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THE CARDINAL'S SNUFF-BOX

By Henry Harland

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I

“The Signorino will take coffee?” old Marietta asked, as she set the fruit before him.

Peter deliberated for a moment; then burned his ships.

“Yes,” he answered.

“But in the garden, perhaps?” the little brown old woman suggested, with a persuasive flourish.

“No,” he corrected her, gently smiling, and shaking his head, “not perhaps—certainly.”

Her small, sharp old black Italian eyes twinkled, responsive.

“The Signorino will find a rustic table, under the big willow-tree, at the water's edge,” she informed him, with a good deal of gesture. “Shall I serve it there?”

“Where you will. I leave myself entirely in your hands,” he said.

So he sat by the rustic table, on a rustic bench, under the willow, sipped his coffee, smoked his cigarette, and gazed in contemplation at the view.

Of its kind, it was rather a striking view.

In the immediate foreground—at his feet, indeed—there was the river, the narrow Aco, peacock-green, a dark file of poplars on either bank, rushing pell-mell away from the quiet waters of the lake. Then, just across the river, at his left, stretched the smooth lawns of the park of Ventirose, with glimpses of the many-pinnacled castle through the trees; and, beyond, undulating country, flourishing, friendly, a perspective of vineyards, cornfields, groves, and gardens, pointed by numberless white villas. At his right loomed the gaunt mass of the Gnisi, with its black forests, its bare crags, its foaming ascade, and the crenelated range of the Cornobastone; and finally, climax and cynosure, at the valley's end, Monte Sfiorito, its three snow-covered summits almost insubstantial-seeming, floating forms of luminous pink vapour, in the evening sunshine, against the intense blue of the sky.

A familiar verse had come into Peter's mind, and kept running there obstinately.

“Really,” he said to himself, “feature for feature, down to the very 'cataract leaping in glory,' the scene might have been got up, apres coup, to illustrate it.” And he began to repeat the beautiful hackneyed words, under his breath....

But about midway of the third line he was interrupted.

II

“It's not altogether a bad sort of view—is it?” some one said, in English.

The voice was a woman's. It was clear and smooth; it was crisp-cut, distinguished.

Peter glanced about him.

On the opposite bank of the Aco, in the grounds of Ventirose, five or six yards away, a lady was standing, looking at him, smiling.

Peter's eyes met hers, took in her face.... And suddenly his heart gave a jump. Then it stopped dead still, tingling, for a second. Then it flew off, racing perilously.—Oh, for reasons—for the best reasons in the world: but thereby hangs my tale.

She was a young woman, tall, slender, in a white frock, with a white cloak, an indescribable complexity of soft lace and airy ruffles, round her shoulders. She wore no hat. Her hair, brown and warm in shadow, sparkled, where it caught the light, in a kind of crinkly iridescence, like threads of glass.

Peter's heart (for the best reasons in the world) was racing perilously. “It's impossible—impossible—impossible”—the words strummed themselves to its rhythm. Peter's wits (for had not the impossible come to pass?) were in a perilous confusion. But he managed to rise from his rustic bench, and to achieve a bow.

She inclined her head graciously.

“You do not think it altogether bad—I hope?” she questioned, in her crisp-cut voice, raising her eyebrows slightly, with a droll little assumption of solicitude.

Peter's wits were in confusion; but he must answer her. An automatic second-self, summoned by the emergency, answered for him.

“I think one might safely call it altogether good.”

“Oh—?” she exclaimed.

Her eyebrows went up again, but now they expressed a certain whimsical surprise. She threw back her head, and regarded the prospect critically.

“It is not, then, too spectacular, too violent?” she wondered, returning her gaze to Peter, with an air of polite readiness to defer to his opinion. “Not too much like a decor de theatre?”

“One should judge it,” his automatic second-self submitted, “with some leniency. It is, after all, only unaided Nature.”

A spark flickered in her eyes, while she appeared to ponder. (But I am not sure whether she was pondering the speech or its speaker.)

“Really?” she said, in the end. “Did did Nature build the villas, and plant the cornfields?”

But his automatic second-self was on its mettle.

“Yes,” it asserted boldly; “the kind of men who build villas and plant cornfields must be classified as natural forces.”

She gave a light little laugh—and again appeared to ponder for a moment.

Then, with another gracious inclination of the head, and an interrogative brightening of the eyes, “Mr. Marchdale no doubt?” she hazarded.

Peter bowed.

“I am very glad if, on the whole, you like our little effect,” she went on, glancing in the direction of Monte Sfiorito. “I”—there was the briefest suspension—“I am your landlady.”

For a third time Peter bowed, a rather more elaborate bow than his earlier ones, a bow of respectful enlightenment, of feudal homage.

“You arrived this afternoon?” she conjectured.

“By the five-twenty-five from Bergamo,” said he.

“A very convenient train,” she remarked; and then, in the pleasantest manner, whereby the unusual mode of valediction was carried off, “Good evening.”

“Good evening,” responded Peter, and accomplished his fourth bow.

She moved away from the river, up the smooth lawns, between the trees, towards Castel Ventirose, a flitting whiteness amid the surrounding green.

Peter stood still, looking after her.

But when she was out of sight, he sank back upon his rustic bench, like a man exhausted, and breathed a prodigious sigh. He was absurdly pale. All the same, clenching his fists, and softly pounding the table with them, he muttered exultantly, between his teeth, “What luck! What incredible luck! It's she—it's she, as I 'm a heathen. Oh, what supernatural luck!”

III

Old Marietta—the bravest of small figures, in her neat black-and-white peasant dress, with her silver ornaments, and her red silk coif and apron—came for the coffee things.

But at sight of Peter, she abruptly halted. She struck an attitude of alarm. She fixed him with her fiery little black eyes.

“The Signorino is not well!” she cried, in the tones of one launching a denunciation.

Peter roused himself.

“Er—yes—I 'm pretty well, thank you,” he reassured her. “I—I 'm only dying,” he added, sweetly, after an instant's hesitation.

“Dying—!” echoed Marietta, wild, aghast.

“Ah, but you can save my life—you come in the very nick of time,” he said. “I'm dying of curiosity—dying to know something that you can tell me.”

Her stare dissolved, her attitude relaxed. She smiled—relief, rebuke. She shook her finger at him.

“Ah, the Signorino gave me a fine fright,” she said.

“A thousand regrets,” said Peter. “Now be a succouring angel, and make a clean breast of it. Who is my landlady?”

Marietta drew back a little. Her brown old visage wrinkled up, perplexed.

“Who is the Signorino's landlady?” she repeated.

“Ang,” said he, imitating the characteristic nasalised eh of Italian affirmation, and accompanying it by the

characteristic Italian jerk of the head.

Marietta eyed him, still perplexed—even (one might have fancied) a bit suspicious.

“But is it not in the Signorino's lease?” she asked, with caution.

“Of course it is,” said he. “That's just the point. Who is she?”

“But if it is in your lease!” she expostulated.

“All the more reason why you should make no secret of it,” he argued plausibly. “Come! Out with it! Who is my landlady?”

Marietta exchanged a glance with heaven.

“The Signorino's landlady is the Duchessa di Santangiolo,” she answered, in accents of resignation.

But then the name seemed to stimulate her; and she went on “She lives there—at Castel Ventirose.” Marietta pointed towards the castle. “She owns all, all this country, all these houses—all, all.” Marietta joined her brown old hands together, and separated them, like a swimmer, in a gesture that swept the horizon. Her eyes snapped.

“All Lombardy?” said Peter, without emotion.

Marietta stared again.

“All Lombardy? Mache!” was her scornful remonstrance. “Nobody owns all Lombardy. All these lands, these houses.”

“Who is she?” Peter asked.

Marietta's eyes blinked, in stupefaction before such stupidity.

“But I have just told you,” she cried “She is the Duchessa di Santangiolo.”

“Who is the Duchessa di Santangiolo?” he asked.

Marietta, blinking harder, shrugged her shoulders.

“But”—she raised her voice, screamed almost, as to one deaf—“but the Duchessa di Santangiolo is the Signorino's landlady la, proprietaria di tutte queste terre, tutte queste case, tutte, tutte.”

And she twice, with some violence, reacted her comprehensive gesture, like a swimmer's.

“You evade me by a vicious circle,” Peter murmured.

Marietta made a mighty effort-brought all her faculties to a focus—studied Peter's countenance intently. Her own was suddenly illumined.

“Ah, I understand,” she proclaimed, vigorously nodding. “The Signorino desires to know who she is personally!”

“I express myself in obscure paraphrases,” said he; “but you, with your unfailing Italian simpatia, have divined the exact shade of my intention.”

“She is the widow of the Duca di Santangiolo,” said Marietta.

“Enfin vous entrez dans la voie des aveux,” said Peter.

“Scusi?” said Marietta.

“I am glad to hear she's a widow,” said he. “She—she might strike a casual observer as somewhat young, for a widow.”

“She is not very old,” agreed Marietta; “only twenty-six, twenty-seven. She was married from the convent. That was eight, nine years ago. The Duca has been dead five or six.”

“And was he also young and lovely?”

Peter asked.

“Young and lovely! Mache!” derided Marietta. “He was past forty. He was fat. But he was a good man.”

“So much the better for him now,” said Peter.

“Gia,” approved Marietta, and solemnly made the Sign of the Cross.

“But will you have the kindness to explain to me,” the young man continued, “how it happens that the Duchessa di Santangiolo speaks English as well as I do?”

The old woman frowned surprise.

“Come? She speaks English?”

“For all the world like an Englishman,” asseverated Peter.

“Ah, well,” Marietta reflected, “she was English, you know.”

“Oho!” exclaimed Peter. “She was English! Was she?” He bore a little on the tense of the verb. “That lets in a flood of light. And—and what, by the bye, is she now?” he questioned.

“Ma! Italian, naturally, since she married the Duca,” Marietta replied.

“Indeed? Then the leopard can change his spots?” was Peter's inference.

“The leopard?” said Marietta, at a loss.

“If the Devil may quote Scripture for his purpose, why may n't I?” Peter demanded. “At all events, the Duchessa di Santangiolo is a very beautiful woman.”

“The Signorino has seen her?” Marietta asked.

“I have grounds for believing so. An apparition—a phantom of delight—appeared on the opposite bank of the tumultuous Aco, and announced herself as my landlady. Of course, she may have been an impostor—but she made no attempt to get the rent. A tall woman, in white, with hair, and a figure, and a voice like cooling streams, and an eye that can speak volumes with a look.”

Marietta nodded recognition.

“That would be the Duchessa.”

“She's a very beautiful duchessa,” reiterated Peter.

Marietta was Italian. So, Italian—wise, she answered, “We are all as God makes us.”

“For years I have thought her the most beautiful woman in Europe,” Peter averred.

Marietta opened her eyes wide.

“For years? The Signorino knows her? The Signorino has seen her before?”

A phrase came back to him from a novel he had been reading that afternoon in the train. He adapted it to the occasion.

“I rather think she is my long-lost brother.”

“Brother—?” faltered Marietta.

“Well, certainly not sister,” said Peter, with determination. “You have my permission to take away the coffee things.”

IV

Up at the castle, in her rose-and-white boudoir, Beatrice was writing a letter to a friend in England.

“Villa Floriano,” she wrote, among other words, “has been let to an Englishman—a youngish, presentable-looking creature, in a dinner jacket, with a tongue in his head, and an indulgent eye for Nature—named Peter Marchdale. Do you happen by any chance to know who he is, or anything about him?”

V

Peter very likely slept but little, that first night at the villa; and more than once, I fancy, he repeated to his pillow his pious ejaculation of the afternoon: “What luck! What supernatural luck!” He was up, in any case, at an unconscionable hour next morning, up, and down in his garden.

“It really is a surprisingly jolly garden,” he confessed. “The agent was guiltless of exaggeration, and the photographs were not the perjuries one feared.”

There were some fine old trees, lindens, acacias, chestnuts, a flat-topped Lombardy pine, a darkling ilex, besides the willow that overhung the river, and the poplars that stiffly stood along its border. Then there was the peacock-blue river itself, dancing and singing as it sped away, with a thousand diamonds flashing on its surface—floating, sinking, rising—where the sun caught its ripples. There were some charming bits of greensward. There was a fountain, plashing melodious coolness, in a nimbus of spray which the sun touched to rainbow pinks and yellows. There were vivid parterres of flowers, begonia and geranium. There were oleanders, with their heady southern perfume; there were pomegranate-blossoms, like knots of scarlet crepe; there were white carnations, sweet-peas, heliotrope, mignonette; there were endless roses. And there were birds, birds, birds. Everywhere you heard their joyous piping, the busy flutter of their wings. There were goldfinches, blackbirds, thrushes, with their young—the plumpest, clumsiest, ruffle-feathered little blunderers, at the age ingrat, just beginning to fly, a terrible anxiety to their parents—and there were also (I regret to own) a good many rowdy sparrows. There were bees and bumblebees; there were brilliant, dangerous-looking dragonflies; there were butterflies, blue ones and white ones, fluttering in couples; there were also (I am afraid) a good many gadflies—but che volete? Who minds a gadfly or two in Italy? On the other side of the house there were fig-trees and peach-trees, and artichokes holding their heads high in rigid rows; and a vine, heavy with great clusters of yellow grapes, was festooned upon the northern wall.

The morning air was ineffably sweet and keen—penetrant, tonic, with moist, racy smells, the smell of the good brown earth, the smell of green things and growing things. The dew was spread over the grass like a veil of silver gossamer, spangled with crystals. The friendly country westward, vineyards and white villas, laughed in the sun at the Gnisi, sulking black in shadow to the east. The lake lay deep and still, a dark sapphire. And away at the valley's end, Monte Sfiorito, always insubstantial-seeming, showed pale blue-grey, upon a sky in which still lingered some of the flush of dawn.

It was a surprisingly jolly garden, true enough. But though Peter remained in it all day long—though he haunted the riverside, and cast a million desirous glances, between the trees, and up the lawns, towards Castel Ventirose—he enjoyed no briefest vision of the Duchessa di Santangiolo.

Nor the next day; nor the next.

“Why does n't that old dowager ever come down and look after her river?” he asked Marietta. “For all the attention she gives it, the water might be undermining her property on both sides.”

“That old dowager—?” repeated Marietta, blank.

“That old widow woman—my landlady—the Duchessa Vedova di Santangiolo.”

“She is not very old—only twenty-six, twenty-seven,” said Marietta.

“Don't try to persuade me that she is n't old enough to know better,” retorted Peter, sternly.

“But she has her guards, her keepers, to look after her property,” said Marietta.

“Guards and keepers are mere mercenaries. If you want a thing well done, you should do it yourself,” said Peter, with gloomy sententiousness.

On Sunday he went to the little grey rococo parish church. There were two Masses, one at eight o'clock, one at ten—and the church was quite a mile from Villa Floriano, and up a hill; and the Italian sun was hot—

but the devoted young man went to both.

The Duchessa was at neither.

“What does she think will become of her immortal soul?” he asked Marietta.

On Monday he went to the pink-stuccoed village post-office.

Before the post-office door a smart little victoria, with a pair of sprightly, fine-limbed French bays, was drawn up, ducal coronets emblazoned on its panels.

Peter's heart began to beat.

And while he was hesitating on the doorstep, the door opened, and the Duchessa came forth—tall, sumptuous, in white, with a wonderful black-plumed hat, and a wonderful white-frilled sunshade. She was followed by a young girl—a pretty, dark-complexioned girl, of fourteen, fifteen perhaps, with pleasant brown eyes (that lucent Italian brown), and in her cheeks a pleasant hint of red (that covert Italian red, which seems to glow through the thinnest film of satin).

Peter bowed, standing aside to let them pass.

But when he looked up, the Duchessa had stopped, and was smiling on him.

His heart beat harder.

“A lovely day,” said the Duchessa.

“Delightful,” agreed Peter, between two heart-beats.—Yet he looked, in his grey flannels, with his straw-hat and his eyeglass, with his lean face, his even colour, his slightly supercilious moustaches—he looked a very embodiment of cool-blooded English equanimity.

“A trifle warm, perhaps?” the Duchessa suggested, with her air of polite (or was it in some part humorous?) readiness to defer to his opinion.

“But surely,” suggested he, “in Italy, in summer, it is its bounden duty to be a trifle warm?”

The Duchessa smiled.

“You like it? So do I. But what the country really needs is rain.”

“Then let us hope,” said he, “that the country's real needs may remain unsatisfied.”

The Duchessa tittered.

“Think of the poor farmers,” she said reproachfully.

“It's vain to think of them,” he answered. “'T is an ascertained fact that no condition of the weather ever contents the farmers.”

The Duchessa laughed.

“Ah, well,” she consented, “then I 'll join in your hope that the fine weather may last. I—I trust,” she was so good as to add, “that you're not entirely uncomfortable at Villa Floriano?”

“I dare n't allow myself to speak of Villa Floriano,” he replied. “I should become dithyrambic. It's too adorable.”

“It has a pretty garden, and—I remember—you admired the view,” the Duchessa said. “And that old Marietta? I trust she does for you fairly well?” Her raised eyebrows expressed benevolent (or was it in some part humorous?) concern.

“She does for me to perfection. That old Marietta is a priceless old jewel,” Peter vowed.

“A good cook?” questioned the Duchessa.

“A good cook—but also a counsellor and friend. And with a flow of language!”

The Duchessa laughed again.

“Oh, these Lombard peasant women. They are untiring chatterers.”

“I 'm not sure,” Peter felt himself in justice bound to confess, “that Marietta is n't equally untiring as a listener. In fact, there's only one respect in which she has disappointed me.”

“Oh—?” said the Duchessa. And her raised eyebrows demanded particulars.

“She swears she does n't wear a dagger in her garter—has never heard of such a practice,” Peter explained. “And now,” he whispered to his soul, “we 'll see whether our landlady is up in modern literature.”

Still again the Duchessa laughed. And, apparently, she was up in modern literature. At any rate—

“Those are Lombard country-girls along the coast,” she reminded him. “We are peaceful inland folk, miles from the sea. But you had best be on your guard, none the less.” She shook her head, in warning. “Through all this country-side that old Marietta is reputed to be a witch.”

“If she's a witch,” said Peter, undismayed, “her usefulness will be doubled. I shall put her to the test directly I get home.”

“Sprinkle her with holy water?” laughed the Duchessa. “Have a care. If she should turn into a black cat, and fly away on a broomstick, you'd never forgive yourself.”

Wherewith she swept on to her carriage, followed by her young companion.

The sprightly French bays tossed their heads, making the harness tinkle. The footman mounted the box. The carriage rolled away.

But Peter remained for quite a minute motionless on the door-step, gazing, bemused, down the long, straight, improbable village street, with its poplars, its bridge, its ancient stone cross, its irregular pink and yellow houses—as improbable as a street in opera-bouffe. A thin cloud of dust floated after the carriage, a thin screen of white dust, which, in the sun, looked like a fume of silver.

“I think I could put my finger on a witch worth two of Marietta,” he said, in the end. “And thus we see,” he added, struck by something perhaps not altogether novel in his own reflection, “how the primary emotions, being perennial, tend to express themselves in perennial formulae.”

VI

Back at the villa, he enquired of Marietta who the pretty brown-eyed young girl might have been.

“The Signorina Emilia,” Marietta promptly informed him.

“Really and truly?” questioned he.

“Ang,” affirmed Marietta, with the national jerk of the head; “the Signorina Emilia Manfredi—the daughter of the Duca.”

“Oh—? Then the Duca was married before?” concluded Peter, with simplicity.

“Che-e-e!” scoffed Marietta, on her highest note. “Married? He?” Then she winked and nodded—as one man of the world to another. “Ma molto porn! La mamma fu robaccia di Milano. But after his death, the Duchessa had her brought to the castle. She is the same as adopted.”

“That looks as if your Duchessa's heart were in the right place, after all,” commented Peter.

“Gia,” agreed Marietta.

“Hang the right place!” cried he. “What's the good of telling me her heart is in the right place, if the right place is inaccessible?”

But Marietta only looked bewildered.

He lived in his garden, he haunted the riverside, he made a daily pilgrimage to the village post, he thoroughly neglected the work he had come to this quiet spot to do. But a week passed, during which he never once beheld so much as the shadow of the Duchessa.

On Sunday he trudged his mile, through the sun, and up the hill, not only to both Masses, but to Vespers and Benediction.

She was present at none of these offices.

“The Pagan!” he exclaimed.

VII

Up at the castle, on the broad marble terrace, where clematis and jessamine climbed over the balustrade and twined about its pilasters, where oleanders grew in tall marble urns and shed their roseate petals on the pavement, Beatrice, dressed for dinner, in white, with pearls in her hair, and pearls round her throat, was walking slowly backwards and forwards, reading a letter.

“There is a Peter Marchdale—I don't know whether he will be your Peter Marchdale or not, my dear; though the name seems hardly likely to be common—son of the late Mr. Archibald Marchdale, Q. C., and nephew of old General Marchdale, of Whitstoke. A highly respectable and stodgy Norfolk family. I've never happened to meet the man myself, but I'm told he's a bit of an eccentric, who amuses himself globe-trotting, and writing books (novels, I believe) which nobody, so far as I am aware, ever reads. He writes under a pseudonym, Felix—I 'm not sure whether it's Mildmay or Wildmay. He began life, by the bye, in the Diplomatic, and was attache for a while at Berlin, or Petersburg, or somewhere; but whether (in the elegant language of Diplomacy) he 'chucked it up,' or failed to pass his exams, I'm not in a position to say. He will be near thirty, and ought to have a couple of thousand a year—more or less. His father, at any rate, was a great man at the bar, and must have left something decent. And the only other thing in the world I know about him is that he's a great friend of that clever gossip Margaret Winchfield—which goes to show that however obscure he may be as a scribbler of fiction, he must possess some redeeming virtues as a social being—for Mrs. Winchfield is by no means the sort that falls in love with bores. As you 're not, either—well, verbum sap., as my little brother Freddie says.”

Beatrice gazed off, over the sunny lawn, with its trees and their long shadows, with its shrubberies, its bright flower-beds, its marble benches, its artificial ruin; over the lake, with its coloured sails, its incongruous puffing steamboats; down the valley, away to the rosy peaks of Monte Sfiorito, and the deep blue sky behind them. She plucked a spray of jessamine, and brushed the cool white blossoms across her cheek, and inhaled their fairy fragrance.

“An obscure scribbler of fiction,” she mused. “Ah, well, one is an obscure reader of fiction oneself. We must send to London for Mr. Felix Mildmay Wildmay's works.”

VIII

On Monday evening, at the end of dinner, as she set the fruit before him, “The Signorino will take coffee?” old Marietta asked.

Peter frowned at the fruit, figs and peaches—

“Figs imperial purple, and blushing peaches”—

ranged alternately, with fine precision, in a circle, round a central heap of translucent yellow grapes.

“Is this the produce of my own vine and fig-tree?” he demanded.

“Yes, Signorino; and also peach-tree,” replied Marietta.

“Peaches do not grow on fig-trees?” he enquired.

“No, Signorino,” said Marietta.

“Nor figs on thistles. I wonder why not,” said he.

“It is n't Nature,” was Marietta's confident generalisation.

“Marietta Cignolesi,” Peter pronounced severely, looking her hard in the eyes, “I am told you are a witch.”

“No,” said Marietta, simply, without surprise, without emotion.

“I quite understand,” he genially persisted. “It's a part of the game to deny it. But I have no intention of sprinkling you with holy water-so don't be frightened. Besides, if you should do anything outrageous—if you should turn into a black cat, and fly away on a broomstick, for example—I could never forgive myself. But I'll thank you to employ a little of your witchcraft on my behalf, all the same. I have lost something—something very precious—more precious than rubies—more precious than fine gold.”

Marietta's brown old wrinkles fell into an expression of alarm.

“In the villa? In the garden?” she exclaimed, anxiously.

“No, you conscientious old thing you,” Peter hastened to relieve her. “Nowhere in your jurisdiction—so don't distress yourself: Laggiu, laggiu.”

And he waved a vague hand, to indicate outer space.

“The Signorino should put up a candle to St. Anthony of Padua,” counselled this Catholic witch.

“St. Anthony of Padua? Why of Padua?” asked Peter.

“St. Anthony of Padua,” said Marietta.

“You mean of Lisbon,” corrected Peter.

“No,” insisted the old woman, with energy. “St. Anthony of Padua.”

“But he was born in Lisbon;” insisted Peter.

“No,” said Marietta.

“Yes,” said he, “parola d' onore. And, what's more to the purpose, he died in Lisbon. You clearly mean St. Anthony of Lisbon.”

“No!” Marietta raised her voice, for his speedier conviction. “There is no St. Anthony of Lisbon. St. Anthony of Padua.”

“What's the use of sticking to your guns in that obstinate fashion?” Peter complained. “It's mere pride of opinion. Don't you know that the ready concession of minor points is a part of the grace of life?”

“When you lose an object, you put up a candle to St. Anthony of Padua,” said Marietta, weary but resolved.

“Not unless you wish to recover the object,” contended Peter.

Marietta stared at him, blinking.

“I have no wish to recover the object I have lost,” he continued blandly. “The loss of it is a new, thrilling, humanising experience. It will make a man of me—and, let us hope, a better man. Besides, in a sense, I lost it long ago—'when first my smitten eyes beat full on her,' one evening at the Francais, three, four years ago. But it's essential to my happiness that I should see the person into whose possession it has fallen. That is why I am not angry with you for being a witch. It suits my convenience. Please arrange with the powers of darkness to the end that I may meet the person in question tomorrow at the latest. No!” He raised a forbidding hand. “I will listen to no protestations. And, for the rest, you may count upon my absolute discretion.

'She is the darling of my heart
And she lives in our valley,'”

he carolled softly.

“E del mio cuore la carina,
E dimor' nella nostra vallettina,”

he obligingly translated. “But for all the good I get of her, she might as well live on the top of the Cornobastone,” he added dismally. “Yes, now you may bring me my coffee—only, let it be tea. When your coffee is coffee it keeps me awake at night.”

Marietta trudged back to her kitchen, nodding at the sky.

The next afternoon, however, the Duchessa di Santangiolo appeared on the opposite bank of the tumultuous Aco.

IX

Peter happened to be engaged in the amiable pastime of tossing bread-crumbs to his goldfinches.

But a score or so of sparrows, vulture-like, lurked under cover of the neighbouring foliage, to dash in viciously, at the critical moment, and snatch the food from the finches' very mouths.

The Duchessa watched this little drama for a minute, smiling, in silent meditation: while Peter—who, for a

wonder, had his back turned to the park of Ventirose, and, for a greater wonder still perhaps, felt no pricking in his thumbs—remained unconscious of her presence.

At last, sorrowfully, (but there was always a smile at the back of her eyes), she shook her head.

“Oh, the pirates, the daredevils,” she sighed.

Peter started; faced about; saluted.

“The brigands,” said she, with a glance towards the sparrows' outposts.

“Yes, poor things,” said he.

“Poor things?” cried she, indignant. “The unprincipled little monsters!”

“They can't help it,” he pleaded for them. “'It is their nature to.' They were born so. They had no choice.”

“You actually defend them!” she marvelled, rebukefully.

“Oh, dear, no,” he disclaimed. “I don't defend them. I defend nothing. I merely recognise and accept. Sparrows—finches. It's the way of the world—the established division of the world.”

She frowned incomprehension.

“The established division of the world—?”

“Exactly,” said he. “Sparrows—finches the snatchers and the snatched-from. Everything that breathes is either a sparrow or a finch. 'T is the universal war—the struggle for existence—the survival of the most unscrupulous. 'T is a miniature presentment of what's going on everywhere in earth and sky.”

She shook her head again.

“YOU see the earth and sky through black spectacles, I 'm afraid,” she remarked, with a long face. But there was still an underglow of amusement in her eyes.

“No,” he answered, “because there's a compensation. As you rise in the scale of moral development, it is true, you pass from the category of the snatchers to the category of the snatched-from, and your ultimate extinction is assured. But, on the other hand, you gain talents and sensibilities. You do not live by bread alone. These goldfinches, for a case in point, can sing—and they have your sympathy. The sparrows can only make a horrid noise—and you contemn them. That is the compensation. The snatchers can never know the joy of singing—or of being pitied by ladies.”

“N... o, perhaps not,” she consented doubtfully. The underglow of amusement in her eyes shone nearer to the surface. “But—but they can never know, either, the despair of the singer when his songs won't come.”

“Or when the ladies are pitiless. That is true,” consented Peter.

“And meanwhile they get the bread, crumbs,” she said.

“They certainly get the bread-crumbs,” he admitted.

“I 'm afraid “—she smiled, as one who has conducted a syllogism safely to its conclusion—“I 'm afraid I do not think your compensation compensates.”

“To be quite honest, I daresay it does n't,” he confessed.

“And anyhow”—she followed her victory up—“I should not wish my garden to represent the universal war. I should not wish my garden to be a battle-field. I should wish it to be a retreat from the battle—an abode of peace—a happy valley—a sanctuary for the snatched-from.”

“But why distress one's soul with wishes that are vain?” asked he. “What could one do?”

“One could keep a dragon,” she answered promptly. “If I were you, I should keep a sparrow-devouring, finch-respecting dragon.”

“It would do no good,” said he. “You'd get rid of one species of snatcher, but some other species of snatcher would instantly pop UP.”

She gazed at him with those amused eyes of hers, and still again, slowly, sorrowfully, shook her head.

“Oh, your spectacles are black—black,” she murmured.

“I hope not,” said he; “but such as they are, they show me the inevitable conditions of our planet. The snatcher, here below, is ubiquitous and eternal—as ubiquitous, as eternal, as the force of gravitation. He is likewise protean. Banish him—he takes half a minute to change his visible form, and returns au galop. Sometimes he's an ugly little cacophonous brown sparrow; sometimes he's a splendid florid money-lender, or an aproned and obsequious greengrocer, or a trusted friend, hearty and familiar. But he 's always there; and he's always—if you don't mind the vernacular—'on the snatch.'”

The Duchessa arched her eyebrows.

“If things are really at such a sorry pass,” she said, “I will commend my former proposal to you with increased confidence. You should keep a dragon. After all, you only wish to protect your garden; and that”—she embraced it with her glance—“is not so very big. You could teach your dragon, if you procured one of an intelligent breed, to devour greengrocers, trusted friends, and even moneylenders too (tough though no doubt they are), as well as sparrows.”

“Your proposal is a surrender to my contention,” said Peter. “You would set a snatcher to catch the snatchers. Other heights in other lives, perhaps. But in the dark backward and abysm of space to which our lives are confined, the snatcher is indigenous and inexpugnable.”

The Duchessa looked at the sunny landscape, the bright lawns, the high bending trees, with the light caught in the network of their million leaves; she looked at the laughing white villas westward, the pale-green vineyards, the yellow cornfields; she looked at the rushing river, with the diamonds sparkling on its surface, at the far-away gleaming snows of Monte Sfiorito, at the scintillant blue shy overhead.

Then she looked at Peter, a fine admixture of mirth with something like gravity in her smile.

“The dark backward and abysm of space?” she repeated. “And you do not wear black spectacles? Then it must be that your eyes themselves are just a pair of black-seeing pessimists.”

“On the contrary,” triumphed Peter, “it is because they are optimists, that they suspect there must be

forwarder and more luminous regions than the Solar System.”

The Duchessa laughed.

“I think you have the prettiest mouth, and the most exquisite little teeth, and the eyes richest in promise, and the sweetest laughter, of any woman out of Paradise,” said Peter, in the silence of his soul.

“It is clear I shall never be your match in debate,” said she.

Peter made a gesture of deprecating modesty.

“But I wonder,” she went on, “whether you would put me down as 'another species of snatcher,' if I should ask you to spare me just the merest end of a crust of bread?” And she lifted those eyes rich in promise appealingly to his.

“Oh, I beg of you—take all I have,” he responded, with effusion. “But—but how—?”

“Toss,” she commanded tersely.

So he tossed what was left of his bread into the air, above the river; and the Duchessa, easily, deftly, threw up a hand, and caught it on the wing.

“Thank you very much,” she laughed, with a little bow.

Then she crumbled the bread, and began to sprinkle the ground with it; and in an instant she was the centre of a cloud of birds. Peter was at liberty to watch her, to admire the swift grace of her motions, their suggestion of delicate strength, of joy in things physical, and the lithe elasticity of her figure, against the background of satiny lawn, and the further vistas of lofty sunlit trees. She was dressed in white, as always—a frock of I know not what supple fabric, that looked as if you might have passed it through your ring, and fell in multitudes of small soft creases. Two big red roses drooped from her bodice. She wore a garden-hat, of white straw, with a big daring rose-red bow, under which the dense meshes of her hair, warmly dark, dimly bright, shimmered in a blur of brownish gold.

“What vigour, what verve, what health,” thought Peter, watching her, “what—lean, fresh, fragrant health!” And he had, no doubt, his emotions.

She bestowed her bread crumbs on the birds; but she was able, somehow, to discriminate mightily in favour of the goldfinches. She would make a diversion, the semblance of a fling, with her empty right hand; and the too-greedy sparrows would dart off, avid, on that false lead. Whereupon, quickly, stealthily, she would rain a little shower of crumbs, from her left hand, on the grass beside her, to a confiding group of finches assembled there. And if ever a sparrow ventured to intrude his ruffianly black beak into this sacred quarter, she would manage, with a kind of restrained ferocity, to “shoo” him away, without thereby frightening the finches.

And all the while her eyes laughed; and there was colour in her cheeks; and there was the forceful, graceful action of her body.

When the bread was finished, she clapped her hands together gently, to dust the last mites from them, and looked over at Peter, and smiled significantly.

“Yes,” he acknowledged, “you outwitted them very skilfully. You, at any rate, have no need of a dragon.”

“Oh, in default of a dragon, one can do dragon's work oneself,” she answered lightly. “Or, rather, one can make oneself an instrument of justice.”

“All the same, I should call it uncommonly hard luck to be born a sparrow—within your jurisdiction,” he said.

“It is not an affair of luck,” said she. “One is born a sparrow—within my jurisdiction—for one's sins in a former state.—No, you little dovelings”—she turned to a pair of finches on the greensward near her, who were lingering, and gazing up into her face with hungry, expectant eyes—“I have no more. I have given you my all.” And she stretched out her open hands, palms downwards, to convince them.

“The sparrows got nothing; and the goldfinches, who got 'your all,' grumble because you gave so little,” said Peter, sadly. “That is what comes of interfering with the laws of Nature.” And then, as the two birds flew away, “See the dark, doubtful, reproachful glances with which they cover you.”

“You think they are ungrateful?” she said. “No—listen.”

She held up a finger.

For, at that moment, on the branch of an acacia, just over her head, a goldfinch began to sing—his thin, sweet, crystalline trill of song.

“Do you call that grumbling?” she asked.

“It implies a grumble,” said Peter, “like the 'thank you' of a servant dissatisfied with his tip. It's the very least he can do. It's perfunctory—I 'm not sure it is n't even ironical.”

“Perfunctory! Ironical!” cried the Duchessa. “Look at him! He's warbling his delicious little soul out.”

They both paused to look and listen.

The bird's gold-red bosom palpitated. He marked his modulations by sudden emphatic movements of the head. His eyes were fixed intently before him, as if he could actually see and follow the shining thread of his song, as it wound away through the air. His performance had all the effect of a spontaneous rhapsody. When it was terminated, he looked down at his auditors, eager, inquisitive, as who should say, “I hope you liked it?”—and then, with a nod clearly meant as a farewell, flew out of sight.

The Duchessa smiled again at Peter, with intention.

“You must really try to take a cheerier view of things,” she said.

And next instant she too was off, walking slowly, lightly, up the green lawns, between the trees, towards the castle, her gown fluttering in the breeze, now dazzling white as she came into the sun, now pearly grey as she passed into the shade.

“What a woman it is,” said Peter to himself, looking after her. “What vigour, what verve, what sex! What a woman!”

And, indeed, there was nothing of the too-prevalent epicene in the Duchessa's aspect; she was very

certainly a woman. “Heavens, how she walks!” he cried in a deep whisper.

But then a sudden wave of dejection swept over him. At first he could not account for it. By and by, however, a malicious little voice began to repeat and repeat within him, “Oh, the futile impression you must have made upon her! Oh, the ineptitudes you uttered! Oh, the precious opportunity you have misemployed!”

“You are a witch,” he said to Marietta. “You've proved it to the hilt. I 've seen the person, and the object is more desperately lost than ever.”

X

That evening, among the letters Peter received from England, there was one from his friend Mrs. Winchfield, which contained certain statistics.

“Your Duchessa di Santangiolo 'was' indeed, as your funny old servant told you, English: the only child and heiress of the last Lord Belfont. The Belfonts of Lancashire (now, save for your Duchessa, extinct) were the most bigoted sort of Roman Catholics, and always educated their daughters in foreign convents, and as often as not married them to foreigners. The Belfont men, besides, were ever and anon marrying foreign wives; so there will be a goodish deal of un-English blood in your Duchessa's own ci-devant English veins.

“She was born, as I learn from an indiscretion of my Peerage, in 1870, and is, therefore, as near to thirty (the dangerous age!) as to the six-and-twenty your droll old Marietta gives her. Her Christian names are Beatrice Antonia Teresa Mary—faites en votre choix. She was married at nineteen to Baldassarre Agosto, Principe Udeschini, Duca di Santangiolo, Marchese di Castellofranco, Count of the Holy Roman Empire, Knight of the Holy Ghost and of St. Gregory, (does it take your breath away?), who, according to Frontin, died in '93; and as there were no children, his brother Felipe Lorenzo succeeded to the titles. A younger brother still is Bishop of Sardagna. Cardinal Udeschini is the uncle.

“That, dear child, empties my sack of information. But perhaps I have a bigger sack, full of good advice, which I have not yet opened. And perhaps, on the whole, I will not open it at all. Only, remember that in yonder sentimental Italian lake country, in this summer weather, a solitary young man's fancy might be much inclined to turn to thoughts of—folly; and keep an eye on my friend Peter Marchdale.”

Our solitary young man brooded over Mrs. Winchfield's letter for a long while.

“The daughter of a lord, and the widow of a duke, and the niece-in-law of a cardinal,” he said. “And, as if that were not enough, a bigoted Roman Catholic into the bargain.... And yet—and yet,” he went on, taking heart a little, “as for her bigotry, to judge by her assiduity in attending the village church, that factor, at least, thank goodness, would appear to be static, rather than dynamic.”

After another longish interval of brooding, he sauntered down to the riverside, through his fragrant garden, fragrant and fresh with the cool odours of the night, and peered into the darkness, towards Castel Ventirose. Here and there he could discern a gleam of yellow, where some lighted window was not entirely hidden by the trees. Thousands and thousands of insects were threading the silence with their shrill insistent voices. The repeated wail, harsh, prolonged, eerie, of some strange wild creature, bird or beast, came down from the forest of the Gnisi. At his feet, on the troubled surface of the Aco, the stars, reflected and distorted, shone like broken spearheads.

He lighted a cigarette, and stood there till he had consumed it.

“Heigh-ho!” he sighed at last, and turned back towards the villa. And “Yes,” he concluded, “I must certainly keep an eye on our friend Peter Marchdale.”

“But I 'm doubting it's a bit too late—troppo tardo,” he said to Marietta, whom he found bringing hot water to his dressing-room.

“It is not very late,” said Marietta. “Only half-past ten.”

“She is a woman—therefore to be loved; she is a duchess—therefore to be lost,” he explained, in his native tongue.

“Cosa.” questioned Marietta, in hers.

XI

Beatrice and Emilia, strolling together in one of the flowery lanes up the hillside, between ranks of the omnipresent poplar, and rose-bush hedges, or crumbling pink-stuccoed walls that dripped with cyclamen and snapdragon, met old Marietta descending, with a basket on her arm.

Marietta courtesied to the ground.

“How do you do, Marietta?” Beatrice asked.

“I can't complain, thank your Grandeur. I have the lumbago on and off pretty constantly, and last week I broke a tooth. But I can't complain. And your Highness?”

Marietta returned, with brisk aplomb.

Beatrice smiled. “Bene, grazie. Your new master—that young Englishman,” she continued, “I hope you find him kind, and easy to do for?”

“Kind—yes, Excellency. Also easy to do for. But—!” Marietta shrugged her shoulders, and gave her head

two meaning oscillations.

“Oh—?” wondered Beatrice, knitting puzzled brows.

“Very amiable, your Greatness; but simple, simple,” Marietta explained, and tapped her brown old forehead with a brown forefinger.

“Really—?” wondered Beatrice.

“Yes, Nobility,” said Marietta. “Gentle as a canarybird, but innocent, innocent.”

“You astonish me,” Beatrice avowed. “How does he show it?”

“The questions he asks, Most Illustrious, the things he says.”

“For example—?” pursued Beatrice.

“For example, your Serenity—” Marietta paused, to search her memory.— “Well, for one example, he calls roast veal a fowl. I give him roast veal for his luncheon, and he says to me, 'Marietta, this fowl has no wings.' But everyone knows, your Mercy, that veal is not a fowl. How should veal have wings?”

“How indeed?” assented Beatrice, on a note of commiseration. And if the corners of her mouth betrayed a tendency to curve upwards, she immediately compelled them down. “But perhaps he does not speak Italian very well?” she suggested.

“Mache, Potenza! Everyone speaks Italian,” cried Marietta.

“Indeed?” said Beatrice.

“Naturally, your Grace—all Christians,” Marietta declared.

“Oh, I did n't know,” said Beatrice, meekly. “Well,” she acknowledged, “since he speaks Italian, it is certainly unreasonable of him to call veal a fowl.”

“But that, Magnificence,” Marietta went on, warming to her theme, “that is only one of his simplicities. He asks me, 'Who puts the whitewash on Monte Sfiorito? 'And when I tell him that it is not whitewash, but snow, he says, 'How do you know?' But everyone knows that it is snow. Whitewash!”

The sprightly old woman gave her whole body a shake, for the better exposition of her state of mind. And thereupon, from the interior of her basket, issued a plaintive little squeal.

“What have you in your basket?” Beatrice asked.

“A little piglet, Nobility—un piccolo porcellino,” said Marietta.

And lifting the cover an inch or two, she displayed the anxious face of a poor little sucking pig.

“E carino?” she demanded, whilst her eyes beamed with a pride that almost seemed maternal.

“What on earth are you going to do with him?” Beatrice gasped.

The light of pride gave place to a light of resolution, in Marietta's eyes.

“Kill him, Mightiness,” was her grim response; “stuff him with almonds, raisins, rosemary, and onions; cook him sweet and sour; and serve him, garnished with rosettes of beet-root, for my Signorino's Sunday dinner.”

“Oh-h-h!” shuddered Beatrice and Emilia, in a breath; and they resumed their walk.

XII

Francois was dining—with an appearance of great fervour.

Peter sat on his rustic bench, by the riverside, and watched him, smoking a cigarette the while.

The Duchessa di Santangiolo stood screened by a tree in the park of Ventirose, and watched them both.

Francois wore a wide blue ribbon round his pink and chubby neck; and his dinner consisted of a big bowlful of bread and milk.

Presently the Duchessa stepped forth from her ambush, into the sun, and laughed.

“What a sweetly pretty scene,” she said. “Pastoral—idyllic—it reminds one of Theocritus—it reminds one of Watteau.”

Peter threw his cigarette into the river, and made an obeisance.

“I am very glad you feel the charm of it,” he responded. “May I be permitted to present Master Francois Vllon?”

“We have met before,” said the Duchessa, graciously smiling upon Francois, and inclining her head.

“Oh, I did n't know,” said Peter, apologetic.

“Yes,” said the Duchessa, “and in rather tragical circumstances. But at that time he was anonymous. Why—if you won't think my curiosity impertinent—why Francois Villon?”

“Why not?” said Peter. “He made such a tremendous outcry when he was condemned to death, for one thing. You should have heard him. He has a voice! Then, for another, he takes such a passionate interest in his meat and drink. And then, if you come to that, I really had n't the heart to call him Pauvre Lelian.”

The Duchessa raised amused eyebrows.

“You felt that Pauvre Lelian was the only alternative?”

“I had in mind a remark of Pauvre Lilian's friend and confrere, the cryptic Stephane,” Peter answered. “You will remember it. 'L'ame d'un poete dans le corps d'un—' I—I forget the last word,” he faltered.

“Shall we say 'little pig'?” suggested the Duchessa.

“Oh, please don't,” cried Peter, hastily, with a gesture of supplication. “Don't say 'pig' in his presence. You'll wound his feelings.”

The Duchessa laughed.

“I knew he was condemned to death,” she owned. “Indeed, it was in his condemned cell that I made his acquaintance. Your Marietta Cignolesi introduced us. Her air was so inexorable, I 'm a good deal surprised to see him alive to-day. There was some question of a stuffing of rosemary and onions.”

“Ah, I see,” said Peter, “I see that you're familiar with the whole disgraceful story. Yes, Marietta, the unspeakable old Tartar, was all for stuffing him with rosemary and onions. But he could not bring himself to share her point of view. He screamed his protest, like a man, in twenty different octaves. You really should have heard him. His voice is of a compass, of a timbre, of an expressiveness! Passive endurance, I fear, is not his forte. For the sake of peace and silence, I intervened, interceded. She had her knife at his very throat. I was not an instant too soon. So, of course, I 've had to adopt him.”

“Of course, poor man,” sympathised the Duchessa. “It's a recognised principle that if you save a fellow's life, you 're bound to him for the rest of yours. But—but won't you find him rather a burdensome responsibility when he's grownup?” she reflected.

“—Que voulez-vous?” reflected Peter. “Burdensome responsibilities are the appointed accompaniments of man's pilgrimage. Why not Francois Villon, as well as another? And besides, as the world is at present organised, a member of the class vulgarly styled 'the rich' can generally manage to shift his responsibilities, when they become too irksome, upon the backs of the poor. For example—Marietta! Marietta!” he called, raising his voice a little, and clapping his hands.

Marietta came. When she had made her courtesy to the Duchessa, and a polite enquiry as to her Excellency's health, Peter said, with an indicative nod of the head, “Will you be so good as to remove my responsibility?”

“Il porcellino?” questioned Marietta.

“Ang,” said he.

And when Marietta had borne Francois, struggling and squealing in her arms, from the foreground—

“There—you see how it is done,” he remarked.

The Duchessa laughed.

“An object-lesson,” she agreed. “An object-lesson in—might n't one call it the science of Applied Cynicism?”

“Science!” Peter plaintively repudiated the word. “No, no. I was rather flattering myself it was an art.”

“Apropos of art—” said the Duchessa.

She came down two or three steps nearer to the brink of the river. She produced from behind her back a hand that she had kept there, and held up for Peter's inspection a grey-and-gold bound book.

“Apropos of art, I've been reading a novel. Do you know it?”

Peter glanced at the grey-and-gold binding—and dissembled the emotion that suddenly swelled big in his heart.

He screwed his eyeglass into his eye, and gave an intent look.

“I can't make out the title,” he temporised, shaking his head, and letting his eyeglass drop.

On the whole, it was very well acted; and I hope the occult little smile that played about the Duchessa's lips was a smile of appreciation.

“It has a highly appropriate title,” she said. “It is called 'A Man of Words,' by an author I've never happened to hear of before, named Felix Wildmay.”

“Oh, yes. How very odd,” said Peter. “By a curious chance, I know it very well. But I 'm surprised to discover that you do. How on earth did it fall into your hands?”

“Why on earth shouldn't it?” wondered she. “Novels are intended to fall into people's hands, are they not?”

“I believe so,” he assented. “But intentions, in this vale of tears, are not always realised, are they? Anyhow, 'A Man of Words' is not like other novels. It's peculiar.”

“Peculiar—?” she repeated.

“Of a peculiar, of an unparalleled obscurity,” he explained. “There has been no failure approaching it since What's-his-name invented printing. I hadn't supposed that seven copies of it were in circulation.”

“Really?” said the Duchessa. “A correspondent of mine in London recommended it. But—in view of its unparalleled obscurity is n't it almost equally a matter for surprise that you should know it?”

“It would be, sure enough,” consented Peter, “if it weren't that I just happen also to know the author.”

“Oh—? You know the author?” cried the Duchessa, with animation.

“Comme ma poche,” said Peter. “We were boys together.”

“Really?” said she. “What a coincidence.”

“Yes,” said he.

“And—and his book?” Her eyebrows went up, interrogative. “I expect, as you know the man, you think rather poorly of it?”

“On the contrary, in the teeth of verisimilitude, I think extremely well of it,” he answered firmly. “I admire it immensely. I think it's an altogether ripping little book. I think it's one of the nicest little books I've read for ages.

“How funny,” said she.

“Why funny?” asked he.

“It's so unlikely that one should seem a genius to one's old familiar friends.”

“Did I say he seemed a genius to me? I misled you. He does n't. In fact, he very frequently seems—but, for Charity's sake, I 'd best forbear to tell. However, I admire his book. And—to be entirely frank—it's a constant source of astonishment to me that he should ever have been able to do anything one-tenth so good.”

The Duchessa smiled pensively.

“Ah, well,” she mused, “we must assume that he has happy moments—or, perhaps, two soul-sides, one to face the world with, one to show his manuscripts when he's writing. You hint a fault, and hesitate dislike. That, indeed, is only natural, on the part of an old friend. But you pique my interest. What is the trouble with him? Is—is he conceited, for example?”

“The trouble with him?” Peter pondered. “Oh, it would be too long and too sad a story. Should I anatomise him to you as he is, I must blush and weep, and you must look pale and wonder. He has pretty nearly every weakness, not to mention vices, that flesh is heir to. But as for conceit... let me see. He concurs in my own high opinion of his work, I believe; but I don't know whether, as literary men go, it would be fair to call him conceited. He belongs, at any rate, to the comparatively modest minority who do not secretly fancy that Shakespeare has come back to life.”

“That Shakespeare has come back to life!” marvelled the Duchessa. “Do you mean to say that most literary men fancy that?”

“I think perhaps I am acquainted with three who don't,” Peter replied; “but one of them merely wears his rue with a difference. He fancies that it's Goethe.”

“How extravagantly—how exquisitely droll!” she laughed.

“I confess, it struck me so, until I got accustomed to it,” said he, “until I learned that it was one of the commonplaces, one of the normal attributes of the literary temperament. It's as much to be taken for granted, when you meet an author, as the tail is to be taken for granted, when you meet a cat.”

“I'm vastly your debtor for the information—it will stand me in stead with the next author who comes my way. But, in that case, your friend Mr. Felix Wildmay will be, as it were, a sort of Manx cat?” was her smiling deduction.

“Yes, if you like, in that particular, a sort of Manx cat,” acquiesced Peter, with a laugh.

The Duchessa laughed too; and then there was a little pause.

Overhead, never so light a breeze lisped never so faintly in the tree-tops; here and there bird-notes fell, liquid, desultory, like drops of rain after a shower; and constantly one heard the cool music of the river. The sun, filtering through worlds and worlds of leaves, shed upon everything a green-gold penumbra. The air, warm and still, was sweet with garden-scents. The lake, according to its habit at this hour of the afternoon, had drawn a grey veil over its face, a thin grey veil, through which its sapphire-blue shone furtively. Far away, in the summer haze, Monte Sfiorito seemed a mere dim spectre of itself—a stranger might easily have mistaken it for a vague mass of cloud floating above the horizon.

“Are you aware that it 's a singularly lovely afternoon?” the Duchessa asked, by and by.

“I have a hundred reasons for thinking it so,” Peter hazarded, with the least perceptible approach to a meaning bow.

In the Duchessa's face, perhaps, there flickered, for half-a-second, the least perceptible light, as of a comprehending and unresentful smile. But she went on, with fine aloofness.

“I rather envy you your river, you know. We are too far from it at the castle. Is n't the sound, the murmur, of it delicious? And its colour—how does it come by such a subtle colour? Is it green? Is it blue? And the diamonds on its surface—see how they glitter. You know, of course,” she questioned, “who the owner is of those unequalled gems?”

“Surely,” Peter answered, “the lady paramount of this demesne?”

“No, no.” She shook her head, smiling. “Undine. They are Undine's—her necklaces and tiaras. No mortal woman's jewel-case contains anything half so brilliant. But look at them—look at the long chains of them—how they float for a minute—and are then drawn down. They are Undine's—Undine and her companions are sporting with them just below the surface. A moment ago I caught a glimpse of a white arm.”

“Ah,” said Peter, nodding thoughtfully, “that's what it is to have 'the seeing eye.' But I'm grieved to hear of Undine in such a wanton mood. I had hoped she would still be weeping her unhappy love-affair.”

“What! with that horrid, stolid German—Hildebrandt, was his name?” cried the Duchessa. “Not she! Long ago, I'm glad to say, she learned to laugh at that, as a mere caprice of her immaturity. However, this is a digression. I want to return to our 'Man of Words.' Tell me—what is the quality you especially like in it?”

“I like its every quality,” Peter affirmed, unblushing. “Its style, its finish, its concentration; its wit, humour, sentiment; its texture, tone, atmosphere; its scenes, its subject; the paper it's printed on, the type, the binding. But above all, I like its heroine. I think Pauline de Fleuvieres the pearl of human women—the cleverest, the loveliest, the most desirable, the most exasperating. And also the most feminine. I can't think of her at all as a mere fiction, a mere shadow on paper. I think of her as a living, breathing, flesh-and-blood woman, whom I have actually known. I can see her before me now—I can see her eyes, full of mystery and mischief—I can see her exquisite little teeth, as she smiles—I can see her hair, her hands—I can almost catch the perfume of her garments. I 'm utterly infatuated with her—I could commit a hundred follies for her.”

“Mercy!” exclaimed the Duchessa. “You are enthusiastic.”

“The book's admirers are so few, they must endeavour to make up in enthusiasm what they lack in numbers,” he submitted.

“But—at that rate—why are they so few?” she puzzled. “If the book is all you think it, how do you account for its unpopularity?”

“It could never conceivably be anything but unpopular,” said he. “It has the fatal gift of beauty.”

The Duchessa laughed surprise.

“Is beauty a fatal gift—in works of art?”

“Yes—in England,” he declared.

“In England? Why especially in England?”

“In English-speaking—in Anglo-Saxon lands, if you prefer. The Anglo-Saxon public is beauty-blind. They have fifty religions—only one sauce—and no sense of beauty whatsoever. They can see the nose on one's face

—the mote in their neighbour's eye; they can see when a bargain is good, when a war will be expedient. But the one thing they can never see is beauty. And when, by some rare chance, you catch them in the act of admiring a beautiful object, it will never be for its beauty—it will be in spite of its beauty for some other, some extra-aesthetic interest it possesses—some topical or historical interest. Beauty is necessarily detached from all that is topical or historical, or documentary or actual. It is also necessarily an effect of fine shades, delicate values, vanishing distinctions, of evasiveness, inconsequence, suggestion. It is also absolute, unrelated—it is positive or negative or superlative—it is never comparative. Well, the Anglo-Saxon public is totally insensible to such things. They can no more feel them, than a blind worm can feel the colours of the rainbow."

She laughed again, and regarded him with an air of humorous meditation.

"And that accounts for the unsuccess of 'A Man of Words'?"

"You might as well offer Francois Villon a banquet of Orient pearls."

"You are bitterly hard on the Anglo-Saxon public."

"Oh, no," he disclaimed, "not hard—but just. I wish them all sorts of prosperity, with a little more taste."

"Oh, but surely," she caught him up, "if their taste were greater, their prosperity would be less?"

"I don't know," said he. "The Greeks were fairly prosperous, were n't they? And the Venetians? And the French are not yet quite bankrupt."

Still again she laughed—always with that little air of humorous meditation.

"You—you don't exactly overwhelm one with compliments," she observed.

He looked alarm, anxiety.

"Don't I? What have I neglected?" he cried.

"You 've never once evinced the slightest curiosity to learn what I think of the book in question."

"Oh, I'm sure you like it," he rejoined hardily. "You have 'the seeing eye.'"

"And yet I'm just a humble member of the Anglo-Saxon public."

"No—you're a distinguished member of the Anglo-Saxon 'remnant.' Thank heaven, there's a remnant, a little scattered remnant. I'm perfectly sure you like 'A Man of Words.'"

"'Like it' is a proposition so general. Perhaps I am burning to tell someone what I think of it in detail."

She smiled into his eyes, a trifle oddly.

"If you are, then I know someone who is burning to hear you," he avowed.

"Well, then, I think—I think..." she began, on a note of deliberation. "But I 'm afraid, just now, it would take too long to formulate my thought. Perhaps I'll try another day."

She gave him a derisory little nod—and in a minute was well up the lawn, towards the castle.

Peter glared after her, his fists clenched, teeth set.

"You fiend!" he muttered. Then, turning savagely upon himself, "You duffer!"

Nevertheless, that evening, he said to Marietta, "The plot thickens. We've advanced a step. We've reached what the vulgar call a psychological moment. She's seen my Portrait of a Lady. But as yet, if you can believe me, she doesn't dream who painted it; and she has n't recognised the subject. As if one were to face one's image in the glass, and take it for another's! 3—I 'll—I 'll double your wages—if you will induce events to hurry up."

However, as he spoke English, Marietta was in no position to profit by his offer.

XIII

Peter was walking in the high-road, on the other side of the river—the great high-road that leads from Bergamo to Milan.

It was late in the afternoon, and already, in the west, the sky was beginning to put on some of its sunset splendours. In the east, framed to Peter's vision by parallel lines of poplars, it hung like a curtain of dark-blue velvet.

Peter sat on the grass, by the roadside, in the shadow of a hedge—a rose-bush hedge, of course—and lighted a cigarette.

Far down the long white road, against the blue velvet sky, between the poplars, two little spots of black, two small human figures, were moving towards him.

Half absently, he let his eyes accompany them.

As they came nearer, they defined themselves as a boy and a girl. Nearer still, he saw that they were ragged and dusty and barefoot.

The boy had three or four gaudy-hued wicker baskets slung over his shoulder.

Vaguely, tacitly, Peter supposed that they would be the children of some of the peasants of the countryside, on their way home from the village.

As they arrived abreast of him, they paid him the usual peasants' salute. The boy lifted a tattered felt hat from his head, the girl bobbed a courtesy, and "Buona sera, Eccellenza," they said in concert, without, however, pausing in their march.

Peter put his hand in his pocket.

"Here, little girl," he called.

The little girl glanced at him, doubting.

“Come here,” he said.

Her face a question, she came up to him; and he gave her a few coppers.

“To buy sweetmeats,” he said.

“A thousand thanks; Excellency,” said she, bobbing another courtesy.

“A thousand thanks, Excellency,” said the boy, from his distance, again lifting his rag of a hat.

And they trudged on.

But Peter looked after them—and his heart smote him. They were clearly of the poorest of the poor. He thought of Hansel and Gretel. Why had he given them so little? He called to them to stop.

The little girl came running back.

Peter rose to meet her.

“You may as well buy some ribbons too,” he said, and gave her a couple of lire.

She looked at the money with surprise—even with an appearance of hesitation. Plainly, it was a sum, in her eyes.

“It's all right. Now run along,” said Peter.

“A thousand thanks, Excellency,” said she, with a third courtesy, and rejoined her brother....

“Where are they going?” asked a voice.

Peter faced about.

There stood the Duchessa, in a bicycling costume, her bicycle beside her. Her bicycling costume was of blue serge, and she wore a jaunty sailor-hat with a blue ribbon. Peter (in spite of the commotion in his breast) was able to remember that this was the first time he had seen her in anything but white.

Her attention was all upon the children, whom he, perhaps, had more or less banished to Cracklimbo.

“Where are they going?” she repeated, trouble in her voice and in her eyes.

Peter collected himself.

“The children? I don't know—I didn't ask. Home, aren't they?”

“Home? Oh, no. They don't live hereabouts,” she said. “I know all the poor of this neighbourhood.—Ohe there! Children! Children!” she cried.

But they were quite a hundred yards away, and did not hear.

“Do you wish them to come back?” asked Peter.

“Yes—of course,” she answered, with a shade of impatience.

He put his fingers to his lips (you know the schoolboy accomplishment), and gave a long whistle.

That the children did hear.

They halted, and turned round, looking, enquiring.

“Come back—come back!” called the Duchessa, raising her hand, and beckoning.

They came back.

“The pathetic little imps,” she murmured while they were on the way.

The boy was a sturdy, square-built fellow, of twelve, thirteen, with a shock of brown hair, brown cheeks, and sunny brown eyes; with a precocious air of doggedness, of responsibility. He wore an old tail-coat, the tail-coat of a man, ragged, discoloured, falling to his ankles.

The girl was ten or eleven, pale, pinched; hungry, weary, and sorry looking. Her hair too had been brown, upon a time; but now it was faded to something near the tint of ashes, and had almost the effect of being grey. Her pale little forehead was crossed by thin wrinkles, lines of pain, of worry, like an old woman's.

The Duchessa, pushing her bicycle, and followed by Peter, moved down the road, to meet them. Peter had never been so near to her before—at moments her arm all but brushed his sleeve. I think he blessed the children.

“Where are you going?” the Duchessa asked, softly, smiling into the girl's sad little face.

The girl had shown no fear of Peter; but apparently she was somewhat frightened by this grand lady. The toes of her bare feet worked nervously in the dust. She hung her head shyly, and eyed her brother.

But the brother, removing his hat, with the bow of an Italian peasant—and that is to say, the bow of a courtier—spoke up bravely.

“To Turin, Nobility.”

He said it in a perfectly matter-of-fact way, quite as he might have said, “To the next farm-house.”

The Duchessa, however, had not bargained for an answer of this measure. Startled, doubting her ears perhaps, “To—Turin—!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, Excellency,” said the boy.

“But—but Turin—Turin is hundreds of kilometres from here,” she said, in a kind of gasp.

“Yes, Excellency,” said the boy.

“You are going to Turin—you two children—walking—like that!” she persisted.

“Yes, Excellency.”

“But—but it will take you a month.”

“Pardon, noble lady,” said the boy. “With your Excellency's permission, we were told it should take fifteen days.”

“Where do you come from?” she asked.

“From Bergamo, Excellency.”

“When did you leave Bergamo?”

“Yesterday morning, Excellency.”

“The little girl is your sister?”

“Yes, Excellency.”

“Have you a mother and father?”

“A father, Excellency. The mother is dead.” Each of the children made the Sign of the Cross; and Peter was somewhat surprised, no doubt, to see the Duchessa do likewise. He had yet to learn the beautiful custom of that pious Lombard land, whereby, when the Dead are mentioned, you make the Sign of the Cross, and, pausing reverently for a moment, say in silence the traditional prayer of the Church:

“May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the Mercy of God, rest in peace.”

“And where is your father?” the Duchessa asked.

“In Turin, Excellency,” answered the boy. “He is a glass-blower. After the strike at Bergamo, he went to Turin to seek work. Now he has found it. So he has sent for us to come to him.”

“And you two children—alone—are going to walk all the way to Turin!” She could not get over the pitiful wonder of it.

“Yes, Excellency.”

“The heart-rending little waifs,” she said, in English, with something like a sob. Then, in Italian, “But—but how do you live by the way?”

The boy touched his shoulder-load of baskets.

“We sell these, Excellency.”

“What is their price?” she asked.

“Thirty soldi, Excellency.”

“Have you sold many since you started?”

The boy looked away; and now it was his turn to hang his head, and to let his toes work nervously in the dust.

“Haven't you sold any?” she exclaimed, drawing her conclusions.

“No, Excellency. The people would not buy,” he owned, in a dull voice, keeping his eyes down.

“Poverino,” she murmured. “Where are you going to sleep to-night?”

“In a house, Excellency,” said he.

But that seemed to strike the Duchessa as somewhat vague.

“In what house?” she asked.

“I do not know, Excellency,” he confessed. “We will find a house.”

“Would you like to come back with me, and sleep at my house?”

The boy and girl looked at each other, taking mute counsel.

Then, “Pardon, noble lady—with your Excellency's permission, is it far?” the boy questioned.

“I am afraid it is not very near—three or four kilometres.”

Again the children looked at each other, conferring. Afterwards, the boy shook his head.

“A thousand thanks, Excellency. With your permission, we must not turn back. We must walk on till later. At night we will find a house.”

“They are too proud to own that their house will be a hedge,” she said to Peter, again in English. “Aren't you hungry?” she asked the children.

“No, Excellency. We had bread in the village, below there,” answered the boy.

“You will not come home with me, and have a good dinner, and a good night's sleep?”

“Pardon, Excellency. With your favour, the father would not wish us to turn back.”

The Duchessa looked at the little girl.

The little girl wore a medal of the Immaculate Conception on a ribbon round her neck—a forlorn blue ribbon, soiled and frayed.

“Oh, you have a holy medal,” said the Duchessa.

“Yes, noble lady,” said the girl, dropping a courtesy, and lifting up her sad little weazened face.

“She has been saying her prayers all along the road,” the boy volunteered.

“That is right,” approved the Duchessa. “You have not made your First Communion yet, have you?”

“No, Excellency,” said the girl. “I shall make it next year.”

“And you?” the Duchessa asked the boy.

“I made mine at Corpus Christi,” said the boy, with a touch of pride.

The Duchessa turned to Peter.

“Do you know, I haven't a penny in my pocket. I have come out without my purse.”

“How much ought one to give them?” Peter asked.

“Of course, there is the fear that they might be robbed,” she reflected. “If one should give them a note of any value, they would have to change it; and they would probably be robbed. What to do?”

“I will speak to the boy,” said Peter. “Would you like to go to Turin by train?” he asked.

The boy and girl looked at each other. “Yes, Excellency,” said the boy.

“But if I give you money for your fare, will you know how to take care of it—how to prevent people from robbing you?”

“Oh, yes, Excellency.”

“You could take the train this evening, at Venzona, about two kilometres from here, in the direction you are walking. In an hour or two you would arrive at Milan; there you would change into the train for Turin. You would be at Turin to-morrow morning.”

“Yes, Excellency.”

“But if I give you money, you will not let people rob you? If I give you a hundred lire?”

The boy drew back, stared, as if frightened.

“A hundred lire—?” he said.

“Yes,” said Peter.

The boy looked at his sister.

“Pardon, Nobility,” he said. “With your condescension, does it cost a hundred lire to go to Turin by train?”

“Oh, no. I think it costs eight or ten.”

Again the boy looked at his sister.

“Pardon, Nobility. With your Excellency's permission, we should not desire a hundred lire then,” he said.

Peter and the Duchessa were not altogether to be blamed, I hope, if they exchanged the merest hint of a smile.

“Well, if I should give you fifty?” Peter asked.

“Fifty lire, Excellency?”

Peter nodded.

Still again the boy sought counsel of his sister, with his eyes.

“Yes, Excellency,” he said.

“You are sure you will be able to take care of it—you will not let people rob you,” the Duchessa put in, anxious. “They will wish to rob you. If you go to sleep in the train, they will try to pick your pocket.”

“I will hide it, noble lady. No one shall rob me. If I go to sleep in the train, I will sit on it, and my sister will watch. If she goes to sleep, I will watch,” the boy promised confidently.

“You must give it to him in the smallest change you can possibly scrape together,” she advised Peter.

And with one-lira, two-lira, ten-lira notes, and with a little silver and copper, he made up the amount.

“A thousand thanks, Excellency,” said the boy, with a bow that was magnificent; and he proceeded to distribute the money between various obscure pockets.

“A thousand thanks, Excellency,” said the girl, with a courtesy.

“Addio, a buon' viaggio,” said Peter.

“Addio, Eccellenze,” said the boy.

“Addio, Eccellenze,” said the girl.

But the Duchessa impulsively stooped down, and kissed the girl on her poor little wrinkled brow. And when she stood up, Peter saw that her eyes were wet.

The children moved off. They moved off, whispering together, and gesticulating, after the manner of their race: discussing something. Presently they stopped; and the boy came running back, while his sister waited.

He doffed his hat, and said, “A thousand pardons, Excellency-”

“Yes? What is it?” Peter asked.

“With your Excellency's favour—is it obligatory that we should take the train?”

“Obligatory?” puzzled Peter. “How do you mean?”

“If it is not obligatory, we would prefer, with the permission of your Excellency, to save the money.”

“But—but then you will have to walk!” cried Peter.

“But if it is not obligatory to take the train, we would pray your Excellency's permission to save the money. We should like to save the money, to give it to the father. The father is very poor. Fifty lire is so much.”

This time it was Peter who looked for counsel to the Duchessa.

Her eyes, still bright with tears, responded, “Let them do as they will.”

“No, it is not obligatory—it is only recommended,” he said to the boy, with a smile that he could n't help. “Do as you will. But if I were you, I should spare my poor little feet.”

“Mille grazie, Eccellenze,” the boy said, with a final sweep of his tattered hat. He ran back to his sister; and next moment they were walking resolutely on, westward, “into the great red light.”

The Duchessa and Peter were silent for a while, looking after them.

They dwindled to dots in the distance, and then, where the road turned, disappeared.

At last the Duchessa spoke—but almost as if speaking to herself.

“There, Felix Wildmay, you writer of tales, is a subject made to your hand,” she said.

We may guess whether Peter was startled. Was it possible that she had found him out? A sound, confused, embarrassed, something composite, between an oh and ayes, seemed to expire in his throat.

But the Duchessa did n't appear to heed it.

“Don't you think it would be a touching episode for your friend to write a story round?” she asked.

We may guess whether he was relieved.

“Oh—oh, yes,” he agreed, with the precipitancy of a man who, in his relief, would agree to anything.

“Have you ever seen such courage?” she went on. “The wonderful babies! Fancy fifteen days, fifteen days and nights, alone, unprotected, on the highway, those poor little atoms! Down in their hearts they are really filled with terror. Who would n't be, with such a journey before him? But how finely they concealed it, mastered it! Oh, I hope they won't be robbed. God help them—God help them!”

“God help them, indeed,” said Peter.

“And the little girl, with her medal of the Immaculate Conception. The father, after all, can hardly be the brute one might suspect, since he has given them a religious education. Oh, I am sure, I am sure, it was the Blessed Virgin herself who sent us across their path, in answer to that poor little creature's prayers.”

“Yes,” said Peter, ambiguously perhaps. But he liked the way in which she united him to herself in the pronoun.

“Which, of course,” she added, smiling gravely into his eyes, “seems the height of absurdity to you?”

“Why should it seem the height of absurdity to me?” he asked.

“You are a Protestant, I suppose?”

“I suppose so. But what of that? At all events, I believe there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in the usual philosophies. And I see no reason why it should not have been the Blessed Virgin who sent us across their path.”

“What would your Protestant pastors and masters do, if they heard you? Isn't that what they call Popish superstition?”

“I daresay. But I'm not sure that there's any such thing as superstition. Superstition, in its essence, is merely a recognition of the truth that in a universe of mysteries and contradictions, like ours, nothing conceivable or inconceivable is impossible.”

“Oh, no, no,” she objected. “Superstition is the belief in something that is ugly and bad and unmeaning. That is the difference between superstition and religion. Religion is the belief in something that is beautiful and good and significant—something that throws light into the dark places of life—that helps us to see and to live.”

“Yes,” said Peter, “I admit the distinction.” After a little suspension, “I thought,” he questioned, “that all Catholics were required to go to Mass on Sunday?”

“Of course—so they are,” said she.

“But—but you—” he began.

“I hear Mass not on Sunday only—I hear it every morning of my life.”

“Oh? Indeed? I beg your pardon,” he stumbled. “I—one—one never sees you at the village church.”

“No. We have a chapel and a chaplain at the castle.”

She mounted her bicycle.

“Good-bye,” she said, and lightly rode away.

“So-ho! Her bigotry is not such a negligible quantity, after all,” Peter concluded.

“But what,” he demanded of Marietta, as she ministered to his wants at dinner, “what does one barrier more or less matter, when people are already divided by a gulf that never can be traversed? You see that river?” He pointed through his open window to the Aco. “It is a symbol. She stands on one side of it, I stand on the other, and we exchange little jokes. But the river is always there, flowing between us, separating us. She is the daughter of a lord, and the widow of a duke, and the fairest of her sex, and a millionaire, and a Roman Catholic. What am I? Oh, I don't deny I 'm clever. But for the rest? ... My dear Marietta, I am simply, in one word, the victim of a misplaced attachment.”

“Non capisco Francese,” said Marietta.

XIV

And after that, for I forget how many days, Peter and the Duchessa did not meet; and so he sank low and lower in his mind.

Nothing that can befall us, optimists aver, is without its value; and this, I have heard, is especially true if we happen to be literary men. All is grist that comes to a writer's mill.

By his present experience, accordingly, Peter learned—and in the regretful prose of some future masterpiece will perhaps be enabled to remember—how exceeding great is the impatience of the lovesick, with what febrile vehemence the smitten heart can burn, and to what improbable lengths hours and minutes can on occasions stretch themselves.

He tried many methods of distraction.

There was always the panorama of his valley—the dark-blue lake, pale Monte Sfiorito, the frowning Gnisi, the smiling uplands westward. There were always the sky, the clouds, the clear sunshine, the crisp-etched shadows; and in the afternoon there was always the wondrous opalescent haze of August, filling every distance. There was always his garden—there were the great trees, with the light sifting through high spaces of feathery green; there were the flowers, the birds, the bees, the butterflies, with their colour, and their fragrance, and their music; there was his tinkling fountain, in its nimbus of prismatic spray; there was the swift, symbolic Aco. And then, at a half-hour's walk, there was the pretty pink-stuccoed village, with its hill-top church, its odd little shrines, its grim-grotesque ossuary, its faded frescoed house-fronts, its busy, vociferous, out-of-door Italian life:—the cobbler tapping in his stall; women gossiping at their toilets; children sprawling in the dirt, chasing each other, shouting; men drinking, playing mora, quarrelling, laughing, singing, twanging mandolines, at the tables under the withered bush of the wine-shop; and two or three more pensive citizens swinging their legs from the parapet of the bridge, and angling for fish that never bit, in the impetuous stream below.

Peter looked at these things; and, it is to be presumed, he saw them. But, for all the joy they gave him, he,

this cultivator of the sense of beauty, might have been the basest unit of his own purblind Anglo-Saxon public. They were the background for an absent figure. They were the stage-accessories of a drama whose action was arrested. They were an empty theatre.

He tried to read. He had brought a trunkful of books to Villa Floriano; but that book had been left behind which could fix his interest now.

He tried to write—and wondered, in a kind of daze, that any man should ever have felt the faintest ambition to do a thing so thankless and so futile.

“I shall never write again. Writing,” he generalised, and possibly not without some reason, “when it is n't the sordidest of trades, is a mere fatuous assertion of one's egotism. Breaking stones in the street were a nobler occupation; weaving ropes of sand were better sport. The only things that are worth writing are inexpressible, and can't be written. The only things that can be written are obvious and worthless—the very crackling of thorns under a pot. Oh, why does n't she turn up?”

And the worst of it was that at any moment, for aught he knew, she might turn up. That was the worst of it, and the best. It kept hope alive, only to torture hope. It encouraged him to wait, to watch, to expect; to linger in his garden, gazing hungry-eyed up the lawns of Ventirose, striving to pierce the foliage that embowered the castle; to wander the country round-about, scanning every vista, scrutinising every shape and shadow, a tweed-clad Gastibelza. At any moment, indeed, she might turn up; but the days passed—the hypocritic days—and she did not turn up.

Marietta, the kind soul, noticing his despondency, sought in divers artless ways to cheer him.

One evening she burst into his sitting-room with the effect of a small explosion, excitement in every line of her brown old face and wiry little figure.

“The fireflies! The fireflies, Signorino!” she cried, with strenuous gestures.

“What fireflies?” asked he, with phlegm.

“It is the feast of St. Dominic. The fireflies have arrived. They arrive every year on the feast of St. Dominic. They are the beads of his rosary. They are St. Dominic's Aves. There are thousands of them. Come, Signorino, Come and see.”

Her black eyes snapped. She waved her hands urgently towards the window.

Peter languidly got up, languidly crossed the room, looked out.

There were, in truth, thousands of them, thousands and thousands of tiny primrose flames, circling, fluttering, rising, sinking, in the purple blackness of the night, like snowflakes in a wind, palpitating like hearts of living gold—Jove descending upon Danae invisible.

“Son carin', eh?” cried eager Marietta.

“Hum—yes—pretty enough,” he grudgingly acknowledged. “But even so?” the ingrate added, as he turned away, and let himself drop back into his lounging-chair. “My dear good woman, no amount of prettiness can disguise the fundamental banality of things. Your fireflies—St. Dominic's beads, if you like—and, apropos of that, do you know what they call them in America?—they call them lightning-bugs, if you can believe me—remark the difference between southern euphuism and western bluntness—your fireflies are pretty enough, I grant. But they are tinsel pasted on the Desert of Sahara. They are condiments added to a dinner of dust and ashes. Life, trick it out as you will, is just an incubus—is just the Old Man of the Sea. Language fails me to convey to you any notion how heavily he sits on my poor shoulders. I thought I had suffered from ennui in my youth. But the malady merely plays with the green fruit; it reserves its serious ravages for the ripe. I can promise you 't is not a laughing matter. Have you ever had a fixed idea? Have you ever spent days and nights racking your brain, importuning the unanswering Powers, to learn whether there was—well, whether there was Another Man, for instance? Oh, bring me drink. Bring me Seltzer water and Vermouth. I will seek nepenthe at the bottom of the wine-cup.”

Was there another man? Why should there not be? And yet was there? In her continued absence, the question came back persistently, and scarcely contributed to his peace of mind.

A few days later, nothing discouraged, “Would you like to have a good laugh, Signorino?” Marietta enquired.

“Yes,” he answered, apathetic.

“Then do me the favour to come,” she said.

She led him out of his garden, to the gate of a neighbouring meadow. A beautiful black-horned white cow stood there, her head over the bars, looking up and down the road, and now and then uttering a low distressful “moo.”

“See her,” said Marietta.

“I see her. Well—?” said Peter.

“This morning they took her calf from her—to wean it,” said Marietta.

“Did they, the cruel things? Well—?” said he.

“And ever since, she has stood there by the gate, looking down the road, waiting, calling.”

“The poor dear. Well—?” said he.

“But do you not see, Signorino? Look at her eyes. She is weeping—weeping like a Christian.”

Peter looked-and, sure enough, from the poor cow's eyes tears were falling, steadily, rapidly: big limpid tears that trickled down her cheek, her great homely hairy cheek, and dropped on the grass: tears of helpless pain, uncomprehending endurance. “Why have they done this thing to me?” they seemed dumbly to cry.

“Have you ever seen a cow weep before? Is it comical, at least?” demanded Marietta, exultant.

“Comical—?” Peter gasped. “Comical—!” he groaned....

But then he spoke to the cow.

“Poor dear—poor dear,” he repeated. He patted her soft warm neck, and scratched her between the horns

and along the dewlap.

“Poor dear—poor dear.”

The cow lifted up her head, and rested her great chin on Peter's shoulder, breathing upon his face.

“Yes, you know that we are companions in misery, don't you?” he said. “They have taken my calf from me too—though my calf, indeed, was only a calf in an extremely metaphorical sense—and it never was exactly mine, anyhow—I daresay it's belonged from the beginning to another man. You, at least, have n't that gall and wormwood added to your cup. And now you must really try to pull yourself together. It's no good crying. And besides, there are more calves in the sea than have ever been taken from it. You'll have a much handsomer and fatter one next time. And besides, you must remember that your loss subserves someone else's gain—the farmer would never have done it if it hadn't been to his advantage. If you 're an altruist, that should comfort you. And you must n't mind Marietta,—you must n't mind her laughter. Marietta is a Latin. The Latin conception of what is laughable differs by the whole span of heaven from the Teuton. You and I are Teutons.”

“Teutons—?” questioned Marietta wrinkling her brow.

“Yes—Germanic,” said he.

“But I thought the Signorino was English?”

“So he is.”

“But the cow is not Germanic. White, with black horns, that is the purest Roman breed, Signorino.”

“Fa niente,” he instructed her. “Cows and Englishmen, and all such sentimental cattle, including Germans, are Germanic. Italians are Latin—with a touch of the Goth and Vandal. Lions and tigers growl and fight because they're Mohammedans. Dogs still bear without abuse the grand old name of Sycophant. Cats are of the princely line of Persia, and worship fire, fish, and flattery—as you may have noticed. Geese belong indifferently to any race you like—they are cosmopolitans; and I've known here and there a person who, without distinction of nationality, was a duck. In fact, you're rather by way of being a duck yourself: And now,” he perorated, “never deny again that I can talk nonsense with an aching heart.”

“All the same,” insisted Marietta, “it is very comical to see a cow weep.”

“At any rate,” retorted Peter, “it is not in the least comical to hear a hyaena laugh.”

“I have never heard one,” said she.

“Pray that you never may. The sound would make an old woman of you. It's quite blood-curdling.”

“Davvero?” said Marietta.

“Davvero,” he assured her.

And meanwhile the cow stood there, with her head on his shoulder, silently weeping, weeping.

He gave her a farewell rub along the nose.

“Good-bye,” he said. “Your breath is like meadowsweet. So dry your tears, and set your hopes upon the future. I 'll come and see you again to-morrow, and I 'll bring you some nice coarse salt. Good-bye.”

But when he went to see her on the morrow, she was grazing peacefully; and she ate the salt he brought her with heart-whole bovine relish—putting out her soft white pad of a tongue, licking it deliberately from his hand, savouring it tranquilly, and crunching the bigger grains with ruminative enjoyment between her teeth. So soon consoled! They were companions in misery no longer. “I 'm afraid you are a Latin, after all,” he said, and left her with a sense of disappointment.

That afternoon Marietta asked, “Would you care to visit the castle, Signorino?”

He was seated under his willow-tree, by the river, smoking cigarettes—burning superfluous time.

Marietta pointed towards Ventirose.

“Why?” said he.

“The family are away. In the absence of the family, the public are admitted, upon presentation of their cards.”

“Oho!” he cried. “So the family are away, are they?”

“Yes, Signorino.”

“Aha!” cried he. “The family are away. That explains everything. Have—have they been gone long?”

“Since a week, ten days, Signorino.”

“A week! Ten days!” He started up, indignant. “You secretive wretch! Why have you never breathed a word of this to me?”

Marietta looked rather frightened.

“I did not know it myself, Signorino,” was her meek apology. “I heard it in the village this morning, when the Signorino sent me to buy coarse salt.”

“Oh, I see.” He sank back upon his rustic bench. “You are forgiven.” He extended his hand in sign of absolution. “Are they ever coming back?”

“Naturally, Signorino.”

“What makes you think so?”

“But they will naturally come back.”

“I felicitate you upon your simple faith. When?”

“Oh, fra poco. They have gone to Rome.”

“To Rome? You're trifling with me. People do not go to Rome in August.”

“Pardon, Signorino. People go to Rome for the feast of the Assumption. That is the 15th. Afterwards they come back,” said Marietta, firmly.

“I withdraw my protest,” said Peter. “They have gone to Rome for the feast of the Assumption. Afterwards they will come back.”

“Precisely, Signorino. But you have now the right to visit the castle, upon presentation of your card. You address yourself to the porter at the lodge. The castle is grand, magnificent. The Court of Honour alone is thirty metres long.”

Marietta stretched her hands to right and left as far as they would go.

“Marietta,” Peter enquired solemnly, “are you familiar with the tragedy of 'Hamlet'?”

Marietta blinked.

“No, Signorino.”

“You have never read it,” he pursued, “in that famous edition from which the character of the Prince of Denmark happened to be omitted?”

Marietta shook her head, wearily, patiently.

Wearily, patiently, “No, Signorino,” she replied.

“Neither have I,” said he, “and I don't desire to.”

Marietta shrugged her shoulders; then returned gallantly to her charge.

“If you would care to visit the castle, Signorino, you could see the crypt which contains the tombs of the family of Farfalla, the former owners. They are of black marble and alabaster, with gilding—very rich. You could also see the wine-cellars. Many years ago a tun there burst, and a serving man was drowned in the wine. You could also see the bed in which Nabulione, the Emperor of Europe, slept, when he was in this country. Also the ancient kitchen. Many years ago, in a storm, the skeleton of a man fell down the chimney, out upon the hearth. Also what is called the Court of Foxes. Many years ago there was a plague of foxes; and the foxes came down from the forest like a great army, thousands of them. And the lords of the castle, and the peasants, and the village people, all, all, had to run away like rabbits—or the foxes would have eaten them. It was in what they call the Court of Foxes that the King of the foxes held his court. There is also the park. In the park there are statues, ruins, and white peacocks.”

“What have I in common with ruins and white peacocks?” Peter demanded tragically, when Marietta had brought her much-gesticulated exposition to a close. “Let me impress upon you once for all that I am not a tripper. As for your castle—you invite me to a banquet-hall deserted. As for your park, I see quite as much of it as I wish to see, from the seclusion of my own pleached garden. I learned long ago the folly of investigating things too closely, the wisdom of leaving things in the vague. At present the park of Ventirose provides me with the raw material for day-dreams. It is a sort of looking-glass country,—I can see just so far into it, and no farther—that lies beyond is mystery, is potentiality—terra incognita, which I can populate with monsters or pleasant phantoms, at my whim. Why should you attempt to deprive me of so innocent a recreation?”

“After the return of the family,” said Marietta, “the public will no longer be admitted. Meantime—”

“Upon presentation of my card, the porter will conduct me from disenchantment to disenchantment. No, thank you. Now, if it were the other way round, it would be different. If it were the castle and the park that had gone to Rome, and if the family could be visited on presentation of my card, I might be tempted.”

“But that would be impossible, Signorino,” said Marietta.

XV.

Beatrice walking with a priest—ay, I am not sure it would n't be more accurate to say conspiring with a priest: but you shall judge.

They were in a room of the Palazzo Udeschini, at Rome—a reception room, on the piano nobile. Therefore you see it: for are not all reception-rooms in Roman palaces alike?

Vast, lofty, sombre; the walls hung with dark-green tapestry—a pattern of vertical stripes, dark green and darker green; here and there a great dark painting, a Crucifixion, a Holy Family, in a massive dim-gold frame; dark-hued rugs on the tiled floor; dark pieces of furniture, tables, cabinets, dark and heavy; and tall windows, bare of curtains at this season, opening upon a court—a wide stone-eaved court, planted with fantastic-leaved eucalyptus-trees, in the midst of which a brown old fountain, indefatigable, played its sibilant monotone.

In the streets there were the smells, the noises, the heat, the glare of August of August in Rome, “the most Roman of the months,” they say; certainly the hottest, noisiest, noisomest, and most glaring. But here all was shadow, coolness, stillness, fragrance-the fragrance of the clean air coming in from among the eucalyptus-trees.

Beatrice, critical-eyed, stood before a pier-glass, between two of the tall windows, turning her head from side to side, craning her neck a little—examining (if I must confess it) the effect of a new hat. It was a very stunning hat—if a man's opinion hath any pertinence; it was beyond doubt very complicated. There was an upward-springing black brim; there was a downward-sweeping black feather; there was a defiant white aigrette not unlike the Shah of Persia's; there were glints of red.

The priest sat in an arm-chair—one of those stiff, upright Roman arm-chairs, which no one would ever dream of calling easy-chairs, high-backed, covered with hard leather, studded with steel nails—and watched her, smiling amusement, indulgence.

He was an oldish priest—sixty, sixty-five. He was small, lightly built, lean-faced, with delicate-strong features: a prominent, delicate nose; a well-marked, delicate jaw-bone, ending in a prominent, delicate chin; a large, humorous mouth, the full lips delicately chiselled; a high, delicate, perhaps rather narrow brow, rising above humorous grey eyes, rather deep-set. Then he had silky-soft smooth white hair, and, topping the occiput, a tonsure that might have passed for a natural bald spot.

He was decidedly clever-looking; he was aristocratic-looking, distinguished-looking; but he was, above all,

pleasant-looking, kindly-looking, sweet-looking.

He wore a plain black cassock, by no means in its first youth—brown along the seams, and, at the salient angles, at the shoulders, at the elbows, shining with the lustre of hard service. Even without his cassock, I imagine, you would have divined him for a clergyman—he bore the clerical impress, that odd indefinable air of clericism which everyone recognises, though it might not be altogether easy to tell just where or from what it takes its origin. In the garb of an Anglican—there being nothing, at first blush, necessarily Italian, necessarily un-English, in his face—he would have struck you, I think, as a pleasant, shrewd old parson of the scholarly—earnest type, mildly donnish, with a fondness for gentle mirth. What, however, you would scarcely have divined—unless you had chanced to notice, inconspicuous in this sober light, the red sash round his waist, or the amethyst on the third finger of his right hand—was his rank in the Roman hierarchy. I have the honour of presenting his Eminence Egidio Maria Cardinal Udeschini, formerly Bishop of Cittareggio, Prefect of the Congregation of Archives and Inscriptions.

That was his title ecclesiastical. He had two other titles. He was a Prince of the Udeschini by accident of birth. But his third title was perhaps his most curious. It had been conferred upon him informally by the populace of the Roman slum in which his titular church, St. Mary of the Lilies, was situated: the little Uncle of the Poor.

As Italians measure wealth, Cardinal Udeschini was a wealthy man. What with his private fortune and official stipends, he commanded an income of something like a hundred thousand lire. He allowed himself five thousand lire a year for food, clothing, and general expenses. Lodging and service he had for nothing in the palace of his family. The remaining ninety-odd thousand lire of his budget... Well, we all know that titles can be purchased in Italy; and that was no doubt the price he paid for the title I have mentioned.

However, it was not in money only that Cardinal Udeschim paid. He paid also in labour. I have said that his titular church was in a slum. Rome surely contained no slum more fetid, none more perilous—a region of cut-throat alleys, south of the Ghetto, along the Tiber bank. Night after night, accompanied by his stout young vicar, Don Giorgio Appolloni, the Cardinal worked there as hard as any hard-working curate: visiting the sick, comforting the afflicted, admonishing the knavish, persuading the drunken from their taverns, making peace between the combative. Not infrequently, when he came home, he would add a pair of stilettos to his already large collection of such relics. And his homecomings were apt to be late—oftener than not, after midnight; and sometimes, indeed, in the vague twilight of morning, at the hour when, as he once expressed it to Don Giorgio, “the tired burglar is just lying down to rest.” And every Saturday evening the Cardinal Prefect of Archives and Inscriptions sat for three hours boxed up in his confessional, like any parish priest—in his confessional at St. Mary of the Lilies, where the penitents who breathed their secrets into his ears, and received his fatherly counsels... I beg your pardon. One must not, of course, remember his rags or his sores, when Lazarus approaches that tribunal.

But I don't pretend that the Cardinal was a saint; I am sure he was not a prig. For all his works of supererogation, his life was a life of pomp and luxury, compared to the proper saint's life. He wore no hair shirt; I doubt if he knew the taste of the Discipline. He had his weaknesses, his foibles—even, if you will, his vices. I have intimated that he was fond of a jest. “The Sacred College,” I heard him remark one day, “has fifty centres of gravity. I sometimes fear that I am its centre of levity.” He was also fond of music. He was also fond of snuff:

“'T is an abominable habit,” he admitted. “I can't tolerate it at all—in others. When I was Bishop of Cittareggio, I discountenanced it utterly among my clergy. But for myself—I need not say there are special circumstances. Oddly enough, by the bye, at Cittareggio each separate member of my clergy was able to plead special circumstances for himself I have tried to give it up, and the effort has spoiled my temper—turned me into a perfect old shrew. For my friends' sake, therefore, I appease myself with an occasional pinch. You see, tobacco is antiseptic. It's an excellent preservative of the milk of human kindness.”

The friends in question kept him supplied with sound rappee. Jests and music he was abundantly competent to supply himself. He played the piano and the organ, and he sang—in a clear, sweet, slightly faded tenor. Of secular composers his favourites were “the lucid Scarlatti, the luminous Bach.” But the music that roused him to enthusiasm was Gregorian. He would have none other at St. Mary of the Lilies. He had trained his priests and his people there to sing it admirably—you should have heard them sing Vespers; and he sang it admirably himself—you should have heard him sing a Mass—you should have heard that sweet old tenor voice of his in the Preface and the Pater Noster.

So, then, Beatrice stood before a pier-glass, and studied her new hat; whilst the Cardinal, amused, indulgent, sat in his high-backed armchair, and watched her.

“Well—? What do you think?” she asked, turning towards him.

“You appeal to me as an expert?” he questioned.

His speaking-voice, as well as his singing-voice, was sweet, but with a kind of trenchant edge upon it, a genial asperity, that gave it character, tang.

“As one who should certainly be able to advise,” said she.

“Well, then—” said he. He took his chin into his hand, as if it were a beard, and looked up at her, considering; and the lines of amusement—the “parentheses”—deepened at either side of his mouth. “Well, then, I think if the feather were to be lifted a little higher in front, and brought down a little lower behind—”

“Good gracious, I don't mean my hat,” cried Beatrice. “What in the world can an old dear like you know about hats?”

There was a further deepening of the parentheses.

“Surely,” he contended, “a cardinal should know much. Is it not 'the badge of all our tribe,' as your poet Byron says?”

Beatrice laughed. Then, “Byron—?” she doubted, with a look.

The Cardinal waved his hand—a gesture of amiable concession.

“Oh, if you prefer, Shakespeare. Everything in English is one or the other. We will not fall out, like the

Morellists, over an attribution. The point is that I should be a good judge of hats."

He took snuff.

"It's a shame you haven't a decent snuff-box," Beatrice observed, with an eye on the enamelled wooden one, cheap and shabby, from which he helped himself.

"The box is but the guinea-stamp; the snuff's the thing.—Was it Shakespeare or Byron who said that?" enquired the Cardinal.

Beatrice laughed again.

"I think it must have been Pulcinella. I'll give you a lovely silver one, if you'll accept it."

"Will you? Really?" asked the Cardinal, alert.

"Of course I will. It's a shame you haven't one already."

"What would a lovely silver one cost?" he asked.

"I don't know. It does n't matter," answered she.

"But approximately? More or less?" he pursued.

"Oh, a couple of hundred lire, more or less, I daresay."

"A couple of hundred lire?" He glanced up, alerter. "Do you happen to have that amount of money on your person?"

Beatrice (the unwary woman) hunted for her pocket—took out her purse—computed its contents.

"Yes," she innocently answered.

The Cardinal chuckled—the satisfied chuckle of one whose unsuspected tactics have succeeded.

"Then give me the couple of hundred lire."

He put forth his hand.

But Beatrice held back.

"What for?" she asked, suspicion waking.

"Oh, I shall have uses for it."

His outstretched hand—a slim old tapering, bony hand, in colour like dusky ivory—closed peremptorily, in a dumb-show of receiving; and now, by the bye, you could not have failed to notice the big lucent amethyst, in its setting of elaborately-wrought pale gold, on the third finger.

"Come! Give!" he insisted, imperative.

Rueful but resigned, Beatrice shook her head.

"You have caught me finely," she sighed, and gave.

"You should n't have jingled your purse—you should n't have flaunted your wealth in my face," laughed the Cardinal, putting away the notes. He took snuff again. "I think I honestly earned that pinch," he murmured.

"At any rate," said Beatrice, laying what unction she could to her soul, "I am acquainted with a dignitary of the Church, who has lost a handsome silver snuffbox—beautiful repousse work, with his arms engraved on the lid."

"And I," retaliated he, "I am acquainted with a broken-down old doctor and his wife, in Trastevere, who shall have meat and wine at dinner for the next two months—at the expense of a niece of mine. 'I am so glad,' as Alice of Wonderland says, 'that you married into our family.'"

"Alice of Wonderland—?" doubted Beatrice.

The Cardinal waved his hand.

"Oh, if you prefer, Punch. Everything in English is one or the other."

Beatrice laughed. "It was the I of which especially surprised my English ear," she explained.

"I am your debtor for two hundred lire. I cannot quarrel with you over a particle," said he.

"But why," asked she, "why did you give yourself such superfluous pains? Why couldn't you ask me for the money point-blank? Why lure it from me, by trick and device?"

The Cardinal chuckled.

"Ah, one must keep one's hand in. And one must not look like a Jesuit for nothing."

"Do you look like a Jesuit?"

"I have been told so."

"By whom—for mercy's sake?"

"By a gentleman I had the pleasure of meeting not long ago in the train—a very gorgeous gentleman, with gold chains and diamonds flashing from every corner of his person, and a splendid waxed moustache, and a bald head which, I think, was made of polished pink coral. He turned to me in the most affable manner, and said, 'I see, Reverend Sir, that you are a Jesuit. There should be a fellow-feeling between you and me. I am a Jew. Jews and Jesuits have an almost equally bad name!'"

The Cardinal's humorous grey eyes swam in a glow of delighted merriment.

"I could have hugged him for his 'almost.' I have been wondering ever since whether in his mind it was the Jews or the Jesuits who benefited by that reservation. I have been wondering also what I ought to have replied."

"What did you reply?" asked Beatrice, curious.

"No, no," said the Cardinal. "With sentiments of the highest consideration, I must respectfully decline to tell you. It was too flat. I am humiliated whenever I recall it."

"You might have replied that the Jews, at least, have the advantage of meriting their bad name," she suggested.

"Oh, my dear child!" objected he. "My reply was flat—you would have had it sharp. I should have hurt the

poor well-meaning man's feelings, and perhaps have burdened my own soul with a falsehood, into the bargain. Who are we, to judge whether people merit their bad name or not? No, no. The humiliating circumstance is, that if I had possessed the substance as well as the show, if I had really been a son of St. Ignatius, I should have found a retort that would have effected the Jew's conversion."

"And apropos of conversions," said Beatrice, "see how far we have strayed from our muttons."

"Our muttons—?" The Cardinal looked up, enquiring.

"I want to know what you think—not of my hat—but of my man."

"Oh—ah, yes; your Englishman, your tenant." The Cardinal nodded.

"My Englishman—my tenant—my heretic," said she.

"Well," said he, pondering, while the parentheses became marked again,—"I should think, from what you tell me, that you would find him a useful neighbour. Let me see... You got fifty lire out of him, for a word; and the children went off, blessing you as their benefactress. I should think that you would find him a valuable neighbour—and that he, on his side, might find you an expensive one."

Beatrice, with a gesture, implored him to be serious.

"Ah, please don't tease about this," she said. "I want to know what you think of his conversion?"

"The conversion of a heretic is always 'a consummation devoutly to be desired,' as well, you may settle it between Shakespeare and Byron, to suit yourself. And there are none so devoutly desirous of such consummations as you Catholics of England—especially you women. It is said that a Catholic Englishwoman once tried to convert the Pope."

"Well, there have been popes whom it would n't have hurt," commented Beatrice. "And as for Mr. Marchdale," she continued, "he has shown 'dispositions.' He admitted that he could see no reason why it should not have been Our Blessed Lady who sent us to the children's aid. Surely, from a Protestant, that is an extraordinary admission?"

"Yes," said the Cardinal. "And if he meant it, one may conclude that he has a philosophic mind."

"If he meant it?" Beatrice cried. "Why should he not have meant it? Why should he have said it if he did not mean it?"

"Oh, don't ask me," protested the Cardinal. "There is a thing the French call politesse. I can conceive a young man professing to agree with a lady for the sake of what the French might call her beaux yeux."

"I give you my word," said Beatrice, "that my beaux yeux had nothing to do with the case. He said it in the most absolute good faith. He said he believed that in a universe like ours nothing was impossible—that there were more things in heaven and earth than people generally dreamed of—that he could see no reason why the Blessed Virgin should not have sent us across the children's path. Oh, he meant it. I am perfectly sure he meant it."

The Cardinal smiled—at her eagerness, perhaps.

"Well, then," he repeated, "we must conclude that he has a philosophic mind."

"But what is one to do?" asked she. "Surely one ought to do something? One ought to follow such an admission up? When a man is so far on the way to the light, it is surely one's duty to lead him farther?"

"Without doubt," said the Cardinal.

"Well—? What can one do?"

The Cardinal looked grave.

"One can pray," he said.

"Emilia and I pray for his conversion night and morning."

"That is good," he approved.

"But that is surely not enough?"

"One can have Masses said."

"Monsignor Langshawe, at the castle, says a Mass for him twice a week."

"That is good," approved the Cardinal.

"But is that enough?"

"Why doesn't Monsignor Langshawe call upon him—cultivate his acquaintance—talk with him—set him thinking?" the Cardinal enquired.

"Oh, Monsignor Langshawe!" Beatrice sighed, with a gesture. "He is interested in nothing but geology—he would talk to him of nothing but moraines—he would set him thinking of nothing but the march of glaciers."

"Hum," said the Cardinal.

"Well, then—?" questioned Beatrice.

"Well, then, Carissima, why do you not take the affair in hand yourself?"

"But that is just the difficulty. What can I what can a mere woman—do in such a case?"

The Cardinal looked into his amethyst, as a crystal-gazer into his crystal; and the lines about his humorous old mouth deepened and quivered.

"I will lend you the works of Bellarmine in I forget how many volumes. You can prime yourself with them, and then invite your heretic to a course of instructions."

"Oh, I wish you would n't turn it to a joke," said Beatrice.

"Bellarmine—a joke!" exclaimed the Cardinal. "It is the first time I have ever heard him called so. However, I will not press the suggestion."

"But then—? Oh, please advise me seriously. What can I do? What can a mere unlearned woman do?"

The Cardinal took snuff. He gazed into his amethyst again, beaming at it, as if he could descry something deliciously comical in its depths. He gave a soft little laugh. At last he looked up.

“Well,” he responded slowly, “in an extremity, I should think that a mere unlearned woman might, if she made an effort, ask the heretic to dinner. I 'll come down and stay with you for a day or two, and you can ask him to dinner.”

“You're a perfect old darling,” cried Beatrice, with rapture. “He'll never be able to resist you.”'

“Oh, I 'm not undertaking to discuss theology with him,” said the Cardinal. “But one must do something in exchange for a couple of hundred lire—so I'll come and give you my moral support.”

“You shall have your lovely silver snuffbox, all the same,” said she.

Mark the predestination!

XVI

“CASTEL VENTIROSE,
“August 21 st.

“DEAR Mr. Marchdale: It will give me great pleasure if you can dine with us on Thursday evening next, at eight o'clock, to meet my uncle, Cardinal Udeschini, who is staying here for a few days.

“I have been re-reading 'A Man of Words.' I want you to tell me a great deal more about your friend, the author.

Yours sincerely,
BEATRICE DI SANTANGIOLO.”

It is astonishing, what men will prize, what men will treasure. Peter Marchdale, for example, prizes, treasures, (and imagines that he will always prize and treasure), the perfectly conventional, the perfectly commonplace little document, of which the foregoing is a copy.

The original is written in rather a small, concentrated hand, not overwhelmingly legible perhaps, but, as we say, “full of character,” on paper lightly blueish, in the prescribed corner of which a tiny ducal coronet is embossed, above the initials “B. S.” curiously interlaced in a cypher.

When Peter received it, and (need I mention?) approached it to his face, he fancied he could detect just a trace, just the faintest reminder, of a perfume—something like an afterthought of orris. It was by no means anodyne. It was a breath, a whisper, vague, elusive, hinting of things exquisite, intimate of things intimately feminine, exquisitely personal. I don't know how many times he repeated that manoeuvre of conveying the letter to his face; but I do know that when I was privileged to inspect it, a few months later, the only perfume it retained was an unmistakable perfume of tobacco.

I don't know, either, how many times he read it, searched it, as if secrets might lie perdu between the lines, as if his gaze could warm into evidence some sympathetic ink, or compel a cryptic sub-intention from the text itself.

Well, to be sure, the text had cryptic subintentions; but these were as far as may be from any that Peter was in a position to conjecture. How could he guess, for instance, that the letter was an instrument, and he the victim, of a Popish machination? How could he guess that its writer knew as well as he did who was the author of “A Man of Words”?

And then, all at once, a shade of trouble of quite another nature fell upon his mind. He frowned for a while in silent perplexity. At last he addressed himself to Marietta.

“Have you ever dined with a cardinal?” he asked.

“No, Signorino,” that patient sufferer replied.

“Well, I'm in the very dickens of a quandary—son' proprio nel dickens d'un imbarazzo.” he informed her.

“Dickens—?” she repeated.

“Si—Dickens, Carlo, celebre autore inglese. Why not?” he asked.

Marietta gazed with long-suffering eyes at the horizon.

“Or, to put it differently,” Peter resumed, “I've come all the way from London with nothing better than a dinner jacket in my kit.”

“Dina giacca? Cosa e?” questioned Marietta.

“No matter what it is—the important thing is what it is n't. It is n't a dress-coat.”

“Non e un abito nero,” said Marietta, seeing that he expected her to say something.

“Well—? You perceive my difficulty. Do you think you could make me one?” said Peter.

“Make the Signorino a dress-coat? I? Oh, no, Signorino.” Marietta shook her head.

“I feared as much,” he acknowledged. “Is there a decent tailor in the village?”

“No, Signorino.”

“Nor in the whole length and breadth of this peninsula, if you come to that. Well, what am I to do? How am I to dine with a cardinal? Do you think a cardinal would have a fit if a man were to dine with him in a dina giacca?”

“Have a fit? Why should he have a fit, Signorino?” Marietta blinked.

“Would he do anything to the man? Would he launch the awful curses of the Church at him, for instance?”

“Mache, Signorino!” She struck an attitude that put to scorn his apprehensions.

“I see,” said Peter. “You think there is no danger? You advise me to brazen the dina giacca out, to swagger

it off?”

“I don't understand, Signorino,” said Marietta.

“To understand is to forgive,” said he; “and yet you can't trifle with English servants like this, though they ought to understand, ought n't they? In any case, I 'll be guided by your judgment. I'll wear my dina giacca, but I'll wear it with an air! I 'll confer upon it the dignity of a court-suit. Is that a gardener—that person working over there?”

Marietta looked in the quarter indicated by Peter's nod.

“Yes, Signorino; ha is the same gardener who works here three days every week,” she answered.

“Is he, really? He looks like a pirate,” Peter murmured.

“Like a pirate? Luigi?” she exclaimed.

“Yes,” affirmed her master. “He wears green corduroy trousers, and a red belt, and a blue shirt. That is the pirate uniform. He has a swarthy skin, and a piercing eye, and hair as black as the Jolly Roger. Those are the marks by which you recognise a pirate, even when in mufti. I believe you said his name is Luigi?”

“Yes, Signorino—Luigi Maroni. We call him Gigi.”

“Is Gigi versatile?” asked Peter.

“Versatile—?” puzzled Marietta. But then, risking her own interpretation of the recondite word, “Oh, no, Signorino. He is of the country.”

“Ah, he's of the country, is he? So much the better. Then he will know the way to Castel Ventirose?”

“But naturally, Signorino.” Marietta nodded.

“And do you think, for once in a way, though not versatile, he could be prevailed upon to divert his faculties from the work of a gardener to that of a messenger?”

“A messenger, Signorino?” Marietta wrinkled up her brow.

“Ang—an unofficial postman. Do you think he could be induced to carry a letter for me to the castle?”

“But certainly, Signorino. He is here to obey the Signorino's orders.” Marietta shrugged her shoulders, and waved her hands.

“Then tell him, please, to go and put the necessary touches to his toilet,” said Peter. “Meanwhile I'll indite the letter.”

When his letter was indited, he found the piratical-looking Gigi in attendance, and he gave it to him, with instructions.

Thereupon Gigi (with a smile of sympathetic intelligence, inimitably Italian) put the letter in his hat, put his hat upon his head, and started briskly off—but not in the proper direction: not in the direction of the road, which led to the village, and across the bridge, and then round upon itself to the gates of the park. He started briskly off towards Peter's own toolhouse, a low red-tiled pavilion, opposite the door of Marietta's kitchen.

Peter was on the point of calling to him, of remonstrating. Then he thought better of it. He would wait a bit, and watch.

He waited and watched; and this was what he saw.

Gigi entered the tool-house, and presently brought out a ladder, which he carried down to the riverside, and left there. Then he returned to the tool-house, and came back bearing an armful of planks, each perhaps a foot wide by five or six feet long. Now he raised his ladder to the perpendicular, and let it descend before him, so that, one extremity resting upon the nearer bank, one attained the further, and it spanned the flood. Finally he laid a plank lengthwise upon the hithermost rungs, and advanced to the end of it; then another plank; then a third: and he stood in the grounds of Ventirose.

He had improvised a bridge—a bridge that swayed upwards and downwards more or less dizzily about the middle, if you will—but an entirely practicable bridge, for all that. And he had saved himself at least a good three miles, to the castle and back, by the road.

Peter watched, and admired.

“And I asked whether he was versatile!” he muttered. “Trust an Italian for economising labour. It looks like unwarrantable invasion of friendly territory—but it's a dodge worth remembering, all the same.”

He drew the Duchessa's letter from his pocket, and read it again, and again approached it to his face, communing with that ghost of a perfume.

“Heavens! how it makes one think of chiffons,” he exclaimed. “Thursday—Thursday—help me to live till Thursday!”

XVII

But he had n't to live till Thursday—he was destined to see her not later than the next afternoon.

You know with what abruptness, with how brief a warning, storms will spring from the blue, in that land of lakes and mountains.

It was three o'clock or thereabouts; and Peter was reading in his garden; and the whole world lay basking in unmitigated sunshine.

Then, all at once, somehow, you felt a change in things: the sunshine seemed less brilliant, the shadows less solid, less sharply outlined. Oh, it was very slight, very uncertain; you had to look twice to assure yourself that it was n't a mere fancy. It seemed as if never so thin a gauze had been drawn over the face of the sun, just faintly bedimming, without obscuring it. You could have ransacked the sky in vain to discover the

smallest shred of cloud.

At the same time, the air, which had been hot all day—hot, but buoyant, but stimulant, but quick with oxygen—seemed to become thick, sluggish, suffocating, seemed to yield up its vital principle, and to fall a dead weight upon the earth. And this effect was accompanied by a sudden silence—the usual busy out-of-door country noises were suddenly suspended: the locusts stopped their singing; not a bird twittered; not a leaf rustled: the world held its breath. And if the river went on babbling, babbling, that was a very part of the silence—accented, underscored it.

Yet still you could not discern a rack of cloud anywhere in the sky—still, for a minute or two.... Then, before you knew how it had happened, the snow-summits of Monte Sfiorito were completely lapped in cloud.

And now the cloud spread with astonishing rapidity—spread and sank, cancelling the sun, shrouding the Gnisi to its waist, curling in smoky wreaths among the battlements of the Cornobastone, turning the lake from sapphire to sombre steel, filling the entire valley with a strange mixture of darkness and an uncanny pallid light. Overhead it hung like a vast canopy of leaden-hued cotton-wool; at the west it had a fringe of fiery crimson, beyond which a strip of clear sky on the horizon diffused a dull metallic yellow, like tarnished brass.

Presently, in the distance, there was a low growl of thunder; in a minute, a louder, angrier growl—as if the first were a menace which had not been heeded. Then there was a violent gush of wind—cold; smelling of the forests from which it came; scattering everything before it, dust, dead leaves, the fallen petals of flowers; making the trees writhe and labour, like giants wrestling with invisible giants; making the short grass shudder; corrugating the steel surface of the lake. Then two or three big raindrops fell—and then, the deluge.

Peter climbed up to his observatory—a square four-windowed turret, at the top of the house—thence to watch the storm and exult in it. Really it was splendid—to see, to hear; its immense wild force, its immense reckless fury. Rain had never rained so hard, he thought. Already, the lake, the mountain slopes, the villas and vineyards westward, were totally blotted out, hidden behind walls and walls of water; and even the neighbouring lawns of Ventirose, the confines of his own garden, were barely distinguishable, blurred as by a fog. The big drops pelted the river like bullets, sending up splashes bigger than themselves. And the tiled roof just above his head resounded with a continual loud crepitation, as if a multitude of iron-shod elves were dancing on it. The thunder crashed, roared, reverberated, like the toppling of great edifices. The lightning tore through the black cloud-canopy in long blinding zig-zags. The wind moaned, howled, hooted—and the square chamber where Peter stood shook and rattled under its buffetings, and was full of the chill and the smell of it. Really the whole thing was splendid.

His garden-paths ran with muddy brooklets; the high-road beyond his hedge was transformed to a shallow torrent.... And, just at that moment, looking off along the highroad, he saw something that brought his heart into his throat.

Three figures were hurrying down it, half-drowned in the rain—the Duchessa di Santangiolo, Emilia Manfredi, and a priest.

In a twinkling, Peter, bareheaded, was at his gate.

“Come in—come in,” he called.

“We are simply drenched—we shall inundate your house,” the Duchessa said, as he showed them into his sitting-room.

They were indeed dripping with water, soiled to their knees with mud.

“Good heavens!” gasped Peter, stupid. “How were you ever out in such a downpour?”

She smiled, rather forlornly.

“No one told us that it was going to rain, and we were off for a good long walk—for pleasure.”

“You must be wet to the bone—you must be perishing with cold,” he cried, looking from one to another.

“Yes, I daresay we are perishing with cold,” she admitted.

“And I have no means of offering you a fire—there are no fireplaces,” he groaned, with a gesture round the bleak Italian room, to certify their absence.

“Is n't there a kitchen?” asked the Duchessa, a faint spark of raillery kindling amid the forlornness of her smile.

Peter threw up his hands.

“I had lost my head. The kitchen, of course. I 'll tell Marietta to light a fire.”

He excused himself, and sought out Marietta. He found her in her housekeeper's room, on her knees, saying her rosary, in obvious terror. I 'm afraid he interrupted her orisons somewhat brusquely.

“Will you be so good as to start a rousing fire in the kitchen—as quickly as ever it can be done?”

And he rejoined his guests.

“If you will come this way—” he said.

Marietta had a fire of logs and pine-cones blazing in no time. She courtesied low to the Duchessa, lower still to the priest—in fact, Peter was n't sure that she did n't genuflect before him, while he made a rapid movement with his hand over her head: the Sign of the Cross, perhaps.

He was a little, unassuming-looking, white haired priest, with a remarkably clever, humorous, kindly face; and he wore a remarkably shabby cassock. The Duchessa's chaplain, Peter supposed. How should it occur to him that this was Cardinal Udeschini? Do Cardinals (in one's antecedent notion of them) wear shabby cassocks, and look humorous and unassuming? Do they go tramping about the country in the rain, attended by no retinue save a woman and a fourteen-year-old girl? And are they little men—in one's antecedent notion? True, his shabby cassock had red buttons, and there was a red sash round his waist, and a big amethyst glittered in a setting of pale gold on his annular finger. But Peter was not sufficiently versed in fashions canonical, to recognise the meaning of these insignia.

How, on the other hand, should it occur to the Duchessa that Peter needed enlightenment? At all events,

she said to him, “Let me introduce you;” and then, to the priest, “Let me present Mr. Marchdale—of whom you have heard before now.”

The white-haired old man smiled sweetly into Peter's eyes, and gave him a slender, sensitive old hand.

“E cattivo vento che non e buono per qualcuno—debbo a questa burrasca la pregustazione d' un piacere,” he said, with a mingling of ceremonious politeness and sunny geniality that was of his age and race.

Peter—instinctively—he could not have told why—put a good deal more deference into his bow, than men of his age and race commonly put into their bows, and murmured something about “grand' onore.”

Marietta placed a row of chairs before the raised stone hearth, and afterwards, at her master's request, busied herself preparing tea.

“But I think you would all be wise to take a little brandy first,” Peter suggested. “It is my despair that I am not able to provide you with a change of raiment. Brandy will be the best substitute, perhaps.”

The old priest laughed, and put his hand upon the shoulder of Emilia.

“You have spared this young lady an embarrassing avowal. Brandy is exactly what she was screwing her courage to the point of asking for.”

“Oh, no!” protested Emilia, in a deep Italian voice, with passionate seriousness.

But Peter fetched a decanter, and poured brandy for everyone.

“I drink to your health—c'est bien le cas de le dire. I hope you will not have caught your deaths of cold,” he said.

“Oh, we are quite warm now,” said the Duchessa. “We are snug in an ingle on Mount Ararat.”

“Our wetting will have done us good—it will make us grow. You and I will never regret that, will we, Emilietta?” said the priest.

A lively colour had come into the Duchessa's cheeks; her eyes seemed unusually bright. Her hair was in some disorder, drooping at the sides, and blown over her brow in fine free wavelets. It was dark in the kitchen, save for the firelight, which danced fantastically on the walls and ceiling, and struck a ruddy glow from Marietta's copper pots and pans. The rain pattered lustily without; the wind wailed in the chimney; the lightning flashed, the thunder volleyed. And Peter looked at the Duchessa—and blessed the elements. To see her seated there, in her wet gown, seated familiarly, at her ease, before his fire, in his kitchen, with that colour in her cheeks, that brightness in her eyes, and her hair in that disarray—it was unspeakable; his heart closed in a kind of delicious spasm. And the fragrance, subtle, secret, evasive, that hovered in the air near her, did not diminish his emotion.

“I wonder,” she asked, with a comical little glance upwards at him, “whether you would resent it very much if I should take off my hat—because it's a perfect reservoir, and the water will keep trickling down my neck.”

His joy needed but this culmination that she should take off her hat!

“Oh, I beg of you—” he returned fervently.

“You had better take yours off too, Emilia,” said the Duchessa.

“Admire masculine foresight,” said the priest. “I took mine off when I came in.”

“Let me hang them up,” said Peter.

It was wonderful to hold her hat in his hand—it was like holding a part of herself. He brushed it surreptitiously against his face, as he hung it up. Its fragrance—which met him like an answering caress, almost—did not lessen his emotion.

Then Marietta brought the tea, with bread-and-butter, and toast, and cakes, and pretty blue china cups and saucers, and silver that glittered in the firelight.

“Will you do me the honour of pouring the tea?” Peter asked the Duchessa.

So she poured the tea, and Peter passed it. As he stood close to her, to take it—oh, but his heart beat, believe me! And once, when she was giving him a cup, the warm tips of her fingers lightly touched his hand. Believe me, the touch had its effect. And always there was that heady fragrance in the air, like a mysterious little voice, singing secrets.

“I wonder,” the old priest said, “why tea is not more generally drunk by us Italians. I never taste it without resolving to acquire the habit. I remember, when I was a child, our mothers used to keep it as a medicine; and you could only buy it at the chemists' shops.”

“It's coming in, you know, at Rome—among the Whites,” said the Duchessa.

“Among the Whites!” cried he, with a jocular simulation of disquiet. “You should not have told me that, till I had finished my cup. Now I shall feel that I am sharing a dissipation with our spoliators.”

“That should give an edge to its aroma,” laughed she. “And besides, the Whites aren't all responsible for our spoliation—some of them are not so white as your fancy paints them. They'd be very decent people, for the most part—if they were n't so vulgar.”

“If you stick up for the Whites like that when I am Pope, I shall excommunicate you,” the priest threatened. “Meanwhile, what have you to say against the Blacks?”

“The Blacks, with few exceptions, are even blacker than they're painted; but they too would be fairly decent people in their way—if they were n't so respectable. That is what makes Rome impossible as a residence for any one who cares for human society. White society is so vulgar—Black society is so deadly dull.”

“It is rather curious,” said the priest, “that the chief of each party should wear the colour of his adversary. Our chief dresses in white, and their chief can be seen any day driving about the streets in black.”

And Peter, during this interchange of small-talk, was at liberty to feast his eyes upon her.

“Perhaps you have not yet reached the time of life where men begin to find a virtue in snuff?” the priest said, producing a smart silver snuff box, tapping the lid, and proffering it to Peter.

“On the contrary—thank you,” Peter answered, and absorbed his pinch like an adept.

“How on earth have you learned to take it without a paroxysm?” cried the surprised Duchessa.

“Oh, a thousand years ago I was in the Diplomatic Service,” he explained. “It is one of the requirements.”

Emilia Manfredi lifted her big brown eyes, filled with girlish wonder, to his face, and exclaimed, “How extraordinary!”

“It is n't half so extraordinary as it would be if it were true, my dear,” said the Duchessa.

“Oh? Non e poi vero?” murmured Emilia, and her eyes darkened with disappointment.

Peter meanwhile was looking at the snuffbox, which the priest still held in his hand, and admiring its brave repousse work of leaves and flowers, and the escutcheon engraved on the lid. But what if he could have guessed the part he had passively played in obtaining it for its possessor—or the part that it was still to play in his own epopee? Mark again the predestination!

“The storm is passing,” said the priest.

“Worse luck!” thought Peter.

For indeed the rain and the wind were moderating, the thunder had rolled farther away, the sky was becoming lighter.

“But there's a mighty problem before us still,” said the Duchessa. “How are we to get to Ventirose? The roads will, be ankle-deep with mud.”

“If you wish to do me a very great kindness—” Peter began.

“Yes—?” she encouraged him.

“You will allow me to go before you, and tell them to come for you with a carriage.”

“I shall certainly allow you to do nothing of the sort,” she replied severely. “I suppose there is no one whom you could send?”

“I should hardly like to send Marietta. I 'm afraid there is no one else. But upon my word, I should enjoy going myself.”

She shook her head, smiling at him with mock compassion.

“Would you? Poor man, poor man! That is an enjoyment which you will have to renounce. One must n't expect too much in this sad life.”

“Well, then,” said Peter, “I have an expedient. If you can walk a somewhat narrow plank—?”

“Yes—?” questioned she.

“I think I can improvise a bridge across the river.”

“I believe the rain has stopped,” said the priest, looking towards the window.

Peter, manning his soul for the inevitable, got up, went to the door, opened it, stuck out his head.

“Yes,” he acknowledged, while his heart sank within him, “the rain has stopped.”

And now the storm departed almost as rapidly as it had arrived. In the north the sky was already clear, blue and hard-looking—a wall of lapis-lazuli. The dark cloud-canopy was drifting to the south. Suddenly the sun came out, flashing first from the snows of Monte Sfiorito, then, in an instant, flooding the entire prospect with a marvellous yellow light, ethereal amber; whilst long streamers of tinted vapour—columns of pearl-dust, one might have fancied—rose to meet it; and all wet surfaces, leaves, lawns, tree-trunks, housetops, the bare crags of the Gnisi, gleamed in a wash of gold.

Puffs of fresh air blew into the kitchen, filling it with the keen sweet odour of wet earth. The priest and the Duchessa and Emilia joined Peter at the open door.

“Oh, your poor, poor garden!” the Duchessa cried.

His garden had suffered a good deal, to be sure. The flowers lay supine, their faces beaten into the mud; the greensward was littered with fallen leaves and twigs—and even in one or two places whole branches had been broken from the trees; on the ground about each rose-bush a snow of pink rose-petals lay scattered; in the paths there were hundreds of little pools, shining in the sun like pools of fire.

“There's nothing a gardener can't set right,” said Peter, feeling no doubt that here was a trifling tax upon the delights the storm had procured him.

“And oh, our poor, poor hats!” said the Duchessa, eyeing ruefully those damaged pieces of finery. “I fear no gardener can ever set them right.”

“It sounds inhospitable,” said Peter, “but I suppose I had better go and build your bridge.”

So he threw a ladder athwart the river, and laid the planks in place, as he had seen Gigi do the day before.

“How ingenious—and, like all great things, how simple,” laughed the Duchessa.

Peter waved his hand, as who should modestly deprecate applause. But, I 'm ashamed to own, he didn't disclaim the credit of the invention.

“It will require some nerve,” she reflected, looking at the narrow planks, the foaming green water. “However—”

And gathering in her skirts, she set bravely forward, and made the transit without mishap. The priest and Emilia, gathering in their skirts, made it after her.

She paused on the other side, and looked back, smiling.

“Since you have discovered so efficacious a means of cutting short the distance between our places of abode,” she said, “I hope you will not fail to profit by it whenever you may have occasion—on Thursday, for example.”

“Thank you very much,” said Peter.

“Of course,” she went on, “we may all die of our wetting yet. It would perhaps show a neighbourly interest if you were to come up to-morrow, and take our news. Come at four o'clock; and if we're alive... you shall have another pinch of snuff,” she promised, laughing.

“I adore you,” said Peter, under his breath. “I'll come with great pleasure,” he said aloud.

“Marietta,” he observed, that evening, as he dined, “I would have you to know that the Aco is bridged. Hence, there is one symbol the fewer in Lombardy. But why does—you mustn't mind the Ollendorfian form of my enquiry—why does the chaplain of the Duchessa wear red stockings?”

“The chaplain of the Duchessa—?” repeated Marietta, wrinkling up her brow.

“Ang—of the Duchessa di Santangiolo. He wore red stockings, and shoes with silver buckles. Do you think that's precisely decorous—don't you think it 's the least bit light-minded—in an ecclesiastic?”

“He—? Who—?” questioned Marietta.

“But the chaplain of the Duchessa—when he was here this afternoon.”

“The chaplain of the Duchessa!” exclaimed Marietta. “Here this afternoon? The chaplain of the Duchessa was not here this afternoon. His Eminence the Lord Prince Cardinal Udeschini was here this afternoon.”

“What!” gasped Peter.

“Ang,” said Marietta.

“That was Cardinal Udeschini—that little harmless-looking, sweet-faced old man!” Peter wondered.

“Sicuro—the uncle of the Duca,” said she.

“Good heavens!” sighed he. “And I allowed myself to hobnob with him like a boon-companion.”

“Gia,” said she.

“You need n't rub it in,” said he. “For the matter of that, you yourself entertained him in your kitchen.”

“Scusi?” said she.

“Ah, well—it was probably for the best,” he concluded. “I daresay I should n't have behaved much better if I had known.”

“It was his coming which saved this house from being struck by lightning,” announced Marietta.

“Oh—? Was it?” exclaimed Peter.

“Yes, Signorino. The lightning would never strike a house that the Lord Prince Cardinal was in.”

“I see—it would n't venture—it would n't presume. Did—did it strike all the houses that the Lord Prince Cardinal was n't in?”

“I do not think so, Signorino. Ma non fa niente. It was a terrible storm—terrible, terrible. The lightning was going to strike this house, when the Lord Prince Cardinal arrived.”

“Hum,” said Peter. “Then you, as well as I, have reason for regarding his arrival as providential.”

XVIII

“I think something must have happened to my watch,” Peter said, next day.

Indeed, its hands moved with extraordinary, with exasperating slowness.

“It seems absurd that it should do no good to push them on,” he thought.

He would force himself, between twice ascertaining their position, to wait for a period that felt like an eternity, walking about miserably, and smoking flavourless cigarettes;—then he would stand amazed, incredulous, when, with a smirk (as it almost struck him) of ironical complacence, they would attest that his eternity had lasted something near a quarter of an hour.

“And I had professed myself a Kantian, and made light of the objective reality of Time! thou laggard, Time!” he cried, and shook his fist at Space, Time's unoffending consort.

“I believe it will never be four o'clock again,” he said, in despair, finally; and once more had out his watch. It was half-past three. He scowled at the instrument's bland white face. “You have no bowels, no sensibilities—nothing but dry little methodical jog-trot wheels and pivots!” he exclaimed, flying to insult for relief. “You're as inhuman as a French functionary. Do you call yourself a sympathetic comrade for an impatient man?” He laid it open on his rustic table, and waited through a last eternity. At a quarter to four he crossed the river. “If I am early—tant pis!” he decided, choosing the lesser of two evils, and challenging Fate.

He crossed the river, and stood for the first time in the grounds of Ventirose—stood where she had been in the habit of standing, during their water-side colloquies. He glanced back at his house and garden, envisaging them for the first time, as it were, from her point of view. They had a queer air of belonging to an era that had passed, to a yesterday already remote. They looked, somehow, curiously small, moreover—the garden circumscribed, the two-storied house, with its striped sunblinds, poor and petty. He turned his back upon them—left them behind. He would have to come home to them later in the day, to be sure; but then everything would be different. A chapter would have added itself to the history of the world; a great event, a great step forward, would have definitely taken place. He would have been received at Ventirose as a friend. He would be no longer a mere nodding acquaintance, owing even that meagre relationship to the haphazard of propinquity. The ice-broken, if you will, but still present in abundance—would have been gently thawed away. One era had passed; but then a new era would have begun.

So he turned his back upon Villa F'loriano, and set off, high-hearted, up the wide lawns, under the bending trees—whither, on four red-marked occasions, he had watched her disappear—towards the castle, which faced him in its vast irregular picturesqueness. There were the oldest portions, grimly mediaeval, a lakeside fortress, with ponderous round towers, meurtrieres, machiolations, its grey stone walls discoloured in fantastic streaks and patches by weather-stains and lichens, or else shaggily overgrown by creepers. Then there were later portions, rectangular, pink-stuccoed, with rusticated work at the corners, and, on the blank

spaces between the windows, quaint allegorical frescoes, faded, half washed-out. And then there were entirely modern-looking portions, of gleaming marble, with numberless fanciful carvings, spires, pinnacles, reliefs—wonderfully light, gay, habitable, and (Peter thought) beautiful, in the clear Italian atmosphere, against the blue Italian sky.

"It's a perfect house for her," he said. "It suits her—like an appropriate garment; it almost seems to express her."

And all the while, as he proceeded, her voice kept sounding in his ears; scraps of her conversation, phrases that she had spoken, kept coming back to him.

One end of the long, wide marble terrace had been arranged as a sort of out-of-door living-room. A white awning was stretched overhead; warm-hued rugs were laid on the pavement; there were wicker lounging-chairs, with bright cushions, and a little table, holding books and things.

The Duchessa rose from one of the lounging-chairs, and came forward, smiling, to meet him.

She gave him her hand—for the first time.

It was warm—electrically warm; and it was soft—womanly soft; and it was firm, alive—it spoke of a vitality, a temperament. Peter was sure, besides, that it would be sweet to smell; and he longed to bend over it, and press it with his lips. He might almost have done so, according to Italian etiquette. But, of course, he simply bowed over it, and let it go.

"Mi trova abbandonata," she said, leading the way back to the terrace-end. There were notes of a peculiar richness in her voice, when she spoke Italian; and she dwelt languorously on the vowels, and rather slurred the consonants, lazily, in the manner Italian women have, whereby they give the quality of velvet to their tongue. She was not an Italian woman; Heaven be praised, she was English: so this was just pure gain to the sum-total of her graces. "My uncle and my niece have gone to the village. But I 'm expecting them to come home at any moment now—and you'll not have long, I hope, to wait for your snuff."

She flashed a whimsical little smile into his eyes. Then she returned to her wicker chair, glancing an invitation at Peter to place himself in the one facing her. She leaned back, resting her head on a pink silk cushion.

Peter, no doubt, sent up a silent prayer that her uncle and her niece might be detained at the village for the rest of the afternoon. By her niece he took her to mean Emilia: he liked her for the kindly euphemism. "What hair she has!" he thought, admiring the loose brown masses, warm upon their background of pink silk.

"Oh, I'm inured to waiting," he replied, with a retrospective mind for the interminable waits of that interminable day.

The Duchessa had taken a fan from the table, and was playing with it, opening and shutting it slowly, in her lap. Now she caught Peter's eyes examining it, and she gave it to him. (My own suspicion is that Peter's eyes had been occupied rather with the hands that held the fan, than with the fan itself—but that's a detail.)

"I picked it up the other day, in Rome," she said. "Of course, it's an imitation of the French fans of the last century, but I thought it pretty."

It was of white silk, that had been thinly stained a soft yellow, like the yellow of faded yellow rose-leaves. It was painted with innumerable plump little cupids, flying among pale clouds. The sticks were of mother-of=pearl. The end-sticks were elaborately incised, and in the incisions opals were set, big ones and small ones, smouldering with green and scarlet fires.

"Very pretty indeed," said Peter, "and very curious. It's like a great butterfly's wing is n't it? But are n't you afraid of opals?"

"Afraid of opals?" she wondered. "Why should one be?"

"Unless your birthday happens to fall in October, they're reputed to bring bad luck," he reminded her.

"My birthday happens to fall in June but I 'll never believe that such pretty things as opals can bring bad luck," she laughed, taking the fan, which he returned to her, and stroking one of the bigger opals with her finger tip.

"Have you no superstitions?" he asked.

"I hope not—I don't think I have," she answered. "We're not allowed to have superstitions, you know—nous autres Catholiques."

"Oh?" he said, with surprise. "No, I did n't know."

"Yes, they're a forbidden luxury. But you—? Are you superstitious? Would you be afraid of opals?"

"I doubt if I should have the courage to wear one. At all events, I don't regard superstitions in the light of a luxury. I should be glad to be rid of those I have. They're a horrible inconvenience. But I can't get it out of my head that the air is filled with a swarm of malignant little devils, who are always watching their chance to do us an ill turn. We don't in the least know the conditions under which they can bring it off; but it's legendary that if we wear opals, or sit thirteen at table, or start an enterprise on Friday, or what not, we somehow give them their opportunity. And one naturally wishes to be on the safe side."

She looked at him with doubt, considering.

"You don't seriously believe all that?" she said.

"No, I don't seriously believe it. But one breathes it in with the air of one's nursery, and it sticks. I don't believe it, but I fear it just enough to be made uneasy. The evil eye, for instance. How can one spend any time in Italy, where everybody goes loaded with charms against it, and help having a sort of sneaking half-belief in the evil eye?"

She shook her head, laughing.

"I 've spent a good deal of time in Italy, but I have n't so much as a sneaking quarter-belief in it."

"I envy you your strength of mind," said he. "But surely, though superstition is a luxury forbidden to Catholics, there are plenty of good Catholics who indulge in it, all the same?"

“There are never plenty of good Catholics,” said sire. “You employ a much-abused expression. To profess the Catholic faith, to go to Mass on Sunday and abstain from meat on Friday, that is by no means sufficient to constitute a good Catholic. To be a good Catholic one would have to be a saint, nothing less—and not a mere formal saint, either, but a very real saint, a saint in thought and feeling, as well as in speech and action. Just in so far as one is superstitious, one is a bad Catholic. Oh, if the world were populated by good Catholics, it would be the Millennium come to pass.”

“It would be that, if it were populated by good Christians—wouldn't it?” asked Peter.

“The terms are interchangeable,” she answered sweetly, with a half-comical look of defiance.

“Mercy!” cried he. “Can't a Protestant be a good Christian too?”

“Yes,” she said, “because a Protestant can be a Catholic without knowing it.”

“Oh—?” he puzzled, frowning.

“It's quite simple,” she explained. “You can't be a Christian unless you're a Catholic. But if you believe as much of Christian truth as you've ever had a fair opportunity of learning, and if you try to live in accordance with Christian morals, you are a Catholic, you're a member of the Catholic Church, whether you know it or not. You can't be deprived of your birthright, you see.”

“That seems rather broad,” said Peter; “and one had always heard that Catholicism was nothing if not narrow.”

“How could it be Catholic if it were narrow?” asked she. “However, if a Protestant uses his intelligence, and is logical, he'll not remain an unconscious Catholic long. If he studies the matter, and is logical, he'll wish to unite himself to the Church in her visible body. Look at England. See how logic is multiplying converts year by year.”

“But it's the glory of Englishmen to be illogical,” said Peter, with a laugh. “Our capacity for not following premisses to their logical consequences is the principal source of our national greatness. So the bulk of the English are likely to resist conversion for centuries to come—are they not? And then, nowadays, one is so apt to be an indifferentist in matters of religion—and Catholicism is so exacting. One remains a Protestant from the love of ease.”

“And from the desire, on the part of a good many Englishmen at least, to sail in a boat of their own—not to get mixed up with a lot of foreign publicans and sinners—no?” she suggested.

“Oh, of course, we're insular and we're Pharisaical,” admitted Peter.

“And as for one's indifference,” she smiled, “that is most probably due to one's youth and inexperience. One can't come to close quarters with the realities of life—with sorrow, with great joy, with temptation, with sin or with heroic virtue, with death, with the birth of a new soul, with any of the awful, wonderful realities of life—and continue to be an indifferentist in matters of religion, do you think?”

“When one comes to close quarters with the awful, wonderful realities of life, one has religious moments,” he acknowledged. “But they're generally rather fugitive, are n't they?”

“One can cultivate them—one can encourage them,” she said. “If you would care to know a good Catholic,” she added, “my niece, my little ward, Emilia is one. She wants to become a Sister of Mercy, to spend her life nursing the poor.”

“Oh? Would n't that be rather a pity?” Peter said. “She's so extremely pretty. I don't know when I have seen prettier brown eyes than hers.”

“Well, in a few years, I expect we shall see those pretty brown eyes looking out from under a sister's coif. No, I don't think it will be a pity. Nuns and sisters, I think, are the happiest people in the world—and priests. Have you ever met any one who seemed happier than my uncle, for example?”

“I have certainly never met any one who seemed sweeter, kinder,” Peter confessed. “He has a wonderful old face.”

“He's a wonderful old man,” said she. “I 'm going to try to keep him a prisoner here for the rest of the summer—though he will have it that he's just run down for a week. He works a great deal too hard when he's in Rome. He's the only Cardinal I've ever heard of, who takes practical charge of his titular church. But here in the country he's out-of-doors all the blessed day, hand in hand with Emilia. He's as young as she is, I believe. They play together like children—and make—me feel as staid and solemn and grown-up as one of Mr. Kenneth Grahame's Olympians.”

Peter laughed. Then, in the moment of silence that followed, he happened to let his eyes stray up the valley.

“Hello!” he suddenly exclaimed. “Someone has been painting our mountain green.”

The Duchessa turned, to look; and she too uttered an exclamation.

By some accident of reflection or refraction, the snows of Monte Sfiorito had become bright green, as if the light that fell on them had passed through emeralds. They both paused, to gaze and marvel for a little. Indeed, the prospect was a pleasing one, as well as a surprising—the sunny lawns, the high trees, the blue lake, and then that bright green mountain.

“I have never known anything like those snow-peaks for sailing under false colours,” Peter said. “I have seen them every colour of the calendar, except their native white.”

“You must n't blame the poor things,” pleaded the Duchessa. “They can't help it. It's all along o' the distance and the atmosphere and the sun.”

She closed her fan, with which she had been more or less idly playing throughout their dialogue, and replaced it on the table. Among the books there—French books, for the most part, in yellow paper—Peter saw, with something of a flutter (he could never see it without something of a flutter), the grey-and-gold binding of “A Man of Words.”

The Duchessa caught his glance.

“Yes,” she said; “your friend's novel. I told you I had been re-reading it.”

“Yes,” said he.

“And—do you know—I 'm inclined to agree with your own enthusiastic estimate of it?” she went on. “I think it's extremely—but extremely—clever; and more—very charming, very beautiful. The fatal gift of beauty!”

And her smile reminded him that the application of the tag was his own.

“Yes,” said he.

“Its beauty, though,” she reflected, “is n't exactly of the obvious sort—is it? It does n't jump at you, for instance. It is rather in the texture of the work, than on the surface. One has to look, to see it.”

“One always has to look, to see beauty that is worth seeing,” he safely generalised. But then—he had put his foot in the stirrup—his hobby bolted with him. “It takes two to make a beautiful object. The eye of the beholder is every bit as indispensable as the hand of the artist. The artist does his work—the beholder must do his. They are collaborators. Each must be the other's equal; and they must also be like each other—with the likeness of opposites, of complements. Art, in short, is entirely a matter of reciprocity. The kind of beauty that jumps at you is the kind you end by getting heartily tired of—is the skin-deep kind; and therefore it is n't really beauty at all—it is only an approximation to beauty—it may be only a simulacrum of it.”

Her eyes were smiling, her face was glowing, softly, with interest, with friendliness and perhaps with the least suspicion of something else—perhaps with the faintest glimmer of suppressed amusement; but interest was easily predominant.

“Yes,” she assented.... But then she pursued her own train of ideas. “And—with you—I particularly like the woman—Pauline. I can't tell you how much I like her. I—it sounds extravagant, but it's true—I can think of no other woman in the whole of fiction whom I like so well—who makes so curiously personal an appeal to me. Her wit—her waywardness—her tenderness—her generosity—everything. How did your friend come by his conception of her? She's as real to me as any woman I have ever known she's more real to me than most of the women I know—she's absolutely real, she lives, she breathes. Yet I have never known a woman resembling her. Life would be a merrier business if one did know women resembling her. She seems to me all that a woman ought ideally to be. Does your friend know women like that—the lucky man? Or is Pauline, for all her convincingness, a pure creature of imagination?”

“Ah,” said Peter, laughing, “you touch the secret springs of my friend's inspiration. That is a story in itself. Felix Wildmay is a perfectly commonplace Englishman. How could a woman like Pauline be the creature of his imagination? No—she was a 'thing seen.' God made her. Wildmay was a mere copyist. He drew her, tant bien que mal, from the life from a woman who's actually alive on this dull globe to-day. But that's the story.”

The Duchessa's eyes were intent.

“The story-? Tell me the story,” she pronounced in a breath, with imperious eagerness.

And her eyes waited, intently.

“Oh,” said Peter, “it's one of those stories that can scarcely be told. There's hardly any thing to take hold of. It's without incident, without progression—it's all subjective—it's a drama in states of mind. Pauline was a 'thing seen,' indeed; but she wasn't a thing known: she was a thing divined. Wildmay never knew her—never even knew who she was—never knew her name—never even knew her nationality, though, as the book shows, he guessed her to be an Englishwoman, married to a Frenchman. He simply saw her, from a distance, half-a-dozen times perhaps. He saw her in Paris, once or twice, at the theatre, at the opera; and then later again, once or twice, in London; and then, once more, in Paris, in the Bois. That was all, but that was enough. Her appearance—her face, her eyes, her smile, her way of carrying herself, her way of carrying her head, her gestures, her movements, her way of dressing—he never so much as heard her voice—her mere appearance made an impression on him such as all the rest of womankind had totally failed to make. She was exceedingly lovely, of course, exceedingly distinguished, noble-looking; but she was infinitely more. Her face her whole person—had an expression! A spirit burned in her—a prismatic, aromatic fire. Other women seemed dust, seemed dead, beside her. She was a garden, inexhaustible, of promises, of suggestions. Wit, capriciousness, generosity, emotion—you have said it—they were all there. Race was there, nerve. Sex was there—all the mystery, magic, all the essential, elemental principles of the Feminine, were there: she was a woman. A wonderful, strenuous soul was there: Wildmay saw it, felt it. He did n't know her—he had no hope of ever knowing her—but he knew her better than he knew any one else in the world. She became the absorbing subject of his thoughts, the heroine of his dreams. She became, in fact, the supreme influence of his life.”

The Duchessa's eyes had not lost their intentness, while he was speaking. Now that he had finished, she looked down at her hands, folded in her lap, and mused for a moment in silence. At last she looked up again.

“It's as strange as anything I have ever heard,” she said, “it's furiously strange—and romantic—and interesting. But—but—” She frowned a little, hesitating between a choice of questions.

“Oh, it's a story all compact of 'buts,'” Peter threw out laughing.

She let the remark pass her—she had settled upon her question.

“But how could he endure such a situation?” she asked. “How could he sit still under it? Did n't he try in any way—did n't he make any effort at all—to—to find her out—to discover who she was—to get introduced to her? I should think he could never have rested—I should think he would have moved heaven and earth.”

“What could he do? Tell me a single thing he could have done,” said Peter. “Society has made no provision for a case like his. It 's absurd—but there it is. You see a woman somewhere; you long to make her acquaintance; and there's no natural bar to your doing so—you 're a presentable man she's what they call a lady—you're both, more or less, of the same monde. Yet there 's positively no way known by which you can contrive it—unless chance, mere fortuitous chance, just happens to drop a common acquaintance between you, at the right time and place. Chance, in Wildmay's case, happened to drop all the common acquaintances they may possibly have had at a deplorable distance. He was alone on each of the occasions when he saw her. There was no one he could ask to introduce him; there was no one he could apply to for information concerning her. He could n't very well follow her carriage through the streets—dog her to her lair, like a detective. Well—what then?”

The Duchessa was playing with her fan again.

“No,” she agreed; “I suppose it was hopeless. But it seems rather hard on the poor man—rather baffling

and tantalising."

"The poor man thought it so, to be sure," said Peter; "he fretted and fumed a good deal, and kicked against the pricks. Here, there, now, anon, he would enjoy his brief little vision of her—then she would vanish into the deep inane. So, in the end—he had to take it out in something—he took it out in writing a book about her. He propped up a mental portrait of her on his desk before him, and translated it into the character of Pauline. In that way he was able to spend long delightful hours alone with her every day, in a kind of metaphysical intimacy. He had never heard her voice—but now he heard it as often as Pauline opened her lips. He owned her—he possessed her—she lived under his roof—she was always waiting for him in his study. She is real to you? She was inexpressibly, miraculously real to him. He saw her, knew her, felt her, realised her, in every detail of her mind, her soul, her person—down to the very intonations of her speech—down to the veins in her hands, the rings on her fingers—down to her very furs and laces, the frou-frou of her skirts, the scent upon her pocket-handkerchief. He had numbered the hairs of her head, almost."

Again the Duchessa mused for a while in silence, opening and shutting her fan, and gazing into its opals.

"I am thinking of it from the woman's point of view," she said, by and by. "To have played such a part in a man's life—and never to have dreamed it! Never even, very likely, to have dreamed that such a man existed—for it's entirely possible she didn't notice him, on those occasions when he saw her. And to have been the subject of such a novel—and never to have dreamed that, either! To have read the novel perhaps—without dreaming for an instant that there was any sort of connection between Pauline and herself! Or else—what would almost be stranger still—not to have read the novel, not to have heard of it! To have inspired such a book, such a beautiful book—yet to remain in sheer unconscious ignorance that there was such a book! Oh, I think it is even more extraordinary from the woman's point of view than from the man's. There is something almost terrifying about it. To have had such an influence on the destiny of someone you've never heard of! There's a kind of intangible sense of a responsibility."

"There is also, perhaps," laughed Peter, "a kind of intangible sense of a liberty taken. I'm bound to say I think Wildmay was decidedly at his ease. To appropriate in that cool fashion the personality of a total stranger! But artists are the most unprincipled folk unhung. Ils prennent leur bien la, ou ils le trouvent."

"Oh, no," said the Duchessa, "I think she was fair game. One can carry delicacy too far. He was entitled to the benefits of his discovery—for, after all, it was a discovery, was n't it? You have said yourself how indispensable the eye of the beholder is—'the seeing eye.' I think, indeed, the whole affair speaks extremely well for Mr. Wildmay. It is not every man who would be capable of so purely intellectual a passion. I suppose one must call his feeling for her a passion? It indicates a distinction in his nature. He can hardly be a mere materialist. But—but I think it's heart-rending that he never met her."

"Oh, but that's the continuation of the story," said Peter. "He did meet her in the end, you know."

"He did meet her!" cried the Duchessa, starting up, with a sudden access of interest, whilst her eyes lightened. "He did meet her? Oh, you must tell me about that."

And just at this crisis the Cardinal and Emilia appeared, climbing the terrace steps.

"Bother!" exclaimed the Duchessa, under her breath. Then, to Peter, "It will have to be for another time—unless I die of the suspense."

After the necessary greetings were transacted, another elderly priest joined the company; a tall, burly, rather florid man, mentioned, when Peter was introduced to him, as Monsignor Langshawe. "This really is her chaplain," Peter concluded. Then a servant brought tea.

"Ah, Diamond, Diamond, you little know what mischief you might have wrought," he admonished himself, as he walked home through the level sunshine. "In another instant, if we'd not been interrupted, you would have let the cat out of the bag. The premature escape of the cat from the bag would spoil everything."

And he hugged himself, as one snatched from peril, in a qualm of retroactive terror. At the same time he was filled with a kind of exultancy. All that he had hoped had come to pass, and more, vastly more. Not only had he been received as a friend at Ventirose, but he had been encouraged to tell her a part at least of the story by which her life and his were so curiously connected; and he had been snatched from the peril of telling her too much. The day was not yet when he could safely say, "Mutato nomine....." Would the day ever be? But, meanwhile, just to have told her the first ten lines of that story, he could not help feeling, somehow advanced matters tremendously, somehow put a new face on matters.

"The hour for which the ages sighed may not be so far away as you think," he said to Marietta. "The curtain has risen upon Act Three. I fancy I can perceive faint glimmerings of the beginning of the end."

XIX

All that evening, something which he had not been conscious of noticing especially when it was present to him—certainly he had paid no conscious attention to its details—kept recurring and recurring to Peter's memory: the appearance of the prettily-arranged terrace-end at Ventirose: the white awning, with the blue sky at its edges, the sunny park beyond; the warm-hued carpets on the marble pavement; the wicker chairs, with their bright cushions; the table, with its books and bibelots—the yellow French books, a tortoise-shell paperknife, a silver paperweight, a crystal smelling-bottle, a bowlful of drooping poppies; and the marble balustrade, with its delicate tracery of leaves and tendrils, where the jessamine twined round its pillars.

This kept recurring, recurring, vividly, a picture that he could see without closing his eyes, a picture with a very decided sentiment. Like the gay and gleaming many-pinnacled facade of her house, it seemed appropriate to her; it seemed in its fashion to express her. Nay, it seemed to do more. It was a corner of her every-day environment; these things were the companions, the witnesses, of moments of her life, phases of

herself, which were hidden from Peter; they were the companions and witnesses of her solitude, her privacy; they were her confidants, in a way. They seemed not merely to express her, therefore, but to be continually on the point—I had almost said of betraying her. At all events, if he could only understand their silent language, they would prove rich in precious revelations. So he welcomed their recurrences, dwelt upon them, pondered them, and got a deep if somewhat inarticulate pleasure from them.

On Thursday, as he approached the castle, the last fires of sunset were burning in the sky behind it—the long irregular mass of buildings stood out in varying shades of blue, against varying, dying shades of red: the grey stone, dark, velvety indigo; the pink stucco, pink still, but with a transparent blue penumbra over it; the white marble, palely, scintillantly amethystine. And if he was interested in her environment, now he could study it to his heart's content: the wide marble staircase, up which he was shown, with its crimson carpet, and the big mellow painting, that looked as if it might be a Titian, at the top; the great saloon, in which he was received, with its polished mosaic floor, its frescoed ceiling, its white-and-gold panelling, its hangings and upholsteries of yellow brocade, its satinwood chairs and tables, its bronzes, porcelains, embroideries, its screens and mirrors; the long dining-hall, with its high pointed windows, its slender marble columns supporting a vaulted roof, its twinkling candles in chandeliers and sconces of cloudy Venetian glass, its brilliant table, its flowers and their colours and their scents.

He could study her environment to his heart's content, indeed—or to his heart's despair. For all this had rather the effect of chilling, of depressing him. It was very splendid; it was very luxurious and cheerful; it was appropriate and personal to her, if you like; no doubt, in its fashion, in its measure, it, too, expressed her. But, at that rate, it expressed her in an aspect which Peter had instinctively made it his habit to forget, which he by no means found it inspiriting to remember. It expressed, it emphasised, her wealth, her rank; it emphasised the distance, in a worldly sense, between her and himself, the conventional barriers.

And she...

She was very lovely, she was entirely cordial, friendly, she was all that she had ever been—and yet—and yet—Well, somehow, she seemed indefinably different. Somehow, again, the distance, the barriers, were emphasised. She was very lovely, she was entirely cordial, friendly, she was all that she had ever been; but, somehow, to-night, she seemed very much the great lady, very much the duchess....

“My dear man,” he said to himself, “you were mad to dream for a single instant that there was the remotest possibility of anything ever happening.”

The only other guests, besides the Cardinal and Monsignor Langshawe, were an old Frenchwoman, with beautiful white hair, from one of the neighbouring villas, Madame de Lafere, and a young, pretty, witty, and voluble Irishwoman, Mrs. O'Donovan Florence, from an hotel at Spiaggia. In deference, perhaps, to the cloth of the two ecclesiastics, none of the women were in full evening-dress, and there was no arm-taking when they went in to dinner. The dinner itself was of a simplicity which Peter thought admirable, and which, of course, he attributed to his Duchessa's own good taste. He was not yet familiar enough with the Black aristocracy of Italy, to be aware that in the matter of food and drink simplicity is as much the criterion of good form amongst them, as lavish complexity is the criterion of good form amongst the English-imitating Whites.

The conversation, I believe, took its direction chiefly from the initiative of Mrs. O'Donovan Florence. With great sprightliness and humour, and with an astonishing light-hearted courage, she rallied the Cardinal upon the neglect in which her native island was allowed to languish by the powers at Rome. “The most Catholic country in three hemispheres, to be sure,” she said; “every inch of its soil soaked with the blood of martyrs. Yet you've not added an Irish saint to the Calendar for I see you're blushing to think how many ages; and you've taken sides with the heretic Saxon against us in our struggle for Home Rule—which I blame you for, though, being a landowner and a bit of an absentee, I 'm a traitorous Unionist myself.”

The Cardinal laughingly retorted that the Irish were far too fine, too imaginative and poetical a race, to be bothered with material questions of government and administration. They should leave such cares to the stolid, practical English, and devote the leisure they would thus obtain to the further exercise and development of what someone had called “the starfire of the Celtic nature.” Ireland should look upon England as her working-housekeeper. And as for the addition of Irish saints to the Calendar, the stumbling-block was their excessive number. “'T is an embarrassment of riches. If we were once to begin, we could never leave off till we had canonised nine-tenths of the dead population.”

Monsignor Langshawe, at this (making jest the cue for earnest), spoke up for Scotland, and deplored the delay in the beatification of Blessed Mary. “The official beatification,” he discriminated, “for she was beatified in the heart of every true Catholic Scot on the day when Bloody Elizabeth murdered her.”

And Madame de Lafere put in a plea for Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette, and the little Dauphin.

“Blessed Mary—Bloody Elizabeth,” laughed the Duchessa, in an aside to Peter; “here is language to use in the presence of a Protestant Englishman.”

“Oh, I'm accustomed to 'Bloody Elizabeth,'” said he. “Was n't it a word of Cardinal Newman's?”

“Yes, I think so,” said she. “And since every one is naming his candidate; for the Calendar, you have named mine. I think there never was a saintlier saint than Cardinal Newman.”

“What is your Eminence's attitude towards the question of mixed marriages?” Mrs. O'Donovan Florence asked.

Peter pricked up his ears.

“It is not the question of actuality in Italy that it is in England,” his Eminence replied; “but in the abstract, and other things equal, my attitude would of course be one of disapproval.”

“And yet surely,” contended she, “if a pious Catholic girl marries a Protestant man, she has a hundred chances of converting him?”

“I don't know,” said the Cardinal. “Would n't it be safer to let the conversion precede the marriage? Afterwards, I 'm afraid, he would have a hundred chances of inducing her to apostatise, or, at least, of rendering her lukewarm.”

“Not if she had a spark of the true zeal,” said Mrs. O'Donovan Florence. “Any wife can make her husband's life a burden to him, if she will conscientiously lay herself out to do so. The man would be glad to submit, for the sake of peace in his household. I often sigh for the good old days of the Inquisition; but it's still possible, in the blessed seclusion of the family circle, to apply the rack and the thumbscrew in a modified form. I know a dozen fine young Protestant men in London whom I'm labouring to convert, and I feel I 'm defeated only by the circumstance that I'm not in a position to lead them to the altar in the full meaning of the expression.”

“A dozen?” the Cardinal laughed. “Aren't you complicating the question of mixed marriages with that of plural marriage?”

“'T was merely a little Hibernicism, for which I beg your Eminence's indulgence,” laughed she. “But what puts the most spokes in a proselytiser's wheel is the Faith itself. If we only deserved the reputation for sharp practice and double dealing which the Protestants have foisted upon us, it would be roses, roses, all the way. Why are we forbidden to let the end justify the means? And where are those accommodements avec le ciel of which we've heard? We're not even permitted a few poor accommodements avec le monde.”

“Look at my uncle's face,” whispered the Duchessa to Peter. The Cardinal's fine old face was all alight with amusement. “In his fondness for taking things by their humorous end, he has met an affinity.”

“It will be a grand day for the Church and the nations, when we have an Irish Pope,” Mrs. O'Donovan Florence continued. “A good, stalwart, militant Irishman is what's needed to set everything right. With a sweet Irish tongue, he'd win home the wandering sheep; and with a strong Irish arm, he'd drive the wolves from the fold. It's he that would soon sweep the Italians out of Rome.”

“The Italians will soon be swept out of Rome by the natural current of events,” said the Cardinal. “But an Irish bishop of my acquaintance insists that we have already had many Irish Popes, without knowing it. Of all the greatest Popes he cries, 'Surely, they must have had Irish blood.' He's perfectly convinced that Pius the Ninth was Irish. His very name, his family-name, Ferretti, was merely the Irish name, Farrity, Italianised, the good bishop says. No one but an Irishman, he insists, could have been so witty.”

Mrs. O'Donovan Florence looked intensely thoughtful for a moment.... Then, “I 'm trying to think of the original Irish form of Udeschini,” she declared.

At which there was a general laugh.

“When you say 'soon,' Eminence, do you mean that we may hope to see the Italians driven from Rome in our time?” enquired Madame de Lafere.

“They are on the verge of bankruptcy—for their sins,” the Cardinal answered. “When the crash comes—and it can't fail to come before many years—there will necessarily be a readjustment. I do not believe that the conscience of Christendom will again allow Peter to be deprived of his inheritance.”

“God hasten the good day,” said Monsignor Langshawe.

“If I can live to see Rome restored to the Pope, I shall die content, even though I cannot live to see France restored to the King,” said the old Frenchwoman.

“And I—even though I cannot live to see Britain restored to the Faith,” said the Monsignore.

The Duchessa smiled at Peter.

“What a hotbed of Ultramontanes and reactionaries you have fallen into,” she murmured.

“It is exhilarating,” said he, “to meet people who have convictions.”

“Even when you regard their convictions as erroneous?” she asked.

“Yes, even then,” he answered. “But I'm not sure I regard as erroneous the convictions I have heard expressed to-night.”

“Oh—?” she wondered. “Would you like to see Rome restored to the Pope?”

“Yes,” said he, “decidedly—for aesthetic reasons, if for no others.”

“I suppose there are aesthetic reasons,” she assented. “But we, of course, think there are conclusive reasons in mere justice.”

“I don't doubt there are conclusive reasons in mere justice, too,” said he.

After dinner, at the Cardinal's invitation, the Duchessa went to the piano, and played Bach and Scarlatti. Her face, in the soft candlelight, as she discoursed that “luminous, lucid” music, Peter thought... But what do lovers always think of their ladies' faces, when they look up from their pianos, in soft candlelight?

Mrs. O'Donovan Florence, taking her departure, said to the Cardinal, “I owe your Eminence the two proudest days of my life. The first was when I read in the paper that you had received the hat, and I was able to boast to all my acquaintances that I had been in the convent with your niece by marriage. And the second is now, when I can boast forevermore hereafter that I've enjoyed the honour of making my courtesy to you.”

“So,” said Peter, as he walked home through the dew and the starlight of the park, amid the phantom perfumes of the night, “so the Cardinal does n't approve of mixed marriages and, of course, his niece does n't, either. But what can it matter to me? For alas and alas—as he truly said—it's hardly a question of actuality.”

And he lit a cigarette.

XX

“So he did meet her, after all?” the Duchessa said.

“Yes, he met her in the end,” Peter answered.

They were seated under the gay white awning, against the bright perspective of lawn, lake, and mountains, on the terrace at Ventirose, where Peter was paying his dinner-call. The August day was hot and still and

beautiful—a day made of gold and velvet and sweet odours. The Duchessa lay back languidly, among the crisp silk cushions, in her low, lounging chair; and Peter, as he looked at her, told himself that he must be cautious, cautious.

“Yes, he met her in the end,” he said.

“Well—? And then—?” she questioned, with a show of eagerness, smiling into his eyes. “What happened? Did she come up to his expectations? Or was she just the usual disappointment? I have been pining—oh, but pining—to hear the continuation of the story.”

She smiled into his eyes, and his heart fluttered. “I must be cautious,” he told himself. “In more ways than one, this is a crucial moment.” At the same time, as a very part of his caution, he must appear entirely nonchalant and candid.

“Oh, no—tutt' altro,” he said, with an assumption of nonchalant airiness and candid promptness. “She 'better bettered' his expectations—she surpassed his fondest. She was a thousand times more delightful than he had dreamed—though, as you know, he had dreamed a good deal. Pauline de Fleuvieres turned out to be the feeblest, faintest echo of her.”

The Duchessa meditated for an instant.

“It seems impossible. It's one of those situations in which a disenchantment seems the foregone conclusion,” she said, at last.

“It seems so, indeed,” assented Peter; “but disenchantment, there was none. She was all that he had imagined, and infinitely more. She was the substance—he had imagined the shadow. He had divined her, as it were, from a single angle, and there were many angles. Pauline was the pale reflection of one side of her—a pencil-sketch in profile.”

The Duchessa shook her head, marvelling, and smiled again.

“You pile wonder upon wonder,” she said. “That the reality should excel the poet's ideal! That the cloud-capped towers which looked splendid from afar, with all the glamour of distance, should prove to be more splendid still, on close inspection! It's dead against the accepted theory of things. And that any woman should be nicer than that adorable Pauline! You tax belief. But I want to know what happened. Had she read his book?”

“Nothing happened,” said Peter. “I warned you that it was a drama without action. A good deal happened, no doubt, in Wildmay's secret soul. But externally, nothing. They simply chatted together—exchanged the time o' day—like any pair of acquaintances. No, I don't think she had read his book. She did read it afterwards, though.”

“And liked it?”

“Yes—she said she liked it.”

“Well—? But then-?” the Duchessa pressed him, insistently. “When she discovered the part she had had in its composition—? Was n't she overwhelmed? Wasn't she immensely interested—surprised—moved?”

She leaned forward a little. Her eyes were shining. Her lips were slightly parted, so that between their warm rosiness Peter could see the exquisite white line of her teeth. His heart fluttered again. “I must be cautious, cautious,” he remembered, and made a strenuous “act of will” to steady himself.

“Oh, she never discovered that,” he said.

“What!” exclaimed the Duchessa. Her face fell. Her eyes darkened—with dismay, with incomprehension. “Do you—you don't—mean to say that he didn't tell her?” There was reluctance to believe, there was a conditional implication of deep reproach, in her voice.

Peter had to repeat his act of will.

“How could he tell her?” he asked.

She frowned at him, with reproach that was explicit now, and a kind of pained astonishment.

“How could he help telling her?” she cried. “But—but it was the one great fact between them. But it was a fact that intimately concerned her—it was a fact of her own destiny. But it was her right to be told. Do you seriously mean that he did n't tell her? But why did n't he? What could have possessed him?”

There was something like a tremor in her voice. “I must appear entirely nonchalant and candid,” Peter remembered.

“I fancy he was possessed, in some measure, by a sense of the liberty he had taken by a sense of what one might, perhaps, venture to qualify as his 'cheek.' For, if it was n't already a liberty to embody his notion of her in a novel—in a published book, for daws to peck at—it would have become a liberty the moment he informed her that he had done so. That would have had the effect of making her a kind of involuntary particeps criminis.”

“Oh, the foolish man!” sighed the Duchessa, with a rueful shake of the head. “His foolish British self-consciousness! His British inability to put himself in another person's place, to see things from another's point of view! Could n't he see, from her point of view, from any point of view but his own, that it was her right to be told? That the matter affected her in one way, as much as it affected him in another? That since she had influenced—since she had contributed to—his life and his art as she had, it was her right to know it? Couldn't he see that his 'cheek,' his real 'cheek,' began when he withheld from her that great strange chapter of her own history? Oh, he ought to have told her, he ought to have told her.”

She sank back in her chair, giving her head another rueful shake, and gazed ruefully away, over the sunny landscape, through the mellow atmosphere, into the golden-hazy distance.

Peter looked at her—and then, quickly, for caution's sake, looked elsewhere.

“But there were other things to be taken into account,” he said.

The Duchessa raised her eyes. “What other things?” they gravely questioned.

“Would n't his telling her have been equivalent to a declaration of love?” questioned he, looking at the signet-ring on the little finger of his left hand.

“A declaration of love?” She considered for a moment. “Yes, I suppose in a way it would,” she acknowledged. “But even so?” she asked, after another moment of consideration. “Why should he not have made her a declaration of love? He was in love with her, wasn't he?”

The point of frank interrogation in her eyes showed clearly, showed cruelly, how detached, how impersonal, her interest was.

“Frantically,” said Peter. For caution's sake, he kept HIS eyes on the golden-hazy peaks of Monte Sfionto. “He had been in love with her, in a fashion, of course, from the beginning. But after he met her, he fell in love with her anew. His mind, his imagination, had been in love with its conception of her. But now he, the man, loved her, the woman herself, frantically, with just a downright common human love. There were circumstances, however, which made it impossible for him to tell her so.”

“What circumstances?” There was the same frank look of interrogation. “Do you mean that she was married?”

“No, not that. By the mercy of heaven,” he pronounced, with energy, “she was a widow.”

The Duchessa broke into an amused laugh.

“Permit me to admire your piety,” she said.

And Peter, as his somewhat outrageous ejaculation came back to him, laughed vaguely too.

“But then—?” she went on. “What else? By the mercy of heaven, she was a widow. What other circumstance could have tied his tongue?”

“Oh,” he answered, a trifle uneasily, “a multitude of circumstances. Pretty nearly every conventional barrier the world has invented, existed between him and her. She was a frightful swell, for one thing.”

“A frightful swell—?” The Duchessa raised her eyebrows.

“Yes,” said Peter, “at a vertiginous height above him—horribly 'aloft and lone' in the social hierarchy.” He tried to smile.

“What could that matter?” the Duchessa objected simply. “Mr. Wildmay is a gentleman.”

“How do you know he is?” Peter asked, thinking to create a diversion.

“Of course, he is. He must be. No one but a gentleman could have had such an experience, could have written such a book. And besides, he's a friend of yours. Of course he's a gentleman,” returned the adroit Duchessa.

“But there are degrees of gentleness, I believe,” said Peter. “She was at the topmost top. He—well, at all events, he knew his place. He had too much humour, too just a sense of proportion, to contemplate offering her his hand.”

“A gentleman can offer his hand to any woman—under royalty,” said the Duchessa.

“He can, to be sure—and he can also see it declined with thanks,” Peter answered. “But it wasn't merely her rank. She was horribly rich, besides. And then—and then—! There were ten thousand other impediments. But the chief of them all, I daresay, was Wildmay's fear lest an avowal of his attachment should lead to his exile from her presence—and he naturally did not wish to be exiled.”

“Faint heart!” the Duchessa said. “He ought to have told her. The case was peculiar, was unique. Ordinary rules could n't apply to it. And how could he be sure, after all, that she would n't have despised the conventional barriers, as you call them? Every man gets the wife he deserves—and certainly he had gone a long way towards deserving her. She could n't have felt quite indifferent to him—if he had told her; quite indifferent to the man who had drawn that magnificent Pauline from his vision of her. No woman could be entirely proof against a compliment like that. And I insist that it was her right to know. He should simply have told her the story of his book and of her part in it. She would have inferred the rest. He needn't have mentioned love—the word.”

“Well,” said Peter, “it is not always too late to mend. He may tell her some fine day yet.”

And in his soul two voices were contending.

“Tell her—tell her—tell her! Tell her now, at once, and abide your chances,” urged one. “No—no—no—do nothing of the kind,” protested the second. “She is arguing the point for its abstract interest. She is a hundred miles from dreaming that you are the man—hundreds of miles from dreaming that she is the woman. If she had the least suspicion of that, she would sing a song as different as may be. Caution, caution.”

He looked at her—warm and fragrant and radiant, in her soft, white gown, in her low lounging-chair, so near, so near to him—he looked at her glowing eyes, her red lips, her rich brown hair, at the white-and-rose of her skin, at the delicate blue veins in her forehead, at her fine white hands, clasped loosely together in her lap, at the flowing lines of her figure, with its supple grace and strength; and behind her, surrounding her, accessory to her, he was conscious of the golden August world, in the golden August weather—of the green park, and the pure sunshine, and the sweet, still air, of the blue lake, and the blue sky, and the mountains with their dark-blue shadows, of the long marble terrace, and the gleaming marble facade of the house, and the marble balustrade, with the jessamine twining round its columns. The picture was very beautiful—but something was wanting to perfect its beauty; and the name of the something that was wanting sang itself in poignant iteration to the beating of his pulses. And he longed and longed to tell her; and he dared not; and he hesitated....

And while he was hesitating, the pounding of hoofs and the grinding of carriage-wheels on gravel reached his ears—and so the situation was saved, or the opportunity lost, as you choose to think it. For next minute a servant appeared on the terrace, and announced Mrs. O'Donovan Florence.

And shortly after that lady's arrival, Peter took his leave.

XXI

“Well, Trixie, and is one to congratulate you?” asked Mrs. O'Donovan Florence.

“Congratulate me—? On what?” asked Beatrice.

“On what, indeed!” cried the vivacious Irishwoman. “Don't try to pull the wool over the eyes of an old campaigner like me.”

Beatrice looked blank.

“I can't in the least think what you mean,” she said.

“Get along with you,” cried Mrs. O'Donovan Florence; and she brandished her sunshade threateningly. “On your engagement to Mr.—what's this his name is?—to be sure.”

She glanced indicatively down the lawn, in the direction of Peter's retreating tweeds.

Beatrice had looked blank. But now she looked—first, perhaps, for a tiny fraction of a second, startled—then gently, compassionately ironical.

“My poor Kate! Are you out of your senses?” she enquired, in accents of concern, nodding her head, with a feint of pensive pity.

“Not I,” returned Mrs. O'Donovan Florence, cheerfully confident. “But I 'm thinking I could lay my finger on a long-limbed young Englishman less than a mile from here, who very nearly is. Hasn't he asked you yet?”

“Es-to bete?” Beatrice murmured, pitifully nodding again.

“Ah, well, if he has n't, it's merely a question of time when he will,” said Mrs. O'Donovan Florence. “You've only to notice the famished gaze with which he devours you, to see his condition. But don't try to hoodwink me. Don't pretend that this is news to you.”

“News!” scoffed Beatrice. “It's news and nonsense—the product of your irrepressible imagination. Mr. What's-this-his-name-is, as you call him, and I are the barest acquaintances. He's our temporary neighbour—the tenant for the season of Villa Floriano—the house you can catch a glimpse of, below there, through the trees, on the other side of the river.”

“Is he, now, really? And that's very interesting too. But I wasn't denying it.” Mrs. O'Donovan Florence smiled, with derisive sweetness. “The fact of his being the tenant of the house I can catch a glimpse of, through the trees, on the other side of the river, though a valuable acquisition to my stores of knowledge, does n't explain away his famished glance unless, indeed, he's behind with the rent: but even then, it's not famished he'd look, but merely anxious and persuasive. I'm a landlord myself. No, Trixie, dear, you've made roast meat of the poor fellow's heart, as the poetical Persians express it; and if he has n't told you so yet with his tongue, he tells the whole world so with his eyes as often as he allows them to rest on their loadstone, your face. You can see the sparks and the smoke escaping from them, as though they were chimneys. If you've not observed that for yourself, it can only be that excessive modesty has rendered you blind. The man is head over ears in love with you. Nonsense or bonsense, that is the sober truth.”

Beatrice laughed.

“I 'm sorry to destroy a romance, Kate,” she said; “but alas for the pretty one you 've woven, I happen to know that, so far from being in love with me, Mr. Marchdale is quite desperately in love with another woman. He was talking to me about her the moment before you arrived.”

“Was he, indeed?—and you the barest acquaintances!” quizzed Mrs. O'Donovan Florence, pulling a face. “Well, well,” she went on thoughtfully, “if he's in love with another woman, that settles my last remaining doubt. It can only be that the other woman's yourself.”

Beatrice shook her head, and laughed again.

“Is that what they call an Irishism?” she asked, with polite curiosity.

“And an Irishism is a very good thing, too—when employed with intention,” retorted her friend. “Did he just chance, now, in a casual way, to mention the other woman's name, I wonder?”

“Oh, you perverse and stiff-necked generation!” Beatrice laughed. “What can his mentioning or not mentioning her name signify? For since he's in love with her, it's hardly likely that he's in love with you or me at the same time, is it?”

“That's as may be. But I'll wager I could make a shrewd guess at her name myself. And what else did he tell you about her? He's told me nothing; but I'll warrant I could paint her portrait. She's a fine figure of a young Englishwoman, brown-haired, grey-eyed, and she stands about five-feet-eight in her shoes. There's an expression of great malice and humour in her physiognomy, and a kind of devil-may-care haughtiness in the poise of her head. She's a bit of a grande dame, into the bargain—something like an Anglo-Italian duchess, for example; she's monstrously rich; and she adds, you'll be surprised to learn, to her other fascinations that of being a widow. Faith, the men are so fond of widows, it's a marvel to me that we're ever married at all until we reach that condition;—and there, if you like, is another Irishism for you. But what's this? Methinks a rosy blush mantles my lady's brow. Have I touched the heel of Achilles? She IS a widow? He TOLD you she was a widow?... But—bless us and save us!—what's come to you now? You're as white as a sheet. What is it?”

“Good heavens!” gasped Beatrice. She lay back in her chair, and stared with horrified eyes into space. “Good—good heavens!”

Mrs. O' Donovan Florence leaned forward and took her hand.

“What is it, my dear? What's come to you?” she asked, in alarm.

Beatrice gave a kind of groan.

“It's absurd—it's impossible,” she said; “and yet, if by any ridiculous chance you should be right, it's too horribly horrible.” She repeated her groan. “If by any ridiculous chance you are right, the man will think that I have been leading him on!”

“LEADING HIM ON!” Mrs. O'Donovan Florence suppressed a shriek of ecstatic mirth. “There's no question

about my being right," she averred soberly. "He wears his heart behind his eyeglass; and whoso runs may read it."

"Well, then—" began Beatrice, with an air of desperation... "But no," she broke off. "YOU CAN'T be right. It's impossible, impossible. Wait. I'll tell you the whole story. You shall see for yourself."

"Go on," said Mrs. O'Donovan Florence, assuming an attitude of devout attention, which she retained while Beatrice (not without certain starts and hesitations) recounted the fond tale of Peter's novel, and of the woman who had suggested the character of Pauline.

"But OF COURSE!" cried the Irishwoman, when the tale was finished; and this time her shriek of mirth, of glee, was not suppressed. "Of course—you miracle of unsuspecting innocence! The man would never have breathed a whisper of the affair to any soul alive, save to his heroine herself—let alone to you, if you and she were not the same. Couple that with the eyes he makes at you, and you've got assurance twice assured. You ought to have guessed it from the first syllable he uttered. And when he went on about her exalted station and her fabulous wealth! Oh, my ingenue! Oh, my guileless lambkin! And you Trixie Belfont! Where's your famous wit? Where are your famous intuitions?"

"BUT DON'T YOU SEE," wailed Beatrice, "don't you see the utterly odious position this leaves me in? I've been urging him with all my might to tell her! I said... oh, the things I said!" She shuddered visibly. "I said that differences of rank and fortune could n't matter." She gave a melancholy laugh. "I said that very likely she'd accept him. I said she couldn't help being... Oh, my dear, my dear! He'll think—of course, he can't help thinking—that I was encouraging him—that I was coming halfway to meet him."

"Hush, hush! It's not so bad as that," said Mrs. O'Donovan Florence, soothingly. "For surely, as I understand it, the man doesn't dream that you knew it was about himself he was speaking. He always talked of the book as by a friend of his; and you never let him suspect that you had pierced his subterfuge."

Beatrice frowned for an instant, putting this consideration in its place, in her troubled mind. Then suddenly a light of intense, of immense relief broke in her face.

"Thank goodness!" she sighed. "I had forgotten. No, he does n't dream that. But oh, the fright I had!"

"He'll tell you, all the same," said Mrs. O'Donovan Florence.

"No, he'll never tell me now. I am forewarned, forearmed. I 'll give him no chance," Beatrice answered.

"Yes; and what's more, you'll marry him," said her friend.

"Kate! Don't descend to imbecilities," cried Beatrice.

"You'll marry him," reiterated Mrs. O'Donovan Florence, calmly. "You'll end by marrying him—if you're human; and I've seldom known a human being who was more so. It's not in flesh and blood to remain unmoved by a tribute such as that man has paid you. The first thing you'll do will be to re-read the novel. Otherwise, I'd request the loan of it myself, for I 'm naturally curious to compare the wrought ring with the virgin gold—but I know it's the wrought ring the virgin gold will itself be wanting, directly it's alone. And then the poison will work. And you'll end by marrying him."

"In the first place," replied Beatrice, firmly, "I shall never marry any one. That is absolutely certain. In the next place, I shall not re-read the novel; and to prove that I shan't, I shall insist on your taking it with you when you leave to-day. And finally, I'm nowhere near convinced that you're right about my being... well, you might as well say the raw material, the rough ore, as the virgin gold. It's only a bare possibility. But even the possibility had not occurred to me before. Now that it has, I shall be on my guard. I shall know how to prevent any possible developments."

"In the first place," said Mrs. O'Donovan Florence, with equal firmness, "wild horses couldn't induce me to take the novel. Wait till you're alone. A hundred questions about it will come flocking to your mind; you'd be miserable if you had n't it to refer to. In the next place, the poison will work and work. Say what you will, it's flattery that wins us. In the third place, he'll tell you. Finally, you'll make a good Catholic of him, and marry him. It's absurd, it's iniquitous, anyhow, for a young and beautiful woman like you to remain a widow. And your future husband is a man of talent and distinction, and he's not bad-looking, either. Will you stick to your title, now, I wonder? Or will you step down, and be plain Mrs. Marchdale? No—the Honourable Mrs.—excuse me—'Mr. and the Honourable Mrs. Marchdale.' I see you in the 'Morning Post' already. And will you continue to live in Italy? Or will you come back to England?"

"Oh, my good Kate, my sweet Kate, my incorrigible Kate, what an extravagantly silly Kate you can be when the mood takes you," Beatrice laughed.

"Kate me as many Kates as you like, the man is really not bad-looking. He has a nice lithe springy figure, and a clean complexion, and an open brow. And if there's a suggestion of superciliousness in the tilt of his nose, of scepticism in the twirl of his moustaches, and of obstinacy in the squareness of his chin—ma foi, you must take the bitter with the sweet. Besides, he has decent hair, and plenty of it—he'll not go bald. And he dresses well, and wears his clothes with an air. In short, you'll make a very handsome couple. Anyhow, when your family are gathered round the evening lamp to-night, I 'll stake my fortune on it, but I can foretell the name of the book they'll find Trixie Belfont reading," laughed Mrs. O'Donovan Florence.

For a few minutes, after her friend had left her, Beatrice sat still, her head resting on her hand, and gazed with fixed eyes at Monte Sfiorito. Then she rose, and walked briskly backwards and forwards, for a while, up and down the terrace. Presently she came to a standstill, and leaning on the balustrade, while one of her feet kept lightly tapping the pavement, looked off again towards the mountain.

The prospect was well worth her attention, with its blue and green and gold, its wood and water, its misty-blushing snows, its spaciousness and its atmosphere. In the sky a million fluffy little cloudlets floated like a flock of fantastic birds, with mother-of-pearl tinted plumage. The shadows were lengthening now. The sunshine glanced from the smooth surface of the lake as from burnished metal, and falling on the coloured sails of the fishing-boats, made them gleam like sails of crimson silk. But I wonder how much of this Beatrice really saw.

She plucked an oleander from one of the tall marble urns set along the balustrade, and pressed the pink blossom against her face, and, closing her eyes, breathed in its perfume; then, absent-minded, she let it drop,

over the terrace, upon the path below.

“It's impossible,” she said suddenly, aloud. At last she went into the house, and up to her rose-and-white retiring-room. There she took a book from the table, and sank into a deep easy-chair, and began to turn the pages.

But when, by and by, approaching footsteps became audible in the stone-floored corridor without, Beatrice hastily shut the book, thrust it back upon the table, and caught up another so that Emilia Manfredi, entering, found her reading Monsieur Anatole France's “Etui de nacre.”

“Emilia,” she said, “I wish you would translate the I Jongleur de Notre Dame' into Italian.”

XXII

Peter, we may suppose, returned to Villa Floriano that afternoon in a state of some excitement.

“He ought to have told her—”

“It was her right to be told—”

“What could her rank matter—”

“A gentleman can offer his hand to any woman—”

“She would have despised the conventional barriers—”

“No woman could be proof against such a compliment—”

“The case was peculiar—ordinary rules could not apply to it—”

“Every man gets the wife he deserves—and he had certainly gone a long way towards deserving her—”

“He should simply have told her the story of his book and of her part in it—he need n't have mentioned love—she would have understood—”

The Duchessa's voice, clear and cool and crisp-cut, sounded perpetually in his ears; the words she had spoken, the arguments she had urged, repeated and repeated themselves, danced round and round, in his memory.

“Ought I to have told her—then and there? Shall I go to her and tell her to-morrow?”

He tried to think; but he could not think. His faculties were in a whirl—he could by no means command them. He could only wait, inert, while the dance went on. It was an extremely riotous dance. The Duchessa's conversation was reproduced without sequence, without coherence—scattered fragments of it were flashed before him fitfully, in swift disorder. If he would attempt to seize upon one of those fragments, to detain and fix it, for consideration—a speech of hers, a look, an inflection—then the whole experience suddenly lost its outlines, his recollection of it became a jumble, and he was left, as it were, intellectually gasping.

He walked about his garden, he went into the house, he came out, he walked about again, he went in and dressed for dinner, he sat on his rustic bench, he smoked cigarette after cigarette.

“Ought I to have told her? Ought I to tell her to-morrow?”

At moments there would come a lull in the turmoil, an interval of quiet, of apparent clearness; and the answer would seem perfectly plain.

“Of course, you ought to tell her. Tell her—and all will be well. She has put herself in the supposititious woman's place, and she says, 'He ought to tell her.' She says it earnestly, vehemently. That means that if she were the woman, she would wish to be told. She will despise the conventional barriers—she will be touched, she will be moved. 'No woman could be proof against such a compliment.' Go to her to-morrow, and tell her—and all will be well.”

At these moments he would look up towards the castle, and picture the morrow's consummation; and his heart would have a convulsion. Imagination flew on the wings of his desire. She stood before him in all her sumptuous womanhood, tender and strong and glowing. As he spoke, her eyes lightened, her eyes burned, the blood came and went in her cheeks; her lips parted. Then she whispered something; and his heart leapt terribly; and he called her name—“Beatrice! Beatrice!” Her name expressed the inexpressible—the adoring passion, the wild hunger and wild triumph of his soul. But now she was moving towards him—she was holding out her hands. He caught her in his arms—he held her yielding body in his arms. And his heart leapt terribly, terribly. And he wondered how he could endure, how he could live through, the hateful hours that must elapse before tomorrow would be to-day.

But “hearts, after leaps, ache.” Presently the whirl would begin again; and then, by and by, in another lull, a contrary answer would seem equally plain.

“Tell her, indeed? My dear man, are you mad? She would simply be amazed, struck dumb, by your presumption. I can see from here her incredulity—I can see the scorn with which she would wither you. It has never dimly occurred to her as conceivable that you would venture to be in love with her, that you would dare to lift your eyes to her—you who are nothing, to her who is all. Yes—nothing, nobody. In her view, you are just a harmless nobody, whose society she tolerates for kindness' sake—and faute de mieux. It is precisely because she deems you a nobody—because she is profoundly conscious of the gulf that separates you from her—that she can condescend to be amiably familiar. If you were of a rank even remotely approximating to her own, she would be a thousand times more circumspect. Remember—she does not dream that you are Felix Wildmay. He is a mere name to her; and his story is an amusing little romance, perfectly external to herself, which she discusses with entirely impersonal interest. Tell her by all means, if you like Say, 'I am Wildmay—you are Pauline.' And see how amazed she will be, and how incensed, and how indignant.”

Then he would look up at the castle stonily, in a mood of desperate renunciation, and vaguely meditate packing his belongings, and going home to England.

At other moments a third answer would seem the plain one: something between these extremes of optimism and pessimism, a compromise, it not a reconciliation.

“Come! Let us be calm, let us be judicial. The consequences of our actions, here below, if hardly ever so good as we could hope, are hardly ever so bad as we might fear. Let us regard this matter in the light of that guiding principle. True, she does n't dream that you are Wildmay. True, if you were abruptly to say to her, 'I am Wildmay—you are the woman,' she would be astonished—even, if you will, at first, more or less taken aback, disconcerted. But indignant? Why? What is this gulf that separates you from her? What are these conventional barriers of which you make so much? She is a duchess, she is the daughter of a lord, and she is rich. Well, all that is to be regretted. But you are neither a plebeian nor a pauper yourself. You are a man of good birth, you are a man of some parts, and you have a decent income. It amounts to this—she is a great lady, you are a small gentleman. In ordinary circumstances, to be sure, so small a gentleman could not ask so great a lady to become his wife. But here the circumstances are not ordinary. Destiny has meddled in the business. Small gentleman though you are, an unusual and subtle relation-ship has been established between you and your great lady. She herself says, 'Ordinary rules cannot apply—he ought to tell her.' Very good: tell her. She will be astonished, but she will see that there is no occasion for resentment. And though the odds are, of course, a hundred to one that she will not accept you, still she must treat you as an honourable suitor. And whether she accepts you or rejects you, it is better to tell her and to have it over, than to go on forever dangling this way, like the poor cat in the adage. Tell her—put your fate to the touch—hope nothing, fear nothing—and bow to the event.”

But even this temperate answer provoked its counter-answer.

“The odds are a hundred to one, a thousand to one, that she will not accept you. And if you tell her, and she does not accept you, she will not allow you to see her any more, you will be exiled from her presence. And I thought, you did not wish to be exiled from her presence, You would stake, then, this great privilege, the privilege of seeing her, of knowing her, upon a. chance that has a thousand to one against it. You make light of the conventional barriers—but the principal barrier of them all, you are forgetting. She is a Roman Catholic, and a devout one. Marry a Protestant? She would as soon think of marrying a Paynim Turk.”

In the end, no doubt, a kind of exhaustion followed upon his excitement. Questions and answers suspended themselves; and he could only look up towards Ventirose, and dumbly wish that he was there. The distance was so trifling—in five minutes he could traverse it—the law seemed absurd and arbitrary, which condemned him to sit apart, free only to look and wish.

It was in this condition of mind that Marietta found him, when she came to announce dinner.

Peter gave himself a shake. The sight of the brown old woman, with her homely, friendly face, brought him back to small things, to actual things; and that, if it was n't a comfort, was, at any rate, a relief.

“Dinner?” he questioned. “Do peris at the gates of Eden DINE?”

“The soup is on the table,” said Marietta.

He rose, casting a last glance towards the castle.

Towers and battlements...
Bosomed high in tufted trees,
Where perhaps some beauty lies,
The cynosure of neighbouring eyes.”

He repeated the lines in an undertone, and went in to dinner. And then the restorative spirit of nonsense descended upon him.

“Marietta,” he asked, “what is your attitude towards the question of mixed marriages?”

Marietta wrinkled her brow.

“Mixed marriages? What is that, Signorino?”

“Marriages between Catholics and Protestants,” he explained.

“Protestants?” Her brow was still a network. “What things are they?”

“They are things—or perhaps it would be less invidious to say people—who are not Catholics—who repudiate Catholicism as a deadly and soul-destroying error.”

“Jews?” asked Marietta.

“No—not exactly. They are generally classified as Christians. But they protest, you know. Protesto, protestare, verb, active, first conjugation. 'Mi pare che la donna protesta troppo,' as the poet sings. They're Christians, but they protest against the Pope and the Pretender.”

“The Signorino means Freemasons,” said Marietta.

“No, he does n't,” said Peter. “He means Protestants.”

“But pardon, Signorino,” she insisted; “if they are not Catholics, they must be Freemasons or Jews. They cannot be Christians. Christian—Catholic: it is the same. All Christians are Catholics.”

“Tu quoque!” he cried. “You regard the terms as interchangeable? I 've heard the identical sentiment similarly enunciated by another. Do I look like a Freemason?”

She bent her sharp old eyes upon him studiously for a moment. Then she shook her head.

“No,” she answered slowly. “I do not think that the Signorino looks like a Freemason.”

“A Jew, then?”

“Mache! A Jew? The Signorino!” She shrugged derision.

“And yet I'm what they call a Protestant,” he said.

“No,” said she.

“Yes,” said he. “I refer you to my sponsors in baptism. A regular, true blue moderate High Churchman and Tory, British and Protestant to the backbone, with 'Frustrate their Popish tricks' writ large all over me. You

have never by any chance married a Protestant yourself?" he asked.

"No, Signorino. I have never married any one. But it was not for the lack of occasions. Twenty, thirty young men courted me when I was a girl. But—mica!—I would not look at them. When men are young they are too unsteady for husbands; when they are old they have the rheumatism."

"Admirably philosophised," he approved. "But it sometimes happens that men are neither young nor old. There are men of thirty-five—I have even heard that there are men of forty. What of them?"

"There is a proverb, Signorino, which says, Sposi di quarant' anni son mai sempre tiranni," she informed him.

"For the matter of that," he retorted, "there is a proverb which says, Love laughs at locksmiths."

"Non capisco," said Marietta.

"That's merely because it's English," said he. "You'd understand fast enough if I should put it in Italian. But I only quoted it to show the futility of proverbs. Laugh at locksmiths, indeed! Why, it can't even laugh at such an insignificant detail as a Papist's prejudices. But I wish I were a duke and a millionaire. Do you know any one who could create me a duke and endow me with a million?"

"No, Signorino," she answered, shaking her head.

"Fragrant Cytherea, foam-born Venus, deathless Aphrodite, cannot, goddess though she is," he complained. "The fact is, I 'm feeling rather undone. I think I will ask you to bring me a bottle of Asti-spumante—some of the dry kind, with the white seal. I 'll try to pretend that it's champagne. To tell or not to tell—that is the question.

'A face to lose youth for, to occupy age
With the dream of, meet death with—

And yet, if you can believe me, the man who penned those lines had never seen her. He penned another line equally pat to the situation, though he had never seen me, either

'Is there no method to tell her in Spanish?"

But you can't imagine how I detest that vulgar use of 'pen' for 'write'—as if literature were a kind of pig. However, it's perhaps no worse than the use of Asti for champagne. One should n't be too fastidious. I must really try to think of some method of telling her in Spanish."

Marietta went to fetch the Asti.

XXIII

When Peter rose next morning, he pulled a grimace at the departed night.

"You are a detected cheat," he cried, "an unmasked impostor. You live upon your reputation as a counsellor—'tis the only reason why we bear with you. La nuit porte conseil! Yet what counsel have you brought to me?—and I at the pass where my need is uttermost. Shall I go to her this afternoon, and unburden my soul—or shall I not? You have left me where you found me—in the same fine, free, and liberal state of vacillation. Discredited oracle!"

He was standing before his dressing-table, brushing his hair. The image in the glass frowned back at him. Then something struck him.

"At all events, we'll go this morning to Spiaggia, and have our hair cut," he resolved.

So he walked to the village, and caught the ten o'clock omnibus for Spiaggia. And after he had had his hair cut, he went to the Hotel de Russie, and lunched in the garden. And after luncheon, of course, he entered the grounds of the Casino, and strolled backwards and forwards, one of a merry procession, on the terrace by the lakeside. The gay toilets of the women, their bright-coloured hats and sunshades, made the terrace look like a great bank of monstrous moving flowers. The band played brisk accompaniments to the steady babble of voices, Italian, English, German. The pure air was shot with alien scents—the women's perfumery, the men's cigarette-smoke. The marvellous blue waters crisped in the breeze, and sparkled in the sun; and the smooth snows of Monte Sfiorito loomed so near, one felt one could almost put out one's stick and scratch one's name upon them.... And here, as luck would have it, Peter came face to face with Mrs. O'Donovan Florence.

"How do you do?" said she, offering her hand.

"How do you do?" said he.

"It's a fine day," said she.

"Very," said he.

"Shall I make you a confidence?" she asked.

"Do," he answered.

"Are you sure I can trust you?" She scanned his face dubiously.

"Try it and see," he urged.

"Well, then, if you must know, I was thirsting to take a table and call for coffee; but having no man at hand to chaperon me, I dared not."

"Je vous en prie," cried Peter, with a gesture of gallantry; and he led her to one of the round marble tables. "Due caffe," he said to the brilliant creature (chains, buckles, ear-rings, of silver filigree, and head-dress and apron of flame-red silk) who came to learn their pleasure.

"Softly, softly," put in Mrs. O'Donovan Florence. "Not a drop of coffee for me. An orange-sherbet, if you

please. Coffee was a figure of speech—a generic term for light refreshments."

Peter laughed, and amended his order.

"Do you see those three innocent darlings playing together, under the eye of their governess, by the Wellingtonia yonder?" enquired the lady.

"The little girl in white and the two boys?" asked Peter.

"Precisely," said she. "Such as they are, they're me own."

"Really?" he responded, in the tone of profound and sympathetic interest we are apt to affect when parents begin about their children.

"I give you my word for it," she assured him. "But I mention the fact, not in a spirit of boastfulness, but merely to show you that I 'm not entirely alone and unprotected. There's an American at our hotel, by the bye, who goes up and down telling every one who'll listen that it ought to be Washingtonia, and declaiming with tears in his eyes against the arrogance of the English in changing Washington to Wellington. As he's a respectable-looking man with grown-up daughters, I should think very likely he's right."

"Very likely," said Peter. "It's an American tree, is n't it?"

"Whether it is n't or whether it is," said she, "one thing is undeniable: you English are the coldest-blooded animals south of the Arctic Circle."

"Oh—? Are we?" he doubted.

"You are that," she affirmed, with sorrowing emphasis.

"Ah, well," he reflected, "the temperature of our blood does n't matter. We're, at any rate, notoriously warm-hearted."

"Are you indeed?" she exclaimed. "If you are, it's a mighty quiet kind of notoriety, let me tell you, and a mighty cold kind of warmth."

Peter laughed.

"You're all for prudence and expediency. You're the slaves of your reason. You're dominated by the head, not by the heart. You're little better than calculating-machines. Are you ever known, now, for instance, to risk earth and heaven, and all things between them, on a sudden unthinking impulse?"

"Not often, I daresay," he admitted.

"And you sit there as serene as a brazen statue, and own it without a quaver," she reproached him.

"Surely," he urged, "in my character of Englishman, it behooves me to appear smug and self-satisfied?"

"You're right," she agreed. "I wonder," she continued, after a moment's pause, during which her eyes looked thoughtful, "I wonder whether you would fall upon and annihilate a person who should venture to offer you a word of well-meant advice."

"I should sit as serene as a brazen statue, and receive it without a quaver," he promised.

"Well, then," said she, leaning forward a little, and dropping her voice, "why don't you take your courage in both hands, and ask her?"

Peter stared.

"Be guided by me—and do it," she said.

"Do what?" he puzzled.

"Ask her to marry you, of course," she returned amiably. Then, without allowing him time to shape an answer, "Touche!" she cried, in triumph. "I 've brought the tell-tale colour to your cheek. And you a brazen statue! 'They do not love who do not show their love.' But, in faith, you show yours to any one who'll be at pains to watch you. Your eyes betray you as often as ever you look at her. I had n't observed you for two minutes by the clock, when I knew your secret as well as if you 'd chosen me for your confessor. But what's holding you back? You can't expect her to do the proposing. Now curse me for a meddlesome Irishwoman, if you will—but why don't you throw yourself at her feet, and ask her, like a man?"

"How can I?" said Peter, abandoning any desire he may have felt to beat about the bush. Nay, indeed, it is very possible he welcomed, rather than resented, the Irishwoman's meddling.

"What's to prevent you?" said she.

"Everything," said he.

"Everything is nothing. That?"

"Dear lady! She is hideously rich, for one thing."

"Getaway with you!" was the dear lady's warm expostulation. "What has money to do with the question, if a man's in love? But that's the English of it—there you are with your cold-blooded calculation. You chain up your natural impulses as if they were dangerous beasts. Her money never saved you from succumbing to her enchantments. Why should it bar you from declaring your passion."

"There's a sort of tendency in society," said Peter, "to look upon the poor man who seeks the hand of a rich woman as a fortunehunter."

"A fig for the opinion of society," she cried. "The only opinion you should consider is the opinion of the woman you adore. I was an heiress myself; and when Teddy O'Donovan proposed to me, upon my conscience I believe the sole piece of property he possessed in the world was a corkscrew. So much for her ducats!"

Peter laughed.

"Men, after coffee, are frequently in the habit of smoking," said she. "You have my sanction for a cigarette. It will keep you in countenance."

"Thank you," said Peter, and lit his cigarette.

"And surely, it's a countenance you'll need, to be going on like that about her money. However—if you can find a ray of comfort in the information—small good will her future husband get of it, even if he is a fortunehunter: for she gives the bulk of it away in charity, and I 'm doubtful if she keeps two thousand a year

for her own spending.”

“Really?” said Peter; and for a breathing-space it seemed to him that there was a ray of comfort in the information.

“Yes, you may rate her at two thousand a year,” said Mrs. O'Donovan Florence. “I suppose you can match that yourself. So the disparity disappears.”

The ray of comfort had flickered for a second, and gone out.

“There are unfortunately other disparities,” he remarked gloomily.

“Put a name on them,” said she.

“There's her rank.”

His impetuous adviser flung up a hand of scorn.

“Her rank, do you say?” she cried. “To the mischief with her rank. What's rank to love? A woman is only a woman, whether she calls herself a duchess or a dairy-maid. A woman with any spirit would marry a bank manager, if she loved him. A man's a man. You should n't care that for her rank.”

“That,” was a snap of Mrs. O' Donovan Florence's fingers.

“I suppose you know,” said Peter, “that I am a Protestant.”

“Are you—you poor benighted creature? Well, that's easily remedied. Go and get yourself baptised directly.”

She waved her hand towards the town, as if to recommend his immediate procedure in quest of a baptistery.

Peter laughed again.

“I 'm afraid that's more easily said than done.”

“Easy!” she exclaimed. “Why, you've only to stand still and let yourself be sprinkled. It's the priest who does the work. Don't tell me,” she added, with persuasive inconsequence, “that you'll allow a little thing like being in love with a woman to keep you back from professing the true faith.”

“Ah, if I were convinced that it is true,” he sighed, still laughing.

“What call have you to doubt it? And anyhow, what does it matter whether you 're convinced or not? I remember, when I was a school-girl, I never was myself convinced of the theorems of Euclid; but I professed them gladly, for the sake of the marks they brought; and the eternal verities of mathematics remained unshaken by my scepticism.”

“Your reasoning is subtle,” laughed Peter. “But the worst of it is, if I were ten times a Catholic, she wouldn't have me. So what's the use?”

“You never can tell whether a woman will have you or not, until you offer yourself. And even if she refuses you, is that a ground for despair? My own husband asked me three times, and three times I said no. And then he took to writing verses—and I saw there was but one way to stop him. So we were married. Ask her; ask her again—and again. You can always resort in the end to versification. And now,” the lady concluded, rising, “I have spoken, and I leave you to your fate. I'm obliged to return to the hotel, to hold a bed of justice. It appears that my innocent darlings, beyond there, innocent as they look, have managed among them to break the electric light in my sitting-room. They're to be arraigned before me at three for an instruction criminelle. Put what I 've said in your pipe, and smoke it—'tis a mother's last request. If I 've not succeeded in determining you, don't pretend, at least, that I haven't encouraged you a bit. Put what I 've said in your pipe, and see whether, by vigorous drawing, you can't fan the smouldering fires of encouragement into a small blaze of determination.”

Peter resumed his stroll backwards and forwards by the lakeside. Encouragement was all very well; but... “Shall I—shall I not? Shall I—shall I not? Shall I—shall I not?” The eternal question went tick-tack, tick-tack, to the rhythm of his march. He glared at vacancy, and tried hard to make up his mind.

“I'm afraid I must be somewhat lacking in decision of character,” he said, with pathetic wonder.

Then suddenly he stamped his foot.

“Come! An end to this tergiversation. Do it. Do it,” cried his manlier soul.

“I will,” he resolved all at once, drawing a deep breath, and clenching his fists.

He left the Casino, and set forth to walk to Ventirose. He could not wait for the omnibus, which would not leave till four. He must strike while his will was hot.

He walked rapidly; in less than an hour he had reached the tall gilded grille of the park. He stopped for an instant, and looked up the straight avenue of chestnuts, to the western front of the castle, softly alight in the afternoon sun. He put his hand upon the pendent bell-pull of twisted iron, to summon the porter. In another second he would have rung, he would have been admitted.... And just then one of the little demons that inhabit the circumambient air, called his attention to an aspect of the situation which he had not thought of.

“Wait a bit,” it whispered in his ear. “You were there only yesterday. It can't fail, therefore, to seem extraordinary, your calling again to-day. You must be prepared with an excuse, an explanation. But suppose, when you arrive, suppose that (like the lady in the ballad) she greets you with 'a glance of cold surprise'—what then, my dear? Why, then, it's obvious, you can't allege the true explanation—can you? If she greets you with a glance of cold, surprise, you 'll have your answer, as it were, before the fact you 'll know that there's no manner of hope for you; and the time for passionate avowals will automatically defer itself. But then—? How will you justify your visit? What face can you put on?”

“H'm,” assented Peter, “there's something in that.”

“There's a great deal in that,” said the demon. “You must have an excuse up your sleeve, a pretext. A true excuse is a fine thing in its way; but when you come to a serious emergency, an alternative false excuse is indispensable.”

“H'm,” said Peter.

However, if there are demons in the atmosphere, there are gods in the machine—(“Paraschkine even goes so far as to maintain that there are more gods in the machine than have ever been taken from it.”) While Peter stood still, pondering the demon's really rather cogent intervention, his eye was caught by something that glittered in the grass at the roadside.

“The Cardinal's snuff-box,” he exclaimed, picking it up.

The Cardinal had dropped his snuff-box. Here was an excuse, and to spare. Peter rang the bell.

XXIV

And, like the lady in the ballad, sure enough, she greeted his arrival with a glance of cold surprise.

At all events, eyebrows raised, face unsmiling, it was a glance that clearly supplemented her spoken “How do you do?” by a tacit (perhaps self-addressed?) “What can bring him here?”

You or I, indeed, or Mrs. O'Donovan Florence, in the fulness of our knowledge, might very likely have interpreted it rather as a glance of nervous apprehension. Anyhow, it was a glance that perfectly checked the impetus of his intent. Something snapped and gave way within him; and he needed no further signal that the occasion for passionate avowals was not the present.

And thereupon befell a scene that was really quite too absurd, that was really childish, a scene over the memory of which, I must believe, they themselves have sometimes laughed together; though, at the moment, its absurdity held, for him at least, elements of the tragic.

He met her in the broad gravelled carriage-sweep, before the great hall-door. She had on her hat and gloves, as if she were just going out. It seemed to him that she was a little pale; her eyes seemed darker than usual, and graver. Certainly—cold surprise, or nervous apprehension, as you will—her attitude was by no means cordial. It was not oncoming. It showed none of her accustomed easy, half-humorous, wholly good-humoured friendliness. It was decidedly the attitude of a person standing off, shut in, withheld.

“I have never seen her in the least like this before,” he thought, as he looked at her pale face, her dark, grave eyes; “I have never seen her more beautiful. And there is not one single atom of hope for me.”

“How do you do?” she said, unsmiling and waited, as who should invite him to state his errand. She did not offer him her hand but, for that matter, (she might have pleaded), she could not, very well: for one of her hands held her sunshade, and the other held an embroidered silk bag, woman's makeshift for a pocket.

And then, capping the first pang of his disappointment, a kind of anger seized him. After all, what right had she to receive him in this fashion?—as if he were an intrusive stranger. In common civility, in common justice, she owed it to him to suppose that he would not be there without abundant reason.

And now, with Peter angry, the absurd little scene began.

Assuming an attitude designed to be, in its own way, as reticent as hers, “I was passing your gate,” he explained, “when I happened to find this, lying by the roadside. I took the liberty of bringing it to you.”

He gave her the Cardinal's snuff box, which, in spite of her hands' preoccupation, she was able to accept.

“A liberty!” he thought, grinding his teeth. “Yes! No doubt she would have wished me to leave it with the porter at the lodge. No doubt she deems it an act of officiousness on my part to have found it at all.”

And his anger mounted.

“How very good of you,” she said. “My uncle could not think where he had mislaid it.”

“I am very fortunate to be the means of restoring it,” said he.

Then, after a second's suspension, as she said nothing (she kept her eyes on the snuffbox, examining it as if it were quite new to her), he lifted his hat, and bowed, preparatory to retiring down the avenue.

“Oh, but my uncle will wish to thank you,” she exclaimed, looking up, with a kind of start. “Will you not come in? I—I will see whether he is disengaged.”

She made a tentative movement towards the door. She had thawed perceptibly.

But even as she thawed, Peter, in his anger, froze and stiffened. “I will see whether he is disengaged.” The expression grated. And perhaps, in effect, it was not a particularly felicitous expression. But if the poor woman was suffering from nervous apprehension—?

“I beg you on no account to disturb Cardinal Udeschini,” he returned loftily. “It is not a matter of the slightest consequence.”

And even as he stiffened, she unbent.

“But it is a matter of consequence to him, to us,” she said, faintly smiling. “We have hunted high and low for it. We feared it was lost for good. It must have fallen from his pocket when he was walking. He will wish to thank you.”

“I am more than thanked already,” said Peter. Alas (as Monsieur de la Pallisse has sagely noted), when we aim to appear dignified, how often do we just succeed in appearing churlish.

And to put a seal upon this ridiculous encounter, to make it irrevocable, he lifted his hat again, and turned away.

“Oh, very well,” murmured the Duchessa, in a voice that did not reach him. If it had reached him, perhaps he would have come back, perhaps things might have happened. I think there was regret in her voice, as well as despite. She stood for a minute, as he tramped down the avenue, and looked after him, with those unusually dark, grave eyes. At last, making a little gesture—as of regret? despite? impatience?—she went into the house.

“Here is your snuff-box,” she said to the Cardinal.

The old man put down his Breviary (he was seated by an open window, getting through his office), and smiled at the snuff box fondly, caressing it with his finger. Afterwards, he shook it, opened it, and took a pinch of snuff.

“Where did you find it?” he enquired.

“It was found by that Mr. Marchdale,” she said, “in the road, outside the gate. You must have let it drop this morning, when you were walking with Emilia.”

“That Mr. Marchdale?” exclaimed the Cardinal. “What a coincidence.”

“A coincidence—?” questioned Beatrice.

“To be sure,” said he. “Was it not to Mr. Marchdale that I owed it in the first instance?”

“Oh—? Was it? I had fancied that you owed it to me.”

“Yes—but,” he reminded her, whilst the lines deepened about his humorous old mouth, “but as a reward of my virtue in conspiring with you to convert him. And, by the way, how is his conversion progressing?”

The Cardinal looked up, with interest.

“It is not progressing at all. I think there is no chance of it,” answered Beatrice, in a tone that seemed to imply a certain irritation.

“Oh—?” said the Cardinal.

“No,” said she.

“I thought he had shown 'dispositions'?” said the Cardinal.

“That was a mistake. He has shown none. He is a very tiresome and silly person. He is not worth converting,” she declared succinctly.

“Good gracious!” said the Cardinal.

He resumed his office. But every now and again he would pause, and look out of the window, with the frown of a man meditating something; then he would shake his head significantly, and take snuff.

Peter tramped down the avenue, angry and sick.

Her reception of him had not only administered an instant death-blow to his hopes as a lover, but in its ungenial aloofness it had cruelly wounded his pride as a man. He felt snubbed and humiliated. Oh, true enough, she had unbent a little, towards the end. But it was the look with which she had first greeted him—it was the air with which she had waited for him to state his errand—that stung, and rankled, and would not be forgotten.

He was angry with her, angry with circumstances, with life, angry with himself.

“I am a fool—and a double fool—and a triple fool,” he said. “I am a fool ever to have thought of her at all; a double fool ever to have allowed myself to think so much of her; a triple and quadruple and quintuple idiot ever to have imagined for a moment that anything could come of it. I have wasted time enough. The next best thing to winning is to know when you are beaten. I acknowledge myself beaten. I will go back to England as soon as I can get my boxes packed.”

He gazed darkly round the familiar valley, with eyes that abjured it.

Olympus, no doubt, laughed.

XXV

“I shall go back to England as soon as I can get my boxes packed.”

But he took no immediate steps to get them packed.

“Hope,” observes the clear-sighted French publicist quoted in the preceding chapter, “hope dies hard.”

Hope, Peter fancied, had received its death-blow that afternoon. Already, that evening, it began to revive a little. It was very much enfeebled; it was very indefinite and diffident; but it was not dead. It amounted, perhaps, to nothing more than a vague kind of feeling that he would not, on the whole, make his departure for England quite so precipitate as, in the first heat of his anger, the first chill of his despair, he had intended. Piano, piano! He would move slowly, he would do nothing rash.

But he was not happy, he was very far from happy. He spent a wretched night, a wretched, restless morrow. He walked about a great deal—about his garden, and afterwards, when the damnable iteration of his garden had become unbearable, he walked to the village, and took the riverside path, under the poplars, along the racing Aco, and followed it, as the waters paled and broadened, for I forget how many joyless, unremunerative miles.

When he came home, fagged out and dusty, at dinner time, Marietta presented a visiting card to him, on her handsomest salver. She presented it with a flourish that was almost a swagger.

Twice the size of an ordinary visiting-card, the fashion of it was roughly thus:

IL CARDLE UDESCHINI
Sacr: Congr: Archiv: et Inscript: Praef:

Palazzo Udeschini.

And above the legend, was pencilled, in a small oldfashioned hand, wonderfully neat and pretty:—

“To thank Mr. Marchdale for his courtesy in returning my snuff-box.”

“The Lord Prince Cardinal Udeschini was here,” said Marietta. There was a swagger in her accent. There was also something in her accent that seemed to rebuke Peter for his absence.

“I had inferred as much from this,” said he, tapping the card. “We English, you know, are great at putting two and two together.”

“He came in a carriage,” said Marietta.

“Not really?” said her master.

“Ang—veramente,” she affirmed.

“Was—was he alone?” Peter asked, an obscure little twinge of hope stirring in his heart.

“No. Signorino.” And then she generalised, with untranslatable magniloquence: “Un amplissimo porporato non va mai solo.”

Peter ought to have hugged her for that amplissimo porporato. But he was selfishly engrossed in his emotions.

“Who was with him?” He tried to throw the question out with a casual effect, an effect of unconcern.

“The Signorina Emelia Manfredi was with him,” answered Marietta, little recking how mere words can stab.

“Oh,” said Peter.

“The Lord Prince Cardinal Udeschini was very sorry not to see the Signorino,” continued Marietta.

“Poor man—was he? Let us trust that time will console him,” said Peter, callously.

But, “I wonder,” he asked himself, “I wonder whether perhaps I was the least bit hasty yesterday? If I had stopped, I should have saved the Cardinal a journey here to-day—I might have known that he would come, these Italians are so punctilious—and then, if I had stopped—if I had stopped—possibly—possibly—”

Possibly what? Oh, nothing. And yet, if he had stopped... well, at any rate, he would have gained time. The Duchessa had already begun to thaw. If he had stopped... He could formulate no precise conclusion to that if; but he felt dimly remorseful that he had not stopped, he felt that he had indeed been the least bit hasty. And his remorse was somehow medicine to his reviving hope.

“After all, I scarcely gave things a fair trial yesterday,” he said.

And the corollary of that, of course, was that he might give things a further and fairer trial some other day.

But his hope was still hard hurt; he was still in a profound dejection.

“The Signorino is not eating his dinner,” cried Marietta, fixing him with suspicious, upbraiding eyes.

“I never said I was,” he retorted.

“The Signorino is not well?” she questioned, anxious.

“Oh, yes—cosi, cosi; the Signorino is well enough,” he answered.

“The dinner”—you could perceive that she brought herself with difficulty to frame the dread hypothesis —“the dinner is not good?” Her voice sank. She waited, tense, for his reply.

“The dinner,” said he, “if one may criticise without eating it, the dinner is excellent. I will have no aspersions cast upon my cook.”

“Ah-h-h!” breathed Marietta, a tremulous sigh of relief.

“It is not the Signorino, it is not the dinner, it is the world that is awry,” Peter went on, in reflective melancholy. “'T is the times that are out of joint. 'T is the sex, the Sex, that is not well, that is not good, that needs a thorough overhauling and reforming.”

“Which sex?” asked Marietta.

“The sex,” said Peter. “By the unanimous consent of rhetoricians, there is but one sex the sex, the fair sex, the unfair sex, the gentle sex, the barbaric sex. We men do not form a sex, we do not even form a sect. We are your mere hangers-on, camp-followers, satellites—your things, your playthings—we are the mere shuttlecocks which you toss hither and thither with your battledores, as the wanton mood impels you. We are born of woman, we are swaddled and nursed by woman, we are governessed by woman; subsequently, we are beguiled by woman, fooled by woman, led on, put off, tantalised by woman, fretted and bullied by her; finally, last scene of all, we are wrapped in our cerements by woman. Man's life, birth, death, turn upon woman, as upon a hinge. I have ever been a misanthrope, but now I am seriously thinking of becoming a misogynist as well. Would you advise me to-do so?”

“A misogynist? What is that, Signorino?” asked Marietta.

“A woman-hater,” he explained; “one who abhors and forswears the sex; one who has dashed his rose-coloured spectacles from his eyes, and sees woman as she really is, with no illusive glamour; one who has found her out. Yes, I think I shall become a misogynist. It is the only way of rendering yourself invulnerable, 't is the only safe course. During my walk this afternoon, I recollected, from the scattered pigeon-holes of memory, and arranged in consequent order, at least a score of good old apothegmatic shafts against the sex. Was it not, for example, in the grey beginning of days, was it not woman whose mortal taste brought sin into the world and all our woe? Was not that Pandora a woman, who liberated, from the box wherein they were confined, the swarm of winged evils that still afflict us? I will not remind you of St. John Chrysostom's golden parable about a temple and the thing it is constructed over. But I will come straight to the point, and ask whether this is truth the poet sings, when he informs us roundly that 'every woman is a scold at heart'?”

Marietta was gazing patiently at the sky. She did not answer.

“The tongue,” Peter resumed, “is woman's weapon, even as the fist is man's. And it is a far deadlier weapon. Words break no bones—they break hearts, instead. Yet were men one-tenth part so ready with their fists, as women are with their barbed and envenomed tongues, what savage brutes you would think us—would n't you?—and what a rushing trade the police-courts would drive, to be sure. That is one of the good old cliches that came back to me during my walk. All women are alike—there's no choice amongst animated fashion-plates: that is another. A woman is the creature of her temper; her husband, her children, and her servants are its victims: that is a third. Woman is a bundle of pins; man is her pin-cushion. When woman loves, 't is not the man she loves, but the man's flattery; woman's love is reflex self-love. The man who marries puts himself in irons. Marriage is a bird-cage in a garden. The birds without hanker to get in; but the

birds within know that there is no condition so enviable as that of the birds without. Well, speak up. What do you think? Do you advise me to become a misogynist?”

“I do not understand, Signorino,” said Marietta.

“Of course, you don't,” said Peter. “Who ever could understand such stuff and nonsense? That's the worst of it. If only one could understand, if only one could believe it, one might find peace, one might resign oneself. But alas and alas! I have never had any real faith in human wickedness; and now, try as I will, I cannot imbue my mind with any real faith in the undesirability of woman. That is why you see me dissolved in tears, and unable to eat my dinner. Oh, to think, to think,” he cried with passion, suddenly breaking into English, “to think that less than a fortnight ago, less than one little brief fortnight ago, she was seated in your kitchen, seated there familiarly, in her wet clothes, pouring tea, for all the world as if she was the mistress of the house!”

Days passed. He could not go to Ventirose—or, anyhow, he thought he could not. He reverted to his old habit of living in his garden, haunting the riverside, keeping watchful, covetous eyes turned towards the castle. The river bubbled and babbled; the sun shone strong and clear; his fountain tinkled; his birds flew about their affairs; his flowers breathed forth their perfumes; the Gnisi frowned, the uplands westward laughed, the snows of Monte Sfiorito sailed under every colour of the calendar except their native white. All was as it had ever been—but oh, the difference to him. A week passed. He caught no glimpse of the Duchessa. Yet he took no steps to get his boxes packed.

XXVI

And then Marietta fell ill.

One morning, when she came into his room, to bring his tea, and to open the Venetian blinds that shaded his windows, she failed to salute him with her customary brisk “Buon giorno, Signorino.”

Noticing which, and wondering, he, from his pillow, called out, “Buon' giorno, Marietta.”

“Buon' giorno, Signorino,” she returned but in a whisper.

“What's the matter? Is there cause for secrecy?” Peter asked.

“I have a cold, Signorino,” she whispered, pointing to her chest. “I cannot speak.”

The Venetian blinds were up by this time; the room was full of sun. He looked at her. Something in her face alarmed him. It seemed drawn and set, it seemed flushed.

“Come here,” he said, with a certain peremptoriness. “Give me your hand.”

She wiped her brown old hand backwards and forwards across her apron; then gave it to him.

It was hot and dry.

“Your cold is feverish,” he said. “You must go to bed, and stay there till the fever has passed.”

“I cannot go to bed, Signorino,” she replied.

“Can't you? Have you tried?” asked he.

“No, Signorino,” she admitted.

“Well, you never can tell whether you can do a thing or not, until you try,” said he. “Try to go to bed; and if at first you don't succeed, try, try again.”

“I cannot go to bed. Who would do the Signorino's work?” was her whispered objection.

“Hang the Signorino's work. The Signorino's work will do itself. Have you never observed that if you conscientiously neglect to do your work, it somehow manages to get done without you? You have a feverish cold; you must keep out of draughts; and the only place where you can be sure of keeping out of draughts, is bed. Go to bed at once.”

She left the room.

But when Peter came downstairs, half an hour later, he heard her moving in her kitchen.

“Marietta!” he cried, entering that apartment with the mien of Nemesis. “I thought I told you to go to bed.”

Marietta cowered a little, and looked sheepish, as one surprised in the flagrant fact of misdemeanour.

“Yes, Signorino,” she whispered.

“Well—? Do you call this bed?” he demanded.

“No, Signorino,” she acknowledged.

“Do you wish to oblige me to put you to bed?” he asked.

“Oh, no, Signorino,” she protested, horror in her whisper.

“Then go to bed directly. If you delay any longer, I shall accuse you of wilful insubordination.”

“Bene, Signorino,” reluctantly consented Marietta.

Peter strolled into his garden. Gigi, the gardener, was working there.

“The very man I most desired to meet,” said Peter, and beckoned to him. “Is there a doctor in the village?” he enquired, when Gigi had approached.

“Yes, Signorino. The Syndic is a doctor—Dr. Carretaji.”

“Good,” said Peter. “Will you go to the village, please, and ask Dr. Carretaji if he can make it convenient to call here to-day? Marietta is not well.”

“Yes, Signorino.”

“And stop a bit,” said Peter. “Are there such things as women in the village?'

“Ah, mache, Signorino! But many, many,” answered Gigi, rolling his dark eyes sympathetically, and waving his hands.

“I need but one,” said Peter. “A woman to come and do Marietta's work for a day or two—cook, and clean up, and that sort of thing. Do you think you could procure me such a woman?”

“There is my wife, Signorino,” suggested Gigi. “If she would content the Signorino?”

“Oh? I was n't aware that you were married. A hundred felicitations. Yes, your wife, by all means. Ask her to come and rule as Marietta's vicereine.”

Gigi started for the village.

Peter went into the house, and knocked at Marietta's bed-room door. He found her in bed, with her rosary in her hands. If she could not work, she would not waste her time. In Marietta's simple scheme of life, work and prayer, prayer and work, stood, no doubt, as alternative and complementary duties.

“But you are not half warmly enough covered up,” said Peter.

He fetched his travelling-rug, and spread it over her. Then he went to the kitchen, where she had left a fire burning, and filled a bottle with hot water.

“Put this at your feet,” he said, returning to Marietta.

“Oh, I cannot allow the Signorino to wait on me like this,” the old woman mustered voice to murmur.

“The Signorino likes it—it affords him healthful exercise,” Peter assured her.

Dr. Carretaji came about noon, a fat middleaged man, with a fringe of black hair round an ivory-yellow scalp, a massive watch-chain (adorned by the inevitable pointed bit of coral), and podgy, hairy hands. But he seemed kind and honest, and he seemed to know his business.

“She has a catarrh of the larynx, with, I am afraid, a beginning of bronchitis,” was his verdict.

“Is there any danger?” Peter asked.

“Not the slightest. She must remain in bed, and take frequent nourishment. Hot milk, and now and then beef-tea. I will send some medicine. But the great things are nourishment and warmth. I will call again to-morrow.”

Gigi's wife came. She was a tall, stalwart, blackbrowed, red-cheeked young woman, and her name (Gigi's eyes flashed proudly, as he announced it) her name was Carolina Maddalena.

Peter had to be in and out of Marietta's room all day, to see that she took her beef-tea and milk and medicine regularly. She dozed a good deal. When she was awake, she said her rosary.

But next day she was manifestly worse.

“Yes—bronchitis, as I feared,” said the doctor. “Danger? No—none, if properly looked after. Add a little brandy to her milk, and see that she has at least a small cupful every half-hour. I think it would be easier for you if you had a nurse. Someone should be with her at night. There is a Convent of Mercy at Venzona. If you like, I will telephone for a sister.”

“Thank you very much. I hope you will,” said Peter.

And that afternoon Sister Scholastica arrived, and established herself in the sick-room. Sister Scholastica was young, pale, serene, competent. But sometimes she had to send for Peter.

“She refuses to take her milk. Possibly she will take it from you,” the sister said.

Then Peter would assume a half-bluff (perhaps half-wheedling?) tone of mastery.

“Come, Marietta! You must take your milk. The Signorino wishes it. You must not disobey the Signorino.”

And Marietta, with a groan, would rouse herself, and take it, Peter holding the cup to her lips.

On the third day, in the morning, Sister Scholastica said, “She imagines that she is worse. I do not think so myself. But she keeps repeating that she is going to die. She wishes to see a priest. I think it would make her feel easier. Can you send for the Parrocco? Please let him know that it is not an occasion for the Sacraments. But it would do her good if he would come and talk with her.”

And the doctor, who arrived just then, having visited Marietta, confirmed the sister's opinion.

“She is no worse—she is, if anything, rather better. Her malady is taking its natural course. But people of her class always fancy they are going to die, if they are ill enough to stay in bed. It is the panic of ignorance. Yes, I think it would do her good to see a priest. But there is not the slightest occasion for the Sacraments.”

So Peter sent Gigi to the village for the Parrocco. And Gigi came back with the intelligence that the Parrocco was away, making a retreat, and would not return till Saturday. To-day was Wednesday.

“What shall we do now?” Peter asked of Sister Scholastica.

“There is Monsignor Langshawe, at Castel Ventirose,” said the sister.

“Could I ask him to come?” Peter doubted.

“Certainly,” said the sister. “In a case of illness, the nearest priest will always gladly come.”

So Peter despatched Gigi with a note to Monsignor Langshawe.

And presently up drove a brougham, with Gigi on the box beside the coachman. And from the brougham descended, not Monsignor Langshawe, but Cardinal Udeschini, followed by Emilia Manfredi.

The Cardinal gave Peter his hand, with a smile so sweet, so benign, so sunny-bright—it was like music, Peter thought; it was like a silent anthem.

“Monsignor Langshawe has gone to Scotland, for his holiday. I have come in his place. Your man told me of your need,” the Cardinal explained.

“I don't know how to thank your Eminence,” Peter murmured, and conducted him to Marietta's room.

Sister Scholastica genuflected, and kissed the Cardinal's ring, and received his Benediction. Then she and Peter withdrew, and went into the garden.

The sister joined Emilia, and they walked backwards and forwards together, talking. Peter sat on his rustic

bench, smoked cigarettes, and waited.

Nearly an hour passed.

At length the Cardinal came out.

Peter rose, and went forward to meet him.

The Cardinal was smiling; but about his eyes there was a suggestive redness.

“Mr. Marchdale,” he said, “your housekeeper is in great distress of conscience touching one or two offences she feels she has been guilty of towards you. They seem to me, in frankness, somewhat trifling. But I cannot persuade her to accept my view. She will not be happy till she has asked and received your pardon for them.”

“Offences towards me?” Peter wondered. “Unless excess of patience with a very trying employer constitutes an offence, she has been guilty of none.”

“Never mind,” said the Cardinal. “Her conscience accuses her—she must satisfy it. Will you come?”

The Cardinal sat down at the head of Marietta's bed, and took her hand.

“Now, dear,” he said, with the gentleness, the tenderness, of one speaking to a beloved child, “here is Mr. Marchdale. Tell him what you have on your mind. He is ready to hear and to forgive you.”

Marietta fixed her eyes anxiously on Peter's face.

“First,” she whispered, “I wish to beg the Signorino to pardon all this trouble I am making for him. I am the Signorino's servant; but instead of serving, I make trouble for him.”

She paused. The Cardinal smiled at Peter.

Peter answered, “Marietta, if you talk like that, you will make the Signorino cry. You are the best servant that ever lived. You are putting me to no trouble at all. You are giving me a chance—which I should be glad of, except that it involves your suffering—to show my affection for you, and my gratitude.”

“There, dear,” said the Cardinal to her, “you see the Signorino makes nothing of that. Now the next thing. Go on.”

“I have to ask the Signorino's forgiveness for my impertinence,” whispered Marietta.

“Impertinence—?” faltered Peter. “You have never been impertinent.”

“Scusi, Signorino,” she went on, in her whisper. “I have sometimes contradicted the Signorino. I contradicted the Signorino when he told me that St. Anthony of Padua was born in Lisbon. It is impertinent of a servant to contradict her master. And now his most high Eminence says the Signorino was right. I beg the Signorino to forgive me.”

Again the Cardinal smiled at Peter.

“You dear old woman,” Peter half laughed, half sobbed, “how can you ask me to forgive a mere difference of opinion? You—you dear old thing.”

The Cardinal smiled, and patted Marietta's hand.

“The Signorino is too good,” Marietta sighed.

“Go on, dear,” said the Cardinal.

“I have been guilty of the deadly sin of evil speaking. I have spoken evil of the Signorino,” she went on. “I said—I said to people—that the Signorino was simple—that he was simple and natural. I thought so then. Now I know it is not so. I know it is only that the Signorino is English.”

Once more the Cardinal smiled at Peter.

Again Peter half laughed, half sobbed.

“Marietta! Of course I am simple and natural. At least, I try to be. Come! Look up. Smile. Promise you will not worry about these things any more.”

She looked up, she smiled faintly.

“The Signorino is too good,” she whispered.

After a little interval of silence, “Now, dear,” said the Cardinal, “the last thing of all.”

Marietta gave a groan, turning her head from side to side on her pillow.

“You need not be afraid,” said the Cardinal. “Mr. Marchdale will certainly forgive you.”

“Oh-h-h,” groaned Marietta. She stared at the ceiling for an instant.

The Cardinal patted her hand. “Courage, courage,” he said.

“Oh—Signorino mio,” she groaned again, “this you never can forgive me. It is about the little pig, the porcellino. The Signorino remembers the little pig, which he called Francesco?”

“Yes,” answered Peter.

“The Signorino told me to take the little pig away, to find a home for him. And I told the Signorino that I would take him to my nephew, who is a farmer, towards Fogliamo. The Signorino remembers?”

“Yes,” answered Peter. “Yes, you dear old thing. I remember.”

Marietta drew a deep breath, summoned her utmost fortitude.

“Well, I did not take him to my nephew. The—the Signorino ate him.”

Peter could hardly keep from laughing. He could only utter a kind of half-choked “Oh?”

“Yes,” whispered Marietta. “He was bought with the Signorino's money. I did not like to see the Signorino's money wasted. So I deceived the Signorino. You ate him as a chicken-pasty.”

This time Peter did laugh, I am afraid. Even the Cardinal—well, his smile was perilously near a titter. He took a big pinch of snuff.

“I killed Francesco, and I deceived the Signorino. I am very sorry,” Marietta said.

Peter knelt down at her bedside.

“Marietta! Your conscience is too sensitive. As for killing Francesco—we are all mortal, he could not have

lived forever. And as for deceiving the Signorino, you did it for his own good. I remember that chicken-pasty. It was the best chicken-pasty I have ever tasted. You must not worry any more about the little pig."

Marietta turned her face towards him, and smiled.

"The Signorino forgives his servant?" she whispered.

Peter could not help it. He bent forward, and kissed her brown old cheek.

"She will be easier now," said the Cardinal. "I will stay with her a little longer."

Peter went out. The scene had been childish—do you say?—ridiculous, almost farcical indeed? And yet, somehow, it seemed to Peter that his heart was full of unshed tears. At the same time, as he thought of the Cardinal, as he saw his face, his smile, as he heard the intonations of his voice, the words he had spoken, as he thought of the way he had held Marietta's hand and patted it—at the same time a kind of strange joy seemed to fill his heart, a strange feeling of exaltation, of enthusiasm.

"What a heavenly old man," he said.

In the garden Sister Scholastica and Emilia were still walking together.

They halted, when Peter came out; and Emilia said, "With your consent, Signore, Sister Scholastica has accepted me as her lieutenant. I will come every morning, and sit with Marietta during the day. That will relieve the sister, who has to be up with her at night."

And every morning after that, Emilia came, walking through the park, and crossing the river by the ladder-bridge, which Peter left now permanently in its position. And once or twice a week, in the afternoon, the Cardinal would drive up in the brougham, and, having paid a little visit to Marietta, would drive Emilia home.

In the sick-room Emilia would read to Marietta, or say the rosary for her.

Marietta mended steadily day by day. At the end of a fortnight she was able to leave her bed for an hour or two in the afternoon, and sit in the sun in the garden. Then Sister Scholastica went back to her convent at Venzona. At the end of the third week Marietta could be up all day. But Gigi's stalwart Carolina Maddalena continued to rule as vicereine in the kitchen. And Emilia continued to come every morning.

"Why does the Duchessa never come?" Peter wondered. "It would be decent of her to come and see the poor old woman."

Whenever he thought of Cardinal Udeschini, the same strange feeling of joy would spring up in his heart, which he had felt when he had left the beautiful old man with Marietta, on the day of his first visit. In the beginning he could only give this feeling a very general and indefinite expression. "He is a man who renews one's faith in things, who renews one's faith in human nature." But gradually, I suppose, the feeling crystallised; and at last, in due season, it found for itself an expression that was not so indefinite.

It was in the afternoon, and he had just conducted the Cardinal and Emilia to their carriage. He stood at his gate for a minute, and watched the carriage as it rolled away.

"What a heavenly old man, what a heavenly old man," he thought.

Then, still looking after the carriage, before turning back into his garden, he heard himself repeat, half aloud

"Nor knowest thou what argument
Thy life to thy neighbour's creed hath lent."

The words had come to his lips, and were pronounced, were addressed to his mental image of the Cardinal, without any conscious act of volition on his part. He heard them with a sort of surprise, almost as if some one else had spoken them. He could not in the least remember what poem they were from, he could not even remember what poet they were by. Were they by Emerson? It was years since he had read a line of Emerson's.

All that evening the couplet kept running in his head. And the feeling of joy, of enthusiasm, in his heart, was not so strange now. But I think it was intensified.

The next time the Cardinal arrived at Villa Floriano, and gave Peter his hand, Peter did not merely shake it, English fashion, as he had hitherto done.

The Cardinal looked startled.

Then his eyes searched Peter's face for a second, keenly interrogative. Then they softened; and a wonderful clear light shone in them, a wonderful pure, sweet light.

"Benedicat te Omnipotens Deus, Pater, et Filius, et Spiritus Sanctus," he said, making the Sign of the Cross.

XXVII

Up at the castle, Cardinal Udeschini was walking backwards and forwards on the terrace, reading his Breviary.

Beatrice was seated under the white awning, at the terrace-end, doing some kind of needlework.

Presently the Cardinal came to a standstill near her, and closed his book, putting his finger in it, to keep the place.

"It will be, of course, a great loss to Casa Udeschini, when you marry," he remarked.

Beatrice looked up, astonishment on her brow.

"When I marry?" she exclaimed. "Well, if ever there was a thunderbolt from a clear sky!"

And she laughed.

“Yes-when you marry,” the Cardinal repeated, with conviction. “You are a young woman—you are twenty-eight years old. You will, marry. It is only right that you should marry. You have not the vocation for a religious. Therefore you must marry. But it will be a great loss to the house of Udeschini.”

“Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof,” said Beatrice, laughing again. “I haven't the remotest thought of marrying. I shall never marry.”

“Il ne faut jamais dire a la fontaine, je ne boirai pas de ton eau,” his Eminence cautioned her, whilst the lines of humour about his mouth emphasised themselves, and his grey eyes twinkled. “Other things equal, marriage is as much the proper state for the laity, as celibacy is the proper state for the clergy. You will marry. It would be selfish of us to oppose your marrying. You ought to marry. But it will be a great loss to the family—it will be a great personal loss to me. You are as dear to me as any of my blood. I am always forgetting that we are uncle and niece by courtesy only.”

“I shall never marry. But nothing that can happen to me can ever make the faintest difference in my feeling for you. I hope you know how much I love you?” She looked into his eyes, smiling her love. “You are only my uncle by courtesy? But you are more than an uncle—you have been like a father to me, ever since I left my convent.”

The Cardinal returned her smile.

“Carissima,” he murmured. Then, “It will be a matter of the utmost importance to me, however,” he went on, “that, when the time comes, you should marry a good man, a suitable man—a man who will love you, whom you will love—and, if possible, a man who will not altogether separate you from me, who will perhaps love me a little too. It would send me in sorrow to my grave, if you should marry a man who was not worthy of you.”

“I will guard against that danger by not marrying at all,” laughed Beatrice.

“No—you will marry, some day,” said the Cardinal. “And I wish you to remember that I shall not oppose your marrying—provided the man is a good man. Felipe will not like it—Guido will pull a long nose—but I, at least, will take your part, if I can feel that the man is good. Good men are rare, my dear; good husbands are rarer still. I can think, for instance, of no man in our Roman nobility, whom I should be content to see you marry. Therefore I hope you will not marry a Roman. You would be more likely to marry one of your own countrymen. That, of course, would double the loss to us, if it should take you away from Italy. But remember, if he is a man whom I can think worthy of you, you may count upon me as an ally.”

He resumed his walk, reopening his Breviary.

Beatrice resumed her needlework. But she found it difficult to fix her attention on it. Every now and then, she would leave her needle stuck across its seam, let the work drop to her lap, and, with eyes turned vaguely up the valley, fall, apparently, into a muse.

“I wonder why he said all that to me?” was the question that kept posing itself.

By and by the Cardinal closed his Breviary, and put it in his pocket. I suppose he had finished his office for the day. Then he came and sat down in one of the wicker chairs, under the awning. On the table, among the books and things, stood a carafe of water, some tumblers, a silver sugar-bowl, and a crystal dish full of fresh pomegranate seeds. It looked like a dish full of unset rubies. The Cardinal poured some water into a tumbler, added a lump of sugar and a spoonful of pomegranate seeds, stirred the mixture till it became rose-coloured, and drank it off in a series of little sips.

“What is the matter, Beatrice?” he asked, all at once.

Beatrice raised her eyes, perplexed.

“The matter—? Is anything the matter?”

“Yes,” said the Cardinal; “something is the matter. You are depressed, you are nervous, you are not yourself. I have noticed it for many days. Have you something on, your mind?”

“Nothing in the world,” Beatrice answered, with an appearance of great candour. “I had not noticed that I was nervous or depressed.”

“We are entering October,” said the Cardinal. “I must return to Rome. I have been absent too long already. I must return next week. But I should not like to go away with the feeling that you are unhappy.”

“If a thing were needed to make me unhappy, it would be the announcement of your intended departure,” Beatrice said, smiling. “But otherwise, I am no more unhappy than it is natural to be. Life, after all, is n't such a furiously gay business as to keep one perpetually singing and dancing—is it? But I am not especially unhappy.”

“H'm,” said the Cardinal. Then, in a minute, “You will come to Rome in November, I suppose?” he asked.

“Yes—towards the end of November, I think,” said Beatrice.

The Cardinal rose, and began to walk backwards and forwards again.

In a little while the sound of carriage-wheels could be heard, in the sweep, round the corner of the house.

The Cardinal looked at his watch.

“Here is the carriage,” he said. “I must go down and see that poor old woman.... Do you know,” he added, after a moment's hesitation, “I think it would be well if you were to go with me.”

A shadow came into Beatrice's eyes.

“What good would that do?” she asked.

“It would give her pleasure, no doubt. And besides, she is one of your parishioners, as it were. I think you ought to go. You have never been to see her since she fell ill.”

“Oh—well,” said Beatrice.

She was plainly unwilling. But she went to put on her things.

In the carriage, when they had passed the village and crossed the bridge, as they were bowling along the

straight white road that led to the villa, “What a long time it is since Mr. Marchdale has been at Ventirose,” remarked the Cardinal.

“Oh—? Is it?” responded Beatrice, with indifference.

“It is more than three weeks, I think—it is nearly a month,” the Cardinal said.

“Oh—?” said she.

“He has had his hands full, of course; he has had little leisure,” the Cardinal pursued. “His devotion to his poor old servant has been quite admirable. But now that she is practically recovered, he will be freer.”

“Yes,” said Beatrice.

“He is a young man whom I like very much,” said the Cardinal. “He is intelligent; he has good manners; and he has a fine sense of the droll. Yes, he has wit—a wit that you seldom find in an Anglo-Saxon, a wit that is almost Latin. But you have lost your interest in him? That is because you despair of his conversion?”

“I confess I am not greatly interested in him,” Beatrice answered. “And I certainly have no hopes of his conversion.”

The Cardinal smiled at his ring. He opened his snuffbox, and inhaled a long deliberate pinch of snuff.

“Ah, well—who can tell?” he said. “But—he will be free now, and it is so long since he has been at the castle—had you not better ask him to luncheon or dinner?”

“Why should I?” answered Beatrice. “If he does not come to Ventirose, it is presumably because he does not care to come. If he does care to come, he needs no invitation. He knows that he is at liberty to call whenever he likes.”

“But it would be civil, it would be neighbourly, to ask him to a meal,” the Cardinal submitted.

“And it would put him in the embarrassing predicament of having either to accept against his will, or to decline and appear ungracious,” submitted Beatrice. “No, it is evident that Ventirose does not amuse him.”

“Bene,” said the Cardinal. “Be it as you wish.”

But when they reached Villa Floriano, Peter was not at home.

“He has gone to Spiaggia for the day,” Emilia informed them.

Beatrice, the Cardinal fancied, looked at once relieved and disappointed.

Marietta was seated in the sun, in a sheltered corner of the garden.

While Beatrice talked with her, the Cardinal walked about.

Now it so happened that on Peter's rustic table a book lay open, face downwards.

The Cardinal saw the book. He halted in his walk, and glanced round the garden, as if to make sure that he was not observed. He tapped his snuff—box, and took a pinch of snuff. Then he appeared to meditate for an instant, the lines about his mouth becoming very marked indeed. At last, swiftly, stealthily, almost with the air of a man committing felony, he slipped his snuff-box under the open book, well under it, so that it was completely covered up.

On the way back to Ventirose, the Cardinal put his hand in his pocket.

“Dear me!” he suddenly exclaimed. “I have lost my snuff box again.” He shook his head, as one who recognises a fatality. “I am always losing it.”

“Are you sure you had it with you?” Beatrice asked.

“Oh, yes, I think I had it with me. I should have missed it before this, if I had left it at home. I must have dropped it in Mr. Marchdale's garden.”

“In that case it will probably be found,” said Beatrice.

Peter had gone to Spiaggia, I imagine, in the hope of meeting Mrs. O'Donovan Florence; but the printed visitors' list there told him that she had left nearly a fortnight since. On his return to the villa, he was greeted by Marietta with the proud tidings that her Excellency the Duchessa di Santangiolo had been to see her.

“Oh—? Really?” he questioned lightly. (His heart, I think, dropped a beat, all the same.)

“Ang,” said Marietta. “She came with the most Eminent Prince Cardinal. They came in the carriage. She stayed half an hour. She was very gracious.”

“Ah?” said Peter. “I am glad to hear it.”

“She was beautifully dressed,” said Marietta.

“Of that I have not the shadow of a doubt,” said he.

“The Signorina Emilia drove away with them,” said she.

“Dear, dear! What a chapter of adventures,” was his comment.

He went to his rustic table, and picked up his book.

“How the deuce did that come there?” he wondered, discovering the snuff box.

It was, in truth, an odd place for it. A cardinal may inadvertently drop his snuff box, to be sure. But if the whole College of Cardinals together had dropped a snuff box, it would hardly have fallen, of its own weight, through the covers of an open book, to the under-side thereof, and have left withal no trace of its passage.

“Solid matter will not pass through solid matter, without fraction—I learned that at school,” said Peter.

The inference would be that someone had purposely put the snuff box there.

But who?

The Cardinal himself? In the name of reason, why?

Emilia? Nonsense.

Marietta? Absurd.

The Du—

A wild surmise darted through Peter's soul. Could it be? Could it conceivably be? Was it possible that—that

—was it possible, in fine, that this was a kind of signal, a kind of summons?

Oh, no, no, no. And yet—and yet—

No, certainly not. The idea was preposterous. It deserved, and (I trust) obtained, summary deletion.

“Nevertheless,” said Peter, “it's a long while since I have darkened the doors of Ventirose. And a poor excuse is better than none. And anyhow, the Cardinal will be glad to have his snuff.”

The ladder-bridge was in its place.

He crossed the Aco.

XXVIII

He crossed the Aco, and struck bravely forward, up the smooth lawns, under the bending trees, towards the castle.

The sun was setting. The irregular mass of buildings stood out in varying shades of blue, against varying, dying shades of red.

Half way there, Peter stopped, and looked back.

The level sunshine turned the black forests of the Gnisi to shining forests of bronze, and the foaming cascade that leapt down its side to a cascade of liquid gold. The lake, for the greater part, lay in shadow, violet-grey through a pearl-grey veil of mist; but along the opposite shore it caught the light, and gleamed a crescent of quicksilver, with roseate reflections. The three snow-summits of Monte Sfiorito, at the valley's end, seemed almost insubstantial—floating forms of luminous pink vapour, above the hazy horizon, in a pure sky intensely blue.

A familiar verse came into Peter's mind.

“Really,”' he said to himself, “down to the very 'cataract leaping in glory,' I believe they must have pre-arranged the scene, feature for feature, to illustrate it.” And he began to repeat the vivid, musical lines, under his breath...

But about midway of them he was interrupted.

“It's not altogether a bad sort of view—is it?” a voice asked, behind him.

Peter faced about.

On a marble bench, under a feathery acacia; a few yards away, a lady was seated, looking at him, smiling.

Peter's eyes met hers—and suddenly his heart gave a jump. Then it stood dead still for a second. Then it flew off, racing perilously. Oh, for the best reasons in the world. There was something in her eyes, there was a glow, a softness, that seemed—that seemed... But thereby hangs my tale.

She was dressed in white. She had some big bright-yellow chrysanthemums stuck in her belt. She wore no hat. Her hair, brown and warm in shadow, sparkled, where the sun touched it, transparent and iridescent, like crinkly threads of glass.

“You do not think it altogether bad—I hope?” she questioned, arching her eyebrows slightly, with a droll little assumption of concern.

Peter's heart was racing—but he must answer her.

“I was just wondering,” he answered, with a tolerably successful feint of composure, “whether one might not safely call it altogether good.”

“Oh—?” she exclaimed.

She threw back her head, and examined the prospect critically. Afterwards, she returned her gaze to Peter, with an air of polite readiness to defer to his opinion.

“It is not too sensational? Not too much like a landscape on the stage?”

“We must judge it leniently,” said he; “we must remember that it is only unaided Nature. Besides,” he added, “to be meticulously truthful, there is a spaciousness, there is a vivacity in the light and colour, there is a sense of depth and atmosphere, that we should hardly find in a landscape on the stage.”

“Yes—perhaps there is,” she admitted thoughtfully.

And with that, they looked into each other's eyes, and laughed.

“Are you aware,” the lady asked, after a brief silence, “that it is a singularly lovely evening.”

“I have a hundred reasons for thinking it so,” Peter answered, with the least approach to a meaning bow.

In the lady's face there flickered, perhaps, for half a second, the faintest light, as of a comprehending and unresentful smile. But she went on, with fine detachment

“How calm and still it is. The wonderful peace of the day's compline. It seems as if the earth had stopped breathing—does n't it? The birds have already gone to bed, though the sun is only just setting. It is the hour when they are generally noisiest; but they have gone to bed—the sparrows and the finches, the snatchers and the snatched-from, are equal in the article of sleep. That is because they feel the touch of autumn. How beautiful it is, in spite of its sadness, this first touch of autumn—it is like sad distant music. Can you analyse it, can you explain it? There is no chill, it is quite warm, and yet one knows somehow that autumn is here. The birds know it, and have gone to bed. In another month they will be flying away, to Africa and the Hesperides—all of them except the sparrows, who stay all winter. I wonder how they get on during the winter, with no goldfinches to snatch from?”

She turned to Peter with a look of respectful enquiry, as one appealing to an authority for information.

“Oh, they snatch from each other, during the winter,” he explained. “It is thief rob thief, when honest

victims are not forthcoming. And—what is more to the point—they must keep their beaks in, against the return of the goldfinches with the spring."

The Duchessa—for I scorn to deceive the trustful reader longer; and (as certain fines mouches, despite my efforts at concealment, may ere this have suspected) the mysterious lady was no one else—the Duchessa gaily laughed.

"Yes," she said, "the goldfinches will return with the spring. But isn't that rather foolish of them? If I were a goldfinch, I think I should make my abode permanent in the sparrowless south."

"There is no sparrowless south," said Peter. "Sparrows, alas, abound in every latitude; and the farther south you go, the fiercer and bolder and more impudent they become. In Africa and the Hesperides, which you have mentioned, they not infrequently attack the caravans, peck the eyes out of the camels, and are sometimes even known to carry off a man, a whole man, vainly struggling in their inexorable talons. There is no sparrowless south. But as for the goldfinches returning—it is the instinct of us bipeds to return. Plumed and plumeless, we all return to something, what though we may have registered the most solemn vows to remain away."

He delivered his last phrases with an accent, he punctuated them with a glance, in which there may have lurked an intention.

But the Duchessa did not appear to notice it.

"Yes—true—so we do," she assented vaguely. "And what you tell me of the sparrows in the Hesperides is very novel and impressive—unless, indeed, it is a mere traveller's tale, with which you are seeking to practise upon my credulity. But since I find you in this communicative vein, will you not push complaisance a half-inch further, and tell me what that thing is, suspended there in the sky above the crest of the Cornobastone—that pale round thing, that looks like the spectre of a magnified half-crown?"

Peter turned to the quarter her gaze indicated.

"Oh, that," he said, "is nothing. In frankness, it is only what the vulgar style the moon."

"How odd," said she. "I thought it was what the vulgar style the moon."

And they both laughed again.

The Duchessa moved a little; and thus she uncovered, carved on the back of her marble bench, and blazoned in red and gold, a coat of arms.

She touched the shield with her finger.

"Are you interested in canting heraldry?" she asked. "There is no country so rich in it as Italy. These are the arms of the Farfalla, the original owners of this property. Or, seme of twenty roses gules; the crest, on a rose gules, a butterfly or, with wings displayed; and the motto—how could the heralds ever have sanctioned such an unheraldic and unheroic motto?

Rosa amorosa,
Farfalla giojosa,
Mi cantano al cuore
La gioja e l' amore.

They were the great people of this region for countless generations, the Farfalla. They were Princes of Ventirose and Patricians of Milan. And then the last of them was ruined at Monte Carlo, and killed himself there, twenty-odd years ago. That is how all their gioja and amore ended. It was the case of a butterfly literally broken upon a wheel. The estate fell into the hands of the Jews, as everything more or less does sooner or later; and they—if you can believe me—they were going to turn the castle into an hotel, into one of those monstrous modern hotels, for other Jews to come to, when I happened to hear of it, and bought it. Fancy turning that splendid old castle into a Jew-infested hotel! It is one of the few castles in Italy that have a ghost. Oh, but a quite authentic ghost. It is called the White Page—il Paggio Bianco di Ventirose. It is the ghost of a boy about sixteen. He walks on the ramparts of the old keep, and looks off towards the lake, as if he were watching a boat, and sometimes he waves his arms, as if he were signalling. And from head to foot he is perfectly white, like a statue. I have never seen him myself; but so many people say they have, I cannot doubt he is authentic. And the Jews wanted to turn this haunted castle into an hotel... As a tribute to the memory of the Farfalla, I take pains to see that their arms, which are carved, as you see them here, in at least a hundred different places, are remetalled and retinctured as often as time and the weather render it necessary."

She looked towards the castle, while she spoke; and now she rose, with the design, perhaps, of moving in that direction.

Peter felt that the moment had come for actualities.

"It seems improbable," he began,—"and I 'm afraid you will think there is a tiresome monotony in my purposes; but I am here again to return Cardinal Udeschini's snuff box. He left it in my garden."

"Oh—?" said the Duchessa. "Yes, he thought he must have left it there. He is always mislaying it. Happily, he has another, for emergencies. It was very good of you to trouble to bring it back."

She gave a light little laugh..

"I may also improve this occasion," Peter abruptly continued, "to make my adieux. I shall be leaving for England in a few days now."

The Duchessa raised her eyebrows.

"Really?" she said. "Oh, that is too bad," she added, by way of comment. "October, you know, is regarded as the best month of all the twelve, in this lake country."

"Yes, I know it," Peter responded regretfully.

"And it is a horrid month in England," she went on.

"It is an abominable month in England," he acknowledged.

"Here it is blue, like larkspur, and all fragrant of the vintage, and joyous with the songs of the vintagers,"

she said. “There it is dingy-brown, and songless, and it smells of smoke.”

“Yes,” he agreed.

“But you are a sportsman? You go in for shooting?” she conjectured.

“No,” he answered. “I gave up shooting years ago.”

“Oh—? Hunting, then?”

“I hate hunting. One is always getting rolled on by one's horse.”

“Ah, I see. It—it will be golf, perhaps?”

“No, it is not even golf.”

“Don't tell me it is football?”

“Do I look as if it were football?”

“It is sheer homesickness, in fine? You are grieving for the purple of your native heather?”

“There is scarcely any heather in my native county. No,” said Peter, “no. To tell you the truth, it is the usual thing. It is an histoire de femme.”

“I 'might have guessed it,” she exclaimed. “It is still that everlasting woman.”

“That everlasting woman—?” Peter faltered.

“To be sure,” said she. “The woman you are always going on about. The woman of your novel. This woman, in short.”

And she produced from behind her back a hand that she had kept there, and held up for his inspection a grey-and-gold bound book.

“MY novel—?” faltered he. (But the sight of it, in her possession, in these particular circumstances, gave him a thrill that was not a thrill of despair.)

“Your novel,” she repeated, smiling sweetly, and mimicking his tone. Then she made a little moue. “Of course, I have known that you were your friend Felix Wildmay, from the outset.”

“Oh,” said Peter, in a feeble sort of gasp, looking bewildered. “You have known that from the outset?” And his brain seemed to reel.

“Yes,” said she, “of course. Where would the fun have been, otherwise? And now you are going away, back to her shrine, to renew your worship. I hope you will find the courage to offer her your hand.”

Peter's brain was reeling. But here was the opportunity of his life.

“You give me courage,” he pronounced, with sudden daring. “You are in a position to help me with her. And since you know so much, I should like you to know more. I should like to tell you who she is.”

“One should be careful where one bestows one's confidences,” she warned him; but there was something in her eyes, there was a glow, a softness, that seemed at the same time to invite them.

“No,” he said, “better than telling you who she is, I will tell you where I first saw her. It was at the Francais, in December, four years ago, a Thursday night, a subscription night. She sat in one of the middle boxes of the first tier. She was dressed in white. Her companions were an elderly woman, English I think, in black, who wore a cap; and an old man, with white moustache and imperial, who looked as if he might be a French officer. And the play—.”

He broke off, and looked at the Duchessa. She kept her eyes down.

“Yes—the play?” she questioned, in a low voice, after a little wait.

“The play was Monsieur Pailleron's 'Le monde ou l'on s'ennuie',” he said.

“Oh,” said she, still keeping her eyes down. Her voice was still very low. But there was something in it that made Peter's heart leap.

“The next time I saw her,” he began...

But then he had to stop. He felt as if the beating of his heart must suffocate him.

“Yes—the next time?” she questioned.

He drew a deep breath. He began anew—

“The next time was a week later, at the Opera. They were giving Lohengrin. She was with the same man and woman, and there was another, younger man. She had pearls round her neck and in her hair, and she had a cloak lined with white fur. She left before the opera was over. I did not see her again until the following May, when I saw her once or twice in London, driving in the Park. She was always with the same elderly Englishwoman, but the military-looking old Frenchman had disappeared. And then I saw her once more, a year later, in Paris, driving in the Bois.”

The Duchessa kept her eyes down. She did not speak.

Peter waited as long as flesh-and-blood could wait, looking at her.

“Well?” he pleaded, at last. “That is all. Have you nothing to say to me?”

She raised her eyes, and for the tiniest fraction of a second they gave themselves to his. Then she dropped them again.

“You are sure,” she asked, “you are perfectly sure that when, afterwards, you met her, and came to know her as she really is—you are perfectly sure there was no disappointment?”

“Disappointment!” cried Peter. “She is in every way immeasurably beyond anything that I was capable of dreaming. Oh, if you could see her, if you could hear her speak, if you could look into her eyes—if you could see her as others see her—you would not ask whether there was a disappointment. She is... No; the language is not yet invented, in which I could describe her.”

The Duchessa smiled, softly, to herself.

“And you are in love with her—more or less?” she asked.

“I love her so that the bare imagination of being allowed to tell her of my love almost makes me faint with

joy. But it is like the story of the poor squire who loved his queen. She is the greatest of great ladies. I am nobody. She is so beautiful, so splendid, and so high above me, it would be the maddest presumption for me to ask her for her love. To ask for the love of my Queen! And yet—Oh, I can say no more. God sees my heart. God knows how I love her."

"And it is on her account—because you think your love is hopeless—that you are going away, that you are going back to England?"

"Yes," said he.

She raised her eyes again, and again they gave themselves to his. There was something in them, there was a glow, a softness ...

"Don't go," she said.

Up at the castle—Peter had hurried down to the villa, dressed, and returned to the castle to dine—he restored the snuff-box to Cardinal Udeschini.

"I am trebly your debtor for it," said the Cardinal.

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