says her people would turn her out, if they knew."

"Poor girl! No, I suppose she must manage to keep them in the dark somehow. Did she tell you how it happened?"

"She told me in confidence, but one thing I can assure you of, Virginia, she has been most outrageously treated, and taken advantage of—her very goodness and innocence have betrayed her."

Virginia waved this aside. "After all, what does that matter? The fact remains that she is in a hole and must be got out of it. What had you thought of doing for her, Rico?"

"I wanted to ask your advice—a woman knows so much more in a case like this."

What he wished to do was to enlist his wife's sympathy and interest; he knew how invaluable, and how necessary her help would be, for without her adherence, there really was not much he could do.

"Won't you tell me, Virginia, what you think should be done?"

Virginia sat up, dropping her feet down over the edge of the bed; chin in hands, elbows on knees, she reflected, her tumbled dark hair falling over her pretty ivory tinted shoulders, from which the chemise had slipped.

"The first thing, of course, is for her to leave her party before they find out, and how it is that they have suspected nothing, is beyond my comprehension! She must leave them at once.—Fru Bjork is kind, but on her daughter's account, she would throw Ragna off with no compunctions whatever—It's lucky that that old maid they had with them in Florence isn't here—she would have seen it all long ago. I'll tell you what, Rico, Ragna can say she is coming back to Florence with me, and when we go back next week—I always liked the girl and I will do that much anyhow, for her—tell her she can use my name in any way she likes, and she can count on me to help her out. In Florence, she can have it all over quietly and go home afterwards."

"I thought you would help her, Virginia, and she will appreciate it, I know. If you could have seen her utter misery!"

"Would you like me to go to her? I will if it would do any good."

Ferrati raised his wife's face to his, and kissed her.

"Yes, she would appreciate that—to-morrow, you shall go." He paused a moment. "I am thinking how to manage about Fru Bjork, how to get the girl away from her, without her suspecting—"

"Ah, well, you and she must work that out together. Necessity sharpens the wits, and Ragna ought to be able to find a way—I don't think that should prove very difficult."

"I must be getting back to her now. I promised her I would come soon."

"Tell her I will come to-morrow, or she can come to me, and we will arrange it all. Tell her to keep her courage up, and that we will see her through!" Virginia called after him, as he left the room, and he answered her with a smile and a wave of the hand.

In the hotel lobby he met Fru Bjork, anxious inquiry written large upon her face.

"Now, Doctor, what is the matter with Ragna? I am really most anxious about the child."

"My dear Signora," he said, "there is nothing to be alarmed about; I find her very much run down—there may be something more, but until I am certain I prefer not to say anything. All that she needs for the present is complete rest and quiet. I shall go up now and see if her headache is any better, and afterwards I would like to talk over with you the course of treatment I wish to propose for her general health."

"I will go up with you," said Fru Bjork, gathering her skirts about her. The Doctor raised a deprecating hand.

"Afterwards, my dear lady, afterwards. With her head as bad as it was this morning, she ought not to see more than one person at a time."

"Just as you say, Doctor—and I hope you will find the poor child more comfortable. I can't tell you Doctor, how glad I am that you are here to look after her—I have worried over her so, I love her as though she were my own child, and that's a fact. Go up to her then, and I'll wait for you here." She sank on to a wicker settee, fanning herself with an awkward jerky movement.

Ferrati went to Ragna's room, and listened an instant at the door; there was no sound within—He tapped gently and entered in obedience to a languid "Come in!"

Ragna lay on the bed, staring towards the window. She was very pale, her eyes had dark circles and her features looked pinched and worn—In a toneless voice she asked the Doctor to be seated, and he drew a chair beside the bed. He felt her pulse, which was regular, but weak, and glanced anxiously at the sharpened delicacy of her face.

"How do you feel by now?"

"Oh, very tired," she answered wearily, "and rather stunned. My head seems too weak to think—and I must think," she added desperately, passing a hand over her forehead.

"I told you not to worry, that I would do the thinking for you," he reminded her. "Now is it essential that your friends should not guess—or could you take Fru Bjork into your confidence? Would she not help you?" He thought of the motherly anxiety the good woman had just displayed, and wondered if Virginia had not been wrong.

"Fru Bjork!" exclaimed Ragna, shuddering. "Oh, no! I would rather die than tell Fru Bjork! She is a good woman, she would not understand—she would despise me! Oh, not Fru Bjork!"

"Then if it won't do to tell her, you must find a way to leave her without her suspecting. You cannot remain with her much longer—not a day longer than can be helped."

"But how shall I manage it?"

"We will think of some way, and as for the rest, you must come back to Florence, and I will see you through with this. My wife says that you may tell your friends you are going to stop with her—she is very sorry for you, and will do all she can to help you."

"Then you told her—she knows?"

"She had guessed already, but you need not worry, she is quite safe—and my child, you must have some woman friend to help you now. Virginia will do all she can."

"The Signora is very good—but oh, I shall feel ashamed to see her again—now!"

"You need not, I assure you, she understands, and is full of sympathy."

Ragna smiled faintly—it was good to hear that, after all, she would not be friendless.

"Do you know when Fru Bjork intends to return to Christiania?"

"She will be going soon now—she has always said she would go home in July, and we are at the end of June."

Ferrati pursed up his lips.

"June—next Wednesday is the first of July—if she keeps to her plan we may win through—but if she postpones her departure—In any case, I shall tell her that your health will not permit of your taking a long journey now. I shall tell her that I am afraid of a growth of some kind, a tumour,

and that I wish to keep you under my observation until I can be sure. She has confidence in me, and if she can be persuaded to leave you in my care—"

"But she will never leave me like that. She is very fond of me, and nothing would induce her to leave me alone and ill in a strange country."

"We must think of a way to get her to do it, something may turn up—and in any case, if the worst comes to the worst, you can quarrel with her on some pretext or other, and leave her."

"Oh, I should hate to do that, she has been so good to me!"

"My dear child, we can't afford to consider your likes and dislikes in the matter, since you feel that you can't confide in her, you must take whatever means offers of leaving her before she finds out. However, there is no reason to precipitate matters, we can wait a few days, in case of something happening. In the meantime, you must be very careful not to arouse her suspicions in any way,—this migraine will tide you over two or three days anyway. We must arrange for you to travel back to Florence with my wife and me, next week; I shall take rooms for you near our apartment, for you can't stop on in a pension now,—and you must have a woman to do the work and look after you."

As an inspiration the thought of Carolina flashed through Ragna's mind.

"Doctor," she said, "there is that girl I promised to help, she is coming here to see me to-morrow, —she might do for a servant for me—at any rate, I should have no need to feel ashamed before her, she knows what it is to be unhappy, and it would be a way of redeeming my promise."

"You might do worse—we can certainly consider the question. Send the girl to me, I will speak to her, and make some inquiries about her. If she proves to be a suitable person, we can take her back to Florence with us."

"How kind you are to me, dear Dr. Ferrati! I don't know what I should do without you, nor how I shall ever thank you!"

"I wish there was more I could do, my poor child! If you want to please me, be brave and gather up all your strength. We all have our hard times to live through, and we must do it as best we can. You are very young, remember, and life lies before you,—you will have many bright and happy days yet—"

Ragna smiled bitterly, and made no answer.

"I think you had better stop in bed, and I shall come again to-morrow. I will tell Fru Bjork that you are not to talk or be disturbed." He took her hand and stroked it gently. "Don't worry and reproach yourself, my child; regretting the past will undo none of the mischief, one must go forward and face the future. Looking backward never does any good; if all the strength wasted in repentance and vain regrets were turned into a wholesome resolve to make the future better than the past! Ah, my dear, the Church has much to be responsible for, in fostering introspection and useless repentance as virtues! Virtues indeed! they sap the strength and muddle the brain, and make one weak and mawkish! Face the future, and make the best of it, that is the true morality!" He smiled whimsically down at the girl. "See how my tongue runs away with me, when I mount one of my hobbies! We shall have long discussions in future, you and I,—and I think you will find that life is not such a bad affair after all!"

He left Ragna much benefited by his cheery optimism, and kindly manner.

"At least I have one real friend," she thought, and then her mind turned to Angelescu. He had meant well by her, he had tried to help her,—would he, if he could have foreseen all? His earnest face with the serious steadfast eyes rose before her mental vision, and she knew that nothing would have made any difference to him. The impulse seized her to write to him, to recall him—but no, that was impossible, she had refused his offer twice, and so decisively that reconsideration was impossible, even if present circumstances had not precluded such a thought. No, as she had made her bed, so must she lie in it. She fell into a state of self-pity, in which she saw herself the victim of adverse circumstance, about to be crushed by the juggernaut-car of fatality, broken and cast out! The flagrant injustice that she alone should suffer the penalty, while Mirko went scot free, seared her soul, but it caused her, nevertheless, a sort of pride. Her sufferings made him appear but a poor creature in his careless detachment from moral responsibility, and in the abstract, the idea of shouldering the whole of the burthen alone, gave her an odd sense of exhilaration. She said defiantly to herself:

"God has denied me the common joys of women. He has chosen me to wreak His vengeance upon; my lover has forsaken me, and mocked me, what matter? I will take up the load he has shirked. I will rise above the condemnation of society. I will prove myself mistress of my fate."

With this, calm came upon her, and she fell asleep.

Fortune favoured Ragna, or at least had for her that ambiguous smile, which for the time being, promises a smoothing of the way, but which, retrospectively, seems but an ironic mask. "Here is the way open before you," says Fate; but the path leads but to the deeper intricacies of the labyrinth, from which we would fain escape.

Fru Bjork received a telegram, announcing the illness of Astrid's fiancé, and requesting their instant return.

Ragna was still in bed with a low fever, brought on by the shock and subsequent extreme nervous tension, resulting from her terrible discovery. Fru Bjork, poor woman, was in a quandary; she felt that she must take Astrid back to Christiania, while Dr. Ferrati positively forbade Ragna's undertaking the journey in her weak state of health, and gave his opinion, moreover, that several weeks must elapse before she might contemplate it. The good lady worried, and lost sleep at night, her fat rosy cheeks drooped in anxious curves, and her cap sat perpetually awry on her grey hair. She vacillated hopelessly, without arriving at any decision,—should she and Astrid stop on with Ragna, or should she bundle Ragna off with them, in defiance of Dr. Ferrati's orders? Astrid grew pale, and talked of setting off alone.

At this juncture, the Signora Ferrati stepped in, offering to receive Ragna into her care, and take her back to Florence, where she should remain under the Doctor's eye until he should declare her fit to travel. Fru Bjork, although loath to leave the girl, finally agreed to the arrangement,—indeed, there was nothing else to be done,—and with a heavy heart, set about her preparations for the return journey.

"I don't like it," she kept repeating to Astrid. "I don't like it at all. Something tells me that I should not leave Ragna behind. How shall I explain it to Gitta Boyesen?"

"But, Mother," Astrid would answer, "what else can you do? Ragna can't take a long journey, and she will be perfectly safe with the Ferratis—and I must get back to Edvard!"

"Let us hope that it will all work out for the best!" Fru Bjork would sigh.

Ragna's feelings during these days were mixed. Her relief was great that Fru Bjork and Astrid should leave without discovering her secret, yet she felt lonely and helpless at the prospect of being abandoned by her old and trusting friends,—abandoned to a fate, of which they could have no idea and which she herself could not foresee. When the time for leave-taking came, she broke down utterly, and wept in such a heartbroken fashion, that Fru Bjork untied her bonnet strings, and sitting down announced firmly:

"We will not go,—I cannot go and leave this child in such a state!"

Almost Ragna would have welcomed this change of decision, but the realization of what it would mean, the inevitable discovery, and subsequent shame, brought her to her senses.

"Oh, no, Fru Bjork!" she cried. "It is quite right that you should go! I would not think of letting you stay, I would not indeed! I shall soon get well under Dr. Ferrati's care, and you will see me back in Christiania before you think,"—her heart failed her with the last words, but she said them boldly. "Dear Fru Bjork, you have been so very, very kind to me, and I would not, for worlds, keep you now, when it is your duty to go. Astrid must go to Edvard at once, and she can't go alone."

"Do you really think that, Ragna? Are you quite sure, child, that you don't so very much mind being left alone?"

"But I shan't be alone. I shall be with the Signora Ferrati, and you know how pleasant and kind she is! Really, I don't mind at all.—I am only sorry at parting with you and Astrid, even if only for a short time!"

"I wish it could have been helped," said Fru Bjork regretfully. "I don't like at all leaving you in this way, but as you say, it seems that it must be so.—Well, good-bye my dear, I am glad you have the Ferratis anyway—do whatever they advise, and be sure you let me know how you get on. Good-bye!—Ragna, dear, it does grieve me to leave you!"

She kissed the girl in her motherly way, and followed Astrid to the door; as she went out, she turned once again to wave her plump hand to the pale girl lying on the bed, and the door closed behind her.

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

Ragna sat at the window of a little apartment overlooking the Piazza S. Spirito. The day was hot and the green Venetian shutters left the room in a refreshing dusk very grateful in comparison to the glare of sunshine outside, beating pitilessly on the light walls of the houses across the square and vibrating in waves of heat over the stunted palms in the garden below. In a shady corner a water-seller who had set up his little stand, gay with bottles and coloured glasses and was languidly chaffing a *facchino* who had come to refresh himself with a glass of lemonade. The vendor of watermelons, whose stand nearly touched that of the acquaiolo, had gone to sleep under his lurid sign of firemen rushing to extinguish the fire simulated by a glorious red melon the size of a house. Flies droned in the stillness and the girl fanned herself languidly. The room where she sat was furnished in the usual shabby-genteel style of the furnished apartment. A table with a cheap tapestry cover on which stood a glass lamp and a folding case of books occupied the

middle of the room; about it were ranged a few poorly carved chairs in the Florentine style. A sofa appeared to lean against the stencilled wall and over it hung a miserable bituminous copy of the Madonna della Seggiola, in a scaling gilt frame. A wooden shelf along one wall supported two vases of dried grasses and paper flowers and a few photographs. There were also yellowed prints of Garibaldi, King Umberto, Queen Margherita and Vittorio Emanuele II.

Ragna herself occupied a long invalid-chair of rattan and by her side stood a small table on which were a small vase of fresh flowers, a half-cut book and a glass of syrup and water.

She had been in Florence about three weeks and had settled herself at once in the small apartment chosen for her by Dr. Ferrati. She had with her Carolina her Venetian protégée and who had proved to be just the person to help her through the difficult time to come. Carolina, effusively grateful, was devoted to her young mistress and evinced a truly Latin sympathy, and tact to the delicate situation. To her, at least, Ragna was a superior person, unfortunate perhaps, but to be admired and respected none the less.

During the first few days, the newness of it all and the interest afforded by learning Italian ways of housekeeping and the work of arranging her belongings, had occupied Ragna's mind, but now that there was nothing more to do, only to live and wait, her spirits flagged and she became dull and unable to interest herself in the small details of her circumscribed existence. Her thoughts had freer scope and wandered far and wide, increasing in bitterness as the days crawled by. The first flush of her resolution to down the dictates of society at large by the arrogance of her individual will and strength of character, had died down, and she dragged through day after day in a state of dreary apathy.

Egidio Valentini had come to see her several times and was keeping careful watch over her state of mind in order to seize the psychological moment for the furtherance of his project. He observed with satisfaction her growing depression and discontent with herself and her immediate surroundings. Ferrati gave her as much of his time as he could, unfortunately, it was but little, absorbed as he was in his professional duties, and though Virginia was kind, Ragna did not yet feel quite at ease with her. With Valentini she had many long and interesting conversations; he could be fascinating when he chose and with her he did choose, also the consideration and respect of his manner soothed her irritated self-consciousness, ever on the alert for a slight. She grew more and more dependent on him and on his visits and he occupied a larger portion of her thoughts than she would have cared to admit. She wondered sometimes, if he had penetrated the reason of her return to Florence, or if he accepted the fable of her ill health. If he had guessed, nothing in his manner pointed to the fact, and there was nothing sufficiently marked as yet in Ragna's appearance to make her condition patent to the inexperienced eye. She thought with dread of the time when he must know, and wondered how the knowledge would affect him and their relations, for his good opinion was dear to her and her heart sank at thought of losing it. She did not often speak to him of Ferrati, and the latter was in ignorance of the frequency of Egidio's visits, as he had seen but little of him since the return to Florence and Egidio was careful to choose his hours with Ragna, when there would be little likelihood of encountering his friend, as he did not wish to submit himself to questioning or comment.

Ragna, as she lay in her chair was thinking of Valentini and expecting him. She was dressed in white piqué and the severe lines of the frock suited her well. Her hair was arranged partly in plaits piled on the top of her head, and partly left loose, flowing over the dull blue cushion behind her head. At her breast she wore a bunch of scented geranium leaves.

Valentini had promised to bring for her inspection a water colour copy of one of Botticelli's paintings he was making for the Arundell Society of London. The continuance of her art studies was the pretext for their intercourse thinly veiling a loverlike intensity on his part that was not without its disquieting side to the girl, and on hers a pathetic dependence on his friendship and company.

She lay waiting, half drowsy with the heat, recollection in abeyance, idly afloat on a hazy sea of thought. Finally she heard the door-bell tinkle and Carolina ushered in the visitor. He had left his hat and stick in the outside passage and entered the salotto carrying in one hand a bunch of gardenias, and in the other his picture wrapped in paper. His footsteps rang on the bare tile floor as he advanced to her side and laid his floral offering on her knees.

"How good of you to come so early," she said.

"Early? I thought the hour would never come! It seems such a long time, to me at least, since I saw you last. I have brought the picture you see,—I put the last touches to it this morning."

He unwrapped the picture as he spoke and gave it into her hands. It was a careful copy of exquisite delicacy of colour and finish and she gazed on it with a kind of wonder.

"How beautiful it is, and how wonderfully done!"

He flushed with pleasure at the note of genuine admiration in her voice.

"It's my business to do it well," he said simply. "I am glad you like it." He drew up a chair and seated himself beside her. "They will pay me well for it," he added, then as he saw the note jarred, "but it is not for the money I do it, though that is not to be despised—and the labourer is worthy of his hire. I love the work; it is the greatest pleasure in the world I think, to do the work one loves and do it well, to see it growing under one's touch. I lose myself quite and the time

passes without my knowing it. When you are stronger you must take up your work again and you will feel what a satisfaction it is."

"The lines are all so beautiful," said Ragna tracing them with her slender forefinger.

"Ah, that is where the old Masters are inimitable especially Botticelli and his school. Do you not remember what I was saying to you the other day, that the study of them and their methods is the foundation of all true art? What do your modern painters make of the use of the line and the science of draughtsmanship? They slosh on their colours with barely a thought for structure and the result, pah!"

He took the picture from her as he spoke and propped it up against the lamp on the centre table. Ragna smiled.

"You are hard on the moderns."

"Hard on them! But I am right to be! They take themselves seriously, not their work. And their training! Do they begin by grinding the colours and washing the brushes in the Master's studio and work slowly up from stage to stage until they become masters in their turn? Not they! They spend a few months or years in academies or studios or schools and then when they are tired of serious study, set up for themselves and with rockety technique and flashy design impress the imagination of the crowds. They spill pots of paint over their canvases and to hide their bad drawing, they do things in flat tones because they can't model and call it decorative art! They work for the commission, and a good price for a picture, a piece of scamped meretricious work, pure clap-trap, means more to them than all the traditions of art—yet they talk of Art for Art's sake! I tell you they are dirt! Dirt!"

He was carried away by his theme and marched up and down the small salotto, stamping his feet, gesticulating, threatening with annihilation the entire breed of modern artists. His enthusiasm impressed Ragna; she saw in it the expression of burning conviction, and its true character escaped her—that of a facile heat of prejudice easily aroused and incapable of cool or judicious comparison. Still he was at his best when talking of art, and his love of it was entirely sincere.

He looked at the girl with a critical eye.

"I should like to paint you there, just as you are; you would make a delightful study with the reflected light on your white dress and the harmony of your golden hair and the blue cushion and the green shutters beyond in that half light. You should have some of the gardenias on the table by you, though, instead of those pink flowers, to make the colour scheme perfect—all green and blue and cool with the one relieving note of your hair." He paused close beside her. "Your hair is the most beautiful I have ever seen—so fine, so silky—so much of it, and such a rare shade, like moonlight on gold!" He lifted a shining strand, drawing it through his fingers with a sort of voluptuous pleasure, then he raised it to his lips. Ragna shrank away from him, a half-frightened look in her eyes. He laid a hand on her shoulder, compelling her glance.

"I love you. Surely you know that, you must have seen it?"

"Don't," she said faintly, "you must not say that!"

"And why not, Ragna cara?" he asked sinking to one knee and pushing aside the chair he had occupied.

"Don't!" she repeated, drawing back as far as she could.

"Ragna, you know that I love you," he insisted. "I love you, I loved you before you went to Venice! Do you not remember I told you that you would come back—to me? And you have, carissima! I think you love me too, is it not so?"

"I don't, I can't!" she answered wildly. "Oh, Signor Valentini, you don't know—I have no right to love anyone or to let anyone love me!"

"Why not, dear?" he asked and tried to take possession of her hands but she resisted him. "I love you, and I want to marry you."

"Oh, please don't, Signor Valentini! We have been such good friends, please don't spoil it!"

"We have been friends, yes, but we shall be more than friends."

"No! no! That can never be!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh, don't ask me! I can't! It is quite impossible; and besides I don't love you in that way."

"But I love you!"

"I tell you it is impossible."

"But why should it be impossible? I love you, you are more to me than my life,—I can't live without you. You must be my wife or—" He made a gesture of utter despair, "Ragna, dearest, you must be mine or my life is finished."

"Signor Valentini, you must not talk like this—it is quite impossible."

"But why?"

Ragna closed her eyes wearily and drew a long breath. The moment she dreaded had come, and so suddenly that she found herself unprepared. She still tried to gain time.

"Because—because I cannot marry anyone. But it should be enough that I do not love you."

"But I will marry you without that and trust to the future."

"I tell you it is impossible for me to marry anyone."

He rose to his feet and stood looking down at her searchingly. She turned uneasily under his gaze, and reddened, her fan slipped from her knees to the floor.

"Ragna," he said reproachfully, "what is it? Cannot you tell me? I am not like other men, I love you for yourself alone, you can tell me anything, anything,—nothing would change my feeling for you. Have I not been a good friend? Have I not earned the right to your confidence? Tell me all, dear,—you owe me at least an explanation of your refusal."

Ragna obstinately kept the lids lowered over her eyes; she twisted and untwisted her fingers in silent agony.

"Tell me, dear," he plead.

She looked up at him piteously. "Why do you insist? Don't you see that you are hurting me?"

"You have said too much or too little," he answered. "In justice to me and to yourself you should take me into your confidence."

She sat up, a dull flush spreading over her face. "Since you will know then, it is this: I am going to have a child." She sank back, covering her face with her hands.

"Ragna!" his cry rang out in the stillness. She heard him sink to a chair, pushing it back as he did so with a grating noise on the tiled floor. Presently he rose and came to her side, she remained motionless; he drew her resisting hands down from her face.

"Ragna, is this true?"

She nodded, not daring to look at him. He knelt beside her.

"Ragna, will you be my wife? Have I proved that I love you, now?"

She gazed at him in amazement.

"What! you still—?"

"Yes, dearest, I still love you. I told you that I was not like other men, I love you for yourself. Whatever your past may have been, if you have been unfortunate, all the more reason that I should protect your future, that I should give you the shield of my name."

"But there is not only myself, there is the child," she said weakly.

He frowned but recovered himself instantly.

"The child? I shall love it as I would my own,—is it not yours? I shall recognise it—it will be mine."

"You are generous," she said, "but I cannot accept, it would be taking an unfair advantage—I should be doing you a wrong."

"That is as I choose to look at it, and I don't consider it is."

"But I don't love you."

"Do you love anyone else?" He asked with swift scrutiny.

"No."

"Then you will love me in time—as long as there is no one else I am sure of that. All I ask is that you should marry me, that you should accept the protection I offer. For the child's sake you must accept—you can't refuse your child an honourable name. You will come to love me dear, I know it, and until that time I will be a brother to you, a friend, nothing more. All I ask is the privilege of helping you!"

He was carried away by the nobility of the pose, it was a fine attitude *un beau giste*; it fired his histrionic imagination and gave a ring of sincerity to his voice. For a moment he believed in himself as the chivalrous rescuer of distressed damsels.

"You do not know all, let me tell you all," she demurred.

"Yes, you must give me your entire confidence—you owe me that."

So she told him the whole story, and he pressed her hand the while to show his sympathy. At the end she paused, waiting—

"I can only repeat what I said before, dear: will you consent to marry me? If you like, don't think of yourself at all, think of me—I am a lonely man, an unhappy man, I have had a hard,

disappointing life. You have become the lodestar of my life, you, Ragna! With you beside me I can do great things: I need you dear, without you life would be a desert. Last year I was very ill with typhoid fever, I nearly died; I was alone, no one loved me, no one cared whether I lived or died. If I were to be ill again who would care for me, who would nurse me? Whom have I to welcome me when I come home at night tired and discouraged? Oh, Ragna, say 'yes,' do! and I will love you always for that word!"

His voice rose and fell in impassioned cadence, his eyes burned into hers, how was she not to believe him? How was she to refuse the succour so timely offered, seemingly so disinterested? Still she made an effort.

"I must think it over, you must go away and let me think—oh, don't imagine I do not recognise your generosity—but I cannot think it right for me to take advantage of it."

"Ragna," he said solemnly, "this means more to me than you think. I told you that my life without you would be worth nothing to me. I give you my word of honour that if you refuse I will kill myself—I can't live without you. I mean what I say and I always speak the truth. When I was a little boy in the *collegio* Cardinal Ferri who was the head-master used to call me up when there had been any mischief, and say to me: 'Tell me the straight of this, Valentini, you are the only one I know who always speaks the truth!' and I would weep, I would struggle, but I had to tell the truth, and I did. And remember, Ragna, if you marry me, I will be a brother to you, dear, it will be enough for me just to have you near me, to feel your sweet presence in the house, to have your society always:—I will not ask for more unless you give it of your own accord."

"Give me time," said Ragna desperately, "give me time to think it over."

"Very well, I will give you until to-morrow at this hour. I shall come for my answer,—and if it is not 'yes,' you know what will happen, I swear it!" He released her hands and she passed them over her face.

"Till to-morrow," she said, "that is not much time."

"It is enough,—and it is too long for a man to wait for his death sentence or for the gift of life. Oh, Ragna, I do love you so! It must be yes."

"Now you must go," she said.

"Don't send me away, dear,—here at least I can see you, I am with you, life is possible. Let me stay a little longer!"

"No, you must go now, I can't think clearly with you here. If you want your answer to-morrow you must go now."

"I will go then, dear, since you wish it—see how obedient I am! You can do anything with me, anything, Ragna darling! Give me one kiss then and I will go?"

He bent over her but she turned her head away.

"No, not that! and you said in any case that you would be content to be a brother to me."

"But you would let a brother kiss you! Just one, darling!"

"No," she said firmly and he saw that it would be unwise to insist.

"As you will, then, dear,—see, again I yield to your wish, and to-morrow you will give me my answer—remember what it will mean to me and to you."

He rose and slowly crossed the room and, as he reached the door, turned with the one word,

"Remember!"

Left alone, Ragna felt overwhelmed by the unexpectedness of the turn her affairs had taken and torn with doubt as to the course to pursue. She did not question Egidio's sincerity, had she not seen the tears in his eyes as he pleaded with her? And besides what ulterior motive could he possibly have? She was consumed with gratitude for his generosity, the offer of his name and protection to a girl in her position—to her it would mean salvation. Marriage with a man who knew all and in spite of it loved her still, would be a haven of refuge, it would save her reputation and give her child the advantage of a father's name. But could she accept the offer, could she accept the charity of it? True, Egidio had put it as a benefit to be conferred still more on him than on her—but even so, could she accept? With her woman's knowledge of the facts of life and marriage, could she be his wife? She did not love him and the thought of submitting to his kisses and caresses sickened her with physical repugnance—but then he had said he would be a brother, a friend, nothing more, that merely to have her by his side would satisfy him. As a friend she liked him and found him interesting, and his person was not unpleasing apart from that faint underlying sense of physical repulsion she was conscious of in his presence. Then his threat of suicide,—he meant it, she could see that! Could she take upon herself the responsibility of driving him to such desperate courses? Could she bear the thought of his blood upon her head in addition to her burthen, heavy enough already, in all conscience? Still marriage, a binding contract involving her whole life and his,—could she honestly bring herself to accept?

She rose and feverishly paced the floor, refusing the refreshment of eggs and milk that Carolina brought her. Oh, why was this decision forced upon her now? The more she thought the more

confused did she become. All arguments were in favour of her accepting and she was at a loss to explain her reluctance. Some hidden instinct warned her against it,—but could she in justice to herself, to Valentini, and above all, to the child—could she refuse? He had said that he would love the child as his own, might not the child himself, reproach her some day for bringing him into the world nameless, a bastard, when it had lain with her to give him an honourable name and position? For the child's sake could she dare to refuse? Surely for his sake, she could fulfill her part of the contract, be an affectionate friend, a faithful and dutiful helpmate, wife in name only? Finally in her perplexity, she decided to lay the case before Ferrati and abide by his judgment in the matter. He, a man of the world, a friend both of herself and of Valentini would know what was right, would counsel her wisely. This decision brought her some measure of calm, but when she was in bed her torment returned, and she spent the night feverishly arguing the pros and cons.

Valentini, on the contrary, slept well, he was entirely satisfied with the trend of his affairs, with the way he had managed the interview and felt quite sure of the girl's ultimate decision. Fru Boyesen's fortune loomed large in his expectant imagination.

CHAPTER II

Ferrati came to Ragna early the next morning, and found her restless and worn, her eyes sunken by the fever of the night. She told him of Valentini's proposal and her doubts, ending with:

"Something tells me that I should not accept; it may only be a foolish fancy, but I feel it very strongly."

"I think," said Ferrati, "that you are overwrought and hysterical by all your self-questioning. The question, as I see it, is simple enough: in accepting you have everything to gain, in refusing everything to lose. Now the point of the matter is, do you care enough for Egidio to become his wife, or at least do you feel sure of never caring more for another man?"

"I told him that I did not love him," said Ragna, "but he said that made no difference to him, that he was content to take me, feeling merely a friendly affection for him, that he would trust to the future to bring the rest. I should do my best,—gratitude alone would make me do that. But I don't think I could ever love a man very much again."

"Perhaps," said Ferrati musingly, "that the feeling you have for him is better than love, considering the circumstances, and you may grow to love him in time; women often do grow to love the men they marry for friendship or by their parents' choice. You are of a steady, serious nature, not subject to caprice,—that is in your favour."

"Oh, I am quite sure at least I shall love no other man, I am done with love,—I have seen what it is!"

Ferrati smiled.

"You have still much to learn, Ragna, and I hope Egidio may be the man to teach it to you."

Ragna smiled in answer, rather bitterly however.

"Then your opinion is?"

"That you should marry Egidio, if you have no more serious reasons against it; I am sure that it will be best for you both—and there will be the great satisfaction to you of having provided for the future of your child,—think of the child."

"I do think of the child, and it is for its sake that I shall accept, since you think it the right thing to do."

"I am sure of it, and I hope the future has great happiness in store for you."

They talked for a little while on indifferent matters, but when he left her, she moved restlessly about taking things up and putting them down again aimlessly. Though the fact of the decision being made, took a great weight from her mind she still felt uneasy and could settle to nothing, dreading Valentini's visit in the afternoon.

A curious sense of embarrassment had kept her from telling Ferrati of the compact between herself and Valentini, to observe only friendly relations leaving the marriage a mere form for the eyes of the world. It was unfortunate that she had not told the Doctor as with his man's knowledge of life and of the fiery temperament of his friend, he would have seen the impossibility of prolonging any such state of affairs, and the mere fact of Egidio's having proposed such a scheme would have aroused his suspicions as to his friend's motives in the matter and his entire sincerity of purpose. Egidio was no Sir Galahad and was not in the least given to idealizing the relations between man and woman, or even capable of conceiving of such a relation apart from the sexual element, and Ferrati knew it.

As it was, he went home very pleased with the way things were falling out, and announced the coming engagement to Virginia who raised her arms in silent amazement, and let them drop limply.

"Not Egidio Valentini?" she said. "Poor girl!"

"Now why do you say that, Virginia?"

"I say 'poor girl' if she is to marry Egidio, that is all. What on earth can induce her to do such a thing?"

"What can she do? Think of her situation, Ninì. I consider her fortunate to have found as good a man as Egidio."

"As good a man as Egidio—well—what I wonder is, what has induced him to propose to her. What does he expect to gain by it? She is not rich."

"Now, Ninì, you are unjust; you have never liked Egidio, I know, but you must admit that he is behaving most magnanimously. Here is a girl who has been unfortunate, who has no money, and who is about to lose her reputation, he offers her marriage, he gives her his name, he declares himself ready to recognise the child, what more would you have? What better proof of his disinterestedness? I tell you, you have always misjudged Egidio, you let your prejudice blind you."

"Believe me, Rico, there is more in this than meets the eye,—*gatto ci cova*, Egidio is not the man for such a quixotic action. I am sorry for Ragna, I am afraid she will find herself out of the frying pan into the fire."

"I hope at least, that you will say nothing to her to discourage her. She has had a hard time already to make up her mind—and you must admit that this marriage is her one chance."

"Did you influence her in any way, Rico?"

"She asked me my opinion and I told her I thought she should accept Egidio, if not for her own sake, then for the child's."

"I wish you had not done that, I wish you had kept out of the affair altogether. It never does to make up people's minds for them, the time always comes when they turn on you and rend you. And in this case the responsibility is far too great—you will regret it some day, mark my words!"

"How pessimistic you are, Virginia, your name ought to be Cassandra!" said the Doctor angrily. "I should think that instead of blaming me you would join me in trying to secure Ragna's happiness. And you are so unjust to Egidio, I ask you, what has he ever done to give you such a poor opinion of him?"

Virginia smiled enigmatically.

"We shall see what we shall see," she said.

Presently she rose from the table and left the room, leaving her husband to reflect on the curious ways of women. Nevertheless her reception of his news had given him a vague feeling of uneasiness which he vainly tried to shake off. Virginia was rarely mistaken in her judgment of men and things, and he generally relied on her intuition and keen perceptions. But then, what cause could there be for doubt? So far as he could see, Egidio in this at least, was the very pattern of disinterestedness and chivalry. He lacked the clue to the mystery, for Astrid had never told him as she had Valentini, of Ragna's expectations from her aunt—true he had never sought any information on the subject. And above all, Ferrati's chief characteristic was a total inability to believe ill of anyone who had gained his affection.

Valentini came for his answer at the time appointed and found Ragna, outwardly calm, awaiting him. She was standing by the window, the shutters casting greenish reflections on her white piqué gown. He noted the dark circles under her eyes, the waxiness of her skin and the weary droop of her mouth, as she came forward with outstretched hand to greet him. His glance questioned her.

"It is 'yes'," she answered with composure.

He sank to one knee and lifted her hands to his lips. Hers curled slightly at the dramatic gesture, it seemed tawdry, after the hours of agonised indecision she had passed through, still it was better than verbal raptures. Egidio rose to his feet, and seeing that she was in no mood for demonstrative affection, had the tact to maintain a restrained friendliness of demeanour that went far towards soothing the girl and putting her at her ease. Nevertheless when he had taken his departure she was conscious of a distinct sensation of relief, and wondered at herself for it. Was this not the way of deliverance and was it not being made as easy for her as lay in the circumstances?

They had agreed as to the necessity of hastening the marriage; prolonging the actual state of affairs could be of no possible advantage, and Ragna herself, now that she had made up her mind, was eager to bring the thing to its logical conclusion without further delay. Valentini's motives are readily devinable.

"I have her!" he chuckled as he ran down the stairs, swinging his cane jauntily, "she can't draw back now—and she would not if she could, she is not the kind that breaks promises."

The banns were published at once at the Palazzo Vecchio, and as Ragna was of age there was no difficulty to be anticipated. They had agreed to forgo the religious marriage, Egidio being a fervent son of the Church only when it suited his convenience so to appear, and Ragna, imbued with her philosophical studies, attaching no importance to the, to her, empty ceremony. Having the civil wedding alone would also avoid the delay and expense occasioned by a mixed marriage.

She had decided not to write to her relations in time for any remonstrance to reach her before the *fait accompli* should render any such interference obviously useless. "Since I have decided on this step," she reasoned, "why do anything to make it more difficult? They cannot understand why I am doing it—they never can know; they will think I have gone out of my mind."

To those about her she showed an impassive face, and even the sympathetic questionings of Dr. Ferrati were unsuccessful in eliciting a response.

"It is as though you had built a stone wall about yourself—you have become a Sister of the Murate," he complained to her one day.

She smiled in answer.

"I do feel rather frozen; perhaps being the Signora Valentini will thaw me out."

"I hope so, I feel as though I had lost my little friend."

Ragna had, as it were, shut Ferrati out of the more intimate part of her personality, for the time being—indeed she had shut herself out, living on the surface, occupying her thoughts with the details of her simple preparations. She did not wish to dwell on the confused, apprehensive state of her feelings, and above all wished to hide that state from the eyes of her kind friend, so delighted at the prospect of this unhoped for escape from the difficulties of her situation. He, on his part, had tried to put away from him Virginia's insidious suggestions, but they would return at times in spite of him. To set his conscience entirely at rest he desired to penetrate the girl's thoughts and feelings with regard to Valentini and their approaching union or to have a conversation with Valentini himself, but to all his tentative questions Ragna opposed an impenetrable mask of reserve, answering superficially or turning the question. And never before had Egidio been so elusive; the Doctor found it impossible to obtain more than the most casual exchange of greetings with him. It was always,

"*Ciao*, old man! I shall come to see you some day soon. I am in a fearful hurry to-day, I had no idea that getting married was such hard work!"

Virginia herself called on Ragna soon after the announcement of the engagement. To her keen eyes the girl seemed thin, feverish, as though harassed by unwelcome thoughts and doing her best to evade them. She sat down by Ragna's side on the shabby sofa, and took a listless hand between her own.

"Now tell me, dear, how it all came about, won't you? I was never so surprised in my life as when Rico told me."

"Why should you be surprised? Though, of course, it is surprising that anyone should wish to marry me. Oh, I quite understand that!" The girl's voice was bitter.

"Oh, no cara, not that! You misunderstand me. I was astonished that Valentini should marry at all —I looked for his motives—"

"His motives?"

Virginia patted the hand she held.

"Now don't be angry with me, cara. Valentini is the most utterly selfish man I know, and for him to marry you in the present circumstances is something I can't understand. That he should be attracted by you, yes—but marriage! I ask myself, what is there beneath it all? I ask myself this, because, believe me, Ragna dear, I do not wish you to make a mistake, to be unhappier than you are. Remember that when one is married it is for a long time."

"What do you know against Valentini?" asked Ragna.

"I know nothing to his discredit except that he is utterly selfish and self-indulgent—it is a feeling, I search for the solution of this problem. I do not believe it possible for Egidio Valentini to be disinterested."

"Then let me tell you, Signora, that you are quite, quite wrong. Signor Valentini has made me an extremely honourable and disinterested offer which I am grateful and proud to accept. I only hope I may prove myself worthy of the trust he has in me, and I must refuse to discuss him further." Ragna drew her hand away as she spoke, and as she was looking straight before her, missed the half amused, half pitying smile that crept over Virginia's face.

"If that is the way you look at it, there is nothing more to be said, and I am sorry, if with the best of intentions, I have hurt you or seemed to meddle. Only one thing, cara, don't be too grateful—yet. Don't hold yourself too cheap, you will gain nothing, believe me, by making of yourself a door-mat for your husband to wipe his feet on. That sort of thing never does with any man, but with Valentini it would be fatal."

"But you must see that it is my duty to be grateful!"

"Grateful! Duty! Then you do not love him at all?"

"It is not a love marriage—we are great friends; he has been, is, most kind to me."

"But he loves you? He has said so?"

"He has told me so," said Ragna gravely, "but we are on a friendly footing, not lovers at all. And that is why I must be grateful, don't you see?"

Virginia puckered her brows thoughtfully; she did not in the least believe in either Egidio's love or his disinterestedness—still less in his marrying on a "friendly footing" merely, but she could give no positive grounds for her disbelief. Ragna's reserve and her refusal to discuss her fiancé's motives, or in any way throw more light on the question forbade any further pursuance of the subject. After all if the girl was satisfied, what more was necessary, what more could be said or done? Virginia had an uncomfortable feeling that the matter should not be left thus, but Ragna's next words closed the subject definitely and decisively.

"Thank you very much indeed for your kindly interest, Signora. There are many things I should like to consult you about, as I am a stranger here. Will you help me with my little trousseau?"

A trousseau is a subject near and dear to the feminine heart the world over, and the two were still immersed in the fascinating discussion when the tinkle of the door-bell announced Egidio's arrival. Virginia rose as he entered the room and turning to Ragna, kissed her on both cheeks.

"I wish *you* all happiness, my dear," she said pointedly, "I really must run away now, the babies will be calling for me. I shall come for you in the morning and we will go shopping."

She gave her finger-tips to Egidio and their eyes met, each divining in the other a veiled hostility. In her glance he read an undisguised query and he met it with a sort of insolent defiance.

"Congratulations," she said, in her clear, low voice. "You have gained a good wife—take care of her or I shall hold you to account."

He bowed, "*Servo suo*, Signora Virginia," and opened the door for her.

He returned to Ragna, a slight frown on his face, but waited with characteristic caution until the outer door slammed to, before he said,

"The Signora Virginia does not like me, cara; you must not let her poison your mind against me."

Ragna flushed guiltily, but loyally took up the cudgels in her friend's defence.

"You are unjust, Egidio, she only wants me to be happy, and she is most kind in helping me. You must not speak of her like that!"

"Oh, she does not like me, I have always known it. She dislikes me because I am her husband's friend. All women are jealous at heart of their husbands' friends, male or female."

Ragna laughed at the absurdity of the idea and said playfully,

"Then I think you dislike her because she is my friend!"

"Perhaps that is it," agreed Valentini. "I am jealous of all who are near you, dear one, when I am away."

He smiled to himself and registered a mental vow that Ragna should see but little of Virginia in future. "She knows or guesses too much, and she has a sharp tongue," he thought.

Carolina, the Venetian maid, was the only one who openly expressed disapproval. She flounced about the kitchen, banging the pots and pans, in a state of continual ill-humour.

"I do not like that Signore!" she would say a dozen times a day, "I do not like him. You will be sorry if you marry him, Signorina mia!"

In vain did Ragna reprove her, in vain asked her the reason for her dislike of Valentini.

"I do not know why, Signorina, but I hate him. He has the evil eye, I know it—this marriage will bring you no luck. I shall burn candles to the Madonna, but it will do no good—even the Madonna can't exorcise the evil eye!"

Her croakings made Ragna uncomfortable, and she avoided Carolina to the serving-maid's intense distress.

Meanwhile time was passing and the wedding day arrived. Egidio and Ragna accompanied by Ferrati and his wife, Agosti, a Neapolitan friend of Egidio's who was to be second witness, and the weeping Carolina bringing up the rear, made up the small cortège. It was a hot morning and the city was deserted. A few idle *facchini* and women of the people followed them up to the *Sala de' matrimoni*, where a wheezy clerk read through the marriage contract, and a bored, perspiring official representing the absent Sindaco put the questions to the pair. As Ragna rose from her red velvet armchair to answer, it seemed to her that she must be dreaming. The dry rapid reading, the abrupt, indifferent manner of the official, the darkened musty hall, traversed by a stray beam of sunlight in which dust motes danced—could this be her wedding? Mechanically she answered and when told to do so, signed her name in the registers under Egidio's; Ferrati and Agosti signed also, then the official gave her a copy of the certificate and wished her happiness. As in a

trance she descended the stair, on Egidio's arm, and heard him say:

"You are my wife now, Ragna, you have promised to obey me and follow me everywhere—to the world's end—to Hell if I lead the way!"

An oppression stopped her breathing, her head swam, the premonition came over her that not to Hell would she follow the man at her side, but through a daily, living Hell, to the end of her life. She stumbled and would have fallen, but Egidio sustained her, and Ferrati hurrying forward caught her other arm.

"Poor child," he said, "it is the emotion and the heat, she is quite overcome! Let us get her quickly to the carriage!"

So, half supporting, half carrying her, they reached the landau, waiting below in the courtyard. Virginia would have taken the place beside Ragna but Egidio thrust her aside, and himself took the girl's head on his shoulder, and held the smelling salts to her nose.

"See," said Ferrati to his wife, "how fond he is of her!"

Virginia held her peace, but inwardly thought, "All for the gallery!"

In this she was not quite right, as Egidio, for the moment, was thoroughly honest in his anxiety for Ragna. She was his wife, his possession, his chattel; he loved her for the moment because she was fair to look upon, but above all because she was newly his.

Ragna's faintness soon passed off, and crushing down her presentiment as silly weakness, she smiled up into her husband's face. Agosti came forward, hat in hand, wished them happiness and went his ways; Ferrati and Virginia took their places facing the pair, as Egidio still refused to relinquish his post by Ragna's side—a malicious desire to annoy Virginia had something to do with this, perhaps—and they drove to Ferrati's house where luncheon was spread. In spite of all efforts on the part of Ferrati it was but a half-earted affair, and all felt relieved when at the close Virginia carried Ragna off to her room to rest. They were all to dine together at the restaurant of the "Due Terrazze," and then the newly wedded couple were to go to the apartment Egidio had taken in the Via Serragli.

Dinner was gayer than luncheon had been; Ragna, now quite herself again, feeling as does a bather when the first cold plunge has been made, entertained them all by her gay sallies and quiet wit. The coloured lanterns swinging from the *pergola*, the music on the terrace, the many tables of merry diners calling for *pesciolini d' Arno*, *fritto misto* and *Chianti* all seemed delightful to her unaccustomed eyes. They drank her health and Egidio's and she smiled, and sparkled; it seemed to her that she had really reached port, that the worst of her troubles must be over. So when Egidio squeezed her hand under the table, she returned the pressure, and Ferrati who saw the movement rejoiced that all was well. Ragna smiled at him and at Egidio, but the latter's head being in the shadow, she did not see the expression of his burning, gloating eyes fixed on the flushed face and shining hair under the white lace hat. He did not, however, escape the watchful Virginia.

Dinner was over at last and Ferrati and his wife on their way home, accompanied by much cracking of the *fiaccheraio's* whip, and Ragna seated in a carriage by Egidio's side let herself lapse into a sort of reverie. So it was done, she was married! She was the wife of Egidio Valentini, far from her home, her kindred! The sultry night air, through which a faint breeze was stirring, wafting the odour of the thick-lying dust to her nostrils, oppressed her. She longed for a breath from her native fjords, crisp and aromatic from mountain and fir woods, sharp with the tang of the sea. She closed her eyes to the noisy strolling crowd thronging the streets and a wave of homesickness swept over her. She fought it down and found solace in the thought that at last anxiety and fear of a public shame were over for her, that she was saved from disgrace, and through Valentini. A flood of gratitude welled up in her heart, she took his hand and raised it to her lips, tears brimming in her eyes.

"How good you are to me," she murmured, "How very good!"

He smiled and put his arm around her and she nestled back against it confidingly. Neither spoke again till they reached the house in the Via Serragli, but Egidio watched her obliquely out of those burning eyes of his, and his arm tingled where she leaned against it. He shifted his feet nervously once or twice and his breath came fast, but he gave no other sign of the emotion that possessed him. As they rattled over the Trinità bridge the full moon, reflected in the dark glancing waters below, shamed the yellow street lamps, and the houses towering above the Lung 'Arno Giucciardini glowed here and there with lights behind the barred windows. As the darkness of the narrowing street engulfed them, Ragna felt a vague uneasiness come over her—but was she not safe with her husband-friend?

They drew up before the door of a *palazzo*, Egidio paid the driver, and opened the heavy *portone* with a large iron key. They climbed to the first floor and at the sound of their approach a door on the landing opened disclosing Carolina silhouetted against the light within.

"The Signora is tired," said Egidio, in a slightly hoarse voice, "she wants to go to bed at once, take the light!" Then to Ragna, "Come, carissima, this is your room."

Carolina lit the way to a large bedroom, overlooking the street on one side and a garden on the other. It was furnished with a large old four-poster bed with canopy and valance, some

armchairs, a table, a couch and a large writing desk. A screen hid the wash-stand, and Carolina had laid out Ragna's simple toilet necessaries on a monumental dressing table. A huge carved clothes-press stood against the wall.

"It is a beautiful room," said Ragna, but she shivered. With the wavering shadows of Carolina's guttering candle, it seemed an abode of grotesque and horrible ghostly shapes, a gloomy cavern haunted by kobolds and evil spirits.

"I am glad you like it," said Egidio gratified. "Good-night, *mogliettina*, sleep well." He kissed her on the forehead without bending, she was nearly as tall as he and withdrew.

Carolina helped her to undress and she crept into the huge bed with a sigh of relief, for the emotions of the day had tired her out. When the maid had left her she lay quite still, following with her eyes the unfamiliar outlines of this furniture, dimly seen by the flickering night-light. She wondered why she had felt no curiosity as to the rest of the apartment, why she had not even asked to see it. "Poor Egidio! I hope he was not disappointed! I shall be nicer to him to-morrow. He is so kind and this is a beautiful room, even if it is so large and strange and unhome-like—" Her thoughts were wandering drowsily on, when a sudden noise brought her to a sitting posture. A crack of light showed in the wall, then a door she had not seen before, opened and Egidio appeared, dressed for the night.

"You! You!" she stammered in surprise, clutching together the folds of her night-dress at the neck.

"Yes, I," he answered. "You did not think that was all the good-night I should ask for, did you?"

He used the familiar "tu," instead of the "Lei" he had always addressed her with heretofore. That and something rough in his voice alarmed her, a sudden fear froze her veins but she hid it, and said with well assumed calm,

"Egidio dear, it is good of you to say good-night again. You thought I would feel lonely?"

"Yes," he answered grimly, "I thought you would be lonely, so I have come to keep you company. Make room for me beside you, dear."

"Oh!" she laughed with a catch in her throat, "I am not so lonely as all that! I am quite sleepy—I shall sleep very well indeed. Good-night Egidio!"

He bent forward and she raised her cheek, but he kissed her on the mouth and as his lips touched hers his arms went around her and pressed her to him.

"Oh, no!" she panted, "oh, no! no! Not that, Egidio, not that! You said you would be a friend to me, a brother, nothing more!"

"I was a fool then," he muttered, "and you were a fool if you believed I could marry you, a woman like you, and be no more than a brother!"

She struggled wildly to free herself, but he clasped her tight, and forcing her hands away from his chest where she had braced them, said angrily:

"Look here, Ragna, after all, I am your husband, I have my rights and I mean to take them, *Intendiamoci*, I don't want to hurt you, but if you behave this way, I shall, so make an end of it! And remember this, you owe me a wife's duty in return for all I have done for you!"

With a groan she fell back on her pillows and his lips found hers again.

Thus did Ragna learn the most bitter of all humiliations, and it seemed to her, that night, that her very soul died within her, together with her newborn self-respect. Now indeed was all dust and ashes and gall—all that remained to her was the outward shell of respectability, "And God knows how dearly bought," she moaned into her pillow, as in the grey dawn she lay with aching head and dry painful throat from which rose hard tearless sobs of disgust and despair. Even if Egidio had loved her, she thought, but she knew now that his feeling for her was anything but love; a vile passion brutal and overmastering, a desire that would bite rather than kiss, tear rather than caress, the passion of a beast. And all the tenderness, the consideration, the respect of the past few weeks? Sham, all sham! "Then Virginia was right, *this* is what she tried to warn me against, and I would not listen!" thought Ragna. "And it is for always, there can be no escape—never until death!" Then she hugged herself in her arms, "Ah, little child, little child of mine, your name is dearly bought." So she lay, crushed and miserable, in the sad dawn, and there rose to her ears the creak and rattle of the axles of the heavy country carts, bringing in fowls and vegetables and hay from the country. One after another they creaked and groaned by, now and then a whip cracked, or a muffled curse rose. Then came the sweepers with the swish of brooms and water and a few early street cries pierced the morning stillness.

And always in after life, these morning sounds, the creaking of the carts, the swish of the brooms, the hawkers' cries, were associated in Ragna's mind, together with the chill and cruel dawn, with a dreary sense of hopelessness, as when the watcher by a sickbed sees, by the first livid streak of light, the ashen grey of death steal over some beloved face, and realizes the despairing cheerlessness of all the long day to follow, of all the cheerless dawns throughout the years.

CHAPTER III

Ragna's letter announcing her marriage reached Fru Boyesen as that lady and Ingeborg were eating their substantial early breakfast. Ingeborg, at her aunt's request, had come to spend some months with her, and though not as dear to the old lady's heart as Ragna, perhaps because the element of pride in an unquestioned intellectual supremacy was lacking, had won a place for herself by her quiet unassuming manners and gentle dependence of spirit.

Fru Boyesen eagerly tore open the envelope with its foreign stamp and post mark, but as she mastered the meaning of the first sentences her hands dropped and she gave a cry of astonishment.

"What is it, Auntie?" asked Ingeborg who had recognised her sister's handwriting.

Fru Boyesen speechlessly waved a hand; she resettled the glasses on her nose and continued her perusal of the letter, growing red in the face as she proceeded. Ingeborg sat watching her with round anxious eyes exercising all her self-control in silencing the queries that crowded to her lips. The thin foreign paper crackled and creased as the pages were turned, and Ingeborg followed the close fine lines of writing, though too far away to distinguish a word. Crushing the letter in her hand Fru Boyesen rose to her feet, upsetting her cup of coffee; Ingeborg sprang forward, but the expression of her aunt's face was such as to drive from her mind the minor importance of the slight mishap, and the creamy liquid streamed unheeded to the floor.

"What is it, Aunt? Oh, do tell me!"

"Your sister," said Fru Boyesen, "has disgraced herself. She has married a foreigner that nobody ever heard of, without her family's permission—without mine. My consent! She never even asked it, she knew well enough what I would say! Oh, I knew there was something in the wind when that fool, Else Bjork, came back without her! You knew, Ingeborg, I wanted to go down to her, and you all persuaded me not to. God knows, if I had, I might have stopped this folly—but now listen to what the shameless idiot says!"

She smoothed out the crumpled sheets and glancing through them read out a paragraph here and there at random.

"'Dear Auntie:

"'I hope you are not going to be very angry when you hear my news. I know you won't approve, but perhaps by and by—I am sorry that I could not consult you, but it has all been so sudden. It would be difficult for me to explain to you so that you would understand, how it was I came to take this step'—I should think so indeed—'and knowing how little use it would be to try and make you, who are so far away, understand it all I thought it better not to attempt it—Fru Bjork knew nothing of this, and indeed there was nothing definite to know at the time she left, so you must not hold her in any way responsible. I know you will think me very foolish, but perhaps time will prove even to you—Signor Valentini is a young man of whom great things are predicted; he is very kind to me and we have many interests in common—'"

The reading was interrupted by the opening of the dining-room door and the appearance of Astrid rosy and smiling on the threshold. She glanced in amazement from Fru Boyesen's flushed face to Ingeborg's strained white one, noting the overturned coffee-cup and the letter in Fru Boyesen's trembling fingers.

"My dear Fru Boyesen!" she exclaimed, stepping forward, "what is the matter? Have you bad news?" Then recognising the handwriting of the letter—"Has Ragna—?"

"Come here, Astrid," said Fru Boyesen, "tell me what you know of this disgraceful business."

"Disgraceful business!" echoed Astrid, in consternation.

"Yes, this marriage—"

"Marriage!" repeated Astrid almost dazed, "what marriage?"

"Ragna's marriage. What do you know of this Valentini person, this, this—"

"Valentini!" exclaimed Astrid, still amazed, but with a note of comprehension in her voice. "Ragna has married Valentini?"

"You knew him then?"

"Why, yes," said Astrid seating herself on the chair Ingeborg set for her. "We both knew him, he was our drawing master in Florence."

"A drawing master! My niece marry a drawing master! My niece!"

"But Fru Boyesen, he is not just a drawing master, he is an artist."

Now this conveyed absolutely nothing to the elder woman's mind. She considered artists a sort of licensed and decorative charlatans, a long-haired and casual fraternity, the froth rising to the surface of the solid and respectable mass of society, all very well in their place, no doubt, but to be kept at a discreet distance; beings as much outside the orbit of ordinary existence as the Milky Way or a handful of wandering meteors. To her mind Ragna might as well have married a peddler

or an acrobat.

"An artist!" she repeated scornfully, flicking the letter with outraged fingers. "And she wastes six sheets of good paper in explanations that explain nothing!"

Astrid, glad to turn the point of the conversation, said,

"Ragna must surely have good reasons for what she has done."

"Reasons! She gives me no reasons. In the end this is what it amounts to: 'Dear Aunt, I have taken my own way; it is too late for you to change anything, so pray don't make a fuss, but make the best of it!'"

The bitterness in the good woman's voice was unmistakable.

"Oh, yes, she was afraid of our interference, of our disapproval—but disapproval counts for nothing with Madame, now. Well, she has made her bed, let her lie in it—nor look to me to feather her nest, I'm done with her!"

"Oh, Auntie," interposed Ingeborg's gentle voice, "she is fond of you, I know it; don't be so hard on her! Ragna would never do anything that wasn't right. I know, and she would never intentionally grieve you, who have been so good to her."

"Good to her, yes, I have been good to her and this is my reward; have ingratitude and an insolent disregard of me and my opinion! Ingeborg, and you too, Astrid, remember that from this day forth I wash my hands of Ragna Andersen—no I forgot, of Ragna Valentini; she is no longer my niece. She has chosen to flout me, well, she shall find out what it is to do without me, and I forbid you, both of you, ever to mention her name in my presence again. She is dead to me, as dead as if she lay in her coffin—do you understand?"

She crossed the room unsteadily and tearing the letter across, thrust it into the fireplace of the large porcelain stove, then swept from the room, leaving Ingeborg and Astrid gazing horror-stricken into each other's faces.

If Ragna could have brought her news in person, her presence, her affectionate manner would have had a very different effect. Aunt Gitta might have raged and stormed but the mere presence of her favourite niece, once the first shock was over, would have influenced her insensibly and outweighed her prejudice. If the letter had even been a tender pleading one—but poor Ragna, sore from her disillusionment, filled with hatred and disgust for herself and her surroundings, yet obliged to justify those same surroundings, and give some explanation of her reasons for her hurried marriage, had not been able to break through the false crust of formality. So much had, of necessity, to be concealed, so much left unexplained, that try as she would, her letter lacked the compelling note of genuine feeling, and seemed hard, cynical, almost insolent, in fact. If she had frankly opened her heart to her aunt, and had thrown herself on the good woman's mercy, the appeal would have had its effect after Fru Boyesen's horror and indignation had had time to cool, but poor Ragna, half from shame and despair, half from the desire to spare her family the inevitable sorrow entailed by a disclosure, had not been able to bring herself to a frank confession. Even if Fru Boyesen had had insight enough to enable her to read between the lines of that poor inadequate letter,—but to her a word was a word, a sentence, a sentence, meaning just so much and no more, and all that she saw, was a high-handed disregard of her feelings and an impervious ingratitude for all the benefits she had conferred. It wounded her vanity not to have had her consent considered essential or even desirable. Her feelings were wounded, but they would have recovered—what are wounded feelings compared to a hurt sense of self-importance? So she hardened her heart.

Left together, Astrid and Ingeborg sat silent, neither wishing to be the first to speak, though Astrid was curious to learn all that she could of Ragna's extraordinary marriage. She reviewed in her mind the months spent in Italy, she remembered Ragna's long absences in Rome, and the half-formed suspicions they had aroused in her, then she called to mind her friend's changed demeanour in Florence, in Venice, her pallor, her lack of spirits. She remembered Ragna's feverish interest in her work, but not in her teacher, and the more she thought the more mystified did she become.

"She does not love Valentini," Astrid reflected, "at least she did not at that time, and it is not in the least like her to rush into a piece of folly like this. No, there must be something behind it all."

Ingeborg had fallen forward, her arms crossed on the table, her face hidden, weeping silently; Astrid went round the table to her, and laid a caressing hand on her shoulder.

"Don't cry, Ingeborg dear."

The girl raised her tear-stained countenance.

"Oh, Astrid, we shall never see her any more."

"What foolishness!"

"No, it is not foolishness, I feel it here," she said laying her hand on her heart; "she has gone from us for ever,—and Auntie has cast her off."

"Oh, don't let that worry you," said Astrid, "she will come round in time; I have seen Fru Boyesen in a temper before."

"But this is different, Ragna was the apple of her eye, and now—"

"All the more reason, little goose; it is only a question of time. She is sure to come round, especially with you here to put in a good word for Ragna now and then."

"I'm afraid it won't be much use, but I shall do my best," sighed Ingeborg, then in another tone, "tell me, Astrid, what is your candid opinion of this Signor Valentini?"

Astrid was rather taken aback by this sudden volte-face.

"I don't know that I have an opinion, I never thought much about him at all. He is a clever man, but curious; there seemed to be two of him, one very plausible and the other quite rude and rough. He is rather handsome in a way, and his family, I believe, is quite good. I could see when we were in Florence that he had his eye on Ragna—"

"Did she seem to like him then?" asked Ingeborg eagerly.

"I can't say she did, more than as a friend, but then it is hard to tell, Ragna is such a self-contained sort of girl. It struck me though,—but this is just between you and me,—that she had something on her mind, something that was worrying her, and that she took up the drawing and Valentini as a sort of distraction. It began in Rome, from the Carnival on she was not the same."

Ingeborg wrinkled her forehead thoughtfully, and nodded her head.

"Yes, now I think of it, there was a change in her letters too—but from there to marrying this man! Do you know, Astrid, in her letter to Aunt Gitta, never once did she say that she was in love with him and that is the only thing that would explain."

Astrid was standing before the mirror, fluffing her hair; she turned at Ingeborg's last words, and set her hands on her hips.

"Ingeborg, if I were you, I'd get to the bottom of this, there's something mysterious about it."

"No," said Ingeborg, "I won't pry; if Ragna had wished me to know, she would have told me. As long as she doesn't, I wouldn't spy on her for all the world. She must have some good reason, it's not like her to fly off at a tangent!"

"If you knew more, you might be able to help her, to explain things to your Aunt."

"Yes," said Ingeborg, "that is true; I might—"

"I have an idea," said Astrid suddenly, "I shall write to the Signora Ferrati, she may be able to tell us something; you know Ragna went back to Florence with her so she must know all about it."

"Wouldn't that seem like going behind Ragna's back?" objected Ingeborg.

"Oh, I shall be careful about that. I shall just write in a friendly way and say how surprised we all were at the announcement of the marriage. And it will be only natural for her to tell how it came about, in her reply. We may find out a good deal that way, and I don't know how else. Besides she is very fond of Ragna, and wouldn't do or say anything to hurt her feelings."

"Very well," agreed Ingeborg grudgingly, "write to the Signora Ferrati, and show me her answer, when it comes. But, Astrid, you won't say anything to anybody, except just that Ragna is married, will you?"

"Of course not, dear."

Then they kissed each other on the cheek, and Ingeborg accompanied Astrid to the door and went to her own room, the one that had been Ragna's formerly, and sat down to compose a letter to her sister.

Fru Boyesen was writing also, a letter which she was to bitterly regret, the more so that her pride would not let her recall it or abandon the position she had taken. She felt a savage joy in wounding as she had been wounded, and re-read the finished note with the pride of an artist in his masterpiece, yet with a pang at heart.

> "My dear niece," it ran, "I am much obliged to you for your letter, showing, as it does, so nice a consideration for my feelings and so just an appreciation of your duty towards me. I rejoice in your independence of spirit, and since you have shown yourself quite able to dispense with my counsel or assistance I shall not trouble you in future with either.
>
> "(Signed) Your Aunt Gitta.
>
> "P. S.—You need not bother about answering this letter, as I think you must understand that any correspondence between us has become unnecessary."

She stamped the letter, frowning as she wrote the address, and affixed a large seal of black wax. Allowing herself no time for reflection, she rang for a maid and gave orders that the letter should be immediately posted. Then, determined that the shock which had broken the whole current of her life should leave no trace on her everyday existence, she brought out her account-books, it being her accustomed Saturday morning's task, and proceeded to carefully check the tradesmen's bills for the week.

CHAPTER IV

To Ragna her Aunt's letter was a shock and a grief, but not unexpected. She had warned Egidio that something of the kind was to be looked for and as Ingeborg's letter arrived at the same time bidding Ragna be patient and hope for the best, promising that she, Ingeborg, would bend all her efforts to winning their Aunt over, Valentini was not really disappointed. Ingeborg, however, had made the mistake of advising Ragna strongly against writing to Fru Boyesen in the existing state of affairs. The poor woman in spite of her plainly expressed wish to the contrary, was secretly hoping for a letter from Ragna, a dutifully humble letter which might permit of her abating somewhat of her wrath. But Ragna followed her sister's advice, and no letter came. So the misunderstanding deepened.

It has been said that one can accustom one's self to anything, and it is certain that after the first few days of her marriage Ragna lost, to a great extent, the feeling of moral and physical degradation which at first had made her wish to cover her face forever from the eyes of mankind. Or rather, as some feelings are too poignant to be born long, there ensued a deadening of the fibres, and the daily torment became a burden to which she learned to bend her back. She even took a bitter satisfaction in saying to herself that she was paying her debt to the full, earning her salt of outward respectability as it were, by the prostitution of her soul. As for her body, it seemed to her a thing to leave out of account henceforward, a temple profaned beyond all hope of purification.

Respite came to her though, after some time, by Dr. Ferrati's dissatisfaction with her state of health, and his consequent prescription of complete rest.

He even took Valentini aside and berated him soundly.

"Have you no sense at all, Egidio, you who know your wife's condition, that you take so little care of her? If you keep on in this way, I tell you, I won't be answerable for the consequences!"

Virginia watched the course of events but refrained from comment, much to her husband's relief, for there was something in the expression of Ragna's eyes, a miserable, hunted look that made him most uncomfortable. She never complained and when he tried to sound her, she fenced as before her marriage; once even, when he went so far as to put a direct question, she resolutely denied any cause for unhappiness.

Virginia had received Astrid's letter, and had answered it, but could not give any information as she did not feel free to disclose Ragna's secret, the real reason of her marriage. Instead she insinuated her doubts of Valentini's disinterestedness, leaving Ragna as much out of the question as she could. The letter, such as it was, carried a great light to Astrid, who recalled her indiscreet confidences to Valentini, in his studio. His motive, she saw clearly enough—but Ragna's? Here all was still mystery. She re-read the letter and understood that the Signora's reticence was intentional, and that she might hope to learn nothing more from that source.

Ingeborg, to whom she took the letter, remained as much in the dark as ever, for Astrid naturally omitted to tell of her own conversation with Valentini on the subject of Ragna's prospects.

"She is a friend of Ragna's, I can see that," said Ingeborg, folding and unfolding the letter, "and I am sure that if she can help her she will. As for the rest, the reasons for this marriage, perhaps Ragna does not wish her to speak of them, or else she is too good a friend to pry and spy. I like her, I wish I could have a talk with her."

As time went on, the Valentinis became rather pinched for means. Shortly after the birth of Ragna's son, whom they called "Egidio," they removed to a smaller and cheaper apartment on the other side of the river. Carolina, whose baby had been born a month before her mistress's, served as *balia* and so avoided the expense of a professional wet-nurse, for Ragna's health was at this time too delicate and her recovery too slow, to permit of her nursing the child herself. The long strain had told on her severely, and for some time she was obliged to spend most of the day in her rattan reclining-chair. She welcomed this weakness—it was good just to lie there set apart from the everyday worries, and to let life slip past unresistingly. Egidio, to be just to him, was kind to her at this period, bringing her flowers and fruit and any little dainty he could afford. Her pale face and listless hands appealed to him, also he had a sort of vicarious pride in the plump sturdy child, and graciously accepted as his due the compliments that such of his friends as were admitted to his intimacy, lavished on his first born. As he had always been of a secretive nature as to his own affairs, the sudden appearance on the scene of a wife and child, surprised no one particularly,—the only wonder was that after keeping his marriage secret so long, he should have divulged it at all,—but again the birth of a son explained that.

Virginia often came to sit with Ragna during these days of languor, and the girl welcomed her as she never had before. Virginia was touched by the affectionate warmth of Ragna's manner towards her and during these visits her busy fingers fashioned many little garments for the baby. He was fair, like his mother, round and rosy, with great blue eyes, and from the first moment they had laid him in her arms she had loved him with a fierce tenderness that was almost aggressive in its intensity. She looked to the child for compensation for all she had been through. Virginia often observed the change in the young mother's expression, when Carolina left the baby with her; all the languor, all the listlessness disappeared, the thin pale cheeks took on the colour

and the eyes the brightness that was natural to them. Virginia said to her one day:

"I am sure that if you made an effort, Ragna cara, you could overcome this weakness. It is because you voluntarily let yourself go that you get no better. Tell me, why is it that you don't want to get well and strong?"

Ragna lifted her head. She was dressing little Egidio. Her eyes, torn from the contemplation of his plump rosy body had a startled expression.

"How did you guess that, Virginia?"

The other smiled.

"It was not very difficult to guess. But seriously, carissima, you should make an effort,—for the child's sake, at least."

"I suppose I ought to, for the child's sake," said Ragna slowly, caressing the coral-pink feet and dimpled legs, "but I can't somehow, I can't make the effort. I—I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what, cara?"

"That when I am stronger, Egidio—"

The blood rose in Ragna's cheek; Virginia leaned forward and patted her hand.

"I understand, poverina,—but what would you have? We married women are not our own mistresses,—it is the way of the world. The Creator has willed that some of us serve our Purgatory on earth."

Before she left, she kissed Ragna tenderly, and murmured, "Poverina, I am sorry—but you have the bimbo! Let that make up to you for the rest!"

She was thinking of Egidio with his mouth like that of a beast.

After the Valentinis moved, Virginia was not able to come so often; they lived further apart, and her visits in consequence became less frequent. Indeed, this had been part of Valentini's intention in going so far. He wished, partly from jealousy, and partly from mingled dislike and fear of Virginia to remove Ragna from her close companionship and the moving offered a good pretext for this, without the risk of offending the susceptibilities of his friend Ferrati.

Ragna missed Virginia greatly, she had grown to depend on her society, and as she had few friends and but little opportunity for making new acquaintances, her lonely days became singularly dull and empty.

Egidio had had a run of bad luck and had sold no pictures for some time and the expenses of Ragna's confinement had been a heavy drain on his resources. As week after week passed, bringing no sign from Fru Boyesen, he grew impatient, although he had told himself to expect nothing for some time. The confinement had cost more than he expected, and he thought that Ragna's family might have helped him out, though realizing at the same time the absurdity of the idea, as they could and must know nothing of the birth of a child for some months to come. He grew moody and taciturn, and without speaking directly on the subject, gave Ragna to understand that her faulty diplomacy was to blame for their discomfort. This bewildered her, as she had even yet, no inkling of his real motive in marrying her.

She withdrew more and more into herself, realizing as time went on, how vain had been the hopes of a friendly comradeship on which she had founded her expectations of married life. Egidio no longer cared to talk with her about his work and his interests, and when she proposed a visit to his studio and a resumption of her lessons, he received the suggestion with such coldness and evident lack of pleasure, that she let the subject drop and never revived it again. He nearly always spent the evenings out now and when, by chance, he remained at home, his sour, forbidding expression and the aura of gloom that hung about him, effectually choked any conversation. Ragna felt a distinct relief in his absence for Carolina's cheery song rang out unreproved in the kitchen, little Egidio, or "Mimmo," as they called him, cooed and prattled in his crib—the whole household, in fact, seemed to stretch its cramped limbs and breathe freely, relieved of the oppressive presence of the master.

They were poor, very poor; Ragna did the best she could in restricting expense, but the bills crept up in spite of her, and Egidio's reproaches for her extravagance hurt her bitterly. Was all her life to be a failure, she wondered drearily? She had always acted for the best, she told herself; she had only consented to marry because Egidio had begged her to, and on her child's account, and now all was misery. She could see from day to day her husband's affection for the child slowly waning. What would become of them all? In these reflections she did not dare to be quite honest with herself,—she had acted for the best, yes, but as others saw it for her, she had lacked the courage to be true to herself, to her instinct. So, because she had gone counter to her nature, because she had denied the essential truth in her soul, and surrendered her life to the guidance of others, in giving to her motherhood the shield of what she expected to be but an empty social contract, a sham, she had sold her birthright for a mess of pottage. Even the love of her child, which should have been her consolation, was to become as dust and ashes in her mouth. It seemed cruel, as she did not err consciously, and it was not her fault if the arguments with which society and custom supplied her, proved specious. But she was not one who could live on the surface, buoyed up by a succession of more or less agreeable occurrences and material

facts, therefore the Law, the first commandment of which is, "This above all, to thine own self be true," bore heavily on her.

She grew desperate, and driven by Egidio's moodiness and fits of temper, finally wrote to her father begging him for help, announcing herself about to become a mother, and giving as an excuse for her appeal her husband's extraordinary ill luck and the extra expense occasioned by her condition. Lars Andersen replied affectionately. His daughter's marriage had been a grief to him, and his national pride had been hurt that she should have preferred a foreigner to one of her own countrymen, but except for that she had become almost a stranger to him. The years she had spent at school and with her Aunt Gitta had taken her out of his life, and the knowledge that by her choice of a husband she had definitely separated herself from her own family and country had brought no such sharp pang to him as it had to her mother and to her aunt.

He wrote that he was sorry not to be able to do more for her, his limited income being barely sufficient for home needs, and that she must take the will for the deed.

Tears rose to Ragna's eyes as she read the letter; her memory conjured up the cosy, low house, sheltered by pine-trees, nestled at the foot of the steep bare promontory overlooking the fjord; she recalled one by one the happy times of her childhood. Now, Lotte was the only one left at home, the old grandmother gone, Ingeborg in Christiania, she herself far away,—what was there left of the old life save yearnings and vain regrets?

Egidio came in and found her sitting, the letter lying on her lap, her eyes far away.

"See, Egidio!" she cried, starting up, "Father has sent us a present."

He took the enclosed draft eagerly, but his face fell as he read the figure of the modest sum it represented, and he cast it scornfully on the table.

"A beggar's dole!"

"Oh, Egidio," she remonstrated, "poor Father can't afford more. I didn't expect so much. He has sent all he could spare."

He turned on his heel, his hands in his pockets, the black felt hat which he had neglected to remove still on his head.

"I am glad to find that I have married into such a princely family!"

With a lump in her throat she gathered up the letter and the draft and left the room, afraid to trust herself to speak. That her Father's kindness should meet with such disdain! True, Egidio could not know the self-denial the gift represented,—but at least he need not have sneered!

Small as it was the gift helped her for some time, and she used the utmost ingenuity in making it last as long as possible. But when it was gone? The inspiration came to her, and she wondered that she had not thought of it sooner, to write some descriptive articles for a Norwegian review to which she had contributed as a girl. They were accepted, and she supplemented them by a few stories for children, which were taken by a children's magazine. So she helped tide over the period of depression.

If she had looked to her husband for encouragement or gratitude, she was disappointed; he was angry at her success, jealous even and he mentally compared the small sums her work brought in with the expectations he had entertained and which seemed as far from realization as ever.

She gained though in other ways, first through the restoration of her self-respect—she was still worth something in the world, even if unappreciated by those nearest her; then the interest of her occupation gave her new life, and as she worked her strength came back to her, the colour returned to her cheeks and the spring to her step.

Egidio, coming home to dinner one evening, paused in the doorway to look at her, surprised at the change, patent at last, even to his eyes, and a feeling long in abeyance reawoke in him as he watched the rosy, graceful woman, sewing in the warm radiance of the lamp. She raised her head, and as her eyes met his, realized with a thrill of horror that her chains were in that moment, rivetted afresh. She had almost given up thinking of the probability of a return of the early days of their marriage; she had hoped, nay, almost believed them over for ever. She had even encouraged Egidio's long evenings out, thinking that the pleasures he found away from home would keep him from her and spare her the return of the slavery she most dreaded. But as she saw the admiration in his look, her heart sank.

He moved over to her, something cat-like in his tread and as she turned her head away, kissed her on the ear, murmuring,

"I am tired of my little room, *mogliettina cara*, I am coming back to you again. I shall tell Carolina to move the crib into her own room."

He moved off towards the kitchen, and she heard his voice raised in peremptory command as, sick at heart, she folded up her sewing with shaking hands.

CHAPTER V

"Well, Ragna, for a young lady who could not make up her mind whether to be married or not, you are doing well," said Dr. Ferrati, jokingly.

The baby kicked on the knees of the *levatrice*, who was dressing it, and Ragna, pale and worn out lay back on her pillows; Egidio stood by the window, looking out and from the adjoining room came the voices of Virginia and Mimmo, now a lively child of nearly two.

Ragna made no answer, her eyelashes barely quivered on her pale cheeks. She wished they would all go away and leave her to rest, to rest for ever. Ferrati looking at her, understood, and beckoning to Egidio, motioned him from the room.

"We must let her sleep now, she needs rest."

Egidio paused by the bed on his way out. Now that she was the mother of a child of his, he felt an odd sort of tenderness for her. Stooping awkwardly he kissed her pale forehead; she shivered slightly, and made no response.

"Come away," said Ferrati, "she must rest, she is worn out," and together they left the room.

Virginia raised her head from the game of blocks she was playing with Mimmo.

"Well!" she asked.

"She is doing well," said Ferrati, "but she is very tired and must sleep. You ought to be a proud man, Egidio," he continued, turning to his friend, "to have a pair of boys like this rogue and the little one in there—one of the finest children I have ever seen, he weighs five kilos if he weighs an ounce, a fine straight limbed youngster he is, too!"

Valentini smiled; then as his eyes rested on Mimmo, the smile vanished. The child scrambled to his feet and toddled up to him, holding out a block.

"See, babbo, the pretty birdie!"

He pushed the boy away roughly, jealous of this usurper who had taken and must always keep the place of the eldest, the place of his own son. The childish lip quivered and tears rolled down over the round rosy cheeks.

"Be quiet!" said Egidio gruffly, "if you cry or make a noise I shall beat you!"

Mimmo dropped the block and ran to Virginia; he hid his face in her skirt and sobbed loud and long.

"For shame, Valentini!" she said sharply.

For answer he made an angry gesture and left the room, slamming the door to, after him. Virginia and Ferrati stared at each other in consternation.

"He hates the child," said Virginia, "he never liked him but now that the other has come, he hates him! God knows it was hard enough before, for that poor thing," she waved her hand towards the door of Ragna's room, "but it will be an Inferno now. I always told you, Rico *mio*, that this marriage would turn out badly."

Then as little Mimmo's sobs continued she kissed him and caressed his fair curly head.

"There, there, Mimmo caro, be a good boy! Babbo didn't mean to frighten his little man! Look up! There is only Zia Virginia who loves you. You must be a good boy and help take care of poor mammina who is ill. Hush now! If you are good, I will show you your new little brother, such a dear little baby boy, just come from heaven!"

"I don't want a little brother," said Mimmo suddenly, "wants my mammina, wants to go to her! Take little brother away, Mimmo doesn't want to see him."

Ferrati's eyes again sought those of his wife; he was very grave.

"I'm afraid you are right, Virginia," he said.

A few hours later, when Ragna awoke from a deep refreshing sleep, the *levatrice* laid the baby in her arms. She looked curiously at the little head covered with a dark down, it hardly seemed possible that it could be her child, its presence, the little weight of it on her arm gave her no such thrill as had Mimmo. This child was altogether his father's, not hers, she felt, conceived with intense revolt of spirit, he must inevitably be antagonistic to her and hers. The mystery of this little being, born of her, yet a stranger to her, flesh of her flesh, yet divided from her by the spirit, oppressed her heart and mind. She tried to think it out, to understand, but the problem was too great for her tired head, and she drifted slowly away on a dreamless sea of sleep, unvexed by the worries of life.

CHAPTER VI

The weeks drew into months, and Beppino in his turn was short-coated and crept about the floors with his playthings. Mimmo, after the first attack of infantile jealousy had passed, succumbed to the fascinations of his baby brother and adored him with the whole strength of his little heart.

Beppino was a strange child, grave and self-contained; the selfishness of his nature made itself apparent from the very beginning, and it needed all the sunny brightness of Mimmo's character, all his childish good nature to cope with the other's exactions. Beppino wanted the blocks. Mimmo relinquished them to him. Beppino threw the precious red ball out of the window, to keep his brother from playing with it. Mimmo wept over the loss of his treasure but straightway invented a new game for the delectation of baby-brother. Beppino took a special delight in tormenting animals, pussy fled at his approach. Pallino, the little Pomeranian incontinently turned tail and sought shelter when the baby's toddling footsteps announced his coming. He loved to tear the wings off flies laughing at their vain efforts to escape, and once he carried his experiment too far, for he swallowed the hapless insects and Ragna was surprised by his rushing to her side his hands applied to his round little stomach, shrieking with fright.

"Mammina! Mammina! I can feel them crawling and buzzing inside!"

Egidio had come to spend less and less time at home, his affairs prospered, one commission followed another, and often Ragna hardly saw him for weeks together. They had moved into another and larger apartment in a good street, an apartment occupying two floors of the house in which it was situated, the living and reception rooms being on the first floor and the bedrooms above. Egidio's studio was also in the house, on the first floor, it had a separate street entrance and staircase and was connected with the rest of the apartment by a long winding passageway. In this studio, forbidden territory to the rest of the household, Valentini spent most of his time when in the house, rarely condescending to appear in the sitting-room, and these occasions were anything but occasions for rejoicing, as his bursts of temper grew more and more frequent, and when in the grip of one of the headaches from which he so often suffered, the whole household trembled at his approach. Once, in a fit of rage at the unintentional banging of a door he seized the tureen of steaming soup from the hands of the offending servant, and flung it, contents and all at the man's head, meeting Ragna's remonstrance with:

"I am master in my own house, if you please, and since you show yourself incompetent to train the servants, I must try my hand at it."

He had become openly contemptuous in his treatment of her; the brief glow of affection aroused by the birth of Beppino had soon faded and he took an unholy joy in holding her up to ridicule before the servants and the children. Mimmo especially, he taught to be impertinent, insolent even—a child is very ready to adopt the tone and manner of the head of the house, and when Ragna pleaded with him with tears in her eyes to desist, he laughed at her and asked her what she had ever done to deserve either consideration or respect.

"But I am your wife, Egidio, the mother of your children," she paused biting her lip, at the unfortunate slip of the tongue.

"Oh, yes, *my* children—very fine indeed. Your generosity does you credit—but as a title to veneration—"

"Leave me out then," she interrupted, flushing painfully, "consider only the boys. How do you think they will grow up, without love and respect for their parents?"

"Oh, I warrant you they will always respect me," he growled, "the hand that holds the purse-strings commands respect."

"So you think now, Egidio," returned Ragna, for once speaking out her mind—generally she schooled herself to submission, "but I tell you the time will come when all the disrespect you inspire them with towards their mother will be turned against yourself. You think you can hold them by your power over them, by your authority, I tell you that you are building on sand. Love begets love, coldness begets coldness and hatred begets hatred!"

Valentini's face grew red, the veins swelled in his forehead, his eyes glared from under the beetling brows.

"You talk of love and respect, you!" he roared, and she recoiled involuntarily from his violence. "How dare you speak to me like that? Remember that I picked you out of the gutter—where would you be now if it were not for me? If I ever married you at all, it was because my head was still so weak from the fever that I knew no better than to let myself be roped in. And here I find myself, saddled with a bad tempered, puling wife and a family that is only half mine, where other young men of my age—"

"Egidio!" she cried with flashing eyes, "recollect please, that I only married you because you wore down my resistances, because you begged and implored—"

"Silence, you lie! How dare you interrupt me?"

"I dare because what I say is true."

"True!" his hands appealed to Heaven. "It is as false as Hell, like yourself! How much do you suppose I believed of that cock-and-bull story you told me, about your being the light-of-love of a prince? A prince!—a gondolier perhaps, or a *facchino di piazza*!"

"Hush," she said, as pale as death, "the servants will overhear you."

"The servants! What do I care for the servants? Let them hear, I have nothing to conceal from them!"

The taunt was like a blow in the face; Ragna stiffened under it and turned cold.

"You forget, Signor Valentini, that in insulting me, you insult yourself, for when all is said and done, I am the wife you have chosen. Policy at least should dictate another course of conduct towards me,—everything that lowers me in the eyes of the world lowers you, too."

His answer was to seize a large Contagalli vase, standing on a console between the windows and smash it on the tiled floor, then he turned and rushed from the room. Ragna stood looking after him a scornful smile creeping over her frozen face. In that moment she had seen revealed the innermost hideous recesses of the man's soul, the man who was her husband, the father of Beppino. In the silence there rose to her ears the reverberating bang of the *portone*, and the angry beat of his footsteps on the stone pavement outside.

After a few days of sullen silence, he appeared before her one evening before dinner, a little box in his hand. It was never his way to offer an apology, but the desire for peace which stood to him for remorse, frequently took the form of material reparation. Never would he, in any circumstances, have admitted himself in the wrong. He opened the box, displaying a ruby ring set with diamonds, saying:

"You must admit that I am a generous husband, my dear!"

"Thank you," said Ragna, without looking up, "I do not care for it."

"Not care for it!" he exclaimed, straightening up suddenly as though struck by some unseen missile. "A nice return I get for all my kindness. Of all the ungrateful—"

She raised her eyes slowly and something in their cold, scornful gaze silenced him. He stood uncertainly opening and shutting the box. Meanwhile a thought came to her—why not take the jewel after all? Why not take all that she could get? Life with this man was becoming fast unbearable, and when at last she should be able to endure it no longer, these trinkets might provide her with the means of escape.

"If you very much desire it," she said coldly, "I will accept your gift."

"I thought you would when you came to think it over. It is a good stone," he said taking up the ring and holding it in the light of the lamp, "and it is worth considerably more than I gave for it. I am not one of your fools who pay the fancy prices of a fashionable jeweller—indeed it is they who come to me for advice, they know I have a good eye for stones, and for a bargain."

"So have the Jews," said Ragna, biting her thread, she was sewing a little garment for Beppino.

"The Jews!" said Valentini, glaring at her, "what do you mean by that? Of course you are so accustomed to the society of princes and grandees that you think yourself above prudence and wise expenditure. You are a fool, which of your princes would have done for you what I have done?"

Ragna bowed her head over her work; she tried to hold herself above the continual taunts and reproaches, and she realized that sometimes, as in this instance, she drew them on herself by her resentment of her husband's little meannesses. He never gave her a present but he expatiated on his shrewdness in buying at a pawn-broker's sale at the proper moment or in taking advantage of some impoverished nobleman's hour of need. The things were, many of them, beautiful and valuable both artistically and intrinsically but the pleasure of their possession was spoiled to Ragna by the unvarying circumstances of their purchase and bestowal.

Egidio's meanness showed itself also in other ways. In September he had accompanied his wife and children to the sea-side for a fortnight and having installed them in the lodgings he had taken, went out for a stroll. It lacked two hours to dinner-time and as little Mimmo was hungry and the baby fretful, Ragna requested the landlady to send up two bowls of bread and milk. Valentini returned in the midst of this frugal repast and with lowering brow inquired the meaning thereof.

"The children were hungry," said Ragna, "and it is too long for them to wait for dinner."

"Too long! They can wait if I can! Besides you should have thought of it before and brought something with you. I tell you, Ragna, your senseless extravagance will be the ruin of me! If you dare ever again to order extras without my permission—" The rest of the threat was lost as he seized the bowls and emptied them out of the window. He then beat a rapid retreat leaving Ragna to quiet as best she could the disappointed and hungry children.

This was one of the many instances that rose to her mind as she sat there sewing, choking down the lump in her throat, while Egidio flashed the ruby admiringly in the ray of the lamp. When times were hard, she had understood his economies, but now that they were prosperous, that there was no need for it! She did not understand that certain meannesses were ingrained in his character, as were certain generosities—that it was as much a part of his nature to stint her in handkerchiefs and stockings as it was to bestow costly jewels upon her—yet, the key to it was simple, the one redounded publicly to his credit, the other was unknown except to himself and to

her. She had long ago lost any feeling of gratitude towards him, he had shown her all too clearly what personal motives had actuated him at the time of their marriage, and his attempts to throw the onus of the transaction on her, caused her a bitter amusement; they revealed so plainly the innate selfishness of him, his desire to divest himself of responsibility, and yet to claim gratitude, where according to his own showing, it least was due!

"Your friends will admire this ring," said Valentini, "but I must beg of you, Ragna, not to give it away. The things I buy for you I do not intend to let pass out of the family." This because she had once sent a small and not particularly valuable brooch he had given her, to her sister Ingeborg, much to the latter's pleasure and surprise, though Fru Boyesen had sniffed when the gift was shown her.

"Why don't you answer?" demanded Valentini, "you might at least attend to what I say. When I give you a thing it is for yourself, not for others."

"But if it should please me better to give it to a sister whom I love, than to wear it myself?"

"You have no right to squander my property or my gifts."

"Very well," said Ragna wearily, "I have not the slightest intention of giving the ring away."

They relapsed into silence and Egidio read the evening paper. The rustling of the pages grated so on her nerves that she thought she must scream and she jerked her needle in and out till the thread snapped. Generally she took but little interest in the local news, but to-night, when Egidio laid the paper on the table, she took it up, and in turning the pages over, her eye fell by chance on the list of names of travellers stopping at the large hotels. An involuntary exclamation rose to her lips as the name "Count Angelescu" stared at her from the printed column.

"What is it?" inquired Egidio suspiciously.

"Nothing—I have pricked my finger—" She still held her sewing crushed in her left hand.

He turned again to the design he was making on the back of an old envelope.

Angelescu in Florence! Angelescu! The blood surged and beat in her temples, her hands shook as she raised the paper to her eyes. No, there could be no mistake, it must be he and no other!

For so long she had hardly thought of him; the realities of her everyday life had deadened her memory of the past, and unless something out of the ordinary occurred to recall them specially to her mind, her thoughts rarely turned to those days in Rome. Her household cares, the constant attention required by the children, her interest in her writing, which she still carried on, and the social intercourse with the little circle of friends she had formed, all these sufficiently occupied her time, leaving her but little leisure for brooding over past or present.

Egidio mocked at her social proclivities, at her friends, especially when they happened to be titled folk, and called her a snob, so that it was with terror and dismay that she viewed his arrival when any of her friends happened to be present, for unless they were young and pretty women, he exaggerated his habitual boorishness of manner. If a really pretty woman occupied his wife's drawing-room, his airs and graces were a sight to see, and caused Ragna even more shame than his rudeness.

It must be admitted that titles had an attraction for her, as they inevitably must to those in whose countries they are non-existent—strange that such should be the result of democracy—but a snob she was not. A title to her represented continuity of race, historic and chivalric tradition, something removed from the plane of ordinary life, and which appealed to her sense of romance. This must have been strong indeed, to blind her to the faults and weaknesses of the bearers of some of these titles, but such was the glamour of an historic name that her otherwise clear vision and independent judgment not infrequently played her false and she saw the object of her veneration through a rose-coloured mist which exaggerated qualities and obscured defects.

She had gone on from day to day, bearing her heavy burden with a sort of sodden resignation. Now and again a scene worse than usual made her feel that this life was past enduring, and she beat her wings against the bars, but never for long. The treadmill of the daily round carried her on and her half-hearted attempts at self-assertion fell by the wayside. The utmost she could oppose to her husband's tyranny was a passive resistance, infinitely irritating to him. His character was so much more violent than hers that if she attempted to meet him on his own ground, the force of his passion bore her down, swept her from her feet, buried her beneath the floods of his wrath. She had grown patient, God knows she had need to be; and just lately a dim light had shone on her horizon, a vague hope of relief, for Ingeborg had written that Fru Boyesen was relenting, had inquired after her wayward niece, had even asked to see the photographs of the children. If she should be restored to favour, reinstated as her Aunt's heiress it would mean for her the independence that only the possession of money can give, and it would silence for ever Egidio's taunts as to her dowerless state. He would have to consult her wishes when she had the money, she thought with secret exultation.

So time had passed, the present absorbing her whole being, barring out alike memories and regrets. The announcement of Angelescu's presence in Florence came to her as a trumpet-call, the dead rose from their graves, dead hopes, dead fears, dead emotions, and walked with her.

CHAPTER VII

She was relieved, when after dinner Egidio put on his hat and went out, not deigning any explanation, as was his custom. She took a book, and settled herself in an armchair by the lamp, but not to read; her eyes followed the printed lines but her thoughts were far away.

"If I had accepted Angelescu's offer," she mused, "what a difference it would have made. Why, oh why was I such a fool? I refused a good man, a loyal man,—I knew he was true and loyal—to come to this!"

Her eyes rose involuntarily to a portrait of her husband, the tribute of an enthusiastic if untalented pupil, which he had considered good enough for his wife's sitting-room, and she shuddered. The picture though poorly painted, was a striking likeness, almost a caricature. The cunning expression of the handsome eyes, the slight twist of the nose, the repulsive sensual mouth half hidden by beard and moustache were faithfully if naively depicted. The right hand hung over the back of a chair, a hand in curious contrast to the face, a well-formed strong but delicate artist's hand, but even here the slight grasping curve of the pointed fingers, the thickness of the thumb betrayed the nature of the man.

Often she had wished to destroy the picture, or at least to take it down, hide it, banish it from her sight, but Egidio would hear of no such thing; it seemed to possess, to fill the room with a hated presence as Valentini filled her life. Even when she turned her back upon it, the knowledge of its presence obtruded itself upon her inner consciousness, she could not escape it.

To-night, however, it seemed to have lost some of its customary power. With a defiant lift of her shoulder she rose and went to her writing-desk, a monumental piece of furniture which had once belonged to a Cardinal, and opening a secret drawer, reminiscent of inquisitorial mysteries, took out her old writing-case, shabby and worn, with one of the hinges broken. The lock still held, however, and she opened it with a key on her watch-chain. Inside were the sketch Angelescu had made of her feeding the gulls, and his letter to her. She returned to her seat and studied the drawing; the paper was yellow, the pencil-strokes faded and rubbed, but the little sketch had kept its air of freshness and force, the girlish figure seemed to defy the elements with all the ignorant courage of youth.

"And that was I," said Ragna softly; it seemed to her that it must have been some other girl, long, long ago, in the dim ages past.

"And it was not eight years ago," she said, counting on her fingers. She put the drawing down and turned to the letter.

"What a blind fool I was not to understand! Oh if only, if only—! But I must not see him now, it would not be right. I must dree my weird. Besides he will have forgotten me long ago—ah but will he? He said in his letter 'now and always,' and he meant it, but so much water has flowed under the bridges!"

She sank into a reverie, calling up his every word and look, his steady dog-like eyes, the firm grasp of his hand. She tried to imagine what her life would have been like all these years, if instead of Egidio she had had him by her side. A knock on the door startled her; she would not have been surprised to see Angelescu himself on the threshold, indeed she all but expected it for an instant, but the door opening, only disclosed the familiar figure of Carolina, who came forward timidly, quite stripped of her usually assured manner.

"What is it, my girl?" asked Ragna kindly.

"Signora," she answered, with lowered head, "I do not know how to say it nor what you will think of me, but I have come to give notice, I wish to go."

"You wish to go!" exclaimed Ragna with the greatest surprise, "you wish to leave me? Why, Carolina, what in the world do you mean by that?"

The girl stood nervously rolling and unrolling a corner of her apron between her fingers, her eyes on the floor.

"It is just that, Signora, I wish to go."

"Are you going to be married?"

"No, Signora!"

"Then why? Are you not happy here? You have been with me so long, to leave suddenly like this, what is the matter?"

"Don't ask me Signora, I—I can't stay."

"Carolina," said Ragna sternly, "look at me!"

The maid raised unwilling eyes to her mistress's face.

"Don't you know that that is no way to speak to me? Now tell me frankly, why it is you wish to leave me after all these years. Have I not been kind to you? What cause have you for complaint? Think, what will Mimmo do without you?"

The girl began to cry and dabbed ineffectually at her eyes with her apron.

"Stop crying and tell me!" cried Ragna, exasperated.

"Signora mia, Signora mia," sobbed the maid, "I do not want to tell you, I do not want to add to your troubles. Please don't ask me!"

Ragna's face grew hard, she more than guessed what was coming.

"I command you to speak out and hide nothing," she said in a tense voice.

"It is on account of the Signor Padrone, Signora."

"Ah!" said Ragna, "go on, what has he done?"

"Signora," said the maid hanging her head and working her toe in and out of the heelless slipper she still sometimes wore in the house. "The Signor Padrone used to say things to me when he passed me, and sometimes he would chuck me under the chin or pinch my arm, but I thought nothing of it, it is the way of many Signori and means nothing."

"Go on," said Ragna coldly, as the girl paused.

"Well, Signora, he got more pressing, and I kept out of his way all I could, and then one night he surprised me in my room—"

"Why did you not call out?"

"I did, Signora, but you know where my room is." Ragna did,—down at the end of a long corridor shut off by a door from the rest of the house. Why, oh why had she been so blind?

"And Cook was out, nursing her sick mother. Afterwards I said to him: 'I will tell the Signora,' and he said: 'You will do nothing of the kind. If you dare so much as hint to her I will throw you out neck and crop without a character. Be good, Linella, and I will give you a present. I said I did not want his present, that I was not afraid of being turned out. Then he grew very angry and put his hands round my neck, and said he would strangle me if I would not promise to keep quiet. '*Padronissimo!*' I answered, 'but if you kill me the police will get you!' He was very angry, but that frightened him, and he let his hands drop and I stood facing him with my arms crossed,—so! 'Look here, Carolina,' he said suddenly in a wheedling voice, 'you are fond of the Padrona, I know, if you tell her it will grieve her and you do not want to do that!' Signora! he had the courage to say that, after the way he treats you and all! But it was true and I knew I would have to be quiet, so I said, 'If I do say nothing it will be because of the Signora and not for you. I despise you, I hate you, but I do not fear you, you cannot harm me!' 'Have a care!' he said, and his eyes got like those of the Evil One in that picture in the studio. 'You are a little devil, Carolina, but I am more than a match for you. I tell you, beware!' Signora, that fired my blood, I stood up to him and I said: 'You are the husband of my Padrona, but you are not my master. I will keep silence because I don't want to hurt her, she has always been kind to me, but if you ever dare touch me again I shall tell her; it is better that she should know than be shamed in her own house, and I will kill you, I swear it on the Cross!' He sneered at me, Signora. 'And the police you mention so freely,' he said, 'what of them?' 'I will tell them I did it to save my honour.' 'Honour,' he said, 'you guttersnippet, who would believe you? Do you think they don't know your story in Questura?' It made me mad, I took my scissors from the table and I flew at him—he nearly broke my wrist wrenching them from me, but not before I had scratched him well. 'Little viper!' he yelled, 'assassin!' I thought he was going to kill me, but he turned and went away."

Ragna had followed every word, every gesture, with a sickening horror; she had imagined some tale of annoyance, but not this, and the leer of the portrait on the wall seemed to confirm every word of the girl's tale.

"Well, my poor child, has,—has he,—?"

The girl threw herself impulsively on her knees, beside her mistress and lifted the hem of her skirt to her lips.

"Signora mia," she moaned, "you are too good, you are an angel! Any other lady would have thrown me into the street without hearing me out."

"Hush, my poor girl," Ragna interrupted, "you are a victim and to be pitied. How should I blame you, since your wrong is partly my fault, I should have seen, should have guessed—"

"Signora, don't worry about me, I have had trouble before, as you know, and no one can blame me for what is not my fault since you don't."

Ragna looked at the girl in surprise at the simplicity with which she accepted the *fait accompli*, though it was characteristic of her and her race. She could see no reason for weeping over spilt milk, hers was the rational and childlike philosophy of the people—"*cosa fatta capo ha*," and a shrug of the shoulders for the inevitable. The one thought is to "rimediare" in the present. This state of mind appeared to Ragna so entirely enviable and sent her back over so long a train of thought in which she viewed her own experience for the first time with new eyes, and perceiving the uselessness of her futile beating against the bars of her fate, that with difficulty she brought herself back to a sense of the present. She remembered that the maid had not answered her last question.

"Tell me, Carolina, since you did not come to me at once, what has obliged you to speak now?"

"Signora," said the girl passionately, "the Padrone looks at me from under his eyebrows, in a way I don't like—I said I was not afraid but I am. I hate him, I can't breathe the same air with him, and before he does anything to me,—or before I go mad and kill him, it is better for me to go."

Ragna stroked the maid's hair absent-mindedly; the Venetian had been with her more than five years now; it would be hard to part with her, for she was entirely devoted to her mistress and the children, especially Mimmo, but it was clearly impossible to keep her longer. Ragna sighed.

"I am afraid you are right, Carolina. Yes, you must go, although you know how sorry I shall be to lose you. We will talk it over to-morrow, it is late now and I am tired. Run away to bed."

Carolina took her mistress's hand and pressed her lips fervently upon it.

"God bless you, Signora, and may you sleep well!" She closed the door silently after her.

Ragna sat on in her armchair, immersed in thought, bowed down by this new burden of vicarious shame, outraged and indignant. As the clock struck twelve she heard her husband's latchkey grate in the outer door and she straightened herself up with flushed cheeks. "I will have it out with him here and now," she thought.

"Egidio!" she called, as his step sounded in the passage.

He entered the room, an expression of annoyed surprise on his face, called forth by his finding her still up.

"Have you taken to sitting up for me?" he grunted.

"I have been waiting for you, there is something I must speak to you about."

"Well, out with it then, don't keep me waiting all night!"

He leaned against a console, his overcoat unbuttoned and thrown back, his black felt hat pulled down over his eyes, one hand thrust in a pocket, the other brandishing his Tuscan cigar, the villainous fumes of which filled the air.

"What are you going to do about Carolina?" she asked without preamble.

"Carolina?" he said, "why should I do anything? What is Carolina to me? You have been sitting up all this time to ask me a fool's question like that? You should go to bed, your head is tired, *ti gira ta testa*!"

"Carolina," she returned steadily, "has good cause for complaint against you."

He tapped his forehead with his forefinger.

"You are mad, *mia cara*," he said with a short laugh, but she could see the uneasy expression of his eyes.

"Have done with this fooling," said Ragna scornfully, "will you deny that you have made Carolina your mistress? You had better not, you see I know all."

He bent forward, an ugly look on his face.

"You lie! You spy on me and imagine things."

"It is you who lie, Egidio," said Ragna coldly. She was astonished at her own coolness; passion had deserted her, she sat, calm and critical, in the seat of judgment.

With a roar he came and stood over her.

"Take that back! How dare you! How dare you!"

"I am not deaf," said Ragna, "there is no occasion to shout. Please lower your voice and try to behave like a gentleman for once. Go and sit down," she continued without a quiver, "I have not finished yet and I can't speak if you are towering over my chair. And please make up your mind either to speak first and say your say, or else wait until I have done, but don't interrupt me."

Her calmness, the low even tones of her voice imposed on him; raging at her and at himself, he yet obeyed, albeit almost unconsciously, and dropped on a chair under his own portrait.

"It is quite useless to deny or to bluster," said Ragna, "I know all, I am sorry for Carolina, and I—"

"So that slut has been to you with her tale," he interrupted, "and you believe her in preference to your husband. The lying hussy—! I'll teach her—"

"Egidio," said the cold accusing voice, "she did not lie, she is a good girl. With all due regard, the one liar in the case is—"

"You dare call me a liar!" he roared, rising from his seat. She waived him back again. "When I was a little boy in school, Cardinal Ferri used to call me up and say—"

"Yes, yes," she said wearily, "that is an old story, I have heard it many times. The good Cardinal was not infallible, or else you have changed since—" He was choking with inarticulate rage; she continued,

"However, that is not the question; what I have been trying to find out is: what are you going to do about Carolina?"

"I shall throw the fool out of my house," he said sullenly.

"You can't do that, she is going of her own accord; but you owe her reparation."

"Reparation!" he raved, "Carolina! reparation! Let her show her face before me again—Reparation! She shall have all she wants and more too!"

Carolina, who, aroused by the noise of her master's rage, was listening at the key-hole slunk away and double-locked herself into her room, where she spent the greater portion of the night on her knees before the little image of the Virgin beseeching protection.

Egidio bounded to Ragna's chair and shook his fist in her face.

"I'll have you to understand that I won't have this sort of thing. I am master in my own house."

"Say harem!" she suggested. His violence left her unmoved, superficially, at least; she only saw how ridiculous he looked, stamping his foot, shaking his fist, his face inflamed and swollen, the eyes blood-shot and starting from their sockets. She laughed.

"My dear Signor Valentini, if you could only see how extremely ludicrous you make yourself!"

With an oath he rushed at her, but she moved not a muscle and the derisive smile never left her face. It cowed him, and with a demented gesture he jammed his hat down over his eyes and flung out of the room.

With shaking fingers Ragna put the drawing and the letter back into the writing-case and returned it to the secret drawer. She felt the effect of the scenes she had just been through, her head was dull and heavy, her senses numb. She went to the dining-room and poured herself a glass of water, then taking the lamp—she had to steady it with both hands, she went upstairs and passed through the children's room on the way to her own, pausing an instant by Mimmo's cot. He lay, moist and rosy, his fair curls tossed back on the pillow; one arm was thrown up and out, the other by his side; the long dark lashes swept his cheek—he was the picture of childish innocence and health. Beppino lay breathing heavily his face puckered to a frown, his fists clenched; he was a handsome child, but lacked Mimmo's winsomeness. Ragna set down the lamp and pulled up the covers about Mimmo's chest where he had thrown them back. A lump rose in her throat.

"Oh, my little child, my poor little child—that you should have to call that man 'father'!"

Afraid to stop longer, lest in her agitation she should wake the children, she took up the lamp again and went on to her own room. Too weary to sleep, she tossed restlessly on her bed, pressing her cool fingers to her hot forehead and burning eyes. The interview with Carolina, the subsequent scene with her husband, repeated themselves over and over in her tired brain; the demoniac mask of Egidio's which had scared her vision, seemed branded on her very soul like some horrid Medusa-head. And the effect of that exhibition of impotent rage had been that of the Medusa; she had felt herself turning to stone, had almost felt the wells of common human feeling dry up in her heart. Certainly she was no longer conscious of the slightest bond of human interest between herself and this man; nay, to her he had become the *Beast*, no longer a man at all. And she was subject to this Beast, his slave, his chattel, his wife! The name was a mockery. Virginia was a wife indeed, Virginia, happy with her husband and children, living her busy, blessed life in the house she loved. But this—no marriage but a hateful bondage. It was an immoral contradiction to all right living and thinking. Could any man-made law or social convention justify the iniquity of this horror? Ragna wondered dully why she had not been able, like Carolina, to accept the consequences of her weakness. She saw now in the clear light of unsparing self-study, how at the time of her marriage she had wilfully blinded herself to what had been patent to the eyes of Virginia, how she had weakly let the consideration of her social security outweigh the fundamental instincts of her nature. But it was not in the spirit of calm acceptance that she thus put to the test motives and conduct; she was in no condition for dispassionate investigation or conclusion; her nature, raw and abraded by the events of the day and still more by the cumulative effect of all the preceding days, seethed in a state of bitter revolt. She longed with a fierce, mad desire to straighten her back, to throw off the burden that galled her, to break once and for all the chains that degraded her in her own eyes. No one who saw her as she was now, fierce-eyed, feverish, her long hair unbound and streaming over the pillow would have known her for the calm stately woman whose formal courtesy of manner was a by-word among her friends. Rather she seemed a Valkyrie riding down the battling clouds, challenging the thunder. It was the old Ragna of the storm-swept fjord, but a Ragna who had eaten of the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, wild with a sense of injustice, resentful of fate.

Gradually she grew calmer, the flame burnt itself out, and weary to the core of her being she relaxed her aching limbs and abandoned her head among the pillows. Dulled, numb, she was dozing off, when a voice seemed to say in her ear: "Angelescu is in Florence." A slight smile parted her dry lips and she fell asleep.

CHAPTER VIII

Fru Boyesen lay propped up in her high, large bed; her face was congested and she breathed stertorously. With an unconscious gesture she threw back the feather-bed covering her, only to have it instantly replaced by the watchful Ingeborg. The room was close and stuffy, it was cold outside, all the windows were hermetically closed and a fire burned in the porcelain stove. The sick woman's hair had been braided neatly, but with the restless movements of her head, straggling yellowish-grey strands had come loose and strayed over her mottled forehead and on the pillow. With a feverish hand she tugged at the top button of her flannel nightgown.

"Air! I want air!" she muttered.

Ingeborg laid her cool hand on her Aunt's forehead, while she counted the respiration, and under the soothing touch the old woman grew calm for a few minutes.

She had been ill four days, an ordinary attack of bronchitis, the doctor thought at first, but it rapidly ran into pneumonia, and the age of the patient left but a bare chance of recovery. Ingeborg nursed her devotedly assisted by one of the servants and would not hear of calling in outside help.

"You are as good a nurse as I could wish," said the doctor, "but I am afraid you will wear yourself out."

"No fear of that," Ingeborg had answered, "and I want to do all I can for poor Auntie—you know how she hates to have anyone else in the room."

"Well, in five days I shall be able to tell, you can do without help till then, and afterwards if it is necessary—"

The way he spoke the last words, however, gave but little hope of such a contingency arising and Ingeborg's eyes filled with tears.

Fru Boyesen had lain most of the time in a heavy stupor, waking occasionally to fits of delirium when her strong will and habit of command made it very difficult for Ingeborg to keep her in bed. When she raved it was always about Ragna who was coming to pay a visit and in whose honour due preparation must be made, or Ragna who would not come and refused to give ear to her Aunt's pleading, or it was Ragna ill and lonely who must be helped,—but always Ragna, nothing but Ragna.

The poor old soul, debarred by her own action from the natural outlet of her affection, nay adoration, for her heart's darling, had brooded over her sorrow, feeding on her own repressed love. Deprived of outward expression, she bowed down in secret before the idol enshrined in her heart. All these years she had kept up the sham of an unforgiving spirit, had worn her mask of hardness, never once betraying herself to anyone except the watchful Ingeborg, and now that delirium had loosened her tongue, she raved on, babbling like a child of that which was nearest her heart, while Ingeborg marvelled somewhat bitterly at all the misspent effort of repression, when so much good might have been done, so much pain avoided.

Ragna thought herself thoroughly on her guard, when writing to her sister, little dreaming how much Ingeborg read between the lines, more from what was omitted than from what was said, though she herself, to whom many things had grown "through custom stale" mentioned them casually, as though quite in the ordinary course of events, things which to the unaccustomed eyes of Ingeborg seemed unbearable to the last degree, little meannesses on the part of Valentini, his way of opening her letters, his habit of spending the evenings away from home and the like.

When Aunt Gitta fell ill, Ingeborg's first impulse had been to telegraph for Ragna, sure that her presence would set all right, but the doctor said that five days would decide everything, one way or the other, and three times five days was the shortest space of time in which it would be possible for Ragna to reach her Aunt.

There had been but little delirium to-day, at most a gentle wandering, the greater part of the time the old woman lay oblivious to her surroundings, lost to the world. To Ingeborg who took this state of coma for sleep it seemed of favourable augury, but the doctor shook his head.

"She may drift away without waking up again," he said.

Ingeborg thought it terrible that anyone should die thus, with no chance to repair the wrong done or to prepare for the future life, but there was nothing she could do, except administer the medicines to the unconscious woman at the appointed hours, and between whiles sit silent, her hands folded in her lap, her anxious eyes, eager to detect any change, fixed on her aunt's face.

It was snowing outside, a fine dry snow, hard, like ice crystals, the room was in profound silence, broken only by the stinging sound of the snow, driven against the window pane, the crackling of the wood in the stove, the ticking of a small clock on the mantel, and the heavy stertorous breathing of the sick woman. At dusk a maid came in with a lighted lamp, tip-toeing noiselessly in list slippers; she set it on the table cast a glance at the bed and withdrew. Ingeborg fastened a piece of paper to the lamp shade to keep the bright light from her Aunt's face, but it seemed already to have aroused Fru Boyesen, for she turned uneasily, groaned and made as if to sit up.

Ingeborg stepped lightly to her side and pressed her quietly back against her pillows. Fru

Boyesen passed her hand over her eyes twice or thrice as if dazed, but the expression of her eyes as she looked up at Ingeborg was such that the light of reason shone in them.

"Ingeborg," she said in a hoarse voice, "how long have I been ill?"

"Four days, Aunt."

"And what does Dr. Ericssen say is the matter with me?"

"He said it was bronchitis, and that—"

"Don't lie, girl," said the old lady, quick to perceive the hesitation in her niece's voice "tell me the truth, I can bear it."

"He says now that it is pneumonia."

"Pneumonia—" repeated Fru Boyesen, "pneumonia! And I am over sixty." She closed her eyes a moment and her face became stern. "Tell me, Ingeborg, how long does Ericssen give me? I have a right to know."

Her eyes claimed the truth from the girl, who answered with a sob in her voice.

"He says the fifth day is the decisive day, until then he can't tell."

"Oh, can't he? I can then. I tell you, Ingeborg, this is the end, I shall never recover."

The girl would have protested but such was her own intimate conviction and had been from the first; with her Aunt's eyes on her face she felt the futility of it. A silence fell between them, broken by a sigh from Fru Boyesen.

"Ingeborg!" she said suddenly, "there is something I must do before I go, I have something on my conscience."

"Do you wish me to send for the Herr Pastor, Aunt?"

"The Herr Pastor! This is not a matter for clergymen, this is something that regards me alone. I have been unjust to your sister, Ingeborg—I am an old woman on my death bed, and I see clearly now that I have done wrong. The living may be vindictive, but the dying must make reparation if they would be forgiven. I made a will disinheriting Ragna, I want to destroy that, to reinstate her. She has been wilful, Ingeborg, proud and inconsiderate, she has hurt me more than I can say, but she is young and I am old, it is I who should have known better. Young people will be foolish, it is for us old wise ones to repair the damage done, and I have been a wicked, resentful old woman. 'Judgment is mine, saith the Lord,' and I would have taken it into my own hands. I wished to punish her, and perhaps I have, but I have punished myself far more. Remember this, little Ingeborg, we should leave judgment and condemnation to the Lord,—we should only try to love and help."

She sank back on her pillows, exhausted. Ingeborg put a cup of brandy and water to her lips, saying,

"Hush, Auntie dear, you must not talk so much, you will tire yourself out."

But Fru Boyesen would not be satisfied, she motioned Ingeborg to come near, and whispered into her ear,

"Get the solicitor, send for Hendriksen, at once, *at once* do you hear? I must make it right for Ragna before it is too late."

Ingeborg nodded, and summoning the maid in attendance ordered her, in the old lady's hearing to go at once for Herr Hendriksen, and gave her the money for a cab to bring the solicitor back.

Fru Boyesen smiled contentedly and closed her eyes. Ingeborg burning with suppressed excitement, could hardly keep her seat—now indeed was all to come right, like in a story! Her loyal sisterly heart rejoiced for Ragna, and could she have guessed the true state of affairs in Florence, she would have rejoiced still more. Then the pathos of the thing struck her, all her love and compassion went out to the quiet figure on the bed.

"Poor Aunt Gitta!" she said softly to herself, "how she must have suffered—and how she loves Ragna!"

How she must have loved her indeed, for that love to break down her stubborn will, sweeping away in an all-devouring flood the barriers of prejudice and pride, leaving nothing but tenderness and the desire to help.

Ingeborg could no longer contain her agitation; she rose and stood by the window, gazing out at the driving storm. Though but five in the afternoon it was quite dark and the whirling flakes of snow made wavering circles in the halo of light about the street lamps. In the garden a gaunt tree, stripped of its leaves, raised black limbs skyward, and below, an even blanket of white shaded off into the night. This late snow storm belying the earlier promise of spring seemed of evil portent to the watching girl. To her anxious eyes all the world outside seemed like a great white desert, she sought in vain for some sign of life, of human companionship, but there were no passers-by in the quiet street. Suddenly two dim black masses appeared, coming from different directions; they stopped simultaneously at the garden gate and resolved themselves into three

figures whom Ingeborg recognized as the doctor, the solicitor and the maid who had been sent to fetch him. She watched them struggle up the garden path till they reached the door-step and the muffled sound of the bell rang through the house, then hastened to the bedside.

"Auntie! Auntie! he has come! Herr Hendriksen is here!"

There was no answer, the heavy breathing had begun again. Ingeborg was helplessly watching the flapping of the cheeks, the puff of the lips at each breath, when the doctor entered; he advanced to the bed and stood frowning, his lips pushed out.

"Can't we wake her, Doctor?" asked Ingeborg eagerly. "She was awake just a little while ago, and had me send for Herr Hendriksen,—she wants to set things right again for Ragna, in case—in case—Oh, Doctor, it is most important!" she joined her hands beseechingly, "after what she said I don't think she can die in peace, unless she has done it!"

The doctor shook his head. He knew the story of Ragna's marriage and subsequent estrangement from her aunt; she was a favourite of his, and he wished with all his heart to help her cause, but there was nothing to be done.

"What a pity you did not get her to sign a statement then! Who can tell if she will come out of this coma again? She may, but I doubt it—see, the pulse has failed steadily since this morning, it is barely a thread!"

"Oh, Doctor!" said Ingeborg, tears in her eyes, "can nothing be done? Nothing? Think of all that it means!"

"There is always the possibility of a return to consciousness. Have Herr Hendriksen draw up a will or a codicil or whatever the thing is, according to your aunt's expressed wishes, and if she comes to, she may be able to sign it. I can try a hypodermic of caffeine," he added to himself, "but I'm afraid it's no use. Run down to Hendriksen and let him get the will ready in any case, I shall stop here."

Ingeborg sped down the stairs and found the solicitor enjoying a cup of coffee in the sitting-room. She explained the case to him and he agreed to draw up a codicil annulling all former wills, in the tenour of the will destroyed by Fru Boyesen after Ragna's marriage and to hold it in readiness. Accordingly he set to work and Ingeborg returned to the sick chamber.

They waited some time and as there was still no sign of returning consciousness Dr. Ericssen tried the hypodermic of caffeine, but without effect, except for a slightly stronger pulse, the stertorous breathing continued unchanged. Solicitor and doctor supped together, in a gloomy silence, while Ingeborg, unwilling to leave her aunt, had a tray sent up to her; after which the doctor returned to his patient and the man of law to his post by the fire. The evening dragged on drearily; Ingeborg sat despondently by the bedside; it all seemed such cruel irony—the waiting solicitor, the fate of her sister hanging in the balance, dependent on that unconscious figure on the bed.

Towards morning there was a change, patent even to the inexperienced eyes of the girl. Fru Boyesen opened her eyes, but they appeared oblivious of her immediate surroundings, they were fixed on space, and seemed to have a glaze over them; her lips moved, and bending over her, Ingeborg caught the words:

"Solicitor—Ragna!"

"Quick!" she said to the doctor; he ran to the landing and called Hendriksen, who gathered up his papers, pen, ink, and seals, and bounded up the stairs.

"Oh!" thought Ingeborg, "if only there is time—if only she is able to sign!"

She poured some brandy into a spoon, but as she turned to administer it, the sick woman's head fell back on the pillow, and her jaw dropped—Herr Hendriksen approaching, pen and paper in hand, stopped, hesitating. Ingeborg dropped the spoon, brandy and all, and the doctor rushed forward; one glance was enough; he waved the solicitor back, his services were no longer required.

Poor Aunt Gitta! she had put off, too long, her work of reparation, and now it was too late.

Too late! These are indeed the "saddest words of tongue or pen," a lower circle in the Inferno of Fate than the poet's "it might have been!" Alas! for those to whom the long sought opportunity, the ardently desired happiness comes at last, and finds the sands run down in the glass, the vital energy spent. The chance is there, but an ironical voice gives the sentence "Too late!" And alas, above all, for those, who in the sunset of life see in retrospect, the false turning, the long weary miles of the road they have followed, and which they would retrace, ere darkness fall, and the night come,—but the stern voice says: "Ye have wasted the precious years, ye have put life and strength into that which is vain, and ye would unravel the strand of the Fates and plait it up afresh when the shears of Atropos are already extended? Too late! Remorse is not reparation."

"Who shall restore the years that the locust hath eaten?"

The words sounded like a knell in the ears of Ingeborg, as she drew the sheet over her aunt's face. Ragna would have laughed a bitter laugh, but Ingeborg wept.

CHAPTER IX

"Mammina," asked Mimmo, stirring his soup with thoughtful care, "can people do just what they like, when they are big?"

Ragna was feeding Beppino out of a bowl of bread and milk. It was the usual luncheon hour, but Valentini had not yet come in, and the children chattered away, gaily.

"No," said Ragna, "no one can do exactly what he likes."

"But they can,—they does," insisted Mimmo.

"Do, you should say, dear."

"'Do,' then," corrected Mimmo, "they do. Babbo says 'accidenti' and bangs the door, but you punish us if we do,—why does no one punish him?"

"Punish Babbo!" exclaimed Beppino agape.

"Grown up people do many things that children aren't allowed to do,—but they don't always do what is right, and God punishes them," said Ragna.

"Who ith God," asked Beppino.

"I know," Mimmo hastened to show his superior knowledge,—"He is a big person sitting on a cloud in the sky, with a beard and a dove with shiny lines out of it,—I have never seen him really truly, but *Babbo* has a picture of him."

"Yeth," assented Beppino without interest.

But Mimmo was not so assured as he wished to appear.

"Mammina," he said, "does God come off his cloud to punish people?"

"God is everywhere," said his mother.

The child puckered his brows.

"How can he be everywhere if he sits on a cloud in the sky? Is he here now, in this room?"

"Yes, dear."

"Then why can't I see Him?"

"He is here like the air,—you can't see the air."

"Is He in my soup?" he inquired eagerly, "does I eat Him in my spoon?"

Ragna could not help smiling. Mimmo's questions often puzzled her as to how to answer them in a way suited to the child's understanding. This time, she hedged.

"Eat your soup, darling; you are too little to understand yet. When you are older, Mammina will tell you."

Mimmo addressed himself to his task, but he turned the question over in his childish mind, and when Valentini made his tardy appearance, greeted him with:

"Babbo, Mammina says that I am eating up God in my soup, and that He will punish you,—but if I eat Him up, he won't be able to, will He?"

"God will punish your mother for telling such wicked lies," growled Egidio, hitching his chair to the table.

He had not deigned to greet his wife on entering, and his sullen expression, the yellow, bilious colour of his skin, the mottled puffiness about his eyes were the evidences of his rage the night before, as the retreating tide leaves uncovered the unsightly mud-flats. He had a bad taste in his mouth, both physically and morally; an uneasy feeling possessed him that his wife by her unbroken calm had got the better of him in their acrimonious discussion. She had called him "ludicrous," that was what galled him most. He was more than her match in opprobrium, in biting sarcasm, but before ridicule and a cool, unperturbed demeanour, he felt himself helpless. He cast about in his mind for a way to humble her, to pierce the joint of her new armour of indifference, and fate had brought a weapon to his hand, though he did not yet know it. Indeed, he had finished his meal and was lighting a cigar when he bethought him of a letter addressed to Ragna, which the postman had brought that morning. It was his habit to take the letters from the postman himself, or have them brought to his studio, where he opened them, his own and those addressed to his wife, alike. It was one of his numerous ways of keeping himself informed of all that went on. He prided himself on knowing everything that occurred, and was pleased, on occasions, to give his wife a proof of his ability, by recounting minutely all her doings, both indoors and out. He wished her to acknowledge his power over her, and he wished her, above all, to believe that nothing could be hidden from him. This system of constant espionage was one of Ragna's greatest trials, and despite her efforts to free herself from it, to keep the peace, she had

been obliged to submit, tacitly, at least. She had never cared to inquire into her husband's sources of information, she would not give him so much satisfaction, she despised the ingenuity and acumen he displayed to such a despicable end. It really was a symptom of the man's craving for power; it gratified his pride to feel that he had a hold over others, that they should be at the mercy of his good pleasure and discretion. He believed that the one way to get on in the world was by using other people, and these either had to be bought, or captured. "Knowledge," he said to himself, "is power," and certainly, in the wire-pulling for which he afterwards became famous, he used the power his "knowledge" brought him, with an unsparing hand.

Had he enjoyed a different education there is no telling to what heights he might have attained, but the early Jesuit influence, coupled with the weak indulgence of his mother, had endowed him, on the one hand, with a cynical unscrupulousness, and on the other with an unsatiable self-indulgence which sapped his better qualities at the fountain-head and warped his entire character to such an extent that his natural cleverness failed to redeem him from the narrowing distortion of his life.

Remembering the letter for his wife, he drew it from his pocket and jerked it across the table to her, without looking up, or appearing otherwise to be aware of her presence.

She seized the envelope eagerly, frowning at the torn flap, but smiled in spite of herself, as she saw that it was written in Norwegian—the nut had been too hard to crack this time! She was obliged to defer her reading until she had lifted the children down and sent them off to Carolina. They slunk away like little animals, even as they had sat silent since Valentini's entrance; they lived in mortal terror of his fits of ill-humour, and had learned to avoid irritating him, by making themselves as inconspicuous as possible.

Ragna took up her letter and began to read. It was from Ingeborg written two days after Fru Boyesen's death, telling of the old woman's intention of reinstating Ragna as her heiress and of the frustration of her design.

"You must not think hardly of poor Auntie," wrote Ingeborg, "she has been so unhappy. I have seen the struggle going on for some time, and I was sure her better nature would win in the end. Oh, Ragna, if I had only known, I might have done something, but although I could see she was relenting I never guessed she was so near to giving in, and I was afraid of doing more harm than good, if I tried to push things—If you had seen the expression of her poor eyes, when she said, 'I must make it right for Ragna,' and the agonised look in them, that last instant just before—. Oh, if only she could have lived ten minutes, five minutes longer! Isn't it awful to think of her remorse, feeling herself dying without having accomplished what was in her heart? Dr. Ericssen and Herr Hendriksen, both went to see the Directors of the Orphanage, to which she had left her money,—she did that you know, when she tore up her will in favour of you,—and told them they had no moral right to accept the bequest, as the last wishes of the deceased were otherwise, but they did not see it at all that way. Why are charities so grasping, I wonder? I don't see how they can reconcile their consciences to accept a bequest that morally belongs to someone else! It makes my blood boil, Ragna dear, as according to Auntie's wishes it all ought to be yours—"

Ragna put the letter down with a sigh. She hardly realized as yet all that this disappointment meant to her, the hopes of relative independence dashed, nothing to look forward to beyond her own unaided effort. The news of her Aunt's death grieved her, but her senses, dulled by the nervous strain of the evening before, refused to appreciate to its full extent the enormity of the catastrophe. She sat as though stunned. Little Mimmo stole in unnoticed and installed himself on the floor with a picture-book. Valentini, smoking ostentatiously, cast furtive glances at his wife, and at last, unable to contain his curiosity any longer, shifted his chair and asked:

"Well, what does Ingeborg say?"

Although he could not read the letter, the handwriting was familiar. Ragna, taken off her guard, answered:

"Aunt Gitta is dead and has left all her money to an orphanage; she wanted to change her will to one in my favour, at the last moment, but died before she could sign the new one."

An oath broke from Valentini's lips.

"And so you are a beggar!"

"Yes," assented Ragna wearily,—what was the use of disputing the fact? Valentini felt his Castle in Spain crash about his ears. He had never ceased to hope that Fru Boyesen would become reconciled to the marriage of her niece, and he had never thought that in any circumstances, she would leave her niece penniless, even if she disposed of the bulk of her fortune in another way. He felt as though the ground had suddenly slipped from beneath his feet, and instinctively turned on the involuntary source of his disappointment.

"I suppose that that is one of your charming national customs? *Santo Dio*, why was I ever so left to myself as to marry a Norwegian?"

Ragna let the sarcasm fall unheeded, so with a rising intonation he tried again.

"You prate about honesty, yet you inveigled me into a marriage, by giving me to understand that you were your Aunt's heiress—yet you knew all the time what might be expected! Oh, yes, I have had a refreshing experience of Norwegian honesty and straightforwardness!"

She smiled disdainfully.

"Permit me, it was not I who held out any hopes of future riches, your memory misleads you. But had you been frank, Egidio, had you told me then your real reason for wishing to marry me, be very sure that I should have declined the honour."

"Yes," he sneered, "now lie about it. When it suits your convenience, you lie worse than anyone I ever heard. And your airs and graces! One would think you sprang from '*la cuisse de Jupiter*.' You were not quite so high and mighty when I married you! To exchange the gutter for a comfortable home—"

Mimmo, alarmed by Valentini's rough voice had fled to his mother's knee, and Ragna, stung into reply by the child's presence, said:

"Be careful, Egidio,—the child—"

The child! Ah, here was the way to hurt her! Valentini's laugh rang hatefully in her ears; he beckoned to the boy, but Mimmo refused to leave his refuge.

"Ask your mother, Mimmo caro, what a bastard is?"

Ragna sprang to her feet, her eyes blazing; she carried the child to the door, set him down outside, bidding him run to Carolina, and returned to face her husband, who sat leaning back in his chair, his legs crossed, his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, a sneering expression on his face.

Ragna advanced to the table and leaning both hands on it leant forward, her eyes burning with a fierce light.

"I have borne much from you, Egidio Valentini, since you married me. I have been a dutiful wife to you, and a faithful one, I am the mother of your child; you have no just cause for complaint against me. I married you in the first place, induced by your insistence, by your pleadings, by the seemingly disinterested offers you made me of protection and comradeship. You made me many promises none of which have you kept. Instead of that you have abused me morally and physically, you have taken pleasure in tormenting me and humiliating me; you have been openly unfaithful to me, you have even outraged me in my own home by ill-using my maid. All this I have stood, but to-day you have gone too far, you have struck at me through my child whom you bound yourself to cherish as your own. Coward!"

Egidio started from his chair threateningly, but she was not to be stopped.

"Yes, coward!" she repeated. "And I tell you, Egidio Valentini, I can bear no more, this is the end. I will take my child and go, I will shake the dust of your house off my feet, I will leave you to the curse of your own evil nature."

He turned upon her with a roar.

"Go, then, do! There is the door, I won't keep you, beggar, liar, ingrate! You spit on the hand that raised you from the dirt—well, you shall see! Go, yes go, I beg of you, you could do me no greater pleasure! Go, my sweet dove, my repentant Magdalen,—but you go alone, the child remains with me."

"I shall take the child, do you think I would let you keep him?" said Ragna, "He is mine, you have said it often enough, he goes with me."

"You forget, *cara mia*, or you are more ignorant than I thought. I acknowledged the child as my own, he is on the State register, 'Egidio, son of Egidio Valentini.' No, no, in the eyes of the State he is not all yours—the State does not know what we know. He is five years old, is he not, the bastard? From five years up, the State gives a child to the father. Mimmo is mine, by the law. A pleasant life he shall have,—my first born, my darling! Do not fear, he shall be brought up to appreciate his mother at her true worth!"

"Oh!" gasped Ragna, "you would not be so wicked."

"You have just given such a flattering opinion of me!"

"Oh, but there are limits to everything!"

"So you will soon find; I know how to keep my own. Be wise, Ragna, realize that you are absolutely powerless. If you want a scandal, beware! It will hurt you, not me; I know the good opinion people have of me, I could put it to public vote. Who are you? You have neither money nor powerful friends nor position, you are dependent on me for the clothes on your back and the bread you eat. You are far too rash. Your conduct is ungrateful and insulting; if I were not the most forbearing man alive I should have thrown you into the street long ago. Think it over, even you must realize the position you put yourself in."

He had the pleasure of seeing her wince, as the iron of his words entered into her soul. Her calm deserted her; his words had a paralysing hypnotic effect, she saw herself stripped and naked in a cold world inimical to her desolate state. Trembling with rage, she felt herself beaten, crushed by the power that circumstances and the law put into her husband's hands, and that he used like a bludgeon. Despairingly she searched her mind for any fact that she could turn to her advantage and found none. She felt herself sinking helplessly in the quicksand.

"I hate you!" she cried with all the intensity of her being. "I hate you! May God deal with you as you have dealt with me!"

"God is not a silly woman,"—he used the insulting word *femmina*. A smile curled his lips, for her expression of hatred was the cry of the weak creature driven to the wall. She had defied him, she had called him "ludicrous"? Well, he had sworn to punish her, and punish her he would. Fate had placed her at his mercy.

He sauntered jauntily to the door, his thumbs in his armholes; she, leaning on the table, speechless with hatred, followed him with burning eyes.

As the door closed behind him, she sank to a chair, and falling forward, buried her face in her arms, in an attitude of utter despair. One thought possessed her mind; she must get away, she must escape somehow, anyhow; this life was intolerable. Then from the depths of her inner consciousness rose the image of Angelescu—she would see him, she would ask him to help her. He would not refuse,—had he not said he would always be at her service?

Should she write, or should she go in person? She sprang to her feet and paced up and down the long dining-room, her hands clasped, twisting and untwisting her fingers. To and fro, to and fro, like a caged lioness she went, living over in her mind day by day the Calvary of the five years of her marriage. The sense of the oppression of it grew like the rising tide, engulfing prudence, common sense, even the thought of her children, leaving only the wild uncontrollable longing for freedom. Free! She flung her head back and stretched out her arms. Almost she felt the salt kiss of the home-fjord on her face, she offered herself to the buffeting of the strong sea-wind, her lungs inhaled with rapture the balsam of the firs, the wild singing of the gale filled her ears. A mist rose before her eyes, she soared on imaginary wings to undreamt of heights.

Her rapture came to an end as raptures must, and she was again Ragna Valentini, pacing the long dining-room with its high vaulted ceiling, its solid early Renaissance furniture, the untidy remains of luncheon still littering the table, but she no longer felt the oppression of it all. It was as though a veil had been drawn aside disclosing a new landscape, or rather as though having toiled through hardship unspeakable to the uttermost depths of the Valley of Despondency, she saw before her the wondrous vision of sunlit peaks and the Promised Land beyond—no longer a mirage but a blessed actuality. All that she had to do was to enter. A light long extinguished came back to her eyes, she carried her head with a conscious air of resolution.

The manservant entering, started as though at an apparition, so different was she from the reserved, patient mistress he had served. And a scene with the *Padrone* had had this effect! With admirable self-control the man held his peace, though questions all but burst from his lips—your Italian servant is on a very familiar footing with the family he serves—but his eyes were less discreet, in fact they never left his mistress during the time he spent clearing the table and setting the room to rights, and it may be said that he in no way hastened the process. When he finally withdrew, it was to expatiate in the kitchen on the marvellous change come over the *Padrona*.

"I said to myself, the Signora will require a glass of Marsala, for he was worse than usual to-day. *Mondo ladro!* to have to live with a man like that! If it were not for the Signora who is an angel of goodness, I, for one,—"

"That's so," assented the cook.

"But *Assunta mia*, there she was, she who has looked like wilted grass ever since I came, as fresh as a daisy, with a colour like a sunset in her cheeks. *Accitempoli!* I all but dropped my tray! To think that with a bella Signora like her, the *Padrone* should—" He winked knowingly.

"All men are pigs," opined the cook.

"Some things are above the comprehension of females," returned Nando, loftily, his masculine vanity ruffled,—"But all the same—"

He leisurely consumed the Marsala which he had found it unnecessary to offer Ragna, tilting back on the legs of his chair, alternately holding his glass up to the light to enjoy the clear amber colour, and appreciatively smacking his lips as he sipped. Assunta, the cook, her portly form arrayed in a blue apron, stood by the sink rinsing the dishes under the tap and standing them in the overhead rack to drip. A square of sunshine lay on the red brick floor, and Civetta, the cat, lay basking in it, luxuriously curling and uncurling her velvet paws, stretching her neck to lick an unruly patch of fur and blinking at her surroundings with lazy topaz eyes. Copper kettles and pans decorated the whitewashed walls; the red brick stove and the dresser were well scrubbed and tidy.

Nando, having finished his wine, brought his chair back to the perpendicular and rose, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Mark my words, Assunta, something is going to happen in this house! When a woman looks like the Signora does to-day, it means trouble for somebody,—for—"

His dissertation was cut short by the bell, and in his haste to answer the summons he left the kitchen door open. Assunta heard Ragna send him to call a *legno*.

She shook her head, as her little straw fan blew life into the dying charcoal embers; it was most

unusual for Ragna to go out at this time of day,—something was surely in the wind! In any case, her sympathies were with the Signora, even though, with an eye to her own interests she allowed the *Sor Padrone* to pump her as to the Signora's movements. The Signora never did anything wrong, so what harm could it do, she argued? Meanwhile an extra *lira* or two in a poor woman's pocket was not to be despised. Also instant dismissal would be the penalty of a refusal, and who could stand out against the *Padrone* when he glared at one with those awful eyes? Oh, certainly the Signora's lot was not one to be envied, even though she were a lady and had fine clothes and jewels! Such were the humble reflections of Assunta as she fanned the fire, and it gave her considerable satisfaction to think that her confessor Don Bazzanti was right in saying that rich and poor alike have their troubles.

"Signor Iddio is just, after all," thought Assunta piously, and crossed herself. It may give the moralist pleasure to observe that the circumstances that ground the soul of Ragna to the earth, made as a sequence, for the contentment of her cook.

CHAPTER X

Angelescu had spent the morning in the Uffizi, devoting his visit to the three or four paintings he really liked. Of these, the Madonna of the Goldfinch absorbed most of his time; the artless attitude of the children, the virginal grace of the Mother and the tender background with its suggestion of Florence in the distance, gave him the suggestion of the veiled delicacy of early spring, the faint perfume of early violets wafted from the slopes of Fiesole, the embroidery of almond-blossom against the sky. Other pictures claimed his attention, but he returned again and again to the "Cardellino," drawn by the exquisite purity of conception and execution that the divine Raphael must have acquired by some mysterious communion with angels. The face of the Madonna reminded him of someone he had known, but so vaguely that he made no attempt to capture the vague suggestion. The sweet Madonna-face continued to haunt him, and now as he lounged in his room, after luncheon, it floated before him wreathed in the pale blue fumes of his cigarette.

The years had passed over him lightly, though any close observer would have noted the slightly increased sternness discernible in the set of the mouth, the squaring of the lean jaw. The eyes were as kind as ever, the brow as calm, the hair had streaks of grey at the temples, but was no thinner than of old.

On leaving the service, he had made a two years trip round the world, and had then, after a year, spent in the capitals of Europe, joined an exploring expedition to the heart of Africa. From thence he had returned to India, and while there, a sudden desire had seized him to revisit Italy, the land of his youthful dreams. Often during these years of voluntary exile had the face and form of Ragna risen before his eyes; she had left an indelible impression on him. He had been sincere when he said and wrote, "Now and always." His was a tenacious nature, both in hate and in love, and the circumstances attending his love for Ragna had been such as to brand that passion upon his soul, as a mark made upon soft clay is fixed forever by the firing in the kiln. His love for her and his indignation at the unworthiness of her betrayer had caused him to break all the threads of his life, had made of him a wanderer upon the face of the earth. True to his word, he had never seen Prince Mirko again, after that last interview in Rome, and if he sometimes thought wistfully of the earlier days of boyish comradeship, the brutal revelation of the real character of the man had effectually killed all but a somewhat sentimental cast of memory. He had been thoroughly and simply in earnest in the letter which he had written to Ragna on leaving Rome, and her answer had hurt him. He understood her however, too well, not to read between the lines of her answer, and to see in the apparently cold and self-sufficient note, the effort of a nature grievously wounded, striving to hide that wound, even from the hand of the physician.

"She will understand in time, and will turn to me," he thought, and had been content to wait. As time went on and no word came from her, he placed her, as it were, in the inner sanctuary of heart and mind, apart from the daily interests of his life. She was not dethroned, he still awaited her summons,—it had become a habit of mind with him to believe that it would come—but he was unconsciously growing to consider the eventuality of that summons more in the light of a possibility than of a probability. This, until his visit to Rome.

It seemed to him on his arrival there, that the old memories lay in wait for him in the streets, the old pain awoke in his heart, the old indignation burned in his veins. He knew himself for a lonely man, up-rooted from his own country, and the regret for what might have been, had Ragna but accepted his proposal, aroused in him a burning resentment against fate.

Under the spur of this resurrection of feeling, he seemed to awake from a long sleep, and he wondered at the lethargy in which he had been content to lie. He saw, in the light of revivified emotion that what was lacking in his life was Ragna and what she symbolized to him: affection and home-ties, and that he now felt the want of her as a painful deprivation and no longer as a vague lack, he wondered that he had been able to go on so long leaving the course of events to chance; it seemed unworthy of his very masculine energy. Why had he waited helplessly on an improbable (he recognised the fact now), appeal? Why had he not followed the girl, or at least kept in touch with her, renewed his offer, forcibly turned her to himself? At the time he had felt that any such action would be indelicate, unworthy of him; but now, his deeper understanding

showed him that he had erred on the side of too great delicacy, that the prizes of life are for those who seize them. He thought bitterly of the five wasted years.

What had Ragna done? Where had she gone? Back to Norway, perhaps?

With a faint hope of tracing her, he went to the pension in the Piazza Montecitorio, where she had stopped. Yes, the landlady remembered the Norwegian ladies, but that was over five years ago. No, they had never returned. Sorry to disappoint the Signore.

He thought of Fru Boyesen in whose care he had formerly addressed New Year's cards to Ragna, and wrote her a note asking her if she could give him any information as to her niece's whereabouts.

"She will probably not deign to answer, she will think her niece's affairs none of my business, but at least I shall have done what I could," he said to himself.

What with the insistence of old memories and the disappointment of his forlorn hope of finding some trace of Ragna, Rome had become intolerable to him, so he wended a leisurely way to Florence where he hoped to receive an answer from Fru Boyesen, and we now see him lazily stretched on a sofa in his room his mind full of Ragna, and the Madonna-face which reminded him of her, although he did not know it, the resemblance being more of expression than of feature, floating in the smoke wreaths about his head.

The window was open, and his eye went to where, far over the roofs, S. Miniato enshrined in Cypress rose white and aloof, against the background of sky. Spring was merging into early summer, and the sun beat already white and glaring on the deserted Lung' Arno below. The mountains of Vallombrosa rose cool and green at the head of the valley; it was so clear he could even distinguish the white dots of houses composing the little hamlet perched on the ledge. Down in the river an *arenaiuolo* poled his boat in a leisurely fashion, a long pink shirt,—the only garment he boasted—flapping limply about his thin, brown legs.

Angelescu, lying back on the couch, his hands clasped above his head, felt agreeably tired from his morning's doings, half-drowsy, yet not inclined to sleep. He felt still less inclined to read, however, his unfinished novel lay unheeded on the floor by his side and he was debating inwardly how best to pass the time till four o'clock when he could go to the *sferisterio* and watch a match game of *pallone*, when a page knocked at his door and brought him a note on a salver.

"From a lady, Signor Conte, she is waiting for the answer."

A lady? What lady could be writing to him? Some chance acquaintance of his travels perhaps, who had recognised him from a distance. He tore open the envelope and read with eyes that seemed suddenly petrified in their sockets:

> "I saw in the paper that you are stopping here. I *must* see you, that is if you still think of me in the same way as when you wrote to me in Rome. If not, let me go away as I have come, don't try to see me. I shall await your answer.
>
> "RAGNA."

The note had evidently been written in a hurry, under pressure of some extraordinary emotion, so much the handwriting told him. For the rest, she wanted him, she appealed to him, for he read the appeal in the few words of the note. What could it mean? How did she happen to be here? He stood with the note in his hand, lost to his surroundings, fairly dazed by the unexpectedness of the summons, now that it had come. The boy ventured to remind him of his presence.

"What message shall I give the lady, Signor Conte?"

"Tell her,—or stay, I will take her the answer myself. Where is she?"

"In the drawing-room, Signor Conte."

Thrusting the note into his pocket, Angelescu strode from the room and made his way to the drawing-room with beating heart.

A graceful figure rose from the sofa to meet him, both hands outstretched. He took them and drawing Ragna to him, clasped her in his arms; she submitted for an instant, but speedily released herself.

"No, no!" she cried. "You must not! You do not know!"

CHAPTER XI

Waiting for him there, in the hotel drawing-room, Ragna had passed through all the varying emotions of excitement, hope, fear and nervous dread, the last named possessing her to such an extent that when the step of Angelescu rang in the mosaic paved corridor and sounded on the threshold, she hardly dared raise her eyes to him. All at once it seemed to her a terrible thing to have done,—to have presumed on the words of a letter five years old to such an extent as to throw herself on the generosity of a man, who by this time would have every right to consider her

a stranger. The blood burned in her cheeks, tears of shame and misgiving rose in her eyes, and as Angelescu paused in the doorway the beating of her heart almost choked her while a strange thrill ran through her body. Summoning all her courage, she desperately raised her eyes, and meeting his expression of joyful surprise, the eagerness of his look, rose and moved impulsively towards him. It was true then, he still loved her!

The pressure of his arms, however, brought her to a realization of all the barriers the years had raised between them,—she must tell him, and perhaps when he knew all, the light would fade from his eyes, the eager flush from his cheeks! He had greeted her as the Ragna he had parted from in Rome, how would he take the fact of her being the actual wife of another? She was tempted to put off the evil day, to accord herself one hour, at least, of unspoilt happiness, but she was no coward, she recognised that the issue must be faced and at once, that she had already put herself into an equivocal position by accepting his embrace, since he as yet knew nothing. As she freed herself, he made an effort to retain her, but her out-flung hand repelled him.

"No, no!" she said, "you must not. You do not know!"

"I know that the moment for which I have waited so long has come at last! I have awaited your summons five years now. Five years! Think of it, Ragna!"

"But you have not yet learned my reasons—"

"That is true," he assented gravely, "but to me the fact that you have come to me is all-sufficing. I am glad that you have done it of your own accord. Think, Ragna, just two weeks ago, I wrote to your Aunt in Christiania to try and trace you. I—I had grown tired of waiting, I realized that I had been a fool from the first, that I should never have let you slip out of my life, and I did, and for so long."

"Yes, yes," she interrupted breathlessly, "you should not have left me!"

"After your answer to my letter, I was afraid of offending you—I thought it would be better to wait until you made some sign—"

"Oh, my foolish letter!" groaned Ragna. "But I was not myself when I wrote it. I was wild with pain and humiliation, I—"

"I know, dear, I know, and it has been my fault if I have lost sight of you through all these years. I realized that in Rome. When I had tried to find some trace of you there, and failed, I wrote to your Aunt. After all that had happened there, Rome was intolerable to me,—you can understand that—and I came here to await an answer."

"Aunt Gitta is dead," said Ragna. Oh how much there was to say, how much that he must know, before she allowed him to go further! And the things he said, or rather implied—his unchanging devotion, his happiness at finding her, were so perilously sweet to hear. In his presence she felt herself transported to another atmosphere, poles apart from the one she had just left. It transformed her, she felt a different creature already.

Still the past must be dealt with; she gathered herself together for the effort of telling him, but as her lips parted, two English ladies entered the drawing-room, followed by a waiter with a tea-tray. They installed themselves at a small table near a window, casting curious glances the while, at the two standing in the middle of the room,—for both Ragna and Angelescu had been too absorbed in one another to remember the small conventionalities of life.

"What a bore!" said Angelescu impatiently—"and the worst of it is that there is no place in this hotel where we can be by ourselves. What shall we do, Ragna? We must be alone somewhere—is there any place we can drive to?"

"Yes," said Ragna eagerly, guiltily glad of the short reprieve. "Let us drive out into the country, we shall be alone there."

She seated herself while Angelescu went for his hat and tried to collect her ideas, to marshal the facts that must be told. It seemed so cruel that the beauty of their meeting should be dimmed if not destroyed by reason of the very cause that had brought that meeting about. What would he do, what would he say, when he knew? Would it change him? A cold fear gripped her heart, but through it, she felt the happy bound and surge of her pulses at the recollection of the tender expression of his eyes, the radiance of his dear bronzed manly face.

"I must have loved him even then," she marvelled to herself, thinking of their former meetings, for she knew now that she loved him and it seemed to her that it had been so always, ever since she could remember. When she had seen his name in the paper, how spontaneous had been her impulse towards him, how unhesitating the instinct to fly to him for refuge!

"Only, why did I not realize it before?" she asked herself.

Angelescu returned, hat in hand and they walked down the wide staircase and out the door, held open by an attentive flunkey.

"Where shall we go?" asked Angelescu as he beckoned to a cab on the rank.

"To Sta. Margherita a Montici," said Ragna to the driver as she took her seat.

She felt a reckless joy in driving thus publicly with Angelescu. In any ordinary circumstances,

common prudence would have forbidden her such an act in defiance of public opinion, but this was her declaration of independence, the burning of her boats, the definite throwing off of the yoke, and she gloried in it.

Angelescu looked at her with undisguised admiration, though the thick veil she wore rather obscured her features. She was more beautiful by far than she had been as a girl, her figure had riper, richer lines while keeping its lissome grace, her hair was as bright and abundant as ever, and the years of stress and storm had given an added delicacy to her features, a depth to her eyes, the subtle air of having lived and suffered to her expression—a complex charm that no merely young and pretty face can ever possess.

They sat silent as the carriage drove through the Via Maggio and down the long, winding Via Romana, but as they left the Porta Romana behind them and the pace slackened on the long hill, Ragna, with a determined effort, broke the silence.

"I have not yet told you that I am married," she said.

"Married!" repeated Angelescu, "married!" He looked at her as though stunned.

The idea that she might have married had never occurred to him. When she had refused him, he had not, in his direct simplicity, thought of the possibility of her giving to another that which she denied to him. He recoiled instinctively at the thought of her possession by another, and this time no accident, no sudden impulse, but with her full consent, as the fact of marriage must necessarily imply. It sickened him. How could she have given herself to another when everything about her proclaimed her love for himself. Could she then pass so lightly from one man's arms to another's? Now she had turned to him, but in the light of her prior action, what value had her present appeal? And why this appeal, since she had already found a protector, a husband? What explanation could there be to her conduct, except that as a frail barque, she drifted where the currents of circumstance and impulse took her? Or was she dominated by fickleness, a fatal longing for change and excitement? But here, his native generosity came to his aid,—the pressure of extraordinary circumstances must have been brought to bear on her, he must hear her out before judging.

So he turned to her, as she sat apprehensively expectant and took her hand in his own, saying:

"Tell me all, dear, don't be afraid. I was surprised, for I had not guessed—"

His voice was tender, affectionate; he spoke as he would to encourage the confidence of a shrinking child, and the beauty of it all was his perfect naturalness, the outcome of his simple generous soul.

To Ragna, realising as she needs must, from his first involuntary start, his look of horror and surprise, what a shock her bald announcement had been to him, his quick recovery, the tender simplicity of his response seemed little short of miraculous; she had not dared hope for so much. A lump rose in her throat and the hand that lay in his trembled.

"There, there, little one, tell me all!"

He spoke again, soothingly, as he would have spoken to a child; he did not guess that the tears welling up in her eyes were tears of relief, of joy, the reaction from the oppression of dread.

So Ragna told her tale, the terrible discovery that she was about to become a mother—

"Why did you not write to me then?" he interrupted.

"Ah, dear," she answered, "I was too ashamed, I only wanted to hide myself from all who knew me, from you, most of all, because you loved me!"

"The very reason why you should have come to me," he reproved quietly; "Ah, well, you did not, more's the pity. Think of it, Ragna, we might have been so happy."

"God knows I should have been a better woman, at least," she said bitterly, "not the hard cynical creature I have become!"

"You hard and cynical, my little Ragna?"

"Wait until you have heard all, and you will see whether I have not had good reason for it," she rejoined.

The tenderness called forth in response to his own had died away under the bitter memories evoked by the recital of her trials. With growing hardness in her voice, she told of Valentini's offer, of her acceptance and of their marriage—and at this point of her tale she dared not look at Angelescu's face but kept her eyes obstinately fixed on the driver's back, and even as she talked, was curiously conscious of the brown and grey stripes of the man's coat and the deep crease in it where it bulged over the iron rail round the top of the box.

She went on and told of her rapid disillusionment, hiding nothing, using words brutal in their revealing frankness, such as she had often used to herself; then of the birth of Mimmo, of that of Beppino, of the increasing unhappiness of her life, as time went on, and lastly of Carolina's story, the death of Fru Boyesen, the loss of her hopes, and the culminating scene of the morning. She reached this point as the carriage drove past the gate of the Torre al Gallo, where Galileo lived and worked, and through the little town of Arcetri, perched on the hill-top.

Both sat silent as they rattled through the long, narrow stone-paved street, Ragna lost again in the horror of all those awful years, now more unbearable than ever as she compared them to what might have been, Angelescu, his brow drawn into deep furrows of thought, the blaze of indignation in his eyes, a muscle working in his lean cheek, just as he had sat listening to her. As they left the last houses behind them, and came to a piece of undulating sunken road running between high stone walls on the tops of which iris and rose ran riot against the gnarled trunks and silvery leaves of the olives, he drew a long sigh and shrugged his shoulders as though throwing off the weight of some incubus.

"Poor little girl!" he said, and his voice shook with the depth of his emotion. After a pause, he spoke again, and this time his voice was full, deep, decided.

"You can't live with him any longer you know, you must come with me."

Then for an instant his anger blazed out like the sudden flare of lightning on a summer evening.

"By God, if ever I see that man,—no, that beast, I shall kill him!"

A thrill of savage joy ran through Ragna,—here then, was the man, the defender! The primitive woman in her leaped in response to his calm taking possession of her. Here was no questioning as to right, merely the assumption of herself and her burdens as the most perfectly obvious and natural thing in the world. Yes, he was right, she was his; she proudly acknowledged his right to command, to take her; she hugged the consciousness of her recognition of his mastery. Here was a lord she acknowledged with all her sentient being, one whom her soul delighted to honour. Mentally she compared with him the man who had been so long her hated and feared master, and the paltriness of Egidio made her wonder how she had let herself feel insulted by the words and actions of one so mean, so morally insignificant. She longed to throw out her arms to the man beside her, in one glorious gesture of self-abandonment, offering all that she was and could be, her whole being.

But the coachman was pointing with his whip to the beauties of the landscape, austere Fiesole and Settignano nestled in the lap of the hills, across the valley, and perched on the scarred pine-crowned hill between the Casa al Vento, all swimming in rosy amethyst, to Monte alle Croci, on which one distinguished the tiny mortuary chapels, the back of S. Miniato, the Arcivescovado masked in scaffolding, the Capucine monastery with its expresses, and nearer still the slopes of silvery olive and green waving grain, where cornflowers and poppies began to appear. So she only leaned forward and looked into Angelescu's eyes, clasping both her hands on his. She had thrown back her veil and her face appeared radiant, lit from within by the light of her love in its passionate consciousness of supremacy.

A steep bit of hill, and the horse, goaded into a momentary effort drew up panting in the little piazza before the Church which stood as on a pinnacle, the land on both sides sweeping away to a deep valley. On the right hand one saw range upon range of bare hill-tops with olive-covered slopes, and down below small white houses, each surrounded by its "podere," with here and there a "fattoria" or a villa, dotted the green valley. On the near hill-slopes the gorse was in blossom, its yellow flowers straggling over the rough ground like a ragged mantle of cloth of gold, and the strong sweet perfume of it assailed the nostrils. Across the piazza, opposite the grey old church was the priest's garden, an old-fashioned straggling garden sweet with wall-flowers, pinks and stocks, planted as borders to the onions, carrots, cabbages and lettuces; misshapen fig-trees ran riot and the *nespoli* showed the golden glow of ripened fruit among the heavy foliage. Lizards ran to and fro over the wall, from the crevices of which sprouted tufts of grass, snap-dragon, saxifrage and a kind of small fern.

The third side of the piazza, was bounded by a low wall, connecting the *orto* with the church and presbytery, and a flight of stone steps led to the terraced plantations below, where grain grew between the olives, and wild gladiolus, cornflower and poppy starred the undulating green surface.

Ragna, one of whose favourite haunts it was, led the way to the lichen-covered steps. At the foot of them an uneven grassy slope stretched downward, winding in and out among the terraces, and down this they wandered. The grass was still green for the summer heat and drought were yet far off, and many flowers grew in the light shade of the trees.

Ragna, full of the exuberance of the moment, laughed joyously and long like a child; she threw back her head, eyes half closed, the parted lips showing her white even teeth, and her laughter pulsated in her throat, rose in clear ripples. It reminded Angelescu of the song of a bird, of the clear water bubbling up in a spring. She had thrown off the weary years of pain as one casts off a dark cloak; all the youth, the girlish *insouciance* so long repressed rose triumphant to the surface, she irradiated the wonderful joy of life, of love. The sunlight, flecked with narrow, quivering shadow illuminated her white dress, the gold of her hair, the rosy flush of her cheek. She was like a bird escaped from its cage, mad with the newness of its freedom, intoxicated with the wine of life.

Her mood was infectious, it caught Angelescu, and he pursued her among the olive trees, following her light bounds, her lithe turnings and twistings. It was a page of Pagan fable,—there in the soft sunlight, under the grey gnarled olives, on the elastic carpet of flower-starred turf, the perfumed breeze fluttering Ragna's skirts as she laughingly eluded her pursuer. They were Apollo and Daphne and the world was young again. But this Daphne was no restive nymph, and when Angelescu caught her at length, panting and rosy, to his breast, she raised her mouth to his

and closed her eyes. The colour fled from her face, she became grave with the mysterious gravity of all true passion as in that sacramental kiss she felt the utter surrender of her soul to his.

After this they sat down on the grass, among the twisted olive roots, Ragna with her back against a distorted trunk, Angelescu stretched at full length beside her, his elbow on a root, his head supported by his hand. Dreamily happy, silent, like two people to whom the gates of Paradise have suddenly been set ajar, they gazed out over the valley below, where the shining reaches of the Arno reflected the sky. The pink-tiled roofs of the city trailed out like the embroidered hem of a robe from beyond Monte alle Croci, one could see up the valley as far as Ponte a Sieve and the green peaks of Vallombrosa. The sky was that deep, soft blue shading to amethyst on the horizon, that seems peculiar to Italy, and against it the slender olive leaves, shivering in the gentle breeze, stood out in delicate gold-illumined tracery.

Angelescu heaved a deep sigh of contentment, and Ragna echoed it; her wild exuberance of spirits had fallen and it was now the marvel of it, the beautiful tender mystery of this love, the only real love she had ever known, that dominated her. It seemed to her that all she had been through, the pain, the humiliation, the brutal servitude had been but a preparation for this, but the stony path leading to this summit of perfect happiness, whence she looked out and secure in her bliss, saw the whole of the world beneath her feet. "Stay, fleeting moment!" she half-whispered—and smiled, why should not the fleeting moment be eternal, was it not to be her life hence forward? Had not her path at last led her out of the shadow into the sunshine? Oh, perfect day that had broken her bondage! But even as she looked, the soft plum-coloured shadows lengthened in the valley, the sunlight mellowed with the waning day.

It was Angelescu who first broke the silence, there was still so much to be said, so much to be arranged. He leaned forward and took her hand which was idly playing with a bee-orchid she had plucked.

"Ragna dear, we must come back to earth again and consider what we are to do."

She started almost resentfully, so far adrift had she been on the happy sea of her realized day-dream that she had lost sight of all other considerations. It seemed to her that thus must she float on and on, from day to day, lapped in the sweetness of her new found love and exalted above all mundane concerns. She turned to him impulsively,

"Oh, why can't we live in dreamland just a little longer?"

He smiled.

"All our life is to be one long dream, darling, from which there will be no awakening,—but we have yet to make it ours."

"Are we not together? Is that not enough?"

"Yes, darling, and you are coming away with me to a new life,—but we must prepare that new life."

She sat up, throwing off her childish unreasonableness, even as she put back the disordered locks of her hair and straightened her hat.

"Tell me what I am to do,—I am all yours, dear, you shall decide for me."

"Have you a friend with whom you can spend the night? I do not like the idea of your going back for even so few hours to—to your husband," he pronounced the word with an effort.

"No," said Ragna quickly, "not my husband. I no longer recognize his right to call himself by that title. You are my husband dear, you and you only!"

He thanked her with a smile.

"And the friend, have you such an one? We can't get away until to-morrow, and we must not give Valentini any occasion to guess our plans or interfere with them, before I get you safely away. A man like him would be capable of anything, out of spite, and we must not play into his hands. He must know nothing until you are well out of reach. But I do hate the thought, *ma chérie*, of your going back to his roof—is there no one you could go to? You could say you had quarreled with him,—anything—"

Ragna thought of Virginia Ferrati, but was afraid of facing her sharp eyes and keen questions.

"Yes, I have a friend, a good friend, but I should have to take her into my confidence, and somehow I don't like the idea. I think that until we get away the less anyone knows of our plans, the better. Besides, dear, what harm is there if I do go home? I can arrange things so as not to see my husband,—I can say I have a headache and lock myself into my room."

"I don't like the thought of you under his vile roof. You are mine, now, Ragna, do you hear? Mine!"

She turned her face flushed with pleasure, and her dewy glistening eyes to him.

"Ah, dear, what does it matter for a few hours more, since we know that we belong to each other? I have borne with it all for over five years,—" his gesture forbade reminiscence,—"now it is over and I am free, I am yours—What can a few hours more or less, matter? And then there are the

children—I must see them once again, poor little souls!"

Her voice broke slightly as she said the last words; Mimmo's trusting little face rose before her eyes, but she thrust the vision away,—even he, for the moment was but a part of the hated past which she wished to blot out.

Angelescu's face took on an undefinable expression, part constraint, part displeasure, part pity. In spite of himself, a vague jealousy of these children, the living proofs of Ragna's past, the concrete, undeniable evidence of her relations with other men. He had even felt a sort of elation, when she had told him, in relating the scene of the morning, of Egidio's threat to keep Mimmo, should she leave her home, thus taking advantage of the rights the law conferred on him. Now that he had found Ragna again, he wanted her all to himself; the past could not be helped and he was ready to accept it in the abstract, and to put it away from them both. But a sense of shame came over him, he seemed to be matching himself against the slender strength of a child. Still somebody must suffer, and after all it was Valentini's fault and not his as he was ready to accept the child as part of the burden he assumed, and do his conscientious best by it. Ragna's manner when she had talked to him of Beppino had showed him how evidently she considered the child a part of his father as distinct from herself, and he had been glad of it, for while he could bring himself to accept Mimmo, the other, the child of the hated oppressor of the woman he loved would be a burden beyond his endurance. Beppino had thus been eliminated from the question from the very beginning, and as it seemed, he was to be spared the presence of Mimmo also; Ragna and he were to be free to begin their life on a new basis, unencumbered by the evidences of past bondage. He let his thoughts dwell on these considerations, but was not able to still entirely the pricking of his conscience. It was, perhaps, more to ease this than for any other reason that he gave his consent to Ragna's returning to her home for this one last night.

"Certainly you must see the children again," he assented gravely.

Ragna glanced at him, her eyes narrowed under thoughtful brows. The constraint of his manner was clearly apparent to her, as was, of course, the cause of it. Would it be the same with this man, as it had been with Egidio? For she recognized the fact that one of the principal reasons of the unhappiness of their marriage, had been the unwelcome presence of Mimmo. Angelescu met her look openly and squarely, he even smiled into her anxious eyes. Ah, she knew, she could not help but see that this man was as far removed from Egidio as the North Pole from the South! However he might suffer, however hard the weight of accepted responsibility might bear on him she would never see the slightest evidence of it, in so far as it should lie in his power to hide it. And his strength lay not only in resolve, but in his power of calmly accepting existing conditions with no looking backward or moody repining; all his energies would be directed towards the future. This much his steadfast eyes told Ragna, and she marvelled anew, as she recognized in this higher more disciplined form the same simplicity of mental attitude towards life as she had envied in Carolina. Still she could not help wondering if the very resolve on his part to accept the past and put it behind them both would not gradually raise a barrier of silence between them, and she saw their ship of happiness wrecked on the reef of the forbidden subject.

Angelescu rose to his feet and held out his hands to Ragna.

"Come, dear, we must be going. We will talk over the rest on the way back. You must not stop out so late as to arouse suspicions."

She took his outstretched hands and sprang up lightly; he drew her to him and kissed her long and tenderly, then, slowly and in silence, they walked hand in hand up the slope.

On the stone steps Ragna paused and turned for a last look down across the olive plantation to the valley; Angelescu's eyes followed hers, it was as though they were unconsciously bidding farewell to the place. Ragna voiced the vague feeling that possessed them both.

"We have been happy here,—we can never be happier than we have been to-day," she said in a low vibrant voice.

Angelescu raised her hand to his lips.

"No happier, perhaps,—I think too, that it would be impossible, but just as happy, dear!"

She stooped and plucked two small ferns growing in a crevice, one she gave to him, the other she laid in her card-case, saying softly,

"See, they are green—that is for hope."

In the little piazza above they found the *fiaccheraio* asleep on a stone bench, a straw protruding from his mouth, his rusty hat pulled over his eyes. The horse munched at the oats in his nose-bag, in great contentment, as he slouched between the shafts. On being hailed, the man sat up, rubbing his eyes with grimy knuckles.

"Scusino, Signori," he said, "*schiacciavo un sonnellino*. I did not think the Signori would be ready to leave so soon. *Quando si e giovini*—when one is young,—" he gave a broad wink. "Do the Signori wish to return by the same way as we came?"

"No," said Ragna, "go round the other way by the Villa Fensi and the Barriera S. Niccolo."

"Benone!" said the Jehu, as he stowed the nose-bag under the seat. He scrambled to the box with an agility astounding in one of his bulk, and with a crack of his whip they were off.

The road wound sharply down away from the church, past white *fattorie* and peasant-farmers' houses. The hill above cast a soft purple shadow over the road and down into the valley.

"Now, darling," said Angelescu, "I have been thinking about how we are to get away. There is a train to-morrow afternoon at three,—before midnight we can be in Switzerland, out of reach. I shall not try to see you in the morning, it is better to be prudent, but I shall be at the railway station at half past two. I shall wait for you in the first class *Sala d'aspetto*. You must arrange things so that your absence will not be noticed before we shall have crossed the frontier—after that *je ne crains pas le diable en personne*!" he ended gaily.

Ragna smiled up into his face.

"Bien, I understand. The first class waiting room at half past two or a quarter to three."

"You must take with you only what you can't do without for a day or two," he added, "just a dressing case, if you can get it out unnoticed. We will get everything else you need."

She saw that he wished her to leave behind all that she owed to Valentini's grudging liberality. And he, reading her unspoken answer to her thought, said,

"I am not a rich man, darling, but I have enough for us both—and I can't bear to think of you dressed in the clothes that—"

"I shall wear nothing in future but what you give me," she answered gravely.

There was a pause, then Ragna said, harking back to the moment on the steps below the church,

"This afternoon has been like a foretaste of Heaven. It has been the most perfect happiness I have ever known."

Angelescu slipped his arm behind her, and drew her close to him; her head sank to his shoulder.

"Ah, darling," he answered, "and to think that we have waited so long for it—that so much has happened that was unnecessary."

"No," she returned slowly, the words falling from her lips as the thoughts took definite shape in her mind, "it is best as it is. I am sincere at this moment, when I say to you that I regret nothing—nothing. If I had not learned what it is to suffer, I should not know how to love you as I do. I see now that it has all been a preparation—for this. If I had gone to you then, I,—we—I think we might not have been so happy. I was too ignorant, I was too hurt and suspicious to appreciate—And I had no real understanding of love. First I had thought it was romance, sentiment,—then I thought I knew it to be passion,—afterwards I thought it must be affection, friendship, esteem. Now I know."

"What is it then?" he asked.

"I don't know that I can explain in words, it is all I have said and more too, it is the feeling I have for you; it is all myself, the essence of my soul, the best that is in me."

There was a short silence, and she continued,

"I said before that I had grown hard and cynical, but I know now that it is not true. Pain has purified me, and I feel, I know—" she drew herself up proudly and turned her face to his, "that I am infinitely more worthy of your love than I was five years ago,—than I was even before Prince Mirko—I was nothing but a silly, vain girl, then, now I am a woman; I know what life is and what I give you I give consciously, in the full knowledge of what it is, of what it means to you, to me, to our life. Yes, I am a better woman."

"Dear!" said Angelescu and his eyes adored her.

He knew that she spoke the truth, that the harsh discipline had unconsciously prepared her for this glorious bursting into bloom, as the cold rains and snows of winter prepare the earth for the flowering of spring, still in his heart of hearts, manlike, he could not help wishing that she might have been his without having been subjected to the bitterness of life. He wished that he might have claimed her, young, innocent, unsuspicious of the evil in the world; he thought that without any experience of the darker side of existence, his love and the happiness she would have found in it, would have sufficed to bring her nature to its perfection of flowering. Unconsciously he resented any influence but his own in the development of the woman he loved. This was his instinct, his reason told him that Ragna was right, and he was thankful, nay, consummately happy, that she should come to him at last, by whatever road, and above all that she should thus surrender herself to him, fully, unreservedly and consciously.

They looked into each other's eyes and their souls met and mingled, even as they had when their lips met under the olives. An ecstasy of joy possessed them but it was no longer the exuberant joy of two hours earlier, rather a joy so deep in its passionate intensity as to confine on the borders of pain. It held them body and soul, in a state of exquisite torture, penetrating every fibre of their united being, throbbing in every particle, drawing them into communion with the pulsating ether about them, absorbing them into the vibrant Universe, their joint soul into the All-Soul. They felt their entire unity, one with the other and with the whole of the Creation. For an instant Life in its entirety was epitomized in their life, Eternity itself concentrated in the immeasurable pause, the innermost secret of existence lay bare before their reverent eyes.

They were driving now through a little valley, a cleft in the hills; the road was bordered by high walls over which hung tangles of banksia rose and jasmine. The still evening air held the fragrance till it seemed almost unbearable to the senses through its very sweetness, and the new consciousness of happiness in their hearts was like the perfume in the air. It was one of those moments when it seems that the soul can bear no more, that the very perfection of bliss bears in it the seed of its own decay, poor human nature being unable to sustain the pitch of perfection. Something must snap, something must give way, the wayfarer cannot breathe long the rarefied air of the heights, his stumbling feet bear him of their own accord to the valley.

The carriage stopped suddenly amid the objurgations of the driver, which were echoed with equal violence from the road where appeared suddenly the form of a burly *barocciaio* precipitated from his slumbers and also from his perch, where he had been indulging in a nap, by the sudden swerve of his horse at a touch of the *fiaccheraio's* whip. Loud and long was the altercation studded with violent invective in purest *fiorentinaccio*, the reputations of the female relatives of both contestants being the chief point of attack. A small cream-coloured Pomeranian rushed frantically to and fro on the top of the laden *baroccio*, adding his shrill barking to the general uproar. Thus rudely startled from their dream, Ragna and Angelescu looked on, almost dazed.

"Imbecile!" shouted the *fiaccheraio*, "*Bestia!* Why don't you have an eye to your horse and keep to your side of the road, instead of drinking yourself stupid? *Ubbriaccone!*"

The neck of a fiasco protruding from the straw of the *baroccio* gave point to the accusation.

"*Ubbriaccone* yourself! *Mascalzone!*" shrieked the carter. "Have an eye yourself to what you meet on the road! Because you drive aristocrats and imbecile *forestieri* about, do you think you can throw honest working-men into the dust? I'll drag you before the tribunals! You say I am drunk, you lie! You whipped my beast, I saw you!"

"*Socialista! Anarchico! Figlio d'un prete! Assassino!*" screamed the *fiaccheraio*.

"*Figlio d'una—!*" yelled the *barocciaio*.

"Here now," said Angelescu authoritatively, thinking they had gone quite far enough and annoyed by the uproar, "stop that bawling or I'll give you both in charge. You were on the wrong side of the road and you were asleep," he said to the lowering *barocciaio*, "so if you fell off it was your own fault. However, here's a lira for you, and now pull aside and let us pass."

He tossed a silver coin to the man whose ill-humour disappeared as though by magic, he even touched his cap and wished the "Signori" a "*Buona passeggiata*" as he led his horse by. The little dog had stopped barking and sat on his haunches regarding them with bright intelligent eyes, his fluffy ears pointed forward, a tip of his pink tongue showing under his truffle-like muzzle.

The *fiaccheraio* shook his head apologetically.

"*He vuole*, Signore, those people have no education, they will make a bad end. Did you hear what he said about aristocrats? But that is nothing, you should hear what they say in their socialistic meetings! They will end like that Brescia who murdered our good King. It is a bad thing for people of no education to talk too much. *Madonna dé fiaccherai!* to think that such *farabutti* should take the bread from honest men's mouths!"

"You are hard on them," said Angelescu.

"Ah, Signore mio, you do not know our *beceri*, and what they are capable of! It is a bad world and one must work hard for a *tozzo di pane* and a glass of *vin nero*—and these *merli* wish to live without working, and that is a thing which has never been since the world began. They say to us others, 'aha, *minchioni*, we will live on your shoulders!'"

Angelescu amused, continued to draw the old man out; the shrewd mother-wit and quaint phrases of the old Florentine were a source of delight to him. Ragna leaned back, indifferent, lost in the pleasant labyrinth of her day-dreams.

The road came to a sharp turn and the driver instinctively drew rein. Before them, beyond an indeterminate fore-ground of shadow, rose the city, bathed in the rays of the setting sun. Towers pierced the glowing haze, fairest of all the tower of Palazzo Vecchio, slender and tall like some stately lily, and floating bubble-like on the gold, the wonderful airy cupola of the Duomo. The long level mellow rays of sunset gave the scene an unreal aspect; it seemed that as way-worn pilgrims they had come suddenly upon the golden dream city of their desire, a city called up magically before their eyes, a glorious vision evoked by the power and wonder of their love. Above the dome and the towers, pearly clouds merging into amethyst floated in the gold-pink sky. The sound of many church-bells mellowed by the distance to a suggestion of heavenly music floated to their ears. Both felt instinctively that this was the fit ending to their perfect afternoon. In these last few hours they had attained to the apex of human happiness—whatever the future might hold in store for them, nothing could ever mar the transcendent beauty of this day, nor could they ever hope to surpass the joy, the glory of it.

CHAPTER XII

The door was opened to Ragna by Nando—Valentini had never permitted her to keep a latchkey—the anxiety of whose countenance was changed to relief at sight of her.

"*Meno male, Signora*, that you have come at last!"

"Why, Nando, what has happened?"

"The Signorini are crying for you, Signora,—the Sor Padrone found them in mischief and beat them,—beat them as though to break their poor little bones—"

But Ragna stayed for no more, her heart in her mouth she sped up the stairs to the room shared by the children.

What had happened was this: while Carolina saw to the preparation of their *goûter*, they had wandered in search of amusement and finding the door of Egidio's studio open,—a most unusual occurrence, as he generally kept the key in his pocket when not at work, had strayed in. On the large upright easel near the window stood the portrait of a lady, all but finished, a tall beautiful lady whose white dress and long scarlet scarf threw into relief the dark beauty of her head and the slender grace of her figure. The palette with its sheaf of brushes thrust into the thumb-hole lay carelessly in the box of the easel, as Egidio had left it on going to luncheon.

The boys stood hand-in-hand, gazing open-mouthed at the canvas which was lowered to the last notch, as Egidio had been working on the hair and shoulder-drapery.

"What a beautiful lady," said Mimmo in awed tones, "she must be a princess!"

"Yeth, a fairy princeth," agreed Beppino, on whom his mother's fairy tales had made a deep if confused impression.

"I wonder why *babbo* never lets us come into this nice house?" queried Mimmo, looking about him—to his childish eyes it seemed a Paradise of delight.

The model's throne was covered by a Persian carpet on which stood a carved armchair of the Bargello pattern, and behind, on a screen, hung a curtain of old blue-green brocade, the same that formed a background to the beautiful lady. At one end of the long, high-ceilinged room, an old black-walnut press, square and massive supported some vases of Capodimonte and old Ginori ware, and above it was a picture of the Padre Eterno enthroned on clouds, through which the Dove sent golden beams, while a demon leered from a cave in the lower left hand corner. Armchairs and *sgabelli* of various patterns stood about, over some of them were flung long pieces of drapery, brocades and velvets in soft old shades, some of them ragged and torn, but all a delight to the eye. At the other end of the room an old painted *corredo*-chest, the lid turned up, displayed a tumbled heap of costumes within, over it a panoply of armour flanked by two racks of small arms, decorated the wall. On a large round table paint-brushes and tubes of colour made an untidy litter about a Renaissance jewel-casket of steel damascened with gold, and an ivory crucifix on an ebony stand. A deep recess held a stack of half finished portraits, studies, background sketches, bare stretchers and rolls of canvas. A corresponding recess on the other side of the door had been turned into a dressing-room for the model. On the door-lintel stood a small *écorché*, in plaster, and a few heads, hands, feet and anatomical casts. A lay figure on a divan in the corner, emerged wildly from a trail of drapery.

The children wandered about exploring it all with fearful delight, ready to fly at the sound of their father's footstep, for this was forbidden ground, even to Ragna. As time passed and no alarm came, they grew bolder, and presently found themselves standing before the portrait, drawn by its irresistible charm. They stood gazing up at it until suddenly a brilliant idea occurred to Beppino.

"Let'th help *babbo*," he said.

"Babbo will be angry if we touch his things," objected Mimmo, but Beppino was obstinate.

"Me going to help *babbo*," he declared and seized a brush. It happened to be charged with scarlet colour, and left a broad wavering trail over the lady's white skirt. It was too much for Mimmo; he also seized a brush and clambered to the stool Egidio used to sit on when painting.

"You do the dress, Beppino, and I'll do the face! It's too dry, give me that bottle,—I've seen babbo stick his brush in it."

Beppino handed up the desired bottle, and a hard brush dipped in turpentine, gripped firmly in the child's fist was presently scrubbing diligently backwards and forwards over the freshly painted surface. Oily streams ran down from the eyes over cheeks and chin, gobs of impasto spread themselves impartially over the blurred features, the dark of the hair ran down into the face. Face? It was no longer distinguishable as such, and under Beppino's vigorous efforts the white satin of the skirt looked like a Scottish tartan in delirium tremens.

"Beppino," said Mimmo suddenly, in an awed whisper, "her face is coming off!"

It was at this moment that Egidio entered the studio; he saw the children and sprang forward. Beppino, waving his brush, called joyfully,—fear lost in the glory of achievement.

"Babbo! Babbo! we's helping 'oo!"

"Helping indeed!" His eyes roved over the devastated canvas, on which were spread the ruins of

his labour of love and a blind fury gripped him.

"*Accidento a voi!*" he yelled, and the children shrank from his blazing eyes and congested face. He seized the two small culprits by their Van Dyck collars and dragged them over to the side of the room where the armour was. The children, too frightened to cry, struggled, but he held them easily with his left hand while he looked about him for an instrument of punishment; seeing a foil in the rack, he took it down. The first blow brought an agonized scream from both boys, a scream that Carolina heard in the dining-room, where she had just finished laying the table for their *goûter*; and that brought her breathless and with flying feet to the studio door. There she stood a second, horrified by the sight that met her eyes. Egidio, his face distorted like that of a fiend, stood slashing at the children indiscriminately and mercilessly; the poor little things had put up their arms instinctively to shield their faces, and each whistling stroke wrung from them a fresh scream, as it descended. Mimmo's golden curls tossed wildly as he shook in the grasp of the madman—for Egidio at that moment was mad—his lace collar was torn, and on his poor little wrist were cruel marks from which red drops trickled. Being the bigger of the two he partially masked Beppino.

Carolina paused but for the taking in of a breath, then she sprang forward and seized in mid-air the hand wielding the foil. Egidio turned on her with a snarl, infuriated by the interruption.

"Go, woman!" he yelled, "how dare you come here?"

"Stop it!" she answered, "let the children go!"

"I shall punish them as I see fit, I—their father. They have ruined my work, do you hear? My work of weeks! Look!"

She glanced at the portrait and saw that it was smeared but her untutored mind could not grasp the extent of the disaster. The sight of it maddened Valentini again and he made an effort to wrench his hand from her hold.

"Signore," she pleaded, "remember that they are little, they are only babies, they did not know."

"Little are they? They are big enough to ruin my work! *Dio santo*, they shall smart for it!"

Again he tugged at her restraining hands.

"Be careful girl—when I am through with them you shall have your turn—who do you think you are to interfere with your master?"

He wrenched his arm free with a force that sent her reeling and once more the foil descended.

She flew at him again, her face blanched, her eyes blazing, a new note in her voice.

"Have a care yourself!" she shrieked. "Murderer! Assassin! Help! Help! Murder!"

"Stop that, you fool!" he snarled, but she cried the louder, and he dropped the children to choke her cries.

The white scared faces of Nando and Assunta peering in at the door brought him to his senses and he flung the girl off.

"You pack of fools!" he growled, "take that hysterical idiot away and leave this room! How dare you come here without my orders?"

But Assunta was already by Carolina's side, bending over the children, whose loud sobbing filled the room.

"Take your silly face from that door, Nando! *Dio mi strabenedica* if I don't throw the whole crew of you into the street! Am I to have no peace in my own home?"

A sound of steps was heard in the passage; Nando felt a hand on his shoulder thrusting him aside, and Enrico Ferrati entered, glancing about him in astonishment at the scene before him.

"My God, Egidio! What does this mean? What has happened to the children?"

Carolina raised her tear-stained face.

"Ah, Signor Dottore! The good God himself has sent you! Look at these poor innocents, murdered by their father!"

He was kneeling beside them in an instant, examining the welts and cuts on their little necks and hands, feeling them cautiously over—fortunately no bones were broken.

"Take them to their room, my good girl, undress them and put them to bed. I shall come presently—you can put some compresses on these bruises, and wash the cuts with the solution in the big green bottle on the Signora's dressing table. Go, Mimmo caro, go, Beppino mio, Zio Rico is here and will come to you. There now, don't cry! There is nothing to be afraid of, it is all over!"

Carolina took Mimmo in her arms and staggering a little under his weight, led the way, Assunta following with Beppino.

"Go also, my friend," said the Doctor to Nando, "I shall ring if you are wanted."

Nando slunk off in his turn, casting many curious backward glances.

Ferrati waited till the last footstep had died away then he raised his eyes from the foil he had picked up and was fingering.

"And now will you tell me what all this means, Egidio?" he asked quietly.

Valentini shrugged his shoulders sulkily.

"I was merely giving the children a little richly deserved punishment."

"Punishment! They are covered with cuts and welts and bruises! Thank Heaven they are still wearing their thick winter clothes—You might have killed them, Egidio, you would have, if you had not been stopped in time. As it is, it is a miracle that they are not maimed for life! Are you mad to think of touching the tender body of a child with a thing like this?" He bent the flexible blade of the foil, "I tell you that if their clothes had not protected them, you would have cut the flesh of those babies to ribbons!"

"But look, Rico," Valentini burst forth passionately, "look what they have done! I come in here and I find they have ruined my work, the picture that was to make my reputation—and that I shall have no chance to do again, if I could, for she has gone away!"

He wheeled the easel about, and Ferrati gazed aghast on the havoc wrought.

"My God, Egidio," he exclaimed, "this is awful!"

"And yet you blame me for punishing—" he said bitterly, but Ferrati interrupted him.

"You had provocation, I will admit; this is a terrible disappointment. But you are a man, Egidio, and to allow your rage to get the better of you to the extent that you would have murdered—yes, *murdered* is the word—those innocent children—"

"Innocent!"

"Yes, certainly, innocent. Can you suppose for a minute that a child of that age would be capable of a deliberate act of malice such as this? Think man, think how easily you might have killed them, and how would you have met your wife with their blood on your hands?"

"Oh, Ragna!" said Egidio sneeringly.

"Where is she?"

"I suppose she is gadding about somewhere, as usual."

Valentini looked at him keenly.

"That is another thing, in fact it was that I was coming to you about when I heard Carolina's screams of 'murder'. You are not treating your wife as you should, Egidio, and as I was partly responsible for the marriage, I cannot stand aside and let things go on as they have been doing. As your friend, as the friend of both of you, I feel that I can be silent no longer."

"So she has been to you with her complaints!"

"She has done nothing of the sort; Ragna is not the woman to complain of her husband to anyone—you should know your wife better by this time."

He paused, but Valentini his eyes sulkily fixed on the carpet, merely shrugged his shoulders.

"No, I speak only of what Virginia and I have seen with our own eyes and heard with our own ears. You speak slightingly to Ragna and of her, in public; you humiliate her and make her life unbearable. What you say and do in private I have no means of knowing, but I can see that your wife both fears and hates you."

"She has an impossible character," said Egidio petulantly, like a child taken to task. Ferrati seemed always to have this mysterious power of domination over him, the result, perhaps, of the man's clear-eyed honesty.

"She is pretentious, rebellious against my authority; she is ungrateful for all I have done for her, she lies; I tell you she is impossible."

"Let us talk this over," said Ferrati glad to have at last something definite to take hold of. "I will take you up point by point, and we will find out how much foundation there is for what you say. I believe it is all a misunderstanding."

"It is not, I can't be deceived about my own wife, I know her better than she knows herself."

"There is where you are wrong. Your wife is not perfect—no human being is, but you wilfully blind yourself to her good qualities and exaggerate her defects. Now take this, you call her pretentious," he flung his arms round Valentini's shoulders and forced him to pace slowly up and down the room—"I do not think her so. She is a beautiful woman, she is clever—I have read her publications and they are excellent,—she may have a little weakness for titled friends."

"She fills my house with knaves and fools. She continues to receive people I have forbidden her to see, I won't have it! She—"

"Sh! let me continue, when I have finished you shall say what you have to say. I repeat, you call

her pretentious, my opinion and that of everyone who knows her is that she is modest and unassuming. As for her friends—" he wheeled suddenly looking Egidio in the eyes, "what right have you to object to them? Do you suppose your escapades, the way you spend your evenings, to be unknown? This woman, the original of this portrait, what right had you, knowing her for what she is, standing to her in the relation in which you did—what right had you, I say, to bring her here, into the house where your wife lives?"

His voice was like a trumpet-call, and Egidio's eyes fell.

"You say that she rebels against your authority—but if that authority is a tyranny? She is not a child, she is a responsible woman and the day has gone by when a husband's word was law. In virtue of what superior powers do you arrogate to yourself the right to guide and control your wife as though she were a minor child? But if obedience is what you require you must be moderate in your commands, lighten your yoke, fit it to the neck that is to wear it. I don't wonder that Ragna finds your exercise of authority unreasonable. Now for the ingratitude—in what way is she ungrateful? And after all, my dear friend, why should she be grateful, what more have you done for her than she has done for you?" Egidio's jaw dropped. "Your marriage was a contract entered into on both sides with full knowledge of the circumstances. You knew her condition, you knew, for she told you, that she did not love you—you offered her your name and protection in exchange for the advantage of her society. Well, has she not fulfilled her part of the contract? Has she not been a model wife and mother, faithful, true to you in word and deed? Has she not given you a son of whom any man might be proud? What more could you expect of her? Granted that Mimmo—that his presence in the house must be hard at times, but he is a dear affectionate child, whom no one could help loving—and you knew beforehand what you were undertaking. Remember, the child was never foisted on you, as seems sometimes to be your conviction. Here are three of your points disposed of—frankly I cannot see that you have a leg to stand on!"

Egidio opened his mouth to protest but closed it again; indeed what could he say without letting his friend see that it was the loss of Ragna's expected fortune, in hopes of which he had married her, that lay at the root of his grievance. He had so often proclaimed his disinterestedness that he could not very well abandon the position; and more than this he feared Ferrati's condemnation and wished to keep his good opinion. Anything he could say would but put himself in a most unflattering light. Seeing he had no answer to make, Ferrati continued.

"You accuse her of lying—how and when does she lie? I have held her, ever since I first knew her, for the personification of truth."

"Well," said Egidio uneasily, his arraignment of Ragna seemed hard to substantiate, somehow, before this stern judge, "she says she has no housekeeping money when I know she must have. She saves and pinches, to send my money to her pauper family; she gives away the presents I have made her."

"If she chooses to stint herself in order to help her family, and in such a way that the household does not suffer by it, I do not see what you have to complain of. Is it not natural for her to wish to help her own kith and kin? Would not you do the same? And why do you oblige her to ask you for every *centesimo*? Why do you insist on even buying her clothes for her instead of letting her do it herself? If you tyrannize over her you must expect that she will develop a slave's vices—but I can still see no evidence of a direct lie on her part; at most, she may be guilty of an occasional, and considering your conduct, most excusable equivocation! Now, my friend, you have come to a turning-point, you must realize that yourself. By your own fault, I don't say consciously—but still by your own actions, you have come to this pass, that the relations between you and your wife, are, by your own admission, impossible—and that you are both of you miserable, and but for outside intervention you would be standing here now a murderer, as a result of your ungovernable temper—the murderer of the children you really love better than anything else in the world. Pull up man! For God's sake, pull up and start out afresh! I know Ragna will meet you half-way. Can't you see where you are going, at this rate?"

Valentini fairly squirmed under his friend's kindly hand. The indictment was terribly severe; it was the first time in his life that anyone had dared speak to him so openly and so authoritatively. It found him unprepared, bereft of his usual armour of carefully arranged appearances. The incident of the children had shaken him more than he cared to admit. If he had but little affection for Mimmo, Beppino was the very apple of his eye; but he would not willingly have done physical harm even to Mimmo. He, in common with many so-called "bad" men, had an instinctive love of children and animals and in spite of his violent temper nearly always won their affection. He was shocked to think to what his violence had led him—so much so that he could hardly believe it. Indeed had there been no witnesses he would have denied his action and in a short time would positively have persuaded himself that no such thing had taken place. He was not a man, however, to acknowledge himself in the wrong and Ferrati knew him well enough, not to expect it of him; it was enough that he should answer, as he presently did:

"My life, certainly, is anything but happy. A man generally looks forward to finding at least peace in his own home, but that has not been my lot—although if ever a man slaved from morning to night and gave up everything for his family, I am that man!"

It was quite true that he worked hard, but he would have worked equally hard with no family to provide for, industry was in the nature of the man.

"However, ungrateful though they be, *I* shall keep on. I was a fool to get married, I see that now,

if it had not been for that attack of typhoid—but I shall keep on sacrificing myself, I can't help it, I am never happy unless I am doing something for others. What do I care for money for myself?"

He threw out his arms in a noble gesture, at which Ferrati could not help smiling.

"I must think of the future of the children! By the way," he added almost shamefacedly, taking Ferrati's arm, "let us go to them and see that they have taken no harm—you see I don't bear malice—"

"Let us finish all that there is to say first," said Ferrati, anxious to wring some concession for Ragna from this unusually promising occasion. "We were talking of your wife."

"Oh, well, yes, Ragna. She was most insolent to me last night, mad with jealousy and perfectly insufferable—you don't know what it is, Rico, to have a jealous wife! just think, she imagined some perfectly ridiculous thing between me and that slattern, Carolina. It seems impossible to have so little *criterio*. You wouldn't believe, Rico, the things she said! She almost got the better of my patience!" Ferrati smiled grimly. "We had more words this morning and in a fit of rage she said she would leave me, and I told her to go—*a quel paese*. *Peggio per lei!*"

His voice rose as he found a vent for his repressed feelings, he almost forgot Ferrati's presence in the joy of shifting to other shoulders the blame which in his heart he knew to be his. He paused, drawn to his full height, his eyes burning.

"It is always the same story 'put a beggar on horseback and he'll ride to the Devil!' I married her out of the gutter—"

"I beg your pardon, Egidio," broke in Ferrati's stern voice, "you did no such thing and if you set any value on my friendship, you will never repeat those words."

Valentini cast a furtive side glance at him.

"Oh, well, have it as you will. I married her *colla camicia*—it amounts to the same—she has nothing of her own, so the worse for her if she goes off, as she will soon find out. Then she will beg to be taken back and I won't, I swear I won't."

"What!" cried Ferrati horrified, "do you mean to say you have actually driven away your wife, the mother of your child?"

"If she went it was of her own accord."

"Then she has gone?"

Had he come too late? Had Ragna actually found courage to throw off her bondage?

"When I came in, Assunta told me that the padrona had Nando call her a carriage just after luncheon, and she has not come back yet."

Suddenly he flung himself on a chair by the table, his fingers clutching his hair, prey to a violent fit of self-pity.

"Oh, Rico, I am the unhappiest man on the earth! My wife, the woman for whom I sacrificed my whole life, has deserted me! The base ingratitude, the heartlessness of it! Think of a woman deserting her husband and children! My head will burst with the strain of it all. Oh, why was I such a fool as to marry? And a woman like that! All my life is sorrow and disappointment and *gratta-capi*."

He was thoroughly unstrung. He had never thought that Ragna would take him at his word when he bade her begone, but by now he had thoroughly convinced himself that she was gone, and his little world rocked on its foundations. Most of all, he was sorry for himself, he felt ill-used and sore.

Ferrati seated himself, facing Valentini across the table; he spoke, and his voice was incisive and authoritative.

"Do you realize what you have done? You have accused your wife of jealousy, but I know, and all Florence knows, Egidio, that she has good reason to be. However, she is patient and bears with it all until you outrage every sense of decency by running after her own maid in her own house—you need not deny it, I have seen the way you look at Carolina. Then because she dares reproach you with your conduct you drive her away, for that is what it amounts to. Do you realize what this means to you? Your wife is loved and respected here, and when the story of her leaving you comes out, as it surely will—what will the world say of you?"

He had deliberately touched the chord of Egidio's susceptibility to public opinion, the one to which he responded most readily.

"The world knows me, I am not afraid of the world—it is Ragna who will be condemned."

"Ah, there you are wrong, the world is not so easily hoodwinked as you choose to think; there are more whispers afloat as to your conduct than you dream of. There are a number of people already, who accept you only on your wife's account, and if that were not enough, *I* am here," he drew himself up, his stern eyes fixed on Valentini, "if I am questioned, as I am sure to be, I shall answer the truth!"

Valentini bounded on his chair.

"I thought you were my friend—a nice one you are indeed! I have nourished a viper in my bosom —I—"

"I am your friend, Egidio, your best friend, if you only knew it, for I am the only one who dares speak the truth to you without fear or favour. But my friendship cannot compel me to deceit to an unworthy end. I shall tell the truth to the world, and you, Egidio, must make that truth such that it may be told without shame to yourself. You must persuade your wife to come back."

"Persuade her, humble myself to her? Never."

But Ferrati had seen the wavering in his eyes,

"Well, then, leave the 'persuasion' to me."

"You can tell her that I am willing to forgive her, if you like, that I am willing to consider that nothing has come between us—See, I am ready to make concessions, to add one more sacrifice—"

The battle was won, or at least as far as Valentini was concerned; the vague stirring of regret for his violence, the fear of his friend's judgment, the thought of his life without the comforts of a well-ordered home—even the thought of losing Ragna herself, although she had come to be but a *souffre douleur*, had undermined his obstinacy, and the threat of the condemnation of society had been the finishing touch. His declaration of his willingness to "forgive" his wife was, however, all that he could be brought to admit, as Ferrati well knew. It must be taken as the capitulation it signified, and acted upon without further discussion. Remained the problem of Ragna; where was she? Would she return? And, above all, could she be persuaded to resume the burden of Valentini's ill-humour? At least Ferrati intended that she should have the assurance of his friendship and his help in future, for now, after this revealing scene with Valentini he had the weapons for her protection ready to hand.

"Ebbene?" asked Valentini impatiently, anxious to put an end to the interview. "Are you or are you not going to see the children?"

"Of course!" said Ferrati, rising, "poor little things, I had almost forgotten them! But," he added, sharply, turning to the other who was preparing to accompany him, "you must stop here, the sight of you might throw them into convulsions. Wait here, Egidio, and I will come down and report to you when I have seen them."

"Oh, very well," growled Egidio, his mouth twitching with discomfiture, "have it your own way!"

He thrust his hands into his trousers' pockets and slouched moodily up and down the studio. It had been a most unpleasant day for him, the culminating point of many, and the worst of it was he had come out of it with anything but flying colours. The curious part of it was that he felt weak, back-boneless, his rage had burnt itself out—for the time. He could not understand it. He lit a *toscano* and chewed it meditatively as he marched up and down. The fact was that the interview with Ferrati had cowed him; like all bullies he was a coward at heart and his friend's fearless condemnation had as effectually crushed him as physical chastisement would have done. He had met one stronger than himself, and was obliged to recognize the fact. In an astonishingly mild humour, he awaited events.

CHAPTER XIII

Ferrati found the children in bed, reeking of the arnica with which Carolina and Assunta had been bathing their bruises.

"Signor Dottore!" cried Carolina, as he entered, "their poor little bodies are striped like zebras! If the Santissima Madonna and Gesù Bambino had not protected them they would have been killed!"

Both children burst out sobbing at this rehearsal of their woes, and Ferrati had some ado to make himself heard.

"Now then! Now then!" he said, "there will be a treat to-morrow for good boys who don't cry! Be little men, don't let these women see you sobbing like babies!" He waved his hand laughingly "Who's my good boy? Let us see which of you can stop first!"

"I want my mammina!" sobbed Mimmo.

"I wants her too!" echoed Beppino.

"Ah, già, where is the Signora?" Ferrati asked turning to Assunta.

"*Ma chi lo sa*, Sor Dottore?" she answered in some confusion, busying herself about Beppino's cot. "She has gone out."

"But where?"

"How should I know? The Signora's affairs are not mine! Nando said she told the *fiaccheraio* to

drive to the Grand Hotel, but more than that I do not know."

Ferrati knitted his brows—the Grand Hotel! She must have gone there to meet someone, for it was too expensive and fashionable a hostelry as well as too much in the public eye, for her to have chosen had she merely been seeking other lodgings than her husband's house. The children had ceased crying and were watching him intently as were also the women.

He set about bandaging the little wrists where they had been cut, still in silence. When he had finished he turned to Carolina:

"Keep the children quiet, you can go on with the arnica. In half an hour you can give them a bowl of milk each, or a little broth. *Addio bimbi!*" kissing them each in turn, "to-morrow Zia Virginia and I will bring you a treat if you are good."

"Zio Rico!" called Mimmo as Ferrati reached the door.

"Yes, caro?"

"You won't let *him* come up?"

"No, caro, he shan't come to-night."

"And Zio, I want my mammina."

"*Cuor mio*, I am going to look for your mammina now. When I find her I shall fetch her to you."

"That's right, as soon as she knows we want her she'll come, won't she, Zio?"

"*Sicuro!*" answered Ferrati cheerfully—Would he be able to find her though, and would it be in time?

It seemed that the two women read his thoughts for they exchanged a significant glance.

Ferrati, however, had not far to go, for as he descended the stairs he met Ragna coming up, alarm and anxiety writ large on her face, though her eyes were still starry and her cheeks aflame with the joy of the afternoon.

"Are they—tell me, are they—?" she gasped.

"They are not badly hurt," he said soothingly.

"Let me by, let me go to them!" her breath came in swift pants, her bosom heaved.

He took her arm firmly.

"Come now, Ragna, calm yourself. You can't go to them like this, you would excite them and do them harm; you must not!"

"Ah, but you don't know how nearly I—" she exclaimed, and wrenching her arm free sped up the stairs and into the nursery where she flung herself between the cots, sobbing convulsively.

Ferrati stood on the stair gazing after her a moment, then followed her slowly. He looked in through the nursery door and saw her, one arm across either cot, her face hidden, her shoulders shaking with sobs, her hat awry, and Mimmo patting her neck and stray locks of hair with his little bandaged hand, while Beppino on the other side, cuddled close to her protecting arm.

Carolina with fine intuition made a sign to Assunta, and they withdrew noiselessly, leaving their mistress alone with her children.

"We knowed 'oo would come," said Beppino contentedly.

A great wave of emotion had Ragna on its crest, carrying her on, unresisting. She felt dominant within her the powerful impulse of renunciation, it overwhelmed all else. Words Ferrati had spoken to her in Venice, long ago, rang in her ears. "Remember that you are not only a woman, you are a mother, your duty is towards your child, you have no right to cheat him of what should be his!" For the first time she actually realised that Beppino too was her child, bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh as was Mimmo. Hitherto she had always looked on him as altogether his father's, as remote from her personally, and her hatred of the father had been continued in indifference towards the child. Now as she felt the helpless little body lying close within her arm, as she heard the soft little voice lisp out words of confidence, her innermost being stirred at recognition of his oneness with her. But to renounce happiness, to renounce Angelescu! The dark waters of despair engulfed her, she sank down and down—it had been bad enough before, but what would be the torment of life now, without him? How could she give him up, just as she had found him? Her entire being, body and spirit, recoiled from the thought of re-entering that prison from which she had so lately thought to escape forever. For one wild moment the impulse seized her to wrap up the children and carry them off with her. Her fingers twitched feverishly at the bed-clothes. Then the recollection came to her of how Angelescu had involuntarily recoiled at mention of the children. He had not meant her to see it, she knew that, she knew also that he would be unfailingly kind and considerate—but at what cost to himself, to their love? Would she not be preparing a worse torment for both of them? A pale dawn broke on the night of her thoughts; she saw herself no longer as an individual, as a personality warring against circumstance, rebellious towards fate, but rather as an integral part of Fate, a particle of elementary force given in the service of these young lives for their guidance and protection. She

saw her task as a mother as she had not yet understood it and in the light of the new vision stood prepared to strip herself of all selfish attributes, of pride and the desire for happiness. Yet she saw it without exaltation, her sacrifice stood in the cold light of the commonplace, a natural sequence of her enlarged understanding. The chill weight of the years before her settled down on her shoulders, but she accepted that weight, bent her neck consciously and consentingly to the unwelcome yoke. Unwelcome it would be, but no longer galling as in the past, she knew in her soul that in the instant of her renunciation, she had passed beyond Egidio's power to hurt her,—at least more than superficially, he had shrunk to insignificance. Never again would she be afraid of him, or stirred to anger on her own account by his vulgar insults.

Mimmo broke in upon her train of thought, she heard his sweet voice in her ear:

"Mammina you have come back to us, you will never leave us again? *Di! mammina, mai più?*"

She raised her head and kissing him, answered smiling:

"No, *cuoricino mio, mai più*."

She rose to her feet straightening her hat mechanically as she did so, then as she became conscious of its existence, drew out the long pins, folded up her veil, removed the hat and laid it on the table. There was a finality in her action that struck Ferrati, and when she turned towards him her face startled him, so pale was it, so calm, so stamped with thoughtful decision.

"Ah, you are there, my friend," she said.

"Yes," he answered simply, adding, "I am going home now."

"Is *he* downstairs?"

"Yes, in the studio, very much subdued. I shall see him on my way out. Be as kind to him as you can—he is disposed to meet you half way."

A faint ironical smile crept over her face, then faded leaving it in its former marble like calm. She made no direct answer.

"After all life is a question of compromises."

He started—this from Ragna!

"You look surprised, my friend—I have grown older, and let us hope, wiser, since morning."

He made no comment, and turned to go.

"Wait a minute," she said, calling him back, "I should like you to leave a note for me at the Grand Hotel, if it is not out of your way."

The Grand Hotel!

"Not at all," he answered, "Command me in any way, I am entirely at your service."

The sincerity of the words pleased her, but she was past feeling much, for the moment. She signed to him to wait so he sat down and watched Carolina feeding the children with a bowl of milk she had just brought.

Presently Ragna returned and handed him an envelope; within were these words:—

> "My Dear One,—
>
> "The children claim me, I cannot go,—if I were false to them I should be false to myself and to you. We were wrong to-day when we imagined that we could cut a path for ourselves in spite of circumstance. So we must part. I shall never see you again, but remember that as I was yours to-day, so shall I be throughout the years to come. Your love has set me free, the material world exists for me now but as a dream—I have achieved through you the ultimate emancipation, not death, but freedom from the material circumstances of life. What matters the fate of that charnel house, my body? My spirit is yours, nothing can prevent that. Good-bye, my soul, my life.
>
> "Ragna."

The envelope was addressed to Count Angelescu, Grand Hotel, Città.

Ferrati, taking the letter, glanced at the superscription; his instinct divined the truth, but like the wise man he was, he gave no sign. Only, he lifted Ragna's hand and pressed his lips upon it with the reverence he would have accorded a saint.

As he left the room he turned on the threshold, and the picture he saw: Ragna very pale but consummately calm, leaning on the foot of one of the cots, gazing down at the children, a faint smile parting her lips, her dark-circled eyes shaded by the long lashes, remained with him to the end of his life.

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