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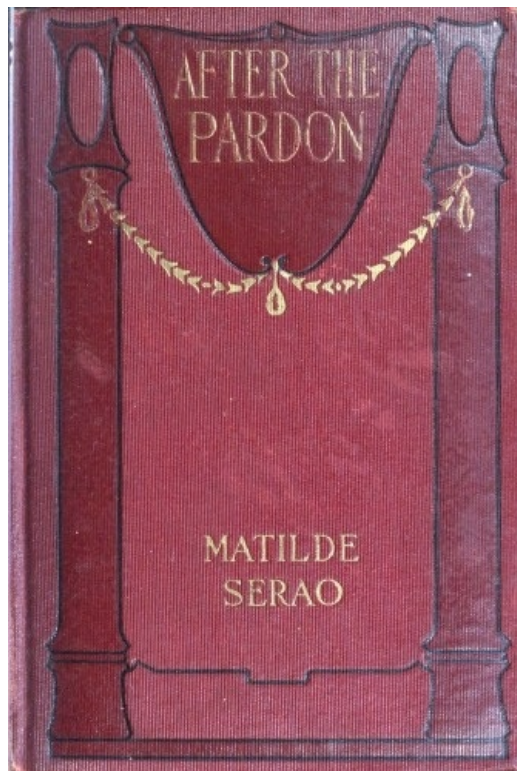
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### AFTER THE PARDON



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# AFTER THE PARDON

BY  
MATILDE SERAO



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1909

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## FOREWARD

In this romance, the author has vividly pictured the ravishing fierceness of the love which sways the Latins and bends them to its desires. Graphically she has shown how their passions force them beyond all laws and duties, beyond all vows. In them the emotional nature and the finer intelligence are ever at variance. They confuse that rude instinct which is jealousy, physical and base, with the higher and more ardent love—the virile affirmation of possession with the fresher, more vigorous desire of love's happiness—but this does not make their passions more trivial nor less consuming.

The author's gifts are of rare quality. She delves alike into the souls of her characters and into their more animal humanity, and contrasts their weaknesses with their strength in a striking manner.

The story is of the intensest interest.

F. F.

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*To that glorious soul*  
*ELEONORA DUSE*

# AFTER THE PARDON

## PART I

### SOLIS OCCASU

#### I

DONNA MARIA GUASCO SIMONETTI, gracefully stretched on the sofa and immersed in the many soft cushions of all kinds of fabrics and colours, was reading alone. A steady light, opalised by the clear transparent silk of a large shade, was diffused from the tall pedestal at her side, on which was placed a quaint lamp of chased silver, so that the reader's head, with her thick mass of chestnut hair, attired almost in harmony with its natural lines in broad waves and rich braids, received exactly the clearness of the light.

The pale face, slightly rosy beneath the fineness of its complexion, the large eyes bent over the reading, the little composed mouth, without smile but without bitterness, were delicately illuminated. The soft, opaque silk, of a sheenless silver, of her dress of exquisite style, blended itself with the colour of the cushions, while the soft fleecy lace which adorned the dress seemed a sort of superfluity of the large sofa. Amidst stuff and lace the feet peeped out in shoes of gold cloth, slightly peculiar and bright, the caprice of a lady in her own home.

She was reading alone, and the slow rustling of the pages, which she turned with a gentle movement, alone broke the silence of the room.

The tiny clock on a small table at her side tinkled clearly, striking half-past nine. Donna Maria started slightly, gave a rapid glance at the clock, and, from a long habit of solitude, said to herself almost aloud—

"Always later, always a little later."

Suppressing a sigh of impatience, and shrugging her beautiful shoulders, she resumed her reading. Her fine sense of hearing told her that outside in the hall the lock of the front door was rattling, and a slight blush rose to her cheeks and forehead.

A servant knocked at the door, entered without waiting for a reply, and silently offered the evening papers on a tray. She took them and placed them on the small table, scarcely bestowing a glance on him as he withdrew discreetly. Then, all of a sudden, a kind of spasm of grief, of anger and of annoyance, contracted her pure countenance, and with a half-angry, and yet suppressed cry, she exclaimed—

"How annoying! How annoying!"

The book fell down. Donna Maria arose, exposing her tall, lithe figure, full of noble grace. The harmony of a body not slender but comfortably covered, added to the pleasing maturity of thirty years, undulated in the silk dress with a slight rustling as she went to the balcony, and lifting the heavy lace curtains looked through the clear glass into the street.

The majestic piazza of Santa Maria Maggiore stretched before her eyes as far as the steps of the great basilica with its lofty closed doors, while the vastness of the piazza and the architectural grandeur of the temple were bathed on that June night by the soft brightness of the moon. The passers-by were few and scattered, little black shadows cast on the roads and footpaths of the square. Then an electric tram, coming from the via Cavour, crossed the square, desecrating for a moment the Roman scene, where faith and the Church had placed one of their most enduring and ancient manifestations, and suddenly disappeared into the other artery of the via Cavour.

The woman gazed at that almost deserted space, at the immense solitary church, rendered cold by the light of the moon, and the solitude of her desolate spirit and desolate heart became more profound and intense.

"Maria," said a voice at her shoulder.

She turned suddenly. The young man who had called her took her two hands and kissed them one after the other with tender gallantry, and while she bent her head with a smile he kissed her eyes with a soft caress.

"It is a little late," he said, excusing himself.

"It wants a quarter of an hour to ten," replied Maria precisely. He looked at his watch and added—

"Perhaps your watch is fast?"

"Perhaps," she replied, as if to break off the discussion.

She sat down, and the young man, taking a low chair, his usual seat, placed himself beside her. Taking her hand loosely he began to play a little with her fingers, toying distractedly with the rings with which they were loaded.

"...*m'aimes?*" said Maria, in an almost childish French fashion, but in a voice without tone or colour.

"...*t'aime,*" he replied childishly, and rather perfunctorily. Having, as it were, accomplished a small preliminary duty of conversation they were silent.

She looked at him, and noticed that he was in evening dress, and in his buttonhole were some carnations which she had given him in the morning. Marco Fiore's slightly delicate appearance was aided by these garments of society. His person gained freedom from a certain thinness more apparent than real. His face was a little too pallid, with deep-black hair and moustaches; the lips were fresh and strong. The eyes, which were extremely soft, with a fascinating softness, had every now and then something feminine in them. But there was nothing feminine in the gleams of passion which kept crossing them in waves, nor was there anything feminine in the generality of the lines, where firmness and even obstinacy were prominent. Two or three times, to break the silence, he kissed her slender fingers.

"Are you going out, Marco?" she asked in that decided voice of hers, which required a precise and direct reply.

"Yes, for a moment or two.... I am obliged to," Marco insinuated.

"Where?"

"To the English Embassy, Maria."

"Is there a reception?"

"Yes, the last of the season," he explained, as if to clear up his obligation for going.

Again there was a silence. Maria sat with her two jewelled hands clasped over her knees among the silken folds

of opaque silver, as if in a dream.

"Once upon a time I was a great friend of Lady Clairville."

"And now?" Marco asked absent-mindedly.

Suddenly he repented of the remark. Maria's large eyes, proud and ardent, were veiled in tears.

"Now no longer," she said, still as if in a dream.

"It is you who avoid her," he said, trying to repair the mischief.

"It is I, yes," she said, awakening suddenly, in a clear voice. "I did not wish her to cut me. The English are faithful, I know. But still she is an ambassadress and sees lots of people, even bad people."

He shook his head melancholily, as if he thought, "What is to be done? These are fatal matters to discuss."

"And you, Marco, why are you going?" Maria questioned, with an increase of hardness.

"My mother is going there, so——"

"But she has your sister-in-law for company?"

"Yes, Beatrice is accompanying her; but both have no escort."

"Is your brother Giulio away?"

"Yes, he is at Spello."

They remained silent for a while.

"I am sure," resumed Maria, "you will meet some one at the English Embassy."

"Whoever, Maria?"

"Vittoria Casalta, your former *fiancée*, the sister of your sister-in-law," and an accent more ironical than disdainful pointed the sentence.

"No, Maria," he said, at once becoming serious.

"What is this 'No,' Marco?" and she smiled more sarcastically; "what are you denying?"

"That Vittoria Casalta is going to the English Embassy, Maria."

"Ah, you know that she is not going there!" and she laughed bitterly.

"Don't torment yourself, don't torment me, dear soul!" he said softly, tenderly drawing her to himself with his conquering sweetness and gentle grace.

Donna Maria let herself be drawn to him, no longer smiling, as if expecting some word or action. But neither action nor word came. After the tender admonition, as usual, a certain dryness rendered them dumb and motionless.

She, as usual, was the first to interrupt this state of mind.

"And then, Marco, how do you know that the fair Vittoria is not going to Lady Clairville's?"

"Because she no longer goes into society, Maria."

"Has she taken the veil?" she exclaimed, with a sarcastic smile.

"Almost. For that matter she never has loved the world."

"Perhaps she flies from you, Marco?"

"Yes, I believe she flies from me."

"I tell you Vittoria Casalta still loves you," Maria murmured slowly as if she were speaking to herself, as if she were repeating to herself a thing said many times.

"No," said Marco vivaciously.

"She still loves you," the woman repeated authoritatively, almost imperiously.

"There is only one woman who loves me, and she is you, Maria—you," he replied, as if to finish the discussion.

She listened attentively from the very first words of the sentence, attentively as if to find in them a trace or a recollection of past things, but she did not hear there quite what she wished. The words were the same, but the voice was no longer the same which pronounced them, and no longer the same, perhaps, was the man who said them. A sense of delusion for an instant, only for an instant, was depicted on her face; an expression, however, which he did not notice.

"I have never understood, Marco," she resumed in a grave voice, "if you loved this Vittoria Casalta seriously."

"What does it matter now?" he exclaimed, a little vexed.

"No, it doesn't matter, it is true. Still, I should have liked to have heard it from you."

"How many times have you asked this, Maria?" he said, between reproof and increasing vexation.

"Also you have asked me pretty often, Marco, if I ever loved my husband," she retorted disdainfully.

At such a reminder the countenance of Marco Fiore became convulsed. Every slightly feminine trace disappeared from his rather pale and delicate face, and the firm and obstinate lines of his profile and chin became more accentuated, manly and rough. His lips trembled as he spoke.

"Why do you name your husband? Why do you name him, Maria?"

"Because he is not dead, Marco; because he exists, because he lives," she proclaimed imperiously, her large eyes flashing.

"I hate him. Don't speak to me of him!" he exclaimed with agitation, rising and kicking the chair aside to walk about.

"But why do you hate him? Why? Tell me, tell me."

"Because he is the only man of whom I can be, of whom I ought to be, jealous, Maria," he exclaimed, beside himself with exasperation. Then Maria smiled joyfully, a smile which he did not observe.

"I renounced him, his name and his fortune for you," she replied simply.

"Do you regret it?" he asked, still hot with anger, but somewhat distractedly.

"I do not regret it," she replied, after an imperceptible moment of hesitation.

"But, Maria, I am sure he regrets you very much."

"No."

"I am as certain as if he had told me, and I am certain he will get you back, Maria."

"No."

"Yes, he will get you back."

"Covering himself with shame?"

"Yes, because he loves you."

"Covering himself with ridicule."

"He loves you, he loves you."

"Knowing that I do not love him."

"What does that matter? He will take you back to try to make you love him."

"This is madness."

"All those who love are mad," murmured Marco Fiore very sadly.

Stupefied and suffering, she looked at him. Each looked at the other as if to recognise themselves. They were the same who, strangely, every day and every evening, scarcely found themselves together without, after a few minutes, involuntarily irritating with curious and cruel fingers the old wounds which seemed to be healing, which their restless and disturbed minds caused to bleed again.

Here she was, Donna Maria Guasco Simonetti, graceful and exquisite, she who had been the object of a thousand desires, repulsed by her serene austerity and boundless pride, who had suddenly loved Marco Fiore madly and faithfully for three years. Here she was in that house where she had come to live alone, after abandoning the conjugal abode for three years, to live apart in a strange, constant and ardent love, forgetful of every other thing. Here she was, ever more graceful in the plenitude of her womanly grace, in the atmosphere of exclusive luxury with which she was surrounded, and in garments which reflected her fascination.

And the man, Marco Fiore, young, trembling with life, who had come there that evening, an impassioned lover who had not tolerated sharing the woman of his love with the husband, *he* had not fallen at her feet, infatuated as usual by his mortal infatuation; *he* had not taken her to his arms to press her to himself, to kiss her as his own.

Instead they had given themselves, as for some time, to a sad duel of words, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes angry, evoking the absent figures of the two betrayed, of Vittoria Casalta, Marco's betrothed, of Emilio Guasco, the husband of Donna Maria.

Both tried to subdue themselves. She crossed the quiet room, and adjusted some knick-knacks on the pianoforte, which was covered with a peculiar flowered fabric, her profile was bent slightly in a pleasing way beneath the dense shadow of her magnificent hair.

Marco opened a cigarette case, and asked, with a voice already become expressionless—

"May I smoke?"

"Do smoke."

"Would you like a cigarette?"

"No, Marco."

She returned to the sofa, throwing herself down gently, and drawing under her head a cushion to support her mass of hair. So they remained for a while, he smoking his cigarette slowly, and she looking at a distant part of the room, her hands stretched along her body.

"Have you found some place for us, Marco, for August?"

"I am very uncertain," he murmured. "In whatever holiday place one goes, however far away, one meets people."

"Far too many," she added.

"You don't wish to meet any one?"

"That is so; I should like not to."

"It is impossible, Maria."

"People always make me suffer so."

"Why, dear?"

"I don't know."

After an instant he resumed quietly—

"Let us remain in Rome."

She trembled, and raised her eyebrows slightly.

"In Rome? In Rome in August?"

"If we can't go anywhere else," he added, without noticing Maria's surprise.

"You renounce the holiday and travelling which we have had every year, Marco! Do you renounce them willingly?"

"Willingly," he replied, with complete resignation.

Why did he not look her in the face? He would have seen the lines discompose under the wave of bitterness which invaded them, and then suddenly with heroic force recompose themselves. Instead, he only heard a proud, cold voice which accepted the renunciation.

"Let us remain in Rome."

The hard, sharp compact which annulled one of their best dreams, and destroyed one of their intensest joys, was subscribed without any further observation.

He resumed with a little difficulty.

"Later on, in September, mamma wants me."

"Where, then?"

"At Spello, you know, at our place, where she passes the autumn."

"I know. You have gone there every year for some days; last year for ten days."

"This year I ought to stay some days longer."

"How many days longer?"

"Two weeks, perhaps two or three."

As usual, on words which he feared would displease her Marco placed a courteous hesitation. He was never precise. He sought always to render the conversation more vague with a sweet smile.

Maria did not fall into the deception, and replied clearly—

"But three weeks are not the same as two, Marco."

"They are not the same, it is true. I will try to shorten them."

"Why remain so long?"

"My mother requires assistance this year; my brother Giulio is unable to give her any. I don't like to say it, but my mother is getting older. The business of the house is heavy: there are so many things to regulate and decide. In fact, I neglect my mother a little."

"Stop three weeks then," she said, lowering her eyelids to hide the flash of her proud eyes.

"And you? What will you do in September in Rome alone?"

"I shall do what I can," she said, throwing her head back among the cushions.

"Poor Maria," he said slowly.

There was so much lack of comfort in those two words, so much empty sorrow; in fact, a pity so sterile, that she broke in—

"Don't pity me, Marco; I don't like you to pity me."

"Does everything offend you, then, Maria?" he exclaimed, surprised.

"Pity above everything offends me—every one's pity; but your pity offers me an atrocious offence."

"You are very proud, Maria."

"Very, Marco."

"Will nothing ever conquer this fatal pride of yours?"

"Nothing, no one. No one except myself, and not even I myself."

"Pride causes weeping, Maria."

"It is true; but very seldom have human eyes seen my tears," she said conclusively.

He felt that evening, as on so many others, that never more would they find, if not the flame of passion, even the penetrating sweetness of loving companionship. The beautiful and beloved woman was near him. They were together, alone and free, alone and masters of every movement of the mind and action of the body; but some mysterious obstacle had been interposed between them, whence all beauty, love, liberty and consent were in vain.

Maria had before her the man she loved, with all his attractive appearance, with all the charms of youth and health, with all his seductiveness of mind, and this man was there in the name of an invincible transport, and ought to be and could be hers in every hour of her life. Yet nothing came of it, just as if a wanton, and deliberately wanton, hand were destroying this flower and fruit of love.

Of the two, Marco Fiore seemed to be yielding feebly to this obstacle which was intruding itself between them: he was passive, a little morbid, and easily resigned. Maria Guasco, however, proud and combative, was fighting and endeavouring to conquer the infamous hand which was plucking in the dark all the roses of their passion. She, on the other hand, allowed herself to be conquered only at the last.

"Why don't you go now?" she said anxiously.

"Do you believe I ought to?"

"Yes, it is nearly eleven. If you want to return here afterwards," she added, "you will make me wait up rather too long."

He raised his eyebrows as if he experienced some difficulty in breathing or speaking.

"Well ... afterwards I should like to return home with Beatrice and mamma."

"Ah!" she exclaimed at this blow, without further observation.

They became silent. He bent his head with that aspect of accustoming himself to a thing which had to occur, which had been usual with him for some time. She, instead, raised hers with that ever renascent pride which scorched her soul, and at last succeeded in smiling.

"But what will you do afterwards at home, Marco?"

"I shall go to bed. I am a little tired."

"Tired of what?"

"Why, I don't know. I have a curious physical weariness."

"You should let a doctor examine you."

"Do you think so? Rest heals everything."

"It is true. Do you remember the time when you were unable to go to sleep without having written me a letter?"

"Yes, I remember," he said surprised; "but when was that?"

"It was before—before we lived together," she replied, with a slight trembling of the lips.

"Some time ago," he said simply, without meaning it.

He got up to go. He took her two hands in his and pressed them with an infantile caress over his face, minutely kissing their soft and fragrant palms, and, as she lowered her head, instead of kissing her eyes as when he came in, his kisses were immersed in the dark and odorous waves of her hair.

"To-morrow, then, Marco," she whispered, raising her head.

"To-morrow certainly, Maria," he replied.

She accompanied him for two or three steps, almost to the door. Then she stopped for still a look or a word.

"*Toujours?*" she asked.

"*Toujours,*" he replied.

Their voices were monotonous and colourless, and their faces inexpressive as they pronounced the usual words of farewell, now three years old.

## II

ALL was quiet in Rome when Marco Fiore returned home to the ancient Palazzo Fiore in the via Bocca di Leone. His mother and sister-in-law had returned from the reception at the English Embassy before him. Donna Arduina Fiore and Donna Beatrice Fiore had, in fact, left without looking for him, supposing that he had returned to the lonely lady in the silent little villa at Santa Maria Maggiore. Instead, he had allowed himself to wander here and there among the well-dressed crowd in the smaller reception-rooms to converse haphazardly with friends, married women and girls, conversations which, with a smile and a laugh, nearly always bore an allusion to his condition as a man chained firmly and for ever, as a man exiled voluntarily from society, and deprived of all intercourse with light loves and flirtations.

At a direct allusion to Maria Guasco, the woman who had behaved with such marvellous audacity in a hypocritical society, he lowered his eyes with a slight smile and did not reply. If the allusion was too unkind to the absent one, to her who had thrown everything on the pyre to be able to love him in liberty and beauty, his face became serious. Anyhow, the conversation languished after such an insinuation or was broken off, and suddenly he felt himself estranged and far away from that society, which nevertheless was his own, from the people who belonged to his set and perhaps to his race. To have lived three years apart from them was sufficient to break the tie.

But that evening amidst such profound elegance, among the most beautiful Roman and foreign women and the most celebrated men, it seemed to him as if like had found like, and that the other Marco Fiore, he of three years ago, was living again. When two or three times his friends had smiled intentionally at his secret marriage, as they called it, a feeling of annoyance and oppression had tormented him. A moral and perhaps physical agitation kept showing him the silent room at Santa Maria Maggiore where the solitary woman was waiting for him, and he no longer saw Maria Guasco in her proud and passionate beauty, refulgent with a powerful and charming love, but in her imperious aspect and indomitable pride, as a soul which had given up everything for ever and which wished for everything. The weight of his amorous chain crushed his heart, as he left the imposing rooms of the English Embassy.

However, when he found himself in his own room, in Palazzo Fiore, one of those old rooms with lofty ceilings and furniture exclusively old; when among the shadows and bizarre half-shadows he looked distractedly at the four or five portraits of Maria Guasco, which were mixed among the beautiful and costly ornaments adorning the table and bookshelves; when he had noticed one of her by his pillow, dressed simply in a travelling costume with a little hat on the abundance of flowing hair, a portrait in which she seemed to walk absorbed and ecstatic towards an ideal aim—in truth that aim had been love, and the portrait had been taken on their first journey, in fact during their flight—Marco Fiore trembled as if under a severe shock, and his heart melted towards her.

Her image, not from scattered portraits, but from the depth of his soul where it was impressed, rose to his eyes with all the allurements of love, and it seemed to him confused in a mortal, incurable sadness. Tears were rising in the eyes of the ardent, sorrowing image, consumed by its secret flame, tears which he had so seldom seen in reality. The fascination of a vision more subjugating than any form of tangible life! Marco Fiore's heart began to melt, seeing Maria weeping in his dream, and an immense regret and remorse overpowered him, because by every movement and deed of his he had caused her sadness that evening, because he had not spoken a single word of love to her, because he had not yielded to her timid and impassioned invitation to return to her after midnight, as he had always done in the past; because she was there in her room alone with the sorrow of her abandonment and desertion. For a short time Marco had no peace thinking of his involuntary coldness and cruelty, and he experienced an irresistible desire to go out, to go to Maria, to throw himself at her feet.

"I will go," he said to himself, starting up.

But he did not pass the threshold of his room. The flow of bitterness and repentance ceased and composed itself slowly at the bottom of his heart, which became all at once mysteriously calm. He meditated on his sudden appearance at Maria's house when she was no longer expecting him, when perhaps she was asleep. Perhaps Maria on that evening had not even wept as his vision had showed him, or perhaps her tears had been dried by her pride. How cold and sharp she had been with him! With what delight she had tortured him, and afterwards had aroused, cleverly and cruelly, his jealousy! With what calmness and iciness she had accepted all he had scarcely dared to tell her for fear of crucifying her: the August without travelling or holiday-making, and the September separated and far away! How in her pride she had spurned his tender pity!

Marco Fiore did not leave his room. His good impulse had fallen, his remorse had dissolved, and his dream of amorous consolation and human compassion had vanished. A great aridness spread itself over him. He was without desires, without hope or plans. Maria's portraits around him spoke no more to him, and before closing his eyes in sleep he looked at them as strange and unknown figures, as figures indifferent to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

A long absorption of thoughts held the woman who was left alone stretched among the cushions.

Twice her little clock struck the hour, but she did not heed it. The book had fallen on the ground and had not been picked up, the little chair where Marco had sat had not been moved from beside her, and in the air the subtle smell of cigarettes remained, while on the ash-tray on the little table there were some ashes. Amidst so much testimony of a vanished hour, which had spoken its word of truth, she immersed herself in the hidden passion of her tumultuous and ecstatic soul. Only the light step of her maid roused her, a pale and sleepy young woman, who was trying to keep her eyes open and conceal her weariness.

"Am I to wait for the master?" she asked in a subdued voice, as if fearing to wake her mistress.

"No, go to bed," replied Donna Maria precisely.

"If Your Excellency is going to wait, I will wait too."

"No, the master will not return."

"Ah," said the other, lowering her eyes, and after saying good-night she left.

At last Donna Maria arose and rapidly passed into the salotto, another room where she had placed her books, pictures, and writing-table, and where she used to pass the morning when she did not go out, and quickly entered the bedroom. A night-light was burning there subduedly, and a fresh fragrance impregnated the air. Everything was there in the familiar and caressing half-light. Like a shadow Donna Maria walked up and down her room, without stopping or touching anything, as if she were looking for something and really did not care to look for it.

She trembled, and sometimes stopped as if at the noise of steps.

With its counterpane of old flowered brocade, fringed with gold lace and turned down, the bed was made and glistened whitely with its sheets and lace.

All at once she discovered what she wanted. Her expert hands opened the drawer of a little inlaid cabinet near the bed, and fumbled there till she found and drew out a small object. It was a little diary, but she was unable to read the small pages as she turned them over. She came nearer the night-light and, finding the page, read thereon. Of a sudden a great cry escaped her breast, and, kneeling by the bed, she embraced the pillows convulsively.

"It is ten days ago—ten days!"

A hundred times with a hundred sighs, in a torrent of tears like one demented, she repeated the words in tones of anger, fear, and lament. She said the words with a desolation and sadness, and an immense melancholy. Then she murmured them more softly, and even stammered them. At last she was silent; her tears ceased. Then she fell, wearied out, into a heavy, dreamless sleep.

### III

As she entered the courtyard of the Baths of Diocletian, where modern Rome has placed a museum for whatever the Tiber has restored, or whatever has been excavated in recent years, Maria Guasco closed her white lace parasol and looked around. The place seemed like the white and silent cloister of a Christian monastery. Four roomy covered *portici* surrounded a garden planted simply with rose-bushes, box hedges, and some small trees. In the middle rose a stone sundial, and on the right a well with an ancient pulley from whose rope was hanging an old-fashioned bucket. The *portici* were quite white, and along their walls were hanging fragments of marble and pieces of Roman bas-reliefs. There was an occasional bust on its pedestal, and some wooden benches. But at the beginning of the summer, at ten in the morning, the place was without visitors. Donna Maria stopped undecidedly.

She was dressed in a white soft stuff which waved noiselessly about her, a large white and very fine veil surrounded her hat, her abundant hair, and oval face. Youth, primal and fresh, proceeded from all the whiteness in which she walked, like one of those dense, soft, white clouds which give a sense of spiritual voluptuousness to the eyes. Her beauty was illuminated by it, and beneath the transparency of her complexion her blood coursed more lively, rendering more rosy her delicate and expressive countenance. Only her eyes contained a tinge of disturbance in their colour, undecided between grey and blue. Something proud and sad concealed them, sometimes even extinguishing their glance. Donna Maria's mouth, too, had not a shadow of a smile. While she stood there she was so wrapped in her thoughts and sensations, as almost to forget the reason for which she had come at that unusual hour to the Baths of Diocletian.

"Good-morning, Donna Maria," said a gentleman, coming towards her, taking off his hat with an extremely correct bow.

"Good-morning, Provana," she said, frowning slightly and biting her lip; "since when have you been a frequenter of museums and a lover of the ancient statues of Faustina and Britannicus?"

"Oh, I don't care for them, cara Signora," he hastened to say with an ironical smile, "I don't understand them, and, therefore, I detest them."

"Why, then?"

"To be able to speak to you alone in a place which is completely deserted at this hour and season."

"Why don't you come to my house?" she replied, growing more austere; "I am alone sometimes."

"Yes; but Marco Fiore can come there any minute, neither can you deny him entrance," he replied coldly.

"Do you hate Marco Fiore so much, Provana?"

"I don't hate him, I envy him," he added, again becoming the gallant.

"So you hasten to give me a meeting where he must not interfere, to tell me things he must not hear?" she replied with a sardonic laugh.

"But you have come to listen," he observed craftily.

She bit her lip hard, and extracted from her gold chain-purse a note, folded in four, which she gave to him.

"Take back your letter, Provana, and goodbye."

"Don't go, Donna Maria, don't go. Listen to me since you have come. It is a serious matter."

"Good-bye, Provana," she replied, almost reaching the main entrance.

"In Heaven's name, don't leave! The matter is really so important," and his voice trembled with anxiety.

Donna Maria looked at him intently. Gianni Provana, whose correct and gentlemanly face, with its more than forty years, for the most part pleasing and inexpressive in lines and colouring, seemed genuinely moved. His monocle had fallen from its orbit, and he was a little pale. He twisted his moustaches nervously, and his mouth, still fresh in spite of its maturity, seemed to restrain a flow of words with difficulty.

Donna Maria had never seen him thus; Gianni, the man of moderation in every gesture and word, so often sceptical, so often cold, but never agitated, the common type, in fact, of the elegant gentleman who assumes a correct pose from infancy, who cloaks himself with a studied disdain for everything, and most especially for the things he is not aiming at, and the persons he does not understand.

"Really I can't think of anything important to listen to from you," she murmured, turning back for a step or two.

"However, it is so, Donna Maria. It is a question of your good which is immensely dear to me."

"Why is it dear to you? How do I concern you?"

"Why, I esteem you deeply; I love you."



"Still I don't love you, neither do I esteem you," she replied icily.

"Why don't you esteem me?"

"Because you are a dissembler, Provana."

"Dissembling is often necessary and most useful in life. It is often an act of prudence and benevolence."

"That is the invention of liars."

They walked together, side by side, along one of the *portici*, drawing further away towards the back of the edifice. Gianni Provana watched her half curiously and half anxiously; she was distracted, gazing intently on an unknown point, trailing her parasol.

"How far has loyalty served you, Donna Maria? You have lost reputation, position, and family."

"I have gained liberty and love," she replied, raising her head proudly.

"But not happiness."

"Liberty is love," she answered, with a cry of revolt.

"You are the prisoner of your horrible condition, Donna Maria, and you are not sure that Marco Fiore loves you," he insisted, determined to say all.

"It is I who ought to love him."

"You don't love him, Donna Maria. I swear that you don't love him."

"Who makes you say this? Who has told you this?"

"I say it because I know it. I say it because it is necessary to open your eyes to yourself and upon Marco Fiore!"

"Why do you do this? For what obscure motive? For what perfidious interest?"

"In your own interest entirely, Donna Maria."

"That can't be. You are a calculator. You have a plan; reveal it at once. I prefer it. What is the motive of this meeting?"

"To persuade you that you do not love Marco Fiore, and that he does not love you."

"Is it he, is it Marco Fiore who sends you?" she exclaimed with a spasm in her voice.

Gianni Provana hesitated an instant.

"No, it is not he. It is I who have guessed all, who know all."

She bent her head in thought. In spite of the horror which this colloquy with a man she had always despised caused her, although she was listening to words which offended her mortally, she continued to listen to him as if subjugated. They had now reached a corner of the *portici* near a large pillar. Not a shadow of a visitor appeared.

"Donna Maria, you who are truth herself, how can you endure this life of lies?"

"Of lies?"

"Exactly. You are deceiving Marco Fiore when you tell him that you love him, and you are deceiving yourself. He is deceiving you. This love is dead, in fact it has been lived much too long."

"According to you, who suppose that you know something about love, how long does passion last? By the way, perhaps you have got the figures with you to explain them?"

"Yes; passion lasts from six months to a year, love from a year to two years. You have been living a lie for more than a year. O Donna Maria, break this chain."

"Are we meant to slay this love?" she exclaimed mockingly, with a shrill bitterness in her voice.

"You ought to slay it!"

"And am I afterwards to burn myself on the pyre like the widows of Malabar?" she continued, even more mockingly and bitterly.

"You ought to live and be happy."

"With you, eh? With Gianni Provana?"

"With another," he said in a low voice, looking at her.

"With whom?"

"With Emilio Guasco," he ventured to say.

"Don't repeat the infamy!" she cried, clenching her teeth.

A terrible silence came upon them. The sun had already invaded half of the simple garden among the thick box hedges and winter roses. The soft singing of a little bird issued here and there from the trees.

"Does he send you, Provana?" she continued, in a voice almost hoarse with annoyance, so great was the disdain which she was controlling within her.

"No, he doesn't send me, but I am come all the same. Donna Maria, does it please you to continue to live outside the laws, outside morality, outside society, when the great cause of it is at an end? Does it please you still to sacrifice your decorum, your dignity, your name, not to love but to your fancy? Where are there any more the supreme compensations for all that you have lost? Where are there any more the rich sentimental and sensual rewards for that which you have thrown away and abandoned? How does your abnegation profit you any more? You have given all and are giving all, and meanwhile your life is empty, your soul is empty."

Why did she listen so intently, without interrupting, without rebelling? Why was no shock given to her pride? And why did she cry out no more in protest? Gianni Provana so cold, so sceptical in his manner, was reaching at that time and in that singular place almost to eloquence. She who suspected him, despised and considered him a liar and a hypocrite, was listening to him, while her face contracted with suffering and disdain.

"Donna Maria, you had the courage to offend and abandon your husband who had done nothing to you, because you did not care to live in deceit and treachery: have another courage, worthy of you, that of flying from Marco Fiore, since you love him no more and he does not love you. Leave the house where you live in heavy and gloomy silence; re-enter the world, re-enter society. Be an honoured and respected lady, as you deserve to be for your beauty and your great soul."

"To become what you tell me, Provana," she replied precisely, in a hard voice, "I ought to return to my husband."

"You ought to return."  
 "And he would take me back?"  
 "He would take you back."  
 "Forgetting all?"  
 "Forgiving you everything."  
 "After three years of public scandal, of life together with Marco Fiore in the same city, under his eyes—my husband would do this?"  
 "He would do it because he believes in the law of pardon."  
 "Knowing that I do not love him?"  
 "Knowing it quite well."  
 "That I shall never love him?"  
 "Who can tell that?"  
 "I!" she proclaimed. "I shall never love him, and he knows it."  
 "In spite of that, he desires to pardon you, and to give you back all that you have lost by your passion."  
 "Why does he do this?"  
 "Because he is good."  
 "A great many good people would never do it!"  
 "Because he has suffered much and learned much."  
 "What have his sufferings to do with me?"  
 "He has pity for your sorrows."  
 "Pity is not enough to do this, Provana."  
 "Because he loves you," Gianni Provana declared at last.  
 "What a poltroon!" she sneered with infinite contempt.  
 "Am I to tell Emilio Guasco this?"  
 "Tell him what you please."  
 "His love does not move you?"  
 "No."  
 "His pity does not soften you?"  
 "No."  
 "Doesn't his pardon seem a sublime act to you? Is he not a hero?"  
 "I am a miserable creature made of clay, and I do not understand sublimity."  
 They were silent. The weather became warmer and slightly heavier, and the singing of the little birds in the trees grew weaker. Some of the roses had scattered their leaves on the ground.  
 "And with all this what are we going to do with Marco Fiore?" she broke in with irony.  
 "With Marco?"  
 "Yes, with him. What will he do when, according to you, I have returned to my husband? What will become of Marco?"  
 "He will be content to marry Vittoria Casalta. The girl has been waiting for him for three years."  
 "Ah!" she exclaimed, in a voice scarcely recognisable.  
 Without greeting or looking at him she turned her back, and went quickly round the corner of the portico. Nor did Gianni Provana dare to follow her.

#### IV

MARIA had searched for Marco Fiore for an hour in all the places she supposed he might be; at the great door of Palazzo Fiore, in the via Bocca di Leone, leaving him word scribbled in pencil on a small piece of paper; at the Hunt Club, which he sometimes looked into towards noon; at the fencing rooms in the via Muratte, where two or three times a week he used to undergo a long sword exercise.

Porters, butlers, servants had seen the beautiful and elegant lady, dressed in white, hidden behind a white veil, ask with insistence for the noble Marco Fiore and go away slowly, as if not convinced that he was not in one of those places. Towards noon, agitated and silent, consumed by her emotion, she entered the little villa at Santa Maria Maggiore, and there, at the threshold, was Marco, who had just arrived, with a slightly languid smile on his lips and the habitual softness in his eyes.

"Ah, Marco, Marco, I have looked for you everywhere," she stammered in confusion, taking him by the hand.

"What is the matter?" he asked, a little surprised, scrutinising her face.

"Come, Marco; come."

Still leading him by the hand she made him cross the ante-room, the drawing-room, the little drawing-room, and the study, and did not stop till she was with him in the bedroom with its closed green shutters, whence entered the perfumes from a very tiny conservatory. Once within, she closed the door with a tired gesture. They were alone. She fixed him with her eyes right into his, placing her two hands on his shoulders, dominating him with her height. And to him never had her face seemed so beautiful and so ardent.

"Do you love me, Marco?"

"I love you," he said with tender sweetness.

"You mustn't say it so. Better, better. Do you love me?"

"I love you," he replied, disturbed.

"As once upon a time, you must say, *as once upon a time.*"

"I love you, Maria," he replied, still more disturbed.

"Do you love me as at first? Reply without hesitating, without thinking—as at first?"

Regarding him, scorching him with her glance, with the pressure of her white and firm hands on his shoulders, she subjugated him.

Already the youthful blood of Marco Fiore coursed in his veins, and the giddiness of passion, which for some time had not overcome his soul, mastered him.

"As at first," he murmured, in a subdued voice.

"It is true you don't want to lose me. Say it! Say it!"

"I would prefer to lose my soul."

"You have never thought of leaving me?"

"Never."

"Am I always your lady?"

"My lady, you, and you only."

"Oh, Marco!" she sighed, letting her face fall on his breast, yielding to an emotion which was too violent.

He had become very pale. His eyebrows were knotted in sad thought. He took her face, covered with tears, and wiped it with his handkerchief, and asked her with a voice, where already suspicion was pressing, and where jealousy was hissing insidiously—

"What is this, Maria? Tell me all."

"Oh, I can't, I can't," she said desperately.

"Tell me all at once," he rejoined in angry impatience.

"No, no, Marco, it is nothing. I am mad this morning."

"That is impossible. You were calm and serene yesterday evening. There is something. There is *somebody*. Whom have you seen this morning?"

The question was so precise and abrupt that the woman of truth hesitated, and dared no longer be silent.

"I have seen Gianni Provana."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, twisting his moustaches; "did you see him here?"

"No, elsewhere."

"Elsewhere? In the street?"

"Almost."

"You met him by accident?"

"Not by accident."

"Maria, Maria!" he cried; "why have you done this?"

"I have erred; pardon me, Marco."

She humbled herself, taking his hands to kiss them in an act of profound contrition.

But releasing himself, he made two or three turns of the room, then returned to her.

"And what has *that* reptile said to you? Repeat to me what that horrid man said to you."

"Oh, he is so horrid as to make one shudder."

"Repeat it; repeat it at once, Maria."

"How am I to tell them? They are infamous things."

"Against me?"

"Against us."

"But speak, at least speak! Do you wish to make me die of anger and impatience?"

"No, Marco. I will tell you all. Come, sit beside me, be tranquil. I don't like to see you so. You must be calm, my love, so that I may tell you all; you must be sweet and loving, and not so disturbed and wicked."

"Maria, I am waiting," he said, almost without listening to her, folding his arms.

"Listen; it is true I ought not to have gone to the meeting with Gianni Provana. I have erred greatly, but a secret terror has been too much for me; I wished to know what he had to tell me. Could it not be perhaps a secret threat for me, for you?"

"I fear nothing, Maria."

"I, too, nothing; but I went to know. That man is so perverse, and he is always seeing my husband."

"Then he came for Emilio Guasco?" he exclaimed, rising.

"Yes," she said with candour.

"To tell you what in the name of Emilio Guasco?"

"To tell me that you no longer love me."

"It is false, I swear!" exclaimed Marco Fiore, with vehemence.

"To suggest to me that I no longer love you."

"Swear that it is false."

"I swear it," she replied, with a grave voice.

"And then? and then?"

"And then, as our love had been killed, it was necessary and right to re-enter the lawful, to re-enter the moral, to resume my place in society, to return esteemed, respected, honoured."

"That is to say?"

"To return to my husband."

"He said this atrocious thing to you?"

"This atrocious thing."

"Of his own initiative?"

"No, Marco."

"So," he exclaimed in the height of anger, "this husband of yours, this friend of his, beyond me, above me, and against me, laughing at me, propose that you should leave me and return to Casa Guasco?"

"Yes."

"After all that has happened?"

"Yes."

"After three years of a life of love, our only and unique life of love, you should return to Casa Guasco?"

"It is so."

The physiognomy of Marco Fiore became transfigured. A convulsion of bitterness, of suffering, of fury shook it continuously; that slightly morbid insouciance, which composed its poetry together with its youth, had quite vanished, showing only a face of energy, crossed by sentiments more unrestrainedly virile.

"And your husband, whom they say is a man of honour, would he forget the dishonour?"

"He is ready to forget it."

"Would a gentleman forget an offence so open and so cruel?"

"He has been ready, he says, for a long time to pardon."

"But why? Is he a rascal perhaps? Is he a saint perhaps? Has he blood in his impoverished veins? Has he a heart in that money-grubbing breast of his?"

"He says that he has suffered; that he is suffering."

"But why does he suffer?—through *amour propre*? through pride? through envy? through punctiliousness?"

She was silent. He, as one mad, continued—

"What has made him suffer?—the injury? the insult? the public shame? ridicule? Why, after having suffered, does he pardon?"

Still she was silent.

"And why does he want you? To shame me? To have his revenge? So that the world may mock me as it has mocked him? Why does he want you? To adorn his salons? To expose the jewels he has given you? To decorate his box at the theatre? Why does he want you?"

With head bowed and hands joined together on her knees, she remained silent and pale. He went towards her and forced her to rise and look at him.

"You know, Maria, why he forgets, why he pardons you, why he wants you. You know and you won't tell me."

She shook her head in denial.

"You know, you know; they have told you; repeat it to me! If you don't tell me, I am going away and I am never going to return again."

Maria trembled.

"I know," she stammered, "I know, but I did not wish to tell. Provana says ... that my husband loves me, he forgets because he loves me; he pardons because he loves me; he wants me because he loves me. That is all."

Violently, brutally, he took her in his arms, and pressed her to himself.

"I love you, Maria, I only love you."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with emotion; "as once upon a time, as once upon a time?"

Pressed to him, closed as in a vice in his arms, he kissed her on the hair, the eyes, the mouth, murmuring—

"I love you, Maria, as at first, as always, for ever, I love you."

Radiant with joy, crying with joy, she threw back her head as if inebriated.

"You are mine, Maria, it is true?"

"Yours, yours, yours."

"No one else's ever?"

"No one else's."

"I shall never let you be taken by any one, Maria."

"No one can take me."

"I would kill him first, Maria, then myself."

"Marco, Marco, I adore you!"

For a moment his encircling arms loosened, as he thought for an instant. A powerful exaltation, proceeding from a powerful instinct, was compelling him. And she was intoxicated with joy of him.

"Maria, will you do as I wish?"

"Yes, like a slave."

"Good; let us go away together."

"Let us go."

"To-morrow?"

"No, this evening."

"This evening? Where?"

"I don't know. Far away. Together. Somewhere where there are not these infamous persons and horrible annoyances, Maria. Far away, where your soul and your person may be only mine, without remorse, without reproach, without remembrances. Together, away from here, far off."

"Let us go, Marco."

"You follow me with desire, with enthusiasm?"

"With desire, with enthusiasm."

"As if you were leaving for ever, never more to return?"

"As if I were going to love and to death, Marco."

"This evening, Maria?"

"This evening."

"But I am not going to leave you to-day. I can't leave you. I am frightened that you may not come. I am frightened that I may lose you, Maria."

"Just as we fled the first time, then," she murmured, in a mysterious, dreamy ecstasy.

"As the first time, darling."

And the old times reappeared to them, just as the voices reappeared, just as the words reappeared; time was annulled, and everything was as at first. They asked nothing of their souls, of their hearts, since the looks, the voices, and the gestures were *as at first*; in the unrestrained tumult of resumed passion their souls and their hearts kept silence, in their profound, singular, and obscure silence.

## V

VENICE, who has consecrated and exalted in her soft and persuasive arms a thousand powerful loveknots, placed the wonderful peace of her mortal beauty round the grand flame of Maria Guasco and Marco Fiore; the silent caress of her glimmering lights, and the tenderness of her melancholy. The amorous fluid that thousands of lovers gathered wherever they lived, wherever they moved in Venice—that amorous fluid that emanates from her quiet waters, from the balconies of her palaces, from the veiled voices of those who sing in flowering gardens on quiet side canals, that emanates from the gloomy colour of her gondolas, from the whiteness of the marble which the water has left intact or obscured, which emanates from every lineament of the place and from every tint of the sky, enveloped Marco Fiore and Maria Guasco, and multiplied their flame into a precipitous tumult of their lives.

Their love had something mysterious, powerful, and troublous in that ardent renewal, which engulfed them as in a whirlwind. They seemed blind and deaf to every other aspect and every other sound of life which was not their amorous delirium. If no idyllic sweetness, if no sentimental tenderness brightened the passing of the days, the fever which caused them to palpitate, which singularly always gave them fresh fire, had aspects unknown to many, unknown even to themselves. A veil was over their eyes when they turned them away from the adored person; and the vision of Venice, where their days were slipping away, was like a dream around them, was like a scene unknown, appearing and vanishing just as in a dream. Never had Maria Guasco, whose beauty consisted above all in a lively, tender, and proud expression of countenance, never had she carried so clearly and openly those signs of amorous happiness which cause envy and regret to those who have never been in love, or who no longer love. Never, too, had Marco Fiore experienced a greater passion, or a larger sense of subjugation to a creature beloved.

Sometimes, however, passion in its violence seemed odious to him, and he would gaze at Maria with eyes sad and stern but still passionate, and he would speak to her shortly and commandingly, while his strong hands would press her soft hands so roughly as almost to cause her pain.

Then she would become silent, biting her lips to prevent a cry, and bowing her head as if conquered and crushed.

Long indeed were the silences of the lovers, and gladly were their lips dumb, as if words were useless to their understanding and thoughts weighed heavily on their hearts, or as if they felt it was profoundly dangerous to give life to their thoughts with a word. They remained side by side in their room in the Grand Hotel on the Grand Canal, silent and absorbed. Sometimes they stood together on the small marble balcony watching the canal winding among the magnificent palaces towards the *Salute*, with joined hands and fingers interlaced, and watched for a long time the bizarre reflections of the water changing colour beneath the light of the sky, always silent and oppressed. On the occasions when the gondola carried them in long excursions, left to the choice of the gondolier, to the more solitary canals and islands, Marco became more imperious in his lover's exactions. If Maria drew aside from him even for a minute, he called her back with a sudden and almost angry gesture; if she had a bunch of flowers in her belt he snatched them one by one, kissed them, and threw them into the water, and he would continually take her handkerchief and gloves and press them to his face and lips.

They spoke seldom and subduedly, just their names, or a monosyllable uttered questioningly and repeated with an acquiescent nod and dropping of the eyes. Their passion, even in its greatest flame, was collected and gloomy, and just as they were not exuberant in words they were not exuberant in smiles. No puerile happiness or youthful gaiety enlivened its intensity. Their passion seemed greater than they could endure, heavy and crushing in its force and vigour, and their souls and heart were too little to contain it; or its secret violence and immeasurable power seemed to surprise and dispirit them every instant, as if they were ignorant of its origin and end. Every now and then Maria, as if she could no longer endure his intense glances, placed her hands over Marco's eyes, as against the light of the sun which vivifies and yet blinds, and sometimes he returned the gesture, placing his hand on her ruby mouth, to stop her rare words and continuous kisses, as if his fibres were relaxing beneath the ideal and sensual caress which was consuming him. Their memories, too, were wrapped in a veil, or they would have remembered their first journey; their flight in which in a thousand forms of joy their cry of liberty had broken out, in which a thousand smiles carelessly adorned their day, in which the song of the simplest and purest jollity overflowed their mornings, and the laugh which closed their day and sent them deliciously to sleep.

They remembered none of that. This other love, silent, without jests, without smiles; this turbid and gloomy love resembled a spell-bound spiritual imprisonment, a magical slavery of the senses, and a tyrannous voluptuousness which filled them with madness and deadly intoxication.

Their reason for leaving Rome was never mentioned by them. Perhaps once or twice the woman wished to allude to it, but immediately, pale with anger and jealousy, the man had cried out—"No!"

And he closed her again to his breast, where his heart beat as tumultuously as on the day in which he had nearly seen the hand of Emilio Guasco, her husband, take her hand in the shade and lead her away. Very often such pallor and such fury passed over Marco's face as to give a greater clearness and heat to the flame of love. Often, too, when she seemed thoughtful and absorbed, and her soul was slipping away from the place and altar of passion he would

lean over her, and, seized again by the madness of that day, would embrace her fiercely, and his breath on her forehead seemed as if it wished to devour the thought which was going towards Rome.

She understood at once, and exclaimed passionately—

“No, Marco, no!”

Then Marco would stammer a question brokenly in a monosyllable.

“Mine? Mine?”

“Thine! thine!” she answered, looking at him.

Nothing more. Nothing more than these two words, so monotonous, intense and inexorable. Not another demand, not another reply; not a promise, not an oath. The words of possession: thine and mine. The length of this delirium and the passing of time left no impression on their minds. Others counted their days by their troubles or pleasures, not so Marco and Maria.

Four weeks had fled on a day at the end of July when, one morning, Maria rising from the old-fashioned chair, approached a table, and, taking a pen, dipped it in the ink as if to write. Then she trembled at her act, which drew her back to the fiery circle of her love, and she looked at Marco. He had seen all without showing surprise. Then she heard his voice, that voice of other times, a little tired, a little veiled, letting fall a question almost of politeness, but without any interest in a reply—

“Are you going to write, Maria?”

A fit of trembling caused her to hesitate. He did not notice her disturbance as his eyes were lowered. She sat down to write. But the tumult within her was so strong that her hand traced mechanically meaningless signs. Maria had no one to write to, and did not know what to write. Her hand fell upon the paper, and she bent her head. Still he noticed nothing.

“Marco?” she asked, in the cold clear voice of former times, “Marco, what is the matter?”

And truth was evoked from the depth of the man’s soul. Truth said simply and cruelly: “I am tired.”

So it was all that memorable day. Maria saw in Marco Fiore’s face nothing but an unspeakable weariness. On the marble balcony above the silver-grey water which he was looking at, his weariness lent a leaden colour to his lips and eyes, and a dense pallor to his face. A sad wrinkle of exhaustion was at each corner of his mouth. Again she asked, “Are you tired?”

Again he replied, cruelly and monotonously, “I am tired.”

She saw him stretch himself on the soft black cushions of the gondola, as if he wished to stay there for ever. He did not look to see if she was beside him and shut his eyes as if asleep, but without sleeping, nor did he issue from that silence and stupor till they landed from the gondola at the Palazzo Ferro. When at night he retired, after touching her hair with the lightest of kisses, when later in her soft night-garments she went to see him asleep, she stopped near the bed. Horrible sight! Marco was sleeping heavily, with his head buried in the pillows just as if it was his last sleep, and all his face was decomposed in its fatigue and pallor, even the lips were white beneath the moustaches, and his forehead had a crease of weariness and bitterness. Too long, indeed, did she gaze at that sight, and drink in its poison with her soul and eyes. She felt her heart like a stone within her breast, and her soul wound her person like a sharp rock with a tremendous spasm. She felt, too, the floods of bitterness like a poison diffuse themselves through her being. Falling on the bed in her white garments she lapsed into the same lead-like lethargy as her lover.

Of their exhausted forces of desire, of their weary and somnolent bodies, their spent phantasies and arid souls, of this cessation of spiritual life, on the following day, they understood the tremendous truth. They understood how, as in common people, that rude and fierce instinct, which is jealousy, had plotted against them; a jealousy physical and base, taking the appearance of a higher and more ardent love, of a passion larger and more consuming; and how like inexperienced and weak creatures they had been victims of a trivial deception of the senses, abandoning themselves to it, as to a renewing flame of love more youthful and more devouring. The man felt the shame mount to his face for having mistaken the impulse of a vulgar, fatuous, and virile affirmation of possession for a fresher and more vigorous desire of love’s happiness, and he experienced a great repentance for having surrendered to it their hope in a new future for their love. But more supreme was the woman’s shame for having fallen into the net of the senses, she so proud, so modest, and so chaste even in passion. Her sorrow was the more supreme for having ever believed that love can be reborn from its ashes.

For a day they hated and despised themselves as never before. For a day they hated themselves fiercely. Then that shadow, that coldness, and that boredom ruled over them, whose signs they had piously hidden in Rome, but which at last in Venice they no longer dared conceal.

## VI

“Spello, October....

“DEAREST MARIA,

“Since you as ever appear to me what you are, a creature of truth, and since you tell me briefly and honestly—and in reading I almost seem to hear your voice—‘Marco, our dream is over,’ I ought to elevate my spirit to your moral height where a lie is impossible, and repeat loyally, ‘Maria, our dream is over.’ It was beautiful. No meanness disturbed its violent grandeur, no weakness spoiled its power, no hypocrisy disturbed its purity, and we indeed preferred to break the social knot rather than loosen it miserably. Moreover, we preferred to give a single sorrow to others rather than inflict ridicule and humiliation on them every day, and we preferred to exile and isolate ourselves than drag deception and fraud from drawing-room to drawing-room, from home to home. We lived so impetuously and ardently in a fulness and richness of life, which, darling Maria, neither of us will ever find again, which ought not to be found again because certain destinies have but one existence. Ours is past and the dream is ended. Nothing remains for us except the enduring memory of its beauty and intensity.

“We believed this dream to be eternal; we believed that it would have led us hand in hand together, full of desire and hope, even to the hour of death. Such is the measured small eternity of man! Not even was this true, not

even was this modest cycle of years, modest compared with Time, just the life of a man and a woman, given to our dream. The hours, days, and years were limited, not by us, not by our enthusiasm, not by our anxiety, but by the laws of passion themselves, those immutable laws, alas! which each believes he can change, which each hopes to elude, and by which we are all dominated.

“Adored Maria, you have had from me all the love which a young man, impassioned and sincere, can give to an adorable woman such as you are; but love is a brief matter, with a brevity which frightens all desolate and tender souls, all faithful hearts and feeling fibres. He who says that he desires only one woman for all his life, either deceives or is deceived. We wished to be constant, faithful, and tenacious of our love, but it escaped us fatally, every day increasingly, till our devastated and cold hearts felt that that love had vanished, because thus it must be, since it is the law; since this brevity is the essential condition of its force and beauty, and this brevity is the reason of its perfidious fascination. We have loved each other, dearest Maria, for three years. A cynic would tell you that they are many, that they are too many—three years. But remember that a cynic always conceals a soul desolated by the reality of things. I shall tell you that the time has been just what it had to be, and, in telling you this, how my heart overflows with an intense bitterness against love’s fall, against the misery of this sentiment and its fugacity. Otherwise I had hoped, lady mine, otherwise we had hoped together. We believed, too, and feared that unhappiness and sorrow would have come to us from outside, from those whom we had abandoned, from laws which we had violated, from society which we had offended. Instead, all the inconsolable sadness of this moment comes from ourselves, from our dead souls, from our dead hearts and senses, where our love has lived, but from whence it has disappeared, leaving colourless ashes which the wind will carry away. Maria, how I should like to rise against myself, against my mortal weariness and indifference. I should like to galvanise my spirit, resuscitate this corpse, and I torture myself in vain, while tears of useless anger course my cheeks. Maria, I am dying through not loving you, but I cannot live to love you.

“O dear Maria, I hope you love me no longer. So it should be. Do you remember our first meeting, in a box at the theatre, one evening when the music of love and torture was filling the house—*Les Huguenots*? Do you remember the first long devouring glance in that box, and the first expressive pressure of the hands, as if they could not disentangle themselves? We loved each other at the same instant. We both abandoned ourselves to the vortex which was engulfing us, and neither hesitated. Neither dragged the other into the delirious circle of passion. Together we gave ourselves, blind, mute, conquered and infatuated. Both, without the one suggesting it to the other, decided to live alone, free, obscure, ignored and forgotten, and neither, in flying from everything, trembled at the mad plan or hesitated. So, Maria, I not only hope but believe that you do not love me.

“In your house of love, lady mine, in that house where the magnificent flower of our passion sprouted and sent forth its celestial perfumes, in that house, which alone of the dream will remain uncancellable in our minds as the house of the most beautiful dream of our lives, I know you are weeping in despair because you no longer love me. I see you weeping about your barren heart, about your exhausted soul, your spent desire, about everything where love is dead. I see sighs swell your throat, and your head fall convulsively on your pillow.

“It is the same with me, Maria; just the same. Never was love born with such consent, never did love live in such equality, and never did love so disappear from two conquered and fettered beings.

“Oh, if I had to think differently, Maria, I should kill myself! If I had to believe that this death of love had only struck me, and that while I no longer had the spark to give light and heat you were still burning; if I had to see you still in love with a man who no longer loved you, if this moral inferiority had to strike me, if I alone had to appear deserted by love, inept to love, inept to feel through my personal weakness of mind—Maria, Maria, I should kill myself. How could I live longer, near to you, far from you, loving you no more while you still loved me, inflicting on the dearest, best, most beautiful of women, upon her who alone for three years has seemed a woman to me, my indifference?

“Maria, write to me, swear to me that you love me no more. I can’t bear the thought that you may still be burning with love for me; I can’t bear the thought of grieving you with the dumbness of my mind. Maria, I owe to you three years of perfect happiness. You have beautified my existence with every grace and charm of yours. You have lavished all the treasures of your heart with a generosity and magnificence which has no equal. You have given me all yourself, and I have known what exaltation a man can enjoy without dying of too much joy. And for this, my lady, gentle and proud, for all this that I owe you I cannot give you a sorrow which has not its equal, that of loving still when one is not loved. Swear that your desolation is only for the dream which has vanished in you as in me; that your tears are of an infinite bitterness for love and not for me; that I am as a brother in sorrow and not a fickle and forgetful lover; that you can think of me without a shock, but with sadness for things which are extinct; that nothing glows in you; that your blood is without fever, and your phantasy is without visions—*that you are like me*.

“And now, Maria, you have my life and your own in your hands, and not only these two lives: because in the step which you boldly and nobly took in abandoning the conjugal roof and your husband, in renouncing your splendid social position, and above all your intact virtue, you lost much more, and to many you lost all; because although in this union of passion we have both been happier than any others in such a union have ever been, you appear as my victim, and such perhaps you will be according to the judgment of the world. You, Maria, brave and good, have to decide what is to become of me, of you, of the others.

“I am at your feet to obey you blindly, and do you take me by the hand and show me the road we ought to traverse, either separated or together. Whatever may be the moral sacrifice you ask of me to save you, I am ready to make it with enthusiasm. You have to order me to live or to perish, and I shall live as you wish; I shall perish by the death you choose.

“So much I ought to do for you, darling Maria, who threw away everything to love and follow me, who looked not behind and sacrificed yourself to passion. Show me the way, lead it wherever it may; it is your task, and always was your task.

“You know, you only know what is necessary. I have lived so madly in our dream that I have forgotten everything, and am now in life like an ignoramus, like a confused and disquieted child unable to avoid hesitation and to have a will. Be my will, you who are stronger than I. You have always been the stronger because you possess a virtue that is lacking in me, which is pride, that lofty and shining guide, which can be cruel yet is always lofty. You, Maria, know what is necessary, and you ought to impose it on me, after having imposed it on yourself. I shall be like matter in your hands and all will be well, since it will have been willed by you, and done by you, creature of strength,

of goodness and beauty, sustained by your shining beacon, your pride.

"Tell me all and show me the way. In following your commandments, the bitter tears which I shed for our dream will become slower and rarer, that mortal sadness which falls on those who have lost somebody or something dear to them will little by little be conquered. The immense bitterness will grow less because I shall have done my duty towards you who have been my happiness, and towards the love which has been the reason of my being. Restore to me, Maria, the consciousness of being a man worth something. Show me my duty, and cause even this last gratitude towards you to be born in my spirit. Cause it that I owe you all my good, even this last of which I am ignorant, though it will be something just and worthy of you, since it comes from you, Maria, blessed to-day, and how I shall bless you for ever, even till my death.

"MARCO FIORE."

This is the reply which reached Marco Fiore at Spello immediately.

"Rome, October...."

"Marco, I swear that I no longer love you. Come at once, and I will tell you all that is necessary.

"MARIA GUASCO."

## VII

A STRONG, cold, almost wintry wind was blowing through the streets of Rome on an afternoon of late October, and a low sky with a mass of whitish-grey clouds was hanging over the semi-circle of the Esedra di Termini. Little whirlwinds of dust rolled from the Esquiline and the Viminal towards ancient Rome, while dead leaves issuing from the gardens of the suburban villas, gyrating, and small squares, still rolled along.

Marco, who had just arrived, trembled with cold, as he crossed on foot the little distance which separated the Stazione di Termini from Santa Maria Maggiore. In spite of his courage, which he knew had been inspired by the soul of Maria Guasco, a dumb fear agitated him, a fear of the present, a fear of the future. He was experiencing the agonising terror of life, when in certain supreme moments a man seems conquered by all the hostile forces within and without him. However, he did not hesitate a moment to enter the villa. He went towards his destiny with a soul in trepidation but with a firm step. The profound faith which he had in Maria's heart, a faith experienced apart from passion and love, alone sustained him, and once again he sought from her the source of his strength in the hour of sorrow and torment.

But when she appeared, and he understood that he was seeing her for the last time, dressed as she was in black, so exquisite, so noble in her mourning, so disdainfully proud as she looked at him with a glance of intense sorrow, his heart was tormented with an immense desolation, and holding and caressing her hands like a child, he wept bigger tears than he had ever wept. Holding his hands in hers and sitting beside him Maria wept without sobs, and her tears coursed silently down her face while she bowed her head in silence, as if unable to pronounce a single word.

"Everything is finished, Maria, everything," sighed Marco.

She was silent. Her tears ceased the first, but her face was composed in a febrile pallor. He kept lamenting brokenly, "Finished, all is finished," like the burden of a death agony. Slowly their embrace relaxed. For some moments they found nothing to say. But again her pale worn face agonised his heart.

"Maria, I have loved you deeply!" he exclaimed.

"I know it," she replied gravely. "Your love has given sun to my life, and its reflection and warmth will remain with me till death."

"I shall never love a woman again like you, Maria, who have been all mine," he said desolately.

"None, Marco," continued Maria, lowering her eyelids to hide the expression of her eyes, "and so it ought to be."

"I shall never forget you, you who have been all my ardour and sweetness," he added, still desolately.

"You ought not to forget me, dear love of mine, you ought not to."

"Well then, Maria, why is everything ended?"

"For this reason," she replied enigmatically.

"I want to love you all my life passionately."

"It isn't possible, it isn't possible. Love doesn't last for life. Life is so long, love is so short."

"Oh, what sadness, Maria! what sadness! I shall never console myself."

"I too shall never console myself, Marco, never."

Again they were silent, desperate and bowed down beneath their fate, as if separated by an iron wall and divided in soul, incapable of passing over or breaking down that wall. They felt as well the weight of time which was falling on their heads, and the mortal tedium which was enveloping them in that so far profitless conversation.

He felt the uselessness of tears and words, and with a renewal of life said—

"What shall we do, Maria?"

"Our duty," she replied severely.

"To whom have we a duty to fulfil, Maria? To what?"

"We have a duty first of all to ourselves, Marco. And that is to live in truth and liberty of soul. Since our love is ended and our dream of happiness is *over*, let us not lie an instant longer, and separate."

"For ever, Maria?"

"For ever, Marco."

"Shall I never see you again, my friend?"

"I shall not see you, and you will not seek me. We will fly as far as we can and ought from each other."

"That is very cruel, Maria."



"Yes, it is very cruel, but it has to be done."

"I shall suffer very much, because, apart from passion and love, you are very dear to me."

"You are very dear to me, my friend," she added, with a fresh veil of sorrow in her voice, "but it is necessary."

"But what will become of me, Maria? Tell me. What will become of me? What shall I do? Where shall I go to lie me down? How will my life go on? Where shall I tie it that the knot does not come undone?"

She did not reply at once. Her eyes were closed as if to concentrate her thoughts, and her mouth was firm as if to close her words; her hands, loaded with jewels, were crossed over her knees in a familiar gesture.

"Maria, Maria, I have come purposely to ask you this, because you ought to tell me, because I do not know and you do. What will become of me without you? What shall I do with my soul? What shall I do with my days? Maria, think of me. Succour me, my friend, my sister, source of all my comfort. Tell me, tell me."

A shadow of a smile, a bitter shadow of a smile, traced itself on Maria Guasco's lips at the uneasiness of the man's convulsed conscience.

"Well," she said, softly and slowly, "after doing our duty towards ourselves in separating, we have to accomplish it towards others, Marco."

"What do you mean?"

She looked him squarely in the eyes, and said—

"You will marry Vittoria Casalta, Marco."

"No."

"You will marry her; she loves you."

"I don't love her."

"What does it matter? Thousands of marriages are made so. She has loved you for years, and you were betrothed. You have betrayed her. She has waited, and she is a patient creature. She has waited, and, see, she was right to wait."

"I can't marry her with a heart devastated by passion, with an unconsolable regret."

"Marco, hearts are healed. Yours will heal. Regrets go to sleep at the bottom of the soul, and one day you will wake up consoled. You ought to marry Vittoria Casalta."

"Ought I to?"

"You ought to. She has suffered for you. She doesn't deserve to suffer. She is good, they say; I don't know. Anyhow, she has suffered. Since your heart is empty, and your spirit has no goal, since your soul has no pasture, fill your heart with charity towards a sufferer, give an affectionate scope to your existence, create a pleasing duty of reparation, and heal the wounds you have made by marrying Vittoria Casalta."

Maria spoke in a low voice, slowly, but suggestively and persuasively. Marco's face grew paler and his lips were white. He recognised that an immense effort was uplifting her courage to say all that she was saying, and he regarded her with profound admiration as he touched her hand lightly to kiss it, which he did almost timorously. A cry escaped his breast.

"Maria, I can't be happy with Vittoria Casalta."

"You can't be; that is true. You have been happy, too happy perhaps. You can't be happy again. And what does it matter? Content yourself in giving happiness to her who has suffered so much for you. That is a great deal."

"That will not suffice for me, Maria."

"You want too much from life, Marco," she said, shaking her head; "you must give something instead. Vittoria Casalta has suffered secret torture for three years. You ought to marry her to sweeten her existence and render her happiness."

He became silent and thoughtful, and she, who was used to reading almost the ideas of his mind on his forehead, saw the doubt there.

"Vittoria desires nothing else but to pardon you and open her arms to you, Marco."

He looked at her, but did not reply. An almost definite silence fell between them. This part of their conversation was concluded. It seemed as if there was nothing else to be said; that they understood each other. Marco was the first to express this feeling.

"And you, Maria?"

"I, Marco?"

"Yes, you. What will you do?"

She shrugged her shoulders in an act of complete indifference, and did not reply.

"Will you return to your husband?"

"I shall return," she said coldly.

"Will you return willingly, Maria?" he exclaimed sorrowfully, but without a trace of anger in his voice.

"Not willingly. I am going to return because I ought to."

"Won't you suffer in returning? Tell me, Maria."

"I shall suffer, that is true," she declared precisely, "but I ought to suffer, it seems. I have been intoxicated with happiness and liberty, my friend. One pays for such things. Here I am ready to pay."

"How will you live with him?"

"As I can. I shall do my best, and shall try to do my duty. Emilio, too, has suffered through my betrayal. In returning to him I must do what I can to make him forget his suffering."

"But you don't love him."

"I don't love him, and I can't love him again. I am exhausted. My heart has lived as much as it can, and it can do no more. But I can, however, have great pity for him, great sweetness, and great friendship to make him forget the torture I have inflicted on him."

Again, before the force of energy which was exalting her and with which she was struggling, Marco felt a great emotion invade him, a melancholy enthusiasm for the moral martyrdom which she was enduring, and forgot his own

immense pain. And anew a lament escaped his lips.

"Poor Maria!"

"Ah, pity me, pity me; you are right!" she cried, twisting her hands in agitation, "I am an unfortunate."

"We are two unfortunates!" he exclaimed, taking her to his arms and kissing her on her hair and eyes.

She repelled him, and drying her tears composed herself.

But he, as he felt the moments of their last meeting flying, and the unsupportable pain of a farewell which was rending his soul, resisted the more.

"Maria, Maria, let us remain together, I implore you."

"No, Marco, no."

"I can't live without you, my love."

"You deceive yourself."

"I see myself dying if I leave you, Maria."

"You deceive yourself."

"I still want you. I want you always."

"You deceive yourself."

"I love you, Maria. I swear it; I love you."

"You lie!" she cried, with a voice vibrant with anger and with a heightened complexion.

"I love you, I love you," he cried more weakly.

"You lie! You lie!"

"I love you," he murmured, with lowered eyes.

"Have you understood that you are lying?" she said. "Be silent."

So all was ended. Even this last rebellion of Marco's soul evaporated, leaving him cold and dumb. His very torment, given its supreme grief, seemed to quieten into torpor. The large emotions which he had just experienced left him exhausted with a disgust of himself and life. White and done up he lay upon the sofa scarcely noticing the woman at his side. She herself, spent by the long spiritual struggle maintained with herself and him, lay with closed mouth, her beautiful chestnut hair with its deep shining waves had fallen about her neck, and her head had fallen forward listlessly. Each was far away, full of thought and sorrow for the new life so uncertain and doubtful which was presenting itself to their gaze, and each was trying to read the unknown words of their new fate.

Both felt themselves in the great obscurity to be without energy, to have spent everything, to have lost all in the high crisis of detachment.

How long this sad absorption lasted they did not know.

It was already dusk when Maria started, and desired that everything should be ended fittingly between them. Silently she rose and giving him her hand led him into the bedroom, to the room which had been theirs. Near the bed, upon a background of dark-blue velvet, an old crucifix of yellowish ivory was hanging, and the face of the Martyr was full of profound and yet serene sorrow.

She looked at the Christ who had died for love and duty, for the desire of the salvation of every suffering soul.

"Do you remember, Marco, we did not dare to invoke the blessing of Maria, the most pure, on our love, but before Him who understood all and pardoned all, who was God, but was also man, who sees all, and who raised all to heaven, we asked Jesus to consecrate our knot?"

"Yes, Maria," he murmured, regarding the anguished but tranquil face of the Son of man.

"Before Him we united ourselves for life and death. I obtained your promise of love and fidelity, Marco."

"I have kept it, Maria."

"It is not our fault if the knot is undone, if our eternity has only lasted three years. That is outside us, Marco. But we were faithful, and if love has deserted us it means that life is fleeting, and that human forces are weak. We were as faithful as we could be. I have loved you, Marco, above everything and everybody."

"And so have I loved you, Maria."

"Well, let us release ourselves to-day before Him, suffering profoundly, but knowing that we have done what is possible to be worthy of our passion, having never lied, having never deceived. Let us release ourselves, suffering like Him, but with the knowledge that this suffering is not useless, dedicating it as we do to the consolation of others, to the happiness of others."

"Let it be so, Maria," he said piously.

They stood a little in silence before the crucifix, as if praying mentally. A sigh escaped Maria Guasco's tired bosom.

"I shall keep all I have of yours, Maria," he murmured in a weak and tremulous voice, "I could never separate myself from them."

"Nor I, Marco."

In truth their anguish had become unbearable, they had cruelly prolonged their martyrdom.

"Good-bye, Marco!" she exclaimed almost inaudibly, bending her head on his shoulder.

"Good-bye, Maria," he said, with a short but almost frenzied embrace.

"*Toujours, toujours, Marco,*" she said once again brokenly.

"*Toujours, Maria, toujours,*" he replied desperately.

Then he left.

She heard nothing. She knew about herself, about the whole world revolving in its immense concentration around her, but every sense of persons, of space, and of time was ignored by her for several hours in that deserted room. When she awoke from this long absence from life, she found nothing within her but bitterness, such a great bitterness that it seemed as if her body and soul had been poisoned for ever. Since all that had seemed lasting to her and alone worthy to be lasting was dispersed and finished with, since the only lofty outstanding reason of life—love—was ended, she felt a nauseating disgust of that mediocre thing, existence, with its false and fugitive sensations.

Marco went as one mad through the streets of Rome, already gloomy with falling night, and swept by chilly winds beneath the low nocturnal clouds. For some time he wandered aimlessly, like a dead leaf detached from a tree, and felt himself dispersed in the shadowy cold and solitude. He felt it useless to call for aid, since the only thing which could succour him—love—was dead. He felt that he too was dead, and that he could never rise again.

## PART II

### THE PARDON

#### I

WHISPERINGS, now slow now more frequent, filled the top of the church dedicated to Santa Maria del Popolo, where the guests invited to the wedding were gathered before the high altar, while the rest of the large central nave preserved the usual solitude and silence of Roman temples. Around the high altar were placed large clumps of palms, and white azaleas with such a wealth of bloom that they seemed as white as snow, without the shadow of a leaf between flower and flower. Some soft dark carpets descended from the altar as far as the first row of seats. The rest of the church, the greater part of it, which it would have been vain to decorate, kept its cold, marbled, and imposing aspect.

Now and then the guests, politely restraining their impatience, turned towards the great door, which was open to the limpid spring sky, to watch if the couple, already late, had arrived. Compared with the vastness of the church, and in spite of their large numbers, they seemed a very small group near the high altar in an oasis of plants and flowers.

All the relations of Casa Fiore were there, together with the Casalta, who are not Romans but Neapolitans, of remote Neapolitan origin but living in Rome for two or three generations. Many had come from the outskirts of Rome, from Umbria and Campania, to be present at the marriage of Marco Fiore and Vittoria Casalta, a marriage so resisted by fate that for a time it had seemed quite broken off, but which had at last become a reality. There was much whispering over the strange story, the lateness of the couple, and the great size of the church.

"How has the bridegroom behaved during this second betrothal?"

"Perfectly."

"Is he very much in love?"

"Full of affection."

"Enamoured?"

"With ideal delicacy."

"How large this church is!"

"But beautiful."

"The church of Lucretia Borgia, is it not?"

"Certainly. You know that Gregorovius has rehabilitated Lucretia?"

"Aren't you cold?"

"Very cold; I would gladly go out."

"Oh, they'll come, they'll come."

"They are thirty-five minutes late."

"Do you think that a lot? At the marriage of Giovannella Farnese we had to wait nearly an hour."

"What bad form; don't you think so?"

"Is it true that the bride is very happy?"

"Diamine! Hasn't she waited four years for the faithless one!"

"Only patient women are right in this world."

"Does she show her happiness? I want to see her face as she comes into church."

"You will gather nothing from it; you know that Vittoria is most reserved."

"Too reserved; she is icy, like this church."

"But why not have the marriage in Santa Maria della Vittoria? It is a small church and beautiful."

"It belongs to Casa Colonna, and the Colonna reserve it for their own marriages."

"Hush! Hush! Here they come!"

Suddenly the whispering ceased; the notes of the organ sounded, heavy and sonorous, waking all the echoes of the church. It was an organ placed up above, on the epistle side of the altar, and the organist was invisible from below. He ought to have been signaled to, for from his invisible hands on the stops escaped the profound and solemn melody of Beethoven's wedding march, so that every one rose to their feet to honour the bridal pair, who surely had reached the church door at that moment, to be accompanied on their procession to the high altar by Beethoven's music, which is a noble greeting and invitation, the expression of fine desire, and the satisfaction of a strong and calm affection.

The well-known notes rolled along among the arches of Santa Maria del Popolo. The guests stood silent and attentive behind their seats, but still no one entered. The march continued in its beauty and gravity; the tones grew less and were extinguished. Silence reigned again. With a noise somewhat louder and whisperings a little stronger, the guests—the Ottoboni, Savelli, Farnese, Aldrobrandini, Caracciolo del Sole, Carafa—re-seated themselves. The top of the church took more than ever the familiar appearance of a drawing-room. Groups were formed and seats were turned round; there was even a little laughter. In the midst of the general distraction the couple and their escort quite suddenly passed up the church and reached the high altar, greeted by none and unaccompanied by the music.

"That's an entry missed!" exclaimed Gianni Provana, with a slight and amiable grin.

In the white cloud of her satin dress and in the fleecy white cloud of her veil, the bride knelt at a *prie-dieu* of brown carved wood on which had been placed a cushion of dark-red velvet. On this cushion she placed her bouquet of orange-blossoms with its long white satin ribbon, and while the religious rite proceeded read from her Prayer-book, a little book bound in white and silver brocade; and her blonde head was slightly bent as she read. The bridegroom was kneeling beside her at another *prie-dieu*, also with bent head, thoughtful and collected. The Fiore have a long reputation for religious piety in the family, and perhaps conquered by the moment he was praying like a Christian to his God.

After the function had begun he glanced two or three times at Vittoria almost questioningly, for according to Italian tradition he had not led her to the altar. As she had no father alive she had been brought by her eldest brother, and at the house he had only exchanged a rapid greeting in the presence of everybody. Marco looked at his bride to read her thoughts and measure her emotions, but Vittoria's face, in its indefinably white and virginal purity, had the virtue of never, or scarcely ever, revealing the secret which was weighing on the mind. She kept her eyes bent over the pages of her Prayer-book, and, as she repeated the words of the prayers, her delicate and sinuous lips, accustomed to silence and mystery, scarcely seemed to move.

The special moment arrived. Interrupting the Mass, after the first Gospel, before the Elevation, the celebrant turned to the couple and summoned them to him. They rose from their knees, and mounted the two steps of the sanctuary, where they prostrated themselves. Fabrizio Ottobone, the master of the ceremonies, placed himself beside them, a tall, thin old man, with flowing whiskers, and in spite of his age a very good figure. The usual form of marriage rite proceeded very slowly. Vittoria's right hand was still gloved, and at a word whispered in her ear by Fabrizio Ottobone, she tried to take the glove off quickly. Not succeeding she tore at it and stripped it off her fingers, and at last the little right hand was stretched on that of Marco Fiore's. The priest pronounced the sacred words which demand the assent of the man and the woman, and when obtained he declared them united in the name of God. The little hand was closed in Marco's; he felt it tremble like a leaf. He pressed it in vain, as if to give it the strength of a promise and the support of an oath, and yet the little hand trembled incessantly.

Marco looked at his wife intently. On her pure face, in every beautiful line, in the fold of the fine taciturn mouth, and in the limpid and clear eyes he read in a flash such anguish mixed with hope; he read there anxiety, uncertainty, and fear, so that all his man's heart filled with pity for her loving, suffering, and fearing. An immense pity welled in his heart, and not being able at that moment to speak a single word to her, he bent his head and prayed with all his might to have the power to console the woman who loved him.

Meanwhile, after completing the nuptial union, the priest stepped back to the altar to continue the Mass, and the couple, now bound for life, returned to their places. The organ again played music well known to all feeling souls. After the first chords from the invisible organist had sounded a cantor took his place, also invisible, but whose sonorous voice diffused itself throughout the church, and was listened to with a sigh of satisfaction by those who recognised the sympathetic timbre of a well-known tenor. He sang the *aria di chiesa* of Alessandro Stradella. It is a prayer offered to a God of clemency and mercy, but it is one of those musical prayers more vibrant in its mortal sadness than the human voice in its emotional notes can pour forth. With the complacency of an artiste, and perhaps with sincerity, the famous singer lent to the lament of Stradella an emphasis more sorrowful and harrowing than ever. The listeners were taken and subdued by it. Some turned anxiously to the organ; several women in particular became pale with emotion, and their eyes were clouded by tears.

Behind her soft veil Vittoria Casalta let her tears fall silently one by one down her cheeks, nor did she make the slightest attempt to dry them, and only Marco could see that silent weeping. He leant towards her a little.

"Vittoria, don't cry."

She made no reply, only a slight movement of the hand to ask his silence, to ask him not to bother about her crying. He became silent. But up above the unseen, but not unknown, singer kept on singing passionately the prayer, so singular for a wedding-day, with its peculiar and painful words: "*Pietà, Signore, di me dolente.*" Again all hearts were touched and all souls secretly struck, for there were in that society, rich and almost scintillating with exterior happiness, and among those exquisitely dressed women covered with jewels, many who had suffered, and all such felt the power of the melody, where the soul cries to her God in waves of agony.

The bride continued to weep silently.

"Vittoria, you must not cry!" murmured Marco Fiore softly, but with virile energy in his low voice. She made a slight nod of obedience; gradually her tears dried, and her face became composed. Stradella's air was finished, the song gave forth its last sobs, and silence reigned again. But in the silence there was a sigh of bitterness from some breast still oppressed; among the rest almost a feeling of relief and a subdued whispering.

"What a singer, that Varisco!"

"Divine."

"He makes such an impression on me."

"That air of Stradella's is so beautiful."

"But what an idea to sing such an air at a marriage!"

"It is sung everywhere."

"But it is too, too sad."

"Do you think matrimony such a gay matter?"

"Does this seem to you the moment to say such a thing?"

"Well, why did you cry?"

"Crying does one good every now and then."

"In my time we laughed at weddings."

"Now we manage better."

"Be quiet, be quiet, it is the Elevation."

At a hint which reached him the celebrant hurried the end of the Mass. It was late; the young couple had delayed so much, and the day had been completely disorganised thereby. A baritone sang in haste the *O Salutaris*

*Hostia*, and was scarcely listened to; the special marriage prayers before the second Gospel were said with much rapidity. Every one had the air of wanting to get up and leave even before it was time to do so, since they had been in church nearly two hours. There was a sound of chairs being moved, and even some footsteps resounded on the marble pavement before the end. The procession was again formed at the high altar. This time the bridegroom gave his arm to the bride, and, after having kissed their nearest relations, they descended the steps of the altar together. Marco Fiore's slightly fragile good looks had for some time assumed a more virile appearance, his physiognomy, which formerly was gracious and sweet with something feminine in it, was composed and settled in an expression of thought and peace. The bride beside him, tall, but not too tall, fairly slender with a white face beneath a shining wave of golden hair, with clear and lively eyes, over which now and then a cloud seemed to pass, with her little mouth like a closed flower, seemed made to be supported and protected by the man. As they proceeded slowly through the church to gather the congratulations and greetings, the organ sounded again for the last time to accompany them out.

It was another march, the one with which the knights and ladies of Thuringia accompanied Elsa of Brabant and Lohengrin, the son of Parsifal, to the nuptial chamber. Involuntarily the procession regulated its step to the rhythm of Wagner's music, while after it had passed the whispering began again.

"Marco Fiore is always sympathetic."

"He doesn't seem exuberantly happy to me."

"Do you want him to start dancing?"

"How charming the bride is!"

"Poor thing!"

"Why do you pity her?"

"I always pity girls who get married."

"Yes, she is very pretty, it is true, but I prefer *the other*."

"The other? Which other?"

"Oh, you know quite well! Maria Guasco."

"Sst! You might be overheard."

"No, no; I liked the other very much. She was a woman."

"Don't raise your voice."

"This one is a figure for a picture; I should place her in a frame and leave her there."

"You are very naughty."

"Is everything over, then, between Marco and Maria?"

"Everything, for six or seven months."

"Do you believe in this ending?"

"I? What does it matter what I believe?"

"Poor girl!"

"There! You see I was right to pity her."

The music, spreading through the large central nave, still followed the bridal couple and the long procession of guests with its sonorous and precise notes. No word passed between them, and they contented themselves with a handshake to the good wishes which accompanied their passage; only at a certain point it seemed to Vittoria as if Marco's face was troubled by a secret idea crossing his spirit. Suddenly her little white-gloved hand imperceptibly held his arm on which she was leaning, as she asked him with a tremor in her voice—

"Marco, what is the matter?"

"Nothing," he replied, seized by his secret and obscure thought.

Wagner's music seemed to exhale a powerful and settled joy which rocked the deep love of Elsa and Lohengrin, and spoke to them of a future of soft and constant passion, even until death. But Marco's face became more clouded, as if his secret imaginings had mastered him.

"What is the matter, Marco?" Vittoria asked again a little anxiously, holding him back almost at the threshold of the church, as if she was unwilling to proceed further without an explanation.

"It is the music!" he exclaimed, sadly turning his head the other way.

"Ah!" she exclaimed without further comment, becoming exceedingly pale.

Vittoria had to suppose, with her cruel and devouring internal suspicion, that the music brought recollections of a former time to her husband, of other things, of another person. Her fine and tender mouth closed as if sealed hermetically, and she assumed her aspect of a flower dead and closed.

Meanwhile outside the view spread itself beneath the caressing April sun. The bright, fresh, blue vault of the sky arched itself from the Via Flaminia to the grandiose Piazza del Popolo, and far away the cypresses of Monte Mario, from amidst the green of the Farnesina, bathed by the twisting Tiber, hurled themselves against the almost quivering firmament, while on the left rose the Pincio, with its groves already in leaf. The large fountain in the middle of the Piazza del Popolo raised its monumental marbles which time had obscured nobly, while its waters fell back into the basin in soft spray. In the background the three roads which lead to Rome spread out like a fan; the Corso in the middle, the via di Ripetta on the right, and on the left the via del Babuino.

The morning joy was so complete that the Piazza del Popolo and adjoining streets, often so austere solitary, now showed a great animation with the movement of passers-by and carriages.

Even the newly-married couple, once outside the large and glacial temple and in the fresh air beneath the enchanting vault of the sky, felt a flutter of exaltation raise their hearts, on which life had already left its traces. That atmosphere of gaiety, so like their flourishing youth, encompassed them, and the usual magnificent allurements of the spring drew them and merged them in its gentle and fervid train. Every recollection vanished, all the wounds seemed healed, and together they began to believe again in life. Blushing Vittoria heard the people's exclamation of admiration as she got into the carriage: her veil thrown back disclosed the white forehead, and a soft smile appeared on her lips.

To the tender pity which Marco Fiore felt for the comely girl he had married a quarter of an hour ago, by the rite which no human hand can dissolve till death, there was united a kind of feeling of masculine pride, a feeling as it were of a great mission to be accomplished worthy of an upright and affectionate heart. Their two hands joined and their glances spoke of a common hope, of a common faith.

The carriage entered the Corso and the ample and exultant view vanished, and only a little narrow strip of cloud appeared between the big austere palaces. They drove towards the Palazzo Casalta in via della Botteghe Oscure. They were silent now. The two hands little by little disentangled themselves naturally from their pressure, nor did they rejoin. Both looked out of the window. As if she were speaking in a dream, Vittoria asked—

“That last wedding music displeased you, Marco?”

He trembled, and replied suddenly, “Yes.”

“Will you tell me why, Marco?”

“Why do you ask so many things, little Vittoria?” he said sweetly; “it doesn’t do to ask so much.”

“Tell me, tell me, Marco,” she insisted anxiously.

“You are like Elsa,” he murmured, shaking his head.

“What did Elsa do, Marco? She loved Lohengrin passionately.”

“Yes, little Vittoria, passionately. But she was not content with loving him without asking anything more. *She wanted to know.*”

“Ah!” she exclaimed, growing pale.

“Instead of loving she wanted to know who her spouse was.”

“Wasn’t she right, perhaps?” said Vittoria, trembling a little.

“She was wrong,” replied Marco gravely; “she had to love—that was all—blindly and humbly. Wherefore Elsa’s imperfect and incomplete love led her to deception, to betrayal, and to abandonment.”

Vittoria bit her little lip silently, as if to restrain a secret sigh.

“Haven’t you ever heard Lohengrin, little Vittoria?” murmured Marco, as if speaking to an imaginary being; “at a certain point, in the nuptial chamber, near his loving and faithful wife, the valiant knight discovers the ambuscade of which Elsa is herself an accomplice. Have you never heard, Vittoria, Lohengrin’s lament, deceived and betrayed an hour after the marriage? His dumb cry of delusion and bitterness? The dream of love was over and had vanished. Vittoria, I never could hear that cry without feeling my heart break.”

“That is why, Marco, you suffered when that music accompanied us from the church?”

“That is why, Vittoria.”

“But why was that wedding march played? It is a funeral march, Marco. Why did they play it?” she asked convulsively, bending over him.

“I don’t know,” he replied desolately.

## II

AFTER descending from the carriage in the noisy station among the crowd which the train from Florence was pouring forth, Donna Maria hesitated a moment, and behind her soft black veil her eyes seemed to be looking for some one. Her maid, carrying shawls and parcels, stood a few steps away from her. Discovering no one she made a resolute movement and opened a way for herself through the crowd, when a gentleman approached and greeted her, taking her hand to kiss it.

“Welcome, Donna Maria.”

“Good-evening, Provana,” she replied with cold courtesy, “what are you doing here?”

“I have come to meet you,” he said, surprised at the question.

“Very kind of you,” she replied, thanking him with a bow.

She approached the exit with him, followed at two or three steps’ distance by her maid. A servant of Casa Guasco was there; he touched his hat, and inquired after the luggage. Maria drily directed the man to her maid.

“The carriage is here too,” said Gianni fussily.

“You are very kind,” she said.

The great electric lights illuminated the arrival place, and Gianni looked at her intently. The morbid and slightly proud grace of Maria’s face seemed unchanged with its faintly rosy complexion, the large eyes were closed purposely as if absorbed in their interior life. Her undulating figure, even in its simple travelling costume, preserved its fascination. Perhaps her glance was less vivid, and the lines of her face were less decided, nor was the expression of the proud mouth quite so firm, little changes due to fatigue, which in fact gave her an air of languor, new and strangely attractive in her.

She did not speak to Gianni as he accompanied her to the coupé, a new and elegant carriage. Before entering she hesitated slightly, and turned to take leave of him. He bowed politely, and asked—

“Will you allow me to accompany you home?”

“Do you think it necessary?”

“To accomplish my duty,” he affirmed, with veiled insistence.

“If it is a duty, yes,” she consented coldly.

The door was closed on them. By the brightness of the electric light Maria discovered a bunch of flowers in the pocket in front of her.

“Are they yours?” she asked.

“No, I wouldn’t allow myself,” he murmured, with a smile. “They are Emilio’s; he has thought of everything. For several days he has busied himself with nothing but your return.”

“You busy yourselves together, it seems to me,” she said, with a fleeting tinge of irony.

"If you like. Emilio considers me, perhaps unworthily, one of the authors of your return. Is he wrong?"

"He is wrong," she replied precisely.

A silence fell between them. In spite of his wit and scepticism Gianni Provana always felt the distance at which the woman held him, and the confused repugnance, a repugnance sometimes cruelly apparent, with which he inspired her.

"Because of this false idea of his, then," resumed Provana, "Emilio wished to organise your return with me."

"And he sent you to the station?"

"He sent me to the station."

"It was useless."

"Ought you to have found no one?"

"I ought to have found Emilio," she said in a low voice, as if to herself. There was a heavy moment of silence.

"Such a meeting, Donna Maria, in public after what has happened! You understand?" he murmured.

"I understand; be silent," she rejoined, with a decisive gesture.

For some time the carriage proceeded on its way without either speaking. Perhaps, in spite of his tenacity, hidden under an appearance of graciousness and indifference, the man repented of having been involved in that *histoire intime*, and perhaps the perverse conception he had of life counselled him to be quiet, to be patient, and to wait. It was Maria who resumed the conversation, as the carriage was drawing near its destination.

"Is Emilio in Rome?"

"Yes."

"Is he at home?"

"He is waiting for you."

"You will leave me at the house door, Provana," she added coldly.

"Of course, there is no necessity to order me to do it. I will come to-morrow to greet you."

"No, Provana."

"Within a few days, then."

"The latest possible, and better never."

"Never is a big word, Donna Maria. Why don't you want to see me any more?"

"Do you believe that I am what I am, and what I shall always be, a creature of truth? Do you believe that I have come this evening to Emilio Guasco's home, to my husband's home, to accomplish a solemn act? Why, then, do you wish me to become a creature of lies? Why, then, do you wish to make grotesque, doubly grotesque, my act of humility, and my husband's act of pardon?"

"But why ever do you suppose that, Donna Maria?" he asked, a little confused.

"I suppose what is, Provana; that it may please you hugely to be the lover of your best friend's wife, that it may please you to preserve a friendship with the husband and love the wife; that you have a horror of scandal, of noise, of open and undeniable betrayal; that the miserable and nauseating betrayal of every day pleases you with all its lies and transactions; that for a long time you have known that you wished to do this to Emilio and to me; that no one upset your plan more than he whom you know—and in fact that you have begun to hope again in its success."

"Every one is allowed to hope for what he ardently desires," replied Gianni ambiguously.

"I shall only have had one love in my life," she said, in a clear low voice, "and only one lover. Good-bye, Provana."

The carriage had driven round the circle of the courtyard of the Guasco Palazzo, in via de' Prefetti, and stopped before the peristyle. Bowing deeply Gianni Provana took his leave, while Maria, preceded by the servants, mounted the stairs very slowly. An inexorable agitation pressed deeply on the soul of the woman who, after the intense love rhapsody in which she had thrown all that was good and bad in her existence as upon a pyre, was retracing her steps and invoking the pardon of him whom she had fatally and unjustly injured. Ah, she would never have returned to the honest, faithful man unless she had seen the magnificent pyre of her passion extinguished, and her life rendered mute and deserted by love!

She had preferred to take time to calm her sorrow, to mature in her conscience the act of remission and humility she had come to accomplish. She had passed five months away from Rome in a villa near Florence, without asking or giving news, and her heart and soul were immersed in a great contrition. They had felt all the weight of the evil done to others, of suffering inflicted undeservedly on the innocent. The sublime idea of reparation had become in Maria so lofty and irrevocable that, at the end of her exile, she was asking to touch the limit of every personal sacrifice, if only to console, heal, and make Emilio Guasco happy again.

In the solitude which she had imposed on herself, in which she had prepared herself for the great work—the greatest and most beautiful work the human soul can accomplish—of giving comfort and happiness, the figure of Emilio Guasco, by his sufferings and the dignity with which he had borne them, and the magnanimity with which he had recalled her to himself, stretching his arms to her in pardon, seemed greater than it had ever been. From the distance Emilio's love for her seemed immeasurable, since it had resisted betrayal, abandonment, and dishonour. It seemed a different love to her—superior, immovable, eternal, a love which she had never experienced, and, in fact, she felt herself unworthy of having inspired. Contrition was breaking, pulverising, volatilising Maria Guasco's pride, that secret strength, sin, and virtue of her life.

Slowly she reached the head of the stairs, her heart beating more quickly, as she noticed again the well-known place where she had lived, where again she had to see the well-known face and hear again the familiar voice. She realised that she was holding in her convulsed hand two existences.

Maria had no other feeling as she placed her feet on the threshold of what had been her home, and was to become so again, except that of the humility of the repentant sinner. All her being was humility. She was begging pardon for the sin committed, and for the pardon was offering in exchange the dedication of a soul, the dedication of a life.

In the large ante-room, with its dark-carved panels, the two servants left their mistress, and retired to the other

side of the living rooms. Once alone her trembling increased, and she seemed to be falling. Where, then, was Emilio, her husband and judge, her husband and her victim, who had not had the strength to meet her at the station, whom at any rate she had expected to find at the threshold? With an effort of will she kept her step firm, and crossed the drawing-room and the little drawing-room. Both rooms were deserted, and so was her bright boudoir. Where was Emilio? A singular thought crossed her brain, which she rejected as soon as she had accepted it, as she perceived him through the open door of his study, standing by his large writing-table holding in his hand, but not reading, a newspaper. The room was less illuminated than the others, and the lamps were shaded in green, but if it had been inundated with the light of the sun Maria would have noticed nothing, so veiled were her eyes and scattered her senses. However, she advanced towards him, where he was waiting silently for the proper word from her. In spite of her horrible trembling, she turned to him contritely with the sincerest repentance; bending her head and stretching out her hands to him. With a very white face, she exclaimed in unspeakable humility—

“Emilio, I ask your pardon.”

If her knees were not bent nor the body prostrated, the soul was prostrated, waiting for the complete pardon, for the word that absolves, the act that cancels, the gesture that redeems. The woman listened humbly without looking at him.

“I pardon you, Maria,” said the man.

Maria raised her eyes and fixed them on Emilio Guasco, and waited; but he did not look at her, neither did he move. An immense silence, an enormous distance seemed to have come between the man and the woman.

### III

AFTER having helped her into a soft white silk robe and laced her shoes, Chiara, the faithful maid, looked at Donna Maria, expecting orders. It was late, past eleven, and as they had been travelling weariness was overwhelming both. After thinking for an instant, Maria said to Chiara—

“Braid my hair.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Chiara, with the slightest movement of surprise. Chiara had forgotten the old custom. Formerly, when she had entered the service of Donna Maria Guasco Simonetti about six months after her marriage, every evening, whether her young mistress went out or not, sometimes even after a theatre or a ball, Chiara had to undo the great thick mass of chestnut hair, taking out the combs and pins, and having combed the magnificent tresses with an almost caressing movement of the brush and comb, she had to gather them into a long plait, tying it at the end with a white silk ribbon, while a similar ribbon went round the head in a bow on top. This gave Maria an exceedingly young, almost girlish appearance. When Maria had fled from Casa Guasco with Marco Fiore, and had cloistered her life in the little villa at Santa Maria Maggiore, where Chiara followed her in blind devotion and obedience, the tresses were no longer unloosed by the girl’s expert hands and bound in a plait. Such a fashion perhaps no longer pleased Donna Maria, as she remembered the house she had left, or more likely it did not please her lover, whose delight it was to plunge his fingers and face in the soft and odorous waves of her hair.

“Make me a plait like you used to, Chiara,” Maria murmured, with her eyes closed.

With a slight tinkle the small combs and pins fell on the crystal-covered toilette table, and that well-known sound seemed to strike the two women as if the old life had begun again. When she had finished, Chiara searched for a moment among the silver-topped vials and ivory boxes.

“Here is the ribbon,” she said softly.

The white ribbon was there, as if Chiara had left it the evening before and four years had not passed, or as if a mysterious hand had placed the things there as in former times, so that the singular resurrection should seem like a continuation of life. In every particular Maria found this secret care that every line and tint should produce the quiet and persuasive impression of an existence which had had no interruptions, which was pursuing its development without a break, so that to-day was like yesterday, like a year ago or seven years ago, and to-morrow and the day after like yesterday and to-day. Not only had none of the old furniture been moved, not only had the carpets, portières and curtains preserved their usual aspect, but they had not even grown old. Not only did the hundred well-known and familiar objects attract the glance with the sympathetic fidelity of inanimate objects, but they gave more than ever the sense of unelapsed time, of objects viewed no later than yesterday, and to-day found again sympathetically in their place. Maria found again a little antique clock on a small table near her bed, with the hours marked in blue figures, which she had left on her departure and missed. It was ticking lightly and pointed to half-past eleven, as if it had never ceased to go in all the time that had passed. In some vases there were large bunches of grass, and green leaves without a flower, such as she always liked to have in her bedroom, seeking out the grasses most peculiar and delicate in form, and the leaves the most varied in colour and marking. Formerly she did not care for the perfume of flowers in her bedroom, fearing its insidious poison; but the green of gardens and meadows, of fields and mountains, the healthy green of leaves and grasses pleased her simple open spirit, her sane and beautiful youth. The ink was fresh in the pen on the writing-table, just as if her last letter had been written an instant ago, and near by was a book in a dark-green binding, a book unfinished with the marker in its place—*Salambo*, of Gustave Flaubert.

Thus Donna Maria had the feeling of the abolition of time.

“Does Your Excellency want anything else?” asked Chiara, mechanically uttering the words of formerly which had returned to her memory.

“Nothing, Chiara; good-night.”

In greeting her maid Maria’s voice trembled with tenderness. For seven years she had given all her services to Maria, and little by little had become a friendly and devoted shadow, almost as if she no longer existed for her own personality. In every peculiar contingency of these seven years, without speaking, without murmuring, even without judging or thinking, Chiara had continued to serve and obey—the shadow of Donna Maria.

On this day, profound with diverse and contrary sentiments, she returned with her mistress silently and humbly, like her with a contrite heart, to the house from which they had fled together, from which they had been absent so long, and just as Donna Maria strangely began her life again where it had been interrupted, and time and her deeds



had seemed abolished, so the poor little shadow of a Chiara returned to that which had been formerly, naturally and tacitly like a faithful shadow.

#### IV

WHEN Chiara had disappeared and Donna Maria's eyes had followed her with a little thrill of affection and gratitude for so much altruism in a service requiring such tact, she settled herself in an arm-chair as of yore. She resumed the novel on Carthage where she had left off, removed the marker methodically from the open page, and fixed her eyes on the printed letters, waiting for Emilio, her husband, to come as he used to.

"He will come now," thought Maria, as her eyes read about the curious refinements of the attiring of Salamambo, as she sets off for the field of the rebels to seize from Matho the veil of Tanith, which he had stolen.

However, her reading was but short. There arose in her soul a dull agitation, which became stronger there where for a moment it had been lulled, as it seemed to her that nothing had happened, and that her life had had no break in its continuity; so much so that she awoke from the calm and peaceful surroundings, speaking of an uninterrupted serenity from which she had obtained a lingering caress of contentment, as in a dream, only to be confronted with a reality. How could she read? *Salamambo* slid from her knees to the carpet. She rose to her feet, crossed the large room, approached the closed door and listened if Emilio were coming towards her, as formerly, even if differently to formerly so long as he came to that room which had been theirs for years; that she may confront his eyes, that their glances may unite and melt together, that she may seize his hand and clasp it with hers, that she may remember the gentle way he used to open his arms and close her tenderly to his bosom.

"I will weep on his bosom," she said to herself, "he will weep with me; nothing is better than weeping when we have to pardon and forget, when we have been pardoned and are invoking forgetfulness."

However, the silence in Casa Guasco was supreme, and Donna Maria heard no step approaching. The boudoir, which preceded her room, was in half-darkness, lit by a single lamp. On the other side was her husband's study, where they had met an hour ago, and where he had remained silent without following her. The study door was closed. No noise reached from there.

"He is working, perhaps," she thought. Then suddenly a contradiction arose. "Working? At what? At this hour?"

Like a spectre Maria re-entered her room, praying for calm against the heavy disturbance which was again oppressing her. She sat at her desk, and pressing her burning forehead in her cool hands, endeavoured to subdue herself, to conquer herself.

Again the sentiment of humility, with which she had mortified her proud heart in the months of solitude and repentance which she had passed at Florence, inundated her soul with pity, with affection, and with loving charity. She thought of the state of Emilio's heart, on that day on which he had accomplished such a noble and tender deed, pardoning a long and atrocious offence, in which he had given a beautiful proof of magnanimity, receiving again into his home the traitress, the truant, who had broken her sacred promises and vows. She thought of how he must have suffered for four eternal years in the same land, in the same society, having no comfort of any kind, having no children and in a deserted house, and of how he must have cursed his destiny and her name.

She thought of what the pardon he had offered her must have cost him in intense moral pain, and in powerful moral sacrifice, which she had only accepted when it was convenient for her to accept it.

Again, the figure of her husband opposed to her egoism, opposed to her love folly, opposed to the delirium of her own passion, seemed to grow large with goodness, and she felt herself mean and unworthy before him. She felt the need of seeing him, of telling him of her gratitude and her admiration, since he alone possessed every virtue and energy of well-doing, while she was a fragile and fallen creature. Thus in the silence, in her solitude, she evoked the presence of her husband. She invoked that presence, in order that she might tell him how a whole life of devotion would compensate for his heroic pardon.

With fixed eyes Maria stood at the door, all ardour, to see it open after the invocation. Her contracted face spoke of a heavy anguish, her sinuous body in its flowing white gown was alert and rigid with waiting. From not seeing her husband appear, as she had thought, hoped, and desired, she suffered the more from the profound silence of the house, from the desert which the house seemed to have become, from that mortal solitude, but especially from her mortal delusion. She suffered acutely. And it was intolerance of such torturing waiting, in all its moments of repression, that exasperated her; she wished through her imperious will to force the destiny of that long night to change.

"I will go and seek him," she said to herself. Once having decided she crossed the boudoir, reached the door of the study, where she supposed her husband was closeted, and stooped to knock, even to open it violently. But her raised hand did not obey the movement suggested by her will. Quite apart, her feverish and convulsed brain had inspired her with a shock, with an immense fear.

"Suppose he were to think.... Suppose he were to think...." she murmured to herself almost deliriously.

With scarcely perceptible motion, taking every care not to make the slightest noise, holding her breath, she turned back, palpitating and trembling, yet striving to restrain the palpitation and the trembling. At last she reached her room.

Throwing herself on the bed she hid her face in the pillow, even stopping her mouth with it, so that her sobs of bitterness, of fear, and terror may not be heard. Hers was all the shame of a woman, who suddenly was fated to tell herself the hard and cruel truth that she was still a young and beautiful woman, that the man she had sought was still young and her husband as well, that, although the night was late, he who loved her surely, since only he who loves pardons, had not come to look for her dressed as she was as if for a love tryst; but that she had been on the point of knocking at his door, as if not to beg merely a colloquy of sadness, of repentance, of tears—not a colloquy of two bruised souls which sought spiritual healing for their wounds—but a colloquy of love.

"No, no, no," she kept on saying, scarcely breathing, with her mouth against the fine linen of the pillow, fighting against the unjust accusation of her conscience.

Unjust! She felt herself perfectly pure from such a transgression, one of those miserable and mean transgressions of the inner feminine life which lower and corrupt a woman even to despising herself. Maria had only

had, as she said, one love and one lover only, Marco Fiore, had only lived with a complete and intense passion for the three years of separation from Casa Guasco, and at once, but for ever, her heart and her senses had become a heap of ashes. As she had never wished to divide her soul and her person between Emilio Guasco and Marco Fiore at the time of the height of her amorous delirium, as she had forgotten everything, thrown everything aside to belong to one only, and had burnt in a single flame all that life had conceded her of love for Marco Fiore, so she, on returning home, to live again with her husband, had not for a moment thought that her person ought to be offered and given again as a sensible and tangible pledge, as a holocaust to the new conjugal existence. The idea that her husband hearing her knock at that door, hearing the handle creak, and seeing her appear in her soft garment, with her look of former times, late at night when he had not sought her; the idea that he might have believed it a sensual offering, had aroused in her a tempestuous crisis of shuddering, of shame, and of fear. Ah, how the lover was finished, was dead in Maria Guasco, dead with a love which is measured and short, as short as human existence, far, far shorter than all short affairs of which life is composed and in which man, alas, desires to place his eternity! Love was over, the lover was dead, and Maria Guasco felt every glory of the senses extinguished within her. If her soul and fibres at Venice and Rome had proved the immeasurable and inconsolable sorrow of her own sentimental and sensual impotence for her delightful lover, never more could she have love and a lover—not even her husband, Emilio Guasco.

“God has nullified and calmed me,” she thought, soothing the anguish of her spirit little by little. “I can be faithful to the past since I have been touched by death, and I have entered into an extreme quiet.”

But the man who was breathing, moving, living his unknown but powerful life in a room not far from Maria’s, the man who was the first to clasp her, his legitimate spouse, who had kept for her, even during the betrayal, even during the abandonment, all his rights as a husband; the man of whom Maria knew only this absolute and irrefutable right, was he, too, finished with love and dead to the senses?

Had the years which were passed withdrawn him from the inebriating flatteries of passion? Had they withdrawn him from all the burning impulses of life in its fulness? Was he dead? And if he was not, if he was alive, of what was he thinking, what was he desiring, what was he wishing, what could he wish of Maria at the present moment, now so late?

“He used to love me—he did love me,” she said to herself, lifting herself from her pillow, absorbed in the intensity of her thoughts.

And even now Emilio ought to love her. A feminine instinct told the thoughtful woman this; a precise and clear presentiment repeated it to her, and every act in daily reality had confirmed it for her, and his very magnanimity bore testimony to it.

“Only he loves who pardons,” she thought, in a secret torture which kept penetrating her spirit. The singular torture, that is, of all those who do not love, who are unable to love, who could break their hearts, but who could not place love there, and who, instead, are loved with tenderness and enthusiasm; the torture, that is, which life inflicts on thousands and thousands of miserable men and women, inept to love, who must endure the love of another, endure it coldly, and measure all its greatness without participating in it, and, in fact, feel all its weight, all its annoyance, and all its execration!—an ineffable torture indeed, which up to a certain point sent a rush of fear through Maria’s excited and sensible fibres. Rising to her feet and gazing with scared eyes at the door, she feared lest Emilio should appear there, should come to her enamoured as of yore, even more enamoured, and burning with precipitous desire. Maria in all that spiritual fever which flowed through her acutest feelings, her sharpest sensations, retired to the door of her room and wrung her hands in desperation, not knowing where to fly from such a danger. And just as she had evoked and invoked that presence of a good and honourable man which she had rendered so unhappy, that presence from which she had desired to hear the voice repeat to her the words of pardon, to let herself pronounce afresh those words of humility and contrition, so that presence—not one of a brother, not one of a friend, not of a suffering soul to be consoled and healed—that presence of a man, of a husband, strong in his love, strong in his instincts, strong in his right, seemed to her an abyss of abjection, of perdition, into which she would have fallen with all her pride and all her womanly dignity.

“What shall I do; whatever shall I do?” she exclaimed, as if invoking succour.

But the silence of Casa Guasco was so profound and absolute! Conquering her terror, Maria recrossed the room and mechanically, with the rigid movements of one who obeys her will rather than dispute with it, she left the boudoir and turned the knob of the electric light. The shadow increased in the brightly lit room, and all fell into obscurity. Entering her own room she closed the door without making any noise, but dared not turn the key. Clothed as she was, leaving the lamp lit, she threw herself on the bed, commanding all her exhausted forces to arouse her, all her tired fibres not to abandon her, so much did she fear to fall asleep since some one could enter her room, since she had not had the courage to shut herself in.

Two or three times, in the torpor by which her mind and limbs were conquered, she tossed about and then sat up in bed, only to fall again without having heard or seen anything. Then a deep sleep fell upon her.

## V

ON entering the room at the usual hour, Chiara found her mistress asleep and dressed on the bed with the electric light on, while outside the sun was high. She turned out the light quietly, half opened the shutters, and re-arranged the scattered things, knowing that her mistress would be awakened. Turning round Chiara saw that Maria’s eyes were open and that she was very pale; she wished her good-morning, and received a feeble reply. Maria closed her eyes again and buried her head in the pillow, as if she had need of escaping the spectacle of the living things around her. A torpor held her on the rumpled bed, a desire to know, to hear, to see nothing. The young maid entered and left two or three times with her rhythmical and noiseless step, till at last Maria raised her head, and asked—

“Is it late?”

“Almost nine. Shall I prepare the bath?”

“Later on,” she replied in a weak voice.

Chiara looked at her with such tender pity in her eyes that Maria gave her a reassuring nod.

"It is nothing. I am all right." And at the same time she made a questioning movement which the loving soul understood—

"The master has gone out."

"Gone out; where?"

"On business to Velletri. He returns this evening."

"When did he go?"

"This morning at seven. Gaspare, the valet, called him very early."

"But where did he sleep?" asked Maria, after a little hesitation.

"In his new room, Excellency."

"His new room?"

"Over there, behind the billiard-room."

There was a silence between the two women.

"How long has your master occupied this room?"

"For some time," said the girl, lowering her eyes.

"Tell me how long, Chiara," insisted Maria.

"Since Your Excellency left."

"Ah!" replied Donna Maria without further observation, letting her head fall on the pillow. Chiara stood waiting for orders.

"Are there any letters for me?" resumed Maria in a feeble voice.

"No, Excellency."

"Has your master left a note for me?"

"Nothing, Excellency. It seems, though, that he has been awake all the night."

"Who told you that?"

"Gaspare."

"Ah!"

Not another word passed between the two women.

Beginning her first day after the pardon, Maria read in her mind these clear and indelible words: "He has pardoned me, but he avoids me; he has pardoned me, but he hates me; he has pardoned me, but he despises me." And all sense of life was lost within her.

## VI

VITTORIA FIORE was alone in her room at the Hôtel de la Paix, dressed ready to go out. She went to and fro from the balcony to the door, waiting for her husband who was nearly an hour late, and every time she withdrew from the balcony overlooking the white Lungarno and the river, and went towards the door to peep into the corridor, to see if Marco were coming, a sorrowful impatience contracted her youthful figure. Passing before a large mirror, two or three times she threw a rapid glance at herself, then shook her head sadly. On the face of the newly made bride there was not shining that smile of gentle delight, of mutual love which trusts in a long future of serene joy. She was thoughtful, agitated, and sometimes completely tormented, as if her inmost soul could find no peace.

But Marco did not return. Where was he then? For an instant the spasm of impatience was so strong that her pale face became livid, and she placed her hand to her heart, as if she felt it stopping. A step sounded in the corridor. In an instant the lines of her face composed themselves, a light wave of blood mounted to her cheeks. The expression of her face became so tranquil and serene that it would have deceived the most expert eye. To complete the deception she pretended to be buttoning her glove.

Marco entered with a great bunch of white lilies and red velvety roses, which shed their delicate fragrance in the room.

"I had to wait a little, Vittoria," he said; "but in compensation I have brought you these flowers."

"I have waited a little, but I didn't notice it," she replied untruthfully.

"I had something to do," he added vaguely, without offering further information; "don't you like the flowers?"

"Yes, I like them," she replied quickly, without any enthusiasm. "Thank you, Marco, they are beautiful flowers." And she immersed her face in them.

He had thrown himself into a chair as if tired from a long walk or fastidiousness, as if he had forgotten that he had come to take her out. Vittoria herself, who had remained standing near the table, where she had placed the flowers, now sat down and placed her purse, and parasol there.

"What magnificent flowers Florence has," added Marco, with an abstracted smile, "every time I return here I am seized with a madness to have such a lot of them, in fact, all if it were possible in my arms and my room."

"You have been several times to Florence?" she asked coldly, almost imperiously.

"Yes," he replied, without heeding either the question or its tone; "not all understand this country, and so not all can love it. It is a country of love and poesy," he ended in saying, almost to himself, with a far-away expression of recollection.

Silent and serene Vittoria seemed to have heard nothing, and, as Marco was not getting up from his seat, nor expressing a wish to go out, she drew off her gloves slowly, stretched them one after the other, and placed them on the table beside the purse and the parasol.

"You have never seen it in the evening and at night, Vittoria, but I assure you it is a dreamland. Shall we go this evening, would you like to?"

"We will go," she replied tranquilly, slightly distractedly, while she raised her long white hands to draw the two

large pearl-headed pins from her hat.

"We must go if the evening is beautiful," he continued, absorbed in his plan. "Is there a moon, Vittoria?"

"Yes, I think so," she replied, lifting the flowers of her hat with her white fingers, and not appearing to give much attention to her husband's discourse.

"Very well, if there is a moon, and it rises late, we must go to the Loggia di Orcagna. Do you remember you saw the Loggia di Orcagna yesterday?"

"Yes, I saw it yesterday," she replied, folding her white veil accurately.

"At that hour there are no people in the streets of Florence, and it is a city recollected and a little melancholy. Then we must sit on the steps of the Loggia di Orcagna, beneath the statue of Judith, holding in her hand the head of Holofernes, and look around the Piazza della Signoria, and all the visions come to him who knows how to dream."

"What visions? What dreams?" she demanded coldly, playing with the charms on her gold chain.

Marco looked at her, marvelling a little.

"Do you never dream, little Vittoria?" he asked, with some irony.

"Never," she replied drily.

"Not even of me when I am not there?" and the tone became still more ironical.

"When you are not there I wait for you; that is all," she murmured, without further observation.

"That is not a great deal; but still it doesn't matter!" and he broke into a laugh.

She lowered her eyelids, as she always did to hide the trouble of her eyes, and closed her lips to repress her words; but these actions were so imperceptible that the man hardly ever noticed them.

"Aren't you going to put your flowers in water? don't you like them?"

"I am just going to," she replied.

Then very slowly she took the flowers and untied them, almost without looking at them, separating them on the table with a mechanical working of the hands.

"It is eleven," he said, looking at his watch. "I should like to lie down a little; I am so tired. It is the spring perhaps."

"Go and sleep; you have an hour and a half before lunch," Vittoria replied, without turning.

"Aren't you tired?"

"No, I haven't been out."

"That is true. Doesn't the spring tire you?"

"No."

"I feel exhausted," he added vaguely, "I am going to sleep. What are you going to do?"

"I am going to write home."

"Brava! Write for me too; tell them everything, little Vittoria."

"You haven't written to any one, Marco," she observed.

"I am a poor letter-writer, little Vittoria."

"Have you always been?" and the question seemed conventional and polite.

"Not always," he replied, falling into the trap; "au revoir, Vittoria; occupy yourself with the flowers, and this evening we will go under the Loggia di Orcagna."

He disappeared into the other room. For several minutes she continued to gather together the branches of odorous lilies and fragrant roses. Then she went on tip-toe to the bedroom door, looked in, and listened. Marco was asleep, and his face was wasted with weariness. Then she returned to the table, threw herself into a chair, and buried her face in her hands, completely unstrung.

"O my God! my God!" she cried, through her clenched teeth, so as not to be heard. But the fresh flowers, the lilies and rich red roses, which were beneath her face and hands, repelled her as something horrid, fell to the ground, and lay there while she sobbed and invoked Heaven desperately in a stifled voice.

## VII

"DECIDE, little Vittoria," said Marco, spreading a small map on the marble table, "you must decide. Here we are in Milan; we have seen the Cathedral, the Brera Gallery, and the Sforza Castle. There is nothing else to see; decide."

"I decide to leave because you don't wish to remain," Vittoria replied, with her usual reserve.

"But by which route shall we go to Paris? Right through from here by the Gothard? Or shall we step off at Turin and go by Mont Cenis? Look at the map carefully and decide."

Ever since they had started on their travels, he had kept up this amiable and slightly teasing tone, that of a travelling companion, a little bored, who has seen everything, but is good-natured enough to lend himself as the cicerone of a tyro. All his concern and care was protecting. He had the expression of a person who spends for the diversion and happiness of another without participating himself in the diversion or the happiness. It was impossible to conceal this expression, and Vittoria, with her common-sense, had understood his peculiar behaviour. Of Florence, Pisa, Siena, Bologna, nothing mattered to Marco Fiore, nor did it concern him to be in one hotel more than another, nor did it matter to him whether he left by this or that *train-de-luxe*—but that his little Vittoria should see and appreciate everything, should pass a happy day without being too tired, that all the Palace Hotels should give her hospitality, and that all the *wagon-lits* should make the journey less heavy and tiresome for her, was his care and occupation. Certainly he was indifferent to all the sights and changes, to the arrivals and departures, like one who has seen everything and could see nothing more.

"Decide, then, Vittoria, for the Gothard or the Cenis?"

Was he not treating her like a child, of whom he was the affectionate tutor? Vittoria looked at the map without the least understanding it, and, raising her eyes, said to him—

"You, Marco, by which route would you go?"

"Oh, I?" he exclaimed, shrugging his shoulders, "I have been so often one way or the other."

"Ah," she said, "then it is quite indifferent to you."

"To me, yes; though the Gothard route is the more beautiful."

"Let us take the other then," she added.

"Would you always be a spirit of contradiction, Vittorietta? Why do you prefer the less beautiful?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

He frowned. Sometimes her cold replies surprised him, freezing all the gentle concern he had in seeing her content and happy. When that pleasant face grew fixed and the lips closed, she seemed like a little unopened flower which no ray of the sun could open, and he experienced a sense of delusion and melancholy. The control he exerted over himself was very great. To be so abundantly affectionate he required so much moral and sentimental effort, and she understood nothing of it. With a word or a gesture she cut off all his tender good-will.

But to accomplish his sentimental existence of a mission, of a duty which should fill the immense empty place of his dead love, was not Marco bound to Vittoria's good and happiness? Was it not his concern, little by little, by daily sympathy and affection, by loving tenderness, to heal the heart wounded by a long and cruel abandonment and betrayal? Should he not make her forget all she had suffered for him? And if that jealous and offended soul was not completely reassured, if that disdainful soul martyred by waiting did not expand and tremble with joy, she was right perhaps. He must be patient and sweet with her, as with an invalid who has scarcely reached convalescence, and has still the horror of the disease in the mind.

"Now, little Vittoria, melt all the ice which surrounds your soul, have a desire and a will, my lady," he resumed, in the half-mocking, half-affectionate tone he liked to take with her. The poor cold soul who only felt the affection of courteous words and the brilliant glance of the clear eyes, asked—

"What do you wish, then, Marco?"

"That you express an idea, expound a plan for the continuance of our journey. Don't you know; can't you decide? I will help you, little Vittoria. Do you wish to go to Paris?"

"Yes."

"At once?"

"This very evening."

"Very good; this evening, then, by the Cenis. You won't see the best part of the journey, but that doesn't matter. How long would you like to stay in Paris?"

"As long as seems necessary to you," she replied, with a little uncertain smile.

"Well, ten days or a fortnight. To which hotel would you like to go?"

She started at this question, and lowered her eyes.

"Is it all the same to you perhaps? If it is——"

"It isn't all the same to me," she murmured, with an evident control of her will. "I should like to go to a new hotel where you have never been."

Her face grew pale for having once dared to tell her secret thought; then she blushed, and tears came to her eyes.

"If it is only that," said Marco slowly, moved, "if it is only that, it is easy. We will go to the Elysée Palace."

"Thanks," she replied, "thanks."

She dared not press his hand because they were in the large hall of the Hôtel Milan, among a crowd of travellers coming and going, where every one gave a glance to the handsome couple, above all to the blonde, with her pale complexion and attractive beauty.

"And at Paris, what life do you intend to lead, Vittorietta?"

"Ah, that I don't know," she added serenely; "I have always heard from my childhood of this fascinating and terrible place; but no one ever told me anything exactly about it. You know they leave us girls very ignorant in Rome, and you must find me so stupid sometimes, Marco."

"Well, in a few sentences I am going to tell how to live in two ways in Paris for ten days or a fortnight. You know that we have relations and friends there, and quite well that our marriage has been announced in the *Figaro* and *Gaulois*, in fact that every one knows that we are coming to Paris. Bear in mind the gravity of what I am telling you, Vittoria," he interrupted in emphatic tones.

"I understand deeply," she replied smilingly, backing him up.

"There is more. At Paris there is my Great Aunt, the Aunt of all the Fiore, the Great Aunt of the family, whom we have respected and venerated ever since we were born, the Duchess of Altomonte, the legitimist, who has been exiled from Italy for forty years; a *femme terrible*, with whom they used to frighten us at night, when we were small and could not sleep."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Vittoria, smiling.

"Very well, dear Vittoria, also flower of flowers, as the poet of Spello said at our wedding, there is the first method of life at Paris. It is that of arriving officially, of making a request to the Duchess of Altomonte to be permitted to kiss her hand, if not her foot; to warn all the other minor aunts, cousins, and friends; to accept all the invitations to lunch, dinner and tea, to the theatre and to supper; every day to have three luncheons and two dinners, three theatres and two suppers; to have no more peace or liberty, not to be able to speak to each other for a minute, falling asleep at night, and the next minute it is morning with the oppression of all the worldly fatigues of the day.

"Naturally you will put on all your best dresses, for the theatre, for the garden party, or a ball, all your jewels en *grande toilette*, and the little time which will remain at your disposal you will use to change your costume, your hat, or your gloves—five times a day."

"Does all that seem amusing to you?" she asked expressionlessly.

"Does it seem amusing to you?"

"Tell me the other way, Marco, to enable me to judge."

"To enable you to choose, dear Minerva, the other way is: to arrive and remain perfectly incognito; to let the proud and ferocious Duchess of Altomonte go, let all the relations and friends go; not to place, and prevent it from being placed, any notice of our arrival in the papers; to live in perfect obscurity and liberty, only going where we wish, only frequenting the places where we wish to amuse ourselves freely, going for excursions in the neighbourhood of Paris, especially those of beauty, poetry, and freshness, from Fontainebleau to Saint Germain, from Chantilly to Enghien—true idylls, Vittoria. Otherwise than the Imperial salon, dry and hard as the Duchess of Altomonte, who has been infesting it for the last forty years! In fact a life gay and sympathetic, especially free, without a single boring or heavy duty."

Vittoria lowered her eyes wrapped in thought, then she asked—

"I suppose you have always, or nearly always, visited Paris in the second way?"

"Not nearly always—always."

"Well then, Marco," she replied coldly and drily, "I choose the first way. It seems more proper to me."

"You are right, Minerva; let it be so!" he exclaimed, even more coldly.

## VIII

SEATED in an arm-chair of the most upright Empire style, a carved curial chair of darkest mahogany, with bronze bosses and ornaments, cushioned in a myrtle pattern, Vittoria sat upright before her Great Aunt and kept respectful silence. The bride in this third and last visit to the Duchess of Altomonte, a visit of thanks and farewell, wore a rich dress of pleated silver, gay with handsome embroidery; in her little ears she wore solitaires, a large hat with a silver-grey feather on her blond tresses, and amid the lace of her corsage an antique necklace of diamonds and emeralds. She was dressed so luxuriously because, on the first visit made to the proud and austere Bourbon *grande dame*, the Duchess had suddenly observed to her nephew that his wife was dressed too humbly, and not suitably to her position and the visit she had come to make.

"Vittoria is very simple in her toilette," Marco had replied philosophically.

"It is one of the mistakes of society in modern times, this affectation of simplicity," the Duchess had replied immediately.

So at the state dinner, which the Duchess had given to the young couple, to which had been asked all the old gentlemen and ladies who had remained faithful to the King of the Two Sicilies, and had followed him in exile to Paris, Vittoria had not only put on her most expensive evening dress, but wore in her hair the diadem given her by her mother-in-law, Donna Arduina, and round her neck a necklace, a gift from Marco.

Under the weight of the glittering jewels, in that respectable but melancholy society, the pretty bride had not pronounced a single word.

Now, a day before their departure, she had come to present her compliments to her Great Aunt, and intimidated by her surroundings, but especially by the Duchess of Altomonte, Vittoria sat on her Empire chair, with closed mouth and drooping eyes waiting for her great new relation to condescend a word and speak to her.

The Duchess of Altomonte, Donna Guilia de' Masi, born of the family of Castropignano, had completed eighty years. Her abundant hair, which she preserved to that age, was of the finest shining white, and dressed in old-fashioned style, framing a face which in youth and maturity must have reflected a majestic and imperious beauty. Of the past it was true there remained only an expression of power in the still bright eyes, and the proud smile, wonderful in its energy at that age. Certainly the shoulders were bent and the step a little slow, but, even in this decadence of years and the signs of dissolution, the Duchess had known how to impress and be imposing. The great Empire chair, where she liked to sit for hours together, with a big embroidered cushion in the fashion of the period beneath her feet shod in black velvet, resembled a throne, and the very black ebony stick with the curved silver handle, on which she leaned her tottering steps, resembled a sceptre. Her whole person gave a sense of immense respect, of silent devotion, of a past of honour and fidelity to all promises and oaths, of a past of lofty sacrifice accomplished in silence without a request for compensation, of a life entirely rigid and firm, where perhaps there was wanting a sense of kindness and indulgence, but where all the other virtues had triumphed.

The Duchess had little by little seen her kindred disappear, some carried away by death, others by destiny, some far away returning now and again, some far away for ever. Her legitimate King was dead, buried in a lonely church in a lonely part of Austria, and every year she went to visit her Queen, a Queen full of sorrow supported with a most brave and admirable mind. The interview between them was usually short, sad, and austere. So everything of the past and present added grandeur to the figure of Guilia de' Masi, Duchess of Altomonte.

"Marco!" she cried, in a still clear voice, in which there was always a tone of command.

"Yes, aunt," he replied at once.

"Haven't you something to see about for your departure? Go and see to it; leave me your wife and return for her."

Without saying a word he bowed in obedience, and kissed the Duchess's hand covered with large emerald and topaz rings. He kissed, too, lightly Vittoria's little gloved hand, who shot him a beseeching glance secretly, and left.

"My daughter," said the Duchess coldly, playing with her gold watch-chain, "I wanted to speak to you about something alone, so I sent Marco away."

Without replying Vittoria Fiore kept her eyes fixed on the majestic lady, waiting for her words, not without secret emotion.

"I am very pleased that you have married my nephew, Marco Fiore. Even when your engagement was announced three or four years ago I approved, because I had heard much good of you and your virtues. The Fiore are certainly a greater house than your own, and your dowry hasn't been so much; but that doesn't matter. In marrying you Marco has turned his back on a past of folly, and has begun a new life."

A profound expression of suffering was depicted on the bride's face, but she kept silent.

"By the way, don't delude yourself: you haven't caused this miracle," continued the imperious lady icily, "he was bound to have enough of *the other*. You will know later on how men tire of their most impassioned loves. Maria—er—

Guasco—I think I am right—was a most beautiful and fascinating woman, and Marco raved about her. He is cured now.”

And her inquisitorial eyes, which had read into a thousand faces and a thousand souls and hearts, read on Vittoria’s face the deep, tormenting and incurable doubt. The old lady raised her eyebrows slightly, on discovering this hidden and torturing truth, and shook her head.

“You don’t believe in this recovery? You are torturing yourself with the fear of the past, my daughter? Your first matrimonial joys have been poisoned by it?”

Seeing that she was understood even to the innermost recess of her soul, Vittoria relaxed her face, and closed her eyes, as if about to faint.

“Well, well,” the Duchess said, in a stronger and harder voice, “why are you ashamed to confess your sufferings to me? Are you perchance a timid person? Have you, maybe, a jealous and reserved heart?”

“Yes, yes,” Vittoria murmured, with a sigh.

“Then you are preparing a sad existence for yourself. Timid characters and reserved and jealous hearts are destined to languish in pain and perish in suffering without the world being aware of it. Make a brave effort over yourself, conquer yourself, and tell your thoughts if they are worthy of being heard and understood; pour forth your feeling if it has truth in it.”

The great lady acquired an even more solemn aspect, and seemed the expression of virtue and nobility of life.

“Ah, I can’t, I can’t!” exclaimed Vittoria, placing her handkerchief to her mouth to repress herself.

“Why can’t you?”

“Because I love him,” she proclaimed.

“He loves you too, I suppose,” replied the Duchess, becoming glacial again.

What uncertain and sorrowful eyes Vittoria raised!

“You think he doesn’t love you?” the Duchess insisted.

The bride humbly and weakly replied, opening her arms—

“I don’t know; I don’t know.”

“You deceive yourself,” resumed the great lady slowly, “Marco is fond of you.”

A great disillusion showed itself on Vittoria’s face, a disillusion mixed with fear and sadness.

“Isn’t it enough for you, my daughter, that he is fond of you? What do you want more? What are you desiring? What are you seeking?”

“Oh, aunt, aunt,” she ventured to cry in the sudden familiarity of suffering, “I want him to love me, to love me with ardour and passion.”

“As *the other*, in fact.”

“As *the other*,” the unhappy woman ventured to cry.

“That is impossible,” stated the Duchess.

“Impossible, impossible?” and she placed her two little hands together convulsively.

“It is so. Marco can’t have for you, and you can’t ask it of him, a true and intense passion.”

“But why? But why? Am I not young? Am I not beautiful? Am I not his? Don’t I adore him?”

“All that is of no avail. Learn, my daughter, that one doesn’t have two passions one after the other, that there are entire existences which scarcely arrive at feeling one, that there are other existences, many others, which never feel one, not even the pretence of passion, not even its shadow. Passion is an exceptional thing, it is outside life.”

Terrified and pale the wretched bride listened to the voice which seemed that of her destiny, a grave voice and free from any interest which was not true, a voice which seemed cruel, but whose cruelty contained a lofty common-sense.

“For that matter don’t complain. You will know later on, when you are calm and wise, how rarely a man marries with passion in his heart and feelings for his bride. Men marry nearly always to be quiet, for security from all amorous tempests. Hasn’t Marco done this? I add, to reassure you, that in the rare cases in which marriage has taken place in obedience to passion it has always ended in unhappiness.”

Vittoria listened nervelessly.

“Thus God wills it,” the Duchess pronounced with a voice more profound and touching. “Christian marriage, which faith and the Church consecrate for life and death, ought not, and can not, serve for the satisfaction of the voracious flame of our senses. And if it be so it is a state of sin. We don’t marry, Vittoria, for the intoxication of a short time. It isn’t for this that the Lord calls us and chooses us in marriage blessed by Himself. If we reduce this sacrament to a profane pleasure, we violate a divine law.”

“It is horrible, it is horrible,” cried Vittoria, as if she felt herself suffocated.

“It isn’t so horrible,” cried the Duchess. “Be more Christian than woman in matrimony and more woman than sweetheart. Don’t commit the ugly sin and grave mistake of being your husband’s mistress! Vittoria, Vittoria, don’t degrade yourself in wishing to be like *the other*! After a little you would be betrayed and despised. Thousands of women have tried to be their husband’s mistresses, falling into a sentimental trap, and other thousands will try it after you, and all, my daughter, all have had, and will have, the same fate—they will be betrayed and despised.”

“But has the world always been so? Will it always be so? But you, you, my aunt,” Vittoria ventured to cry, “weren’t you ardently loved by your husband? You who shone with every virtue, rich, of a great family. Didn’t you love your husband, the Duke of Altomonte, ardently? That is what is known; tell me if it is true.”

The Duchess of Altomonte moved her hand vaguely and slowly, and for the first time a slight smile appeared on her lips.

“All that is so long, long ago!” and emotion rendered her dominating voice less firm, “from the day on which he knew me till that of his death, the Duke of Altomonte had a peaceful and equal tenderness for me, a strong moral sympathy, a tranquil and secure attachment.”

“Nothing more? Nothing more?”

"It was enough for me. I was quite content, and I thanked God for it every day, and even now it still forms the sweetest and pleasantest recollection of my life, now too long."

"And you, and you, how did you love him?"

"As a Christian, Vittoria. I loved him with respect, devotion, and fidelity."

"Nothing more? Nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

"Did it satisfy your husband?"

"He never asked anything else from me. I always saw him serene; he died peacefully with his hand in mine."

The blond bride, with her beautiful pale face, was silent for a moment, then she raised her eyes resolutely and desperately.

"I shall never have the strength for this renunciation—never, never."

"Ask for strength, and you will have it."

"Who will give it to me?"

"Pray, and you will have it."

"Bless me, aunt," murmured the unhappy woman, kneeling before the venerable figure and bowing her head.

The face of the Duchess seemed to shine with purest light. She touched Vittoria's forehead lightly with her hand, and raising her eyes to Heaven, "Bless, O Lord, this my daughter. Give her strength, and she shall have peace."

Vittoria arose, but neither the prayer nor the blessing had given consolation to her anguish.

## IX

"MODANE! MODANE!" was cried from all sides as the *train-de-luxe*, arriving from Paris, rumbled heavily into the station.

"At last we re-enter our fatherland," cried Marco Fiore, with a sigh of relief; and, without waiting for a reply from Vittoria, he placed his grey travelling cap on his head and left the compartment.

"Ought I to come too?" Vittoria asked, as she rejoined him in the corridor.

"If you want a stroll, yes. If not, it isn't necessary. The station is very grey and gloomy."

"Very gloomy," repeated the woman in a low voice.

"But our country is so beautiful. Aren't you content to return home?"

"I am glad," she replied, without further observation. He looked at her as he did now and then with a scrutinising eye, but the pure face assumed that cold and closed aspect against which every glance failed.

"I am going for a small stroll," he said, shrugging his shoulders lightly, "the luggage will be examined later on in the train."

He disappeared along the corridor, and a little later Vittoria saw him walking up and down in the gloomy station, which not even the late May sun managed to lighten. Then she rose and placed herself before the window on the other side of the compartment, watching another train stop on its way to France. Her eyes were fixed on the train. She tried to discover the faces of those who were travelling within, to question if possible their physiognomies, and read there what was passing.

She heaved a deep sigh, and felt jealous of those who were leaving Italy perhaps for ever, and were travelling to France or England, or further, perhaps, never to return. She would have liked to have been one of those unknown travellers, to turn her back for ever on her country, to take away with her the man she adored, far, far away to unknown countries, losing at last the recollection of her own country, of her own people.

"Oh, this returning, this returning!" she thought to herself so desperately that she almost said it aloud.

She fell back on her seat and searched among the flowers and books in front of her for something to distract herself, a volume or a time-table. Then she leaned her head against the arm of the seat, and closed her eyes in an endeavour not to think, to suppress the subtle and voracious work of the jealousy which caused her to think.

"We are off at last," said Marco, entering the compartment.

Heavily the train started, leaving the shadow of the gloomy station, and began to run among the green meadows completely covered with flowers, which stretched beneath the mountains around Mont Cenis.

"We are returning home, little Vittoria; we are returning to our own house, to our own bed, where no one else has slept the night before, and where no stranger will sleep the night after. Home, home; no more hotels, no more restaurants where the cooking is of an unknown provision and quantity. I assure you, my dear, that at Casa Fiore there is an excellent cook, whose kitchen presents no mysteries. What a pleasure to dine and sleep in the house of the Fiore in via Bocca di Leone!"

Vittoria listened attentively to Marco's tirade, with its forced gaiety, where a little irritation was pressing.

"This journey has tired you, Marco?" she asked, as if she had noticed something of no importance.

"Physically, perhaps," he replied quickly; "I am not so young as I was."

"You are thirty-two."

"But I have lived far more than my years," he replied, with candour.

"That is true," she replied calmly; "instead of travelling we could have gone to Spello."

"Oh, Spello isn't very amusing, dear. You will see it this summer. Besides, oughtn't you to have a nice honeymoon?"

"I?" she exclaimed, trembling.

"Yes, you, Vittoria. I had to give you, my beauty, a nice, amusing, pleasing honeymoon. You deserved it; I hope I behaved well?"

"Very well," she replied ambiguously.



"Have I been a good travelling companion—intelligent, zealous, amiable?"

"You have been all that, Marco," she replied coldly.

"Have I, then, accomplished that part of my mission? Have I accomplished it as I ought to?"

"Have you, Marco, a mission? And what is it?" she asked, not without some harshness.

"That which the priest told me in Santa Maria del Popolo; that which the mayor told us at Campidoglio; that which I have given myself."

"That is?" she replied, still coldly.

"To make you happy, darling," he concluded somewhat caressingly, to alleviate the solemnity of the words.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, without further observation.

"Then you give me my first certificate, my wife? Have you been happy or not on your travels? Have I done everything to make you happy?"

"You have done as much as you could," she replied, without emphasising the words.

"That is *all*?" he insisted, looking at her.

"All you could."

He frowned, and was silent. She, too, was silent, turning her head away. An instant afterwards, with a fastidious accent, he added—

"Now I am a little tired, and am glad to return home."

The train ran on through the country that leads to Susa, and from Susa to Turin.

"Have you written to your mother and sister that we are returning?" he asked absently.

"No," she replied.

"When do you count on doing it?"

"I don't know. I was thinking of counter orders, of a prolonging of the journey, of delay. I don't know," she said, confused.

"We will telegraph, then, from Turin; we stop two hours there," he added somewhat drily.

"Are we going straight on to Rome?" she asked a little timidly.

"Naturally, naturally. We arrive at Rome at ten to-morrow."

"Ah."

In spite of her intense power of dissimulation, she did not succeed in hiding an expression of fear.

"It seems to me, Vittoria," said Marco, who had become very bad-tempered, "that you view with little pleasure our returning to Rome."

"You are mistaken."

"Perhaps I am not mistaken. All other wives feel a real need of their homes; you, it seems, scarcely experience this need."

"It isn't true; it isn't true," she stammered.

"Do me the honour not to take me for an idiot," he retorted quickly; "Casa Fiore doesn't seem good enough for your presence!"

"Oh, Marco!" she protested, with a voice full of tears.

"Rome seems a capital too small for you? The place where your mother and my mother live seems mean and empty to you, perhaps?"

"Marco! Marco!" she begged.

But her husband was now exasperated. The first angry, violent conjugal dispute had broken out, and she tried in vain to calm it. Trembling prevented her from pronouncing a word. She felt suffocated.

"Can you deny it?" he replied, in a voice where anger and irony hissed. "Do you deny that you don't share my consolation in returning to Rome?"

Without speaking she clasped her hands as if to implore him to torture her no more.

"I am sorry to tell you, dear Vittoria," he continued implacably, "that sometimes you lie."

"Oh! oh!" she exclaimed, with a movement of horror, hiding her face in her hands.

"Or you dissimulate, which amounts to the same thing."

Although he saw that she was growing pale, he was unable to restrain his indignation.

"Vittoria!" he exclaimed loudly, as if to startle her, "will you answer me?"

Terrified, she looked at him with wide-open eyes.

"I have always been used to truthful women; will you tell me the truth?"

"Yes," she declared, as if this reminder had offended her mortally, restoring all her strength to her.

"Why aren't you glad to return home? Why don't you rejoice to embrace your people again? Why aren't you happy to find yourself in Rome again to-morrow, to begin your new life? Reply, conceal nothing, and don't dissimulate. Tell me the truth as it has always been told to me."

"I hate Rome!" she exclaimed, offended, and making a supreme effort to tell her secret.

"You hate Rome! Why?"

"You know the reason; don't oblige me to tell it," she added, with dignity and supplication.

Immediately all the man's anger evaporated. Again human charity and fraternal pity moved him.

"You are ill, Vittoria," he said. "You must get well."

She made a vague gesture of denial and of impossibility, and said nothing more. Nor did he attempt to break the heavy silence.

EMILIO GUASCO is forty. He is tall, thin, dried up, and appears robust. His face is brown, with shining black moustaches. His hair is black, though white at the temples, which brightens and sweetens the swarthiness of his complexion. His eyes are exceedingly black, of an opaque blackness when their glance is tired or in repose, but sometimes a secret force animates them, giving an ardent and gloomy character to his face. The forehead is ample and well-defined, the nose aquiline, the chin long, showing an obstinate will. The profile is somewhat hard and sharp, scarcely tempered by a mouth still fresh and youthful, in which an acute eye can sometimes notice indulgence and good nature.

But in general Emilio's face is austere, sometimes gloomy, while its lines, if not exactly correct, are at least harmonious. In spite of all this Emilio's appearance is striking and attractive, with the attraction of all men whose appearance speaks of spirit and energy. A portion of the men he associated with, a small portion certainly, came to him with that species of secure instinct, which human sympathy has for souls which contain a really personal secret of life. Another portion, a larger one, regarded him with a certain respect mixed with repulsion, considering him a dramatic character in a laughable comedy. A last portion, and this the greatest and most frivolous, avoided him as a great bore, who prevented others from amusing themselves and taking life as a farce.

Emilio Guasco belongs to the old Roman bourgeois, and to the old bank which for over a hundred years has been allied with the Roman aristocracy and later to the great Italian society, which has taken up its abode in Rome around the rule of the Quirinal. His ancestors, as well as his father and uncles, have always belonged to the smart set, mixing with it intimately, while in business they had dealings with other important sets of the capital. Frequently they have been the saviours of noble fortunes in danger, and of secret aid to Italian politics, so often in the early days in need of pecuniary assistance.

Emilio is the only son. His father is dead, and he is in partnership with his uncles and cousins in the bank of Guasco and Co. But in spite of the fact that from childhood, boyhood, and youth he has always been in the midst of affairs, and that, during the last ten years, after a violent economic crisis, affairs in Rome are waking up again, he is a very mediocre man of business and banker. He never likes this intellectual work, which is sometimes not without its excitement and poetry, so he works at the Guasco Bank moderately, methodically, aridly, without a gleam of geniality or passion. Thus he continues his father's work, which had been fervid, efficacious and fortunate; he continues it as a heavy duty, which he limits to the narrowest and most external mechanical participation.

Sometimes he believes that he would gladly leave the bank, leaving the bulk of his capital there but renouncing its management: sometimes he himself has vaguely hinted that he wished to hear nothing more of it. However, his cousin, Robert Guasco, forced him to stay so as not to give the appearance of weakening the bank. Robert, luckily, is a very intelligent banker, capable and laborious, and his mind, strength, and enormous activity compensate for Emilio's cold inertia.

"Whatever do you want with an idiot and a business nonentity like me? Let me go," Emilio often said to his cousin, with a wan smile.

"Remain, remain," Robert would say, without taking any notice of the protest.

So Emilio Guasco remains at his work. Sometimes he even asks himself what he would do if he were to leave the firm and had to spend his considerable income alone, and how he would dedicate his time so tiring and boring. From youth he has always felt the natural sadness of his temperament. He has tried to counteract and drive away this sadness by giving himself to the sports held in honour in Rome for years, and to the new games introduced there recently by the foreign element. Emilio is an expert and daring rider, and few have a better seat. Every year he is a faithful rider to hounds. But to this brilliant and rather fashionable sport he prefers that other hunting, solitary and melancholy, among the large regions about Palidoro, Maccarese, and Pontegalera, where one goes dressed in thick fustian, exchanging a few words with the cow-boys to be met with on horseback, wrapped in brown mantles with a lining of green serge. Sometimes he is absent two or three days at these hunts, so much in keeping with his thoughtful and sad character, sleeping in a buffalo tent as in Africa. His friends tell him of the example of Prospero Ludovisi, a keen hunter, who took a most pernicious fever at Maccarese and died suddenly of it in thirty-six hours. The malaria is especially deadly in that vast and deserted region. Emilio only smiles. Among modern sports he prefers of all the English games, on foot or horse, by sea or land, Golf—Golf, which is the adoration of all spirits fond of the open air, of solitude and silence,—Golf which is the true symbol of the solitary man. At his club he seldom mixes with the many players of poker, but he is a silent and unwearied devotee of bridge.

Emilio Guasco, in his early youth, has had his love affairs. He has not, however, committed any of the follies of the pleasure-seekers, which in public opinion has classed him among the coldest of men to whom women have little or nothing to say. Some, the more spiteful, have accused him of avarice, since love in general, and under certain conditions, implies generosity of spirit and of purse.

He has never compromised any one, and his adventures have been discreet and somewhat mediocre. The heart which he brought when married to the lovely and fascinating Maria Simonetti was one very sane, without perversion and corruption, a sincere heart which gave itself not in mad transports but with seriousness and faith. If not exceedingly in love during his engagement, he was in love.

One could say that he married for love of the enchanting girl who brought him only a good name, but not a *soldo* of dowry. Nor was his love a smothered flame which alters in marriage, bursting forth as a conflagration of passion. He loved Maria moderately, with a just affection which afterwards had no diminution, but no increase. He had esteemed his *fiancée* deeply, and afterwards his wife, for her character and mettle, her pride and truth; he had even felt a little of her fascination, but not all of it. Especially, he had not experienced in the first year of his marriage that joy of life which causes the hearts of the newly married to vibrate, exalts their souls, and later on seems to make them accept an existence less joyful and less happy through the unforgettable beauty of their first recollections. Emilio did not recognise till later, much later, the immense delusion he had been as a husband to the passionate heart of Maria Simonetti; he became aware of it when there was no longer time and all was lost.

For a long time he believed he had done all he could for his lady, being fond of her, respecting, honouring, and never being false to her, but nothing more. He had not understood that Maria Simonetti's life and happiness were in his two hands. Not having understood that, he had let Maria's life languish in sentimental and moral misery; so that she sought elsewhere the way of magnifying all her faculties and sensations. When he understood it was too late: that was *afterwards*. It was *afterwards* that, intolerant of lies, inept at deception, Maria Guasco Simonetti had left her husband's house and had fled with Marco Fiore.

Then Emilio Guasco had seen all the error of his existence, of his indifference, his want of any abandonment, of any enthusiasm. Alone, in a suddenly deserted house and dishonoured, he discovered his original sin, aridity, that grave sin which separates us from everything beautiful and everybody beloved; which makes those flee from us fatally whom we do not know how to love. The tragedy which that day had brought him in the flight of his wife with her lover had still more paralysed Emilio's mind, which was incapable of efficacious fury, incapable of sustained impulse, and capable only of sorrow and a slow and pointless sadness.

He had not acted and rushed after Maria and Marco; but had remained at home to suffer in silence. A part of the society in which he lived called it an immense disgrace, because to all of them he was what is termed a perfect husband; a smaller part, more intelligent and original, had proclaimed that he deserved no better treatment, since he had not known how to love Maria worthily, and that, in fact, he had annoyed and exasperated her. Secretly, in the long examinations of conscience which every man makes with himself in the hours of moral crisis, Emilio thought those right who had indicted him as the first author of his wife's funereal act. He saw, on one of his sleepless nights, with the eyes of his soul all that he ought to have been and had not been. Certain deep truths of the spirit and the heart, hitherto unknown to him, appeared to him in vivid light. As in all great revolutions which transform and remake the inner life of a being, many new habits were formed by him in the three years of solitude and abandonment, singular habits different and contradictory to each other.

While Maria's flight with Marco had given him acute anguish, the moral figure of his wife appeared prouder and bolder in its act of liberation, and if the husband still carried with him all the pain of the offence, so as to feel the impression of a bleeding wound for three years, the man had admired in Maria her lofty contempt of every minor good to obtain the one supreme good. While Maria was far away, as if lost in the vast world, Emilio saw her again near him palpitating with beauty and life, and he began to love her in solitary silence, vainly and uselessly. He surprised himself into desiring and wanting her more than ever, and in his empty love and desire he ended by knowing that powerful and terrible instinct of love—jealousy.

He had always marvelled when he saw in others the interior torturing lashes of jealousy, and its external manifestations. Now he is a victim to this gloomy and fascinating force which comes from the lowest elements of the human system, but which dominates a man entirely. Sometimes he would give his blood to snatch his wife away from the arms of Marco Fiore, at other times he was seized by an exasperation which almost led him to a crime. Then he had to leave Rome and go far away where only memory could follow him. On his return, through the natural power of his equilibrium, he was always calm, patient, and sad.

At last, at the end of three years, so long to a heart which had never known how to love, which perhaps had still not learned to love better but was not inept to suffer, Emilio, with concealed curiosity and anxiety, had learnt that the amorous folly of Marco and Maria had begun to languish, had become a folly's shadow, and was lapsing into a pale usage. From this knowledge which reached him from reliable sources, from secret inquiries which he had made with extreme caution, knowing how every day that love shadow was vanishing more and more, a unique sentiment, derived from so many opposite sentiments at war with each other, had raised his heart almost to heroism. This was the sentiment of human and Christian pity for a miserable woman who had wanted and still wanted to give her life to her dream, who instead saw all her dream vanish before her in a time which seemed as short as a flash of lightning. Anger long repressed, sorrow long concealed, the offence which wounds without ever a wound appearing, love rendered more supreme and consuming in jealousy itself,—all in Emilio Guasco was sunk in this tender compassion for Maria. He felt within himself all the evangelical virtue of charity, perhaps stronger than any other sentimental impulse. He was the good Samaritan who rescues the dying man on the road-side, doctors his cruel wounds, and pours out the balsam that heals.

Thus the pardon had been offered by Emilio Guasco to the wife who had betrayed and left him. When he had sent her word he had thought nothing more of the past or the future; he had thought only of healing the poor creature's wounds, struck by passion's cruel and implacable weapons; he felt within himself a new soul greater, more generous, and superior to sophisms and the world's axioms. There seemed to be something heroic in his heart, which raised and exalted him as at no other time in his life. The immense tenderness he felt for her reacted on him; he pitied and admired himself like the heroic person in a romance whose story he sometimes read. The nearer the day of her return approached, the more his emotion increased, the more the noble and sublime thing, which is pardon, the law which Christ has given as the most supreme, seemed to find in him a pure interpreter. So on that April evening in the presence of the woman, pale and trembling as he had never seen her before and would never see her again, he had pronounced those Christian words which cancel, absolve, and redeem—

"I pardon you, Maria."

But suddenly afterwards, in a flash, he felt this unique and noble sentiment, this Christian pity, destroyed within him, as if it could only give him one supreme moment of heroism. He felt all the old sentiments rise again in his mind, contending among themselves—anger, suffering, love and jealousy, and he was seized again in their power without guide or will.

## XI

MARIA GUASCO was proceeding minutely to the completion of her toilette. That morning she was wearing a cloth dress of maroon colour, cut in the English fashion, through the jacket of which a blouse of white Irish lace was to be seen; the full skirt in big pleats discovered the neat feet shod in black kid. A large straw hat, with a circlet of red roses and a thin veil, was placed over the chestnut hair, affording a glimpse of its waves over the forehead, temple and neck. In her simple dress without ornaments, and in its exact lines, she looked enchantingly young. She said to Chiara, who was hovering round offering her gloves, parasol, and purse—

"Let your master know that I am ready and waiting for him here."

Meanwhile she buttoned her yellow deerskin gloves and verified the contents of her purse.

"The master begs Your Excellency to oblige him with your presence in the study," said Chiara on returning in a low voice.

Maria frowned slightly, and for an instant the colour left her cheeks. Then, as if her will predominated

immediately, she proceeded towards her husband's study, and not a shadow of her recent emotion appeared on her recomposed face.

Seated behind his desk Emilio was writing a letter and smoking a cigarette. He did not raise his head.

"Well, Emilio," asked his wife in a soothing voice, standing in the middle of the room, "aren't you dressed for the meet?"

"No," he replied, raising his head from his letter absently, "I am not dressed."

"Wasn't this the hour?" she continued gently; "ten o'clock, I think."

"Yes, ten o'clock," and he lowered his head, resuming his writing.

Maria's gloved hand nervously clutched the onyx knob of her parasol.

"Well, well," she asked again, with a certain insistency. Emilio let his pen fall, throwing it on the table, pushed the letter aside, and leaning back in his chair regarded his wife for a long time earnestly without speaking.

"I have decided not to go to this last meet."

"Ah!" said Maria only.

Then, as if it annoyed her to remain standing before her husband's desk, her eyes sought a chair. She found one a little bit away and sat down, still holding her parasol and purse, in the attitude of a lady paying a visit.

Both were silent; though, as ever since her return, he fixed his eyes on his wife's face and person with a curiosity half thoughtful and half observant, with an attitude of acute investigation which sometimes embarrassed Maria.

"Still, Emilio," she said in a low voice, to break the silence, "you are so fond of fox-hunting."

"I like it very much, it is true," he replied.

"And it will be a year before you can begin again."

"That is true."

"Didn't you decide yesterday evening to go?"

"Certainly I did decide to go; but a night has passed on it."

"You don't sleep at night and think of the meet at Cecilia Metella?" she asked, trying to joke.

"Eh, one doesn't always sleep," he replied, with an irritable gesture of annoyance.

She was silent. Then she raised her head resolutely.

"Since I should have accompanied you, may I consider myself free?" she asked, with some impatience.

"You have other plans?" he murmured, looking at her again fixedly.

"I have had no others from the moment that it was arranged that we should go out together," she replied quickly.

"I beg your pardon for having made you dress; you have lost a *toilette*."

"It doesn't matter," she said, shrugging her shoulders, and she began to trace the arabesque designs of the carpet with her parasol.

"Emilio?" she said suddenly.

"Maria!"

"Why don't you go alone to Cecilia Metella? Go and put on your pink; the victoria is ready, and will take you to where Francesco is waiting with the horses. Go now."

Her tone was quiet, indifferent, and persuasive.

"No!" he exclaimed, with an angry gesture; "I don't want to."

"Emilio," she continued, in a voice still more persuasive, "I know that it is on my account that you are not going to Cecilia Metella. I beg you not to renounce this pleasure."

"Thank you; I shall not go," he said drily.

Maria got up suddenly, as if she had nothing further to say.

"Where are you going?" he exclaimed, rising from his seat and following her for a few steps.

"To my room," she replied, a little surprised; "then I shall go out."

"To go where?" he asked again harshly.

"I don't know; I shall go for a walk somewhere," she said, still more surprised.

"Where?" and anger trembled in the demand.

"Emilio!" she exclaimed in sweet reproach; "Emilio!"

He changed colour.

"I beg your pardon, Maria, I beg your pardon."

He threw himself on a large sofa, without taking the hand she offered him. The woman remained standing, and looked at him.

"Shall we go out together, Emilio?" she asked patiently.

"No."

"Let us go outside the city where there is nobody."

"No, no."

"In the carriage to Villa Pamphily? It is such a beautiful morning, and the air is so soft. Come, do."

"No, no, no!" he exclaimed, without looking at her.

"Well, then, what ought I to do?" she asked patiently.

"Nothing."

"What do you wish to do?"

"Nothing."

"Do you wish me to remain? Do you wish me to go?" and the tone was one of sublime patience.

He understood it and melted.

"Maria, you are treating me like a child. Do you think I am ill? I have white hair, but I am not infirm."

She noticed all the signs of anger and suffering.

"At times we are ill without knowing it, and we mustn't repulse an affectionate hand."

"What charity!" he exclaimed, with irony.

"What are you irritated about, Emilio? Because of the sentiment or the person?" she asked.

"For the two things," he replied, with asperity.

"Ah!" she said, and her hand, trembling a little, found the handle of her parasol. Again she made as if to go away without greeting him, without turning round.

"Are you offended?" he cried to her back; "you will end by hating me."

"I am not offended," she replied, stopping with lowered eyes and speaking slowly; "I have tamed my pride, Emilio, in the contact of life, and I am not offended. I can hate no one."

He looked at her peculiarly and gloomily, with the strange insistence of a man who wished to extract a tremendous secret from a glance. But she did not see it. The question which was trembling on Emilio's lips disappeared. He lapsed again into confusion and silence.

"Are you going to your bank?" she asked, to say something.

"Yes, for a moment," he replied absently.

"Shall you come home to lunch?"

"Yes, at the usual hour."

"What are you going to do afterwards?"

"I don't know," he replied.

"I am going to stay at home just now, and later——" she continued monotonously.

"Later?" he asked, with a start.

"I have a meeting."

"Ah!" he replied, looking at her.

"With Flaminia Colonna; a work of charity," she explained, somewhat coldly.

"Flaminia has always continued to love you."

"She has continued to," she answered bitterly, biting her lip, growing a little pale, "like any other friend."

"Do you go out together?"

"Yes," she replied, still paler; "are you surprised?" and the question was put harshly.

"No," he said, speaking with difficulty, so great was his emotion; "Flaminia Colonna is a woman and a friend ... while I——"

"While you?" she asked.

"I am a man, a husband."

There was a deep silence between them.

"Is that the reason why you didn't go to Cecilia Metella with me?" she resumed.

"That is the reason," he replied.

"What were you fearing?" in a voice still deeper.

"Ridicule. Every one would have laughed at me, seeing me with you."

She fell back. Her eyes grew clouded, but she had the strength not to open her mouth, to walk away without turning, leaving the man who had told his secret stretched on the sofa like a miserable weakling.

## XII

THE ices were being served and the dinner was drawing to a close. All of a sudden, in the midst of the slightly laboured and frivolous conversation which occasionally gave place to the species of pompous gravity, Francesco Serlupi, a young man celebrated for his blunders, which assumed either a grotesque or dramatic aspect, again committed one of them.

"Do you know that the Fiore couple have returned home from their honeymoon? It seems that things are not going too well."

A glacial silence fell on all.

Maria Guasco, behind the huge mass of white lilies and red roses, which almost hid her, had not even moved an eyelid; Emilio, taciturn as ever, had lowered his eyes. The other guests, Flaminia Colonna, Gianni Provana, and the Senator, Fabio Guasco, seemed distracted.

"It seems that the Costanzi is to be closed for a week," remarked Gianni Provana, in an attempt to change the conversation.

But Francesco Serlupi stuck to his gaucherie, and proclaimed obstinately—

"However, it is as I have said, Marco Fiore returned to the club yesterday, the day following his return, and yesterday he was at the races without Vittoria."

Again a heavy silence. Maria, with a fervid glance, invoked the aid of Flaminia. She promptly, with her penetrating voice, which was the complement of her dark and proud figure, and of her beauty full of grace and expression, said—

"I am not surprised at it. As a matter of fact Marco Fiore has always liked a club life; his mother, Donna Arduina, had always complained to me about it. Besides, Vittoria has such a reserved and timid character." She emphasised her slow and tactful remark, fixing her sweet grey eyes on Francesco, to make him understand that he must say no more on the subject. He, as usual, understood too late the mischief he had done, and became silent,

keeping his head bent over his plate, not daring to look at his hosts, anxious to escape, as he always did, when he discovered he had committed an enormous indiscretion.

"Are these delicious early peaches from Lama, Emilio?" asked Mario Colonna, to divert the conversation better, alluding to the great property of Casa Guasco near Terni.

"Yes," replied his host immediately, glad to be able to open his mouth and speak of something else; "my gardens there work miracles, and also my gardeners. Every day new flowers and fruit arrive."

"Oh, you must be very happy about it, Maria," observed Flaminia, with a good-natured smile on her lips.

"Oh, most happy," she murmured.

"You ought to love La Lama, Donna Maria," remarked Francesco Serlupi, in an endeavour to mend matters; "it is some time since you were there?"

But the question was put in a low voice, besides, the dinner was finished, so his hostess rose suddenly without replying to this latest piece of stupidity, and leaning on the arm of Senator Fabio Guasco the other guests followed her, Flaminia Colonna on the arm of Emilio, Gianni Provana, Francesco Serlupi, and Mario Colonna in a group.

"However did it come into your head?" said Gianni Provana to Serlupi, keeping him back a little with Mario Colonna. "No one will ask you to dinner, my dear friend, if you start breaking the dishes in your host's face at dessert."

"You are right; I am a proper stupid," Serlupi declared, as they crossed the two or three rooms before the drawing-room, "I shall go away at once; I can't stop here."

"Worse and worse," observed Colonna; "stop a moment or two longer."

"You are going away with Donna Flaminia, aren't you?"

"Yes, we can't possibly stay. We are going to Madame Takuhira's last reception at the Japanese Legation."

"Do me a charity and take me away with you," begged Serlupi.

"Very well, very well," said Colonna, laughing, "we will save you even to the last indiscretion."

A circle was formed in the large drawing-room, all gathering in a corner of it where Maria had formed a little room from the larger with screens, large plants, and furniture, which cut off the space. However, the conversation proceeded languidly, the sort of coldness which had been there since the beginning of dinner had become accentuated after Francesco Serlupi's escapade. It was the first dinner Emilio and Maria had given after her return home, thus resuming their old custom of giving, during the chief Roman season from December to the end of May, two dinners a week, one to intimates, another of ceremony, the traditional hospitality in Casa Guasco and high Roman society. It had been Flaminia Colonna who had urged her friend to resume the habits of life where they had been relaxed; it had been Flaminia, too, who had said affectionately to Emilio Guasco, with a sweet smile, "Give us a dinner like you used to."

With a feeling of concealed timidity, Emilio had only dared to invite persons of whom he was sure; his uncle, Fabio Guasco, the Colonna couple, and finally that silly Francesco Serlupi, who was a gracious youth incapable of an incivility, but more capable of committing a disaster with a remark, the importance of which he did not understand till later, much later. Maria, as hostess, had endeavoured to give an air of continuity to this resumption of worldly life, decorating her dining-room as formerly, receiving her friends as formerly in that bright and flowery corner of the drawing-room, adorning her person with that studied elegance which distinguished her, and with which she satisfied her æsthetic tendencies, producing that impression of sympathy and fascination on her surroundings which was so appreciated. That evening she was dressed in black voile, affording a glimpse of neck and bosom, white in their perfect lines. A cluster of fresh red roses was placed at the opening, nestling on the whiteness of the skin, and rendering it more intense. A tall, stiff collar of small pearls in ten rows, with a clasp in front of rubies and diamonds, surrounded her neck; the bodice of the dress had half-sleeves embroidered with black wavy tulle, which did not reach to the elbow, and showed her magnificent white round arms with their delicate wrists. Her hands were loaded with rings, all in the ancient style, and in her hair, amidst its waves and dark abundance, were two little bright red roses. A quite interior exaltation had rendered more splendid her bright eyes, so often closed and disturbed. That evening she had experienced a sudden pride of energy and beauty.

But in spite of this a subtle sense of embarrassment and pain weighed on the dinner, and all the ordered luxury of the table, the exquisiteness of the viands, the richness of the surroundings, the serenity of the hostess, and the solicitous courtesy of the host had not caused this impression to be removed from the mind of their guests. This impression after Francesco Serlupi's imprudent words became stronger; every one felt oppressed, and sought a decent and amiable excuse for leaving. Donna Maria allowed smoking in her room after dinner; but the men discreetly retired to a far corner, so, as they said, not to fumigate the two ladies. For some minutes Maria and Flaminia Colonna remained alone.

"What a bad experiment, eh, Flaminia, this dinner?" said Maria, with a sneer and a bitter smile.

"One wants much patience, immense patience," replied the friend, shaking her expressive and gracious Roman head.

"Oh, not for me," added Maria; "for myself I am ready to endure any pain. It displeases me on Emilio's account."

"He suffers, doesn't he?" asked Flaminia, in a subdued voice.

"He suffers too much," Maria assented sadly. Then she got up suddenly to serve the coffee and liqueurs, which had been placed before her. Her tall, undulating person possessed a great charm, as she lightly crossed the room, carrying a cup in her hands, while she offered it with a smile on her beautiful mouth to the men. She could see the admiration in all their eyes, and she seemed to see it mixed with confusion in her husband's. She looked at him rather long, and between them, in those glances exchanged, it seemed as if a whole world of thoughts and sentiments had passed. With her rhythmical step Maria returned to her friend.

"Is it true what has been said?" she asked, sitting down.

"What?"

"That ... Marco and Vittoria already make a couple of doubtful happiness."

"What does it matter to you?" replied Flaminia, looking at her with suspicion.

"It matters to me," replied the other seriously; "I wished for their happiness."

"But what do you desire?" said Flaminia a little diffidently.

"I desire with all my soul that they may be happy," said Maria.

The friend believed her, because she recognised her as a creature incapable of lies or falseness.

"I believe that your desire of good for them cannot be a reality."

"Do you know it then?"

"I know it."

Maria sighed.

"Later on, with time," concluded Donna Flaminia, with her sense of justice and equilibrium.

"One wants such patience, immense patience," rejoined Maria Guasco dreamily.

The company began to break up. Flaminia and Mario Colonna had to go to the Japanese Legation. Francesco Serlupi, silently occupied with his flight, followed them, almost holding on to their shoulders, as if to hide himself. When the Senator Fabio Guasco took his leave as well, accustomed to early hours, he kissed his niece's hand, bowing with much gallantry as he begged her not to forget her old uncle in her invitations. Emilio Guasco, who had not said a single word since dinner, announced that he was going to accompany him. So only Gianni Provana remained, immovable, always tranquil, with his monocle fixed in its orbit. Quietly and tactfully Maria made her way to her husband, and asked him in a low voice—

"Are you going out?"

"Yes," he replied quietly.

"Why are you going?"

"To accompany uncle."

"Are you returning soon?"

"I don't know."

"Take away Gianni Provana too," she suggested.

"But why?" he asked, with a little irony; "I don't want you to remain alone."

"Take him away; take him away," she murmured, troubled and nervously.

"Are you afraid of him?" the husband asked mockingly.

"No," she replied proudly, "I am not afraid of any one."

She turned her back on him, greeting and kissing her friend, giving her hand to the men to kiss, and to her husband as well. Did not his lips seem to linger a little longer on her hand?

Gianni Provana remained as usual, the quiet and tenacious man, who allows nothing to disturb the plan he has formed for his existence. Without glancing at him, Maria threw herself into her favourite arm-chair, took a book with uncut leaves from a table, looked for a paper-knife, and, having found it, with the peculiar noise of cut paper, occupied her beautiful hands.

"I don't bore you, Donna Maria?"

"No," she replied, without raising her head.

"You would have preferred me to go with the others?"

"Perhaps," she replied absently.

"You can't bear me, isn't it so?" he asked.

"You are mistaken, Provana."

"Am I very antipathetic to you?"

"You are not antipathetic to me."

"At any rate I am not sympathetic?"

"Certainly not," she replied.

"Then indifferent," and he bit his lip.

"Exactly; indifferent," she concluded in a monotonous voice.

He got up quickly.

"Are you going?" she asked, rather surprised.

"For what am I to remain here? To hear this from you? The worst you could have told me you have told."

The face of the worldling and pleasure-lover expressed at that moment true suffering.

She looked at him.

"Why are you obstinate, Provana," she asked coldly and courteously, "in bothering about me, of what I think, of what I say, of what I do?"

"Because I am a fool," he confessed, taking his monocle out of its orbit and looking at her, a familiar trick of his.

"You are not a fool," she replied, with a little smile; "you are eagerly anxious to get something that seems necessary to you, which would instead be useless and dangerous to you, and which, through your good fortune, you will never obtain."

"Everything has been said," he murmured, offering her his hand, "good-night, Donna Maria."

"Good-night, Provana."

She offered her hand. He took it and kissed it, holding it a little in his own. In spite of his worldly composure, in spite of his mask of good form, he showed that he was moved.

"Can't you really manage, Donna Maria, to consider me a man worthy of some attention and curiosity?" he asked, with some anxiety.

"Oh, I know you well!" she replied, shaking her head.

"You could be wrong."

"No, I can't be wrong. For several years you have been attempting the conquest of my—attention—let us call it attention—a question of self-love. You have possessed other women more beautiful, more elegant than I. You are

accustomed to succeed, so you are irritated and sad because you can't with me. You have begun to suffer because you can't succeed with me, and so you have got as far as believing that you are really in love."

"Alas, it is no supposition!" he replied melancholily, but with an accent of truth.

"Let us not speak of love," she declared; "I oughtn't to listen any more to such talk. My greedy ears are satiated with it, they are tired of it, and have become deaf to it for ever and ever."

"Nevertheless, some one loves you here, Donna Maria."

"Whoever?"

"Emilio!"

"You are mistaken," she said gravely; "Emilio no longer loves me."

"Really?" he asked anxiously.

"Really."

"Is he not an impassioned lover, an enamoured husband, and a tender friend?"

"None of these things, Provana."

"What is he, then?"

"An enemy perhaps," she replied softly.

"But hasn't he pardoned you?"

"He has pardoned me, yes. He has pardoned me, but nothing more."

"I never would have believed it," he said thoughtfully.

"Nor I."

"But perhaps," he resumed, questioning her with his glance, "you have frightened him and kept him at a distance with your contempt."

"I have done all that is possible; I am doing all that is possible," she said vaguely, as if speaking to herself.

"You don't love him; he will have understood."

"I am humiliated and humiliate myself every day!" Maria exclaimed in a sorrowful voice; "and I break my pride every instant before him. But I can't tell him to love me; neither does he ask it of me. He asks me nothing."

"And if he were to ask it?" he said.

"He won't; he won't. He has understood I can't lie."

"Poor Emilio!" he exclaimed.

"Do you pity him? Even I pity him. He has had pity on me, and I return it to him. But beyond this he can do nothing for me, and I can do nothing for him."

The conversation had suddenly become austere. The worldling appeared preoccupied, the woman with her beautiful hands crossed on her knees was telling her tale as if in a dream. Gianni Provana looked two or three times at her. She was so young still, so flourishing in beauty, with every womanly grace, and he said to her—

"Is it possible that Emilio has no eyes, no heart, no feelings, that he doesn't experience near you that invincible attraction which has made me ridiculous for years?"

"Who knows! Who knows!" she exclaimed wearily.

"What, in fact, do you think about your life?"

"I think nothing, Provana. I live my life as I do as a duty neither pleasant nor sad. I was hoping, and still hope, to give consolation for the undeserving sorrow I have sown. Now I don't seem to be walking towards my goal. I don't seem to be moving."

"And how if your heart is elsewhere?" he said harshly; "you still love Marco Fiore."

"If I loved him still I shouldn't have returned," she rejoined immediately, firmly. "I often think of him with tenderness and sweetness, but without love."

"Have you heard? He isn't happy," he continued tartly.

"The fault isn't mine, nor is it his. It is impossible that either he or I could ever be happy again. We knew it when we separated."

"But Vittoria, it seems, is unhappy!" exclaimed Provana.

"Ah, that is very, very sad," she said thoughtfully.

"Like your husband, for that matter," added Provana.

"It is all immensely sad," she concluded bitterly.

"The fault is neither yours nor Marco's," said Provana, with a sneer.

"You can only smile or laugh at all this," and she glanced at him with disdain.

"Better to smile or laugh, Donna Maria. I am an optimist in my cynicism. Everything will gradually and slowly settle down."

"How?" she asked, not without anxiety.

"Vittoria and Marco will end by adapting themselves to each other. He will have a son—perhaps two or three—and she will not bother any more about her husband. Marco will be older, and a monotonous frequenter of the club, the races, and other noble pursuits. Perhaps he will have a mistress or two whom he will not love, since he who has loved cannot love another woman with passion."

"And here?" she asked, with a mocking laugh.

"Here, too, time will do its work. Emilio's pardon will be, shall we say—active. He will love you tranquilly and faithfully as formerly, and you will again be an exemplary couple. Remorse will have ceased to bite yours and Marco's heart; you may yet be two beautiful great souls. The years will be passed, and the four of you will even be able to see each other tranquilly."

A strident and sardonic laugh punctuated the discourse, while he replaced his monocle in its orbit elegantly.

"And you, Provana?" asked the woman, laughing, too, ironically.

"Oh, I!" he exclaimed, with false *bonhommie*; "I am the man who waits. *Vice versâ* in waiting will come old age



and death. So I shall pass to my ancestors with a beautiful and ridiculous epitaph: that of having loved Donna Maria Guasco uselessly."

"It is even a big something to be able to love," she remarked thoughtfully.

"That is what they say in novels and dramas; in life it is rather boring. Above everything the man who loves alone is the greatest bore of all. Good-night, Donna Maria."

"Good-night," she said, without detaining him.

An uncertain, melancholy, bitter dream settled on Maria's soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

A voice awoke her from this dream.

"Good-evening, Maria."

"Good-evening, Emilio."

Her husband had entered without her noticing his step. He sat on the seat which Provana had left. It seemed to Maria that his face had become grave and thoughtful. She put down her book, and leaned her head, as if it were too heavy for her, on her beautiful hands. In the harmony of her movements, her womanly grace and fascination, in the silence of the moment, had something penetrating about it.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Provana went away a minute ago."

"I met him near here, but he didn't see me. What fine tales has he been telling you?" he resumed, with a disingenuous accent.

"Nothing very fine," she replied.

"However, you must have listened to him with interest."

"What makes you think that?" she said, trembling.

"I suppose it. The conversation has not been short, nor have you cut it short," he added a little bitterly.

"Ah!" she exclaimed; "ought I to show the door to your Provana?"

"Mine? Mine? Isn't he your friend?" he interrupted with agitation.

"No," she replied precisely, "he is not my friend."

"He makes love to you, however," observed Emilio.

The tone was intended to appear indifferent, but if Maria had listened carefully and had regarded her husband's face better, she would have understood that it was a question, and asked with anxiety. Instead, she shrugged her shoulders, and let it go without a reply. He repeated it.

"He makes love to you, doesn't he?"

"Yes, perhaps; I believe so," she murmured, letting her reply fall indifferently.

"He has always made love to you, hasn't he?"

"Yes, he seems to have always done so," she replied, with the same indifference and distraction.

"And you?" he said, in a sharp, hard voice which hurt her. Was he really Emilio who was questioning her so haughtily like a judge? Up to then the conversation had seemed to Maria one of those usual monotonous conversations in which every one speaks and thinks quite differently to what he says, and the lips pronounce empty words mechanically. Instead, she was suddenly aware that her husband wished imperiously to know the truth of her heart.

"I?" she replied, at once becoming sad and proud.

"You, you," he replied, without changing his tone.

"What do you want to know from me?"

"If Gianni Provana's suit pleases you, if it has ever pleased you, if it will ever please you?" he said coldly and cuttingly, drawing near to her, and looking at her with eyes full of anger.

She stepped back a little, certainly not in fright, but to measure this new sentiment of Emilio's.

"What does it matter to you?" she asked slowly.

"It matters to me," he replied, without changing either his accent or the expression of his face.

"Gianni Provana's suit has never pleased me, does not please me, and never will please me."

She pronounced the words slowly, letting them fall one by one, fixing her husband with her eyes. She saw his face change distinctly, the anger vanish which had transfigured him, and she heard his voice assume a lower tone, veiled with unfamiliar emotion.

"Why?" he asked; "why?"

"Because I despise him," she concluded honestly, retiring again into a definite silence, as if she had nothing else to say, or wished to say, on that subject.

"I beg your pardon, Maria," he whispered, drawing near her, his voice saddened and a little disturbed.

She glanced at him.

"It doesn't matter," she replied.

"I am certain I have offended you," he insisted, still troubled.

"Yes, a little, but it doesn't matter," she added, with some pride.

"I must have seemed a little bit brutal to you, Maria," he exclaimed remorsefully.

"A little," she replied less proudly; "but it doesn't matter."

"Does nothing matter to you, then?" he asked, exasperated and sad.

She was silent and lowered her eyes, playing with her rings in a way that Emilio remembered.

"Will you give me your hand in token of peace?" he asked, with a false accent of easiness and frivolity.

"Yes," she replied, giving him her hand.

"You bear me no rancour, Maria?" he continued with the same studied disingenuousness.

"No."

"So be it," he said, and he kissed the hand, and afterwards tried to keep it in his. She did not raise her eyes to his, and remained immobile and silent.

"Otherwise," he resumed, as if continuing a discourse, "I find it quite reasonable that Gianni Provana should press his suit on you. Don't get angry again," he said, pressing the hand which she tried to withdraw, "his name annoys you; I won't pronounce it again. I say finally that he is right to press his suit on you."

She listened to him silently.

"Why are you so seducing?" he exclaimed weakly.

Was it the deception of the light, or did a slight flush diffuse itself over his face? But why did she say nothing to the man who was drawing his face nearer to hers and speaking so softly? What thought was restraining her? What sentiment was conquering her? The man was still bending, as if to snatch her from her silence, to snatch a word from her, which would not issue from the tightly closed lips.

"You are not yet thirty, Maria?" he asked, with a sigh.

"I am twenty-eight," she replied softly.

"And I am old now," he murmured melancholily, pressing her still hand, "I am so old for you. Youth is a beautiful thing."

"Youth is a magnificent thing," she replied, raising her voice with flashing eyes.

The incantation was broken. Violently Emilio let go of her hand. Getting up and withdrawing apart he strode through the room two or three times gloomily, almost blindly striking against the furniture. Sadly she looked at him, seeing him a prey to a sudden access of fury, and before this mystery her woman's heart quailed anxiously.

"Emilio!" she called two or three times without his hearing.

"Maria," he replied at last, in a kind of growl, without stopping.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing," he replied, between his teeth.

Very gradually his violent perambulations amongst the furniture grew calmer. He stopped near a table at a little distance away and sat there. Leaning his elbows on it, he hid his head in his hands, immersed in deep and terrible thoughts. Thus the time passed, while Maria herself seemed wrapped in thought. At last she seemed to make a decision. She rose, crossed the room, and bending over her husband, without touching him, called him again: "Emilio."

He only started, but said nothing.

"Emilio, my friend, reply," she said softly and insinuatingly.

"What do you want?" was the gloomy reply.

"I want to know what is disturbing you."

"Nothing is disturbing me."

"Why do you lie? You are very troubled; tell me what is the matter?"

"You would laugh at me."

"I have never laughed at any one," she replied patiently.

"Who knows?" he said, looking at her in mad anger, and with the open intention of offending her.

She stopped, and grew pale. But her moral energy was too great.

"He who laughs at the sufferings of another is a knave and a fool; you would not consider me perverse or stupid, Emilio?"

"I am not suffering," he replied gloomily, rising.

"You are mistaken, my friend. You want to deceive me or yourself. You have some ill in your soul; tell me what it is."

"I have nothing, and I am not suffering," he replied gloomily.

She shook her head sadly.

"Perhaps I could give you some consolation, Emilio?"

"No."

"Every human being who has a feeling heart, and soul, can give comfort."

"No."

"Am I not your friend, Emilio? Have you no faith in your friend?"

He sneered horribly.

"Friend? friend? You my friend? You, you? I should have faith in you?"

His laughter caused her to shudder.

"How you must be suffering, Emilio, to speak thus," she said pityingly, pressing her hands to her breast. The man's heart at such words, and at such a manifestation of pity, melted. He fell again into his seat and a sigh escaped him.

"Oh, how I suffer!"

An immense compassion transfigured the woman. She bent over him and lightly touched his shoulders with her fingers. He trembled and raised his face, and fixed her with eyes so full of immense, measureless sorrow that he seemed to Maria like the living image itself of anguish.

"Tell me why you suffer, Emilio?" she demanded, with such emotion that his spasms seemed to increase.

"I can't!" he said desperately.

"Whatever it is you can tell me; I can bear it. Speak, speak, Emilio; don't be afraid of offending me; don't be afraid of saddening me. Speak," she said to him affectionately, at the height of her pity.

"I can't, I can't," he said, in cold desperation.

"My friend, don't be severe with yourself. Don't be so implacable with your wounded heart; don't maltreat your

wounded soul. Be more humane, more tender, more compassionate with yourself, my friend, or those bleeding wounds will never close, and you will never feel them heal. You will then sigh away all your best blood, Emilio."

"It is true," he murmured, as if to himself.

"Friend, conquer your pride and your *amour propre*. All of us, all of us, no one is excluded, have suffered, are suffering, and will suffer. It is not a shame or a reproach to suffer. Those who hide their pain proudly are not men, are not Christians, and do not feel the human comfort of weeping."

"That is true," he murmured.

"Friend, I know the words that caress sorrow, that rock it and finally send it to sleep. Later on, when it awakes in us, it is more tender and weaker; it is a much duller torment."

Like a suffering child, he looked at her anxiously.

"My friend, why do you suffer?" she asked, leaning over him with a face transfigured with the grandeur of her loving charity, taking his hand and caressing it like that of a sick child in pain. "You oughtn't to suffer. You have been an upright and just man. Your life has no remorse; it was guided by a moral conscience, tranquil and firm. You have not sinned—that I know; you have caused sorrow to none. Yours is a life without remorse, and so beautiful that suffering ought not to touch it."

He looked at her ardently, almost drinking in her words like some divine liquor.

"You ought not to suffer. You are no longer alone in life; your friend is near you, near your heart, desiring one thing only, that you may not suffer, that you may no longer feel lonely, that you may possess a soul near you and for you—"

He looked at her passionately, and every one of her words seemed to intoxicate him. She, too, seemed exhilarated with compassion, tenderness, and devotion.

"Emilio, it is your Maria who is here," she said solemnly.

Then like a madman he took her in his arms, pressed her madly to his breast in a frenzied embrace, and kissed her long, while she, trembling and lost, closed her eyes as before a mortal peril. But immediately, as if the contact of her person had scorched him, as if the lips which had not given him a kiss had scorched him, he pushed Maria brutally aside, crying out at her—

"You cause me horror!"

"Emilio!" she exclaimed, in complete amazement.

"Go away, go away. You cause me horror!" he yelled in her face like a madman.

She drew back, stupefied and terrified.

"You have pardoned me!" she exclaimed.

"It is true, it is true," he yelled, "but I can't forget. Go away, go away; I can't forget."

So she went, bent, defeated, and broken by the incomparable weight of the truth.

### XIII

IN one of the large reception-rooms of Casa Nerola, near a bank formed of an enormous group of Hortense roses, two young girls stand talking and smiling discreetly, slowly moving their little white fans. The one, Theresa Santacroce, is dressed in light blue, with a silver belt, her hair arranged high with a circlet of silver ivy leaves. The other, Stefania Farnese, is dressed in ivory silk, and two large red roses in her chestnut hair give her a Spanish appearance, although her beauty is delicate.

"We thought we were going to be late with mamma."

"Oh, we dined at seven on purpose."

"That is why you haven't been to the tea-room?"

"Of course. Here it is the same as at Court, one has to come before the sovereigns arrive."

"The most beautiful spectacle is, naturally, the entry of the Emperor."

"Is it true that all the women are in love with him?"

"So they say. As for me I don't like Germans."

"O Stefania, let us be grateful to him. If he hadn't come to Rome in December we shouldn't have had the first ball now."

"Long live the Kaiser, then! Since without him we should have had to wait till the end of February."

"You are expecting Giovanni Altieri, aren't you, Stefania?"

"Giovanni Altieri! I don't want to hear him mentioned. No one is more voluble or frivolous."

"Really!"

"Certainly. Just think, he has been in love this summer three or four times with foreigners—American, Russian, English. And now the wretch does nothing but speak badly of Italian girls."

"How all our sweethearts take away these foreign women!"

"Let us give them an exchange. Let us go abroad with our mammas and marry Russian princes, English dukes and American millionaires."

"A good idea; but our Italians are so sympathetic. Look at Marco Fiore over there; what a handsome youth! I would have married him very gladly."

"And you would have done very badly."

"Why?"

"Why ... do you know nothing? you are too simple."

"Tell me why; tell me."

"Another time. How late it is, and the ball can't be opened till the Emperor comes!"

"Shall we see a state quadrille danced?"

"They say he dances beautifully."

"Will he dance with the Principessa di Nerola?"

"Naturally. You know she is German, and a mediatised princess. That is why she is giving the ball and the Emperor is coming."

"Are you engaged for the first waltz?"

"Yes, with De Goertz, of the Austrian Embassy."

"Have you begun, then, with the foreigners?"

"Certainly; and you?"

"Oh, I am dancing with my cousin Roffredo."

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Two old ladies are seated on a sofa of antique brocade in another of the rooms. Their age prohibits them from dancing. Their hair is white, their faces are furrowed with wrinkles, and their bodies bent with senility, so they seldom leave their patriarchal homes except on occasions of great state. They are the Princess of Anticoli and the Duchess of Sutri. Both are dressed in sumptuous dresses, trimmed with valuable lace; the most precious family jewels adorn their white hairs, giving them a certain majesty. Their necks, thin with age, wear scintillating diamond necklaces, and emeralds of old-fashioned style.

The Duchess of Sutri has magnificent eyes, black and vivid, which form a singular contrast to the old age depicted in her face and person. Both their fans are closed in their hands, now so tired of moving them after so many years of balls and festivities. They are talking together slowly, watching with wandering eyes the elegant crowd which is coming and going.

"It wanted an Emperor, Lavinia, to make me leave my home at night."

"Oh, in other times I wouldn't have come here at any cost; isn't he a Lutheran? But all that is changed. My Fabrizio has absolutely stated his wish to enter the Italian army. How was I, a widow, to contradict him? You understand me."

"You have done well, my poor Lavinia. In fact, perhaps our sons and nephews are more right to accustom themselves to the new state of things than we are to protest. Now I am tired and sorry even of the discussion. I look and smile; sometimes I even laugh."

"As for me, on the other hand, so many things happen and cause my pity, Livia. But to whom am I to say it? I should offend people by remarking on certain misfortunes and losses."

"What magnificence, do you remember, in our times?"

"We were all much richer then, Livia."

"What a lot of us have fallen into the most terrible poverty; it is a real shame."

"Giovanna della Marsiliana."

"Poor, poor thing! She lives on her little property near Perugia, just a small house and a garden, I think."

"Does she stay there summer and winter?"

"Always now."

"It is a real exile then."

"But her daughter-in-law, Carolina della Marsiliana, is here. I see her over there."

"Look, look, she is wearing the Marsiliana pearls!"

"Yes, she has rescued them from the moneylender, Labanchi, for a large sum."

"Naturally, her father has so many millions."

"A wholesale boot-manufacturer!"

"Yes, it seems he wants to repurchase the whole of the Marsiliana properties."

"Carolina is speaking with Arduina Fiore."

"Why isn't Arduina wearing her diadem or necklace?"

"She has given them to her two daughters-in-law, Beatrice and Vittoria."

"They are fortunate, those Casalta girls."

"Do you think so? This evening they are wearing the jewels of Casa Fiore. Do you notice the two daughters-in-law are following their mother-in-law side by side?"

"Beatrice is very charming."

"The other is insignificant."

"A little pale and supercilious. She doesn't like society, I suppose. How long are you staying, Lavinia?"

"Don't you know we can't go away till this Emperor leaves?"

"I knew his grandfather very well at Berlin."

"And I his father in London, when he came to fetch his bride, Victoria."

"It is useless to remind him of that."

"Oh dear, yes."

Two gentlemen have withdrawn from the flow of people to an embrasure of a window. One is Carlo Savelli, of the great house of Savelli, tall, strong and nervous, looking as if he had dismounted from one of the well-limbed horses of the Campagna, and had changed his large round cow-boy cloak for the evening dress of society. The other is Guglielmo Morici, pale and delicate, of the best Roman bourgeoisie, but allied by business and relationship to the nobility. In the conversation of each the Roman accent is very marked.

"When is the meeting fixed for?"

"For Saturday evening, Guglielmo. You are going to take part if you can get off?"

"Yes, I can get off for two or three days, for the Monday or even till Tuesday morning."

"Good; we must pray Heaven that it doesn't rain!"

"I don't mind a little rain when one is out shooting, a little, but not too much."

"You are right. We train to Velletri, thence we drive for three hours to Campiglione."

"Do we get there at midnight?"

"Yes, and go to bed at once. At six o'clock we are off. Breakfast is at a place called L'Æqua Morta, and at night we sleep at Fattino."

"How I love these shooting trips, dear Carlo! For three days through fields and woods, eating here and there, sleeping here and there. One could believe oneself far away in Africa or Asia."

"I swear to you, Guglielmo, that everything else is indifferent to me; I rave about the chase. At first it was a hobby, but now it is a passion."

"Oh, I have had it since a boy."

"People who do not understand it laugh at us."

"Let them laugh. Who is coming with us?"

"The usual lot; Mario Colonna, Giovanni Santacroce, and Emilio Guasco."

"Splendid; have you fixed up everything?"

"This evening we must all meet here to arrange the time-table."

"Is Emilio coming here too this evening?"

"I believe he is coming with his wife."

"A beautiful woman!"

"I have always liked her."

"You are not the only one who has liked her."

"What are we to do? It is a misfortune for us husbands."

"However, they are together again now—man and wife!"

"Oh, Emilio is a splendid fellow."

"I wouldn't have done it."

"So one says. But then one has to find oneself in certain predicaments. Watch if you can see them arriving."

"I see him; Mario Colonna is there."

"Beckon to him to look for us after the Emperor has entered."

"He has winked 'yes.' Now I see Emilio Guasco."

"Is he with his wife?"

"Yes, yes. She is more beautiful than ever this evening. Do you know that even I think in looking at her that he was right to have pardoned her."

"Have you nodded to him?"

"Yes; but I suppose he hasn't seen me."

"We will find him as soon as the Emperor has passed. At that moment every one will flock into the ball-room."

"Is there to be much dancing afterwards?"

"Certainly, on account of the festivities the ladies have been enthusiastic about the Kaiser. My daughter, Maria, will stop late."

"I think my wife must be very late. She was still dressing when I went out."

"Oh, these ladies and their *toilette!*"

"Oh, I leave mine every liberty of being late by setting out first. Thus there is no quarrelling."

A telephone message from the German Embassy has warned the Principe di Nerola that the Emperor of Germany with his suite has started for the Palazzo di Nerola. It is half-past ten. Court ceremonial ordains that the host honoured by a royal visit, receives His Majesty in the courtyard of his palace, at the foot of the grand staircase. The December evening is very cold. A slight frost covers the roads. The Prince of Nerola is already seventy, and the waiting in the cutting night air worries him secretly, in spite of the high honour which is coming to him from the Imperial visit.

The Roman patrician descends the stairs of his majestic palace wrapped in a fur coat, with his hat on his head. His three sons, Don Marcontonio, Don Camillo, and Don Clemente follow him at a little distance. On every step of the staircase, on right and left, are valets of Casa Nerola in grand livery. At the foot of the staircase footmen, with large lighted candelabra, form a circle round the group formed by the Prince and his sons.

The Nerola palace, in the via Santi Apostoli, is imposing and solemn in its exterior architecture. The courtyard is immense, with a fountain in the middle with a green tiled circle round it. A portico opens on the four sides of the courtyard. The internal architecture resembles the Palazzo Borghese.

Paolo, fifteenth Prince of Nerola, is tall and thin, with flowing white beard. His sons, between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age, all resemble him, but their appearance is less aristocratic and proud than his. Some minutes pass in silence, and suddenly the janitor of Casa Nerola, a Colossus clothed in a livery resplendent with gold, strikes the asphalt three times with his great gold-headed baton, while a dull noise of carriage-wheels reaches from the street.

At once, with youthful agility, Don Paolo frees himself from his cape, and remains in evening dress, his breast covered with decorations. The first imperial carriage enters, containing the aides-de-camp, and stops in front of the grand staircase. The imperial master of ceremonies and three officials in German uniform descend. Salutes are exchanged, and all four group themselves behind the Prince, in waiting. The second carriage enters more slowly, the Prince advances to the door. The Emperor alights, and uncovers at once before the Roman patrician, who bows profoundly and thanks His Imperial Majesty for the honour he is doing to Casa Nerola. The Emperor smiles beneath his light moustaches, curled up proudly, and the procession is formed.

The footmen go slowly in front, holding the magnificent silver candelabra, lit with sweet-scented candles. Behind, at a certain distance, the Emperor. On his left the Prince walks a little apart, and a little behind him a group

is formed by the Prince's sons and the imperial suite. The procession mounts the stairs almost in silence, and with great solemnity. The sovereign is very calm, and talks to his host in German, looking around at the noble beauty of the house he is entering. Above, in the last ante-room, at the entrance to the suite of reception-rooms, the Princess of Nerola is waiting, born Princess Tekla di Salm-Salm. Dressed in white brocade, she wears the closed crown of a mediatised German princess; on her bodice is pinned a German order, which is only given to German ladies of high lineage. Her hair, which had been of the palest flaxen colour, is now quite white. She has that opaque whiteness of colouring, and the rosy cheeks of the descendants of Arminius. Though massive and big-boned, she looks quite the great lady. Immediately her Emperor appears at the door she goes towards him, and almost prostrates herself in profound reverence. Calmly, and almost jokingly, the Emperor takes her hand, kisses it gallantly, and gives her at once her title: "Your Serene Highness."

The orchestra in the ante-room at once broke into the German National Anthem, in which all the ardent and mysterious power of the German soul is manifested. The procession is again formed, and William, King and Emperor, tall and erect in his uniform of a colonel of the Garde du Corps, gives his arm to the Princess to cross the rooms, glittering with light and magnificently decorated with plants and flowers, showing in all their refulgence the ancient beauty of their sculptural and pictorial decoration, in all the richness of their artistic furniture, an historic luxury, so calm and powerful. Behind the Emperor and the Princess come the Prince, his sons, and the suite. All walk slowly, regulating their step to his. He goes slowly, for he knows the secret of these appearances, and speaks smilingly to the Princess, looking around to right and left at the two lines of men and women who bow profoundly to him, and lower their eyes, if he fixes them with his clear, flashing eyes. It is a double hedge of women especially, in coloured and brilliant gowns, in white and soft gowns, with bare shoulders and arms. It is a double hedge of heads—blondes, brunettes, chestnuts, golden, white—on which feathers flap, on which jewelled stars and shining crescents tremble, on which strange flowers almost open: heads bowed beneath the weight of their thickly dressed hair, little heads almost childish beneath the wavy aureole of golden locks, heads which bow in a salute of reverence, of admiration, of mute feminine sympathy, for this Emperor of legend, of poesy, of ever-renewing self-will. He admires and greets the women with a slightly haughty smile, continuing his way. There is not a word or a whisper as he passes, nothing except the rustling of silk and velvet, or the jingling of the sabres of the suite. In this silence the passing of the Emperor-King acquires a more impressive and imposing character.

Crowded one against the other, dame and damsel had not spoken while he appeared and while he was passing, and indifferent to their surroundings had only thought of seeing him and being seen, of greeting him and receiving his greeting. Mixed among them are old men and young, also intent on bowing to the sovereign. In the famous tapestry-room of Casa Nerola, the room before the ball-room, in the great space cleared in the middle of it to allow the Emperor-King to pass, opposite but far off, divided by the big space and many people, a man and a woman have recognised each other with their eyes, and have remained immobile and silent to gaze at each other.

They are Maria Guasco Simonetti and Marco Fiore.

Since that sad autumn afternoon a year ago, when they had wept their last tears together without either being able to console the other, taking leave of each other for ever, and burying their dead dream of love, they had never seen each other. It is a year ago since, courageously and with broken hearts, they had separated, thinking in that terrible moment that they would never see each other again till death or old age; but so many singular circumstances had happened around them during this time, the change of events has been great, and their fate has changed all its course and aspect. Suddenly and unexpectedly on that December evening, amidst sumptuous and splendid surroundings, amidst flowers, women, jewels, music, and perfumes, the two who had lived their passion of love together, and had placed it desolately in its sepulchre, are face to face, divided by the crowd; but their glances, greedily and intensely attracted, seem as if they never could separate. For a long moment Maria Guasco and Marco Fiore gaze at each other. In their eyes there is only one beautiful, simple, strong expression, sadness free from every ardour, sadness free of every desire; sadness without remorse or hope; a sadness which neither invokes nor offers help. It is an incomparable and immeasurable sadness, which can only be supported by lofty human strength in its humility and innocence. Thus they look at each other and are only sad for that which was and is no more, for that which can never return to them, since nothing which is dead in the soul rises again.

Proud and smiling the Emperor passes, and a flock of people crowd behind the suite and increases near the door, to get near him and surround him. Marco and Maria are separated by the great crowd. But they do not seek each other. Everything has been said in one long glance, in one long moment of intimate understanding.

## XIV

As Emilio Guasco helped his wife into her opera-cloak, she felt on her bare shoulders the sensation of something scorching. It was her husband's hands that had touched her. She turned round quickly, never having seen him so pale. They were alone in the armoury of Casa Nerola, used as a cloak-room. No one is leaving, no one ought to be leaving at the moment when the festival is at its brightest, since the Emperor is dancing in the state quadrille. But Emilio had said to her, coming up unexpectedly, in a decided voice—

"Let us go."

She obeyed at once. Two valets hastened to help her, but Emilio took the cloak and shawl. How hot the man's hands felt on the woman's cold white shoulders. Descending the staircase, with a silent bow he offered his arm to his wife, and, almost as if he feared to see her fall, he pressed hers against his as in a vice. They said not a word, nor did they look at each other. At the bottom of the stairs they waited while the porter called their carriage.

Slightly bending her beautiful head Maria entered the coupé drawn by a pair of grey horses, and the door closed behind Emilio with a dull sound. Emilio sat silently in his corner. Twice his wife looked at him in the half-light, and noticed that he was paler than she had ever seen him; his troubled eyes were brightly fixed on her.

She lowered her head. Suddenly he sought her gloved hand in the large velvet and lace sleeve of her mantle, and pressed it so hard that she gave a cry of pain.

"Emilio, you are hurting me!"

He threw the hand aside brutally and laughed loudly. They had reached Casa Guasco. She mounted the stairs

rapidly, a prey to a singular trouble caused by an unknown fear, of an unknown shame and sorrow. She did not turn round, but she heard her husband following through the different rooms to the boudoir which preceded her own room, the room whose threshold Emilio had never crossed since she had returned home. In that little room they usually said good-night before separating. She stopped, turned round, and offered her hand to her husband.

"Good-night," she said, in a feeble voice.

He did not reply, but looked at her strangely, and preceded her into the bedroom. At the threshold before entering she hesitated, and a feminine trembling caused her to vacillate. However, her pride and her courage came to her aid as she entered the room. The man and the woman stood near to each other, looking into each other's eyes.

"Good-night, Emilio," she said firmly.

"I want to speak to you," he managed to say with difficulty, in a hoarse voice.

"Very good," she replied firmly.

She allowed the shawl, mantle, gloves, and purse to be taken away by Chiara's deft fingers, who was in the room in attendance on her, almost feeling the gloomy hour which was waiting for them. All these operations are done calmly and dexterously. Quietly Maria removed from her head the grand diadem of diamonds, the pearl collar and necklace, the bracelets from her arms, and poured them into Chiara's hands, saying quietly—

"You may go."

"Am I to wait?" whispered the faithful creature, with a timid glance.

"No," exclaimed Emilio suddenly.

"No," replied Maria quietly.

With a light step Chiara disappeared. Maria sat down in an arm-chair in her white ball dress, and waited patiently. Her husband stood before her in evening dress, with a flower in his buttonhole, but like a corpse in the face, except that his eyes were shining with an evil flame.

"Maria," he broke out, "have you decided to make me commit a crime?"

For half-an-hour she had understood that a breath of madness was crossing her husband's senses, and she believed and hoped she could conquer this madness by calmness and coldness.

"I don't understand you; will you explain?" she asked in a harmonious voice.

"Don't lie!" he cried, "don't lie, as you always do! You know quite well what I am saying. You pretend and dissimulate. You lie, that's it; and I shall kill some one to make you content."

"Emilio, Emilio," she murmured sweetly, "you are wronging me; but I can stand the wrong since I see you are very excited. Calm yourself, I beg of you. Make an effort over your impetuosity; conquer yourself and be tranquil."

He replied with a horrible laugh.

"Make an end of it, Maria, make an end of this nauseating cataplasm of your pity! Your compassion exasperates me. Go and use it in some hospital. I am sure you understand; and I am going to kill some one. I am going to kill *him*."

She shook her head. Her sweetness disappeared with his laughter, and she became thoughtful and sad. He had risen, and was walking up and down the room like a madman talking to himself.

"It shall not be allowed for a miserable woman, yes, for a miserable woman, without honour and without heart, to make a poor gentleman unhappy and ridiculous. An honourable man should not allow her."

"Are you speaking of me?" she asked, getting up at once proud and erect before him, and forcing him to stop his mad perambulations.

"Exactly; I am speaking of you, dishonour of my life, misfortune of my life!" Emilio cried in her face.

She bent a little under the new injury, but still gathered all her strength not to retaliate or rebel, to dominate her pride, and to use only her goodness and her tenderness.

"Emilio, Emilio, you are raving!" she exclaimed, with immense sadness.

Again he burst into a harsh laugh, false and stridulous.

"So I am a madman, am I? And what are you, Maria? You who lost your head for three years for that waxen-faced doll, for that languishing idiot, for that perverse and mischievous-souled Marco Fiore? Oh yes, call me mad—you, you, who had neither shame nor honour for three years? You who are a spectacle for the laughter and contempt of the whole of Rome for your madness; and dare you tell me that I am raving?"

"Oh, Emilio, Emilio!" she exclaimed, trembling.

"Do you deny it? Do you deny it?" he yelled, almost stammering, so great was his fury.

She looked at her husband. The great danger she was in only made her a little paler and her lips a little drier. She kept silent.

"Haven't you loved him?" he yelled, coming nearer to her, taking her two hands and squeezing them as in a vice.

She closed her eyes, as if face to face with death. Then she opened them wide, and replied simply—

"Yes."

"Didn't you run away from home for him, with him?"

She tried to free her hands, which were closed in his, but he did not let go. Again with simplicity, with loyalty, she had the courage to reply to the furious man—

"Yes."

"There! there! Didn't you adore him for three years?"

She tightened her lips, and bit them to conquer the pain of her tortured hands, and without a cry still replied—

"Yes."

"And you still love him; you'll always love him!" he cried, and in his anger this time there was mixed deep suffering.

He let go her hands. She fell back exhausted, but replied in a clear, precise voice—

"I do not love him."

"It is false, it is false; you still love him."

"If we had still loved each other we should not have left each other," she declared without hesitation.

"When you returned to this house to laugh at me, to make a fool of your tortured husband, you were in love with Marco Fiore, and Marco Fiore was in love with you."

"I should not have placed a foot in your house, understand, if I had still loved Marco," she proclaimed, proudly and coldly.

"Cursed be that evening! Cursed be that hour!" the man exclaimed, mad with jealousy and suffering.

"You called me here," she stated.

"If not, wouldn't you have come? Wouldn't you have come, eh, woman without soul or heart?"

"I should never have come," she declared.

"You are a monster of pride and aridness!" he cried; but in his voice sorrow conquered anger.

"I have tamed my pride before you, Emilio, don't forget it," she replied.

"When? How? You humiliate yourself? You?"

"When I accepted the pardon you offered me. I could have refused it, but I conquered my pride. I bowed and almost prostrated myself before you, and you pardoned me. Remember that; remember that."

"Cursed be those words; cursed the lips that pronounced them."

Maria stretched out her hand involuntarily, as if to stop her husband from a mortal fall.

"Weren't you sincere at that moment?" she asked in a dull voice.

"I was sincere," he replied, with a gulp.

"Did that pardon come from the bottom of your heart?"

"From the bottom, from the very depths of my heart."

"Why do you then curse that moment, those words and that sentiment?"

"Because you still love Marco Fiore."

"No," she replied.

"You keep his letters."

"That is true; but I don't love him. His letters are sacred, like those of one dead, like those of one dear to me."

"You love him; you love him!" exclaimed Emilio, in a monotony of desperation; "you keep every gift of his."

"I don't love him; but what I have is dear to me as a funereal memory."

"You love him, and he loves you. The house at Santa Maria Maggiore has remained as it was. It belongs to him and you."

"But I have never been there again," she replied disdainfully.

"I know, I know. I know where you go. But you will go there to-morrow perhaps, and he will come to-morrow. Oh, this evening, if I had never seen this evening!"

He turned, wringing his hands under a pain he could no longer resist.

"I saw your eyes, Maria; I saw his when you met at Casa Nerola. I saw all. And Vittoria Fiore, the poor unfortunate, saw you. She was as pale as death. This time, understand, I can't endure the insult; I shall kill you and him. But endure this shame again—never, never!"

She made a supreme effort of courage, subduing her indignation, repressing it at the back of her atrociously offended mind. She remembered that she had returned home to be good, to be sweet, to restore peace and serenity there, to give back happiness to her husband, who had a right to it, to perform works of tenderness, even to the silence and death of her own heart.

"Emilio, Emilio," she said softly, "tell me what I am to do to soften your mind and pacify your heart. You don't believe me to-day, you must to-morrow. Tell me all. Shall we leave Rome together for ever?"

"No," he replied gloomily; "I should think that you wanted to fly from Marco Fiore."

"Shall we go for a long voyage together?"

"No; you have been everywhere together, that I know."

"Do you want me to shut myself up at home, to see no one, as if I were dead?"

"No; I should think you were absorbed in memories of him."

"Well, would you like us to lead a society life together, wild and full of pleasure?"

"No, no. We should meet him every day, every evening, and I should commit a crime, Maria," and the fixed idea returned to him.

She felt lost for a moment.

"Then what am I to do?"

"There is one only means," he replied, drawing much nearer to her, speaking with his hot breath in her face.

"What is it?"

"To love me as you loved him."

The woman frowned two or three times without replying.

"I want to be loved passionately by you, do you understand? You must love me with passion as you loved Marco, as I love you. Have you understood? No more of this pale and flaccid affection, this loving friendship, which I despise and which exasperates me to frenzy. It must be passion. Have you perfectly understood me?"

She stood cold and rigid with staring eyes; but made no reply.

"You want to love me, don't you? I am your husband, who spoke the first words of love to you, who gave you the first kiss. Remember, remember, you who want to love me. You must love me as I have loved you. Speak; reply."

She closed her eyes, and replied in a choking and desperate voice—

"I will try; I will try."

"When?" and the question is like a dull roar.



"Later on, later on," she said, feeling herself lost, but unable to lie.

"No, no," he roared. "No, this evening, this very evening, in which you have seen him again, in which you have looked at and understood each other."

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It is late in the night, Maria is alone, stretched in her easy-chair, with dishevelled hair, which covers her face. Her hands hang limply with fingers apart, and her eyes are wide open, almost deprived of their glance. With a supreme effort of will she raised her hand and touched the bell. Her head fell back exhausted. The silence around was intense. No one came, and she had no strength left. But a little step draws near, a familiar face bends over her.

"I am dying," she cries to the faithful girl.

Chiara suddenly becomes strong, lifts her in her arms, holds her up, and begins to take off her ball dress, while Maria every moment seems to be fainting.

"I am dying," she repeats.

At last she is free of her gay garments, and the faithful girl tries to make her rise, with infinite patience and tact. At last she stands up, tall, rigid and pale as a ghost.

"I am dying!" she cries.

She grips Chiara with her hands for aid, totters, sways, and falls exhausted in the gloom and silence, as if dead.

## XV

DONNA ARDUINA stopped in the centre of the large hall of Palazzo Fiore, with its dark carved wood, and red tapestry bearing the Fiore arms. In spite of her years and life's troubles she still preserved her noble appearance. Marco bent and kissed her hand tenderly, while she kissed him on the forehead affectionately.

"Good-night, Marco."

"Good-night, mamma."

Vittoria had stopped two or three paces behind, wrapped in a white mantle, trimmed with gold, the large chinchilla collar of which suited the delicacy of her face and slender figure. She had placed no shawl on her hair, whose wavy gold was almost oppressed by the weight of the diadem, which shone brightly in the gloom of the hall. Her white and tranquil face is without expression, and her eyes have a distant and dull glance. In her hands she held her shawl, and waited patiently.

"Good-night, Vittoria," said Donna Arduina, approaching her daughter-in-law.

"Good-night, mother," she replied, stooping to kiss her hand. Then she drew herself up naturally and avoided the kiss on her forehead which Donna Arduina intended to give her.

Donna Arduina hesitated a moment as if she wished to say something, then, turning her back, she walked slowly and imposingly towards her own apartments. Marco had already started towards his, and his wife followed him without saying a word. As they crossed the various rooms, Marco looked two or three times at Vittoria as if he wished to question her silent, reserved face. She appeared, however, not to notice his questioning glance. Thus they reached their immense bedroom, the room occupied by the eldest sons of Casa Fiore and their wives for more than three hundred years, which modern taste and modern furniture had changed very little, leaving the solemnity and austerity of the old Roman patrician houses. In the majesty of her surroundings, the fragile woman seemed but a fantastic shadow. She sat down, but did not take off her cloak, opening it a little as if she felt warm.

"Aren't you going to call your maid?" Marco asked, taking the gardenia out of his buttonhole, as if about to undress.

"No," she replied, "a little later. I must say something to you, Marco."

He raised his eyebrows slightly, and jokingly sought to change the tone of the conversation.

"We will talk in bed if you like, dear. It is an excellent place for conversation, and I will listen to you with deep attention without going to sleep."

"No," she replied dryly, "we must talk as we are."

"As we are, dressed for society! As we were in Casa Nerola? Very well, dear, but I find the Emperor is missing. We can telephone to him, if you like, to assist at this colloquy?"

And he laughed mischievously. However, Vittoria paid no attention.

"I want to make a request of you, Marco."

"What is it?"

"I want ten days' freedom."

"You, Vittoria?"

"I, yes."

"To do what?"

"I want to make a retreat at Bambino Gesù now that Christmas is drawing near," she concluded, in a low voice.

"A novena!" he exclaimed, internally relieved, but not showing it; "and what prevents you from doing it here?"

"It is impossible, Marco. It isn't a question of prayer only. One must retire for nine whole days to a convent."

"To a convent? Are you going to become a nun like Ophelia?"

"Why Ophelia? What do you mean?"

"Nothing, nothing. Go then to your convent; which one?"

"That of the white nuns of Gesù Bambino in via Merulana."

"Who put such a strange idea into your head, Vittoria? Doesn't it seem a little ridiculous to you?"

"It is neither ridiculous nor strange," she added, shaking her head; "other ladies go there to retire and pray."

"Old ladies, I suppose?"

"No," she insisted coldly; "young ladies, and beautiful too; young married women especially."

"Who are perhaps in mortal sin. Are you in mortal sin, though I didn't know it, Vittoria?" he laughed loudly, looking at her.

"I hope not," she replied, lowering her eyes to hide a sudden flash; "but so many people can be in mortal sin, prayers are necessary for us and them."

"Even for me, dear nun!" he exclaimed mischievously.

"For you also," she replied expressionlessly.

"When must you enter?"

"To-morrow evening at eight. To-morrow is the fifteenth of December."

"When do you come out?"

"On the evening of the twenty-fourth."

"Have you told mamma this?"

"No; please tell her yourself to-morrow."

"Perhaps mamma will not approve."

"She knows what it is a question of," murmured Vittoria; "all Roman ladies know of this retreat in the monastery of Gesù Bambino. Get her to tell you."

She blushed slightly. He looked at her, and proceeded more gently with the conversation.

"Are there special prayers in this convent, Vittoria? Are special graces asked for?"

"One grace only," she replied, with downcast eyes; "one grace only of the Divine Son, Marco."

"Ah!" he replied without further remark, understanding.

"Do you so very much want to have a son, Vittoria?" he asked in a peculiar tone.

There was a deep silence between them.

"I desire it ardently," she broke out suddenly, with an impetuous accent, immediately recovering herself, "I desire nothing else now."

"Also I want one for you," he said, vaguely and absently.

"Not for yourself?" was the sharp question. But he did not heed the intense expression.

"As for myself, you understand, my brother Giulio has three sons. The house of Fiore has descendants."

"Beatrice has been fortunate," she murmured, with a sigh.

"There, there; you, too, will be fortunate," he resumed jokingly and laughingly; "you will have a quiverful of sons, too many, I tell you, dear Vittoria, for many sons will give you much worry. Don't doubt; you are not sterile."

"Who knows," she said, with a sorrowful shudder.

"Go to your convent, dear, since you are set on it," he said, laughing; "the Bambino Gesù will content you, and when you return home He will send you the little one."

He drew near her to kiss and embrace her. With a cold gesture she repulsed him.

"Houghty, toighty! Houghty toighty!" he exclaimed; "why all this rudeness to your lawful husband, Don Marco Fiore?" He tried again to draw her to himself and kiss her. Again still more coldly and hostilely she kept him at a distance.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"We must live from to-day in prayer and mortification," she replied in glacial tones.

"Therefore?" he asked.

"You resume from to-night your bachelor bedroom."

"Ah; and am I to keep it for ten days?" he said drily.

"Yes, for ten days, till my return."

"Brava! Brava! And if I am bored in there all alone?" he continued, with signs of annoyance.

"Oh, you won't bore yourself there!" she replied, with a slightly bitter smile.

He remembered that in that room everything had remained untouched since he had married, that it was full of portraits, big and small, of Maria Guasco, with recollections of their dead dream, their dead love. He understood more than ever the depth of his wife's thoughts and feelings; he realised her intense pain. So he tried again in pity and tenderness to make her speak, to make her weep.

"Vittoria, Vittoria!" he exclaimed in sad reproach, "you as usual are dissimulating and lying, and that makes you suffer and becomes unfair to me. I don't want to be angry, and you should not suffer."

"You are mistaken," she replied coldly, "neither do I suffer nor need you be angry. My confessor has told me that the scope of matrimony is not love but children, that one must ask Heaven for children, and pray very much. I am going to pray."

"Ah!" he said, suddenly becoming cold, "you are convinced that the scope of matrimony is not love?"

"Quite convinced," she answered harshly.

"All the worse," he exclaimed in a bad temper; "all the worse; and when did you decide to enter the convent for the novena?"

The question was direct and sharp. She hesitated to reply.

"When, Vittoria? Think and tell the truth."

"This evening," she replied, with an effort.

"This evening? At the ball?" he insisted, still more sharply.

"This evening at the ball," she assented, growing very pale.

But pity, sentiment without strength, was already extinguished in Marco's heart, and there was substituted, as in every heart unjustly suspected, a dull and cruel indignation. He shrugged his shoulders, took his fur coat and hat, and left with a dry, "Good-night, Vittoria."

She had no strength to reply. With difficulty she closed the door of her big room where she was alone, desperately alone. She dared not weep, for fear that he might return and find her weeping, for fear that, not being

very far away, he might hear her weeping.

## XVI

MARIA GUASCO wrote thus to Marco Fiore—

“Marco, this sudden and unexpected letter will not surprise you. You know already that it is not a love letter, because our souls united and understood themselves too intimately in that past which can never return, and they were too much agreed in feeling the irremediable end of their love for a sentimental misunderstanding ever again to happen between us. If anybody else, a stranger, were to lean over my shoulder, and read the first word written, he would at once have no other thought but this: ‘*See, it was natural, she is writing to her lover, she has never ceased to love him.*’ Let it be so. Not a short time has passed since we separated freely and voluntarily, overcome by anguish, but stronger than anguish itself, since the reason for our ardent and free union was at an end. Since it is now May it is nearly two years ago. It is a year since you married Vittoria, when, placing her little hand in yours, she will certainly have pardoned your long infidelity and desertion. Well, my friend, no one about me believes that I have ceased loving you with passion, not even those who know me well, such, for instance, as a faithful friend like Flaminia Colonna, not even a would-be lover like Gianni Provana, to give another instance. No one, and especially my husband, Emilio Guasco; he does not believe, can’t believe, never will believe that I have ceased to love you passionately.

“This is the cross that I have been carrying for a year, at first with energy and Christian courage, sustained by a burning desire for expiation, by a burning desire to repair the horrible suffering inflicted on others, to heal all the deep evil inflicted on others, and in fact with the great and lofty hope of giving all the happiness possible to the man who deserved it. Marco, how happily I embraced my cross at first, and how I suffered with humility and simplicity, like a child that feels it deserves all its punishment, or some self-effacing creature who performs every deep act of contrition! You know my pride, Marco; you know that it has always been my weapon of defence and attack in this war of life; you know that my pride has taken the place of many virtues and that, as it was perhaps too great and imperious, it formed also the source of all my sorrows. Well, Marco, I swear it, and I know you believe me, that I have every day thrown this pride at my husband’s feet, and my heart has been prostrated in an almost continual prayer for pardon. To accomplish what I had set myself for you, to accomplish all my vow of reparation I suffered so joyfully, but so bravely. At every fresh sting I did not bind the bleeding point, and from every new wound I let my blood gush forth, glad to suffer, glad to expiate, glad to be able by my secret and open sufferings to unfold and complete all my expiation, rejoicing to reach the goal of being a consolation to Emilio, of being, as of yore, the giver of his happiness. I have been intoxicated with the sacrifice, Marco, but now my intoxication has vanished. Alas, my friend, I see and know that it has been useless! My repentance has been in vain, and so have been all my acts of contrition, and the lowering of my pride. In vain, too, has been my desire to do good. Emilio is unhappier than ever, and I alone am the cause of his unhappiness. It is impossible for me, I swear, to make him happy even if I lived a hundred years, even if I died to-morrow. In life or death I can do nothing more for him—nothing, nothing.

“Listen, Marco, and see if it be not all irreparable. I didn’t understand at once, because I was infatuated with my fine hopes and desires of doing good; but now I know that all is irreparable. Do you know how long my husband’s pardon lasted? The fraction of an April evening in which he pronounced the sacred words which should absolve, cancel, and redeem. Immediately afterwards he despised himself and me, and the act of pardon seemed to him one of hypocrisy and lying humiliation. Later, when in one of our more furious crises, on reminding him that a Christian pardon is an act of renewed esteem, that Christian pardon should destroy the sin and purify the sinner, and that such an one should be loved as a new soul, he replied brutally: ‘Exactly; but Jesus who founded pardon was not married to an adulteress.’ What am I to say to him, Marco? The man loves me, longs for me, but at the same time he hates me. Never for an instant, understand, can he forget that I betrayed and abandoned him, and that for three years I was *yours*. He spies on me and makes me spy. He scrutinises every glance, he watches every action of mine. If I speak to him he doesn’t believe me; if I am kind he refuses my kindness. If my pity breaks out he understands at once, like all morbid hearts, that it is a question of pity and not of love, and he rejects my pity. He wrongs me and you with vituperation, and asks me to love him with passion as I loved you. But I can’t lie; I can’t, I can’t. I have never lied, and if I were to do so for a minute to save him and myself he wouldn’t believe me. What am I to say; what am I to do, Marco? I have said all; I have endured everything, and I don’t want to—I can’t—add anything else, my friend. I can’t write everything; my mind refuses to raise certain veils of shame. Let us leave it, let us leave it. My cross is so heavy on my shoulders that I am on the ground and breathless. What shall I say? What shall I do? Hasn’t all my repentance been useless? Hasn’t all my dedication been useless? And useless every abnegation? Whatever shall I do to-night? Whatever to-morrow? The man whom I have returned to comfort is, as far as I am concerned, in a state of sorrow and implacable agitation; this man whom I imagined so ingenuously and sweetly to make happy again, in spite of my sufferings, is still, and always will be, unhappy. After a terrible year, Marco, after a year of every experiment and attempt, in which I have consumed my will and weakened my energy, after a year in which I have seen all the good which was accumulated in my generous mind miserably dispersed, and day by day the sacred trust of doing good dissipated, I cry to you in my sadness and impotence, in my weariness and discouragement. I ask you whatever I shall do, Marco, with myself and my life, since it is of no further use but for evil? What shall I do with myself, inept for good, inept to give joy, and so involuntarily and fatally capable of evil?

“I am so lonely, Marco. When he is here he regards me with desire and anger. Both sentiments crucify and torture me, but I daren’t repress or combat either sentiment. I have become what I never was, a creature without will or object, a passive and resigned creature—I! I! think, Maria Guasco, a creature of resignation! Often he avoids me for days together, and I don’t know what to do with my dried-up and deserted existence. I do nothing, never, because I fear that all may be for the worse, even when he ignores me—*ignores me!* Sometimes he leaves Rome and goes away for two or three days, for a week. I don’t know where—in his distrust he won’t say. I don’t know when he returns, as he doesn’t wish it to be known. He enters suddenly and looks for me, as if he must always find me in sin, and I am always paralysed just as if my nerves had been cut, just as if a single gesture of mine may be an offence, or the pretext of an offence to him.

“I am so lonely, so lonely.

"In this Casa Guasco, in this Rome, in this world, Marco, I am more lonely than ever woman was, and I cry to you, not as a lover, not even as a friend, but as a soul which was once mine while mine was yours, I cry out my impotence, anguish, and mortal solitude.

"Marco, I am afraid of myself: I know myself. If the hand even of an enemy is stretched towards me with the impetus of unexpected sympathy, my soul at once trembles with emotion and opens its inviolate doors, and abandons itself with tenderness and enthusiasm. If a person who loves me ill-treats me or offends me it is impossible for me not to rebel; all my pride invests me wonderfully and magically with a steel cuirass, and I feel I love no longer, and I disdain the love of the other one who knows not how to love. I am capable of breaking a heart, two hearts, my own and the other's, with a violence which nothing can stop. You know me. You conquered me with your youthful grace, with your sincere passion mixed with gentle languor, which conquers the proudest and most reserved souls. Never once did you offend me, never once, perfect friend and perfect lover, pleasant and sweet to dream of and remember. In those three years, passed together, my simple and impetuous character, so sincere and yet inflammable, found every sentimental delight. Our short life was beautiful, beautiful with unspeakable harmony, and we could separate full of sorrow, but still without anger or a single bitter thought of each other.

"Marco, this unfortunate man for whom I returned a year ago, to heal of all the poison he had absorbed on my account, not only is he more poisoned than at first, but he vents all his revenge on me by a love composed of suspicion, contempt, sensuality, and jealousy. This man who seemed to me a hero, and was one for a single moment when he pronounced the words of pardon, this hero whom I had poetised proudly in my mind, and who deserved the lofty place of poesy for a brief moment, when he pronounced the words of pardon, is no longer a betrayed lover who must be made to forget the betrayal by lavished caresses, is no longer an offended husband whose pardon is asked and given, with whom a new, loyal, and lasting peace is re-established. No, he is now an enemy, who now loves and now hates, who now wants you and now spurns you, who adores you by day and execrates you by night, who would keep you eternally pressed to himself and who flies from you, who thinks you capable of every black action, and makes you understand his suspicions, and declares them. Emilio Guasco is an enemy to me, Maria, an enemy whose name I bear, whose fortune I share; an enemy in whose love I live, an enemy who now keeps me *because I have returned*, an enemy who doesn't wish to see me dead because he would kill himself on my tomb, who wants me to be alive with him and for him, to torture me and himself.

"O Marco, Marco, how terrified I have been lest all the good with which my heart is filled be at an end! how deeply I feel that my kindness which is not superhuman, since I am a woman and not an angel, will dissolve like a cloud, and I may become a naked rock, sharp and fierce of aspect—a rock!

"Marco, if he doesn't calm himself and stop, if he doesn't become more humane, kinder, more generous; if he doesn't become the man of pardon and not him of *after the pardon*, that is sad and contemptuous for having pardoned, how shall I pour the balsam over him which ought to restore him to health, the jar of which is perhaps already empty and wobbling in my hand? Marco, if he doesn't restore to me his esteem, his trust and his friendship, unless he is affectionate and magnanimous with me, how shall I be able to improve and exalt his life? What shall I do here if he continues to be an enemy who loves me? O Marco, I tremble to the very roots of my soul, even to the most mysterious essence of my spirit, lest all my mission of peace, beauty, and affection, can never be accomplished, and lest all my rebellious heart may revolt against the enemy who loves me. Marco, what will become of me to-morrow, a week hence, a year hence?

"MARIA."

At the same time Marco wrote to Maria—

"Maria, my delight, do you know that there has not been a single day since that fatal and tragic one on which we left each other, that I have ceased to think of you, far away or near, deeply separated from me by the depth of our divine dream of love, separated for ever since we wished it to be so, but always present to my spirit, which reflects itself in you as in the coolest and most crystal mountain stream? I have thought of you, Maria, as a dear mother, as a sister, as a friend, as a womanly creature who has been and is most dear to me, wherever I have found myself, whatever the idle words which left my mouth, whatever my careless deeds, however intense my silence and immobility. I thought of you then, soul of beauty, without ardour or desire, because that flame which was so devouring is extinguished in me as in you, but I have thought of you with sweet and melancholy moral sympathy, without jealousy, without bitterness, without gall, without any of the dregs which passion leaves in the heart, but with a measured and calm recollection, as for a memory which will be ever dear. I have never sought you; I have never thought of seeking you: I have never avoided you or wished to avoid you, nor have I written to you. Only your place has been, and is within me, high, unshakable, strong, and you are like a mother, a sister, a friend, the inspirer of my thoughts and sentiments. From the high extinguished pyre a slender warmth of life prevents my heart from getting cold; a thin light, that which they say remains after a star is dead in the firmament, seems to guide me in my unstable and uncertain way.

"But at last, after such a long silence, Maria, on the anniversary of my marriage, since you are always a source of warmth and light to me, and since you can still give me light and tell me *what is necessary*, I am writing to you and am breaking this division of time, of place, of persons which seemed inseparable between us, and I have come to implore help as formerly, as yesterday, as to-morrow, as always. I come to ask moral help of you, because you were always my conscience, even when we broke together the ties of society and laws, since you taught me nobly the way of liberty and truth, even in that which the world calls a mistake and the Faith a mortal sin, but which we called, and shall call, by a single word—Love—whatever it may be, from wherever it may come to us, wherever it may drag us. Maria, you who in the supreme hour of farewell, when I wept upon your hand the most burning tears of my life, you who showed me what to do with my existence; you who reminded me of a great duty to be accomplished; you who spoke no more to me of happiness, no longer possible for me from the moment that our love was ended, but of that which I could still give to a human creature; you who exalted for me this duty even to making it appear adorned with every attraction: Maria, to-day you must tell me, if you know, if you will, *what is necessary*, since I no longer know.

"Maria, the bridal veil which the young woman wore a year ago in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, when she knelt near me and the priest pronounced over our heads and joined hands the words which bind us till death, that soft veil which should be raised after the wedding to show me openly and loyally the face of my lady, where may

be mirrored all her soul, which perhaps possesses concealed the most precious spiritual and sentimental treasures—but however light it was, neither my hands nor my kisses succeeded in rarefying its aërial woof—Vittoria has never once desired to liberate her face from it. I have always felt this veil, between me and her, no longer a bridal veil but a veil of life, in which she enveloped herself in the first vivid days of our marriage; and as time passed—and sometimes its course seemed very slow to me—it became closer and denser even to hiding my lady completely, and as time still went on its course more slowly than ever, I felt that this veil had become a seamless, opaque texture, in which she is enclosed for ever. Maria, Maria, all the solemn words of that last hour in which you enjoined me to assign this deep and great object to my life, this of offering happiness without equal to a woman who had suffered for me, I never forget, when I am with Vittoria, for an instant; and in spite of the unspeakable weariness of my soul, in spite of that mortal aridness which succeeds to great passion, in spite of my hidden distrust of myself, in spite of the fact that I doubted deeply of my success, I have always endeavoured that Vittoria, my wife, should be happy. Dear, dear Maria, if only you knew how often I have invoked you as light, and heat, and guide, so as not to lose myself or falter on the way! How often I have called on you, my conscience, to continue my duty! Well, Maria, you and I have been deceived. Or perhaps you were deceived, beautiful and magnificent soul, in thinking that *that* was the necessary thing, or very likely it is Vittoria who has deceived you, me, and all of us.

“This creature is unable to be happy on my account, perhaps she is unable to be happy on any account. She is a soul incapable of happiness. Such souls, Maria, are to be met with. Heaven has sent them thus on the earth to live a peculiar, cold, sad existence, without joy, without hope and without desires; they are souls incapable of reaching that extreme joy, even for a second, which is called happiness; and probably the others only have it for a single minute, but they do reach it and possess it, and through it feel themselves children of God, near to Him, near to His throne of splendour and glory. This moment you and I have possessed, Maria; but we were born to possess it. Vittoria, my wife, is unable to touch this height. Her hands are as white as her face and garments, they are as cold as her forehead and her heart. Her life, too, is white, cold, and immobile.

“O my conscience, secure and firm, do you know I have managed to extract from Vittoria her secret. Do you know that her secret is terror of you, terror of what you have been in my life, which has been painted fantastically for her—simple, innocent girl—as something horrible and tremendous. Her childish secret as betrothed, bride, and wife, was this ferocious terror that I might belong to you as a lover for ever, that through the mysterious reasons of passion you would always keep me, and that from one day to another I could again belong to you through the impetuous and imperious reasons of desire. By pressing her cold white hands I communicated a flame of life to her, by fixing my eyes on hers I placed a gleam in those two bright eyes, and then I learnt her secret. Hers is a soul sick with this terror. On your account, my lofty pure conscience, on my own, since I am pledged to follow every wish of yours, I have word for word, act for act, tried to destroy in her this morbid terror of you; and believe me, believe me in everything, any other woman would be convinced that her terror was in vain, would have given me all her heart and soul for recognition, affection, love. But the more I demonstrated to her that the bonds of passion were undone through your will and mine, the denser became the veil which surrounded her. Whatever was she wanting, whatever was she asking, for her existence as a woman and a wife; whatever was existence able to give her; more than the affectionate and tender companionship of a man like me, dedicated entirely to her, who desired nothing more than to see her smile in her juvenile happiness, and himself to be the only origin of that smile and that joy? Maria, my wife has smiled five or six times in one year of matrimony, and hasn’t laughed once. Ah, I have tried to tear the closely knit and invisible texture in which she is clothed even because of this, and I have asked her whatever she could wish from me beyond this certainty that I am no longer yours, whatever else she could expect from a man, a companion and a husband beyond this great and absolute dedication to her happiness which should be sufficient for any woman. She lowered her eyelids, closed her little mouth as usual, all her face became as marble. Oh, if only once to see that white marble face flesh!—and she replied—

“I expect nothing and I wish nothing.”

“Maria, the limpid truth is that Vittoria can’t, won’t, and doesn’t know how to become happy with me, because of her sentimental ineptitude, and it has all been a generous mistake of ours. With her I am sad, tired, and bored. Oh, how I bore myself, I can’t tell you, Maria! On some days a mad rage comes over me against this immense boredom. Why did I marry the girl? Why did I give myself this duty of a husband and companion, which I have tried and am trying to accomplish—so badly it seems, both for her and me? Why did I swear to Heaven to make this woman happy, when I am not able to keep the oath, though I want to? Perhaps she would have been happy with another. Why did I bring her my wasted heart? Why have I offered her a life where love’s harvest is gathered, and the earth which had produced too violently has been left fruitless? Why have I given her a soul which has done with love? Maria, Maria, we made a mistake on that last day; our souls did not understand the truth which is within us and not without. We have seen and understood nothing beyond ourselves. Vittoria did not ask for a husband but a lover, a lover like Maria Guasco had; she did not ask for happiness but passion. You knew, Maria, that that was impossible, and I knew it. Now I really begin to fear that I have torn the veil for ever which encloses Vittoria’s soul and person, and that I know all about her, and that I can do nothing now—never, never.

“MARCO.”

In reply to her letter Maria received this from Marco—

“Maria, good and brave, make an appeal to all your goodness and strength. They are great, immense; you can’t measure them, but I can. With your goodness and strength strive to conquer Emilio, the enemy who loves you. Make a friend of him. That is the best way: do it.

“MARCO.”

In reply to his letter Marco received this from Maria—

“Marco, try to love Vittoria. That is all. Try to love her.

“MARIA.”

For a long time neither heard from the other.

## PART III

### USQUE AD MORTEM

#### I

THE *Fragolata*<sup>[1]</sup> was the last festivity of the season, and, on account of the originality and grace of the occasion and the charm of the late Roman April, many strangers had delayed their departure after even a very late Holy Week. Since the middle of March, in the first languors of a spring laden with delicate perfumes, there had been daily gaieties in gardens and the shady majestic parks, which still surround the Roman villas. The poesy of such re-unions, in the soft, clear afternoon hours in the avenues, when light steps have a seducing rustle; in the broad meadows, covered in emerald green, which slope towards the wooded distance, when the ladies' bright dresses in the background make them appear like nymphs;—this penetrating poesy tempts every soul, even the most barren of feeling, and the least susceptible to visions of beauty.

[1] Strawberry feast.

In various ways Roman society, by fancy-dress balls, theatricals, *kermesses*, had called on public charity, Italian and foreign, to help in works of well-doing for so much of the suffering which society sees, feels, and, grieving for and seeing, tries every fashionable and crafty means to alleviate. In short, the idea had been hit on to close the season with a *fragolata* at the Villa Borghese on behalf of the foundlings. The suggestion ran swiftly from the Court to the embassies, from the tea-rooms to the big hotels, from the most select patrician clubs to the sport clubs; and people, tired of balls in over-heated rooms, of shutting themselves up in theatres, people fond of new sensations, learnt at first with a curiosity and later with impatience that a *fragolata* was being arranged at Villa Borghese, and that the most fascinating dames and damsels would sell the strawberries. Later, it was known that, as well as baskets of strawberries, there would be sold roses, since April was entering into May, and lovers of strawberries are lovers of roses. So the discussion was great at the last receptions and teas. The young men shrugged their shoulders with a pretence at being bored at another charity festivity. Some declared that they could not stand strawberries, some hated roses, and some declared that they were leaving before the *fragolata*, while others added maliciously that they would procure a false telegram to absent themselves. But the ladies laughed, shaking their heads, knowing that all their friends and lovers would come that afternoon under the majestic trees of the Villa Borghese to take from their white hands a leaf-full of strawberries or a bunch of fragrant roses. They only were afraid of bad weather—the protectors of abandoned infancy—but not of the hardness and indifference of the human heart before everything that was attractive and pleasant; strawberries, roses, women, at a beautiful time in lovely surroundings.

Nor was the sun's smile wanting on that day for the *fragolata*; a sun not too hot, a light not too strong, a sky not of an intense, but a light blue, occasionally traversed and rendered whiter by a slow soft cloud, melting towards an unknown horizon where all clouds go one never sees again. On that day the Villa Borghese was not open to the public, and on its broad, undulating paths, around its thick woods and spreading lawns, around its fountains spouting and singing their lively and crystalline measure, around its temples and little *casine*, with all the windows closed as if no one had lived there for years, one heard no more the dull and irritating rumbling of a hundred hired carriages, which passed there five times a week, full of unknown faces where often one reads idiocy and perversion, or often one wants to read it, in the profound irritation of seeing the Villa Borghese, the sanctuary of beauty and poesy, violated by strangers.

Towards four o'clock the carriages kept on increasing. The troop of ladies dressed in white, in stuffs of spring-like softness, of young girls in summerish muslin, in straw hats covered with flowers, became thicker, and at that moment the *fragolata* presented an enchanting appearance. Under the wooded plateau of the Piazza di Siena, amidst thick groups of tall trees, with their shining, almost metallic, verdure, and yet transparent with the softness of May, a large counter had been placed, on whose white cloth bunches of roses and baskets of strawberries, most graceful rustic baskets, covered with favours and ribbons of soft colours, and all sorts of strawberries, big and small, were placed on broad fresh leaves. Behind the stall were five or six ladies, Donna Flaminia Colonna, Margherita Savelli, the Princess della Marsiliana, Countess Maria Santacroce, and Maria Guasco, whose care was the sale of the baskets.

Other ladies, especially the young ladies, carried around baskets of the early strawberries come from the mountain and the garden, offering them to the groups which kept forming little by little in increasing numbers. These amateur saleswomen are nearly all beautiful. There are Donna Teresa Santacroce, the liveliest and most seductive of Roman society girls; Miss Jenkins, an English girl, who seemed to have escaped from one of Lawrence's pictures; Mademoiselle de Klapken, an irresistible Hungarian, and Stefania Farnese, with her white complexion, chestnut hair, smiling eyes and mouth, dressed in white like a Grecian Erigone.

Amidst the trees, scattered everywhere, are little tables covered with the whitest cloths, sprinkled with rose-leaves, and seats for the people to sit and taste the strawberries, while ladies offer milk, cream, and sugar. Little conversations take place politely without hurry or bustle, just as at a promenade or a dance, and the groups round the stall and the charming assistants around the little tables, which are gradually filled, form a phantasmagoria of colours which is renewed every moment, and assumes the most unexpected and delightful aspects for appreciative eyes.

The little tables are now all taken, and the luscious fruit bathed in cream and covered with sugar moisten beautiful lips. The men even yield to the seductions of the fine, fresh food. Everywhere baskets are offered and taken, and the fruit is poured into the plates and saucers. The girls offer roses, and roses are in every lady's hands and in every lady's waist. Bunches of roses are on every table, and every man has a rose in his buttonhole. Several foreign ladies, lovers of flowers, have their arms laden with them. One Frenchwoman has filled her parasol with them; an English girl of eighteen has placed a cluster of the freshest white roses under the rim of her straw hat and is the picture of happy youth.

Nevertheless, Maria Guasco, at her place as patroness behind the stall, bends her head of magnificent waving hair, beneath a large white hat with white feathers, and her thoughtful face over a large bundle of red roses, of

intoxicating fragrance, which Stefania Farnese, the gay Erigone, had just given her. Her face is hidden among the red roses whose perfume she has always loved; that perfume, rich with every memory, gives her a silent emotion which fills her eyes for a moment with tears.

"What is the matter?" said Flaminia to Maria.

"Nothing," she said, biting a rose-leaf.

"You are tired?"

"Yes, a little."

"To-morrow you will rest."

"And what shall I do after I have rested?" Maria asked, anxiously and sadly.

Flaminia did not reply, and an expression of pain was diffused over her beautiful, good-natured face. But again people throng round the *fragolata* stall and buy strawberries, and Donna Margherita Savelli, quite blonde beneath her hat of white marguerites, gathers the money into a purse of antique cloth of peculiar make, now quite full, whose silver strings she cannot tie.

"See, see, Flaminia, what a lot of money!" she cried joyfully.

Gianni Provana, who had been walking round for about an hour and had approached all the little tables a little superciliously and proudly, without sitting by any one, came and leaned over the stall, exchanging a word first with one and then with another of the lady patronesses, always cold and composed, with his monocle in its place and a slightly mocking smile on his mouth. He had no rose in his buttonhole, and his eyes every now and then settled on those which Maria was smelling long and silently.

"Well, Provana," said Flaminia Colonna, "haven't you tasted the strawberries?"

"Not one, I assure you. I don't want to ruin my health."

"What a wretch you are! Don't you like strawberries?"

"They don't agree with me, Donna Flaminia. I am getting old, and my digestion isn't so good."

"Are you in a bad temper, Provana?" Maria asked indifferently.

"Very, Donna Maria, and you too, I think?"

"Oh, I!" she said, with a nonchalant gesture.

"Still," resumed Flaminia, to change the conversation, "you haven't given a penny, heartless man, to abandoned infancy."

"Not a penny. I don't like babies."

"What a wretch! Heaven will punish you. You will die tyrannised over by your housekeeper."

"Certainly, Donna Flaminia. But I have still something to do before dying," he added enigmatically, looking at Maria.

"What?" asked Flaminia.

"Not to buy your strawberries, which ruin every one's skin, but to pay for a basket to please you."

He extracts from his purse a note for a hundred francs, giving it to the beautiful treasurer, Margherita Savelli, who gives a cry of joy.

"O Flaminia, how kind this sham knave Provana is!"

"Most kind," Flaminia replied, and she gives him her hand, which he touches with his lips gallantly.

Other people crowd round the stall, and Provana talks softly with Maria Guasco. She replies without looking at him, as if wrapt in her own deep, dominating thoughts, which are marked from eyebrow to eyebrow.

"Are you, too, interested in foundlings, Donna Maria?" he asked.

"Yes, very," she replied vaguely.

"Well, will you give me one of those red roses, only one?"

The request is made with seeming disingenuousness, but she understood that the man was waiting for the reply attentively. The woman was silent, and smelled her roses.

"I will pay whatever price you like—for the foundlings," he murmured suggestively.

"Why do you value it so?" she asked, looking at him.

"Because it is yours; because it has been in your hands, because you have put it near your face, and have placed it to your lips."

The voice is lower and the expression more ardent. The woman had never heard the like from him before. She looked at him with melancholy curiosity, but free from anger.

"Maria, give me the rose," and he attempted to take it gently from the bunch.

Maria drew back and looked at him, protecting her flowers.

"For whom, then, do you wish to keep the roses, Donna Maria?" he asked, half bitterly and ironically.

"I don't know; I don't know," she replied, trembling.

"If you don't give me one, to whom will you, Donna Maria?"

She let the roses fall and scatter on the table, all her face was disturbed with sudden pallor. Gianni Provana quietly took a rose which she had not given him—which he had gained in spite of her; but, instead of placing it in his buttonhole, he placed it with care in the inside pocket of his coat.

"Next to the heart," he whispered.

A short, strident laugh was Maria's only reply.

"How badly you laugh, Donna Maria!" he exclaimed, a little irritated.

"Like you," she replied quietly.

"Come from behind the stall and let us take a walk together?" he asked.

His tone remained simple and disingenuous, but within there was a dull agitation, which the man restrained with difficulty.

"No," she refused drily.

"And why? Aren't you bored there? Don't you see that every one is walking?"

"Yes: sweethearts with their lovers; girls with their flirts; wantons with their courtiers. We belong to none of these classes."

"*Hélas!*" he exclaimed in French, to hide his bitterness, and took out his eye-glass and looked at her.

"Won't you come then? The avenues are most beautiful, and it is a lovely sunset."

She laughed again, with a mocking, malicious laugh.

He looked at her.

"I will return later on," he said, softly withdrawing.

When he had gone she lent her head against the arm of her rustic chair, and shut her eyes as if mortally tired.

"What is the matter?" asked Flaminia.

There was no reply.

"Are you feeling ill, Maria?"

"No; I am sad and I am bored."

"Are you very bored?"

"Immensely. I am bored and sad as no one has ever been bored and sad in this world."

"What should one do to distract you, to make you cheerful?" she said, with sincere anxiety and pain.

"Nothing, dear, nothing," replied Maria in a weak and monotonous voice; "love me a little; there is no need for anything else. That will console me."

"However, that won't amuse you," said Flaminia frankly.

"But it helps me to live," replied Maria sadly.

"Do you need help so much, dear?"

"So much, so much, to go on living!" the miserable woman replied desperately.

But the lugubrious conversation was interrupted by people coming and going. In the west the light took gentle sunset tints, and the whiteness and brightness of the ladies' dresses seemed almost vaporous and transparent, while the beauty of their faces assumed a more indefinite and mysterious aspect. A languor fell from the sky, which kept growing whiter, and the voices became softer and slower.

"Come for a little walk," said Gianni Provana, who had returned, waiting with infinite patience.

"Do go," said Flaminia to her friend. "Provana, tell her something brisk and witty. Maria is so mortally bored."

"Donna Maria, I will force myself to be full of wit!" he exclaimed, with a bow.

The woman made a movement of fastidiousness and nonchalance. Then she rose slowly from her place and replaced her cloak on her shoulders, and taking her white parasol where she had introduced some roses, without seeing if Provana was near or following her, started, after giving Flaminia a little tender embrace, telling her to wait for her till she should return.

Gianni Provana rejoined her and walked beside her. They went through the long avenue on the left, which leads from the top of the wood of the Piazza di Siena towards the back of the Villa Borghese. Others were walking near and far off in couples and groups, some talking softly, others joking and laughing, stopping to chatter better and laugh and joke; others were silent. The sunset rendered the avenue more melancholy, in spite of gay voices and peals of laughter.

Maria and Gianni Provana did not speak. She walked slowly, as if very tired.

"I am incapable of any wit near you, Donna Maria," said Provana, after a little time.

"Don't give yourself any trouble; it is useless."

"Is it true that you are so mortally bored?"

"You know it, it seems," she replied indifferently, far away.

"Once you told me that you found the strength to live in yourself, and only in yourself. Those were your words, I think. I didn't understand them very well, but I remember them."

"Yes, I said them once," she murmured thoughtfully. "And it was true then; but now it is no longer true."

"Why?"

"I have nothing more within me," she replied desolately.

But she seemed to say it to herself more than to him.

"Try to interest yourself in something outside yourself," he suggested insinuatingly and quietly, hiding the intense interest which agitated him.

"I have tried various things; and I haven't succeeded in binding myself to anybody or anything."

"How is that?"

"I have nothing to do with my life, that is all," she concluded, coldly and gloomily, looking at the gnarled trunk of a very old tree.

He was silent and troubled.

"Still, two years ago in returning to your home——" he resumed.

"That tragic and grotesque farce has ended with my husband as the travesty of a hero, and with me as a travesty of a penitent!" she exclaimed with a sneer.

"O Donna Maria!" he exclaimed, shocked.

"You already know that Emilio hates and despises me," she continued, with an increasingly mordant irony. "He must have told you. Among men you discuss these things."

Provana was silent, but he had an air of agreeing.

"All this for having wished to pardon me, dear Provana. Pardon wasn't in him, neither was it in me."

"And why?"

"Because pardon is a great thing, when the soul remains great that accords it—a pardon complete and absolute; but in the other case what a miserable, humiliating, and insulting thing a pardon is!"



"In the other case?"

"Oh, Emilio is a poor creature!" she said, with a profound accent of disdain, shrugging her shoulders, and adding nothing further, as if she had said the last word about him.

"And you, and you, Donna Maria?"

"I? I owe to one of my usual exaltations having inflicted on my lively being one of the most unsupportable humiliations feminine pride can ever endure."

She stopped, troubled and proudly pale, with eyes veiled in tears of indignation.

"You understand, I asked his pardon humbly. I prayed humbly for him to pronounce it with loyalty, to accord it fully and generously, I, Maria Guasco; and I wept, yes wept, before him, and endured his pardon; which was, instead of an absolution, an accusation, an inquiry, a daily condemnation."

Fortunately, the two were far away from the others, and the violet tints of the sunset became deeper beneath the trees. The woman stopped, and made a supreme effort to stifle her sighs, to repress her tears, and compose her face.

"Please forget what I have told you," she said imperiously to Provana, putting a hand on his arm.

"Why, then, why?" he exclaimed, becoming suddenly heated; "why do you like to treat me always as a man without a heart or a soul? Who gives you the right to treat me thus? Why must I always be considered by you as an enemy? Don't you believe that I have fibre and feelings, like other human beings? Am I a monster? Why don't you believe that I can understand you and follow you to the depths and speak a word of consolation, even I? Am I unfit, then, to be your friend?"

She was stupefied at this cry of sorrow, new and unthought of.

"Oh, let me be, Maria, let me be your friend. Do let me, that together our two souls may be healed, mine from cynicism and yours from discomfort and desolation. I ask you to let me be your friend, nothing else. I have been ill for so many years, from every mortal illness, and I thirst for good. You, too, Maria, have been so ill; let us seek some pleasure together."

She felt that he was sincere at that moment, sincere as he had never been, as he never would be again. But she knew that there are no pleasures in life unless accompanied by devouring poisons. She knew that there are no succours and comforts between man and woman without mortal danger, and without fatal and mortal error. The truth, impetuous and brutal, rose in the woman's words.

"Are you asking me to be your lover?"

He at once became cold, and replied—

"Yes."

"I don't wish to be," she replied, turning her back, and replacing her cloak on her shoulders to resume their walk.

Gianni Provana did not frown nor change countenance.

"Still, it will be so."

"Why?" exclaimed Maria disdainfully.

"Because now there is nothing else to be done," he concluded composedly.

"Ah!" she interrupted; and she would have said more but kept silent, becoming absorbed and gloomy.

"You already know that your husband will not change his behaviour to you; your disagreement can't help becoming intenser and deeper every day."

She assented with a nod, becoming gloomier.

"You already know, you will have been told, that Marco Fiore has become enamoured of an actress, an actress with red hair, Gemma Dombrowska, and that perhaps he will go off with her as with you ... as with you."

Bitterness, sarcasm, anger vibrate in every word of Gianni Provana as he follows the woman, persuading and persecuting her.

She bent her head in assent, because she knew.

"You see quite well!" he exclaimed in a hissing voice, "that there is nothing else for you in life, but to become my lover."

A sense of fatality seemed to weigh on the woman's life, which oppressed and squashed her. Evening had fallen in the avenues and it seemed like night. All the ladies who had still remained in the wooded lawns and avenues covered themselves with their cloaks and hurried their steps, accompanied by their cavaliers.

Farewells are exchanged, light laughter, and small cries, while the waiters denude the last tables, and the great stall of the *fragolata* is covered with squashed strawberries and withered leaves. Every one hurries to the gate in a kind of flight, leaving the wood behind filled with night, fearful in its solitude, where it seemed to be peopled with unknown phantoms.

Near the great gate Flaminia Colonna, Maria Guasco and Gianni Provana meet face to face Donna Vittoria Fiore, accompanied by her sister Beatrice. Marco Fiore's wife had been at the *fragolata* all the afternoon, but as usual had kept herself in some far-off corner in the shadow of her sister, and had not approached the patronesses' stall, nor had she participated at any of the little strawberry tables. She was there, at the threshold of Villa Borghese, behind her sister, who had advanced to call the carriage of Casa Fiore. She was there, with her little white closed face and eyelids lowered over eyes too clear and limpid, with the lower half of her face hidden in the feathers of her white boa. But at a certain moment her eyes are raised and meet those of Maria Guasco, pregnant with sadness and pride. Vittoria's glance flashed as never before in unspeakable hate. Maria Guasco smiled and laughed, as bending towards Gianni Provana she said—

"Not so bad! not so bad! She at any rate has not pardoned me."

"YOUR EXCELLENCY, dinner is served," announced the butler at the door of the *salotto*, bowing to Donna Arduina Fiore.

Donna Arduina put down her knitting of dark wool, a petticoat destined for some poor woman dying of cold in the winter. She asked—

"Has Don Marco returned?"

"No, Excellency, but his man Francesco has returned with a letter for Your Excellency," and he advanced with a note on a silver tray. In the increasing gloom of the room, Donna Arduina raised her eyes to Heaven with a fleeting act of resignation, as she took her son's letter. She had received many others in the far-off times, which it seemed to her ought never to have returned again with their habits, and now at the day's fall Marco again writes to her as formerly. She read—

"Dear Mamma, excuse me, pardon me, but I am detained by friends for dinner at the club. If I can return early I will come and kiss your hand, if not, to-morrow. Bless me.—MARCO."

The tender mother sighed, blessing as usual in her heart her favourite son, even if absent and drawn away elsewhere by others. In her deep maternal egoism she is content that nobody and nothing have the power to make her son forget his mother entirely. Still she sighed, and said to the butler—

"Please inform Donna Vittoria that dinner is served, and that I am waiting for her in the dining-room." It is not very long since Donna Arduina made common table with her children, Marco and Vittoria. In the early days of their marriage she said that she did not wish to change her usual time-table, little suitable for the young couple; but it was really an affectionate excuse to leave them in liberty. Little by little, however, she learnt that they not only desired her presence at the family table, but felt an intimate need of it, as if to prevent embarrassment, so great and frequent had become the coldness and silence between Marco and Vittoria. Once, with a boyish caress, which he knew how to give his mother, winning her as he had always won her from a little one, Marco had said to her—

"Mamma dear, don't abandon us in the hour of our dinner as in that of our death!"

"Why? Why?"

"You know Vittoria more than ever at that hour seeks the solution of a philosophical problem, which has fatigued the mind of many philosophers. Hence I dare not disturb her. At least you have the habit of opening your mouth, mamma bella, and pronouncing a few words."

Thus the new custom was assumed without Vittoria asking the reason. At table, to solve the question of places, the two ladies of the house were seated one opposite the other, the two places of honour separated by some distance. Marco's place was on the right of his mother, but much nearer to her, in fact quite far from his wife. So Donna Vittoria Fiore seemed isolated down there in the place of honour on her high-backed chair with a carved coronet, which topped the ornamentation and stood out above the little head with its aureola of golden hair; but she seemed serene and tranquil. Mother and son often, when she was there, forgot her, and during dinner a conversation took place between the two without either directing a word to Vittoria, and as Vittoria never questioned either, neither replied. Sometimes as they talked they looked at her, as if to make her take part in the conversation, but, without opening her mouth, she would content herself with nodding her head to what they said, almost automatically. For two or three months now, with a plausible excuse but with increasing regularity, Marco was missing at the family meal. Sometimes he announced the fact the day before, sometimes he said so at luncheon, and at last, at the close of the season, he more often sent a little note to his mother to say that he was not returning to dinner: but always to his mother, never to Vittoria.

"But why don't you write a word to her?" she asked, a little, but not very, shocked.

"Because Your Excellency is mistress of the house!" he proclaimed, embracing her like a child, and smiling and laughing.

"Still, she could be hurt about it," observed the good woman.

"Vittoria? Never."

When his absences became more frequent, she made some firm remonstrances to him.

"Why do you abandon us, Marco?"

"Do I, mamma?" he said, with an uncertain smile.

"Vittoria may be displeased by it."

"You, mamma, you; not Vittoria."

"Are you sure?"

"Ask her. Try and ask her. You will cut a poor figure, madre bella, since Vittoria will reply that it matters nothing to her."

"Pretending?"

"Pretending? Who knows! For that matter I can't endure people who pretend."

"Even those who are hiding their sorrow?"

"Even them. A hidden sorrow doesn't exist for me."

"You are cruel, Marco."

"There, there, mamma, sweet as honey, you mustn't think me cruel!"

The mother, a little thoughtful, was silent, but not convinced. This evening the absence of her son had worried her more than ever. She entered slowly the immense, solemn, gloomy dining-room of Casa Fiore just as Vittoria entered from the other side. The young woman read the pain on the good-natured old face.

"Isn't Marco coming to dinner, mamma?" she asked indifferently, sitting down.

"No, dear. He has been kept at the club by friends."

"Ah! and is he returning late?" and there was even greater indifference in this second remark.

"Perhaps yes, perhaps no," added Donna Arduina, looking closely at her daughter-in-law.

Vittoria appeared not to have heeded her mother-in-law's reply. The dinner proceeded in silence, slowly and

peacefully, served by servants who made no noise in crossing the imposing space, where a single candelabra concentrated its light on the table, leaving the rest of the room obscure.

Donna Arduina Fiore had always had a holy terror of installing the electric light in the old palace full of carving, precious pictures, and objects of art. So the old aristocratic methods of illumination prevailed, large oil lamps and huge candelabra with wax candles.

"Where are you going this evening, Vittoria?" said Donna Arduina, interrupting the heavy silence.

"Nowhere, mother."

"I thought you were going with Beatrice to the last performance of the *Walkyrie*?"

"Beatrice is going there. I said I wouldn't."

"Does it bore you?"

"It bores me."

"Don't you like the theatre?"

"So-so, you know."

"Still, any way you prefer music?"

"Yes, I prefer music; but even that doesn't make me enthuse."

"It seems to me, Vittoria, that you enthuse for very few things in the world;" and she tempered the observation with a quiet smile.

"I enthuse over nothing, mamma; really over nothing," replied Vittoria emphatically.

"But why, daughter? Why? There is good in enthusiasm."

"I don't enthuse, mother, by temperament, also by character: I am made so. I have been made very badly," the young woman declared, with an expression of bitterness.

"Haven't you tried to change yourself?—to interest yourself deeply in something?—to like something keenly? Have you tried?"

"I have tried and failed."

"Still you must have thought and felt that something in the world deserves all our heart?"

"Yes, mother, I have thought and felt it," the daughter-in-law replied firmly.

"What, my daughter?"

"Love, mother," she replied firmly.

"Love?" repeated Donna Arduina, surprised.

"Exactly, my mother. School stories, follies of youth. Old stories!"

With a vague bow she seemed to greet these dreams and follies so old and far away, so dead and scattered. The mother-in-law was silent, wrapped in the ideas and sentiments suggested by her daughter-in-law, which crowded her mind. The dinner finished, Donna Arduina rose to take leave of Vittoria.

"Will you let me keep you company, mother?" Vittoria asked.

"Certainly, dear; do come."

Presently both were seated in Donna Arduina's ancient room, under the large oil lamp covered with a shade.

While the old lady persevered with her woollen petticoat for some poor woman, Vittoria resumed work on a bodice, also destined to clothe some poor unfortunate in winter. They remained a little without raising their eyes from the brown bundles of wool, which kept increasing under their hands.

"Vittoria!" cried Donna Arduina suddenly.

"Mother?"

"Are you displeased that Marco didn't return to dinner this evening?"

"No."

"Really; doesn't it displease you?"

"Really!"

"In fact it matters nothing to you that Marco doesn't put in an appearance at dinner?"

"Why do you ask me?"

"Tell me if it is true."

"And who told you?"

"My son, your husband. He maintains that it matters nothing to you if he goes or comes, returns or doesn't return."

"He is right," replied Vittoria, after a pause.

"Have you told him that, my daughter?"

"I have told him that."

"Why? You have committed an imprudence. We must never show men that we do not value them."

"Value or not value, show it or not show it, mother, what does it matter?" exclaimed the young woman, leaving off her work, with an accent of weariness and fastidiousness. "All that won't change mine and Marco's fate."

"Christians don't believe in fate, Vittoria!" murmured Donna Arduina.

"Perhaps I'm a bad Christian as well," she replied, with a feeble smile; "but I know my fate and Marco's now, as if I were a gipsy, a sorceress, a witch."

"Vittoria!"

"Take no notice, mother, I was joking," concluded the daughter-in-law, lowering her eyes on her work.

But the mother-in-law did not wish to be silent; it seemed to her that the hour ought not to pass without a more intimate and intense explanation.

"Do you, then, know everything, Vittoria?" she asked slowly.

"How is one not to know it? Even living as a creature abandoned in a corner of a palace, as an insignificant

creature in a corner of a drawing-room, there is always somebody to tell you everything, mother," replied Vittoria bitterly and coldly.

"Some one has told you?"

"Some one? Several; many, in fact. My friends have hurried to let me know that Marco has taken a violent fancy for an actress. I know every particular, mother. The actress is a Milanese, has magnificent red hair, and is tall. She is called Gemma Dombrowska, a Russian name, not her own, but assumed from some great family over there."

The coldest bitterness was in Vittoria's voice, and she continued mechanically to knit her bodice.

"And what do you say, Vittoria? What are you going to do?"

"I? I am going to say and do nothing, mother!" she exclaimed harshly.

"Aren't you going to help yourself? defend yourself?"

"I can't help myself, and nothing can defend me;" and she turned her head away, perhaps so that the mother of her husband might read nothing there.

"But at least you love your husband?" the mother-in-law cried.

"I love him," proclaimed the young woman, with unexpected ardour in her accent. "I love him. It is he who doesn't love me. So you see all is useless."

"Why do you think he doesn't love you? How do you know? How are you convinced of it?"

"Mother, mother, you are convinced of it, you have always been convinced of it," replied the young woman with dignity.

Donna Arduina rose from her place, and stretched out a hand to touch Vittoria's, with a sad, consoling caress.

"Poor Vittoria!" she murmured.

And she thought that the young woman ought to fall in her arms and break into tears and sobs. No. The blonde's youthful mouth contracted like a flower which closes while the colours grow pale, but she did not move nor cry.

"Do you pity me, mother?" she asked strangely.

"Yes, dear, yes!"

"Like your son, then. It is a family habit," replied Vittoria mockingly.

"Vittoria! Vittoria!"

"Excuse me, mother. My horrible destiny is caused from this horrible thing, pity."

"What are you saying? What are you saying?"

"Nothing, mother mine; I'll say no more. I don't want to say anything more. Pardon me. I oughtn't to have spoken. You asked me; in obedience I spoke. Let me be quite silent."

"Oh daughter, daughter, what a difficult character is yours!" replied the elder lady, with a deep sigh.

"Difficult? Very bad, mother, a shocking character! I shall die, and no one will understand it."

"You must live; you must begin your life again, Vittoria, and try to lead my son. He must love you."

"He can't."

"He can't?"

"No. He can't love me."

"But why?"

"Because he loved *the other*."

"Can't one love two women, one after the other?"

"It seems not."

"Still he has always liked you."

"Yes, he has liked me; but not loved me."

"He has married you."

"Through tenderness and pity—not through love."

"He has continued to give you every proof of his affection."

"Affection, certainly; no love."

"What did you expect? What are you expecting?"

"An impossible thing, mother! To be loved with passion, with vehemence, like *the other*."

"Oh, my daughter, it is impossible."

"I have told you; it is impossible."

"And did you marry Marco with that desire?"

"With that desire. If not, I shouldn't have married him; if not, I shouldn't have forgiven his betrayal."

"You pardoned, then, conditionally? With selfish intent? With a selfish desire? Not as a Christian?"

"No, mother, not as a Christian. I pardoned him as a woman, as a woman in love; that is, imperfectly, badly."

"Then the sin is yours, Vittoria."

"Yes, it is mine. If I question my heart it seems I am right, if I question my conscience I am wrong and the sin is mine. Don't you see? I am childless. God has punished me; I shall never be a mother, never, never."

"What will you do, Vittoria? What do you want to do?"

"Nothing, mother. I have nothing to do on this earth, neither for myself nor others. I go on living here because suicide is a great sin. I shall go on living here, forgotten, in a corner as usual, like everybody who hasn't known how to do right in life. I am wrong, mother, I am wrong. That is why I don't complain, that is why I mustn't complain. Why did you make me speak? Forget all I have told you, and repeat it to nobody. Don't expose me again to the pity of anybody: your pity, mother, yes; but nobody else's."

She looked at her with such an expression of suffering, nobly born, with such desire of silence and respect for her suffering, that Donna Arduina was deeply moved.

"Mother, let me be forgotten in a corner. Promise me you will say nothing."

"I promise you, my daughter, I promise you; still I deeply sympathise with you," said Donna Arduina, with a big sigh.

Donna Vittoria rose, bent her golden head to kiss her hand, and disappeared silently, she disappeared like a soft shadow to be forgotten in a corner of the world, in a corner of the house, like a poor, soft, little shadow which has never been right, which can never, never be right—which must always be wrong till death and beyond.

### III

"CAN I come in, Marco?" said a dear and well-known voice at the door.

"Always, always, mamma bella," he cried vivaciously from his bed.

Donna Arduina entered, with slow and dignified tread, and approached the bed where her son was smoking a cigarette after his coffee. He threw the cigarette away at once to embrace her. Instinctively, with maternal care, she adjusted the pillow, and pulled the counterpane over a little. The son smiled as he let her do it. She looked at him, studied him, and found his appearance tired and run down. He leaned again on his pillow, as if still glad to repose. The mother sat by the bed quietly watching.

"You came home late yesterday evening?" she asked.

"A little late, it is true."

"I waited for you till midnight, like I used to, Marco mio."

"Fifteen years ago, madra mia: how old I am growing!"

"I want to preach you a sermon now as I used to. Do you remember? A sermon on your too jolly and disordered life."

"Oh, mother dear," he protested, with a veil of sadness in the accent.

"Suppose I were to preach you a sermon this morning?" she added, still tenderly.

"I don't deserve it, mamma; I don't deserve it."

"Marco, you are again leading a too disordered and jolly life."

"You are wrong. Few men in the world bore themselves more than I do."

"Where do you go, when you don't dine with us, Marco?"

"To some place where I can bore myself less than in Casa Fiore, madre bella. Not on your account, see. You know I adore you."

"Is it to fly from poor Vittoria?"

"Even you, mamma, say *poor* Vittoria! Even you are moved with compassion for her! And why aren't you moved with compassion for your son, for him whom you have placed in the world? Why don't you say, *poor* Marco? Don't you see that I am unhappy?" And his exclamations were half melancholy and ironical, while his face grew disturbed and sad.

"Alas, my son, what a cross for me to see all this, and to be able to do nothing! It seems that all are wrong and all are right. What am I to do, my God, what am I to do?"

"Pity your son. Love him more than ever; caress him as you used to four or five years ago; try to make him forget his domestic unhappiness."

"But why are you unhappy? Why is Vittoria unhappy? Is it through a misunderstanding; through a hundred misunderstandings? Is it not so?"

Marco shook his head, and, without replying, lit another cigarette.

"Marco, why have you resumed your bachelor room? Why do you sleep here?" And she threw a glance round the old room, where all around were large and small portraits of Maria Guasco, with fresh flowers in some vases before them.

"I sleep here because Vittoria wishes it," he said, with a sarcastic laugh.

"Vittoria?"

"Yes. Sometimes for one reason, sometimes for another; sometimes for a novena, sometimes because she is not well, sometimes because of my departure or my return from hunting. In fact it is she, mamma, who has given me liberty, so I have taken it, and I am naturally at present most contented with it."

"I am sure that she has suffered, and is suffering about this."

"Perhaps yes, perhaps no. At any rate she dissimulates perfectly, that is to say, mother, she lies; I can't go beyond appearances."

"How sad, Marco!"

"Mamma, I have always been used to truthful women. You are one of them. Vittoria is a hypocrite."

"You are unjust and cruel to her."

"Certainly. I recognise it. But she has done everything to make me so. If only you knew, mamma, what I was to her at the beginning! If only you knew! Suffering, weak and exhausted by an immense passion, I tried to conquer myself. I searched for strength, for gaiety, for tenderness to give them to Vittoria. Since it was said to me: *render this woman happy, do this work of repentance and beauty*, I have tried to obey, mamma; but everything has been useless. Vittoria has not understood me."

"Perhaps you have not understood her. She loved you ardently from the first moment of her engagement; she still loves you so."

"No, mamma, no. Either Vittoria does not love me or she does not know how to love."

"So young, so inexperienced, and so ignorant!"

"Mother, mother, Vittoria knew everything. All my violent and brutal betrayal has told her that my only and unique love romance has been with Maria Guasco; the only one, mamma. She dreamed of making another in matrimony, another romance of passion and madness, as if matrimony were not a union wise and tender, sweet and

profound, not passionate and frenetic."

"She deceived herself. She hoped for too much. She dared to hope too much. Don't punish her for that."

"It is she who has punished me for having wished to make her happy. All my affection has seemed little to her, all my tenderness has seemed mean to her. But you know, mamma, how she and she only has spurned me. You know that I have seen all my proofs of affection refused."

"O Dio mio!"

"It is so. From the moment that I could not offer her passion, she did not wish to know me. A silent drama, understand, a drama of matrimony developed between us, and I have had ever before me a face as pale and cold as marble; she is a soul closed, indifferent and scornful; she is a spirit that is inattentive and bored, and hers is an iciness which sometimes reaches the point of contempt."

"Oh, Marco, in spite of that she adored you and does adore you!"

"It may be, it may be; but she adores me badly. Nevertheless, believe me, this adoration is composed entirely of egoism, of *amour propre*, and jealousy."

"Even of jealousy?"

"Above all. I know it, I know this is so; Vittoria has lived, and lives, with the incubus of Maria Guasco on her soul and heart. And all this love of hers is the offended pride of a woman who would overcome her supposed rival; all her love is exalted *amour propre*, is a monstrous egoism."

"O Marco, Marco!"

"Mother, I am suffering, let me say it, let me unburden myself. To whom should I say it but to you? Who has placed me before this waxen doll, this poor little animal of a body with cold blood, this dissembling soul, all craftiness, all deceit, this heart full of a desire which it is impossible for it to realise, full of cold anger; in fact this creature without *abandon*, without loyalty and without fascination?"

"O Marco, my son!"

"Since you have come here this morning you must listen to me. I have, in short, bound my life to her, I have given my name to her and I would have given her all my existence, since they told me to give it to her. Mother, see what she has done with it! Among other things she is childless. We have no sons; we shall not have any; and this marriage is another of those immoral and indecent unions between two persons of opposite temperaments, of opposite character, hostile in fact to one another, made not to understand each other, made not to fuse, made to contradict each other, and at last to hate each other. I am perfectly positive Vittoria hates me."

"You are so unjust to her, my son."

"She does not hate me to-day; but she will to-morrow. For her I represent an immense disillusion of *amour propre*, a defeat of her egoism, a real sentimental rout. You will see, you will see how Vittoria will hate me."

"But what should this unfortunate creature have done to please you, to unite herself to you in spirit, to render to you the happiness you were giving to her?"

"Love me, mother!"

"Doesn't she love you?"

"To love me, mother, not for herself; to give all and ask nothing; to be happy that a man delivered from the fatality of an unlawful passion is in a haven of peace; to be serenity itself; to be, in short, the Christian wife, the ideal companion of our hearth whose scope is every soft desire of ours."

"Oh, what a gulf, my son, what a gulf!"

"Between me and Vittoria? Immense, immeasurable, it is impossible to bridge it, impossible to surmount it."

"What is to be done, what is to be done?"

"Nothing, mother dear. You can do nothing. Let Vittoria execrate me to-morrow; let her consider me as the cause of all her misfortune; let me be an object of repulsion to her. It is better so."

"But you already have a sweetheart, after two years of married life?"

"Who, I, a sweetheart? You are joking, mother?"

"But that woman, that actress."

"Who, Gemma? Oh, what a saint you are, my mother! We don't call those sweethearts. They are a slight distraction; a home where there is a different woman who greets you with constant good humour, who lets you play or joke or sleep as you please; who asks you nothing, who understands nothing, but who does not ask to be understood."

"How awful, Marco!"

"O Saint Arduina! O sainted mother mine!"

"Your wife knows of this relation: they have told her of it as being a great scandal."

"You too; and are you scandalised?"

"I? very much."

"If you like I will leave Gemma, mother dear."

"You don't love her, it is true?"

"If you were not an angel you would know that it is not a question of love. But if it annoys you so much I will leave Gemma."

"Do so, do so, my son."

"Nevertheless, I shall soon take another. And after her a third and a fourth."

"You never used to be so, sonny! You have never before said such things to me."

Her tone was so sorrowful, that it smote the son. He half raised himself in bed, exclaiming—

"It is true, it is true, mother! But there is nothing left for me to do but to become a dissolute."

"What horror!" and she hid her face in her hands.

"A horror, is it not? I cause you horror, my sainted mother, my angelic mother! See to what life has brought me. A great, powerful, and beautiful love has only lasted a short time with me, and has left my heart dead to every fresh

ardour. Mother, no one will take the place of Maria Guasco in my existence; she has been all, and that all has descended into the tomb. Afterwards I tried to attach myself to an idea, to a sentiment, to a loving duty, but the creature herself for whom I wished to live, for whom I wished to fight my life, spurned me and fled from me. What more have I to do? I have no love, I have no affection, I have no son, and I have no family risen from me. Nothing remains but to become a vicious and perverse person, to allow all my wicked instincts to pour from me; to give myself to women and play; to lose my fortune; to abase my name; to be a trivial pleasure-lover, and to cause you horror, my mother."

Desperately the mother took him in her arms, pressed him to herself and kissed him, as if to defend him against life itself.

"You are good, you are noble, you are loyal, and you will not do this."

"I used to be that!" cried the son desolately; "and I deserved the love of Maria Guasco; and I should have deserved that Vittoria Fiore knew how to love me and become happy with me and in my dedication. But all has been useless; I have been broken against this subtle, pallid, silent and cold shadow of a woman. If I want to live I must be perverse and dissolute."

"No, my son, no."

"There remains nothing else for me, mamma," he repeated desolately.

#### IV

"DRESS me quickly," said Maria to Chiara distractedly.

Chiara gave a glance towards the balcony, concealed by the white lace curtains, but said not a word. The dress for the races at Tor di Quinto was on the bed, a costume of bright cream voile, trimmed with a sort of silver lace, with a large belt of silver cloth, and a large black hat covered with a black feather held by an antique silver buckle, together with a very fine black veil, which surrounded it like a light cloud. Chiara accomplished the work of dressing her beloved mistress rapidly, without talking. Maria seemed wrapped in her thoughts, and mechanically performed the successive acts by which a lady dresses herself.

"Give me the turquoise necklace," she said, still distractedly.

Chiara went to the cupboard where the jewels were kept, and took a bizarre necklace, in peculiar twisted gold, embellished with large turquoises.

Maria fixed it, still mechanically. Then her eyes, wandering indifferently and uncertainly, stopped at the balcony. She opened them wide, as if at an unexpected spectacle, and listened.

"It is raining in torrents," she said to Chiara, surprised and gloomily.

"Dreadfully," replied Chiara, with a sigh.

Maria's hands, which were fixing her hat, fell back as if tired.

"Then why have I dressed?" she asked, as if to herself, with an accent of weariness and annoyance.

"Perhaps it will stop raining in a little while," said the faithful creature timidly.

"You'll see, it will rain the whole day!" exclaimed Maria, discouraged.

She threw herself into a chair as if a sudden fatigue had mastered her. Her face had the almost infantile sadness of disillusion, and with the sadness flowed the sense of a tedium ever greater, while the pattering rain beat upon the pavement, the marble balcony, and the windows. Chiara retired discreetly at a call from another part, and in a few minutes reappeared.

"The Principessa della Marsiliana is at the telephone, and is asking for Your Excellency."

With a great effort Maria arose and crossed the room to her husband's study. The study was deserted and gloomy with its almost black carved furniture and the dark maroon, green, and red leather of its chairs and sofas. The telephone was there in a corner.

"Well, Carolina, well?"

"No one is going to the races; they have been postponed. What a pity!" exclaimed the gentle, and always a little nervous, voice of the Principessa della Marsiliana.

"Well, then, what are you going to do?"

"Since it is raining, later on I shall get rid of a bothering duty. I am going to the Sacro Cuore at Trinità dei Monti, to visit Guiglia Strozzi's daughter, who is ill. Will you come?"

"No, thank you."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Nothing; the usual—I shall bore myself. Au revoir, Carolina."

"Au revoir. What a pity! I had a beautiful dress."

"So had I. It doesn't matter. Au revoir."

The telephone was rung off.

Maria remained standing in the middle of the study, looking around so uncertainly and fleetingly that it seemed as if she was almost seeking help. Her eyes directed themselves to the chair which Emilio used behind the writing-table, and she almost seemed to be looking for some one. But suddenly she silently recrossed all the rooms she had first crossed, and re-entered her room, where Chiara was replacing all the things in the cupboard.

"Would you like to take off your dress, Excellency?" she asked.

"No, it tires me," replied Maria exhaustedly.

She only took off her hat, drawing out the two pearl-headed pins, and consigning them to Chiara. The rain poured incessantly and noisily.

Once more Maria made a gesture of indecision, looked at her watch, and shook her head discouragedly.

It was only two o'clock in the afternoon. On that Sunday, with the rain falling for nearly an hour, not a sound was to be heard in the streets; not a step or a shadow came to break the silence or populate the desert of Casa

Guasco.

"Do you want me any more?" asked Chiara.

Maria hesitated for a minute, almost as if she wished to ask that human being, that living creature, who was her servant, to remain with her to keep her company; but she felt ashamed of her moral wretchedness, and a motive of pride counselled her to immerse herself in solitude.

"No, you may go," she replied.

Quite alone she passed into her boudoir, which was very light, papered and furnished in an almost white stuff, with bunches of pale roses and soft green grasses, with frames of pale gold, and a carpet of light yellow, with cushions of a very pale colour. With its exquisite taste toned to the surroundings, in that sunless afternoon and incessant rain, the room seemed like that of a person dead for a long time, like a room uninhabited for a long time. Maria sat down in her usual arm-chair, placed her feet on a buffet, and leaned her head against a cushion, letting her arms fall and closing her eyes to allow all the mortal tedium of her soul to expand, to allow all the despair of her heart to cross the lines of her beautiful and noble countenance.

Some time passed thus. Occasionally the rain diminished, becoming a dull noise like steps in the distance, or increased with a pattering as if a fresh whirlwind were spreading over the streets and houses. Maria in her absolute silence started twice and raised her head, stretching her hand towards a table. She took up a book bound in soft chamois leather, with strange designs, and with troubled and indifferent eyes glanced through several pages; even the noise of turning leaves in the silence of Casa Guasco caused her to tremble. The poet whose verses she was slowly reading was of all the most sorrowful, and amidst the gloomy sadness of the sky and earth, of that house and her soul, Maria felt the ardent and powerful words with which Sapho's soul takes leave of life spreading in her spirit. Her head sank on her breast, the book remained open on her knees, and she thought bitterly of the grand lover of Mitylene, to whom everything was unprofitable from birth till death, save her lofty genius, which love had not conceded her; she thought of the most sorrowful poet of all, whose bitterness was joined in that hour to her own bitterness, of Giacomo Leopardi, to whom genius had not even conceded love. An obscure anguish closed her heart in the profound silence and solitude, in that mortally long hour of boredom and sadness. Her hand almost involuntarily touched a bell concealed behind her chair. After a moment a servant appeared.

"Has the post been?"

"Yes; there is nothing for Your Excellency."

"Good; you may go."

She was expecting no letters from any one. But every now and then in her blackest crises of moral abandonment, of ineptitude to live or act, she began to desire an unknown letter written by an unknown hand, she found herself desiring an unexpected telegram, where might be contained from destiny the secret which should help her to do something with her useless life and useless days. While the time passed with desperate slowness, while the soft persistent rain continued to fall on Rome and envelope it in a grey veil of mist and water, she thought that there were not so many mysterious letters written by far-off mysterious persons containing powerful aid, that there are no unthought-of telegrams where a word tells the way for those who have consumed the forces of passion and goodness.

With a second familiar gesture she took a large work-bag of heavy material from a basket, lined with white silk and covered with pretty little bows of ribbon, and took out an embroidery of an old-fashioned kind, with slightly archaic colours, of a charming and rather childish design. Her beautiful hands sought among the tangled skeins of silk the threads suitable for the continuation of the work, and began to pierce the piece of silk with calm and regular movement. Two or three times her hands, as if oppressed with fatigue, dawdled over the embroidery, and she placed the piece of silk on her knees; two or three times a sigh full of annoyance and impatience escaped her breast, and her head fell back on the little cushion in silent exasperation; two or three times she shot a glance round her of anger and hate, yes, of hate, but mechanically her hands resumed the embroidery. The afternoon light began to be obscured, the corners of the room were in shadow; she had to stoop over her work to continue the embroidery.

Again a step approached.

It was the servant with the teapot and kettle. Without speaking he drew a table near Maria's chair and placed everything there, and lit the spirit stove beneath the little kettle. Then, as it was getting darker, he stretched his hand towards a large pedestal lamp to turn on the electric light.

"No," said Maria.

The sound of her voice after such an intense and mortal silence surprised her. The man left. The little flame alone seemed to live and breathe, a bluish little spirit flame, which licked the bottom of the silver kettle. Maria, with her hands stretched along her person, kept her eyes fixed on that poor form of life, a little passing light which was consuming itself, a little form of passing heat which was evaporating. The methodical work of preparing tea she accomplished in half obscurity, bending over the table, while the slight noise of the rain, with which the afternoon was lapsing into evening, still reached her ears. While the warm beverage smoked in the little china cup, she smiled silently with immense bitterness; for the servant had placed two cups on the tray.

She threw herself back in her chair, crossed her two hands behind her neck, stretched out her feet, closed her eyes and tried hard to sleep, at least to sleep and forget her useless life; her useless days, her hours of empty solitude, of savage impatience waiting for the person she did not know who would never come, waiting for a deed she was ignorant of which would never happen, for something strange, far off, unknown, but which should be living and let her live: to sleep, at any rate, since all this was no more possible when one has lived and loved too much; to sleep since no one comes again from afar, since nothing happens again when the heights of good and evil have been touched, and one has descended into the obscure valley of indifference and aridity.

A sudden light and a harsh voice aroused her at once from her torpor. Some one had suddenly turned on the electric light, and was before her talking harshly. It was her husband.

"Are you here, Maria?"

"I am here, as you see," she replied dully.

He had returned suddenly as usual, entering the house and crossing all the rooms to reach her, as if he always wanted to surprise a visit, a secret colloquy, or the furtive scribbling of a letter. He was still in hunting costume, with his maroon velvet coat spattered and discoloured, a big waistcoat with full pockets with bone buttons, and the



breeches stuffed in a pair of dirty riding-boots. Standing there, his face was more than ever gloomy and distrustful, on his temple his hair was completely white, which threw into stronger relief the olive darkness of his face.

"What are you doing here, Maria?"

"Nothing," she replied dully.

"Were you sleeping?"

"I have dozed."

"Didn't you go to the races with Carolina della Marsiliana?"

"No; it rained. The races have been postponed."

"I know. I was told on entering Rome."

"Ah! and why did you ask me?"

"Just," he replied in a subdued voice, "to learn it from you."

"Ah!" she exclaimed evenly.

The soft white hand played nervously with the gilt arm of her chair, but the woman's closed lips uttered no protest.

"Have you had tea?" He resumed his questions in the same cold, suspicious tone.

"Yes. Would you like a cup? I can warm it up."

"No, thanks. You know I hate tea. Did you have it alone?"

"Alone!" she replied, with a fleeting smile of bitterness.

"Hasn't one of your usual courtiers been?"

"I haven't many of them, and even those few have abandoned me," she murmured, with an accent of weariness.

"Still you were expecting some one?"

"I?" she said; "I? No. I never expect any one."

There was something grievous in her words which the man, blind, deaf, and insensible to other impressions which were not his own, did not notice.

"I see two cups here," he pointed, raising his eyebrows.

"One is clean!" she exclaimed, with a burst of laughter meant to be jolly, but really gloomy.

"Yes; but the servant has brought two. He must know something, that fellow; when I am hunting he brings two cups; he is bound to know something."

"Ask him, Emilio, ask him," she said gleefully, with an increasingly mischievous laugh.

"I shall do it, don't doubt," he said harshly; "but all the servants I pay here adore you far too much. Hence they lie; they lie, the whole lot of them, and I shall never know all the truth."

"Oh, poor Emilio!" she exclaimed, pitying him, but without any tenderness.

Emilio Guasco's eyes blazed with anger; for an instant his face became almost livid. He advanced with his heavy, dirty boots on the delicate carpet, and in a vibrant and subdued accent, restraining himself with an effort, but placing in every word, pronounced almost through his closed teeth, all the hidden tempest of his tortured spirit—

"Tell me why you have compassion on me? Why ever you pity me? Do I seem very ridiculous to you? You laugh at me in your mind, it is true, and in speaking to me pretend to have pity on me."

Maria was silent, with an air of glacial detachment on her face, nor did she deign to reply to him. He sat on a chair near her, lowered his head, so that speaking very softly she could hear him well, and continued—

"It is you, you know it, who are making me ill or mad: you have no right to laugh at me. I have no right to accept your compassion. You are my enemy. I am sick of you, of your presence, of your contact. You have been my scourge. I have always thought everything of being calm and content, if not happy. You appeared in my life, and my peace has been destroyed and every joy."

She leant her head against the back of the chair, on the little cushion in the form of a heart, kept her lips closed, and the eyes slightly contracted, her hands on the arms of the chair, like a person making a great effort internally to restrain herself, not to reply, not to rebel, to listen to the last word of what was thrown in her face.

"Yes, it is so," he added fiercely, but subduedly; "no evil, no disaster, could devastate my existence worse than you. It would have been better if I had died on the day I knew you"—and he abandoned himself on the seat heavily, so that it cracked beneath his weight.

She opened her eyes, and looked at the disturbed brownish face without any emotion, and that great body on its chair, and asked quietly—

"Am I then, Emilio, as you say, an enemy of yours?"

He started, darted a contemptuous glance at her, and replied—

"Yes, an enemy of mine."

"Does my presence exasperate you?"

"It exasperates me; that's the word!"

"My contact causes you horror?"

"You know it," he replied, looking peculiarly at her.

Maria understood in a flash to what Emilio was alluding. She grew pale, and then blushed violently, her eyes for a minute filled with tears which offended pride placed there, and which pride's flame absorbed at once. The injurious word, the ferocious word of outrage, which was about to be disgorged from her lips, the mortal horror she had had of her husband on the night of suffering and pain, in which he had wished to possess her only by a cruel instinct of possession, a ferocious instinct of jealousy, and after fleeing from her like a madman she had nearly died of shame and sorrow; the word which would have expressed her womanly horror she had the extreme pity not to pronounce. Then he understood by that face where her lively expressions were depicted, by the eyes which had nearly poured out the rare and scorching tears which her wounded pride snatched from her soul, by the quick breathing in which she seemed to have repressed her cry of rebellion, he understood that in evoking that recollection he had made the disagreement between them deeper and more invincible.

"I loved you—do love you perhaps," he murmured, almost speaking to himself. "I believe it is so. But your contact causes me horror."

Every time he repeated the phrase fatal in its truth, insulting in its brutality, he made a material movement of repulsion. Every time, too, this expression made the woman's face colour in an impetus of anger. Then mastering herself with the singular courage of a strong soul, she answered him with a proud calmness.

"Don't delude yourself, dear Emilio, that you love me; love is quite another thing. I know that. You do me the honour, like any other man, even now, of desiring me; that is all. That would be very flattering to me if this desire of yours—in fact it would be very simple, very common and quite trivial—were not overcome by the horror with which my desired and repugnant person inspires you. Would you tell me why, if you don't mind—out of simple curiosity, my friend, nothing else—I cause you horror: now why?"

Gradually Maria's tone became more disingenuous and frivolous, as if it were a question of a fashionable conversation of very relative interest, yes, although she was hearing words which tortured still more her throbbing soul.

Emilio raised his eyebrows. He knew quite well how much more intelligent, finer, and braver Maria's character was than his, and how he had almost struck her by reminding her of that night of violence and sorrow, after which they had been divided like two enemies. Now he felt he was in her power, which was loftier for defence, and better adapted to conquer her own and another's soul. Not attempting to wrestle with her, as with truth itself in all its harshness and vulgarity, he replied in a low voice without looking at her—

"You cause me horror, because I can't forget."

"What, please?" she asked, toying with her emerald rings.

"Your betrayal; your flight with Marco Fiore; your three years' life with him. It is impossible to forget all this, and this recollection scorches me like a red-hot iron."

"Still," she said, with some disingenuousness, and the same frivolity in which she had kept up the conversation politely from the beginning, "still you desired my return to your house."

"I confess it; I ardently desired it."

"You condescended, then, to pardon an unfaithful wife," she concluded, with a gracious and slight smile, a conventional smile to conclude a worldly discourse.

"It is true, I pardoned you," he replied, still more gloomily: "but I repented of it at once; I repent it every day."

"You think you made a mistake?"

"Much more than a mistake; far more than a mistake!" he exclaimed, raising his voice suddenly.

She motioned to him courteously with her hand, just as if she were asking him to talk more quietly in a room where music was being played.

"I committed a cowardice in pardoning you. I was a fool and a coward. Every one laughs at me; every one. You yourself will laugh at me. There couldn't be a bigger fool or coward than I was on that evening."

Again she grew pale and blushed, as if the blood were moving in waves from the heart to the brain, from the brain to the heart.

"Do you curse that evening?" she asked slowly.

"I curse it every instant, and despise myself for my mistake, for my ineptitude, for my weakness. Every one, every one is laughing at me, who have been dishonoured, who have enjoyed the dishonour, and retaken, as if it were nothing, the woman who inflicted this incancellable dishonour on me."

"Other men have pardoned like you," she said slowly, and somewhat absorbed.

"Others! others!" he exclaimed, suddenly touched on the bleeding wound of his heart, "men different, quite different to me. Perhaps they were perfect cynics: I am not cynic enough, and I suffer for my dishonour, as if it were yesterday, as it were to-day. Or perhaps they were simple people. I also am not simple enough; I understand, I know, I measure, and I remember everything. Perhaps they had children, these men, and it was necessary at any cost to recompose the family: we have no children. Or perhaps grave questions of interest came in between; money, you know, money! *That* had nothing to do with that stupid cowardly pardon I gave you that evening; nothing. Certainly, certainly, many men have pardoned their faithless wives, will pardon, and are pardoning them for so many reasons and causes; but I should like to question them one by one, as man to man, alone and with open heart, and you would see the reply would always be the same from however many of them."

"That is——" she said quietly.

"That it is cowardice to pardon this offence; that one ought not to pardon betrayal in a mistress, but one *never* pardons betrayal in a wife."

"Is that your idea?"

"It is mine."

"When you pardoned you didn't think so. Do you believe that now you can again change your opinion?" she asked, as she strove in vain to hide a little anxiety in the question.

"It is useless," he replied desolately, "I know myself. I am a straightforward man. I can't change the idea which for two years has caused me to suffer as I have never suffered. I am too straightforward, and for this I pity you. I can't change; when one is a man like I am one can't pardon dishonour and absolve betrayal."

She lowered her eyes and said no more, though she seemed very calm and indifferent.

"Well?" he said, questioning her anxiously.

"Well?" she questioned in turn.

"Haven't you anything to say to me?"

"I? No," she replied simply.

"What is your idea, then?"

"I have none," she added, with the same simplicity.

"None? Nothing? Does nothing of this matter to you?" he cried, surprised.

"It would matter very much to me, if I could bring you a remedy. Your sufferings once moved me very much, you

know, and I believed I could cure them. I have not succeeded. You haven't wished to know me as a consoler. My mission here has failed completely. Instead of doing you good I am doing you harm. And in exchange you load me every time you can with expressions of your loathing and contempt. What is to be done? There is no remedy."

"If you had liked, there could have been," he replied in a low voice.

"Exactly, exactly!" she exclaimed, smiling ironically. "I ought to have had a great passion for you. That was necessary for your jealousy and *amour propre*—a great passion;" and the smile became more ironical.

"And you did not succeed? Is it not so?" he cried, trembling.

"I haven't even tried," she replied, seriously and nobly. "I never returned for that, I never promised it; I couldn't give it."

"Then it would have been better not to have returned;" and the man's fury increased.

"It would have been better," replied the woman still more austere.

"It would be better, then, for you to go away," cried the man, blind with fury.

"It would certainly be better," she said austere and finally.

She rose from her seat, crossed the room, and disappeared.

## V

THE long, strident whistle of the large white steamer, the *Vierwaldstettersee*, had already sounded twice in a vain appeal. The little landing-place at Fluelen was deserted. Every day, from the beginning of July to the middle of September, a varied crowd had arrived from Italy by the trains which cross the wonderful Gothard route, and from Switzerland especially, for familiar excursions to Tellsplatz and Altdorf, to take their places on the boat to cross to the winding flowery shores of the lake of the four cantons, to the large and small summer stations, and to the little villages gleaming white among the trees with their red roofs. But now no longer. It is October; the last travellers one by one have returned to their homes, and Fluelen is deserted. The white steamer, too, has been deserted for a long time, and performs a journey of obligation on a deserted lake among deserted shores.

However, a third call sounded longer, more stridulous and melancholy. A single traveller left the Hôtel de la Poste, directly opposite the landing-place, and approached the gangway with leisurely steps. He was still a young man, tall and slender, dressed not only neatly but fashionably. Beneath his hat, which was lowered over his eyes, could be noticed a handsome though slightly delicate physiognomy, a face a little too pale, with very black hair and moustaches, lips still fresh and vivid, and extremely soft eyes of a fascinating softness; but in general the features resulted in firmness and perhaps in obstinacy.

An expression of indifference, and sometimes even of intense boredom, passed over his face. A few paces behind, the hall-porter followed, carrying two large portmanteaux and a travelling-bag. The traveller crossed the gangway alone, and walked to the stern of the steamer, where, wet with moisture, the flag of the Swiss Confederation was hanging. He sat alone on one of the side benches, and slowly lit a cigarette, while the porter deposited the luggage a little way off.

"How long to Lucerne?" he asked, tipping the man.

"Two and a half hours," replied the man, thanking him.

The steamer had now left the bank, the pilot was at his wheel with eyes fixed on the horizon, trying to penetrate the mist which was spreading and growing thicker. The pilot was a robust little man, firmly planted on two short legs encased in black oilskins, which seemed saturated with humidity. His face was broad and rugged beneath a black cap with a peak. For a little time he was the traveller's only companion, who still sat on the bench, lighting one cigarette after the other, looking at the country now wrapped in clouds, now manifest through the broken edges of the mist with black and rugged rocks, with great stretches of snow in the clefts of the mountains, and in the far-off whiteness of the glaciers. But the glance which he threw around from time to time gave no sign either of curiosity or interest, the signs to be discovered were those of a vague weariness, of a persistent boredom, above all of a resigned and calm indifference.

The *Vierwaldstettersee* threaded its way through the grey waters. The white foam broke against the paddle-box, and the wake stretched behind through the mist which seemed to be following the white vessel. Not a human voice sounded on deck beneath the two large awnings from bow to stern. The first station came to view with its little houses on the bank among trees already bare, among little gardens where the flowers were dead, and where the chairs were bathed in moisture. The houses had their doors and windows closed, affording a glimpse, behind the tiny panes, of some little plant drawn in-doors by a provident hand, so as not to let it perish like the other plants; but not a person, not a voice, issued from the houses and gardens of the little square before the landing-place. The Crown Hotel, a little in the background, was hermetically closed. With a precise and methodical movement a man from the steamer threw a rope to another man on land, who had suddenly appeared, and bound it to a large wooden pile. The steamer stopped for some minutes, while the whistle sounded stridulously and in vain. The two men exchanged almost empty bags containing the mail. After having whistled, the *Vierwaldstettersee* started again amidst the grey mist, quite covered with moisture on its outerwork, brasses, sails and ropes, and dripping moisture from all sides. Every quarter of an hour or twenty minutes the halts were repeated, with the whistling, the throwing of the rope, and the exchange of mail bags, without ever a traveller coming on board. Gradually the solitary traveller had sunk at his place, ceasing from smoking, his gloved hands buried in the pockets of his ulster, his head fallen on his breast, and he himself, like the sky, the landscape, like the lake, and the steamer, seemed wrapped in the greyish mist, now of opaque silver, now transparent.

When half the voyage was over the steamer whistled twice and much longer on nearing a station, and another man in uniform appeared on deck from below, as well as a waiter, both, like everything else, enveloped in moisture. The traveller seemed to be dozing, since he never turned his head on seeing the deck populated with these two persons. The station was Vitznau, that village so crowded and so brilliant and pleasant in summer. It is the village whence the Rhigi is climbed, and is well known to every tourist. Even Vitznau, with its group of denuded trees on its gloomy bank, its two closed hotels, and its solitary funicular station, did not seem different to the other stations touched at. Only while the man threw the rope from the deck, and the other man of that place mechanically tied it, a

woman appeared on the landing-place coming from the little funicular station. She was tall and elegant, in spite of the long travelling-cloak which completely covered and enveloped her. With a quiet step she crossed the gangway, climbed the few steps, presented her ticket to the man in uniform, and, walking on deck, sat down on the bench opposite to the other traveller. The man in uniform, while the steamer was drawing away from Vitznau on its course to Lucerne, approached her and asked her something, which she refused with a nod of her head, and after a minute the waiter came up with a question, and she answered him in the same way. Both the man in uniform and the waiter disappeared below.

It was rather difficult to discover the new traveller's face through her veil, and for some time she kept her head towards the lake, gazing at it. Then she turned towards the steamer. Her glance wandered round and fixed itself on the traveller opposite so intensely, that he seemed to wake from his dream and shake himself from his torpor. He looked at the new traveller, looked at her much, and looked at her long. They were quite alone on the steamer, which was sailing like a phantom ship upon a lake of dreams and sadness, amidst the incomparably mournful clouds. The man got up and crossed the deck decidedly. He bowed deeply, remaining uncovered before her.

"Are you alone, Maria?"

"Alone, Marco; and are you alone?"

"Most alone."

Their voices were calm, but so tired.

"May I sit beside you, Maria?" he asked, almost supplicatingly.

"Yes, do," she replied, with a nod.

He placed himself beside her. Lightly and gently he took her gloved hand and pressed it between his for a minute, placing it to his lips. She bent her face just for a minute. The boat went on; the pilot fixed his eyes still more sharply on the mist, because it was getting late and the grey of sky and lake was becoming darker and even threatening.

"I didn't know that you were travelling in these parts," he said, trying to discover her face through her veil.

"Nor I that you were, Marco," she murmured.

Each looked at the other at the same moment, as if they were about to say the same word to express the same idea thought by both, which each left unpronounced.

"Have you been travelling for some time, Maria?" he asked, after a few minutes' silence.

"For more than three months, Marco," she replied wearily.

"Always alone?"

"Always."

"And where have you been, Maria, always alone? Tell me everything, please."

Marco questioned her with penetrating sweetness, in which, however, weariness was mixed.

"I have been everywhere," she replied, and he seemed to notice a tremor in her voice, "everywhere. One can go to a good many places in three months."

"That's true," he added; "I started before you from Rome, a couple of months before."

"I know, Marco. I was told so. Have you always been alone on your journey?"

"Like you, always."

"Have you no regret for those you have left behind?" she asked in a still sadder accent.

"I have regret," he confessed, "for one person only, Maria."

"For one only?"

"Always for the same person, for her of former days, for her of always—for my mother," and a rush of tenderness and sorrow pulsated in the words.

She placed her hand on his arm quickly for a moment without speaking, to calm him.

"Still I have left. I am far away, and I don't want to return!" he exclaimed impetuously.

"Don't you wish to return? Don't you wish to?" and the accent had suddenly become spasmodical.

"I don't wish to," he rejoined gloomily, with decision.

She shook her head sorrowfully, and looked ahead among the fleeting clouds which were rising from the still waters, as if asking the secret of the riddle from those waves of vapour which were closing in on the horizon. The prow of the *Vierwaldstettersee* was directed to the last station, towards a little place on the bank, where an occasional tree was still in foliage, where among woods and meadows the white houses, with their red roofs and little windows full of flowers, did not seem so deserted and dead as the others. Two children, dressed in thick woollen as a protection against the Swiss autumn, were playing outside the inn.

"Maria, Weggis," said Marco, almost in her ear.

"Yes, Weggis," she replied quietly.

Slowly she raised her white gauze veil over the rim of her hat, showing her graceful, melancholy face, enchanting in every line, from the thoughtful, proud, and yet sweet eyes, to the expressively sorrowful and fresh mouth; showing the face which love had exalted to an invincible beauty, which love had deserted, leaving there all the serene sadness of things long dead, and all the proud melancholy of a brief, too brief, passion. Marco looked at the face without its veil, and she looked at him with her expression of calm sadness, finding in him singularly the same expression—a death in life, a love dead.

"Weggis," he murmured, with melancholy, while the boat drew further away towards Lucerne.

"Weggis," she murmured, with ever greater melancholy.

The image of the little flower-laden spot, where they had lodged modestly one very hot summer in passionate solitude, seemed far away amidst the autumn mists. It grew distant, and disappeared among the things of the past, of time, and of space, like their love had vanished. The gloaming was already descending to render the clouds browner and closer; already a colder and more penetrating breath of air struck the two travellers and caused them to shudder. A line of lights, lit for the approaching evening, stretched itself in the background, indicating the quay-side of Lucerne, and in the twilight the massive and bizarre buildings of hotels and villas grew whiter. Side by side

the two travellers looked at the lights, and mechanically rose from their place to leave the *Vierwaldstettersee*, which had already reached the pier. The conductor of the omnibus of the Hôtel National took Marco's luggage, and after an exchange of words in a low voice threw it on to the omnibus and drove off with it. The two travellers remained on a bench, bathed in moisture, silently seized by all that was in their souls. They were undecided and rather confused. At last Maria exclaimed, making an attempt to get away, "Good-night, Marco."

"Where are you going?" he asked sadly and anxiously.

"Up there;" and she pointed to a little hill with her finger.

"Where then?"

"To Sonnenberg; I have been there for two weeks," she added.

"Won't you stay a little with me?" he begged anxiously.

"O Marco, don't ask that!" she exclaimed, turning her head.

"Maria, Maria, remain a little," he said in his tender voice. "What does a little time matter to you, Maria? What does it matter?"

She recognised that voice of a former time, the voice of moments of desolation, the voice which formerly asked succour when his soul had need of comfort; but it was not the voice of love but of sorrow.

"I am so wretched, and you mustn't leave me this evening."

She consented with a nod. Together in the evening's shade, through the cold dampness which arose from the water, through the roads where no passer-by made his appearance; over the bridge, dripping in moisture, under whose arches the doves were sleeping; on the promenade, no longer shaded by the luxuriant foliage of the trees; among the lights distorted by the mist, they went towards the large hotel, which also seemed abandoned for some time with its hundred closed windows, with its flowerless gardens, with its iron seats on which no one seemed to have sat for years. The large hall was lit by a single electric lamp. Maria remained standing, looking through the windows vaguely without seeing anything, while Marco was discussing with the secretary. In that brief moment the woman saw Marco again as he used to be, when for months together they proceeded on their pilgrimage of love, and she marvelled that, ever since they had met on the deck of the boat, he had been able to accomplish the same acts; she marvelled that in all their actions they had been as formerly while their souls were so changed.

"Come, Maria," Marco said, approaching her.

How often she had heard that invitation! She smiled strangely as she followed him, while they went up in the lift and entered a sitting-room, which was immediately illuminated. The waiter silently opened a door on the right and a door on the left, while they appeared not to notice.

"You would like some tea, wouldn't you, Maria? it is so cold," Marco asked in the gentle insinuating voice she recognised in all its modulations.

Maria smiled in consent. She drew a chair to the table and sat down. She untied her veil and drew out the pins from her hat, undid the hooks of her travelling-cloak and appeared in a close-fitting dress of pale mauve, with the usual string of pearls at the neck, which she never left off. Marco followed her with his eyes, and recognised again in Maria the woman he had so often seen make those quiet harmonious gestures. However, he felt that only the movements and the words were the same, but not the ideas and sentiments. But he expressed no surprise at it.

"Give me a cup of tea, dear Maria," he said, speaking softly. She took off her gloves, poured out the tea and gave him a cup with a smile.

"Where is Sonnenberg, Maria?" he said.

"Over there, Marco, on the hill."

"How does one get there?"

"It is a few minutes by the funicular."

"It must be rather a sad place, Maria?"

"Yes, it is a little sad," she murmured, raising her hair with her fingers.

"Any people there?"

"Oh, no; four or five persons besides myself."

"Do you bore yourself there, Maria?"

"A little, as everywhere."

"Are you going to stop there?"

"Yes, I think I shall stop there."

"How long?"

"I don't know; I know nothing, Marco," she said, with a slightly pained expression.

"When will you return to Rome?" he asked, with a greater anxiety than he wished to show.

"I don't know, I don't know at all," she replied monotonously.

"Still, still ... you have somebody there."

"*Somebody*," she repeated, underlining the word, "prefers my absence to my presence."

"Really; is it really so?" Marco exclaimed.

"Yes," she replied, with an expansive gesture of her hands.

"Have you left, Maria?"

"I have left. After having commented bitterly and brutally on my departure, *somebody* let me go free and alone without asking my itinerary, without asking me when I was returning. It is true he was tormented by my flight, but relieved that I had left alone. He was tortured, I believe, by the idea of not seeing me, of not being able to injure me, of not being able to throw my past in my face, but in fact content that I was far away."

"And you, Maria?"

"I?" she exclaimed harshly; "I? Probably I shall never return again. Why should I return? I have nothing to do there for the good of any one. I can only do evil there to others and myself. Certainly, Marco, I shall never return—never."

"Emilio will summon you; he will want you," he said, with agitation.

"No," she declared harshly, "he has driven me out."

"Driven you out, Maria?"

"Not once, but many times, in moments of violence and coldness he said it would have been better if I had never returned. Certainly, certainly, Marco, I shall never return there. I shall go and live alone in a remote corner of the earth, and I shall die there."

She spoke with vehemence and harshness, but still subduedly; he, too, spoke to her in the same subdued way. Their faces were pale and strained. An immense silence reigned in the deserted summer town and the equally deserted huge hotel. The flames flickered in the grate and the logs crackled.

"Are you so unhappy, Maria?" he said, taking her hand tenderly.

"So unhappy, really so unhappy. I dare not kill myself; and why should I? I should be ridiculous and grotesque. I am ashamed to kill myself. I have nothing to do with my life, really nothing."

"You were a magnificent lover, Maria!" he exclaimed, with infinite regret.

"A soul of love like you, Marco, a heart of love," she replied, with the same regret.

"We should have died when our love was over, Maria," Marco said.

"That is true; we ought to have died then. We missed a beautiful death, Marco," replied Maria gloomily.

"Now it is too late to die, too late."

"It is too late."

They were silent, with all the weight of their cold, arid, useless lives, which was weighing down their souls, with all the enormous weight of a dead love, dead after having done all the good which had vanished with it, dead after all the evil which was still living.

"Are you going to stop at Lucerne?" asked Maria at last dreamily.

"A day or two; no more," he replied, as if awakened from a dream.

"Where shall you go?"

"To far-off countries. To Holland, and Denmark, always to the countries furthest off."

"Why don't you stay in Rome?" she asked.

"Not to debase myself under your eyes, Maria," he replied seriously. "There is nothing left but vice for me, and I am ashamed to defile that which you have loved."

"Your wife, Vittoria. What of her?"

"She is with my mother."

"Surely she suffers by your absence?"

"Possibly; less, however, than she does by my presence."

"Why did she suffer?"

"I suppose she suffered; but she has never told me she did, she never showed me, and I have never seen her tears. She always repulsed any consolation of mine for this supposed suffering of hers."

"Poor Vittoria," murmured Maria.

"She certainly deserves pity," replied Marco coldly; "but she repulses it."

"Still she deserved happiness."

"Certainly; but she repulsed happiness, because she is not capable of being happy."

"Why did you fly from her?"

"So as not to hate her, Maria; so as not to curse my marriage day as that of my slavery."

"Are you sure that you have done all your duty as a man, as a friend, as a companion to Vittoria?"

"I am sure of it. I have done beyond my duty as a man, a companion, and a friend. But she didn't want that, she demanded that I should become her lover."

"And couldn't you?"

"No, Maria," he said seriously, "you know very well, you ought to know very well, that I couldn't."

"When shall you return to Rome?"

"I shall never re-enter Rome."

"Are you in exile, then?"

"It is exile without any time limit."

"And your mother?"

"I shall see her at Spello where Vittoria does not go, and she will come to Florence. It is very sad, but there it is."

"And you?"

"If I were poor I should set to work to do something with my faculties and time. Unfortunately I am not even poor. A dissolute life, since I have loved you, fills me with horror."

"We are two miseries, Marco," she concluded gloomily; "far away in Rome there are two others more miserable than we are, and neither you nor I can do anything for them."

"Neither you nor I can do anything for them," he replied, like a dull echo.

"No one can do anything for any one," said Maria desperately.

All that was colossal and indestructible in the fatality of existence, in its mysterious and rigorous laws, weighed upon them. In their youth, in their strength and beauty they felt lost and blind, unable to die and unable to live, groping in the shadows, their breasts full of sighs, and their ears closed to the cries of the two who were suffering alone and abandoned in Rome. They felt themselves incapable of being comforted and giving comfort, and they felt as well that their burning tears were useless, just as the tears of the two in Rome were as equally useless and unconsolable.

The woman rose pale and upright.

"I am going, Marco," she said.

"Can't I accompany you, Maria?" he begged desolately.

"No, remain here. Let me go."

"Shan't I see you to-morrow?"

"Why do you wish to see me?" she asked in a tremulous accent.

"To see the face of a friend, to hear the voice of a friend, not to feel myself so lonely and lost, to-morrow more than ever."

"O Marco, wouldn't it be better for us not to see each other to-morrow?" she asked, trembling still more.

"No, Maria, no. You need to see me, you are so lonely and lost. I will look for you to-morrow; and do you promise not to fly from me?"

A trembling seized her, which made her almost hesitate.

"Maria, promise that you won't fly from me, only then will I let you go?"

"I promise," she replied weakly.

## VI

ON the morrow a keen and pungent wind had rid the lake of all the vapours and clouds, which had robbed the hills and mountains of their lines and colouring. The sky only was covered with a closely fitting veil of clouds. It was a sky quite white, curving from the zenith to the horizon behind the mountains in an immovable whiteness. Beneath this immense inanimate whiteness the ice of the far-away peaks seemed whiter, and the summits blacker and more rocky. Every now and then a gust of wind crossed the quiet streets of Lucerne, and passed over the waters of the lake, causing long, shuddering ripples, while a flight of pigeons wheeled round the arches of the bridge. At the landing-stage the steamer was whistling on its departure for Fluelen.

It was still early when a carriage brought Marco Fiore to Kriens, the last suburb of Lucerne, at the foot of the Sonnenberg funicular. He had the appearance of a man who had slept badly. Only one other person took his place in the carriage, a German or perhaps a Lucernese, who placed himself in a corner and began to smoke a short pipe. The conductor rang his bell and whistled twice in vain; there were no other passengers for Sonnenberg than Marco and the man with the pipe.

The large and rather melancholy hotel at Sonnenberg is a few paces away from the station. Marco directed himself to the porter who was seated in the empty vestibule, as deserted as the garden he had just passed through. Donna Maria Guasco had just gone out, the man said, as she usually did every morning, towards Gutsch, indicating the way with his hand; then he added in a very German French, that it was a fairly long walk. Scarcely listening to him, Marco set off through a broad wooded path. He walked without looking before him with lowered eyes, completely wrapped in his thoughts, without meeting any one, without looking at the landscape, almost without seeing where he was going. Every now and then the wind, which was freshening, caused the trees to rustle with an almost human sound, beating on Marco's face, and, passing on, it grew weaker without disturbing his thoughts. He had lost count of the time he was on the way. At last at a corner he read on a post, "Gutsch," indicated by a white arrow on a blue ground. He took the turning for some fifty steps, and then stopped silent and surprised.

He found himself in a strange wood, formed of tall, colossal trees, whose height the eye could not gauge. The trunks of the trees were round, thin, and devoid of branches to a considerable height, like the stems of bronze candlesticks; then the leafy branches mounted up so intricately and thickly, hiding the sky, that an invincible gloom reigned in the wood. The tall, colossal, upright trees, growing so close together, seemed innumerable, and rose in two lines along a very straight path in the middle, which lost itself in the calm, sad gloom, which the rays of the sun seemed unable to penetrate. Never had a wood seemed so strange and lugubrious to Marco's wondering eyes, never had he breathed an air so still and sepulchral, and never had he noticed a silence so profound and gloomy. On either side of the path the dried leaves were scattered, of every colour from light yellow to dark red, but their colour had merged into one in that darkness of the tomb. A sense of tragic and fatal horror conquered his heart while he advanced under the ominous trees, like dismal funeral candles, in that wood without the song of birds, without the perfume of flowers and the sun's rays. Terror surrounded him, and he seemed to be walking towards his strange destiny, towards the wooden seat beneath a bronze tree trunk, where Maria was seated and looking at him as he approached with sad but sweet eyes.

"This wood is horrible, Maria!" he exclaimed a little petulantly, as he sat down beside her.

"Yes, it is horrible," she replied, looking around, "but I come here every day to let myself be taken by its strong, calm horror. I think that dead people must be here, and nobody knows of it."

"Dead of love, or sorrow, or indifference," he added, looking around, believing himself a prey to an hallucination.

"Or perhaps they had enough of life."

"Everything could have happened here," he continued dreamily, "a bloody duel, a murder ignored by all, a suicide which no one knew of. Doesn't it cause you horror, sweet Maria?"

"Life is more difficult than death," she replied, shaking her head.

He took her hand, covered with a white glove, and with a slow, familiar action took off the glove and kissed her fingers and palm two or three times.

"Maria," he said, "I have thought much during the night. At first I was seized by a mortal disquietude, and I wanted to get up and leave, to look for you in the night. Then little by little I entered into a great peace, because I saw our way."

"Our way?" she asked in agitation.

"Ours, Maria. It is the only way, and there is no choice but for you and me to follow it."

"What are you saying, Marco?" she exclaimed, getting up.

With a gracious and tender action he made her sit down again.

"I say that we ought to live together till death," he declared.

"Without love, Marco? Without love?" the woman cried, and such an utter hopeless bitterness was in the cry.

"Yes, without love," he continued courageously; "the great light and flame of our passion is extinguished, it is true, but the tender reflections can still weakly illuminate the shadows where we have lived; even the rays of the heat, whose flame no longer exists, can rarefy the cold which is conquering us."

"You don't love me, Marco!" she cried.

"I don't love you with passion, and I ought not to deceive you; neither of us will ever lie to the other. But you have been the chosen woman of my heart, the only intense dream of my life. You have been my perfect, only love. If the tabernacle is closed, if the idol has vanished, the soul has in its memory the recollection of a unique adoration."

"But I don't love you!" she cried, convulsed.

"Yes, I know that you don't love me with passion. But I know that I have a beautiful and unforgettable place in your heart. I have been your only lover."

He spoke with a desperate sadness in his eyes and face, in every expression and gesture.

"Is it true, that I am dear to you, Maria?"

"It is true, as you say, you are dear to me," she replied desolately.

Marco drew her to himself and kissed her on the lips chastely. She returned the kiss. But to both the kiss seemed to have the savour of death.

"Let us live together till death," he resumed sadly.

"Together, Marco, together? To reunite when we no longer have love as the excuse of our betrayal, nor passion as an excuse for the sorrow we are inflicting on others! Why? Why?"

"Because nothing else remains," he said desolately.

"Is there really nothing else, Marco?" she cried, wringing her hands.

"Really, Maria, nothing else."

"And that unfortunate at Rome? That unfortunate Emilio? What has he done to be so disgraced? And why must I bring about his misfortune?" she cried, with a sob, hiding her face in her hands.

"Pity him; let us pity him," said Marco; "he is an unfortunate."

"He will curse me."

"He will be right to curse you, but he will also be wrong. All are right and all are wrong confronted with love, Maria."

"And Vittoria? Vittoria? the unlucky Vittoria? What will become of her? What will she say of me? Marco, think, think, what a horrible business!"

"She will curse us justly," resumed Marco, with deep sadness; "she will be right, like Emilio, to curse us, but confronted with love she will be wrong."

"Who will console Vittoria, Marco?"

"I have tried to console her, but she despised my consolations. Like all exigent people who ask too much from life, Vittoria has only gathered delusion and bitterness."

"You promised her everything."

"I offered her everything, and she repulsed it. What she demanded was not in my power, will never be in my power, and I shall never see her again."

"Who will console and comfort Emilio?"

"He is a man; he will forget you."

"And Vittoria?"

"Religion will be able to do much for her. She will forget me."

"But Emilio and Vittoria were not expecting this from us and from existence."

"The fault isn't mine, and isn't ours. If we are to blame we did it for one supreme and invincible reason, which is love."

"My God! my God!" she kept on lamenting, sobbing without tears.

"There is nothing else for us to do, but to live together till death."

"Nothing else? Nothing else? Suppose we were to try again? Suppose we were to return?"

The voice was as desperate as the proposal.

"Why do you want to try again, Maria?" he asked, with infinite desolation; "do you wish to go to your husband who hates and loves you? Do you wish to give yourself to him who is horrified at what you did? Do you wish instead to stop in your home as a stranger and an enemy? Do you wish to live and give yourself to him, as a courtesan whom he pays and despises? Do you wish to live, if you refuse yourself to him, in an inferno? To-morrow he will hate you, and you will be forced either to fly again ridiculously or become the lover of Gianni Provana, and afterwards of another Gianni Provana, descending to every abyss to make something of your life."

"No, no!" she cried, at the height of moral nausea.

"How can I try again with Vittoria? Must I return and fall at the feet of my wife, simulating a passion I do not feel? Must I play a comedy, I who despise a lie? Could I ever take my wife in my arms like you? Oh, she knows, perhaps, and understands; at any rate she would soon understand, that I was lying and deceiving her. Do you know that I inspire her with repulsion? Do you know that she neither wants me as a husband, a companion, or a friend? Do you know that she wants me as a lover? Can I be the lover of Vittoria, Maria? I can't, there, I can't! If I returned to Rome, if I re-entered Piazza Fiore, I should only make Vittoria more unhappy. In desperation I should hurl myself into conviviality. You can't wish the death of your dignity, nor I that of my honour."

"It is true, it is true!" she exclaimed, falling back in the seat as if about to faint.

"Courage, courage, Maria," he said sweetly.

A great silence, a great shadow, an ineffable solitude was around them in that funereal wood.

"But couldn't we go on as we did up to yesterday, each in our own way?" she asked in a weak voice.



"Where, where, Maria?" he asked, with the shadow of a melancholy smile.

"I don't know ... anywhere ... everywhere," she said vaguely, "each our own way, as up to yesterday."

"We met yesterday," he said sweetly.

"Let us separate to-day and resume our way."

"We should meet to-morrow." And his voice was very sweet and sad.

"Do you think so, Marco? Do you think so?"

"It is fate. Maria, it was fate our meeting yesterday; our fate would be meeting to-morrow. A will which we are ignorant of, which is outside us, which acts on us while it is foreign to us, has reunited us yesterday, and would reunite us to-morrow. Let us accept it, Maria."

"But what is this will, Marco?" she said, seized by a sudden fear.

"Maria," he said gravely, "you know, you have known, that passion is outside the usual limits of life, you have known and seen that it forces souls and persons beyond all laws and duties, beyond all vows. You have seen and known that it exalts and multiplies life. Well, Maria, I believe that when once the ordinary limits of life have been passed over, it is extremely difficult to turn back. I believe that when duties are forgotten, vows unloosed, laws broken, it is extremely difficult for people to re-enter the social orbit, to resume their proper place, and to repair their conscience. I believe that for a life which has touched the heights of passion, it is impossible to descend to the great, cold, silent depths."

All that he said was reflected sadly in its truth and irreparableness.

"Then," she interrupted, "then whoever has sinned, in punishment for his sin must continue to sin."

"Yes, Maria; sin, but without fascination. Sin is a punishment in itself. I believe, I am sure, that this is punishment."

A heavy silence fell upon them. The woman's head was bowed, and she had crossed her hands over her knees. There was not a breath of air in that atmosphere of a cemetery.

"At home they will say: '*She always loved him, and always lied in denying that she loved him.*' "

"They will say that," admitted Marco sadly.

"Your wife will say so, Marco," Maria continued monotonously, " '*Marco never forgot her, and always lied.*' "

"Certainly she will say that."

"And it will all be false, Marco, because we shall be again without passion, without love, without rapture."

"That is so, Maria."

"Shall we rehearse our comedy together, Marco," she asked mournfully—"the comedy of love? Couldn't we live like two companions, like two friends? Say, couldn't we live so, at least without lying?"

"No, dear, no," he resumed, with a weak, sorrowful smile, "it isn't possible. You are a woman; I am a man. We are still young. What you say is impossible."

"O Marco, without love?" she murmured, turning her head aside in shame.

He was silent, feeling that she was right. But he could not deceive her.

"Even this, dear lady mine, is a punishment."

"O Marco, Marco!" she cried, leaning her head on his shoulder, and hiding her face in his breast.

He pressed her to himself sweetly, and kissed her on the eyes, which were red without weeping, and upon her pale face and lips.

"At last," he said, "we shall find some sweetness in this expiation. My arms know you, Maria, and my breast is a haven for you. I know your arms, and I know I can sleep peacefully, if not ecstatically, on your heart."

"The days will be long and silent," she murmured, rising, passing her arm under Marco's, as they went down the straight path together.

"Yes, Maria," he replied.

"Our souls will do nothing but secretly regret that which is no more."

"Yes, it is true, Maria."

"Happy we shall never be again."

"Never again, Maria."

"And so we shall go on till death, Marco," she concluded, with an accent of infinite melancholy.

"Together, Maria."

"Towards death."

"Step for step together."

They were in the deepest part of the gloomy wood, like an immense tomb, amidst the thousand bronze candelabra, which seemed to have been lit for something great that was dead.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marco entered the room where Maria was waiting for him, reading a book. She lifted her eyes with a slightly melancholy smile.

"...*m'aimes?*" he asked in a puerile way, in French.

"...*t'aime,*" she replied colourlessly.

He kissed her, and she returned the kiss.

"...*toujours?*" she asked. "...*toujours,*" he replied.

Their words and actions were the same as of a former time, which were born again from the memory of their senses, re-born in an exterior, strange form to them. Their souls were full of inconsolable regret, their hearts of inconsolable grief.

THE END

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**Typographical errors corrected by the etext transcriber:**

~~devasted~~ and cold hearts=> devastated and cold hearts {pg 61}

~~wh~~e took a most pernicious fever=> who took a most pernicious fever {pg 155}

Carolina della ~~Marsiliano~~=> Carolina della Marsiliana {pg 294}

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