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A RAINY JUNE

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

OUIDA

AUTHOR OF 'PUCK,' 'TRICOTRIN,' 'THE MASSARENES,' ETC.

A NEW EDITION

LONDON
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1905

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A RAINY JUNE

From the Principe di San Zenone, Claridge's, London, to the Duchessa dell'Aquila Fulva, Monterone, near Val d'Aosta, Italy.

'Carissima Teresa—I received your letter, which is delightful to me because it is yours, and terrible to me because it scolds me, abuses me, flies at me, makes me feel like a schoolboy who has had a scolding. Yes; it is quite true. I cannot help it. She has bewitched me. She is a lily made into a woman. I feared you would be angry, especially angry because she is a foreigner; but the hour of fate has struck. You will not wonder when you see her. She is as blonde as the dawn and as pure as a pearl. It seems to me that I have never loved any woman at all in my life before. To love her is like plunging one's hand in cool spring water on a midsummer noon. She is such repose; such 2
innocence; such holiness! In the midst of this crowded, over-coloured, vulgar London life—for it is very vulgar at its highest—she seems like some angel of purity. I saw her first standing with a knot of roses in her hand under a cedar tree, at one of their afternoon clubs on the river. She was drinking a cup of tea; they are always drinking tea. And she is so white. I never saw anything so white except the snow on the Leonessa. She is not in the least like the fast young ladies of England, of whom one sees so much in the winter at Rome. I do not like their fast young women. If you want a woman who is fast, a Parisienne is best, or even an American. Englishwomen overdo it. She is just like a primrose; like a piece of porcelain; like a soft, pale star shining in the morning. I write all kinds of poetry when I think of her. And then, there is something *Sainte Nitouche* about her which is delicious, because it is so real. The only thing which was wanting in her was that she ought to have been shut up in a convent, and I ought to have had to imperil my soul for all eternity by getting her over a stone wall with a silken ladder. But it is a prosaic age, 3
and this is a very prosaic country. London amuses me, but it is such a crowd, and it is frightfully ugly. I cannot think how people who are so enormously rich as the English can put up with such ugliness. The houses are all too small, even the big ones. I have not seen a good ballroom; they say there are good ones in the country houses. The clubs are admirable, but life in general seems to me hurried, costly, ungraceful, very noisy, and almost entirely consecrated to eating. It is made up of a scramble and a mass of food. People engage themselves for dinners a month in advance. Everybody's engagement book is so full that it is the burden of their days. They accept everything, and, at the eleventh hour, pick out what they prefer, and, to use their own language, "throw over" the rest. I do not think it is pretty behaviour, but nobody seems to object to it. I wonder that the women do not do so, but they seem to be afraid of losing their men altogether if they exact good manners from them. People here are not at all well-mannered, to my taste; neither the men nor the women. They are brusque and negligent, and have few *petits soins*. You 4
should have come over for my marriage to show them all what an exquisite creature a Venetian patrician beauty can be. Why *would* you marry that Piedmontese? Only two things seem to be of any importance in England—they are, eating and politics. They eat all day long, and are always talking of their politics. Half of them say some person I never heard of is the destruction of England, the other half say the same person is the salvation of England. Myself, I don't care the least which he is; only I know they cannot keep him out of their conversation, one way or another, for five minutes; which, to an unprejudiced foreigner, is a *seccatura*. But to-morrow I go down into the country with my primrose—all alone; to-morrow she will be mine altogether and unalterably, and I shall hear nothing about their detestable politics or anything that is tiresome. Of course, you are wondering that I should take this momentous step. I wonder myself, but then if I did not marry I should be compelled to say an eternal farewell to the Lenten Lily. She has such a spiked wall around her of male relatives and family greatness! It is not the convent wall; 5
there is no ladder that will go over it; one must enter by the big front door, or not at all. Felicitate me, and yet compassionate me! I am going to Paradise, no doubt; but I have the uncomfortable doubt as to whether it will suit me, which all people who are going to Paradise always do feel. Why? Because we are mortal or because we are sinners? *A reverderci, cara mia Teresina!* Write to me at my future Eden: it is called Coombe Bysset, near Luton, Bedfordshire. We are to be there a month. It is the choice of my primrose.'

6

From the Lady Mary Bruton, Belgrave Square, London, to Mrs d'Arcy, British Embassy, Berlin.

'The season has been horribly dull; quantities of marriages—people always will marry, however dull it is. The one most talked about is that of the Cowes' second daughter, Lady Gladys, with the Prince of San Zenone. She is one of the beauties, but a very simple girl, quite old-fashioned, indeed. She has refused Lord Hampshire, and a good many other people, and then fallen in love in a week with this Roman, who is certainly as handsome as a picture. But Cowes didn't like it at all; he gave in because he couldn't help it, but he was dreadfully vexed that the Hampshire affair did not come off instead. Hampshire is such a good creature, and his estates are close to theirs. It is certainly very provoking for them that this Italian must take it into his head to spend a season in London, and lead the cotillon so beautifully that all the young women talked of nothing else but his charms.'

From the Lady Mona St Clair, Grosvenor Square, London, to Miss Burns, Schooner-yacht Persephone, off Cherbourg.

'The wedding was very pretty yesterday. We had frocks of tussore silk, with bouquets of orchids and Penelope Boothby caps. She looked as white as her gown—such a goose!—it was ivory satin, with *point de Venise*. He is quite too handsome, and I cannot think what he could see in her! He gave us each a locket with *her* portrait inside. I wished it had been *his*! I daresay Hampshire would have been better for her, and worn longer than Romeo. Lord Cowes is furious about Romeo. He detests the religion and all that, and he could hardly make himself look pleasant even at church. Of course, there were two ceremonies. The Cardinal had consented at last, though I believe he had made all kinds of fuss first. Lady Gladys, you know, is very, *very* High Church, and I suppose that reconciled a little the very irreconcilable Prelate. She thinks of nothing but the Church and her missions and her poor people. I am afraid the Roman Prince will get dreadfully bored. And they are going down into Bedfordshire, of all places, to be shut up for a month! It is very stupid of her, and such a wet season as it is! They are going to Coombe Bysset, her aunt, Lady Caroline's place. I fancy Romeo will soon be bored, and I don't think Coombe Bysset at all judicious. I would have gone to Homburg, or Deauville, or Japan.'

From the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Luton, Beds., to the Countess of Cowes, London.

'Dearest Mother,—I am too, too, too happy. It is no use writing about it. I would if I could, but I *can't*. He is delighted with Coombe, and says the verdure is something wonderful. We got here just as the sun was setting. There were all Aunt Carrie's school children out to meet us, with baskets of roses. Piero said they looked like bigger roses themselves. He is enchanted with our rural England. It is very fine to-day, and I do so hope it won't rain, but the glass is falling. Forgive a hurried word like this. I am going to take Piero on the lake. I know you haven't liked it, dear; but I am sure when you see how happy I am you will say there was never anyone like him on earth.

'He is an angel. We ride in the morning, we sing and play in the evening. We adore each other all the twenty-four hours through. I wonder however I could have lived without him. I am longing 10
to see all he tells me about his great marble palaces, and his immense dreamlike villas, and his gardens with their multitude of statues, and the wonderful light that is over it all. He protests it is always twilight with us in England. It seems so absurd, when nowadays everybody knows everything about everywhere, that I should never have been to Italy. But we were such country mice down at dear, old, dull, green, muddy Ditchworth. Lanciano, the biggest of all their big places, must be like a poem. It is a great house, all of different coloured marbles, set amidst ilex groves on the mountain side, with cascades like Terni, and gardens that were planned by Giulio Romano, and temples that were there in the days of Horace. I long to see it all, and yet I hope he will not want to leave Coombe yet. There is no place like the place where one is *first* happy. And somehow, I fancy I look better in these homely, low rooms of Aunt Carrie's, with their Chippendale furniture and their smell of dry rose leaves, than I shall do in those enormous palaces which want a Semiramis or a Cleopatra. They were kind enough to make a fuss about me 11
in London, but I never thought much of myself, and I am afraid I must feel rather dull to Piero, who is so brilliant himself, and has all kinds of talents.'

12

From the Countess of Cowes, Cowes House, London, to the Duchess of Dunne, Wavernake, Worcestershire.

'No, I confess I do not approve of the marriage; it will take her away from us, and I am afraid she won't be happy. She has always had such very exaggerated ideas. She is not in the least the girl of the period. Of course, she was taken by his picturesque face and his admirable manners. His manners are really wonderful in these days, when our men have none at all; and he has charmingly caressing and deferential ways which even win me. I cannot wonder at her, poor child, but I am afraid; candidly, I am afraid! He makes all our men look like ploughboys. And it was all done in such tremendous haste that she had no time to reason or reflect; and I don't think they have said two serious words to each other. If only it had been dear old Hampshire, whom we have known all our lives, and whose lands march with ours! But that was too good to be, I suppose, and there was no positive objection we could raise to San Zenone. We could not refuse his proposals merely because he is too good-looking, isn't an Englishman, and has a mother who 13
is reputed *maîtresse femme*! Gladys writes from Coombe as from the seventh heaven. They have been married three days! But I fear she will have trouble before her. I fear he is weak and unstable, and will not back her up amongst his own people when she goes amongst them; and though, now-a-days, a man and woman, once wedded, see so little of each other, Gladys is not quite of the time in her notions. She will take it all very seriously, poor child, and expect the idyl to be prolonged over the honeymoon. And she is very English in her tastes, and has been so very little out of England. However, every girl in London is envying her; it is only her father and I who see these little black specks on the fruit she has plucked. They are gone to Coombe by her wish. I think it would have been wiser not to subject an Italian to such an ordeal as a wet English June in an utterly lonely country house. You know, even Englishmen, who can always find such refuge and comfort in prize pigs and strawyards, and unusually big mangolds, get bored if they are in
the country when there is nothing to shoot, and Englishmen are used to being drenched to the 14
skin every time they move out. He is not. Lord Cowes says love is like a cotton frock—very pretty as long as the sun shines, but it won't stand a wetting. I wish you had been here; Gladys looked quite lovely. The Cardinal most kindly relented, and the whole thing went off very well. Of the San Zenone family, there was only present Don Fabrizio, the younger son, a very good-looking young man. The terrible Duchess didn't come, on account, I think, of her sulks. She hates the marriage on her side as much as we do on ours, I am sure. Really, one must believe a little bit in fate. I do think that Gladys would soon have resigned herself to accepting Hampshire, out of sheer fatigue at saying "No," and, besides, she knew that we are so fond of him, and to live in the same county was such an attraction. But this irresistible young Roman must take it into his head that he wished to see a London season, and when once they had met (it was one afternoon at Ranelagh) there was no more chance for our poor, dear, good, stupid neighbour. Well, we must hope for the best!'

15

From the Principe Piero di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Duchessa dell'Aquila Fulva, Palazzo Fulva, Rome.

'Carissima Mia,—There are quantities of birds in little green nests at this season. I am in a green nest. I never saw anything so green as this Paradise of mine. It is certainly Paradise. If I feel a little like a fish out of water instead of a happy bird in it, it is only because I have been such a sinner. No doubt it is only that. Paradise is chilly; this is its only fault. It is the sixth of June and we have fires. Fires in the dressing-rooms, fires in the drawing-rooms, fires at both ends of the library, fires on both sides of the hall, fires everywhere; and with all of them I shiver. I cannot help shivering, and I feel convinced that in my rapture I have mistaken the month—it must be December! It is all extraordinarily trim and neat here; the whole place looks in such perfect order that it might have been taken out of a box of German toys last night. I have a little the sensation 16
of being always at church. That, no doubt, is the effect of the first step towards virtue that I have ever made. Pray do not think that I am not perfectly happy. I should be more sensible of my happiness, no doubt, if I had not quite such a feeling, due to the dampness of the air, of having been put into an aquarium, like a jelly-fish. But Gladys is adorable in every way; and if she were not quite so easily scared, would be perfection. It was that little air of hers, like that of some irresistible Alpine flower, which bewitched me. But when one has got the Alpine flower, one cannot live for ever on it!—however *ma basta*! I was curious to know what a northern woman was like; I know now. She is exquisite, but a little monotonous, and a little prudish. Certainly she will never compromise me; but then, perhaps, she will never let me compromise myself, and that will be terrible! I am ungrateful; all men are ungrateful; but, then, is it not a little the women's fault? They do keep so very close to one. Now, an angel, you know, becomes tiresome if one never gets 17
out of the shadow of its wings—here, at Coombe Bysset, the angel fills the horizon, and one's distance is a Botticelli picture!'

18

From the Duchessa dell'Aquila Fulva, Palazzo Fulva, Rome, to the Principe Piero di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Luton, Beds., England.

'CARO MIO PIERINO,—Are you sure you have an angel? People have a trick of always calling very commonplace women angels. "She is an angel" is a polite way of saying "she is a bore." I am not sure either that I should care to live with a veritable angel. One would see too much of the wings, as you say; and even a guardian angel must be the *terzo incommodo* sometimes. Why *would* you marry an English girl? I daresay she is so good-tempered that she never contradicts you, and you grow peevish out of sheer weariness at having everything your own way. If you had married Nicoletta, as I wanted you to do, she would have flown at you, like a little tigress, a dozen times a week, and kept you on the *qui vive* to please her. We know what our own men want. I have half a mind to write to your wife and tell her that no Italian is comfortable unless he has his ears boxed twice a day. If your wife would be a little disagreeable, probably you would adore her. But it is a great mistake, *Pierino mio*, to confuse marriage and love. In reality, they have no more to do with one another than a horse chestnut and a chestnut horse; than the *zuccone* that means a vegetable, and the *zuccone* that means a simpleton. I should imagine that your wet English bird's-nest will force you to realise this truth with lamentable rapidity.'

From the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Luton, Beds., to Lady Gwendoline Dormer, British Embassy, Vienna.

'Dearest Gwen,—I did promise, I know, to write to you at once, and tell you everything; and a whole week is gone and I couldn't do it, I really couldn't; and even now I don't know where to begin. I suppose I am dreadfully *vieux jeu*. I suppose you will only laugh at me, and say "spoons." How glad I am Piero cannot say a word of English, and so I never hear that dreadful jargon which I do think so ugly and so vulgar, though you are all so fond of it. I ought not to have come to Coombe Bysset; at least, they all said it was silly. Nessie Fitzgerald was back in London before the week was out, and doing a play. To be sure she was married in October, and she didn't care a bit about him, and I suppose that made all the difference. To me, it seems so much more natural to shut one's self up, and Piero thought so too; but I am half afraid he finds it a little dull now. 21
You see, we knew very little of one another. He came for a month of the London season, and he met me at Ranelagh, and he danced the cotillon with me at a good many houses, and we cared for one another in a week, and were married in a month, as you know. Papa hated it because it wasn't Lord Burlington or Lord Hampshire. But he couldn't really object, because the San Zenone are such a great Roman family, and all the world knows them; and they are Spanish dukes as well as Italian princes. And Piero is such a grand gentleman, and made quite superb settlements; much more, Papa said, than he could have expected, so poor as we are. But what I meant was, meeting like that in the rush of the season, at balls and dinners and garden parties, and luncheons at Hurlingham, and being married to one another just before Ascot, we really knew nothing at all of each other's tastes or habits or character. And when, on the first morning at Coombe, we realised that we were together for life, I think we both felt very odd. We adored one 22
another, but we didn't know what to talk about; we never had talked to each other; we never had time. And I am afraid there is something of this feeling with him. I am afraid he is dreadfully bored, and I told him so, and he answered, "My dear little angel, your admirable countrymen are not bored in the country because they are always eating. They eat a big breakfast, they eat a big luncheon, they eat a big dinner, they are always eating. Myself, I have not that resource. Give me a little coffee and a little wine, and let me eat only once a day. You never told me I was expected to absorb continually food like the crocodiles." What would he say if he saw a hunting breakfast in the shires? I suppose life *is* very material in England. I think it is why there is so much typhoid fever. Do you know, he wasn't going to dress for dinner because we were alone. As if that was any reason! I told him it would look so odd to the servants if he didn't dress, so he has done so since. But he says it was a *seccatura* (this means, I believe, a bore), and he told me we English sacrifice our whole lives to fuss, form and the outside of things. There is a good deal of truth in 23
this. What numbers of people one knows who are ever so poor, and who yet, for the sake of the look of the thing, get into debt over their ears! And then, quantities of them go to church for the form of the thing, when they don't *believe* one atom; they will tell you at luncheon that they don't. I fancy Italians are much more honest than we are in this sort of way. Piero says if they are poor, they don't mind saying so, and if they have no religion, they don't pretend to have any. He declares we English spoil all our lives because we fancy it is our duty to pretend to be something we are not. Now, isn't that really very true? I am sure you would delight in all he says. He is so original, so unconventional; our people think him ignorant, because he doesn't read, and doesn't care a straw about politics. But I assure you he is as clever as anything can be; and he doesn't get his ideas out of newspapers; nor repeat like a parrot what his chief of party tells him. I do wish you could have come over and could have seen him. It was so unkind of you to be ill just at the very time of my marriage. You know that it is only to you that I ever say quite what I feel about 24
things. The girls are too young, and Mamma doesn't understand. She never could see why I would not marry poor Hampshire. She always said that I should care for him in time. I don't think Mamma can ever have been in love with anybody. I wonder what *she* married for—don't you?'

25

From the Principe Piero di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Count Zazzari, Italian Legation, London.

'CARO GIGI,—Pray send me all the French novels you can find, and a case of Turkish cigarettes. I am in Paradise, but Paradise is a little dull, and exceedingly damp, at least in England. Does it always rain in this country? It has rained here without stopping for seventeen days and a half. I produce upon myself the impression of being one of those larks who sit behind wires on a little square of wet grass. I should like to run up to London. I see you have Sarah and Coquelin and the others; but I suppose it would be against all the unwritten canons of a honeymoon. What a strange institution. A honeymoon! Who first invented it?'

From the Principe di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Luton, Beds., to the Duchessa dell'Aquila Fulva, Palazzo Fulva, Milano.

'CARA TERESINA,—I ought to have written to you long since, but you know I am not fond of writing. I really, also, have nothing to say. Happy the people who have no history! I am like that people. I was made happy two weeks ago; I have been happy ever since. It is slightly monotonous. How can you vary happiness, except by quarrelling a little? And then it would not be happiness any longer. It seems to me that happiness is like an omelette, best impromptu.

'Do not think that I am ungrateful, however, either to fate or to the charming innocent who has become my companion. We have not two ideas in common. She is lovely to look at, to caress, to adore; but what to say to her I confess I have no notion. Love ought never to have to find dinner-table conversation. He ought to climb up by a ladder, and get over a balcony, and, when his ecstasies are ended, he ought to go the same way. I fancy she is much better educated than I am, but, as that would be a discovery fatal to our comfort, I endeavour not to make it. She is extraordinarily sweet-tempered: indeed, so much so, that it makes me angry; it gives one no excuse for being impatient. She is divine, exquisite, nymph-like; but, alas, she is a prude! 27

'Never was any creature on earth so exquisitely sensitive, so easily shocked. To live with her is to walk upon eggshells. Of course, it is very nice in a wife; very "proper," as the English say; but it is not amusing. It amused me at first, but now it seems to me a defect. She has brought me down to this terribly damp and very green place, where it rains every day and night. There is a library without novels; there is a cellar without absinthe; there is a *cuisine* without tomatoes, or garlic, or any oil at all; there is an admirably-ordered establishment, so quiet that I fancy I am in a penitentiary. There are some adorably fine horses, and there are acres of glasshouses used to grow fruits that we throw in Italy to the pigs. By the way, there are also several of our field flowers in the conservatories. We eat pretty nearly all day; there is nothing else to do. Outside, the scenery is oppressively green, the green of spinach; there is no variety, there are no ilexes and there are no olives. I understand now why the English painters give such staring colours; unless the colours scream, you don't see them in this aqueous, dim atmosphere. That is why a benign Providence has made the landscape a *purée aux epinards*. 28

'I think the air here, inside and out, must weigh heavily; it lies on one's lungs like a sponge. I once went down in a diving-bell when I was a boy; I have the sensation in this country of being always down in a diving-bell. The scamp Toniello, whom you may remember as having played Leporello to my Don Giovanno ever since we were lads, amuses himself with making love to all the pretty maidens in the village; but, then, I must not do that—now. They are not very pretty either. They have very big teeth, and very long upper lips. Their skins, however, are admirable. For a horse's skin and a woman's, there is no land comparable to England. It is the country of grooming.' 29

30

From the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to Lady Gwendolen Chichester, British Embassy, Petersburg.

'He laughed at me because I went to church yesterday, and really I only went because I thought it *right*. We have been here a fortnight, and I have never been to church at all till yesterday, and you know how very serious dear Aunt Carrie is. To-day, as it is the second Sunday I have been here, I thought I ought to go just once, and I did go; but it was dreadfully pompous and lonely in the big red pew, and the villagers stared so, and all the little girls of the village giggled, and looked at me from under their sun-bonnets. Dear Mr Coate preached a sermon on Marriage. It was very kind of him; but, oh, how I wished he hadn't! When I got back, Piero was playing billiards with his servant. I wondered what Mr Coate would have thought of him. To be sure, English clergymen have to get used to fast Sundays now, when the country houses are full. It is 31
such a dear little yew walk to the church from the house here, not twenty yards long, and all lined with fuchsia. Do you remember it? Even Piero admits that it is very pretty, only he says it is a vignette prettiness, which, I suppose, is true. "You can see no horizon, only a green wall," he keeps complaining; and his beautiful, lustrous eyes look as if they were made to gaze through endless fields of light. When I asked him yesterday what he really thought of England, what do you suppose he said? He said, "*Mia cara*, I think it would be a most delightful country if it had one-fifth of its population, one-half of its houses, a tithe of its dinners, a quarter of its machinery, none of its factories, none of its tramways, and a wholly different atmosphere!" I suppose this means that he dislikes it. I think him handsomer than ever. I sent you his photograph, but that can give you no idea of him. He is like one of his own marble statues. We came to Coombe Bysset directly after the ceremony, and we are here still. I could stay on for ever. It is so lovely in these Bedfordshire woods in mid-June. But I am afraid—just the very least bit afraid—that Piero may 32
get bored with me—me—me—nothing but me.

'You know I never was clever, and really—really—I haven't an idea what to talk to him about when we don't talk about ourselves. And then the weather provokes him. We have hardly had one fine day since we came; and no doubt it seems very grey and chilly to an Italian. "It cannot be June!" he says a dozen times a week. And when the whole day is rainy, as it is very often, for our Junes are such wet ones nowadays, I can see he gets impatient. He doesn't care for reading; he is fond of billiards, but I don't play a good enough game to be any amusement to him. And though he sings divinely, as I told you, he sings as the birds do; only just when the mood is on him. He does not care about music as a science in the least. He laughed when I said so. He declared it was no more a science than love is. Perhaps love ought to be a science too, in a way, or else it won't last? There has been a scandal in the village, caused by his servant, Toniello. An infuriated father came up to the house this morning about it. He is named John Best; he has one of Aunt 33
Carrie's biggest farms. He was in such a dreadful rage, and I had to talk to him, because, of course, Piero couldn't understand him. Only when I translated what he said, Piero laughed till he cried, and offered him a cigarette, and called him "*figlio mio*," which only made Mr John Best purple with fury, and he went away in a greater rage than he had been in when he came, swearing he "would do for the Papist." I have sent for the steward. I am afraid Aunt Carrie will be terribly annoyed. It has always been such a model village. Not a public-house near for six miles, and all the girls such demure, quiet little maidens. This terrible Roman valet, with his starry eyes and his mandoline, and his audacities, has been like Mephistopheles in the opera to this secluded and innocent little hamlet. I beg Piero to send him away, but he looks unutterably reproachful, and declares he really cannot live without Toniello; and what can I say?'

34

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, S. Petersburg, to the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset.

'You are quite in the wrong, my poor pet. If you were only a little older, and ever so much wiser, you would have telegraphed to the libraries yourself for the French books; you would have laughed at them when he laughed, and instead of taking Mr John Best as a tragedy, you would have made him into a little burlesque, which would have amused your husband for five minutes, as much as Gyp or Jean Richepin. I begin to think I should have married your Roman prince, and you should have married my good, dull George, whom a perverse destiny has shoved into diplomacy. Your Roman scandalises you, and my George bores me. Such is marriage, my dear, all the world over. What is the old story? That Jove split all the walnuts in two, and each half is always uselessly seeking its fellow.'

From the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Luton, Beds., to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, British Embassy, S. Petersburg.

'But, surely, if he loved me, he would be as perfectly happy with me alone as I am with him alone? I want no other companion—no other interest—no other thought.'

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, British Embassy S. Petersburg, to the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Luton, Beds.

'Of course you do not, because you are a woman. San Zenone is your god, your idol, your ideal, your universe. But *you* are only one out of the many women who have pleased him, and attached to the pleasure you afford him is the very uncomfortable conviction that he will never be able to get away from you. My dear child, I have no patience with any woman when she says, "He does not love me." If he does not, it is probably the woman's fault. Probably she has worried him. Love dies directly it is worried, quite naturally. Poor Gladys! You were always such a good child; you were always devoted to your old women, and your queer little orphans, and your pet cripples, and your East-End missions. It certainly is hard that you should have fallen into the hands of a soulless Italian, who reads naughty novels all day long and sighs for the flesh-pots of Egypt! But, my child, in reason's name, what did you expect? Did you think that all in a moment he would sigh to hear Canon Farrar; the excellent vicar's sermons; take his guitar to a village concert, and teach Italian to the lodge-keeper's children? Be reasonable, and let your poor caged bird fly out of Coombe Bysset; which will certainly be your worst enemy if you shut him up in it much longer.'

From the Principe di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Duchessa dell'Aquila Fulva, Monterone, Val d'Aosta.

'I am still in my box of wet moss. I have been in it two weeks, four days, and eleven hours, by the calendar and the clocks. I have read all my novels. I have spelled through my *Figaro*, from the title to the printer's address, every morning. I have smoked twenty cigarettes every twenty minutes, and I have yawned as many times. This is Paradise, I know it; I tell myself so; but still I cannot help it—I yawn. There is a pale, watery sun, which shines fitfully. There is a quantity of soaked hay, which they are going to dry by machinery. There is a great variety of muddy lanes in which to ride. There is a post-office seven miles off, and a telegraph station fifteen miles further off. The *ensemble* is not animated. When you go out you see very sleek cattle, very white sheep, very fat children. You may meet, at intervals, labouring people, very round shouldered and very sulky. You also meet, if you are in luck's way, with a traction engine; and wherever you look you 38
perceive a church steeple. It is all very harmless, except the traction engine; but it is not animated or enlivening. You will not wonder that I soon came to the end of my French novels. The French novels have enabled me to discover that my angel is very easily ruffled. In fact, she is that touchy thing—a saint. I had no idea that she was a saint when I saw her drinking her cup of tea in that garden on the Thames. True, she had her lovely little serene, holy, *noli me tangere* air, but I thought that would pass; it does not pass. And when I wanted her to laugh with me at Gyp's '*Autour du Mariage*', she blushed up to the eyes, and was offended. What am I to do? I am no saint. I cannot pretend to be one. I am not worse than other men, but I like to amuse myself. I cannot go through life singing a *miserere*. I am afraid we shall quarrel. You think that very wholesome. But there are quarrels and quarrels. Some clear the air like thunderstorms. Ours are little irritating differences which end in her bursting into tears, and in myself looking ridiculous and feeling a brute. She has cried quite a number of times in the last fortnight. I daresay if she 39
went into a rage, as you justly say Nicoletta would do, and you might have added you have done, it would rouse me, and I should be ready to strike her, and should end in covering her with kisses. But she only turns her eyes on me like a dying fawn, bursts into tears, and goes out of the room. Then she comes in again—to dinner, perhaps, or to that odd ceremony, five o'clock tea—with her little sad, stiff, reproachful air as of a martyr; answers meekly, and makes me again feel a brute. The English sulk a long time, I think. We are at daggers drawn one moment, but then we kiss and forget the next. We are more passionate, but we are more amiable. I want to get away, to go to Paris, Homburg, Trouville, anywhere; but I dare not propose it. I only drop adroit hints. If I should die of *ennui*, and be buried under the wet moss for ever, weep for me.'

40

From the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to Lady Gwendolen Chichester, S. Petersburg.

'Coombe is quite too lovely now. It does rain sometimes, certainly, but between the showers it is so delicious. I asked Piero to come out and hear the nightingale; there really is one in the home wood, and he laughed at the idea. He said, "We have hundreds of nightingales shouting all day and all night at Lanciano. We don't think about them, we eat them in *pasta*; they are very good." Fancy eating a nightingale! You might as well eat Romeo and Juliet. Piero has got a number of French books from London, and he lies about on the couches and reads them. He wants me to listen to naughty bits of fun out of them, but I will not, and then he calls me a prude, and gets angry. I don't see why he shouldn't laugh as much as he likes himself without telling me why he laughed. I dislike that sort of thing. I am horribly afraid I shall care for nothing but him all my life, while he—he yawned yesterday! Papa said to me, before we were married, "My dear little 41
girl, San Zenone put on such a lot of steam at first, he'll be obliged to ease his pace after a bit. Don't be vexed if you find the thing cooling!" Now, Papa speaks so oddly; always that sort of floundering, bald metaphor, you remember it; but I knew what he meant. Nobody could *go on* being such a lover as Piero was. Ah, dear, is it in the past already? No, I don't quite mean that. He is Romeo still very often, and he sings me the divinest love songs, lying at my feet on cushions in the moonlight. But it is not quite the same thing as it was at first. He found fault with one of my gowns this morning, and said I don't know how *de me faire valoir*. I am terribly frightened lest Coombe has bored him too much. I would come here. I wanted to be utterly out of the world, and so did he; and I'm sure there isn't a lover's nest anywhere comparable to Coombe in midsummer. You remember the rose garden, and the lime avenues, and the chapel ruins by the little lake? When Aunt Carrie offered it to us for this June I was so delighted, but now I am half afraid the choice of it was a mistake, and that he does not know what to do with himself. He is *dépaysé*. I 42
cried a little yesterday; it was too silly, but I couldn't help it. He laughed at me, but he got a little angry. "*Enfin que veux tu?*" he said impatiently; "*je suis à toi, bien à toi, beaucoup trop à toi!*" He seemed to me to regret being mine. I told him so; he was more angry. It was, I suppose, what you would call a scene. In five minutes he was penitent, and caressed me as only he can do; and the sun came out, and we went into the woods and heard the nightingale; but the remembrance of it alarms me. If he can say as much as this in a month, what can he say in a year? I do not think I am silly. I had two London seasons, and all those country houses show one the world. I know people, when they are married, are always glad to get away from one another—they are always flirting with other people. But I should be miserable if I thought it would ever be like that with Piero and me. I worship his very shadow, and he does—or he did—worship mine. Why should that change? Why should it not go on for ever, as it does in poems? If it can't, why doesn't one die?'

43

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, S. Petersburg, to the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset.

'What a goose you are, you dearest Gladys! You were always like that. To all you have said I can only reply, *connu*. When girls are romantic (and you always were, though it was quite gone out ages before our time), they always expect husbands to remain lovers. Now, my pet, you might just as well expect hay to remain grass. Papa was quite right. When there is such a lot of steam on, it must go off by degrees. I am afraid, too, you have begun with the passion, and the rapture, and the mutual adoration, and all the rest of it, which is *quite, quite gone out*. People don't feel in that sort of way nowadays. Nobody cares much; a sort of good-humoured liking is the utmost one sees. But you were always such a goose! And now you must marry an Italian, and expect it all to be balconies and guitars and moonlight for ever and ever. I think it quite natural he should want to get to Paris. You should never have taken him to Coombe. I do remember the rose gardens, and the lime avenues, and the ruins; and I remember being sent down there when I had too strong a flirtation with Philip Rous, who was in F. O., and had nothing a year. You were a baby then, and I remember that I was bored to the very brink of suicide; that I have detested the smell of a lime tree ever since. I can sympathise with the Prince, if he longs to get away. There can't be anything for him to do, all day long, except smoke. The photo of him is wonderfully handsome, but can you live all your life, my dear, on a profile?'

From the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, S. Petersburg.

'Because almost all Englishmen have snub noses, Englishwomen always think there is something immoral and delusive about a good profile. At all events, you will admit that the latter is the more agreeable object of contemplation. It still rains, rains dreadfully. The meadows are soaked, and they can't get the hay in, and we can't get out of the house. Piero does smoke, and he does yawn. He has been looking in the library for a French novel, but there is nothing except Mrs Craven's goody-goody books, and a boy's tale by Jules Verne. I am afraid you and Mamma are right. Coombe, in a wet June, is not the place for a Roman who knows his Paris by heart, and doesn't like the country anywhere. We seem to do nothing but eat. I put on an ulster and high boots, and I don't mind the rain a bit; but he screams when he sees me in an ulster. "You have no more figure in that thing than if you were a Bologna sausage," he says to me; and certainly ulsters are 46
very ugly. But I had a delicious fortnight with the Duchess in a driving tour in Westmeath. We only took our ulsters with us, and it poured all the time, and we stayed in bed in the little inns while our things dried, and it was immense fun; the Duke drove us. But Piero would not like that sort of thing. He is like a cat about rain. He likes to shut the house up early, and have the electric light lit, and forget that it is all slop and mist outside. He declares that we have made a mistake in the calendar, and that it is November, not June. I change my gowns three times a day, just as if there were a large house party, but I feel I look awfully monotonous to him. I am afraid I never was amusing. I always envy those women who are all *chic* and "go," who can make men laugh so at rubbish. They seem to carry about with them a sort of exhilarating ether. I don't think they are the best sort of women, but they do so amuse the men. I would give twenty years of my life if I could amuse Piero. He adores me, but that is another thing. That does not prevent him shaking the barometer and yawning. He seems happiest when he is talking Italian with his servant, 47
Toniello. Toniello is allowed to play billiards with him sometimes. He is a very gay, merry, saucy, brown-eyed Roman. He has made all the maids in the house, and all the farmers' daughters round Coombe, in love with him, and I told you how he had scandalised one of the best tenants, Mr John Best. The Bedford rustics all vow vengeance against him, but he twangs his mandoline, and sings away at the top of his voice, and doesn't care a straw that the butler loathes him, the house steward abhors him, the grooms would horsewhip him if they dare, and the young farmers audibly threaten to duck him in the pond. Toniello is very fond of his master, but he does not extend his allegiance to me. Do you remember Mrs Stevens, Aunt Caroline's model housekeeper? You should see her face when she chances to hear Piero laughing and talking with Toniello. I think she believes that the end of the world has come. Piero calls Toniello "*figliolo mio*" and "*caro mio*," just as if they were cousins or brothers. It appears this is the Italian way. They are very
proud in their own fashion, but it isn't our fashion. However, I am glad the man is there when I 48
hear the click of the billiard balls, and the splash of the raindrops on the window panes. "We have been here just three weeks. *Dio!* It seems three years," Piero said, when I reminded him of it this morning. For me, I don't know whether it is like a single day's dream or a whole eternity. You know what I mean. But I wish—I wish—it seemed either the day's dream or the eternity of Paradise to him! I daresay it is all my fault in coming to these quiet, bay-windowed, Queen Anne rooms, and the old-fashioned servants, and the dreary look-out over the drenched hay-fields. But the sun does come out sometimes, and then the wet roses smell so sweet, and the wet lime blossoms glisten in the light, and the larks sing overhead, and the woods are so green and so fresh. Still, I don't think he likes it even then, it is all too moist, too windy, too dim for him. When I put a rose in his button-hole this morning, it shook the drops over him, and he said, "*Mais quel pays!—même une fleur c'est une douche d'eau froide!*" Last month, if I had put a dandelion in his
coat, he would have sworn it had the odour of the magnolia and the beauty of the orchid! It is just 49
twenty-two days ago since we came here, and for the first four or five days, he never cared whether it rained or not; he only cared to lie at my feet, really, literally. We were all in all to each other, just like Cupid and Psyche. And now—he will play billiards with Toniello to pass the time, and he is longing for his *petits théâtres*! Is it my fault? I torment myself with a thousand self-accusations. Is it possible I can have been tiresome, dull, over-exacting? Is it possible he can be disappointed in me?'

50

'No, it isn't your fault, you dear little donkey; it is only the natural sequence of things. Men are always like that when the woman loves them; when she don't, they behave much better. My dear, this is just what is so annoying about love; the man's is always going slower and slower towards a dead stop, as the woman's is "coaling" and getting steam up. I borrow Papa's admirably accurate metaphor, nothing can be truer. It is a great pity, but I suppose the fault is Nature's. *Entre nous*, I don't think Nature ever contemplated marriage, any more than she did crinolettes, pearl powder, or the electric light. There is no doubt that Nature intended to adjust the thing on the butterfly and buttercup system; on the *je reste, tu t'en vas*, principle. And nothing would be easier or nicer, only there are children and poverty. So the butterfly has to be pinned down by the buttercup. That is why the Communists and Anarchists always abolish Property and Marriage 51
together. The one is evolved out of the other, just as the dear scientists say the horse was evolved out of a bird, which I never can see makes the matter any easier of comprehension; but, still—what was I saying? Oh, I meant to say this: you are only lamenting, as a special defalcation and disloyalty in San Zenone, what is merely his unconscious and involuntary and perfectly natural alteration from a lover into a husband. The butterfly is beginning to feel the pin, which has been run through him to stick him down. It is not your fault, my sweet little girl; it is the fault, if at all, of the world, which has decreed that the butterfly, to flirt legitimately with the buttercup, must suffer the corking pin. Now, take my advice: the pin is in, don't worry if he writhe on it a little bit! It is only what the beloved scientists again call automatic action. And do try and beat into your little head the fact that a man may love you very dearly, and yet yearn a little for the *petits théâtres* in the silent recesses of his manly breast. Of course, I know this sort of rough awakening
from delightful dreams is harder for you than it is for most, because you began at such 52
tremendous altitudes. You had your Ruy Blas and Petrarca, and the mandoline and the moonlight, and the love-philtres, all mixed up in an intoxicating draught. You have naturally a great deal more disillusion to go through than if you had married a country squire, or a Scotch laird, who would never have suggested any romantic delights. One cannot go near Heaven without coming down with a crash, like the poor men in the balloons. You have been up in your balloon, and you are now coming down. Ah, my dear, everything depends on *how* you come down. You will think me a monster for saying so, but it will rest so much in your own hands. You won't believe it, but it will. If you come down with tact and good-humour, it will all be right afterwards; but if you show temper, as men say of their horses, why, then, the balloon will lie prone, a torn, empty, useless bag, that will never again get off the ground. To speak plainly, dear, if you will receive with resignation and sweetness the unpleasant discovery that San Zenone is mortal, you won't be unhappy, and you will soon get used to it; but if you perpetually fret about it, you won't alter him, and you will both be miserable; or, if not miserable, you will do something worse; you will each 53
find your amusement in somebody else. I know you so well, my poor, pretty Gladys; you want such an immense quantity of sympathy and affection, but you won't get it, my dear child. I quite understand that the Prince looks like a picture, and he has made life an erotic poem for you for a month, and the inevitable reaction which follows seems dull as ditch water, you would even say as cruel as the grave. But it is *nothing new*. Do try and get that well in your mind. Try, too, and be as light-hearted as you can. Men hate an unamusable woman. Make believe to laugh at the French novels, if you can't really do it; if you don't, dear, he will go to somebody else who will. Why do those *demi-monde* women get such preference over us? Only because they don't bore their men. A man would sooner we flung a champagne glass at his head than cried for five minutes. We can't fling champagne glasses; the prejudices of our education are against it. It is an immense loss to us; we must make up for it as much as we can by being as agreeable as we know
how to be. We shall always be a dozen lengths behind those others who *do* fling the glasses. By 54
the way, you said in one of your earliest notes that you wondered why our mother ever married. I am not sufficiently *au courant* with pre-historic times to be able to tell you why, but I can see what she has done since she did marry. She has always effaced herself in the very wisest and most prudent manner. She has never begrudged Papa his Norway fishing, or his August yachting, though she knew he could ill afford them. She has never bored him *with* herself, or *about* us. She has constantly urged him to go away and enjoy himself, and when he is down with her in the country she always takes care that all the women he admires, and all the men who best amuse him, shall be invited in relays, to prevent his being dull or feeling teased for a moment. I am quite sure she has never cared the least about her own wishes, but has only studied his. This is what I call being a clever woman and a good woman. But I fear such women are as rare as blue roses. Try and be like her, my dear. She was quite as young as you are now when she married. But
unfortunately, in truth, you are a terrible little egotist. You want to shut up this beautiful Roman 55
all alone with you in a kind of attitude of perpetual adoration—of yourself. That is what women call affection; you are not alone in your ideas. Some men submit to this sort of demand, and go about for ever held tight in a leash, like unslipped pointers. The majority—well, the majority bolt. And I am sure I should if I were one of them. I do not think you could complain if your beautiful Romeo did. I can see you so exactly, with your pretty, little, grave face, and your eyes that have such a fatal aptitude for tears, and your solemn little views about matrimony and its responsibilities, making yourself quite odious to this mirthful Apollo of yours, and innocently believing all the while that you are pleasing Heaven and saving your own dignity by being so remarkably unpleasant! Are you *very* angry with me? I am afraid so. Myself, I would much sooner have an unfaithful man than a dull one; the one may be bored *by* you, but the other bores *you*, which is immeasurably worse.'

56

From the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, S. Petersburg.

"Dear Gwen,—How can you *possibly* tell what Mamma did when she was young? I daresay she fretted dreadfully. Now, of course, she has got used to it—like all other miserable women. If people marry only to long to be with other people, what is the use of being married at all? I said so to Piero, and he answered, very insolently, "*Il n'y a point! Si on le savait!*" He sent for some more dreadful French books, Gyp's and Richepin's and Gui de Maupassant's, and he lies about reading them all day long when he isn't asleep. He is very often asleep in the daytime. He apologises when he is found out, but he yawns as he does so. You say I should amuse him, but I *can't* amuse him. He doesn't care for any English news, and he is beginning to get irritable because I cannot talk to him in Italian, and he declares my French detestable, and there is always something dreadful happening. There has been such a terrible scene in the village. Four of the 57
Coombe Bysset men, two blacksmiths, a carpenter, and a labourer, have ducked Toniello in the village pond on account of his attention to their womenkind; and Toniello, when he staggered out of the weeds and the slime, drew his knife on them and stabbed two very badly. Of course, he has been taken up by the constables, and the men he hurt moved to the county hospital. The magistrates are furious and scandalised; and Piero!—Piero has nobody to play billiards with him. When the magistrates interrogated him about Toniello, as, of course, they were obliged to do, he got into a dreadful passion because one of them said that it was just like a cowardly Italian to carry a knife and make use of it. Piero absolutely *hissed* at the solemn old gentleman who mumbled this. "And your people," he cried, "are they so very courageous? Is it better to beat a man into a jelly, or kick a woman with nailed boots, as your English mob does? Where is there anything cowardly? He was one against four. In my country there is not a night that goes by without a *rissa* of that sort, but nobody takes any notice. The jealous persons are left to fight it out as best they may; after all, it is the women's fault." And then he said some things that really I 58
cannot repeat, and it was a mercy that, as he spoke in the most rapid and furious French, the old gentleman did not, I think, understand a syllable. But they saw he was in a passion, and that scandalised them, because, you know, English people always think that you should keep your bad temper for your own people at home. Meantime, of course, Toniello is in prison, and I am afraid they won't let us take him out on bail, because he has hurt one of the blacksmiths dreadfully. Aunt Carrie's solicitors are doing what they can for him, to please me, but I can see they consider it all *peines perdues* for a rogue who ought to be hanged. "And to think," cries Toniello, "that in my own country I should have all the populace with me. The very carabineers themselves would have been with me! *Accidente a tutti quei grulli*," which means, "may apoplexy seize these fools." "They were only the women's husbands," he adds, with scorn; "they are well worth making a fuss about, certainly!" Then Piero consoles him, and gives him cigarettes, and is obliged to leave him 59
sobbing and tearing his hair, and lying face downward on his bed of sacking. I thought Piero would not leave the poor fellow alone in prison, and so I supposed he would give up all idea of going from here, and so I began to say to myself, "*A quelque chose malheur est bon.*" But to-day, at luncheon, Piero said "*Sai carina!* It was bad enough with Toniello, but without him, I tell you frankly, I cannot stand any more of it. With Toniello one could laugh and forget a little. But now —*anima mia*, if you do not wish me to kill somebody, and be lodged beside Toniello by your worthy law-givers, you must really let me go to Trouville." "Alone!" I said; and I believe it is what he did mean, only the horror in my voice frightened him from confessing it. He sighed and got up. "I suppose I shall never be alone any more," he said impatiently. "If only men knew what they do when they marry—*on ne nous prendrait jamais*. No—no. Of course, I meant that you will, I hope, consent to come away with me somewhere out of this intolerable place, which is made up of fog and green leaves. Let us go to Paris to begin with; there is not a soul there, and the theatres are 60
en rélache, but it is always delightful, and then in a week or so we will go down to Trouville, all the world is there." I couldn't answer him for crying. Perhaps that was best, for I am sure I should have said something wicked, which might have divided us for ever. And then what would people have thought?'

61

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, S. Petersburg, to the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset.

'My poor little Dear,—Are you already beginning to be miserable about what people will think? Then, indeed, your days of joy are numbered. If I were to write to you fifty times I could only repeat what I have always written. You are not wise, and you are doing everything you ought not to do. *Of two people who are married, there is always one who has the delusion that he or she is necessary and delightful to the life of the other. The other generally thinks just the contrary.* The result is not peace. This gay, charming, handsome son of Rome has become your entire world, but don't suppose for a moment, my child, that you will ever be his. It is not in reason, not in Nature, that you should be. *If* you have the intelligence, the tact, and the forbearance required, you *may* become his friend and counsellor, but I fear you never will have these. You fret, you weep, and you understand nothing of the masculine temperament. "I see snakes," as the 62
Americans observe; and you will not have either the coolness or the wisdom required to scotch a snake, much less to kill it. Once for all, my poor pet, go cheerfully to Paris, Trouville, and all the pleasure places in the world. Affect enjoyment if you feel it not, and try to remember, beyond everything, that affection is not to be retained or revived by either coercion or lamentation. Once dead, it is not to be awakened by all the "crooning" of its mourner. It is a corpse, for ever and aye. Myself, I fail to see how you could expect a young Italian, who has all the habits of the great world, and the memories of his *vie de garçon*, to be cheerful or contented in a wet June in an isolated English country house, with nobody to look at but yourself. Believe me, my dear child, it is the inordinate vanity of a woman which makes her imagine that she can be sufficient for her husband. Nothing but vanity. The cleverer a woman is, the more fully she recognises her own insufficiency for the amusement of a man, and the more carefully (if she be wise) does she take care that this deficiency in her shall never be forced upon his observation. Now, if you shut a man 63
up with you in a country house, with the rain raining every day, as in Longfellow's poem, you do force it upon him most conspicuously. If you were not his wife, I daresay he would not tire of you, and he might even prefer a grey sky to a blue one. But as his wife!—oh, my dear, why, why don't you try and understand what a terrible penalty-weight you carry in the race? Write and tell me all about it. I shall be anxious. I am so afraid, my sweet little sister, that you think love is all moonlight and kisses, and forget that there are clouds in the sky and quarrels on earth. May Heaven save you from both. *P.S.*—Do remember that this same love requires just as delicate handling as a cobweb does. If a rough touch break the cobweb, all the artists in the world can't mend it. There is a wholesome truth for you. If you prevent his going to Paris now, he will go in six months' time, and perhaps, then, he will go without you. You are not wise, my poor pet; you should make him feel that you sympathise with his pleasures, not that you and his pleasures are enemies. But it is no use to instil wisdom into you; you are very young, and very much in love. 64
You look on all the natural distractions which he inclines to, as on so many rivals. So they may be, but *we don't beat our rivals by abusing them*. The really wise way is to tacitly show that we can be more attractive than they; if we cannot be so, we may sulk or sigh as we will, we shall be vanquished by them. You will think me very preachy-preachy, and, perhaps, you will throw me in the fire unread; but I must say just one word more. Dear, you are in love with Love, but underneath Love there is a real man, and real men are far from ideal creatures. Now, it is the real man that you want to consider, to humour, to study. If the real man be pleased, Love will take care of himself; whereas if you bore the real man, Love will fly away. If you had been wise, my poor pet, I repeat, you would have found nothing so delightful as Gyp and Octave de Mirbeau, and you would have declared that the Paris asphalte excelled all the English lawns in the world. He does not love you the less because he wants to be *dans le mouvement*, to hear what other men are saying, and to smoke his cigar amongst his fellow-creatures.'

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From the Duchessa dell'Aquila Fulva, Hotel des Roches Noires, Trouville, France, to the Principe di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Luton, Beds., England.

'Poor flower, in your box of wet moss, what has become of you? Are you dead, and dried in your wife's *hortus siccus*? She would be quite sure of you *then*, and I daresay much happier than if you were set forth in anybody else's bouquet. I try in vain to imagine you in that "perfectly proper" atmosphere (is not that correct English, "perfectly proper"?) Will you be dreadfully changed when one sees you again? There is a French proverb which says that "the years of joy count double." The days of *ennui* certainly count for years, and give us grey hairs before we are five-and-twenty. But you know I cannot pity you. You *would* marry an English girl because she looked pretty sipping her tea. I told you beforehand that you would be miserable with her, once shut up in the country. The episode of Toniello is enchanting. What people!—to put him in prison for a little bit of *chiasso* like that! You should never have taken his bright eyes and his mandoline to that doleful and damp land of precisians. What will they do with him? And what can you do without him? The weather here is admirable. There are numbers of people one knows. It is really very amusing. I go and dance every night, and then we play—usually "bac" or roulette. Everybody is very merry. We all talk often of you, and say the *De Profundis* over you, my poor Piero. Why did your cruel destiny make you see a *Sainte Nitouche* drinking tea under a lime tree? I suppose *Sainte Nitouche* would not permit it, else, why not exchange the humid greenness of your matrimonial prison for the Rue des Planches and the Casino?'

From the Principe di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Duchessa dell'Aquila Fulva, Trouville.

'Carissima Mia,—I have set light to the fuse! I have frankly declared that if I do not get out of this damp and verdant Bastile, I shall perish of sheer inanition and exhaustion. The effect of the declaration was for the moment such, that I hoped, actually hoped, that she was going to get into a passion! It would have been so refreshing! After twenty-six days of dumb acquiescence and silent tears, it would have been positively delightful to have had a storm. But, no! For an instant she looked at me with unspeakable reproach; the next her dove's eyes filled, she sighed, she left the room! Do they not say that feather beds offer an admirable defence against bullets? I feel like the bullet which has been fired into the feather bed. The feather bed is victorious. I see the Rue des Planches through the perspective of the watery atmosphere; the Casino seems to smile at me 68
from the end of the interminable lime tree avenue, which is one of the chief beauties of this house; but, alas! they are both as far off as if Trouville were in the moon. What could they do to me if I came alone? Do you know what they could do? I have not the remotest idea, but I imagine something frightful. They shut up their public-houses by force, and their dancing places. Perhaps they would shut up me. In England, they have a great belief in creating virtue by Act of Parliament. In myself, this enforced virtue creates such a revolt that I shall *tirer sur le mors*, and fly before very long. The admired excellence of this beautiful estate is that it lies in a ring-fence. I feel that I shall take a leap over that ring-fence. Do not mistake me, *cara mia Teresina*, I am exceedingly fond of my wife. I think her quite lovely, simple, saintly, and truly womanlike. She is exquisitely pretty, and entirely without vanity, and I am certain she is immeasurably my superior morally, and possibly mentally too. But—there is always such a long and melancholy "but" attached to marriage—she does not amuse me in the least. She is always the same. She is 69
shocked at nearly everything that is natural or diverting. She thinks me unmanly because I dislike rain. She buttons about her a hideous, straight, waterproof garment, and walks out in a deluge. She blushes if I try to make her laugh at *Figaro*, and she goes out of the room when I mention Trouville. What am I to do with a woman like this? It is an admirable type, no doubt. Possibly if she had not shut me up in a country-house in a wet June, with the thermometer at 10 R., and the barometer fixedly at the word *Rainy*, I might have been always charmed with this S. Dorothea-like attitude, and never have found out the monotony of it. But, as it is—I yawn till I dislocate my neck. She thinks me a heathen already. I am convinced that very soon she will think me a brute. And I am neither. I only want to get out, like the bird in the cage. It is a worn simile, but it is such a true one!'

70

From the Duchessa dell'Aquila Fulva, Roches Noires, Trouville, to the Principe di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset.

'Piero Mio,—In marriage, the male bird is always wanting to get out when the female bird does not want him to get out; also, she is for ever tightening the wires over his head, and declaring that nothing can be more delightful than the perch which she sits on herself. Come to us here. There are any quantities of birds here who ought to be in their cages, but are not, and manage to enjoy themselves *quand même*. If only you had married Nicoletta! She might have torn your hair occasionally, but she would never have bored you. There is only one supreme art necessary for a woman: it is to thoroughly understand that she must never be a *seccatura*. A woman may be beautiful, admirable, a paragon of virtue, a marvel of intellect, but if she be a *seccatura—addio*! Whereas, she may be plain, small, nothing to look at in any way, and a very monster of sins, big and little, but if she know how to amuse your dull sex, she is mistress of you all. It is evident that this great art is not studied at Coombe Bysset.'

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From the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, S. Petersburg.

'Oh, my dear Gwen,—It is too dreadful, and I am so utterly wretched. I cannot tell you what I feel. He is quite determined to go to Trouville by Paris at once, and just now it is such exquisite weather. It has only rained three times this week, and the whole place is literally a bower of roses of every kind. He has been very restless the last few days, and at last, yesterday, after dinner, he said straight out, that he had had enough of Coombe, and he thought we might be seen at Homburg or Trouville next week. And he pretended to want every kind of thing that is to be bought at Paris and nowhere else. Paris—when we have been together just twenty-nine days to-day! Paris—I don't know why, but I feel as if it would be the end of everything! Paris—we shall dine at restaurants; we shall stay at the Bristol; we shall go to theatres; he will be at his club, he belongs to the Petit Cercle and the Mirliton; we shall be just like anybody else; just like all the 73
million and one married people who are always in a crowd! To take one's new-born happiness to an hotel! It is as profane as it would be to say your prayers on the top of a drag. To me, it is quite horrible. And it will be put in *Galignani* directly, of course, that the "Prince and Princess San Zenone have arrived at the Hotel Bristol." And then, all the pretty women who tried to flirt with him before will laugh, and say: "There, you see, she has bored him already." Everybody will say so, for they all know I wished to spend the whole summer at Coombe. If he would only go to his own country I would not say a word. I am really longing to see his people, and his palaces, and the wonderful gardens with their statues and their ilex woods, and the temples that are as old as the days of Augustus, and the fire-flies and the magnolia groves, and the peasants who are always singing. But he won't go there. He says it is a *seccatura*. Everything is a *seccatura*. He only likes places where he can meet all the world. "Paris will be a solitude, too, never fear," he said, very petulantly; "but there will be all the *petits théâtres* and the open-air concerts, and we 74
can dine in the Bois and down the river, and we can run to Trouville. It will be better than rain, rain, rain, and nothing to look at except your amiable aunt's big horses and big trees. I adore horses, and trees are not bad if they are planted away from the house, but, viewed as eternal companions, one may have too much of them." And I am his eternal companion, but it seems already I don't count! I have not said anything. I know one oughtn't. But Piero saw how it vexed me, and it made him cross. "*Cara mia*," he said, "why did you not tell me before we married that you intended me to be buried for ever in a box under wet leaves like a rose that is being sent to the market? I should have known what to expect, and I do not like wet leaves." I could not help reminding him that he had been ever, ever so anxious to come to Coombe. Then he laughed, but he was very cross too. "Could I tell, *anima mia*," he cried, "that Coombe was situated in a succession of lagoons, contains not one single French novel, is seven miles asunder from its own railway station, and is blessed with a population of sulky labourers? What man have I seen since I have been here except your parish priest, who mumbles, wears spectacles, and tries to give me a 75
tract against the Holy Father? In this country you do not know what it is to be warm. You do not know what sunshine is like. You take an umbrella when you go in the garden. You put on a waterproof to go and hear one little, shivering nightingale sing in a wet elder bush. I tell you I am tired of your country, absolutely tired. You are an angel. No doubt you are an angel; but you cannot console me for the intolerable emptiness of this intolerable life, where there is nothing on earth to do but to eat, drink, and sleep, and drive in a dog-cart." All this he said in one breath, in a flash of forked lightning, as it were. Now that I write it down, it does not seem so very dreadful; but as he, with the most fiery scorn, the most contemptuous passion, said it, I assure you it was terrible. It revealed, just as the flash of lightning would show a gravel pit, how fearfully bored he has been all the time I thought he was happy!'

76

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, S. Petersburg, to the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset.

'Men are very easily bored, my dear, if they have any brains. It is only the dull ones who are not.'

From the Principessa di San Zenone to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester.

'If I believed what your cynical letter says, I should leave him to-morrow. I would never live through a succession of disillusions and of insults.'

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester to the Principessa di San Zenone.

'Where are your principles? Where are your duties? My dear little girl, you have married him; you must submit to him as he is. Marriages wouldn't last two days if, just because the man yawned, the woman ran away. Men always yawn when they are alone with their wives. Hitherto, all San Zenone's faults appear to consist in the very pardonable fact that, being an Italian, he is not alive to the charms of bucolic England in rainy weather, and that, being a young man, he wants to see his Paris again. Neither of these seem to me irreparable crimes. Go to Paris and try to enjoy yourself. After all, if his profile be so beautiful, you ought to be sufficiently happy in gazing at it from the back of a *baignoir*. I grant that it is not the highest amatory ideal—to rush about the boulevards in a daument, and eat delicious little dinners in the cafés, and laugh at naughty little plays afterwards; but *l'amour peut se nicher* anywhere. And Love won't be any the worse for 78
having his digestion studied by good cooks, and his possible *ennui* exorcised by good players. You see for yourself that the great passion yawns after a time. Turn back to what you call my cynical letter, and re-read my remarks upon Nature. By the way, I entirely deny that they are cynical. On the contrary, I inculcate on you patience, sweetness of temper, and adaptability to circumstances; three most amiable qualities. If I were a cynic, I should say to you that Marriage is a Mistake, and two capital letters could hardly emphasise this melancholy truth sufficiently. But, as there are men and women, and, as I before observed, property in the world, nothing better for the consolidation of rents and freeholds has, as yet, been discovered. I daresay some Anarchist in his prison could devise something better, but they are afraid of trying Anarchism. So we all jog on in the old routine, vaguely conscious that we are all blunderers, but indisposed for such a drastic remedy as would alone cure us. Just you remark to any lawyer that marriage is a
mistake, as I have said before, and see what answer you will get. He will certainly reply to you 79
that there is no other way of securing the transmission of property safely. I confess that this view of wealth makes me, for one, a most desperate Radical. Only think, if there were no property we should all be frisking about in our happy valleys as free and as merry as little kids. I shouldn't now be obliged to put on all my war-paint and beads, like a savage, and go out to a dreadful Court dinner, four hours long, because George has a "career," and thinks my suffering advances it. Oh, you happy child, to have nothing worse to do than to rattle down the Bois in a *milord*, and sup off a *matelote* by the lake with your Romeo!'

80

From the Principessa di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, S. Petersburg.

'We are to leave for Paris and Trouville to-morrow. I have yielded—as you and Mamma seemed to think it was my *duty* to do. But my life is over. I shall say farewell to all happiness when the gates of Coombe Bysset close upon me. Henceforth we shall be like everybody else. However, you cannot reproach me any longer with being selfish, nor can he. There is a great friend of his, the Duchess of Aquila Fulva, at Trouville. She writes to him very often, I know. He never offers to show me her letters. *I believe the choice of Trouville is her doing.* Write to me at Paris, at the Windsor.'

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, S. Petersburg, to the Principessa di San Zenone, Hotel Windsor, Paris.

'My poor Child,—Has the green-eyed monster already invaded your gentle soul because he doesn't show you his own letters? My dear, no man who was not born a *cur* would show a woman's letters to his wife. Surely you wish your hero to know the A B C of gentle manners? I am delighted you are going into the world; but if you only go as "a duty," I am afraid the results won't be sunshiny. "Duty" is such a *very* disagreeable thing. It always rolls itself up like a hedgehog with all its prickles out, turning for ever round and round on the axle of its own self-admiration. If you go to Trouville (and wherever else you do go) as a martyr, my dear, you will give the mischievous Duchess, if she be mischievous, a terrible advantage over you at starting. If you mean to be silent, unpleasant, and enwrapped in a gloomy contemplation of your own merits and wrongs, don't blame *him* if he spend his time at the Casino with his friend, or somebody worse. I am quite 82
sure you *mean* to be unselfish, and you fancy you are so, and all the rest of it, quite honestly; but, in real truth, as I told you before, you are only an egotist. You would rather keep this unhappy Piero on thorns beside you, than see him enjoy himself with other people. Now, I call that shockingly selfish, and if you go in that spirit to Trouville, he will soon begin to wish, my dear child, that he had never had a fancy to come over to a London season. I can see you so exactly! Too dignified to be cross, too offended to be companionable; silent, reproachful, terrible!'

83

From the Lady Mary Bruton, Roches Noires, Trouville, to Mrs d'Arcy, British Embassy, Berlin.

'15th July.

'... Amongst the new arrivals here are the San Zenone. You remember my telling you of their marriage some six weeks ago. It was quite *the* marriage of the season. They really were immensely in love with each other, but that stupid month down in the country has done its usual work. In a rainy June, too! Of course, any poor Cupid would emerge from his captivity bedraggled, dripping and disenchanted. She is really very pretty, quite lovely, indeed; but she looks fretful and dull; her handsome husband, on the contrary, is as gay as a lark which has found the door of its cage wide open one morning. There is here a great friend of his, a Duchessa dell'Aquila Fulva. *She* is very gay, too; she is always perfectly dressed, and chattering from morning to night in shrill Italian or voluble French. She is the cynosure of all eyes as she goes to 84
swim in a rose-coloured *maillot*, with an orange and gold eastern burnous flung about her artistically. She has that wonderful Venetian colouring, which can stand a contrast and glow of colour which would simply kill any other woman. She is very tall, and magnificently made, and yet uncommonly graceful. Last night she was persuaded to dance a *salterello* with San Zenone at the Maison Persane, and it was marvellous. They are both such handsome people, and threw such wonderful *brio*, as they would call it, into the affair. The poor, little, pretty Princess, looking as fair and as dull as a primrose in a shower, sat looking on dismally. Stupid little thing!—as if *that* would do her any good! A few days ago Lord Hampshire arrived off here in his yacht. He was present at the *salterello*, and as I saw him out in the gardens afterwards with the neglected one, sitting beside her in the moonlight, I presume he was offering her sympathy and consolation. He is a heavy young fellow, but exceedingly good-humoured and kind-hearted. *He* would have been in Heaven in the wet June at Coombe Bysset—but she refused him, silly little thing! I am quite angry with her; she has had her own way and she won't make the best of that. I met her, and her 85
rejected admirer, riding together this morning towards Villerville, while the beautiful Prince was splashing about in the water with his Venetian friend. I see a great many eventual complications ahead. Well, they will all be the fault of that Rainy June!'

89

DON GESUALDO

I

It was a day in June.

The crickets were chirping, the lizards were gliding, the butterflies were flying above the ripe corn, the reapers were out amongst the wheat, and the tall stalks were swaying and falling under the sickle. Through the little windows of his sacristy, Don Gesualdo, the young vicar of San Bartolo, in the village of Marca, looked with wistful eyes at the hill-side which rose up in front of him, seen through a frame of cherry-boughs in full fruit. The hill-side was covered with corn, with vines, with mulberry trees; the men and women were at work amongst the trees (it was the first day of harvest); there was a blue, happy sky above them all; their voices, chattering and calling to one another over the sea of grain, came to his ears gaily and softened by air and distance. He 90
sighed as he looked and as he heard. Yet, interrogated, he would have said that he was happy and wanted for nothing.

He was a slight, pale man, still almost a youth, with a delicate face, without colour and beardless, his eyes were brown and tender and serious, his mouth was sensitive and sweet. He was the son of a fisherman away by Bocca d'Arno, where the river meets the sea, amidst the cane and cactus brakes which Costa loves to paint. But who could say what fine, time-filtered, pure Etruscan, or Latin, blood might not run in his veins? There is so much of the classic features and the classic forms amongst the peasants of Tyrrhene seashores, of Cimbrian oak woods, of Roman grass plains, of Maremana marshes.

It was the last day of peace which he was destined to know in Marca.

He turned from the window with reluctance and regret, as the old woman, who served him as housekeeper and church-cleaner in one, summoned him to his frugal supper. He could have supped at any hour he had chosen; there were none to say him nay, but it was the custom at 91
Marca to sup at the twenty-third hour, and he was not a person to violate custom; he would as soon have thought of spitting on the blessed bread itself. Habit is a masterful ruler in all Italian communities. It has always been so. It is a formula which excuses all things and sanctifies all things, and to none did it do so more than to Don Gesualdo. Often he was not in the least hungry at sunset, often he grudged sorely the hours spent in breaking black bread, and eating poor soup, when Nature was at her fairest, and the skies giving their finest spectacle to a thankless earth. Yet never did he fail to meekly answer old Candida's summons to the humble repast. To have altered the hour of eating would have seemed to him irreligious, revolutionary, altogether impossible.

Candida was a little old woman, burnt black by the sun, with a whisp of grey hair fastened on the crown of her head, and a neater look about her kerchief and her gown than was usual in Marca, for she was a woman originally from a northern city. She had always been a servant in 92
priests' houses, and, if the sacristan were ill or away, knew as well as he where every book, bell, and candle were kept, and could have said the offices herself had her sex allowed her. In tongue she was very sharp, and in secret was proud of the power she possessed of making the Vice-Regent of God afraid of her. The priest was the first man in this parish of poor folks, and the priest would shrink like a chidden child if she found out that he had given his best shirt to a beggar, or had inadvertently come in with wet boots over the brick floor, which she had just washed and sanded. It was the old story of so many sovereignties. He had power, no doubt, to bind and loose, to bless and curse, to cleanse, or refuse to cleanse, the sinful souls of men; but for all that he was only a stupid, forgetful baby of a man in his servant's eyes, and she made him feel the scorn she had for him, mixed up with a half-motherly, half-scolding admiration, which saw in him half a child, half a fool, and maybe she would add in her own thoughts, a kind of angel.

Don Gesualdo was not wise or learned in any way; he had barely been able to acquire enough 93
knowledge to pass through the examinations necessary for entrance into the priesthood. That slender amount of scholarship was his all; but he was clever enough for Marca, which had very little brains of its own, and he did his duty most faithfully, as far as he saw it, at all times. As for doubts of any sort as to what that duty was, such scepticism never could possibly assail him. His creed appeared as plain and sure to him as the sun which shone in the heavens, and his faith was as single-hearted and unswerving as the devoted soul of a docile sheep dog.

He was of a poetic and retiring nature; religion had taken entire possession of his life, and he was as unworldly, as visionary, and as simple as anyone of the *peccarelle di Dio* who dwelt around Francesco d'Assissi. His mother had been a German servant girl, married out of a small inn in Pisa, and some qualities of the dreamy, slow, and serious Teutonic temperament were in him, all Italian of the western coast as he was. On such a dual mind the spiritual side of his creed had obtained intense power, and the office he filled was to him a Heaven-given mission which 94
compelled him to incessant sacrifice of every earthly appetite and every selfish thought.

'He is too good to live,' said his old housekeeper.

It was a very simple and monotonous existence which was led by him in his charge. There was no kind of change in it for anybody, unless they went away, and few people born in Marca ever did that. They were not forced by climate to be nomads, like the mountaineers of the Apennines, nor like the men of the sea-coast and ague-haunted plains. Marca was a healthy, homely place on the slope of a hill in a pastoral country, where its sons and daughters could stay and work all the year round, if they chose, without risk of fever worse than such as might be brought on by too much new wine at close of autumn.

Marca was not pretty, or historical, or picturesque, or uncommon in any way; there are five hundred, five thousand villages like it, standing amongst corn lands and maize fields and mulberry trees, with its little dark church, and its white-washed presbytery, and its dusky, red-tiled houses, and its one great, silent, empty villa that used to be a fortified and stately palace, and now is given over to the rats and the spiders and the scorpions. A very quiet, little place, far away from cities and railways, dusty and uncomely in itself, but blessed in the abundant light and the divine landscape which are around it, and of which no one in it ever thought, except this simple young priest, Don Gesualdo Brasailo.

Of all natural gifts, a love of natural beauty surely brings most happiness to the possessor of it; happiness altogether unalloyed and unpurchasable, and created by the mere rustle of green leaves, the mere ripple of brown waters. It is not an Italian gift at all, nor an Italian feeling. To an Italian, gas is more beautiful than sunshine, and a cambric flower more beautiful than a real one; he usually thinks the mountains hateful and a city divine; he detests trees and adores crowds. But there are exceptions to all rules; there are poetic natures everywhere, though everywhere they are rare. Don Gesualdo was the exception in Marca and its neighbourhood, and evening after evening saw him in the summer weather strolling through the fields, his breviary in his hand, but his heart with the dancing fire-flies, the quivering poplar leaves, the tall green canes, the little silvery fish darting over the white stones of the shallow river-waters. He could not have told why he loved to watch these things; he thought it was because they reminded him of Bocca d'Arno and the sand-beach and the cane-brakes; but he did love them, and they filled him with a vague emotion; half pleasure and half pain.

His supper over, he went into his church; a little red-bricked, white-washed passage connected it with his parlour. The church was small, and dark, and old; it had an altar-piece, said to be old, and by a Sienese master, and of some value, but Gesualdo knew nothing of these matters. A Raphael might have hung there and he would have been none the wiser. He loved the church, ugly and simple as it was, as a mother loves a plain child or a dull one because it is hers; and now and then he preached strange, passionate, pathetic sermons in it, which none of his people understood, and which he barely understood himself. He had a sweet, full, far-reaching voice, with an accent of singular melancholy in it, and as his mystical, romantic, involved phrases passed far over the heads of his hearers, like a flight of birds flying high up against the clouds, the pathos and music in his tones stirred their hearts vaguely. He was certainly, they thought, a man whom the saints loved. Candida, sitting near the altar with her head bowed and her hands feeling her rosary, would think as she heard the unintelligible eloquence: 'Dear Lord, all that power of words, all that skill of the tongue, and he would put his shirt on bottom upwards were it not for me!'

There was no office in his church that evening, but he lingered about it, touching this thing and the other with tender fingers. There was always a sweet scent in the little place; its door usually stood open to the fields amidst which it was planted, and the smell of the incense, which century after century had been burned in it, blended with the fragrance from primroses, or dog-roses, or new-mown hay, or crushed ripe grapes, which, according to the season, came into it from without. Candida kept it very clean, and the scorpions and spiders were left so little peace there by her ever-active broom, that they betook themselves elsewhere, dear as the wooden benches and the crannied stones had been to them for ages.

Since he had come to Marca, nothing of any kind had happened in it. There had been some marriages, a great many births, not a few burials; but that was all. The people who came to confession at Easter confessed very common sins; they had stolen this or that, cheated here, there, and everywhere; got drunk and quarrelled, nothing more. He would give them clean bills of spiritual health, and bid them go in peace and sin no more, quite sure, as they were sure themselves, that they would have the self-same sins to tell of the next time that they should come there.

Everybody in Marca thought a great deal of their religion, that is, they trusted to it in a helpless but confident kind of way as a fetish, which, being duly and carefully propitiated, would make things all right for them after death. They would not have missed a mass to save their lives; that they dozed through it, and cracked nuts, or took a suck at their pipe stems when they woke, did not affect their awed and unchangeable belief in its miraculous and saving powers. If they had been asked what they believed, or why they believed, they would have scratched their heads and felt puzzled. Their minds dwelt in a twilight in which nothing had any distinct form. The clearest idea ever presented to them was that of the Madonna: they thought of her as of some universal mother who wanted to do them good in the present and future if they only observed her ceremonials: just as in the ages gone by, upon these same hill-sides, the Latin peasant had thought of the great Demeter.

Don Gesualdo himself, despite all the doctrine which had been instilled into him in his novitiate, did not know much more than they; he repeated the words of his offices without any distinct notion of all that they meant; he had a vague feeling that all self-denial and self-sacrifice were thrice blessed, and he tried his best to save his own soul and the souls of others; but there he ceased to think; outside that, speculation lay, and speculation was a thrice damnable offence. Yet he, being imaginative and intelligent in a humble and dog-like way, was at times infinitely distressed to see how little effect this religion, which he taught and which they professed, had upon the lives of his people. His own life was altogether guided by it. Why could not theirs be the same? Why did they go on, all through the year, swearing, cursing, drinking, quarrelling, lying, stealing? He could not but perceive that they came to him to confess their peccadilloes, only that they might pursue them more completely at their ease. He could not flatter himself that his

ministrations in Marca, which were now of six years' duration, had made the village a whit different to what it had been when he had entered it.

Thinking of this, as he did think of it continually night and day, being a man of singularly sensitive conscience, he sat down on a marble bench near the door and opened his breviary. The sun was setting behind the pines on the crest of the hills; the warm orange light poured across the paved way in front of the church, through the stems of the cypresses, which stood before the door, and found its way over the uneven slates of the stone floor to his feet. Nightingales were singing somewhere in the dog-rose hedge beyond the cypress trees. Lizards ran from crack to crack in the pavement. A tendril of honeysuckle came through a hole in the wall, thrusting its 101
delicate curled horns of perfume towards him. The whole entrance was bathed in golden warmth and light; the body of the church behind him was quite dark.

He had opened his breviary from habit, but he did not read; he sat and gazed at the evening clouds, at the blue hills, at the radiant air, and listened to the songs of the nightingales in that dreamy trance which made him look so stupid in the eyes of his housekeeper and his parishioners, but which were only the meditations of a poetic temper, cramped and cooped up in a narrow and uncongenial existence, and not educated or free enough to be able even to analyse what it felt.

'The nightingale's song in June is altogether unlike its songs of April and May,' thought this poor priest, whom Nature had made a poet, and to whom she had given the eyes which see and the ears which hear. 'The very phrases are wholly different; the very accent is not the same; in spring it is all a canticle, like the songs of Solomon; in midsummer—what is it he is singing? Is he lamenting the summer? or is it he is only teaching his young ones how they should sing next 102
year?'

And he fell again to listening to the sweetest bird that gladdens earth. One nightingale was patiently repeating his song again and again, sometimes more slowly, sometimes more quickly, seeming to lay stress on some phrases more than on others, and another voice, fainter and feebler than his own, repeated the trills and roulades after him fitfully, and often breaking down altogether. It was plain that there in the wild-rose hedge he was teaching his son. Anyone who will may hear these sweet lessons given under bays and myrtle, under arbutus and pomegranate, through all the month of June.

Nightingales in Marca were only regarded as creatures to be trapped, shot, caged, eaten, sold for a centime like any other small bird; but about the church no one touched them; the people knew that their *parocco* cared to hear their songs coming sweetly through the pauses in the recitatives of the office. Absorbed, as he was now, in hearkening to the music lesson amongst the white dog-roses, he started violently as a shadow fell across the threshold, and a voice called to 103
him, 'Good evening, Don Gesualdo!'

He looked up and saw a woman whom he knew well, a young woman scarcely indeed eighteen years old; very handsome, with a face full of warmth, and colour, and fire, and tenderness, great flashing eyes which could at times be as soft as a dog's, and a beautiful ruddy mouth with teeth as white as a dog's are also. She was by name Generosa Fè; she was the wife of Tasso Tassilo, the miller.

In Marca, most of the women by toil and sun were black as berries by the time they were twenty, and looked old almost before they were young; with rough hair and loose forms and wrinkled skins, and children dragging at their breasts all the year through. Generosa was not like them; she did little work; she had the form of a goddess; she took care of her beauty, and she had no children, though she had married at fifteen. She was friends with Don Gesualdo; they had both come from the Bocca d'Arno, and it was a link of common memory and mutual attachment. They liked to recall how they had each run through the tall canes and cactus, and waded in the surf, 104
and slept in the hot sand, and hidden themselves for fright when the king's camels had come towards them, throwing their huge mis-shapen shadows over the seas of flowering reeds and rushes and grey spiked aloes.

He remembered her a small child, jumping about on the sand and laughing at him, a youth, when he was going to college to study for entrance into the Church. 'Gesualdino! Gesualdino!' she had cried. 'A fine priest he will make for us all to confess to!' And she had screamed with mirth, her handsome little face rippling all over with gaiety, like the waves of the sea with the sunshine.

He had remembered her and had been glad when Tasso Tassilo, the miller, had gone sixty miles away for a wife, and had brought her from Bocca d'Arno to live at the mill on the small river, which was the sole water which ran through the village of Marca.

Tasso Tassilo, going on business once to the sea coast, had chanced to see that handsome face of hers, and had wooed and won her without great difficulty; for her people were poor folk, living by carting sand, and she herself was tired of her bare legs and face, her robust hunger, 105
which made her glad to eat the fruit off the cactus plants, and her great beauty, which nobody ever saw except the seagulls, and carters, and fishers, and cane-cutters, who were all as poor as she was herself.

Tasso Tassilo, in his own person, she hated; an ugly, dry, elderly man, with his soul wrapped up in his flour-bags and his money-bags; but he adored her, and let her spend as she chose on her attire and her ornaments; and the mill-house was a pleasant place enough, with its walls painted on the outside with scriptural subjects, and the willows drooping over its eaves, and the young men and the mules loitering about on the land side of it, and the peasants coming up with corn to

be ground whenever there had been rain in summer, and so water enough in the river bed to turn the mill wheels. In drought, the stream was low and its stones dry, and no work could be done by the grindstones. There was then only water enough for the ducks to paddle in, and the pretty teal to float in, which they would always do at sunrise unless the miller let fly a charge of small shot amongst them from the windows under the roof.

'Good evening, Don Gesualdo,' said the miller's wife now, in the midst of the nightingale's song and the orange glow from the sunset.

Gesualdo rose with a smile. He was always glad to see her; she had something about her for him of boyhood, of home, of the sea, and of the careless days before he became a seminarist. He did not positively regret that he had entered the priesthood, but he remembered the earlier life wistfully, and with wonder that he could ever have been that light-hearted lad who had run through the cane-brakes to plunge into the rolling waters, with all the wide, gay, sunlit world of sea and sky and river and shore before him, behind him, and above him.

'What is wrong, Generosa?' he asked her, seeing as he looked up that her handsome face was clouded. Her days were not often tranquil; her husband was jealous, and she gave him cause for jealousy. The mill was a favourite resort of all young men for thirty miles around, and unless Tasso Tassilo had ceased to grind corn he could not have shut his doors to them.

'It is the old story, Don Gesualdo,' she answered, leaning against the church porch. 'You know what Tasso is, and what a dog's life he leads me.'

'You are not always prudent, my daughter,' said Gesualdo, with a faint smile.

'Who could be always prudent at my years?' said the miller's young wife. 'Tasso is a brute, and a fool too. One day he will drive me out of myself; I tell him so.'

'That is not the way to make him better,' said Gesualdo. 'I am sorry you do not see it. The man loves you, and he feels he is old, and he knows that you do not care; that knowledge is always like a thorn in his flesh; he feels you do not care.'

'How should he suppose that I care?' said Generosa, passionately. 'I hated him always; he is as old as my father; he expects me to be shut up like a nun; if he had his own way I should never stir out of the house. Does one marry for that?'

'One should marry to do one's duty,' said Gesualdo, timidly; for he felt the feebleness of his counsels and arguments against the force and the warmth and the self-will of a woman, conscious of her beauty, and her power, and her lovers, and moved by all the instincts of vanity and passion.

'We had a terrible scene an hour ago,' said Generosa, passing over what she did not choose to answer. 'It cost me much not to put a knife into him. It was about Falko. There was nothing new, but he thought there was. I fear he will do Falko mischief one day; he threatened it; it is not the first time.'

'That is very grave,' said Gesualdo, growing paler as he heard. 'My daughter, you are more in error than Tassilo. After all, he has his rights. Why do you not send the young man away? He would obey you.'

'He would obey me in anything else, not in that,' said the woman, with the little conscious smile of one who knows her own power. 'He would not go away. Indeed, why should he go away? He has his employment here. Why should he go away because Tasso is a jealous fool?'

'Is he such a fool?' said Gesualdo, and he raised his eyes suddenly and looked straight into hers.

Generosa coloured through her warm, tanned skin. She was silent.

'It has not gone as far as you think,' she muttered, after a pause.

'But I will not be accused for nothing,' she added. 'Tasso shall have what he thinks he has had. Why would he marry me? He knew I hated him. We were all very poor down there by Bocca d'Arno, but we were gay and happy. Why did he take me away?'

The tears started to her eyes and rolled down her hot cheeks. It was the hundredth time that she had told her sorrows to Gesualdo, in the confessional and out of it; it was an old story of which she never tired of the telling. Her own people were far away by the seashore, and she had no friends in Marca, for she was thought a 'foreigner,' not being of that countryside, and the women were jealous of her beauty, and of the idle life which she led in comparison to theirs, and of the cared-for look of her person. Gesualdo seemed a countryman, and a relative and a friend. She took all her woes to him. A priest was like a woman, she thought; only a far safer confidant.

'You are ungrateful, my daughter,' he said, now, with an effort to be severe in reprimand. 'You know that you were glad to marry so rich a man as Tassilo. You know that your father and mother were glad, and you yourself likewise. No doubt, the man is not all that you could wish, but you owe him something; indeed, you owe him much. I speak to you now out of my office, only as a friend. I would entreat you to send your lover away. If not, there will be crime, perhaps bloodshed, and the fault of all that may happen will be yours.'

She gave a gesture, which said that she cared nothing, whatever might happen. She was in a headstrong and desperate mood. She had had a violent quarrel with her husband, and she loved Falko Melegari, the steward of the absent noble who owned the empty, half-ruined palace which stood on the banks of the river. He was a fair and handsome young man, with Lombard blood in him; tall, slender, vigorous, amorous and light-hearted; the strongest of contrasts in all ways to

Tasso Tassilo, taciturn, feeble, sullen, and unlovely, and thrice the years of his wife.

There was not more than a mile between the mill-house and the deserted villa. Tassilo might as well have tried to arrest the sirocco, or the sea winds when they blew, as prevent an intercourse so favoured and so facilitated by circumstances. The steward had a million reasons in the year to visit the mill, and when the miller insulted him and forbade him his doors, the jealous husband had no power to prevent him from fishing in the waters, from walking on the bank, from making signals from the villa terraces, and appointments in the cane-brakes and the vine-fields. Nothing could have broken off the intrigue except the departure of one or other of the lovers from Marca.

But Falko Melegari would not go away from a place where his interests and his passions both combined to hold him; and it never entered the mind of the miller to take his wife elsewhere. He had dwelt at the mill all the years of his life, and his forefathers for five generations before him. 112
To change their residence never occurs to such people as these; they are fixed, like the cypress trees, in the ground, and dream no more than they of new homes. Like the tree, they never change till the heeder, Death, fells them.

Generosa continued to pour out her woes, leaning against the pillar of the porch, and playing with a twig of pomegranate, whose buds were not more scarlet than her own lips; and Gesualdo continued to press on her his good counsels, knowing all the while that he might as well speak to the swallows under the church eaves for any benefit that he could effect. In sole answer to the arguments of Gesualdo, she retorted in scornful words.

'You may find that duty is enough for you, because you are a saint,' she added with less of reverence than of disdain, 'but I am no saint, and I will not spend all my best days tied to the side of a sickly and sullen old man.'

'You are wrong, my daughter,' said Gesualdo, sternly.

He coloured; he knew not why.

'I know nothing of these passions,' he added, with some embarrassment, 'but I know what 113
duty is, and yours is clear.'

He did not know much of human nature, and of woman nature nothing; yet he dimly comprehended that Generosa was now at that crisis of her life when all the ardours of her youth, and all the delight in her own power, combined to render her passionately rebellious against the cruelties of her fate; when it was impossible to make duty look other than hateful to her, and when the very peril and difficulty which surrounded her love-story made it the sweeter and more irresistible to her. She was of a passionate, ardent, careless, daring temperament, and the dangers of the intrigue which she pursued had no terrors for her, whilst the indifference which she had felt for years for her husband had deepened of late into hatred.

'One is not a stick nor a stone, nor a beam of timber nor a block of granite, that one should be able to live without love all one's days!' she cried, with passion and contempt.

She threw the blossoms of pomegranate over the hedge; she gave him a glance half- 114
contemptuous and half-compassionate, and left the church door.

'After all, what should he understand!' she thought. 'He is a saint, but he is not a man.'

Gesualdo looked after her a moment as she went over the court-yard, and between the stems of the cypresses out towards the open hill-side. The sun had set; there was a rosy after-glow which bathed her elastic figure in a carmine light; she had that beautiful walk which some Italian women have who have never worn shoes in the first fifteen years of their lives. The light shone on her dusky auburn hair, her gold earrings, the slender column of her throat, her vigorous and voluptuous form. Gesualdo looked after her, and a subtle warmth and pain passed through him, bringing with it a sharp sense of guilt. He looked away from her, and went within his church and prayed.

That night Falko Melegari had just alighted from the saddle of his good grey horse, when he was told that the *Parocco* of San Bartolo was waiting to see him.

The villa had been famous and splendid in other days, but it formed now only one of the many 115
neglected possessions of a gay young noble, called Ser Baldo by his dependants, who spent what little money he had in pleasure-places out of Italy, seldom or never came near his estates, and accepted, without investigation, all such statements of accounts as his various men of business were disposed to send to him.

His steward lived on the ground floor of the great villa, in the vast frescoed chambers, with their domed and gilded ceilings, their sculptured cornices, their carved doors, their stately couches, with the satin dropping in shreds, and the pale tapestries wearing away with the moths and the mice at work in them. His narrow camp-bed, his deal table and chairs, were sadly out of place in those once splendid halls, but he did not think about it; he vaguely liked the space and the ruined grandeur about him, and all the thoughts he had were given to his love, Generosa, the wife of Tasso Tassilo. From the terraces of the villa he could see the mill a mile further down the stream, and he would pass half the short nights of the summer looking at the distant lights in it.

He was only five-and-twenty, and he was passionately in love, with all the increased ardour of 116
a forbidden passion.

He was fair-haired and blue-eyed, was well made, and very tall. In character he was neither better nor worse than most men of his age; but as a steward he was tolerably honest, and as a

lover he was thoroughly sincere. He went with a quick step into the central hall to meet his visitor. He supposed that the vicar had come about flowers for the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, which was on the morrow. Though the villa gardens were wholly neglected, they were still rich in flowers which wanted no care—lilies, lavender, old-fashioned roses, oleanders red and white, and magnolia trees.

'Good evening, Reverend Father, you do me honour,' he said, as he saw Gesualdo. 'Is there anything that I can do for you? I am your humble servant.'

Gesualdo looked at him curiously. He had never noticed the young man before. He had seen him ride past; he had seen him at mass; he had spoken to him of the feasts of the Church; but he had never noticed him. Now he looked at him curiously as he answered, without any preface whatever,— 117

'I am come to speak to you of Generosa Fè, the wife of Tasso Tassilo.'

The young steward coloured violently. He was astonished and silent.

'She loves you,' said Gesualdo, simply.

Falko Melegari made a gesture as though he implied that it was not his place either to deny or to affirm.

'She loves you,' said Gesualdo again.

The young man had that fatuous smile which unconsciously expresses the consciousness of conquest. But he was honest in his passion and ardent in it.

'Not so much as I love her,' he said, rapturously, forgetful of his hearer.

Gesualdo frowned.

'She is the wife of another man,' he said with reproof.

Falko Melegari shrugged his shoulders; that did not seem any reason against it to him.

'How will it end?' said the priest. The lover smiled.

'These things always end in one way.'

Gesualdo winced, as though someone had wounded him. 118

'I am come to bid you go out of Marca,' he said simply.

The young man stared at him; then he laughed angrily.

'Reverend Vicar,' he said impatiently; 'you are the keeper of our souls, no doubt; but not quite to such a point as that. Has Tassilo sent you to me, or she?' he added, with a gleam of suspicion in his eyes.

'No one has sent me.'

'Why then—'

'Because, if you do not go, there will be tragedy and misery. Tasso Tassilo is not a man to make you welcome to his couch. I have known Generosa since she was a little child; we were both born on the Bocca d'Arno. She is of a warm nature, but not a deep one; and if you go away she will forget. Tassilo is a rude man and a hard one; he gives her all she has; he has many claims on her, for in his way he has been generous and tender. You are a stranger; you can only ruin her life; you can with ease find another stewardship far away in another province; why will you not go? If you really loved her you would go.' 119

Falko laughed.

'Dear Don Gesualdo, you are a holy man, but you know nothing of love.'

Gesualdo winced a little again. It was the second time this had been said to him this evening.

'Is it love,' he said, after a pause, 'to risk her murder by her husband? I tell you Tassilo is not a man to take his dishonour quietly.'

'Who cares what Tassilo does?' said the young steward, petulantly. 'If he touch a hair of her head I will make him die a thousand deaths.'

'All those are mere words,' said Gesualdo. 'You cannot mend one crime by another, and you cannot protect a woman from her husband's vengeance. There is only one way by which to save her from the danger you have dragged her into. It is for you to go away.'

'I will go away when this house walks a mile,' said Falko, 'not before. Go away!' he echoed, in wrath. 'What! run like a mongrel dog before Tassilo's anger? What! leave her all alone to curse me as a faithless coward? What! go away when all my life and my soul, and all the light of my eyes is in Marca? Don Gesualdo, you are a good man, but you are mad. You must pardon me if I speak roughly. Your words make me beside myself.' 120

'Do you believe in no duty, then?'

'I believe in the duty of every honest lover!' said Falko, with vehemence, 'and that duty is to do everything that the loved one wishes. She is bound to a cur; she is unhappy; she has not even any children to comfort her; she is like a beautiful flower shut up in a cellar, and she loves me—me!—and you bid me go away! Don Gesualdo, keep to your Church offices, and leave the loves of others alone. What should you know of them? Forgive me, if I am rude. You are a holy man, but you know nothing at all of men and women.'

'I do not know much,' said Gesualdo, meekly.

He was depressed and intimidated. He was sensible of his own utter ignorance of the passions of life. This man, nigh his own age, but so full of vigour, of ardour, of indignation, of pride in his consciousness that he was beloved, and of resolve to stay where that love was, be the cost what it would, daunted him with a sense of power and of triumph such as he himself could not even comprehend, and yet wistfully envied. It was sin, no doubt, he said to himself; and yet it was life, it was strength, it was virility.

He had come to reprove, to censure, and to persuade into repentance this headstrong lover, and he could only stand before him feeble and oppressed, with a sense of his own ignorance and childishness. All the stock, trite arguments which his religious belief supplied him seemed to fall away and to be of no more use than empty husks of rotten nuts before the urgency, the fervour, and the self-will of real life. This man and woman loved each other, and they cared for no other fact than this on earth or in heaven. He left the villa grounds in silence, with only a gesture of salutation in farewell.

'Poor innocent, he meant well!' thought the steward, as he watched the dark, slender form of the priest pass away through the vines and mulberry trees. The young man did not greatly venerate the Church himself, though he showed himself at mass and sent flowers for the feast days because it was the custom to do so. He was, like most young Italians who have had a smattering of education, very indifferent on such matters, and inclined to ridicule. He left them for women and old men. But there was something about his visitant which touched him; a simplicity, an unworldliness, a sincerity which moved his respect; and he knew in his secret heart that the *parocco*, as he called him, was right enough in everything that he had said.

Don Gesualdo himself went on his solitary way, his buckled shoes dragging wearily over the dusty grass of the wayside. He had done no good, and he did not see what good he could do. He 123
felt helpless before the force and speed of an unknown and guilty passion, as he once felt before a forest fire which he had seen in the Marches. All his Church books gave him homilies enough on the sins of the flesh and the temptings of the devil, but none of these helped him before the facts of this lawless and godless love, which seemed to pass high above his head like a whirlwind. He went on slowly and dully along the edge of the river-bed; a sense of something which he had always missed, which he would miss eternally, was with him.

It was now quite night. He liked to walk late at night. All things were so peaceful, or at the least seemed so. You did not see the gashes in the lopped trees, the scars in the burned hill-side, the wounds in the mule's loins, the bloodshot eyes of the working ox, the goitered throat of the child rolling in the dust. Night, kindly friend of dreams, cast her soft veil over all woes, and made the very dust seem as a silvered highway to the throne of a beneficent God.

He went now through the balmy air, the rustling canes, the low-hanging boughs of the fruit- 124
laden peach trees, and the sheaves of cut corn leaning one up against another under the maples, or the walnut trunks. He followed the course of the water, a shallow thread at this season, glistening under the moon in its bed of shingle and sand. He passed the mill-house perforce on his homeward way; he saw the place of the weir, made visible even in the dark by the lanterns which swung on a cord stretched from one bank to another, to entice any such fish as there might still be in the shallows. The mill-walls stood down into the water, a strong place built in olden days; the great black wheels were now perforce at rest; the mules champed and chafed in their stalls, inactive, like the mill; for the next three months there would be nothing to do unless a storm came and brought a freshet from the hills. The miller would have the more leisure to nurse his wrongs, thought Don Gesualdo; and his heart was troubled. He had never met with these woes of the passions; they oppressed and alarmed him.

As he passed the low mill windows, protected from thieves by their iron gratings, he could see the interior, lighted as it was by the flame of oil lamps, and through the open lattices he heard 125
voices, raised high in stormy quarrel, which seemed to smite the holy stillness of the night like a blow. The figure of Generosa stood out against the light which shone behind her. She was in a paroxysm of rage; her eyes flashed like the lightnings of the hills, and her beautiful arms were tossed above her head in impassioned imprecation. Tasso Tassilo seemed for the moment to crouch beneath this rain of flame-like words; his face, on which the light shone full, was deformed with malignant and impotent fury, with covetous and jealous desire; there was no need to hear her words to know that she was taunting him with her love for Falko Melegari. Don Gesualdo was a weak man and physically timid, but here he hesitated not one instant. He lifted the latch of the house door and walked straightway into the mill kitchen.

'In the name of Christ, be silent!' he said to them, and made the sign of the cross.

The torrent of words stopped on the lips of the young woman; the miller scowled and shrank from the light, and was mute.

'Is this how you keep your vows to Heaven and to each other?' said Gesualdo. 126

A flush of shame came over the face of the woman; the man drew his hat farther over his eyes, and went out of the kitchen silently. The victory had been easier than their monitor had expected. 'And yet of what use was it?' he thought. They were silent out of respect for him. As soon as the restraint of his presence should be removed they would begin afresh. Unless he could change their souls it was of little avail to bridle their lips for an hour.

There was a wild, chafing hatred on one side, and a tyrannical, covetous, dissatisfied love on the other. Out of such discordant elements what peace could come?

Gesualdo shut the wooden shutters of the windows that others should not see, as he had seen, into the interior; then he strove to pacify his old playmate, whose heaving breast and burning cheeks, and eyes which scorched up in fire their own tears, spoke of a tempest lulled, not spent. He spoke with all the wisdom with which study and the counsels of the Fathers had supplied him, and with what was sweeter, and more likely to be efficacious, a true and yearning wish to save 127
her from herself. She was altogether wrong, and he strove to make her see the danger and the error of her ways. But he strove in vain. She had one of those temperaments—reckless, vehement, pleasure-loving, ardent, and profoundly selfish—which see only their own immediate gain, their own immediate desires. When he tried to stir her conscience by speaking of the danger she drew down on the head of the man she professed to love, she almost laughed.

'He would be a poor creature,' she said proudly, 'if all danger would not be dear to him for me!'

Don Gesualdo looked her full in the eyes.

'You know that this matter must end in the death of one man or of the other. Do you mean that this troubles you not one whit?'

'It will not be my fault,' said Generosa, and he saw in her the woman's lust of vanity which finds food for its pride in the blood shed for her, as the tigress does, and even the gentle hind.

He remained an hour or more with her, exhausting every argument which his creed and his sympathy could suggest to him as having any possible force in it to sway this wayward and sin- 128
bound soul; but he knew that his words were poured on her ear as uselessly as water on a stone floor. She was in a manner grateful to him as her friend, in a manner afraid of that vague majesty of some unknown power which he represented to her; but she hated her husband, she adored her lover;—he could not stir her from those two extremes of passion. He left her with apprehension and a pained sense of his own impotence. She promised him that she would provoke Tassilo no more that night, and this poor promise was all that he could wring from her. It was late when he left the mill-house. He feared Candida would be alarmed at his unusual absence; and hastened, with trouble on his soul, towards the village, lying white and lonely underneath the midsummer moon. He had so little influence, so slender a power to persuade or warn, to counsel or command; he felt afraid that he was unworthy of his calling.

'I should have been better in the cloister,' he thought sadly; 'I have not the key to human hearts.'

He went on through a starry world of fire-flies, making luminous the cut corn, the long grass, 129
the high hedges, and, entering his presbytery, crept noiselessly up the stairs to his chamber, thankful that the voice of his housekeeper did not cry to him out of the darkness to know why he had so long tarried. He slept little that night, and was up, as was his wont, by daybreak.

It was still dark when the church bell was clanging above his head for the first office.

It was the day of Peter and of Paul. Few people came to the early mass; some peasants who wanted to have the rest of the day clear; some women, thrifty housewives who were up betimes; Candida herself; no others. The lovely morning light streamed in, cool and roseate; there were a few lilies and roses on the altar; some red draperies floated in the doorway; the nightingales in the wild-rose hedge sang all the while, their sweet voices crossing the monotonous Latin recitatives. The mass was just over, when into the church from without there arose a strange sound, shrill and yet hoarse, inarticulate and yet uproarious; it came from the throats of many 130
people, all screaming, and shouting, and talking, and swearing together. The peasants and the women, who were on their knees, scrambled to their feet, and rushed to the door, thinking the earth had opened and the houses were falling. Gesualdo came down from the altar and strove to calm them, but they did not heed him, and he followed them despite himself. The whole village seemed out—man, woman, and child—the nightingales grew dumb under their outcry.

'What is it?' asked Gesualdo.

Several voices shouted back to him, 'Tasso Tassilo has been murdered!'

'Ah!'

Gesualdo gave a low cry, and leaned against the stem of a cypress tree to save himself from falling. What use had been his words that night?

The murdered man had been found lying under the canes on the wayside not a rood from the church. A dog smelling at it had caused the body to be sought out and discovered. He had been dead but a few hours; apparently killed by a knife, thrust under his left shoulder, which had 131
struck straight under his heart. The agitation in the people was great; the uproar deafening. Someone had sent for the carabineers, but their nearest picket was two miles off, and they had not yet arrived. The dead man still lay where he had fallen; everyone was afraid to touch him.

'Does his wife know?' said Don Gesualdo, in a strange, hoarse voice.

'His wife will not grieve,' said a man in the crowd, and there was a laugh, subdued by awe, and the presence of death and of the priest.

The vicar, with a strong shudder of disgust, held up his hand in horror and reproof, then bent over the dead body where it lay amongst the reeds.

'Bring him to the sacristy,' he said, to the men nearest him. 'He must not lie there like a beast, unclean, by the roadside; go, fetch a hurdle, a sheet, anything.'

But no one of them would stir.

'If we touch him they will take us up for murdering him,' they muttered as one man.

'Cowards! Stand off; I will carry him indoors,' said the priest.

'You are in full canonicals!' cried Candida, twitching at his sleeve. 132

But Don Gesualdo did not heed her. He was brushing off with a tender hand the flies which had begun to buzz about the dead man's mouth. The flies might have stung and eaten him all the day through for what anyone of the little crowd would have cared; they would not have stretched a hand even to drag him into the shade.

Don Gesualdo was a weakly man; he had always fasted long and often, and had never been strong from his birth; but indignation, compassion, and horror for the moment lent him a strength not his own. He stooped down and raised the dead body in his arms, and, staggering

under his burden, he bore it the few roods which separated the place where it had fallen from the church and the vicar's house.

The people looked on open-mouthed with wonder and awe. 'It is against the law,' they muttered, but they did not offer active opposition. The priest, unmolested, save for the cries of the old housekeeper, carried his load into his own house and laid it reverently down on the couch 133
which stood in the sacristy. He was exhausted with the great strain and effort; his limbs shook under him, the sweat poured off his face, the white silk and golden embroideries of his cope and stole were stained with the clotted blood which had fallen from the wound in the dead man's back. He did not heed it, nor did he hear the cries of Candida mourning the disfigured vestments, nor the loud chattering of the crowd thrusting itself into the sacristy. He stood looking down on the poor, dusty, stiffening corpse before him with blind eyes and thinking in silent terror, 'Is it her work?'

In his own soul he had no doubt.

Candida plucked once more at his robes.

'The vestments, the vestments! You will ruin them; take them off—'

He put her from him with a gesture of dignity which she had never seen in him, and motioned the throng back towards the open door.

'I will watch with him till the guards come,' he said; 'go, send his wife hither.'

Then he scattered holy water on the dead body, and kneeled down beside it and prayed.

The crowd thought that he acted strangely. Why was he so still and cold, and why did he seem 134
so stunned and stricken? If he had screamed and raved, and run hither and thither purposelessly, and let the corpse lie where it was in the canes, he would have acted naturally in their estimation. They hung about the doorways, half afraid, half angered; some of them went to the mill-house, eager to have the honour of being the first bearer of such news.

No one was sorry for the dead man, except some few who were in his debt, and knew that now they would be obliged to pay, with heavy interest, what they owed to his successors.

With the grim pathos and dignity which death imparts to the commonest creature, the murdered man lay on the bench of the sacristy, amidst the hubbub and the uproar of the crowding people; he and the priest the only mute creatures in the place.

Don Gesualdo kneeled by the dead man in his blood-stained, sand-stained canonicals; he was praying with all the soul there was in him, not for the dead man, but the living woman.

The morning broadened into the warmth of day. He rose from his knees, and bade his 135
sacristan bring linen, and spread it over the corpse to cheat the flies and the gnats of their ghastly repast. No men of law came. The messengers returned. The picket-house had been closed at dawn and the carabineers were away. There was nothing to be done but to wait. The villagers stood or sat about in the paved court, and in the road under the cypresses. They seldom had such an event as this in the dulness of their lives. They brought hunches of bread and ate as they discoursed of it.

'Will you not break your fast?' said Candida to Don Gesualdo. 'You will not bring him to life by starving yourself.'

He made a sign of refusal.

His mouth was parched, his throat felt closed; he was straining his eyes for the first sight of Generosa on the white road. 'If she were guilty she would never come,' he thought, 'to look on the dead man.'

Soon he saw her coming, with swift feet and flying skirts and bare head, through the boles of the cypresses. She was livid; her unbound hair was streaming behind her.

She had passed a feverish night, locking her door against her husband, and spending the 136
whole weary hours at the casement where she could see the old grey villa where her lover dwelt, standing out against the moonlight amongst its ilex and olive trees. She had had no sense of the beauty of the night; she had been only concerned by the fret and fever of a first love and of a guilty passion.

She was not callous at heart, though wholly untrained and undisciplined in character, and her conscience told her that she gave a bad return to a man who had honestly and generously adored her, who had been lavish to her poverty out of his riches, and had never been unkind until a natural and justified jealousy had embittered the whole current of his life. She held the offence of infidelity lightly, yet her candour compelled her to feel that she was returning evil for good, and repaying in a base manner an old man's unwise but generous affection. She would have hesitated at nothing that could have united her life to her lover; yet, in the corner of her soul she was vaguely conscious that there was a degree of unfairness and baseness in setting their youth and their ardour to hoodwink and betray a feeble and aged creature like Tasso Tassilo. She hated him 137
fiercely; he was her jailer, her tyrant, her keeper. She detested the sound of his slow step, of his croaking voice, of his harsh calls to his men and his horses and mules; the sight of his withered features, flushed and hot with restless, jealous pains, was at once absurd and loathsome to her. Youth has no pity for such woes of age, and she often mocked him openly and cruelly to his face. Still, she knew that she did him wrong, and her conscience had been more stirred by the vicar's reproof than she had acknowledged. She was in that wavering mood when a woman may be saved from an unwise course by change, travel, movement, and the distractions of the world; but

there were none of these for the miller's young wife. So long as her husband lived, so long would she be doomed to live here, with the roar of the mill-wheels and the foaming of the weir water in her ear, and before her eyes the same thickets of cane, the same fields with their maples and vines, the same white, dusty road winding away beyond the poplars, and with nothing to distract her thoughts, or lull her mind away from its idolatry of her fair-haired lover at the old grey palace on the hill above her home.

She had spent the whole night gazing at the place where he lived. He was not even there at that moment; he had gone away for two days to a grain fair in the town of Vendramino, but she recalled with ecstasy their meetings by the side of the low green river, their hours in the wild flowering gardens of the palace, the lovely evenings when she had stolen out to see him come through the maize and canes, the fire-flies all alight about his footsteps. Sleepless but languid, weary and yet restless, she had thrown herself on her bed without taking off her clothes, and in the dark, as the bells for the first mass had rung over the shadowy fields, she had, for the first time, fallen into a heavy sleep, haunted by dreams of her lover, which made her stretch her arms to him in the empty air, and murmur sleeping wild and tender words.

She had been still on her bed, when the men of the mill had roused her, beating at the chamber door and crying to her:

'Generosa, Generosa, get up! The master is murdered, and lying dead at the church!'

She had been lying dreaming of Falko, and feeling in memory his kisses on her mouth, when those screams had come through the stillness of the early day, breaking through the music of the blackbirds piping in the cherry boughs outside her windows.

She had sprung from off her bed; she had huddled on some decenter clothing, and, bursting through the detaining hands of the henchmen and neighbours, had fled as fast as her trembling limbs could bear her to the church.

'Is it true? Is it true?' she cried, with white lips, to Gesualdo.

He looked at her with a long, inquiring regard; then, without a word, he drew the linen off the dead face of her husband and pointed to it.

She, strong as a colt, and full of life as a young tree, fell headlong on the stone floor in a dead swoon.

The people gathered about the doorway and watched her suspiciously and without compassion. There was no one there who did not believe her to be the murderess. No one except Don Gesualdo. In that one moment when he had looked into her eyes, he had felt that she was guiltless. He called Candida to her and left her, and closed the door on the curious, cruel, staring eyes of the throng without.

The people murmured. What title had he more than they to command and direct in this matter? The murder was a precious feast to them; why should he defraud them of their rights?

'He knows she is guilty,' they muttered, 'and he wants to screen her and give her time to recover herself and to arrange what story she shall tell.'

In a later time they remembered against the young vicar all this which he did now.

Soon there came the sound of horses' feet on the road, and the jingling of chains and scabbards stirred the morning air; the carabineers had arrived. Then came also the syndic and petty officers of the larger village of Sant' Arturo, where the Communal Municipality in which Marca was enrolled had its seat of justice, its tax offices and its schools. There were a great noise and stir, grinding of wheels and shouting of orders, vast clouds of dust and ceaseless din of voices, loud bickerings of conflicting authorities at war with one another, and rabid inquisitiveness and greedy excitement on all sides.

The feast of SS. Peter and Paul had been a day of disaster and disorder, but to the good people of Marca both these were sweet. They had something to talk of from dawn till dark, and the blacker the tragedy the merrier wagged the tongues. The soul of their vicar alone was sick within him. Since he had seen the astonished, horrified eyes of the woman Generosa, he had never once doubted her, but he felt that her guilt must seem clear as the noonday to all others. Her disputes with her husband, and her passion for Falko Melegari, were facts known to all the village, and who else had any interest in his death? The whole of Marca pronounced as with one voice against her; the women had always hated her for her superior beauty, and the men had always borne her a grudge for her saucy disdain of them, and that way of bearing herself as though a beggar from Bocca d'Arno were a queen.

'Neighbours put up with her pride while she was on the sunny side of the street,' said Candida, with grim satisfaction, 'but now she is in the shade they'll fling the stones fast enough,' and she was ready to fling her own stone. Generosa had always seemed an impudent jade to her, coming and talking with Don Gesualdo, as she did, at all hours, and as though the church and the sacristy were open bazaars!

How that day passed, and how he bore himself through all its functions, he never knew. It was the dead of night, when he, still dressed, and unable even to think calmly, clasping his crucifix in his hands, and pacing to and fro his narrow chamber with restless and uneven steps, heard his name called by the voice of a man in great agitation, and, looking out of his casement, saw Falko Melegari on his grey horse, which was covered with foam and sweating as from a hard gallop.

'Is it true?' he cried, a score of times.

'Yes, it is all true,' said Gesualdo. His voice was stern and cold; he could not tell what share this man might not have had in the crime.

'But she is innocent as that bird in the air,' screamed her lover, pointing to a scops owl which was sailing above the cypresses.

Don Gesualdo bowed his head and spread out his hands, palm downwards, in a gesture, meaning hopeless doubt. 143

'I was away at dark into the town to buy cattle,' said the steward, with sobs in his throat. 'I rode out by the opposite road; I knew nought of it. Oh, my God, why was I not here? They should not have taken her without it costing them hard.'

'You would have done her no good,' said Don Gesualdo, coldly. 'You have done her harm enough already,' he added, after a pause.

Falko did not resent the words; the tears were falling like rain down his cheeks, his hands were clenched on his saddle-bow, the horse stretched its foam-flecked neck unheeded.

'Who did it? Who could do it? He had many enemies. He was a hard man,' he muttered.

Don Gesualdo gave a gesture of hopeless doubt and ignorance. He looked down on the lover's handsome face and head in the moonlight. There was a strange expression in his own eyes.

'Curse you for a cold-hearted priest,' thought the young steward, with bitterness. Then he wheeled his horse sharply round, and, without any other word, rode off towards his home in the glistening white light, to stable his weary horse, and to saddle another to ride into the larger village of Sant' Arturo. It was past midnight; he could do no good; he could see no one; but it was a relief to him to be in movement. He felt that it would choke him to sit and sup, and sleep, and smoke as usual in his quiet house amongst the magnolias and the myrtles, whilst the love of his life lay alone in her misery. 144

All gladness, which would at any natural death of Tasso Tassilo's have filled his soul, was quenched in the darkness of horror in which her fate was snatched from him and plunged into the mystery and the blackness of imputed crime.

He never actually suspected her for a moment; but he knew that others would, no doubt, do more than suspect.

'Perhaps the brute killed himself,' he thought, 'that the blame of the crime might lie on her and part her from me.'

Then he knew that such a thought was absurd. Tasso Tassilo had loved his life, loved his mill, and his money, and his petty power, and his possession of his beautiful wife; and besides, what man could stab himself from behind between the shoulders? It was just the blow that a strong yet timid woman would give. As he walked to and fro on the old terrace, whilst they saddled the fresh horse, he felt a sickening shudder run through him. He did not suspect her. No, not for an instant. And yet there was a dim, unutterable horror upon him which veiled the remembered beauty of her face. 145

The passing of the days which came after this feast of the two apostles was full of an unspeakable horror to him, and in the brief space of them he grew haggard, hollow-cheeked, almost aged, despite his youth. The dread formalities and tyrannies of law seized on the quiet village, and tortured every soul in it; everyone who had seen or heard or known aught of the dead man was questioned, tormented, harangued, examined, suspected. Don Gesualdo himself was made subject to a searching and oft-repeated interrogation, and severely reproved that he had not let the body lie untouched until the arrival of the officers of justice. He told the exact truth as far as he knew it, but when questioned as to the relations of the murdered man and his wife, he hesitated, prevaricated, contradicted himself, and gave the impression to the judicial authorities that he knew much more against the wife than he would say. What he tried to do was to convey to others his own passionate conviction of the innocence of Generosa, but he utterly failed in doing this, and his very anxiety to defend her only created an additional suspicion against her. 146

The issue of the preliminary investigation was, that the wife of Tasso Tassilo, murdered on the morning of the day of SS. Peter and Paul, was consigned to prison, to be 'detained as a precaution' under the lock and key of the law, circumstantial evidence being held to be strongly against her as the primary cause, if not the actual executant, of the murder of her lord.

Everyone called from the village to speak of her, spoke against her, with the exception of Falko Melegari, who was known to be her lover, and whose testimony weighed not a straw; and Don Gesualdo, himself a priest, indeed, but the examining judge was no friend of priests, and would not have believed them on their oaths, whilst the strong friendship for her and the nervous anxiety to shield her, displayed so unwisely, though so sincerely by him, did her more harm than good, and made his bias so visible, that his declarations were held valueless. 147

'You know I am innocent!' she cried to him, the day of her arrest; and he answered her with the tears falling down his cheeks: 'I am sure of it; I would die to prove it! For one moment I did doubt you—pardon me—but only one. I am sure you are innocent as I am sure that the sun hangs in the skies.'

But his unsupported belief availed nothing to secure that of others; the dominant feeling amongst the people of Marca was against her, and in face of that feeling and of the known jealousy of her which had consumed the latter days of the dead man, the authorities deemed that they could do no less than order her provisional arrest. Her very beauty was a weapon turned

against her. It seemed so natural to her accusers that so lovely and so young a woman should have desired to rid herself of a husband, old, ill-favoured, exacting and unloved. In vain—utterly in vain—did Falko Melegari, black with rage and beside himself with misery, swear by every saint in the calendar that his relations with her had been hitherto absolutely innocent. No one believed him. 148

'You are obliged to say that,' said the judge, with good-humoured impatience.

'But, God in Heaven, why not, when it is true?' shouted Falko.

'It is always true when the *damo* is a man of honour,' said the ironical judge, with an incredulous, amused smile.

So, her only defenders utterly discredited, she paid the penalty of being handsomer and grander than her neighbours, and was taken to the town of Vendramino, and there left to lie in prison until such time as the majesty of the law should be pleased to decide whether or no it deemed her guilty of causing the death of her husband. The people of Marca were content. They only could not see why the law should take such a time to doubt and puzzle over a fact which to them all was as clear as the weather-vane on their church tower.

'Who should have killed him if not she or her *damo*?' they asked, and no one could answer.

So she was taken away by the men of justice, and Marca no more saw her handsome head, 149 with the silver pins in its coiled hair, leaning out from the square mill windows, or her bright-coloured skirts going light as the wind up the brown sides of the hills, and through the yellow-blossomed gorse in the warm autumn air, to some trysting-place under the topmost pines, where the wild pigeons dwelt in the boughs above, and the black stoat ran through the bracken below.

The work of the mill went on the same, being directed by the brother of Tassilo, who had always had a share in it, both of labour and profit. The murder still served for food for people's tongues through vintage and onward until the maize harvest and the olive-gathering. As the nights grew long, and the days cold, it ceased to be the supreme theme of interest in Marca; no one ever dreamed that there could be a doubt of the absent woman's guilt, or said a good word for her; and no one gave her any pity for wasting her youth and fretting her soul out in a prison cell, though they were disposed to grant that what she had done had been, after all, perhaps only natural, considering all things.

Her own family were too poor to travel to her help, indeed, only heard of her misfortunes 150 after many days, and then only by chance, through a travelling hawker. They could do nothing for her, and did not try. She had never sent them as much of her husband's money as they had expected her to do, and now that she was in trouble she might get out of it as she could, so they said. She had always cared for her earrings and breastpins, never for them; she would see if her jewels would help her now. When any member of a poor family marries into riches, the desire to profit by her marriage is, if ungratified, quickly turned into hatred of herself. Why should she have gone to eat stewed kid, and fried lamb, and hare baked with fennel, when they had only a bit of salt fish and an onion now and then?

The authorities at Vendramino had admitted the vicar of San Bartolo, once or twice, to visit her, the jailer standing by, but he had been unable to do more than to weep with her and assure her of his own perfect belief in her innocence. The change he found in her shocked him so greatly that he could scarcely speak; and he thought to himself, as he saw how aged and wasted and altered she was, 'If she lose her beauty and grow old before her time, what avail will it be to her 151 even if they declare her innocent? Her gay lover will look at her no more.'

Falko Melegari loved her wildly, ardently, vehemently indeed; but Don Gesualdo, with that acute penetration which sometimes supplies in delicate natures that knowledge of the world which they lack, felt that it was not a love which had any qualities in it to withstand the trials of time or the loss of physical charms. Perchance, Generosa herself felt as much, and the cruel consciousness of it hurt her more than her prison bars.

152

III

The winter passed away, and with February the corn spread a green carpet everywhere; the almond trees blossomed on the hill-sides, the violets opened the ways for the anemones, and the willows budded beside the water-mill. There were braying of bugles, twanging of lutes, cracking of shots, drinking of wines on the farms and in the village as a rustic celebration of carnival. Not much of it, for times are hard and men's hearts heavy in these days, and the sunlit grace and airy gaiety natural to it are things for ever dead in Italy, like the ilex forests and the great gardens that have perished for ever and aye.

Lent came, with its church bells sounding in melancholy iteration over the March fields, where the daffodils were blowing by millions and the young priest of San Bartolo fasted and prayed and mortified his flesh in every way that his creed allowed, and hoped by such miseries, 153
pains and penances to attain grace in heaven, if not on earth, for Generosa in her misery. All through Lent he wearied the saints with incessant supplication for her.

Day and night he racked his brain to discover any evidence as to who the assassin had been. He never once doubted her; if the very apostles of his Church had all descended on earth to witness against her, he would have cried to them that she was innocent.

The sickening suspicions, the haunting, irrepressible doubts, which now and then came over the mind of her lover as he walked to and fro by the edge of the river at night, looking up at what had been the casement of her chamber, did not assail for an instant the stronger faith of Gesualdo, weak as he was in body, and, in some ways, weak in character.

The truth might remain in horrid mystery, in impenetrable darkness, for ever; it would made no difference to him; he would be always convinced that she had been innocent. Had he not known her when she was a little barefooted child, coming flying through the shallow green pools and the great yellow grasses and the sunny cane-brakes of Bocca d'Arno?

Most innocent, indeed, had been his relations with the wife of Tassilo, but to him it seemed 154
that the interest he had taken in her, the pleasure he had felt in converse with her, had been criminal. There had been times when his eyes, which should have only seen in her a soul to save, had become aware of her mere bodily beauty, had dwelt on her with an awakening of carnal admiration. It sufficed to make him guilty in his own sight. This agony, which he felt for her, was the sympathy of a personal affection. He knew it, and his consciousness of it flung him at the feet of his crucifix in tortures of conscience.

He knew, too, that he had done her harm by the incoherence and the reticence of his testimony, by the mere vehemence with which he had unwisely striven to affirm an innocence which he had no power to prove; even by that natural impulse of humanity which had moved him to bring her husband's corpse under the roof of the church and close the door upon the clamorous and staring throng who saw in the tragedy but a pastime. He, more than any other, had helped to cast on her the darkness of suspicion; he, more than any other, had helped to make 155
earthly peace and happiness for ever denied to her.

Even if they acquitted her in the house of law yonder, she would be dishonoured for life. Even her lover, who loved her with all the sensual, coarse ardour of a young man's uncontrolled desires, had declared that he would be ashamed to walk beside her in broad day so long as this slur of possible, if unproven, crime were on her. Don Gesualdo mused on all these things until his sensitive soul began to take alarm lest it were not a kind of sin to be so occupied with the fate of one to the neglect and detriment of others. Candida saw him growing thinner and more shadow-like every day with ever-increasing anxiety. To fast, she knew, was needful above all for a priest in Lent, but he did not touch what he might lawfully have eaten; the new-laid eggs and the crisp lettuces of her providing failed to tempt him, and no mortal man, she told him, could live on air and water as he did.

'There should be reason in all piety,' she said to him, and he assented.

But he did not change his ways, which were rather those of a monk of the Thebaid than of a 156
vicar of a parish. He had the soul in him of a St Anthony, of a St Francis, and he had been born too late; the world as it is was too coarse, and too incredulous, for him, even in a little rustic primitive village hidden away from the eyes of men under its millet and its fig trees.

The people of Marca, like his old servant, noticed the great change in him. Pale he had always been, but now he was the colour of his own ivory Christ; taciturn, too, he had always been, yet he had ever had playful words for the children, kind words for the aged; these were silent now. The listless and mechanical manner with which he went through the offices of the Church contrasted with the passionate and despairing cries which seemed to come from his very soul when he preached, and which vaguely frightened a rural congregation who were wholly unable to understand them.

'One would think the good *parocco* had some awful sin on his soul,' said a woman to Candida one evening.

'Nay, nay; he is as pure as a lamb,' said Candida, twirling her distaff, 'but he was always helpless and childlike, and too much taken up with heavenly things—may the saints forgive me 157
for saying so. He should be in a monastery along with St Romolo and St Francis.'

But yet, the housekeeper, though loyalty itself, was, in her own secret thoughts, not a little troubled at the change she saw in her master. She put it down to the score of his agitation at the peril of Generosa Fè; but this in itself seemed to her unfitting in one of his sacred calling. A mere

light-o'-love and saucebox, as she had always herself called the miller's wife, was wholly unworthy to occupy, even in pity, the thoughts of so holy a man.

'There could not be a doubt that she had given that knife-stroke amongst the canes in the dusk of the dawn of SS. Peter and Paul,' thought Candida, amongst whose virtues charity had small place; 'but what had the *parocco* to do with it?'

In her rough way, motherly and unmannerly, she ventured to take her master to task for taking so much interest in a sinner.

'The people of Marca say you think too much about that foul business; they do even whisper that you neglect your holy duties,' she said to him, as she served the frugal supper of cabbage 158
soaked in oil. 'There will always be crimes as long as the world wags on, but that is no reason why good souls should put themselves about over that which they cannot help.'

Don Gesualdo said nothing, but she saw the nerves of his mouth quiver.

'I have no business to lecture your reverence on your duties,' she added, tartly; 'but they do say that so much anxiety for a guilty woman is a manner of injustice to innocent souls.'

He struck his closed hand on the table with concentrated expression of passion.

'How dare you say that she is guilty?' he cried. 'Who has proved her to be so?'

Candida looked at him with shrewd, suspicious eyes as she set down the bottle of vinegar.

'I have met with nobody who doubts it,' she said, cruelly, 'except your reverence and her lover up yonder at the villa.'

'You are all far too ready to believe evil,' said Don Gesualdo, with nervous haste; and he arose and pushed aside the untasted dish and went out of the house.

'He is beside himself for that jade's sake,' thought Candida, and after waiting a little while to 159
see if he returned, she sat down and ate the cabbage herself.

Whether there were as many crimes in the world as flies on the pavement in summer, she saw no reason why that good food should be wasted.

After her supper, she took her distaff and went and sat on the low wall which divided the church ground from the road, and gossiped with anyone of the villagers who chanced to come by. No one was ever too much occupied not to have leisure to talk in Marca, and the church wall was a favourite gathering place for the sunburnt women with faces like leather under their broad summer hats, or their woollen winter kerchiefs, who came and went to and from the fields or the well or the washing reservoir, with its moss-grown stone tanks brimming with brown water under a vine-covered pergola, where the hapless linen was wont to be beaten and banged as though it were so many sheets of cast-iron. And here with her gossips and friends, Candida could not help letting fall little words and stray sentences which revealed the trouble her mind was in as to the change in her master. She was devoted to him, but her devotion was not so strong as her love of 160
mystery and her impatience of anything which opposed a barrier to her curiosity. She was not conscious that she said a syllable which could have affected his reputation, yet her neighbours all went away from her with the idea that there was something wrong in the presbytery, and that, if she had chosen, the priest's housekeeper could have told some very strange tales.

Since the days of the miller's murder, a vague feeling against Don Gesualdo had been growing up in Marca. A man who does not cackle, and scream, and roar, till he is hoarse, at the slightest thing which happens, is always unnatural and suspicious in the eyes of an Italian community. The people of Marca began to remember that he had some fishermen's blood in him, and that he had always been more friendly with the wife of Tasso Tassilo than had been meet in one of his calling.

Falko Melegari had been denied admittance to her by the authorities. They were not sure that he, as her lover, had not some complicity in the crime committed; and, moreover, his impetuous 161
and inconsiderate language to the Judge of Instruction at the preliminary investigation had been so fierce and so unwise that it had prejudiced against him all officers of the law. This exclusion of him heightened the misery he felt, and moved him also to a querulous impatience with the vicar of San Bartolo for being allowed to see her.

'Those black snakes slip and slide in anywhere,' he thought, savagely; and his contempt for and dislike of ecclesiastics, which the manner and character of Don Gesualdo had held in abeyance, revived in its pristine force.

In Easter-time, Don Gesualdo was always greatly fatigued, and, when Easter came round this year, and the sins of Marca were poured into his ear—little, sordid, mean sins of which the narration wearied and sickened him—they seemed more loathsome to him than they had ever done. There was such likeness and such repetition in the confessions of all of them—greed, avarice, dishonesty, fornication; the scale never varied, and the story told kept always at the same low level of petty and coarse things. Their confessor heard, with a tired mind, and a sick heart, and, as he gave them absolution, shuddered at the doubts of the infallibility of his Church, 162
which for the first time passed with dread terror through his thoughts. The whole world seemed to him changing. He felt as though the solid earth itself were giving way beneath his feet. His large eyes had a startled and frightened look in them, and his face grew thinner every day.

It was after the last office in this Easter week, when a man came through the evening shadows towards the church. His name was Emilio Raffagiolo, but he was always known as the *girellone*, the rover. Such nicknames replace the baptismal names of the country people till the latter are almost forgotten, whilst the family name is scarcely ever employed at all in rural

communities. The *girellone* was a carter, who had been in service at the water-mill for some few months. He was a man of thirty or thereabouts, with a dusky face and a shock head of hair, and hazel eyes, dull and yet cunning. He was dressed now in his festal attire, and he had a round hat set on one side of his head; he doffed it as he entered the church. He could not read or write, and his ideas of his creed were hazy and curious. The Church represented to him a thing with virtue 163
in it, like a charm or a bunch of herbs; it was only necessary, he thought, to observe certain formulæ of it to be safe within it; conduct outside it was of no consequence. Nothing on earth can equal in confusion and indistinctness the views of the Italian rustic as regards his religion. The priest is to him as the medicine man to the savage; but he has ceased to respect his councils whilst retaining a superstitious feeling about his office.

This man, doffing his hat, entered the church and approached the confessional, crossing himself as he did so. Don Gesualdo, with a sigh, prepared to receive his confession, although the hour was unusual, and the many services of the day had fatigued him, until his head swam and his vision was clouded. But at no time had he ever availed himself of any excuse of time or physical weakness to avoid the duties of his office. Recognising the carter, he wearily awaited the usual tale of low vice and petty sins, some drunkenness, or theft, or lust, gratified in some unholy way, and resigned himself wearily to follow the confused repetitions with which the rustic of every country answers questions or narrates circumstances. His conscience smote him for his 164
apathy. Ought not the soul of this clumsy and wine-soddened boor to be as dear to him as that of lovelier creatures?

The man answered the usual priestly interrogations sullenly and at random; he could not help doing what he did, because superstition drove him to it, and was stronger for the time than any other thing; but he was angered at his own conscience, and afraid; his limbs trembled, and his tongue seemed to him to swell and grow larger than his mouth, and refused to move as he said at length in a thick, choked voice:

'It was I who killed him!'

'Who?' asked Don Gesualdo, whilst his own heart stood still. Without hearing the answer he knew what it would be.

'Tasso, the miller; my master,' said the carter; and, having confessed thus far, he recovered confidence and courage, and, in the rude, involved, garrulous utterances common to his kind, he leaned his mouth closer to Gesualdo's ear, and told, with a curious sort of pride in the accomplishment of it, why and how it had been done.

'I wanted to go to South America,' he muttered. 'I have a cousin there, and he says one makes 165
money fast and works little. I had often wished to take Tassilo's money, but I was always afraid. He locked it up as soon as he took any, were it ever so little, and it never saw light again till it went to the bank, or was paid away for her finery. He wasted many a good fifty franc note on her back. Look you, the night before the feast of Peter and Paul, he had received seven hundred francs in the day for wheat, and I saw him lock it up in his bureau, and say to his wife that he should take it to the town next day. That was in the forenoon. At eventide they had a worse quarrel than usual. She taunted him and he threatened her. In the late night I lay listening to hear him astir. He was up before dawn, and he unbarred and opened the mill-house himself, and called to the foreman, and he said he was going to the town, and told us what we were to do. 'I shall be away all day,' he said. It was still dusky. I stole out after him without the men seeing. I said to myself I would take this money from him as he went along the cross roads to take the 166
diligence at Sant' Arturo. I did not say to myself I would kill him, but I resolved to get the money. It was enough to take one out to America, and keep one awhile when one got out there. So I made up my mind. Money is at the bottom of most things. I followed him half a mile before I could get my courage up. He did not see me because of the canes. He was crossing that grass where the trees are so thick, when I said to myself, 'Now or never!' Then I sprang on him and stabbed him under the shoulder. He fell like a stone. I searched him, but there was nothing in his pockets except a revolver loaded. I think he had only made a feint of going to the town, thinking to come back and find the lovers together. I buried the knife under a poplar a few yards off where he fell. I could have thrown it in the river, but they say things which have killed people always float. You will find it if you dig for it under the big poplar tree that they call the Grand Duke's, because they say Pietro Leopoldo sat under it once on a time. There was a little blood on the blade, but there was none anywhere else, for he bled inwardly. They do, if you strike right. I was 167
a butcher's lad once, and I used to kill the oxen, and I know. That is all. When I found the old rogue had no money with him, I could have killed him a score of times over. I cannot think how it was that he left home without it, unless it was, as I say, that he meant to go back unknown and unawares, and surprise his wife with Melegari. That must have been it, I think. For, greedy as he was over his money, he was greedier still over his wife. I turned him over on his back, and left him lying there, and I went home to the mill and began my day's work, till the people came and wakened her and told the tale; then I left off work and came and looked on like the rest of them. That is all.'

The man who made the confession was calm and unmoved; the priest who heard it was sick with horror, pale to the lips with agitation and anguish.

'But his wife is accused! She may be condemned!' he cried, in agony.

'I know that,' said the man, stolidly. 'But you cannot tell of me. I have told you under the seal of confession.'

It was quite true; come what would, Don Gesualdo could never reveal what he had heard. His 168

eyes swam, his head reeled, a deadly sickness came upon him; all his short life simple and harmless things had been around him; he had been told of the crimes of men, but he had never been touched by them; he had known of the sins of the world, but he had never realised them. The sense that the murderer of Tasso Tassilo was within a hand's breadth of him, that these eyes which stared at him, this voice which spoke to him, were those of the actual assassin, that it was possible, and yet utterly impossible, for him to help justice and save innocence—all this overcame him with its overwhelming burden of horror and of divided duty. He lost all consciousness as he knelt there and fell heavily forward on the wood-work of the confessional.

His teachers had said aright in the days of his novitiate, that he would never be of stern enough stuff to deal with the realities of life.

When he recovered his senses, sight and sound and sensibility all returning to him slowly and with a strange, numb pricking pain in his limbs, and his body and his brain, the church was quite 169
dark, and the man who had confessed his crime to him was gone.

Gesualdo gathered himself up with effort, and sat down on the wooden seat and tried to think. He was bitterly ashamed of his own weakness. What was he worth, he, shepherd and leader of men, if at the first word of horror which affrighted him, he fainted as women faint, and failed to speak in answer the condemnation which should have been spoken? Was it for such cowardice as this that they had anointed him and received him as a servitor of the Church?

His first impulse was to go and relate his feebleness and failure to his bishop; the next he remembered that even so much support as this he must not seek; to no living being must he tell this wretched blood-secret.

The law which respects nothing would not respect the secrets of the confessional; but he knew that all the human law in the world could not alter his own bondage to the duty he had with his own will accepted.

It was past midnight when, with trembling limbs, he groped his way out of the porch of his 170
church and found the entrance of the presbytery, and climbed the stone stairs to his own chamber.

Candida opened her door, and thrust her head through the aperture, and cried to him:

'Where have you been mooning, reverend sir, all this while, and the lamp burning to waste and your good bed yawning for you? You are not a strong man enough to keep these hours, and for a priest they are not decent ones.'

'Peace, woman,' said Don Gesualdo in a tone which she had never heard from him. He went within and closed the door. He longed for the light of dawn, and yet he dreaded it.

When the dawn came, it brought nothing to him except the knowledge that the real murderer was there, within a quarter of a mile of him, and yet could not be denounced by him to justice even to save the guiltless.

The usual occupations of a week-day claimed his time, and he went through them all with mechanical precision, but he spoke all his words as in a dream, and the red sanded bricks of his house, the deal table, with the black coffee and the round loaf set out on it, the stone sink at 171
which Candida was washing endive and cutting lettuces, the old men and women who came and went telling their troubles garrulously and begging for pence, the sunshine which streamed in over the threshold, the poultry which picked up the crumbs off the floor, all these homely and familiar things seemed unreal to him, and were seen as through a mist.

This little narrow dwelling, with the black cypress shadows falling athwart it, which had once seemed to him the abode of perfect peace, now seemed to imprison him, till his heart failed and died within him.

In the dead of night, at the end of the week, moved by an unconquerable impulse which had haunted him the whole seven days, he rose and lit a lanthorn and let himself out of his own door noiselessly, stealthily, as though he were on some guilty errand, and took the sexton's spade from the tool-house and went across the black shadows which stretched over the grass, towards the place where the body of Tasso Tassilo had lain dead. In the moonlight there stood, tall and straight, a column of green leaves, it was the stately Lombardy poplar, which was spared by the 172
hatchet because Marca was, so far as it understood anything, loyal in its regret for the days that were gone. Many birds which had been for hours sound asleep in its boughs flew out with a great whirr of wings, and with chirps of terror, as the footfall of the vicar awakened and alarmed them. He set his lanthorn down on the ground, for the rays of the moon did not penetrate as far as the deep gloom the poplars threw around them, and began to dig. He dug some little time without success, then his spade struck against something which shone amidst the dry clay soil: it was the knife. He took it up with a shudder. There were dark red spots on the steel blade. It was a narrow, slightly curved, knife, about six inches long, such a knife as every Italian of the lower classes carries every day, in despite of the law, and with which most Italian murders are committed.

He looked at it long. If the inanimate thing could but have spoken, could but have told the act which it had done!

He, kneeling on the ground, gazed at it with a sickening fascination, then he replaced it 173
deeper down in the ground, and with his spade smoothed the earth with which he covered it. The soil was so dry that it did not show much trace of having been disturbed. Then he returned homeward, convinced now of the truth of the confession made to him. Some men met him on the

road, country lads driving cattle early to a distant fair; they saluted him with respect, but laughed when they had passed him.

What had his reverence, they wondered, been doing with a spade this time of night? Did he dig for treasure? There was a tradition in the country side, of sacks of ducal gold which had been buried by the river to save them from the French troops in the time of the invasion by the First Consul.

Don Gesualdo, unconscious of their comments, went home, put the spade back in the tool-house, unlocked his church, entered and prayed long; then waking his sleepy sexton, bade him rise, and set the bell ringing for the first mass. The man got up grumbling because it was still quite dark, and next day talked to his neighbours about the queer ways of his vicar; how he would walk all night about his room, sometimes get up and go out in the dead of night even; he 174
complained that his own health and patience would soon give way. An uneasy feeling grew up in the village, some gossips even suggested that the bishop should be spoken to in the town; but everyone was fearful of being the first to take such a step, and no one was sure how so great a person could be approached, and the matter remained in abeyance. But the disquietude, and the antagonism, which the manner and appearance of their priest had created, grew with the growth of the year, and with it also the impression that he knew more of the miller's assassination than he would ever say.

A horrible sense of being this man's accomplice grew also upon himself; the bond of silence which he kept perforce with this wretch seemed to him to make him so. His slender strength and sensitive nerves ill fitted him to sustain so heavy a burden, so horrible a knowledge.

'It has come to chastise me because I have thought of her too often, have been moved by her too warmly,' he told himself; and his soul shrank within him at what appeared the greatness of 175
his own guilt.

Since receiving the confession of the carter, he did not dare to seek an interview with Generosa. He did not dare to look on her agonised eyes and feel that he knew what could set her free and yet must never tell it. He trembled, lest in sight of the suffering of this woman, who possessed such power to move and weaken him, he should be untrue to his holy office, should let the secret he had to keep escape him. Like all timid and vacillating tempers, he sought refuge in procrastination.

All unconscious of the growth of public feeling against him, and wrapped in that absorption which comes from one dominant idea, he pursued the routine of his parochial life, and went through all the ceremonials of his office, hardly more conscious of what he did than the candles which his sacristan lighted. The confession made to him haunted him night and day. He saw it, as it were, written in letters of blood on the blank, white walls of his bed-chamber, of his sacristy, of his church itself. The murderer was there, at large, unknown to all; at work like any other man in the clear, sweet sunshine, talking and laughing, eating and drinking, walking and sleeping, yet as 176
unsuspected as a child unborn. And all the while Generosa was in prison. There was only one chance left, that she should be acquitted by her judges. But even then the slur and stain of an imputed, though unproven, crime would always rest upon her and make her future dark, her name a by-word in her birth-place. No mere acquittal, leaving doubt and suspicion behind it, would give her back to the light and joy of life. Every man's hand would be against her; every child would point at her as the woman who had been accused of the assassination of her husband.

One day he sought Falko Melegari, when the latter was making up the accounts of his stewardship at an old bureau in a deep window-embrasure of the villa.

'You know that the date of the trial is fixed for the tenth of next month?' he said, in a low, stifled voice.

The young man, leaning back in his wooden chair, gave a sign of assent.

'And you?' said Don Gesualdo, with a curious expression in his eyes, 'if they absolve her, will 177
you have the courage to prove your own belief in her innocence? Will you marry her when she is set free?'

The question was abrupt and unlooked for; Falko changed colour; he hesitated.

'You will not!' said Don Gesualdo.

'I have not said so,' answered the young man, evasively. 'I do not know that she would exact it.'

Exact it! Don Gesualdo did not know much of human nature, but he knew what the use of that cold word implied.

'I thought you loved her! I mistook,' he said, bitterly. A rosy flush came for a moment on the wax-like pallor of his face.

Falko Melegari looked at him insolently.

'A churchman should not meddle with these things! Love her! I love her—yes. It ruins my life to think of her yonder. I would cut off my right arm to save her; but to marry her if she come out absolved—that is another thing; one's name a by-word, one's credulity laughed at, one's neighbours shy of one—that is another thing, I say. It will not be enough for her judges to acquit her; that will not prove her innocence to all the people here, or to my people at home in my own 178
country.'

He rose and pushed his heavy chair away impatiently; he was ashamed of his own words, but in the most impetuous Italian natures, prudence and self-love are oftentimes the strongest instincts. The priest looked at him with a great scorn in the depths of his dark, deep, luminous eyes. This handsome and virile lover seemed to him a very poor creature; a coward and faithless.

'In the depths of your soul you doubt her yourself!' he said, with severity and contempt, as he turned away from the writing table, and went out through the windows into the garden beyond.

'No, as God lives, I do not doubt her,' cried Falko Melegari. 'Not for an hour, not for a moment. But to make others believe—that is more difficult. I will maintain her and befriend her always if they set her free; but marry her—take her to my people—have everyone say that my wife had been in gaol on suspicion of murder—that I could not do; no man would do it who had a reputation to lose. One loves for love's sake, but one marries for the world's.'

He spoke to empty air; there was no one to hear him but the little green lizards who had slid 179
out of their holes in the stone under the window-step. Don Gesualdo had gone across the rough grass of the garden, and had passed out of sight beyond the tall hedge of rose-laurel.

The young man resumed his writing, but he was restless and uneasy, and could not continue his calculations of debit and credit, of loss and profit. He took his gun, whistled his dog, and went up towards the hills, where hares were to be found in the heather and snipe under the gorse, for close time was unrecognised in the province. His temper was ruffled, and his mind in great irritation against his late companion; he felt angrily that he must have appeared a poltroon, and a poor and unmanly lover in the eyes of the churchman. Yet he had only spoken, he felt sure, as any other man would have done in his place.

In the sympathy of their common affliction, his heart had warmed for awhile to Gesualdo, as to the only one who, like himself, cared for the fate of Tasso Tassilo's wife; but now that suspicion had entered into him, there returned with it all his detestation of the Church and all the secular 180
hatreds which the gentle character of the priest of Marca had for a time lulled in him.

'Of course he is a liar and a hypocrite,' he thought, savagely. 'Perhaps he was a murderer as well!'

He knew that the idea was a kind of madness. Don Gesualdo had never been known to hurt a fly; indeed, his aversion to even see pain inflicted had made him often the laughing-stock of the children of Marca when he had rescued birds, or locusts, or frogs, from their tormenting fingers, and forbade them to throw stones at the lambs or kids they drove to pasture. 'They are not baptised,' the children had often said, with a grin, and Gesualdo had often answered: 'The good God baptised them Himself.'

It was utter madness to suppose that such a man, tender as a woman, timid as a sheep, gentle as a spaniel, could possibly have stabbed Tasso Tassilo to the death within a few roods of his own church, almost on holy ground itself. And yet, the idea grew and grew in the mind of Generosa's lover until it acquired all the force of an actual conviction. We welcome no supposition so eagerly 181
as we do one which accords with and intensifies our own prejudices. He neglected his duties and occupations to brood over this one suspicion, and put together all the trifles which he could remember in confirmation of it. It haunted him wherever he was; at wine fair, at horse market, at cattle sale, in the corn-field, amongst the vines, surrounded by his peasantry at noonday, or alone in the wild, deserted garden of the villa by moonlight.

In his pain and fury, it was a solace to him to turn his hatred on to some living creature. As he sat alone and thought over all which had passed (as he did think of it night and day always), many a trifle rose to his mind which seemed to him to confirm his wild and vague suspicions of the vicar of San Bartolo. Himself a free-thinker, it appeared natural to suspect any kind of crime in a member of the priesthood. The sceptic is sometimes as narrow and as arrogant in his free-thought as the believer in his bigotry. Falko Melegari was a good-hearted young man, and kind, and gay, and generous by nature; but he had the prejudices of his time and of his school. These prejudices made him ready to believe that a priest was always fit food for the galleys, or the 182
scaffold, a mass of concealed iniquity covered by his cloth.

'I believe you know more than anyone,' he said, roughly, one day when he passed the vicar on a narrow field-path, while his eyes flashed suspiciously over the downcast face of Don Gesualdo, who shrank a little as if he had received a blow, and was silent.

He had spoken on an unconsidered impulse, and would have been unable to say what his own meaning really was; but as he saw the embarrassment, and observed the silence, of his companion, what he had uttered at hazard seemed to him curiously confirmed and strengthened.

'If you know anything which could save her, and you do not speak,' he said, passionately, 'may all the devils you believe in torture you through all eternity!'

Don Gesualdo still kept silent. He made the sign of the cross nervously, and went on his way.

'Curse all these priests,' said the young man, bitterly, looking after him. 'If one could only deal with them as one does with other men!—but, in their vileness and their feebleness, they are 183
covered by their frock like women.'

He was beside himself with rage and misery, and the chafing sense of his own impotence; he was young, and strong, and ardently enamoured, and yet he could do no more to save the woman he loved from eternal separation from him than if he had been an idiot or an infant, than if he had had no heart in his breast, and no blood in his veins.

Whenever he met the vicar afterwards, he did not even touch his hat, but scowled at him in

scorn, and ceased those outward observances of respect to the Church which he had always given before to please his master, who liked such example to be set by the steward to the peasantry.

'If Ser Baldo send me away for it, so he must do,' he thought. 'I will never set foot in the church again. I should choke that accursed *parocco* with his own wafer.'

For suspicion is a poisonous weed which, if left to grow unchecked, soon reaches maturity, and Falko Melegari soon persuaded himself that his own suspicion was a truth, which only lacked time, and testimony, to become as clear to all eyes as it was to his. 184

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IV

Meantime Don Gesualdo was striving with the utmost force that was in him to persuade the real criminal to confess publicly what he had told under the seal of confession. He saw the man secretly, and used every argument with which the doctrines of his Church and his own intense desires could supply him. But there is no obstinacy so dogged, no egotism so impenetrable, no shield against persuasion so absolute, as the stolid ignorance and self-love of a low mind. The carter turned a deaf ear to all censure as to all entreaty; he was stolidly indifferent to all the woe that he had caused and would cause if he remained silent. What was all that to him? The thought of the miller's widow shut up in prison pleased him. He had always hated her as he had seen her in what he called her finery, going by him in the sunshine, with all her bravery of pearl necklace, of silver hairpins, of gold breast chains. Many and many a time he had thirsted to snatch at them 186
and pull them off her. What right had she to them, she, a daughter of naked, hungry folks, who dug and carted sea and river sand for a living even as he carted sacks of flour. She was no better than himself! Now and then, Generosa had called him, in her careless, imperious fashion, to draw water or carry wood for her, and when he had done so she never had taken the trouble to bid him good day or to say a good-natured word. His pride had been hurt, and he had had much ado to restrain himself from calling her a daughter of beggars, a worm of the sand. Like her own people, he was pleased that she should now find her fine clothes and her jewelled trinkets of no avail to her, and that she should weep the light out of her big eyes, and the rose-bloom off her peach-like cheeks in the squalor and nausea of a town prison.

Don Gesualdo, with all the force which a profound conviction that he speaks the truth lends to any speaker, wrestled for the soul of this dogged brute, and warned him of the punishment everlasting which would await him if he persisted in his refusal to surrender himself to justice. 187
But he might as well have spoken to the great millstones that rest in the river water. Why, then, had this wretch cast the burden of his vile secret on innocent shoulders? It was the most poignant anguish to him that he could awaken no sense of guilt in the conscience of the criminal. The man had come to him partly from a vague superstitious impulse, remnant of a credulity instilled into him in childhood, and partly from the want to unburden his mind, to tell his story to someone, which is characteristic of all weak minds in times of trouble and peril. It had relieved him to drag the priest into sharing his own guilty consciousness; he was half proud and half afraid of the manner in which he had slain his master, and bitterly incensed that he had done the deed for nothing; but, beyond this, he had no other emotion except that he was glad that Generosa should suffer through and for it.

'You will burn for ever if you persist in such hideous wickedness,' said Don Gesualdo again and again to him.

'I will take my chance of that,' said the man. 'Hell is far off, and the galleys are near.'

'But if you do not believe in my power to absolve you or leave you accursed, why did you ever 188
confess to me?' cried Don Gesualdo.

'Because one must clear one's breast to somebody when one has a thing like that on one's mind,' answered the carter, 'and I know you cannot tell of it again.'

From that position nothing moved him. No entreaties, threats, arguments, denunciations, stirred him a hair's-breadth. He had confessed *per sfogarsi* (to relieve himself): that was all.

But one night after Gesualdo had thus spoken to him, vague fears assailed him, terrors material, not spiritual; he had parted with his secret; who could tell that it might not come out like a sleuth hound, and find him and denounce him? He had told it to be at peace, but he was not at peace. He feared every instant to have the hand of the law upon him. Whenever he heard the trot of the carabineers' horses going through the village, or saw their white belts and cocked hats in the sunlight of the fields, a cold tremor of terror seized him lest the priest should after all have told. He knew that it was impossible, and yet he was afraid.

He counted up the money he had saved, a little roll of filthy and crumpled bank notes for very 189
small amounts, and wondered if they would be enough to take him across to America. They were very few, but his fear compelled him to trust to them. He invented a story of remittances which he had received from his brother, and told his fellow-labourers and his employer that he was invited to join that brother, and then he packed up his few clothes and went. At the mill and in the village they talked a little of it, saying that the fellow was in luck, but that they for their parts would not care to go so far. Don Gesualdo heard of his flight in the course of the day.

'Gone away! Out of the country?' he cried involuntarily, with white lips.

The people who heard him wondered what it could matter to him that a carter had gone to seek his fortunes over the seas.

The carter had not been either such a good worker, or such a good boon companion, that anyone at the mill or in the village should greatly regret him.

'America gets all our rubbish,' said the people, 'much good may it do her.'

Meantime, the man took his way across the country, and, sometimes by walking, sometimes 190
by lifts in waggons, sometimes by helping charcoal burners on the road, made his way, first to Vendramino to have his papers put in order, and then to the sea coast, and in the port of Leghorn took his passage in an emigrant ship then loading there. The green cane-brakes and peaceful millet fields of Marca saw him no more.

But he had left the burden of his blood-guiltiness behind him, and it lay on the guiltless soul

with the weight of the world.

So long as the man had remained in Marca, there had been always a hope present with Don Gesualdo that he would persuade him to confess in a court of justice what he had confessed to the church, or that some sequence of accidents would lead up to the discovery of his guilt. But with the ruffian gone across the seas, lost in that utter darkness which swallows up the lives of the poor and obscure when once they have left the hamlet in which their names mean something to their neighbours, this one hope was quenched, and the vicar, in agony, reproached himself with not having prevailed in his struggle for the wretch's soul; with not having been eloquent 191
enough, or wise enough, or stern enough to awe him into declaration of his ghastly secret to the law.

His failure seemed to him a sign of Heaven's wrath against himself.

'How dare I,' he thought, 'how dare I, feeble and timid and useless as I am, call myself a servant of God, or attempt to minister to other souls?'

He had thought, like an imbecile, as he told himself, to be able to awaken the conscience and compel the public confession of this man, and the possibility of flight had never presented itself to his mind, natural and simple as had been such a course to a creature without remorse, continually haunted by personal fears of punishment. He, he alone on earth, knew the man's guilt; he, he alone had the power to save Generosa, and he could not use the power because the secrecy of his holy office was fastened on him like an iron padlock on his lips.

The days passed him like nightmares; he did his duties mechanically, scarcely consciously; the frightful alternative which was set before him seemed to parch up the very springs of life itself. 192
He knew that he must look strangely in the eyes of the people; his voice sounded strangely in his own ears; he began to feel that he was unworthy to administer the blessed bread to the living, to give the last unction to the dying; he knew that he was not at fault, and yet he felt that he was accursed. Choose what he would, he must, he thought, commit some hateful sin.

The day appointed for the trial came; it was the tenth of May. A hot day, with the bees booming amongst the acacia flowers, and the green tree-frogs shouting joyously above in the ilex tops, and the lizards running in and out of the china-rose hedges on the highways. Many people of Marca were summoned as witnesses, and these went to the town in mule carts or crazy chaises, with the farm-horse put in the shafts, and grumbled because they would lose their day's labour in their fields, and yet were pleasurably excited at the idea of seeing Generosa in the prisoner's dock, and being able themselves to tell all they knew, and a great deal that they did not know.

Falko Melegari rode over at dawn by himself, and Don Gesualdo, with his housekeeper and 193
sacristan, who were all summoned to give testimony, went by the diligence, which started from Sant' Arturo, and rolled through the dusty roads and over the bridges, and past the wayside shrines, and shops, and forges, across the country to the town.

The vicar never spoke throughout the four weary hours during which the rickety and crowded vehicle, with its poor, starved, bruised beasts, rumbled on its road through the lovely shadows and cool sunlight of the early morning. He held his breviary in his hand for form's sake, and, seeing him thus absorbed in holy meditation as they thought, his garrulous neighbours did not disturb him, but chattered amongst themselves, filling the honeysuckle-scented air with the odours of garlic and wine and coarse tobacco.

Candida glanced at him anxiously from time to time, haunted by a vague presentiment of ill. His face looked very strange, she thought, and his closely-locked lips were white as the lips of a corpse. When the diligence was driven over the stones of the town, all the passengers by it descended at the first wine-house which they saw on the piazza to eat and drink, but he, with 194
never a word, motioned his housekeeper aside when she would have pressed food on him, and went into the cathedral of the place to pray alone.

The town was hot and dusty and sparsely peopled. It had brown walls and large brick palaces untenanted, and ancient towers, also of brick, pointing high to heaven. It was a place dear to the memory of lovers of art for the sake of some fine paintings of the Sienese school which hung in its churches, and was occasionally visited by strangers for sake of these; but, for the most part, it was utterly forgotten by the world, and its bridge of many arches, said to have been built by Augustus, seldom resounded to any other echoes than those of the heavy wheels of the hay or corn waggons coming in from the pastoral country around.

The Court-house, where all great trials took place, stood in one of the bare, silent, dusty squares of the town. It had once been the ancient palace of the Podesta, and had the machicolated walls, the turreted towers, and the vast stairways and frescoed chambers of a larger and statelier time than ours. The hall of justice was a vast chamber pillared with marble, 195
vaulted and painted, sombre and grand. It was closely thronged with country folks; there was a scent of hay, of garlic, of smoking pipes hastily thrust into trouser pockets, of unwashed flesh steaming hotly in the crowd, and the close air. The judge was there with his officers, a mediæval figure in black square cap and black gown. The accused was behind the cage assigned to such prisoners, guarded by carabineers and by the jailers. Don Gesualdo looked in once from a distant doorway; then with a noise in his ears like the sound of the sea, and a deadly sickness on him, he stayed without in the audience-chamber, where a breath of air came to him up one of the staircases, there waiting until his name was called.

The trial began. Everything was the same as it had been in the preliminary examination which had preceded her committal on the charge of murder. The same depositions were made now that

had then been made. In the interval, the people of Marca had forgotten a good deal, so added somewhat of their own invention to make up for the deficiency; but, on the whole, the testimony was the same given with that large looseness of statement, and absolute indifference to fact, so characteristic of the Italian mind, the judge, from habit, sifting the chaff from the wheat in the evidence with unerring skill, and following with admirable patience the tortuous windings and the hazy imagination of the peasants he examined. 196

The examination of the vicar did not come on until the third day. These seventy or eighty hours of suspense were terrible to him. He scarcely broke his fast, or was conscious of what he did. The whole of the time was passed by him listening in the court of justice, or praying in the churches. When at last he was summoned, a cold sweat bathed his face and hair; his hands trembled; he answered the interrogations of the judge and of the advocates almost at random; his replies seemed scarcely to be those of a rational being; he passionately affirmed her innocence with delirious repetition and emphasis, which produced on the minds of the examiners the contrary effect to that which he endeavoured to create.

'This priest knows that she is guilty,' thought the president. 'He knows it—perhaps he knows even more—perhaps he was her accomplice.' 197

His evidence, his aspect, his wild and contradictory words, did as much harm to her cause as he ignorantly strove to do good. From other witnesses of Marca, the Court had learned that a great friendship had always been seen to exist between the vicar of San Bartolo and Generosa Fè, and that on the morning when the murder was discovered, the priest had removed the body of the dead man to the sacristy, forestalling the officers of justice and disturbing the scene of the murder. A strong impression against him was created beforehand in the audience and on the bench, and his pallid, agitated countenance, his incoherent words, his wild eyes, which incessantly sought the face of the prisoner, all gave him the appearance of a man conscious of some guilt himself and driven out of his mind by fear. The president cross-examined him without mercy, censured him, railed at him, and did his uttermost to extract the truth which he believed that Don Gesualdo concealed, but to no avail; incoherent and half-insane as he seemed, he said no syllable which could betray that which he really knew. Only when his eyes rested on Generosa, there was such an agony in them that she herself was startled by it. 198

'Who would ever have dreamt that he would have cared so much?' she thought. 'But he was always a tender soul; he always pitied the birds in the traps, and the oxen that went to the slaughter.'

Reproved, and censured without stint, for the president knew that to insult a priest was to merit promotion in high quarters, Don Gesualdo was at last permitted to escape from his place of torture. Blind and sick he got away through the crowd, past the officials, down the stairs, and out into the hot air. The piazza was thronged with people who could not find standing room in the Court-house. The murmur of their rapid and loud voices was like the noise of a sea on his ears; they had all the same burden. They all repeated like one man the same words: 'They will condemn her,' and then wondered what sentence she would receive; whether a score of years of seclusion or a lifetime.

He went through the chattering, curious cruel throng, barbarous with that barbarity of the populace, which in all countries sees with glee a bull die, a wrestler drop, a malefactor ascend the scaffold, or a rat scour the streets soaked in petroleum and burning alive. The dead man had been nothing to them, and his wife had done none of them any harm, yet there was not a man or a woman, a youth or a girl in the crowd, who would not have felt that he or she was defrauded of his entertainment if she were acquitted by her judges, although there was a general sense amongst them that she had done no more than had been natural, and no more than had been her right. 199

The dark, slender, emaciated figure of the priest glided through the excited and boisterous groups; the air had the heat of summer; the sky above was blue and cloudless; the brown brick walls of church and palace seemed baking in the light of the sun. In the corner of the square was a fountain relic of the old times when the town had been a place of pageantry and power; beautiful pale green water, cold and fresh, leaping and flowing around marble dolphins. Don Gesualdo stooped and drank thirstily, as though he would never cease to drink, then went on his way and pushed aside the leathern curtain of the cathedral door and entered into the coolness and solitude of that place of refuge. 200

There he stretched himself before the cross in prayer, and wept bitter, burning, unavailing tears for the burden which he bore of another's sin and his own helplessness beneath it, which seemed to him like a greater crime.

But even at the very altar of his God, peace was denied him. Hurried, loud, impetuous steps from heavy boots fell on the old, worn, marble floor of the church, and Falko Melegari strode up behind him and laid a heavy hand upon his shoulders. The young man's face was deeply flushed, his eyes were savage, his breath was quick and uneven; he had no heed for the sanctity of the place or of his companion.

'Get up and hear me,' he said, roughly. 'They all say the verdict will be against her; you heard them.'

Don Gesualdo made a gesture of assent.

'Very well, then,' said the steward, through his clenched teeth, 'if it be so, indeed, I swear, as you and I live, that I will denounce you to the judges in her stead.' 201

Don Gesualdo did not speak. He stood in a meditative attitude with his arms folded on his chest. He did not express either surprise or indignation.

'I will denounce you,' repeated Melegari, made more furious by his silence. 'What did you do at night with your spade under the Grand Duke's poplars? Why did you carry in and screen the corpse? Does not the whole village talk of your strange ways and your altered habits? There is more than enough against you to send to the galleys a score of better men than you. Anyhow, I will denounce you if you do not make a clean breast of all you know to the president to-morrow. You are either the assassin or the accomplice, you accursed, black-coated hypocrite!'

A slight flush rose on the waxen pallor of Don Gesualdo's face, but he still kept silence.

The young man, watching him with eyes of hatred, saw guilt in that obstinate and mulish dumbness.

'You dare not deny it, trained liar though you be!' he said, with passionate scorn. 'Oh, 202
wretched cur, who ventures to call yourself a servitor of heaven, you would let her drag all her years out in misery to save your own miserable, puling, sexless, worthless life! Well! hear me and understand. No one can say that I do not keep my word, and here, by the cross which hangs above us, I take my oath that if you do not tell all you know to-morrow, should she be condemned, I will denounce you to the law, and if the law fail to do justice, I will kill you as Tasso Tassilo was killed. May I die childless, penniless, and accursed if my hand fail!'

Then, with no other word, he strode from the church, the golden afternoon sunshine streaming through the stained windows above and falling on his fair hair, his flushed face, his flaming eyes, till his common humanity seemed all transfigured. He looked like the avenging angel of Tintoretto's Paradise.

Don Gesualdo stood immovable in the deserted church; his arms crossed on his breast, his head bent. A great resolve, a mighty inspiration, had descended on him with the furious words of his foe. Light had come to him as from heaven itself. He could not give up the secret which had 203
been confided to him in the confessional, but he could give up himself. His brain was filled with legends of sacrifice and martyrdom. Why might he not become one of that holy band of martyrs?

Nay, he was too humble to place himself beside them even in thought. The utmost he could do, he knew, would be only expiation for what seemed to him his ineffaceable sin in letting any human affection, however harmless, unselfish, and distant, stain the singleness and purity of his devotion to his vows. He had been but a fisher-boy, until he had taken his tender heart and his ignorant mind to the seminary, and he had been born with the soul of a San Rocco, of a S. John, out of place, out of time, in the world he lived in; a soul in which the passions of faith and of sacrifice were as strong as are the passions of lust and of selfishness in other natures. The spiritual world was to him a reality, and the earth, with its merciless and greedy peoples, its plague of lusts, its suffering hearts, its endless injustice, an unreal and hideous dream.

To his temper, the sacrifice which suddenly rose before him as his duty, appeared one which 204
would reconcile him at once to the Deity he had offended, and the humanity he was tempted to betray. To his mind, enfeebled and exhausted by long fasting of the body and denial of every natural indulgence, such sacrifice of self seemed an imperious command from heaven. He would drag out his own life in misery, and obloquy, indeed, but what of that? Had not the great martyrs and founders of his Church endured as much or more? Was it not by such torture, voluntarily accepted and endured on earth, that the grace of God was won?

He would tell a lie, indeed; he would draw down ignominy on the name of the Church; he would make men believe that an anointed priest was a common murderer, swayed by low and jealous hatreds; but of this he did not think. In the tension and perplexity of his tortured soul, the vision of a sacrifice in which he would be the only sufferer, in which the woman would be saved, and the secret told to him be preserved, appeared as a heaven-sent solution of the doubts and difficulties in his path. Stretched in agonised prayer before one of the side altars of the cathedral, he imagined the afternoon sunbeams streaming through the high window on his face to be the 205
light of a celestial world, and in the hush and heat of the incense-scented air, he believed that he heard a voice which cried to him, 'By suffering all things are made pure.'

He was not a wise, or strong, or educated man. He had the heart of a poet, and the mind of a child. There was a courage in him to which sacrifice was welcome, and there was a credulity in him which made all exaggeration of simple faith possible. He was young and ignorant and weak; yet at the core of his heart there was a dim heroism: he could suffer and be mute, and in the depths of his heart he loved this woman better than himself, with a love which in his belief made him accursed for all time.

When he at last arose and went out of the church doors, his mind was made up to the course that he would take; an immense calm had descended upon the unrest of his soul.

The day was done, the sun had set, the scarlet flame of its afterglow bathed all the rusty walls and dusty ground with colours of glory. The crowd had dispersed; there was no sound in the 206
deserted square except the ripple of the water as it fell from the dolphins' mouths into the marble basin. As he heard that sweet, familiar murmur of the falling stream, the tears rose in his eyes and blotted out the flame-like pomp and beauty of the skies. Never again would he hear the water of the Marca river rushing, in cool autumn days, past the poplar stems and the primrose roots upon its mossy banks; never again would he hear in the place of his birth the grey-green waves of Arno sweeping through the cane-brakes to the sea.

At three of the clock on the following day the judgment was given in the court.

Generosa Fè was decreed guilty of the murder of her husband, and sentenced to twenty years of solitary confinement. She dropped like a stone when she heard the sentence, and was carried out from the court insensible. Her lover, when he heard it, gave a roar of anguish like that of some great beast in torment, and dashed his head against the wall and struggled like a mad bull in the hands of the men who tried to hold him. Don Gesualdo, waiting without, on the head of the staircase, did not even change countenance; to him this bitterness, as of the bitterness of death, had been long past; he had been long certain what the verdict would be, and he had, many hours before, resolved on his own part.

A great calm had come upon his soul, and his face had that tranquillity which comes alone from a soul which is at peace within itself.

The sultry afternoon shed its yellow light on the brown and grey and dusty town; the crowd poured out of the Court-house, excited, contrite, voluble, pushing and bawling at one another, ready to take the side of the condemned creature now that she was the victim of the law. The priest alone of them all did not move; he remained sitting on the upright chair under a sculptured allegory of Justice and Equity which was on the arch above his head, and with the golden light of sunset falling down on him through the high casement above. He paid no heed to the hurrying of the crowd, to the tramp of guards, to the haste of clerks and officials eager to finish their day's work and get away to their wine and dominoes at the taverns. His hands mechanically held his breviary; his lips mechanically repeated a Latin formula of prayer. When all the people were gone, one of the custodians of the place touched his arm, telling him that they were about to close the doors; he raised his eyes like one who is wakened from a trance, and to the man said quietly:

'I would see the president of the court for a moment, quite alone. Is it possible?'

After many demurs and much delay, they brought him into the presence of the judge, in a small chamber of the great palace.

'What do you want with me?' asked the judge, looking nervously at the white face and the wild eyes of his unbidden visitant.

Don Gesualdo answered: 'I am come to tell you that you have condemned an innocent woman.'

The judge looked at him with sardonic derision and contempt.

'What more?' he asked. 'If she be innocent, will you tell me who is guilty?'

'I am,' replied the priest.

At his trial he never spoke.

With his head bowed and his hands clasped, he stood in the cage where she had stood, and never replied by any single word to the repeated interrogations of his judges. Many witnesses were called, and all they said testified to the apparent truth of his self-accusation. Those who had always vaguely suspected him, all those who had seen him close the door of the sacristy on the crowd when he had borne the murdered man within, the mule drivers who had seen him digging at night under the great poplars, the sacristan who had been awakened by him that same night so early, even his old housekeeper, though she swore that he was a lamb, a saint, an angel, a creature too good for earth, a holy man whose mind was distraught by fasting, by visions, these all, either wilfully or ignorantly, bore witness which confirmed his own confession. The men of law had the mould and grass dug up under the Grand Duke's poplar, and when the blood-stained knife was found therein, the very earth, it seemed, yielded up testimony against him.

In the end, after many weeks of investigation, Generosa was released and Don Gesualdo was sentenced in her place.

Falko Melegari married her, and they went to live in his own country in the Lombard plains, and were happy and prosperous, and the village of Marca and the waters of its cane-shadowed stream knew them no more.

Sometimes she would say to her husband: 'I cannot think that he was guilty; there was some mystery in it.'

Her husband always laughed, and said in answer: 'He was guilty, be sure; it was I who frightened him into confession; those black rats of the Church have livers as white as their coats are black.'

Generosa did not wholly believe, but she thrust the grain of doubt and of remorse away from her and played with her handsome children. After all, she mused, what doubt could there be? Did not Don Gesualdo himself reveal his guilt, and had he not always cared for her, and was not the whole population of Marca willing to bear witness that they had always suspected him and had only held their peace out of respect for the Church?

He himself lived two long years amongst the galley-slaves of the western coast; all that time he never spoke, and he was considered by the authorities to be insane. Then, in the damp and cold of the third winter, his lungs decayed, his frail strength gave way, he died of what they called tuberculosis, in the spring of the year. In his last moments there was seen a light of unspeakable ecstasy upon his face, a smile of unspeakable rapture on his mouth.

'Domine Deus libera me!' he murmured, as he died.

A bird came and sang at the narrow casement of his prison cell as his spirit passed away. It was a nightingale: perchance one of those who had once sung to him in the summer nights from the wild-rose hedge at Marca.

THE SILVER CHRIST

I

Genistrello is a wild place in the Pistoiese hills.

Its name is derived from the genista or broom which covers many an acre of the soil, and shares with the stone pine and the sweet chestnut the scanty earth which covers its granite and sandstone. It is beautiful exceedingly; but its beauty is only seen by those to whom it is a dead letter which they have no eyes to read. It is one of the many spurs of the Apennines which here lie overlapping one another in curve upon curve of wooded slopes with the higher mountains rising behind them; palaces, which once were fortresses, hidden in their valleys, and ruined castles, or deserted monasteries, crowning their crests.

From some of these green hills the sea is visible, and when the sun sets where the sea is and 216
the red evening glows behind the distant peaks, it is lovely as a poet's dream.

On the side of this lonely hill, known as Genistrello, there dwelt a man of the name of Castruccio Lascarisi. He was called 'Caris' by the whole countryside; indeed, scarcely any knew that he had another patronymic, so entirely amongst these people does the nickname extinguish, by its perpetual use, the longer appellative.

His family name was of Greek extraction undoubtedly; learned Greeks made it familiar in the Italian Renaissance, at the courts of Lorenzo and of Ludovico; but how it had travelled to the Pistoiese hills to be borne by unlearned hinds none knew, any more than any know who first made the red tulip blossom as a wild flower amidst the wheat, or who first sowed the bulb of the narcissus amongst the wayside grass.

He lived miles away from the chapel and the hamlet. He had a little cabin in the heart of the chestnut woods, which his forefathers had lived in before him; they had no title which they could have shown for it except usage, but that had been title enough for them, and was enough for Caris.

It had been always so. It would be always so. His ideas went no further. The autumnal 217
migration was as natural and inevitable to him as to the storks and herons and wild duck which used to sail over his head, going southward like himself as he walked through the Tuscan to the Roman Maremma. But his dislike to the Maremma winters was great, and had never changed in him since he had trotted by his father's side, a curly-pated baby in a little goatskin shirt looking like a Correggio's St. John.

What he longed for, and what he loved, were the cool heights of Genistrello and the stone hut with the little rivulet of water gushing at its threshold. No one had ever disturbed his people there. It was a square little place built of big unmortared stones in old Etruscan fashion; the smoke from the hearth went out by a hole in the roof, and a shutter and door of unplaned wood closed its only apertures.

The lichen and weeds and mosses had welded the stones together, and climbed up over its conical rush roof. No better home could be needed in summer-time; and when the cold weather came, he locked the door and went down with his pack on his back and a goatshair belt round his 218
loins to take the familiar way to the Roman Maremma.

Caris was six-and-twenty years old; he worked amongst the chestnut woods in summer and went to the Maremma for field labour in the winter, as so many of these husbandmen do; walking the many leagues which separate the provinces, and living hardly in both seasons. The songs they sing are full of allusions to this semi-nomadic life, and the annual migration has been a custom ever since the world was young—when the great Roman fleets anchored where now are sand and marsh, and stately classic villas lifted their marble to the sun where now the only habitation seen is the charcoal-burner's rush-roofed, moss-lined hut.

Caris was a well-built, lithe, slender son of the soil, brown from sun and wind, with the straight features and the broad low brows of the classic type, and great brown eyes like those of the oxen which he drove over the vast plains down in the Maremma solitudes. He knew nothing except his work.

He was not very wise, and he was wholly unlearned, but he had a love of nature in his breast, 219
and he would sit at the door of his hut at evening time, with his bowl of bean-soup between his knees, and often forget to eat in his absorbed delight as the roseate glow from the vanished sunrays overspread all the slopes of the Pistoiese Apennines and the snow-crowned crests of the Carara mountains.

'What do you see there, goose?' said a charcoal-burner, once passing him as he sat thus upon his threshold with the dog at his feet.

Caris shrugged his shoulders stupidly and half-ashamed. He could not read the great book outspread upon the knees of the mountains, yet he imperfectly felt the beauty of its emblazoned pages.

The only furniture in the cabin was a table made of a plank, two rude benches, and one small cupboard; the bed was only dried leaves and moss. There were a pipkin, two platters, and a big iron pot which swung by a cord and a hook over the stones where the fire, when lighted, burned. They were enough; he would not have known what to do with more if he had had more. He was only there from May to October; and in the fragrant summers of Italian chestnut woods, privation is easily borne. The winter life was harder and more hateful; yet it never occurred to him to do 220
else than to go to Maremma; his father and grandfather had always gone thither, and as naturally as the chestnuts ripen and fall, so do the men in autumn join the long lines of shepherds and

drovers and women and children and flocks and herds which wind their way down the mountain slopes and across the level wastes of plain and marsh to seek herbage and work for the winter-time.

It never entered the head of Caris, or of the few who knew him or worked with him, to wonder how he and his had come thither. They were there as the chestnut-trees were, as the broom was, as the goats and squirrels and wood-birds were there. The peasant no more wonders about his own existence than a stone does. For generations a Lascaris had lived in that old stone hut which might itself be a relic of an Etruscan tomb or temple. No one was concerned to know further.

The peasant does not look back; he only sees the road to gain his daily meal of bread or chestnuts. The past has no meaning to him, and to the future he never looks. That is the reason 221
why those who want to cultivate or convince him fail utterly. If a man cannot see the horizon itself, it is of no use to point out to him spires or trees or towers which stand out against it.

The world has never understood that the moment the labourer is made to see, he is made unhappy, being ill at ease and morbidly envious and ashamed, and wholly useless. Left alone, he is content in his own ruminant manner, as the buffalo is when left untormented amidst the marshes, grazing at peace and slumbering amidst the rushes and the canes.

Caris was thus content. He had health and strength, though sometimes he had a fever-chill from new-turned soil and sometimes a frost-chill from going out on an empty stomach before the sun had broken the deep shadows of the night. But from these maladies all outdoor labourers suffer, and he was young, and they soon passed. He had been the only son of his mother; and this fact had saved him from conscription. As if she had lived long enough when she had rendered him this service, she died just as he had fulfilled his twenty-third year; and without her the stone hut seemed for awhile lonely; he had to make his fire, and boil or roast his chestnuts, and mend 222
holes in his shirts, and make his own rye loaves; but he soon got used to this, and when in Maremma he always worked with a gang, and was fed and lodged—badly, indeed, but regularly—at the huge stone burn which served such purposes on the vast tenuta where the long lines of husbandmen toiled from dusk of dawn to dusk of eve under the eye and lash of their overseer; and when on his native slopes of Genistrello he was always welcome to join the charcoal-burners' rough company or the woodsmen's scanty supper, and seldom passed, or had need to pass, his leisure hours alone. And these were very few.

His mother had been a violent-tempered woman, ruling him with a rod of iron, as she had ruled her husband before him; a woman loud of tongue, stern of temper, dreaded for miles around as a witch and an evil-eye; and although the silence and solitude which reigned in the cabin after her death oppressed him painfully at first, he soon grew used to these, and found the comfort of them. He brought a dog with him after his winter in Maremma which followed on his mother's loss—a white dog of the Maremma breed, and he and the dog kept house together in the 223
lonely woods in fellowship and peace. Caris was gentle and could never beat or kick a beast as others of his kind do; and the oxen he drove knew this. He felt more akin to them and to the dogs than he did to the men with whom he worked. He could not have expressed or explained this, but he felt it.

He had little mind, and what he had moved slowly when it moved at all; but he had a generous nature, a loyal soul, and a simple and manly enjoyment of his hard life. It did not seem hard to him. He had run about on his bare feet all his childhood until their soles were as hard as leather, and he was so used to his daily meal of chestnuts in cold weather, and of maize or rye-bread with cabbage, or bean-soup, in the hot season, that he never thought of either as meagre fare. In summer he wore rough hempen shirt and trousers; in winter goatskin and rough homespun wool. In appearance, in habits, in clothing, in occupation, he differed little from the peasant who was on that hillside in the times of Pliny and of Properticus. Only the gods were changed; Pan piped no more in the thicket, the Naiad laughed no longer in the brook, the Nymph and Satyr frolicked 224
never beneath the fronds of the ferns.

In their stead there was only a little gaudy chapel on a stony slope, and a greasy, double-chinned, yellow-cheeked man in black, who frowned if you did not give him your hardly-earned pence, and lick the uneven bricks of the chapel floor when he ordered you a penance.

Caris cared little for that man's frown.

He sat thus at his door one evening when the sun was setting behind the many peaks and domes of the Apennine spurs which fronted him. The sun itself had sunk beyond them half an hour before, but the red glow which comes and stays long after it was in the heavens and on the hills.

Genistrello was a solitary place, and only here and there a hut or cot like his own was hidden away under the saplings and undergrowth. Far away down in the valley were the belfries and towers of the little strong-walled city which had been so often as a lion in the path to the invading hosts of Germany; and like a narrow white cord the post-road, now so rarely used, wound in and out until its slender thread was lost in the blue vapours of the distance, and the shadows from the 225
clouds.

Bells were tolling from all the little spires and towers on the hills and in the valleys, for it was a vigil, and there was the nearer tinkle of the goats' bells under the heather and broom as those innocent marauders cropped their supper off the tender chestnut-shoots, the trails of ground ivy, and the curling woodbine. Caris, with his bowl of bean-soup between his knees and his hunch of rye-bread in his hand, ate hungrily, whilst his eyes filled themselves with the beauty of the landscape. His stomach was empty—which he knew, and his soul was empty—which he did not

know.

He looked up, and saw a young woman standing in front of him. She was handsome, with big, bright eyes, and a rosy mouth, and dusky glossy hair coiled up on her head like a Greek Venus.

He had never seen her before, and her sudden apparition there startled him.

'Good-even, Caris,' she said familiarly, with a smile like a burst of sunlight. 'Is the mother indoors, eh?'

Caris continued to stare at her.

'Eh, are you deaf?' she asked impatiently. 'Is the mother in, I want to know?' 226

'My mother is dead,' said Caris, without preamble.

'Dead! When did she die?'

'Half a year ago,' said Caris, with the peasant's confusion of dates and elongation of time.

'That is impossible,' said the young woman quickly. 'I saw her myself and spoke with her here on this very spot in Easter week. What makes you say she is dead?'

'Because she is dead!' said Caris doggedly. 'If you do not believe it, go and ask the sacristan and sexton over there.'

He made a gesture of his head towards the belfry of an old hoary church, dedicated to St. Fulvo, which was seven miles away amongst the chestnut woods of an opposing hillside, and where his mother had been buried by her wish, because it was her birthplace.

The girl this time believed him. She was dumb for a little while with astonishment and regret. Then she said, in a tone of awe and expectation, 'She left her learning and power with you, eh?—and the books?'

'No,' said Caris rudely. 'I had all the uncanny things buried with her. What use were they? She 227
lived and died with scarce a shift to her back.'

'Oh!' said the girl, in a shocked tone, as though she reproved a blasphemy. 'She was a wonderful woman, Caris.'

Caris laughed a little.

'Eh, you say so. Well, all her wisdom never put bit nor drop in her mouth nor a copper piece in her hand that I did not work for; what use was it, pray?'

'Hush. Don't speak so!' said the maiden, looking timidly over her shoulder to the undergrowth and coppice growing dim in the shadows of the evening.

'Tis the truth!' said Caris stubbornly. 'I did my duty by her, poor soul; and yet I fear me the Evil One waited for her all the while, for as soon as the rattle came in her throat, a white owl flapped and screeched on the thatch, and a black cat had sat on the stones yonder ever since the sun had set.'

'The saints preserve us!' murmured the girl, her rich brown and red skin growing pale.

There was silence; Caris finished munching his bread; he looked now and then at his visitor 228
with open-eyed surprise and mute expectation.

'You have buried the things with her?' she asked him, in a low tone, at length.

He nodded in assent.

'What a pity! What a pity!'

'Why that?'

'Because if they are underground with her nobody can use them.'

Caris stared with his eyes wider opened still.

'What do you want with the devil's tools, a fresh, fair young thing like you?'

'Your mother used them for me,' she answered crossly. 'And she had told me a number of things—ay, a vast number! And just in the middle uncle spied us out, and he swore at her and dragged me away, and I had never a chance to get back here till to-night, and now—now you say she is dead, and she will never tell me aught any more.'

'What can you want so sore to know?' said Caris, with wonder, as he rose to his feet.

'That is my business,' said the girl.

'True, so it is,' said Caris.

But he looked at her with wonder in his dark-brown, ox-like eyes.

'Where do you live?' he asked; 'and how knew you my name?' 229

'Everybody knows your name,' she answered. 'You are Caris, the son of Lisabetta, and when you sit on your doorstep it would be a fool indeed would not see who you are.'

'So it would,' said Caris. 'But you,' he added after a pause, 'who are you? And what did you want with Black Magic?'

'I am Santina, the daughter of Neri, the smith, by the west gate in Pistoia,' she said in reply to the first question, and making none to the second.

'But what wanted you of my mother?' he persisted.

'They said she knew strange things,' said the girl evasively.

'If she did she had little profit of them,' said Caris sadly.

The girl looked at him with great persuasiveness in her face, and leaned a little nearer to him.

'You did not really bury the charms with her? You have got them inside? You will let me see them, eh?'

'As the saints live, I buried them,' said Caris truthfully; 'they were rubbish, or worse; accursed maybe. They are safe down in the ground till the Last Day. What can such a bright wench as yourself want with such queer, unhallowed notions?' 230

The girl Santina glanced over her shoulders to make sure that no one was listening; then she said in a whisper:

'There is the Gobbo's treasure in these woods somewhere—and Lisabetta had the wand that finds gold and silver.'

Caris burst into a loud laugh.

'Ah, truly! That is a good jest. If she could find gold and silver, why did we always have iron spoons for our soup, and a gnawing imp in our stomachs? Go to, my maiden. Do not tell such tales. Lisabetta was a poor and hungry woman all her days, and scarce left enough linen to lay her out in decently, so help me Heaven!'

The girl shook her head.

'You know there is the treasure in the woods,' she said angrily.

'Nay, I never heard of it. Oh, the Gobbo's? Che-che! For hundreds of years they have grubbed for it all over the woods, and who ever found anything, eh?'

'Your mother was very nigh it often and often. She told me.' 231

'In her dreams, poor soul!'

'But dreams mean a great deal.'

'Sometimes,' said Caris seriously. 'But what is it to you?' he added, the suspicion always inherent to the peasant struggling with his admiration of the girl, who, unbidden, had seated herself upon the stone before the door. With feminine instinct she felt that to make him do what she wished, she must confide in him, or appear to confide.

And thereon she told him that unless she could save herself, her family would wed her to a wealthy old curmudgeon who was a cart-maker in the town; and to escape this fate she had interrogated the stars by means of the dead Lisabetta and of the astrologer Faraone, who dwelt also in the hills, but this latter reader of destiny would tell her nothing, because he was a friend of her father's, and now the witch of Genistrello was dead and had left her fate but half told!

'What did she tell you?' said Caris, wincing at the word witch.

'Only that I should go over the mountains to some city and grow rich. But it was all dark—obscure—uncertain; she said she would know more next time; and how could I tell that before I came again she would have died?' 232

'You could not tell that, no,' said Caris absently.

He was thinking of the elderly well-to-do wheelwright in the town, and he felt that he would have liked to brain him with one of his own wooden spokes or iron linchpins. For the girl Santina was very beautiful as she sat there with her large eyes shining in the shadows and the tears of chagrin and disappointment stealing down her cheeks. For her faith in her charms and cards had been great, and in her bosom there smouldered desires and ideas of which she did not speak.

She saw the effect that her beauty produced, and said to herself: 'He shall dig up the things before he is a week older.'

She got up with apparent haste and alarm; seeing how dark it had grown around her, only a faint red light lingering far away above the lines of the mountains.

'I am staying at the four roads with my aunt, who married Massaio,' she said as she looked over her shoulder and walked away between the chestnut sapling and the furze. 233

Caris did not offer to accompany or try to follow her. He stood like one bewitched watching her lithe, erect figure run down the hill and vanish as the path wound out of sight amongst the pines. No woman had ever moved him thus. He felt as if she had poured into him at once scalded wine and snow-water.

She was so handsome and bold and lissom, and yet she made his flesh creep talking of his mother's incantations, and bidding him knock at the door of the grave.

'What an awful creature for tempting a man is a woman,' he thought, 'and they will scream at their own shadows one minute and dare the devil himself the next!'

That night Caris sat smoking his black pipe on the stone before the door where she had sat, and the scalded wine and the snow-water coursed by turns feverishly through his veins, as once through Cymon's.

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II

'Where hast been, hussy?' said Massaio crossly, yet jokingly, to his niece when she went home that night.

The four roads was a place where the four cart-tracks at the foot of that group of hills met and parted; the man was a seller of wood, and his cottage and his wood-yards and sheds thatched with furze stood where the four roads met under some huge stone pines. The aunt of Santina had married there many years before.

They were people well-off, who ate meat, drank wine, and had a house full of hardware, pottery, and old oak: people as far removed from Caris and his like as if they had been lords or princes. He knew them by sight, and doffed his hat to them in the woods.

The thought that she was the niece of Massaio, the man who paid for his wood and charcoal with rolls of banknotes, and sent his own mules to bring the loads down from the hills, placed 235
Santina leagues away from and above him.

The only women with whom he had ever had any intercourse had been the rude wenches who tramped with the herds, and dug and hoed and cut grass and grain on the wastes of the Maremma; creatures burnt black with the sun and wrinkled by the winds, and with skin hard and hairy, and feet whose soles were like wood—'la femelle de l'homme,' but not so clean of hide or sweet of breath as the heifers they drove down along the sea-ways in autumn weather.

This girl who called herself Santina was wholesome as lavender, fresh as field thyme, richly and fairly odoured as the flower of the wild pomegranate.

When supper was over and the house was on the point of being bolted and barred, Santina threw her brown soft round arm round her uncle's neck.

'I went down to see Don Fabio, and he was out, and I sat talking with his woman and forgot the time,' she said penitently.

Don Fabio was the priest of the little gaudy church low down in the valley where the post-road 236
ran.

Massaio patted the cheek, which was like an apricot, and believed her.

Her aunt did not.

'There is still snow where the man of God lives up yonder, and there is no water, only dust, on her shoes,' thought the shrewd observer.

But she did not say so; for she had no wish to put her husband out of humour with her kinsfolk.

But to Santina, when with her alone, she said testily:

'I fear you are going again to the black arts of that woman Lisabetta; no good ever is got of them; it is playing with fire, and the devil breathes the fire out of his mouth!'

'I cannot play with it if I wished,' said Santina innocently; 'Lisabetta is dead months ago.'

'That is no loss to anybody if it be true,' said Eufemia Massaio angrily.

Lisabetta had been such an obscure and lonely creature, that her death had been taken little note of anywhere, and the busy, bustling housewife of Massaio had had no heed of such an event. 237
She had not even known the woman by sight; had only been cognizant of her evil repute for powers of sorcery.

Santina went up to her room, which she shared with three of the Massaio children. Long after they were sleeping in a tangle of rough hair and brown limbs and healthy rosy nudity, the girl, their elder, sat up on the rude couch staring at the moon through the little square window.

She was thinking of words that Lisabetta had said, as she had dealt out the cards and gazed in a bowl of spring water, 'Over the hills and far away; wealth and pleasure and love galore—where? how? when?—ay, that is hid; but we shall see, we shall see; only over the hills you go, and all the men are your slaves.'

How? when? where? That was hidden with the dead fortune-teller under the earth.

Santina did not for a moment doubt the truth of the prophecy, but she was impatient for its fulfilment to begin. She knew she was of unusual beauty, and the organist at the duomo in Pistoia had told her that her voice was of rare compass, and only wanted tuition to be such a voice as 238
fetches gold in the big world which lay beyond these hills. But that was all.

She could sing well and loudly, and she knew all the 'canzoe' and 'stornelli' of the district by heart; but there her knowledge stopped; and no one had cared to instruct or enlighten her more. Her own family thought the words of the organist rubbish.

There are so many of these clear-voiced, flute-throated girls and boys singing in their adolescence in the fields and woods and highways; but no one thinks anything of their carols, and life and its travail tell on them and make them hoarse, and their once liquid tones grow harsh and rough from exposure to the weather, and from calling so loudly from hill to hill to summon their children, or their cattle, or their comrades, home.

The human voice is a pipe soon broken. The nightingale sings on and on and on, from youth to age, and neither rain nor wind hurt his throat; but men and women, in rough, rustic lives, soon

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lose their gift of song. They sing at all ages, indeed, over their furrows, their washing-tank, their yoked oxen, their plait of straw or hank of flax; but the voice loses its beauty as early as the skin its bloom.

Santina had no notion in what way she could make hers a means to reach those distant parts in which her fate was to await her if the cards spake truly. Only to get away somewhere, somehow, was her fixed idea; and she would no more have married the sober, well-to-do wheelwright her people picked out for her, than she would have thrown her vigorous and virgin body down the well.

'He shall get me the cards and the treasure wand out of her grave before this moon is out,' she said, between her white teeth, with which she could crack nuts and bite through string and grind the black bread into powder.

Caris took no definite shape in her eyes except as an instrument to get her will and ways. She was but a country girl just knowing her letters, and no more; but the yeast of restless ambition was fermenting in her.

She sat staring at the moon, while the tired children slept as motionless as plucked poppies. The moon was near its full. Before it waned she swore to herself that she would have Lisabetta's 240
magic tools in her hands. Could she only know more, or else get money! She was ignorant, but she knew that money was power. With money she could get away over those hills which seemed drawn like a screen between her fate and her.

Marry Matteo! She laughed aloud, and thought the face in the moon laughed too.

The outfit was made, the pearls were bought, the 'stimatore' who is called in to appraise every article of a marriage corredo had fingered and weighed and adjudged the cost of every single thing, and the wheelwright had bought the bed and the furniture, and many other matters not usual or incumbent on a bridegroom, and her parents had said that such a warm man and so liberal a one was never seen in their day: and very little time was there now left wherein she could escape her fate.

All unwillingness on her part would have been regarded by her parents as an insanity, and would have only seemed to her bridegroom as the spice which is added to the stewed hare. There was no chance for her but to use this single fortnight which she had been allowed to spend in 241
farewell at the four roads of Genistrello.

Her uncle and aunt had helped generously in the getting together of the corredo; and their wish to have her with them had been at once conceded. Her parents were poor, and the woodsman was rich as rubies are esteemed, amongst the oak scrub and chestnut saplings of the Pistoiese Apennines.

The Massaio people liked her and indulged her; but had they dreamed that she meant to elude her marriage they would have dragged her by the hair of her head, or kicked her with the soles of their hob-nailed boots down the hillside into her father's house, and given her up to punishment without pity, as they would have given a runaway horse or dog.

The day for the ceremony had not been fixed, for in this country, where love intrigues speed by as swift as lightning, matrimonial contracts move slowly and cautiously; but the word was passed, the goods were purchased, the house was ready; and to break a betrothal at such a point would have been held a crime and a disgrace.

Santina herself knew that; she was well aware that decent maidens do not do such things 242
when the dower clothing and linen are all stitched, and the marriage-bed bought by the bridegroom. She knew, but she did not care. She was headstrong, changeable, vain and full of thirst for pleasure and for triumph and for wealth. She would not pass her life in her little native town, in the wheelwright's old house with a jealous rheumatic curmudgeon, for all the saints in heaven and all the friends on earth.

'Not I! Not I! Oh, why did Lisabetta go underground for ever with half the cards unread?' she thought, as she sat upon her couch of sacking and dry maize leaves, and she shook her clenched hands at the moon with anger at its smiling indifference. The moon could sail where it chose and see what it liked; and she was chained down here by her youth, and her sex, and her ignorance, and her poverty; and her only one faint hope of escape and aid lay in the closed grave of a dead old woman.

Though she was voluble and garrulous and imprudent and passionate, she could keep her own counsel.

Under her Tuscan volubility there was also the Tuscan secretiveness. Nobody saw inside her 243
true thoughts. Her mind was like a little locked iron box into which no one could peep.

The Tuscan laughs quickly, weeps quickly, rages, fumes, smiles, jumps with joy; seems a merely emotional creature, with his whole heart turned inside out; but in his inmost nature there is always an ego wholly different to that which is shown to others, always a deep reserve of unspoken intents and calculations and desires.

It resembles a rosebush all bloom and dew and leaf and sunshine, inside which is made the nest of a little snake, never seen, but always there; sometimes, instead of the snake, there is only a flat stone; but something alien there always is under the carelessly blowing roses.

The Tuscan never completely trusts his nearest or dearest, his oldest friend, his truest companion, his fondest familiar; be he gentle or simple, he never gives himself away.

The homeliest son and daughter of the soil will always act as though he or she were cognizant of the axiom of the fine philosopher of courts: 'Deal with your friend at all times as though some day he would become your enemy.'

Santina, therefore, had told her secret intent to no living soul, and only Caris's old weird mother had been shrewd enough to guess it in the girl's flashing eyes and in her eager questioning of Fate. 244

The house of Massaio was a very busy house, especially so at this season of the year, when the purchasing and fetching and stacking of wood for the coming winter was in full vigour, and all the boys and girls were up in the woods all day long, seeking out and bringing down brushwood and pines and cut heather.

Santina with wonderful alacrity entered into the work, although usually she was averse to rough labour, fearing that it would spoil her hands and her skin before she could get to that unknown life of delight which she coveted.

But going with the heedless and unobservant children up on the hillsides where the heather and chestnut scrub grew, and farther up still where the tall stone pines grew, she had chances of meeting Caris or of again getting away to his hut unnoticed. He was usually at this season occupied in carrying wood or helping the charcoal-burners, and was now in one place, now in another, as men who have no fixed labour must be.

Moreover, her just estimate of her own attraction for him made her guess that this year he would choose to labour nearer the four roads than usual, if he could get employment, and she was in no manner surprised when she saw him amongst a group of men who were pulling at the ropes of one of her uncle's wood-carts, to prevent the cart and the mules harnessed to it from running amuck down the steep incline which led to that green nook at the foot of Genistrello, where the woodman's buildings and sheds were situated. 245

She gave him a sidelong glance and a shy smile as she passed them, and Caris, colouring to the roots of his hair, let his rope slacken and fall, and was sworn at fiercely by his fellow-labourers, for the cart lurched, and one of the wheels sunk up to its hub in the soft wet sand.

'Get away, lass!' shouted the carter roughly. 'Where women are men's work is always fouled.'

'You unmannerly churl!' shouted Caris; and he struck the carter sharply across the shoulders with his end of the rope.

The man flung himself round and tried to strike his assailant in return with the thong of his long mule-whip; but Caris caught it in his grip and closed with him. 246

They wrestled savagely for a moment, then the carter, freeing his right arm, snatched out of his breeches belt the knife which every man carries, however severely the law may denounce and forbid such a habit. It would have buried its sharp, narrow blade in the ribs or the breast of Caris had not the other men, at a shout from Massaio, who came hurrying up, thrown themselves on the two combatants, and pulled them apart.

'To —— with you both!' cried Massaio, furious to see his cart stuck in the sand, its load of wood oscillating, and the time wasted of men whom he paid by the day.

Santina had stood quietly on the bank above the mules and the men, watching with keen interest and pleasure.

'Why did you stop them, uncle?' she cried to Massaio pettishly. 'I do love to see two good lads fight. 'Tis a sight that warms one's blood like good communion wine.'

But no one heeded what she said.

On these hills women are used but never listened to by any man.

'The cows give milk, not opinions,' the men said to their womenkind. 247

Only Caris had seen in the sunlight that lithe erect figure amongst the gorse, and those two burning, melting, shining eyes, which had incited him to combat.

He was deeply angered with Massaio for stopping the duello.

A knife? What mattered a knife? He had one, too, in his breeches band; in another second he, too, would have had his out, and then Santina would have seen work fit for a brave, bold woman to watch, with the red blood running merrily through the thirsty sand and the tufted heather.

He was not quarrelsome or bloodthirsty; but any man who goes down into Maremma through the 'macchia,' where the 'mal-viventi' hide, learns to know very well how to sell his own life dearly, and hold the lives of others cheaply; and these contraband knives, which the law forbids so uselessly, cost very little to buy, and yet do their work surely, quickly, and well.

He cast one longing look up at Santina standing above amongst the gorse, and moved on sullenly with the other men and the mule, when the cart with rare effort had been pulled erect and dragged out of the sand. It was then only an hour or two after daybreak. 248

The day came and ended without Caris seeing his goddess again.

During the repose at noontide, when he with others broke bread and ate soup at the big table in Massaio's kitchen, she was not there. They were served by her aunt Eufemia. He had only accepted this work of fetching and stacking for sake of the vicinity to her which it offered; and his heart was heavy and his blood was turned, as he would himself have expressed it.

Chagrin and irritation, in the Italian's opinion, turns the blood as tempest changes milk. He was too shy and tongue-tied to venture to inquire for her; and the instinct of secrecy which characterizes all passion was joined to his natural hesitation in speech.

Massaio's people seemed, too, to him to be very grand folks, with their byres and stalls filled with beasts, and their casks of wine and great earthen jars of oil standing there for anybody to read in mute declaration of their prosperity.

A barrel of wine had never entered the hut of the Lascarises within the memory of man. No one took any notice of him. He was a 'bracciante,' paid by the day, nothing more. Had Eufemia known that he was the old witch's son he would have attracted her attention; but she did not know it. When there is quick rough work to be done, nobody notices who does it. 249

When the last wood of the day was brought in, Caris went home by himself, by ways he knew. He was downcast and dull. He had been baulked of his knife-play with the carter, and he had not seen Santina.

At a bend in the hill-path, where the chestnut saplings grew taller than usual, and aged pines with scaly scarred trunks were left standing, he heard a laugh amongst the leafy scrub, and in the dusk of the moonless evening a slender straight figure shot up from its screen of heather.

'Eh, Caris!' cried the girl to him. 'What a poor day's work! Have you left Black Simon without an inch of steel in him? Fie for shame! A man should always write his name large when he has a stiletto for his pen.'

Caris gazed at her dumb and agitated, the veins in his throat and temples throbbing. 250

'It was your uncle stopping the play,' he muttered; 'and I could not begin to brawl in his house.'

Santina shrugged her shoulders. 'Brave men don't want excuses,' she said unkindly.

'Ask of me in Maremma,' said Caris sullenly. 'They will tell you whether men taste my blade.'

'Maremma is far,' said Santina, sarcastic and jeering; 'and the men there are weak!'

'You shall see what you shall see,' muttered Caris, growing purple, red, and then pale. 'Tell me a man you have a quarrel with—nay, one who stands well with you—that will be better.'

'Those are words,' she said, with curt contempt.

'You shall see deeds. Who is it stands well with you?'

'No one. Many wish it.'

'Your promised man should; but he is old, and a poor creature. 'Twould be no credit to do away with him.'

'He is a poor creature,' said Santina, her lips curling. 'So are you, when to do a woman a pleasure you will not open a grave.' 251

'Open a grave! Nay, nay, the saints forbid.'

'The saints! That is how all weaklings and cowards talk. What harm could it do any saint in heaven for you to get those magic things? If they be the devil's toys and tools, as you say, more reason to pluck them out of holy ground.'

'How you go on!' muttered Caris, whose slower brain was scared and terrified by his companion's rapid and fearless strides of thought. 'Heaven have mercy on us! You would have me commit sacrilege! Rifle a tomb! Holy Christ! and that tomb my mother's!'

The sweat stood on his brow, and made the chestnut curls of his hair wet as with dew or rain.

Santina poured into his all the magnetic force and fire of her own eyes, shining in the dusk like some wild cat of the woods.

'Sacrilege! whew! Where got you that big word? You put the things in; you can take the things out. Your mother will sleep sounder without them. I want them, my lad, do you understand? I want them. And what I want I get from those who love me; and those who deny me, hate me, and I hate them.' 252

Caris shuddered as he heard.

'I love you,' he stammered. 'Do not hate me—for pity's sake, do not hate me.'

'Obey me, then,' she said, with her dark level brows contracting over her luminous eyes.

'In anything else!'

'Oh, ay! It is always anything else, except the one thing which is wanted!'

'But what is it you want?'

'I want the charms and the wand and the book out of your mother's grave.'

'What could you do with them? Without the knowledge, they are no more than a dry twig and a few dirty play-cards.'

'How know you what knowledge I have? I want the things, that is all, I tell you.'

'They were accursed if they had any use in them. And what use had they? She who understood them lived and died all but a beggar. If they had any power in them, they cheated and starved her.'

The speech was a long one for Caris, whose thoughts were so little used to fit themselves to utterance.

Santina heard him with the passionate impatience and intolerance of a swift mind with a dull one, of a bold will with a timid nature. 253

She had set her soul on possessing these magic things; she was convinced that she should find the way to make them work; superstition was intense and overwhelming in her, and allied to a furious ambition, all the more powerful because given loose rein through her complete ignorance.

'Oh, you white-livered ninny!' she cried to him, with boundless scorn. 'Would to Heaven Black Simon had buried his blade into you! It would have rid the earth of a dolt and a dastard!'

'Then let me be, if I be worth so little,' said Caris sullenly, whilst his eyes devoured her beauty half seen in the darkness which preceded the late rising of the moon. Then she saw that she had mistaken her path, and she changed it. She let great tears come into her eyes, and her mouth trembled, and her bosom heaved.

'This was the lad I could have loved!' she murmured. 'This was the strong bold youth whom I thought would be my brave and bonny damo before all the countryside. Oh, what fools are women—what fools!—taken by the eye, with a falcon glance and a sheaf of nut-brown curls and a broad breast that looks as if the heart of a true man beat in it. Oh, woe is me! Oh, woe is me! I dreamed a dream, and it has no more truth in it than the slate shingle here has of silver.' 254

She kicked downward scornfully as she spoke the crumbling slate and mia which showed here and there betwixt the heather plants in the tremulous shadow relics of a quarry worked long centuries before, and forsaken when the fires of the camp of Hun and Goth had blazed upon those hillsides.

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Caris stared at her as she spoke, his whole frame thrilling and all his senses alive as they had never been before under a woman's glamour. He heeded not the derision, he thought not of the strangeness of the avowal; delicacy is not often a plant which grows in uncultured soil, and he had none of the intuition and suspicion which an educated man would have been moved by before such an avowal and such an upbraiding. He only knew, or thought he was bidden to know, that he had the power in him to please her fancy and awaken her desire.

'You love me! You can love me!' he shouted in a loud, vibrating, exultant voice which wakened all the echoes of the hills around him, and he sprang forward to seize her in his arms. But Santina, agile and strong, pushed him back, and stood aloof.

'Nay, nay, stand off!' she cried to him. 'Ne'er a coward shall touch me. All I said was, you might have won me.' 256

'I am no coward,' said Caris hotly. 'And why do you fool and tempt one so? 'Tis unfair. 'Tis unfair. You may rue it.'

His face was convulsed, his eyes were aflame, he breathed like a bull in a hard combat.

Santina smiled; that was how she liked to see a man look.

She had all the delight in watching and weighing the effects of the passion which she excited that moved the great queens of Asia and the empresses of Rome. She was only a poor girl, but the love of dominance and the violence of the senses were in her strong and hot and reckless.

In her was all that ferment of ambition and vanity and discontent which drives out from their hamlets those who are born with something in them different to their lot and alien to their fellows. She had never been anywhere farther afield than the hills and woods about Pistanse, but she knew that there were big cities somewhere, where men were made of money, and women wore satin all day long, and everybody ate and drank out of gold plates and silver vessels. She knew that; and to get to these kingdoms of delight was the one longing which possessed her day and night. 257

She wanted to get one thing out of this man—the means of liberty—and she cared nothing how she won it. Besides, he was so simple, so malleable, so credulous, it diverted her to play on him as one could play on a chitarra, making the strings leap and sigh and thrill and groan. And he was good to look at, too, with his tanned, fresh face, and his clustering curls, and his strong, straight, cleanly limbs.

'I only said you might have won me,' she repeated—'nay, you may still, if you have the heart of a man and not of a mouse. Hearken!'

'Do not fool me,' said Caris sternly, 'or as the Lord lives above us——'

She laughed airily.

'Oh, big oaths cannot frighten me. It shall lie with you. I want those things of your mother's. When you bring them I will thank you—as you choose.'

He grew gray under his brown, bright skin.

'Always that,' he muttered—always that!'

'Naturally, it is what I want.' 258

'Go, get them, since you think it holy work.'

'I will,' said Santina, 'and then good-night to you, my good Caris; you will never see me more.'

She turned on her heel and began to run down the slope in the moonlight.

Santina would not have ventured inside the graveyard at night to get mountains of gold. She would not have passed after nightfall within a mile of its gate without crossing herself and murmuring Aves all the way. Superstition was born and bred in every inch of her bone and every drop of her blood, and she would no more have carried out her threat than she would have carried the mountain upon her shoulders.

But he did not know that. She was so bold, so careless, so self-confident, if she had told him she would split open the earth to its centre he would have believed her.

He overtook her as she fled down the slope and seized her in his arms.

'No, no!' he cried, close in her ear. 'It is not work for you. If it must be done I will do it. Will you swear that you will give yourself to me if I bring you the unholy things?' 259

'I love you!' she said breathlessly, while her lips brushed his throat—'yes, I do love you! Go, get the things, and bring them hither at dawn. I will meet you. Oh, I will find the way to use them, never fear. That is my business. Get you gone. They are calling below. They shut the house at the twenty-four.'

No one was calling, but she wished to get rid of him. He was strong, and he was on fire with her touch and her glance; he strained her in his arms until her face was bruised against the hairy sinews and bones of his chest.

She thrust him away with a supreme effort, and ran down the stony side of the hill, and was swallowed up in the duskiness of the tangled scrub.

A little scops owl flitted past, uttering its soft, low note, which echoes so far and long in the

silence of evening in the hills.

Caris shook himself like a man who has been half stunned by a heavy fall. He was on fire with the alcohol of passion, and chilled to the marrow by the promise he had made.

Open a tomb! Rifle a grave! See his mother again in her cere clothes—see all the untold and untellable horrors of which the dead and the earth make their secrets! 260

Oh, why had he ever admitted that he had sealed up the uncanny things in the coffin! He could have bitten his tongue out for its tell-tale folly.

He had thrust them in almost without consciousness of his act as he had hammered the lid down on the deal shell all alone with it in his cabin.

The things had been always under his mother's pillow at night; it had seemed to him that they ought to go with her down to the grave. He had had a secret fear of them, and he had thought that their occult powers would be nullified once thrust in sacred soil. He had been afraid to burn them.

The churchyard in which his mother lay was on the topmost slope of Genistrello, where the brown brick tower of the massive medieval church of St. Fulvo rose amongst the highest pines, upon a wind-swept and storm-scarred scarp.

Few were the dead who were taken there; meagre and miserable were the lot and the pittance of its poor Vicar, and weather-beaten and worn by toil were the score of peasants who made up its congregation, coming thence from the scattered huts and farmhouses of the hillside. 261

It was seven miles off from the chestnut wood where he dwelt, and twice seven from the four roads; a lonely and not over-safe tramp across the hills and the water-courses and the brushwood.

But it was not the distance which troubled him, nor any possible danger. He knew his way through all that country, and the full round moon was by now showing her broad disc over the edge of the farther mountains on the south-east. But the thought of what he would have to do at the end of his pilgrimage made him sick with fear not altogether unmanly.

He knew that what he would do would be sacrilege and punishable by law, but it was not of that he thought: his mind was filled with those terrors of the nether world, of the unknown, of the unseen, which a lonely life and a latent imagination made at once so indistinct and so powerful to him.

'Had she but asked me anything else! 'he thought piteously. 'Anything!—to cut off my right hand or to take the life of any man!' 262

But she had set him this task; inexorably as women of old set their lovers to search for the Grail or beard the Saracen in his mosque, and he knew that he must do what she willed or never again feel those warm red lips breathe on his own.

He tightened the canvas belt round his loins, and went home to his cabin to fetch a pickaxe and a spade, and, bidding his dog stay to guard the empty hut, he set out to walk across the vast steep breadth of woodland darkness which separated him from the church and churchyard which were his goal.

A labourer on those hills all his life, and accustomed also to the more perilous and murderous thickets of Maremma, where escaped galley-slaves hid amongst the boxwood and the bearberry, and lived in caves and hollow trees, no physical alarm moved him as he strode on across the uneven ground with the familiar scents and sounds of a woodland night around him on every side.

The moon had now risen so high that the valleys were bathed in her light, and the sky was radiant with a brilliancy which seemed but a more ethereal day. 263

He had no eyes for its beauty. His whole soul was consumed by the horror of his errand. He only looked up at the pointers and the pole-star which he knew, so as to guide himself by them up the steep slopes to the church, for he had left the cart-tracks and mule-paths and struck perforce through the gorse and undergrowth westward, gradually ascending as he went.

'Poor mother! poor mother!' he kept saying to himself. It seemed horrible to him to go and molest her out in her last sleep and take those things which were buried with her. Would she know? Would she awake? Would she rise and strike him?

Then he thought of a dead woman whom he had found once in the 'macchia' in Maremma, lying unburied under some myrtle bushes; he remembered how hideous she had looked, how the ants and worms had eaten her, how the wild boars had gnawed her flesh, how the jaws had grinned and the empty eyeballs had stared, and how a black toad had sat on her breast.

Would his mother look like that? 264

No; for she was safe under ground, under sacred ground, shut up secure from wind and weather in that deal shell which he had himself made and hammered down; and she was in her clothes, all neat and proper, and the holy oil had been upon her.

No, she had been put in her grave like a Christian, witch though they said that she was. She could not look like the woman in Maremma, who had been a vagrant and a gipsy.

Yet he was afraid—horribly afraid.

265

IV

It was a soft and luminous night; there was the faintest of south winds now and then wandering amongst the tops of the pines, and fanning their aromatic odours out of them. The sound of little threads of water trickling through the sand and moss, and falling downward through the heather, was the only sound, save when a night bird called through the dark, or a night beetle whirred on its way.

The summit of the hillside was sere and arid, and its bold stony expanse had seldom a living thing on it by daylight. By night, when the priest and sacristan of St. Fulvo were sleeping, there was not a single sign of any life, except the blowing of the pine-tops in the breeze.

He had never been there except by broad day; his knees shook under him as he looked up at the tall straight black tower, with the moonlit clouds shining through the bars of its open belfry. If he had not heard the voice of Santina crying to him, 'No coward shall win me,' he would have 266
turned and fled.

He was alone as utterly as though all the world were dead.

It was still barely midnight when he saw the bell-tower on high looming darker than the dark clouds about it, and the pine-trees and the presbytery and the walls of the burial-ground gathered round it black and gaunt, their shapes all fused together in one heap of gloom.

The guardians of the place, old men who went early to their beds, were sleeping somewhere under those black roofs against the tower. Below, the hills and valleys were all wrapped in the silence of the country night.

On some far road a tired team of charcoal-bearing mules might be treading woefully to the swing of their heavy bells, or some belated string of wine-carts might be creeping carefully through the darkness, the men half-drunk and their beasts half-asleep.

But there was no sound or sign of them in the vast brooding stillness which covered like great soft wings the peaceful hills overlapping one another, and the serenity of the mountains bathed in the rays of the moon.

There was no sound anywhere: not even the bleat of a sheep from the flocks, nor the bark of a 267
dog from the homesteads.

Caris crossed himself, and mounted the steep path which led to the church-gate.

The last time he had come thither he had climbed up with the weight of his mother's coffin on his shoulders; the ascent being too steep for a mule to mount and he too poor to pay for assistance.

The walls of the graveyard were high, and the only access to it was through a wooden iron-studded door, which had on one side of it a little hollowed stone for holy water, and above it a cross of iron and an iron crown. To force the door was impossible; to climb the wall was difficult, but he was agile as a wild cat, and accustomed to crawl up the stems of the pines to gather their cones, and the smooth trunks of the poplars in the valleys to lop their crowns.

He paused a moment, feeling the cold dews run like rain off his forehead, and wished that his dog was with him, a childish wish, for the dog could not have climbed: then he kicked off his boots, set his toe-nails in the first crevice in the brick surface, and began to mount with his hands 268
and feet with prehensile agility.

In a few moments he was above on the broad parapet which edged the wall, and could look down into the burial-place below. But he did not dare to look; he shut his eyes convulsively and began to descend, holding by such slight aids as the uneven surface and the projecting lichens afforded him. He dropped at last roughly but safely on the coarse grass within the enclosure.

All was black and still; the graveyard was shut in on three sides by its walls, and at the fourth side by the tower of the church.

The moon had passed behind a cloud and he could see nothing.

He stood ankle-deep in the grass; and as he stirred he stumbled over the uneven broken ground, made irregular by so many nameless graves. He felt in his breeches pockets for his pipe and matches, and drew one of the latter out and struck it on a stone.

But the little flame was too feeble to show him even whereabouts he was, and he could not in the darkness tell one grave from another.

Stooping and stretching out his hands, he could feel the rank grass and the hillocks all round 269
him; there were a few head-stones, but only a few; of such dead as were buried in the graveyard of St. Fulvo, scarce one mourner in a century could afford a memorial stone or even a wooden cross.

He stood still and helpless, not having foreseen the difficulty of the darkness.

He could feel the stirring of wings in the air around him. His sense told him that they were but owls and bats, of which the old tower was full; but he shivered as he heard them go by; who could be sure what devilish thing they might not be?

The horror of the place grew on him.

Still, harmless, sacred though it was, it filled him with a terror which fastened upon him, making his eyeballs start, and his flesh creep, and his limbs shake beneath him.

Yet he gripped his pickaxe closer and tighter, and held his ground, and waited for the moon to shine from the clouds.

Santina should see he was no white-livered boy. He would get her what she asked, and then she would be his—his—his; and the woods would hide their loves and the cold moss grow warm with their embrace. 270

Stung into courage and impatience by her memory, he struck violently upon one of the stones his whole handful of brimstone matches; they flared alight with a blue, sharp flash, and he saw there at his feet his mother's grave.

He could not doubt that it was hers; it was a mound of clay on which no grass had had time to grow, and there were the cross-sticks he had set up on it as a memorial, with a bit of an old blue kerchief which had been hers tied to them.

It was just as he had left them there four months before, when the summer had been green and the brooks dry and the days long and light. She was there under his feet where he and the priest had laid her, the two crossed chestnut sticks the only memorial she would ever have, poor soul!

She was there, lying out in all wind and weather alone—horribly, eternally alone; the rain raining on her and the sun shining on her, and she knowing nought, poor, dead woman!

Then the wickedness of what he came to do smote him all of a sudden so strongly that he staggered as under a blow, and a shower of hot tears gushed from his eyes, and he wept bitterly. 271

'Oh, mother, poor mother!' he cried aloud.

She had been a hard mother to him, and had had ways which he had feared and disliked, and a cruel tongue and a bad name on the hillside, but she had been his mother, and when she had lain dying she had been sorrowful to think that she would leave him alone.

She had been his mother, and he came to rifle her grave.

What a crime! What a foul, black crime, such as men and women would scarce speak of with bated breath by their hearths in the full blaze of day! What a crime! He abhorred himself for doing it, as he would have abhorred a poisoner or a parricide seeing them pass to the gallows.

'Oh, mother, mother, forgive me! She will have it so!' he sobbed with a piteous prayer.

He thought that, being dead, his mother would understand and forgive, as she would never have understood or forgiven when living.

Then he struck his spade down into the heavy clay on which no bird-sown seed of blade or blossom had yet had any time to spring. 272

He dug and dug and dug, till the sweat rolled off his limbs and his shoulders ached and his arms quivered.

He threw spadefuls of clay one after another out on the ground around, his eyes growing used to the darkness, and his hands gripping the spade handle harder and harder in desperation. The very horror of his action nerved him to feverish force.

'Oh, Santina, Santina, you give my soul to hell fires everlasting!' he cried aloud once, as he jammed the iron spade down deeper and deeper into the ground, tearing the stiff soil asunder and crushing the stones.

The moon came forth from the clouds, and the burial-ground grew white with her light where the shadows of the wall did not fall. He looked up once; then he saw black crosses, black skulls and cross-bones, rank grass, crumbling headstones, nameless mounds all round him, and beyond them the tower of the church.

But his mother's coffin he did not find. In vain he dug, and searched, and frantically tossed aside the earth in such haste to have ended and finished with his horrible task. 273

His mother's coffin he could not find.

Under the rays of the moon the desecrated ground lay, all broken up and heaped and tossed together, as though an earthquake had riven the soil. But the deal shell which he had made with his own hands and borne thither on his own shoulders, he could not find.

'She will never believe! she will never believe!' he thought.

Santina would never believe that he had come there if he met her at dawn with empty hands. He could hear in fancy her shrill, cruel, hissing shriek of mockery and derision; and he felt that if he did so hear it in reality it would drive him mad.

He dug, and dug, and dug, more furiously, more blindly, going unconsciously farther and farther away from where the two crossed chestnut sticks had been; they had been uprooted and buried long before under the first heap of clay which he had thrown out from the grave.

He had forgotten that they alone were his landmarks and guides; in the darkness which had been followed by the uncertain, misleading light of the moon, he had gone far from them. 274

His work had become almost a frenzy with him; his nerves were strung to an uncontrollable pitch of excitation, fear, and horror, and obstinacy, and a furious resolve to obtain what he sought, with a terrible dread of what he should see when he should reach it, had together, in their conflict of opposing passions, driven him beside himself.

He dug on and on, without any consciousness of how far he had gone from his goal, and no

sense left but the fury of determination to possess himself of what he knew was there in the earth beneath him.

He stood up to his knees in the yawning clay, with the heavy clods of it flung up on either side of him, and the moon hanging up on high in the central heavens, her light often obscured by drifting cloud wrack, and at other times shining cold and white into his face, as though by its searching rays to read his soul.

How long he had been there he knew not; time was a blank to him; his supernatural terrors were lost in the anguish of dread lest he should be unable to do Santina's will.

He felt as though he strove with the fiend himself. 275

Who but some hideous power of evil could have moved the corpse and baffled and beaten him thus? Perhaps truly the charms had been things born of the devil, and the devil had taken them both to himself, and the body of his mother with them. He dug on and on frantically, deriving relief from the fever within him through that violent exertion which strained every vein and muscle in his body, till he felt as though beaten with iron rods.

He did not see, in the confusion of his mind and the gloom of the night, that he had come close under the graveyard wall, and was digging almost at its base. He believed himself still to be on the spot where he had buried his mother; and he had deepened the pit about him until he was sunk up to his loins. He never remembered the danger of the priest or the sacristan waking and rising and seeing him at his occult labour.

He never remembered that the bell would toll for matins whilst the stars would be still in their places, and the hills and the valleys still dark. All sense had left him except one set, insane 276 resolve to obtain that by which the beauty of a woman was alone to be won.

Of crime he had grown reckless, of emotion he had none left; he was only frantically, furiously determined to find that which he had come to seek. Standing in the damp, clogging soil, with the sense of moving creatures about him which his labours had disturbed in the bowels of the earth, he dug and dug and dug until his actions had no purpose or direction in them, only hurling clod upon clod in breathless, aimless, senseless monotony and haste.

At last his spade struck on some substance other than the heavy soil and the slimy worms; he thrilled through all his frame with triumph and with terror.

At last! At last! He never doubted that it was the coffin he sought; he did not know that his mother's grave lay actually yards away from him. Oh, were there only light, he thought; it was so dark, for the moon had now passed down behind the wall of the graveyard, and there would be only henceforth growing ever darker and darker that dense gloom which precedes the dawn. He dared not go on digging; he was afraid that the iron of his spade should stave in the soft wood of 277 the coffin, and cut and maim the body within it. He stooped and pushed the clay aside with his hands, trying to feel what the tool had struck.

What met his touch was not wood, but metal—rounded, smooth, polished; though clogged and crusted with the clay-bed in which it lay. He pushed the earth farther and farther away, and the object he had reached seemed to lie far down, under the soil, and to be held down by it.

He was himself hemmed in by the broken clods, and stood in the hole he had dug, half imprisoned by it. But he could move enough to strike a few remaining matches on the iron of the spade, and let their light fall on what he had unearthed.

Then it seemed to him that a miracle had been wrought.

Before him lay a silver image of the Child Christ. His knees shook, his whole frame trembled, his lips gasped for breath; the flame of the matches died out; he was left in the dark with the image.

'It is the Gesu! It is the Gesu!' he muttered, sure that his dead mother, or the saints, or both, 278 had wrought this miracle to show him the evil of his ways.

In truth, the statue had lain there many centuries, buried against the wall by pious hands in times when the torch of war had been carried flaming over all the wasted villages and ravaged fields in the plain below.

But no such explanation dawned on the mind of Caris.

To him it was a miracle wrought by the saints or by the dead. In the dark he could feel its round shoulders, its small hands folded as in prayer, its smooth cheek and brow, its little breast; and he touched them reverently, trembling in every nerve.

He had heard of holy images shown thus to reward belief or to confound disbelief.

His faith was vague, dull, foolish, but it was deep-rooted in him. He was a miserable sinner; and the dead and the saints turned him thus backward on his road to hell; so he thought, standing waist-deep in the rugged clay and clutching his spade to keep himself from falling in a swoon.

279

To Caris miracles were as possible as daily bread.

He knew little of them, but he believed in them with his whole soul. It seemed wonderful that the heavenly powers should create one for such a poor and humble creature as himself; but it did not seem in any way wonderful that such a thing should be.

The Divine Child was there in the earth, keeping away all evil things by its presence, and he could not doubt that the saints who were with Mary, or perchance his own mother's purified spirit, had called the image there to save him from the fiend.

He sank on his knees on the clay, and said over breathlessly all the Aves he could think of in his awe. They were few, but he repeated them over and over again, hoping thus to find grace and mercy for his sin for having broken into these sacred precincts and disturbed the dead in their rest.

But what of Santina? Would she believe him when he told her of this wondrous thing? 280

If he went to her with his hands empty, would she ever credit that he had courage to come upon this quest? He could hear, as it were, at his ear, her mocking, cruel, incredulous laughter.

She had said, 'Bring me the magic toys.' What would the tale of a miracle matter to her? She wanted treasure and knowledge. She would care nothing for the souls of the dead or the works of the saints—nothing.

He knew that her heart was set on getting things which she knew were evil, but believed were powerful for good and ill, for fate and future.

Suddenly a thought which froze his veins with its terror arose in him, and fascinated him with its wickedness and his daring. What if he took the holy image to her in proof that he had tried to do her will, and had been turned from his errand by powers more than mortal?

Since she had believed in the occult powers of his mother's divining tools, surely she would still more readily believe in the direct and visible interposition of the dead?

If he bore the Gesu to her in his arms, she could not then doubt that he had passed the hours 281
of this night in the graveyard of St. Fulvo.

She could not, before its sacred testimony, be angry, or scornful, or incredulous, or unkind.

But could he dare to touch the holy thing? Would the image consent to be so taken? Would not its limbs rebel, its lips open, its body blister and blast the mortal hands which would thus dare to desecrate it?

A new fear, worse, more unspeakable than any which had moved him before, now took possession of him as he knelt there on the bottom of the pit which he had dug, gazing through the blackness of the darkness to the spot where he knew the silver body of the Christ Child lay.

The thing was holy in his eyes, and he meant to use it for unholy purposes. He felt that his hands would wither at the wrist if they took up that silver Gesu from its bed of earth.

His heart beat loudly against his ribs, his head swam.

It was still dark, though dawn in the east had risen.

He crawled out of the pit of clay with difficulty, holding the silver image to his bosom with one 282
arm, and stood erect, and gazed around him.

If saints or friends were there beside him, they made no sign; they neither prevented nor avenged the sacrilege.

The sweet, sharp smell of the wet blowing grasses was in his nostrils, and the damp clinging sods were about his feet, dragging at the soles of his boots, that was all.

He began to think of the way in which he could, thus burdened, climb the wall.

The silver Christ was heavy in his hold, and he needed to have both hands free to ascend the height above him.

He knew it was an image and not a living god; yet none the less was it in his sight holy, heaven-sent, miraculous, potent for the service of the saints, and to take it up and bear it away seemed to him like stealing the very Hostia itself.

True, he would bring it back and give it to the vicar, and let it, according to the reverend man's choice, be returned to its grave or laid on the altar of the church for the worship of the 283
people, and the continued working of miracles.

Yes, he said to himself, assuredly he would bring it back. He would only bear it in his arms most reverently to Santina, that she might see and believe, and become his; and then he would return hither with it and tell the priest the wondrous story.

Yet he shook as with palsy at the thought of carrying the blessed image as though it were a mere living human babe.

It seemed to him as if no man could do such a deed and live. The anointed hands of a priest might touch it, but not his—his so hard and rough and scarred with work, never having held aught better than his pipe of clay and his tool of wood or of iron, and the horn haft of his pocket-knife.

Nor was even his motive for taking it pure. He wanted through it to justify himself in the sight of a woman, and to find favour with her, and to gratify a strong and furious passion. His reasons were earthly, gross, selfish; they could not redeem, or consecrate, or excuse his act. That he knew.

All was still, dusky, solitary; the church was wrapt in gloom, the daybreak did not reach it; 284
only above the inland hills the white light spread where he could not see; behind the high wall of the graveyard, beyond the ranges of the inland hills, the gray soft light of daybreak had arisen.

He thought he heard voices all around him, and amongst them that of his mother warning him to leave untouched the sacred Child, and get up on his feet and flee. But above these he heard the laughter of Santina mocking him as an empty-handed, white-livered fool, who came with foolish tales of visions to hide his quaking soul.

Better that his arms should shrivel, that his sight should be blinded, that his body should be shrunken and stricken with the judgment of heaven, than that he should live to hear her red lips laugh and call him a feckless coward.

With all the life which was in him shrinking and sickening in deadly fear, he stooped down, groped in the dark until he found the image, grasped its metal breast and limbs, and dragged it upward from the encircling earth.

It was of the size of a human child of a year old.

He plucked it roughly upward, for his terror made him rude and fierce, and held it in his 285
arms, whilst he wondered in his great awe and horror that no judgment of affronted heaven followed on his desperate act.

All was still well with him; he saw, he heard, he breathed, he lived; the cool night air was blowing about him, the clouds were letting fall a faint fine mist-like rain.

He undid the belt about his loins—a mere piece of webbing with a buckle—strapped it around the body of the Gesu, and taking the ends thereof between his firm, strong teeth, sought in the dark for the place whence he had descended, and found it.

He climbed the wall with slow, laborious, and painful effort, the dead weight of the silver figure encumbering him as he mounted with cat-like skill, cutting his hands and bruising his skin against the rough, undressed stones.

He dropped carefully down on the earth beneath, and began the descent of the hill.

'When I can bring the little Christ back, I can get the tools,' he thought. It seemed a small matter.

He was forced to leave behind him his spade and pickaxe.

286

VI

When at last he reached the top of the coping, he saw that it was dawn. His heart leaped in his breast. Down in the chestnut coppice Santina would be awaiting him; and she would believe—surely, certainly she would believe—when she should see this holy Gesu brought out from the tomb.

He was in good time. It was barely day. He unslung the little Christ and took it again in his arms, as carefully as a woman would take a new-born child. The polished limbs grew warm in his hands; its small face leaned against his breast; he lost his awe of it; he ceased to fear what it might do to him; he felt a kind of love for it.

'Oh, Gesu, dear Gesu, smile on us!' he said to it; and although it was still too dark to see more than its outline faintly, he thought he saw the mouth move in answer.

Holding it to him, he started homeward down the stony slope. He was thankful to be out of 287
that ghostly place of tombs; he was thankful to have escaped from that scene of terror whole in limb, and uncursed if unpardoned; the tension of his nerves in the past hours had given place to an unreasoning and overstrung gladness. But for his reverence for the burden he carried, he could have laughed aloud.

Only once now and then, as he went, his conscience smote him. His poor mother!—he had forgotten her; he had displaced the mark set above her grave; no one would ever now be sure where she was buried. Did it hurt her, what he had done? Would she be jealous in her grave of the woman for whom he did it? Was it cruel to have come away without smoothing the rugged earth above her bed and saying an Ave for her?

But these thoughts, this remorse, were fleeting; his whole mind was filled with the heat of passion and its expectation. Fatigued and overworked and sleepless as he was, he almost ran down the paths of the hills in his haste, and tore his skin and his clothes as he pushed his way through the brushwood and furze, guarding only the Gesu from hurt as he went.

The day had now fully dawned, and the sun had risen; its rosy flush was warm over all the 288
land and sky; the woodlarks and the linnets were singing under the bushes; the wild doves were dabbling in the rivulets of water; the hawks were circling high in the light.

On the wooded hillside all was peaceful with the loveliness of the unworn day; the air was full of the smell of heather and wet mosses and resinous pine-cones; rain was falling above where the church was, but in these lower woods there was a burst of sunrise warmth and light. None of these things, however, did he note. He went on and on, downward and downward, holding the silver image close against his breast, scarcely feeling the boughs which grazed his cheeks or the flints which wounded his naked feet.

When he came within sight of the place where he had left Santina the night before, he strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of her through the tangle of leaves and twigs and fronds. And true enough to her tryst she was there, waiting impatiently, fretting, wishing the time away, blaming her own folly in setting all her hopes of freedom and the future on a foolish, cowardly 289
churl—for so she called him in her angry thought, as she crouched down under the chestnut scrub and saw the daylight widen and brighten.

She ran a great risk in hiding there; if any of her people or their carters saw her, their suspicions would be aroused and their questions endless. She would say that she came for mushrooms; but they would not believe her. She was too well known for a late riser and a lazy wench.

Still, she had imperilled everything to keep her word with him, and she waited for him seated on the moss, half covered with leaves, except at such times as her impatient temper made her cast prudence to the winds and rise and look out of the thicket upward to the hills.

She had made herself look her best; a yellow kerchief was tied over her head, her hair shone like a blackbird's wing, her whole face and form were full of vivid, rich, and eager animal beauty. To get away—oh, only to get away! She looked up at the wild doves sailing over the tops of the tall pines and envied them their flight.

Caris saw that eager, longing look upon her countenance before he reached her, and he 290
thought it was caused by love for him.

He held the Gesu to his bosom with both hands and coursed like lightning down the steep slope which still divided him from her; he was unconscious of how jaded, soiled, and uncomely he looked after his long night's work and all his ghostly fears; his feet were scratched and bleeding, his shirt soaked in sweat, his flesh bespattered with the clay, his hair wet and matted with moisture; he had no remembrance of that, he had no suspicion that even in that moment of agitation, when she believed her errand done, her will accomplished, she was saying in her heart as she watched him draw nigh: 'He has got them, he has got them; but, Holy Mary! what a clown!—he has all the mud of fifty graves upon him!'

He rushed downward to her, and held the silver image out at arm's-length, and sobbed and laughed and cried aloud, indifferent who might hear, his voice trembling with awe and ecstasy.

'It is the Gesu Himself, the Gesu—and I have brought Him to you because now you will believe—and my mother must be well with them in heaven or they never had wrought such a miracle for 291
me—and such a night as I have passed, dear God! such things as I have seen and heard—but the Child smiles—the Child is pleased—and now you will believe in me, though I could not find the

magic things—and I said to myself when she sees the Gesu she will believe—and she will be mine—mine—mine! The Lord forgive me, that has been all my thought, though heaven wrought such a miracle for me!'

The words poured out of his mouth one over another like the rush of water let loose through a narrow channel. He was blind with his own excess of emotion, his own breathless desire; he did not see the changes which swept over the face of Santina in a tumult of wrath, wonder, fury, eagerness, suspicion, cupidity, as one after another each emotion went coursing through her soul and shining in her eyes, making her beauty distorted and terrible.

Her first impulse was fury at his failure to bring her what she wanted; the second was to comprehend in a flash of instantaneous insight the money value of that to which he only attached a spiritual merit.

She snatched the image from him, and in the morning light she saw the silver of it glisten 292
through the earth which still in parts clung to it. It might be better, surer, more quick aid to her than the uncertain divining tools whereof she was ignorant of the full employ. Her rapid mind swept over in a second all the uses to which it might be put, and comprehended the superstitious adoration of it which moved Caris and made him control his passion for herself, as he stood gazing at it in her arms, his own hands clasped in prayer, and his whole frame trembling with the portentous sense of the mercy of heaven which had been made manifest to him.

She in a second divined that it had been part of some buried treasure which he had by accident disinterred, but she was too keen and wise to let him see that she did so; it was her part to humour and to confirm him in his self-deception.

She calmed the angry, gibing words which rose to her lips, she held back the exultant covetousness which flashed in her eyes and betrayed itself in the clutching grasp of her fingers; she gazed on the Gesu with a worship half real, half affected, for it was also a holy image to her, 293
if its sanctity were to her outweighed and outshone by its monetary worth in precious metal.

'Tell me how you found this?' she asked, under her breath, as one almost speechless with awe before such a manifestation from on high.

She was really in genuine fear. He had been into precincts which none could enter without offending immortal and unseen powers. He had done it at her bidding. Who could be sure that the offending spirits would not avenge his sacrilege on her?

But through her fears she kept her hold upon the image, whilst she asked the question.

Tremblingly he told her how he had passed the awful hours of the night and failed to find his mother's tomb, but in its stead found this.

'And I brought it that you should know that I had been there,' he said in conclusion, 'that you might know I had been where you willed, and am no coward; and we will take it back together and give it to the holy man up yonder—and now—and now—and now——'

His hands touched her, his breath was upon her, his timid yet violent passion blazed in his 294
eyes and quivered all over his frame: he had dared all things for his reward, and he claimed it. But, quick as lightning, and merciless as dishonest, she put the holy image between her and him. The sacred silver froze his burning lips.

His arms fell to his side as though they were paralyzed.

'Not while the Gesu is with us,' she murmured in rebuke. 'Let us not be unworthy—you say yourself a miracle was wrought.'

'But——'

He stood before her, checked, daunted, breathing heavily, like a horse thrown back on its haunches in full flight.

'Hush!' she said, with a scared look. 'There are people near; I hear them. We will take the Gesu back to the church, but that cannot be till dusk. I will keep Him safe with me. Go, you dear, and clean your skin and your clothes, lest any seeing you should suspect what you have done.'

'I will not go,' he muttered; 'you promised——'

'I promised, oh fool!' she said, with quick passion, 'and my word I will keep, but not while the 295
Gesu is with us. I love you for all you have braved. I love you for all you have done. I will be yours and no other's. See! I swear it on the Holy Child's head!'

And she kissed the silver brow of the babe.

He was convinced, yet irresolute and impatient.

'Let us go back with it now, then,' he muttered. 'I did but bring him to show you in witness of what I had done.'

'No,' she said, with that imperious command in her voice and her gaze which made the resolve in him melt like wax beneath a flame. 'You cannot be seen with me in such a state as you are. I will carry the Christ back to the church if so be that He rests uneasily in common arms like ours, and then—well, I will pass by your cabin as I come down. Dost complain of that, my ingrate?'

A flood of warmth and joy and full belief swept like flame through the whole being of Caris. Her eyes were suffused, her cheek blushed, her lips smiled; he believed himself beloved; he thought himself on the threshold of ecstasy; the minutes seemed like hours until he should regain 296

his hut and watch from its door for her coming.

'You will go now?' he asked eagerly.

'At once,' she answered, holding the Gesu to her as a woman would hold a sucking child.

Caris closed his eyes, dazed with her beauty and the wild, sweet thought of how she would hold to her breast some child of his on some fair unborn morrow.

'Then go,' he muttered. 'The sooner we part, the sooner we shall meet. Oh, my angel!'

She gave him a smile over her shoulder, and she pushed her way upward through the chestnut boughs, carrying the Gesu folded to her bosom.

Watching her thus depart, a sudden and new terror struck him.

'Wait,' he called to her. 'Will the priest be angered that I disturbed the graves, think you?'

'Nay, nay, not when he sees that you give him the image,' she called backward in answer.

Then she disappeared in the green haze of foliage, and Caris struck onward in the opposite direction, to take the way which led to his cabin on Genistrello. Her words had awakened him to 297
a consciousness of his bruised, befouled, and tattered state.

He wished to avoid meeting anyone who might question him as to his condition.

He got as quickly as he could by solitary paths to his home, and was met with rapture by his dog. He entered the house, and drank thirstily; he could not eat; he washed in the tank at the back of the hut, and clothed himself in the best that he had: what he wore on holy and on festal days.

Then he set his house-door wide open to the gay morning light which, green and gleeful, poured through the trunks of the chestnuts and pines; and he sat down on his threshold with the dog at his feet, and waited.

It would be a whole working-day lost, but what of that? A lover may well lose a day's pay for love's crown of joy.

Hour after hour passed by, and his eyes strained and ached with looking into the green light of the woods. But Santina came not.

The forenoon, and noontide and afternoon went by; and still no living thing came up to his solitary house. The whole day wore away, and he saw no one, heard nothing, had no visitant 298
except the black stoat which flitted across the path, and the grey thrushes which flew by on their autumn flights towards lower ground.

The long, fragrant, empty day crept slowly by, and at last ended. She had not come.

He was still fasting. He drank thirstily, but he could not eat, though he fed the dog.

He was in a state of nervous excitation almost delirious. The trees and the hills and the sky seemed to whirl around him. He dared not leave the hut, lest she should come thither in his absence. He stared till he was sightless along the green path which led down to the four roads. Now and then, stupidly, uselessly, he shouted aloud; and the mountains echoed his solitary voice.

The dog knew that something was wrong with his master, and was pained and afraid.

The evening fell. The night wore away. He put a little lamp in his doorway, thinking she might come, through shyness, after dark; but no one came. Of her there was no sign, or from her any word.

When the day came he was still dressed and sleepless, seated before his door; the flame of the 299
little lamp burnt on, garish and yellow in the sunshine.

The sun mounted to the zenith; it was again noon. He went indoors, and took a great knife which he was accustomed to carry with him to Maremma. He put it in his belt inside his breeches, so that it was invisible.

Then he called the dog to him, kissed him on the forehead, gave him bread, and motioned to him to guard the house; then he took his way once more down the hillside to Massaio's house.

If she had fooled him yet again, she would not live to do it thrice. His throat was dry as sand; his eyes were bloodshot; his look was strange.

The dog howled and moaned as he passed out of sight.

He went onward under the boughs tinged with their autumnal fires, until he came to the place where the house and sheds and walls of the wood merchant's homestead stood. He walked straight in through the open gates, and then stood still.

He saw that there was some unusual stir and trouble in the place: no one was at work, the 300
children were gaping and gabbling, the housewife was standing doing nothing, her hands at her sides; Massaio himself was seated drumming absently on the table.

'Where is Santina?' asked Caris.

They all spoke in answer, 'Santina is a jade'—Massaio's voice louder and rougher than the rest.

'She has gone out of the town and away, none knows where; and she has left a letter behind her saying that none need try to follow, for she is gone to a fine new world, where she will want none of us about her; and my brother says it is all my fault, giving her liberty out on the hills. And

the marvel is where she got the money, for we and they kept her so close—not a stiver—not a penny—and it seems she took the train that goes over the mountains ever so far, and paid a power of gold at the station wicket.'

The voice of Caris crossed his in a loud, bitter cry. 'She sold the Gesu! As God lives—she sold the Gesu!'

Then the blood rushed from his nostrils and his mouth, and he fell face downwards.

VII

A few days later he was arrested for having violated and robbed the tombs in the burial-grounds of St. Fulvo. The pickaxe and the spade had been found with his name burned on the wood of them; he was sentenced to three years at the galleys for sacrilege and theft.

When the three years were ended he was an old, gray, bowed man, though only twenty-nine years of age; he returned to his cabin, and the dog, who had been cared for by the charcoal-burners, knew him from afar off, and flew down the hill-path to meet him.

'The wench who ruined you,' said the charcoal-burners around their fire that night, 'they do say she is a fine singer and a rich madam somewhere in foreign parts. She sold the Gesu—ay, she sold the Gesu to a silversmith down in the town. That gave her the money to start with, and the rest her face and her voice have done for her.'

'Who has the Gesu?' asked Caris, hiding his eyes on the head of the dog. 302

'Oh, the Gesu, they say, was put in the smelting-pot,' said the charcoal-burner.

Caris felt for the knife which was inside his belt. It had been given back to him with his clothes when he had been set free at the end of his sentence.

'One could find her,' he thought, with a thrill of savage longing. Then he looked down at the dog and across at the green aisles of the pines and chestnuts.

'Let the jade be,' said the forest-man to him. 'You are home again, and 'twas not you who bartered the Christ.'

Caris fondled the haft of the great knife under his waistband.

'She stole the Gesu and sold Him,' he said, in a hushed voice. 'One day I will find her, and I will strike her: once for myself and twice for Him.'

305

A LEMON-TREE

I

It was a small lemon-tree, not more than forty inches high, growing in its red earthen vase as all lemons are obliged to be grown further north than Rome. There were many thousands and tens of thousands of other such trees in the land; but this one, although so little, was a source of joy and pride to its owner. He had grown it himself from a slender slip cast away on a heap of rubbish, and he had saved his pence up with effort and self-denial to purchase, second-hand, the big pot of ruddy clay in which it grew, now that it had reached its first fruit-bearing prime. It had borne as its first crop seven big, fragrant lemons, hanging from its boughs amidst leaves which were as fresh and green as a meadow in May. He had watched its first buds creep out of the slender twigs, and swell and swell gradually into sharp-pointed little cones, which in their turn 306
became pale yellow fruit, 'fit for a princess,' as he said, patting their primrose-coloured rind. They seemed so many separate miracles to him, coming as by some magic out of the little starry white flowers on the glossy twigs.

He was a poor, ignorant man, by name Dario Baldassino, known as Fringuello (or the Chaffinch) to his neighbourhood and fellow workmen. He lived on the south side of the ferry of Royezano, and dug and carted the river-sand; a rude labour and a thankless, taking the sinew and spirit out of a man, and putting little in return into his pocket. The nave or ferry is a place to please an artist. All the land around on this south side is orchard—great pear-trees and cherry-trees linked together by low-growing vines, and in the spring months making a sea of blossom stretching to the river's edge. The watermills, which were there centuries ago, stand yellow and old, and cluster like beavers' dams upon the water. The noise of the weir is loud, but the song of the nightingale can be heard above it. Looking along westward down the widening, curving stream, above the fruit-trees planted thick as woods, there arise, two miles off, the domes and 307
spires of the city of Florence, backed by the hills, which here take an Alpine look upon them when the sun sets beyond the rounded summits of the more distant Carrara range; and the spurs of the Apennines grow deeply blue with that intense transparent colour which is never seen in northern lands. To the north also lie the mountains, and on the east; and late into May the snow lingers where the day breaks above Vallombrosa and Casentino. All the vale is orchard, broken now and then by some great stone-pine, some walnut or chestnut tree, some church spire with its statue of its saint, some low, red-brown roofs, some grey old granary with open-timbered lofts. It is a serene and sylvan scene—at sunset and at sunrise grand—and the distant city rises on its throne of verdure, seeming transfigured as Dante, exiled, may have seen it in his dreams.

Of all this beauty outspread before his sight Fringuello saw little; his eyes were always set on the sand and shingle into which he drove his heart-shaped spade—all which is the pageant of the painter, the paradise of the poet, but is nothing to the toiler of the soil. The sweat of his fatigue 308
drops down before his eyes, and shuts out from him the scenes amidst which he dwells. For him the weir has no song, the orchard no poem, the mountains no counsel, and the vales no charm. He does but see the cart-rucks in the sand, the house-fly in the sunlight, the coins hard-earned in his horny palm, the straw which covers the coveted wine-flask, or the glass which holds the hot and acid flavours of less natural drinks. Now and then Giotto looks up from his sheepfold, and Robert Burns from his furrow, but it is only once in a century. This poor labourer, Fringuello, lived in two little rooms in a poor house which looked on the weir and the water-mills. He had never been able to have a house of his own, and even the small charge of the rooms was more than he could easily pay, miserable though they were. His employment was intermittent, and in winter, when the river was spread wide over its bed, covering the sand and shingle, it ceased entirely. Some odd jobs he got elsewhere, but nothing certain. He had no knowledge of any other work than the digging and carrying which had been his lot. But he was always merry, with the mirth which had gained him his nickname, and in his light-hearted poverty had done what the 309
poorest always do—he had married at twenty a girl as poor as himself. She was called Lizina, the familiar corruption of Luisa, and was the daughter of a cobbler of the adjacent village of Ripoli.

It was an imprudent union and a foolish one, but it was happier than many which fulfil every condition of prudence and thrift. Lizina was a blithe, buoyant, active, and laborious creature, and whilst she lived he never had a hole in his hempen shirt, or went without a tablespoonful of oil to his beans and bread. They were as merry and happy as if they had really been a pair of chaffinches in a nest in one of the pear-trees. But of joy the gods are envious, whether it go to roost in garret or palace, and in a few brief years Lizina died of fever and left him all alone with one little girl, as like herself as the bud is like the flower.

For months he never sang as he worked, and his ruddy face was pale, and he had long fits of weeping when he lay on his lonely bed, and stared up at the starry skies which were visible through the square, unshuttered window. Lizina was in the ground, in a nameless grave, with two 310
crossed sticks set above it, and the river rolled over the weir, and the wide wheel turned, and the orchards blossomed, and the people laughed on the yellow sand, and no one cared that a little merry, glad, tender, harmless life was done for and over, stamped down into the clay like a crushed butterfly, a broken branch, a rotten fruit, or a dead grasshopper. Nobody cared; and after a time he, too, ceased to care, and began to hum and whistle and carol once more as he worked, and laughed once more at his comrades' jokes as they dug up the heavy sand. In the lives of the poor there is little leisure for sorrow, and toil passes over them like an iron roller over the inequalities of a road, forcing them down into dull indifference, as the roller forces into level nothingness alike the jagged flint and the sprouting grass.

Meanwhile, Lizina, as she was called after her mother, grew up apace like the little lemon-tree which had been planted at her birth, a lovely child like a Correggio cherub, thriving on her

dry bed and herb-soup as the lemon plant thrived on the dry earth and uncongenial atmosphere of the attic under the roofs.

Fringuello did his best by both of them, making up to them by tenderness and gentleness what he was forced to refuse to both of material comfort. Both the child and the tree went hungry often, suffered from cold and frost in the sharp, short winters, and languished in the scorching days, when foul odours rose from the naked bed of the shrunken river, and white clouds of little moths hovered over the cracked sand, and the leaves of the orchards grew yellow and wrinkled, and curled up, and dropped in the heat before their time.

All that he could not help; he could not help it more than he could help the shrinking of the river in drought, and the coming of blight to the orchards. Though it went to his soul like a knife-thrust when he saw the child pale and thin, and the lemon-tree sickly and shrunk, he could do nothing. But he murmured always, 'Patience, courage,' as he coaxed the child to eat a morsel of crust, and consoled the tree with a spray of spring-water, and he got them both safely through several burning summers and icy winters, and when they were both sixteen years old the tree was strong and buxom, with glossy foliage and fine fruit, and the child was healthy and handsome, with shining eyes and laughing mouth.

He had worked as hard as any mule for them both, and though a young man in years, he looked an old man from excess of toil, though his heart was light and his smile was like sunshine.

When he got up in the dark to go to his work, and drew his leathern belt about his lean ribs, he always looked at the pale light of dawn as it touched the green leaves of the tree and the closed eyes of the child, and then he muttered an Ave, content and thankful at heart. Many would have thought the hardness of his lot excuse enough for suicide; he never knew what it was not to feel tired, he never knew what it was to have a coin in his pocket for pleasure. His bones ached, and the gnawing of rheumatism was in his nerves, from the many hours spent knee-deep in water or damp sand, and always at the pit of his stomach was that other still worse gnawing of perpetual insufficiency of food. But he was content and grateful to his fate, as the birds are, though they hunger and thirst, and every man's hand is against them.

The child and the tree were indissolubly united in his mind and memory. They had grown up together, and seemed part and parcel of each other. Imagination scarcely exists in the brains of the poor; they do not know what it is. The perpetual grind of daily want leaves no space for or possibility of impersonal fancy in it; but, in a vague kind of superstitious way, he associated the well-being of the one with the welfare of the other. If the tree sickened and drooped for a day, he always looked nervously at Lizina to see if she ailed anything also. If the little girl coughed or grew hot with fever, he always watched anxiously the leaves of the lemon. It was a talisman and fetish to him; and when he came up from the river at evening when his work was done, he looked upward always to see the green boughs of the tree at the square little window of his garret under the deep eaves, and above an archway of old brown-red brick.

If it had been missing at the window, he would have told himself that Lizina was dead. There was no likelihood that it would ever be missing there. Lemon-trees live long, and this one would, he knew, most likely outlive himself if he kept it from worm and fly, and rot and mildew. Nevertheless, he always glanced upward to make sure that it was there when he toiled up the strip of road which led to his home when his work in the sand was done. Lizina herself did not wait at the window. She always came jumping and dancing down the path, her auburn curls flying, and her big brown eyes sparkling; barefooted, ill-clad, scarcely fed, but happy and healthy, singing at the top of her voice as her father had always done in his youth.

When they reached their fifteenth birthday, neither she nor the lemon-tree had ever ailed anything worse than a passing chill from a frosty week, or a transient sickness from a sultry drought.

The lemon-tree had given her the few little gifts she had ever received. The pence brought in by its fruit were always laid out for her: cake at Christmas, sugar-egg at Easter, a white ribbon for her first Communion, a pair of shoes to wear on high feasts and holy days—these little joys, few and far between, had all come to her from the copper pieces gained by the pale, wrinkled, fragrant fruit sold at five centimes each in the village or the town. '*Soldi della Lizinanina*,' said her father whenever he put any so gained in his trousers pocket.

Well as he loved his pipe, and thankful as he was when he could get a drink of watered wine, he never touched a halfpenny of the lemon money to buy a pinch of tobacco or a glass of *mezzo-vino*. It was all saved up carefully for his little girl's small wants. Sometimes in hard seasons it had even to go in bread for her, but of that bread he would never himself take a mouthful. Moreover, the pence were few, for the lemons were not many.

Lizina remained quite a child, though she grew fast, and her little round breasts swelled up high and firm where the rough hempen shift cut across them. Young as she was, the eyes of an admirer had fallen upon her, and young Cecco, the son of Lillo, the *contadino* where the big pine stood (a pine three hundred years old if one), had said to her father and to her that when he had served out his time in the army he should say something serious about it; but Fringuello had answered him ungraciously that he could never give her bridal clothes or bridal linen, so that she would needs die a maid, and his own people had told him roughly that when he should have served his time he would be in a different mind. But Cecco, nevertheless, thought nothing would please him ever so well as this ragged, pretty child with her blowing cloud of short, crisp bright curls, and he said to her one evening as she sat on the wall by the ferry, 'If you will be patient, my Lizinanina, I will be true;' and Lizina, too young to be serious, but amused and triumphant,

laughed gaily and saucily, and replied to him: 'I will make no promises, Cecco. You will come back with a shorn pate and soft hands and tender soles to your feet.'

For the soldier seems but a poor creature to the children of the soil, and is, indeed, of but little use when the barracks vomit him out of their jaws and send him back to his home, a poor, indifferent trooper, but also a spoiled peasant; having learned to write indeed, but having forgotten how to handle a spade, drive a plough, or prune a grape-vine, and to whose feet, once hard and firm as leather, the once familiar earth with its stones and thorns and sticks seems rough and sharp and painful, after having marched in ill-fitting boots for three years along smooth roads and paven streets.

317 To the city lad and lass the conscript may seem somebody very fine; but to the country ones he seems but a mere popinjay, only useful to waste powder. Lizina, although only a river labourer's daughter, was country born and bred, and had the prejudices and preferences of the country, and had run about under the orchard boughs and down the vineyards of the countryside till she thought as a peasant and spoke as one.

Cecco was mortified, but he shared her views of the life to which he was about to go. He was useful now to tame a steer, to milk a heifer, to fell a tree, to mow a meadow, to reap a field, to get up in the dark and drive the colt into the city with a load of straw and bring back a load of manure. But in the barracks he would be nothing—worse than nothing; a poor numb-skull, strapped up in stiff clothes with a pack on his back, and a musket, which he must fire at nothing, on his shoulder.

'Wait for me, Lizina,' he said sadly. 'The time will soon pass, and I will come back and marry you, despite them all.'

318 'Pooh! I shall have married a man with a mint of money by the time they let you come back,' said the unkind child, saucily tossing the curls out of her eyes; but through her long lashes her glance rested a moment softly on the ruddy face of Cecco, which had looked down on her so often through the boughs and twigs of the cherry or pear trees of his father's farm, as he threw down fruit into her outstretched and eager little hands where she stood in the grass of the orchard.

She said nothing more tender then, being coy and wayward and hard to please, as became her incipient womanhood; but before she went to bed that night she came close to her father's side and put her hand on his.

'Cecco says he will come back and marry me, *babbo*,' she said, with a child's directness. Her father stroked her curls.

'That is a joke, dear; his people would never let him marry a little penniless chit like you.'

Lizina shook her head sagely with a little proud smile.

'He will not mind his people. He will do it—if I wish—when he comes back.'

Her father looked at her in amazement; in his eyes she was a little child still.

319 'Why, baby, you speak like a woman!' he said stupidly. 'I am glad this lad goes away, as he puts such nonsense into your head.'

'But if we both wish, you would not mind, *babbo*?' she asked, persistent and serious.

'The angels save us! She speaks like a grown woman!' cried her father. 'My poor little dear,' he thought sadly, 'you will never be able to wed anyone. We are poor! so poor! I can never give you even a set of shifts. Who could go to a house so naked—in rags, as one may say? My poor little angel, you must live a maid or go to a husband as beggared as I.'

He wished to say all this, but the words choked him in his throat. It seemed so cruel to set before the child the harsh, mean demands of life, the merciless rules and habits of that narrow world of theirs, which was bounded by the river and the sand on one side, and the cornfields and orchards on the other.

'Let be, let be,' he said to himself. 'She is but a child, and the youth is going away for years; if it please her to think of this thing, it can hurt no one. He will forget, and she will forget.'

320 So he patted her pretty brown cheek, and drew her closer and kissed her.

'You are but a baby, my treasure,' he said softly. 'Put these grave thoughts out of your head. Many moons will wax and wane before Cecco will be free again to come to his old home. The future can take care of itself. I will say neither yea nor nay. We will see what the years will bring forth.'

'But you would not mind?' she murmured coaxingly.

The tears started to his eyes.

'Ah! God knows, dear, how sweet it would be to me!'

He thought of his little girl safe and happy for her lifetime in that pleasant and plentiful household under the red-brown roofs where the big pine grew amongst the pear and cherry trees. The vision of it was beautiful and impossible. It hurt him to look on it, as the sun dazzles the eyes at noon.

'But put it out of your head—out of your head, little one!' he said. 'Even if the boy should keep of the same mind, never would Lillo consent.'

321 'Cecco will keep in the same mind,' said Lizina, with the serene undoubting certainty of

childhood, and she broke off a little twig of the lemon-tree, with a bud upon it and three leaves, and gave it to Cecco that evening in the dusk as they sat again upon the river-wall. It was all she had to give, except her little waking heart.

The next day he went away along the dusty high-road in his father's cart to begin his new life. He sobbed as if his heart would break, and fastened in his shirt was the lemon shoot.

'To break off a bud! Oh, Lizina!' cried her father, in reproof and reproach. 'A bud means a fruit, and a fruit means a halfpenny, perhaps a penny.'

'It is only one,' said the child; 'and I have nothing else.'

Lizina did not speak of him, nor did she seem to fret in any way. Her blithe voice rang in clear carol over the green river water, as she sat on the wall whilst her father worked below, and she ate her dry bread with healthy and happy appetite.

'She is only a baby. She has forgotten the boy already,' thought her father, half disappointed, half relieved, whilst he broke up the earth about the roots of the lemon-tree, and counted the 322
little pointed fruits coming out on it, green as malachite, and promising a fair crop.

No letters could arrive to stimulate her memory, for Cecco could scarcely scrawl his name, and Lizina could not read her A B C. Absence to the poor is a complete rupture, an absolute blank, over which the intelligence can throw no bridge.

Fringuello worked early and late, worked like a willing mule, and lost no chance of doing anything, however hard, which could bring in a centime; and he was so tired when night fell that he could do little except swallow his bread-soup and fling himself down on his bed of dry leaves thrust into an old sack. So that as long as Lizina's voice was heard in song, and her little bare feet ran busily to and fro, he noticed nothing else, and was content, believing all was well with her.

The winter which followed on Cecco's departure to his military service was of unusual rigour for the vale of Arno; the waters were stormy and dark, and the fields were frozen and brown, and snow lay on the long lines of the mountains from their summit to their base. But the lemon-tree 323
flourished before its narrow window, and Lizina was well and gay in the cold little brick-floored, plaster-walled, unceiled garret; and her father asked nothing more of Fate, and went out to his work in the bitter coldness and darkness of the morning dawns with an empty stomach but a warm heart, leaving her sleeping, easily and dreamlessly, curled up like a little dormouse in her corner of the room.

The winter passed and the spring came, making all the orchard lands once more become seas of white flowers, and setting the chaffinches and linnets and nightingales to work at their nests amongst the lovely labyrinth of bursting blossom; and one sunlit afternoon, towards the close of April, the village priest, coming along the road by the river, saw Fringuello, who was backing his sand-cart into the bed of the now shallow stream, and beckoned to him. The priest had an open letter in his hand, and his plump, smooth olive face was sad.

'Dario,' he said gravely, 'I have some terrible news in this paper. Lillo's son, Cecco, is dead. I have to go and tell the family. The authorities have written to me.'

He stopped suddenly, surprised by the effect which his news had on his hearer. 324

'Saints protect us, how you look!' he cried. 'One would think you were the lad's father!'

'Is it sure? Is it true?' stammered Fringuello.

'Ay, ay, it is true and sure enough. The authorities write to me,' answered the vicar, with some pride. 'Poor lad! Poor, good, pretty lad! They sent him to the Marenna marshes, and the ague and fever got on him, and he died in the fort a week ago. And only to think that this time last year he was bringing me armfuls of blooming cherry boughs for the altar at Easter-day! And now dead and buried. Good lack! Far away from all his friends, poor lad! The decrees of heaven are inscrutable, but it is of course for the best.'

He crossed himself and went on his way.

Fringuello doffed his cap mechanically, and crossed himself also, and rested against the shaft of his cart with his face leaning on his hands. His hope was struck down into nothingness; the future had no longer a smile. Though he had told himself, and them, that children were fickle and unstable, and that nothing was less likely than that the lad would come back in the same mind, he 325
had nevertheless clung to and cherished the idea of such a fate for his little daughter with a tenacity of which he had been unconscious until his air castle was scattered to the winds by the words of the priest. The boy was dead; and never would Lizina go to dwell in peace and plenty at the old farmhouse by the great pine.

'It was too good to be. Patience!' he said to himself, with a groan, as he lifted his head and bade the mule between the shafts move onward. His job had to be done; his load had to be carried; he had no leisure to sit down alone with his regret.

'And it is worse for Lillo than it is for me,' he said to himself, with an unselfish thought for the lad's father.

He looked up at the little window of his own attic which he could see afar off; the lemon-tree was visible, and beside it the little brown head of Lizina as she sat sewing.

'Perhaps she will not care; I hope she will not care,' he thought.

He longed to go and tell her himself lest she should hear it from some gossip, but he could not 326
leave his work. Yet, he could not bear the child to learn it first from the careless chattering of

neighbouring gossips.

When he had discharged the load he carried, he fastened the mule to a post by the water-side, and said to a fellow-carter, 'Will you watch him a moment whilst I run home?' and on the man's assenting he flew with lightning speed along the road and up the staircase of his house.

Lizina dropped her sewing in amazement as he burst into the room and stood on the threshold with a look which frightened her.

She ran to him quickly.

'*Babbo! Babbo!* What is the matter?' she cried to him. Then, before he could answer, she said timidly, under her breath, 'Is anything wrong—with Cecco?'

Then Fringuello turned his head away and wept aloud.

He had hoped the child had forgotten. He knew now that she had remembered only too well. All through the year which had gone by since the departure of the youth she had been as happy as a field-mouse undisturbed in the wheat. The grain was not ripe yet for her, but she was sure that it would be, and that her harvest would be plenteous. She had always been sure, quite sure, that Cecco would come back; and now, in an instant, she understood that he was dead.

Lizina said little then or at any time; but the little gay life of her changed, grew dull, seemed to shrink into itself and wither up as a flower will when a worm is at its root. She had been so sure that Cecco would return!

'She is so young; soon it will not matter to her,' her father told himself.

But the months went by and the seasons, and she did not recover her bloom, her mirth, her elasticity; her small face was always grave and pale. She went about her work in the same way, and was docile, and industrious, and uncomplaining, but something was wrong with her. She did not laugh, she did not sing; she seldom even spoke unless she was spoken to first. He tried to persuade himself that there was no change in her, but he knew that he tried to feed himself on falsehood. He might as well have thought his lemon-tree unaltered if he had found it withered up by fire.

II

Once Lizina said to her father, 'Could one walk there?'

'Where, dear? Where?'

'Where they have put Cecco,' she answered, knowing nothing of distances or measurements or the meaning of travel or change of place.

She had never been farther than across the ferry to the other bank of the river.

Her father threw up his hands in despair.

'Lord! my treasure! why it is miles and miles and miles away! I don't know rightly even where—some place where the sun goes down.'

And her idea of walking thither seemed to him so stupefying, so amazing, so incredible, that he stared at her timorously, afraid that her brain was going wrong. He had never gone anywhere in all his life.

'Oh, my pretty, what should we do, you and I, in a strange place?' moaned Fringuello, 329
weeping with fear at the thought of change and with grief at the worn, fevered face lifted up to his. 'Never have I stirred from here since I was born, nor you. To move to and fro—that is for well-to-do folks, not for us; and when you are so ill, my poor little one, that you can scarcely stand on your feet—if you were to die on the way——'

'I shall not die on the way,' said the child firmly.

'But I know nought of the way,' he cried wildly and piteously. 'Never was I in one of those strings of fire-led waggons, nor was ever any one of my people that ever I heard tell of. How should we ever get there, you and I? I know not even rightly what place it is.'

'I know,' said Lizina; and she took a crumpled scrap of paper out of the breast of her worn and frayed cotton frock. It bore the name of the seashore town where Cecco had died. She had got the priest to write it down for her. 'If we show this all along as we go people will put us right until we reach the place,' she said, with that quiet persistency which was so new in her. 'Ask how one
can get there,' she persisted, and wound her arm about his throat, and laid her cheek against his 330
in her old caressing way.

'You are mad, little one—quite mad!' said Fringuello, aghast and affrighted; and he begged the priest to come and see her.

The priest did come, but said sorrowfully to him:

'Were I you, I would take her down to one of the hospitals in the town; she is ill.'

He did so. He had been in the town but a few times in his whole life; she never. It was now wintry weather; the roads were wet, the winds were cold; the child coughed as she walked and shivered in her scanty and too thin clothes. The wise men at the hospital looked at her hastily among a crowd of sick people, and said some unintelligible words, and scrawled something on a piece of paper—a medicine, as it proved—which cost to buy more than a day of a sand carter's wage.

'Has she really any illness?' he asked, with wild, imploring eyes, of the chemist who made up the medicine.

'Oh no—a mere nothing,' said the man in answer; but thought as he spoke: 'The doctors might
spare the poor devil's money. When the blood is all water like that there is nothing to be done; 331
the life just goes out like a wind-blown candle.' 'Get her good wine; butcher's meat; plenty of nourishing food,' he added, reflecting that while there is youth there is hope.

The father groaned aloud, as he laid down the coins which were the price of the medicine. Wine! Meat! Nourishment! They might as well have bidden him feed her on powdered pearls and melted gold. They got home that day footsore and wet through; he made a little fire of boughs and vine-branches, and, for the first time ever since it had been planted, he forgot to look at the lemon-tree.

'You are not ill, my Lizinanina?' he said eagerly. 'The chemist told me it was nothing.'

'Oh no, it is nothing,' said the child; and she spoke cheerfully and tried to control the cough which shook her from head to foot.

Tears rolled down her father's cheeks and fell on to the smouldering heather, which he set all right. Wine! Meat! Nourishment! The three vain words rang through his head all night. They
might as well have bade him set her on a golden throne and call the stars down from their 332
spheres to circle round her.

'My poor little baby!' he thought; 'never did she have a finger ache, or a winter chill, or an hour's discomfort, or a moment's pain in mind or body until now!'

The child wasted and sickened visibly day by day. Her father looked to see the lemon-tree waste and sicken also; but it flourished still, a green, fresh, happy thing, though growing in a place so poor. A superstitious, silly notion took possession of him, begotten by his nervous terrors for his child, and by the mental weakness which came of physical want. He fancied the lemon-tree hurt the child, and drew nourishment and strength away from her. Perhaps in the night, in some mysterious way—who knew how? He grew stupid and feverish, working so hardly all day on hardly more than a crust, and not sleeping at night through his fears for Lizina. Everything

seemed to him cruel, wicked, unintelligible. Why had the State taken away the boy who was so contented and useful where he was born? Why had the strange, confined, wearisome life amongst the marshlands killed him? Why was he himself without even means to get decent food? Why, after working hard all these years, could he have no peace? Must he even lose the one little creature he had? The harshness and injustice of it all disturbed his brain and weighed upon his soul. He sank into a sullen silence; he was in the mood when good men turn bad, and burn, pillage, slay—not because they are wicked or unkind by nature, but because they are mad from misery.

But she was so young, and had been always so strong, he thought; this would pass before long, and she would be herself again—brisk, brown, agile, mirthful, singing at the top of her voice as she ran through the lines of the cherry-trees. He denied himself everything to get her food, and left himself scarce enough to keep the spark of life in him. He sold even his one better suit of clothes and his one pair of boots; but she had no appetite, and perceiving his sacrifice, took it so piteously to heart that it made her worse.

The neighbours were good-natured and brought now an egg, now a fruit, now a loaf for Lizina; but they could not bring her appetite, and were offended and chilled by her lassitude, her apparent ignorance of their good intentions, and her indifference to their gifts.

Some suggested this nostrum, others that; some urged religious pilgrimages, and some herbs, and some charms, and some spoke of a wise woman, who, if you crossed her hand with silver, could relieve you of any evil if she would. But amidst the multitude of counsellors, Lizina only grew thinner and thinner, paler and paler, all her youth seeming slowly to wane and die out of her.

Her little sick heart was set obstinately on what her father had told her was impossible.

None of Cecco's own people thought of going to the place where he died. He was dead, and there was an end to it; even his mother, although she wept for him, did not dream of throwing away good money in a silly and useless journey to the place where he had been put in the ground.

Only the little girl, who had laughed at him and flouted him as they sat on the wall by the river, did think of it constantly, tenaciously, silently. It seemed to her horrible to leave him all alone in some unfamiliar, desolate place, where no step was ever heard of any whom he had ever known. She said nothing of it, for she saw that even her father did not understand; but she brooded over the thought of it constantly, turning to and fro in her mind the little she had ever known or heard of the manner and means by which people transported themselves from place to place. There were many, of course, in the village who could have told her how others travelled, but she was too shy to speak of the matter even to the old man of the ferry, in whose boat, when it was moored to a *poula* driven in the sand, she had spent many an hour of playtime. She had always been a babbling, communicative, merry child, chattering like a starling or a swift, until now. Now she spoke rarely, and never of the thing of which her heart was full.

One day her father looked from her pinched, wan face to the bright green leaves of the flourishing lemon-tree, and muttered an oath.

'Day and night, for as many years as you are old, I have taken care of that tree, and sheltered it and fed it; and now it alone is fair to see and strong, whilst you—verily, oh verily, Lizina, I could find it in my heart to take a billhook and hew it down for its cruelty in being glad and full of vigour, whilst you pinch and fade, day by day, before my sight!'

Lizina shook her head, and looked at the tree which had been the companion of her fifteen years of life.

'It's a good tree, *babbo*!' she said gently. 'Think how much it has given us; how many things you bought me with the lemon money! Oh! it is very good; do not ever say a word against it; but—but—if you are in anger with it, there is a thing which you might do. You have always kept the money which it brought for me?'

'Surely, dear. I have always thought it yours,' he answered, wondering where her thoughts were tending.

'Then—then,' said Lizina timidly, 'if it be as mine really, and you see it no more with pleasure in its place there, will you sell it, and with the price of it take me to where Cecco lies?'

Her eyes were intensely wistful; her cheeks grew momentarily red in her eagerness; she put both hands to her chest and tried to stop the cough which began to choke her words. Her father stared, incredulous that he could hear aright.

'Sell the tree?' he asked stupidly.

Not in his uttermost needs had the idea of selling it come to him. He held it in a superstitious awe.

'Since you say it is mine,' said the child. 'It would sell well. It is strong and beautiful and bears good fruit. You could take me down where the sun sets and the sea is—where Cecco lies in the grass.'

'Good Lord!' said Fringuello, with a moan.

It seemed to him that the sorrow for her lost sweetheart had turned the child's brain.

'Do, father—do!' she urged, her thin brown lips trembling with anxiety and with the sense of her own powerlessness to move unless he would consent.

Her father hid his face in his hands; he felt helpless before her stronger will. She would force him to do what she desired, he knew; and he trembled, for he had neither knowledge nor means to make such a journey as this would be to the marshlands in the west, where Cecco lay.

'And the tree—the tree!' he muttered.

He had seen the tree so long by that little square window, it was part of his life and hers. The 338
thought of its sale terrified him as if he were going to sell some human friend into bondage.

'There is no other way,' said Lizina sadly.

She, too, was loth to sell the tree, but they had nothing else to sell; and the intense selfishness of a fixed idea possessed her to the exclusion of all other feeling.

Then the cough shook her once more from head to foot, and a little froth of blood came to her lips.

Lizina, in the double cruelty of her childhood and of her ill-health, was merciless to her father, and to the tree which had been her companion so long. She was possessed by the egotism of sorrow. She was a little thing, now enfeebled and broken by long nights without sleep and long days without food, and her heart was set on this one idea, which she did not reveal—that she would die down there, and that then they would put her in the same ground with him. This was her idea.

In the night she got up noiselessly, whilst her father was for awhile sunk in the deep sleep 339
which comes after hard manual toil, and came up to the lemon-tree and leaned her cheek against its earthen vase.

'I am sorry to send you away, dearie,' she said to it; 'but there is no other way to go to him.'

She felt as if it must understand and must feel wounded. Then she broke off a little branch—a small one with a few flowers on it.

'That is for him,' she said to it.

And she stood there sleepily with the moonlight pouring in on her and the lemon-tree through the little square hole of the window.

When she got back to her bed she was chilled to the bone, and she stuffed the rough sacking of her coverture between her teeth to stop the coughing, which might wake her father. She had put the little branch of her lemon into the broken pitcher which stood by her at night to slake her thirst.

'Sell it, *babbo*, quick, quick!' she said in the morning.

She was afraid her strength would not last for the journey, but she did not say so. She tried to seem cheerful. He thought her better.

'Sell it to-day—quick, quick!' she cried feverishly; and she knew that she was cruel and 340
ungrateful, but she persisted in her cruelty and ingratitude.

Her father, in despair, yielded.

It seemed to him as if he were cutting the throat of a friend. Then he approached the tree to carry it away. He had called in one of his fellow-carters to help to move it, for it was too heavy for one man. With difficulty it was forced through the narrow, low door and down the steep stair, its leaves brushing the walls with a sighing sound, and its earthen jar grinding on the stone of the steps. Lizina watched it go without a sigh, without a tear. Her eyes were dry and shining; her little body was quivering; her face was red and pale in quick, uneven changes.

'It goes where it will be better than with us,' said Fringuello, in a vague apology to it, as he lifted it out of the entrance of the house.

He had sold it to a gardener in a villa near at hand.

'Oh yes, it will be better off,' he said feverishly, in the doubtful yet aggressive tone of one who argues that which he knows is not true. 'With rich people instead of poor; out in a fine garden 341
half the year, and in a beautiful airy wooden house all winter. Oh yes, it will be much better off. Now it has grown so big it was choked where it stood in my little place; no light, no air, no sun, nothing which it wanted. It will be much better off where it goes; it will have rich, new earth and every sort of care.'

'It has done well enough with you,' said his comrade carelessly, as he helped to shove the vase on to the hand-cart.

'Yes, yes,' said Fringuello impatiently, 'but it will do better where it goes. It has grown too big for a room. It would starve with me.'

'Well, it is your own business,' said the other man.

'Yes, it is his own business,' said the neighbours, who were standing to see it borne away as if it were some rare spectacle. 'But the tree was always there; and the money you get will go,' they added, in their collective wisdom.

He took up the handles of the little cart and placed the yoke of cord over his shoulders, and began to drag it away. He bent his head down very low so that the people should not see the tears which were running down his cheeks.

When he came back to his home he carried its price in his hands—thirty francs in three paper 342
notes. He held them out to Lizina.

'All is well with it; it is to stand in a beautiful place, close to falling water, half in shade, half in sun, as it likes best. Oh, all is well with it, dear! do not be afraid.' Then his voice failed him, and he sobbed aloud.

The child took the money. She had a little bundle in her hand, and she had put on the only pair of shoes she possessed.

'Clean yourself, father, and come—come quickly,' she said in a little hard, dry, panting voice.

'Oh wait, wait, my angel!' he cried piteously through his sobs.

I cannot wait,' said the child, 'not a minute, not a minute. Clean yourself and come.'

In an hour's time they were in the train. The child did everything—found the railway-station, asked the way, paid their fares, took their seats, pushing her father hither and thither as if he were a blind man. He was dumb with terror and regret; he resisted nothing. Having sold the tree, there seemed to him nothing left for him to do. Lizina obeyed him no more—she commanded. 343

People turned to look after this little sick girl with death written on her face, who spoke and moved with such feverish decision, and dragged after her this thin dumb man, her small lean hand shut with nervous force upon his own. All the way she ate nothing; she only drank thirstily of water whenever the train stopped.

The novelty and strangeness of the transit, the crowd, and haste, and noise, the unfamiliar scenes, the pressure of unknown people, and the stare of unknown eyes—all which was so bewildering and terrible to her father, had no effect upon her. All she thought of was to get to the place of which the name was written on the scrap of paper which she had shown at the ticket-office, and which she continued to show mutely to anyone who spoke to her. It said everything to her; she thought it must say everything to everyone else.

Nothing could alarm her or arrest her attention. Her whole mind was set on her goal.

'Your little lady is very ill!' said more than one in a crowded railway-waggon, where they 344 jammed one on to another, thick as herrings in a barrel.

'Ay, ay, she is very ill,' he answered stupidly; and they did not know whether he was unfeeling or daft. He was dizzy and sick with the unwonted motion of the train, the choking dust, the giddy landscape which seemed to run past him, earth and sky together; but on Lizina they made no impression, except that she coughed almost incessantly. She seemed to ail nothing and to perceive nothing. He was seized with a panic of dread lest they should be taken in some wrong direction, even out of the world altogether; dreaded fire, accident, death, treachery; felt himself caught up by strong, invisible hands, and whirled away, the powers of heaven or hell alone knew where. His awful fear grew on him every moment greater and greater; and he would have given his soul to be back safe on the sand of the river at his home.

But Lizina neither showed nor felt any fear whatever.

The journey took the whole day and part of the ensuing night; for the slow cheap train by which they travelled gave way to others, passed hours motionless, thrust aside and forgotten, and 345 paused at every little station on the road. They suffered from hunger and thirst, and heat and draught, and fatigue and contusion, as the poor cattle suffered in the trucks beside them. But the child did not seem to feel either exhaustion or pain, or to want anything except to be there—to be there. The towns, the mountains, the sea, the coast, all so strange and wonderful to untravelled eyes, had no wonder for her. She only wanted to get beyond them, to where it was that Cecco lay. Every now and then she opened her bundle and looked at the little twig of the lemon-tree.

Alarmed at her aspect, and the racking cough, their companions shrank away from them as far as the crowding of the waggon allowed of, and they were left unquestioned and undisturbed, whilst the day wore on and the sun went down into the sea and the evening deepened into night.

It was dawn when they were told to descend; they had reached their destination—a dull, sun-baked, fever-stricken little port, with the salt water on one side of it, and the *machia* and marsh on the other.

Lizina got down from the train, holding her little bundle in one hand and in the other her 346 father's wrist. Their limbs were bruised, aching, trembling, their spines felt broken, their heads seemed like empty bladders, in which their brains went round and round; but she did not faint or fall—she went straight onward as though the place was familiar to her.

Close to the desolate, sand-strewn station there was a fort of decaying yellow stone, high walls with loopholes, mounds of sand with sea-thistle and bryony growing in them; before these was the blue water, and a long stone wall running far out into the water. To the iron rings in it a few fisher boats were moored by their cables. The sun was rising over the inland wilderness, where wild boars and buffalo dwelt under impenetrable thickets. Lizina led her father by the hand past the fortifications to a little desolate church with crumbling belfry, where she knew the burial-ground must be. There were four lime-washed walls, with a black iron door, through the bars of which the graves within and the rank grass around them could be seen. The gate was locked; the child sat down on a stone before it and waited. She motioned to her father to do the 347 same. He was like a poor steer landed after a long voyage in which he has neither eaten nor drank, but has been bruised, buffeted, thrown to and fro, galled, stunned, tormented. They waited, as she wished, in the cool dust of the breaking day. The bell above in the church steeple was tolling for the first Mass.

In a little while a sacristan came out of the presbytery near the church, and began to turn a

great rusty key in the church door. He saw the two sitting there by the graveyard, and looking at them over his shoulder, said to them, 'You are strangers—what would you?'

Lizina rose and answered him: 'Will you open to me? I come to see my Cecco, who lies here. I have something to give him.'

The sacristan looked at her father.

'Cecco?' he repeated, in a doubtful tone.

'A lad of Royezzano, a soldier who died here,' said Fringuello, hoarsely and faintly, for his throat was parched and swollen, and his head swam. 'He and my child were playmates. Canst tell us, good man, where his grave is made?'

The sacristan paused, standing before the leathern curtain of the church porch, trying to 348
remember. Save for soldiers and the fisher folk, there was no one who either lived or died there; his mind went back over the winter and autumn months, to the last summer, in which the marsh fever and the pestilential drought had made many sicken and some die in the fort and in the town.

'Cecco? Cecco?' he said doubtfully. 'A Tuscan lad? A conscript? Ay, I do recall him now. He got the tertian fever and died in barracks. His reverence wrote about him to his family. Yes, I remember. There were three soldier lads died last year, all in the summer. There are three crosses where they lie. I put them there; his is the one nearest the wall. Yes, you can go in; I have the key.'

He stepped across the road and unlocked the gate. He looked wonderingly on Lizina as he did so. 'Poor little one!' he muttered, in compassion. 'How small, how ill, to come so far!'

Neither she nor her father seemed to hear him. The child pressed through the aperture as
soon as the door was drawn ajar, and Fringuello followed her. The burial-ground was small and 349
crowded, covered with rank grass, and here and there sea-lavender was growing. The sacristan led them to a spot by the western wall where there were three rude crosses made of unbarked sticks nailed across one another. The rank grass was growing amongst the clods of sun-baked yellow clay; the high white wall rose behind the crossed sticks; the sun beat down on the place: there was nothing else.

The sacristan motioned to the cross nearest the wall, and then went back to the church, being in haste, as it was late for matins. Lizina stood by the two poor rude sticks, once branches of the hazel, which were all that marked the grave of Cecco.

Her father, uncovering his head, fell on his knees.

The child's face was illuminated with a strange and holy rapture. She kissed the lemon bough which she held in her hand, and then laid it gently down upon the grass and clay under the wall.

'I have remembered, dear,' she said softly, and knelt on the ground and joined her hands in
prayer. Then the weakness of her body overcame the strength of her spirit; she leaned forward 350
lower and lower until her face was bowed over the yellow grass. 'I came to lie with you,' she said under her breath; and then her lips parted more widely with a choking sigh, the blood gushed from her mouth, and in a few minutes she was dead.

They laid her there in the clay and the sand and the tussocks of grass, and her father went back alone to his native place and empty room.

* * * * *

One day on the river-bank a man said to him:

'It is odd, but that lemon-tree which you sold to my master never did well; it died within the week—a fine, strong, fresh young tree. Were there worms at its root, think you, or did the change to the open air kill it?'

Fringuello, who had always had a scared, wild, dazed look on his face since he returned from the sea-coast, looked at the speaker stupidly, not with any wonder, but like one who hears what he has long known but only imperfectly understands.

'It knew Lizina was dead,' he said simply; and then thrust his spade into the sand and dug. 351

He would never smile nor sing any more, nor any more know any joys of life; but he still worked on from that habit which is the tyrant and saviour of the poor.

THE END

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Transcriber's Notes:

Punctuation and spelling were made consistent when a predominant preference was found in this book; otherwise they were not changed.

Simple typographical errors were corrected, sometimes by referencing other editions of these stories.

Ambiguous hyphens at the ends of lines were retained.

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