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, by Matilde Serao**

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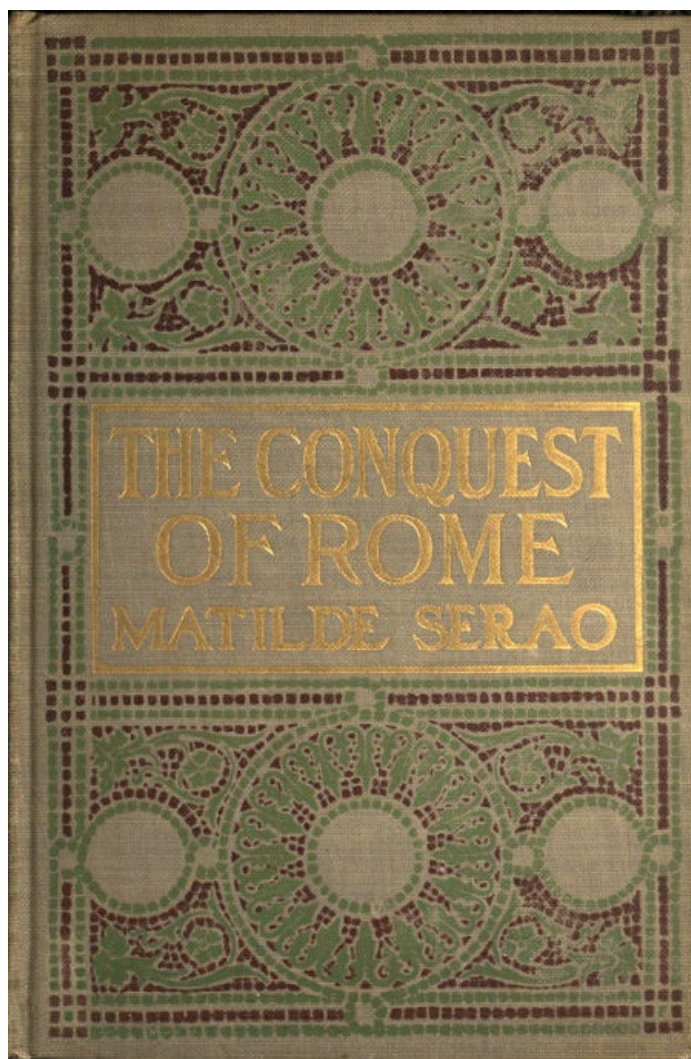
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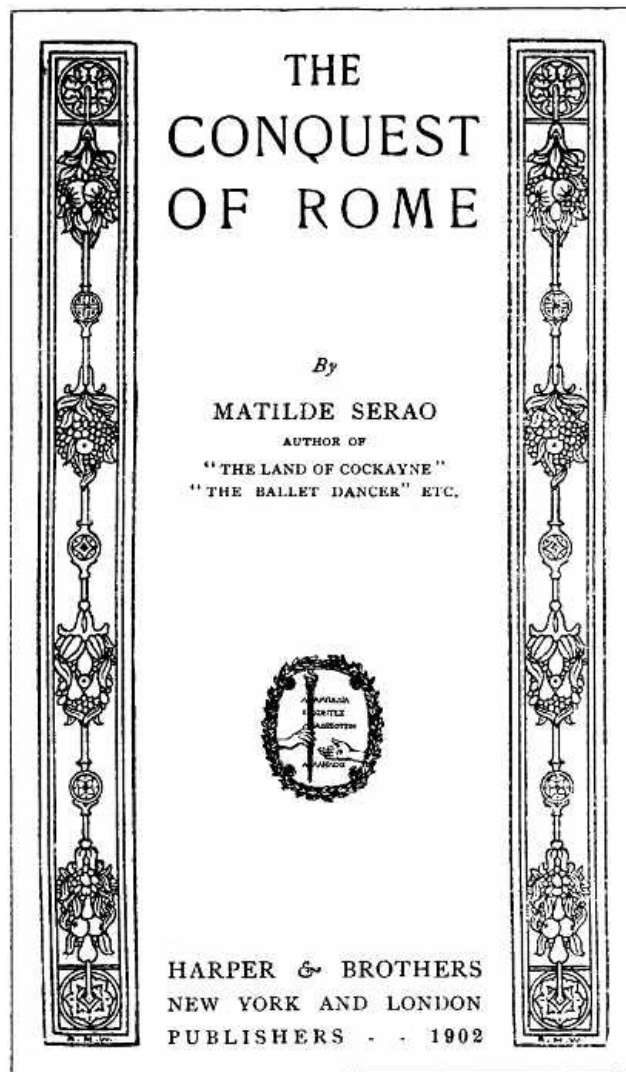
Transcriber's Note:

A Table of Contents has been added.



# The Conquest of Rome

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## THE CONQUEST OF ROME

*By*

**MATILDE SERAO**

AUTHOR OF  
"THE LAND OF COCKAYNE"  
"THE BALLET DANCER" ETC.

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# PART I

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## CHAPTER I

The train stopped.

'Capua! Capua!' three or four voices cried monotonously into the night.

A clanking of swords dragged on the ground was heard, and some lively muttering that passed between a Lombard and a Piedmontese. It came from a group of subaltern officers, who were ending their evening's amusement in coming to see the night train from Naples to Rome pass through. While the conductor chatted respectfully with the station-master, who gave him a commission for Caianello, and while the postman handed up a mail-sack full of letters to the clerk in the postal van, the officers, talking to each other and making their spurs ring (from habit), looked to see if anyone got in or out of the train, peeping through the doors which were open for the sight of a fair feminine face or that of a friend. But many of the doors were closed. Blue blinds were stretched over the panes, through which glimmered a faint lamplight, as if coming from a place where lay travellers overpowered by sleep. Bodies curled up in a dark tangle of coats, shawls, and sundry coverings, were dimly discernible.

'They are all asleep,' said one of the officers; 'let us go to bed.'

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'This is probably a newly-married couple,' suggested another, reading over a door the word 'Reserved.' And since the blind was not drawn, the officer, aflame with youthful curiosity, jumped on the step and flattened his face against the window. But he came down at once, disappointed and shrugging his shoulders.

'It is a man, alone,' he said—'a deputy, no doubt; he is asleep, too.'

But the solitary man was not asleep. He was stretched out at full length on the seat, an arm under his neck, and one hand in his hair; the other hand was lost in the bosom of his coat. His eyes were closed, but his face bore not the soft expression of repose, not the deep peace of human lineaments in sleep. Instead, the effort of thought was to be read in those contracted features.

When the train had passed the bridge over the Volturno, and ran into the dark, deserted, open country, the man reopened his eyes, and tried another position more favourable to repose. But the monotonous, everlasting *grind, grind* of the train racked his head. Now and then a farmhouse, a little villa, a rural cottage, stood out darkly from a dark background; a thin streak of light would ooze out through a crack; a lantern would throw a glimmering, dancing circle in the path of the speeding train. The cold prevented him from sleeping. Accustomed to the mild Southern nights, and not in the habit of travelling, he had set out with a simple light overcoat and neither rug nor shawl; he had a small handbag, and other luggage was following him on the train.

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Of importance to him were neither clothes, nor maps, nor books, nor linen—nothing but that little gold medal, that precious amulet suspended from his watch-chain. From the day it was his—it had been obtained for him by special request through the quæstor of the Chamber—his fingers were perpetually running over it with light touch, as if in a mechanical caress. At such times as he was alone he crushed it into the palm of his hand so hard that a red mark would remain on the skin. In order to have the compartment reserved, he had shown this to the station-master, lowering his eyes and compressing his lips to fight down a look of triumph and a smile of complacency. And since the beginning of the journey he held it in his hand, as though afraid to lose it, so infusing it with the warmth of the epiderm it was scorching. And so acute was the sensation of pleasure derived from the contact of that possession that he faintly felt every protuberance and every hollow in the face of the metal—*felt* under his fingers the number and the words:

'XIV. Legislature.'

On the reverse were a Christian name and a surname, indicative of the ownership:

'FRANCESCO SANGIORGIO.'

His hands were hot, yet he shook with the cold. He rose and went to the door. The train was now running through open country, but its noise was subdued. It seemed as though the wheels were anointed with oil as they rolled noiselessly along the rails, accompanying the travellers' sleep without disturbing it. The luminous windows stamped themselves as they fled by on a high, black embankment. Not a shadow behind the panes. The great house of slumbers coursed through the night, driven, as it were, by an iron, fervent will, whirling away with it those wills inert in repose.

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'Let us try to sleep,' thought the Honourable Sangiorgio.

Stretching out once more, he attempted to do so. But the name of Sparanise, called out softly two or three times at a stoppage, reminded him of a small and obscure place in the Basilicata, whence he hailed, and which, together with twenty other wretched villages, had given all their votes to make him a deputy. The little spot, three or four hours distant from an unknown station on the Eboli-Reggio line, seemed very far off to the Honourable Sangiorgio—far off in a swampy vale, among the noxious mists which in autumn emanate from the streams, whose dried-up beds are stony, arid, and yellow in summertime. On the way to the railway-station from that little lonely place in the dreary tracts of the Basilicata he had passed close to the cemetery—a large, square piece of ground, with black crosses standing up, and two tall, graceful pines. There lay, under the ground, under a single block of marble, his erstwhile opponent, the old deputy who had always been re-elected because of patriotic tradition, and whom he had always fought with the enthusiasm of an ambitious young man ignoring the existence of obstacles. Not once had he defeated him, had this presumptuous young fellow, who was born too late, as the other said, to do anything for his country. But Death, as a considerate ally, had secured him a sweeping and easy victory. His triumph was an act of homage to the old, departed patriot. But as he had passed the burial-ground he had felt in his heart neither reverence nor envy in respect to the tired old soldier who had gone down to the great, serene indolence of the tomb. All of this recurred to his mind, as well as the long, odious ten years of his life as a provincial advocate, with the mean, daily task common in the courts, and rare appearance at assizes. Perhaps a land litigation over an inheritance of three hundred lire, a mere spadeful of ground; a whole miniature world of sordid, paltry affairs, of peasants' rascalities, of complicated lies for a low object, in which the client would suspect his lawyer and try to cheat him, while the lawyer would look upon the client as an unarmed enemy. Amid such surroundings the young advocate had felt every instinct of ardour die in his soul; speech, too, had died in his throat. And since the cause he must defend was barren and trivial, and the men he must address listened with indifference, he at last took refuge in hastening through the defence in a few dry words; therefore his reputation as an advocate was not great. Now he was entirely bereft of the capacity to regret leaving his home and his old parents, who at seeing him go had wept like all old persons of advanced years when someone departs through that great selfishness which is a trait of old age. Many secret, furious tempests, smothered eruptions that could find no vent, had exhausted the well-springs of tenderness in his heart. Now, during this journey, he remembered it all quite clearly, but without emotion, like an impartial observer. He shut his eyes and attempted to sleep, but could not.

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In the train, however, everyone else appeared to be wrapped in deep slumber. Through the noise and the increased rocking the Honourable Sangiorgio seemed to hear a long, even respiration; he seemed almost to see a gigantic chest slowly rising and falling in the happy, mechanical process of breathing.

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At Cassino, where there was a stop of five minutes at one in the morning, no one got out. The waiter in the café was asleep under the petroleum lamp, motionless, his arms on the marble table and his head on his arms. The station men, huddled up in black capes, with hoods over their eyes and lantern in hand, went by, testing the journals, which gave forth the sound of a metal bell, clear, crystalline in tone. The whistle of the engine, as the train started, was gently shrill; the loud, strident voice was lowered as if by courtesy. Resuming the journey, the movement of the train became a soft rocking, without shocks, without grating, without unevenness, a rapid motion as on velvet, but with a dull rumble like the snoring of a giant in the heavy plenitude of his somnolence. Francesco Sangiorgio thought of all those people who were travelling with him: people in sorrow over their recent parting, or glad at nearing their new bourn; people loving without hope, loving tragically, or loving happily; people taken up with work, with business, with anxieties, with idleness; people oppressed by age, by illness, by youth, by felicity; people who

knew they were journeying towards a dramatic destiny, and those who were going that way unconsciously. But they all, within half an hour, had one by one yielded to sleep, in full forgetfulness of body and soul. The gentle, pacific, healing balm of rest had come to still the unquiet spirits, had soothed them, had spread over those perturbed mortals, whether too happy or too unhappy, and they were all at ease in their sleep. Irritated nerves, anger, disdain, desires, sickness, cowardice, incurable grief—all the bestiality and grandeur of human nature travelling in that nocturnal train was lost in the great, calm embrace of sleep. The train was hastening to their fate—sad, lucky, or commonplace—those dreaming spirits and those prostrate shapes of beings who were tasting the profound delight of painless annihilation, leaving it to a power outside of themselves to bear them along.

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'But why cannot I sleep also?' thought Francesco Sangiorgio.

For a moment, as he stood in his solitary compartment under the wavering light of the oil-lamp, with the pitch-black earth scudding by past the windows, with the light vapour that clouded the glass, with the cold of the night that was growing more intense—for a moment he felt alone, irremediably lost and abandoned in the feebleness of his situation. He repented having so proudly asked for a reserved compartment, wished for the company of a human being, of anyone whomsoever, of anyone of his kind, even the very humblest. He was dismayed and terrified like a child, imprisoned in that cage out of which there was no escape, drawn along by a machine which he was powerless to stop in its course. Seized with unreasoning horror, with parched throat he dropped helplessly on the seat, from which, pricked by a latent reflection, he suddenly jumped up; he began to walk nervously back and forth.

'It is Rome, it is Rome,' he murmured.

Yes, it was Rome. Those four letters, round, clear, and resonant as the bugles of a marching army, now rang through his imagination with the persistency of a fixed idea. The name was short and sweet, like one of those flexible, musical names of women which are one of the secrets of their seductions, and he twisted it about in his mind in queer patterns, in contorted curves. He was unable, he did not know how, to shape a notion of what those four letters, cut as it were in granite, actually represented. The fact that it was the name of a city, of a large agglomeration of houses and people, eluded him. He did not know what Rome was. Through want of the leisure and the money to go there, he, the obscure little advocate, the utterly insignificant, had never been to Rome. And never having seen it, he was unable to form any but an abstract conception of it: as a huge, strange vision, as a great fluctuating thing, as a fine thought, as an ideal apparition, as a vast shape with shadowy outlines. Thus all his thoughts about Rome were grand, but indefinite and vague—wild comparisons, fictions that developed into ideas, a tumult of fantasies, a crowded jumble of imaginations and conceits. Beneath the cold mask worn by the pensive son of the South burned an active imagination habituated to selfish and solitary meditations. And Rome threw that mind into furious commotion!

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Oh, he felt Rome—he felt it! He saw it, like a colossal human shade, stretching out immense maternal arms to clasp him in a strenuous embrace, as the earth did Antæus, who was thereby rejuvenated. He seemed to hear, through the night, a woman's voice uttering his name with irresistible tenderness, and a voluptuous shudder ran over him. The city was expecting him like a well-beloved son far from home, and magnetized him with the mother's desire for her child. How often, from the little overarched, embowered terrace in front of his house, in his Basilicata, had he stared out upon the horizon beyond the hill, thinking how, over there, over there under the bend of the sky, Rome was waiting for him! Like faithful, reverent lovers who have an adored one afar, and who are consumed with the desire to be at her side, he sorrowfully thought of the great distance separating him from Rome; and as in cases of crossed love, men, things, and events interposed between him and his adored. With what deep, self-avowed hatred, all asurge in his heart, did he detest those who put themselves in the way of himself and the city that was calling him! Like lovers, in their inmost thoughts, nothing was present to him but the rapturous vision of the being he loved and was loved by: all those black shadows eclipsing the brightness of his dream enraged him. Bitterness invaded him; rancour, anger, scorn, and desires accumulated in his mind—as with lovers.

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With Rome ever in his heart, the ten years' strife had changed him. A secret distrust of all others and a sovereign esteem of himself; continued and oft harmful introspection; the steady assumption of outward calm while his heart rioted within; a profound contempt for all human endeavours foreign to ambition; growing experience of the discrepancy between wish and fulfilment; the consequent delusions, kept private, but no less bitter for that; the love of success, success only, nothing else than success—all this had been born in his innermost soul. Yet sometimes, in the dark hours of despair, he was prostrated with unspeakable debility; humiliation drove out pride; he felt himself a poor, miserable, futile creature. Like lovers, when bad fortune overtakes them, he felt unworthy of Rome. Ah! he must possess himself in patience, fortify himself with persistence, temper his strength in adversity, purify his spirit in the cleansing fire, like a saint of old, in order to be worthy of Rome. Sacred as a priestess, mother, bride, Rome must have expiations and sacrifices, must have a heart unalloyed and a will of iron!

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'Ceprano! Ceprano! Fifteen minutes' stop!' was being shouted outside.

The Honourable Sangiorgio looked about him, listened as one dazed. He had been raving.

First a bar of pallid green; then a cold, livid lightness, creeping slowly upward until it reached the top of the heavens. In that chillness of expiring night opened the vast Roman Campagna. It was an ample plain, whose colour was as yet indistinct, but which here and there undulated like the dunes of the seashore. This Sangiorgio observed as he stood erect by the window. The dense shadows as yet unconquered by the encroaching whiteness gave the Campagna the aspect of a desert. Not a tree in sight. Only, from time to time, a tall thick hedge, that seemed to make a circular bow and run away.

The stations now began to look gray, all wet still with the nocturnal dews, their windows barred and their green shutters closed, these taking on a reddish tint; the mean little oleanders, with their branches hanging down and their blossoms dropping on the ground, looked as though they were weeping; and there was the clock with large, white disc, splashed with moisture, the dark hands and the fat body likening it to a two-legged spider. The station-master, huddled up in his cloak, with a scarf wound about the lower part of his face, marched with lowered cape up and down among the porters. In the cold morning air an insidious, acrid smell of damp earth pierced to the brain. A large place high up on a hill, fortified by a surrounding wall and two towers, stood forth gray and ancient, with a medieval air: it was Velletri.

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The train seemed to be waking up. In the next compartment there was a scraping on the floor, and two people were talking. Out of a first-class window protruded the head of a Spanish priest, with hard, shaven cheeks of a bluish hue, who was lustily puffing at a cigar. And as the white, frosty dawn irradiated the whole sky, the nakedness of the Campagna appeared in all its grandeur. On those fields, stretching beyond sight and dimly lighted, grew a sparse, short grass of a soft, marshy green; here and there were yellowish stains, blotched with brown, of coarse, rude earth, stony, muddy, uncultivable. It was an imperial desert ungraced by any tree, undarkened by any shadow of man, untraversed by any flight of bird; it was desolation, enormous and solemn.

In the contemplation of this landscape, which resembled nothing else whatever, Sangiorgio was seized by a growing surprise that absorbed all his individual dreams. He stood looking out, mute and motionless, from the corner of the coach trembling with cold, conscious that the beating of his temples was abating. Then by degrees his eyelids became heavy, a sensation of lassitude came over his whole body; he felt the full fatigue of his wakeful night. He would have liked to stretch himself out in the railway-carriage with a comfortable ray of sunshine streaming in through an open window, and to get an hour's sleep before reaching Rome; he was envious of the people who had spent the long hours of the night in getting renewed strength from sleep.

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The journey was now seeming intolerably long to Sangiorgio, and the spectacle of the Campagna in its majestic poverty was oppressive to him. Would it never end? Would he never be in Rome? He was worn out: a sensation of torpor was spreading from his neck through all his limbs, his mouth was pasty and sour, as if he were convalescing from an illness, and his impatience became painful, a sort of small torture; he began to pity himself, as though an injustice had been done him. The ordinary passenger trains were too slow; he had done wrong to come in this one, expecting to sleep during the night; this last hour had been unendurable. The reality of his dreams was upon him, close as close could be, and the proximity caused him a shock of gladness. He felt he was hastening towards Rome, like a lover to his lady; he strove to be calm, inwardly ashamed of himself. But the last twenty minutes were a veritable spasm. With his head out of the window, receiving the damp smoke of the engine in his face, without a further look at the Campagna, without a glance at the fine aqueducts running over the plain, he stared into the distance, believing and fearing that at every moment Rome would appear, and was depressed by a vague feeling of terror. The Campagna vanished behind him as if it were drowning, going down with the moist fields, the yellow aqueducts, and the little white road-labourers' houses. The locomotive seemed to be increasing its speed, and from time to time gave vent to a long, long, piercing whistle twice and thrice repeated. At nearly all the windows heads were peering out.

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Where was Rome, then? It was nowhere to be seen. So strong was his trepidation that when the train commenced to slacken the Honourable Sangiorgio sank down on the seat; his heart beat under his throat as though it filled up his whole chest. As he stepped down upon the platform from the footboard, the violent throbbing within him was answered by as many imaginary hammer-like blows upon the head. Yet all that the railway officials said was 'Rome.' But he was seized with a slight trembling in the legs; the crowd surrounded him, pushed him, jostled him, without paying any attention to him. He was between two currents of passengers, arrived simultaneously by two trains, from Naples and Florence. The Honourable Sangiorgio was bewildered among so many people; he leaned against the wall, his handbag at his feet, and his eyes wandered through the crowd as if in search of someone. The station was still quite damp and rather dark, smelling horribly, as usual, of coal, of oil, of wet steel, and was full of black waggons and high piles of accumulated luggage. All faces were tired, sleepy, ill-humoured, expanding into a yawn about the mouth; their sole expression was one of indifference, not hostile, but invincible.

No one noticed the deputy, who had unfastened his overcoat with the childish motive of displaying his medal. Twice he called to a porter, who went off without listening to him. Instead, the employés of the railroad were gathering round a group of gentlemen in tall hats, with pale, bureaucratic countenances, who had on black tailcoats and white cravats under buttoned-up overcoats, their collars up, and their faces sallow from short sleep. They bore the aspect of persons of position accomplishing a high social formality. When from a coach in the Florence train a tall, slender, fashionable lady alighted they all uncovered. Then a thin old gentleman got

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out. The group closed in; the lean gentleman bowed, while the lady smilingly bent her head over a proffered bunch of flowers. From the now open coats shone an array of white shirtfronts; smiles flitted over the visages, which had quickly coloured. On some of the watchchains hung four or five medals.

'His Excellency!' was murmured roundabout.

Then the whole group began to move, the fine lady giving her arm to the thin old man, the deputies and other high functionaries following. The Honourable Sangiorgio stayed behind mechanically, having remained alone. On the Piazza Margherita he saw the whole procession get into carriages between the rows of friends, who were lined up bowing. The lady put her head out at the door and smiled. He saw them all drive off after her, and was alone in the great square. On the ground lay moisture, as though it had been raining. All the windows of the *Albergo Continentale* were shut. To the left lay the *Corso Margherita* still building, heaped up with stones, beams, and rubbish. The hotel omnibuses turned, about to start. Three or four hackney-coaches remained behind through the laziness of the coachmen, who sat smoking and waiting. At the right was an empty tavern, closed up, and on a high stone wall a screeching advertisement of the *Popolo Romano*. Over all hung a thick, soggy atmosphere, an enveloping mist, a somewhat disagreeable odour. The nauseous sight was there of a city scarce awake in the limp heaviness of an autumn morning, with that fever-tainted breath which seems to be emitted by the houses.

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The Honourable Francesco Sangiorgio was exceedingly pale, and he was cold—in his heart.

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## CHAPTER II

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That day he must resist and not go to Montecitorio. The rain had ceased, as if weary of a week's downpour; a suggestion of dampness still floated in the atmosphere, the streets were muddy, the sky was all white with clouds. Pale-faced people encased in overcoats, with trousers turned up at the ankle and with countenances distrustful of the weather, were walking the thoroughfares.

From a window of the *Albergo Milano* the Honourable Sangiorgio was contemplating the Parliament House, painted light yellow, on which the autumnal rains had left large marks of a darker colour, and he was trying to strengthen himself in his resolve not to go in there that day. All through that rainy week he had stood there—morning, noon, and night. When he opened his window of a morning, through the steaming veil would he peer at the large pot-bellied structure, which appeared to like standing out in the wet. He dressed mechanically, his eyes fixed in its direction, while he made plans to go about Rome, to see the town, to look for furnished lodgings, since this life in an inn could not last. But as he opened his umbrella in the doorway of the hotel a sudden fit of indolence overcame him; the street which sloped to the Piazza Colonna looked slippery and dangerous; he gave his shoulders a shrug, and went straightway before the pursuing rain into the Montecitorio. He left again only for the purpose of taking breakfast at his inn, in the corner ground-floor room, with glass doors and mirrors; and while eating a veal stew, done in Roman style, he every now and then turned to see who entered the Parliament House. He ate rapidly, like one whose brain has no consideration for the benefit of his stomach. Everyone who went in there interested him. Now, he thought, this must be Sella, with his stout figure, rather square, as though carved with a hatchet, and his shaggy beard, of an opaque black, which was gradually speckling. Again, it looked as if this must be Crispi, with his large, white moustache and red face, more like a growling old general than a fiery debater. The Honourable Sangiorgio finished his meal hastily, inwardly gnawed with impatience to get a close view of these statesmen, these party leaders, and then once more made for Montecitorio. But there new delusions awaited him.

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He went about everywhere, looking for Sella and Crispi. But the hall was void and chill under the skylight, with the benches still in their summer linen covers, with the dust-coloured carpets bordered in blue, resembling a deep, dark well, with a light pouring in from on high, as if filtered through a net of water. Abstractedly he ascended the five steps leading to the Speaker's chair, where he stopped for a moment and looked at the benches, which, narrow below, widened as they rose towards the galleries. An infantile desire came over him to try the white buttons of the electric bells; in order not to yield, he walked down quickly on the other side, and quitted the hall, carrying away some of the oppression of that great inverted cone, pale and melancholy in its forsakenness. Neither Sella nor Crispi was anywhere to be found. They were not in the dark circular corridor of columns, which lend it the semblance of a porticoed crypt, nor in the other passage, long and straight, where the deputies have their lockers for bills and reports. Nor did he discover a politician in the refreshment-room, nor in the great room called the *Lost Footsteps*, nor in the office chambers facing the square. Silence and solitude everywhere; no one but a few ushers lolling about in uniform, without their badges, and bearing the listless air of people with nothing to do. Now and then Sangiorgio met the quæstor of the chamber, who had come to exchange with the other quæstor, a patrician who, during October, revelled in the luxury of his seigneurial villa on *Lago Maggiore*; and this other one, a Baron from the *Abruzzi*, with calm, aristocratic air, with a flowing, fair beard, with the mild, unsevere propriety of a gentleman attentive to his duties, went about vigilant yet apparently unconcerned. Whenever the baronial quæstor met the Honourable Sangiorgio, he gave him a little nod and murmured 'Honourable'; and, passing on, he said nothing more. The Honourable Sangiorgio felt embarrassed and shy in consequence of this continued politeness and this continued reserve; he would have preferred to

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be unsaluted, like a stranger, or spoken to, like a colleague. This correctness, polite though cold, disconcerted Sangiorgio to such a degree that after a week of this repeated bowing and no word passed, he blushed when he encountered the quæstor, as though caught in a mistake. Hereupon, doubting whether he would find what he was in search of, he took refuge in the reading-room, on the large oval table of which lay scattered the daily newspapers. There, at least, he found a pair of deputies—one a Socialist from Romagna, of light chestnut whiskers and mobile eyes behind glasses, writing letter after letter, at a tiny table—flaming addresses, perhaps; the other, an old Parliamentarian, with white beard and ruddy countenance, who was peacefully asleep in an armchair, his feet on another chair, his hands in his lap, and a newspaper overspreading his body.

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Francesco Sangiorgio, succumbing to the stillness of the place, to the warm air, to the softness of the great dark-blue easy-chair, leant his head upon one of his hands, though still holding up the number of the *Diritto* or the *Opinione* he was reading. A lethargy stole over all his being, which seemed to have relaxed in the warm and silent atmosphere; but in that lethargy, behind the hand covering his eyes, he was still alert. If the Socialist deputy turned over a page, if the old man made a spring in his chair creak, Sangiorgio started: the fear of being discovered asleep haunted him—unlike that aged deputy, who was not ashamed to exhibit his worn-out, useless senility in the reading-room, sleeping soundly, with the croaking respiration of a catarrhal old man. He then got up, and went across the room on tiptoe.

The Socialist deputy raised his head, and scrutinized Sangiorgio with his cunning eyes, those of an overrascally apostle. Possibly he was seeking to discern the stuff of a disciple in that young novice of a deputy; but the cold glance, the low forehead, where the stiff hairs were planted as on a brush, the whole energetic physiognomy of Francesco pointed to a character already formed, unsusceptible to the sway of influences—one on whom social mysticism would have taken no hold. So that the Socialist, Lamarca, bent his head again to his writing.

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The Honourable Sangiorgio climbed to the third floor, to the library. In the bright corridor, which has its own windows beneath the skylight of the legislative hall, two or three clerks were at the high wooden desks, entering in large books the general catalogue of the works kept in the library; their occupation was continuous, unceasing; they wrote without stirring, without speaking. A short deputy, bald and red-nosed, was posted in front of a desk and turning over, always turning over, the leaves of one of those large books, as though hunting for some undiscoverable volume. Very small, standing on a footstool so as to reach the level of the desk, with a pair of short-sighted eyes that compelled him to put his nose down to the paper, he seemed to disappear behind the volume, and remained in concealment like a bookmark. In the series of rooms, all full of books, Sangiorgio found no one; the tables, covered with papers, with pens, with inkstands, with pencils, for the studious, were deserted.

In a corner of one of the rooms, before a half-filled shelf, standing on a ladder, the learned librarian-deputy, the persevering Dantophile of the black eyebrows, looking as though they were put on with two heavy strokes of charcoal, was rummaging furiously among the books, with that passion for his library which he had derived from the chaos he had found it in. Nevertheless, he turned round, the honourable librarian-deputy, at Sangiorgio's cautious footstep; catching sight of him, he turned and scrutinized him with a pair of blackest, most vivacious eyes, all pregnant with the literary researches he had been making.

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Francesco Sangiorgio, embarrassed anew, as if he were an intruder admonished by the silence and the librarian's staring gaze, walked more softly, and in the last room of the library set to reading the titles of the new books, one by one, dizzy at all the lore relating to government, economics, and politics collected on those shelves, and for pretence he took down a volume of Buckle's 'History of Civilization'—the second—and began to read.

Like lovers unable to tire of the lady of their heart, enchained by the sweet fascination, seeking the smallest pretext for remaining by her, so also did he linger in the corridors, looking at the maps on the walls; in the hall, studying the allotment of the seats; in the reading-room, perusing the newspapers; in the library, reading some books he cared little or nothing about. With the natural rusticity of his mind and his provincial shyness, he feared, in his heart, lest that quæstor who bowed to him so properly, but without ever speaking to him; lest those ushers who so indifferently saw him pass by; lest that librarian, so much in love with his library, might judge him for what he really was: a provincial, a novice, stunned with his first political success, who was afraid to take his comfort in the Parliamentary armchairs, and who could not tear himself away from the place. It seemed to him, as it does to lovers, that everyone must read his sole passion in his face.

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That day he would not set foot there, at Montecitorio; he would not on any account think of the Parliamentary world; he must see Rome, must find a lodging. He looked out of the window, intending to start after breakfast. He had been awakened early by a hubbub of voices and laughter in the adjoining room. A sonorous, virile, resounding voice, with a very pronounced Neapolitan accent, and speaking in pure Neapolitan dialect, broken by rude laughter, was loudly arguing and declaiming. Two visitors came, who were then followed by two others; then there was a string of friends, of petitioners, who implored, boasted their claims, repeated their requests over and over again in Neapolitan dialect and with an obstinate rhetorical verbosity, to all of which the Honourable Bulgaro, Deputy for Chiaia, the second Naples district, replied with vigorous objections. He could be heard through the dividing doors, and the Honourable

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Sangiorgio involuntarily listened.

No, he could not, he really could not, said the Honourable Bulgaro. Was he, perchance, the Eternal Father, that he could grant everything to everybody? Let them leave him in peace, once and for all! And he walked up and down the room with the cumbrous stride of a large man, grown loutish in civil life after losing the agility of the handsome young officer, who, in his palmy days, had won many a fair creature's heart. But those who came with a purpose insisted, begged, explained their family history, related their troubles, everlastingly repeating it all, so that the Honourable Bulgaro, with his easy Neapolitan good-nature, yielded after being worn out, and said:

'Very well! Very well! We'll see if something cannot be done!'

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They went away as well pleased as though they already had their desires, and the Honourable Bulgaro, left alone for a minute, puffed and swore:

'Lord! Lord! what jabbering!'

The Honourable Sangiorgio was ashamed of having overheard so much, and went down to breakfast in a very pensive mood. He armed himself with courage to resist the seductions of Montecitorio. He reflected that perhaps many deputies had arrived, since but three weeks were wanting before the opening of the forty-fourth legislature. And he was already giving way to curiosity, as a pretext for his weakness, when a carriage, which chanced to be slowly passing by on the flooded paving-stones, obstructed his view of the main porch. With a decided gesture he hailed the carriage and jumped in.

'Where may it be your pleasure to go?' asked the coachman of his absent-minded patron, who had given him no directions.

'To—St. Peter's—yes, take me to St. Peter's!' answered Francesco Sangiorgio.

The drive was long. The three consecutive streets—Fontanella di Borghese, Monte Brianzo, Tordinona—were choked with vehicles and foot-passengers; they were narrow and tortuous, with those dingy stationery and second-hand iron shops, all dirty and dusty, with those narrow front-doors, with those squalid blind alleys. At Castel Sant' Angelo there was breathing-space, but along the turbid and almost stagnant yellow stream was a succession of brown hovels, of gray tenements, with thousands of tiny windows, with damp stains of green on them, as though a loathsome disease had discoloured them, with filthy mildewed foundations disclosed by low-water: that angle of the river, near Trastevere, was vile. In the Via Borgo the deep ecclesiastical quiet began, with the silent, grayish palaces, with the shops for sacred articles, statuettes, images, oleographs, rosaries, crucifixes, where the pompous legend stood forth: 'OBJECTS OF ART.'

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In the great deserted square before the church two fountains which were playing looked like white plumes, and the obelisk in the middle like a walking-stick, and round about the ground was lightly bedewed with spray from the fountains standing there in the silence of an untenanted place. The carriage turned the obelisk, and stopped at the grand stairway. The Honourable Sangiorgio surveyed the front of St. Peter's, and it seemed to him very small and squat.

'Will you go into the church?' asked the coachman.

'Yes,' said the deputy, shaking himself out of his fit of abstraction.

When he arrived at the threshold, he veered round and took a mechanical glance at the square. He had read that at that distance a man looked like an ant; but nobody appeared, and the huge, empty space, besprent with water under the gray sky, to his mind resembled the vast, naked Campagna. Inside the church he experienced no mysterious emotions: he was an indifferent as to religion, never speaking of it, discussing the Pope like an important political question, leaving religious faith and practice to women. The architecture of St. Peter's did not stir him. As he advanced he perceived that the church grew in size, but to him that deceptive harmony seemed purposeless, reprehensible. A few Germans were circulating, looking about with rather severe mien, as if their rigid Lutheranism disdained such Christian pomp. Not a chair, not a bench, not a priest, not a sacristan—the familiar spirit who extinguished the candles and replenished the holy water at the great pillars. The brown confessionals, on which might be read in gilt characters, 'Pro Hispanica Lingua,' 'Pro Gallica Lingua,' 'Pro Germanica Lingua,' were empty. There was nothing to kneel on but the steps of the pulpit or of the main altar; else there was the cold pavement.

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Francesco Sangiorgio had no understanding for the monuments of the Popes: he examined them without appreciating either their beauty or their ugliness. His notions of art were vague and narrow. Canova's, with the sleeping lions, he thought mediocre; Rovere's Pope, all in bronze, he considered superb and handsome; Bernini's, with the figure of Death in gold, the drapery of red, veined marble, the Pope of white marble—this gave him no sensations, but was simply queer. He did not know whether the paintings over the altars were by great artists or not, whether they were copies or originals. He wandered about, killing time, as though performing a duty, abstracted and thinking of something else, not at all interested in that gigantic pile of stones, freezing and forsaken, where only a few shadows flitted. Finally, on the way out, the monument to the two last Stuarts impressed him as a poor thing.

'Drive to the Coliseum,' he said resolutely to the coachman, throwing himself back into the cushions.

The coachman, in order to prolong the drive, since he was engaged by the hour, and so as to avoid the streets by which they had come, and which were ugly enough, went through the old, dark streets of the Borgo Santo Spirito and the Governo Vecchio, where the real Roman population lives, loath to abandon the ancient quarters and the small houses crawling with beetles. The coachman made his horse go at the slow gait of a tired animal, having cleverly secured a stranger with no ideas. At the Foro Traiano he still further slackened the horse's pace, and Sangiorgio pretended to admire that broad expanse below the level of the ground, where the mutilated pillars serve for tree-trunks, that great burial-place for dead cats, that great dwelling-place for stray cats, whom the charitable servants of the Via Magnanapoli and Macel de' Corvi bring the remains of their dinner. He could not see the Campidoglio, nor the Arch of Septimius Severus, nor the GrecoStasi, nor the Temple of Peace, nor the whole great Roman Forum; because of the perpetual demolitions he could not pass by there, nor could he go on the Palatine Hill. This the coachman explained as he followed the Via Tor de' Conti.

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And soon the carriage was under the Coliseum, without the visitor having seen it from afar on the road which he had to take thither. The Honourable Sangiorgio felt obliged to alight, and went in under the arched entrance, sinking into the muddy soil. A large pool of rain-water, bordered by verdant vegetation, lay near the doorway of the Flavian Amphitheatre. In the hollows of the white stones scattered here and there, in the fluting of the stairs, and even in the hand of a broken statue, there was rain-water. Francesco, marvelling at the immensity of the walls, looked for points of identification; where, then, was the imperial box, the gallery for the vestals, and that for the priests? He stood in the centre, but did not realize the nature of that subterraneous structure. Yes, the Coliseum was grand, but the dirty light of a rainy day partially dimmed its majesty, and showed its decay and all the wear and tear of time. The country outside was green with the rich growth of moist fields; but there was not the song of a bird, not the voice of a beast, not the voice of a man.

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Under an archway a municipal guard appeared; he was leisurely and apathetic, taking no notice of the visitor. The Honourable Sangiorgio conscientiously went the round of the circular corridor, which was rather dark. He thought perhaps this Coliseum might be finer at night, under the moonlight, which gives ruins a romantic aspect, making them look larger and more mysterious. He had done wrong to come in the daytime to get his first impression. The Coliseum, he thought, was a great, useless thing, built by vain, foolish people. A gentleman and a lady—she being young and frail, he tall and robust—were also walking through the circular corridor, where the air is soft and cool, as in a cellar; they were walking slowly, without looking at one another, speaking in undertones, their fingers interlocked. She cast down her eyes at meeting Sangiorgio's, and the man gave him a surprised, resentful glance.

'Let us imagine what it looks like at night, with the moon,' said the Honourable Sangiorgio to himself. 'The old Romans built the Coliseum for modern lovers to walk in.' And he shrugged his shoulders, in expression of his secret contempt for love—the scorn of the provincial who has lacked time, opportunity, and inclination to love; the scorn of a man profoundly absorbed by another desire, which was not love.

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'Shall we go to the Church of San Giovanni?' inquired the coachman, assuming the initiative.

'Very well, let us go.'

And he conveyed him first to San Giovanni and then to Santa Maria Maggiore, depositing him conscientiously at the door. But these churches were smaller than St. Peter's. They failed to astonish him by their size; they were, perhaps, more inviting to worship, but his soul was closed to the sweet mysteries of religious belief; he walked to and fro aimlessly, like a somnambulist. Upon his coming out the coachman, without asking him anything, with a short trot of his nag, took him by the way traversed before, passing under the Titus Arch, to the stupendous Baths of Caracalla. The deputy, Sangiorgio, did not stop to inspect the photographs at the door; he entered quickly, as if seized with impatience.

The walls stood up enormously high, covered with tufts of grass and prickly weeds, and had the solidity that is bestowed by centuries. In the midst of the huge compartments the flooring had given way, becoming concave, like a basin, and filling with a puddle of inky water. At the end of the hall for games and recreation was a sitting statue, headless, the statue of a woman decently attired—Hygeia, probably. Against the sad November sky was outlined a lofty reach of ragged wall, a hideous toothed cliff, that seemed to mount up and up into the region of the clouds. Down below in the plain stood a round temple, tiny and graceful—to Venus, perhaps.

The Honourable Sangiorgio was ill at ease in that wide edifice; felt a chill in his marrow; was conscious of his smallness and insignificance. And anything that mortified or humiliated him made him suffer.

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'No!' he said decisively to the coachman, who offered to show him the old Appian Way, 'we will go back to town!'

As they returned to Rome he began to shiver. The mild autumn day was drawing to an end, and he seemed to be actually clothed in all its penetrating dampness, all the dirty white splotches, all the thin layers of mud. And he also seemed to bear within him all the gloom, all the solitude, all the melancholy, of those ruins, large or small, mean or splendid, all the void, the insensibility of those useless churches, of those great stone saints, that were hieratic figures without entrails, of those cold altars of precious marble.

What did all those memories of the past matter to him, all those tiresome records? Who cared aught for the past? He belonged to the present, was a modern of moderns, in love with his age, in love with the life he was to lead and not with the days gone by, fit for the daily strife, fit for the stiffest endeavours to conquer the future. He was not a weakling who repined; he did not believe that things had once gone better; he loved his own day, and saw that it was great—richer in thought, in activity, in individuality. But in the twilight that darkened the cloud-covered heavens he felt belittled, tainted by the dangerous, enervating contemplation of the past; a heavy oppression sank down upon his breast, upon his soul: he must have taken a fever in the bogs of the Coliseum and the Baths, in the tepid humidity of the churches.

The gas-jets on the Piazza Sciarra, however, brought him to. A newsboy was calling out the *Fanfulla* and the *Bersagliere* for sale. People were standing in groups on the pavement. The bustle of life once more stimulated his blood. A man talking in front of Ronzi and Singer's stated loudly that the opening of Parliament was fixed for November 20. The Fagiano and Colonne eating-houses, under the Veian Portico, were ablaze with light. Through the window of the Colonne the Honourable Sangiorgio thought to descry the Honourable Zanardelli, whose portrait he knew. He went in there instead of going on to the Albergo Milano, and took a seat at a table alone, near the honourable member from Brescia. And while he ate Sangiorgio examined that elongated, disjointed frame, that little nervous head, so full of indomitable will-power, those convulsive gestures, that essentially Southern pugnacity. The deputy from Brescia was dining with three other guests. In another corner dined more deputies, and the waiters busied themselves about those familiar customers, forgetting the solitary, unknown Sangiorgio. In that surcharged atmosphere he felt himself revive; he breathed anew; he took courage for the conflict. And when at an advanced hour he returned to the Piazza Montecitorio, in the presence of the Parliament House—mighty in the gloom—he felt shaken to the very foundations of his being. His heart was over there.

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### CHAPTER III

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In the glove-shop of the Via di Pietra there was a great bustle. The handsome proprietress, fair and tall, a cheerful Milanese, and two lean girls with weary eyes, did nothing but perpetually turn round with outstretched arms to take down glove-boxes from the shelves. They bowed their heads while they felt for the required pair with long, nimble fingers. All customers who came in wearing a top-coat, under which it could be assumed was a dress-coat, whose collars were upturned, and who had shiny silk hats, asked for light gloves. A fine gentleman in a high hat, with a red and white ribbon at his throat—a commander, in fact—asked specifically for the colour he wanted, selecting pigeon gray. A lady from the provinces, attired in wine-coloured satin and a white hood, in which she was suffocating, was a long time choosing a pair of gloves, arguing and trying the patience of three or four customers waiting in a corner. She desired a tight glove that would not wrinkle, and then she complained of buttons loosely sewn on with a single thread, which came off immediately. When told the price, six lire, she became scandalized, put on an injured air, said that the material was very poor at such a high price, and went away gloveless, with pursed-up lips, carrying in her hand her invitation-card to one of the galleries in the Parliament.

An honourable, a stout, dark young Southerner, with black moustache, was relating to a credulous constituent how at the last moment he had discovered he had no gloves, how those landlords threw away everything with the rubbish. And the poor constituent listened with a faint, confiding smile, having no gloves, not he, and probably no money to buy any.

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In the meantime another lady had come in who had stepped from a carriage. She was tall, with a fine face all painted crimson and white, with ruby lips, eyebrows so black that they looked blue, and exceedingly yellow hair. She was dressed entirely in white satin, had on a hat bedecked with white feathers, and carried a parasol bordered with cream lace. She asked for a pair of eighteen-buttoned black gloves; her bracelets tinkled as they slid up and down her bare arms; she exhaled a penetrating odour of white rose.

A small deputy, short and fat, almost round, with a fringe of black beard and a pair of sparkling, tiny, bead-like eyes, scanned her up and down. He was pouring out his grievances to a colleague, a tall, handsome man, with flaxen moustache and the important demeanour of a ceremonious blockhead. He, a democratic deputy of the Extreme Left, always drew one of the lots conferring the duty of receiving the King and the Queen at the door of the Parliament. Yes, he, a democratic deputy, was obliged to bow and give his arm to a lady of the Court whom he did not know, who did not speak to one, to whom one had nothing to say.

'I like fashionable women,' murmured the other, with his stupid, self-satisfied expression.

'May be. But when one considers that their dresses are made with the money of one's constituents——' retorted the fat republican honourable.

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And then they left, eyeing the handsome painted female as she got into her carriage. Between the indentations of her lace wrap was visible a pink card; she was to sit in another gallery, was she, in a distinguished gallery.

'The revenge of the proletariat,' remarked the democratic deputy quite complacently.

By this time people were treading on one another's heels in the glove-shop. There were faces of Government clerks, with freshly-shaven beard, white necktie ironed at home, pepper-and-salt overcoat, or cannon-smoke-coloured, or coal-dust-coloured, under which the black broadcloth trousers shone in perfect preservation; there were sallow faces of high officials, to which the green ribbon of St. Maurice and St. Lazarus imparted a still more cadaverous hue; there were all sorts of antiquated beaver hats, rejuvenated for the nonce by a hot iron.

The fair, smiling proprietress never flagged, never lost her head, bowed amiably to everyone, always answered with the politeness of a well-bred Northern saleswoman. She had disposed of the whole supply of white cravats, and when the Honourable Di Santamarta arrived, a fair-haired Sicilian of Mephistophelian mien, and asked for a necktie, she expressed profound regrets, the Marquis being an all-the-year-round customer. That very moment the last of those white neckties had been sold, but Salvi, in the Piazza di Sciarra yonder, he surely would have some. The blond Marquis listened apathetically, with his feminine blue eyes turned down and his sceptical smile.

'Is the Signora Marchesa in Rome? Of course she is going to the opening of Parliament?'

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'Yes, I believe so,' answered the Honourable Marquis. 'I think she will be going with her sister. I left my house in a hurry to buy this necktie. What a nuisance these performances are!' He went out wearily as if he had undergone some great fatigue, another just as onerous remaining. 'At Salvi's, you say?' he asked from the door in a drooping voice.

'Salvi, in the Piazza Sciarra.'

For a moment the shop was empty. The two girls took a respite standing up; their faces were very pale. Before them on the counter lay open boxes and piles of gloves. Even the proprietress was seized with momentary lassitude, and also stood still, her hands leaning on the counter. She was reminded of one of those hot carnival nights, one of the last, when there are three fashionable balls in Rome, four public balls, and eight or nine receptions, and when there would be a concourse of young gallants in her shop, and milliners, servants, ladies' maids, desperate husbands, fretsome lovers. But now a family from Salerno came in, father, mother, and daughter—the father employed in the Interior Department—and wanted a pair of gloves for the girl. They explained at once that they were bound for the Chamber, that they had their tickets from several people. One was from Baron Nicotera, their deputy—the Baron, as the mother simply called him; another had been given them by Filippo Leale—the Honourable Leale, the gentleman with the black beard, who had been Secretary-General; the third ticket had been procured by an usher of Parliament from their own district, a good fellow with five medals. Oh, it was not so easy to get cards! They were in very great demand. A lady of their acquaintance, who was the aunt of a deputy, had been unable to get one. They were rather disturbed on account of the different colours of their cards, which meant three separate galleries; but—well, they would not lose their way in the Parliament.

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'I think you will have to go in by three different ways,' placidly observed the proprietress in the midst of this flood of words, while she was battling to fit a glove on the girl's fat, red hand. The father of the family looked at his wife in dismay.

The shop was filling with fidgety, nervous people, who could not wait, who stamped with impatience, who tore the gloves in trying them on too hurriedly. Before the counter was a double row of customers, treading on each other's heels; on the counter was a tangle of open boxes, a confused agglomeration of miscellaneous gloves; and there was an all-pervading odour of skin—that pungent, essentially feminine odour which intoxicates.

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The gay autumn sun, on that most merry morning, sparkled on the housetops of the Via della Colonna, on the roofs of the Via degli Orfanelli, and threw its beams athwart the Piazza Colonna. The Antonine Column looked black and worn in the surrounding shaft of bright light, and stood out all wrinkled and hunchbacked against the red surface of the Piombino Palace. In the limpid air was a scintillation as of gilded atoms. Not a breath of wind stirred; streets and houses were steeped in a silent delight, in the joyful atmosphere of sunshine. Tricoloured banners were hung out; at the corner of the Palazzo Chigi, on the balcony of the Austrian Embassy, the two flags fraternally entwined. In the brilliant light, under which everything seemed to vibrate in the utmost precision and clearness of outline, the three vivid colours gave out a sharp, glad note. On the terrace of the Circolo Nazionale was a fluttering of parasols—red, white, blue—glistening in the sun. From both sides of the Corso, from the Via Cacciabove, from the Via della Missione, from the Via Bergamaschi, came a continual rush of people, in crowds and in groups, a flashing of black silk hats, a coruscation of gold epaulets, an undulating wave of white and pink feathers on the women's hats.

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By half-past nine the military cordon had stopped all issues, and, ascending towards Montecitorio, rounded the obelisk, and stretched to the Uffici del Vicario. At every break in the line there was perpetual haranguing between the officers and the people who tried to pass without tickets, each one of them looking for a deputy. Ah, there he was, under the Parliament porch! Now for making signs to him! But, heavens! he would not turn the right way! Behind the string of troops the multitudes of spectators formed a deep, dense hedge, iridescent in the morning sunlight; here and there a red gown, or a white one, made the effect of a blur. Between this line and the porch intervened a large empty space, strewn with gravel. Now and then some gentleman with overcoat unbuttoned, and some lady in fashionable morning attire, made their

way across on foot, walking slowly so as to be seen better, and while conversing together enjoying the envy of those who had no cards. Near the four steps in the porch a group of three ladies halted for a moment. One, habited in black, sparkled all over in the sunlight by reason of the lustrous cuirass of black beads imprisoning the upper part of her body; the other, dressed in a delicate gray, had a white veil over her face; the third was dressed in the iron blue, called *electric*, then in fashion; and the three had all met in the doorway, and bowed to each other, showered compliments on one another, laughed, swayed to and fro on their tinsel-slippered feet, conscious of being stared at by the crowd, of being admired and envied. After prolonging this delightful moment, they disappeared, one by one, into Montecitorio. As the hour drew near, the crowd increased on every side, and, like the waves of the sea, ebbed from and flowed against the wall of the military cordon. All the windows of the Albergo Milano were crammed with heads; from the attics peered out the curly heads of men-servants and the white caps of maid-servants; the large bay-windows of the Pensione dell' Unione, the little squat windows of the Fanfulla, the windows of the Wedekind Palace, all had three or four rows of spectators, closely crowded; and in all the adjacent thoroughfares, in the Orfanelli square, the Guglia Lane, the Uffici del Vicario, the two branches of the Via della Missione, there was a host of people on balconies and doorsteps, and at windows. At Aragno's, the liquor-seller's, women had climbed upon the chairs and tables.

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Then, as the hour of the ceremonial opening drew near, a file of people—those invited—crossed the open space. Occasionally a row of medals gleamed under a buttonhole. The carriages left the Corso at a trot, without noise from the wheels, turned the obelisk in a graceful curve, and halted at the porch. They were carriages belonging to Cabinet Ministers, to senators, to members of the corps diplomatique; old men got out of them, supported by a servant or a secretary, a white or red uniform was visible for an instant, and then disappeared beneath the porch.

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On the small platform two journalists in dress-coats and soft hats were jotting down the names of the notabilities who passed by. One was short, with a pointed, light beard, mottled with gray; he wore gold eyeglasses and an impassive look. The other, too, was short, but of sturdy figure and deadly white complexion, with a schoolboy moustache and a smile denoting a fondness for satire. They were the managers of the two largest Roman newspapers, who were contributing in person to the columns of those important journals, and between themselves were amicably jesting about the queer specimens who passed.

The sun spread over the corner of the Pensione dell' Unione, thus beginning the invasion of the Montecitorio square, and to this gradual encroachment corresponded a movement of the crowd, as if a feeling of contentment were stealing over them; here and there the smooth, round head of a parasol was raised. The procession of the ticket-holders continued across the open space, and they were now beginning to grow uneasy and impatient, and slightly excited, thinking they were too late to secure good places. The crowds in the streets, the alleys, the balconies, the windows, seemed at moments to have been suddenly stricken lifeless, as if petrified by magic, as if a huge, invisible photographic machine were photographing them; and one might have observed blank faces with staring eyes, children whom their nurses held by the collar, or a dozen people who had scaled a hackney-coach. Then the spell seemed to loosen; the crowds again showed some of the restlessness of people moving about and gaining no ground—a motion resembling the expansion and contraction of the rings of a worm. A little boy had climbed upon the pedestal of the obelisk, where, clinging to the great stone pillar, he amused himself with gymnastic feats.

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At length the sun reached the line of soldiers, falling obliquely upon them. First the white gaiters were illumined, then the blue capotes, then the black leather hats, and finally a bright streak ran along the barrels of the rifles. And from the distance came a low, brief rumble, the echo of a cannonade, upon which there passed from one to another of the whole mass of spectators, from balcony to window, from street to alley, a flutter and a sigh of immense relief:

'The procession! THE PROCESSION! THE PROCESSION!' exclaimed the crowd in an undertone, which grew to a clamour.

In the hall, too, the rumble of the cannon was heard; for an instant absolute silence reigned there. Then a murmuring of voices began and grew loud, fans were once more set in motion, the insidious, penetrating female chatter, the footsteps of persons turning about in the aisles in vain search of seats, the rustle of silk gowns, fused and were confused. The hall was metamorphosed. Round about it the sections had been raised to the level of the galleries by means of scaffolding, a large supplementary gallery being thus created, containing four rows of spectators close upon the shoulders of the deputies on the last bench. On the two side-stairways, which the ushers know so well from a hundred ascents and descents every day of every session, were two tightly-packed files of people, two thick, solid stripes extending from the top of the galleries down to the bottom, the ladies sitting on the steps, the men who had gallantly surrendered their places leaning against the wall.

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All around the galleries were all filled to their utmost capacity. The press gallery, too—the best for hearing the speeches—had been given up to the public, the reporters being distributed over the best seats below. The ladies' gallery was quite full, but this seemed a piece of irony, and everyone laughed at there being a special little gallery for ladies when they had already invaded everything, were present everywhere, at the elbows of the deputies and almost on the floor of the House, all aglow with their imperishable women's curiosity. The officers' gallery was an effulgence of epaulettes and gold-braid; in the Speaker's gallery there was much craning of necks and great lamentation from disappointed and deluded people: both were situated over the royal

canopy, which would conceal the King from view. And the two large galleries at the corners—the diplomats' and the senators'—were empty, deeply shaded by the dark-blue velvet draping their wooden walls.

In the hemicycle the committee benches had disappeared; they had run parallel to the sections on the arc of a circle. Gone, too, was the long Ministerial bench, called by the most virulent among the Opposition the prisoners' bench. The small desk in the middle, where the stenographers wrote, and relieved one another at five-minute intervals, had been taken away. The whole Speaker's box had been removed. In its place a broad platform, accessible by four steps and covered with red carpeting, had been erected, and over it had been stretched an enormous red velvet canopy, fringed with gold and divided into three compartments. All this red looked very sombre under the expansive dome, and in the claustral dimness the gold on the royal armchair shone forth like a holy shrine. Somewhat lower down, outside the canopy, to the right and left, were two other armchairs for members of the Royal Family. The members were scattered about, standing on the steps of the sections and talking with the women. Some had gone up to the last row and turned their backs to the House, gossiping glibly with the women in the large wooden gallery, bowing to an acquaintance, smiling at a friend, familiarly nodding to a constituent for whom they had procured a ticket. Airy, frivolous conversations were spun between the women, who were surprised at everything and laughed at everything, and the deputies who tried to help them at it.

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A dark, well-dressed lady, wearing a hat cross-laced with gold, was having the deputies pointed out to her by the Honourable Rosolino Scalia, a grave Sicilian in correctly cut clothes, presenting the appearance of an officer in civilian garb, his buttonhole containing a minute daisy, and at the leisurely explanations of Scalia the lady bent forward, peered through her eyeglasses, and pointed her lips to a malicious smile. Ah, indeed, was that the Honourable Cavalieri, the Calabrian, the member who was so ingenuously Calabrian? A patriot, did he say? Yes, she understood that, and admitted he was famous, but he wore too many medals! That lean, fair man, with the gray eyes and the mop of hair brushed back, was that the Honourable Dalma, the literary deputy who talked about Ophelia in the House and about real estate assessment to the women? Why did they not make the Honourable Dalma a Minister? Did many of them want to be Minister? And was this really a serious thing with them, this passion for politics? So the Honourable Scalia, a trifle disgusted with her empty rattle, tried to prove to the lady that, although politics might seem a jest to those not taking them seriously, they nevertheless were a noble passion. But she shook her head, unconvinced, laughing again with her pretty, frivolous laugh, and the Honourable Scalia's face showed his increasing abstraction; he sought relief from her cackle in looking about the hall, politely pretending to be amused.

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The public was not impatient of the delay. The women were glad to be seated, to see and to be seen; they would have stayed there till evening, playing their fans, tossing their heads to make the jewels in their hats sparkle, levelling their opera-glasses. The men were inwardly congratulating themselves on the early toilet which had been necessary, and which lent them an air of gravity and elegance; some pretended it was all a great bother. But invitations to lunch were being passed about, and meetings were being arranged at cafés to discuss the ceremony.

The crowd which peopled the hall and the galleries and the corridors, and every inch of space where a man might stand, was touched with nervous excitement, with a dash of intoxication. Many of these individuals had never visited Parliament, and feigned to take no interest in their surroundings, though in reality the atmosphere went to their heads. Meanwhile there was nothing gay about the Chamber itself, which kept its wonted appearance. The skylight windows had been washed, to be sure, but the light of that fair morning filtered through sadly, thinned like the cold, whitish, damp light that passes through an aquarium, and the wooden-coloured walls, with their streaks of dark blue, were well adapted to reflect no brightness whatever, to quench any cheerful gleam. That ugly colour absorbed and annulled all the others, condemned all the colours to a pale monotone. Such was the effect, from any gallery, of the optical phenomenon which is the first disillusionment of whoever visits the Italian Parliament: all faces were the same colour, melted into one another; no individuals could be distinguished; it was a monotonous whole, without design, without variety, from which one turned away disappointed.

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But this place, which equalized so many faces, so many sorts and conditions, so many kinds of clothes, this levelling to which the most rebellious must submit, this universal imprint which no one who came into the hall might escape—this produced a tremendous result. The hall seemed to be a huge sanctuary which swallowed up the individual, a holy precinct that subdued mind, will, and character, and where to stand up and be one the possession was needed of a profound, burning, mystic faith, or of the sacrilegious audacity that will overturn an altar. And the great royal canopy, all dark red, with the rigid, straight folds in the velvet, with the heavy gold fringe, and the golden eagle gathering up the folds under its claws, with the spacious armchair in the mysterious shadow, had an ecclesiastical aspect like a tabernacle—a shrine where an almighty power was abiding.

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Of a sudden all the deputies were in their places standing up, and a deep silence fell on the galleries, while outside the ringing bugles of the infantry sounded a flourish. Then a long round of applause burst forth—a dull, persistent applause from gloved hands. The ladies, who had risen, were applauding too, leaning on the shoulders of the deputies in order to see better. Standing in the diplomatic gallery and surrounded by her Ladies-in-Waiting, the Queen bowed in every direction, and the pearly whiteness of her face eclipsed the wooden background. She looked fresh and young and all serene under the brim of her yellow straw hat, adorned with a

strawberry-coloured plume. And when the acclaim seemed at an end, and the Queen sat down rather above her ladies, the whole assembly was carried off by a wave of admiration for that poetic figure, and new applause, universal and deafening, again greeted the Queen. Excitement reigned everywhere. On the right aisle there were ladies distracted because they were under the diplomatic gallery and could not see the Queen. Those in the Speaker's gallery were happy; they could not see the King very well, to be sure, but they were within two paces of Her Majesty. To some of the spectators on the left aisle half of the performance was lost—the whole corps diplomatique in full uniform in the senators' gallery, with the wives of the Ambassadors and of the Italian Cabinet Ministers. From the central, the press, public, officers', and Government clerks' galleries, though far off, everything could be seen. There was a perpetual aiming of opera-glasses. The crowd, seized with nervousness, swayed and bent to right and left. Dialogues between reporters were overheard: Where was the German Ambassador? Ah, there he was, with his good-humoured face, his white moustache, and his soft eyes! That lady dressed in violet, with the large black eyes, behind Donna Vittoria Colonna, who could she be? Donna Lavinia Taverna, a Piombino. And all the women were in feverish agitation, names were whispered, scraps of comment on the gowns flew to and fro, whoever was most in evidence tried to be recognised by the Ministers' wives, by the Ambassadors, by the Ladies-in-Waiting. An increasing murmur of questions and answers and subdued discussions rose in the air of the hall like the buzzing of a million flies.

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The King entered unexpectedly without the royal anthem being intoned. He appeared at the right-hand door in the midst of his household, of the Ministers, and of the ten deputies who had received him, and in three strides he was under the canopy. Two or three times he turned to the right and the left with the nervous abruptness of his quick, self-repressed nature. The members and the public hailed him, and he answered by motions of his gilded helmet, with its tall, waving white feather, while in his right hand he held a paper scroll. On the General's tunic which he wore were only his foreign military medals and the medal for bravery in the field. And in his close-fitting uniform, white collar, and tightest of trousers, as he stood under the overshadowing red dome with his helmet on his wrist in the attitude of a soldier at attention, he bore an unusually martial aspect, thin, brown, and strong, ever in readiness to mount on horseback, ever willing to sleep under a tent. He resembled one of those old pictures of a Commander-in-Chief, with proud, piercing eye and pale visage, clasping in one hand a rolled parchment on which the plan of a fortress is drawn. The old Prince of Savoia-Carignano, the King's uncle, fat and bald, placed himself at the right of the chair, on the arm of which he leant his flaccid and fatigued person, but he did not sit down for respect. The young Duke of Genoa, brother to the Queen and cousin to the King, took up his position at the Sovereign's left, while on the floor to the right was the group of Ministers and to the left the royal household.

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Out of the general silence rose the rather harsh voice of the King; and certainly the hearts of many of those politicians must have leapt at the recollection in that very assembly of another voice, slightly veiled, somewhat strident, a voice made for giving commands in battle, and that spoke the loyal words with which he sealed the national compact. And all the faces of the members had at once grown thoughtful; they remained motionless, with eyes fastened upon the King's. All of the women took to silence, as though struck by a sudden sense of reverence. In the deep quiet, in that stillness of a whole multitude, the respiration of the King was audible between one sentence and the next of the royal message. And the voice in which he spoke sounded like that paternal one; it had a certain explosiveness, certain peculiar accentuations, in its tone. The Queen listened intently without a smile from the diplomats' gallery, her handsome face bent downward and absorbed; the ladies were listening without the quiver of an eyelash; the whole Ambassadors' gallery had the smile that knows what is coming; the public galleries all round listened without losing a word; the deputies, standing up, listened, and every now and then something like a thrill of approval ran through the assembly. Twice the speech was interrupted by applause. At times a louder word seemed to wing its way, to soar up to the skylight: *peace—the administration of justice—financial retrenchment*. But suddenly the voice was lowered, as if the King disdained the final applause crowning his remarks, and he stopped short as if fatigued. The last words were muttered rather than spoken. He quickly took his helmet from the armchair where he had deposited it, while the audience shouted, 'Long live the King!' That rapt attention, however, had strained people's minds and imparted a sense of awe to them. The event of the day, which at first had seemed but a strange spectacle, now assumed larger proportions; the royal speech, on that sole occasion on which the constitutional Sovereign spoke in public declaring his will and intentions, became a solemn promise. A few of the most sensitive women had a little cold perspiration at the temples; others slapped their hands lightly with their fans, and with wandering eyes murmured, 'Beautiful, beautiful!' and the most romantic gazed fixedly at the Queen to observe her emotion.

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Then the swearing-in began. Old Depretis had advanced a few steps, and had read out the formula for the senators and deputies, scanning the words as if he wanted to imprint them on the minds of the listeners.

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The assembly of members and senators stood out in black and white from the bottom to the top of the sections, an assembly of energetic heads and puny heads, of scintillating eyes and eyes of dead fish, of bald, shining skulls, and of heavy, leonine manes. Narrow on the first bench, the gathering spread out to a wide semicircle on the last, and it seemed as though the space was all too small for the eruptive force of those wills and those brains.

The King measured the nation's representatives with a glance. The first senator, the Duke of

Genoa, took the oath in naval fashion in a vibrant tone, with a vigorous gesture; he was applauded. Then came eight new senators; there was a stir at the swearing of allegiance by the great Piedmontese Latinist, who was a clerical. What interested the audience most was the swearing-in of the deputies. Depretis said their name and surname and waited a brief moment, and from a bench a weak voice or a strong one would respond: 'I swear!' In that moment of expectation breathing was suspended; the King's eyes sought out him who was to swear and watched him take the oath.

The patriot veterans swore in military style, laying their bare hand on their breast: their faith was proved. The lawyers took the oath in the high voice of persons wishing to attract attention. When he came to his own name, Depretis drew his right hand from his Ministerial uniform coat, and extended it as he took the oath; the assembly laughed at the astute old man who was its leader. The Minister continued to tell off the names, and agitated as well as tranquil answers were given, now as if issuing from the bowels of the earth, now as if descending from the skylight. The old Parliamentarians took the oath simply putting out a hand and repeating the words in an undertone; the radical deputies, who had long been preparing for the ordeal, swore in extreme haste, as if to get rid of a load. And the women listened, all excitement, all seized with unconquerable emotion, they, the inventors of all sorts of false vows, overcome with feeling in presence of those solemn promises made by five hundred men to one man and to the whole nation.

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But the most perturbed were the new members: this royal and Parliamentary pomp, this male and female public, this message of the King, the swearing-in of the other deputies—all this had shaken their nerves. And those who had come with the intention of behaving with spirit, of swearing as if it were nothing at all to them, trembled with impatience while waiting for their name, and then piped in a thin little note which made their neighbours smile, and which was inaudible to the crowd. Some played furiously with their watch-chain, and when they were called started up as if from a dream, ejaculated a choked and hurried *I swear!* and fell back into their seat.

Between the Honourable Salviati—a Florentine Duke—and the deputy Santini, the oath was taken, in a strangled voice that nobody heard, by the Honourable Francesco Sangiorgio.

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## CHAPTER IV

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The door marked No. 50 in the Via Angelo Custode was situated two doors from a large, gray, dismal mansion, which was closed up. Francesco Sangiorgio hesitated a moment: there was no one to ask for information. One of the wings of the door was shut, the other ajar. The deputy entered a dingy passage-way, and advanced six or seven paces before reaching the stairs. He perceived that they were winding stairs, and in order not to risk breaking his neck he lit a match. But at the first floor there was rather more light, and at the second one might almost see. Upon the landing were three doors, and to that in the middle was attached by two bent pins a dirty visiting card bearing a forename and a surname: 'Alessandro Bertocchini.' Sangiorgio consulted the piece of paper given him by the house-agent. This was the name. He knocked.

For some time no one came; he knocked again, timidly. Then was heard a great rattling of keys and chains, of bolts pushed and drawn, and at last the middle door was cautiously opened a few inches. A tall man with a red nose and two fair curls plastered against his temples appeared. The Honourable touched his hat, and asked if Signor Alessandro Bertocchini lived here. It was himself—the man of the ruddy nose and washed-out complexion. Was there not an apartment to let? Signor Alessandro examined Sangiorgio, ogled the gold medal all over, and said:

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'Certainly, there is a furnished apartment to let; I will go for the keys.' And plunging his frosty fingers into his pockets, he left the deputy to wait on the landing. Through the open doorway a small anteroom was visible, with a table, a chair, and a lamp, and a breath of staleness, of ancient dust, assailed the lungs.

'Here it is,' twittered Signor Alessandro in his thin, high voice.

He opened the door at the left. There was a dingy room with a chair, and then a long narrow room, looking out upon a balcony. Along one of the walls stood a sofa of crimson cloth, with the back and arms of painted and tarnished wood. At each end of the sofa was an easy-chair, upon which were pieces of lace crochet-work; in front was a threadbare carpet. Along the opposite wall ran a white marble mantelpiece, upon which stood two tall petroleum lamps, a clock that had stopped, and three photographs in their frames. On the wall hung a long, narrow mirror, somewhat greenish, in whose corners were stuck, for ornament, little red, yellow, and blue oleographs of the King, Queen, and heir to the throne. Near the mantle were two wooden chairs cushioned with crimson cloth. Close to the balcony was a writing-table, also with cloth cover, of crochet-work, with green, violet, scarlet, orange, and indigo stars, and in the centre stood a carved matchstand. Before the balcony hung two shabby lace curtains beneath a piece of red woollen drapery. Two more chairs of black wood completed the furniture.

'This is the parlour,' said Signor Alessandro, in his weak, drawling voice, looking into the air, his shivering hands stuck into the pockets of his jacket.

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Francesco Sangiorgio stepped to the balcony; it faced an inside courtyard, on which fronted many other windows, balconies, doors, and loggias. Above a housetop, the barren branch of a tree protruded. From the bottom of the yard rose a strong smell of kitchen, of slops, and dishwater. The landlord said nothing, and kept his air of indifference, allowing the deputy to investigate the apartment. The bedchamber adjoined the parlour, and was likewise long and narrow. The bed stood lengthwise, and beside it were a chair and the nightstand; before it lay a carpet like that in the parlour, and at the back was a blue cloth easy-chair, with a spot that had eaten into the colour. Against the other wall stood a chest of drawers whose wooden top was somewhat stained, with circles on it, as if wet glasses had been there; the two brass candlesticks were without candles. The toilet-table stood in a recess; here, too, lace curtains appeared beneath a piece of print, with dark background and large red and yellow roses. The splendours of this room consisted in a tobacco-coloured feather quilt on the bed, with many-hued woollen arabesques. Jug and basin were hidden in a corner, where stood the washstand, without towels and without water.

'The price?' inquired the Honourable Sangiorgio.

'Eighty lire a month—in advance,' whistled Signor Alessandro's plaintive organ.

'And what about the service?'

'There is a servant who makes the bed, sweeps, brushes the clothes and polishes the boots. Eighty lire a month—in advance.' And he sighed deeply, running his hand through his hair, which bore the aspect of varnished mahogany. [Pg 53]

'Rather dear—eighty lire.'

The Signor Alessandro preserved silence, since he perhaps could not muster enough breath for a discussion, and did not want to waste any. As they were about to leave the apartment, he added simply, with his nose in the air, like a donkey taking an anxious sniff:

'You are permitted free entrance.'

The Honourable Sangiorgio went away, shrugging his shoulders. Perhaps he would come back. In the street, near the offices of the Minister of Agriculture, he met His Excellency's wife, the lady he had seen at the station. Tall, slender, habited in black, wearing a velvet cloak, she was quite fresh and young behind her black veil. She walked with rhythmical step, her gloved hands hidden in her muff, her eyes downcast, as though she were immersed in thought. And there was such dignity and sweetness in that female form that the Honourable Sangiorgio involuntarily bowed to her. But His Excellency's wife did not acknowledge his bow, and passed on, proceeding towards the Via Angelo Custode along the pavement. And in Francesco Sangiorgio arose a profound feeling of resentment, because of the rejected salute.

He next walked to the Piazza del Pantheon, to the second address given him by the house-agent, and he passed along the streets with that everlasting symptom of moral oppression, a weight on his chest, on his shoulders, on his head, which he had been unable to shake off from the day of his arrival in Rome, and in the thoroughfares he met people who also wore the same expression of dejection. [Pg 54]

The house was midway between the Pantheon and the Piazza della Minerva, and next door to a bakery. From below were to be seen two windows, with white blinds stretched tight. It was on the first floor: three doors, all three bearing the names of women, one of them written in violet ink, and in a feminine hand, on a tiny bit of pink pasteboard. The right-hand door, marked 'Virginia Magnani,' was opened by an untidy maid-servant, who stared Sangiorgio in the face without speaking. But after a moment the landlady arrived, in a blue cashmere gown trimmed with white lace, her front locks in curl-papers.

'Has the gentleman come about the apartment? Run away, Nanna! Step in, step in—I am quite at your service! Pray excuse me for receiving you like this, but one never manages to finish dressing in the morning. I go to the theatre sometimes, with Toto, to hear Marini; it gets late, and then, of course, one is too tired to get up in the morning.'

Sangiorgio listened, taken aback by the loquacity of this little woman with the powdered cheeks.

'Did Pochalsky send you here?'

'Yes, madam.'

'I thought so. Pochalsky knows that this house is for deputies. I take no others. But allow me: this is the waiting-room, and here is a table with writing materials for the voters who do not find their deputy at home. I had the Honourable Santinelli here. He was besieged from morning till night, never a minute's rest, so he always used to tell me when we chatted together a little—he was so civil, the Honourable Santinelli. "My dear Signora Virginia," he would say, "I can endure this life no longer!" This, as you see, is the parlour, neat and elegant. All these hangings are my own work; I made them when I was younger and had no troubles on my mind. No matter—we will not speak of that. Here is everything—carpet, cushions. The Deputy Gagliardi would never have gone away, he was so comfortable here, if the voters had not played him the trick of not re-electing him. But political life is full of these disappointments——'

And the little woman put on a serious look, her lips pinched and her head down on one shoulder. [Pg 55]

This parlour was really not very different from that of the Via Angelo Custode: there was more faded drapery, a larger number of photographs, and an American rocking-chair. The gilded frame of the mirror had a green net covering, to preserve it from the flies.

'This,' continued the Signora Virginia in a strong Roman accent, 'is the bedroom. There is a little library, for books, as I have always had studious deputies. The Honourable Gotti was reading novels the whole time. Do you read novels?'

'No, madam, never.'

'That's a pity, because you might have lent me some. A clothes cupboard is wanting here, but I am waiting for a sale in the Via Viminale, where Muccioli, the auctioneer, has promised to keep a good wardrobe for me. However, you can let me take care of your clothes—your dress-suit, your overcoat, your pelisse—I will keep them in my own wardrobe, and they will be quite safe. Here is everything—basin, jug, slop-jar, bed with two good curtains, etcetera. Look at it—look at it all, and satisfy yourself. I am not boasting, but night and morning Toto gives thanks to God for having blessed him with a wife like Virginia. All this, Honourable—'

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'Sangiorgio—Francesco Sangiorgio.'

'Deputy for—'

'Tito, Basilicata.'

'Honourable Sangiorgio, all this is to be had for a hundred and thirty lire a month, not a centesimo less, for I make nothing by it. If I had to live by letting rooms, I should be left out in the cold. In the anteroom there is a door communicating with my apartment; when it is locked you have your own apartment, with free entrance. You require free entrance, do you?' And she looked at him searchingly out of her light cat's eyes.

Sangiorgio did not quite understand.

'I do not know—I do not know,' he said at haphazard.

'Because, if you wanted free entrance, of course you would pay twenty lire more per month—a hundred and fifty lire. But if you are married, and want other rooms for your lady, there is my sister, Restituta Coppi, on the same landing, who has rooms to dispose of. My sister's-in-law, on the second floor, I cannot recommend; she is not cleanly, poor creature! She belongs to the lower classes, like all of them in this region. It was a fatal mistake that poor George—my brother—made. Are you married, Honourable?'

'No, madam.'

'Very well, then. You had better enjoy your youth, too, because it's a horrible thing to marry too soon. I, praise God! cannot complain, for Tito is a flower of a man; but, still, liberty is best. I always said so to the Deputy Gotti, who was a bachelor, like yourself, Honourable Sangiorgio, and he would answer amiably—as, indeed, was his habit—"I should have to find another Signora Virginia before I married, but there are no more of them." Well, we were saying a hundred and thirty lire a month, which is really a low price, and ten lire a month for service to Nanna; and then there is the gas on the stairs until eleven o'clock—five lire. By-the-by, I can also have your washing attended to. I have an excellent laundress; she washes with March water and soap and no potash. In fact, there is everything you want, and if some day the Honourable should wish to dine at home, being sick of the pastry one eats at the cook-shops, there is Toto, my husband, who amuses himself with making and cooking dumplings. They are a joy! I never set foot in the kitchen myself; my health is too delicate—'

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They had gone back to the waiting-room, and Sangiorgio maintained the cold reserve of the taciturn towards the talkative.

'And—you will excuse me, sir,' suddenly said the Signora Virginia in a voice become hard because of Sangiorgio's long silence, 'but what do you propose to do? I have many inquiries, you will understand; an apartment like this is an opportunity not to be neglected.'

'Do not let me hinder your business, madam,' said the deputy, in whom the natural diffidence of the provincial asserted itself. 'In case I want the rooms I will let you know.'

'I may expect a letter, then? Am I to call and ask for it at the Parliament?' she asked in tones once more mellifluous.

'No, do not trouble; I will send word.'

The Signora Virginia bowed and held out her hand like a great lady. As soon as he was on the stairs, he felt tired of all the jabber and quite bewildered, and it seemed to him as if he had already been to ten houses. He had two more addresses on his piece of paper, and his inclination to pursue the choice had greatly diminished. It was only by a revulsion that he was able to give orders to be driven to the Via del Gambero, No. 37, since he did not yet know the streets. The Via del Gambero had the atmosphere of mystery of the streets parallel to the Corso, affected by hurrying men and busy women. From the great Palazzo Raggi, with its courtyard like a square, with one entrance on the Corso and the other on the Via Gambero, every now and then someone would issue forth who was avoiding the crowd or in fear of dangerous encounters, and who hastened away without looking back. In the porch of No. 37, a decent-looking place, there was a

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wooden porter's box with a window-pane, deriving its light from the house. A little woman came out to meet the deputy.

'Have you not an apartment to let here on the third floor?'

'Yes, sir. Will you look at it?'

'I should like to see it.'

The little woman went back into her box, picked out a key from a bunch, and set forth, blinking the red eyelids which belonged to a pair of gray eyes. She was evidently the portress. She was dressed in green cloth, faded and worn out, and rather showily trimmed; she wore a chestnut wig, with a false plait at the neck and a fluffy fringe on the forehead. As she went upstairs her dirty, red silk stockings showed. As for the flaccid, wan cheeks, white and dotted with freckles, and the pale-violet, youthful mouth, one might guess that once this face had been round, rosy, and that it had collapsed suddenly like a doll's from which the sawdust has escaped through a little hole. The staircase was spacious, and had wide turnings, a rare circumstance in Roman houses; on every landing were three doors, uniformly situated. On the first floor, to the right, the Honourable Sangiorgio read: 'Barone di Sangarzia, Deputy to Parliament'; there was nothing on the middle door, and to the left was: 'Anna Scartozzi, Tailoress.' On the second floor, to the right, the door was marked: 'Marchese di Tuttavilla, Deputy to Parliament'; no name was on the door in the centre, and that on the left bore the inscription: 'Commission and General Agency.'

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'Have these two deputies also furnished rooms?'

'No, sir, they furnish their own, but the apartment is the same,' replied the woman, inserting the key in the lock of the right-hand door of the third floor, where no name was on the middle door, and on the left: 'Paolo Galasso, Dentist.'

The apartment facing the street was very light, and the furniture, which was almost new, had pretensions to elegance. A majolica flower-vase stood on a table, and there was a fireplace—a real fireplace—an extreme luxury in a Roman middle-class house.

'You can light a fire here, and after dinner, in winter, that is a pleasure,' observed the woman. 'There are fireplaces on each floor. The deputy on the first floor has his lighted in the morning; he has a blazing fire all day.'

'But does he not go to the Chamber?' asked Sangiorgio, yielding to inquisitiveness.

'Not always—not always,' answered the woman, with a malicious smile that spread all over her face.

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'And what does one pay here?' Sangiorgio interrupted dryly.

'One hundred and eighty lire a month.'

'It seems dear.'

'No, sir; if you will inquire about prices, as you are a stranger, you will see it is not too high, in the middle of Rome, two steps from the Corso. I am not boasting, but the apartment is arranged in the best taste; I have always understood how to——'

And the portress brushed down the fringe of the wig over her forehead. The deputy shrugged his shoulders.

'It is dear,' he insisted.

'You are not obliged to take it, you know, but if you want a large apartment with a door on the landing, furnished and comfortable, with a fireplace, and everybody minding their own business, that is convenience you will find nowhere else, and if you want all this in the Via del Gambero for less than a hundred and eighty lire, my dear sir, I assure you the thing is impossible. The deputy on the first floor came here four years ago, and was so well suited that he has remained ever since; the deputy on the second story came on the recommendation of a friend, and has already stayed two years. No one ever leaves. The dressmaker on the first floor has ladies of the aristocracy for her customers; there is always a carriage before our door.'

'Yes, I understand, but these things do not interest me.'

'Quite so, sir! But you will come back, you will come back, for you will find nothing as good as this, I am sure; the place was positively made for you!'

And as they went downstairs there ascended a lady wrapped in a fur cape, with a brown veil that went round her hat, head, neck, and chin, under which it was tied in a showy knot. She walked up slowly.

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'There is one of the dressmaker's customers,' murmured the portress. 'She is no doubt going to have a gown fitted.'

But the bell of the dressmaking establishment was not heard to ring, and the Honourable Sangiorgio, casting his eyes upward, perceived that the disguised woman was quietly mounting to the second floor.

In haste to have done with it, he ordered the coachman—for he was still driving—to go to the top

of the Capo le Case, a bright, lively, sunny street cutting midway across the Via Due Macelli. An atmosphere of refinement, of aristocratic self-possession wafted thither from the neighbouring Piazza di Spagna, Via Sistina, Via Propaganda, and Via Condotti, the most fashionable part of Rome. No. 128 was situated opposite a shop where English biscuits were sold, and preserves, and liquors, and soaps, a *grocery*, as the English call it, whence streamed a strong and almost warm smell of spices. Next to it was a florist's shop, full of vases with bulrushes, of reeds, of tree-trunks, with winter roses in the window, a bunch of lilies of the valley in a jar, tender, early flowers. The stairs were marble, clean, and lit from above by a window in the roof. Three doors fronted on each landing; they were of light wood, of varnished maple, with shining brass knobs for knockers. A servant in undress livery opened the door immediately, and ushered the Honourable Sangiorgio into a dim parlour, saying that the lady of the house would join him in a moment. The Honourable felt a soft carpet under foot, and sat down, fingering the low, pliant lounge. In the half-darkness he distinguished a table covered with a gold plush cloth, on it a Japanese ash-tray and a vase of Venetian glass. But a light footfall was heard, and the woman of the house entered. She was tall, not stout, but with a full figure; with a head of chestnut hair neatly dressed, frizzed by curling-irons, and adorned by tortoiseshell combs; with a plain, black gown of a soft material, and a high, white linen collar buttoned by a gold horseshoe stud.

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'Will you oblige me?' she said.

They went out together upon the landing, and now he observed the opaque pallor of the ivory face of a woman in the thirties, and her fathomless, turbid, coal-black eyes, with something claustal in their depths. Her fair, plump hand closed caressingly on the key. The apartment was small, but bright and cheerful, as if it were in the sunlight of the open country. The parlour furniture was a gray and pink chintz, very agreeable to the eye; the mirror was oval, with a ledge of carved wood; a long, low sofa stood near the bay-window, hung with close, embroidered muslin curtains, which, draped in heavy folds and without cords, dragged on the floor. A great array of photographs were queerly disposed on the wall, as if they had been thrown at it at haphazard; on a tiny writing-desk stood a red plush photograph frame without a picture. The bedroom had pale-blue, satin-plush furniture, with a similar counterpane on the bed, which was spread with a wide lace coverlet; the toilet-table was fitted out in white fancy muslin, embellished with bows of blue ribbon; the wardrobe had a mirror door, and at the windows, besides the soft curtains dragging on the floor, were little screens behind the panes, of light-blue, wavy silk.

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'There is a dressing-room, too,' murmured the lady, without smiling.

'No, I will not trouble you,' interposed the other.

'No, no, I want you to see it; it is important; it has a door opening on the stairs.'

The mistress, with her rather fleshy, rather pasty face, resembling some of the old Roman heads, opened another door, which fronted on the landing; this was the third door, so that this apartment of two rooms and a half had two free entrances.

'It is a very convenient house,' she suggested demurely, inspecting a hand, and smoothing it to make it whiter. In her black dress, with its statuesque folds, and with the pale, calm Roman matron's countenance, she imposed respect. The Honourable Sangiorgio spoke to her as to a lady of high station.

'The apartment is rather too luxurious for me,' he said. 'I like it very much, but my requirements are very plain.'

'Indeed!' she remarked, as if she did not quite believe him, in a lightly courteous tone.

'Yes, I assure you I am something of a savage,' continued Sangiorgio frankly. 'I want a quiet place for my work, and nothing more. I spend much time at the Parliament. Here—it is a little feminine, it seems to me,' he added smilingly.

'Yes, there was a Russian lady here last year; she was called away, and had to leave.' And she stopped, without vouchsafing further explanations.

'And—the price?' asked the deputy, after a moment's hesitation.

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'Two hundred and fifty lire a month,' replied the lady placidly, straightening the horseshoe collar-stud.

'Ah! And service and gas included?' the Honourable Sangiorgio inquired, with genteel curiosity.

'You would have to come to an understanding with Teresa, my maid.'

'To be sure—to be sure,' murmured the other, as if in apology.

The pale-faced woman with the deep black eyes, which were so full of liquid, nun-like melancholy, accompanied the deputy back to the door, without even asking him whether he intended to engage the apartment, took leave of him with a smile—her first—and did not shake hands with him.

He now felt exhausted, overcome with a deadly lassitude; the November sun stung him like the burning rays of August, and the air weighed heavily upon him. Surely there must have been some faint but effective perfume in that Capo le Case house, of the kind which first excites the nerves and then brings a state of languor. Perhaps the perfume had been worn by the lady who was so

pallid, so severe, with the imposing claustral mien of a high-born Abbess, in her black gown and white collar. While idly walking along the Via Mercede, he drew a picture in his mind of the pink and gray parlour, so sweet in its simplicity, of the blue room all veiled with white, of the double curtains floating and billowy, with their suggestion of privacy, of the retreat ensconced high up, away from the world. All that furniture—the lounge upon which the Russian lady must have reposed, to dream the dreams of a whimsical foreigner; that minute table, on which she had written her letters; that dressing-table, before which she had bedecked herself—that whole female domain presented itself to him. But most of all was he interested in that red frame containing no portrait, as though it had been carried off in haste by a bustling traveller. He was unable to imagine this Russian lady's face, and in the empty place which his fancy failed to fill up he always would find the white oval, like an ivory carnation, of the other woman, with the gentle waves of chestnut hair surrounding her face.

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Unconsciously he had entered the Aragno café, and in the last, small, solitary room he had bespoke a glass of cognac, to relieve him of his depression. The Capo le Case lady again appeared to him, but in less precise shape; all the more clearly, on the other hand, did he picture the woman in the fur cloak whom he had met on the staircase in the Via del Gambero. He had observed her arched, alert foot, daintily poised on a step close to the iron railing, and he wanted to know where she had intended to go, because, startled at meeting him, she had pretended to knock at the tailoress's door, and had then proceeded further up, her head down, and the lower part of her face immersed in the heavy, brown veil. The porterness, certainly, must know her; yes, she must know her quite well, that porterness with the flaccid countenance and the hideous eyes; there was cunning in her insinuating language. Who knows? She must have been handsome, the porterness with the horrible wig—perhaps also genteel; she must have a curious history, and he had not given her time to talk, as she had desired to. Signora Virginia, however, had told him a considerable portion of her history, but what sort of wife was she who read novels while her husband cooked dumplings in the kitchen? And from his depression he gradually revived, harbouring a growing interest for all those feminine puzzles: the vision of the Russian lady, that mysterious person of the Via Capo le Case; the visitor of the Via del Gambero and her secret; the porterness's behaviour; the singular confusion manifested in Signora Virginia's verbosity. He would have liked to know, understand, appreciate all this furtive femininity, that eluded him, that was hid from his curiosity; and from this his detailed consideration, from this analytical review of women seen and women fancied, a desire arose which had up till then been latent: a certain figure displaced all the rest, excluded them, and appeared before him, tall, lithe, black-gowned, placid and pink behind a black veil, walking slowly, with measured step and steady gaze—the wife of His Excellency. Where might she have been going at that hour—where was His Excellency's wife going?

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Just then, outside in the street, the large, full-bodied Duke di Bonito was passing by, the popular Neapolitan deputy, his face slashed across with a sabre-cut; rolling upon his legs as he walked, he resembled a clumsy merchant vessel, one of those black, flat ships that run into the little ports of Torregreco and Granatello, and into Portici, to unload coal and take in cargoes of macaroni. Beside him was his faithful friend, the deputy Pietraroia, with a calm face and a violent disposition—a man of quiet voice and impassioned language, who for months and months would sit silent in the Chamber, and then, one day, would break out with Southern ardour, astonishing everybody. The Honourable Sangiorgio looked after them for a minute; they were returning from breakfast, and on the pavement they met the third of the Neapolitan trinity, the Honourable Piccirillo, with a fair, flowing beard, with small blue eyes, the lord of the turbulent popular district of Naples. And then a lively conversation ensued on the pavement. The Honourable Piccirillo narrated something important and authentic, gesticulating, making signs with his hand injured in a duel with the Honourable Dalma, tugging at an overcoat button of the Duke of Bonito, who giggled and sniggered incredulously, ironically, with the cold scepticism of a man who has seen life; and meanwhile the Honourable Pietraroia was listening composedly, as he daintily twisted his moustache. Opposite Sangiorgio, huddled up behind a small table, with his shrunken legs and his wizened baby-face, the Honourable Scabzi, the working-man delegate, the only one in Parliament, whom Milan had elected, was modestly breakfasting on a cup of coffee and a roll.

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Francesco Sangiorgio, once more in his usual sphere, and his thoughts running in a more serious channel of reflection, felt suddenly reinvigorate, as if free from the burden of indolence which had been weighing upon him that morning. All those women whom he had seen, with whom he had spoken, had infused a sort of debility into his veins, had debased his spirit to an inclination for triviality, and had upset his mind with absurd and futile dreams. By a natural reaction he recovered his balance, and with his normal sense came clear reasoning, discerning logic, which penetrated and explained what had been obscure before. He now understood what all these furnished houses were, these furnished apartments, these furnished rooms, which have their being and flourish all over Rome, vegetating almost abundantly enough to stifle it; and the meaning dawned upon him of all this strange mixture of middle-class females, of tailoresses, porternesses, servants, and shopkeepers, who find the letting of rooms the easiest and surest profit; and he saw 'twixt the seeker for rooms and all these women the compulsory association, the communication of doors open or closed, the half-cohabitation, the meetings in the morning, at night, at dangerous hours of the daytime—a female control beginning in the house, extending to the laundry, then to the clothes, then to the books, then to the letters of the tenants, and at length by devious ways reaching himself. He felt how much there was of the dramatic, of the comical, of passion, and of vice, in all this system of 'free entrance,' of apartments with two doors, of courtyards with two openings, of locks with double springs, in all this doubling, in this

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phantasmagoria of closed doors, of clashing bolts, of bells that did not ring, of female shoes that did not creak, of close women's veils and hermetically-sealed cloaks. And the great equivocity of Roman life, so decorous and impassive in appearance, so restless, passionate, burning in reality, was now manifest to him—in one of its aspects.

And in his vague, instinctive dread of this female omnipresence and omniprevalence, in his fierce thirst for solitude and independence, he took the lodgings in the Via Angelo Custode, where there were no women.

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## CHAPTER V

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Another walk from the corner of the Piazza Sciarra to the Piazza San Carlo, all the way by the Corso—the Corso on a festal day, with all the shops shut and the street empty between the unfrequented hours of two and three, on a winter's afternoon. In the Piazza Colonna, Ronzi and Singer, pastrycooks, were open, but not a soul was in the shop. In the window but a few boxes of sweetmeats were left, and the glass showcases on the marble counter were depleted of pastry. The newspaper kiosk by the fountain was closed. From Montecitorio a broad ray of pale sunlight fell on the front of the Chigi Palace; an occasional hackney coach turned in from the Via Berghmaschi, grazed the dark Antonine Column, and slowly wandered into the Via di Cacciabove. Through its closed glass doors one might look into the Parliament café, low-vaulted and dingy, like a dark, shadowy crypt; there was no one inside. Opposite Morteo's, the liquor-seller's, two very young journalists were gossiping, their hands in their pockets, yawning, and bearing the expression of persons mortally bored. Four or five other youths were drinking vermouth behind the spacious windows of the Aragno café, and were reading a sheaf of pink papers—an obscure literary journal. And then there was the whole length of the Corso, with a few rare pedestrians and a few gentlemen, who, after issuing from their houses, immediately entered their closed carriages, which shot off like arrows. A mild winter sirocco tempered and enlanguored the air; on that Friday, on that Christmas Day, at that afternoon hour, the life of Rome seemed suddenly suspended. The whole of that central district of the city, that stretch of the Corso which is always feverishly astir, with its four squares, the Sciarra, the Montecitorio, the Colonna, and the San Carlo, with its overflowing cafés, its handsome shops, its crowded pavements—it all seemed plunged into a sudden stupor on that happy, holy day, in that balmy weather. In his contact with the feverish, workaday world, Sangiorgio felt the strange excitement of it without participating in its activity. And now this emptiness, this drowsiness, this peaceful Christmas—which in the smallest provincial village is celebrated with gleeful shouts and discharges of gunpowder—had filled him with amazement, as many things had in this wonderful Rome, always so new, always so surprising. He had been walking back and forth for an hour after his mid-day meal, subsequent to perusing the three or four newspapers published in the morning, which chiefly contained sentimental Christmas rhapsodies; he had met no one, not even a familiar face—for friends he had none—not even any of the faces he was wont to meet. Everyone who had been able to go away to celebrate Christmas in his part of the country, with his own family, had departed—deputies, senators, students, clerks, and officials. And all who had remained apathetically shut themselves up at home in their plebeian or aristocratic way, since the Roman neither seeks nor expects chances. Francesco Sangiorgio had foreseen that he would be very lonely, isolated, lost in the midst of a merry-making, giddy throng; instead, Rome, to his surprise, had the great solemn silence of a dead city.

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Turning about for the fourth time, as he was bitterly regretting that he had not gone to spend Christmas with his old parents in that poor, humble, and respectable Basilicata, he saw issuing from the Via Convertite, into the Corso, a body of forty or fifty men marching in procession, with a tricoloured banner at their head. In front went four or five men in overcoats and low-crowned hats; they walked along very gravely, and looked as though they were measuring their steps. The standard-bearer wore a leather belt over his outside coat, with a metal ring near the buckle to steady the flag, while a shining, tall silk hat was set rakishly over his ear. Then came a number of old men in soft felt hats and shaggy, worn overcoats quite out of date. Some had three medals, others four; a few stooped; one was lame, and dragged himself along laboriously with the aid of a stick. They were veterans who had survived the battles of 1848 and 1849. A few young men, much under thirty, had joined them. At the tail of the procession came two mock guards, of doubtful physiognomy, brown, shining skin, mottled moustaches, wearing jackets and low hats set on the side of the head, and walking in military style, with bamboo canes under their armpits. The waiters in the Aragno café paid no heed whatever to the procession, being accustomed to such sights; on the pavement a few people were standing still, in an absent-minded manner. The two journalists talked for a moment in front of Morteo's, and then one came to a decision, separated from the other, shrugged his shoulders, and went with the veterans and the rest, with the disdainful air of an idler.

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Francesco Sangiorgio did not fall in behind them, but followed the procession along the pavement, and kept pace with it. Some people joined it on the line of march, at the Orfanelli and the Pastini. At the Piazza Rotonda, opposite the Pantheon, where the great King lay at rest, the banner was lowered, the veterans baring their heads. The procession then wended its way through some of the obscure, narrow streets of old Rome, stringing, winding along those lanes where only four can walk abreast. And everywhere reigned the deep silence of closed shops, closed windows, deserted alleys, a great festal peace which left the streets empty, which kept all

the Christmas rejoicings within the walls of the houses. Now and then the standard would waver, but quickly its bearer would adjust it in the ring with an energetic jerk.

A brief halt was made at the Sistine Bridge. Here there was some slight stir; on both the broad pavements a number of people were standing, looking at the river, which was flaxen fair under the wan, wintry sky; carriages went by at a trot, drawing up sharply at the abrupt curve of the bridge. All about, at the beginning of the Via Giulia, towards the Piazza Farnese, and down below towards the Politeama, extensive building renovations were in progress—piles of stones, bricks, and masonry, walls of houses in course of demolition, little white lakes of hardened lime, masons' barrows handles up, high wooden scaffoldings on which advertisements were affixed; high and low, right and left, more demolition; and then there was part of a street already paved, and some of the work begun upon the embanking of the Tiber. The sirocco was driving the clouds in the direction of the Via Farnesina, and the yellow floods shimmered gaily. An immense black raft split the river in two; it was stationary, for the purpose of the work being done, and it looked like some engine of war. Here, too, peace prevailed, like a cessation of life, like a sleep in the mild winter afternoon.

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Sangiorgio went on with toilsome step, and, raising himself on his toes, saw the banner of the company emerge into Trastevere. Again began the silent threading of the lanes in that remote suburb; a few of the populace, in holiday clothes, swelled the procession, which now consisted of about a hundred persons. At the corner of a little street, suddenly, under an unforeseen burst of light, they found themselves in a broad avenue. At one hand, beyond a low parapet, lay Rome; on the other rose a green ridge—the Janiculum; halfway between the Academy of Spain was visible, about which wound the rising avenue. Three or four times the company was obliged to divide, to let a carriage pass that was trotting swiftly up the slope, noiselessly, on the sand; a female face would appear and vanish behind the panes. At a certain point in the bend of the road, near the Villa Sciarra, between two aristocratic lines of flourishing century plants and young poplars, a gentleman who was standing still called out: 'Honourable Sangiorgio!'

Sangiorgio started, turned round, and perceived the Honourable Giustini, a Tuscan deputy, with whom he had spoken three or four times, as they were neighbours on the last bench of their section, in the Right Centre. He went up to him.

'Are you following the procession, colleague?' asked Giustini in a voice tinged with irony and weariness.

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'Merely as an idler. And you?'

'I am watching it march, as a spectator. It is much the same thing.'

The Tuscan pronounced the letter *c* very hard, and spoke without looking his interlocutor in the face. He tossed his head once or twice, as if in contempt. They walked together by tacit accord.

The Honourable Giustini was neither lame, nor hip-shot, nor deformed, but his legs draggled, one of his shoulders was higher than the other, his neck was shrunk, like a turtle's, his arms and hands dangled at his side as if he did not know what to do with them. He had an earthy face, a pair of light, pale eyes, and a thin, tawny beard, cleft at the chin. His make-up was that of a man completely worn out—one afflicted with physical and moral rickets.

'These processions,' said he, 'these promenades with flags, these wreaths laid down on stones—they are all the same. I have seen a thousand of them, and have taken part in some. When one has been young and has been a law student, how can one help having taken part in processions?'

'I did, too, at the University,' replied Sangiorgio.

'Who believes in such rubbish?' resumed the Honourable Giustini, with an energetic shrug of the shoulders. 'One must be twenty or sixty—the ages at which one is silly.'

'Do not speak against youth,' answered Sangiorgio, exhibiting a faint smile.

'Yes, yes—youth, love, death—the three things sung by Leopardi. He really only sang of two, but the other stands behind them. All Southerners are Leopardists, are they not? Well, and what a famous bore that Leopardi is! He had a hump, and he made it an excuse to write verses and tire people. I am half humpbacked, too, but I write no verses, by God! And neither do I bore my colleagues in the Chamber by making speeches.'

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'True, you have not made a speech since the opening of the session.'

'And my colleagues have not the good grace to pay me back in the same coin. What a collection of hopeless babblers, what a lot of superfluous verbiage, what an amount of wasted breath!'

His respiration came slowly; his dull glance filtered through half-closed lids. Sangiorgio listened and looked at him, allowing him to talk without arguing, continuing the silent study of men and things he had been pursuing in Rome for two months, which was to constitute so much of his strength. Walking leisurely, they had reached another corner of the avenue. At the square a great panorama was now offered—another view of Rome from a semicircular terrace. They were up near the Academy of Spain. Opposite the great gate several carriages were waiting, one of them a Cardinal's; the beardless groom, without a hair on his face, like a priest, dressed in black, was walking up and down. The procession went on upward towards the Acqua Paola—a noisy, singing fountain. The foot-passengers stopped to watch it pass. A tall, lean gentleman, with a fair,

grizzled beard, standing by the hedge, exchanged greetings with the veterans as they marched by.

'That man would like to believe in the modern spirit, and cannot,' again began Giustini's ill-natured voice. 'He is a fine man, yes, he is, that man over there in the tall hat, Giorgio Serra. A handsome type, too—an apostle, a poet—but secretly, no doubt, he is full of disillusionment. He is a man of good faith, he is—one of the few democrats I like. Otherwise, in his artistic tastes he is an aristocrat; he loves the people because he has a good, affectionate heart, and cannot help loving somebody, although vulgarity he hates. You will see him go up to the Janiculum for the commemoration, but he will not give an address; he is as delicate as a woman in some things. We shall pass him in a moment; he will give me a cool bow, since he hates the Centre in the Chamber. And he is right: nothing is more hateful than the Centre, to which we have the honour of belonging, honourable colleague.'

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'And why do you belong to it, Honourable Giustini?'

'Oh, I!' exclaimed the other, with a gesture denoting callous indifference.

The water was falling noisily into the ample basin from three spouts; two maid-servants were sitting on the edge and talking; a German priest was looking at Castel Sant' Angelo from a terrace, and at the river, and at the straight Via Longara, down below in Trastevere, under the Villa Corsini. The procession was moving into the Via Garibaldi; at the rear went Giorgio Serra, surveying the Roman Campagna and landscape with amorous glances. The two deputies had hastened their gait, but were occasionally obliged to stand still because of the fashionable carriages.

'Are all these ladies going to the commemoration?' asked Sangiorgio.

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'Yes, they are,' sneered Giustini. 'But they are not aware there is to be a commemoration. They are bound for the Villa Pamphily for a drive; it is Friday and the weather is fine, and then, one might add, there is the great Roman sirocco, which takes away the appetite, creates a desire for sleep, weakens the fibres, and undermines the will. And, by the way, the women know what to do then, they do.'

'Bah!' said Sangiorgio, with a gesture of contempt for the female sex. Giustini gave him a long look, as if to appraise him mentally, but asked him no questions. They passed the Porta San Pancrazio. The Via della Mura ran down, narrow and crooked, towards the Valle dell' Inferno and the Vatican on the right, and the Villa Pamphily on the left. Before a tavern stood erect and impassive two carabinieri; then came a road with a hedge separating it, on the left, from the open country; at the right was a high, gray, crusty wall. At a salient spot was a little, worm-eaten, wooden gate, on which was inscribed the name of the farm and house behind the wall—'Il Vascello.' That glorious name was enough—superfluous was the monument on the wall, superfluous were the dry wreaths rotted by the rain—the name was enough.

The procession had formed a group under the memorial-stone, leaving a free space for the carriages rolling towards the Villa Pamphily; the carabinieri had drawn near. The old veterans were all gathered about the flag, and stood silent and thoughtful; the deputies held somewhat aloof, Giustini with a hideous grimace of boredom, Sangiorgio in an observing mood prompted by curiosity. A workman climbed up a ladder leaning against the wall, took the old wreaths, threw them away, brushed off the monument with his elbow, and hung the fresh wreath upon it: he was applauded from beneath. From the top of the wall a peasant, the guardian of the place, with one of the sallow, melancholy faces of the Roman peasantry, looked on indifferently. Then a man got up, for the purpose of making a speech, on the seat of a single-horsed hackney coach standing by the wall. The students greeted him with a cheer.

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He was a very fair, stout young man, with little, languid blue eyes, with a little, pointed moustache, with hands white and plump like a woman's, with long, pink nails and a diamond ring on his fourth finger. He was dressed in the dandified fashion of a hairdresser, had an open, fresh face, full of the joy of living, while his eyes rolled about with sheer happiness. He waited for the cheering to subside before he began to speak, and made a sign with his hand for it to cease. They all crowded about him to listen—veterans, students, workmen, carabinieri, and guards.

The young man, in a thin but well-modulated drawing-room tenor voice, with well-calculated pauses, turning about his head with the deliberation of a coquettish girl, explained with dignity why and wherefore, after the commemoration in April, another was taking place in December. And then he at once launched into a description of the siege of Rome, as though he had been present; the veterans bowed their heads before this elegant youth—they, who had been there. He had an easy but slow delivery; at one time he seemed to warm, and took a fling at the priesthood, at the Vatican, of which, as he leant against the wall to his left, he spoke with ambiguity, and in the manner of a young actor, rolling his *r's*. The few veterans, abstracted and preoccupied, were paying attention no longer, wrapped as they were in memories of the sacred hill where they had fought for their country's redemption, where their companions-in-arms had fallen with contorted faces and breasts pierced by the bullets of the Vincennes Sharpshooters. Now and then one of them would mumble a few words, as he called to mind some episode, his brow bent, his hands pressing on the pommel of his cane.

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'During the night they heard the Frenchmen merrily chatting in their tents——'

'Do you remember Garibaldi's negro, who died after his shoulder was broken by a splinter from a



French bomb?'

'How magnificent Colonel Manara was——'

'Handsome and brave——'

The young man concluded by apostrophizing the Seven Hills of Rome, with Roman history interlarded. His friends, the students, crowded still more closely round the hackney carriage, shaking hands with him, applauding him with acclaim. And he bowed to them, all affability, all smiles, lavishing handshakes, intermittently applying to his white forehead a tiny cambric handkerchief, bordered with black, scented with hay. The working men and the common people remained unconvinced and unmoved, with that sarcastic Roman smile which few things can dislodge. A voice was heard:

'Serra! Serra! Where is Serra? Let Giorgio Serra speak!'

But Serra did not answer. Mayhap he was hiding modestly in the crowd. And the crowd began to look about, as if making a choice. [Pg 80]

'Serra! Serra!' was repeated, the name evoking the picture of that fine head of a poet and an artist.

But Serra was not there. Possibly the gentle dreamer, whom all realities repelled, had made his way back to that Rome he loved so well, or, more likely, skirting the big hedge abloom with hawthorn and wild roses, had betaken himself to the broad, silent avenues of the Villa Pamphily, to resume his dear illusions amid the rural green, to quaff them again from the inspiring loveliness of Nature.

'I knew it,' whispered Giustini to Sangiorgio. 'I knew Serra would disappear. He hates oratory.'

'He is wrong; oratory is power,' replied Sangiorgio.

A second time the Tuscan deputy scrutinized the deputy from the South, with slight surprise betokened in his face. These two were not mutually attracted by esteem, sympathy, or any other interest; there was nothing but the curiosity, the desire to know each other mixed with a sense of diffidence, of two adepts at fencing who place themselves in guard and are unwilling to hazard an open assault. All round them the crowd was slowly dispersing; the standard-bearer had departed, the veterans had disbanded, and were wending their downward way in groups of two and three, with stooping backs in rough overcoats, and legs somewhat uncertain. Occasionally one of them would stop to give a last look at the Vascello.

The youthful orator had descended from the carriage with a jump, and had joined his student friends; he had picked a rose from the hedge, and put it in his buttonhole; starting towards Rome with four or five others in a row, he held his black whalebone stick under his arm, while he daintily drew on a glove. A number of the workmen had repaired to the tavern, and, seated about a rude table on a platform, were drinking that light, yellow wine which savours of sulphur. Ten minutes had elapsed, and not a soul remained under the monument to the victims of 1848; in its solitariness the Vascello preserved its appearance of a house dismantled with only its walls left standing. On the high wall enclosing the farm the peasant was left alone: with his head leaning on his closed fist he was impassively looking down. [Pg 81]

The two deputies had come down to the little open space near the great fountain of Paul III., and were progressing slowly. A suspicion of crepuscular dampness was filtering through the breeze, or rather the tepid breeze of daytime was changing into the moist breeze which invades the city at nightfall. The fashionable carriages were descending from the Villa Pamphily, and driving towards Rome. Leaning on the parapet of the terrace which overlooks the town, the two members of Parliament glanced at the passing carriages. Two or three times Giustini bowed abruptly and curtly, like a man little given to gallantry, and soon after said as if soliloquizing:

'The Baldassarri, a Bolognese Countess—handsome woman—wife of an old senator. She is a lunatic I no longer visit—has a mania for poets. She always has a varied collection of them, one a barbarian, another a sentimentalist, another a naturalist. Those who write sonnets for weddings are received with a certain degree of favour. She is the woman about whom the most verses and the most insinuations are made. Over there is the Gagliarda, a Baroness, stupid, commonplace, underhanded, and bad. She is always secretly planning to upset the Ministry. After it has fallen, through some other agency, she wears a triumphant look. She is so cruel that she visits the Ministers' wives the day their husbands have been defeated. Otherwise she pushes young deputies forward, or thinks she does. Deluded unfortunates pay court to her; she is an important woman. In her drawing-room the tea is insipid, but the gossip is spicy.' [Pg 82]

'Do you go there?'

'No, not now. Do I look like a young deputy?—Ah, there is His Excellency's wife!'

Both men bowed profoundly. The lady responded serenely and gently by an inclination of the head behind the carriage window. Sangiorgio said nothing, but with slight inward trepidation awaited and feared a sarcastic remark from Tullio Giustini.

'Fine woman, His Excellency's wife,' muttered the Tuscan deputy—'too beautiful and too young for him! Nevertheless, she is faithful to him; nobody knows why. Her women friends hate her cordially, but it is the fashion to be her admirer.'

'Do you go there?' asked Sangiorgio.

'No, I am too Ministerial.'

'What does that matter?'

'What should I be doing there? I am a convert, and none but the doubtful are noticed. And then I should join the Opposition if I frequented that house. It rouses my ire too much to see a lean, withered husband, cross-grained and irritable through his political life, appropriate a young wife; and then—and then—Donna Angelica is too kind: she would spoil me.'

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'Donna Angelica?' repeated Sangiorgio beneath his breath.

But Giustini did not hear him. He had taken his hat off again to a brougham that passed. This time the carriage stopped; a slender hand gloved in black let down the window, and beckoned to the Tuscan deputy. Sangiorgio remained alone in contemplation of his companion, who, with his body leaning against the door and his head inside the carriage, seemed to be indulging in a chat. In a little while Giustini came back to Sangiorgio, and said to him:

'Come, I will present you to the Countess Fiammanti.'

Sangiorgio had no time to demur or even to reply; he at once found himself beside the carriage.

'Countess, the Honourable Sangiorgio, member for Tito, a Southerner and a newcomer.'

The Countess's fine gray eyes lit up mischievously; her mobile mouth stretched to a smile.

'I asked Giustini to present you, after hearing you were from the South. How unpleasant Rome must seem to you, Honourable! Oh, Naples is so lovely, I adore it! My husband was a Neapolitan. From him I learned to love Naples and everything there. How smooth the speech is, and how agreeable compared to the ugly Tuscan accent, Giustini!'

'Is that the reason, Countess, that you never let me speak when I begin to——'

'Make love to me? No, my dear Giustini, I like you too well to let you. Love is an old, played-out farce, which nobody any longer laughs at. Honourable Sangiorgio, you must think we are very frivolous, do you not? We know how to be serious, for example, when Giustini tells me about politics. I am greatly interested in politics; they amuse me. And you?'

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'They are the only thing that interest me,' said Sangiorgio rather rudely.

'Oh, they amuse me so much!' exclaimed the lady, without showing that she had noticed his discourtesy.

'To get amusement from a thing, one must not be too much in love with it,' murmured Sangiorgio, but with so much expression that the handsome Countess, who emitted a strong odour of violets, rested her eyes upon him for a moment.

'Well then, Giustini, in a few hours—is it agreed? Honourable Sangiorgio, I am at home every odd evening, the third, the fifth, the seventh, and so on. I will not force you to drink tea. I allow smoking. I sing passably. No other women come. *Au revoir*, gentlemen!' and hardly had they moved on when the carriage was speeding in the direction of Rome.

'Who is that lady?' Sangiorgio inquired.

'Why does that concern you? Do you not like her?'

'Yes, I like her.'

'Well—go there this evening; you will enjoy yourself. She is fascinating, not beautiful. Some evenings she is irresistible. She sings excellently. At times, though not often, she is witty. She talks too much. But she is a good girl.'

'What sort of woman is she?' persisted Sangiorgio.

'How can I tell?' And Giustini shrugged his shoulders. 'I have not succeeded in becoming her lover. Perhaps that might depend on one's accent.'

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'And her name is——'

'Donna Elena Fiammanti.'

They had arrived at the square in front of the Academy of Spain, deserted in the rapidly darkening winter's evening.

'Look at Rome!' said Giustini, now at the parapet of the terrace. 'Have you ever seen it all at once, like this?'

'No, never.'

'Rome is great, very great,' whispered the Tuscan deputy, with a strain of melancholy in his voice.

'It looks asleep,' rejoined Sangiorgio, also in a whisper, as though he were talking in a church.

'Asleep? Do not believe that. She is not asleep; she is only keeping silent, and watching, and thinking. Look down there, far in the distance, at that large, light dome against the sky. It is St.

Peter's. Have you ever seen it? Very well—it is a huge, empty, useless church, is it not? About St. Peter's is a large cluster of buildings standing out from the green of the gardens. They seem small from here do those buildings, and wrapped in deep slumber. All that is the Vatican, and inside is the Pope. He is seventy years old, frail, an invalid. Death is at his pillow, but what does that matter? He is strong. How many believe in him, stretch out their hands to him, bow down before him, pray in his name, die in his name! We triumphantly count our array of atheists and sceptics. Who can count the believers? Are you a believer, Honourable?

'No.'

'Nor I. But the Pope is strong. He has on his side the unfortunate, the weak, the humble, the young people, the women—the women who from mother to daughter transmit, not religion, but its forms. You think all is asleep down there by the river-bank, in the great palace painted by Michel Angelo? That is the Vatican; it is a vast idea, in whose service and under whose authority is a population of Cardinals, Bishops, parish-priests, curates, monks, friars, seminarists, and clericals who do not confine themselves to praying, holding services, and singing: they may be found in the houses, they reach the families, they teach in the schools—yes, and they love, hate, enjoy, live, for themselves and their own interests, for the Church and for the Pope. Who can measure their strength, their influence, their potency?'

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'Rome does not believe,' interposed Sangiorgio.

'I am not talking of faith. Am I a glorifier of religion? The old fables are exploded, but the human interest survives and multiplies. We live near all this great ferment, and do not see it. We have our being in the presence of a gigantic mystery working in darkness, yet we do not suspect its existence.'

Giustini ceased, again casting his eyes over the vast panorama of the city, which seemed drowned in the nebulous atmosphere of the sirocco. Sangiorgio listened in excitement, with a thrill of anxiety at his heart, as one might at the approach of danger, while Giustini continued:

'There is the Quirinal—the King, the Queen, the Court. Yes, down there, under that rosy light. Four balls, eight official receptions, forty gala dinners, twenty evenings at the theatre, four concerts, thirty inaugurations, four hundred presentations, diamonds at the throat, medals on the chest, plumes in the hat, naked shoulders, *pâté de foie gras*, quadrilles of honour—whoever thought it was anything else? But this beautiful Queen, who receives friend and foe, monarchist and republican, with the same cordiality, is also a woman who thinks, who feels, who knows, who listens. And this King, harassed by such a heavy burden, dutifully bound to perpetual obedience, is he not a man, has not he, too, a conscience, a mind, a will? And all these Court people, officers and secretaries, ladies-in-waiting and diplomats, major-domos and servants, do you think they do not worry, and struggle, and live? Do you suppose they do nothing but make bows? That they only know how to walk in front of the King in a room? Who can assert that? Do they not love and hate, and have furious passions and ambitions? Has not every one of those women a desire, some envy, bitter regrets?'

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The ruthless man was running his fingers nervously along the top of the parapet, where he found a large piece of dried lime. He broke off little pieces, and flipped them over the green bank. Francesco Sangiorgio followed with utmost attention the action of those thin, brown hands, with their heavy, swelled veins.

'You cannot see that cauldron of Montecitorio,' resumed the Tuscan in a harder tone of voice; 'it is lost among the houses; we are lost in it—a furnace of waste-paper, in which one is gradually burnt up by a desiccating heat—the temperature of an incubator, which lulls to sleep all audacities and quickens all timidities, which ends in scorching terribly all the waverers, and which awakens a few pseudo-ideas in the cranium of idiots. All the inmates of that cardboard drum excite themselves to shrieking, or remain utterly dumb, because of a law, or a regulation, or a railway, or a bridge; they clamour for more laws, weighty and trivial, more railways of all kinds, more bridges everywhere; they want to become Ministers, wear uniforms, be deafened by the national anthem wherever they arrive in the country, have as natural enemies their early friends, be branded thieves in the newspapers, know their private letters are opened by a too officious secretary—and other delights of the same kind. Some poor wretches want to be Secretary-General! I was one of them. Oh, the frightful furnace, that shrivels men like dry beans, men inflamed by furious desires and consumed in the emptiness of those desires!'

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The heavens, all white at their zenith, now assumed a delicate tint of gray on the circular hem of the horizon; like an ethereal veil the spirit of evening rose in the air above the city. Francesco Sangiorgio experienced a strange uneasiness; Tullio Giustini at that moment seemed to him more hideous than ever; as he laughed he displayed two rows of ugly yellow teeth.

'How quiet the city is!' he went on. 'It seems to be asleep, enjoying the Christmas festival. It seems to be, but is not. Up there, in the verdure of the Pincio and the Villa Medici, which extends down to the Via Babuino, the painters sing, laugh, discuss heresies as if they were theories of art, and produce pictures that seem great absurdities. But what do they care? To console themselves for their failure they have invented the word *Philistine*, which expresses their contempt for the public. In the whiteness over there, on the other side, are the *new quarters*. Have you ever been there? Seventy thousand people, in all sorts of employment, with their families, servants, dogs, and cats: a concourse of savages—unarmed, hungry savages—squatting up there, looking at Rome and hating it because they cannot understand it, and they find it exacting while their

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women make children and cook, women with pale faces, with flat breasts, and red hands. They have been celebrating Christmas in their prisons, venting their spleen against the Government, their servants, Rome, and the butcher, like real, miserable, stupid savages. And the Romans—the true Romans—of the Regola and the Popolo, of the Monti district and the Trevi district, who add the adjective *Roman* to their name like a title of nobility, who eat dumplings on Thursdays, tripe on Sundays, and lamb at all times, who like white wine and the fireworks at Sant' Angelo, who are proud of their March water, and calmly allow the beetles to swarm in their old houses, the sceptical, clever, impassive, and industrious Romans, who are good husbands and kind lovers, they certainly are not asleep. And the women, Roman or Neapolitan, Italian or foreign, who go for walks, stand at the window, argue, laugh, kiss when they love, and are kissed when loved, they are not asleep—no, the women never sleep, not even at night. Oh, Rome is so alert, though it seems stagnant; it is so great, so complicated, so delicate in its mechanism, so powerful on its steel springs, that when I bend over to look at it, from up here, it frightens me, like an infernal machine.'

In the spreading twilight Francesco Sangiorgio, deadly pale, bent down to look also, as though to discover the mysterious machinery of Rome. [Pg 90]

'And what is the dream of those who come here?' continued Tullio Giustini, with a short, sardonic laugh. 'You believe that you are awaited with the amorous serenity of a great city, because you are young, and you have talents, and you wish to work, and not be unworthy of the noble city. I, too, came thus, and I thought the first Roman citizen must needs embrace me. Instead, after three or four years of fretting, of internal torments, and of huge delusions, I learned a few things: that I was too frank to succeed in politics, that I was too rough to please the women, that I was too sickly to do scientific work, that I was too brittle to succeed in diplomacy. This I learned, and from this, a fact as glaring as the sun, as terrible as truth itself—Rome gives herself up to no one!'

'And what must one do?' asked Francesco Sangiorgio, half trembling.

'Conquer her!'

Tullio Giustini made a sweeping gesture towards the city with his skinny hand.

'Conquer her! Woe to the commonplace, woe to the cowards, woe to the weak, like myself! This city does not expect you, and does not fear you; it gives you no welcome, does not reject you; it does not oppose you, and disdains to accept a challenge. Its strength, its power, its loftiness, is lodged in an almost divine attribute—indifference. You may make a stir—howl, rave, set fire to your house and your books, and dance on the ruins—Rome will take no note of it. It is the city to which all have come, and where all have fallen: why should it be concerned with you, an infinitesimal atom, passing across the scene so quickly? It is indifferent; it is the great cosmopolitan city which has this universal character, which knows everything because it has seen everything. Indifference is the equivalent of the unchangeably serene, the deaf soul, *the woman who knows not how to love*. Indifference is the moral mid-winter sirocco, the tepid, uniform temperature which debilitates the nervous system, and saps the will-power, and causes tremendous internal revolutions and tremendous dejections. Yet someone must come to disturb that serenity, to vanquish that indifference. Someone must conquer Rome, whether for ten years, for one year, for one month; but he must conquer it, must capture it, must avenge all the dead, all the fallen, all the feeble who have touched its walls without being able to overcome it. But, ah! such a one must have a heart of brass, an inflexible, rigid will; he must be young, healthy, robust, and bold, without ties and without weaknesses; he must apply himself profoundly, intensely to that one idea of victory. But who is to conquer her, this proud Rome?' [Pg 91]

'I will!' said Francesco Sangiorgio.

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## PART II

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### CHAPTER I

The Minister had been speaking for an hour. He was no orator: he lacked fire and polish. Rather was he a modest speaker, one who did not strive after effects in political eloquence, and who said things concisely, in the logical, mathematical order in which they presented themselves to a square, solid brain. The discourse, as was natural, bristled with figures, was an interminable procession of numbers. He uttered them with a certain deliberation, as if he wanted them weighed by friends and foes. His voice was too gentle, too familiar, perhaps, but was plainly audible in the silence. He might have been taking part in a Cabinet Council; the Parliamentary pitch of voice was altogether absent. The Minister stopped occasionally to wipe his nose on a large silk handkerchief, checked in red and black. As a matter of fact, in that short, stout little person plainly dressed in black, in that placid face, shaved on the lips and chin, but flanked with whiskers at the side in English fashion, in those plump, white hands, in the whole atmosphere of repose and thoughtfulness which he exhaled, one might divine the indefatigable workman of the study, the man who spent twelve hours a day at the Ministerial offices, behind a desk covered with documents—writing, reading, verifying registers, advising with heads of departments, with general directors. Thus, the Minister, the man of meditation, seemed out of place in debate with [Pg 93]

the members; and in announcing the most important facts, in rendering matters exact and profound, he spoke with the easy simplicity of a scientist setting forth his vast learning in popular language.

The Chamber sat still out of respect, but as a fact the members were inattentive. They were so sure of him and his adherents! He was strong, he was such an iron, massive, luminous tower of strength that the anger of political slander or debate left him unmoved. His very adversaries admitted his power, and thus contributed to render his triumphs all the more sweeping. By listening to him intently one might succeed in understanding how he stood outside the political passion, and was all absorbed in his love of finance.

The atmosphere of the hall conduced to a certain vague, inactive contemplativeness. While out of doors—it being the middle of January—a dry, whistling, cutting north wind was blowing, as was wont to happen on one of the three cold days of a Roman winter, inside the hall the stoves sent out a perpetual stream of heat. Tightly closed, without windows, with gallery doors rarely opening—doors that shut quickly, noiselessly, as though hinged on velvet—with the matting that deadened every footstep, the hall suggested physical comfort. Nevertheless, the Speaker, a fine man of fifty, with swarthy face and hair still black as jet, had his legs covered with a blue velvet wrap lined with fur; and as he listened to the Minister, he would cast an occasional glance at the galleries, possibly seeking out someone. The secretaries sat motionless to his right and left. Falucci, the Abruzzan, tall and muscular, with a curly, slightly grizzled mane, was whispering frequent sentences to handsome Sangarzia, who nodded without answering, accustomed as he was to protracted, patient silence; Varrini, the agreeable and intelligent Calabrian, with the muzzle of a sagacious mouse, with the refinement of a young lady covering the power of a champion, was writing letters; and Bulgaro, the Neapolitan, was making the seat creak which bore his enormous frame, his embrowned visage showing traces of an almost childish fretfulness. There was not, as on other days of minor debates, a string of deputies coming to chat with the Speaker on his bench, exchanging jokes with the secretaries, and going down on the other side, after which there might be a stroll outside, a moment's prattle at intervals in the room of the Lost Footsteps, in which fashion the sitting went by. For to-day the Minister was expounding a very serious question; both Ministerialists and Opposition must listen.

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The Right, nearly all of them old members of eight Parliaments, heard without paying attention, knowing their opponent to be invincible, and thus they bore the air of veterans, faithful at their posts, neither suffering nor enjoying. The Extreme Left paid no heed whatever, but did not disturb the speech; that party disdained questions of the economic-administrative order, having made no study of finance, and now awaited some political argument, which would be an opportunity to stir up a little excitement. One of the small phalanx of Hubertists was asleep, his face politely covered by his hands; another deputy, Gagliardi, was sleeping without attempt at concealment. Only on one of the Centrist benches was any sincere attention paid, like that of eager scholars to their master's explanations. Of these deputies there were four—young, clever, and aspiring. Seymour, of English descent, dark, myopic, and well-mannered, was taking notes on paper; beside him was Marchetti, with the Nazarene beard; Gerini, a taciturn Florentine, with long, fair, flowing beard, was passing memoranda to Joanna, the Southerner of the handsome, thoughtful, studious head. But the whole Chamber, Speaker, secretaries, committee-men, members, were under the soft influence of that warm air, that closed place, that silence broken only by the tranquil voice of the Minister.

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The galleries were crowded—a strange circumstance on a day given up to financial discussion. But no doubt the cold had driven in from the streets those ladies sitting upstairs with their capes open, their hands stuffed into their muffs, their faces pink from the warmth of the hall. They were quite happy to remain there, though they understood not a word; the voice of the speaker fell on their ears like a hum, while they shivered at the thought of returning out of doors, where the north wind was blowing, making one's eyes water and one's nose turn red. The public gallery, too, was full of people: pale, jaded faces of do-nothings, wretched figures of petitioners who had spent the day in looking for a cousin of a deputy's friend, and who at last, demoralized and trembling with cold, had come to finish in the Chamber, in the public gallery, where they listened without a wink. The long press gallery was also more crowded than usual, and the occupants of the first row were pretending to write a summary of the proceedings. But one was inditing a letter, another a theatrical article, another was sketching a fantastic profile of Depretis, and another still was practising the art of calligraphy, writing his own name with large flourishes. The Opposition journalists had already prepared a mild, platonic attack, the Government writers having extolled the Minister's financial report for the last ten days; all of them were quite unruffled. Only Gennaro Casale, in the Government's employ, a violent Neapolitan journalist, and an enemy of all Governments whatsoever, grew excited, and exclaimed from the rear of the gallery:

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'Gentlemen, this balancing is a Ministerial shuffle!'

Up in the diplomatic gallery, leaning against the blue velvet balustrade, was to be seen the slender figure of the Countess Beatrice di Santaninfa, with the large, deep, soft eyes, who was not listening, but was absorbed in thought.

When, at half-past four, the Minister had ended his speech, members old and young nodded their heads in a general rustle of approval and admiration. He restored his papers to his big portfolio without a tremor in his fingers, without a shade of colour changing in his countenance. Then a group of friends, ardent and lukewarm, gathered about him to shake hands with him and

congratulate him. Even an ex-Minister of Finance came down from the benches of the Right to compliment the fat little Minister with the hard head. Some disorder occurred, and a little noise. Then the voice of the Speaker was heard, sonorous and distinct:

'Honourable colleagues, I beg for silence. The Honourable Sangiorgio has the floor.'

'Who? Who?' was the universal inquiry.

And again the Speaker was heard:

'I beg for silence. The Honourable Sangiorgio has the privilege of speaking.'

Hereupon the curious eyes of the members sought out that colleague of theirs, whom scarcely anyone knew. He was up there, on the last bench of a section, with the Right Centre. He was standing erect and calm, waiting for his turn to speak. And he stepped out halfway upon the stair so as to be seen better. He was not tall, but up there he looked tall, since his carriage was upright and he had a robust figure. Nor was he handsome, but his head bore all the characteristics of strength; his hair was planted rudely on a low brow, his nose was aquiline, his moustache was dark and dense, his chin was set hard and full of power. No one thought him insignificant. And then divers speculations grew rife in the Chamber. Would this new deputy speak for or against the Minister? Was he one of those flatterers who, scarcely arrived, hastened to make a show of loyalty to the Government? Or was he some little impudent nobody who would stammer through a feeble attack before the House, and be suppressed by the ironical murmurs of the assembly? He was a Southerner and a lawyer—only that was known about him. Therefore he would deliver an oration, the usual rhetoric which the Piedmontese detested, the Milanese derided, and the Tuscans despised.

Instead, the Honourable Sangiorgio began to talk deliberately, but with such a resonant, commanding voice that it filled the hall and made the audience give a sigh of relief. The ladies, whom the warmth had half lulled to sleep, revived, and the press gallery, empty since the conclusion of the Minister's discourse, began to refill with reporters, returning to their places.

The Honourable Sangiorgio opened with an exordium proclaiming respect for the illustrious person at the head of Italy's finances, and his eulogy nowise partook of vulgar adulation, but was tendered in a sober and restrained manner. The speaker alluded in passing to his own youth, to the obscurity of one who, tied down to provincial life, ever had his eyes turned towards Rome, where the noble war of politics was constantly being waged. He extolled politics, declaring them greater than the arts, greater than science: they embraced the whole history of human activity, and to him the statesman was the highest type of man, apostle and labourer, arm and head.

A loud *Good!* burst forth from the Right.

The Honourable Sangiorgio paused for a short minute, but only for a short minute. His appeal to the sublimity of politics as a kind of high ideal, which was vulgarized in the hands of men, had evoked general approval, and had given several nonentities a sense of elation. The Minister, who from the beginning had raised his head, fixing his pale blue eyes firmly on the speaker, had now dropped it again upon overhearing remarks behind him from men who embarrassed and annoyed him.

Sangiorgio went on to say that those youthful years in the provinces were, however, not without value to anyone who sought to know modern life in all its sufferings and in all its needs. The great cities were all-invading, all-devouring; they fed upon the existence of others; they exhausted vigour, and stifled complaint, and threw the man who lived there into such a fever that he forgot all other human interests. Who knew of the distress of the provinces? Who ever heard the echo of those dolorous, humble sighs, which never could reach Rome? True, that a few stout and good and brave men on occasion informed the Chamber of the grievances of all those fellow-Italians; but such voices were isolated, grew faint, and then were silent. Yet there must not be silence; the truth must be known.

The House was now listening attentively in a less ironical, a kinder attitude of mind. It was a natural reaction from the strain, from the difficulty of comprehension which the preceding speech by the Minister had offered. After a painful tension of two hours and a half in following a fantastic whirl of figures, this easy eloquence relieved the oppressed spirits. And now, in that hour of dusk, so cold and dark outside, so gratefully warm and bright in the hall, the members yielded to a sentimental mood, to a feeling of sympathy and benevolence—what were these wrongs of the provinces, then?

Sangiorgio continued, saying that all the sad experience of his youth among the peasants had rebelled at a seemingly innocent proposal of the Minister's. The Minister had stated that, being obliged to give his colleague of the War Department several millions, there was necessity for further economizing. Very good; economy was the strength of young nations. But instead the Minister had asked for a slight increase of the salt tax. Sangiorgio fully appreciated, he declared, the reasons of State which compelled the Minister to ask for that rise in taxation, but those few centesimi represented a promise of woe made worse, an aggravation of conditions of life already unendurable. And then he drew a vivid picture of peasant poverty, which was so much more distressingly and variously terrible than poverty in the towns, relating, with veridical details, with short, pathetic anecdotes, where the peasants lived, what they ate—that is to say, how hungry they always were—and how the tax-collector appeared in their eyes as the fearful spectre of starvation and death. He described the nakedness of that great Basilicata country, the landslides

which rolled down bare mountains to bury meagre pastures, and he spoke of the distance of those wretched villages from the railway, whence the impossibility of paying industries, and he mentioned the unhealthy plains, where engineers, road-makers, and stationmasters contracted malarial fevers.

While talking of his own country, so desolate and so unhappy, his voice had lowered, as though veiled with emotion. But he quickly recovered himself and came to the point. The duty on salt fell heavily on the lower classes—more so in the rural districts than in the urban. They already ate their broth with very little salt; now they would eat it entirely without salt. And the latest hygienic researches, unsparing but reliable, had established that to the insufficiency of salt were to be traced the dreadful diseases prevailing among the peasantry of Lombardy and Piedmont.

A murmur of approval ran along some of the benches. The closest attention of all was paid where the four vigorous young Centrists were sitting, Seymour, Gerini, Joanna, and Marchetti, who nevertheless made no demonstrations, with that British impassiveness of the young economist deputies.

'In the small towns and boroughs and villages of the South of Italy,' Sangiorgio went on, 'the bakers always make two kinds of bread—tasteless and cheap for the poor people, and salted for the well-to-do. And to this second kind the bakers often give its flavour, not with salt, because it is too dear, but by passing a cloth steeped in sea-water over the fresh dough. In the houses of the poor a coarse, dark, heavy-grained salt is used, which ought only to be sold for cattle, but which human beings are obliged to buy for themselves. By increasing the duty the Government would condemn a whole class of taxpayers to intolerable privations, whose consequence would be ravage by sickness and yet deeper destitution. The millions spent on national defence, on the fortifications of the country, on the army, are wisely allotted, but is it necessary to be powerful when one is so poor? When the Minister of War calls the young men of the Basilicata to arms, and hopes to find a body of stalwart and valiant mountaineers, he will be disappointed at seeing a herd of creatures pale and emaciated from illness, weakness, and dejection. Or, rather, not even that, for the barren and unfruitful provinces are becoming more and more depopulated; the peasant, desperate over the sterility of the soil, harried by the fisc, abandoned by Nature, persecuted by man, prefers to turn his back upon the land of his birth and leave it for the remote shores of America. The peasant prefers a foreign people, a foreign clime, whence there is no return. When the war-trumpet shall call the Italian sons of the Basilicata there will be no answer. Driven by hunger and despair, they will have gone away to die in regions far from home!'

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The Honourable Francesco Sangiorgio stepped back to his bench and resumed his seat. Cheers and applause sounded upon his ears, but only vaguely. He was conscious of the buzz of discussion which follows upon every important speech. Immediately in front of him had collected a group of deputies who were arguing somewhat loudly, referring now and then to their honourable colleague, Sangiorgio, and half turning towards him, as if seeking endorsement from him. Remaining stolidly in his place, with eyes downcast, and without anyone coming to shake hands with him because he was unknown, Sangiorgio nevertheless felt the approbation of the whole House rise to him where he sat on the topmost bench. He had given satisfaction to the old party of the Right, whose political pride was flattered; to the Extreme Left, who thought to have discovered a Socialist in a deputy belonging to the Centre; to all the egoistic and sentimental members, ready to cry misfortune at all times without seeking for remedies; to all deputies with economist leanings and shadowy notions of agrarian Socialism. This speech, which on another occasion would have passed for some literary effusion, to-day bore a character of great importance.

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Once a minute the glass door of the room on the ground-floor at No. 9, Via della Missione, opened to admit a newcomer. Those already in the room, seated on the little divans or standing about, would turn and eye such a one angrily; a cold blast of wind would come in with him. Whoever entered, shaking and shivering, made straight for the long desk dividing the room, took a small blank, and wrote on it his own name, as well as the deputy's he wished to see; and, like him, there were always five or six others writing on small blanks. On the other side of the desk the ushers, in uniform, with medals on their chest, with a tricoloured band on their arm, gray or bald-headed, were moving to and fro, taking away those blanks, half a dozen at a time, disappearing through a door opening upon corridors giving access to the hall. Satisfied with having despatched his request, its sender would begin to walk up and down, or, if he happened to have been standing, would take a seat, without impatience, even with a somewhat presumptuous air of certainty.

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The sacred door opened, and an usher reappeared with several blanks in hand; everybody looked up and lent ear.

'Who asked for the Honourable Parodi?' shouted the usher.

'I,' answered a voice from among the number of people waiting.

'He is not there.'

'Did you look carefully?' urgently asked the voice, belonging to an old man with a florid, red nose, with heavy, purple lips.

'The Honourable Parodi is not there,' repeated the usher civilly.

'Well, he ought to be,' muttered the other.

'Who wanted the Honourable Sambucetto?'

'I!' exclaimed a young fellow with a pale face and a threadbare overcoat, whose collar was turned up.

'He is there, but he is unable to come.'

'Why can he not come?' demanded the youngster in an insolent tone, his face now livid.

'He said nothing more. He cannot come.'

The young man mingled with the people who filled the room, but he did not depart; he remained, angry, sullen, his cap pulled down over his eyes, in an altogether unpromising frame of mind. Moreover, all the faces of the people who hurried in and out of that room, or sat against the wall on the divans, all those faces wore an imprint of sadness, of weariness, of repressed suffering. It might have been the anteroom of a celebrated physician, where invalids came, one after another, waiting their turn, looking about with the indifferent gaze of people who have lost all interest in everything else, their thoughts for ever occupied with their malady. And as in such a lugubrious anteroom, which he who has once been there on his own behalf or for one dear to him can never forget, as in such a room are assembled people with all the infirmities that torment our poor, mortal body—the consumptive, with narrow, stooping shoulders, with lean neck, his eyes swimming with a noxious fluid; the victim of heart disease, with pallid face, large veins, yellowish, swollen hands; the anæmic, with violet lips and white gums; the neurotically affected, with protuberant jaws, bulging cheekbones, emaciated frame; and the sufferers from all other diseases, hideous or pitiful, which draw the lines of the face tight, which make the mouth twitch, and impart an unwelcome glow to the hand, that glow that terrifies the healthy—thus, in such a room, did the possessors of all the moral ills unite, oblivious of all complaints but their own.

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There was the youth who had taught in a school without a license, who has come to Rome to take any sort of employment, however mean, and who, after a month's half-hearted, vain search, has at last begged for a servant's place, which is denied him because he is not servile; the ex-clerk of the Bank of Naples or the Bank of Sicily, who was turned out for dishonesty twelve years ago, when the Left was in power, and wants to be reinstated by the Progressists, whom he has always served faithfully; the uncertain industrial speculator, who must pay a heavy fine into the Treasury Department because he has neglected to register a contract, and who hopes the Minister will graciously remit the penalty; the widow of a pensioner, accompanied by a child crying with the cold, who for ten months has been applying for a lottery office, and is willing to surrender the pension; the loafer, who knows how to do everything and is of no use for anything, who positively must have a place, of whatever description, on the ground that, since there are so many fools in the Chamber and the Government offices, he, too, is entitled to share in their paradise.

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The variety of their wishes and needs is infinite. Every one of those people has a grievance in his soul, an unfulfilled desire, an active, torturing delusion, a secret sorrow, a fierce ambition, a discontent. And in their faces may be seen a corresponding spasmodic twitching, a contraction of angry lips, a dilation of nostrils trembling with nervousness, a knitting of the brows which clouds the whole countenance, hands convulsively doubled in overcoat pockets, a melancholy furrow in the women's smile, which deepens with every new disillusion. But all of them are completely self-centred, entirely oblivious of foreign interests, indulging in a single thought, a fixed idea, because of which they watch, meet, and conflict with one another, although seeming neither to hear nor to see each other. The floor of the room is filthy, muddied by feet that have splashed through the puddles in the lanes, and spotted all over with the thick expectorations of people afflicted with a cold.

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'Who asked for the Honourable Moraldi?' shouts the usher.

'I,' answers, with loud, imposing voice, a large, stout, red-throated man.

'Be kind enough to wait a little; the Minister is speaking.'

The large man puffs himself out in his warm topcoat, which protuberates sensibly at the paunch. Someone looks at him enviously, because *his* deputy has at least asked him to wait, while others allege absence or simply send word that they cannot come. Perhaps he is also envied his warm overcoat, since there are so many thin suits under a wretched threadbare overcoat, worn through autumn and winter with pretended resignation, so many pepper-and-salt trousers under a green overcoat, so many trousers of a dirty yellow under a cinnamon-coloured, ancient, worn-out overcoat.

The coming and going continued. Those who had received a definite refusal remained rather undecided, a sullen look on their faces, glancing at the door as if they lacked courage to go out into the cold, and then they made up their minds to go, which they did with bowed shoulders, at a slow pace, without looking back. For one who went away, two or three came in: the room was as full as ever; the ushers came and went through the door, which suggested that of a sanctuary. It rained refusals.

'Who was wishing to see the Honourable Nicotera?'

'I,' answered a very tall, very thin man, with scrawny neck and the face of a skeleton, on which sprouted a few colourless hairs.

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'He is there, but begs to be excused; he is not able to come.'

The fantastically lean individual bent double, like a caterpillar, on a bench, filled out another blank, and consigned it to another usher, who returned exclaiming:

'Who asked for the Honourable Zanardelli?'

'I,' whispered a sibilant voice.

'He is there, but the Minister is speaking; he cannot come.'

The spectre persistently went on writing.

One deputy, however, more obliging, had come out upon the request of the person who wanted him, accosting him with a certain degree of nimble zeal, leading him into the next room, where the deputies interviewed their constituents. In this room were three or four ladies, sitting down, waiting, with their hands in their muffs. The deputy and his constituent walked up and down; the constituent spoke vivaciously, with gesticulations; the deputy listened attentively, with eyes downcast, now and then nodding his head in approval.

In the waiting-room all the people were grown weary; a physical and moral lassitude weighed upon them: the new disillusion, that evenfall, sapped their strength; one of them was leaning against the wall; the child had gone to sleep on the widow's knee; total silence reigned. Real or fictitious misfortunes, desires of idle brains or worthy, fervent desires of persevering souls, necessities brought about by indulgence in vice or unmerited mishaps, extravagant ambitions, modest little ambitions, crazes due to overwrought nerves, the thirst for justice of obstinate monomaniacs—all this human suffering, endured in silence, was mixed with a sense of oppression, of sadness, of having been abandoned, a feeling of woeful disconsolateness at having once more come to knock at that door which would not open. The gas-jets were burning brightly, but their light fell on the mortified faces of people paralyzed and listless, as though they were dead.

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Three ushers came in through the door, one after the other.

'Who asked for the Honourable Sella?'

'Who asked for the Honourable Bomba?'

'Who asked for the Honourable Crispi?'

'I—I—I,' answered the thin little voice of the man-skeleton.

'The Honourable Sella cannot leave the hall.'

'The Honourable Bomba is busy in the hall.'

'The Honourable Crispi is with the Budget Committee.'

Quietly the skeleton wrote on another blank, and handed it to an usher.

'Excuse me,' observed the usher, 'we are not allowed to call the Ministers, and especially the President of the Council.'

'And why?' asked the spectre in surprise.

'It is the rule.'

But with unabated patience he wrote another name, and then began to walk to and fro, overtopping all the rest. One concluded to leave; his footstep dragged as he took away with him the humiliation of that long, useless wait; others, making a desperate resolve, went away to post themselves, in the chill of the evening, at the door of Montecitorio, to wait for the deputies coming out. Others, less venturesome, still lingered behind: the gas afforded a little warmth, and at the end of the sitting some deputy might appear. A brougham stopped before the door, remained closed, a footman jumped from the box, came in, gave a note to an usher, and stood waiting, with the impassive air of people used to receive orders. An usher shouted:

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'Who wanted the Honourable Barbarulo?'

'I,' said the ghost.

'He is not there.'

'Is he away for a holiday?'

'He has been dead four months.'

This remark settled the living corpse. He reflected for an instant, but probably could think of no other names, and slowly took his departure. A moment after Francesco Sangiorgio crossed the room, spoke to the footman—only two words—and accompanied by him went out of doors and got into the carriage, all excitement still with his success.

'My sincere congratulations,' said Donna Elena Fiammanti, pressing his hand.

The brougham drove off. In the waiting-room the going and coming had ceased; the child was crying, after being awakened by its mother; the tired ushers sat down for a minute; two deputies,

one with three acquaintances and the other with two, were gossiping in the other room.

\* \* \* \* \*

The flames were flickering in the fireplace; three logs forming a triangle were burning at their ends. Donna Elena gently stirred the hot ashes and the glowing embers; they gave forth a few sparks, and the three logs blazed up. Then she sat back in her chair and mechanically smoothed down her clinging, black silk skirt at the hips.

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'Do you like a fire, Sangiorgio? It must be cold down there in the Basilicata.'

'Very cold,' said he, taking a seat in an easy-chair. 'We have no handsome fireplaces; there are large high stoves under whose arch a wooden bench is placed. The head of the family sits there in winter, with his children and relatives about him.'

'I am very fond of an open fire,' she said, with eyes half closed, as if they were heavy from fatigue, 'but only when someone is with me. I get melancholy alone.'

She spoke with her two arms lying upon the arms of the chair, her head leaning against the back. The lamplight made the gold necklace sparkle on the high collar of her silk dress, and drew a flash from the gilt buckle on her black slipper. Her foot was forward; it was rather plump, although arched.

'You are never alone, I suppose?'

'No, never,' she replied frankly. 'I hate being alone.'

'No doubt,' he vaguely assented.

'No, no, do not agree with me from politeness! I know that you men, especially when you have a great ambition or are deeply in love, wish for solitude. But we women never do. We must have company. If a woman tells you she prefers solitude, do not believe her, Sangiorgio. She is deceiving you deliberately, or else wishes to avoid a discussion. They are all like myself, or, rather, I am a woman like the rest. Visitors amuse me. Fools interest me, too. To-day, in the Chamber, for instance——'

'For instance?' he asked with a faint smile.

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'There was one behind me in the Speaker's gallery; he was talking nonsense to me for an hour.'

'And did he not bore you?'

'No, he prevented me from hearing the Minister's speech. Do you smoke?'

'Thank you.'

She handed him the tobacco-box. Her hands were plump, with pink, polished nails.

'You made a remarkably fine speech to-day,' she resumed, lighting a yellow cigarette.

Sangiorgio raised his eyes without answering.

'If you care to, buy the newspapers to-morrow; they will be full of you.'

'I think not; the Minister is a great favourite.'

'Nonsense! He is like Aristides: his fellow-citizens have become tired of hearing him called "The Just." Do not let the quotation alarm you, Sangiorgio; I know neither Greek nor Latin. It was merely a reminiscence of my youth, when I used to read.'

'You do not read now?'

'No; I am tired of books.'

'They are no use.'

The man-servant came in with a small bamboo tray and the coffee; the cups, too, were Japanese, of a most delicate, blue porcelain.

'How many lumps?' she asked, holding up the silver sugar-tongs.

'Two.'

While they were drinking the coffee Sangiorgio looked about the room. He had been there for a moment, before dinner, while the Countess had gone to change her dress. It was a little parlour, without brackets, without tables, without upholstered furniture, full of large and small easy-chairs, small divans, and stools; it was a little room without corners. The piano was also draped with a quantity of Turkish and Persian stuffs. On the wall hung a piece of an ecclesiastical vestment, red and embroidered with gold.

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'You will see that to-morrow a number of deputies will ask to be presented to you. You will enjoy all the sweets of success.'

'Am I to believe in the admiration of my colleagues?'

'No, my dear friend, but you may take pleasure in it. Many beautiful and good things in life are

false in their essence. It is wisdom to profit by them, to take them as they are, without asking any more.'

And she cast at him a fugitive, rapid glance. He understood at once. In that little room the same perspicacity came to his aid which during the day had assisted him in his boldness before the Chamber.

'Love is like that, too,' he murmured.

'Particularly love,' remarked the Countess Elena Fiammanti, opening wide her large gray eyes, which that evening were tinted with blue. 'Have you ever been very much in love, Sangiorgio?'

'Never much, and besides——'

'Very well. When you do fall in love, remember what I say. Love is a great thing, but not the best. One must not ask more of it than it can give. But a man is exacting, a man is selfish, a man insists on being the object of a passion, and then—the woman lies. The sentiment of love is really an ordinary one; there are some stronger; love is an ephemeral thing, and often accomplishes nothing.'

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And while she uttered her romantic paradoxes with a slight touch of pedantry, her crimson lips gleamed in their humidity, her hand ruffled the natural curls over her forehead, she swung her plump little foot backward and forward, whose skin was visible through the black silk, perforated stocking. Sangiorgio, feeling very much at home, looked at her with a rather fatuous smile, which, being absorbed in her paradoxes, she probably did not notice.

Throwing her cigarette into the fire, Elena continued:

'Women also want to be deluded. "Those traitors of men do not know how to love!" you hear them cry; and then they weep and wail. They must have faithfulness—a pretty story, good enough to be palmed off on children! As if they could be faithful! As if they had no fibres, blood, imagination—destructive, all of these, to constancy! A hundred thousand lire reward to anyone who will bring me a man and a woman who are truly faithful, absolutely faithful!'

Francesco Sangiorgio had taken her uplifted hand in his. He toyed lightly with her fingers, with her diamond rings. He more than once playfully bent his head over the hand, and finally kissed it on the vein in the wrist. Donna Elena was no longer in the least formidable to him; he seemed to be quite intimate with her already; vulgar ideas began surging into his mind. What intoxication remained from the events of the day, aided by this feminine atmosphere all redolent with coryopsis, by this alluring woman, by her language become common by force of paradox, turned his head. To assert his new intimacy with Donna Elena, he would have liked to stretch himself out on a sofa, or fling himself on the carpet, or throw matches into the fire—in fact, to conduct himself as impertinently as an ill-bred boy. He resisted these temptations through an exertion of will; nevertheless, he was incited by the ironical smile which gave Donna Elena's nether lip a disdainful curve, the light tremor of the nostrils of that prominent aquiline nose, the combined refinement and coarseness of that face. Quite gently he took the rings off her left hand and dandled them in his own; and in the state of inebriation which had seized upon him his strongest wish was to slip off one of her shoes, to see her little foot bend bashfully in her stocking.

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'To be sure, there are virtuous women,' she went on; 'who denies that? But with them the case is totally different. There are cold women; there are women who do not love. I know a few—not many, only a few. Under those circumstances it needs little strength to remain true. Donna Angelica, His Excellency's wife—there you have a virtuous woman! Do you know Donna Angelica, Sangiorgio?'

'H'm—yes—by sight,' he stammered.

And then he became utterly embarrassed, with the rings in his hands, having not a notion what to do with them. At last he put them on a stool, not venturing to place them back upon the hand whence he had stripped them. Suddenly the cloud which had shadowed his mind was dissipated, and he felt ashamed of the childish tricks he had contemplated. He was very near to begging Donna Elena's pardon, but she, most likely, was unconcerned. All nervousness, with his hand he stroked and stroked the folds of his black cloth waistcoat, as though he wanted to make it immutably rigid.

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'What do you think of my sermon?'

'I am an enthusiastic disciple. I do not grasp all your teachings, but I bow to them,' answered the deputy, having recovered enough presence of mind to be jocose.

'I will give you some music; you will understand that,' she said, getting up. 'You may smoke, read, or go to sleep. If you do not listen I shall not mind. I shall be playing as much for myself as for you.'

In a moment a soft and sympathetic voice was singing the first notes of Tosti's 'Ave Maria.' Francesco started at those unexpected, unaccountable tones. Indeed, Donna Elena's voice was unlike herself, or, rather, it was hers in one respect, and by its other qualities it completed her. In singing she met with her own character. She sounded the key of the deep contralto which lacks in smoothness, and yet is rich and warm, and stirs the soul; which is full-toned and amorous; which conveys impassioned avowals and storms of jealousy. That side of Elena's voice resembled

her. But there was also infinite sweetness; there was the purity of notes sung without a quaver; there was the liquid tenderness and innocence of an almost childish voice. And there was—which is a rare feature in singing—a sort of ideal sensuality, a harmonious transfiguration of it, a supremely poetical interpretation of it. In this way did her voice complete her.

She had forgotten her hearer, and was singing with her head thrown back, and with such languorous eyes that the lashes cast a shadow on her cheeks. Her lips were lightly parted, and they scarcely moved. Her white throat was swelling under the black collar and the necklace on her dress, while her hands ran nimbly over the keys, fingering them as delicately as a caress. A serener, sweeter atmosphere seemed to be diffused in the little room, which until then had suggested hardness and effrontery. A suave light settled on the surroundings, on the furniture, and on all things inanimate, tempering their sharp, brazen expression. Donna Elena was singing a melancholy romance by Schumann, whose refrain seemed rather to add affliction than to console, so extremely mournful was the music: 'Va, prends courage, cœur souffrant.' And Sangiorgio, at the end of his day of triumph, listened pensively, invaded by an unfamiliar sensation of sadness.

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## CHAPTER II

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It was the last public ball on the last Tuesday of the carnival, at the Costanzi Theatre. The small people whose only amusement during the whole carnival was one public ball; students who still had ten lire in their pocket; Government clerks who had a taste for mild debauches; shop assistants whose establishments would be closed the following day; fledgelings in law and beginners in medicine—all these and many more from ten o'clock forward filed in through the four red doors, which remained open all night. On the ground-floor the attendants in the cloakrooms lost their heads a little with the numbering of overcoats and capes, gathering up of sashes and veils, and putting together of walking-sticks and wraps. Crowds of people streamed continuously into the huge parterre, which never seemed to fill, in spite of the tremendous concourse of people, clad in bright colours that stood out against the sober background. They were indulging in the everlasting circular promenade which is a characteristic feature at a Roman public ball. Four-and-twenty pulcinellos—a merry company of young fellows holding on to one another's white blouses, one behind the other—careered across the floor laughing and shrieking, like a rushing avalanche. In the middle of the place a number of feminine masks had collected in a large circle. They wore short white jackets, very much like babies' shirts, tied under the chin with large red and blue bows, and had infants' curls on their heads and tinkling rattles in their hands—the inexpensive, pretty, and saucy costume of Donna Juanita in the act laid in Jamaica. Having come in good company, these fair masqueraders scarcely quitted their escorts. Hardly did the orchestra, in the stand erected on the proscenium near the great purling fountain, strike up a polka, when the couples began to turn in a curiously sedate manner, with steps carefully regular, avoiding collisions, dancing conscientiously. When the music ceased they halted abruptly, as if in surprise, the men offered their partners an arm, and without exchanging a word they began the circular promenade. At a fresh summons they once more went into the middle and danced again, with almost laborious persistency, while all round them stood admiring spectators three deep.

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Three girls dressed in black, with white aprons and enormous white muslin caps, were going about arm-in-arm, speaking in a high, piping voice, and making gestures with their hands gloved in black, puzzling half the assembly. In a box of the second tier a red satin, female domino, with a hood like a cock's comb, sat quite alone, her arm, which was red to the very gloves, lying on the edge of the box. Here and there other stylish and mysterious dominos were to be seen—one tall and slender, all in blue, with a big hat shaped like a closed conch; another in black satin, with face concealed behind black Venetian lace; an opulent mask exhibiting under an open domino of red and gold brocade a suit of cream-coloured brocade; and many more besides, all followed by young men trying to guess at their faces. But in the main the gathering was composed of plain, middle-class families—father and mother, sons and daughters, who had come to this ball as to an evening outdoor performance, in dark cloth dress, white neckerchief, and hat with black feathers; and as they met they stopped to exchange compliments and tittle-tattle, taking jokes from each other with the equanimity of the Roman middle class that is never upset. The throng was densest about the two barges (the small stage boxes), in one of which the members of the Hunt Club, in evening dress, with black necktie and gardenia at buttonhole, and in the other the cavalry officers, were leaning over to talk and laugh with their friends in the parterre.

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When Francesco Sangiorgio entered the vestibule and bought a ticket of admission, it was half-past eleven. A feminine shape, dressed in an embroidered Turkish costume, her head covered over, and her face concealed behind a white veil, came up to him, and said in a flutelike voice:

'Good-evening, dear Sangiorgio! Why so melancholy?'

'Because I have not yet found out who you are, sweetheart!'

'You do not know me, you must not know me, you never will know me! I can tell why you are melancholy, Sangiorgio. I will whisper it in your ear: you are in love!'

'Yes, with you, my dear!'

'How amusing you are! You are much too gallant. That's not the custom here. Be rude, I beg of you—your reputation is at stake! But listen—Ferrante is no longer a candidate for membership on the Budget Committee. You are being talked of; I warn you, be careful.'

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He stood dumfounded. The mask edged away into the crowd, and vanished.

The news had greatly astonished him: he had not expected it. What had been the outcome of his great speech? A flattering interview with the leader of the Right, Don Mario Tasca, the cool speaker, moderate and accomplished, the mild Socialist, the politician who had lost his own party through the nebulousness of his views. And then there had been bows and introductions and handshakings. The Minister, in response, had rendered honour to his adversary, but had insisted on his motion, and the Chamber had voted the Budget by a large majority. Who was thinking of his speech any more? The Honourable Dalma had once said to him, with his poetical Parliamentary cynicism: 'In politics everything is forgotten.'

In the vestibule, the couples were walking and talking, arm-in-arm; here groups of young bloods were discussing the financial situation, with a view to supper; here solitary dominos were wandering back and forth in expectation of someone who came not. Here Sangiorgio met the Honourable Gulli-Pausania. The Sicilian deputy was leaning against the wall, waiting like some of the others, stylish and handsome in evening costume, gallant Southerner that he was, with his pointed, chestnut beard, his greenish eyes travelling over the crowd, and his silk hat covering a premature baldness, because of which several women were in love with him.

'Oh, my dear Sangiorgio!' said Gulli, with a strong Sicilian accent, 'alone, all alone, at the ball?'

'Yes, alone. I expect nobody; nobody expects me, and I am sure my honourable colleague, Gulli-Pausania, is not following my example.'

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'Well, what is to be done?' replied Gulli, smiling. 'We spend our lives waiting—'

'Not always for the same person, fortunately.'

'Oh no! that would be too desperate. Any political news?'

'None, my dear colleague. Hope you will enjoy yourself!'

'Thanks!' replied Gulli-Pausania, with his distinguished, sensual smile.

Sangiorgio went into the auditorium. His lashes quivered over his down-looking eyes. The theatre, with its three rows of boxes, its galleries, and its stage, was brilliantly lighted, and the white background of the decorations enhanced the brightness. On the stage the stream of the tall fountain was tinted red by a ray of electric light. The place was full; people were still arriving from other entertainments, from cafés, from receptions, from balls; neither standing still nor fast walking was now any longer permitted. At first Sangiorgio saw nothing but the shoulders of a stalwart gentleman in front of him, at his right the red ear of a *cocotte*, whose mask was certainly fastened on too tight, to his left the sharp profile of a thin, elongated damsel, with melancholy eyes. The tall gentleman looked here, there, and everywhere among the boxes, jerking a head with a light mane, precisely parted in the middle. Once, when he stopped to look at a box in the first tier, full of black dominos, making neither sound nor motion, Sangiorgio found himself beside him. It was the Honourable Prince di Sirmio, who bore the title of Most Serene Highness, and was the richest nobleman in Rome.

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'Good-evening, honourable colleague,' said the Prince in his slow, liquid tone, with the note of cold fatigue which was one of his personal peculiarities. 'I believe this is your first visit to one of these places of corruption, where everyone assumes strict virtue. Strict virtue, do you not think? You have no doubt been told that we people in the capital lead a wild life; instead of that, as you see, we walk very slowly round and round, *pour le bon motif*, looking for our wife, who must be in one of the boxes with her sister. Meanwhile, we mingle with the crowd, as you perceive, to listen and learn. They all tell me I am democratic—and I behave accordingly. Are you doing anything in politics, honourable colleague? *Ce n'est pas le bonheur*—however, I have had nothing to do with politics for an everlasting age. The head of my party is Don Emilio Castelar: I am a Spanish Republican. Are you surprised?'

Francesco Sangiorgio smiled, but made no answer, which pleased the Prince, since he liked neither to be talked to nor interrupted. He had a smooth, flowing tongue, and interruption annoyed him.

'Ah, there is my wife,' continued Sirmio. 'Who is that in the box next to hers? I see—it is the Minister of Foreign Affairs with his two daughters, Grace and the other, whose name ought to be Justice, but who is called Eleonora. The quip is not mine; it is from a newspaper. Good-night, honourable colleague.'

'Good-night, Prince.'

Sangiorgio, in lieu of walking the smaller circle on the floor, took the larger, and went up towards the stage, where along the wings were disposed tables and chairs, about which sat whole families of the middle classes, drinking aerated waters, or inseparable couples, tired of one another, but not daring to split, quaffing mugs of beer. He passed close to the fountain now tinged violet by the electric light—a most delicate shade—and he went by the basin and the great mirror at the back over to the musicians' stand. Over his head, they suddenly burst into the opening notes of

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the postilion mazurka from the ballet 'Excelsior,' which was highly popular that winter. A momentary movement took place from the stage to the parterre, a general undulation of heads in time with the lively measure, as it were; people crowded towards the parterre to see the dancing. At a table near the left wing, the Honourable Schuffer sat alone, drinking beer, reviewing the assembly through a pair of bright eyes behind spectacles, occasionally raising his pointed nose and sharp chin.

'Come, my dear colleague, and take a mug of beer with me,' said Schuffer, in his soft, Venetian accent. 'But being a Neapolitan, perhaps you do not like beer.'

'No, thank you, Honourable—no, thank you, I will not take any; I have just come in.'

'I came an hour ago, and in that hour goodness knows how many elbows have been dug into me, how many times I have been shoved, and how many feet have trodden on mine. I took refuge here to avoid it; you know I am unlucky in some things.'

Sangiorgio smiled. The Honourable Schuffer, looking tousled and mischievous like a boy, with his curly head of hair, had already had four suits for defamation. The deputy, unfortunately, had seen fit to get at odds with a guard, a porter, a station-master, and a waiter in a café, and while the same thing happened to a hundred other deputies without serious consequences, as if on purpose the guard, the porter, the station-master, and the waiter, had severally brought action against him, so that every now and then the Chamber was called upon to authorize legal proceedings.

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'I learnt to drink beer on my travels to Japan,' went on Schuffer. 'Great country that, honourable colleague! I never had a lawsuit there with anyone, I assure you. Honourable, you are Ministerial—shall you vote those millions for the Minister of War?' he added, as if struck by a sudden idea.

'What about yourself, Honourable Schuffer?' quickly threw in Sangiorgio.

'I? I?' said the other, nonplussed; 'I must think about it. We might discuss it, do you not think—and come to some understanding? It is a serious question; war swallows up every farthing in the country.'

'I ask for nothing better; certainly we will talk about it again. Good-night, Honourable Schuffer.'

The postilion mazurka was now greatly enlivening the ball. There were three circles of dancers: near the entrance to the parterre, in the centre of the floor, and on the stage. A woman masquerader dressed as a Bersagliere officer, with plumed hat over one ear, bare arms coming out from beneath the gold fringes of her epaulets, and breeches fitting closely at the knee, was dancing with a girl disguised as a Satanic imp. Both were as serious as could be, repulsing everyone who wanted to separate them. The boxes, too, were now filled with ladies and gentlemen come from receptions and balls. The first and second tiers were entirely taken up. In the box next to the 'barge,' in the first tier, were to be seen the delicate and graceful Florentine beauty of Elsa Bellini, married to Novelli, and the blond opulence of Lalla Terziani. Both ladies had come from the Valle. With them were Rosolino Scalia, the Sicilian deputy of military carriage; the little Prince of Nerola, the new deputy from the Abruzzi; a young man of distinguished mien, with a small black moustache; Novelli and Terziani, the two husbands.

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'Honourable Sangiorgio,' said the little Prince, leaning over the side of the box.

'Well, honourable colleague?' said the other, raising his head.

'If you see Sangarzia, will you be good enough to tell him I am here? Do you know who will be elected, the day after to-morrow, for the Budget Committee?'

'The Honourable Ferrante, of course.'

'I think not—I think not,' replied the Prince, smiling maliciously.

As Sangiorgio went away he heard remarks from the box like 'Clever fellow!' and 'Gifted Southerner!'

He looked at various boxes in search of Sangarzia. In one, of the first tier, were the two Neapolitan sisters Acquaviva, one of them married to the deputy Marquis di Santa Marta, the other to the deputy Count Lapucci. The Countess, dark and vivacious, with a thick-lipped, deep-hued mouth, with two flashing eyes, was the very opposite of her husband, a dark, slender, very taciturn, very pensive young man, said to be haughty, although he was a Socialist deputy. The Santa Marta pair was different. The wife, fair and curly-haired, had a childish face and a frank expression, and was very simply gowned; the husband was fair, with languid eyes and an indolent manner. The Countess Lapucci was laughing loudly; the Marchioness di Santa Marta was smiling. Count Lapucci was watching the crowd silently, his thumbs stuck in his waistcoat pockets; the Marquis di Santa Marta was chatting affably with the Honourable Melillo, the strong financial man from the Basilicata, with a heart too open to women, a confirmed celibate, which made him interesting in the eyes of unmarried girls, whom he did not care about. The Honourable Melillo answered Francesco Sangiorgio's bow with an elaborate salute and a patronizing wave of the hand, and Sangiorgio drew near the box while his name was being mentioned. The Honourable Melillo was no doubt speaking of the bright promise his fellow-countryman gave.

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The wife of the Secretary-General of Finance had arrived in the box near the door, after an evening party at the Quirinal. This graceful, slight Piedmontese, with the pale, interesting face of an invalid, wore a low-cut dress, was loaded with jewels, frequently coughed, continually carried

her pocket-handkerchief to her rather bright lips, nervously pulled her chamois gloves up to her elbows. The Honourable Pasta, the Subalpine lawyer, with shaven chin and fair, grizzled whiskers, was saying something very witty to her, that made her laugh. The Honourable Cimbro, the Piedmontese journalist-deputy, staring through his glasses, his necktie having slipped up under his ears, was a man apparently embarrassed by his own presence, whereas the Secretary-General, rather bald, with a thick, stout moustache, sat in solemn silence, looking at the stage as if he did not notice it. When Sangiorgio passed, he made him a low bow, full of meaning, almost sentimental, the appreciative bow of a Secretary-General showing his gratitude to the man who has afforded him the pleasure of attacking his Minister.

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'Where may Sangarzia be?' thought Francesco to himself, threading his way with difficulty through the ever-increasing crowd.

The Baroness Noir was in her box, her serpentine form clad in a strange, close-fitting garment of shot silk, on which tulips and peacocks' feathers were embroidered, and she had gathered about her a little sub-Ministerial staff of foreign affairs. Her husband had, in fact, been Secretary-General. He was holding aloof, at the back of the box, like a diplomat awaiting appointment, but the Honourable di San Demetrio, a self-possessed Abruzzan, with an already whitening black beard, who had strong aspirations towards the Cabinet, was well in front, under the full light. Besides, there was the Honourable di Campofranco, a frigid Sicilian, the son of Italy's most prominent female politician, the Princess di Campofranco. The Honourable di San Demetrio was talking, explaining, mayhap, some section of the Budget Report, and the little Baroness was listening attentively, slapping her fingers with her fan. Hustled by the crowd, Sangiorgio stopped for a moment under her box; he felt fatigued from head to foot, the lights dazzled him, and the atmosphere, pregnant with acrid odours, stifled him.

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'Sangiorgio!' exclaimed San Demetrio.

He started, as if from a dream.

'Do you know if the Honourable Mascari has registered to speak on the other side in the debate on the Foreign Budget?'

'No, he has not registered.'

'Positively?'

'Positively.'

'Thank you; excuse the question.'

And he went back to his place, happy in the knowledge that there was to be one opponent less. Sangiorgio stood straight and motionless against the wall, feeling at ease in that position and shutting his eyes against the light. Seymour and Marchetti came up to him, arm-in-arm. They presented a marked contrast, these two apostles of social science: Seymour, dark and severe, with the upward curving chin of a man of energy and a brush of black hair beginning to streak with white; Marchetti, with a frank, fresh face, a long chestnut beard, and the sparkling blue eyes of an enthusiast. They were both strolling about in morning coats, and therefore did not venture to speak to any of the ladies.

'Are you bored, Sangiorgio?' asked Seymour.

'A little. I am tired, too.'

'Were you at the office this evening?' inquired Marchetti.

'No. What was being done there?'

'Nothing very substantial yet—not much work,' remarked Seymour, adjusting his glasses on his nose. 'Why do you not have your speech printed, Sangiorgio?'

'What is the use?' he answered in a tone of sincere doubt. 'I shall return to the charge in a different way when the Agricultural Budget comes up,' he then went on, as if reanimated.

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The orchestra just then struck up Strauss' lively, inspiriting waltz, 'Freuet euch des Lebens,' a general movement took place, the circle spread outward, people were crowded back under the boxes, the deputies were separated, and Sangiorgio was left alone. The ladies in the boxes were gazing down enviously at the dancers enjoying themselves below; they were obliged to sit still, up there, while the music and the sight of the rest on the floor made them itch to join in the dancing. Three or four, who had come low-necked from a ball at the Huffer House, were exhibiting themselves in all the splendours of their dress. Little Prince Nerola was now in his cousin's box, the Countess di Genzano, the fascinating, Titianesque blonde. In the background was to be seen the sallow but still handsome face, almost noble in outline, of the Minister of Grace and Justice, the inflexible and gallant official, as unswerving in his inflexibility as he was in his gallantry. Sangiorgio roused himself from the state of torpor he had fallen into: he must find Sangarzia.

Looking carefully, box for box, he at last succeeded in discovering him in the second tier, near the royal box. A domino in black silk, highly fashionable, with a tight, black veil covering her head and face, and wearing a large bunch of pinks, was sitting in a front chair; beside her was the Honourable Valitutti, a rich, olive-hued Calabrian, with a black beard and the face of a taciturn Arab; in the background sat the Honourable Fraccareta, one of the largest corn

'Who might the lady be?' wondered Sangiorgio, on his way up to the second floor.

Some lady, put out at not being able to dance, was going home in ill-humour, letting her train drag, her mouth twisted as a woman's is who has been forbidden something. And behind her came husband and lover, with the thankful expression of men who have been bored, and who at last hope to get to bed. The five black dominos, who had been sitting the whole evening in a box without either moving or speaking, like so many conspirators, now came down on the arms of five youths; silent, lugubrious couples they were; they might have been bound for a funeral banquet. Just behind them the Honourable Carusio descended the stairs, a deputy with a head as bald as a billiard-ball, with an extravagantly long, pointed, Napoleonic beard, reaching to his stomach, and with the air of a timorous, anxious person, full of apprehensions and full of worries.

'My dear colleague,' began Carusio, suddenly stopping Sangiorgio on the first landing, 'excuse me if I stop you like this; you must pardon me—I am in great trouble. A relative of mine, from the provinces, who is visiting here, made me come to this affair, which he had never seen. Imagine what a dreadful nuisance! I can scarcely endure it. And so the Prime Minister is very ill?'

'No, not very—not very,' answered Sangiorgio, smiling. 'It is only the gout he is suffering from.'

'Are you quite sure, my dear colleague? Is your news at least accurate?'

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'I went to find out in person.'

'Oh, thank you ever so much, my dear colleague! I am so glad I met you. You have relieved me from a great anxiety. If the Prime Minister were to become seriously ill, just think what confusion! If he were to die, what complications!'

'God forbid!' said Sangiorgio, still smiling.

'Yours to command, my dear colleague: I am delighted; I am infinitely obliged to you. You may count upon me at any time, I assure you; do not spare me. You could not have come to the rescue more opportunely. Good-night, good-night, honourable colleague!'

'Good-night! I hope you will sleep well. The Prime Minister will be better to-morrow.'

'Thank you again, thank you.'

Sangiorgio knocked very gently at No. 15. Fraccareta's voice said 'Come in!' Sangiorgio half opened the door, and said:

'Excuse me, honourable colleagues: I am looking for the Honourable Sangarzia.'

'Here I am—here I am!'

And they went outside together, the black domino with the pinks having scarcely turned her head.

'Nerola, the Prince, wants you, Honourable Sangarzia.'

'Oh, my dear Sangiorgio, Nerola and yourself could not have done me a greater service! I was at a loss how to get away from here. And where is the Prince?'

'He is in the first tier now, with the Countess Genzano.'

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'Let us get there quickly.'

He went back into the box, put on his long cape over his evening coat, bowed to the woman and his two colleagues, and descended the stairs with Sangiorgio.

'What a good service you have rendered me! The lady was getting tired of it—probably wanted to dance. Have you come from the Countess's?'

'I do not know her.'

At this there issued forth from a box in the first tier a feminine figure strangely attired in a Turkish costume, with head and face hidden by a close white veil.

'Come with me,' she murmured with her soft voice to Sangiorgio.

'No need to wish you good luck, colleague,' whispered Sangarzia, taking leave of him.

'Come with me,' the woman repeated, bearing on his arm to draw him away.

It was half-past two. People were hastening to the cloakrooms to go home, getting into their overcoats listlessly, wrapping up their heads in scarfs, like so many acrobats, who after performing in the street put on old, worn wraps over their tawdry, spangled finery.

'Come, come!' urged the woman, seized with impatience, while Sangiorgio was donning his great-coat.

Outside she at once singled out her carriage, and got in eagerly, dragging Sangiorgio in after her.



'Home!' she said to the coachman.

But once in the carriage, behind the drawn blinds, she quickly unwound the veil from her head and threw it on the opposite seat. She disencumbered herself of the Oriental garb, jerking out the pins and tearing at the embroidery. A cloak with a hood lay at the bottom of the carriage; this she put on. Sangiorgio silently assisted her. She looked out into the street for a moment.

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'Ah, there is the moon!' she murmured with great tenderness.

And she tapped on the pane to tell the coachman something. Immediately the carriage stopped, in the Piazza Barberini. She got out quickly, and pulled the hood on her cloak over her head.

'Drive home!' she ordered the coachman. 'Tell Carolina she may go to bed. I have the key.'

They were left alone in the Piazza Barberini. The stream of the fountain, tall and translucent, shone brightly in the moonlight.

'Shall we walk a little?' she said. 'It was suffocating in the ballroom.'

He offered her an arm, determined to show surprise at nothing. They went along the Via Sistina, the great thoroughfare which looks so aristocratic by day and so ghostly at night. She nestled up to him as though she was cold and fearsome, as if she pretended to be small and wanted his protection. Nevertheless, she was strong and tall in her black cloak, and under the hood where her eyes were sparkling. And that person and those eyes had the peculiar quality of magnetism—the violent fascination that stirs the senses. Again Francesco Sangiorgio felt as he had in her drawing-room, when she had so ruthlessly cast love into contempt. The sensation was profound and sharp, without any sweetness whatever—a revulsion, a storm, a sort of inebriation.

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'How quiet it is!' she observed, in a voice slightly a-tremble, which shook every nerve in Sangiorgio's body.

'Say something else,' he whispered.

'What?' she asked, leaning against his shoulder.

'Anything, anything—I like your voice so much!'

But the Countess Fiammanti made no answer. They had arrived at the little square of the Trinità dei Monti. The obelisk stood erect in the bright moonlight, and its tall, slender shadow was imprinted on the wall of the church. The rising road, leading to the Villa Medici and the Pincio, was quite lustrous. They bent over the high parapet of the square, whence so many melancholy visitors have gazed upon Rome in the hours of twilight. But Rome was very dimly visible, shrouded in a white, moon-washed vapour, which almost seemed a continuation of the sky, a slant of the horizon covering houses, bell-towers, and cupolas.

'One can see nothing. What a pity!' exclaimed Donna Elena. And, taking hold of Sangiorgio's arm rather forcibly, she led him to a narrow stair in front of the Trinità—not the stair with two balusters to the church, but the steps going up to the convent, where the monks and the children they are educating live together. This stairway has a little landing before the door, and a railing. Donna Elena made Sangiorgio go up there.

'Shall we knock at the convent?' she asked him, as if trying the iron chain. 'We are two frozen pilgrims begging for shelter!'

She laughed, showing those resplendent white teeth that made her smile so irresistible. Only she never smiled, she always laughed.

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But neither was there any view from their elevated position, except that the diaphanous, whitish, milky ocean of mist looked larger yet. Straight in front were discernible the few lights, which still remained unextinguished at three o'clock in the morning, in the Via Condotti. Below, the Piazza di Spagna lay spread out, in its reposeful and magnificent architectural beauty, from the Via Propaganda Fide to the Via Babuino.

'Let us go away from here,' she said.

He allowed himself to be taken in leading-strings; this, his first romantic adventure, gave him intense pleasure. This lady, for she was a lady in spite of the lightness and audacity of her conduct, aroused all the desires of a virile man, provincial, imaginative, and by nature sentimental. This was a real romance, and this fine lady, wrapped in her fur cloak, scented, wearing magnificent diamonds that glistened in the moonlight, who had sent her carriage away so as to walk with him here, at night, through the streets of Rome—this splendid creature seduced him by everything she was and everything she represented. He succumbed to her personal fascination, the stronger through the peculiarity of the circumstances. His wonted, ordinary scruples were overcome, and he yielded to this new triumph for his vanity, flattered, exultant, and delighted over his conquest.

They went down the steps in the moonbeams that seemed to bathe the stones of old Rome. On the last step but two, Donna Elena withdrew her arm from Sangiorgio's and sat down. She now looked quite small and black, cowering down on the stair, with her head in her hands and her elbows on her knees, as she gazed at the lovely Bernini fountain, with its bowl overbrimming. Sangiorgio had not seated himself; he was standing upright by her side, eyeing her with a sense of masculine fatuity, which filtered through his submissiveness. The pretty woman seemed

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downcast, squatting on the ground like a beggar, a bundle of dark clothes, under which perhaps an anxious soul was alive in a throbbing heart. And it almost seemed to him as though he were her lord.

'Do you like the fountain?' she asked in her melodious voice, raising her head.

'It is rather handsome.'

'Yes, it is,' she agreed with a nod. 'Why do you not sit down?'

And she appeared not to be addressing him, but speaking to the purling waters, which for ever fell back into the drowned bowl. He sat down on the step beside her.

'Have you no cigars? Will you not smoke a little?'

'I am sorry I have no cigarettes for you.'

'Never mind. But you smoke!' He lighted a cigar, and she inhaled its aroma.

'What brand is it?'

'A Minghetti.'

'Your Minghetti has a nice odour.' And she watched him smoke, following the thin, blue streak as it vanished into the air. A closed carriage emerged from the Via Due Macelli, passed them with extreme rapidity, and disappeared in the direction of the Via Babuino.

'They are coming from the ball,' he said.

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'What a hideous affair that ball was!' whispered Donna Elena softly.

'Yes,' replied Sangiorgio to the harmonious voice by whose caress he felt his nerves excited to the point of painfulness.

Suddenly she jumped to her feet, as if propelled by a spring.

'I am cold, I am cold; let us be off!' she exclaimed roughly.

She folded her cloak more tightly about her than ever, pulled her hood further forward over her forehead, clung to his arm, and dragged him away, towards the Via Propaganda. He had thrown his cigar down, and all at once was conscious that this woman's mind was changing, and that he could not count on her at all. But he proudly kept his peace. Probably his vanity had been an empty fiction. Who could reckon on the caprice of a woman? He shrugged his shoulders, laughing at himself, who for a moment had believed he might master one of these frivolous creatures.

She uttered not a word, hastening her pace along the Via Due Macelli, as though greatly affected by the cold and intending to overcome it by walking; she stared at the ground, without turning to her companion. Sangiorgio did not ask her whither they were bound in this fashion; he was resolved to stay with her till the end, despite the blow she was giving his pride. When they reached the corner of the Via Due Macelli, she turned abruptly into the Via Angelo Custode.

'I live here,' he observed, for the sake of saying something.

'Here?' she cried, stopping still for a moment. 'Where?'

'At No. 50—over there.'

'Do you live alone?'

'I do.'

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'Let us go up,' she said, making a motion to cross the street. 'I will warm myself at your fire!'

'There is no fire.'

'No matter; I will warm myself playing the piano!'

'There is no piano,' he replied, determined to hear her out.

'I don't care!' was all she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later Francesco Sangiorgio was elected a member of the Budget Committee.

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### CHAPTER III

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Mild, genteel applause, coming from small, female, well-gloved, though rather listless hands, greeted the noisy conclusion of the pianist, an insignificant, meagre, dark little dot of a creature, who was invisible behind the piano.

'What feeling!' exclaimed the wife of a Puglian deputy, a stout woman with a torrent of black curls on her red, shining forehead.

'Splendid, splendid, delightful!' said Signora di Bertrand, the wife of a high functionary, a frail Piedmontese, with a Madonna face, wearing a brocaded cloak threaded with gold.

And from one lady to another, from group to group, along sofas, from easy-chairs to small stools, under the palm branches in the pots, under the brackets bearing statuettes, from the pianoforte to the door, swiftly ran the current of feminine approval. Those standing on the threshold of the Ministerial drawing-room nodded two or three times, as if secretly wearied. Only His Highness, the Oriental Prince in exile, ponderously ensconced in an armchair, made no sign. With his bloated, sallow visage, grown here and there with patches of nondescript, speckling beard, with the contemplative apathy of a bulky Oriental, he remained quiet, thinking perhaps of the dramatic incantations of the Aidas who had been one of the boasts of his throne, as he sat with his big, round eyes half shut under the soft, red rim of his fez.

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But the female chatter reopened, and Donna Luisa Catalani, the Minister's wife, the mistress of the house, who had rested during the music, renewed her round of bows and compliments and smiles; and her white cashmere gown, her diamond rosettes, her small head, her provokingly pretty face, her somewhat peculiar headdress, were to be seen everywhere, as though there was not one Donna Luisa, but ten of her.

'How fatiguing these receptions are!' languidly said the Countess Schwarz, an extremely thin woman, with livid countenance, with fluffy fringe, in imitation, probably, of Sarah Bernhardt. Sunk in a comfortable easy-chair, and huddled in her furs like a sick, shivering bird, she merely moved her lips to sip her cup of tea.

'Donna Luisa is not tired; she is made of iron,' murmured Signora Gallenga, wife of the Secretary-General of Finance, coughing slightly and smoothing her pointed, Chinese eyebrows. 'It would be too much for me. I am glad my receptions are small. Were you at the Parliament to-day, Countess?'

'I never go.'

The graceful Piedmontese saw the error of her question. Count Schwarz had succeeded in becoming a provincial councillor, but never a deputy.

'I was there,' interposed Signora Mattei, the wife of another Secretary-General, a Tuscan woman as brown as a peppercorn, with fiery eyes, a rapid tongue, and a black hat buried under poppies. 'It was an interesting meeting.'

'And not to have been there!' exclaimed Signora Gallenga. 'How unfortunate! And did Sangiorgio speak?'

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'Yes, yes——'

But a 'hush' now circulated through the room. A robust lady, with a mighty bosom tightly cuirassed in red satin, with a broad, good-natured face, sang a moving romance by Tosti. She had undone her pelisse, throwing it back on her shoulders, and with her hands in her muff, her veil down on her eyes, quite serenely, without a single quiver in a line of her face, she poured out her lamentations in the music of the Abruzzan master. Donna Luisa, standing in the middle of the drawing-room among fifty ladies seated, listened with the polite attention of a hostess; but she was assailed by an uneasy feeling, since she observed that in the two adjoining parlours there were people—ladies waiting to come in. It was the most important reception of the season; in the drawing-room reigned the quiet of a hothouse and the sweet, sugary smell of a place where there are many women. Standing along the wall, encased in severe frock-coats, was a row of commanders, bald and silent, who had left the Court of Accounts at half-past four, of officials from the Treasury, of men from other Government offices. But they preserved the statuesque immobility of the bureaucratic make-up, the unwearying patience, the endless, incalculably long expectation by dint of which they passed from one grade to another, until they had forty years of service behind them; to them this reception was an infinitesimal fraction of the forty years of service.

A sigh of relief was audible; the romance was finished, and Luisa Catalani complimented the singer, who was smiling like the full moon. Then the hostess immediately left the room; there were seven or eight ladies in the next room.

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'What was the Chamber like to-day?' asked a fair, pale-faced Minister's daughter, who had newly arrived.

'Very warm. I do not understand how our men keep from getting ill,' replied another, spreading out her fan by way of original illustration.

'Sangiorgio spoke very well,' murmured Signora Giroux, a little lady with white hair and a sweet smile—her ladyship of the Agricultural Department.

'He is from the South,' remarked Donna Luisa Catalani. 'Was there anyone in the diplomatic gallery?'

'Countess di Santaninfa and Countess di Malgra.'

'Fine hats?'

'Might pass,' answered the pallid blonde abstractedly.

Over in a corner a group of girls was prattling in lively fashion, with their jackets unbuttoned because of the heat, and showing the fine texture of their dark cloth dresses. Enrichetta Serafini, daughter of the Minister of Public Works, a brunette in mourning, was talking for half a dozen, and gathered about her were the Camilly girl, an Italian born in Egypt; the Borla girl, a predestined old maid, condemned by the everlasting youth of her mother; the Fasulo girl, a lymphatic person, with large, meditative eyes, an accountant's niece; the Allievo girl, a nice, quiet thing; and the single aristocratic bud, all fair under the white plume in her hat—Donna Sofia di Maccarese.

'I prefer Tosti to all the rest,' maintained Enrichetta Serafini. 'He can make one weep.'

'Denza, too, makes one weep at times,' observed the Borla girl, who did not know how to sing, and was obliged to listen to her fifty-year-old mother. [Pg 143]

'And you, Donna Sofia, which do you like best?'

'Schumann,' she murmured, without another word.

The others stopped. They did not know his music. But the Serafini girl, nervous and vivacious, answered:

'But all that music must be sung well. Pardon me'—lowering her voice—'perhaps you like the lady who has just sung?' And the whole group giggled surreptitiously.

'The best singer in Rome is the Fiammanti,' added the young Camilly girl, with her round, white face, with her languid gaze—this Oriental transplanted to Italy.

The other girls remained silent. The Borla pursed her lips in token of reproof; the Fasulo cast down her eyes; the Allievo blushed; only Donna Sofia di Maccarese did not change countenance, either not knowing or not caring about Countess Fiammanti.

'Is it true that she is to marry the deputy Sangiorgio?' asked the Serafini.

'No, no,' replied the Camilly, with a peculiar smile.

This time the girls exchanged the mute, expressive looks into which society compels girls to condense their meaning. In the drawing-room a great concourse of ladies had gathered; the warm atmosphere of heavy clothes was spreading, and an odour of tea and opopanax, of beaver and marten. Nearly all of them were talking now, in couples, or in groups of three or four, with certain nods and certain subtle modulations of the voice, gossiping about the Chamber of Deputies, gravely discussing the Honourable Bomba's delivery, saying which gallery they liked best, commenting on the colour of the carpets, describing the flesh-coloured waistcoats of the Honourable Count Lapucci and the romantic face—like a pensive Christ's—of the Honourable Joanna. And Signora Gallenga, an authority on literature, announced the following: [Pg 144]

'This year the Abruzzo is fashionable in literature and the Basilicata in politics.'

So they thought they were doing politics in right earnest, elated by their own chatter, they, with their light little heads. But no other performer moved to the piano, and as the placid, middle-aged lady who had languished with Tosti was taking her third cup of tea, a hardly perceptible stir took place in the drawing-room, and Donna Angelica Vargas, tall and lovely, walked across the room with her rhythmic step, seeking out Donna Luisa Catalani. She was dressed in black, as usual, with an iridescence of some sort about her person and her hat. Donna Luisa ran towards her with her prettiest smile. They made low bows to each other, and a subdued colloquy began between them.

The people in the room pretended not to hear, from politeness, but an embarrassing silence prevailed, as sometimes happens among a number of persons none of whom wants to speak first. His Highness Mehemet Pasha had opened his eyes wide, and ogled the beautiful Italian, so chaste in appearance, but whose large eyes reminded him of his Eastern women, for whom he perhaps was longing. Then those large, fine eyes, shining like the black pearls on her dress, cast an intelligent glance all round the room, and as Donna Luisa Catalani turned away, singly, by twos, by threes did the women come and surround Donna Angelica Vargas, to exchange amenities with her; and although her husband was not Prime Minister, although she was the wife of a Minister of Commerce holding a non-political portfolio, although in that drawing-room were three or four wives of political Ministers, important men, pillars of the Cabinet, yet she was the centre of all this adulation, and in the simplicity of her manner there lay something queenly. [Pg 145]

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To feel the cold less, while writing in that long, narrow parlour, without a fire, in the Via Angelo Custode, Sangiorgio had thrown an old coat over his legs. At eight the servant had brought him a cup of coffee, in bed, and while she was cleaning the chilly room he put on his clothes, so as to begin work. The girl did the other room quickly, and went away without a word, looking sullen and resentful, like all poor wretches who cannot reconcile themselves to penury and hard work. But the sweeping being done in haste, dirt remained in the corners of the floor. The window-curtains were yellow with dust, and a horrible smell of stale rubbish hung in both rooms. Barely had the servant vanished, trailing her feet in a pair of men's shoes, when Sangiorgio, without a look at that melancholy inner courtyard, with balconies full of old boxes and broken glass, and worm-eaten, filthy loggias, set to writing at a small student's table. He had settled down to work,

among a lot of Parliamentary papers and a heap of letters from the Basilicata, on large, white sheets of commercial foolscap, dipping his pen into a wretched clay inkpot. Towards ten o'clock an intolerable sensation of cold had crept over his feet and legs; he still had three hours' work before him, and therefore went to his bedroom for an old overcoat, which he spread over his legs. He did this automatically, without taking his mind off the Parliamentary report which had absorbed him for a week. The fire that burned within him was manifest in the large, clear handwriting with which he covered the big sheets of paper; his preoccupation showed plainly in his face, in his—as it were—introspective glance, ignoring all things external.

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Sheets of paper were now heaping up at his left; he did not stop writing except to refer to Parliamentary Blue-books, or to consult a fat volume of agricultural reports, or a dirty, little, torn notebook. At eleven, as he was engrossed in his task, the slight grating of a key was heard, and a woman entered, closing the door noiselessly behind her.

'It is I,' she said softly, clasping a bunch of roses to her breast. He lifted his head, and stared at her with the bewildered eyes of one not yet sufficiently aroused from his employment to recognise a new-comer.

'Do I disturb you?' asked Elena, with her flutelike voice. 'Yes, yes, I am disturbing you! Go on with your writing—do your work. I will read a book.'

'There are no books here you would like,' he replied, not remembering to thank her for having come.

She rummaged among the papers with her slender hands, gloved in black and hampered by the bunch of roses. Sangiorgio smiled at her complacently. She was always so fascinating, with those heavy lips of hers, red and moist, with those strange eyes of indefinable colour, with that graceful opulence of figure, that even to look at her, to have her present, here, in his own room, was always a new delight to him.

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'There is nothing there!' she laughed. 'I could never read about the quantity of polenta the peasants of Lombardy eat, and how many potatoes the Southerners. That would make me too melancholy. Do your writing—do your writing, Franz; do not mind me.'

And he got up, and went over to kiss her on the eyes, through her thin veil, as she liked it; she made a face like a greedy child receiving a sweetmeat. He returned to his writing. Elena walked up and down in the parlour, as if trying to get warm: in this room, on this bleak March day, it was freezing.

'Are you not cold, Franz?' asked Elena from the sofa, whence she was curiously eyeing the pictures on the hooks.

'A little,' he answered, without ceasing from his writing.

She again reviewed the room in all its squalor, realized in what a state of decent poverty he existed, and watched him, writing so swiftly at that little table, where he was obliged to draw in his elbows so as not to brush the papers over the edge. And into the eyes of the woman watching the tireless worker came a new light of tenderness which he did not see.

Now leaning against the mantelpiece, she reviewed her surroundings, first examining the three photographs of a corporal, a stout gentleman, and a boy belonging to the Nazzareno school, and then the three libellous oleographs representing the Royal Family.

'Franz, have you ever had your photograph taken?' she inquired, looking at herself in the mirror, and adjusting the bow on her hat.

'Yes, at Naples once, when I was a student,' he answered, turning over some Parliamentary records.

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'And have you it now?'

'No, of course not.'

'If you had it, I should want it,' she insinuated in a voice like a child's.

'Is the original not enough for you?'

'No,' was Elena's reflective response. He got up again, came over and took her hands, and asked her:

'Then, you like me?'

'Yes—yes—yes,' she sang on three musical notes.

Francesco returned to the table, where he resumed his work. She hazarded a step to the threshold of his bedroom, and cast a glance inside.

'Franz,' said she, 'you did not come to the Valle last night.'

'There was the Budget Committee up till eleven. Afterwards I was too tired.'

'A number of people came to see me in my box—Giustini, for instance. How do you come to be so intimate with him?'

'He is useful to me,' he answered simply, without looking up.

'He speaks ill of you.'

'I hope so.'

'To be sure, he never praises anyone but mediocrities. You will become a great statesman, Franz!'

'Oh, that will take a long time,' he replied tranquilly, noting down some figures on a small piece of paper.

'Gallenga and Oldofredi came, too. Oldofredi makes love to me.'

'Quite right of Oldofredi,' he murmured gallantly.

She laughed, and vanished into the adjoining room. It was so cold and ugly that for a moment she shrank back in repulsion. She scanned the woollen arabesques on the bedquilt, which the servant had given a furious shaking. But it was the large grease-spot on the blue-cloth easy-chair which caused her to turn her head; her feminine instincts made her wince at that grease-spot. She walked about the room in search of an unavailable article: on the chest of drawers were only two candlesticks without candles and a clothes-brush, and nothing that would serve her purpose; on the toilet-table were only two combs and a broken bottle of Felsina water. The place was as bare as a hermit's cell. At last she descried, on the stand near the bed, a water-bottle and glass, and, beaming with pleasure, untied her bundle of roses, thrust three or four into the neck of the decanter, a few into the cup, dropped a handful on the coverlet at the foot of the bed, and then, being at a loss where to put any more, stuffed two under the pillow. Moving cautiously, she went back to the chest of drawers, and opened the top drawer, which contained neckties and gloves; here, too, she left some of her roses. A portrait lay thrown in there, still in its envelope. It was her own. A light shadow of displeasure flitted across her face, and quickly disappeared. In that miserable room, in that murky light that came from the courtyard, in that stench of kitchen slops, the roses gave out a vernal freshness, the essence of a garden, a remembrance of sunlight, an atom of fragrance.

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'I have finished,' said Sangiorgio, appearing in the doorway.

'Let us go home to lunch.'

'Do you think we shall have done by half-past one?'

'Why?'

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'I have an appointment with a constituent.'

'Well, I hope so, as I also have an appointment—at two.'

'With a constituent?'

'With Oldofredi.'

'Indeed,' he answered, putting on his overcoat.

'He is to tell me how he came to be unwilling to marry Angelica Vargas.'

'Was he intending to marry her?'

'Yes, and he did not want to. Perhaps, though, it was she who refused. Nearly everyone dislikes Oldofredi, especially in Parliament. Do you know him?'

'No; I am not interested in him.'

'You are quite pale; what is the matter?'

'I don't know; probably it is the cold.'

'Come, come away to my house; there is a fire there, and you can warm yourself!'

He accompanied her, without saying a word about the roses.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Honourable Oldofredi was not a particularly assiduous frequenter of the Parliamentary library. He occasionally went there to look for a friend, but did not read; he never asked for books or papers. Malicious tongues among the deputies, forsooth, had it that he did not know how to read. Now, as he entered the library that day, and found Sangiorgio seated in front of a veritable mountain of books, flying through statistical works, skimming over the pages of volumes of political economy, history, and social science with that impetuosity in research and preparation which characterizes the provincial Southerner, at the sight of this the fatuous Oldofredi smiled disdainfully. He had first put his head in at the door, to see if it was the colleague he was in search of; then, prompted by some new idea, he went in, although he had not seen his friend. He began to saunter idly up and down, blowing the remains of a cigarette out of a small amber mouthpiece. The Honourable Oldofredi, despite his reputation as a Don Juan and a swashbuckler, was neither a handsome nor a powerful man; he was a machine of bones and sinews badly put together, the whole of his elongated person had an unpleasant, battered appearance, his face was of a repulsively cadaverous hue; in his eyes lay vacant stupidity, and all his limbs were so

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disjointed as to make him look like a perambulating automaton.

Sangiorgio, from the moment he rested his eyes on him, could not take them away again. A sort of irritating fascination drew the Basilicatan's attention from the statistics and the works on political economy, and attracted him to the deputy from the Marches, whom he detested and hated through some vague instinct of sectionalism, lover's jealousy, and ambition. While Oldofredi walked to and fro, he stared at him fixedly, holding his pen over the paper. This Don Quixote, disliked by the whole Chamber, hateful to all the women, ignorant, stupid, and devoid of ability, who with all these forbidden qualities had nevertheless always been successful in his re-election, in having himself talked about, and in holding a position of prominence in political and social life—this man weighed on Sangiorgio's stomach like some indigestible food to which repugnance is instinctive. Oldofredi was a political sword-swallower. His duels were no longer a topic of conversation, unless in a vague way, as if about something doubtful and distant, because it was so many years since anyone had ventured to challenge him. But no personal dispute could happen in which he was not concerned as second, or arbiter, or adviser, and neither inside the Chamber nor out of it was there a surer or readier authority on fighting. This endowed this coarse, commonplace individual with a halo of romance, and in the annals of gossip it was stated that women were prompt to lay their wavering virtue at the feet of this Orlando of the Marches, who in their eyes could be counted on as a formidable champion to cover their transgressions.

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'Have you seen friend Bomba by chance, Honourable Sangiorgio?' queried Oldofredi, stopping opposite the writer.

'I? No,' replied the other curtly, raising his head.

'Where can he be hiding? He is not in the hall; that ass of a Borgonero was making a speech there about some foolery or other. I have been looking for Bomba everywhere. He can only be here, in the company of that idiot of a Giordano Bruno. Do you, Sangiorgio, believe Giordano Bruno existed?'

'I? yes,' he answered dryly.

Sangiorgio gave Oldofredi a frigid stare, which would have baffled a less conceited talker. But he continued to walk up and down, with his nose in the air. He lighted another cigarette, making a noisy rustle with his long, ugly, ungainly person, which disturbed the quiet of that studious place. In the little adjoining room at the right the Honourable Gasperini, the white-bearded Tuscan with a subtle smile and a pair of sharp eyes behind his spectacles, had already looked up twice in the midst of his perusal of some financial thesis; he had shrugged his shoulders, annoyed at Oldofredi's obtrusiveness. Arrived at the other door, which opened into the room on the left, he stood still on the threshold, and leaned against the jamb, with his hands in his pockets. In this room the Honourable Giroux, a slow, grave old gentleman with half-closed lids and sleepy look, was reading in a large tome bound in parchment. Oldofredi smiled; then, returning to Sangiorgio's table, accosted him with another sneer:

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'He is in there, you know, with Copernic.'

'Who?' asked the other, with the same studied coldness.

'Giroux. Not satisfied with bothering people about his own philosophical absurdities, he has invented some for Copernic. Who may this Copernic be? Pah! Giroux will swear he knew him in Turin, and that he was a *carbonaro*!'

And Oldofredi burst out laughing. But he did not see the strong and set expression of displeasure in Sangiorgio's face; he did not observe the slight nervous tremble which made the pen dance between the Southern deputy's fingers.

'And over on the other side is Gasperini, the ex-secretary, who certainly is reading the proceedings of the British Parliament, so as to be able to argue against Giroux to-morrow. What do you think of it?'

'Nothing.'

'Well, I shall pick up Gasperini with two fingers, and put him into Giroux's arms; then their reconciliation will be accomplished, Copernic and Bentham will bless them, and Italian finance—and agriculture, too—will go on in the same way as before—that is to say, as badly as possible.'

This he announced in a loud voice, not caring whether the others overheard him. Sangiorgio glanced at both doors, as though signifying his apprehension.

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'No, they are not listening. When Giroux is with Copernic he hears nothing, and Gasperini is befogged in English finance. And what if they did hear!'

He made his favourite motion of defiance with his shoulders, one of the gestures which had won him the reputation of being a brave man.

'They might answer you,' replied Sangiorgio in an equivocal tone.

'Oh no! they would not answer at all! More likely they would make a note of it, and remind me of it at a future time, in the hall, in a lobby, or in a newspaper. That's the way in politics. Or probably they would try to forget to do even that, as so many others have forgotten. You seem to be new here; you have a great deal left to learn. One thing, my dear sir, I can inform you of

myself: in politics one must never reply immediately, to a man's face, directly. Either one forgets or one waits.'

'And supposing you should get an immediate answer?' rejoined Sangiorgio more glacially than ever.

'What! Imagine, my dear new deputy, that for five years in these precincts I have gone about saying the whole truth to everybody concerning facts, men, and events, at the top of my voice, merely to relieve my liver. Has anyone had the courage to defend himself, to answer me to my face? No one has—no one, my dear new deputy!'

'And how is that?' said Sangiorgio, his eyes rooted to the paper he had been writing upon, as if in reflection.

'Come, now! It is because the old ones have exhausted their whole supply of courage—if they ever had any—and the young ones have not yet begun to draw on theirs—if they ever do have any.'

'Do you think so, Oldofredi?'

'Great heavens! Do I think so! The Chamber is full of cowards!'

'It is not, Honourable Oldofredi.'

'Cowardice and Company, that is the name of the firm!'

'I assure you it is not, Oldofredi.'

'You are giving me the lie, it seems to me?'

'Certainly.'

'Do you give me the lie?'

'Yes—I do.'

'You want to prove to me that the Chamber is not cowardly?'

'Yes.'

'I live in the Via Frattina, No. 46, I dine at the Colonne, and I shall be at the Apollo this evening.'

'Very well.'

'Good-day.'

'Good-day.'

Oldofredi shrugged his shoulders, flicked the ashes off his cigarette, and went out, shaking his loose limbs. Sangiorgio dipped his pen into the inkpot, and resumed his writing. The occupants of the next room had heard nothing, especially as the conversation had been carried on in an ordinary tone of voice. Gasperini was turning over the English financial reports, Giroux was immersed in Copernic, and Sangiorgio made notes from Tullio Martello's 'Storia dell' Internazionale.'

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## CHAPTER IV

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When the Honourable Sangiorgio entered the Parliament café at seven to dine, when he went into that dark, oppressive vault, which was, as it were, in a state of fumigation, sundry heads were turned, and his name was whispered in well-bred undertones by the diners. Only two or three tables were vacant. After a moment of indecision, Sangiorgio sat down at one with three chairs unoccupied. At once, from the next table, the Honourable Correr, the young deputy of the Right, nodded to him amicably, and the Honourable Scalatelli, a Colonel of carabinieri, with a peaked, grizzly beard and merry eyes, scrutinized him with interest. The other two, ex-deputies, the great Paulo, the big Paulo, the strong Paulo, continued to dispute with the little Paduan Mephistopheles, Berna, a queer spirit.

'Is it true, then, Sangiorgio, about the duel?' asked Correr in a subdued voice.

'It is true,' answered the other, looking over the bill of fare.

'Your first duel?'

'My first.'

'Have you ever taken fencing lessons?'

'A few.'

'You are rash. Oldofredi is a remarkable fencer.'

'A duel—a duel? Who is fighting?' exclaimed the bulky Paulo, having just administered 'donkey' to

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his friend Berna, who had treated him to 'idiot.'

'Here, the Honourable Sangiorgio with Oldofredi,' explained Correr.

'A fine opponent, by God! He is left-handed, is Oldofredi; you had better take that into consideration, Honourable Sangiorgio.'

'I was not aware of it, but I will consider it.'

'And the seconds—who are the seconds?' inquired the gigantic Paulo, the colossus, the molossus, whom every duel intoxicated.

'Count Castelforte and Rosolino Scalia; I am waiting for them to dine with me,' courteously replied Sangiorgio.

'Excellent! A good choice—seconds not given to mediation, will attempt no friendly settlement on the ground.'

'Was the duel unavoidable, Sangiorgio?' inquired Scalatelli.

'Unavoidable.'

'Oldofredi has good luck, Sangiorgio. I fought with him some years ago, and he cut my wrist,' calmly elucidated Scalatelli.

At this, the Count di Castelforte and Rosolino Scalia came upon the scene, and singled out Sangiorgio. The Count preserved the aristocratic chill that emanated from his whole self, from his tall, lean person, from his long, black, whitening beard, from the half-inborn, half-literary composure of a nobleman and a writer. Rosolino Scalia comported himself like an officer in plain clothes, with flower at buttonhole and moustache scented; but he, too, was cool and serious. Castelforte engaged in conversation with Correr and Scalatelli, while Scalia removed his topcoat.

'Well,' asked Sangiorgio, 'what has happened?'

'Nothing as yet,' replied Scalia with reserve—'or very little.'

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Sangiorgio asked no further questions. The beginning of the dinner of the three men was marked by complete silence. Castelforte was, as usual, supercilious, Scalia grave, and Sangiorgio impassive.

'The seconds are Lapucci and Bomba,' said Scalia, helping himself to wine. 'We are to meet them at half-past nine. Have you provided for sabres, Sangiorgio?'

'Yes.'

'Very well,' said Castelforte. 'I hope you have had them sharpened; nothing is worse, in a duel, than blunt swords. The duel becomes too long, and the gashes are always ridiculously broad, indecently so.'

'I have had them ground by Spadini himself.'

'Well done,' commented Scalia. 'A protracted duel has all sorts of disadvantages; it smacks of the burlesque, for one. One thing I advise you, Sangiorgio: think of nothing, and worry about nothing, but at the first onset rush in; do not wait for your enemy, and make no calculations, simply go at him; for beginners this is the only chance of success.'

'On the other hand,' interjected Castelforte, 'as I was led to understand by Lapucci, the conditions will be of a most serious kind. But you are not in jest, Sangiorgio; it is natural that between two serious men these things should be taken seriously.'

'I have no intention of joking,' observed Sangiorgio, taking some salad.

'All the better. Have you a doctor?'

'No.'

'Let us take the usual doctor—Alberti,' said Scalia. 'I will attend to it this evening.'

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A small boy in livery, whose cap wore the inscription 'Caffè di Roma,' came into the place, looking about for someone. He had a note for the Honourable Sangiorgio.

'The Speaker of the Chamber has sent for me at the Roma café, where he will be until half-past nine.'

'And you will go,' said Castelforte. 'But stand your ground; do not allow your purpose to be changed.'

'Scalia! Scalia!' cried the mastiff Paulo from the other table, no longer capable of reticence, 'take care what place you choose for the duel! Let it be near a house, an inn, a farm—any sort of shelter. Since I once had to bring back poor Goffredi, wounded in the lungs, and gasping and spitting blood at every jolt of the carriage, over three miles of highroad all stones and ruts, I made a vow never to act as second again unless there was a bed ready within fifty yards.'

'Then it would be better to have it in a house,' suggested Correr.

'A house! Not at all!' exclaimed Scalia. 'It is unlucky in a house. All duels in houses end badly.'

The seconds rose, and for five minutes more conversed with their principal, all standing up together. They were watched with curiosity from the other tables, but the three faces betrayed nothing. Then followed a great profusion of vigorous handshakes and of bows. Sangiorgio, left alone, settled the bill. The guests at the other tables also left, bidding Sangiorgio farewell.

'Good luck, colleague! Ram it down the wolf's jaws!' said Correr.

'I wish you a steady hand, Honourable Sangiorgio,' added Scalatelli.

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'Do not look at him if you believe in the evil-eye,' advised Berna.

But from the middle of the room the enormous Paula, with sudden familiarity, shouted out while he laughed:

'Good-bye, Sangiorgio, and I tell you what: aim at his face!'

He understood that they all went away doubtful about the issue. He left two minutes later. At the door he met a reporter of a morning paper, who asked him for news.

'Nothing yet,' was his answer.

'In case—well, in case of—may I come to your house to-morrow for information?' persisted the beardless youth with the boyish manner.

'Angelo Custode, 50,' said the other, moving off.

At the Caffè di Roma the Speaker was finishing dinner with his friend, Colonel Freitag, a large man of childish mien, of high-pitched, reedy voice. The Speaker had the worn-out appearance of an individual resting from some unprofitable labour. As soon as Sangiorgio accosted him he went straight to the point:

'Cannot this ugly business be mended, honourable colleague?'

The Speaker repressed a nervous little gesture and bit his lips.

'I think not, sir.'

'Now, come, honourable colleague—has there not been some misunderstanding? A duel between two deputies is a grave matter; it ought not to occur without cause.'

'There was no misunderstanding, I assure you, Speaker.'

'I have experience in such things: Oldofredi is rather excitable, you are young, and some joke was taken the wrong way. One ought to be careful on these occasions, colleague; to-morrow the newspapers will talk, and then a scandal will arise.'

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'I hope not. In any case, there is no remedy.'

'No one will make Oldofredi say that you, Sangiorgio, brought about this duel for notoriety's sake.'

And the Speaker cast a narrowly scrutinizing glance at the Southern deputy's face, but read in it only indifference, impassivity, and he seemed to abandon his attempt at mediation.

'Have the seconds fixed upon the conditions?' he inquired.

'Not yet; I am to meet them at eleven.' And he rose to go.

'Take my advice—give no information to reporters; a Parliamentary duel is a godsend to them. Good luck, honourable colleague!'

Sangiorgio departed, feeling that the Speaker's frigid speech and the Honourable Freitag's obdurate silence both meant the same thing.

Out in the street, in the Corso, he stopped and hesitated. He had arranged to meet his seconds at the Aragno café, although he was now possessed of an invincible repugnance against his nocturnal vagabondage, this wandering from one café to another, against those artificial camping-grounds of deputies, journalists, and idlers without a home of their own, who, having no family, spent their evenings in those hot, smoke-laden places. An intense disgust was growing up in him for the people who came and asked questions, and wanted to know, and offered comments, and were for ever indifferent. He knew that Castelforte and Scalia must have come together with Lapucci and Bomba at the Uffici; he therefore preferred to walk slowly up towards Montecitorio, purchasing some newspapers at the kiosk in the Piazza Colonna, and reading them by lamplight under the Veian portico.

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Two or three evening papers announced the duel with some ceremony; one gave initials only, but alleged that attempts at conciliation had proved fruitless. He put them into his pocket, and, seized somewhat with impatience, began to pace up and down opposite the Parliament. The great windows of the offices were all alight; the clerks were still at work. But the square, the large square without shops, was deserted. He walked back and forth, round the obelisk from the Uffici del Vicario to the Via degli Orfanelli, and from the Via degli Orfanelli to the Via della Missione, his hands in his pockets, his head down, stepping out at a lively gait to combat the dampness that

penetrated to the bone.

The porch door of the Albergo Milano, which fronts upon the square, was closing after the arrival of the last omnibus from the station, and Sangiorgio's seconds had not yet appeared. He became irritated at being observed by the deputies who had passed the evening in the Chamber, and when anyone showed himself in the doorway Sangiorgio stopped, or else turned away fretting with vexation. At length Scalia and Castelforte came out upon the steps; the tall figure of the Lombard Count was outlined against the shorter but sturdier frame of the Sicilian deputy. They were talking eagerly at one another; then they ceased, and made their way down. Sangiorgio joined them at a run.

'I did not wish to wait for you at the café. It is full of people, and they all want to know about it, and I have no desire to look as if I were posing,' he explained to his seconds.

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'You did well,' said Scalia. 'When one is to fight, it is best not to be seen, from motives of delicacy. That poser of an Oldofredi was declaiming the whole evening at the Colonne; he is at the theatre now, at the Apollo, for the purpose of being admired. Enough of that—everything seems to be in readiness.'

'The Acqua Acetosa, outside the Popolo gate, is a good place,' suggested Castelforte, 'because one can get there so quickly. We have fixed on the hour of ten, and shall call for you at half-past eight.'

All three of them walked in the direction of Sangiorgio's house. He smoked in silence.

'Are you nervous, eh?' asked Scalia.

'Not in the least!'

'Well, then, try to get some sleep. Have you any brandy at home?'

'No.'

'Brandy is a good thing in case of a duel. I shall bring some on the ground to-morrow morning. But do you try to sleep.'

'Confound it! I shall sleep!'

'We have ruled out no strokes,' resumed Castelforte. 'That was what you wanted, I think.'

'Exactly so.'

'I have notified Dr. Alberti,' added Scalia; 'he is coming; his experience will be of great value. Do not trouble about a carriage; we shall bring a landau ourselves. Only be ready punctually, for we must arrive in good time.'

'How is it, Sangiorgio, that you have never fought a duel?'

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'Oh, we in the Basilicata are very slow to wrath.'

'It would not seem so,' laughed Castelforte.

Hereupon, as they went up through the Via Angelo Custode, they remained silent. Their three shadows were cast conspicuously on the empty street: Castelforte's, lean and almost ghostly; Scalia's, rigidly martial; Sangiorgio's, small but solid.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alone at last. The tallow candle shed a dim light in the cold and barren parlour, whose stale air was mingled with the bad kitchen smells which came up from the inner courtyard. Alone at last—he was glad of it, with that savage desire for solitude which frequently invaded his being.

On that afternoon and evening the strong sentiment in him of contempt for man, always latent in his breast, had grown apace; for seven hours he was passing through one of the great human trials which leave the soul embittered, disappointed, sickened. In the solitude of his little apartment, in the nocturnal lucidity of his brain, which no man, nor thing, nor circumstance had, up till then, been able to obscure, all the pettiness, the love of compromise, the coldness, the indifference, the stunted zeal of the people he had met with, now stood before him, arrayed, classified, definite. First, the difficulty of finding seconds against Oldofredi, who had a reputation for swordsmanship; then, the very limited enthusiasm of Scalia and Castelforte; all the advice, all the suggestions, all the inconsiderate sayings, all the melancholy forecasts, pitying inquiries, unmeaning, superficial compliments—all this multitude of words, of phrases, of unpleasant accents, disgusted him as they once more filed before his mind, reminding him again of men's meanness and smooth hypocrisy.

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He felt how everyone, acquaintances and strangers, friends and foes, admirers and detractors, far or near, entertained an adverse judgment of him because of his duel with Oldofredi. He was conscious of the offensive commiseration of some, of the ironical sneers of others, of the wrathful envy of others still, of the profound contempt of very many. He was aware that his audacious exploit of venturing to measure swords—he, the young, inexperienced novice—with a fire-eater whom no one any longer dared insult, and who was an old deputy, was bringing down upon him ridicule, pity, and disdain. In that hour he had the whole of public opinion against him, and felt overwhelmed by the injustice of humanity. It was bliss to him to be alone, to be able to shut

himself up with his bitterness and his broken illusions. But he was not quite alone, no—something there was that lay shining on the sofa. And as he took the candle in hand in order to see better, a glistening streak glowed forth. In the watches of the night the sharp-edged swords watched too.

They, at all events, did not lie. Stubborn was their strength in attack and defence; it was enough to smooth their sides for five minutes, and the power of good and evil was in them. They never dissembled, but were ready—loyally ready—to parry mortal strokes, to pierce, to cut, to kill; one in his hand, the other in his enemy's; blade against blade; edge against edge—those faithful swords! The word of man by its unkindness congeals the blood, or through its bitterness poisons the heart; a good blade does its work honestly, cuts straight and deep. The human tongue inflicts rending wounds; the sword scarcely gives pain, because of the rapid precision of the blow.

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Sangiorgio, irresistibly attracted by the sheen of the steel, went to sit on the sofa, and ran his finger along the keen edge of one of the sabres. What did seconds, deputies, friends, enemies, reporters, matter now? The whole affair depended on those two weapons; the end would be decided by a well-tempered, well-sharpened piece of steel. End? He looked about, as if looking for the person who had said the word. But he was alone; the swords lay by his side; his gaze was raptly fixed upon them. For others the night preceding a duel is a night of agitation, of nervousness, of walking the floor; others all have a woman to be reassured by airiness, a relative to whom a letter must be written, a friend entitled to a note, a servant to be charged with an important errand; others are not afraid, perhaps, but they all feel a little troubled, a trifle thoughtful, a particle of remorse; all others are either elated or try to forget, at the idea of the end; some great interest of the heart must suffer; the soul is exalted or cast down, thrilled or plunged in lethargy. Of all this there was no question with Sangiorgio; no woman, no parents, no friends, no servants; not a line to be written, not a word to be said, not an order to be given. In vain did Sangiorgio seek in his heart for the great interest to be hurt at the notion of the end.

Whom would it grieve if to-morrow Oldofredi sent him home seriously wounded or dead? To what man or woman would this matter? No one would care—no one; he was alone, in face of the swords, in face of the end. And in that cool process of elimination, in that misanthropical method of selection of men and sentiments, he arrived at himself, at his grand, absorbing, selfish passion: political ambition. If he were wounded next day—badly or slightly would be equally significant of defeat—then the absolute end would come to his profound, intense, burning desire for fame and power. Wounded or dead, no tears of woman, no love of friend, no affectionate regrets, would be his portion; but he, Sangiorgio, would be the sole mourner of his own lost hopes of renown, his own dreams of ambition wrecked in the physical and moral shame of the disaster. The swordthrust which to-morrow pierced his flesh, cut through his muscles, sundered his veins, would find its way to his heart, that hard, fast-closed heart, where only one passion lived, and would give that passion a mortal wound. The slow, substantial task, at which he had been labouring so long with the diligence of an ant, with inflexible persistency, might crumble to nothing the next day. Then, of what account all the strength put forth, all those endeavours, privations, abstinences, all those pangs endured in silence? One stroke of a sword, and all this was vain. Thus, in the smoky light of the tallow candle, in the night, in the solitude, those naked sabres for one brief instant frightened him.

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At half-past eight precisely the seconds arrived. Sangiorgio, completely dressed, his overcoat buttoned and his lustrous, tall silk hat on a table, was rather pale, but quite composed; only by a scarcely perceptible tremble of one corner of his mouth did he show the least sign of agitation.

'Where are the sabres?' inquired Castelforte.

'Here.'

Castelforte took them from their sheaths separately, touched their points, ran his finger along their edges, bent them backwards and forwards with the points stuck into the floor, and tried them again and again, making flourishes in the air.

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'Have you a scarf or a silk handkerchief, to tie them together?'

Sangiorgio had a scarf ready. Scalia put the sabres into a bag, about which he wound the neckcloth, took up the gauntlet lying on the lounge, and looked at Castelforte, saying:

'Shall we go?'

'Yes, let us go.'

They descended the dark staircase. The coachman opened the door of the landau, Scalia threw the swords and the glove on one of the seats; then they all three jumped quickly into the carriage. They drove through the Via Due Macelli, where the florist was displaying a large show of roses, and thence into the Piazza di Spagna. From the woolly clouds gathering in the sky a few drops of wet fell upon the carriage windows.

'It is raining,' said Sangiorgio.

'That does not matter,' said Castelforte. 'A duel in the rain is more dramatic.'

In the Via del Babuino demolitions were in progress. Heaps of ruins blocked the mouths of the side-streets; the beginning of the Via Vittoria was all topsy-turvy, since the drain-pipes were being mended. By the time they had reached the Piazza del Popolo, the rain was heavier, and was falling with as lively a patter as though it were hail.

'It will leave off,' said Scalia. 'The wind is changing.'

Outside the gate the carriage stopped, to take up the doctor, who was waiting at the Caffè dei Tre Re. Under his arm he had a case of instruments and some lint. He took a seat opposite Sangiorgio, beside Castelforte. He was in cheerful humour, and told tales of other duels he had witnessed.

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And as the landau went at a gallop over the muddy stones of the Flaminian Way, the first Ponte Molle tram left the station, and rattled off half empty, bouncing and swaying on the rails.

The carriage then passed the gasometer, and rapidly bent into the street leading to the Villa Glori. Under the Arco Oscuro the country loomed in sight; the first trees were visible beyond the walls.

Then Sangiorgio, who up to that time had been sunk in a sort of mental and moral stupor, in a sort of weariness of brain and heart, roused himself in a state of reaction. Castelforte had lowered a window, and the fresh air came whistling in. As the road happened to be sloping upwards, the carriage was moving at a walk. Sangiorgio began to revive and to think. By degrees, during the approach to the appointed place, all his nervous force concentrated in his teeth, which he bit closer and closer together, minute by minute. He also seized one of the window-tassels in his hand, and closed his fingers upon it with more and more vigour. Under his eyes a streak of warm red appeared, which began to spread irregularly downward. But, as his fervour grew, all desire to show it outwardly diminished; he was slowly shutting himself up with himself, in a sort of romantic, idolatrous self-communion, and to the remarks of the doctor and his seconds he vouchsafed no other reply than a series of more than usually violent nods. The horses puffed hard on the inclining road; at last, at the Villa Glori, the descent began. Then the carriage started off again at a fast trot. There were no more walls; henceforth, to right and left, blooming hedges sped by the carriage windows. For a while it seemed to Sangiorgio as though girls were running along offering him bunches of hawthorn. Then the hedges ceased, and the carriage drove in between two rows of elms, whose tops quivered gently in the wind. A wild shudder ran through Sangiorgio's body, and the flush under his eyes was gone. They had arrived. He wanted to jump out at once; Castelforte held him back.

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'Remain in the carriage with the doctor,' said he. 'The exact spot is not agreed upon yet. Wait a little.'

The seconds got out. Sangiorgio stayed inside at the window.

They were first on the ground. The cabin at the Acqua Acetosa was deserted. Doors and shutters were closed. There was not a vestige of life. The great plain stretched along the river, green, treeless, and without a human creature. Far away, in the direction of the Villa Ada, a long file of white sheep was distinguishable against the uniform green and ash-gray, and a hooded shepherd was standing there erect and motionless.

Castelforte and Scalia walked out upon the plain, gesticulating. The weather was clearing a little, though there were still rumblings and threatening signs. The immense area, grown with useless herbage, was such a mournful and desolate wilderness that the shapes of the two well-dressed men moving among the blooming chicory created a curious dissonance in the scene. The Tiber, swollen and livid, was tossing in angry turbulence. Castelforte and Scalia turned back slowly, arguing the while. Sangiorgio was beginning to tremble with impatience. The carriage seemed suffocating to him, and he could barely breathe.

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The two seconds drew near again. Castelforte leaned in at the window.

'We have found a good place; it is a little soft, but not slippery. We must wait to see if the others are satisfied with it.'

'Here they come!' said Sangiorgio, whose senses had become excessively acute through the excitement.

Indeed, the noise of a carriage was audible, and it rapidly grew more defined; the vehicle turned into the plain at a fast gallop, and drew up at a short distance from the hut, in the middle of the field. The door opened, and Oldofredi, Lapucci, and Bomba leaped down.

These last advanced towards Castelforte and Scalia, who came to meet them; Sangiorgio's doctor and Oldofredi's kept aside, kneeling in the grass and opening out their cases, so as to have everything ready. Oldofredi remained near his carriage, with his topcoat on, smoking and playfully tapping the croup of one of the horses with his thin bamboo cane. Sangiorgio, his body half out of the door, was casting hesitating glances about. What enraged him was his inexperience, the newness of the thing, and his ignorance of the formalities. Was he to stay in the coach, or alight as his adversary had done? He looked at the seconds. Castelforte and Lapucci, bent low, were clearing the ground with their feet and drawing lines with their walking-sticks. Scalia came to the window.

'Be quick! Leave your topcoat and hat in the carriage.'

He took the swords and gauntlet, and turned to the spot chosen for the encounter. Bomba also turned, with a pair of swords and another gauntlet. Sangiorgio, whose breast and temples were throbbing, shivered with expectancy and eagerness, threw aside his hat, tore off topcoat, coat, waistcoat, and necktie, and rushed impetuously towards the seconds. The sharp, hard ring of the

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swords cast on the grass by Scalia checked him. Castelforte shouted to him from the distance:

'Keep on your coat! It is cold!'

Sangiorgio returned, fetched his great-coat, drew it over his shoulders, and joined the seconds. In the centre of the duelling-ground Castelforte and Lapucci were drawing lots for the choice of swords and the privilege of giving the words of command. Scalia and the doctor took Sangiorgio between them, and spoke to him quietly:

'Have you taken a mouthful of brandy?'

'No.'

'That's bad. One ought always to fortify one's self.'

'I shall not need it,' was Sangiorgio's mental retort.

'I am to give the words of command in the fight. You are to choose the swords,' said Castelforte. 'Do you wish to examine ours?'

'I choose our own,' answered Lapucci; 'here they are.'

Oldofredi, who was in another part of the ground, considering the landscape with an anemone between his lips, veered to the right-about. Castelforte stepped up to Sangiorgio, put a sword into his grasp, tied its handle to his wrist, and accompanied him to his post. The doctors moved off twenty paces. Scalia stayed at Sangiorgio's left, and Bomba at Oldofredi's left. Lapucci and Castelforte took up their position in the middle, opposite one another, each with sword in hand.

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Oldofredi bore a more stupid and vacant expression than usual; certainly his mind was as yet unoccupied with what ought to have concerned him most.

Castelforte, with his cavalry Captain's manner, looked imperiously at Sangiorgio and then at Oldofredi.

'Gentlemen——' he began in a singing tone.

Sangiorgio, whose blood had run violently to his face, stared at him; Oldofredi spat out the anemone, and with an aristocratic gesture dropped his overcoat from his shoulders.

'Gentlemen, it would be an insult to admonish two men of your breeding to comport yourselves in perfectly chivalrous fashion. I will only remind you that you must immediately stop as soon as you hear the word "Halt!" and that you must not attack excepting at the command "Go!" Now let us begin.'

He gave Lapucci a nod, who replied with another, and called out:

'Guard!'

With a hardly noticeable movement Oldofredi advanced his right foot, bent his arm and sword to the proper angle, and planted himself firmly on his legs. Sangiorgio sprang to the attitude of guard with a bound, stretching out his right arm and sword in such a rigid straight line that he might have been of iron.

'Go!' commanded Castelforte.

And they made a dash at one another. Oldofredi's sword struck Sangiorgio's, which was aimed at him in a thrust, warded it off, and slid down upon the padded glove. But Sangiorgio, raising arm and weapon with savage strength, beat back his enemy's blade, and all but broke his sword guard in the onslaught.

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'Halt!' shouted Castelforte, interposing his own weapon.

The two combatants obeyed, and resumed their places. Oldofredi, a little pale, was smiling; he had gauged his foe. Sangiorgio, however, in whose breast raged the fury of a bull that has seen red, kept his mouth shut, and breathed vehemently through his nose.

'Guard!' said Castelforte again.

Sangiorgio, with his arm extended, and his steel's point directed at his adversary's face, glowered at him with such fierce, menacing eyes that Oldofredi took note of it.

'Go!' exclaimed Castelforte.

This time Oldofredi attacked, making for his opponent's body; Sangiorgio, standing steady, his arm outstretched and his point at the enemy's eyes, did not parry. But as he saw the blade, with which a feint had been made at his stomach, flash by his eyes and about to reach his face, he met it with a grinding stroke, so sweeping and so determined that Oldofredi's sword fell from his hand, and remained suspended from the lash.

'Halt!' shouted Castelforte.

Lapucci and Bomba hastened to refasten Oldofredi's weapon to his wrist.

'Good! Another score!' whispered Castelforte into his principal's ear.

Sangiorgio was in a serener state of mind. An internal exultation of pride gratified expressed itself in his face. His teeth closed together. Oldofredi was back at his post, his sword in hand, but this time he was white with the pallor of rage. His teeth, too, were interlocked, and his brow was as dark as if ready to hurl thunderbolts.

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At the word of command he flew at his enemy at a bound, without a feint or any sort of artifice in fencing, intending to split his head open. But before his sword could reach its mark, the point of Sangiorgio's cut into his nether lip, and rent his whole cheek as far as the temple. The four seconds precipitated themselves on the duellists, and the doctors ran up. Oldofredi was dragged aside, and made to sit on a stretcher surrounded by the six men. Sangiorgio stood alone, sword in hand, half undressed, and dazed, under the leaden sky which once more sent down a muddy shower.

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While the carriage was passing under the Porta del Popolo indistinctly he heard Castelforte ask the doctor:

'How many stitches will be required?'

'Ten.'

'How many days will he be laid up?'

'Twenty—unless a violent fever sets in.'

'By God, what a fine stroke!' interjected Scalia, gleefully pulling at his cigar.

'And then there is the scar,' added Castelforte, laughing. 'Oldofredi will not forget that stroke!'

The doctor got out at the San Giacomo hospital, after making an appointment to sign the record of the duel. At the mention of this, Sangiorgio broke his silence.

'Are you hungry?' Scalia asked him.

'He ought to be; he certainly deserves an appetite,' said Castelforte.

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And they both smiled complacently.

The seconds had not embraced their principal on the ground, so as not to be seen, but during the return, in the carriage, they gradually gave themselves up to affectionate demonstrations. Their coolness and stiffness were gone; they looked at Sangiorgio lovingly, with shining eyes, spoke of him proudly, tenderly, as of a good son who has passed an examination and carried off the highest number of marks. Castelforte actually tapped him two or three times on the shoulder—a very unusual piece of familiarity as coming from this grand gentleman. They caressed him with their eyes, with the tone of their voices, with flattering words, showing how they valued him and how well they were disposed towards him after the duel. He received this flood of new friendship very quietly; the tension of his nerves was relaxing more and more, giving room to a strong desire for physical life, in which he would not think, but would only eat, digesting the meal in a warm room, and then sleep soundly for several hours. He smiled at his seconds like a boy who has distinguished himself at his examinations, like a little girl after her first communion. The whole scene of the Acqua Acetosa, with that great, bleeding, streaming gash on his adversary's face, had now vanished; he felt nothing but the blissful happiness of triumphant rest. His features had expanded, his eyes had lost their feverish glitter, his jaws were loosely set: Francesco Sangiorgio looked like a dolt.

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The luncheon at the Roma café was loud and lively. Once a minute Castelforte and Scalia filled Sangiorgio's glass. He ate and drank plentifully, happy in the doing of it, acknowledging by nods the amiable remarks of his two seconds, laughing when they spoke of Oldofredi's mortification, which hurt him far more than his wound.

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At dessert the genial humour increased.

'Because,' Scalia was continuing, 'because I have a great experience of duels, and I was anxious on your account, my dear Sangiorgio. Your opponent was strong and brave, and had fought twenty times. You were new at it, inexperienced—and so, of course—I was anxious—'

'Oldofredi was not!' interjected Castelforte.

'He seemed to be in a jocular mood on the ground,' remarked Sangiorgio.

'Oldofredi never makes a joke,' said Scalia sententiously. 'One need not believe in his posings. At the third attack, let me assure you, my dear colleagues, he was raving; he went at you, Sangiorgio, as if he wanted to cleave your skull. What a stroke, ye holy fiends!'

'What a stroke, by God!' chimed in Castelforte.

And the same complimentary speeches began over again; they were rather monotonous, rather exaggerated, as though proffered by persons still under a recent vivid impression, who repeat the same story a hundred times, rocking themselves to the same tune and unable to think of anything else. Thus the tale was retold three or four times. The Honourable Melillo, who had been at lunch

with the Honourable Cermigniani at the Colonne, and who was somewhat concerned about his Basilicatan colleague, had come down by way of the Corso to see if he might meet his carriage, and while he was jabbering politics, shouting, excitedly gesticulating, vociferating, quoting figures and demolishing calculations, he espied the group of three at table in the eating-house. So the Honourable Melillo, the blonde member with the red face and the white waistcoat, had joined them, in order to embrace Sangiorgio, and meantime Cermigniani, the deputy from the Abruzzi, stood by, listening to the account given by the seconds, tugging mechanically at his black beard, throwing in exclamations, and, seized with warlike ardour, planting himself in a sort of offensive attitude.

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Bencini, the old deputy of the Right, the clever old lukewarm Catholic, suspected of deriding God and the devil alike, was chatting and laughing in spirited fashion, at the other end of the room, with Gambarà, the dean of the old Conservative party. Bencini, inquisitive and talkative as a woman, came to offer his congratulations, although he scarcely knew Sangiorgio. But the witty, paradox-loving Tuscan entertained a deep dislike for Oldofredi's vainglorious, swaggering stupidity. He chuckled as he thought of the fury of the deputy from the Marches. Quoth he:

'Oldofredi cannot consign this affair to oblivion; they have sewed it on his face! Fortunately, we are not in the dog-days at present, or he might try to bite.'

And all of them, gathered about Sangiorgio, burst out laughing. Castelforte told Gambarà, who had come up to him, the story over again, and Gambarà smiled placidly as he looked at Sangiorgio with the eye of an old Parliamentarian fond of studious and brave young deputies. Cermigniani and Melillo were listening to the brilliant tittle-tattle of Bencini, with his cackling speech and his dry laugh.

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It was almost a procession that escorted Sangiorgio to the landau. The sun had come out, the top of the carriage had been lowered, and Melillo insisted on getting in with him. And all the way down the Corso there was shaking of hands, bows, nods, congratulations, gestures, and smiles, in lavish profusion. The street was full of deputies, journalists, business men, and reporters, standing about after lunch to enjoy a little sunshine before going to Montecitorio. The Honourable Chialamberto, the short Ligurian deputy, was having a discussion with Colonel Dicenzo, a lean Abruzzan of ascetic appearance; both bowed low to the four deputies as they passed, at the same time nudging one another. As for the deputy Carusio, in the Piazza Colonna he rushed to the carriage door, made the coachman stop, hugged and kissed Sangiorgio, shouting excitedly that he was on his way to the Prime Minister's, to inform him of the happy result of the duel.

In the Chamber an ever-growing demonstration occurred, of which Sangiorgio was the centre. The Speaker maintained, as was his wont, his proper dignity, but in the smile with which he greeted Sangiorgio there was something cordial, something affable, a sort of kindly light. The Honourable Freitag, big and stout, with his head sunk between his shoulders, and in the habit of swinging his bulk up and down the dark corridors like an elephant, asked the Southern deputy, in his small, piping voice:

'In the face, was it not?'

'In the face.'

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The rest did nothing but stop and congratulate one another with hearty handshakes; they all wanted particulars of the duel. Scalia, Castelforte, and even Melillo, were all besieged; the tale went round of the three sundry attacks and the final stroke; the bellicose deputies listened with sparkling eyes and with occasional exclamations of praise; the pacific deputies listened silently and smiling, thinking of a tournament. A few—the cruellest—wanted to be told more, had the length and depth of Oldofredi's wound described to them, asked if he had bled much, if the wound would heal soon, if the scar would be very plain. But all over the House, by every one, even by the most cautious, even by those who ventured only a word and a bow, the profound antipathy was evinced which was entertained for Oldofredi by most of his fellow-members. In many of them lingered secret rancour because of a sentence, a glance, some trifling insult received and merely endured from forbearance, so as to avoid talk and scandal.

A few rare friends of Oldofredi held aloof, satisfying themselves with offering Sangiorgio no felicitations. When Lapucci and Bomba entered the Chamber as if nothing had happened, at about four o'clock, inquiries were scarce, and were dictated by cold curiosity. The two seconds felt, in their turn, the isolation of their principal, who lay in bed, with face and head bandaged, in a state of violent fever. Few asked about him; they thought, one and all, that the wound was a well-merited punishment for his sovereign insolence, but that one ought to be charitable towards the vanquished.

The enthusiasm for Sangiorgio continued until evening, waxing higher still at the dinner-hour. Overwhelmed and confused, but always preserving his external calm, which was now and then varied by a stolid smile, he let them say and do what they pleased, listening to everybody and everything, yielding to the enjoyment of this new popularity.

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He repaired to the Costanzi Theatre, where the 'Huguenots' was being performed, took an orchestra stall, and listened to the music, with which he was unfamiliar, in a half-imbecile state. Behind him, two young men were discussing the duel, pointing at him as the individual who had inflicted the sword-cut on Oldofredi; they spoke in a whisper, but he heard them very well, as he was giving but one ear to the music. After the first act he felt the glow of an ardent gaze upon his



face: Donna Elena Fiammanti was looking at him from a box. He betook himself up there automatically. Opening the door, he stepped into the minute room separated from the box and the public by a red curtain. Two arms surrounded his neck, and an agitated voice spoke:

'Oh, Franz! oh, Franz! Why did you fight on my account? It was not worth while!'

On their way downstairs, after the opera—in the course of which at least ten visits had been paid at the box—as Donna Elena leant upon his arm, her eyes moist with pleasure and pride, he saw, in the lobby, the monster Paulo putting on a huge overcoat. Of a sudden, the whole fog of vanity was dispelled, and Sangiorgio felt an impulse to throw himself on that gallant gentleman's broad breast. It was he, the mastiff, who had advised him to aim at the face. On the ground he had remembered nothing but that counsel.

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## CHAPTER V

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The case had come up expectedly two days after a public holiday. In one of the Italian provinces, on that festal day of patriotic celebration, some of the municipal board and the communal council had made most overt manifestations of advanced republican sentiments. The royalist councillors had immediately resigned their seats; telegrams had been despatched to deputies, newspapers, men of influence; the question had all in a moment assumed a serious aspect.

The summer season had arrived, and the sittings were dragging along in weary fashion; foreign politics had already sunk into their summer sleep; no important laws were being passed; the diversion came up unexpectedly, as a surprise, and was therefore welcome, and received general attention. The love-making between the Chamber and the Ministry had grown languid, like all passions meeting response and gratification; intimacy had brought disgust to those who had loved too warmly, and the commencement of the dispute, which grew more and more complicated, was the lash that stung the surfeited, apathetic lovers to activity. They had neither the inclination left, nor the strength, for fervent love. They now met to fight, to exchange insults, to wage a war of suspicion, political calumny, and private slander. The chief accused was the Minister of Home Affairs, who, obedient to his ideal worship of liberty, had not found it in his heart to cast off the aforesaid municipality.

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A man of profound thought, large ideas, fine character, accustomed to take a broader view of political questions than was tolerable to the petty spirit of other politicians, ever rising to a lofty conception of things, he stated that the liberty of political conscience must be respected. In private amused at the unwonted importance attached to the affair, he said there was 'no likelihood that these little aldermen would burn down the temple of our institutions.' He declared publicly that the matter was trifling; and to the anxious, deeply-concerned people who came to appeal to him he showed the calm front of the superior individual, which seemed a pretence, but actually was the security of a quiet mind.

But all round him, surreptitiously and visibly, raged the desire for a crisis. All the malcontents, the ambitious, the mediocre, the envious incapables, the conceited fools, agitated, combined, held meetings, talked, harnessing mediocrity with envy, ambition with conceit, discontent with folly. They shouted in the cafés, made speeches at the eating-houses, arranged little sub-conspiracies in the parlours of the furnished houses where deputies had lodgings, behaved like arch-plotters at the tables set out in summer by Ronzi and Singer, the liquor-sellers, in the Piazza Colonna.

All day, at all the railway-stations, from all parts of Italy, deputies were arriving with small hand-bags—the emergency-week bag, into which a careful wife packs four shirts, six pocket-handkerchiefs, a pair of slippers, a clothes-brush, and so on, against the possibility of sudden departure. There were already three hundred and fifty deputies in Rome, an unusual number, never mustered in the most active winter sessions. And probably every one of the three hundred and fifty was expecting, believing, wishing, hoping to become, was certain of becoming, a Minister after the crisis.

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The Minister—a strong, good, and wise man—either did not hear, or, if he did, ascribed no importance to the increasing clamour about the crisis.

'There will be no crisis,' he smilingly replied to those who asked him about it in friendly conversation. 'There will be no crisis,' he stated to those whom he assured of the fact with a preoccupied air of condescension.

At bottom he knew the political world and the men composing it. He was fully aware that the Prime Minister was on his side, that the seven other Ministers were with him, that this powerful body of nine would not allow itself to be ousted for no earthly reason but the refusal of a Mayor to sign an address to the King and his raising the cross of the tricoloured banner. He knew the furious lust for power of his eight colleagues, the tenacity of those oysters sticking to the rock; to attain it they had gone through all kinds of political sufferings and agony, and now they would sooner die than let go their hold. He smiled as he thought of what strength proceeds from weakness; he smiled, and felt safe.

But he passed on to a more moral flight of thought: his fine beliefs were still intact from scepticism, his faith in human conscience was yet unshaken. He felt that this supreme worship of

liberty was rooted in every Italian heart and brain; he knew that mean interests might for a moment possess those hearts and brains; but that all would vanish in the presence of a great idea.

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Malicious whispers, misrepresentations, false or fabricated news which reached him, were without effect; in vain would some true friend caution him and counsel a pessimistic view. The Home Minister maintained his ideality, which was touched ever so little with bitterness: he was not subject to defeat; he felt morally and materially secure, united with his brother Ministers in a generous cause that itself was strength. He ignored the approach of a political crisis, this Minister; besides, in the political caldron all kinds of characters were cooking, and the traits of every section of Italy were represented. The Sicilians were conspicuous for their warm feeling, mixed with irony and common-sense; the Neapolitans shouted and waved their arms; the Romans waited patiently and temporized, but knew the moment for action; the Tuscans laughed behind their spectacles, smiled mockingly under their moustaches, Mephistophelian and ambitious as they were, and laughed at each other and all the rest; the Lombards, with their aristocratic tendencies, flocked together in a solitary group; the Piedmontese and the Ligurians came and went, and made a bustle without speaking, their communications with each other being through the eye. But the most fiery, the most rebellious and wild, were the members from the smaller provinces—the Abruzzi, the Marches, the Romagnas, the Campania, the Calabrias, the countrymen, the representatives of the provinces that give life and wealth to the great cities, the deputies who had a genuine love for politics, who believed in them, who thought politics were the greatest force in human life, who became drunk with them as with strong wine.

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But in the midst of all these latent elements of discord the men of the Basilicata never spoke, but coalesced, formed groups; frigid and impeccable, they asked no questions and gave no answers. The Minister, the stanch man and true, felt safe; he had never known fear at any juncture—and now he smiled.

When the Minister of Home Affairs entered the hall, on the day when the question was to be brought up, a prolonged murmur ran along the benches. He did not fail to observe it, but, a strong man in great things and small, he had the good sense not to look about, nor to look up at the galleries. It at once occurred to him, however, that the matter was more serious than he at first had considered it. Indeed, on the first day he had said to the Prime Minister, in a tone of unconcern:

'There is a lot of talk about this municipal affair.'

'Heat-blossoms,' the Prime Minister had replied, with a smile.

'Do you agree with me?'

'Of course I agree with you,' answered the other, without, however, specifying upon what points.

'Do you think Don Mario Tasca's speech will be important?'

'One of the usual speeches.'

And they talked of other things.

His other colleagues in the Cabinet had shielded themselves behind a strict reserve. Vargas only, the Minister of Fine Arts, a lean, dried-up old man, consumed by devouring ambitions, had offered some uncertain resistance, which the Minister of Home Affairs had combated in an uncertain tone. In the Chamber, however, there was undeniable evidence of a prospectively hot debate. Turning over some of his papers with eyes lowered, the Home Minister became conscious, from the loud, Parliamentary buzz, that at least 400 members must be present. He glanced up at the diplomatic gallery, where the Countess di Santaninfa, lovely and pensive, and dressed in black, was scanning the hall with melancholy eyes, and where the Countess di Malgra, a pale, seductive blonde, who was that day wearing a yellow straw hat, never for an instant ceased from intently considering the assembly. The civil service gallery was full; in the press gallery a triple row of heads anxiously bent forward.

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'They smell powder,' thought the Minister. And he looked at his two or three brother Ministers, as if he had something to tell them, but they wore such an indifferent air that he said nothing. He therefore merely glanced at the House. It had quieted down, but had a hard, solid appearance; it was a substantial body of 400 silent, expectant men. And in a quarter of an hour, at three o'clock, the orator of the Right, Don Mario Tasca, began his address from the top bench of the last section but one, in a stillness like that of an empty church. The Prime Minister had come softly into the hall, and had sat down at the end of the Cabinet bench. Don Mario Tasca was a white-haired old man, with pink skin, and a white beard for a collar. His style was elegant; it had rounded periods accompanied and completed by circular manual gestures, resembling the rotation of a small wheel. The speech flowed on and on, softly and gently, with never a failure of the voice, never a check, just like the song of a bird. The orator did not look at the Minister; he looked into the air, like an inspired genius. He never bent his head to refer to his notes, but was as one who knows his part by memory. But, under all this external suavity, his discourse yet sounded of rebuke; the speaker mentioned neither individuals nor facts, but, confining himself to terms somewhat vague, stated that certain institutions and certain ideas were being assailed which hitherto no one had ever thought of impugning. It was a speech that did not rail, and was rather nebulous, perhaps; still, it accused. It withheld names, but it scorched consciences.

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The Minister paid close attention, and from time to time glanced sideways at the Premier, who never once turned in his direction; the other Ministers also listened attentively to Don Mario Tasca, who continued in his beautiful, fluent prose. All the deputies were turned to the right and were lending ear; up above the whole public was leaning forward; the two Countesses—the dark and the fair—seemed to be drinking in Don Mario Tasca's words.

He spoke for one hour, with never a halt, and scarcely a blunder, and without the least change in the colour of his vocal tone. He challenged the Minister, in his last sentences, which became briefer and ever more contracted, to answer whether he intended to persist in this criminal do-as-you-like, go-as-you-please system. A very, very long murmur of applause rewarded Don Mario Tasca.

The Minister, before replying, tried to question his chief with his eyes, but the Prime Minister was writing, and this was therefore impossible. He then rose, and answered very placably, very judicially, reducing the question to its lowest terms, declaring it unimportant, planing and smoothing all the facts, having recourse to a number of highly-sensible arguments, foregoing expansion into fine language, which he believed inept. And as he spoke so calmly, he looked about, casting questioning glances at the deputies' faces, as if seeking their approval. But their faces did not light up, for they were displeased. The deputies were not mollified—no, not they; they had come here wrought up by a week of debate and anticipation, the matter was very serious, and the Minister had tried to deal them another hand by belittling the whole affair. [Pg 189]

Fruitlessly did he lavish the best of his cleverness and ingenuity, as well as striking sallies both lucid and logical; he continued in the wrong key, not having caught the spirit of the occasion, blind to the circumstance that good oratory was the thing on a day when a crisis threatened. He took note of the general dissatisfaction but without understanding its cause—he still thought he could win this battle with the plain weapons of reason. But glacial silence prevailed in the hall at the close of his defence.

Niccolo Ferro, the Radical deputy, hereupon requested the floor. The Minister frowned; that moment foreboded peril. Niccolo Ferro, the best speaker of the Extreme Left, calm, lucid, imperturbable, strong in logic as in rhetoric, threw so clear a light on the situation that it was no longer subject to doubt. The action of that Mayor was held up in its real and great importance; it was a sign of the times; no one would venture to violate liberty of conscience so far as to prohibit or punish such manifestations. He treated of the historical traditions of the communes, of the long strife in Italy for the attainment of that state of freedom, which was yet in the bud, but which would soon blossom out. A Councillor is a man, he is a citizen, said the orator; he thinks according to his convictions, and acts as he thinks. Institutions are not destroyed by the hands of men, but fall because of their inherent corruption; not men strangle them, but new ideas are their ruin. They fatally rot through the germs of disease they contain; nothing can ever save them when decay has progressed so far. [Pg 190]

Fundamentally Niccolo Ferro was both pleased and displeased with the Minister, and he declared it openly.

He was displeased because he, the champion of liberty, was attempting to throw ridicule on the courageous and bold conduct of this clear-sighted municipality; he was pleased because he knew that the old faith never changed in the hearts of upright men, despite the allurements of despotism to those in power; and he was convinced that never would a tyrannous act be done under instruction from that illustrious man.

The illustrious man had absorbed the whole speech, while nervously twisting his gray moustache. He looked at Niccolo Ferro, his friend, very gently, quite unrepvingly. He felt crushed; he felt the amazement of the Chamber at this fresh piece of audacity from the Radical party; he felt that they all, friend and foe, wanted to force him into an equivocal position, from which there was no escape. He could neither declare himself out and out of Niccolo Ferro's opinion, nor oppose him. In that hour he was conscious of having indulged in a too loyal policy, founded on truth alone, inspired solely by lofty principles, independent of men and events, poetical almost and unreal—a policy so unpractical that it lent itself to ready defeat by both the Right and the Left at the same time. The illustrious man recognised all this, but could say nothing. Possibly, in this peril the old Prime Minister, by addressing the house in his kindly, easy way, might save the situation; he might put Don Mario Tasca's mystical, lyrical apprehensions, and Niccolo Ferro's uncalled-for petulance, in their proper places. But the old Premier was reading a letter, as though he were in the peace of his study instead of in the tumult of the hall. [Pg 191]

The floor was then given to the Honourable Sangiorgio, and immediately the assembly was hushed. The Prime Minister raised his hoary head, and looked at the Basilican deputy as piercingly as if he were trying to read his soul; the Home Minister breathed a sigh of relief, supposing that what himself and the Premier had omitted Sangiorgio would say. Sangiorgio was clever, and was friendly to the Ministry, so that he could not fail to set things right.

Instead, in one first cruel sentence, the Honourable Sangiorgio fell fiercely and with concentrated wrath upon the Government's home policy. Don Mario Tasca and Niccolo Ferro had said too little, whether for or against. Things really bore a far graver aspect. For a year back the worst disorder had reigned in the management of internal affairs; there was no longer a guiding hand, no longer a bridle; the public officials performed their duties at haphazard, or did nothing at all, having no orders. The policy of the Home Department was founded on equivocation and culpable carelessness; these elastic theories of liberty were causing havoc. And this bitter, almost [Pg 192]

tragic vein of attack was readily guessed to correspond to the sentiment of the House, which murmured approval of each sentence. Sangiorgio cited facts. He enumerated the Republican associations, which in the course of a year had increased beyond measure; he declared that Republican committees were multiplying everywhere, and likewise rebellious acts, which were done not by that single Mayor, nor in that single place, but by other public officials elsewhere. He spoke of a Prefect who had consented to take part in a banquet where toasts to the King were prohibited, and said that the Minister of Home Affairs, although he knew of it, and in spite of the articles in the Royalist newspapers, had not reprimanded such Prefects, Commissioners, and delegates, all of whom were allowed the free scope of their own opinions and own will, committing deeds inexcusably arbitrary or weak. But the dominant note was their indolence, their shameful neglect. No energetic circular of instructions was ever sent from Rome. The reports of the most zealous functionaries always remained unanswered, or were replied to ambiguously; at Rome, a number of philosophical and sociological deductions were indulged in, but never was an energetic step taken.

The Chamber applauded Sangiorgio so vociferously that the Speaker was obliged to call for order twice. Sangiorgio spoke with a peculiar hardness of voice, with such sharp accent and brevity of phrase, and with such bare simplicity, that the smallest points told. His facts were like so many blows from an unerring weapon, each striking the mark remorselessly. It was a document of impeachment, a summary compiled with the cold cruelty of a judge in vindication of law and ethics. Sangiorgio's face was set and severe, his features were rigid; he did not smile, did not gesticulate, nor had recourse to any of the common artifices of oratory; he seemed to be so sure of his cause, and so wrapt up in it, that he considered a cold, precise exposition sufficient. He supplied no comments, or very few, but enumerated facts, proceeding from one to another, with the occasional remark: 'But that is not all; there is more.' This sentence, repeated at intervals of three or four minutes with the regularity of a tragic refrain, made a deep impression; nervous tremors seem to run down the spinal column of that great body in the Chamber.

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The atmosphere of Parliament was laden with electricity. No one was writing, no one was reading—all were turned towards the speaker; groups of listeners had gathered near his section; some had even climbed the stairs, as if to drink in Sangiorgio's words, in their exaggerated attentiveness. Up above, in the diplomatic gallery, had appeared the ever-beautiful Countess Lalla d' Ariccia, who was the surest barometer of a crisis, for she never came excepting in electrical weather. Donna Luisa Catalani was leaning over, her little head tied about with a white veil, and beside her Donna Angelica Vargas looked down, her lovely face unveiled, quite pink at the temples, under the excitement of curiosity.

The speaker recapitulated all he had said, using his synthesis upon the audience with the force of a hammer. And without adding any deductions, without challenging reply, without so much as expecting one, and in disdain of whatever argument from whatever opponent, he read out the following motion:

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'That the Chamber, disapproving of the Ministry's home policy, now proceed with the business of the day. Francesco Sangiorgio.'

Then there arose such a huge, irrepressible clamour that for five minutes the Speaker rang his bell in vain. Discussion rang all over the hall, on the steps, in the hemicycle, on the benches, in the galleries—everywhere. The ladies in the diplomatic gallery stared and stared, themselves, perhaps, also seized with nervous agitation.

And the strong, honest man who was Minister of Home Affairs had, without budging, received the strokes of the Honourable Sangiorgio in his breast, half admiring his adversary's might.

Only, towards the end, when the ultimate solution was becoming plain, a growing doubt assailed him. After that extremely vigorous attack, coming from the Centre, from a Ministerialist, from a man who had shown democratic leanings, the situation was so perilous that only the Prime Minister could relieve it. Defence now devolved upon the senior, the chief, the old Parliamentarian. A new and bitter suspicion sprang from the Minister's heart to his head, and in those five minutes of Parliamentary uproar, like certain poisonous plants indigenous to the tropics so this suspicion spread apace in his soul. He looked at the old Prime Minister as penetratingly as if he wanted to tear the truth from out of him, yet, fearing lest some emotion might cloak his voice, he said not a word to him, nor asked him a single question, but merely looked at him, expecting him to come out of his silence, to come to life, for that morning he might as well have been dead. The Prime Minister, however, remained speechless, and went on writing, stroking his beard with his other hand. And the Minister of Home Affairs suddenly composed himself inwardly, showing nothing outwardly but a slight pallor.

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Certainty was at hand, and it was irrefragable. He felt himself abandoned, felt himself betrayed. His colleagues and the Prime Minister had left him to fall alone. They had already separated from him, as though shunning a corpse because of its nauseous odour. Assuredly the betrayal was complete; they wanted to be rid of him, as of a diseased arm or a cancerous leg. The Chamber would have none of him henceforth—that he felt. When the Speaker gave him permission to answer in his own justification, in frank, calm tones the illustrious man was heard to say:

'I have no remarks to make; I accept the Sangiorgio motion.'

At the division, a majority of thirty votes went against him. The Minister of Home Affairs had fallen.

A week after the official Ministerial organ, all the other newspapers following suit, published this:

'It is now ascertained that, in the reconstruction of the Cabinet, Don Silvio Vargas will exchange from the Fine Arts to the Home Department. The Honourable Sangiorgio, in vain requested to join in the new combination, has persistently refused, and has left for the Basilicata.'

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## PART III

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### CHAPTER I

A soft breath of lamentation; a dim light, which the blue flamelets cast against the massive granite walls in tedious pagan obsequies had never dispelled; a veiled light, which the yellow taper of Christian burial rites could not strengthen; a chill, sepulchral atmosphere; a frequent sob of music; a great, black mass of people, lost, as it were, in the funeral shadows; in the air, in the light, in the flames, in the music, tears shed and the desire to shed more, betokening irremediable woe.

As for him, sitting in his place, and yielding to the state of melancholy contemplation which by infinite, perpetual gradations merged into grief, a secret tremor shook his fibres, and made his pulse throb fast; and by a natural impulse, conscious that he was trembling and pale, he turned round, searching for something in the faint light falling from the velarium.

Beside him he saw that sweetest of women, Donna Angelica, of truly angelic mien. She was habited in black, in deep mourning, as was seemly in the Pantheon, sacred through the glory and the death of the Hero, and her sad eyes were fixed upon a candle that was consuming away. She saw nothing, and appeared to hear nothing, plunged in thoughts assuredly sorrowful, lost in her mournful dreams. Sitting next to a pillar, she had tried to read in her prayer-book the prayers beseeching peace, invoking rest for the departed; but soon the book had fallen into her lap half open, and her listless hands had not taken it up again.

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And to him that dearest of mourners, pale as a pearl under her black veil, her sweet lips still apart for the passage of her prayer, her gaze dissolved in sad religious meditation—to him she appeared as a divine shape. And everything, the fitful, blue glare of the lamps, the thin, streaming flames of the candles, the atmosphere of woe, the sorrowful music, the dire gloom that had overcast even the ancient, stolid walls of the Pantheon, the incurable malady of the spirit—to him it was all embodied in that female form sitting near him: she personified the whole of that tepid, damp winter's day, on which the sun was dead; she was the moral seat of the tears that welled from all things; she was the magnetic abyss of sorrow, which the sorrow of all things could never fill, and in the profound shock of his system, in the thrill of his entire being, of flesh, blood, nerves, muscle, in all the strong composition of a strong man, there was aroused, there started into life, grew, abounded, a sentiment of amorous compassion.

She, all unwitting, gave herself up to her woman's fancies, which wandered among the tapers, the dark sacerdotal vestments glittering with gold, the tall, almost colossal, human cuirassier caryatides, among all the pale, dejected, sad, sorrowful, or indifferent faces. In spite of the immense throng of people surrounding the catafalque, in spite of the vague murmur detaching itself from them, in that hour of spiritual freedom she lost herself completely—in that brief restful hour, that hour of freedom in which private grief was renascent, and melted and flowed into the universal grief. Now and then, at a more lugubrious strain of music, at the voice of a singer bathed, as it were, in tears, at a sentence monotonously chanted in minor by the officiating priest, she would start, and her desolate dream would begin again, moving through other phases and other degrees, in other circles of melancholy; and in a new, intenser mood did she set out upon the path of pain that gentle souls all must travel. She did not weep, for the occasion was too big, too solemn; but he perceived how her delicate eyelids, as finely made as the petals of a flower, were shaded about with violet; there had tears been, there more would flow.

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And while he thus ardently gazed upon that sweetest of faces, to which the shadows of pain imparted a nobly ideal expression, and was thinking of naught but that white face, half impregnate, half saturate with tears, and had forgotten all else in his amorous contemplation of the lady, he felt a wonderful change within himself. The infinite grief by which she seemed oppressed he naturally and gradually absorbed into his own spirit; it was like penetration into her heart, slow, but infallibly sure. He asked not the meaning of it, but felt his whole self disappear, drown, perish in that woman; he was mastered, not by her, perhaps, but by what she felt. The whole vagueness, mysteriousness, and unfathomableness of a feminine grief, without lament and without tears, without foundation and without limit, which had appealed to his heart now seized upon his brain, invaded it and took possession, driving out all other ideas whatever. No, it was no longer compassion, the great, natural compassion of a man towards a suffering woman; compassion is, after all, a personal feeling; compassion is something egoistic; compassion is a cry from one's self. It was he, he who was suffering now, as if the torture of that female heart were his own torture and anguish; it was he who felt the sharp pricking of the unshed tears scorching his lids; it was he who was in the throes of altruistic sympathy, and seemed to be lost in anguish, in a great waste of anguish, as that woman seemed to be struggling in a void of suffering.

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And as the obsequial hour advanced, in the pagan temple where the Hero lay in state, a subtle

odour of Christian incense went up; from altar to roof the smoke curled upward in graceful spiral shapes, which became more and more attenuated and ethereal until they vanished above, even like prayers ascending to the Most High. The incense, too, partook of the aromatic savour of tears, and the perfume of it, going through the nostrils to the brain, profoundly affected the nerves, caressing them into a state of voluptuous woe. In the half-light everything seemed to sway under that tragic, aromatic kiss; the women had all bent their brows to conceal the trembling of their lips, and the head of the woman he was watching was bowed down, as though her strength was gone. He sustained a shock, and made a motion as if to support her; but a sort of paralysis fell upon his limbs. The incense burned and burned in the silver censers, without flame, overcoming his last efforts of resistance.

A bell rang faintly, but in the midst of such silence it sounded sonorous; Donna Angelica slid from her seat down upon the cold marble floor, covered her face with her hands, and was no more than a heap of black clothes on the ground, unseen, unseeing, forlorn. And he, without kneeling, without inclining his head, without praying, felt annihilated in the woman's annihilation; everything seemed at an end for him, as everything was for her. And at each sound of the bell, as she gave a start as though called by a distant voice, the same action was reflected in him; nothing that spiritually took rise in her but was expressed in him by reflection.

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A line of priests, with lighted tapers, drew up round the catafalque; a silver cross, on which hung the dying Saviour, stood fronting the bier. And through the music a strident, rending voice was heard—a voice that did not sing, but cried; a voice that did not ask, but implored: 'Libera, libera, libera me, Domine.' The Christian prayer, the painful cry begging salvation, made the sweet lady raise her eyes. And in her features, consuming away in their pallor like a fading flower, in her transfigured features, a true, intense aspiration was declared.

Now, while the piercing, distressful voice of the singer sued to heaven for deliverance with religious fervour, Donna Angelica, after passing through all the stages of undefined grief, felt a distinct need form in her heart. She now spoke to God, her lips moving as she prayed for deliverance. What had been indefinite till then now was defined: it was deliverance—deliverance from all that had been, good or evil, happiness or wretchedness—'From all, even this, O Lord! From all, even what has been, merciful Lord! From all, even the dreadful past, O God of pity!'

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As for him who lay in the sepulchre, and whose funeral obsequies were being celebrated, deliverance had come to him at the glorious height to which he had risen; he had found deliverance, and perhaps special grace. The weight of a royal crown, the burden of a reign, the heavy responsibility of the law and of the majestic will, a load of thought and care—deliverance had come to lift all from his soul, now at rest in the ineffable peace. 'As the King sleeps, so let me sleep, O Lord!' she prayed. 'As Thou hast delivered the strong soul of the King, O Lord, so do Thou deliver my weak soul! Even if Death be the deliverer, let me die and be delivered, O Lord!'

In this supreme moment the lovely, despairing creature stretched out her arms to heaven, and as she prayed the hot, rebellious tears, so long restrained, coursed down her cheeks.

He had heard, in a mysterious way, what she besought of God. And that mourning petition, that last appeal of sorrow, gathered into a word, that agonized, Christian supplication, had also flowed from his own heart, amid the music, in the sensuous sadness of the incense, in the sepulchral glimmer of the candles, in the uncertain rocking of the light, under that blue-tinted circle of the velarium, which seemed to be alive. There sprang up in his virile heart, and flowed from it, the prayer of desolation she offered up; what she desired, he desired. An exalted satisfaction of the soul resulted from this feeling of a common desire; so sharp was the strain, so intensely was his will concentrated upon a single object, that his being seemed multiplied. And as he turned, and saw her feebly weeping, he yielded to the successive, softening emotions of great satisfaction and great sorrow, and bowed his proud head. In truth, he also was weeping—for very love.

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Her face almost buried in a bunch of white roses, with which she was toying, and whose fresh, strong perfume coloured her cheeks, Donna Angelica Vargas was listening to a conversation between her husband and Francesco Sangiorgio.

They had been talking politics for an hour, or, rather, Don Silvio Vargas had been talking, as he reclined in his easy-chair, smoking a pestilent Tuscan cigar, and gazing at the dainty flowers painted on the light gray ceiling of the room. He spoke in a dry, hissing voice, by fits and starts, and in abrupt phrases, between the puffs of smoke; every now and then he tugged at his spare moustache, which, despite his years, had remained as brown as his hair. Age did not show in that lean old man, excepting in the thin lines at the corners of the eyes, running fan-shaped to the temples; in the two deep furrows at the corners of the mouth, dug out by his smile; in the hardness of all his features, become almost rigid; in the fleshless neck, where the tendons stood out like the strings of a violin. But otherwise he was strong and robust in his leanness, and when he inserted the round, unframed eyeglass, suspended on a black cord, under his eyebrow, his features assumed a certain vivacity, became almost youthful.

With Don Silvio Vargas this eyeglass was an infallible barometer: in his hours of rest the eyebrow scarcely retained it; in the hours of indifference it seemed dull and tarnished, the eye behind it being fixed, and closed or half closed; in the hours of utter weariness, of disgust, the lens loosened from its ring, fell upon his chest, wandered into the folds of his coat and waistcoat; in

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the hours of conflict, in skirmish, and in battle, the glass stood rigid in its place, clear and bright, and his eye was wide open and scintillant. Both enemies and friends, too much in earnest to be observers, never took note of these changes until later, until afterwards; they overlooked the political barometer; they felt the man's strength, or his weakness, but they did not see the symbols of either.

When, after luncheon, Angelica heard Sangiorgio announced, she had risen to leave the room, but her husband, as he folded up a newspaper and opened another, curtly requested her to stay, as if he intended to be obeyed. She remained standing by a vase of cineraria, flourishing in spite of the severe winter weather. She bowed to the new arrival, and did not join in the conversation. Her slender, youthful figure—she had recently quitted her mourning—was clad in a soft gown of claustral colour, material, and style; a thick silk girdle encircled her waist, and her beautiful white hands were lost in the amplitude of the sleeves. From time to time she looked up; at a clever or spirited remark from her husband she would smile, to show that she was interested in the conversation—that she understood, that she approved. At a reply from Sangiorgio, at one of his objections or statements, she would cast a brief glance of appreciative intelligence at him. And meanwhile she tended her plants, lovingly, eyeing them with great solicitude, removing the dust with which their leaves were covered, breaking off the little dried branches and the decayed blossoms, which spoiled their beauty and freshness. She went to and fro among the quantity of green plants, which lent the little drawing-room the appearance of a vernal bower, her tiny white hands coming out of the wide, nunlike sleeves, her fingers pretty as a child's. As she bent over the plants, the white nape of her neck was visible, where her dark hair traced a thick wavy line. When she turned towards Don Silvio or Sangiorgio, it was seen that the violet shadows were absent from her sweet face, from the lids which had shed or suppressed so many tears; charming peace reigned there instead. At a certain moment she cast an inquiring glance at her husband's gloomy face; the bright eye behind the single glass told her to remain. Yet she had finished the daily visit to her plants. She took a bunch of roses from a vase, seated herself in an arm-chair near a bay-window, and inhaled the scent of the flowers, while a little colour strayed to her pale cheeks. On chairs, tables, and mantel lay piled a number of discarded and opened and uncut newspapers, smelling strongly of printer's ink; ragged packages of various colours were strewn on the floor, thrown down there hastily and carelessly. But Donna Angelica neither took up, nor touched, nor even looked at, any of the newspapers; her foot, as if instinct with neatness, pushed two or three of the packages aside. She was smelling the flowers.

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Sangiorgio had come to that house in the Piazza dell' Apollinare upon the invitation of Silvio Vargas. The Minister of Home Affairs had stopped him on the threshold of the Pantheon, had passed his arm into his, and had spoken to him in an undertone for several minutes. Then he had insisted upon his coming to his house, not to his office—yes, to his house, where they could talk after luncheon—and why the deuce was he never seen there!

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'To-morrow, then?' asked Sangiorgio hesitatingly. 'What is the use of to-morrow? No! to-day—this very day!' said Vargas. He repeated that he must talk with him, and, leaving Sangiorgio's arm for his wife's, went off with her.

Sangiorgio went to the Piazza Apollinare at one o'clock. Fearing he might be too early, he was seized with a fit of hesitation at the door. But once inside, he was quickly reassured by Don Silvio's cordial manner. Only, while the Minister talked, he listened to be sure, but followed Donna Angelica in each of her quiet, graceful movements.

'Smoke! Why don't you smoke?' Don Silvio urged him, offering him some cigars while he chewed the end of his Tuscan.

Sangiorgio looked inquiringly in the lady's direction.

'My wife is accustomed to it; she does not object,' briefly commented the Minister.

Sangiorgio did not smoke, however, Donna Angelica's engaging smile notwithstanding. Seated near a little round table, he listened rather than spoke, for Don Silvio liked to be listened to. The Minister, who adored politics with the fervour of a boy of twenty, was that day greatly wrought up on the subject. In the very abuse he levelled at politics, in the very deprecations he showered on them, in his now sarcastically, now angrily nervous speech, the flaming passion for politics was evident that burned in the breast of the old Parliamentarian. And from Don Silvio, Sangiorgio seemed to hear, as if in a dream, a portion of his own thought, an echo of his own aspiring ambition, whose fancies he had never confided to a living soul. He recognised the same fever which had internally consumed him for years, while in Don Silvio the spiritual fire found expression in ideas and words. The Minister was too old, and too passionate by nature, to hide his feelings; he no longer cared to dissemble them. That inner flame must have kept Don Silvio's enthusiasm aglow. Thus did Sangiorgio reason out the cause of such prolonged and lasting vigour.

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Occasionally, Don Silvio, as he looked at Sangiorgio, suppressed the sneer which deepened the furrows at the corners of his mouth, and smiled almost tenderly. Oh, he did not forget, not he, how his predecessor had fallen after a speech and a motion by Sangiorgio; he remembered Sangiorgio's brief refusal to enter the reorganized Cabinet. He had never been able to testify his gratitude, but ever since the opening of the new session had shown him his affection, had sought his company, consulted him, in a spirit of mingled deference and cordiality.

'But, at bottom, you are indifferent to power,' said Sangiorgio, after a pause in the conversation.

'No,' answered Vargas frankly, 'I am not indifferent to it; I like it; I wanted it. But the Opposition disgusts me. Sometimes it is stupid, sometimes false, sometimes brutal, and it always acts in bad faith. Where is our loyal, bold, cruel, implacable Opposition? Instead of open attack, they indulge in low pantry gossip; instead of fighting, they sneak in corners; instead of an open onslaught, it is trickery!'

'Man is a paltry creature,' observed Sangiorgio.

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'He ought not to be, or ought not to appear so, if he is. By the Lord! have I not been in Opposition, too? You remember, Angelica, when I was in Opposition?'

'I remember,' she answered in the sweetest voice, raising her head.

'I was a devil. I took no rest, and gave my enemies none. Never a moment's truce! Now I am petrifying. I cannot make war now, I must wait for it; and this eternal brigandage makes my blood boil! How you fell upon the Minister that day, Sangiorgio! And you were Ministerial! Were you there that day, Angelica?'

'Yes, I was there.'

'And it is to you we owe it that I am Minister of Home Affairs,' said Vargas with emotion.

'Oh no!' murmured Sangiorgio, smiling.

'Yes, yes! The Prime Minister would never have had the courage to disavow his colleague openly. It surprises me, nevertheless, that he spoke of it to you; no one was aware of it—not even myself.'

'The Premier had told me nothing,' replied Sangiorgio deliberately.

'What! you knew nothing about it?'

'Nothing.'

'There was no understanding?'

'No.'

'By God!' exclaimed Vargas, 'you are wonderful!' And he admiringly looked Sangiorgio all over. The latter laughed formally, but immediately perceived that Angelica's face was losing its serenity, and was invaded by an air of fatigue.

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'Come to the Chamber with me, Sangiorgio; it is two o'clock,' said Vargas, rising to take his departure.

'Shall you be back soon?' asked his wife, fighting down her appearance of lassitude.

'No; there is the Chamber first, and then the Senate, and afterwards I must go to my office, to arrange about a transfer of some Prefects.'

'Shall you be here at seven?'

'About eight or nine—I don't know.'

'Shall I call for you at the Chamber?'

'No, go for a walk to the Villa Borghese, or outside the Porta Pia—anywhere you like. It is no use coming to the Parliament! I shall dine after I have finished. This affair about the Prefects is very serious. I will tell you about it on the way, Sangiorgio. If any letters, or messages, or despatches arrive, let them be sent at once to wherever I am, in the Chamber, or the Senate, or my office. I am expecting important news. I am coming, Sangiorgio.'

And orders were dealt out, short and concise, to his wife and to the secretary who had entered the room; they were delivered in a tone of military command. Don Silvio stood there firm, erect, and strong, like a young man. His feverish ardour was his support; his enthusiasm was his salvation. He went into his study, taking his secretary with him, speaking in low tones and very sharply. Francesco and Angelica remained alone, he standing upright, she with head bent as if in prayer, her fingers playing with the silk girdle about her waist. They did not speak, and the moments went by in the prolonged vibration of a musical beat. Suddenly she looked at him with saddened eyes, clasped her hands, and said:

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'Why did you want us to have this Home Minister's place?' And her voice trembled with restrained feeling.

Don Silvio returned with overcoat and hat, rolling the extinguished stump of his Tuscan cigar between his lips, his secretary following, with a portfolio full of papers.

'Would you like a rose?' said Angelica to her husband, on the spur of the moment, offering to put one in his buttonhole.

'What can you be thinking of!' he cried, repelling the white hand with a certain degree of roughness. 'Do you want the Opposition to quizz me? A Minister with a rose! I should become the subject of caricatures in the newspapers at once!'

Donna Angelica timidly drew back, casting a furtive glance at Sangiorgio. But she did not give him the rose.



A low sky, with gray, leaden, heavy clouds, becoming black on the horizon, over the Tusculan hills, on Soratte, which itself might have been a great cloud settled down upon the earth; the Campagna bare and wan, undulating in places as though heaving up its inwards; two black hedges, two prickly scant hedges, without a sign of green, without a blossom; a tavern, with a rude depiction on the damp wall of three black decanters standing on a triangle and a girl drinking wine, but with doors and windows barred by decayed wooden shutters; the large gray building where the widow Mangani gives Roman summer and autumn holiday-makers tripe in sauce to eat on a terrace, in an arbour, or in a small yard, where there is room for a table and a pint of white wine; the curious ruin, alone in a field, which bears the semblance of a gigantic armchair with a chipped back, and which in fact is known as the Devil's Chair; a carter lying dozing, face down, on a load of volcano ashes he was bringing into Rome; an occasional fat drop of rain that fell upon the ground; this side St. Agnes' a Cardinal's carriage returning leisurely from the Catacombs, and a few priests walking on both sides of the road; immediately beyond St. Agnes' two carabineers sitting rigid on horseback, wrapped up in their dark cloaks; a gentle, mild breeze that swept the earth; a pungent smell, the peculiar smell of the Roman Campagna, which goes to the brain, and from the brain goes into the system like an insidious miasma; a strange dog, all muddy, that went sniffing along the hedges and looked at every wayfarer with sad, unhappy eyes—these were the things, people, animals, surroundings, seen by Francesco Sangiorgio, towards the close of a winter's day, in the Via Nomentana. And over all things, animals, houses, churches, hung the deep gloom of the imminent rainstorm, the tremendous gloom of a Roman sunset in the Campagna.

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'Here is the Ponte Nomentana,' said the coachman, pointing to it with his whip.

'Stop; I wish to get out. And wait for me here,' said Sangiorgio.

He walked up the little slope to the bridge, the strange walled bridge, whose broad, graceful arch curves over the gurgling waters of the Aniene, with two large casements facing up stream and down. Sangiorgio stood on the bridge, and, leaning on a ledge, looked into the distance whence the river came.

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It flowed with a narrow, but deep, winding and singularly rapid current, increased by winter rains; it flowed a dull, silvery, but cold white, without a shimmer and utterly glacial. A number of little whirlpools took shape, tiny circles with an interior mouth round which the water coursed in circular ripples.

On the bank was a little mould of lighter colour, but no vegetation, no gravel, no volcano ashes, and round about was the great desert of the Roman Campagna.

It was not raining as yet, but the vapours from the river and the moist sirocco had imparted a certain dampness to the old bridge, and as he touched the wall at a casement where he was standing, Sangiorgio felt the trickling wet; the elbows of his coat were soaking and dirtied. He scanned the Campagna intently, but neither the poorest specimen of a tree nor the meanest specimen of a human being was in sight; the river, which at Tivoli is so magnificent, so gay, so clamorous, over there ran to a very mournful strain.

He then posted himself at the casement on the left, and watched the water flow swiftly down to join the Tiber. From here the Via Nomentana was seen to continue over the plain, to make an angle and vanish. In the middle of a field stood a cottage, a tumbledown hovel, with two rooms and no ceiling, and walls like broken teeth; at the corner of the road was a tidy, white little cottage, the Huntsman's Inn, from which a fine meadow stretched down to the river. In the water stood willow bushes, with blackish, scrawny branches; on the banks were small willows, equally scrawny. A boat was held in the stream by means of a rope attached to a wooden post driven into the shore; the water broke gurgling against boat, willows, and rope.

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With the descending darkness, the sky, too, seemed to descend. Gazing with the strenuousness of an earnest searcher, Sangiorgio perceived a closed carriage to stop near the Huntsman's Inn, but it had halted in such a way that he could see neither horse nor coachman. And then, from afar, on the river's right bank, he saw a dark spot that grew and grew, and he recognised the sweet lady who had wept in church.

Dressed in black, she wended her solitary way along the river, walking up-stream, pausing every now and then to look at the speeding current; she moved gently, very close to the water, sinking into the spongy soil, advancing with measured footsteps.

When she had drawn nearer, he observed against the dark dress the bunch of white roses from the room at home full of green plants; she held them clasped to her waist with her hands. Two or three times she turned to the horizon, in admiration of the sad sky, which seemed about to smother the earth, and looked for the Tusculan hills already hidden by the approaching storm. Then she resumed her lonely walk with such lightness of action that she seemed barely to graze the earth.

Not once did she raise her eyes to the walls of the bridge, to the wide casement where stood he who was watching her. Assuredly she believed herself in absolute solitude, in that vast bare Campagna, that threatening tempest, that last hour of daylight, that melancholy landscape, from which the vulgar would shrink; she believed herself alone, as if in church, praying to God,

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speaking to God.

At fifty paces from the bridge, near the rotten post to which the boat's rope was tied, Donna Angelica stopped short. She looked as if she had been suddenly overtaken by fatigue, despite the slowness of her gait, or perhaps she had succumbed to the great fascination of running water that seizes upon the spirit of the beholder and keeps it under a spell. Indeed, leaning against the post, as if rooted to the river-bank, at one step from the coursing stream, which bent the dark boughs of the willows, Donna Angelica was entirely lost in contemplation of the river.

An immense dark roof of clouds—a shroud forestalling night—now shut in the whole horizon round about, and the light seemed slowly perishing, as if being crushed between sky and earth. Sangiorgio was unconscious of everything save that female form, standing stark as a statue on the bank of the river. But a rumbling noise came from the Via Nomentana, a sound of wheels, of trotting horses; and in the gray light something red and bright flashed by. Under the lowered hood of a Daumont carriage something white passed by—a fugitive face, a royal face. The royal carriage crossed the bridge at a trot, the royal lady having responded to Sangiorgio's bow; and the whole brief, vivid, transient vision disappeared in the direction of Rome. Sangiorgio again turned to the river.

The lady was unaware of all this. Lost in thought, the noise and the purple passage of the royal equipage—a sort of brilliant, gleaming comet, which for an instant had lit up the darkness of the cloud-ensombred twilight—had escaped her. She seemed to be unable to tear herself away from the sight of the austere Aniene, with its gelid waters. He saw her bend over several times, as if she were trying to mirror herself in the river, or to discern the bottom of it. Her fingers hereupon plucked a rose to pieces, and threw the white leaves into the hurrying flood, which carried them away; one after another she picked off all the leaves, throwing them adrift upon the current by handfuls. She did not angrily ravish the white leaves from their stem, but detached them lingeringly, as if everything in her soul were actually departing or dying with the departing, dying leaves. The hands relinquishing those floral lives had also known the desolation and death of other lives. The last leaf, indeed, faded between her fingers. He could not see all this from the distance, but he guessed it; and as the last leaf went, withered and crumpled, he felt a languor as of death overtake him. After a last look at the Aniene, the lady went back to the road without a backward glance, and got into her carriage. It passed over the bridge at high speed. Donna Angelica did not see Sangiorgio, but he saw very plainly how the pale creature was still pressing the stripped stems of the dead roses to her side.

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## CHAPTER II

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From his Centrist bench, where he was pretending to write letters, but where he was in reality mechanically tracing her name twenty, thirty times on a sheet of paper, he distinctly saw Donna Angelica Vargas alone in the diplomatic gallery, leaning on its velvet edge. He had felt her presence suddenly, with a nervous shock; he had ventured to turn two or three times to bow to her. She had responded with a grave smile, but had immediately looked away. He knew no desire but to go up there and sit beside her, only he thought perhaps it would be improper to be seen by so many of his colleagues, to make an exhibition of himself. Later the desire became so strong that he rose from his seat, crossed the hall, and went out into the corridor, where he wandered about abstractedly, giving monosyllabic replies to all who spoke to him about the University Reform Law. Upon returning, he still lacked the courage to go up, and was ashamed of his own cowardice. When he was near the Ministerial Bench, Don Silvio Vargas called to him:

'Sangiorgio, listen——'

And he told him something about the Communal and Provincial Law, which was then being discussed for the third time.

Don Silvio's friendship for Sangiorgio had grown rapidly in a short period. Whenever he was in doubt as to some political or administrative question, he took him to his house, consulted him, or had long conversations with him at his office. This time he had another idea to submit to him. Sangiorgio gave him his opinion, and then added:

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'Is Madame Vargas up there?'

'Oh yes,' said Vargas quite indifferently, without turning his head. 'Do you think these clauses will be debated on?'

'Yes, especially the fourth; the Extreme Left attaches great importance to it.'

'Shall you speak, Sangiorgio?'

'I hardly know——'

'You ought to speak. Listen: come to dinner at my house to-morrow; I want to explain some of my views to you.'

'I shall be there,' replied the other after a moment's hesitation.

Hereupon he moved off, but the Minister whispered to him to come back.

'As you are going to sacrifice yourself to me, go up and keep my wife company for a little. She is bored to death, and I have not even time to nod to her.'

'She is bored, you say?'

'She loathes politics. Woman is selfish, my dear Sangiorgio,' answered Don Silvio philosophically, squeezing his glass in under his eyebrow.

Sangiorgio gathered up his papers with ill-dissembled haste, thrust them into his locker, traversed the hall and corridors, and went up the stairs, curbing himself lest he should run. But Donna Angelica did not turn round upon hearing the door of the gallery open.

'Are you very tired?' he gently asked over her shoulder.

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'Not more so than usual,' she responded, turning slightly and putting out her hand to him, without manifesting the least surprise.

He sat down behind her. She spoke to him without looking at him, which she would also have done had he been beside her, for she was looking down into the hall.

'But you seem to come here often,' he urged.

'Yes, often. Even our dislikes become habits; and besides—Silvio is a Minister, and many people think I am an influential woman. At home there is a constant stream of them who want something.'

'One can close one's door.'

'Yes, if one happens to be an ordinary woman, but not if one is the wife of a politician, of a Minister. Don Silvio is always afraid I shall make him lose his popularity.' Her voice was choked with bitterness.

'No doubt you often must endure vulgar acquaintances?' he asked in a sympathetic tone that made her change colour.

'Yes, I am indulgent enough. It is natural to me to be indulgent. But vulgarity is offensive and painful to me.'

'You must keep your heart up.'

'My heart? The heart does not enter into the question at all! It is the moral being that suffers, and the nerves. So I prefer to come here; it is the lesser of two evils.'

'Do you hate politics so much?' he ventured.

'I do not hate them, and I cannot like them.'

'Nevertheless, it is a great and noble idea,' he hazarded again.

'So they say—but I do not believe it. I understand other ideas as being noble, good, great, generous, fruitful—not this one. I am too ignorant,' she added humbly.

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'No, no,' he hastened to assure her. 'You are perhaps right!'

'I am unable to like this idea. To us women certain ideas, abstract ideas especially, convey nothing. We require something real, represented by something concrete—religion by the Church, the figure of the Holy Virgin, Christ; our country by lovely scenery, the sea, the mountains, the friends we love. But politics—a mere idea—what is there to stand for politics?'

'The politicians,' he murmured, after holding back a little.

'Oh yes!' she exclaimed with cold disdain.

'Do you hate them, too?'

'I pity them.'

He felt no impulse to retort, but an expression of pain came over his face.

'Well, look at them all; look at them, Honourable! Look at the haggard, worn faces, yellow with bile, green with envy! Look at the fat, flaccid faces, pale and unhealthy! How worn out before their time are some of those men, and what nervousness in the gestures of others! They all seem afflicted with the same disease—a fatal malady which eats them up or swells them out. I imagine that gamblers in the gambling dens must be like them.'

'At least, politics are a great passion,' he timidly suggested.

'Great? Perhaps. So people say, but I do not believe it. When politics possess the soul, they fetter it with contemptible pride, paltry ambitions. Down there are three hundred people, who have minds, and who are educated, who have physical and moral courage, who have honest consciences and manly characters. Very well; those three hundred clever, brave men, those three hundred wills, those consciences, those intelligences—what do they all want, without exception, at any cost?'

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'To be Minister.'

'Minister—at any cost whatever. And in that unrelenting pursuit, pray ask yourself, does not the mind ever go miserably to waste? Does not that mind, capable of creating wonders of beauty and utility, if it were applied to the arts and sciences, often accomplish nothing?'

'It is true,' he admitted.

'To invent a machine which will benefit mankind, morally or physically, is that not better than overthrowing a Ministry? Is it not better to carve a statue, paint a picture, or write a book?'

'It is true,' he averred.

'As for bravery, do you think its true impetuosity can be preserved, and its true dashing valour, here, where everything is summed up in a speech, where all worthy initiative is frittered away in twenty-five public sittings and fourteen discussions in committee? All words, all words!'

'But we fought when we were wanted.'

'Ah!' she said, suddenly become thoughtful, 'those were times! We women, you see, understand the heroism of the battlefield and of conspiracies, but Parliamentary heroism escapes us!'

For a moment they maintained silence. Donna Angelica's cheeks were aflame, and her hot words, surging into Sangiorgio's soul, made their imprint there as if on soft wax. [Pg 220]

'And then there is conscience,' she resumed, purposing to speak out her mind fully. 'Heavens! how can it remain clean among so many personal schemes, so many unavoidable bargains, so much equivocation? How can it be changeless and inflexible when the surest virtue leading to success is actually elasticity?'

'True, true,' he repeated.

'Some are mad over politics, I know very well,' she continued, looking down into the hall, her fingers playing on the velvet edge of the gallery. 'We all know that, we politicians wives. In the hearts of these men it is a passion which dries up all the others. If we live in the provinces, our husband leaves us for nine months in the year, without a thought of his wife's youth, beauty, or solitude. If we come to Rome, it is worse. The house becomes a small Parliament, where conspiracies are hatched if we are not in power, where methods of defence are planned if we belong to the Cabinet. No more friends. Confederates, clients, parasites, rivals, self-seekers—none but such. Their affection is not asked for, but their vote is. Who says "Yes" is a friend; who says "No" is a traitor. The privacy of the home disappears. It is invaded by a stream of strange people who sully it, who turn it into a vestibule, a courtyard, a street, a public square. Confidence vanishes. Our husband is worried and disturbed; we seek to know the reason, and he believes we cannot understand, for politicians despise the advice of women. At table the husband reads newspapers or answers telegrams. At balls he finds it difficult to escort us, yet he is obliged to go, so as to represent the Government, in order to meet influential deputies, to make his bow to the wives of the party leaders, to shake hands with the insignificant creatures who would not live if the great political passion did not. It is either a case of melancholy solitude in the country, like a poor abandoned thing, or else of being mobbed in town, without a breath of poetry, without a smile of the ideal. A great passion, to be sure, but so mad and absorbing and confining that it creates fears and disgust!' [Pg 221]

Another long silence. Don Silvio Vargas was speaking in the hall, with his strident voice, his hands in his pockets, his thin, spare body swaying slightly, looking at an interlocutor through his shining eyeglass, as if he were making game of him, with the mocking irony that irritated his opponents.

'A great passion, a great passion,' murmured Donna Angelica. 'Women understand only one.'

'Which is?'

'Love.'

'That is true,' answered Sangiorgio.

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'We dine alone to-day,' said Don Silvio, sitting down at table. 'Donna Angelica is in her room, dressing for the ball at the Quirinal.'

The secretary sat down with them at the small family dinner-table; the fourth seat—that of the lady of the house—remained empty. In the middle of the table stood a slender-necked vase, containing red lilies, and Sangiorgio's eyes continually wandered from the vacant chair to the great red flowers. The two deputies—the Minister and the important politician—eagerly discussed politics, eating all the while, Don Silvio slashing his meat nervously while he waxed warm over the Communal and Provincial Law, Sangiorgio listening, answering, stating objections, forgetting to dine. But his thoughts were in a little room panelled with light wood, and cosily heated by a crackling grate fire—for thus he conceived of Donna Angelica's retreat. [Pg 222]

The secretary only bestowed any real thought on dining, and devoted his whole gastronomical energies to it. But he maintained a serious face; every now and then he seconded a remark from the Minister with a nod, with an air of restrained admiration; at Sangiorgio's sayings he would often knit his brows, as if a difficulty mentioned were apparent to him also.

Thus the dinner went by, while two footmen brought in now a telegram, now letters, now a newspaper, or a new dish. Don Silvio at once tore open the despatches, opened and read the letters, cut the cover of the newspapers, and ran his eye down the columns; he would not taste the food, but looked at it with the abstracted gaze of a wandering mind.

Beside him were an inkstand, a pen, telegraph-blanks, notepaper, and he would write answers then and there, after pushing his plate away from him. The newspapers he handed to his secretary, having first marked certain places with a red pencil; the secretary read the marked passages with the placidity of an old diplomat. In the meantime Sangiorgio was vainly listening for some feminine sound, vainly keeping on the alert for the least incident: not a maid came through, not a bell rang; nothing feminine happened; not a flower was wanted, not a candlestick was brought; there was no bustle of servants; nothing occurred—nothing whatever.

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In the privacy of her apartment Donna Angelica was in the throes of the romantic and feverish excitement of a woman dressing for a ball; and the great mystery of beauty adorning itself—amid lustre-imparting, perfumed liquids, loose hair, scattered flowers, billowy gauze, sparkling jewels, smooth silks, soft furs—modern woman's great mystery of Isis, was being accomplished as in a tabernacle.

An evermore consuming desire to know or hear something assailed Sangiorgio in the dining-room during all the political discussion and writing; a desire caused by the vacant place at the table where the chair stood; a desire springing from the red lilies—the fiery St. Louis lilies—which seemed to combine purity and the heat of passion. If only she would come out for a moment, to greet her husband, to greet her guest! If she would but show herself, radiant in her youth and beauty! Each time a door opened, as the evening wore on, Sangiorgio started, shutting his eyes, seeming to see her appear in the splendour of her loveliness and her dress. But other telegrams, messages, and letters arrived; in one instance Don Silvio drew a cipher-book from his pocket to translate a political despatch. Where could Donna Angelica be? In what floods of perfume had she vanished?

The time went by, and there was no sign of anything in the house reminiscent of ballroom gaiety; the house kept its busy atmosphere; the slamming of doors continued, the loud or low discussions, the coming and going of written and printed papers. It was like a public square, a stock exchange, a political institution, a camping-ground for all manner of intrigue, deceit, and turmoil. Perhaps in the sanctuary within, which harboured Donna Angelica's youth and beauty, there were signs of the female excitement that precedes a ball, and to which is always due a ravishing confusion of scattered linen, silk stockings hanging out of open drawers, unstoppered vials, corsets straggling over the floor. But of such feminine disarray, of such intoxicating disorder, so fascinating to a husband or a lover, no indication passed outside her apartment. Through the three or four doors separating him from the woman he loved Francesco Sangiorgio felt this new charm, which was quite earthly, and which captivated him in a new way, addressing itself to his instincts of sex. He felt the contrast between the weariness, the emptiness of Don Silvio's tumultuous life, and the poetical delicacy of that feminine toilet, and all the perturbation of heart and senses instilled by everything that comes into contact with a woman's body.

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At last, at ten o'clock, doors were opened and shut, and subdued voices heard; and Sangiorgio, choked by his one wish, shut his eyes to avoid the blinding spectacle of Donna Angelica's beauty. But no one appeared; a dull rumble of wheels was audible in the courtyard, and then in the Piazza dell' Apollinare.

'Donna Angelica has gone to the Quirinal,' said Don Silvio calmly, opening the *Riforma*, which had just been brought in. 'Shall you not be going, too, Sangiorgio?'

'Later on,' feebly answered Sangiorgio, who had turned deadly pale.

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In the white electric light illuminating the grand staircase of the Quirinal the women were slowly making their way upward, touching the carpet only with the toes of their satin slippers. And with sweeping trains, with rich, soft, warm, white cloaks over their nude shoulders, with heads bejewelled, befeathered, or beflowered, in their ascent they cast stray glances at the two great green shrubs, at the Muses among the broad, red-veined leaves, at the palms that stood darkly against the white stucco of the walls. The women went up slowly, so as not to become ruffled, and in order that the even pallor or the florid pink of their cheeks might not be disturbed. After all their nervous excitement, the calm self-possession of women determined to look handsome asserted itself. It was enough to see how composedly, in the great, chilly, tapestried place transformed into a cloak-room, they untied their bows, and undid their hoods or their cloaks, allowing them to slip gently from their shoulders, maintaining their likeness to beautiful, self-moving statues. It was enough to see the phlegmatic way in which they smoothed out the flexible Swedish gloves over their arms, while husband, brother, or father was impatiently waiting to escort an unconcerned charmer, who was quietly readjusting a shoulder-sleeve that had become displaced.

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The journey, too, through the other two rooms and a corridor with statues, was easy and silent; but when the ladies reached the warmer atmosphere spread around by the stoves, and began feeling gratified at their nearness to the scene of pleasure, their lips parted in elaborate ballroom smiles, of the sort which are diffused over the whole face, over the whole person. Near the door of the ballroom, the Chamberlain, offering them a programme, a bunch of flowers, and his arm to

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take them in, was privileged with the first smile, father, husband, or brother being abandoned without a bow, without a word.

There was a vast glitter of jewellery. Upon three rows of red benches sat 300 women, jewels in their hair, on their ears, their bare necks, bosoms, and arms. From some headdresses more unpretentious than the rest shone forth a thin, piercing ray, but when some of the stately shoulders moved, or an arm, or feathered fan, there was a whole torrent of sparks, a brilliant flash of lightning. The women were crowded together, and one female costume counteracted and neutralized another, to be in its turn counteracted and neutralized; neither materials nor colours might be distinguished; only a glimpse could be obtained of a bodice or a bit of shoulder-sleeve sometimes concealed by a flower, a bow, or an ornament. And what eclipsed everything, soft billows of gauze, sheen of satin, intricacy of lace, heavy, dark hair, light, fair locks, the almost living skin of the gloves, the pink on necks, shoulders, arms, was the jewellery; more luminous, more vivid in colour, more iridescent than all, were the triumphant jewels.

And under that triple splendour of scintillation, what was most conspicuous, most admirable, and all-dominating, was the infinitely varied loveliness of the unclad arms and shoulders. Here was a cold, anæmic white resembling glacial marble, which froze the glance that looked upon it; here was a pearly skin, polished and transparent, whose colour no shadow could ever change; then came a firm white, under which flowed the rich blood as red cloth appears under a thin white fabric; elsewhere, a smooth, even surface, indicative of a moderate temperament and a moderate temperature, which nothing could affect; elsewhere again, an opaque white, here and there marbled with slabs of pink; elsewhere still, a complexion neither dark nor fair, but cloudy, as though the blood rolled over a bed of black earth; yet again elsewhere, a bright, handsome, striking complexion, like a heavy, thick magnolia-leaf, like the well-nourished flesh of ripe fruit.

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All the moulded loveliness emerged from the bodices as though softly escaping from bondage; it flowered from the shoulder-sleeves and the billowing gauze as out of a calyx; in its luxuriance and spontaneousness it was like the richest out-blossoming of anything in the vegetable kingdom. Repeated in all tints three-hundred-fold, it assumed a character of general, complete loveliness, like that of a great forest; the individual disappeared, personality was absorbed.

Nothing—it might be supposed—could have more enraptured the eye, nothing so effectively set the imagination rioting, with regard to individual charms; but, instead, there was sounded the grand note of the whole of woman's beauty, which the senses cannot grasp, but the spirit grasps, a united chorus blending all voices, white, pink and red, into a single voice.

In vain did the dense black and white rows of men, under the band, behind the benches, in the doorways, strive to recognise a certain face or person, *the* person, *the* woman. They, the men, were able to see nothing but a great blaze of jewellery, which killed everything else; they merely saw the sex as a single woman with naked arms and shoulders, although they were in the presence of three hundred low-necked women together.

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But a sudden silence ensued: the three hundred women were struck stark, with unblinking eyes glued to the door at the back. The band intoned the beginning of a flourish, clear, loud, and martial, which was of singular effect in that silence, that essentially feminine display. The three hundred ladies rose as one, with a rustle of dresses; and then they stood waiting, one close against the other, all smiles, with shoulders so high that they seemed escaping from the sleeves, arms hanging listlessly down, faces beautifully and unalterably serene. Behind them, under the band, and in the doorways, the black and white masses of men swayed silently to and fro. The moment of anticipation seemed interminable. Then in the door at the back appeared something effulgent, a multiplied and concentrated effulgence, like the vision of a comet; and as the exalted, irradiant apparition made a bow of supremest grace, the glittering hedge of jewels, the close array of gems, the starry pageant, bowed low. To the eternally feminine in one was reverence paid by the eternally feminine in number. The men looked on in agitation.

Standing on the tips of his toes, Francesco Sangiorgio was attempting to discover the sweetest of women. He was with a group of deputies. The Honourable Galvagna, a Colonel from the Irredentist part of the country, and the Honourable Sangarzia, were patiently waiting to reach the ladies. The Honourable San Demetrio was about to dispense gallantry in the diplomatic circle; but Sangiorgio was seeking out Angelica.

All those women, standing in a row, with nosegay in hand, smiling as they watched the royal quadrille, confused Sangiorgio; he could distinguish none of their features, recognised not one of them. Never had he seen so many women in a body, so closely ranged together, in all the splendours of beauty and dress, in all the potency of their sex. Every now and then he shut his dazzled eyes; reopening them, he again attempted to seek out the most beautiful of them all, her who, to him, was the only woman.

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Of a sudden, while Her Majesty was gracefully dancing round the gray-headed, urbane German Ambassador, her long, regal, flame-coloured train flashing like the tail of a comet, and the royal diadem astrally akindle, Sangiorgio caught sight of Donna Angelica Vargas on the arm of a bronzed old gentleman with dyed moustache and bristles on his head that were a shade of black tending to red. Donna Angelica was figuring in the royal quadrille, opposite the very fair, very pale Hamlet-faced lady who was the Swedish Envoy's wife.

Donna Angelica crossed the floor with the harmonious, almost musical glide that rendered her step one of her most potent charms; her white, brocaded train undulated gently behind her, as

though it were aflow, and in it glittered streaks of silver worked into the brocade.

Now and then, as the stately slow promenade, which constituted the royal quadrille, might permit, he saw Donna Angelica's nimble, youthful figure, and the white brocade bodice, modestly cut and topped with a hazy fluff of white gauze; on her white throat a necklace of pearls lay against a pearly skin, and a diamond cross hung luminous upon her breast.

Donna Angelica, her chestnut-brown hair closely coiled round her head, was crowned with stars—brilliant stars of diamonds, studding the darkness of her locks, four in front, four at the back, set irregularly and without design, as stars actually appear in the obscurity of night on the dark, deep blue of the firmament of heaven. [Pg 230]

And the penetrating eye of her lover clearly distinguished on the gauze about the throat a tiny spray of lilies of the valley, without leaves, a scarce visible little spray of lilies of the valley, put there for the poetry and perfume of a flower's sake, put there for discovery by the eye of him who knew how to love.

And amid such wealth of beauty, here mild and simple, there provokingly alluring, amid such an exuberance of beauty and seductions, Donna Angelica was beauty undefiled and pensive; beauty was in her melancholy, frank expression, in the peace of a soul that had won its battle. She was the picture of purity. Her dress was a rich, dull white of plain and unpretentious pattern. Between the seams ran silver threads here and there, like gentle thoughts, varying the sameness of such simplicity. The noble folds of her train had a classical aspect, such as the drapery of a chaste, antique statue. Her bodice was of exactly the right cut, in nothing diminishing the attractions of the woman, and being entirely to the credit of the modesty of the lady. About the shoulders the dress was heavy enough to conceal the enticing, almost sensual place where a woman's shoulder becomes her arm. She wore the lightest of cream-coloured gloves of the finest kind, which, covering her elbow and three inches besides, lay moulded to her arm without a wrinkle. She wore no bracelets, but had on plain diamond earrings. The whole impression was one of chastity. There was none of the vacant stupidity of a cross-grained girl, but all the innocence of thought and emotion of a pure woman. To Francesco Sangiorgio it seemed as if he were in the presence of purity personified. Her eyes shed a soft light, her eyelids moved slowly, dispassionately, without a shadow under them of sleeplessness or illness; she looked placidly at the persons and objects surrounding her; her temples were as clear as a child's, and the skin as transparent as the skin round an egg; seen in profile her face showed a delicate pink at the nostril; her sinuous red mouth was shut lightly, like the bud of a flower. And the whole expression of her peaceful countenance was that of a person cherishing neither hopes nor desires. An aureole of something more than human, of something entirely spiritual, seemed to transfigure her loveliness. [Pg 231]

At the sight of her, Francesco Sangiorgio felt the excruciating desire yield which had possessed him in the dining-room, where he had been on the rack of expectation concerning Angelica, who had left the house without showing herself. Little by little his nerves were quieted, his prickling senses went into a state of languid contemplation. That chastity and purity descended upon Sangiorgio like a refreshing breath, cooling the ardour of passion; affecting him like the beneficence of an innocent caress from the lips of a child, the hand of a sister, or a friend's embrace; invading him like a placid river, gently and silently overflowing its banks. His delirious pulse had abated; the veins in his temples throbbed less violently than before; his wrongful desires of lust had melted away. And while Donna Angelica was standing at rest in the quadrille, he felt her eyes upon him in an open, frank gaze, the which was a clear, steady light dimmed with tenderness. In truth, she was to him in that hour, and for ever, the divine Beatrice. [Pg 232]

Sitting in the large, royal armchair, the Queen bent over a little while talking with Donna Clara Tasca, who was beside her on a stool, which was her place as the wife of a Knight of the Annunciation. The ardent Sicilian, with bright, clever eyes, slightly grizzled hair, and mobile features, betraying a thoroughly restless mind, was answering the Queen with great rapidity, bending forward also, and showing respectful attention. The other ladies—of the aristocracy, of diplomacy, and of the political world—collected in groups, were conversing with one another and pretending to be interested, but kept every motion of the Queen assiduously in eye. And as yet they would not dance, refusing offers to do so, wrapt and engrossed as they were in the recollection of the words spoken to them by the Queen. Every woman in the place, whatever her wealth, rank, or beauty, whatever her charms of mind or body, coveted nothing beyond that moment's colloquy with the Queen, in the presence of two thousand people; they all forgot every other hope, wish, interest, or sentiment in the feminine ambition for that minute of conversation in public. The girls only, to whom this honour would not fall, who had come to exhibit their young fascinations, to be gay, to dance, to drown an innocent, romantic, amorous fancy—the girls, instead, were already dancing a waltz round a large circle in the room, amid a fluttering of white, pink, and blue muslin, and shyly kept at a distance from the royal chair. The men walked about, stood in groups, danced, chatted—no one paid any heed to them. After the royal quadrille, Francesco Sangiorgio had squeezed through the serried files of spectators, and had arrived within twenty feet of her when she was talking with the deputy, Count di Carimate, the Lombard nobleman, with a black beard and vague, Socialistic principles. But she, Donna Angelica, was somewhat absent-minded; her eyes were cast down, and occasionally they turned in the direction of the royal personage. [Pg 233]

And whenever that star revolved to right or left, whenever she gave the signal for rising, a prolonged thrill ran through the groups of women; they all turned their heads in the direction

indicated, many continuing to chatter or to listen; but they stammered when they spoke, for their thoughts were elsewhere. The Queen had gone over to her Ladies-in-Waiting, and sat down in their midst, while they surrounded her standing. They comprised two Americans married to Roman Princes, one of them remarkably fair, and more English than American, the other slender, affable, and well dressed; Donna Vittoria Colonna, with black, diamond eyes; Donna Lavinia di Sora, with pearl-coloured face and pensive, leonine eyes; Countess Genzano, whose charms were artificial and whose hair was yellow; Princess Seraphita, of classically ideal features, robed in plain white, with a bunch of violets at her bosom; Princess Lalla, whose regular, cameo-lined face was still youthful, and whose shoulders were white and arched; and finally the Marchioness of Paola, the head Lady-in-Waiting, a happy mother with hair yet fair and wavy, whose sprightly daughters, both brunettes, were dancing in the ballroom.

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The women of the corps diplomatique were patiently smoothing their gloves on their arms, opening and closing their large, soft, feather fans, each for the hundredth time eagerly scanning her programme, as if she had never seen it before.

By degrees Sangiorgio had reached Donna Angelica's side, where, after arriving, he whispered 'Good-evening.'

'Good-evening,' she murmured, with that depth of expression quite individual to herself. And she turned to him, asking him whether her husband had come, talking with half-closed lips, while he cast such enamored and admiring glances at her that a slight blush tinged her cheeks. The Queen was speaking in French to the French Ambassadors, a spare, ascetic woman with a long face; yonder the King was conversing with Donna Luigia Catalani, attired in bronze, a strange blue feather in her blonde locks; the vivacious, witty Sicilian was smiling maliciously. A new quadrille was beginning.

'You are not dancing,' observed Sangiorgio.

'No, I am not; the Government does not dance this time,' she replied calmly. 'Later on, if you like, we will take a turn.'

'Later on?'

'Yes, later on.'

He did not understand at first. He had been too unobservant, his thoughts all centred on her he loved; he had been unwitting of the scene of feverish female ambition all round him. Yet he saw that something of supreme importance was happening in this essentially feminine festive affair; he saw that these women were completely given over to some idea which made them forget even their wish to look beautiful. The ballroom was now alive with dancers, and the rest of the men were moving towards the sitting, smoking, and refreshment rooms.

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On the right side of the ballroom the throng of expectant women was still increasing; they were crowded together closer than ever, and, while they still hoped their turn was coming, had no inclination to dance, since their hearts and minds were over in that corner of the room.

The Queen, sitting in the recess of a balcony, with only her train and the lock of her necklace showing, was conversing with Donna Lidia, the Prime Minister's wife, a hearty, amiable little woman, who only left her quiet family home on the occasion of official routs.

'That is Donna Lidia—the Queen is talking to Donna Lidia!' the women and those of the girls who were well informed were whispering to each other. The interview had thus far lasted five minutes; the eyes of all the waiting ladies were, by an irresistible, magnetic force, drawn upon Donna Lidia and her Queen, whose movements were subject to general speculation: would she go to the right or the left when she got up to leave the alcove? In the ballroom the couples who had taken part in the quadrille were now promenading; engagements were being made for the polka; the young men were writing with pencils on the girls' programmes; the ladies who were strangers, or elderly, middle-aged, or old, sat on the last row of the red velvet benches with the formal air of people voluntarily bored, and were laden with jewels and splendid laces, and wore feathers in their hair. The women who had been honoured by a few words from royalty went about flushed and smiling and satisfied, with a happy light in their eyes, repeating to one another the gracious remarks that had been made to them; and they cared nothing for anything else, paid no heed to others who were still waiting with ill-concealed impatience. The King was talking to the large, handsome wife of Italy's prime patriot, a worthy lady, with dark skin and honest eyes, dressed all in blue.

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'I had hoped to see you before, this evening,' said Sangiorgio, like a very schoolboy.

'Ah, indeed,' she vaguely replied.

At that she turned her back upon him. A path had suddenly opened through the crowd, and between two rows of people the Queen was advancing, majestically and gracefully beautiful, in a tremulous, starry radiance. She was coming towards Donna Angelica, and Sangiorgio stepped back, abashed, recognising in that female couple—the simple, serene woman and the royal, smiling woman—the whole potency of the sex.

Later on Francesco Sangiorgio and Donna Angelica were walking through the rooms together at a leisurely pace, wending their way through the maze of trains which formed little lanes on the floor, occasionally coming to a standstill when the flood of femininity barred their passage. In the



great ballroom, the girls, the secretaries' wives, the ladies in love with balls, the women of the middle class, and all those who had no official position, gave themselves up entirely to the pleasures of dancing; the orchestra was playing lively tunes by Métra and Fahrback; the animation of the affair was at its height. Others were meanwhile promenading, sitting on lounges in the parlours, holding receptions, and circulating everywhere. The British Ambassador, with her beautiful and poetic daughter by her side, who resembled a Botticelli Madonna, was holding court in the blue-room to a circle of young diplomats. For two minutes these ladies spoke English with Donna Angelica; Sangiorgio listened without understanding, but what he heard sounded like delicious music to him.

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The Countess di Malgra, the sympathetic blonde of interesting pallor and bewitching eyes, was dispensing social paradoxes to three or four young Centrist deputies following in her train; Signorina Maria Gaston, a girl of gentle loveliness, the daughter of the Minister of Marine, a mundanely agreeable little angel, was not dancing, but was chatting at a window with three or four old Admirals; Signora Giulia Greuze, the Belgian with a sparkling wit and a beautiful young body, like a rose bursting from its bud, was laughing under a hanging basket of ivy, showing her frank teeth.

Donna Angelica, on Sangiorgio's arm, went on, stopping a moment here and there, exchanging bows and smiles with the deputies' wives she met. The little Marchioness di Santa Marta, fair and fluffy, like a young bird, faithful to her taste for dark-red dresses, showing the prettiest little feet in the Italian political world; the Baroness Romito, a gorgeous, sedate Juno; the Countess di Treicastagne, a pale Frenchwoman, married to a Sicilian; the Baroness di Sparanise, the clever lady whose eyes were black as Egyptian night; the mild and affable Marchioness di Costanza, with her caressing voice and gentle footsteps; the two fair-haired daughters of the Minister of Grace and Justice, one blonde and slender, the other blonde and pensive—all these were walking about, without returning to the ballroom, occasionally gathering in groups, laughing together, telling little stories of the evening, looking one another all over with kind though searching smiles, correctly appraising one another's magnificence and beauty.

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Donna Clara Tasca had stayed half an hour, had chatted with some Ministers, politicians, and deputies, and had left abruptly, following Don Mario, whose political fortune she would certainly have made if he had been less nebulous, fantastic, and virtuous in his politics.

Donna Angelica, on Sangiorgio's arm, spoke little, but he asked for nothing more, happy at feeling that modestly-gloved arm on his coat-sleeve, happy at being able to count the pearls in her necklace, happy in the sensation of his foot being grazed by the hem of her brocaded dress. She cast about for her husband, though very dispassionately, without urgency, and without making inquiries of anyone, exchanging but a few occasional phrases with her escort. At length Don Silvio, arm-in-arm with a deputy of the Opposition, appeared in a doorway, came up to her, and, scarcely looking at her, scarcely noticing in whose company she was, asked her curtly in an undertone:

'Her Majesty?'

'Most amiable,' she answered, casting her eyes down.

'More so than usual?'

'I do not know—I think——'

'Well, do you think, or are you sure?' he interrupted severely.

'I am sure—quite sure,' she hastened to say.

He turned his back upon her; she was pale and agitated.

'Would you like to sit down, perhaps?' asked Sangiorgio reverently.

'No, no,' she said; 'let us walk—let us walk.'

They went into a refreshment-room full of people nibbling or nipping at sweetmeats, ices, coffee, or tea, where the floor was strewn with little bags of sweets. Here, too, women abounded. Princess Valmy was sipping tea and arguing with a little man who was a renowned translator of Plato, a Parliamentary athlete, a Southerner of deep intellect, rather strident voice, and incisive, oft cutting, language. The Countess di Roccamorice was eating sugared chestnuts as she chatted with the Grand Master of the Order of St. Maurice, with his white beard and discreet Lombard smile. The Princess di Rocco, the handsomest woman in Rome, was reclining in an easy-chair, with the Honourable Melillo, the Honourable Marchetti, and the Honourable Sangarzia in attendance; she was consuming an ice, benevolent and placid as a goddess. The Baroness Noir, tiny and frail, in a dress of Japanese blue, with gorgeous jewels—large turquoises set in diamonds—was slapping her fingers with her fan, nervously listening to an argument between the Italian Minister at Brussels and the Italian Minister at Bucharest.

'I want nothing—I want nothing,' she murmured to Sangiorgio, who was conducting her towards the well-laden table.

She was trying to overcome her agitation by degrees. She spoke for a moment with Signora Gasperini, the Secretary-General's wife, thus trying to recover her calm; but she was no more than half successful. Deep down in her soul she was still perturbed.

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'Would you like to leave?' Sangiorgio asked her.

'Oh yes!' she exclaimed impulsively.

They resumed their search for Don Silvio, traversed the red room, the blue room, the ballroom, and the corridor with the statues, where the cold made her naked shoulders shiver, and then passed through three or four empty apartments, arriving in the banqueting chamber, where folks were merrily chattering and glasses were clinking. They turned back, and finally, in the Don Quixote tapestry room, found Don Silvio in spirited debate with the British Ambassador. Donna Angelica was about to accost him, when, by a wink, her husband forbade her to do so, giving her to understand that she was to move on. Blushing, she inclined her head, and took Sangiorgio quickly away.

'Do you not dance?' she laughingly asked him. 'You are too serious! What is it you are so deep in thought about? Politics, I hope!'

'Oh no!'

'Well, on no account think of politics, I beg you!' she said, leaning more emphatically on his arm. 'You are not in love, are you, by any chance?'

'Yes,' he briefly replied.

She stopped, put out of countenance, regretting she had said too much. And then she immediately turned to other subjects—the ball, the tapestries, Don Quixote, the heat of the rooms, and all manner of things, speaking in a voice that was somewhat veiled. [Pg 241]

By two o'clock in the morning the ball was at its height; in the ballroom some forty couples were waltzing, and in all the apartments, among hangings, flower-pots, embroidered curtains, white stucco, and gilt decorations, there was an abounding, a teeming, an overflowing of women, a glitter of starred headdresses, a heaving of lustrous female bosoms.

Just then Vargas' secretary came up to her with his officious demeanour.

'His Excellency is obliged to go to his office at once because of an important telegram. He will not be able to take you home.'

And deferentially he stood waiting, but as if conscious of being dispensable, to be asked to take her home.

'Very well,' she replied, dismissing him with a glance.

Sangiorgio silently accompanied her to the waiting-room, where, under the white electric light, and in the presence of the stolid, almost automatic footmen, he assisted her in putting on her heavy, ermine-lined, white brocade cloak. Without explanations, without a word passing between them, she took his arm again, and calmly descended the staircase, the Vargas groom having preceded them to call the carriage. Arrived at the open door of the brougham, with a gentle, rapid motion she gathered up her train, and stepped into the carriage; she did not bow to Francesco, did not offer him her hand, and he stepped into the carriage after her—quite naturally.

Not a word was spoken; but her white train covered Francesco Sangiorgio's feet and legs and the bottom of the small carriage with its rich folds; in that small space, a faint odour of lilies of the valley was noticeable. [Pg 242]

She had nothing over her hair, neither shawl nor hood nor lace wrapper; her bare head emerged freely from the white of the ermine, and in her dark locks sparkled the diamond stars. From the ample sleeves of the cloak her hands fell on her knees, one hand still in its light glove of Swedish kid; the other was gloveless, with a scintillant diamond ring on the third finger. In the semi-darkness of the carriage, which was making for old Rome from the Quirinal hill at a slow trot, Francesco Sangiorgio dwelt now on that sweet face, whose continued pallor rendered it more fascinating than ever, and now on that little hand, lying as listlessly in her lap as if she were overcome with mortal fatigue. In the long-awaited rapture of that moment, in the strange seclusion of the dark little blue nest, conveying the sweetest of her sex homeward, her lover was seized with not a single desire, with no care for the time which was speeding and bringing separation nearer. That supreme spiritual pleasure he was drinking in, that great happiness was quite without alloy.

Motionless and mute he sat, with his eyes enchained, as it were by a spell, seeing nothing but that white face, and that small, soft white hand, which seemed asleep; he neither stirred nor spoke, a Buddhist of love, since there was naught to hinder the loftiest feelings.

Never had he known his life to unfold and run its course so smoothly, like a broad, smiling river, flowing down to the sea through a beautiful green plain in the sunlight, barely rippling under the willows. Never had he felt himself thus enthralled by pure bliss, in which soul and senses were alike assuaged, to the delight of heart and emotion. He quaffed deeply and exhaustively that cup of joy in the quiescence and passivity of complete happiness. [Pg 243]

Donna Angelica from time to time gave him a lingering look. Nestling in her corner, but neither curled nor huddled up, with that beauty of shape and pose peculiar to her, her attitude was one of rest; it was not too loose and not too stiff. She was not asleep—oh no; her large, dark eyes

were wide open, and every now and then fell quietly on him who loved her. But all the lines of her face had seemingly become softened and rounded in that state of repose.

Like children, like some women whose features relax and grow young again in sleep, whose faces then seem innocent and artless once more, so, in that unruffled moment, she looked like a little girl, like an ingenuous young creature still growing up. She no longer appeared as a woman bedizened in ballroom finery; her cloak might have been a schoolgirl's frock, plain and unpretentious, shapeless and chaste, a maiden's mantle; and the gleam of the diamonds in her dark hair and on her little hand was like a ray of light, not the fulgurant opulence of jewellery. She was a young girl once more, in the pure, spiritual essence of beauty and grace, in a state of repose that was also a new birth. No flame lit up those lovely eyes, so full of peace, chiselled like a statue's. She, too, was very tranquil; her small hand was as wax against the white of her gown; her face was outlined like a luminous oval against the dark background of the carriage, and what she thought or felt was unrevealed. Beneath that external composure, beneath the repose of those lines, perhaps thought was astir, perhaps a heart was beating strongly, perhaps a great inner, intellectual and emotional life was going through all the stages of activity. Yet, perhaps, this calm and peace had reached her very spirit; perhaps within her she likened the depths of a fathomless, steely lake, which no tempest could ever disturb. Nothing was certain, however. She was, as always, enwrapped in the great mystery of her own serenity.

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Between them both, between the happy mortal who was suffering himself to be engulfed in the whelming flood of spiritual bliss that stole over him, and the young, chaste, placid, and serene being, sat a third—Love.

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### CHAPTER III

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Scarcely had Francesco Sangiorgio emerged from the Via Babuino into the Piazza del Popolo than a handful of coriander seeds went down his neck, although he could not tell whence they came; a loose bunch of chicory-flowers then grazed his cheek, and in the rush of people he was borne away towards the obelisk. A black, noisy, shouting, whistling mob was surging round the fountain under a white shower of coriander seeds thrown by pedestrians, from carriages, and from the two great wooden stands which, as it were, formed a prolongation of the Corso to the fountain.

This dark crowd, with its excited faces, was shone upon by the afternoon sunlight, which covered the square with a cheerful spring cape, and in the tepid air, in the mild February sirocco, the grains of pulverized coriander inflamed the throat and drew blood to the cheeks. Sangiorgio was obliged to use elbows and shoulders in pushing his way through the howling mob, which jerked and jostled him; he was seized with wrath against an amusement so brutal as to outdo the ferocity of animals at play.

The crowd reached to the Pincio gates, obstructing them, barring them, clinging to the open railings, turning their backs upon both the avenues; but no one went in, no one thought of going up to the Pincio, all being impressed by the extraordinary spectacle which is always afforded by an unbridled human mob. Sangiorgio made his way energetically against the tide, putting a mighty restraint on himself not to distribute fisticuffs among those who hustled him. But the great difficulty for him was to get into the Pincio; the people who blocked the entrance would not let him pass—were afraid of losing their places, suspecting him of wanting to steal one, believing he wished to establish himself there, not for a moment imagining that he merely wanted to walk about inside.

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How could a man have the strange taste to walk in the deserted Pincio, on that holiday, at that warm afternoon hour, when everybody was mad with carnival mirth, from the Piazza Venezia to the Piazza del Popolo? The crowd was incredulous of such eccentricity, and refused to let Francesco Sangiorgio pass. Two or three times he shouted, his cheeks flushed with anger:

'I am going to the Pincio! I am going to the Pincio!'

He went in. No sooner had he rounded the corner of the avenue than a great sigh of relief escaped his breast, and a sense of tranquillity settled upon his overwrought nerves. He was entering upon the green, sloping solitude of the broad avenue, under the soft shadows of the elms, budding out anew in the anticipation of spring.

Not a soul was to be seen in the avenue, which in one direction went towards the Villa Medici and the Trinita dei Monti, and in the other up to the Pincio; there was not a single passer-by, not a woman, not a child. Everyone, everyone was in the Corso, in the street, doorways, balconies, loggias, on the improvised stands, on the pedestals of lamp-posts, on the backs of carriages; everyone, everyone was in the Corso, seized with carnival madness.

Francesco Sangiorgio felt more and more at ease and peace, as he ascended to that place of rural solitude. Now and then a shred of an echo reached him, from the Piazza del Popolo, of shrill, piercing voices dampened by distance; but as he went further away the echoes diminished, became quite faint, and then died. To anyone skirting the wall that overlooks the Piazza del Popolo, down below there still was visible a great black, struggling mass, and a great, transparent, white haze, a white, low haze, such as might hover over a swamp.

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On the ample terrace, broad and cheerful, which is almost a plain, which commands a view of Rome, St. Peter's, the Vatican, Monte Mario, and all the Campagna adjacent to the Tiber, besides the Flaminian gate, a poorly-clad old man was sitting on a bench, under a tree. His walking-stick was left to itself between his legs, the sun was beating down on his face, and he had closed his eyes, succumbing to age, the warmth, and sleep. Leaning, or more properly lying, on the broad baluster of the terrace, a priest was looking at Rome, a little black spot in front of the large white spot that the city appeared, bathed in the mellow afternoon sunshine. Francesco Sangiorgio went up to the priest to see who he was; he found a pale, thin youth, with freckled face; but he was looking neither at Rome nor the indistinct, dark mass swaying in the Piazza del Popolo; he was reading his breviary, a stout book bound in black, with yellow leaves. Sangiorgio moved on quickly, feeling safer than ever. Indeed, in that whole garden, favoured by nurses, governesses, and maid-servants, and adored by children, reigned the stillness of a deserted park, from which every sound and every sign of life had disappeared.

The large circular space where the band plays looked as if it had been unoccupied for years; the iron desks used for concerts were standing about in disorder and rusted, as if they had for an indefinite length of time been exposed to sun and rain, without ever being touched by the hand of man; the little stall belonging to the indiarubber ball, hoop, and skipping-rope vendor was untenanted, and the wares hung on a tree with no one to think of selling, buying, or stealing them; the merry-go-round was at a standstill, silent, deserted, with its hideous blue-and-red horses; the rope of the swing was dragging down as if weeping at being forsaken. On other days this juvenile playground was enlivened with childish shrieks, loud laughter, maternal calls, merry voices; now children and mothers and servants were down below there, lost in the great vortex of the carnival, seeming to have forgotten their delightful, verdant retreat, when the nascent spring-tide was calling everything into bloom.

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At the tiny lake, there was no one to throw bread-crumbs to the handsome white swan, which bent its neck so gracefully, like a drooping maiden, and swam so deliberately about its small stagnant pond; the swan looked worn and sad, as though it missed the gentle hands of the creatures wont to feed it. The water-dial, dirty and splashed, pointed to a quarter-past five—of what day, what year? One of the wheels was broken. No one at all was sitting in the shade of the Swiss cottage so much liked by the strange German seminarists who dress in red, and the pupils of the Nazzareno College; and from the railing separating the ground of the Villa Medici from the Pincio a long, dark, dank avenue was in sight. Under the plane-trees, the marble figures of Mercury, with cheeks rather washed out by the rains, with their curly locks blackened by the dampness, looked as if they had for centuries been tired of standing there.

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And Francesco Sangiorgio was glad of these solitary, rural surroundings, alive with new sap as befitted the soft season. The large garden, with its spacious walks, seemed entirely his own, left to him by the roistering multitude, apt for the concealment of his loves, the secluded nest of a pure, sentimental idyll. From afar, from the rear terrace, he had reviewed the immense green body of foliage of the Villa Borghese, where it would have been easy to hide; but she had declined, so as not to be obliged to cross the Piazza del Popolo on that horrible carnival day, although the Villa Borghese gardens—yet more than the Pincio—then resembled a huge natural park, untrodden by man, a vast lonely tract of virgin country.

Passing the dividing line between the Pincio and the Villa Medici, Sangiorgio cast a regretful glance at the gloomy darkness of the dense alley of trees where his sweet idyll would have been safe from the bright, lavish sunlight, but she had refused, since a special permit would have been requisite for the Villa Medici. What disturbed Sangiorgio, in his walk round the big garden, was the part which faced Rome and the Piazza del Popolo, all that open side, that gigantic breach, whence at moments came a deep drone, the clamour of the crowd in its mirth or disappointment. Each time he turned towards the Villa Borghese, he seemed to be in peace, alone with his love, unmolested in the beneficent, rural solitude. Whenever he turned back towards Rome, the sudden view of the city and the drone and the whole of the unwelcome outer world spoiled all his dreams. That public, that crowd, meant to him obstacles, difficulties, pain.

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When she arrived, he had been awaiting her for an hour, but had not been impatient, being still unfamiliar with the torture of waiting in uncertainty, still a believer in woman's word.

She came by the avenue leading to the Trinita dei Monti, having left her carriage in the Piazza di Spagna; she was dressed in dark-blue cloth, with a thin white veil over her face, which made her look younger; she walked softly, without any movement of her skirts, as though she were gliding over the ground, not coming but approaching. At a certain moment, both raised their eyes at once, and their glances met at a distance of thirty paces. She at once cast her eyes down, without hastening her step; he did not stir from the little buttress he had been leaning against, as he waited for her, watching her advance in her dark dress, in her youthful white veil. Surely she was a spring flower, a large human flower blooming for his special delight.

When they met, they neither bowed nor put out their hands; her small fist clasped the handle of her sunshade, a miniature cock carved in wood, with a red comb; they did not speak as they walked together, without looking at one another.

'Thank you,' said he.

'No, no,' she answered quickly, and, looking round with a timid glance, she added: 'Everybody will see us here.'

'There is no one; do not be afraid.'

'No one?'

'No one—because of the carnival.'

'True, they are all in the Corso; I was to have gone, too.'

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And she stopped on the broad, sunny terrace, whence they could view the whole, great, riotous sea of the populace in the Piazza del Popolo. He felt a pang at his heart, as if the sight robbed him of a portion of his happiness. She laid her slender hand, gloved in chamois, on the parapet, and gazed upon the great, dark floods of people, from which a noise rose up as of a volcano.

'How they are enjoying themselves down there,' she murmured sadly.

He waited behind her, seized with a fit of impatience.

'Come away, come away,' he urged.

She turned her back to the city, and accompanied him to the large avenue at the left; she kept her eyes on the ground as if wrapt in thought.

'No, there is nobody about,' she said, as though in relief. 'It is fortunate that it is carnival time. The people are nearly mad. Would you not rather be down there?'

'How can you possibly believe——?' he began in an injured tone.

'There are many things I can no longer believe in,' she whispered, as though in self-communion.

'You are so kind; I do not know what to say; be merciful,' he begged, with the humility of a Christian before the Blessed Image.

'I have sad tidings to tell you, my friend,' she continued, with her beautiful, sympathetic voice.

'Not to-day, not to-day—to-morrow—another day——'

'Better to-day than to-morrow,' she interposed, settling her lovely, mild eyes upon the Villa Borghese gardens. 'You must have courage.'

'I have none, none at all——'

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'You must,' she insisted, 'in order to be at peace with your conscience.'

And with a shiver she wrapped her little fur pelisse about her, since they were passing close to the sombre, chilly region of the Villa Medici.

'Conscience, conscience!' he exclaimed rebelliously. 'And what of love?'

'We must not love,' she said sententiously.

'And why not?'

'Because they will not allow it.'

'Who will not allow it?'

'They.' And, pointing with her finger, she indicated Rome and the Piazza del Popolo, where the carnival fever was at its height.

'But you do not know who they are.'

'They are our conscience: I could never endure doing wrong for the sake of love.'

'You do not love,' he bitterly remarked.

'Perhaps,' she said, lost in contemplation of Monte Mario.

'Come away, come away,' he repeated, seized with a spasm of repentance, and desirous of drawing her away from the spectacle of the crowd.

Indeed, as she turned her back upon the panorama of Rome, her face cleared, and her thoughts seemed to flow in a brighter channel. The great peace of the Pincian hill, the solitude, the first breath of spring, the sweet afternoon in the green, the tepid air, the looks of love and respect he bestowed upon her, the fidelity which he manifested, the amorous reverence with which he spoke to her, made her forget the tumult and the shouting of the carnival-smitten town, made her forget that another world existed besides the country, besides spring, besides love.

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He understood—oh yes—that a little of that soul was his, that it inclined towards him, in that deserted place, in the presence of the foliage, the falling waters of the fountain, the brazen, open horizon. But he divined that some of that feminine soul escaped him, that most of that heart was closed against him.

In this solitude, amid the new budding of tree and flower, where Nature was so full of charm, she was kind, and sweet, and affectionately sympathetic. But at the sight of that hard, malignant city, that never forgives, she summoned up all her courage to maintain herself inflexible, stiffened in her purpose to demand and insure the sacrifice of love. For this reason he did his utmost not to

let her return to the terrace and to the view upon the town, persuaded that the hour, weather, and place had a softening influence on her.

'One must not love too late,' she resumed, with melancholy infinitely sweet; 'it is useless and painful. Where were you five years ago?'

'Down there in the Basilicata,' he replied, with a vague gesture.

'And I was up there—up there in the mountains, among the snows. I believed in the snows of the glaciers, the invincible glaciers. I married Don Silvio; he was kind; I knew nothing of the sun. Now the sun has come to me too late.'

'Do not say so—do not say so!' he implored.

'We must not turn the snow into mud, my friend.'

Then there was silence. He became extremely pale, as though he were dying. Her eyes were full of tears; and he gazed into the brimming orbs, trembling at the sight of those flowing tears, as distressed as if his last hour had come.

But he did not tell her how he was suffering; he would not, could not complain; everything that came from her was good, was sweet. With the profound unselfishness of true, strong love, he forgot all his own griefs when he looked at those lovely, tearful eyes, saw the mournful droop of those lips. Her sorrow spurred him and lifted him up; he was carried away by a powerful, voluptuous thrill of sentiment.

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'Life is very hard for me, I must tell you,' she continued faintly, as if her emotions had overpowered her. 'I have no children to keep my heart warm with a mother's love. I have an old man who is utterly cold towards me; he is entirely taken up with his passion for something else, for another idea. Oh, if you only knew, my friend, what this solitude means, this eternal silence!'

'But why do you submit?'

'Because I do,' she said, as if this were the inscrutable decree of fate.

And she went on walking, speechless and still slower, as though succumbing to fatigue; he kept by her side, without seeing or hearing anything further, his mind and his senses a blank.

The sun was setting behind St. Peter's, between the church and Monte Mario.

'It is over, my friend—all over. I almost feel as if I were dead. People see my placid face, my invariable calmness, and they must know nothing more; they must never guess the truth. But there is nothing left in here.'

And she tapped her cloak over the place where her heart was. She was unaware what a cruel blow she had dealt the enamoured man in telling him she could never love him. At that hour and that spot she was yielding to one of the melancholy and egoistic outbursts of self-contained spirits; she had lost sight of her companion; she gave herself up to all the private woes of a disenchanted young soul.

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'But,' he murmured, 'you have a disinterested, steadfast friend, whose devotion will stand any test; whatever you wish, he wishes; his desire to help you, humbly, secretly, knows no limit—'

And he stopped short, because his voice quavered, because his words choked him, because this, his unspeakable love, threatened to overleap all bounds.

'Thank you—thank you,' she said, a sad smile lighting up her countenance; 'I know it.'

'You cannot—cannot know. I have never told you. I never shall tell you. I never could tell you. I only assure you that it is devotion of the deepest kind. Why reject it? How can you refuse it?'

'Because it is too much like love, my friend.'

'Love is not mentioned.'

'It can be inferred.'

'You must not understand it so; you must not infer thus. I am asking nothing; I want no more than to be allowed to give you this devotion.'

'So you say to-day; to-morrow love will demand love.'

'Who says so?'

'Ah me! Experience, my friend!'

'Experience lies!' exclaimed the other, with violence. 'My love is like no other.'

Angelica bowed her head for a moment as if convinced, and Sangiorgio repented his violence.

'Forgive me,' he humbly said, 'but the idea of losing you is unendurable.'

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'But we must part—better now than later. Later on we should suffer much more; I should be more in the wrong, and you would have a better right to accuse me. Habit aggravates and intensifies love. A day would come when we could not possibly separate—a day of exultation for you, of

shame for me. Now—we are still free. What are we to each other? Nothing—and it is best so. We have seen one another four or five times——'

'I have always seen you.'

'In the midst of life's frivolities——'

'I wept with you when you wept in the Pantheon.'

'Among inquisitive, evil-minded people——'

'I watched you for an hour, that day, from the Ponte Nomentano, when you let the rose-leaves drift on the current of the Aniene. You were alone—we were alone——'

'Among the conventional formalities of political life——'

'How lovely you were that night at the Quirinal ball! I went away with you. You did not speak. You said nothing to me. How lovely you were!'

'It is a dream—it is a dream,' she returned, inspired to the sacrifice by his vibrant words of love. 'We must awake; we must part.'

'Then it is death.'

'Who is speaking of death?'

He did not answer her question, but she understood his look of pain and reproach. The sun had set, and the great purple, crepuscular shrouds now rose from the earth to the white sky; a cold, noxious breeze sprang up; from the terrace the priest had vanished, the reader of the breviary; from the wooden bench the old man had vanished, the whole Pincian hill was becoming dark, and down below the crowd was howling louder than ever, excited at the coming of evening. She prepared to leave by the broad road to the Trinita dei Monti, but he went with her, as if bewitched, without a word, but intent upon going anywhere with her. At the stone buttress where she had met him, she turned, and put out her hand:

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'Good-bye, my friend.'

'No, not good-bye!'

'It is late,' said the beloved voice in a measured tone.

And Angelica was lost in the vapours of evenfall.

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From the Piazza del Popolo to the Piazza di Venezia the little candles were now being lit. There were a myriad tiny points of fire, wandering flamelets, in the streets, on verandas, balconies, carts; tiny, nondescript, dirty bundles flew about; long-handled fans were active; handkerchiefs and rags were in motion; there was jumping about and puffing out of mouths—all manner of contrivances, all pranks, all sorts of violence and brutality were indulged in to extinguish the candles. And the shouts of resistance and attack sounded in the universal human echo:

'Candles, candles, candles!'

Through all the lights, all the uproar, and all the tumultuous merry-making, a poor mortal was making his way, agonized with pain, unconsciously pushed about, shouldered, jostled.

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## CHAPTER IV

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Three times they had met on the great road, lined with elms and plane-trees, which skirts the Tiber. She would leave her carriage before it reached the Milvio Bridge, and send her coachman back to wait for her in the Piazza San Pietro. She would cross the bridge on foot, looking about for him at the same time. To-day he had been waiting there for two hours, crazed with impatience and his intense desire of being in her company, walking to and fro opposite the Morteo Tavern, taking a turn in the Via di Tor di Quinto, going back as far as the bridge, reaching the point where the Flaminian Way begins, turning back again, casting restless glances all about, at the green willows bending over the river, at the blossoming almond-trees peering over the hedges of the Farnesina, in vain looking steadily in the direction of the Ponte Milvio, where she was to appear. And when he saw her in the distance, sudden blushes inflamed his pale cheeks; he would not go to meet her, but would wait where he stood, pretending absent-mindedness and unconcern.

She always came after missing three or four appointments, was always an hour or an hour and a half late, never apologized, never even alleged the slightest feminine excuse. And he, who was in despair—who up to the last moment had inwardly been accusing her of coldness and indifference, while he stamped his feet in an irresistible fit of nervousness—when he saw her said not a word, but stared at her quite bewitched, compensated by that moment of intense joy for all the suffering endured.

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Their first moments together were always embarrassing; they knew not what to say to one

another, and walked slowly beneath the trees, she with eyes downcast, her hands plunged in her muff, so as to have an excuse for not taking his arm, he twisting his extinguished cigar between his fingers, and in a blissful state despite Angelica's severity and melancholy.

The Roman spring was gently pervading the atmosphere among the cypresses of the Monte Mario and the plantains of the Monte Parioli, and from the tall hedges by river-bank and countryside emanated a strong scent of white hawthorn. Angelica's first words usually denoted grief, regret, repentance; brief words they were, but earnest, all of them weighing like lead upon her lover's heart. He would remain humbly silent, at a loss what consolation to proffer to the virtuous and saintly lady, whose conscience was stricken with remorse on his account.

She had never spoken of love to him, and never had he asked her for it. Timidity and shamefacedness perpetually restrained him. Perhaps he feared the answer, an answer that might be cruel in its frankness from a woman who was not in love, and whose deep religiosity would not allow her to lie.

Thus it came to be naturally established, in their singular relationship, that Donna Angelica was to give nothing of her heart, and was not to be asked to give any of it; it was tacitly but plainly understood that she should accept, support, and endure his love without ever being under an obligation to return it. She was the blessed image that vouchsafed to lower gracious eyes upon the faithful one; and the faithful one worshipped her more and more, adored her, and spoke to her of his love. Under the big trees of the Via Angelica, along which wound the silvery stream, as they walked on the hard earth amid the odours of the country, and as the sad rocking of Donna Angelica's voice diminished, with bated breath did he speak to her of his love. First came incoherent sentences, broken up by passion, which hastily recorded his feelings and thoughts since he had last seen her, or those he had before been unable to utter in her presence; and while he ejaculated these jerky, almost violent sentences he looked at her with a madman's eyes, for an instant terrifying her. But at the sound of his own voice Sangiorgio took heart of grace; his speech flowed more smoothly, his ideas connected themselves in logical sequence, his love found expression in such plain and convincing eloquence of sentiment that Donna Angelica was reassured by his humble and pleasing language; her face grew red like a young girl's in the pure enjoyment of amorous homage. Meanwhile, she would be picking long green stalks, or a bunch of bright yellow swallow-wort, or clusters of the tiny white flowerets resembling lacework, or some of the poisonous red berries, so attractive to the eye; and he spoke of love, and she suddenly rejuvenated, picked flowers, and occasionally took a flower from her bunch to give to him. He would hold it in his hand, furiously desiring to bite it, and one day he wanted to eat the red berries, so vivid in hue and so alluring.

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'Do you want to die?' she said jestingly, but trembling at the same time.

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And that apprehension of hers was one of the moral treasures Sangiorgio was gathering together. One day she stood on tip-toe by a short almond tree, and broke off a few sprigs, smelling them for a long time, with a happy smile on her face. Surely she was spring itself, fresh and lightsome! The almond blossom she gave him he added to a dried piece of lily of the valley, a fragment of cloth from a dress, begged and granted as a great favour, and a precious, invaluable object—a cambric pocket-handkerchief, received one evening when he had grown desperate, after three days of futile attempt, and asked for as something to comfort him. She knew this, and was glad in the knowledge. She looked long in the direction of Castel Sant' Angelo, towards the new carabineer barracks, towards old Rome, where the lights were beginning to be lit. But though she might be looking away, she listened to all the words that Sangiorgio spoke so softly, and she nodded her head, like a pleased child. Thus they reached the Porta Angelica, with minds soothed and at peace; he was to take the Via Reale, which leads to the Prati di Castello and the Ripetta, she was to go by the gate on the way to St. Peter's. But their farewell was long and full of tenderness.

One day she arrived all a-tremble. She had met the Honourable Giustini, the half-deformed Tuscan cynic. Her carriage had passed him quickly, yet Giustini had had time to recognise her, and had bowed with an air of astonishment. So much had this unbalanced her that at every step she turned round, imagining every passing peasant to be the hump-backed deputy, and then gazed at her companion in utter fright. He in vain tried to reassure her, to persuade her that a pedestrian could not follow a fast-trotting carriage, that the Flaminian Way was a public thoroughfare, where there was nothing remarkable about meeting a lady driving. Nevertheless, himself was seized with the vague apprehension which attacks lovers in their fullest felicity, and spoils their most innocent joys. That meeting was therefore painful, and the two were unable to settle into their usually tranquil state, and Angelica summarized her fears in this sentence:

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'Now Giustini is in the chamber, and is telling everyone, even my husband, that he met me on the Flaminian Way.'

In this unpleasant hour Sangiorgio ventured to tell her that the public highways were no suitable place for their attachment, that it must be concealed in a house, between four walls, far from prying eyes and inquisitive idlers. He spoke with such respectful feeling, such deep deference, such honest candour, that, although she at once briefly answered 'No,' she did so in a quite unoffended tone. She replied 'No' to all the humble proposals he had to offer, saying it slowly and decisively, without anger or vacillation. At a certain point she said, as if vexed:

'Stop it!'



He stopped. They separated without further conversation. But from the fatal hour that she had met Giustini, they felt the awkwardness of pursuing their love affair in public more and more, of trusting to chance, and taking no precautions although the danger was patent. It was a migratory, homeless affair, a vagabond affair that made the waiters lounging about the Morteo Café, at the Ponte Molle, smile ironically, a melancholy affair, whose tender adieus made the vulgar tax-officials at the Porta Angelica laugh.

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Two further meetings were very painful. Fear had now settled in Donna Angelica's heart, and made her shudder whenever a waggoner or a huntsman passed by; even the boats on the Tiber frightened her. She was always thinking the boatmen might recognise her, and might salute her by raising their oars. They no longer talked of love. That is to say, he no longer talked of love, since she would interrupt him incessantly, looking round, lowering her head when any carriage with strangers passed, blushing, paling, almost losing her breath.

One day when they had an appointment, it rained hard for an hour before the time. He took shelter under the Morteo doorway, but, unable to control his impatience, went on towards the Ponte Molle, becoming utterly soaked, trying to descry someone through the veil of rain. He saw nobody. She could not possibly have come in such weather, yet he persistently waited, sustained by a vague hope. The rain continued, and, of course, she did not come; but he returned to Rome only at seven o'clock, wet to the skin, in an open tram, with his feet on the sodden floor of the last one from Ponte Molle to Rome, in a very downcast, desolate mood, almost ill. He could not tell her of it that evening, since she was surrounded with people, and so she knew nothing of the dismal hours he had spent in the rain of heaven and the mists of the river.

But the next time he repeated his suggestion she still said 'No,' although unemphatically, as if she were rather answering herself than him. The hour was late and the weather freezing. It was one of those horrible January days transported into April; a lashing north wind was raging, the sky was murky, and the ground soaking and miry. She had on a little velvet cape, which barely protected her neck and shoulders, so that the cold penetrated her from top to toe; her head was bent, and she was holding her pocket-handkerchief to her mouth. Sangiorgio, too, was very cold, in his light spring overcoat, but he did not mention the fact, both of them being disappointed and depressed by the weather. At intervals he asked her:

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'You are very cold, are you not?'

'Oh yes,' she replied gently.

'Oh, Lord!' he said, looking about, not knowing what to do to make her warm.

They hastened their steps, but the mud was splashing Donna Angelica's boots and the bottom of her dress, and they could not run. As if accidentally, he brought up the subject of a warm room like his own, like that in the Piazza dell' Apollinare, where a fire was always burning in the hearth, a room where they would be alone.

She made no answer.

'Where?' she finally asked, after a lengthy silence.

He was about to tell her, but checked himself.

'Down there,' he then said, indefinitely pointing to Rome.

Nothing more passed between them. The hour was getting late, and it was growing dark and cold in the deserted Campagna. She was so melancholy and frightened that, for the first time, she passed her arm under her friend's, who received this favour with due humility. Then for three mortal days he did not see her at all. Vargas told him at the Chamber that she was indisposed. The fourth evening he found her alone, for a minute, in a box at the Apollo Theatre; she was pale and looked ill. Behind her large feather fan she confided to him that on her way back from their last tryst she had seen the Honourable Oldofredi near St. Peter's, who had looked her all over and grinned maliciously. Oldofredi was known to be revengeful. Finally, blushing for shame, she expressed doubts about her coachman and maid; she was sure they were spying on her. And, seeing her friend dumfounded and hopeless, she added very quickly:

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'I will go—I will go wherever you please.'

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## CHAPTER V

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When he returned that night to his modest lodgings in the Via Angelo Custode, Francesco Sangiorgio was in an almost feverish state. Donna Angelica's promise scourged his blood, his head was all a-buzz and confused. And immediately upon entering his parlour, a chilly sensation, and the bad smell forever pervading the place, made him shudder and feel nauseated. In order not to see the bare, wretched room, he neither lighted the lamp nor even struck a match. He threw himself dressed on his bed, and thought of the sort of house in which he could receive Donna Angelica.

His heated imagination, consumed with excitement and love, soared in visions. He conceived nothing definite, nothing exact. He saw before his open eyes a flight of warm, scented rooms,

with heavy, triple curtains, with soft carpets deadening every sound, but did not know where they would be, these rooms. He could not determine in what part of Rome they could be found, now selecting the Janiculum, now the Piazza Navona, now the Via Sistina, now the Piazza di Spagna. And this uncertainty, this state of not knowing, racked him terribly; it was torture of the kind involved in a bad or unfinished dream, whose victim wants to walk and cannot stir, tries to scream and finds no voice. Where was the door to these rooms, where was the staircase, which way did the windows face?

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He would see in his mind's eye a blaze of colours, the red of a silk curtain reflected on the wall, the tawny flash of a plush lounge, the metallic glitter from a Damascus blade under a ray of light, the intricate design of some old, yellow lace. But all this presented itself to him hazily, without his having a notion as to the where, the how, the when, or as to anything. Where would Donna Angelica sit when she came to this house, where would she rest her tired little feet, where would she put her beautiful arm, and assume her usual, ravishing attitude? He then fancied that in this house there would be neither chairs, sofas, stools, nor tables; he fancied an empty, vast, limitless space, where he and Donna Angelica would be lost to the world.

His imaginings made him writhe with anguish; a weight lay on his chest, his blood ran riot, his head was dizzy.

Stretched out upon his bed, half awake and half asleep, alternately in dismay and bliss over his dreams, he did not budge for fear that the whole might vanish, and Donna Angelica's promise as well; and at every new quarter of an hour spent in mental contortion his dream changed, was transmuted, was strangely reversed, became fearful or comical. At one time it seemed to him that he had been waiting for Donna Angelica ever since his memory had begun, and that she never, never came. The white curtains became yellow, and then gray; the hangings were discoloured and ruined by moths, falling to pieces, falling into dust; the furniture was all filthy, tumble-down from age; at the bottom of the flower-stand was a small heap of pestilent refuse that once had been flowers; the very walls exhaled dampness and decay, and seemed quite rotten. And he, Sangiorgio, in his everlasting wait, seemed to have become a tottering old man, more than a hundred years old, slow, infirm, with long, white beard and wan face. Donna Angelica never, never came, and Sangiorgio continued to wait, patient and lovelorn. Then a great voice thundered thrice through the house: 'Donna Angelica is dead! Donna Angelica is dead! Donna Angelica is dead!'

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The first time, the furniture fell into bits; the second, the old man fell dead, face down and arms out; the third, the walls of the house crumbled, burying everything beneath them, making a tomb of the house Donna Angelica would not visit.

His dream was perpetually changing. He thought that on the day of the first meeting in this house, he through some curious cause had forgotten the hour of the appointment, and was fretting his brain to recall whether it was for two o'clock or three, but was not sure, could not remember.

Then he left Montecitorio at noon, so as to be in time, but in the corridor he met the old Prime Minister, who stopped him, and, while stroking his flowing white beard, talked to him about the Basilicata, salt, peasants, and things scarcely intelligible to Sangiorgio, so absent-minded did he seem.

He contrived to escape from him, but on the threshold of the portico he met the Honourable Giustini, whose hump had become enormous, and whose venomous grin gave him a pain in the chest, as if a leech had been sucking his blood. Giustini barred his way, crossing his crooked legs, talking to him of Rome, Rome that pretended to be lazily asleep, but that was really very wide awake; and he clenched his arm, hurting him as he did so. Eventually Sangiorgio tore himself abruptly away from Giustini's grasp, and ran across the Piazza Colonna, where a female voice hailed him from a closed carriage. He did not want to stop, yet felt he was being drawn to the carriage against his will. A pair of black, sparkling eyes gazed upon him with love and desire; there were the luscious, alluring lips that had kissed him, and were ready to kiss him again; there were the soft, caressing hands; there was the strong, sweet odour of violets; there was Donna Elena Fiammanti, who had liked him, and liked him still, and who, without moving her lips, said to him:

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'Come with me! come, remember it all! Remember when we met on Christmas Day at the Janiculum; remember the night of the ball, and the moon, and the Piazza di Spagna; remember the roses I left at your house that day; remember the kiss I gave you in the theatre after the duel; remember all my kisses, all my love; come with me—with me is joy, with me is pleasure, with me you shall not weep, with me you shall not suffer. So come, tell me what afflicts you, and I will comfort you; I will not tell you of my sorrows, me you shall have no need to comfort.'

But he bent his head, stuffed up his ears, shut his eyes, in order not to hear that fascinating voice, in order not to see that face grow mournfully sad. He said a name to himself—'Angelica'—his talisman, and it seemed as if its echo struck Donna Elena in the heart, as if she threw herself back despairingly in the carriage, and ordered the coachman to drive quickly away.

Sangiorgio ran on and on. All the carriages he met were full, all the friends he met tried to stop him, a crowd hedging him in on all sides prevented his progress. Dogs got in his way. He ran on and on, panting, panting. Now he could not be in time; it was too late. Donna Angelica would be there already. She would have gone; she would not have waited. What a long way to go, what

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obstacles, what hindrances! At last he had reached the place. Red in the face, out of breath, hopeless, he now stopped short. In front of the door walked the Honourable Oldofredi, sardonic, dangerous, grinning. The very wound in his face that Sangiorgio had inflicted grinned. He was walking back and forth on guard, hideous, hateful, vengeful, implacable.

\* \* \* \* \*

The house was No. 62, Piazza di Spagna. At the door an itinerant flower-girl had set down her basket of spring flowers: pale, odorous Parma violets, double roses, sweet-smelling jonquils. The staircase was dark, and three doors opened upon the landing. Sangiorgio's card was affixed to the central door by two pins. In a small anteroom Noci had put a bridal coffer of handsomely carved oak, on which lay a cushion of red and yellow silk, and by its side stood three or four stools and a table. A bronze lamp was suspended from the ceiling. It was always burning, and created an illusion of night in the rather gloomy anteroom, whose ugly ceiling and whose walls were covered by painted canvas, which concealed some grotesque pictures and a large map of France. The sitting-room had a large window overlooking the square. It was a spacious, cheerful, sunny room. Damask curtains of old rose and pale green, falling over a widow-shade of yellow lace, softened the garish light of day. The walls were stretched with satin of a light nut colour, which disappeared beneath Persian rugs and squares of antique brocades, artistically draped, and held in place by a shining metal shield, by a silver scimitar, or by fan-shaped tufts of peacock's feathers. A sandalwood rosary, one of the long necklaces of perfumed beads which Turkish women are always running through their fingers to scent their hands, and to kill heavily hanging time by a monotonous pastime—such a Turkish rosary, not for praying, but for pleasure of touch and mind, a *comboloi* hung upon one of the walls; from the other hung a great white veil with silver stars, the gear worn by Eastern women called *feredje*. But the strange, dominant feature was on the walls—a piece of antique, yellow brocade, something like an oriflamme, with a Latin cross, cut lengthwise and crosswise in black velvet, a cross that stood out strikingly amid all the quiet tints of hazelnut, dull brick, and pale pink which prevailed in the room. The place was extremely luxurious. There was not a single piece of bare wooden furniture, not a table or stool with sharp corners; everything was velvet, silk, and satin. In vases of opalescent glass were hyacinths, mauve lilac, white and blue; an orchid in a Japanese vase was languidly shedding its leaves. On an immense divan eiderdown cushions lay, heaped up in a corner, in fabrics of purple, scarlet, amaranth, light pink, in short every shade of red, from the faint blush in the heart of the white rose to the darkest wine colour; this might serve for a chair, a bed, or a throne. The two windows of the bedroom also fronted upon the Piazza di Spagna; it was a sort of second parlour, draped with dark blue velvet striped white and silver. There was no bed, but only a low divan, over which lay a blue and silver cover with a long, ornate 'A' worked in the middle. Overhead a tent, which was the colour of the nocturnal sky, and, like it, sprinkled with stars, threw down a discreet shadow. It formed a peculiar triangle, sustained by silver ropes and loops. A rosewood cupboard relieved this sombre tone, besides some of the small, dainty, coquettish furniture of the kind affected by the Pompadour.

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In a tall Japanese vase, big enough for a man to hide in, a paradise plant spread its opulent, richly-veined leaves. There was not another plant, not another flower. The little dressing-room adjoining was hung with creamy cashmere, and on a table all enveloped in snowy muslin was displayed a set of toilet articles in oxidized silver, between two enormous full-blown white azaleas. The place has been furnished in four days, in obedience to Sangiorgio's desperate haste. At first he had comported himself rationally, going there occasionally to superintend matters, but soon he became too impatient. Everything seemed too ugly for her; nothing could be done quickly enough. He went away, determined to come back only when the house should be finished, sleeping or dozing or dreaming the while in his cold, foul-smelling quarters in the Via Angelo Custode, pending the preparation of the lovers' nest in the Piazza di Spagna.

He did not return until everything was ready, and then his emotions were at once joyous and sorrowful. What would she say to it? Was not the sitting-room too voluptuous for the fair, dignified creature, who never threw herself into an easy attitude in an armchair? Would not this Oriental savour be too sensual for the chaste mind of that gentlest of beings? Were not the hyacinths, those flowers without leaves, too carnal in their efflorescence? And those piled cushions, crimson and faint pink—did they not too directly invite to repose, the perfidious repose in which the soul surrenders?

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The bedroom he thought handsome in its severity, but never would the pure one enter it. He was satisfied and agitated. He had wished the apartment to be fitted out as a retreat for lovers, and this was accomplished. The secrecy and seclusion of the spot, the floral and exotic perfumes, now upset his ideal—or, rather, gave rise to a new ideal, more vital, more human.

\* \* \* \* \*

Here, in his apartments warmed by the bright sun, which blazed upon the Piazza di Spagna from the dark Propaganda Fide to the cheerful Albergo di Londra, Francesco Sangiorgio was sitting opposite the open grate, where a fire of dry wood was always crackling and flaming, waiting for Donna Angelica. As soon as the apartment was completed, he had begun to repeat his persuasions whenever he found himself alone with her for a moment, at her house, at the theatre, in the diplomatic gallery, going from one door to another, in a corridor, on the threshold of her home, in any place where he could say a word or give a beseeching look without being seen or heard. This matter of meeting in the Piazza di Spagna house had become his mania; he neither spoke to her of, nor asked her for, anything else. She, repenting of having made the concession,

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and plunged into scruples, still refused to come, shaking her head, distrustful of him and of love, and apprehensive of being seen in the streets. She never mentioned her fears, her suspicions, but persisted in declining, always possessed by the indifference of a chaste woman, cured of ardent impulses, beyond any inclination to sin against religion. He became irritated and indignant at her suspicion, embittered through her resistance, the violence of his temperament and desires clashing against Donna Angelica's mildness, shattering against her refusal. Profound exasperation at himself and love began to take root in him, and he felt the injustice of such treatment from the woman he loved. One evening, overcome with resentment because of Donna Angelica's ingratitude, trembling with anger, he said to her:

'Well—tell me—why are you afraid—of what—of whom? Have I not always been obedient to your wishes? Do you not understand, Angelica, that you are in no danger whatever with me? Your strength is in yourself—you have no weaknesses—you never falter!'

She raised her head, all blushing with pride and defiance.

'I will come,' she said, like a heroine sure of victory.

'When?'

'I do not know. One of these days. You know the hours at which I am free.'

Further particulars she would not give. She felt no obligation to do so, believed he lived there in the Piazza di Spagna, and that it cost him nothing to wait for her. She believed in his devotion; like all women, she counted only her own sacrifice, and could not estimate that of the other side.

And every day towards the end of a very beautiful April Sangiorgio spent several expectant hours in the little sitting-room of the Piazza di Spagna. He rose rather late in his wretched lodgings in the Via Angela Custode, and dressed leisurely while sipping a cup of atrocious coffee, brought in by the servant. He touched neither pen nor book in the morning, but left the reeking atmosphere of those rooms as soon as possible. From instinctive curiosity he went to Montecitorio for his letters, but set foot neither in the reading-rooms nor the lobbies. Some of his colleagues addressed him thus:

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'What has become of you? We never see you nowadays. Why have you left off attending the sittings?'

'I have some work to do,' he would reply, passing a hand over his forehead.

Or someone would inquire:

'I suppose you have been to the Basilicata, Sangiorgio? Is your agricultural report nearly ready?'

'Yes, yes, I have been in the Basilicata,' he would answer, very much embarrassed and very red, adding vaguely: 'Yes, the report will soon be finished; it is a tremendous piece of work.'

He avoided being questioned, since he hated lies, and was not adept in the invention of them. He went away from Montecitorio, reading his letters without grasping their intent, uninterested in the requests of his constituents and of the officials in his district. Up to a month before he had been a model deputy, cool but courteous, answering all inquiries, frequently doing so on the day of receipt; not losing much time over unimportant people, wisely rendering services to influential constituents, and to everybody likely to be useful, satisfying one with a promise, or securing realization for another—in fact, offending no one. But now all this was distasteful to him; he could not endure the thought of it. His mind dwelt incessantly on the pretty little nest where his sweet lady would come to see him, and with a nervous gesture he would thrust his correspondence into his pockets, shrugging his shoulders, and would go straight to the Colonne, to breakfast there all alone, absorbed in his fancies, immersed in Buddhist-like meditations on love. He ate blindly, and when his conscience happened to prick him because of urgent letters to be answered, he would order paper, pens, and ink, and would write hurriedly, briefly, on a corner of his little table, leaving his beefsteak to get cold.

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But after a few letters disgust and impatience would overtake him; he would pay the bill and depart quickly. Sometimes the letters he had written remained in his pockets several days; he had forgotten them, and they were no longer any use. By one o'clock he was always in the Piazza di Spagna, buying flowers from all the flower-girls, loading himself with roses, hyacinths, and violets, hastening so as not to miss Angelica, who might, perhaps, be at his very door while the key was in his pocket.

The quiet, luxurious, cheerful atmosphere of the apartment gave him a delightful sensation of contentment. Donna Angelica was certain to come; she had promised—yes, she was certain to come. And he would set himself to lighting the fire, squatting on the ground, like an eager husband much in love. He knew that he would be displeased if, when the wood was burning brightly, Donna Angelica did not express approval of the blaze which quickens the blood and warms the heart.

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Then he would wander about the apartment, putting flowers in the vases, throwing away those that were faded in the little empty kitchen; and sometimes he placed a jar of hyacinths differently, bunched roses and violets together, separated them again, never satisfied, pursuing this lover's task with great assiduity. He would wander about the apartment, and the bedroom, with the low soft divan, would always cause him a nervous thrill. He would go back into the

sitting-room, to the fire—the chaste, comfortable fire, the purifying fire, the symbol of a noble soul. There he would wait.

Fortunately, the contemplation of a fire is a great pleasure to thoughtful and intense souls, so that Francesco Sangiorgio was able to restrain, to rock, as it were, his impatience at Donna Angelica's absence.

Though spending five or six hours a day alone by the grate in the little room without venturing to go away, he learnt to follow the whole life of the fire, from the small spark that grows and spreads to the big roaring flame, from the vigorous and powerful blaze to the spark that shrinks, dims, dies. His eye, on those long spring afternoons, mild to suffocation, followed the life, the glow, the death of each ember; and while his whole soul cried out and longed for Donna Angelica, consuming away for very desire, the fire was burning, like himself, with the same heat, the same flaring up, the same languid smouldering, that by degrees perished. The fire was at its brightest between four and six, the time during which Donna Angelica was most likely to come; at that time, in the heart of the man as well as in the grate, there was a mighty furnace, a temperature high enough to melt anything, courage or metal. Any moment she might come; perhaps even now she was on the stairs, was trembling and hesitating on the landing. He closed his eyes at the very idea, at the fierce, violent shock it gave him. Every day between four and six his nervous system underwent a double strain of excitement, and during those two hours the flames from the logs would lick the walls of the fireplace.

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Then came the twilight. Hope and desire declined within the bosom of the lover, who was sunk in lethargy; the fire declined in the grate, the light failed, the embers blackened, and the gray ashes of night descended upon the earth, upon love, upon the fire. At half-past seven each evening he would depart, in the chill of the evening and of the street, in the chill of his own disappointment. He would go away pale and stooping, his hands in his pockets and his head down on his chest, like a wretched victim to fever, whose system is pervaded with the disease, like a gambler who has lost his last game.

And, like the gambler who every day is bowed down under his chagrin, but who every night finds fresh strength to hope and play more energetically and daringly, so did the discouraged lover in the evening, when he saw Donna Angelica, renew his faith in love. He then saw her only among other people, and could scarcely get a word with her, but her eyes said to him, exhorting him to patience, to fortitude:

'Wait for me; wait for me still! I am coming!'

The next day, in spite of the voice of doubt in his soul, in spite of all past disappointments, he would once more hie to the little apartment in the Piazza di Spagna, and shut himself up there. It was folly to expect her before two o'clock, but, in his impatience, he came earlier every day, going at noon into the little sitting-room, where the bright April sun was shining, and leaving later than ever in the evening—at eight. At times, sitting by the waning fire, he would be overtaken by drowsiness, as fever patients often are; he would doze and dream, waking up with a start, thinking he heard a bell ring. But it was nothing; Donna Angelica did not come. And connected with this waiting was something vastly exasperating: before he was thus obliged to wait for Donna Angelica, silent and alone, before he had any notion of an apartment, he was at liberty to go out, upon the chance of finding her at a lecture, at a reception, at the Parliament, out walking—could even find an excuse to go to her house for a moment, could, failing anything better, talk about her for a minute with Don Silvio. But now it was different. While she went about, perhaps to the Villa Borghese, perhaps to a friend's for a visit, perhaps to a Parliamentary sitting; while she was shedding the light of her presence on women, fools, and callous people; while any silly fop could see her, make his bows to her, talk with her—he, who loved her, who wanted her, who lived for her alone, was condemned to inactivity, to impotence, alone, all alone between four walls, tormented by these two thoughts:

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'Where is she? Will she come?'

At first, before he had any notion of an apartment, he still was one of the human fraternity. He went about among people, under the sway, it is true, of a single idea, but at least showing all evidence of life. His colleagues met him, spoke to him, discussed with him; he listened mechanically and answered like a musician who plays by ear; he pretended interest in his former passion. That was at any rate a semblance of living. But now, betwixt him and politics, betwixt him and life, a great chasm existed. He would appear at Montecitorio for a moment merely, early in the morning from his habit of going there for letters; after which the apartment in the Piazza di Spagna swallowed all thought and action, took entire possession of Sangiorgio's activity and attention. At night, when he set forth in quest of Donna Angelica, he would come back to life like a somnambulist: he knew nothing, had heard and seen nothing, had spoken with no one, had read no newspaper, had a childish air. Meanwhile such opinions as these began to gain currency regarding him:

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'That Sangiorgio! He seemed such a formidable fellow! What a pity!'

'Just like all Southerners! A blaze of straw that gives neither light nor heat.'

'Sangiorgio has had his day.'

He felt this wall of ice building around him, this separation from everybody, this departure from public life. He was keenly conscious of the dissent between his spirit and politics; he realized that

each day with his new, absorbing ideal removed him thousands of miles from his old ideals. All of this he plainly saw.

He was not blind—oh no! not blind, but waking, and wanting to sacrifice himself. He was not a victim uttering words of despair, not a rebel reviling a tyrant, but a happy, contented martyr, blissfully watching his best blood flow from his veins. And the more his love carried him away, the greater did his enthusiasm grow, the greater his sacrifice, the greater his wish for sacrifice. Thus a sort of sombre, painful sense of pleasure would overcome him when, on sunny mornings, he left the streets, so full of people and business and the movement of life, to shut himself up in a little room and wait. Like a fanatical worshipper of Buddha, he went up and down the whole scale of annihilation, even to the utter abstraction of suffering, even to a Nirvana that was all pain.

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It was the first morning of the month of May—a fair, sunny, fragrant morning, on which the bells of the Trinita dei Monti were chiming merrily. Sangiorgio had just arrived at his sanctuary laden with roses, but his face was pale and thin; the moist freshness of the flowers, their healthy, handsome colour, contrasted with the bearer, who was mournful and sickly as an October evening laden with noxious vapours. He was arranging the roses with the childish look of pain that inspires compassion, the more so because sincerely and uncomplaining. A light touch of the bell gave him a nervous thrill, made him blush, sent tears to his eyes. The roses fell on the carpet.

'It is I,' whispered Angelica Vargas, as she walked in. She did not look about, but hastened into the parlour, sat down in an armchair, and repeated, 'It is I.'

He stood by her, gazing at her with his tearful eyes, not venturing a word, not even finding courage to thank her.

She, sweet lady, had kept her promise; she could not lie. With fragrant May, the poetic month of roses, she had come—the divine one. Surely she was the Madonna to whom roses are offered. Without saying a word, upon an abrupt impulse, he went through the house collecting all the roses, whether on the ground or in the vases, and very gently, without remark, poured them into her lap, until her dress, which was of a light gray material, was covered with them.

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'I have delayed coming very long,' she murmured, bending her head under the stream of flowers, 'but I could not help it.'

And she made a vague gesture of female helplessness. With glance of eye and sign of hand he begged her to desist; her actions needed no justification in his sight. And so profound was the consolation of her presence in the house, so complete his heart's felicity, that he was loath to disturb it by any painful thoughts, any suggestion of reproach. The sweet lady, dressed in a delicate shade of gray, with an airy white feather in her hat, with a transparent, white veil over her eyes, which made her face look more youthful than ever, sat composedly in her chair, her knees covered with roses, one hand gloved in gray lying hidden among the roses in her lap, while the other ungloved hand hung out of her sleeve with open fingers, as though she had dropped something. He sat down beside her, gently raised her inert hand, carried it to his lips, breathed a kiss upon it. She appeared not to notice it.

'It is quite pretty here,' she tranquilly observed, after a lengthy pause, as if visiting a female friend in a new house. 'Yes, it is quite pretty.'

'I thought I had heard you say you liked the Piazza di Spagna,' he answered.

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'It is the part of the town I like best. You have made a good choice. I have never been able to find an apartment here. Old Rome, where I live, is so very, very dismal; that is why I go out so much. Whenever I do, no matter what hurry I am in, I always pass through the Piazza di Spagna.'

'Come and stay in this room,' he said smilingly, as if in jest.

'I would come if I could,' she replied innocently, 'but I cannot. I must live down there, in the shade. How sunny it is here! And you have flowers for sale in the doorways; I saw some as I came in here. The houses seem to be full of them. I should think that all the homes in this square must be happy. So much sunlight, so much spring, so much loveliness! You are happy here, are you not, my friend?'

'Yes,' he said, with deep meaning.

'May God bless you,' she murmured, as though she were praying. Then she buried her face for several minutes in a rose.

'And then,' she resumed, 'by way of contrast to all the brightness, to the white palaces, and the fine art shops, how strange is that great, severe, gray edifice, with the inscription "Propaganda Fide." The spread of the faith! Do you not think those words have a grand and mysterious sound, that they must go to all the corners of the earth? I hope you are a believer, my friend?'

'If you believe, Angelica, I believe also.'

'It is so vulgar to be an atheist! Religion is so good and beautiful; it is worth more than most things the world cares for. Have you ever been in any of the churches in Rome?'

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'I have looked into the basilicas from motives of artistic curiosity.'

'Oh yes, those are great empty churches that serve no purpose. You must see the little Roman chapels, that are meant to pray in. There is one up there, at the Trinita, where the young monks sing behind a railing on Sundays. What divine music that is! The monks are out of sight, and one would say they were souls chanting their sorrows and joys. Let us go and hear them together some day. Would you like to?'

'If you wish it, I will go.'

'I should like you to think as I do, my friend. I should like you to feel what I feel. Perhaps you can guess at it.'

'I am so fond of you—I shall guess,' he said, with the stifled voice in which he always spoke when alluding to his love.

'Sh! You promised to say nothing about that!' she murmured, blushing like a little girl.

'Sometimes it is too much for me. Let me tell you again, Angelica, you who are sweetness itself. I am so fond of you, so fond of you that it is killing me! I am all alone, I have no one in the whole world, I love no one else, can love no one else; I am very fond of you, Angelica.'

And, observing that he was flushed with emotion, she said nothing more, but very lightly passed her hand over his face, as though it had been the wing of a bird or a leaf stirred by the breeze. He stopped, liked a shamefaced boy, brightening up a little, put out of countenance a little, feeling his face refreshed by the caress.

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She smiled with a tinge of playful malice before asking him the following question:

'Is it true that you were in love with Elena Fiammanti?'

'No; I never was.'

'Then she was in love with you?'

'I do not think she was.'

'You never lie, do you?'

'No; never.'

'I think she loved you, nevertheless. She seems to have a rather light, fickle nature, but no doubt she has a good, affectionate heart. I hardly ever see her; she prefers men's society to women's. Have you really never been fond of her?'

'I never have been fond of anyone but you, Angelica.'

'Let us not speak of love. You promised me. If I mention it again do not answer. Let me go on talking without interruption. I feel the need of thinking aloud in the presence of one who understands me, sympathizes with me, has some affection for me. Sympathy, that is all! You will give me sympathy, will you not, my friend?'

'Angelica, Angelica, do not talk like that!'

'Because, you see, I am like a child sometimes; I forget that I am a woman, a responsible person. I become timid again, and superstitious, and fearsome, full of juvenile extravagances, unaccountable caprices. Outwardly to society I seem calm—that is my duty; but at times, when I am upset, when I am in a melancholy mood which has no explanation, or when I am suddenly gay without reason, then I want someone to sympathize with me. Do you sympathize with me, my friend?'

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And, as if praying to him, she joined her hands, turning a pair of beseeching eyes upon him. He bent for a moment over her gentle white forehead, and kissed her there so lightly that it seemed a mere breath, and with such tender kindness, with affection so pure, that she was deeply moved, and began to shed silent tears.

'Do not weep, Angelica,' he soon said in a changed voice; 'do not weep.'

'Yes, let me—let me! I want to; at home I never can. Now—now I will stop; you shall see—it will be over directly.'

He did not interrupt her, since it would have been like taking a comfort away from the poor soul. But the tears which flowed over her cheek caused him a deep pang; they were terribly painful and terribly seductive to him; they acted upon him with the irresistible voluptuousness of agony. While she was talking quietly and cheerfully, as though she were in her own drawing-room, or visiting a friend's, and not shut up surreptitiously in a house with a lover, where no disturbing spirit would ever come, he was able to control his masculine feelings enough not to ask anything of her, not to speak to her of love. But when, after telling him of her incurably broken heart, of her lost illusions, of the dreams of her youth, dead and gone for ever, when she wept and wept over their grave, when he knew her sobbing softly and steadily, like a suffering child—then it was all he could do to resist the temptation of clasping her in his arms, of holding her close to him for ever, to their last hour.

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Sangiorgio bent his head, so as not to see the face furrowed by tears, the bosom swelling and fluttering like a bird's. But, worn out at last, she gradually ceased, retaining the woebegone look

of one who has been weeping, and the aroma of tears. She silently examined the lace on her soaked handkerchief.

'Your pardon, my friend,' she finally said, as if she just then remembered he was there.

'Do not speak of it; am I not your friend?'

'Ah me, I fear I am a dull friend!' she said with a faint smile. 'I certainly shall not bring much joy into your life. It would be better to lose me than to keep me, I assure you.'

'I like you as you are; I like you because you are as you are!' he declared passionately.

She remained silent for an instant as her eyes rested on a ray of light which penetrated the yellow lace curtain, played upon the carpet, and lit up the heap of red cushions all ready for a tired lady. A sudden thought crossed her mind, and she rose abruptly.

'I must go.'

'No, no, no!' he pleaded in despair, as if such a thing was quite out of the question.

'I must go,' she repeated seriously.

'Why?' he asked in childish manner.

'Because——' she answered, smiling at his ingenuous question.

'Stay a little longer; you have only just come.'

'It is one o'clock. It is late. I must go!'

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'A few minutes, a few minutes more,' he urged, in the boyishness of his love.

'I cannot possibly; I have already stayed too long.'

'What difference can a few more minutes make?'

'No difference, but what is the use? A minute more, or five minutes more—what can it matter to you?'

'Do not torture me, Angelica. Be kind; grant me another five minutes.'

'I will stay, but you are very exacting,' quoth she, shaking her head like a mother who is unwillingly surrendering a sweetmeat to her clamouring little boy.

And then they remained standing opposite each other at the door, she as though annoyed and wishing to be gone, he as though embarrassed and sorry for having kept her back. Of a sudden Sangiorgio's face exhibited an anxious doubt.

'And shall you really never come back?'

'I will come back.'

'Oh yes, you say so, but you will not come!' he exclaimed in deep agitation, and totally carried away by this idea. 'Why deceive me? You are going away, and I shall never see you here again. I have a presentiment of it; I feel it in me!'

'I shall come back—I shall come back,' she assured him, with that gentle, firm voice that had the power of assuring him. And to reassure him she allowed the freshness of a smile to dwell on him for a moment, the serenity of her glance.

This calmed and appeased him.

'Promise me, then, that you will come back. Will you promise?'

'I promise you.'

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'For the sake of the thing or person interesting you most in the whole world?'

'For the sake of the thing or person interesting me most in the whole world, I promise you.'

'When will you come back?'

'That I cannot tell. My time is not my own. I will come back when I can.'

'You can come back soon if you want to, Angelica. Anyhow, can you not mention an hour or a day?'

'What for? Do you find waiting for me tiresome? Is this not your home?'

'Yes, but at least name a day——'

'Oh, then, you do not like waiting for me! You have more amusing things to do.'

'No, Angelica, nothing.'

'Well, then?'

'Well—if you only knew, Angelica, how sad I feel when I do not know the day or the hour that I



am to see you again! This vague expectation is torture—it is a nightmare! You would be sorry for me, Angelica, if you knew how it makes my heart and my brain suffer. Even if you intend to delude me, or you cannot come, still, name a day.'

'To-day is Sunday,' she reflected. 'To-morrow I cannot come, nor the day after, nor Wednesday; all my time is taken up those days. Thursday—yes, you may count on seeing me on Thursday—'

'Not before?'

'How do I know? Possibly for a minute one of those three days. But I will come on Thursday for certain. Good-bye, my friend!' [Pg 290]

'Oh, stay!' he cried, holding her back by the hand.

'How childish you are! Good-bye!' And she flitted down the stairs, as though she were making a fortunate escape.

Immediately he felt as if life were ebbing from him; he felt as if all his blood was flowing away out of a deadly wound. He did not look back into the room where they had been together, nor at the place where they had sat side by side. He took his hat and darted off to find Angelica, in the wild hope of finding her. The square, so full of sunlight in the middle of the day, dazzled him, and instinctively he made for the Via Condotti. But nowhere did he descry the pretty gray dress and the white veil. Halfway up the street he retraced his steps, and hastened in the direction of the Via Propaganda Fide—a name fresh in his memory—wandered through the Via Sant' Andrea delle Fratte, the Via Mercede, and the Via San Silvestro, like one befogged, like someone eagerly looking for a thing he is sure of having lost.

But the dear shape seemed to have melted into the sunshine, for, after searching all the streets in the neighbourhood of the Piazza di Spagna in hot haste, spurred by an invincible impulse, Sangiorgio had not succeeded in finding her. He then walked for another hour by the Via Babuino, the Via Due Macelli, and the Via Sistina, to the Villa Medici and the Pincio, prey to a nervous tension which prevented him from feeling fatigued, giving rein to the mad idea that Donna Angelica must have intended to take a walk at this time of the day. He arrived in the Piazza del Popolo, suddenly composed, with tired legs, with his brain all confused. It must be late, he thought, very late; he seemed to have spent a long, eventful day; he felt the moral and physical fatigue incident to the great days of a lifetime. He took out his watch. It was barely half-past one; the rest of the day was a blank to him. Mechanically and very, very slowly, in obedience to former habits, he wended his way down the Corso to the Chamber, with a disgusted expression, ignoring the handsome middle-class Roman women going home from Mass, recognising no one who bowed to him in the glad, bright beams of that May Sunday. He went to the Parliament, but did not know whether on a Sunday there would be a sitting. Nevertheless, he went to take refuge there, not knowing what to do with body or soul. The people he met all appeared new and foreign to him, and as he looked at them, surprised at so many strange faces, they, too, seemed to look at him in surprise and askance. At this hour the coming and going of deputies about Montecitorio was incessant; friends went up and down in couples, and also little groups of politicians, who had lunched together at the Colonne, the Parliamente, the Fagiano, or the Sorelle Venete. Sangiorgio acknowledged a bow now and then as if he was in a dream. He saw them debating, heard them arguing; passing close by them, he caught snatches of their discussions, but it all conveyed nothing to him. Luckily, there was a sitting that day.

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He took his usual seat, and from the force of physical habit put the papers in front of him in order, while hearing the small but penetrating voice of Sangarzia read out the schedule of proceedings. What was it all about? That voice was bewildering to his mind. Those words he seemed to have heard before—but when? It cost him a stupendous effort to pull himself together. He was like a man who, after experiencing a growing nervous exhilaration for a certain period, afterwards yields to utter lassitude, his strength being totally exhausted.

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He sat with his head between his hands, trying to grasp the sound and sense of all that was being said. But he was too weak. A torpor was creeping over him; he was afraid he might fall asleep! He went out upon the corridors to smoke a cigar. The Honourable di Carimate, the agreeable Lombard gentleman, chairman of an agrarian committee, accosted him:

'Well, Sangiorgio, what about that report?'

'The report? Yes, when was I to have given it to you?'

'Why, a week ago. We are very much behindhand. I tried to find you everywhere. Did you not receive my last two notes?'

'No, neither,' he answered, lying.

'And to think that yesterday we were attacked! I was obliged to answer, as chairman. Have you been ill?'

'Very ill.'

'You look it. I hope you will get better, Sangiorgio. Have you caught a fever by any chance?'

'I think so.'

'I hope you will get better. And when do you say we may be ready?'

'I can hardly tell. In a week, perhaps. I will let you know.'

He returned to the hall, after shaking off the painful sensation of the lie. The Honourable Bonora was still speaking. An obscure, tedious newcomer, who would make a speech on every question, he was now boring the house. The Speaker, from his chair, made a friendly little sign to Sangiorgio, who went down and shook hands with him.

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'Ill?' asked the Romagnan of the honest brown eyes.

'Slightly.'

'Why do you not apply for leave of absence?'

'I shall. I want it.'

And he went back to his seat exhausted. A strong sense of irritation began to take root in him. It was five o'clock, and he seemed to have been in the Chamber for a century. San Demetrio, the Abruzzan deputy, and Scalia, the Sicilian, were talking in undertones about a duel between an editor and a deputy, and asked his opinion; he manifested obvious indifference.

All these voices, high or deep, at length sickened him. He was hot all over; he felt ill in that atmosphere; he was suffering there, could scarcely breathe. He left hurriedly, took a cab, and drove straight to the quarters in the Piazza di Spagna. There he threw himself, with outstretched arms, into a large chair Angelica had occupied, rested his face where that dear head had rested, and wept long and bitterly.

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## CHAPTER VI

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Angelica only kept her appointments with Sangiorgio by exception. Sometimes in the evening, when handing him a cup of tea, she would hastily whisper to him:

'To-morrow, at two o'clock.'

'Are you sure to come?' he would ask, since he had been disappointed several times.

'Quite sure.'

Believing this promise, he lived upon it that night and the next morning. By two o'clock she would not have arrived. At first he would think she had been delayed, would take patience, and look out of the window for her. Then he would be seized with uncertainty, and finally, at dusk, in that sweet month of May, he would lose hope altogether, and give way to despondency. When he saw her again, in all her beauty and serenity and freshness, as frank as ever, and amiable towards everybody, he was invaded with mingled bitterness, tenderness, and regret. Never, never should she know the extent of his love and sufferings. She excused herself not at all, or else only vaguely, by some brief phrase interjected fugitively into an account she was giving someone else of the day's tiresome doings. It was always a concert, a lecture, a charity bazaar, some visits to a hospital, a public function, or else some other trivial or stupid affair, which had interfered. Thus Sangiorgio's despair increased, for he saw how little of that soul belonged to him. But the whole evening she would lavish on him the sweetness of her veiled glances, would hold him captive under the fascinating brightness of her smile, would ask him for a book, her fan, or her handkerchief in such dulcet tones, and, in fact, impressing him to such an extent as the type of beatific femininity, that by the end of the evening he would be conquered once more. In his weakness, he would mentally ask her pardon for having harboured resentment.

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From time to time, however, she remembered the poor recluse who was waiting for her, shut up indoors in the ripe springtide, so delightful to enjoy in the streets of Rome and among the villas and on the flowery hills. She would arrive in the Piazza di Spagna unexpectedly, at an unforeseen hour, at ten in the morning or at seven in the evening, just as he was about to go away disconsolate. Once she came during one of the long May rain-storms and the first flashes of summer lightning. These unexpected visits always gave Sangiorgio a violent moral shock; he could not accustom himself to them, occurring as they did when he had lost hope of receiving any more, when he was plunged in the depths of disappointment, or into the half-besotted state peculiar to persons given to a single idea. Never did satiety come to him, since each new appearance of Donna Angelica was a special grace to him, a jewel from her spiritual treasure-house. And when she came in the first consoling moment the wearing, terrible pain of hopeless waiting was miraculously healed; the afflicted, sick, suffering man was resurrected like Lazarus from the tomb.

In the presence of the beloved reality he forgot everything he had endured in his visions of her, and when she was with him he could do nothing but worship her, kneel before her humbly, kiss her hands, thanking her for remembering him. And Donna Angelica maintained the place to which Sangiorgio's love had exalted her, which she was able to keep by force of her temperament and character, which was a high, solitary niche, unattainable, unassailable, a tabernacle of virtue and purity, whence she might deign to incline her eyes to him who loved her, might smile at him, stretch out a hand to him, allow the hem of her garment to be kissed, and this without any of her condescensions in the least dulling her aureole, without her divinity ever becoming humanized or feminized. Whenever she came to see him, it was an act of grace; her hands showered roses;

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she brought felicity with her. Her part was to do nothing but exist, appear, smile and vanish. And this she did.

Sangiorgio's individuality was losing itself more and more. Never did Angelica concern herself about his thoughts, feelings, or tortures during her absence; never did she question him about his work, his ambitions, his aims; she seemed to have no curiosity to really know him. She called him Sangiorgio, simply because she thought his Christian name, Francesco, too commonplace and ugly. And he felt this commonplaceness and this ugliness, and regretted both, but did not dare to ask her to call him by his first name.

Sitting beside him, looking at the large, black velvet cross on the yellow, brocaded cloth—a combination of vivid and sombre passionate colours—she vouchsafed to talk to him at great length, observing with what ecstasy he listened. Angelica yielded to the everlasting need that women have of communicating their thoughts, on all matters, great or small, to the want of a vent that drives so many of them to the steps of the confessional, that gives rise to so many sham friendships with other women, that also makes them seek a confidant in a man, without a care for the effect of their confidences.

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How much she had to say—she, who was condemned to perpetual silence—of Don Silvio's political pursuits, his age, his sardonic disposition! How much she had to say—she, whose husband's position forbade her to enter upon friendship with any woman in her social circle! And here she had found a confidant, the best of confidants, ever happy to listen to her, ever ready to agree with her, ever prone to sympathize with her, ever prone to admire her, hearing from his tongue the echo in epigram of the plain meaning of her speech and thought. He interpreted them best, in the way that women like, being a man who wanted to know everything, whose curiosity was insatiable, who understood everything, was indulgent towards all small faults, magnified and glorified the smallest virtues, turned a word into a poem, a sentence into a sentiment, and a kindness into a heroic deed—this man in love.

Sitting beside him, in the quiet of the room, the flower-scented room, among the soft-hued materials and the deep rich folds suggestive of intimacy, surrounded by all the queerly contrasting exotic articles, her eyes fixed on a glittering gold spot in some fabric, she would talk of herself, of the state of her heart, of the inexpressible sorrows no one should ever know of, but which he alone knew, of her small spiritual enjoyments, brief pleasures only confessed to one's self or one's closest friend.

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Angelica's disillusionment after marriage had not been abrupt, but gradual, continuous, increasing day by day, through a number of small griefs, until indifference and isolation had come. Her legitimate hopes of married happiness, of beautiful dreams, of a pure, tranquil love, and of faith in a loyal soul, had wretchedly gone shipwreck, and shattered against Don Silvio's great, burning, selfish passion—politics. It had not been the catastrophe of an instant, the huge, prostrating catastrophe, from which, however, recovery is possible through the natural workings of a strong soul; it was the daily drop, drop that hollows out, that ploughs furrows, that at last vanquishes even the hardness and coldness of stones.

Donna Angelica had much to say in telling the tale of her moral widowhood, and she musically varied her infinite lamentations in every key of sadness. She made no open accusations, not she; not a harsh or reviling word crossed her lips. But everything was mournful, innocent complaint, was the story of how she had been gradually and cruelly crushed, narrated with a delicate choice of words, but with an irremediable sense of woe.

Sangiorgio listened to it, and seeing her so wrapt up in her tale, so affected by what had been the slow stamping out of her heart, that he had no courage even to interrupt her, nor did he ever venture to tell her how he would have worshipped her, had fate blessed him with the supreme favour of giving her to him as his wife.

With avidity he received, from the adored lips, the minutest details of those small, daily tribulations, shuddering at each one of them, feeling what she had felt. He saturated himself in her story, which by degrees became his own, in which his personality ever more surely dissolved; when she, agitated by her own recital, and observing the paleness and perturbation of her listener, gave vent to tears or forcibly restrained them, he, by reflection, experienced the same emotion.

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In one of her sentiments he went further than she did.

Donna Angelica did not hate Don Silvio, not knowing how to hate, but he was shut out of her heart for evermore; she could not love him because he had neglected to love her; could not respect him because politics force a man into too much bargaining and baseness. But she did not hate him—oh no! he was merely indifferent to her. And she uttered her little assertions of indifference with such frigid precision, with such icy simplicity, that Sangiorgio shivered with the thought that these killing words might some day apply to him. But he went further than Angelica. He was a man, and he hated Don Silvio with a true lover's hatred. He hated him cordially, in every way, morally and materially, as an enemy and a wicked man, as a fortunate rival and a despicable creature; he hated him to the point of wishing him defeated, disgraced, defamed, dishonoured, dead. He had robbed him of Donna Angelica, barred her soul, rendered her incapable of further illusions, made her unhappy and suspicious of happiness; he had never loved her and had destroyed her faculty of loving; he—yes, he—still had Angelica in his power. And Sangiorgio also hated Don Silvio—that husband—with the fury, the jealousy, and the injustice of a

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lover who loves truly.

But this was not all that Donna Angelica related in her visits to the Piazza di Spagna. With the juvenile frankness of women who never do wrong, with the unobtrusive but dangerous sincerity which so closely resembles decoying and coquetry, she indulged in the circumstantial description of the feelings, habits, rules, tastes, which are the foundation of woman's life.

Sangiorgio now knew in detail the whole of Donna Angelica's daily life. At any time, closing his eyes, he could imagine what she was doing, so often had she repeated her favourite pursuits to him.

Although she went to bed late, she got up early in the morning, from an early Northern habit she had never been able to shake off. No one was allowed in her room, not even her maid. Angelica insisted that no one should intrude into the sacred nook of her nocturnal thoughts and dreams and slumbers. Did he, Sangiorgio, not think a bedroom was a sanctuary, to be free from profane intrusion? Yes, he thought so, she was quite right, he would reply, greatly agitated, with a fire burning his entrails. Donna Angelica only permitted her maid to do her hair and dress her when she went to balls; she detested the officious hands of servants about her body, their vulgar babble, the contact of their fingers with her hair, all of which shocked and disgusted her. Long ago, as a young girl, finding the length of her tresses annoying when she combed her hair, she had had it cut short, and had begun to wear the dark coiled headdress of an adult. One day, when she spoke of this in whispers, as in a dream, Sangiorgio humbly asked her to let her hair down, as he had never seen how long it was. She simply said no; that she would never have time to arrange it again; that it took an hour. He repeated the request in vain. She promised to do it some other day, when she would have more time with him.

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After her toilet, Donna Angelica spent a couple of hours in her little sitting-room next to her bedroom, reading, writing, dreaming, always alone.

She answered the notes of her friends up there, and the people who sent her applications, and those who wanted recommendations. She wrote very fast, always using white paper, without crest, motto, or monogram; the like of these, to which other women were devoted, she considered cheap, vulgar.

One day he asked her to write something on paper, a line merely, since he had never had a written word from her; and she would perhaps have done it, but Sangiorgio searched the apartment in vain, unable to lay his hands on either an inkstand, a pen, or a sheet of paper. In this house, intended for love, there were naturally lacking the things intended for study, for business, for everything that was not love.

She remarked, with a smile, that he evidently never wrote. No, he never wrote, he said—he only loved; and Angelica, still smiling, signed to him to stop. She would not listen to any of this, would not come back if he continued.

And the delightful, fascinating confidences would go on.

At half-past eleven she usually met Don Silvio at lunch. She was always hungry in the morning, like all young and healthy people. She would like to be chatting and laughing with someone as young and lively as herself at that cheerful hour of the day, but Don Silvio was at that hour always bursting with anger or the morning's annoyances, was never hungry, because the disease of politics had ruined his liver and stomach; and all through the meal he read newspapers and letters, and wrote at the table, just as he did in his drawing-room at the Braschi mansion, in the Chamber, and everywhere. Ah! she preferred to the company of that lean, old, pertinacious devourer of newspapers, letters, and telegrams, who let his cutlet get cold on his plate, who forgot to eat his fruit, in his daily fit of bile—to this she preferred being alone, with the sun casting a long ray on the table, with the music of a piano near by, with the buzz of the noonday flies when the weather was warm. And, seized with one of the strange caprices that pure women have, she proposed to Sangiorgio to go into the country quite early some morning, to one of the little inns with terraces arbour'd by creeping vines, and to have a meal together, as truant schoolboys might.

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'But why do you torture me? why do you tell me this?' he asked, gently reproachful.

'Do I torture you?'

'You would never go.'

'Yes, I shall—yes, I shall,' she murmured uncertainly, still amused at her juvenile idea.

After lunch Donna Angelica began her duties as a Minister's wife, as a woman with public obligations. She also went shopping then. She liked plain dresses, and black was her favourite colour. And Sangiorgio—yes, she knew he, too, cared most for black; he had seen her in black the first time, at the station, the day he arrived in Rome. Then came all the feminine features of politics—calls to be made and returned, patronesses' committees, meetings of charitable associations, benefit concerts, diplomatic receptions, opening ceremonies, lectures, prize distributions—all those long, tedious affairs, for no object, for no sensible reason, a brilliant gloss over cardboard, all for the honour of His Excellency, nothing for its own sake, nothing spiritual. She loathed all that. Ah! how happy she might have been as the wife of a quiet, thoughtful man, who was not eaten with the fever of politics, who regarded political power as an ignominious farce, who estimated correctly what it was to be Minister—namely, to be the accused instead of

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the judge, to sit on the prisoner's bench.

'Your wife, Sangiorgio,' she added.

'Oh, Angelica!' he said, with a peculiar intonation.

But she did not understand. She had revealed her whole life to him, had told him everything. Sangiorgio knew her, but she did not know Sangiorgio.

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A change occurred in their relations. Angelica had become accustomed to these visits, and came often, showing the easiest manner, as if she expected to meet friends, exhibiting neither a trace of sentiment nor the slightest diffidence. Sangiorgio sometimes scanned her face in doubt: it was serene, unclouded by fear or shame.

When she arrived she sat down as if she were in any other house, with not a quiver in her voice, not a tremor of her hand; nothing to suggest a woman doing a surreptitious thing, nothing to indicate consciousness of deceit. There now seemed to be no difficulty about coming; it was such a natural, simple thing. She would often come between two calls; she would leave the Chamber, and, on her way to the Russian Ambassadors, would see him for a moment—just a moment—before going on to the Embassy. She would come between two errands; after leaving her dressmaker's, who lived in the Piazza di Spagna, to go to Janetti's to buy some article, she would come and ask Sangiorgio's advice about a garment, or about a little Renaissance shrine.

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One day she cruelly said, as she entered:

'I happened to be passing by, and as I thought you might possibly be at home, I came up.'

Another time, when he was looking out into the street through the window, which he did not dare to open for fear of being recognised, and was almost suffocated with the heat of the room, he saw her walking in the square with her rhythmical step, glancing at the shops and the people. He gave a start, and wanted to call out to her to make her come up, but he lacked the courage, and his voice failed him. She went on and on without looking back. At a certain moment something seemed to come into her mind. She turned round, threw up a glance at that first-story window, saw that eager pale face behind it, smiled, went back again and up to his apartment, as she might have called on a friend she had seen on a balcony. How cruelly she did this! And these meetings with a man who was in love with her, in a private place, in a room accessible to no one, aroused no sense of guilt or betrayal in her. In fact, the thing had become a habit. She shook hands with him as one does with friends in the street; she let him button her glove as if they were at a ball; she looked him as straight in the face, treated him as she did in her own drawing-room; she spoke of trivial or serious matters according to inclination; she gave him any letters to read that might be in her pocket; she consulted him on family affairs; she had adopted a familiar friendly tone, never speaking or thinking of love, being ingenuously and aggressively blunt and open.

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Not so Sangiorgio. This continued intimacy, these secret confidences, these sequestered chats, in a warm room, with the lady of his heart, the hand he was allowed to kiss, the arm that rested so softly on his, the wavy locks on her forehead, which she let him fondle—all this physical femininity excited his blood and his senses, stirring up manhood and youth in him anew.

He was a man after all, and when that beloved face leaned very close to his in conversation, when he felt the odour of that hair going to his brain, when that supple form fell back in an armchair, shaken by a sob or in a burst of merry laughter, when that fair brow was bent in thought, at such moments he was on the verge of clasping Angelica in his arms, tenderly, passionately, in a lingering grasp.

The divine image had become too kind, too familiar, and too friendly for him not to feel her sex, with all her charms, all her seductions; they were together too much, alone and safe, for him always to remain a calm, religious worshipper; his love was too great for him not to aim, ultimately, at the entire possession of this woman.

In vain did he try to drive away temptation by recalling the sweet, pure beginning, when love floated on the wings of the ideal and the abstract; however hard it might once have been to relinquish her, now it was impossible to banish Angelica from his blood and his fibres.

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It was all in vain. The absolute, Buddhist five months' concentration had brought with it the concentration of his mind upon a single desire. With his simple, sober, robust nature, he in vain tried to escape from this phase of contemplation, for he was unable to wish for anything else. He went through daily struggles not to let Angelica read the truth in his longing eyes, not to let her understand the trembling of his longing lips, to prevent his longing arms from snatching her in their embrace. He was a man after all, and he fought because of his promise, fought with inner desperation, with now victory, now defeat imminent. The sweet lady smiled at him, put her face near his, spoke to him in whispers, all unwitting, cruel and innocent. He choked, he shut his eyes, as if it were all over with him. He had promised, promised! But she—why did she not understand? She was a woman, surely! Then why did she play with this peril? He had promised, but he was a man; endure the struggle he could not. How was it that Donna Angelica did not understand? Had she never understood? How long was this martyrdom to last? No, the torture of it was surpassing his strength. To have her there with him, beautiful, young, beloved—to be alone with her in that silent place—yet no, he could not break his promise which he had given: he must spare her that cup, he must give her up, she must come no more!

One day in June, while explaining a new way of doing her hair, she remembered her promise to take it down and let him see it.

'No, no,' he murmured.

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'Why?' she asked innocently.

'I could not bear it.'

'Not bear it?'

He did not answer. She took off her hat, laughing, snatched out three hairpins and a tortoiseshell comb, and shook out the dark tresses over her shoulders, still laughing like a child in fun.

'How lovely! how lovely!' he exclaimed in a stifled voice, seizing some of her locks and kissing them.

'May I go into your room to make myself tidy?' she asked, jumping to her feet, pink and fresh under this hood of hair.

She had never been in there, nor had ever evinced any curiosity to go. And she did not now wait for Sangiorgio's sanction, but went in without further ado, quite at home, confiding, unsuspecting. First, she was taken aback at the blue striped with silver, at once so sober and so sensual. She mechanically passed the yellow comb into her hair, without looking into the Pompadour mirror. Sangiorgio, standing by her, said nothing. Then her eyes fell for a moment on the blue velvet coverlet. She saw the capital 'A' embroidered on it, saw that piece of audacity, and uttered a faint cry of pain. She looked into Sangiorgio's eyes, and the truth was plain to her. Speechless, she knotted her hair on her neck, left the room, put on her hat, took her gloves and went away, without looking back.

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## CHAPTER VII

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Sangiorgio was idling under the porch at Montecitorio, while inside the ushers were nimbly extinguishing the gas in the library, reading and writing rooms, and offices. He was gazing at the starry summer sky and the square, being unable to make up his mind to go home. A tall, lean man, appearing from the Via Orfanelli, came up to him, cigar in mouth, with shoulders slightly bent.

'Good-evening, Sangiorgio,' he said. 'Are you at liberty?'

'Good-evening, Don Silvio. I am.'

'I have something to say to you.'

'Shall we go to your office, then?'

'No, no, not there.'

'To your house?'

'No, not to my house, either. I prefer to go to yours, Sangiorgio.' dryly answered the Minister, raising his head.

'As you please,' answered the deputy in the same tone, having understood what was coming. 'Come.'

They went across the Piazza Colonna in silence, smoking their cigars, looking at their shadows against the ground in the moonlit night. At the corner of the Via Cacciabove Sangiorgio made motion to turn off.

'That way?' asked Vargas doubtfully.

'Certainly.'

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'Do you not live at 62, Piazza di Spagna, Sangiorgio?'

'I admit it,' rejoined Sangiorgio frigidly.

They continued along the Corso, both maintaining silence, meeting people who were coming out of the summer theatres, the Quirino, the Corea, the Alhambra, and who, recognising the Minister's tall figure in spite of the darkness, pointed him out to one another, and turned round to look at him, taking Sangiorgio for a secretary or clerk. The two walked very slowly. At the Via Condotti no more people were in sight; there was no one in the Piazza di Spagna. The front-door of No. 62 was closed, but Sangiorgio had a key, though he had never been there at night. He lit a match on the dark staircase, Don Silvio following, still smoking. In the anteroom the oil lamp, which was always burning, threw sombre shadows on the carved, wooden bridal coffer, on the high-backed chairs. In the sitting-room, where no lights had ever been used, Sangiorgio turned about in embarrassment, match in hand, at a loss how to obtain a light. At last he found a slender, bronze, Pompeian candlestick, with three pink candles, which he lit. He sat down opposite Don Silvio, who had already taken a seat. The Minister had thrown his cigar away on the

landing, and left his hat in the anteroom; his head was lowered on his chest, and his eyeglass hanging down on his coat. Don Silvio was in one of his reflective moods.

'I am waiting, Don Silvio,' said Sangiorgio, with difficulty restraining himself from speaking impatiently.

'I was thinking, Sangiorgio,' quietly began the Minister, 'what a very strong desire you must have to kill me.'

'Very strong.'

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'To-day, no doubt, it is irresistible.'

'Irresistible.'

'You are wrong, Sangiorgio,' Don Silvio went on, very gently. 'Why should you wish to kill me? I am old, quite old; what you do not do, death will soon do in its natural course.'

'Don Silvio!' cried the other, suddenly prostrated.

'It is true; I am seventy-two years old, but I have lived the lives of three men. I am, in reality, more exhausted and much weaker than anyone knows of. Some day I shall collapse in a single moment. You might be my son, Sangiorgio. You would surely not kill your father for the sake of the inheritance.'

'Don Silvio, Don Silvio, do not say such things!'

'Yes, let me speak. We will not fight about this, however strong my right to do so, and however great your desire. Besides, it would be ridiculous. I, so near the grave, assuming the heat and passion of youth; you, so young, confessing you could not wait. We must not make ourselves ridiculous. I understand such affairs, when they are a question of love and youth, as being tragical, not comical. Better dishonour than a farce, Sangiorgio.'

'True, quite true.'

'And then there is Angelica,' added her aged husband, pronouncing the name with infinite tenderness.

A prolonged silence occurred in the little temple where the absent divinity still invisibly reigned.

'Angelica is good; she must not suffer. When she threw herself into my arms to-day, trembling with terror, beseeching me to save her—do not be jealous, Sangiorgio; she is a daughter to me—although I knew her secret, I let her speak, because her tears, her sobs, her despair, were the proof of her virtue: they showed her conscience rebelling against evil.'

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'You knew her whole secret?'

'Yes, from the very first. She did not exactly remember whether she came here for the first time on the second or the third of May; but I knew very well it was on a Sunday, the first of May. She confessed to having been here about fifteen times, but I knew better—that she had come eighteen times. I am Minister of Home Affairs. But I do not reproach her, and I am not reproaching you; you are right to love each other.'

Sangiorgio humbly raised his head to look the grief-smitten old husband in the eyes.

'Of course,' he resumed, 'Angelica being handsome and young and clever, she required some young person like herself, entirely devoted to her, who would appreciate all her good, lovely qualities, who would live the life of the spirit and the heart together with her. Instead, she has a withered, disbelieving, ruined old man, who has an old and greedy passion to feed—ambition, the exacting, absorbing, furious passion of men over forty.'

'It is natural that Angelica should prefer you to me. As for you, who know how to love, and still want to, who have no ambition, who do not yet know that fever of the soul which never can be stilled, who have a heart full of trust and an imagination full of enthusiasm, you prefer the sweet intoxication of love to everything else. Who could possibly find fault with you? It is you who are the wiser; we are the fools. We deserve to be tricked and deceived; we are striving for a vulgar sham, you for a divine reality! I cannot blame you.'

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Sangiorgio listened, with his face buried in his hands, without proffering a word.

'Further than that,' Don Silvio went on, as if soliloquizing, 'that great thing called man, that power, that force, that combination of forces, is governed by a certain law which imposes a restriction upon his achievements. Do this, and nothing else, says this law, if you do not want to be feeble and insufficient in both. One single, strong, intense, profound passion you may entertain; one single, high, distant, unattainable ideal you may cherish; and your soul must be completely devoted to this sole passion, from which nothing must make you swerve, and your soul must be wholly bent upon that one ideal if you want to reach it. Love, art, politics, science, these great human activities, these highest forms of passion, and the ideal, all go their own separate roads; and so stupendous are they that the miserable mind of a man can scarcely get his grasp on one of them. A man cannot be a scientist and an artist, nor a politician and a lover, without failing in both the things he wants to do. We must take our choice; the great human interests of mind and heart are selfish, and demand heavy sacrifices.'

'What is Donna Angelica's wish?' asked Sangiorgio briefly, rousing himself from the long spell of meditation in which he had been immersed.

'That you leave Rome, Sangiorgio,' answered Don Silvio.

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'I shall leave. For how long?'

'As long as possible.'

'I shall hand in my resignation. May I see her once more? I have not the shadow of an evil thought in making this request now.'

'She wishes not to see you.'

'Very well. May I at least write to her?'

'She begs that you will spare her. You will understand her reserve.'

'I understand. Now, tell me, Don Silvio, in this bitterest hour of my life, tell me before God, is it you who are compelling her to do all this, or is she doing it of her own free will?'

'I swear to you, my son,' said the old man gently, 'that it is all by her own free will, without any compulsion from me. You may see her if you like; I shall offer no opposition. But it will be better for you not to see her,' he added significantly.

'Is she suffering?'

'She has suffered.'

'What does she say about me?'

'She counts upon your love.'

'Very well. Tell her I am going away never to return. Good-bye, Don Silvio.'

'Good-bye, Sangiorgio.'

And they took leave of one another at the street door, under the sky of night.

'Another word, Don Silvio. You knew I loved Donna Angelica, and that she came to see me. Had you no fears?'

'I know Donna Angelica,' answered Don Silvio, with an accent of profound conviction, and went away.

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Francesco Sangiorgio understood. Like Don Silvio, he now also saw what Donna Angelica was—the woman who knew not how to love.

\* \* \* \* \*

He stole to the Speaker's rooms while the House was sitting, since he did not wish to be seen. From there he wrote a note, in which he asked to resign for reasons of health—a curt note, without any other particulars whatever. Upon handing the letter to the usher, his nerves underwent a violent shock; he seemed to be suffocated by a rush of blood. After seeing the man disappear through the door, he fell back into the yellow satin armchair, aged and weak, as if he were coming out of a ten years' sickness. He waited and waited, not daring to stir, not daring to go into the Chamber, whence that day he was voluntarily banishing himself. He was afraid to show himself, like a criminal; was afraid to give way to his feelings; was afraid to throw himself on the ground and weep over everything that was dying in him that day.

The usher came back with a note from the Speaker. The Chamber, as was customary, granted him, on the request of the Honourable Melillo, a three months' leave of absence. Did they not understand, then, that he wanted to go? Was the agony to begin over again? He was obliged to write the Speaker another note; positively, he was ill, and could not act as deputy any more. Then he walked up and down in the Speaker's sitting-room, like a caged lion; and each time he was near the bedroom he became seized with a sense of envy.

In there, on a bed to which he had been carried after taking a sudden fit during a speech he was making in the Chamber, a young and bold athlete of finance had breathed his last. He had known the supreme blessing of being able to die like a soldier on the battlefield, and Sangiorgio envied him his death. The usher came back. The House accepted the resignation, in view of the urgency of the case, the Speaker conveying besides a short message of regret, with wishes for his recovery. That was all, and it was the end of all. Sangiorgio mechanically felt for his medal, his pride, his amulet, and between his fingers it seemed eroded, thinned, as if it had been through fire. And slowly he went thence, resisting his strong desire to look once more at the lobbies, the corridors, the waiting-rooms, the library, the refreshment-rooms, the offices. But he went away without seeing them, since he was afraid of meeting too many deputies, to be obliged to give too many explanations, and shake too many hands; and he knew—yes, he knew that before anyone who should happen to be the first to bid him good-bye he would burst into tears, without shame, like a boy whose father has shut the door of his house against him. Better had he leave as though he cared not, like an unfaithful servant, who goes unthanked and without being bidden farewell; who wants to say no thanks, and offers no farewells.

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Suddenly, in the Montecitorio Square, he felt a great void within and all about him. He seemed to have nothing more to do, to have nowhere else to go to, to be excluded from seeing anyone; all things, people, and events became discoloured all at once. He wanted neither to walk, eat, talk, nor think; it all seemed useless—all. Instinctively he made for the Via Angelo Custode, to his old lodgings, where so much dust had accumulated in the summer, and where the disgusting smell of bugs was mixed with other horrible smells that came from the courtyard. There he threw himself on the bed, face downwards, buried in the cushions, hands lifeless, in mortal inanition. He had made no attempt to see Donna Angelica again; what use would it have been? Would there have been any change in her, or in his love, if he had seen her?

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It was all useless, all of it. He owed a large sum to an upholsterer, and another to a bank, the natural penalty of every honest but forbidden love. But what did it matter? He would pay, perhaps, when he was able, at some uncertain date; otherwise, if it meant ruin—well, so much the worse. Nothing could hurt him now; everything was useless, everything. He did not even want to see the apartment in the Piazza di Spagna again, all fragrant still, and warm with Angelica's late presence; he did not want to kiss the place where she had sat. These memories must be buried in the past; the evidence of the past must perish. Nor did he desire to take another walk through Rome, the city of his choice, the city of his dreams, which he was to quit in two hours.

He was fit for nothing more, and all was useless—all.

Now that all was over, better remain out of sight on that wretched bed in the furnished lodgings, with the filth and the vile smells, better see and hear nothing.

Surely this was a sleep-walker, this man who was going to and fro in the waiting-room at the station, after taking a second-class ticket for an unheard-of little place in the Basilicata, since he had not enough money to buy a first-class ticket. He must be walking in his sleep, this man, who saw none of the passengers, but stumbled up against them, while waiting for the departure of the Naples train; who paid no attention either to his traps, or to the itinerant news vendor offering him papers, or to the summer breeze that blew the gas about. This was a sleep-walker, surely, who was looking for a seat as he vacantly followed the voice of the guard.

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Ah, the long dream! With the first puffs of the departing train a severe shock at his heart awakens the pale sleep-walker. He moves to the window of the coach and sees Rome, black, towering, stupendous, on the seven hills flooded with light. And he draws back, and falls upon the seat as one dead, for in very truth Rome has conquered him.

THE END

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