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William R. Winick.

AFTER DARK.

AFTER DARK.

BY

WILKIE COLLINS,

AUTHOR OF "BASIL," "HIDE AND SEEK," &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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AFTER DARK.

PROLOGUE TO THE FOURTH STORY.

MY practice in the art of portrait-painting, if it has done nothing else, has at least fitted me to turn my talents (such as they are) to a great variety of uses. I have not only taken the likenesses of men, women, and children, but have also extended the range of my brush, under stress of circumstances, to horses, dogs, houses, and in one case even to a bull—the terror and glory of his parish, and the most truculent sitter I ever had. The beast was appropriately named “Thunder and Lightning,” and was the property of a gentleman-farmer named Garthwaite, a distant connexion of my wife’s family.

How it was that I escaped being gored to death

before I had finished my picture, is more than I can explain to this day. "Thunder and Lightning" resented the very sight of me and my colour-box, as if he viewed the taking of his likeness in the light of a personal insult. It required two men to coax him, while a third held him by a ring in his nostrils, before I could venture on beginning to work. Even then he always lashed his tail, and jerked his huge head, and rolled his fiery eyes with a devouring anxiety to have me on his horns for daring to sit down quietly and look at him. Never, I can honestly say, did I feel more heartily grateful for the blessings of soundness of limb and wholeness of skin, than when I had completed the picture of the bull!

One morning, when I had but little more than half done my unwelcome task, my friend and I were met on our way to the bull's stable by the farm-bailiff, who informed us gravely that "Thunder and Lightning" was just then in such an especially surly state of temper as to render it quite unsafe for me to think of painting him. I looked inquiringly at Mr Garthwaite, who smiled with an air of comic resignation, and said:—"Very well, then, we have nothing for it but to wait till to-morrow. What do you say to a morning's fishing, Mr Kerby, now that my bull's bad temper has given us a holiday?"

I replied, with perfect truth, that I knew nothing about fishing. But Mr Garthwaite, who was as ardent an angler in his way as Izaak Walton himself, was not to be appeased even by the best of excuses. "It is never too late to learn," cried he. "I will make a fisherman of you in no time, if you will only attend to my directions." It was impossible for me to make any more apologies, without the risk of appearing discourteous. So I thanked my host for his friendly intentions, and with some secret misgivings, accepted the first fishing-rod that he put into my hands.

"We shall soon get there," said Mr Garthwaite. "I am taking you to the best mill-stream in the neighbourhood." It was all one to me whether we got there soon or late, and whether the stream was good or bad. However, I did my best to conceal my unsportsmanlike apathy; and tried to look quite happy and very impatient to begin, as we drew near to the mill, and heard louder and louder the gushing of many waters all around it.

Leading the way immediately to a place beneath the falling stream, where there was a deep, eddying pool, Mr Garthwaite baited and threw in his line before I had fixed the joints of my fishing-rod. This first difficulty overcome, I involuntarily plunged into some excellent, but rather embarrassing, sport with

my line and hook. I caught every one of my garments, from head to foot; I angled for my own clothes with the dexterity and success of Izaak Walton himself. I caught my hat, my jacket, my waistcoat, my trousers, my fingers, and my thumbs—some devil possessed my hook; some more than eel-like vitality twirled and twisted in every inch of my line. By the time my host arrived to assist me, I had attached myself to my fishing-rod, apparently for life. All difficulties yielded, however, to his patience and skill; my hook was baited for me, and thrown in; my rod was put into my hand; my friend went back to his place; and we began at last to angle in earnest.

We certainly caught a few fish (in *my* case, I mean, of course, that the fish caught themselves); but they were scanty in number and light in weight. Whether it was the presence of the miller's foreman—a gloomy personage, who stood staring disastrously upon us from a little flower-garden on the opposite bank—that cast an adverse influence over our sport; or whether my want of faith and earnestness as an angler acted retributively on my companion as well as myself, I know not; but it is certain that he got almost as little reward for his skill as I got for my patience. After nearly two hours of intense expectation on my part, and intense angling on his, Mr

Garthwaite jerked his line out of the water in a rage, and bade me follow him to another place, declaring that the stream must have been netted by poachers in the night, who had taken all the large fish away with them, and had thrown in the small ones to grow until their next visit. We moved away, further down the bank, leaving the imperturbable foreman still in the flower-garden, staring at us speechlessly on our departure, exactly as he had already stared at us on our approach.

“Stop a minute,” said Mr Garthwaite suddenly, after we had walked some distance in silence by the side of the stream, “I have an idea. Now we *are* out for a day’s angling, we won’t be baulked. Instead of trying the water here again, we will go where I know, by experience, that the fishing is excellent. And, what is more, you shall be introduced to a lady whose appearance is sure to interest you, and whose history, I can tell you beforehand, is a very remarkable one.”

“Indeed,” I said. “May I ask in what way?”

“She is connected,” answered Mr Garthwaite, “with an extraordinary story, which relates to a family once settled in an old house in this neighbourhood. Her name is Miss Welwyn; but she is less formally known among the poor people about here, who love her dearly, and honour her almost superstitiously, as

The Lady of Glenwith Grange. Wait till you have seen her before you ask me to say anything more. She lives in the strictest retirement : I am almost the only visitor who is admitted. Don't say you had rather not go in. Any friend of mine will be welcome at the Grange (the scene of the story, remember), for my sake—the more especially because I have never abused my privilege of introduction. The place is not above two miles from here, and the stream (which we call in our county dialect, Glenwith Beck), runs through the grounds.

As we walked on, Mr Garthwaite's manner altered. He became unusually silent and thoughtful. The mention of Miss Welwyn's name had evidently called up some recollections which were not in harmony with his every-day mood. Feeling that to talk to him on any indifferent subject would be only to interrupt his thoughts to no purpose, I walked by his side in perfect silence, looking out already with some curiosity and impatience for a first view of Glenwith Grange. We stopped, at last, close by an old church, standing on the outskirts of a pretty village. The low wall of the churchyard was bounded on one side by a plantation, and was joined by a park paling, in which I noticed a small wicket-gate. Mr Garthwaite opened it, and led me along a shrubby-path, which conducted us circuitously to the dwelling-house.

We had evidently entered by a private way, for we approached the building by the back. I looked up at it curiously, and saw standing at one of the windows on the lower floor a little girl watching us as we advanced. She seemed to be about nine or ten years old. I could not help stopping a moment to look up at her, her clear complexion, and her long dark hair, were so beautiful. And yet there was something in her expression—a dimness and vacancy in her large eyes, a changeless unmeaning smile on her parted lips—which seemed to jar with all that was naturally attractive in her face; which perplexed, disappointed, and even shocked me, though I hardly knew why. Mr Garthwaite, who had been walking along thoughtfully, with his eyes on the ground, turned back when he found me lingering behind him; looked up where I was looking; started a little, I thought; then took my arm, whispered rather impatiently, “Don’t say anything about having seen that poor child when you are introduced to Miss Welwyn; I’ll tell you why afterwards,” and led me round hastily to the front of the building.

It was a very dreary old house, with a lawn in front thickly sprinkled with flower-beds, and creepers of all sorts climbing in profusion about the heavy stone porch and the mullions of the lower windows. In spite of these prettiest of all ornaments clustering

brightly round the building—in spite of the perfect repair in which it was kept from top to bottom—there was something repellent to me in the aspect of the whole place: a deathly stillness hung over it, which fell oppressively on my spirits. When my companion rang the loud, deep-toned bell, the sound startled me as if we had been committing a crime in disturbing the silence. And when the door was opened by an old female servant (while the hollow echo of the bell was still vibrating in the air), I could hardly imagine it possible that we should be let in. We were admitted, however, without the slightest demur. I remarked that there was the same atmosphere of dreary repose inside the house which I had already observed, or rather felt, outside it. No dogs barked at our approach—no doors banged in the servants' offices—no heads peeped over the banisters—not one of the ordinary domestic consequences of an unexpected visit in the country met either eye or ear. The large shadowy apartment, half library, half breakfast-room, into which we were ushered, was as solitary as the hall of entrance; unless I except such drowsy evidences of life as were here presented to us, in the shape of an Angola cat and a gray parrot—the first lying asleep in a chair, the second sitting ancient, solemn, and voiceless in a large cage. Mr Garthwaite walked to the window when we

entered, without saying a word. Determining to let his taciturn humour have its way, I asked him no questions, but looked around the room to see what information it would give me (and rooms often do give such information) about the character and habits of the owner of the house.

Two tables covered with books were the first objects that attracted me. On approaching them, I was surprised to find that the all-influencing periodical literature of the present day—whose sphere is already almost without limit; whose readers, even in our time, may be numbered by millions—was entirely unrepresented on Miss Welwyn's table. Nothing modern, nothing contemporary in the world of books, presented itself. Of all the volumes beneath my hand, not one bore the badge of the circulating library, or wore the flaring modern livery of gilt cloth. Every work that I took up had been written at least fifteen or twenty years since. The prints hanging round the walls (towards which I next looked) were all engraved from devotional subjects by the old masters: the music-stand contained no music of later date than the compositions of Hadyn and Mozart. Whatever I examined besides, told me, with the same consistency, the same strange tale. The owner of these possessions lived in the bygone time; lived among old recollections and old associations—a volun-

tary recluse from all that was connected with the passing day. In Miss Welwyn's house, the stir, the tumult, the "idle business" of the world, evidently appealed in vain to sympathies which grew no longer with the growing hour.

As these thoughts were passing through my mind, the door opened, and the lady herself appeared.

She looked certainly past the prime of life ; longer past it, as I afterwards discovered, than she really was. But I never remember, in any other face, to have seen so much of the better part of the beauty of early womanhood still remaining, as I saw in hers. Sorrow had evidently passed over the fair calm countenance before me, but had left resignation there as its only trace. Her expression was still youthful—youthful in its kindness and its candour especially. It was only when I looked at her hair, that was now growing gray—at her wan thin hands—at the faint lines marked round her mouth—at the sad serenity of her eyes, that I fairly detected the mark of age ; and, more than that, the token of some great grief, which had been conquered, but not banished. Even from her voice alone—from the peculiar uncertainty of its low calm tones when she spoke—it was easy to conjecture that she must have passed through sufferings, at some time of her life, which had tried to the quick the noble nature that they could not subdue.

Mr Garthwaite and she met each other almost like brother and sister : it was plain that the friendly intimacy between them had been of very long duration. Our visit was a short one. The conversation never advanced beyond the commonplace topics suited to the occasion : it was, therefore, from what I saw, and not from what I heard, that I was enabled to form my judgment of Miss Welwyn. Deeply as she had interested me—far more deeply than I at all know how to explain in fitting words—I cannot say that I was unwilling to depart when we rose to take leave. Though nothing could be more courteous and more kind than her manner towards me during the whole interview, I could still perceive that it cost her some effort to repress in my presence the shades of sadness and reserve which seemed often ready to steal over her. And I must confess that when I once or twice heard the half-sigh stifled, and saw the momentary relapse into thoughtfulness suddenly restrained, I felt an indefinable awkwardness in my position which made me ill at ease ; which set me doubting whether, as a perfect stranger, I had done right in suffering myself to be introduced where no new faces could awaken either interest or curiosity ; where no new sympathies could ever be felt, no new friendships ever be formed.

As soon as we had taken leave of Miss Welwyn,

and were on our way to the stream in her grounds, I more than satisfied Mr Garthwaite that the impression the lady had produced on me was of no transitory kind, by overwhelming him with questions about her—not omitting one or two incidental inquiries on the subject of the little girl whom I had seen at the back window. He only rejoined that his story would answer all my questions; and that he would begin to tell it as soon as we had arrived at Glenwith Beck, and were comfortably settled to fishing.

Five minutes more of walking brought us to the bank of the stream, and showed us the water running smoothly and slowly, tinged with the softest green lustre from the reflections of trees which almost entirely arched it over. Leaving me to admire the view at my ease, Mr Garthwaite occupied himself with the necessary preparations for angling, baiting my hook as well as his own. Then, desiring me to sit near him on the bank, he at last satisfied my curiosity by beginning his story. I shall relate it in his own manner, and, as nearly as possible, in his own words.

THE ANGLER'S STORY
OF
THE LADY OF GLENWITH GRANGE.

I HAVE known Miss Welwyn long enough to be able to bear personal testimony to the truth of many of the particulars which I am now about to relate. I knew her father, and her younger sister Rosamond; and I was acquainted with the Frenchman who became Rosamond's husband. These are the persons of whom it will be principally necessary for me to speak; they are the only prominent characters in my story.

Miss Welwyn's father died some years since. I remember him very well—though he never excited in me, or in any one else that I ever heard of, the slightest feeling of interest. When I have said that he inherited a very large fortune, amassed during his father's time, by speculations of a very daring, very fortunate, but not always very honourable kind, and

that he bought this old house with the notion of raising his social position, by making himself a member of our landed aristocracy in these parts, I have told you as much about him, I suspect, as you would care to hear. He was a thoroughly commonplace man, with no great virtues and no great vices in him. He had a little heart, a feeble mind, an amiable temper, a tall figure, and a handsome face. More than this need not, and cannot, be said on the subject of Mr Welwyn's character.

I must have seen the late Mrs Welwyn very often as a child ; but I cannot say that I remember anything more of her than that she was tall and handsome, and very generous and sweet-tempered towards me when I was in her company. She was her husband's superior in birth, as in everything else ; was a great reader of books in all languages ; and possessed such admirable talents as a musician, that her wonderful playing on the organ is remembered and talked of to this day among the old people in our country houses about here. All her friends, as I have heard, were disappointed when she married Mr Welwyn, rich as he was ; and were afterwards astonished to find her preserving the appearance, at least, of being perfectly happy with a husband who, neither in mind nor heart, was worthy of her.

It was generally supposed (and I have no doubt

correctly), that she found her great happiness and her great consolation in her little girl Ida—now the lady from whom we have just parted. The child took after her mother from the first—inheriting her mother's fondness for books, her mother's love of music, her mother's quick sensibilities, and, more than all, her mother's quiet firmness, patience, and loving-kindness of disposition. From Ida's earliest years, Mrs Welwyn undertook the whole superintendence of her education. The two were hardly ever apart, within doors or without. Neighbours and friends said that the little girl was being brought up too fancifully, was not enough among other children, was sadly neglected as to all reasonable and practical teaching, and was perilously encouraged in those dreamy and imaginative tendencies of which she had naturally more than her due share. There was, perhaps, some truth in this; and there might have been still more, if Ida had possessed an ordinary character, or had been reserved for an ordinary destiny. But she was a strange child from the first, and a strange future was in store for her.

Little Ida reached her eleventh year without either brother or sister to be her playfellow and companion at home. Immediately after that period, however, her sister Rosamond was born. Though Mr Welwyn's own desire was to have had a son, there were, never-

theless, great rejoicings yonder in the old house on the birth of this second daughter. But they were all turned, only a few months afterwards, to the bitterest grief and despair: the Grange lost its mistress. While Rosamond was still an infant in arms, her mother died.

Mrs Welwyn had been afflicted with some disorder after the birth of her second child, the name of which I am not learned enough in medical science to be able to remember. I only know that she recovered from it, to all appearance, in an unexpectedly short time; that she suffered a fatal relapse, and that she died a lingering and a painful death. Mr Welwyn (who, in after-years, had a habit of vaingloriously describing his marriage as "a love-match on both sides") was really fond of his wife in his own frivolous feeble way, and suffered as acutely as such a man could suffer, during the latter days of her illness, and at the terrible time when the doctors, one and all, confessed that her life was a thing to be despaired of. He burst into irrepressible passions of tears, and was always obliged to leave the sick-room whenever Mrs Welwyn spoke of her approaching end. The last solemn words of the dying woman, the tenderest messages that she could give, the dearest parting wishes that she could express, the most earnest commands that she could leave behind her, the

gentlest reasons for consolation that she could suggest to the survivors among those who loved her, were not poured into her husband's ear, but into her child's. From the first period of her illness, Ida had persisted in remaining in the sick-room, rarely speaking, never showing outwardly any signs of terror or grief, except when she was removed from it; and then bursting into hysterical passions of weeping, which no expostulations, no arguments, no commands—nothing, in short, but bringing her back to the bedside—ever availed to calm. Her mother had been her playfellow, her companion, her dearest and most familiar friend; and there seemed something in the remembrance of this which, instead of overwhelming the child with despair, strengthened her to watch faithfully and bravely by her dying parent to the very last.

When the parting moment was over, and when Mr Welwyn, unable to bear the shock of being present in the house of death at the time of his wife's funeral, left home and went to stay with one of his relations in a distant part of England, Ida, whom it had been his wish to take away with him, petitioned earnestly to be left behind. "I promised mamma before she died that I would be as good to my little sister Rosamond as she had been to me," said the child simply; "and she told me in return that I might

wait here and see her laid in her grave." There happened to be an aunt of Mrs Welwyn, and an old servant of the family, in the house at this time, who understood Ida much better than her father did, and they persuaded him not to take her away. I have heard my mother say that the effect of the child's appearance at the funeral on her, and on all who went to see it, was something that she could never think of without the tears coming into her eyes, and could never forget to the last day of her life.

It must have been very shortly after this period that I saw Ida for the first time.

I remember accompanying my mother on a visit to the old house we have just left, in the summer, when I was at home for the holidays. It was a lovely, sunshiny morning; there was nobody in-doors, and we walked out into the garden. As we approached that lawn yonder, on the other side of the shrubbery, I saw, first, a young woman in mourning (apparently a servant) sitting reading; then a little girl, dressed all in black, moving towards us slowly over the bright turf, and holding up before her a baby whom she was trying to teach to walk. She looked, to my ideas, so very young to be engaged in such an occupation as this, and her gloomy black frock appeared to be such an unnaturally grave garment for a mere child of her age, and looked so doubly dismal by contrast with

the brilliant sunny lawn on which she stood, that I quite started when I first saw her, and eagerly asked my mother who she was. The answer informed me of the sad family story, which I have just been relating to you. Mrs Welwyn had then been buried about three months; and Ida, in her childish way, was trying, as she had promised, to supply her mother's place to her infant sister Rosamond.

I only mention this simple incident, because it is necessary, before I proceed to the eventful part of my narrative, that you should know exactly in what relation the sisters stood towards one another from the first. Of all the last parting words that Mrs Welwyn had spoken to her child, none had been oftener repeated, none more solemnly urged, than those which had commended the little Rosamond to Ida's love and care. To other persons, the full, the all-trusting dependence which the dying mother was known to have placed in a child hardly eleven years old, seemed merely a proof of that helpless desire to cling even to the feeblest consolations which the approach of death so often brings with it. But the event showed that the trust so strangely placed had not been ventured vainly when it was committed to young and tender hands. The whole future existence of the child was one noble proof that she had been worthy of her mother's dying confidence when it was first reposed

in her. In that simple incident which I have just mentioned, the new life of the two motherless sisters was all foreshadowed.

Time passed. I left school—went to college—travelled in Germany, and stayed there some time to learn the language. At every interval when I came home, and asked about the Welwys, the answer was, in substance, almost always the same. Mr Welwyn was giving his regular dinners, performing his regular duties as a county magistrate, enjoying his regular recreations as an amateur farmer and an eager sportsman. His two daughters were never separate. Ida was the same strange, quiet, retiring girl, that she had always been; and was still (as the phrase went) “spoiling” Rosamond in every way in which it was possible for an elder sister to spoil a younger by too much kindness.

I myself went to the Grange occasionally, when I was in this neighbourhood, in holiday and vacation time; and was able to test the correctness of the picture of life there which had been drawn for me. I remember the two sisters, when Rosamond was four or five years old; and when Ida seemed to me, even then, to be more like the child’s mother than her sister. She bore with her little caprices as sisters do not bear with one another. She was so patient at lesson-time, so anxious to conceal any weariness that

might overcome her in play-hours, so proud when Rosamond's beauty was noticed, so grateful for Rosamond's kisses when the child thought of bestowing them, so quick to notice all that Rosamond did, and to attend to all that Rosamond said, even when visitors were in the room ; that she seemed, to my boyish observation, altogether different from other elder sisters, in other family circles into which I was then received.

I remember them, again, when Rosamond was just growing to womanhood, and was in high spirits at the prospect of spending a season in London, and being presented at Court. She was very beautiful at that time—much handsomer than Ida. Her “accomplishments” were talked of far and near in our country circles. Few, if any, of the people, however, who applauded her playing and singing, who admired her water-colour drawings, who were delighted at her fluency when she spoke French, and amazed at her ready comprehension when she read German, knew how little of all this elegant mental cultivation and nimble manual dexterity she owed to her governesses and masters, and how much to her elder sister. It was Ida who really found out the means of stimulating her when she was idle ; Ida who helped her through all her worst difficulties ; Ida who gently conquered her defects of memory over her books, her

inaccuracies of ear at the piano, her errors of taste when she took the brush or pencil in hand. It was Ida alone who worked these marvels, and whose all-sufficient reward for her hardest exertions was a chance word of kindness from her sister's lips. Rosamond was not unaffectionate, and not ungrateful; but she inherited much of her father's commonness and frivolity of character. She became so accustomed to owe everything to her sister—to resign all her most trifling difficulties to Ida's ever-ready care—to have all her tastes consulted by Ida's ever watchful kindness—that she never appreciated, as it deserved, the deep devoted love of which she was the object. When Ida refused two good offers of marriage, Rosamond was as much astonished as the veriest strangers, who wondered why the elder Miss Welwyn seemed bent on remaining single all her life.

When the journey to London, to which I have already alluded, took place, Ida accompanied her father and sister. If she had consulted her own tastes, she would have remained in the country; but Rosamond declared that she should feel quite lost and helpless twenty times a-day, in town, without her sister. It was in the nature of Ida to sacrifice herself to any one whom she loved, on the smallest occasions as well as the greatest. Her affection was as intuitively ready to sanctify Rosamond's slightest caprices as to

excuse Rosamond's most thoughtless faults. So she went to London cheerfully, to witness with pride all the little triumphs won by her sister's beauty; to hear, and never tire of hearing, all that admiring friends could say in her sister's praise.

At the end of the season, Mr Welwyn and his daughters returned for a short time to the country; then left home again to spend the latter part of the autumn and the beginning of the winter in Paris.

They took with them excellent letters of introduction, and saw a great deal of the best society in Paris, foreign as well as English. At one of the first of the evening parties which they attended, the general topic of conversation was the conduct of a certain French nobleman, the Baron Franval, who had returned to his native country after a long absence, and who was spoken of in terms of high eulogy by the majority of the guests present. The history of who Franval was, and of what he had done, was readily communicated to Mr Welwyn and his daughters, and was briefly this:—

The Baron inherited little from his ancestors besides his high rank and his ancient pedigree. On the death of his parents, he and his two unmarried sisters (their only surviving children) found the small territorial property of the Franvals, in Normandy, barely productive enough to afford a comfortable subsistence for

the three. The Baron, then a young man of three-and-twenty, endeavoured to obtain such military or civil employment as might become his rank ; but, although the Bourbons were at that time restored to the throne of France, his efforts were ineffectual. Either his interest at Court was bad, or secret enemies were at work to oppose his advancement. He failed to obtain even the slightest favour ; and, irritated by undeserved neglect, resolved to leave France, and seek occupation for his energies in foreign countries, where his rank would be no bar to his bettering his fortunes, if he pleased, by engaging in commercial pursuits.

An opportunity of the kind that he wanted unexpectedly offered itself. He left his sisters in care of an old male relative of the family at the château in Normandy, and sailed, in the first instance, to the West Indies ; afterwards extending his wanderings to the continent of South America, and there engaging in mining transactions on a very large scale. After fifteen years of absence (during the latter part of which time false reports of his death had reached Normandy), he had just returned to France ; having realized a handsome independence, with which he proposed to widen the limits of his ancestral property, and to give his sisters (who were still, like himself, unmarried) all the luxuries and advantages that afflu-

ence could bestow. The Baron's independent spirit, and generous devotion to the honour of his family and the happiness of his surviving relatives, were themes of general admiration in most of the social circles of Paris. He was expected to arrive in the capital every day; and it was naturally enough predicted that his reception in society there could not fail to be of the most flattering and most brilliant kind.

The Welwysns listened to this story with some little interest; Rosamond, who was very romantic, being especially attracted by it, and openly avowing to her father and sister, when they got back to their hotel, that she felt as ardent a curiosity as anybody to see the adventurous and generous Baron. The desire was soon gratified. Franval came to Paris, as had been anticipated—was introduced to the Welwysns—met them constantly in society—made no favourable impression on Ida, but won the good opinion of Rosamond from the first; and was regarded with such high approval by their father, that when he mentioned his intention of visiting England in the spring of the new year, he was cordially invited to spend the hunting season at Glenwith Grange.

I came back from Germany about the same time that the Welwysns returned from Paris: and at once set myself to improve my neighbourly intimacy with

the family. I was very fond of Ida; more fond, perhaps, than my vanity will now allow me to —— but that is of no consequence. It is much more to the purpose to tell you, that I heard the whole of the Baron's story enthusiastically related by Mr Welwyn and Rosamond; that he came to the Grange at the appointed time; that I was introduced to him; and that he produced as unfavourable an impression upon me as he had already produced upon Ida.

It was whimsical enough, but I really could not tell why I disliked him, though I could account very easily, according to my own notions, for his winning the favour and approval of Rosamond and her father. He was certainly a handsome man, as far as features went; he had a winning gentleness and graceful respect in his manner when he spoke to women; and he sang remarkably well, with one of the sweetest tenor voices I ever heard. These qualities alone were quite sufficient to attract any girl of Rosamond's disposition: and I certainly never wondered why he was a favourite of hers.

Then, as to her father, the Baron was not only fitted to win his sympathy and regard in the field, by proving himself an ardent sportsman and an excellent rider, but was also, in virtue of some of his minor personal peculiarities, just the man to gain the friendship of his host. Mr Welwyn was as ridiculously

prejudiced, as most weak-headed Englishmen are, on the subject of foreigners in general. In spite of his visit to Paris, the vulgar notion of a Frenchman continued to be *his* notion, both while he was in France and when he returned from it. Now, the Baron was as unlike the traditional "Mounseer" of English songs, plays, and satires, as a man could well be; and it was on account of this very dissimilarity that Mr Welwyn first took a violent fancy to him, and then invited him to his house. Franval spoke English remarkably well; wore neither beard, moustachios, nor whiskers; kept his hair cut almost unbecomingly short; dressed in the extreme of plainness and modest good taste; talked little in general society; uttered his words, when he did speak, with singular calmness and deliberation; and, to crown all, had the greater part of his acquired property invested in English securities. In Mr Welwyn's estimation, such a man as this was a perfect miracle of a Frenchman, and he admired and encouraged him accordingly.

I have said that I disliked him, yet could not assign a reason for my dislike; and I can only repeat it now. He was remarkably polite to me; we often rode together in hunting, and sat near each other at the Grange table; but I could never become familiar with him. He always gave me the idea of a man who had some mental reservation in saying the most trif-

ling thing. There was a constant restraint, hardly perceptible to most people, but plainly visible, nevertheless, to me, which seemed to accompany his lightest words, and to hang about his most familiar manner. This, however, was no just reason for my secretly disliking and distrusting him as I did. Ida said as much to me, I remember, when I confessed to her what my feelings towards him were, and tried (but vainly) to induce her to be equally candid with me in return. She seemed to shrink from the tacit condemnation of Rosamond's opinion which such a confidence on her part would have implied. And yet she watched the growth of that opinion, or, in other words, the growth of her sister's liking for the Baron, with an apprehension and sorrow which she tried fruitlessly to conceal. Even her father began to notice that her spirits were not so good as usual, and to suspect the cause of her melancholy. I remember he jested, with all the dense insensibility of a stupid man, about Ida having invariably been jealous, from a child, if Rosamond looked kindly upon anybody except her elder sister.

The spring began to get far advanced towards summer. Franval paid a visit to London; came back in the middle of the season to Glenwith Grange; wrote to put off his departure for France; and, at last (not at all to the surprise of anybody who was inti-

mate with the Welwyns) proposed to Rosamond, and was accepted. He was candour and generosity itself when the preliminaries of the marriage settlement were under discussion. He quite overpowered Mr Welwyn and the lawyers with references, papers, and statements of the distribution and extent of his property, which were found to be perfectly correct. His sisters were written to, and returned the most cordial answers : saying that the state of their health would not allow them to come to England for the marriage ; but adding a warm invitation to Normandy for the bride and her family. Nothing, in short, could be more straightforward and satisfactory than the Baron's behaviour, and the testimonies to his worth and integrity which the news of the approaching marriage produced from his relatives and his friends.

The only joyless face at the Grange now was Ida's. At any time it would have been a hard trial to her to resign that first and foremost place, which she had held since childhood in her sister's heart, as she knew she must resign it when Rosamond married. But, secretly disliking and distrusting Franval as she did, the thought that he was soon to become the husband of her beloved sister filled her with a vague sense of terror which she could not explain to herself, which it was imperatively necessary that she should conceal, and which, on those very accounts, became a daily

and hourly torment to her that was almost more than she could bear.

One consolation alone supported her : Rosamond and she were not to be separated. She knew that the Baron secretly disliked her as much as she disliked him ; she knew that she must bid farewell to the brighter and happier part of her life on the day when she went to live under the same roof with her sister's husband ; but, true to the promise made, years and years ago, by her dying mother's bed, true to the affection which was the ruling and beautiful feeling of her whole existence, she never hesitated about indulging Rosamond's wish, when the girl, in her bright light-hearted way, said that she could never get on comfortably in the marriage state unless she had Ida to live with her and help her just the same as ever. The Baron was too polite a man even to *look* dissatisfied when he heard of the proposed arrangement ; and it was therefore settled from the beginning that Ida was always to live with her sister.

The marriage took place in the summer, and the bride and bridegroom went to spend their honeymoon in Cumberland. On their return to Glenwith Grange, a visit to the Baron's sisters, in Normandy, was talked of ; but the execution of this project was suddenly and disastrously suspended by the death of Mr Welwyn from an attack of pleurisy.

In consequence of this calamity, the projected journey was of course deferred; and when autumn and the shooting season came, the Baron was unwilling to leave the well-stocked preserves of the Grange. He seemed, indeed, to grow less and less inclined, as time advanced, for the trip to Normandy; and wrote excuse after excuse to his sisters, when letters arrived from them urging him to pay the promised visit. In the winter-time, he said he would not allow his wife to risk a long journey. In the spring, his health was pronounced to be delicate. In the genial summer-time, the accomplishment of the proposed visit would be impossible; for at that period the Baroness expected to become a mother. Such were the apologies which Franval seemed almost glad to be able to send to his sisters in France.

The marriage was, in the strictest sense of the term, a happy one. The Baron, though he never altogether lost the strange restraint and reserve of his manner, was, in his quiet, peculiar way, the fondest and kindest of husbands. He went to town occasionally on business, but always seemed glad to return to the Baroness; he never varied in the politeness of his bearing towards his wife's sister; he behaved with the most courteous hospitality towards all the friends of the Welwyns: in short, he thoroughly justified the good opinion which Rosamond and her

father had formed of him when they first met at Paris. And yet no experience of his character thoroughly reassured Ida. Months passed on quietly and pleasantly; and still that secret sadness, that indefinable, unreasonable apprehension on Rosamond's account, hung heavily on her sister's heart.

At the beginning of the first summer months, a little domestic inconvenience happened, which showed the Baroness, for the first time, that her husband's temper could be seriously ruffled—and that by the veriest trifle. He was in the habit of taking in two French provincial newspapers—one published at Bordeaux, and the other at Havre. He always opened these journals the moment they came, looked at one particular column of each with the deepest attention for a few minutes, then carelessly threw them aside into his waste-paper basket. His wife and her sister were at first rather surprised at the manner in which he read his two papers; but they thought no more of it when he explained that he only took them in to consult them about French commercial intelligence, which might be, occasionally, of importance to him.

These papers were published weekly. On the occasion to which I have just referred, the Bordeaux paper came on the proper day, as usual; but the Havre paper never made its appearance. This trifling circumstance seemed to make the Baron seriously

uneasy. He wrote off directly to the country post-office, and to the newspaper agent in London. His wife, astonished to see his tranquillity so completely overthrown by so slight a cause, tried to restore his good-humour by jesting with him about the missing newspaper. He replied by the first angry and unfeeling words that she had heard issue from his lips. She was then within about six weeks of her confinement, and very unfit to bear harsh answers from anybody—least of all from her husband.

On the second day no answer came. On the afternoon of the third, the Baron rode off to the post-town to make inquiries. About an hour after he had gone, a strange gentleman came to the Grange, and asked to see the Baroness. On being informed that she was not well enough to receive visitors, he sent up a message that his business was of great importance, and that he would wait down stairs for a second answer.

On receiving this message, Rosamond turned, as usual, to her elder sister for advice. Ida went down stairs immediately to see the stranger. What I am now about to tell you of the extraordinary interview which took place between them, and of the shocking events that followed it, I have heard from Miss Welwyn's own lips.

She felt unaccountably nervous when she entered

the room. The stranger bowed very politely, and asked, in a foreign accent, if she were the Baroness Franval. She set him right on this point, and told him she attended to all matters of business for the Baroness; adding, that, if his errand at all concerned her sister's husband, the Baron was not then at home.

The stranger answered that he was aware of it when he called, and that the unpleasant business on which he came could not be confided to the Baron—at least in the first instance.

She asked why. He said he was there to explain; and expressed himself as feeling greatly relieved at having to open his business to her, because she would, doubtless, be best able to prepare her sister for the bad news that he was, unfortunately, obliged to bring. The sudden faintness which overcame her, as he spoke those words, prevented her from addressing him in return. He poured out some water for her from a bottle which happened to be standing on the table, and asked if he might depend on her fortitude. She tried to say "Yes;" but the violent throbbing of her heart seemed to choke her. He took a foreign newspaper from his pocket, saying that he was a secret agent of the French police—that the paper was the *Havre Journal* for the past week, and that it had been expressly kept from reaching the Baron, as

usual, through his (the agent's) interference. He then opened the newspaper, and begged that she would nerve herself sufficiently (for her sister's sake) to read certain lines, which would give her some hint of the business that brought him there. He pointed to the passage as he spoke. It was among the "Shipping Entries," and was thus expressed:—

"Arrived, the *Berenice*, from San Francisco, with a valuable cargo of hides. She brings one passenger, the Baron Franval, of Château Franval, in Normandy."

As Miss Welwyn read the entry, her heart, which had been throbbing violently but the moment before, seemed suddenly to cease from all action, and she began to shiver, though it was a warm June evening. The agent held the tumbler to her lips, and made her drink a little of the water, entreating her very earnestly to take courage and listen to him. He then sat down, and referred again to the entry; every word he uttered seeming to burn itself in for ever (as she expressed it) on her memory and her heart.

He said: "It has been ascertained beyond the possibility of doubt that there is no mistake about the name in the lines you have just read. And it is as certain as that we are here, that there is only *one* Baron Franval now alive. The question, therefore, is, whether the passenger by the *Berenice* is the true

Baron, or—I beg you most earnestly to bear with me and to compose yourself—or the husband of your sister. The person who arrived last week at Havre was scouted as an impostor by the ladies at the château, the moment he presented himself there as their brother, returning to them after sixteen years of absence. The authorities were communicated with, and I and my assistants were instantly sent for from Paris.

“ We wasted no time in questioning the supposed impostor. He either was, or affected to be, in a perfect frenzy of grief and indignation. We just ascertained, from competent witnesses, that he bore an extraordinary resemblance to the real Baron, and that he was perfectly familiar with places and persons in and about the château : we just ascertained that, and then proceeded to confer with the local authorities, and to examine their private entries of suspected persons in their jurisdiction, ranging back over a past period of twenty years or more. One of the entries thus consulted contained these particulars :—‘ Hector Auguste Monbrun, son of a respectable proprietor in Normandy. Well educated ; gentlemanlike manners. On bad terms with his family. Character : bold, cunning, unscrupulous, self-possessed. Is a clever mimic. May be easily recognised by his striking likeness to the Baron Franval. Imprisoned at twenty for theft and assault.’ ”

Miss Welwyn saw the agent look up at her after he had read this extract from the police-book, to ascertain if she was still able to listen to him. He asked, with some appearance of alarm, as their eyes met, if she would like some more water. She was just able to make a sign in the negative. He took a second extract from his pocket-book, and went on.

He said : " The next entry under the same name was dated four years later, and ran thus : ' H. A. Monbrun, condemned to the galleys for life, for assassination, and other crimes not officially necessary to be here specified. Escaped from custody at Toulon. Is known, since the expiration of his first term of imprisonment, to have allowed his beard to grow, and to have worn his hair long, with the intention of rendering it impossible for those acquainted with him in his native province to recognise him, as heretofore, by his likeness to the Baron Franval.' There were more particulars added, not important enough for extract. We immediately examined the supposed impostor : for, if he was Monbrun, we knew that we should find on his shoulder the two letters of the convict brand, ' T. F.' (standing for *Travaux Forcés*). After the minutest examination with the mechanical and chemical tests used on such occasions, not the slightest trace of the brand was to be found. The moment this astounding discovery was made, I started

to lay an embargo on the forthcoming numbers of the *Havre Journal* for that week, which were about to be sent to the English agent in London. I arrived at Havre on Saturday (the morning of publication), in time to execute my design. I waited there long enough to communicate by telegraph with my superiors in Paris, then hastened to this place. What my errand here is, you may——”

He might have gone on speaking for some moments longer ; but Miss Welwyn heard no more.

Her first sensation of returning consciousness was the feeling that water was being sprinkled on her face. Then she saw that all the windows in the room had been set wide open, to give her air ; and that she and the agent were still alone. At first, she felt bewildered, and hardly knew who he was ; but he soon recalled to her mind the horrible realities that had brought him there, by apologizing for not having summoned assistance when she fainted. He said it was of the last importance, in Franval's absence, that no one in the house should imagine that anything unusual was taking place in it. Then, after giving her an interval of a minute or two to collect what little strength she had left, he added that he would not increase her sufferings by saying anything more, just then, on the shocking subject of the investigation which it was his duty to make—that he would leave

her to recover herself, and to consider what was the best course to be taken with the Baroness in the present terrible emergency—and that he would privately return to the house between eight and nine o'clock that evening, ready to act as Miss Welwyn wished, and to afford her and her sister any aid and protection of which they might stand in need. With these words he bowed, and noiselessly quitted the room.

For the first few awful minutes after she was left alone, Miss Welwyn sat helpless and speechless; utterly numbed in heart, and mind, and body—then a sort of instinct (she was incapable of thinking) seemed to urge her to conceal the fearful news from her sister as long as possible. She ran up stairs to Rosamond's sitting-room, and called through the door (for she dared not trust herself in her sister's presence) that the visitor had come on some troublesome business from their late father's lawyers, and that she was going to shut herself up, and write some long letters in connexion with that business. After she had got into her own room, she was never sensible of how time was passing—never conscious of any feeling within her, except a baseless, helpless hope that the French police might yet be proved to have made some terrible mistake—until she heard a violent shower of rain come on a little after sunset. The noise of the rain, and the freshness it brought with

it in the air, seemed to awaken her as if from a painful and a fearful sleep. The power of reflection returned to her; her heart heaved and bounded with an overwhelming terror, as the thought of Rosamond came back vividly to it; her memory recurred despairingly to the long past day of her mother's death, and to the farewell promise she had made by her mother's bedside. She burst into an hysterical passion of weeping that seemed to be tearing her to pieces. In the midst of it she heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs in the court-yard, and knew that Rosamond's husband had come back.

Dipping her handkerchief in cold water, and passing it over her eyes as she left the room, she instantly hastened to her sister.

Fortunately, the daylight was fading in the old-fashioned chamber that Rosamond occupied. Before they could say two words to each other, Franval was in the room. He seemed violently irritated; said that he had waited for the arrival of the mail—that the missing newspaper had not come by it—that he had got wet through—that he felt a shivering fit coming on—and that he believed he had caught a violent cold. His wife anxiously suggested some simple remedies. He roughly interrupted her, saying there was but one remedy, the remedy of going to bed; and so left them without another word. She

just put her handkerchief to her eyes, and said softly to her sister, "How he is changed!"—then spoke no more. They sat silent for half an hour or longer. After that, Rosamond went affectionately and forgivingly to see how her husband was. She returned, saying that he was in bed, and in a deep, heavy sleep; and predicting hopefully that he would wake up quite well the next morning. In a few minutes more the clock struck nine; and Ida heard the servant's step ascending the stairs. She suspected what his errand was, and went out to meet him. Her presentiment had not deceived her; the police agent had arrived, and was waiting for her down stairs.

He asked her if she had said anything to her sister, or had thought of any plan of action, the moment she entered the room; and, on receiving a reply in the negative, inquired further if "the Baron" had come home yet. She answered that he had; that he was ill and tired, and vexed, and that he had gone to bed. The agent asked in an eager whisper if she knew that he was asleep, and alone in bed? and, when he received her reply, said that he must go up into the bed-room directly.

She began to feel the faintness coming over her again, and with it sensations of loathing and terror that she could neither express to others nor define to herself. He said that if she hesitated to let him avail

himself of this unexpected opportunity, her scruples might lead to fatal results. He reminded her that if "the Baron" were really the convict Monbrun, the claims of society and of justice demanded that he should be discovered by the first available means; and that if he were not—if some inconceivable mistake had really been committed—then, such a plan for getting immediately at the truth as was now proposed, would ensure the delivery of an innocent man from suspicion, and at the same time spare him the knowledge that he had ever been suspected. This last argument had its effect on Miss Welwyn. The baseless, helpless hope that the French authorities might yet be proved to be in error, which she had already felt in her own room, returned to her now. She suffered the agent to lead her up stairs.

He took the candle from her hand when she pointed to the door; opened it softly; and, leaving it ajar, went into the room.

She looked through the gap, with a feverish, horror-struck curiosity. Franval was lying on his side in a profound sleep, with his back turned towards the door. The agent softly placed the candle upon a small reading-table between the door and the bed-side, softly drew down the bed-clothes a little way from the sleeper's back, then took a pair of scissors from the toilette table, and very gently and slowly began

to cut away, first the loose folds, then the intervening strips of linen from the part of Franval's night-gown, that was over his shoulders. When the upper part of his back had been bared in this way, the agent took the candle and held it near the flesh. Miss Welwyn heard him ejaculate some word under his breath, then saw him looking round to where she was standing, and beckoning to her to come in.

Mechanically she obeyed; mechanically she looked down where his finger was pointing. It was the convict Monbrun—there, just visible under the bright light of the candle, were the fatal letters "T. F." branded on the villain's shoulder!

Though she could neither move nor speak, the horror of this discovery did not deprive her of her consciousness. She saw the agent softly draw up the bed-clothes again into their proper position, replace the scissors on the toilet-table, and take from it a bottle of smelling-salts. She felt him removing her from the bed-room, and helping her quickly down stairs, giving her the salts to smell to by the way. When they were alone again, he said, with the first appearance of agitation that he had yet exhibited, "Now, madam, for God's sake, collect all your courage, and be guided by me. You and your sister had better leave the house immediately. Have you any relatives in the neighbourhood, with whom you

could take refuge?" They had none. "What is the name of the nearest town where you could get good accommodation for the night?" Harleybrook (he wrote the name down on his tablets). "How far off is it?" Twelve miles. "You had better have the carriage out at once, to go there with as little delay as possible: leaving me to pass the night here. I will communicate with you to-morrow at the principal hotel. Can you compose yourself sufficiently to be able to tell the head-servant, if I ring for him, that he is to obey my orders till further notice?"

The servant was summoned, and received his instructions, the agent going out with him to see that the carriage was got ready quietly and quickly. Miss Welwyn went up stairs to her sister.

How the fearful news was first broken to Rosamond, I cannot relate to you. Miss Welwyn has never confided to me, has never confided to anybody, what happened at the interview between her sister and herself that night. I can tell you nothing of the shock they both suffered, except that the younger and the weaker died under it; that the elder and the stronger has never recovered from it, and never will.

They went away the same night, with one attendant, to Harleybrook, as the agent had advised. Before daybreak Rosamond was seized with the pains of premature labour. She died three days after,

unconscious of the horror of her situation ; wandering in her mind about past times, and singing old tunes that Ida had taught her, as she lay in her sister's arms.

The child was born alive, and lives still. You saw her at the window as we came in at the back way to the Grange. I surprised you, I dare say, by asking you not to speak of her to Miss Welwyn. Perhaps you noticed something vacant in the little girl's expression. I am sorry to say that her mind is more vacant still. If "idiot" did not sound like a mocking word, however tenderly and pityingly one may wish to utter it, I should tell you that the poor thing had been an idiot from her birth.

You will, doubtless, want to hear now what happened at Glenwith Grange, after Miss Welwyn and her sister had left it. I have seen the letter which the police agent sent the next morning to Harleybrook ; and, speaking from my recollection of that, I shall be able to relate all you can desire to know.

First, as to the past history of the scoundrel Monbrun, I need only tell you that he was identical with an escaped convict, who, for a long term of years, had successfully eluded the vigilance of the authorities all over Europe, and in America as well. In conjunction with two accomplices, he had succeeded in possessing himself of large sums of money by the most

criminal means. He also acted secretly as the "banker" of his convict brethren, whose dishonest gains were all confided to his hands for safe keeping. He would have been certainly captured, on venturing back to France, along with his two associates, but for the daring imposture in which he took refuge; and which, if the true Baron Franval had really died abroad, as was reported, would, in all probability, never have been found out.

Besides his extraordinary likeness to the Baron, he had every other requisite for carrying on his deception successfully. Though his parents were not wealthy, he had received a good education. He was so notorious for his gentlemanlike manners among the villanous associates of his crimes and excesses, that they nicknamed him "the Prince." All his early life had been passed in the neighbourhood of the Château Franval. He knew what were the circumstances which had induced the Baron to leave it. He had been in the country to which the Baron had emigrated. He was able to refer familiarly to persons and localities, at home and abroad, with which the Baron was sure to be acquainted. And, lastly, he had an expatriation of fifteen years to plead for him as his all-sufficient excuse, if he made any slight mistakes before the Baron's sisters, in his assumed character of their long-absent brother. It will be, of

course, hardly necessary for me to tell you, in relation to this part of the subject, that the true Franval was immediately and honourably reinstated in the family rights of which the impostor had succeeded for a time in depriving him.

According to Monbrun's own account, he had married poor Rosamond purely for love ; and the probabilities certainly are, that the pretty innocent English girl had really struck the villain's fancy for the time ; and that the easy, quiet life he was leading at the Grange pleased him, by contrast with his perilous and vagabond existence of former days. What might have happened if he had had time enough to grow wearied of his ill-fated wife and his English home, it is now useless to inquire. What really did happen on the morning when he awoke after the flight of Ida and her sister can be briefly told.

As soon as his eyes opened they rested on the police-agent, sitting quietly by the bedside, with a loaded pistol in his hand. Monbrun knew immediately that he was discovered ; but he never for an instant lost the self-possession for which he was famous. He said he wished to have five minutes allowed him to deliberate quietly in bed, whether he should resist the French authorities on English ground, and so gain time by obliging the one government to apply specially to have him delivered up by

the other—or whether he should accept the terms officially offered to him by the agent, if he quietly allowed himself to be captured. He chose the latter course—it was suspected, because he wished to communicate personally with some of his convict associates in France, whose fraudulent gains were in his keeping, and because he felt boastfully confident of being able to escape again, whenever he pleased. Be his secret motives, however, what they might, he allowed the agent to conduct him peaceably from the Grange; first writing a farewell letter to poor Rosamond, full of heartless French sentiment, and glib sophistries about Fate and Society. His own fate was not long in overtaking him. He attempted to escape again, as it had been expected he would, and was shot by the sentinel on duty at the time. I remember hearing that the bullet entered his head and killed him on the spot.

My story is done. It is ten years now since Rosamond was buried in the churchyard yonder; and it is ten years also since Miss Welwyn returned to be the lonely inhabitant of Glenwith Grange. She now lives but in the remembrances that it calls up before her of her happier existence of former days. There is hardly an object in the old house which does not tenderly and solemnly remind her of the mother, whose last wishes she lived to obey; of the sister,

whose happiness was once her dearest earthly care. Those prints that you noticed on the library walls, Rosamond used to copy in the past time, when her pencil was often guided by Ida's hand. Those music-books that you were looking over, she and her mother have played from together, through many a long and quiet summer's evening. She has no ties now to bind her to the present but the poor child whose affliction it is her constant effort to lighten, and the little peasant population around her, whose humble cares and wants and sorrows she is always ready to relieve. Far and near her modest charities have penetrated among us ; and far and near she is heartily beloved and blessed in many a labourer's household. There is no poor man's hearth, not in this village only, but for miles away from it as well, at which you would not be received with the welcome given to an old friend, if you only told the cottagers that you knew the Lady of Glenwith Grange !

PROLOGUE TO THE FIFTH STORY.

THE next piece of work which occupied my attention after taking leave of Mr Garthwaite, offered the strongest possible contrast to the task which had last engaged me. Fresh from painting a bull at a farmhouse, I set forth to copy a Holy Family, by Correggio, at a convent of nuns. People who go to the Royal Academy Exhibition, and see pictures by famous artists, painted year after year in the same marked style which first made them celebrated, would be amazed indeed if they knew what a Jack-of-all-Trades a poor painter must become before he can gain his daily bread.

The picture by Correggio which I was now commissioned to copy, had been lent to the nuns by a Catholic gentleman of fortune, who prized it as the gem of his collection, and who had never before trusted it out of his own hands. My copy, when completed, was to be placed over the high altar of the convent chapel; and my work throughout its pro-

gress was to be pursued entirely in the parlour of the nunnery, and always in the watchful presence of one or other of the inmates of the house. It was only on such conditions that the owner of the Correggio was willing to trust his treasure out of his own hands, and to suffer it to be copied by a stranger. The restrictions he imposed, which I thought sufficiently absurd, and perhaps offensively suspicious as well, were communicated to me politely enough before I was allowed to undertake the commission. Unless I was inclined to submit to precautionary regulations which would affect any other artist exactly as they affected me, I was told not to think of offering to make the copy; and the nuns would then address themselves to some other person in my profession. After a day's consideration, I submitted to the restrictions, by my wife's advice, and saved the nuns the trouble of making application for a copier of Correggio in any other quarter.

I found the convent was charmingly situated in a quiet little valley in the West of England. The parlour in which I was to paint was a large well-lighted apartment; and the village inn, about half a mile off, afforded me cheap and excellent quarters for the night. Thus far, therefore, there was nothing to complain of. As for the picture, which was the next object of interest to me, I was surprised to find that the copying of it would be by no means so difficult a task as I had

anticipated. I am rather a revolutionary spirit in matters of art, and am bold enough to think that the old masters have their faults as well as their beauties. I can give my opinion, therefore, on the Correggio at the convent independently at least. Looked at technically, the picture was a fine specimen of colouring and execution; but looked at for the higher merits of delicacy, elevation, and feeling for the subject, it deserved copying as little as the most commonplace work that any unlucky modern artist ever produced. The faces of the Holy Family not only failed to display the right purity and tenderness of expression, but absolutely failed to present any expression at all. It is flat heresy to say so; but the valuable Correggio was nevertheless emphatically, and, in so many words, a very uninteresting picture.

So much for the convent and the work that I was to do in it. My next anxiety was to see how the restrictions imposed on me were to be carried out. The first day, the Mother Superior herself mounted guard in the parlour—a stern, silent, fanatical-looking woman, who seemed determined to awe me and make me uncomfortable, and who succeeded thoroughly in the execution of her purpose. The second day, she was relieved by the officiating priest of the convent: a mild, melancholy, gentlemanlike man, with whom I got on tolerably well. The third day, I had for over-

looker the portress of the house : a dirty, dismal, deaf, old woman, who did nothing but knit stockings and chew orris-root. The fourth day, a middle-aged nun, whom I heard addressed as Mother Martha, occupied the post of guardian to the precious Correggio ; and with her the number of my overlookers terminated. She, and the portress, and the priest, and the Mother Superior, relieved each other with military regularity, until I had put the last touch to my copy. I found them ready for me every morning on entering the parlour, and I left them in the chair of observation every evening on quitting it. As for any young and beautiful nuns who might have been in the building, I never so much as set eyes on the ends of their veils. From the door to the parlour, and from the parlour to the door, comprised the whole of my experience of the inside of the convent.

The only one of my superintending companions with whom I established anything like a familiar acquaintance was Mother Martha. She had no outward attractions to recommend her ; but she was simple, good-humoured, ready to gossip, and inquisitive to a perfectly incredible degree. Her whole life had been passed in the nunnery ; she was thoroughly accustomed to her seclusion ; thoroughly content with the monotonous round of her occupations ; not at all anxious to see the world for herself ; but, on the other

hand, insatiably curious to know all about it from others. There was no question connected with myself, my wife, my children, my friends, my profession, my income, my travels, my favourite amusements, and even my favourite sins, which a woman could ask a man, that Mother Martha did not, in the smallest and softest of voices, ask of me. Though an intelligent, well-informed person in all that related to her own special vocation, she was a perfect child in everything else. I constantly caught myself talking to her, just as I should have talked at home to one of my own little girls.

I hope no one will think that, in expressing myself thus, I am writing disparagingly of the poor nun. On two accounts, I shall always feel compassionately and gratefully towards Mother Martha. She was the only person in the convent who seemed sincerely anxious to make her presence in the parlour as agreeable to me as possible; and she good-humouredly told me the story which it is my object in these pages to introduce to the reader. In both ways I am deeply indebted to her; and I hope always to remember the obligation.

The circumstances under which the story came to be related to me may be told in very few words.

The interior of a convent parlour being a complete novelty to me, I looked around with some interest on

first entering my painting-room at the nunnery. There was but little in it to excite the curiosity of any one. The floor was covered with common matting, and the ceiling with plain whitewash. The furniture was of the simplest kind: a low chair with a praying-desk fixed to the back, and a finely carved oak-bookcase, studded all over with brass crosses, being the only useful objects that I could discern which had any conventual character about them. As for the ornaments of the room, they were entirely beyond my appreciation. I could feel no interest in the coloured prints of saints, with gold platters at the backs of their heads, that hung on the walls; and I could see nothing particularly impressive in the two plain little alabaster pots for holy water, fastened, one near the door, the other over the chimney-piece. The only object, indeed, in the whole room which in the slightest degree attracted my curiosity, was an old worm-eaten wooden cross, made in the rudest manner, hanging by itself on a slip of wall between two windows. It was so strangely rough and misshapen a thing to exhibit prominently in a neat room, that I suspected some history must be attached to it, and resolved to speak to my friend the nun about it at the earliest opportunity.

“Mother Martha,” said I, taking advantage of the first pause in the succession of quaintly innocent

questions which she was as usual addressing to me, "I have been looking at that rough old cross hanging between the windows, and fancying that it must surely be some curiosity——"

"Hush! hush!" exclaimed the nun: "You must not speak of that as a 'curiosity.' The Mother Superior calls it a Relic."

"I beg your pardon," said I, "I ought to have chosen my expressions more carefully——"

"Not," interposed Mother Martha, nodding to show me that my apology need not be finished,— "not that it is exactly a relic in the strict Catholic sense of the word; but there were circumstances in the life of the person who made it——." Here she stopped, and looked at me doubtfully.

"Circumstances, perhaps, which it is not considered advisable to communicate to strangers?" I suggested.

"Oh, no!" answered the nun, "I never heard that they were to be kept a secret. They were not told as a secret to me."

"Then you know all about them?" I asked.

"Certainly. I could tell you the whole history of the wooden cross; but it is all about Catholics, and you are a Protestant."

"That, Mother Martha, does not make it at all less interesting to me."

"Does it not, indeed?" exclaimed the nun inno-

cently—"What a strange man you are!—And what a remarkable religion yours must be!—What do your priests say about ours?—Are they learned men your priests?"

I felt that my chance of hearing Mother Martha's story would be a poor one indeed, if I allowed her to begin a fresh string of questions. Accordingly, I dismissed the inquiries about the clergy of the established church with the most irreverent briefness, and recalled her attention forthwith to the subject of the wooden cross.

"Yes, yes," said the good-natured nun; "surely you shall hear all I can tell you about it; but—" she hesitated timidly—"but I must ask the Mother Superior's leave first."

Saying these words, she summoned the portress, to my great amusement, to keep guard over the inestimable Correggio in her absence; and left the room. In less than five minutes she came back, looking quite happy and important in her innocent way.

"The Mother Superior," she said, "has given me leave to tell all I know about the wooden cross. She says it may do you good, and improve your Protestant opinion of us Catholics."

I expressed myself as being both willing and anxious to profit by what I heard; and the nun began her narrative immediately.

She related it in her own simple, earnest, minute way ; dwelling as long on small particulars as on important incidents ; and making moral reflections for my benefit at every place where it was possible to introduce them. In spite, however, of these drawbacks in the telling of it, the story interested and impressed me in no ordinary degree ; and I now purpose putting the events of it together as skilfully and strikingly as I can, in the hope that this written version of the narrative may appeal as strongly to the reader's sympathies as the spoken version did to mine.

THE NUNS STORY

OF

GABRIEL'S MARRIAGE.

CHAPTER I.

ONE night, during the period of the first French Revolution, the family of François Sarzeau, a fisherman of Brittany, were all waking and watching at a late hour in their cottage on the peninsula of Quiberon. François had gone out in his boat that evening, as usual, to fish. Shortly after his departure, the wind had risen, the clouds had gathered; and the storm, which had been threatening at intervals throughout the whole day, burst forth furiously about nine o'clock. It was now eleven; and the raging of the wind over the barren, heathy peninsula still seemed to increase with each fresh blast that tore its way out upon the open sea; the crashing of the waves on the beach was awful to hear; the dreary blackness

of the sky terrible to behold. The longer they listened to the storm, the oftener they looked out at it, the fainter grew the hopes which the fisherman's family still strove to cherish for the safety of François Sarzeau and of his younger son who had gone with him in the boat.

There was something impressive in the simplicity of the scene that was now passing within the cottage.

On one side of the great rugged black fireplace crouched two little girls; the younger half asleep, with her head in her sister's lap. These were the daughters of the fisherman; and opposite to them sat their eldest brother Gabriel. His right arm had been badly wounded in a recent encounter at the national game of the *Soule*, a sport resembling our English football; but played on both sides in such savage earnest by the people of Brittany as to end always in bloodshed, often in mutilation, sometimes even in loss of life. On the same bench with Gabriel sat his betrothed wife—a girl of eighteen—clothed in the plain, almost monastic black and white costume of her native district. She was the daughter of a small farmer living at some little distance from the coast. Between the groups formed on either side of the fire place, the vacant space was occupied by the foot of a truckle bed. In this bed lay a very old man, the father of François Sarzeau. His haggard face was covered

with deep wrinkles ; his long white hair flowed over the coarse lump of sacking which served him for a pillow, and his light grey eyes wandered incessantly, with a strange expression of terror and suspicion, from person to person, and from object to object, in all parts of the room. Whenever the wind and sea whistled and roared at their loudest, he muttered to himself and tossed his hands fretfully on his wretched coverlid. On these occasions his eyes always fixed themselves intently on a little delf image of the Virgin placed in a niche over the fireplace. Every time they saw him look in this direction Gabriel and the young girls shuddered and crossed themselves ; and even the child, who still kept awake, imitated their example. There was one bond of feeling at least between the old man and his grandchildren, which connected his age and their youth unnaturally and closely together. This feeling was reverence for the superstitions which had been handed down to them by their ancestors from centuries and centuries back, as far even as the age of the Druids. The spirit-warnings of disaster and death which the old man heard in the wailing of the wind, in the crashing of the waves, in the dreary monotonous rattling of the casement, the young man and his affianced wife and the little child who cowered by the fireside, heard too. All differences in sex, in temperament, in years,

Superstition was strong enough to strike down to its own dread level, in the fisherman's cottage, on that stormy night.

Besides the benches by the fireside and the bed, the only piece of furniture in the room was a coarse wooden table, with a loaf of black bread, a knife, and a pitcher of cider placed on it. Old nets, coils of rope, tattered sails, hung about the walls and over the wooden partition which separated the room into two compartments. Wisps of straw and ears of barley drooped down through the rotten rafters and gaping boards that made the floor of the granary above.

These different objects, and the persons in the cottage, who composed the only surviving members of the fisherman's family, were strangely and wildly lit up by the blaze of the fire and by the still brighter glare of a resin torch stuck into a block of wood in the chimney-corner. The red and yellow light played full on the weird face of the old man as he lay opposite to it, and glanced fitfully on the figures of the young girl, Gabriel, and the two children; the great gloomy shadows rose and fell, and grew and lessened in bulk about the walls like visions of darkness, animated by a supernatural spectre-life, while the dense obscurity outside spreading before the curtainless window seemed as a wall of solid darkness that had closed in for ever around the fisherman's house. The

night-scene within the cottage was almost as wild and as dreary to look upon as the night-scene without.

For a long time the different persons in the room sat together without speaking, even without looking at each other. At last, the girl turned and whispered something into Gabriel's ear.

"Perrine, what were you saying to Gabriel?" asked the child opposite, seizing the first opportunity of breaking the desolate silence—doubly desolate at her age—which was preserved by all around her.

"I was telling him," answered Perrine simply, "that it was time to change the bandages on his arm; and I also said to him, what I have often said before, that he must never play at that terrible game of the *Soule* again."

The old man had been looking intently at Perrine and his grandchild as they spoke. His harsh, hollow voice mingled with the last soft tones of the young girl, repeating over and over again the same terrible words: "Drowned! drowned! Son and grandson, both drowned! both drowned!"

"Hush! grandfather," said Gabriel, "we must not lose all hope for them yet. God and the Blessed Virgin protect them!" He looked at the little delf image, and crossed himself; the others imitated him, except the old man. He still tossed his hands

over the coverlid, and still repeated "Drowned! drowned!"

"Oh that accursed *Soule!*" groaned the young man. "But for this wound I should have been with my father. The poor boy's life might at least have been saved; for we should then have left him here."

"Silence!" exclaimed the harsh voice from the bed. "The wail of dying men rises louder than the loud sea; the devil's psalm-singing roars higher than the roaring wind! Be silent, and listen! François drowned! Pierre drowned! Hark! Hark!"

A terrific blast of wind burst over the house as he spoke, shaking it to its centre, overpowering all other sounds, even to the deafening crash of the waves. The slumbering child awoke, and uttered a scream of fear. Perrine, who had been kneeling before her lover binding the fresh bandages on his wounded arm, paused in her occupation, trembling from head to foot. Gabriel looked towards the window: his experience told him what must be the hurricane fury of that blast of wind out at sea, and he sighed bitterly as he murmured to himself, "God help them both—man's help will be as nothing to them now!"

"Gabriel!" cried the voice from the bed in altered tones—very faint and trembling.

He did not hear, or did not attend to the old man. He was trying to soothe and encourage the young girl at his feet.

“Don't be frightened, love,” he said, kissing her very gently and tenderly on the forehead. “You are as safe here as anywhere. Was I not right in saying that it would be madness to attempt taking you back to the farm-house this evening? You can sleep in that room, Perrine, when you are tired—you can sleep with the two girls.”

“Gabriel! brother Gabriel!” cried one of the children. “O! look at grandfather!”

Gabriel ran to the bedside. The old man had raised himself into a sitting position; his eyes were dilated, his whole face was rigid with terror, his hands were stretched out convulsively towards his grandson. “The White Women!” he screamed. “The White Women! the grave-diggers of the drowned are out on the sea!”

The children, with cries of terror, flung themselves into Perrine's arms; even Gabriel uttered an exclamation of horror, and started back from the bedside.

Still the old man reiterated, “The White Women! The White Women! Open the door, Gabriel! look out westward, where the ebb-tide has left the sand dry. You'll see them bright as lightning in the darkness, mighty as the angels in stature, sweeping like the wind over the sea, in their long white garments, with their white hair trailing far behind them! Open the door, Gabriel! You'll see them stop and

hover over the place where your father and your brother have been drowned ; you'll see them come on till they reach the sand ; you'll see them dig in it with their naked feet, and beckon awfully to the raging sea to give up its dead. Open the door, Gabriel—or, though it should be the death of me, I will get up and open it myself!"

Gabriel's face whitened even to his lips, but he made a sign that he would obey. It required the exertion of his whole strength to keep the door open against the wind while he looked out.

"Do you see them, grandson Gabriel? Speak the truth, and tell me if you see them," cried the old man.

"I see nothing but darkness—pitch darkness," answered Gabriel, letting the door close again.

"Ah! woe! woe!" groaned his grandfather, sinking back exhausted on the pillow. "Darkness to *you*; but bright as lightning to the eyes that are allowed to see them. Drowned! drowned! Pray for their souls, Gabriel—I see the White Women even where I lie, and dare not pray for them. Son and grandson drowned! both drowned!"

The young man went back to Perrine and the children.

"Grandfather is very ill to-night," he whispered. "You had better all go into the bedroom, and leave me alone to watch by him."

They rose as he spoke, crossed themselves before the image of the Virgin, kissed him one by one, and, without uttering a word, softly entered the little room on the other side of the partition. Gabriel looked at his grandfather, and saw that he lay quiet now, with his eyes closed as if he were already dropping asleep. The young man then heaped some fresh logs on the fire, and sat down by it to watch till morning.

Very dreary was the moaning of the night-storm ; but it was not more dreary than the thoughts which now occupied him in his solitude—thoughts darkened and distorted by the terrible superstitions of his country and his race. Ever since the period of his mother's death he had been oppressed by the conviction that some curse hung over the family. At first they had been prosperous, they had got money, a little legacy had been left them. But this good fortune had availed only for a time ; disaster on disaster strangely and suddenly succeeded. Losses, misfortunes, poverty, want itself had overwhelmed them ; his father's temper had become so soured, that the oldest friends of François Sarzeau declared he was changed beyond recognition. And now, all this past misfortune—the steady, withering, household blight of many years—had ended in the last worst misfortune of all—in death. The fate of his father and his brother admitted no longer of a doubt—he knew

it, as he listened to the storm, as he reflected on his grandfather's words, as he called to mind his own experience of the perils of the sea. And this double bereavement had fallen on him just as the time was approaching for his marriage with Perrine ; just when misfortune was most ominous of evil, just when it was hardest to bear ! Forebodings which he dared not realize began now to mingle with the bitterness of his grief, whenever his thoughts wandered from the present to the future ; and as he sat by the lonely fireside, murmuring from time to time the Church prayer for the repose of the dead, he almost involuntarily mingled with it another prayer, expressed only in his own simple words, for the safety of the living—for the young girl whose love was his sole earthly treasure ; for the motherless children who must now look for protection to him alone.

He had sat by the hearth a long, long time, absorbed in his thoughts, not once looking round towards the bed, when he was startled by hearing the sound of his grandfather's voice once more.

“ Gabriel,” whispered the old man, trembling and shrinking as he spoke, “ Gabriel, do you hear a dripping of water—now slow, now quick again—on the floor at the foot of my bed ?”

“ I hear nothing, grandfather, but the crackling of the fire, and the roaring of the storm outside.”

“Drip, drip, drip! Faster and faster; plainer and plainer. Take the torch, Gabriel; look down on the floor—look with all your eyes. Is the place wet there? Is it the rain from heaven that is dropping through the roof?”

Gabriel took the torch with trembling fingers, and knelt down on the floor to examine it closely. He started back from the place, as he saw that it was quite dry—the torch dropped upon the hearth—he fell on his knees before the statue of the Virgin and hid his face.

“Is the floor wet? Answer me, I command you—Is the floor wet?”—asked the old man quickly and breathlessly.

Gabriel rose, went back to the bedside, and whispered to him that no drop of rain had fallen inside the cottage. As he spoke the words, he saw a change pass over his grandfather's face—the sharp features seemed to wither up on a sudden; the eager expression to grow vacant and death-like in an instant. The voice too altered; it was harsh and querulous no more; its tones became strangely soft, slow, and solemn, when the old man spoke again.

“I hear it still,” he said, “drip! drip! faster and plainer than ever. That ghostly dropping of water is the last and the surest of the fatal signs which have told of your father's and your brother's deaths to-

night, and I know from the place where I hear it—the foot of the bed I lie on—that it is a warning to me of my own approaching end. I am called where my son and my grandson have gone before me: my weary time in this world is over at last. Don't let Perrine and the children come in here, if they should awake—they are too young to look at death."

Gabriel's blood curdled, when he heard these words—when he touched his grandfather's hand, and felt the chill that it struck to his own—when he listened to the raging wind, and knew that all help was miles and miles away from the cottage. Still, in spite of the storm, the darkness, and the distance, he thought not for a moment of neglecting the duty that had been taught him from his childhood—the duty of summoning the priest to the bedside of the dying. "I must call Perrine," he said, "to watch by you while I am away."

"Stop!" cried the old man, "Stop, Gabriel; I implore, I command you not to leave me!"

"The priest, grandfather—your confession—"

"It must be made to you. In this darkness and this hurricane no man can keep the path across the heath. Gabriel! I am dying—I should be dead before you got back, Gabriel! For the love of the Blessed Virgin, stop here with me till I die—my time is short—I have a terrible secret that I must tell to some-

body before I draw my last breath! Your ear to my mouth—quick! quick!”

As he spoke the last words, a slight noise was audible on the other side of the partition, the door half opened, and Perrine appeared at it, looking affrightedly into the room. The vigilant eyes of the old man—suspicious even in death—caught sight of her directly.

“Go back!” he exclaimed faintly, before she could utter a word, “go back—push her back, Gabriel, and nail down the latch in the door, if she won't shut it of herself!”

“Dear Perrine! go in again,” implored Gabriel. “Go in and keep the children from disturbing us. You will only make him worse—you can be of no use here!”

She obeyed without speaking, and shut the door again.

While the old man clutched him by the arm, and repeated, “Quick! quick!—your ear close to my mouth,” Gabriel heard her say to the children (who were both awake), “Let us pray for grandfather.” And as he knelt down by the bedside, there stole on his ear the sweet, childish tones of his little sisters, and the soft, subdued voice of the young girl who was teaching them the prayer, mingling divinely with the solemn wailing of wind and sea, rising in a still and

awful purity over the hoarse, gasping whispers of the dying man.

“ I took an oath not to tell it, Gabriel—lean down closer ! I’m weak, and they mustn’t hear a word in that room—I took an oath not to tell it ; but death is a warrant to all men for breaking such an oath as that. Listen ; don’t lose a word I’m saying ! Don’t look away into the room : the stain of blood-guilt has defiled it for ever !—Hush ! Hush ! Hush ! Let me speak. Now your father’s dead, I can’t carry the horrid secret with me into the grave. Just remember, Gabriel—try if you can’t remember the time before I was bedridden—ten years ago and more—it was about six weeks, you know, before your mother’s death ; you can remember it by that. You and all the children were in that room with your mother ; you were all asleep, I think ; it was night, not very late—only nine o’clock. Your father and I were standing at the door, looking out at the heath in the moonlight. He was so poor at that time, he had been obliged to sell his own boat, and none of the neighbours would take him out fishing with them—your father wasn’t liked by any of the neighbours. Well ; we saw a stranger coming towards us ; a very young man, with a knapsack on his back. He looked like a gentleman, though he was but poorly dressed. He came up, and told us he was dead tired, and didn’t

think he could reach the town that night, and asked if we would give him shelter till morning. And your father said yes, if he would make no noise, because the wife was ill, and the children were asleep. So he said all he wanted was to go to sleep himself before the fire. We had nothing to give him but black bread. He had better food with him than that, and undid his knapsack to get at it—and—and—Gabriel! I'm sinking—drink! something to drink—I'm parched with thirst."

Silent and deadly pale, Gabriel poured some of the cider from the pitcher on the table into a drinking-cup, and gave it to the old man. Slight as the stimulant was, its effect on him was almost instantaneous. His dull eyes brightened a little, and he went on in the same whispering tones as before.

"He pulled the food out of his knapsack rather in a hurry, so that some of the other small things in it fell on the floor. Among these was a pocket-book, which your father picked up and gave him back; and he put it in his coat-pocket—there was a tear in one of the sides of the book, and through the hole some bank-notes bulged out. I saw them, and so did your father (don't move away, Gabriel; keep close, there's nothing in me to shrink from). Well, he shared his food, like an honest fellow, with us; and then put his hand in his pocket, and gave me four or five livres,

and then lay down before the fire to go to sleep. As he shut his eyes, your father looked at me in a way I didn't like. He'd been behaving very bitterly and desperately towards us for some time past; being soured about poverty, and your mother's illness, and the constant crying out of you children for more to eat. So when he told me to go and buy some wood, some bread, and some wine with the money I had got, I didn't like, somehow, to leave him alone with the stranger; and so made excuses, saying (which was true) that it was too late to buy things in the village that night. But he told me in a rage to go and do as he bid me, and knock the people up if the shop was shut. So I went out, being dreadfully afraid of your father—as indeed we all were at that time—but I couldn't make up my mind to go far from the house: I was afraid of something happening, though I didn't dare to think what. I don't know how it was; but I stole back in about ten minutes on tip-toe to the cottage; and looked in at the window; and saw—O! God forgive him! O, God forgive me!—I saw—I—more to drink, Gabriel! I can't speak again—more to drink!”

The voices in the next room had ceased; but in the minute of silence which now ensued, Gabriel heard his sisters kissing Perrine, and wishing her good night. They were all three trying to go to sleep again.

“Gabriel, pray yourself, and teach your children after you to pray, that your father may find forgiveness where he is now gone. I saw him as plainly as I now see you, kneeling with his knife in one hand over the sleeping man. He was taking the little book with the notes in it out of the stranger’s pocket. He got the book into his possession, and held it quite still in his hand for an instant, thinking. I believe—oh, no! no!—I’m sure he was repenting; I’m sure he was going to put the book back; but just at that moment the stranger moved, and raised one of his arms, as if he was waking up. Then, the temptation of the devil grew too strong for your father—I saw him lift the hand with the knife in it—but saw nothing more. I couldn’t look in at the window—I couldn’t move away—I couldn’t cry out; I stood with my back turned towards the house, shivering all over, though it was a warm summer-time, and hearing no cries, no noises at all, from the room behind me. I was too frightened to know how long it was before the opening of the cottage-door made me turn round; but when I did, I saw your father standing before me in the yellow moonlight, carrying in his arms the bleeding body of the poor lad who had shared his food with us and slept on our hearth. Hush! hush! Don’t groan and sob in that way! Stifle it with the bed-clothes. Hush! you’ll wake them in the next room!”

“Gabriel—Gabriel!” exclaimed a voice from behind the partition. “What has happened? Gabriel! let me come out and be with you?”

“No! no!” cried the old man, collecting the last remains of his strength in the attempt to speak above the wind, which was just then howling at the loudest; “stay where you are—don’t speak—don’t come out, I command you!—Gabriel” (his voice dropped to a faint whisper), “raise me up in bed—you must hear the whole of it, now—raise me; I’m choking so that I can hardly speak. Keep close and listen—I can’t say much more. Where was I?—Ah, your father! He threatened to kill me if I didn’t swear to keep it secret; and in terror of my life I swore. He made me help him to carry the body—we took it all across the heath—oh! horrible, horrible, under the bright moon—(lift me higher, Gabriel). You know the great stones yonder, set up by the heathens; you know the hollow place under the stones they call ‘The Merchant’s Table’—we had plenty of room to lay him in that, and hide him so; and then we ran back to the cottage. I never dared go near the place afterwards; no, nor your father either! (Higher, Gabriel! I’m choking again.) We burnt the pocket-book and the knapsack—never knew his name—we kept the money to spend. (You’re not lifting me! you’re not listening close enough!) Your father said it was a legacy,

when you and your mother asked about the money. (You hurt me, you shake me to pieces, Gabriel, when you sob like that.) It brought a curse on us, the money; the curse has drowned your father and your brother; the curse is killing me; but I've confessed—tell the priest I confessed before I died. Stop her; stop Perrine! I hear her getting up. Take his bones away from The Merchant's Table, and bury them for the love of God!—and tell the priest—(lift me higher: lift me till I'm on my knees)—if your father was alive, he'd murder me—but tell the priest—because of my guilty soul—to pray—and—remember The Merchant's Table—to bury, and to pray—to pray always for——”

As long as Perrine heard faintly the whispering of the old man—though no word that he said reached her ear—she shrank from opening the door in the partition. But, when the whispering sounds—which terrified her she knew not how or why—first faltered, then ceased altogether; when she heard the sobs that followed them; and when her heart told her who was weeping in the next room—then, she began to be influenced by a new feeling which was stronger than the strongest fear, and she opened the door without hesitating—almost without trembling.

The coverlid was drawn up over the old man; Gabriel was kneeling by the bedside, with his face

hidden. When she spoke to him, he neither answered nor looked at her. After a while, the sobs that shock him ceased; but still he never moved—except once when she touched him, and then he shuddered—shuddered under *her* hand! She called in his little sisters, and they spoke to him, and still he uttered no word in reply. They wept. One by one, often and often, they entreated him with loving words; but the stupor of grief which held him speechless and motionless was beyond the power of human tears, stronger even than the strength of human love.

It was near daybreak, and the storm was lulling—but still no change occurred at the bedside. Once or twice, as Perrine knelt near Gabriel, still vainly endeavouring to arouse him to a sense of her presence, she thought she heard the old man breathing feebly, and stretched out her hand towards the coverlid; but she could not summon courage to touch him or to look at him. This was the first time she had ever been present at a deathbed; the stillness in the room, the stupor of despair that had seized on Gabriel, so horrified her, that she was almost as helpless as the two children by her side. It was not till the dawn looked in at the cottage-window—so coldly, so drearily, and yet so reassuringly—that she began to recover her self-possession at all. Then she knew that her best resource would be to summon assistance imme-

diately from the nearest house. While she was trying to persuade the two children to remain alone in the cottage with Gabriel during her temporary absence, she was startled by the sound of footsteps outside the door. It opened ; and a man appeared on the threshold, standing still there for a moment in the dim uncertain light.

She looked closer—looked intently at him. It was François Sarzeau himself !

CHAPTER II.

THE fisherman was dripping with wet ; but his face—always pale and inflexible—seemed to be but little altered in expression by the perils through which he must have passed during the night. Young Pierre lay almost insensible in his arms. In the astonishment and fright of the first moment, Perrine screamed as she recognised him.

“There ! there ! there !” he said, peevishly, advancing straight to the hearth with his burden ; “don’t make a noise. You never expected to see us alive again, I dare say. We gave ourselves up as lost, and only escaped after all by a miracle.”

He laid the boy down where he could get the full warmth of the fire ; and then, turning round, took a wicker-covered bottle from his pocket, and said, “If it hadn’t been for the brandy !——” He stopped suddenly—started—put down the bottle on the bench near him—and advanced quickly to the bedside.

Perrine looked after him as he went ; and saw Gabriel, who had risen when the door was opened,

moving back from the bed as François approached. The young man's face seemed to have been suddenly struck to stone—its blank ghastly whiteness was awful to look at. He moved slowly backward and backward till he came to the cottage-wall—then stood quite still, staring on his father with wild vacant eyes, moving his hands to and fro before him, muttering, but never pronouncing one audible word.

François did not appear to notice his son; he had the coverlid of the bed in his hand.

“Anything the matter here?” he asked, as he drew it down.

Still Gabriel could not speak. Perrine saw it, and answered for him.

“Gabriel is afraid that his poor grandfather is dead,” she whispered nervously.

“Dead!” There was no sorrow in the tone as he echoed the word. “Was he very bad in the night before his death happened? Did he wander in his mind? He has been rather light-headed lately.”

“He was very restless, and spoke of the ghostly warnings that we all know of: he said he saw and heard many things which told him from the other world that you and Pierre——Gabriel!” she screamed, suddenly interrupting herself. “Look at him! Look at his face! Your grandfather is not dead!”

At that moment, François was raising his father's head to look closely at him. A faint spasm had indeed passed over the deathly face ; the lips quivered, the jaw dropped. François shuddered as he looked, and moved away hastily from the bed. At the same instant Gabriel started from the wall : his expression altered, his pale cheeks flushed suddenly, as he snatched up the wicker-cased bottle, and poured all the little brandy that was left in it down his grandfather's throat.

The effect was nearly instantaneous ; the sinking vital forces rallied desperately. The old man's eyes opened again, wandered round the room, then fixed themselves intently on François, as he stood near the fire. Trying and terrible as his position was at that moment, Gabriel still retained self-possession enough to whisper a few words in Perrine's ear. "Go back again into the bedroom, and take the children with you," he said. "We may have something to speak about which you had better not hear."

"Son Gabriel, your grandfather is trembling all over," said François. "If he is dying at all, he is dying of cold : help me to lift him, bed and all, to the hearth."

"No, no ! don't let him touch me !" gasped the old man. "Don't let him look at me in that way ! Don't let him come near me, Gabriel ! Is it his ghost ? or is it himself ?"

As Gabriel answered, he heard a knocking at the door. His father opened it; and disclosed to view some people from the neighbouring fishing-village, who had come—more out of curiosity than sympathy—to inquire whether François and the boy Pierre had survived the night. Without asking any one to enter, the fisherman surlily and shortly answered the various questions addressed to him, standing in his own doorway. While he was thus engaged, Gabriel heard his grandfather muttering vacantly to himself—“Last night—how about last night, grandson? What was I talking about last night? Did I say your father was drowned? Very foolish to say he was drowned, and then see him come back alive again! But it wasn't that—I'm so weak in my head, I can't remember! What was it, Gabriel? Something too horrible to speak of? Is that what you're whispering and trembling about? I said nothing horrible. A crime? Bloodshed? I know nothing of any crime or bloodshed here—I must have been frightened out of my wits to talk in that way! The Merchant's Table? Only a big heap of old stones! What with the storm, and thinking I was going to die, and being afraid about your father, I must have been light-headed. Don't give another thought to that nonsense, Gabriel! I'm better now. We shall all live to laugh at poor grandfather for talking nonsense about crime and

bloodshed in his sleep. Ah! poor old man—last night—light-headed—fancies and nonsense of an old man—why don't you laugh at it? I'm laughing—so light-headed—so light—!”

He stopped suddenly. A low cry, partly of terror and partly of pain, escaped him; the look of pining anxiety and imbecile cunning which had distorted his face while he had been speaking, faded from it for ever. He shivered a little—breathed heavily once or twice—then became quite still.

Had he died with a falsehood on his lips?

Gabriel looked round and saw that the cottage-door was closed, and that his father was standing against it. How long he had occupied that position, how many of the old man's last words he had heard, it was impossible to conjecture, but there was a lowering suspicion in his harsh face as he now looked away from the corpse to his son, which made Gabriel shudder; and the first question that he asked, on once more approaching the bedside, was expressed in tones which, quiet as they were, had a fearful meaning in them.

“What did your grandfather talk about last night?” he asked.

Gabriel did not answer. All that he had heard, all that he had seen, all the misery and horror that might yet be to come, had stunned his mind. The

unspeakable dangers of his present position were too tremendous to be realized. He could only feel them vaguely in the weary torpor that oppressed his heart: while in every other direction the use of his faculties, physical and mental, seemed to have suddenly and totally abandoned him.

“Is your tongue wounded, son Gabriel, as well as your arm?” his father went on with a bitter laugh. “I come back to you, saved by a miracle; and you never speak to me. Would you rather I had died than the old man there? He can't hear you now—why shouldn't you tell me what nonsense he was talking last night?—You won't? I say you shall!” (He crossed the room and put his back to the door.) “Before either of us leave this place, you shall confess it! You know that my duty to the Church bids me to go at once and tell the priest of your grandfather's death. If I leave that duty unfulfilled, remember it is through your fault! *You* keep me here—for here I stop till I am obeyed. Do you hear that, idiot? Speak! Speak instantly, or you shall repent it to the day of your death! I ask again—what did your grandfather say to you when he was wandering in his mind, last night?”

“He spoke of a crime, committed by another, and guiltily kept secret by him,” answered Gabriel slowly and sternly. “And this morning he denied his own

words with his last living breath. But last night, if he spoke the truth—”

“The truth!” echoed François. “What truth?”

He stopped, his eyes fell, then turned towards the corpse. For a few minutes he stood steadily contemplating it; breathing quickly, and drawing his hand several times across his forehead. Then he faced his son once more. In that short interval he had become in outward appearance a changed man: expression, voice, and manner, all were altered.

“Heaven forgive me!” he went on, “but I could almost laugh at myself, at this solemn moment, for having spoken and acted just now so much like a fool! Denied his words, did he? Poor old man! they say sense often comes back to light-headed people just before death; and he is a proof of it. The fact is, Gabriel, my own wits must have been a little shaken—and no wonder—by what I went through last night and what I have come home to this morning. As if you, or anybody, could ever really give serious credit to the wandering speeches of a dying old man! (Where is Perrine? Why did you send her away?) I don’t wonder at your still looking a little startled, and feeling low in your mind, and all that—for you’ve had a trying night of it; trying in every way. He must have been a good deal shaken in his wits last night, between fears

about himself and fears about me. (To think of my being angry with you, Gabriel, for being a little alarmed—very naturally—by an old man's queer fancies!) Come out, Perrine—come out of the bedroom whenever you are tired of it: you must learn sooner or later to look at death calmly. Shake hands, Gabriel; and let us make it up, and say no more about what has passed. You won't? Still angry with me for what I said to you just now?—Ah! you'll think better about it by the time I return. Come out, Perrine, we've no secrets here."

"Where are you going to?" asked Gabriel, as he saw his father hastily open the door.

"To tell the priest that one of his congregation is dead, and to have the death registered," answered François. "These are *my* duties, and must be performed before I take any rest."

He went out hurriedly as he said these words. Gabriel almost trembled at himself, when he found that he breathed more freely, that he felt less horribly oppressed both in mind and body, the moment his father's back was turned. Fearful as thought was now, it was still a change for the better to be capable of thinking at all. Was the behaviour of his father compatible with innocence? Could the old man's confused denial of his own words in the morning and in the presence of his son, be set for one instant

against the circumstantial confession that he had made during the night alone with his grandson? These were the terrible questions which Gabriel now asked himself; and which he shrank involuntarily from answering. And yet that doubt, the solution of which would one way or the other irrevocably affect the whole future of his life, must sooner or later be solved at any hazard!

Was there any way of setting it at rest? Yes, one way:—to go instantly while his father was absent, and examine the hollow place under the Merchant's Table. If his grandfather's confession had really been made while he was in possession of his senses, this place (which Gabriel knew to be covered in from wind and weather) had never been visited since the commission of the crime by the perpetrator, or by his unwilling accomplice: though time had destroyed all besides, the hair and the bones of the victim would still be left to bear witness to the truth—if truth had indeed been spoken. As this conviction grew on him, the young man's cheek paled; and he stopped irresolute half-way between the hearth and the door. Then he looked down doubtfully at the corpse on the bed; and then there came upon him suddenly a revulsion of feeling. A wild feverish impatience to know the worst without another instant of delay possessed him. Only telling Perrine that he should be back soon, and that she must watch by

the dead in his absence, he left the cottage at once, without waiting to hear her reply, even without looking back as he closed the door behind him.

There were two tracks to the Merchant's Table. One, the longer of the two, by the coast cliffs; the other across the heath. But this latter path was also, for some little distance, the path which led to the village and the church. He was afraid of attracting his father's attention here, so he took the direction of the coast. At one spot the track trended inland, winding round some of the many Druid monuments scattered over the country. This place was on high ground, and commanded a view, at no great distance, of the path leading to the village, just where it branched off from the heathy ridge which ran in the direction of the Merchant's Table. Here Gabriel descried the figure of a man standing with his back towards the coast.

This figure was too far off to be identified with absolute certainty, but it looked like, and might well be, François Sarzeau. Whoever he was, the man was evidently uncertain which way he should proceed. When he moved forward, it was first to advance several paces towards the Merchant's Table—then he went back again towards the distant cottages and the church. Twice he hesitated thus: the second time pausing long before he appeared finally to take the way that led to the village.

Leaving the post of observation among the stones, at which he had instinctively halted for some minutes past, Gabriel now proceeded on his own path. Could this man really be his father? And if it were so, why did François Sarzeau only determine to go to the village where his business lay, after having twice vainly attempted to persevere in taking the exactly opposite direction of the Merchant's Table? Did he really desire to go there. Had he heard the name mentioned, when the old man referred to it in his dying words? And had he failed to summon courage enough to make all safe by removing——? This last question was too horrible to be pursued: Gabriel stifled it affrightedly in his own heart as he went on.

He reached the great Druid monument without meeting a living soul on his way. The sun was rising, and the mighty storm-clouds of the night were parting asunder wildly over the whole eastward horizon. The waves still leapt and foamed gloriously: but the gale had sunk to a keen fresh breeze. As Gabriel looked up, and saw how brightly the promise of a lovely day was written in the heavens, he trembled as he thought of the search which he was now about to make. The sight of the fair fresh sunrise jarred horribly with the suspicions of committed murder that were rankling foully in his heart. But he knew that his errand must be performed, and he

nerved himself to go through with it ; for he dared not return to the cottage until the mystery had been cleared up at once and for ever.

The Merchant's Table was formed by two huge stones resting horizontally on three others. In the troubled times of more than half a century ago, regular tourists were unknown among the Druid monuments of Brittany ; and the entrance to the hollow place under the stones—since often visited by strangers—was at this time nearly choked up by brambles and weeds. Gabriel's first look at this tangled nook of briars convinced him that the place had not been entered—perhaps for years—by any living being. Without allowing himself to hesitate (for he felt that the slightest delay might be fatal to his resolution), he passed as gently as possible through the brambles, and knelt down at the low, dusky, irregular entrance of the hollow place under the stones.

His heart throbbed violently, his breath almost failed him ; but he forced himself to crawl a few feet into the cavity, and then groped with his hand on the ground about him.

He touched something ! Something which it made his flesh creep to handle ; something which he would fain have dropped, but which he grasped tight in spite of himself. He drew back into the outer air and sunshine. Was it a human bone ? No ! he had

been the dupe of his own morbid terror—he had only taken up a fragment of dried wood !

Feeling shame at such self-deception as this, he was about to throw the wood from him before he re-entered the place, when another idea occurred to him.

Though it was dimly lighted through one or two chinks in the stones, the far part of the interior of the cavity was still too dusky to admit of perfect examination by the eye, even on a bright sunshiny morning. Observing this, he took out the tinder-box and matches, which—like the other inhabitants of the district—he always carried about with him for the purpose of lighting his pipe, determining to use the piece of wood as a torch which might illuminate the darkest corner of the place when he next entered it. Fortunately the wood had remained so long and had been preserved so dry in its sheltered position, that it caught fire almost as easily as a piece of paper. The moment it was fairly aflame Gabriel went into the cavity—penetrating at once—this time—to its farthest extremity.

He remained among the stones long enough for the wood to burn down nearly to his hand. When he came out, and flung the burning fragment from him, his face was flushed deeply, his eyes sparkled. He leaped carelessly on to the heath, over the bushes through which he had threaded his way so warily but

a few minutes before, exclaiming, "I may marry Perrine with a clear conscience now—I am the son of as honest a man as there is in Brittany!"

He had closely examined the cavity in every corner, and not the slightest sign that any dead body had ever been laid there was visible in the hollow place under the Merchant's Table.

CHAPTER III.

“ I MAY marry Perrine with a clear conscience now !”

There are some parts of the world where it would be drawing no natural picture of human nature to represent a son as believing conscientiously that an offence against life and the laws of hospitality, secretly committed by his father, rendered him, though innocent of all participation in it, unworthy to fulfil his engagement with his affianced wife. Among the simple inhabitants of Gabriel's province, however, such acuteness of conscientious sensibility as this was no extraordinary exception to all general rules. Ignorant and superstitious as they might be, the people of Brittany practised the duties of hospitality as devoutly as they practised the duties of the national religion. The presence of the stranger-guest, rich or poor, was a sacred presence at their hearths. His safety was their especial charge—his property their especial responsibility. They might be half-starved, but they were ready to share the last crust with him nevertheless, as they would share it with their own children.

Any outrage on the virtue of hospitality, thus born

and bred in the people, was viewed by them with universal disgust, and punished with universal execration. This ignominy was uppermost in Gabriel's thoughts by the side of his grandfather's bed; the dread of this worst dishonour, which there was no wiping out, held him speechless before Perrine, shamed and horrified him so that he felt unworthy to look her in the face; and when the result of his search at the Merchant's Table proved the absence there of all evidence of the crime spoken of by the old man, the blessed relief, the absorbing triumph of that discovery, was expressed entirely in the one thought which had prompted his first joyful words:—He could marry Perrine with a clear conscience, for he was the son of an honest man!

When he returned to the cottage, François had not come back. Perrine was astonished at the change in Gabriel's manner; even Pierre and the children remarked it. Rest and warmth had by this time so far recovered the younger brother, that he was able to give some account of the perilous adventures of the night at sea. They were still listening to the boy's narrative when François at last returned. It was now Gabriel who held out his hand, and made the first advances towards reconciliation.

To his utter amazement, his father recoiled from him. The variable temper of François had evidently

changed completely during his absence at the village. A settled scowl of distrust darkened his face as he looked at his son.

“ I never shake hands with people who have once doubted me,” he exclaimed loudly and irritably ; “ for I always doubt them for ever after. You are a bad son ! You have suspected your father of some infamy that you dare not openly charge him with, on no other testimony than the rambling nonsense of a half-witted, dying old man. Don’t speak to me ! I won’t hear you ! An innocent man and a spy are bad company. Go and denounce me, you Judas in disguise ! I don’t care for your secret or for you. What’s that girl Perrine doing here still ? Why hasn’t she gone home long ago ? The priest’s coming ; we don’t want strangers in the house of death. Take her back to the farm-house, and stop there with her, if you like : nobody wants you here ! ”

There was something in the manner and look of the speaker as he uttered these words, so strange, so sinister, so indescribably suggestive of his meaning much more than he said, that Gabriel felt his heart sink within him instantly ; and almost at the same moment this fearful question forced itself irresistibly on his mind—might not his father have followed him to the Merchant’s Table ?

Even if he had been desired to speak, he could not

have spoken now, while that question and the suspicion that it brought with it were utterly destroying all the reassuring hopes and convictions of the morning. The mental suffering produced by the sudden change from pleasure to pain in all his thoughts, reacted on him physically. He felt as if he were stifling in the air of the cottage, in the presence of his father; and when Perrine hurried on her walking attire, and with a face which alternately flushed and turned pale with every moment, approached the door, he went out with her as hastily as if he had been flying from his home. Never had the fresh air and the free daylight felt like heavenly and guardian influences to him until now!

He could comfort Perrine under his father's harshness, he could assure her of his own affection which no earthly influence could change, while they walked together towards the farm-house; but he could do no more. He durst not confide to her the subject that was uppermost in his mind: of all human beings she was the last to whom he could reveal the terrible secret that was festering at his heart. As soon as they got within sight of the farm-house, Gabriel stopped; and, promising to see her again soon, took leave of Perrine with assumed ease in his manner and with real despair in his heart. Whatever the poor girl might think of it, he felt, at that moment, that

he had not courage to face her father, and hear him talk happily and pleasantly, as his custom was, of Perrine's approaching marriage.

Left to himself, Gabriel wandered hither and thither over the open heath, neither knowing nor caring in what direction he turned his steps. The doubts about his father's innocence which had been dissipated by his visit to the Merchant's Table, that father's own language and manner had now revived—had even confirmed, though he dared not yet acknowledge so much to himself. It was terrible enough to be obliged to admit that the result of his morning's search was, after all, not conclusive—that the mystery was in very truth not yet cleared up. The violence of his father's last words of distrust; the extraordinary and indescribable changes in his father's manner while uttering them—what did these things mean? Guilt or innocence? Again, was it any longer reasonable to doubt the deathbed confession made by his grandfather? Was it not, on the contrary, far more probable that the old man's denial in the morning of his own words at night had been made under the influence of a panic terror, when his moral consciousness was bewildered, and his intellectual faculties were sinking?—The longer Gabriel thought of these questions, the less competent—possibly also the less willing—he felt to answer them. Should he seek advice

from others wiser than he? No: not while the thousandth part of a chance remained that his father was innocent.

This thought was still in his mind, when he found himself once more in sight of his home. He was still hesitating near the door, when he saw it opened cautiously. His brother Pierre looked out, and then came running towards him. "Come in, Gabriel; oh, do come in!" said the boy earnestly. "We are afraid to be alone with father. He's been beating us for talking of you."

Gabriel went in. His father looked up from the hearth where he was sitting, muttered the word "Spy!" and made a gesture of contempt—but did not address a word directly to his son. The hours passed on in silence; afternoon waned into evening, and evening into night; and still he never spoke to any of his children. Soon after it was dark, he went out, and took his net with him—saying that it was better to be alone on the sea than in the house with a spy.

When he returned the next morning, there was no change in him. Days passed—weeks, months even elapsed, and still, though his manner insensibly became what it used to be towards his other children, it never altered towards his eldest son. At the rare periods when they now met, except when absolutely

obliged to speak, he preserved total silence in his intercourse with Gabriel. He would never take Gabriel out with him in the boat ; he would never sit alone with Gabriel in the house ; he would never eat a meal with Gabriel ; he would never let the other children talk to him about Gabriel ; and he would never hear a word in expostulation, a word in reference to anything his dead father had said or done on the night of the storm, from Gabriel himself.

The young man pined and changed so that even Perrine hardly knew him again, under this cruel system of domestic excommunication ; under the wearing influence of the one unchanging doubt which never left him ; and, more than all, under the incessant reproaches of his own conscience, aroused by the sense that he was evading a responsibility which it was his solemn, his immediate duty to undertake. But no sting of conscience, no ill-treatment at home, and no self-reproaches for failing in his duty of confession as a good Catholic, were powerful enough in their influence over Gabriel to make him disclose the secret, under the oppression of which his very life was wasting away. He knew that if he once revealed it, whether his father was ultimately proved to be guilty or innocent, there would remain a slur and a suspicion on the family, and on Perrine besides, from her approaching connexion with it, which in their time and

in their generation could never be removed. The reproach of the world is terrible even in the crowded city, where many of the dwellers in our abiding-place are strangers to us—but it is far more terrible in the country, where none near us are strangers, where all talk of us and know of us, where nothing intervenes between us and the tyranny of the evil tongue. Gabriel had not courage to face this, and dare the fearful chance of lifelong ignominy—no, not even to serve the sacred interests of justice, of atonement, and of truth.

CHAPTER IV.

WHILE Gabriel still remained prostrated under the affliction that was wasting his energies of body and mind, Brittany was visited by a great public calamity, in which all private misfortunes were overwhelmed for a while.

It was now the time when the ever-gathering storm of the French Revolution had risen to its hurricane climax. Those chiefs of the new republic were in power, whose last, worst madness it was to decree the extinction of religion and the overthrow of everything that outwardly symbolized it throughout the whole of the country that they governed. Already this decree had been executed to the letter in and around Paris; and now the soldiers of the republic were on their way to Brittany, headed by commanders whose commission was to root out the Christian religion in the last and the surest of the strongholds still left to it in France.

These men began their work in a spirit worthy of the worst of their superiors who had sent them to do it. They gutted churches, they demolished chapels, they overthrew roadside crosses wherever they found

them. The terrible guillotine devoured human lives in the villages of Brittany, as it had devoured them in the streets of Paris ; the musket and the sword, in highway and byway, wreaked havoc on the people—even on women and children kneeling in the act of prayer ; the priests were tracked night and day from one hiding-place where they still offered up worship to another, and were killed as soon as overtaken—every atrocity was committed in every district ; but the Christian religion still spread wider than the widest bloodshed ; still sprang up with ever-renewed vitality from under the very feet of the men whose vain fury was powerless to trample it down. Everywhere the people remained true to their Faith ; everywhere the priests stood firm by them in their sorest need. The executioners of the republic had been sent to make Brittany a country of apostates : they did their worst, and left it a country of martyrs.

One evening while this frightful persecution was still raging, Gabriel happened to be detained unusually late at the cottage of Perrine's father. He had lately spent much of his time at the farm-house : it was his only refuge now from that place of suffering, of silence, and of secret shame, which he had once called home ! Just as he had taken leave of Perrine for the night, and was about to open the farm-house door, her father stopped him, and pointed to a chair

in the chimney-corner. "Leave us alone, my dear," said the old man to his daughter; "I want to speak to Gabriel. You can go to your mother in the next room."

The words which Père Bonan—as he was called by the neighbours—had now to say in private, were destined to lead to very unexpected events. After referring to the alteration which had appeared of late in Gabriel's manner, the old man began by asking him, sorrowfully but not suspiciously, whether he still preserved his old affection for Perrine. On receiving an eager answer in the affirmative, Père Bonan then referred to the persecution still raging through the country, and to the consequent possibility that he, like others of his countrymen, might yet be called to suffer and perhaps to die for the cause of his religion. If this last act of self-sacrifice were required of him, Perrine would be left unprotected, unless her affianced husband performed his promise to her, and assumed, without delay, the position of her lawful guardian. "Let me know that you will do this," concluded the old man. "I shall be resigned to all that may be required of me, if I can only know that I shall not die leaving Perrine unprotected." Gabriel gave the promise—gave it with his whole heart. As he took leave of Père Bonan, the old man said to him:—

"Come here to-morrow; I shall know more then

than I know now—I shall be able to fix with certainty the day for the fulfilment of your engagement with Perrine.”

Why did Gabriel hesitate at the farm-house door, looking back on Père Bonan as though he would fain say something, and yet not speaking a word? Why, after he had gone out and had walked onward several paces, did he suddenly stop, return quickly to the farm-house, stand irresolute before the gate, and then retrace his steps sighing heavily as he went, but never pausing again on his homeward way? Because the torment of his horrible secret had grown harder to bear than ever, since he had given the promise that had been required of him. Because, while a strong impulse moved him frankly to lay bare his hidden dread and doubt to the father whose beloved daughter was soon to be his wife, there was a yet stronger passive influence which paralyzed on his lips the terrible confession that he knew not whether he was the son of an honest man, or the son of an assassin and a robber. Made desperate by his situation, he determined, while he hastened homeward, to risk the worst and ask that fatal question of his father in plain words. But this supreme trial for parent and child was not to be. When he entered the cottage, François was absent. He had told the younger children that he should not be home again before noon on the next day.

Early in the morning Gabriel repaired to the farmhouse, as he had been bidden. Influenced by his love for Perrine, blindly confiding in the faint hope (which in despite of heart and conscience he still forced himself to cherish) that his father might be innocent, he now preserved the appearance at least of perfect calmness. “If I tell my secret to Perrine’s father, I risk disturbing in him that confidence in the future safety of his child, for which I am his present and only warrant”—Something like this thought was in Gabriel’s mind, as he took the hand of Père Bonan, and waited anxiously to hear what was required of him on that day.

“We have a short respite from danger, Gabriel,” said the old man. “News has come to me that the spoilers of our churches and the murderers of our congregations, have been stopped on their way hitherward by tidings which have reached them from another district. This interval of peace and safety will be a short one—we must take advantage of it while it is yet ours. My name is among the names on the list of the denounced. If the soldiers of the Republic find me here!—but we will say nothing more of this: it is of Perrine and of you that I must now speak. On this very evening, your marriage may be solemnized with all the wonted rites of our holy religion, and the blessing may be pronounced

over you by the lips of a priest. This evening, therefore, Gabriel, you must become the husband and the protector of Perrine. Listen to me attentively, and I will tell you how."

This was the substance of what Gabriel now heard from Père Bonan :—

Not very long before the persecutions broke out in Brittany, a priest, known generally by the name of Father Paul, was appointed to a curacy in one of the northern districts of the province. He fulfilled all the duties of his station in such a manner as to win the confidence and affection of every member of his congregation, and was often spoken of with respect, even in parts of the country distant from the scene of his labours. It was not, however, until the troubles broke out, and the destruction and bloodshed began, that he became renowned far and wide, from one end of Brittany to another. From the date of the very first persecutions the name of Father Paul was a rallying cry of the hunted peasantry ; he was their great encouragement under oppression, their example in danger, their last and only consoler in the hour of death. Wherever havoc and ruin raged most fiercely, wherever the pursuit was hottest and the slaughter most cruel, there the intrepid priest was sure to be seen pursuing his sacred duties in defiance of every peril. His hairbreadth escapes from death ; his ex-

traordinary re-appearances in parts of the country where no one ever expected to see him again, were regarded by the poorer classes with superstitious awe. Wherever Father Paul appeared, with his black dress, his calm face, and the ivory crucifix which he always carried in his hand, the people revered him as more than mortal; and grew at last to believe that, single-handed, he would successfully defend his religion against the armies of the republic. But their simple confidence in his powers of resistance was soon destined to be shaken. Fresh reinforcements arrived in Brittany, and overran the whole province from one end to the other. One morning, after celebrating service in a dismantled church, and after narrowly escaping with his life from those who pursued him, the priest disappeared. Secret inquiries were made after him in all directions; but he was heard of no more.

Many weary days had passed, and the dispirited peasantry had already mourned him as dead, when some fishermen on the northern coast observed a ship of light burden in the offing, making signals to the shore. They put off to her in their boats; and on reaching the deck saw standing before them the well-remembered figure of Father Paul.

The priest had returned to his congregations; and had founded the new altar that they were to worship

at on the deck of a ship! Razed from the face of the earth, their church had not been destroyed—for Father Paul and the priests who acted with him had given that church a refuge on the sea. Henceforth, their children could still be baptized, their sons and daughters could still be married, the burial of their dead could still be solemnized, under the sanction of the old religion for which, not vainly, they had suffered so patiently and so long.

Throughout the remaining time of trouble, the services were uninterrupted on board the ship. A code of signals was established by which those on shore were always enabled to direct their brethren at sea towards such parts of the coast as happened to be uninfested by the enemies of their worship. On the morning of Gabriel's visit to the farmhouse, these signals had shaped the course of the ship towards the extremity of the peninsula of Quiberon. The people of the district were all prepared to expect the appearance of the vessel some time in the evening, and had their boats ready at a moment's notice to put off and attend the service. At the conclusion of this service Père Bonan had arranged that the marriage of his daughter and Gabriel was to take place.

They waited for evening at the farm-house. A little before sunset the ship was signalled as in sight; and then Père Bonan and his wife, followed by Ga-

briel and Perrine, set forth over the heath to the beach. With the solitary exception of François Sarzeau, the whole population of the neighbourhood was already assembled there; Gabriel's brother and sisters being among the number.

It was the calmest evening that had been known for months. There was not a cloud in the lustrous sky—not a ripple on the still surface of the sea. The smallest children were suffered by their mothers to stray down on the beach as they pleased; for the waves of the great ocean slept as tenderly and noiselessly on their sandy bed, as if they had been changed into the waters of an inland lake. Slow, almost imperceptible, was the approach of the ship—there was hardly a breath of wind to carry her on—she was just drifting gently with the landward set of the tide at that hour, while her sails hung idly against the masts. Long after the sun had gone down, the congregation still waited and watched on the beach. The moon and stars were arrayed in their glory of the night, before the ship dropped anchor. Then the muffled tolling of a bell came solemnly across the quiet waters; and then, from every creek along the shore, as far as the eye could reach, the black forms of the fishermen's boats shot out swift and stealthily into the shining sea.

By the time the boats had arrived alongside of the

ship, the lamp had been kindled before the altar, and its flame was gleaming red and dull in the radiant moonlight. Two of the priests on board were clothed in their robes of office, and were waiting in their appointed places to begin the service. But there was a third, dressed only in the ordinary attire of his calling, who mingled with the congregation, and spoke a few words to each of the persons composing it, as, one by one, they mounted the sides of the ship. Those who had never seen him before knew by the famous ivory crucifix in his hand that the priest who received them was Father Paul. Gabriel looked at this man, whom he now beheld for the first time, with a mixture of astonishment and awe; for he saw that the renowned chief of the Christians of Brittany was, to all appearance, but little older than himself.

The expression on the pale calm face of the priest was so gentle and kind, that children just able to walk tottered up to him, and held familiarly by the skirts of his black gown, whenever his clear blue eyes rested on theirs, while he beckoned them to his side. No one would ever have guessed from the countenance of Father Paul what deadly perils he had confronted, but for the scar of a sabre-wound, as yet hardly healed, which ran across his forehead. That wound had been dealt while he was kneeling before the altar, in the last church in Brittany which had escaped spoliation.

He would have died where he knelt, but for the peasants who were praying with him, and who, unarmed as they were, threw themselves like tigers on the soldiery, and at awful sacrifice of their own lives saved the life of their priest. There was not a man now on board the ship who would have hesitated, had the occasion called for it again, to have rescued him in the same way.

The service began. Since the days when the primitive Christians worshipped amid the caverns of the earth, can any service be imagined nobler in itself, or sublimer in the circumstances surrounding it, than that which was now offered up? Here was no artificial pomp, no gaudy profusion of ornament, no attendant grandeur of man's creation. All around this church spread the hushed and awful majesty of the tranquil sea. The roof of this cathedral was the immeasurable heaven, the pure moon its one great light, the countless glories of the stars its only adornment. Here were no hired singers or rich priest-princes; no curious sight-seers, or careless lovers of sweet sounds. This congregation and they who had gathered it together, were all poor alike, all persecuted alike, all worshipping alike, to the overthrow of their worldly interests, and at the imminent peril of their lives. How brightly and tenderly the moonlight shone upon the altar and the people before it!—how solemnly and

divinely the deep harmonies, as they chanted the penitential Psalms, mingled with the hoarse singing of the freshening night-breeze in the rigging of the ship!—how sweetly the still rushing murmur of many voices, as they uttered the responses together, now died away and now rose again softly into the mysterious night!

Of all the members of the congregation—young or old—there was but one over whom that impressive service exercised no influence of consolation or of peace: that one was Gabriel. Often, throughout the day, his reproaching conscience had spoken within him again and again. Often, when he joined the little assembly on the beach, he turned away his face in secret shame and apprehension from Perrine and her father. Vainly, after gaining the deck of the ship, did he try to meet the eye of Father Paul as frankly, as readily, and as affectionately as others met it. The burden of concealment seemed too heavy to be borne in the presence of the priest—and yet, torment as it was, he still bore it! But when he knelt with the rest of the congregation and saw Perrine kneeling by his side—when he felt the calmness of the solemn night and the still sea filling his heart—when the sounds of the first prayers spoke with a dread spiritual language of their own to his soul—then, the remembrance of the confession which he had neglected, and the terror of receiving unprepared the sacrament which

he knew would be offered to him—grew too vivid to be endured: the sense that he merited no longer, though once worthy of it, the confidence in his perfect truth and candour placed in him by the woman with whom he was soon to stand before the altar, overwhelmed him with shame: the mere act of kneeling among that congregation, the passive accomplice by his silence and secrecy, for aught he knew to the contrary, of a crime which it was his bounden duty to denounce, appalled him as if he had already committed sacrilege that could never be forgiven. Tears flowed down his cheeks, though he strove to repress them: sobs burst from him, though he tried to stifle them. He knew that others besides Perrine were looking at him in astonishment and alarm; but he could neither control himself, nor move to leave his place, nor raise his eyes even—until suddenly he felt a hand laid on his shoulder. That touch, slight as it was, ran through him instantly. He looked up, and saw Father Paul standing by his side.

Beckoning him to follow, and signing to the congregation not to suspend their devotions, he led Gabriel out of the assembly—then paused for a moment, reflecting—then beckoning again, took him into the cabin of the ship, and closed the door carefully.

“You have something on your mind,” he said,

simply and quietly, taking the young man by the hand. "I may be able to relieve you, if you tell me what it is."

As Gabriel heard these gentle words, and saw, by the light of a lamp which burned before a cross fixed against the wall, the sad kindness of expression with which the priest was regarding him, the oppression that had lain so long on his heart seemed to leave it in an instant. The haunting fear of ever divulging his fatal suspicions and his fatal secret had vanished, as it were, at the touch of Father Paul's hand. For the first time, he now repeated to another ear—the sounds of prayer and praise rising grandly the while from the congregation above—his grandfather's death-bed confession, word for word almost, as he had heard it in the cottage on the night of the storm.

Once, and once only, did Father Paul interrupt the narrative, which in whispers was addressed to him. Gabriel had hardly repeated the first two or three sentences of his grandfather's confession, when the priest, in quick altered tones, abruptly asked him his name and place of abode.

As the question was answered, Father Paul's calm face became suddenly agitated; but the next moment, resolutely resuming his self-possession, he bowed his head, as a sign that Gabriel was to continue; clasped his trembling hands, and raising them as if in silent

prayer, fixed his eyes intently on the cross. He never looked away from it while the terrible narrative proceeded. But when Gabriel described his search at the Merchant's Table; and, referring to his father's behaviour since that time, appealed to the priest to know whether he might, even yet, in defiance of appearances, be still filially justified in doubting whether the crime had been really perpetrated—then Father Paul moved near to him once more, and spoke again.

“Compose yourself, and look at me,” he said with his former sad kindness of voice and manner. “I can end your doubts for ever. Gabriel, your father was guilty in intention and in act; but the victim of his crime still lives. I can prove it.”

Gabriel's heart beat wildly; a deadly coldness crept over him, as he saw Father Paul loosen the fastening of his cassock round the throat.

At that instant the chanting of the congregation above ceased; and then, the sudden and awful stillness was deepened rather than interrupted by the faint sound of one voice praying. Slowly and with trembling fingers the priest removed the band round his neck—paused a little—sighed heavily—and pointed to a scar which was now plainly visible on one side of his throat. He said something at the same time; but the bell above tolled while he spoke.

It was the signal of the elevation of the Host. Gabriel felt an arm passed round him, guiding him to his knees, and sustaining him from sinking to the floor. For one moment longer he was conscious that the bell had stopped, that there was dead silence, that Father Paul was kneeling by him beneath the cross, with bowed head—then all objects around vanished ; and he saw and knew nothing more.

When he recovered his senses, he was still in the cabin—the man whose life his father had attempted was bending over him, and sprinkling water on his face—and the clear voices of the women and children of the congregation were joining the voices of the men in singing the *Agnus Dei*.

“Look up at me without fear, Gabriel,” said the priest. “I desire not to avenge injuries : I visit not the sins of the father on the child. Look up, and listen ! I have strange things to speak of ; and I have a sacred mission to fulfil before the morning, in which you must be my guide.”

Gabriel attempted to kneel and kiss his hand, but Father Paul stopped him, and said, pointing to the cross : “Kneel to that—not to me : not to your fellow-mortal, and your friend—for I will be your friend, Gabriel ; believing that God’s mercy has ordered it so. And now listen to me,” he proceeded, with a brotherly tenderness in his manner which went to

Gabriel's heart. "The service is nearly ended. What I have to tell you must be told at once; the errand on which you will guide me must be performed before to-morrow dawns. Sit here near me; and attend to what I now say!"

Gabriel obeyed: Father Paul then proceeded thus:—

"I believe the confession made to you by your grandfather to have been true in every particular. On the evening to which he referred you, I approached your cottage, as he said, for the purpose of asking shelter for the night. At that period I had been studying hard to qualify myself for the holy calling which I now pursue; and, on the completion of my studies, had indulged in the recreation of a tour on foot through Brittany, by way of innocently and agreeably occupying the leisure time then at my disposal, before I entered the priesthood. When I accosted your father I had lost my way, had been walking for many hours, and was glad of any rest that I could get for the night. It is unnecessary to pain you now, by reference to the events which followed my entrance under your father's roof. I remember nothing that happened from the time when I lay down to sleep before the fire, until the time when I recovered my senses at the place which you call the Merchant's Table. My first sensation was that of

being moved into the cold air: when I opened my eyes I saw the great Druid stones rising close above me, and two men on either side of me rifling my pockets. They found nothing valuable there, and were about to leave me where I lay, when I gathered strength enough to appeal to their mercy through their cupidity. Money was not scarce with me then, and I was able to offer them a rich reward (which they ultimately received as I had promised) if they would take me to any place where I could get shelter and medical help. I suppose they inferred by my language and accent—perhaps also by the linen I wore, which they examined closely—that I belonged to the higher ranks of the community, in spite of the plainness of my outer garments; and might therefore be in a position to make good my promise to them. I heard one say to the other, ‘Let us risk it;’ and then they took me in their arms, carried me down to a boat on the beach, and rowed to a vessel in the offing. The next day they disembarked me at Paimbœuf, where I got the assistance which I so much needed. I learnt through the confidence they were obliged to place in me, in order to give me the means of sending them their promised reward, that these men were smugglers, and that they were in the habit of using the cavity in which I had been laid, as a place of concealment for goods, and for letters of advice to

their accomplices. This accounted for their finding me. As to my wound, I was informed by the surgeon who attended me, that it had missed being inflicted in a mortal part by less than a quarter of an inch, and that, as it was, nothing but the action of the night air in coagulating the blood over the place had, in the first instance, saved my life. To be brief, I recovered after a long illness, returned to Paris, and was called to the priesthood. The will of my superiors obliged me to perform the first duties of my vocation in the great city; but my own wish was to be appointed to a cure of souls in your province, Gabriel. Can you imagine why?"

The answer to this question was in Gabriel's heart; but he was still too deeply awed and affected by what he had heard to give it utterance.

"I must tell you then what my motive was," said Father Paul. "You must know first that I uniformly abstained from disclosing to any one where and by whom my life had been attempted. I kept this a secret from the men who rescued me—from the surgeon—from my own friends even. My reason for such a proceeding was, I would fain believe, a Christian reason. I hope I had always felt a sincere and humble desire to prove myself, by the help of God, worthy of the sacred vocation to which I was destined. But my miraculous escape from death made an im-

pression on my mind, which gave me another and an infinitely higher view of this vocation—the view which I have since striven, and shall always strive for the future, to maintain. As I lay, during the first days of my recovery, examining my own heart, and considering in what manner it would be my duty to act towards your father when I was restored to health, a thought came into my mind which calmed, comforted, and resolved all my doubts. I said within myself—‘In a few months more I shall be called to be one of the chosen ministers of God. If I am worthy of my vocation, my first desire towards this man who has attempted to take my life, should be, not to know that human justice has overtaken him, but to know that he has truly and religiously repented and made atonement for his guilt. To such repentance and atonement let it be my duty to call him; if he reject that appeal, and be hardened only the more against me because I have forgiven him my injuries, then it will be time enough to denounce him for his crimes to his fellow-men. Surely it must be well for me here and hereafter, if I begin my career in the holy priesthood by helping to save from hell the soul of the man who, of all others, has most cruelly wronged me.’ It was for this reason, Gabriel—it was because I desired to go straightway to your father’s cottage, and reclaim him after he had believed me to be dead—that I kept

the secret and entreated of my superiors that I might be sent to Brittany. But this, as I have said, was not to be at first, and when my desire was granted, my place was assigned me in a far district. The persecution under which we still suffer broke out; the designs of my life were changed; my own will became no longer mine to guide me. But, through sorrow and suffering, and danger and bloodshed, I am now led after many days to the execution of that first purpose which I formed on entering the priesthood. Gabriel! when the service is over, and the congregation are dispersed, you must guide me to the door of your father's cottage."

He held up his hand, in sign of silence, as Gabriel was about to answer. Just then, the officiating priests above were pronouncing the final benediction. When it was over, Father Paul opened the cabin-door. As he ascended the steps, followed by Gabriel, Père Bonan met them. The old man looked doubtfully and searchingly on his future son-in-law, as he respectfully whispered a few words in the ear of the priest. Father Paul listened attentively, answered in a whisper, and then turned to Gabriel, first begging the few people near them to withdraw a little.

"I have been asked whether there is any impediment to your marriage," he said, "and have answered that there is none. What you have said to me has

been said in confession, and is a secret between us two. Remember that; and forget not, at the same time, the service which I shall require of you to-night, after the marriage ceremony is over. Where is Perrine Bonan?" he added aloud, looking round him. Perrine came forward. Father Paul took her hand, and placed it in Gabriel's. "Lead her to the altar steps," he said, "and wait there for me."

It was more than an hour later; the boats had left the ship's side; the congregation had dispersed over the face of the country—but still the vessel remained at anchor. Those who were left in her watched the land more anxiously than usual; for they knew that Father Paul had risked meeting the soldiers of the republic by trusting himself on shore. A boat was awaiting his return on the beach; half of the crew, armed, being posted as scouts in various directions on the high land of the heath. They would have followed and guarded the priest to the place of his destination; but he forbade it; and, leaving them abruptly, walked swiftly onward with one young man only for his companion.

Gabriel had committed his brother and his sisters to the charge of Perrine. They were to go to the farm-house that night with his newly married wife and her father and mother. Father Paul had desired

that this might be done. When Gabriel and he were left alone to follow the path which led to the fisherman's cottage, the priest never spoke while they walked on—never looked aside either to the right or the left—always held his ivory crucifix clasped to his breast. They arrived at the door.

“Knock,” whispered Father Paul to Gabriel, “and then wait here with me.”

The door was opened. On a lovely moonlight night François Sarzeau had stood on that threshold, years since, with a bleeding body in his arms. On a lovely moonlight night, he now stood there again, confronting the very man whose life he had attempted, and knowing him not.

Father Paul advanced a few paces, so that the moonlight fell fuller on his features, and removed his hat.

François Sarzeau looked, started, moved one step back, then stood motionless and perfectly silent, while all traces of expression of any kind suddenly vanished from his face. Then the calm, clear tones of the priest stole gently on the dead silence. “I bring a message of peace and forgiveness from a guest of former years,” he said; and pointed, as he spoke, to the place where he had been wounded in the neck.

For one moment, Gabriel saw his father trembling violently from head to foot—then his limbs steadied

again—stiffened suddenly, as if struck by catalepsy. His lips parted, but without quivering; his eyes glared, but without moving in their orbits. The lovely moonlight itself looked ghastly and horrible, shining on the supernatural panic-deformity of that face! Gabriel turned away his head in terror. He heard the voice of Father Paul saying to him: “Wait here till I come back,”—then, there was an instant of silence again—then a low groaning sound, that seemed to articulate the name of God; a sound unlike his father’s voice, unlike any human voice he had ever heard—and then the noise of a closing door. He looked up, and saw that he was standing alone before the cottage.

Once, after an interval, he approached the window.

He just saw through it the hand of the priest holding on high the ivory crucifix; but stopped not to see more, for he heard such words, such sounds, as drove him back to his former place. There he stayed, until the noise of something falling heavily within the cottage, struck on his ear. Again he advanced towards the door; heard Father Paul praying; listened for several minutes; then heard a moaning voice, now joining itself to the voice of the priest, now choked in sobs and bitter wailing. Once more he went back out of hearing, and stirred not again from his place. He waited a long and a weary time

there—so long that one of the scouts on the look-out came towards him, evidently suspicious of the delay in the priest's return. He waved the man back, and then looked again towards the door. At last, he saw it open—saw Father Paul approach him, leading François Sarzeau by the hand.

The fisherman never raised his downcast eyes to his son's face ; tears trickled silently over his cheeks ; he followed the hand that led him, as a little child might have followed it, listening anxiously and humbly at the priest's side to every word that he spoke.

“Gabriel,” said Father Paul, in a voice which trembled a little for the first time that night—
“Gabriel, it has pleased God to grant the perfect fulfilment of the purpose which brought me to this place ; I tell you this, as all that you need—as all, I believe, that you would wish—to know of what has passed while you have been left waiting for me here. Such words as I have now to speak to you, are spoken by your father's earnest desire. It is his own wish that I should communicate to you his confession of having secretly followed you to the Merchant's Table, and of having discovered (as you discovered) that no evidence of his guilt remained there. This admission he thinks will be enough to account for his conduct towards yourself from that time to

this. I have next to tell you (also at your father's desire) that he has promised in my presence, and now promises again in yours, sincerity of repentance in this manner:—When the persecution of our religion has ceased—as cease it will, and that speedily, be assured of it!—he solemnly pledges himself henceforth to devote his life, his strength, and what worldly possessions he may have, or may acquire, to the task of re-erecting and restoring the roadside crosses which have been sacrilegiously overthrown and destroyed in his native province, and to doing good, good where he may. I have now said all that is required of me, and may bid you farewell—bearing with me the happy remembrance that I have left a father and son reconciled and restored to each other. May God bless and prosper you, and those dear to you, Gabriel! May God accept your father's repentance, and bless him also throughout his future life!”

He took their hands, pressed them long and warmly, then turned and walked quickly down the path which led to the beach. Gabriel dared not trust himself yet to speak; but he raised his arm, and put it gently round his father's neck. The two stood together so, looking out dimly through the tears that filled their eyes, to the sea. They saw the boat put off in the bright track of the moonlight, and reach the vessel's side; they watched the spreading of the

sails, and followed the slow course of the ship till she disappeared past a distant headland from sight.

After that, they went into the cottage together. They knew it not then, but they had seen the last, in this world, of Father Paul.

CHAPTER V.

THE events foretold by the good priest happened sooner even than he had anticipated. A new government ruled the destinies of France, and the persecution ceased in Brittany.

Among other propositions which were then submitted to the parliament, was one advocating the restoration of the roadside crosses throughout the province. It was found, however, on inquiry, that these crosses were to be counted by thousands, and that the mere cost of the wood required to re-erect them necessitated an expenditure of money which the bankrupt nation could ill afford to spare. While this project was under discussion, and before it was finally rejected, one man had undertaken the task which the government shrank from attempting. When Gabriel left the cottage, taking his brother and sisters to live with his wife and himself at the farm-house, François Sarzeau left it also, to perform in highway and byway his promise to Father Paul. For months and months he laboured without intermission at his task ; still, always doing good, and

rendering help and kindness and true charity to all whom he could serve. He walked many a weary mile, toiled through many a hard day's work, humbled himself even to beg of others, to get wood enough to restore a single cross. No one ever heard him complain, ever saw him impatient, ever detected him in faltering at his task. The shelter in an outhouse, the crust of bread and drink of water, which he could always get from the peasantry, seemed to suffice him. Among the people who watched his perseverance, a belief began to gain ground that his life would be miraculously prolonged until he had completed his undertaking from one end of Brittany to the other. But this was not to be.

He was seen one cold autumn evening, silently and steadily at work as usual, setting up a new cross on the site of one which had been shattered to splinters in the troubled times. In the morning he was found lying dead beneath the sacred symbol which his own hands had completed and erected in its place during the night. They buried him where he lay; and the priest who consecrated the ground allowed Gabriel to engrave his father's epitaph in the wood of the cross. It was simply the initial letters of the dead man's name, followed by this inscription:—
“ Pray for the repose of his soul : he died penitent, and the doer of good works.”

Once, and once only, did Gabriel hear anything of Father Paul. The good priest showed, by writing to the farm-house, that he had not forgotten the family so largely indebted to him for their happiness. The letter was dated "Rome." Father Paul said, that such services as he had been permitted to render to the Church in Brittany, had obtained for him a new and a far more glorious trust than any he had yet held. He had been recalled from his curacy, and appointed to be at the head of a mission which was shortly to be despatched to convert the inhabitants of a savage and a far distant land to the Christian faith. He now wrote, as his brethren with him were writing, to take leave of all friends for ever in this world, before setting out—for it was well known to the chosen persons intrusted with the new mission, that they could only hope to advance its object by cheerfully risking their own lives for the sake of their religion. He gave his blessing to François Sarzeau, to Gabriel, and to his family; and bade them affectionately farewell for the last time.

There was a postscript to the letter, which was addressed to Perrine, and which she often read afterwards with tearful eyes. The writer begged that, if she should have any children, she would show her friendly and Christian remembrance of him by teaching them to pray (as he hoped she herself would

pray) that a blessing might attend Father Paul's labours in the distant land.

The priest's loving petition was never forgotten. When Perrine taught its first prayer to her first child, the little creature was instructed to end the few simple words pronounced at its mother's knees, with :—"God bless Father Paul."

In those words the nun concluded her narrative. After it was ended, she pointed to the old wooden cross, and said to me :—

"That was one of the many that he made. It was found, a few years since, to have suffered so much from exposure to the weather, that it was unfit to remain any longer in its old place. A priest in Brittany gave it to one of the nuns in this convent. Do you wonder now that the Mother-Superior always calls it a Relic?"

"No," I answered. "And I should have small respect indeed for the religious convictions of any one who could hear the story of that wooden cross, and not feel that the Mother-Superior's name for it is the very best that could have been chosen."

PROLOGUE TO THE SIXTH STORY.

ON the last occasion when I made a lengthened stay in London, my wife and I were surprised and amused one morning by the receipt of the following note, addressed to me in a small, crabbed, foreign-looking handwriting :—

“ Professor Tizzi presents amiable compliments to Mr Kerby, the artist, and is desirous of having his portrait done, to be engraved from, and placed at the beginning of the voluminous work on *The Vital Principle, or Invisible Essence of Life*, which the Professor is now preparing for the press — and posterity.

“ The Professor will give five pounds; and will look upon his face with satisfaction, as an object perpetuated for public contemplation at a reasonable rate, if Mr Kerby will accept the sum just mentioned.

“ In regard to the Professor’s ability to pay five pounds, as well as to offer them, if Mr Kerby should from ignorance entertain injurious doubts, he is re-

quested to apply to the Professor's honourable friend, Mr Lanfray, of Rockleigh Place."

But for the reference at the end of this strange note, I should certainly have considered it as a mere trap set to make a fool of me by some mischievous friend. As it was, I rather doubted the propriety of taking any serious notice of Professor Tizzi's offer; and I might probably have ended by putting the letter in the fire without further thought about it, but for the arrival by the next post of a note from Mr Lanfray, which solved all my doubts, and sent me away at once to make the acquaintance of the learned discoverer of the Essence of Life.

"Do not be surprised" (Mr Lanfray wrote) "if you get a strange note from a very eccentric Italian, one Professor Tizzi, formerly of the University of Padua. I have known him for some years. Scientific inquiry is his monomania, and vanity his ruling passion. He has written a book on the principle of life, which nobody but himself will ever read; but which he is determined to publish, with his own portrait for frontispiece. If it is worth your while to accept the little he can offer you, take it by all means, for he is a character worth knowing. He was exiled, I should tell you, years ago, for some absurd political reason, and has lived in England ever since. All the money he inherits from his

father, who was a mail-contractor in the north of Italy, goes in books and experiments, but I think I can answer for his solvency, at any rate, for the large sum of five pounds. If you are not very much occupied just now, go and see him. He is sure to amuse you."

Professor Tizzi lived in the northern suburb of London. On approaching his house, I found it, so far as outward appearance went, excessively dirty and neglected, but in no other respect different from the "Villas" in its neighbourhood. The front garden door, after I had rung twice, was opened by a yellow-faced, suspicious old foreigner, dressed in worn-out clothes, and completely and consistently dirty all over from top to toe. On mentioning my name and business, this old man led me across a weedy neglected garden, and admitted me into the house. At the first step into the passage I was surrounded by books. Closely packed in plain wooden shelves, they ran all along the wall on either side to the back of the house; and when I looked up at the carpetless staircase, I saw nothing but books again, running all the way up the wall, as far as my eye could reach. "Here is the Artist Painter!" cried the old servant, throwing open one of the parlour doors, before I had half done looking at the books, and signing impatiently to me to walk into the room.

Books again ! all round the walls, and all over the floor—among them a plain deal table, with leaves of manuscript piled high on every part of it—among the leaves a head of long elfish white hair covered with a black skullcap, and bent down over a book—above the head a sallow withered hand shaking itself at me as a sign that I must not venture to speak just at that moment—on the tops of the book-cases glass vases full of spirits of some kind, with horrible objects floating in the liquid—dirt on the window-panes, cobwebs hanging from the ceiling, dust springing up in clouds under my intruding feet—these were the things I observed on first entering the study of Professor Tizzi.

After I had waited for a minute or so, the shaking hand stopped, descended with a smack on the nearest pile of manuscript, seized the book that the head had been bending over, and flung it contemptuously to the other end of the room. “ I’ve refuted *you*, at any rate !” said Professor Tizzi, looking with extreme complacency at the cloud of dust raised by the fall of the rejected volume.

He turned next to me. What a grand face it was ! What a broad white forehead—what fiercely brilliant black eyes—what perfect regularity and refinement in the other features ; with the long, venerable hair, framing them in, as it were, on either side ! Poor

as I was, I felt that I could have painted his portrait for nothing. Titian, Vandyk, Velasquez—any of the three would have paid him to sit to them!

“Accept my humblest excuses, sir,” said the old man, speaking English with a singularly pure accent for a foreigner. “That absurd book plunged me so deep down in the quagmires of sophistry and error, Mr Kerby, that I really could not get to the surface at once when you came into the room. So you are willing to draw my likeness for such a small sum as five pounds?” he continued, rising, and showing me that he wore a long black velvet gown, instead of the paltry and senseless costume of modern times.

I informed him that five pounds was as much as I generally got for a drawing.

“It seems little,” said the Professor; “but if you want fame, I can make it up to you in that way. There is my great work” (he pointed to the piles of manuscript), “the portrait of my mind and the mirror of my learning: put a likeness of my face on the first page, and posterity will then be thoroughly acquainted with me, outside and in. Your portrait will be engraved, Mr Kerby, and your name shall be inscribed under the print. You shall be associated, sir, in that way with a work which will form an epoch in the history of human science. The Vital Principle,—or,

in other words, the essence of that mysterious Something which we call Life, and which extends down from Man to the feeblest insect and the smallest plant—has been an unguessed riddle from the beginning of the world to the present time. I, alone, have found the answer; and here it is!" He fixed his dazzling eyes on me in triumph, and smacked the piles of manuscript fiercely with both his sallow hands.

I saw that he was waiting for me to say something; so I asked if his great work had not cost a vast expenditure of time and pains.

"I am seventy, sir," said the Professor; "and I began preparing myself for that book at twenty. After mature consideration, I have written it in English (having three other foreign languages at my fingers' ends), as a substantial proof of my gratitude to the nation that has given me an asylum. Perhaps you think the work looks rather long in its manuscript state? It will occupy twelve volumes, sir, and it is not half long enough, even then, for the subject. I take two volumes (and no man could do it in less) to examine the theories of all the philosophers in the world, ancient and modern, on the Vital Principle. I take two more (and little enough) to scatter every one of the theories, seriatim, to the winds. I take two more (at the risk, for brevity's sake, of doing things by halves) to explain the exact stuff, or vital

compound, of which the first man and woman in the world were made—calling them Adam and Eve, out of deference to popular prejudices. I take two more—but you are standing all this time, Mr Kerby; and I am talking instead of sitting for my portrait. Pray take any books you want, anywhere off the floor, and make a seat of any height you please. Furniture would only be in my way here, so I don't trouble myself with anything of the kind."

I obediently followed the Professor's directions, and had just heaped up a pile of grimy quartos when the old servant entered the room with a shabby little tray in his hand. In the middle of the tray I saw a crust of bread and a bit of garlic, encircled by a glass of water, a knife, salt, pepper, a bottle of vinegar, and a flask of oil.

"With your permission, I am going to breakfast," said Professor Tizzi, as the tray was set down before him on the part of his great work relating to the vital compound of Adam and Eve. As he spoke, he took up the piece of bread, and rubbed the crusty part of it with the bit of garlic, till it looked as polished as a new dining-table. That done, he turned the bread, crumb uppermost, and saturated it with oil, added a few drops of vinegar, sprinkled with pepper and salt, and, with a gleam of something very like greediness in his bright eyes, took up the knife to cut himself a

first mouthful of the horrible mess that he had just concocted. "The best of breakfasts," said the Professor, seeing me look amazed. "Not a cannibal meal of chicken-life in embryo (vulgarly called an Egg); not a dog's gorge of a dead animal's flesh, blood, and bones, warmed with fire (popularly known as a Chop); not a breakfast, sir, that lions, tigers, Carribbees, and Costermongers could all partake of alike; but an innocent, nutritive, simple, vegetable meal; a philosopher's refection; a breakfast that a prizefighter would turn from in disgust, and that a Plato would share with relish."

I have no doubt that he was right, and that I was prejudiced; but as I saw the first oily, vinegary, garlicky morsel slide noiselessly into his mouth, I began to feel rather sick. My hands were dirty with moving the books, and I asked if I could wash them before beginning to work at the likeness, as a good excuse for getting out of the room, while Professor Tizzi was unctuously disposing of his simple vegetable meal.

The philosopher looked a little astonished at my request, as if the washing of hands at irregular times and seasons offered a comparatively new subject of contemplation to him; but he rang a hand-bell on his table immediately, and told the old servant to take me up into his bedroom.

The interior of the parlour had astonished me ; but a sight of the bedroom was a new sensation—not of the most agreeable kind. The couch on which the philosopher sought repose after his labours was a truckle-bed that would not have fetched half-a-crown at a sale. On one side of it dangled from the ceiling a complete male skeleton, looking like all that was left of a man who might have hung himself about a century ago, and who had never been disturbed since the moment of his suicide. On the other side of the bed stood a long press, in which I observed hideous coloured preparations of the muscular system, and bottles with curious, twining, thread-like substances inside them, which might have been remarkable worms or dissections of nerves, scattered amicably side by side with the Professor's hairbrush (three parts worn out), with remnants of his beard on bits of shaving paper, with a broken shoe-horn, and with a travelling looking-glass of the sort usually sold at sixpence a-piece. Repetitions of the litter of books in the parlour lay all about over the floor ; coloured anatomical prints were nailed anyhow against the walls ; rolled-up towels were scattered here, there, and everywhere, in the wildest confusion, as if the room had been bombarded with them ; and last, but by no means least remarkable among the other extraordinary objects in the bed-chamber, the stuffed figure

of a large unshaven poodle-dog, stood on an old card-table, keeping perpetual watch over a pair of the philosopher's black breeches twisted round his forepaws.

I had started, on entering the room, at the skeleton, and I started once more at the dog. The old servant noticed me each time with a sardonic grin. "Don't be afraid," he said; "one is as dead as the other." With these words, he left me to wash my hands.

Finding little more than a pint of water at my disposal, and failing altogether to discover where the soap was kept, I was not long in performing my ablutions. Before leaving the room, I looked again at the stuffed poodle. On the board to which he was fixed, I saw painted in faded letters the word "Scaramuccia," evidently the comic Italian name to which he had answered in his lifetime. There was no other inscription; but I made up my mind that the dog must have been the Professor's pet, and that he kept the animal stuffed in his bed-room as a remembrance of past times. "Who would have suspected so great a philosopher of having so much heart!" thought I, leaving the bed-room to go down stairs again.

The Professor had done his breakfast, and was anxious to begin the sitting; so I took out my chinks and paper, and set to work at once—I seated on one pile of books and he on another.

“Fine anatomical preparations in my room, are there not, Mr Kerby?” said the old gentleman. “Did you notice a very interesting and perfect arrangement of the intestinal ganglia? They form the subject of an important chapter in my great work.”

“I am afraid you will think me very ignorant,” I replied. “But I really do not know the intestinal ganglia when I see them. The object I noticed with most curiosity in your room was something more on a level with my own small capacity.”

“And what was that?” asked the Professor.

“The figure of the stuffed poodle. I suppose he was a favourite of yours?”

“Of mine? No, no:—a young woman’s favourite, sir, before I was born; and a very remarkable dog, too. The vital principle in that poodle, Mr Kerby, must have been singularly intensified. He lived to a fabulous old age, and he was clever enough to play an important part of his own, in what you English call a Romance of Real Life! If I could only have dissected that poodle, I would have put him into my book—he should have headed my chapter on the Vital Principle of Beasts.”

“Here is a story in prospect,” thought I, “if I can only keep his attention up to the subject.”

“He should have figured in my great work, sir,” the Professor went on. “Scaramuccia should have

taken his place among the examples that prove my new theory ; but unfortunately he died before I was born. His mistress gave him, stuffed, as you see up stairs, to my father to take care of for her, and he has descended as an heir-loom to me. Talking of dogs, Mr Kerby, I have ascertained, beyond the possibility of doubt, that the brachial plexus in people who die of hydrophobia—but stop ! I had better show you how it is—the preparation is up stairs under my wash-hand stand.”

He left his seat as he spoke. In another minute he would have sent the servant to fetch the “preparation,” and I should have lost the story. At the risk of his taking offence, I begged him not to move just then, unless he wished me to spoil his likeness. This alarmed, but fortunately did not irritate him. He returned to his seat, and I resumed the subject of the stuffed poodle, asking him boldly to tell me the story with which the dog was connected. The demand seemed to impress him with no very favourable opinion of my intellectual tastes ; but he complied with it, and related, not without many a wearisome digression to the subject of his great work, the narrative which I propose calling by the name of “The Yellow Mask.” After the slight specimens that I have given of his character and style of conversation, it will be almost unnecessary for me to premise that I tell this

story as I have told the last, and "Sister Rose," in my own language, and according to my own plan in the disposition of the incidents—adding nothing, of course, to the facts, but keeping them within the limits which my disposable space prescribes to me.

I may perhaps be allowed to add in this place, that I have not yet seen or heard of my portrait in an engraved state. Professor Tizzi is still alive; but I look in vain through the publishers' lists for an announcement of his learned work on the Vital Principle. Possibly, he may be adding a volume or two to the twelve already completed, by way of increasing the debt which a deeply obliged posterity is, sooner or later, sure of owing to him.

THE PROFESSOR'S STORY
OF
THE YELLOW MASK.

PART FIRST.—CHAPTER I.

ABOUT a century ago, there lived in the ancient city of Pisa a famous Italian milliner, who, by way of vindicating to all customers her familiarity with Paris fashions, adopted a French title, and called herself the Demoiselle Grifoni. She was a wizen little woman, with a mischievous face, a quick tongue, a nimble foot, a talent for business, and an uncertain disposition. Rumour hinted that she was immensely rich; and scandal suggested that she would do any thing for money.

The one undeniable good quality which raised Demoiselle Grifoni above all her rivals in the trade was her inexhaustible fortitude. She was never known to yield an inch under any pressure of adverse

circumstances. Thus the memorable occasion of her life on which she was threatened with ruin was also the occasion on which she most triumphantly asserted the energy and decision of her character. At the height of the demoiselle's prosperity, her skilled forewoman and cutter-out basely married and started in business as a rival. Such a calamity as this would have ruined an ordinary milliner; but the invincible Grifoni rose superior to it almost without an effort, and proved incontestably that it was impossible for hostile Fortune to catch her at the end of her resources. While the minor milliners were prophesying that she would shut up shop, she was quietly carrying on a private correspondence with an agent in Paris. Nobody knew what these letters were about until a few weeks had elapsed, and then circulars were received by all the ladies in Pisa, announcing that the best French forewoman who could be got for money was engaged to superintend the great Grifoni establishment. This master-stroke decided the victory. All the demoiselle's customers declined giving orders elsewhere until the forewoman from Paris had exhibited to the natives of Pisa the latest fashions from the metropolis of the world of dress.

The Frenchwoman arrived punctual to the appointed day,—glib and curt, smiling and flippant, tight of face and supple of figure. Her name was

Mademoiselle Virginie, and her family had inhumanly deserted her. She was set to work the moment she was inside the doors of the Grifoni establishment. A room was devoted to her own private use; magnificent materials in velvet, silk, and satin, with due accompaniment of muslins, laces, and ribbons, were placed at her disposal; she was told to spare no expense, and to produce, in the shortest possible time, the finest and newest specimen-dresses for exhibition in the show-room. Mademoiselle Virginie undertook to do everything required of her, produced her portfolios of patterns and her book of coloured designs, and asked for one assistant who could speak French enough to interpret her orders to the Italian girls in the work-room.

“I have the very person you want,” cried Demoiselle Grifoni. “A workwoman we call Brigida here—the idlest slut in Pisa, but as sharp as a needle—has been in France, and speaks the language like a native. I’ll send her to you directly.”

Mademoiselle Virginie was not left long alone with her patterns and silks. A tall woman, with bold black eyes, a reckless manner, and a step as firm as a man’s, stalked into the room with the gait of a tragedy-queen crossing the stage. The instant her eyes fell on the French forewoman, she stopped, threw up her hands in astonishment, and exclaimed, “Finette!”

“Teresa!” cried the Frenchwoman, casting her scissors on the table, and advancing a few steps.

“Hush! call me Brigida.”

“Hush! call me Virginie.”

These two exclamations were uttered at the same moment, and then the two women scrutinized each other in silence. The swarthy cheeks of the Italian turned to a dull yellow, and the voice of the Frenchwoman trembled a little when she spoke again.

“How, in the name of Heaven, have you dropped down in the world as low as this?” she asked. “I thought you were provided for when——”

“Silence!” interrupted Brigida. “You see I was not provided for. I have had my misfortunes; and you are the last woman alive who ought to refer to them.”

“Do you think I have not had my misfortunes, too, since we met?” (Brigida’s face brightened maliciously at those words.) “You have had your revenge,” continued Mademoiselle Virginie coldly, turning away to the table and taking up the scissors again.

Brigida followed her, threw one arm roughly round her neck, and kissed her on the cheek. “Let us be friends again,” she said. The Frenchwoman laughed. “Tell me how I have had my revenge,” pursued the other, tightening her grasp. Mademoiselle

Virginie signed to Brigida to stoop, and whispered rapidly in her ear. The Italian listened eagerly, with fierce suspicious eyes fixed on the door. When the whispering ceased, she loosened her hold; and, with a sigh of relief, pushed back her heavy black hair from her temples. "Now we are friends," she said, and sat down indolently in a chair placed by the work-table.

"Friends," repeated Mademoiselle Virginie, with another laugh. "And now for business," she continued," getting a row of pins ready for use by putting them between her teeth. "I am here, I believe, for the purpose of ruining the late forewoman, who has set up in opposition to us? Good! I *will* ruin her. Spread out the yellow brocaded silk, my dear, and pin that pattern on at your end, while I pin at mine. And what are your plans, Brigida? (Mind you don't forget that Finette is dead, and that Virginie has risen from her ashes.) You can't possibly intend to stop here all your life? (Leave an inch outside the paper, all round.) You must have projects? What are they?"

"Look at my figure," said Brigida, placing herself in an attitude in the middle of the room.

"Ah!" rejoined the other, "it's not what it was. There's too much of it. You want diet, walking, and a French staymaker," muttered Mademoiselle Virginie through her chevaux-de-frise of pins.

“Did the goddess Minerva walk, and employ a French staymaker? I thought she rode upon clouds, and lived at a period before waists were invented.”

“What do you mean?”

“This—that my present project is to try if I can’t make my fortune by sitting as a model for Minerva in the studio of the best sculptor in Pisa.”

“And who is he? (Unwind me a yard or two of that black lace.)”

“The master sculptor, Luca Lomi,—an old family, once noble, but down in the world now. The master is obliged to make statues to get a living for his daughter and himself.”

“More of the lace—double it over the bosom of the dress. And how is sitting to this needy sculptor to make your fortune?”

“Wait a minute. There are other sculptors besides him in the studio. There is, first, his brother, the priest—Father Rocco, who passes all his spare time with the master. He is a good sculptor in his way—has cast statues and made a font for his church—a holy man, who devotes all his work in the studio to the cause of piety.”

“Ah, bah! we should think him a droll priest in France. (More pins.) You don’t expect *him* to put money in your pocket surely?”

“Wait, I say again. There is a third sculptor in

the studio—actually a nobleman! His name is Fabio d'Ascoli. He is rich, young, handsome, an only child, and little better than a fool. Fancy his working at sculpture, as if he had his bread to get by it—and thinking that an amusement! Imagine a man belonging to one of the best families in Pisa mad enough to want to make a reputation as an artist!—Wait! wait! the best is to come. His father and mother are dead—he has no near relations in the world to exercise authority over him—he is a bachelor, and his fortune is all at his own disposal; going a-begging, my friend; absolutely going a-begging for want of a clever woman to hold out her hand and take it from him.”

“Yes, yes — now I understand. The goddess Minerva is a clever woman, and she will hold out her hand and take his fortune from him with the utmost docility.”

“The first thing is to get him to offer it. I must tell you that I am not going to sit to him, but to his master, Luca Lomi, who is doing the statue of Minerva. The face is modelled from his daughter; and now he wants somebody to sit for the bust and arms. Maddalena Lomi and I are as nearly as possible the same height, I hear—the difference between us being that I have a good figure and she has a bad one. I have offered to sit, through a friend who is

employed in the studio. If the master accepts, I am sure of an introduction to our rich young gentleman ; and then leave it to my good looks, my various accomplishments, and my ready tongue, to do the rest.”

“ Stop ! I won’t have the lace doubled, on second thoughts. I’ll have it single, and running all round the dress in curves—so. Well, and who is this friend of yours employed in the studio ? A fourth sculptor ? ”

“ No ! no ! the strangest, simplest little creature——”

Just then a faint tap was audible at the door of the room.

Brigida laid her finger on her lips, and called impatiently to the person outside to come in.

The door opened gently, and a young girl, poorly but very neatly dressed, entered the room. She was rather thin, and under the average height ; but her head and figure were in perfect proportion. Her hair was of that gorgeous auburn colour, her eyes of that deep violet blue, which the portraits of Giorgione and Titian have made famous as the type of Venetian beauty. Her features possessed the definiteness and regularity, the “ good modelling ” (to use an artist’s term), which is the rarest of all womanly charms, in Italy as elsewhere. The one serious defect of her face was its paleness. Her cheeks, wanting nothing

in form, wanted everything in colour. That look of health, which is the essential crowning-point of beauty, was the one attraction which her face did not possess.

She came into the room with a sad and weary expression in her eyes, which changed, however, the moment she observed the magnificently dressed French forewoman, into a look of astonishment, and almost of awe. Her manner became shy and embarrassed; and after an instant of hesitation, she turned back silently to the door.

“Stop, stop, Nanina,” said Brigida, in Italian. “Don’t be afraid of that lady. She is our new forewoman; and she has it in her power to do all sorts of kind things for you. Look up, and tell us what you want. You were sixteen last birth-day, Nanina, and you behave like a baby of two years old!”

“I only came to know if there was any work for me to-day,” said the girl, in a very sweet voice, that trembled a little as she tried to face the fashionable French forewoman again.

“No work, child, that is easy enough for *you* to do,” said Brigida. “Are you going to the studio to-day?”

Some of the colour that Nanina’s cheeks wanted began to steal over them as she answered “Yes.”

“Don’t forget my message, darling. And if Master Luca Lomi asks where I live, answer that

you are ready to deliver a letter to me ; but that you are forbidden to enter into any particulars at first, about who I am, or where I live."

"Why am I forbidden?" inquired Nanina, innocently.

"Don't ask questions, baby ! Do as you are told. Bring me back a nice note or message to-morrow from the studio, and I will intercede with this lady to get you some work. You are a foolish child to want it, when you might make more money here and at Florence, by sitting to painters and sculptors : though what they can see to paint or model in you I never could understand."

"I like working at home better than going abroad to sit," said Nanina, looking very much abashed as she faltered out the answer, and escaping from the room with a terrified farewell obeisance, which was an eccentric compound of a start, a bow, and a curtsy.

"That awkward child would be pretty," said Mademoiselle Virginie, making rapid progress with the cutting out of her dress, "if she knew how to give herself a complexion, and had a presentable gown on her back. Who is she?"

"The friend who is to get me into Master Luca Lomi's studio," replied Brigida, laughing. "Rather a curious ally for me to take up with, isn't she?"

"Where did you meet with her?"

“ Here, to be sure, she hangs about this place for any plain work she can get to do ; and takes it home to the oddest little room in a street near the Campo Santo. I had the curiosity to follow her one day, and knocked at her door soon after she had gone in, as if I was a visitor. She answered my knock in a great flurry and fright, as you may imagine. I made myself agreeable, affected immense interest in her affairs, and so got into her room. Such a place ! A mere corner of it curtained off to make a bed-room. One chair, one stool, one saucepan on the fire. Before the hearth, the most grotesquely hideous, unshaven poodle-dog you ever saw ; and on the stool a fair little girl plaiting dinner-mats. Such was the household—furniture and all included. ‘ Where is your father ? ’ I asked. ‘ He ran away and left us, years ago, ’ answers my awkward little friend who has just left the room, speaking in that simple way of hers, with all the composure in the world. ‘ And your mother ? ’—‘ Dead. ’—She went up to the little mat-plaiting girl, as she gave that answer, and began playing with her long flaxen hair. ‘ Your sister, I suppose, ’ said I. ‘ What is her name ? ’—‘ They call me La Biondella, ’ says the child, looking up from her mat (La Biondella, Virginie, means The Fair).—‘ And why do you let that great, shaggy, ill-looking brute lie before your fireplace ? ’ I asked.—‘ O ! ’ cried the

little mat-plaiter, 'that is our dear old dog, Scaramuccia. He takes care of the house when Nanina is not at home. He dances on his hind legs, and jumps through a hoop, and tumbles down dead when I cry Bang! Scaramuccia followed us home one night, years ago, and he has lived with us ever since. He goes out every day by himself, we can't tell where, and generally returns licking his chops, which makes us afraid that he is a thief; but nobody finds him out, because he is the cleverest dog that ever lived!' The child ran on in this way about the great beast by the fireplace, till I was obliged to stop her; while that simpleton Nanina stood by, laughing and encouraging her. I asked them a few more questions, which produced some strange answers. They did not seem to know of any relations of theirs in the world. The neighbours in the house had helped them, after their father ran away, until they were old enough to help themselves; and they did not seem to think there was anything in the least wretched or pitiable in their way of living. The last thing I heard when I left them that day, was La Biondella crying 'Bang!'—then a bark, a thump on the floor, and a scream of laughter. If it was not for their dog I should go and see them oftener. But the ill-conditioned beast has taken a dislike to me, and growls and shows his teeth whenever I come near him."

“The girl looked sickly when she came in here. Is she always like that?”

“No. She has altered within the last month. I suspect our interesting young nobleman has produced an impression. The oftener the girl has sat to him lately, the paler and more out of spirits she has become.”

“O! she has sat to him, has she?”

“She is sitting to him now. He is doing a bust of some Pagan nymph or other, and prevailed on Nanina to let him copy from her head and face. According to her own account the little fool was frightened at first, and gave him all the trouble in the world before she would consent.”

“And now she has consented, don't you think it likely she may turn out rather a dangerous rival? Men are such fools, and take such fancies into their heads——”

“Ridiculous! A thread-paper of a girl like that, who has no manner, no talk, no intelligence; who has nothing to recommend her but an awkward babyish-prettiness!—Dangerous to me? No! no! If there is danger at all, I have to dread it from the sculptor's daughter. I don't mind confessing that I am anxious to see Maddalena Lomi. But as for Nanina, she will simply be of use to me. All I know already about the studio and the artists in it, I know

through her. She will deliver my message, and procure me my introduction ; and when we have got so far, I shall give her an old gown and a shake of the hand ; and then, good bye to our little Innocent !”

“ Well, well, for your sake I hope you are the wiser of the two in this matter. For my part, I always distrust innocence. Wait one moment and I shall have the body and sleeves of this dress ready for the needlewomen. There, ring the bell, and order them up ; for I have directions to give, and you must interpret for me.”

While Brigida went to the bell, the energetic Frenchwoman began planning out the skirt of the new dress. She laughed as she measured off yard after yard of the silk.

“ What are you laughing about ?” asked Brigida, opening the door and ringing a hand-bell in the passage.

“ I can't help fancying, dear, in spite of her innocent face and her artless ways, that your young friend is a hypocrite.”

“ And I am quite certain, love, that she is only a simpleton.”

CHAPTER II.

THE studio of the Master-Sculptor, Luca Lomi, was composed of two large rooms, unequally divided by a wooden partition, with an arched doorway cut in the middle of it.

While the milliners of the Grifoni establishment were industriously shaping dresses, the sculptors in Luca Lomi's workshop were, in their way, quite as hard at work shaping marble and clay. In the smaller of the two rooms the young nobleman (only addressed in the studio by his Christian name of Fabio) was busily engaged on his bust, with Nanina sitting before him as a model. His was not one of those traditional Italian faces from which subtlety and suspicion are always supposed to look out darkly on the world at large. Both countenance and expression proclaimed his character frankly and freely to all who saw him. Quick intelligence looked brightly from his eyes; and easy good-humour laughed out pleasantly in the rather quaint curve of his lips. For the rest, his face expressed the defects as well as the merits of his character, showing that he wanted resolution and perseverance just as plainly

as it showed also that he possessed amiability and intelligence.

At the end of the large room, nearest to the street door, Luca Lomi was standing by his life-size statue of Minerva, and was issuing directions, from time to time, to some of his workmen, who were roughly chiselling the drapery of another figure. At the opposite side of the room, nearest to the partition, his brother, Father Rocco, was taking a cast from a statuette of the Madonna; while Maddalena Lomi, the sculptor's daughter, released from sitting for Minerva's face, walked about the two rooms, and watched what was going on in them.

There was a strong family likeness of a certain kind between father, brother, and daughter. All three were tall, handsome, dark-haired, and dark-eyed; nevertheless, they differed in expression, strikingly as they resembled one another in feature. Maddalena Lomi's face betrayed strong passions, but not an ungenerous nature. Her father, with the same indications of a violent temper, had some sinister lines about his mouth and forehead which suggested anything rather than an open disposition. Father Rocco's countenance, on the other hand, looked like the personification of absolute calmness and invincible moderation; and his manner, which, in a very firm way, was singularly quiet and deliberate, assisted in

carrying out the impression produced by his face. The daughter seemed as if she could fly into a passion at a moment's notice, and forgive also at a moment's notice. The father, appearing to be just as irritable, had something in his face which said, as plainly as if in words, "Anger me, and I never pardon." The priest looked as if he need never be called on either to ask forgiveness or to grant it, for the double reason that he could irritate nobody else, and that nobody else could irritate him.

"Rocco," said Luca, looking at the face of his Minerva, which was now finished; "this statue of mine will make a sensation."

"I am glad to hear it," rejoined the priest dryly.

"It is a new thing in art," continued Luca enthusiastically. "Other sculptors, with a classical subject like mine, limit themselves to the ideal classical face, and never think of aiming at individual character. Now I do precisely the reverse of that. I get my handsome daughter, Maddalena, to sit for Minerva, and I make an exact likeness of her. I may lose in ideal beauty, but I gain in individual character. People may accuse me of disregarding established rules—but my answer is, that I make my own rules. My daughter looks like a Minerva, and there she is exactly as she looks."

"It is certainly a wonderful likeness," said Father Rocco, approaching the statue.

“It is the girl herself,” cried the other. “Exactly her expression, and exactly her features. Measure Maddalena, and measure Minerva, and, from forehead to chin, you won’t find a hair’s breadth of difference between them.”

“But how about the bust and arms of the figure, now the face is done?” asked the priest, returning, as he spoke, to his own work.

“I may have the very model I want for them to-morrow. Little Nanina has just given me the strangest message. What do you think of a mysterious lady-admirer who offers to sit for the bust and arms of my Minerva?”

“Are you going to accept the offer?” inquired the priest.

“I am going to receive her to-morrow; and if I really find that she is the same height as Maddalena, and has a bust and arms worth modelling, of course I shall accept her offer; for she will be the very sitter I have been looking after for weeks past. Who can she be? That’s the mystery I want to find out. Which do you say, Rocco—an enthusiast or an adventuress?”

“I do not presume to say, for I have no means of knowing.”

“Ah! there you are with your moderation again. Now, I do presume to assert, that she must be either

one or the other—or she would not have forbidden Nanina to say anything about her, in answer to all my first natural inquiries. Where is Maddalena? I thought she was here a minute ago.”

“She is in Fabio’s room,” answered Father Rocco, softly. “Shall I call her?”

“No, no!” returned Luca. He stopped, looked round at the workmen, who were chipping away mechanically at their bit of drapery; then advanced close to the priest, with a cunning smile, and continued in a whisper: “If Maddalena can only get from Fabio’s room here to Fabio’s palace over the way, on the Arno—come, come, Rocco! don’t shake your head. If I brought her up to your church-door one of these days, as Fabio d’Ascoli’s betrothed, you would be glad enough to take the rest of the business off my hands, and make her Fabio d’Ascoli’s wife. You are a very holy man, Rocco, but you know the difference between the clink of the money-bag and the clink of the chisel, for all that!”

“I am sorry to find, Luca,” returned the priest coldly, “that you allow yourself to talk of the most delicate subjects in the coarsest way. This is one of the minor sins of the tongue which is growing on you. When we are alone in the studio I will endeavour to lead you into speaking of the young man in the room there, and of your daughter, in terms more be-

coming to you, to me, and to them. Until that time, allow me to go on with my work."

Luca shrugged his shoulders and went back to his statue. Father Rocco, who had been engaged during the last ten minutes in mixing wet plaster to the right consistency for taking a cast, suspended his occupation, and, crossing the room to a corner next the partition, removed from it a cheval-glass which stood there. He lifted it away gently, while his brother's back was turned, carried it close to the table at which he had been at work, and then resumed his employment of mixing the plaster. Having at last prepared the composition for use, he laid it over the exposed half of the statuette with a neatness and dexterity which showed him to be a practised hand at cast-taking. Just as he had covered the necessary extent of surface, Luca turned round from his statue.

"How are you getting on with the cast?" he asked. "Do you want any help?"

"None, brother, I thank you," answered the priest. "Pray do not disturb either yourself or your workmen on my account."

Luca turned again to the statue: and, at the same moment, Father Rocco softly moved the cheval-glass towards the open doorway between the two rooms, placing it at such an angle as to make it reflect the figures of the persons in the smaller studio. He did

this with significant quickness and precision. It was evidently not the first time he had used the glass for purposes of secret observation.

Mechanically stirring the wet plaster round and round for the second casting, the priest looked into the glass, and saw, as in a picture, all that was going forward in the inner room. Maddalena Lomi was standing behind the young nobleman, watching the progress he made with his bust. Occasionally she took the modelling-tool out of his hand, and showed him, with her sweetest smile, that she too, as a sculptor's daughter, understood something of the sculptor's art; and, now and then, in the pauses of the conversation, when her interest was especially intense in Fabio's work, she suffered her hand to drop absently on his shoulder, or stooped forward so close to him that her hair mingled for a moment with his. Moving the glass an inch or two, so as to bring Nanina well under his eye, Father Rocco found that he could trace each repetition of these little acts of familiarity by the immediate effect which they produced on the girl's face and manner. Whenever Maddalena so much as touched the young nobleman—no matter whether she did so by premeditation, or really by accident—Nanina's features contracted, her pale cheeks grew paler, she fidgeted on her chair, and her fingers nervously twisted and untwisted the loose ends of the ribbon fastened round her waist.

“Jealous,” thought Father Rocco; “I suspected it weeks ago.”

He turned away, and gave his whole attention for a few minutes to the mixing of the plaster. When he looked back again at the glass, he was just in time to witness a little accident which suddenly changed the relative positions of the three persons in the inner room.

He saw Maddalena take up a modelling-tool which lay on a table near her, and begin to help Fabio in altering the arrangement of the hair in his bust. The young man watched what she was doing earnestly enough for a few moments; then his attention wandered away to Nanina. She looked at him reproachfully, and he answered by a sign which brought a smile to her face directly. Maddalena surprised her at the instant of the change; and, following the direction of her eyes, easily discovered at whom the smile was directed. She darted a glance of contempt at Nanina, threw down the modelling-tool, and turned indignantly to the young sculptor, who was affecting to be hard at work again.

“Signor Fabio,” she said, “the next time you forget what is due to your rank and yourself, warn me of it, if you please, beforehand, and I will take care to leave the room.” While speaking the last words she passed through the doorway. Father Rocco,

bending abstractedly over his plaster mixture, heard her continue to herself in a whisper, as she went by him : " If I have any influence at all with my father, that impudent beggar-girl shall be forbidden the studio."

" Jealousy on the other side," thought the priest. " Something must be done at once, or this will end badly."

He looked again at the glass, and saw Fabio, after an instant of hesitation, beckon to Nanina to approach him. She left her seat, advanced half-way to his, then stopped. He stepped forward to meet her, and, taking her by the hand, whispered earnestly in her ear. When he had done, before dropping her hand, he touched her cheek with his lips, and then helped her on with the little white mantilla which covered her head and shoulders out of doors. The girl trembled violently, and drew the linen close to her face as Fabio walked into the larger studio, and, addressing Father Rocco, said :

" I am afraid I am more idle, or more stupid, than ever to-day. I can't get on with the bust at all to my satisfaction, so I have cut short the sitting, and given Nanina a half-holiday."

At the first sound of his voice, Maddalena, who was speaking to her father, stopped ; and, with another look of scorn at Nanina standing trembling

in the doorway, left the room. Luca Lomi called Fabio to him as she went away, and Father Rocco, turning to the statuette, looked to see how the plaster was hardening on it. Seeing them thus engaged, Nanina attempted to escape from the studio without being noticed; but the priest stopped her just as she was hurrying by him.

“My child,” said he, in his gentle quiet way, “are you going home?”

Nanina’s heart beat too fast for her to reply in words—she could only answer by bowing her head.

“Take this for your little sister,” pursued Father Rocco, putting a few silver coins in her hand; “I have got some customers for those mats she plaits so nicely. You need not bring them to my rooms—I will come and see you this evening, when I am going my rounds among my parishioners, and will take the mats away with me. You are a good girl, Nanina—you have always been a good girl—and as long as I am alive, my child, you shall never want a friend and an adviser.”

Nanina’s eyes filled with tears. She drew the mantilla closer than ever round her face as she tried to thank the priest. Father Rocco nodded to her kindly, and laid his hand lightly on her head for a moment, then turned round again to his cast.

“Don’t forget my message to the lady who is to

sit to me to-morrow," said Luca to Nanina, as she passed him on her way out of the studio.

After she had gone, Fabio returned to the priest, who was still busy over his cast.

"I hope you will get on better with the bust to-morrow," said Father Rocco, politely; "I am sure you cannot complain of your model."

"Complain of her!" cried the young man, warmly; "she has the most beautiful head I ever saw. If I were twenty times the sculptor that I am, I should despair of being able to do her justice."

He walked into the inner room to look at his bust again—lingered before it for a little while—and then turned to retrace his steps to the larger studio. Between him and the doorway stood three chairs. As he went by them, he absently touched the backs of the first two, and passed the third; but just as he was entering the larger room, stopped, as if struck by a sudden recollection, returned hastily, and touched the third chair. Raising his eyes, as he approached the large studio again after doing this, he met the eyes of the priest fixed on him in unconcealed astonishment.

"Signor Fabio!" exclaimed Father Rocco, with a sarcastic smile; "who would ever have imagined that you were superstitious?"

"My nurse was," returned the young man, reddening.

ing, and laughing rather uneasily. "She taught me some bad habits that I have not got over yet." With those words he nodded, and hastily went out.

"Superstitious!" said Father Rocco softly to himself. He smiled again, reflected for a moment, and then, going to the window, looked into the street. The way to the left led to Fabio's palace, and the way to the right to the Campo Santo, in the neighbourhood of which Nanina lived. The priest was just in time to see the young sculptor take the way to the right.

After another half-hour had elapsed, the two workmen quitted the studio to go to dinner, and Luca and his brother were left alone.

"We may return now," said Father Rocco, "to that conversation which was suspended between us earlier in the day."

"I have nothing more to say," rejoined Luca, sulkily.

"Then you can listen to me, brother, with the greater attention," pursued the priest. "I objected to the coarseness of your tone in talking of our young pupil and your daughter—I object still more strongly to your insinuation that my desire to see them married (provided always that they are sincerely attached to each other) springs from a mercenary motive."

"You are trying to snare me, Rocco, in a mesh of

fine phrases ; but I am not to be caught. I know what my own motive is for hoping that Maddalena may get an offer of marriage from this wealthy young gentleman—she will have his money, and we shall all profit by it. That is coarse and mercenary, if you please ; but it is the true reason why I want to see Maddalena married to Fabio. You want to see it, too—and for what reason, I should like to know, if not for mine ?”

“ Of what use would wealthy relations be to me ? What are people with money—what is money itself—to a man who follows my calling ?”

“ Money is something to everybody.”

“ Is it ? When have you found that I have taken any account of it ? Give me money enough to buy my daily bread and to pay for my lodging and my coarse cassock—and though I may want much for the poor, for myself I want no more. When have you found me mercenary ? Do I not help you in this studio for love of you and of the art without exacting so much as journeyman’s wages ? Have I ever asked you for more than a few crowns to give away on feast-days among my parishioners ? Money ! money for a man who may be summoned to Rome to-morrow, who may be told to go at half an hour’s notice on a foreign mission that may take him to the ends of the earth, and who would be ready to go the moment when

he was called on! Money to a man who has no wife, no children, no interests outside the sacred circle of the church! Brother! do you see the dust and dirt and shapeless marble-chips lying around your statue there? Cover that floor instead with gold—and, though the litter may have changed in colour and form, in my eyes it would be litter still.”

“A very noble sentiment, I dare say, Rocco, but I can’t echo it. Granting that you care nothing for money, will you explain to me why you are so anxious that Maddalena should marry Fabio? She has had offers from poorer men—you knew of them—but you have never taken the least interest in her accepting or rejecting a proposal before.”

“I hinted the reason to you, months ago, when Fabio first entered the studio.”

“It was rather a vague hint, brother—can’t you be plainer to-day?”

“I think I can. In the first place, let me begin by assuring you, that I have no objection to the young man himself. He may be a little capricious and undecided, but he has no incorrigible faults that I have discovered.”

“That is rather a cool way of praising him, Rocco.”

“I should speak of him warmly enough if he were not the representative of an intolerable corruption,

and a monstrous wrong. Whenever I think of him I think of an injury which his present existence perpetuates, and if I do speak of him coldly it is only for that reason."

Luca looked away quickly from his brother, and began kicking absently at the marble chips which were scattered over the floor around him.

"I now remember," he said, "what that hint of yours pointed at. I know what you mean."

"Then you know," answered the priest, "that while part of the wealth which Fabio d'Ascoli possesses is honestly and incontestably his own; part, also, has been inherited by him from the spoilers and robbers of the church—"

"Blame his ancestors for that; don't blame him."

"I blame him as long as the spoil is not restored."

"How do you know that it was spoil, after all?"

"I have examined more carefully than most men the records of the Civil Wars in Italy; and I know that the ancestors of Fabio d'Ascoli wrung from the church, in her hour of weakness, property which they dared to claim as their right. I know of titles to lands signed away, in those stormy times, under the influence of fear, or through false representations of which the law takes no account—I call the money thus obtained, spoil—and I say that it ought to be

restored, and shall be restored to the church from which it was taken."

"And what does Fabio answer to that, brother?"

"I have not spoken to him on the subject."

"Why not?"

"Because, I have, as yet, no influence over him. When he is married, his wife will have influence over him; and she shall speak."

"Maddalena, I suppose? How do you know that she will speak?"

"Have I not educated her? Does she not understand what her duties are towards the church, in whose bosom she has been reared?"

Luca hesitated uneasily, and walked away a step or two before he spoke again.

"Does this spoil, as you call it, amount to a large sum of money?" he asked, in an anxious whisper.

"I may answer that question, Luca, at some future time," said the priest. "For the present, let it be enough that you are acquainted with all I undertook to inform you of when we began our conversation. You now know that if I am anxious for this marriage to take place, it is from motives entirely unconnected with self-interest. If all the property which Fabio's ancestors wrongfully obtained from the church, were restored to the church to-morrow, not one paulo of it

would go into my pocket. I am a poor priest now, and to the end of my days shall remain so. You soldiers of the world, brother, fight for your pay—I am a soldier of the church, and I fight for my cause.”

Saying these words, he returned abruptly to the statuette; and refused to speak, or leave his employment again, until he had taken the mould off, and had carefully put away the various fragments of which it consisted. This done, he drew a writing-desk from the drawer of his working-table, and taking out a slip of paper, wrote these lines :

“Come down to the studio to-morrow. Fabio will be with us, but Nanina will return no more.”

Without signing what he had written, he sealed it up, and directed it to—“Donna Maddalena.” Then took his hat, and handed the note to his brother.

“Oblige me by giving that to my niece,” he said.

“Tell me, Rocco,” said Luca, turning the note round and round perplexedly between his finger and thumb. “Do you think Maddalena will be lucky enough to get married to Fabio?”

“Still coarse in your expressions, brother!”

“Never mind my expressions. Is it likely?”

“ Yes, Luca, I think it is likely.”

With those words he waved his hand pleasantly to his brother, and went out.

CHAPTER III.

FROM the studio, Father Rocco went straight to his own rooms, hard by the church to which he was attached. Opening a cabinet in his study, he took from one of its drawers a handful of small silver money—consulted for a minute or so a slate on which several names and addresses were written—provided himself with a portable inkhorn and some strips of paper, and again went out.

He directed his steps to the poorest part of the neighbourhood ; and entering some very wretched houses, was greeted by the inhabitants with great respect and affection. The women, especially, kissed his hands with more reverence than they would have shown to the highest crowned head in Europe. In return, he talked to them as easily and unconstrainedly as if they were his equals ; sat down cheerfully on dirty bed-sides and rickety benches ; and distributed his little gifts of money with the air of a man who was paying debts rather than bestowing charity. Where he encountered cases of illness, he pulled out his inkhorn and slips of paper, and wrote

simple prescriptions to be made up from the medicine-chest of a neighbouring convent, which served the same merciful purpose then that is answered by dispensaries in our days. When he had exhausted his money and had got through his visits, he was escorted out of the poor quarter by a perfect train of enthusiastic followers. The women kissed his hand again, and the men uncovered as he turned, and, with a friendly sign, bade them all farewell.

As soon as he was alone again, he walked towards the Campo Santo ; and passing the house in which Nanina lived, sauntered up and down the street thoughtfully, for some minutes : when he at length ascended the steep staircase that led to the room occupied by the sisters, he found the door ajar. Pushing it open gently, he saw La Biondella, sitting with her pretty fair profile turned towards him, eating her evening meal of bread and grapes. At the opposite end of the room, Scarammuccia was perched up on his hind quarters in a corner, with his mouth wide open to catch the morsel of bread which he evidently expected the child to throw to him. What the elder sister was doing the priest had not time to see ; for the dog barked the moment he presented himself, and Nanina hastened to the door to ascertain who the intruder might be. All that he could observe was that she was too confused, on catching sight of him,

to be able to utter a word. La Biondella was the first to speak.

“Thank you, Father Rocco,” said the child, jumping up, with her bread in one hand and her grapes in the other: “Thank you for giving me so much money for my dinner-mats. There they are tied up together in one little parcel, in the corner. Nanina said she was ashamed to think of your carrying them; and I said I knew where you lived, and I should like to ask you to let me take them home.”

“Do you think you can carry them all the way, my dear?” asked the priest.

“Look, Father Rocco, see if I can’t carry them!” cried La Biondella, cramming her bread into one of the pockets of her little apron, holding her bunch of grapes by the stalk in her mouth, and hoisting the packet of dinner-mats on her head in a moment. “See, I am strong enough to carry double,” said the child, looking up proudly into the priest’s face.

“Can you trust her to take them home for me?” asked Father Rocco, turning to Nanina. “I want to speak to you alone; and her absence will give me the opportunity. Can you trust her out by herself?”

“Yes, Father Rocco, she often goes out alone.” Nanina gave this answer in low, trembling tones, and looked down confusedly on the ground.

“Go then, my dear,” said Father Rocco, patting the

child on the shoulder. "And come back here to your sister, as soon as you have left the mats."

La Biondella went out directly in great triumph, with Scaramuccia walking by her side, and keeping his muzzle suspiciously close to the pocket in which she had put her bread. Father Rocco closed the door after them; and then, taking the one chair which the room possessed, motioned to Nanina to sit by him on the stool.

"Do you believe that I am your friend, my child; and that I have always meant well towards you?" he began.

"The best and kindest of friends," answered Nanina.

"Then you will hear what I have to say patiently; and you will believe that I am speaking for your good, even if my words should distress you?" (Nanina turned away her head.) "Now, tell me; should I be wrong, to begin with, if I said that my brother's pupil, the young nobleman whom we call 'Signor Fabio,' had been here to see you to-day?" (Nanina started up affrightedly from the stool.) "Sit down again, my child; I am not going to blame you. I am only going to tell you what you must do for the future."

He took her hand; it was cold, and it trembled violently in his.

“ I will not ask what he has been saying to you,” continued the priest ; “ for it might distress you to answer ; and I have, moreover, had means of knowing that your youth and beauty have made a strong impression on him. I will pass over, then, all reference to the words he may have been speaking to you ; and I will come at once to what I have now to say, in my turn. Nanina, my child, arm yourself with all your courage, and promise me, before we part to-night, that you will see Signor Fabio no more.”

Nanina turned round suddenly, and fixed her eyes on him, with an expression of terrified incredulity. “ No more ? ”

“ You are very young, and very innocent,” said Father Rocco ; “ but surely you must have thought, before now, of the difference between Signor Fabio and you. Surely you must have often remembered that you are low down among the ranks of the poor, and that he is high up among the rich and the nobly-born ? ”

Nanina’s hands dropped on the priest’s knees. She bent her head down on them, and began to weep bitterly.

“ Surely you must have thought of that ? ” reiterated Father Rocco.

“ O, I have often, often thought of it ! ” murmured the girl. “ I have mourned over it, and cried about

it in secret for many nights past. He said I looked pale, and ill, and out of spirits to-day ; and I told him it was with thinking of that !”

“ And what did he say in return ?”

There was no answer. Father Rocco looked down. Nanina raised her head directly from his knees, and tried to turn it away again. He took her hand and stopped her.

“ Come !” he said ; speak frankly to me. Say what you ought to say to your father and your friend. What was his answer, my child, when you reminded him of the difference between you ?”

“ He said I was born to be a lady,” faltered the girl, still struggling to turn her face away, “ and that I might make myself one if I would learn and be patient. He said that if he had all the noble ladies in Pisa to choose from on one side, and only little Nanina on the other, he would hold out his hand to me, and tell them, ‘ This shall be my wife.’ He said Love knew no difference of rank ; and that if he was a nobleman and rich, it was all the more reason why he should please himself. He was so kind, that I thought my heart would burst while he was speaking ; and my little sister liked him so, that she got upon his knee and kissed him. Even our dog, who growls at other strangers, stole to his side and licked his hand. O, Father Rocco ! Father Rocco !” The

tears burst out afresh, and the lovely head dropped once more, wearily, on the priest's knee.

Father Rocco smiled to himself, and waited to speak again till she was calmer.

“Supposing,” he resumed, after some minutes of silence, “supposing Signor Fabio really meant all he said to you——”

Nanina started up, and confronted the priest boldly for the first time since he had entered the room.

“Supposing!” she exclaimed, her cheeks beginning to redden, and her dark blue eyes flashing suddenly through her tears. “Supposing! Father Rocco, Fabio would never deceive me. I would die here at your feet, rather than doubt the least word he said to me!”

The priest signed to her quietly to return to the stool. “I never suspected the child had so much spirit in her,” he thought to himself.

“I would die,” repeated Nanina, in a voice that began to falter now. “I would die rather than doubt him.”

“I will not ask you to doubt him,” said Father Rocco, gently; “and I will believe in him myself as firmly as you do. Let us suppose, my child, that you have learnt patiently all the many things of which you are now ignorant, and which it is necessary for a lady to know. Let us suppose that Signor

Fabio has really violated all the laws that govern people in his high station, and has taken you to him publicly as his wife. You would be happy then, Nanina; but would he? He has no father or mother to control him, it is true; but he has friends—many friends and intimates in his own rank—proud, heartless people, who know nothing of your worth and goodness; who, hearing of your low birth, would look on you, and on your husband too, my child, with contempt. He has not your patience and fortitude. Think how bitter it would be for him to bear that contempt—to see you shunned by proud women, and carelessly pitied or patronized by insolent men. Yet all this, and more, he would have to endure, or else to quit the world he has lived in from his boyhood—the world he was born to live in. You love him, I know——”

Nanina's tears burst out afresh. “O, how dearly!—how dearly!” she murmured.

“Yes, you love him dearly,” continued the priest; “but would all your love compensate him for everything else that he must lose? It might, at first; but there would come a time when the world would assert its influence over him again; when he would feel a want which you could not supply—a weariness which you could not solace. Think of his life, then, and of yours. Think of the first day when the first secret

doubt whether he had done rightly in marrying you would steal into his mind. We are not masters of all our impulses. The lightest spirits have their moments of irresistible depression; the bravest hearts are not always superior to doubt. My child, my child, the world is strong, the pride of rank is rooted deep, and the human will is frail at best! Be warned! For your own sake and for Fabio's, be warned in time."

Nanina stretched out her hands towards the priest, in despair.

"O, Father Rocco! Father Rocco!" she cried; "why did you not tell me this before?"

"Because, my child, I only knew of the necessity for telling you, to-day. But it is not too late, it is never too late, to do a good action. You love Fabio, Nanina? Will you prove that love by making a great sacrifice for his good?"

"I would die for his good!"

"Will you nobly cure him of a passion which will be his ruin, if not yours, by leaving Pisa to-morrow?"

"Leave Pisa!" exclaimed Nanina. Her face grew deadly pale: she rose and moved back a step or two from the priest.

"Listen to me," pursued Father Rocco, "I have heard you complain that you could not get regular

employment at needlework. You shall have that employment, if you will go with me—you and your little sister too, of course—to Florence to-morrow.”

“ I promised Fabio to go to the studio,” began Nanina, affrightedly. “ I promised to go at ten o’clock. How can I——”

She stopped suddenly, as if her breath were failing her.

“ I myself will take you and your sister to Florence,” said Father Rocco, without noticing the interruption. “ I will place you under the care of a lady who will be as kind as a mother to you both. I will answer for your getting such work to do as will enable you to keep yourself honestly and independently ; and I will undertake, if you do not like your life at Florence, to bring you back to Pisa after a lapse of three months only. Three months, Nanina. It is not a long exile.”

“ Fabio ! Fabio !” cried the girl, sinking again on the seat, and hiding her face.

“ It is for his good,” said Father Rocco, calmly ; “ for Fabio’s good, remember.”

“ What would he think of me if I went away ? O, if I had but learnt to write. If I could only write Fabio a letter !”

“ Am I not to be depended on to explain to him all that he ought to know ?”

“ How can I go away from him ? O, Father Rocco, how can you ask me to go away from him ? ”

“ I will ask you to do nothing hastily. I will leave you till to-morrow morning to decide. At nine o'clock I shall be in the street ; and I will not even so much as enter this house, unless I know beforehand that you have resolved to follow my advice. Give me a sign from your window. If I see you wave your white mantilla out of it, I shall know that you have taken the noble resolution to save Fabio and to save yourself. I will say no more, my child ; for, unless I am grievously mistaken in you, I have already said enough. ’

He went out, leaving her still weeping bitterly.

Not far from the house, he met La Biondella and the dog on their way back. The little girl stopped to report to him the safe delivery of her dinner-mats ; but he passed on quickly with a nod and a smile. His interview with Nanina had left some influence behind it which unfitted him just then for the occupation of talking to a child.

Nearly half-an hour before nine o'clock on the following morning, Father Rocco set forth for the street in which Nanina lived. On his way thither he overtook a dog walking lazily a few paces a-head in the road-way ; and saw, at the same time, an elegantly

dressed lady advancing towards him. The dog stopped suspiciously as she approached, and growled and showed his teeth when she passed him. The lady, on her side, uttered an exclamation of disgust; but did not seem to be either astonished or frightened by the animal's threatening attitude. Father Rocco looked after her with some curiosity, as she walked by him. She was a handsome woman, and he admired her courage. "I know that growling brute well enough," he said to himself, "but who can the lady be?"

The dog was Scarammuccia, returning from one of his marauding expeditions. The lady was Brigida, on her way to Luca Lomi's studio.

Some minutes before nine o'clock, the priest took his post in the street, opposite Nanina's window. It was open; but neither she nor her little sister appeared at it. He looked up anxiously as the church-clocks struck the hour; but there was no sign for a minute or so after they were all silent. "Is she hesitating still?" said Father Rocco to himself.

Just as the words passed his lips, the white mantilla was waved out of the window.

PART SECOND.—CHAPTER I.

EVEN the masterstroke of replacing the treacherous Italian forewoman by a French dressmaker, engaged direct from Paris, did not at first avail to elevate the great Grifoni establishment above the reach of minor calamities. Mademoiselle Virginie had not occupied her new situation at Pisa quite a week, before she fell ill. All sorts of reports were circulated as to the cause of this illness ; and the Demoiselle Grifoni even went so far as to suggest that the health of the new forewoman had fallen a sacrifice to some nefarious practices of the chemical sort, on the part of her rival in the trade. But, however the misfortune had been produced, it was a fact that Mademoiselle Virginie was certainly very ill, and another fact, that the doctor insisted on her being sent to the Baths of Lucca as soon as she could be moved from her bed.

Fortunately for the Demoiselle Grifoni, the Frenchwoman had succeeded in producing three specimens of her art before her health broke down. They comprised the evening dress of yellow brocaded silk, to which she had devoted herself on the morning when

she first assumed her duties at Pisa ; a black cloak and hood of an entirely new shape ; and an irresistibly fascinating dressing-gown, said to have been first brought into fashion by the princesses of the blood-royal of France. These articles of costume, on being exhibited in the show-room, electrified the ladies of Pisa ; and orders from all sides flowed in immediately on the Grifoni establishment. They were, of course, easily executed by the inferior workwomen, from the specimen - designs of the French dressmaker. So that the illness of Mademoiselle Virginie, though it might cause her mistress some temporary inconvenience, was, after all, productive of no absolute loss.

Two months at the Baths of Lucca restored the new forewoman to health. She returned to Pisa, and resumed her place in the private work-room. Once re-established there, she discovered that an important change had taken place during her absence. Her friend and assistant, Brigida, had resigned her situation. All inquiries made of the Demoiselle Grifoni only elicited one answer : the missing workwoman had abruptly left her place at five minutes' warning, and had departed without confiding to any one what she thought of doing, or whither she intended to turn her steps.

Months elapsed. The new year came ; but no ex-

planatory letter arrived from Brigida. The spring season passed off, with all its accompaniments of dress-making and dress-buying; but still there was no news of her. The first anniversary of Mademoiselle Virginie's engagement with the Demoiselle Grifoni came round; and then, at last, a note arrived, stating that Brigida had returned to Pisa, and that, if the French forewoman would send an answer, mentioning where her private lodgings were, she would visit her old friend that evening after business-hours. The information was gladly enough given; and punctually to the appointed time, Brigida arrived in Mademoiselle Virginie's little sitting-room.

Advancing with her usual indolent stateliness of gait, the Italian asked after her friend's health as coolly, and sat down in the nearest chair as carelessly, as if they had not been separated for more than a few days. Mademoiselle Virginie laughed in her liveliest manner, and raised her mobile French eyebrows in sprightly astonishment.

"Well, Brigida!" she exclaimed, "they certainly did you no injustice when they nicknamed you 'Care-for-Nothing,' in old Grifoni's work-room. Where have you been? Why have you never written to me?"

"I had nothing particular to write about; and besides, I always intended to come back to Pisa and

see you," answered Brigida, leaning back luxuriously in her chair.

"But where have you been for nearly a whole year past? In Italy?"

"No; at Paris. You know I can sing?—not very well; but I have a voice, and most Frenchwomen (excuse the impertinence) have none. I met with a friend, and got introduced to a manager; and I have been singing at the theatre—not the great parts, only the second. Your amiable countrywomen could not screech me down on the stage, but they intrigued against me successfully behind the scenes. In short, I quarrelled with our principal lady, quarrelled with the manager, quarrelled with my friend; and here I am back at Pisa, with a little money saved in my pocket, and no great notion what I am to do next."

"Back at Pisa! Why did you leave it?"

Brigida's eyes began to lose their indolent expression. She sat up suddenly in her chair, and set one of her hands heavily on a little table by her side.

"Why?" she repeated, "Because when I find the game going against me, I prefer giving it up at once to waiting to be beaten."

"Ah! you refer to that last year's project of yours for making your fortune among the sculptors. I

should like to hear how it was you failed with the wealthy young amateur. Remember that I fell ill before you had any news to give me. Your absence when I returned from Lucca, and, almost immediately afterwards, the marriage of your intended conquest to the sculptor's daughter, proved to me, of course, that you must have failed. But I never heard how. I know nothing at this moment but the bare fact that Maddalena Lomi won the prize."

"Tell me first, do she and her husband live together happily?"

"There are no stories of their disagreeing. She has dresses, horses, carriages, a negro page, the smallest lap-dog in Italy—in short, all the luxuries that a woman can want; and a child, by-the-by, into the bargain."

"A child!"

"Yes; a child, born little more than a week ago."

"Not a boy, I hope?"

"No; a girl."

"I am glad of that. Those rich people always want the first-born to be an heir. They will both be disappointed. I am glad of that!"

"Mercy on us, Brigida, how fierce you look!"

"Do I? It's likely enough. I hate Fabio d'Ascoli and Maddalena Lomi—singly as man and

woman, doubly as man and wife. Stop! I'll tell you what you want to know directly. Only answer me another question or two first. Have you heard anything about her health?"

"How should I hear? Dressmakers can't inquire at the doors of the nobility."

"True. Now one last question: That little simpleton, Nanina?"

"I have never seen or heard anything of her. She can't be at Pisa, or she would have called at our place for work."

"Ah! I need not have asked about her if I had thought a moment beforehand. Father Rocco would be sure to keep her out of Fabio's sight for his niece's sake."

"What, he really loved that 'thread-paper of a girl,' as you called her?"

"Better than fifty such wives as he has got now! I was in the studio the morning he was told of her departure from Pisa. A letter was privately given to him, telling him that the girl had left the place out of a feeling of honour, and had hidden herself beyond the possibility of discovery to prevent him from compromising himself with all his friends by marrying her. Naturally enough he would not believe that this was her own doing; and, naturally enough also, when Father Rocco was sent for, and was not

to be found, he suspected the priest of being at the bottom of the business. I never saw a man in such a fury of despair and rage before. He swore that he would have all Italy searched for the girl, that he would be the death of the priest, and that he would never enter Luca Lomi's studio again——”

“ And, as to this last particular, of course being a man, he failed to keep his word ? ”

“ Of course. At that first visit of mine to the studio I discovered two things. The first, as I said, that Fabio was really in love with the girl—the second, that Maddalena Lomi was really in love with him. You may suppose I looked at her attentively while the disturbance was going on, and while nobody's notice was directed on me. All women are vain, I know, but vanity never blinded my eyes. I saw directly that I had but one superiority over her—my figure. She was my height, but not well made. She had hair as dark and as glossy as mine ; eyes as bright and as black as mine ; and the rest of her face better than mine. My nose is coarse, my lips are too thick, and my upper lip overhangs my under too far. She had none of those personal faults ; and, as for capacity, she managed the young fool in his passion, as well as I could have managed him in her place.”

“ How ? ”

“She stood silent, with downcast eyes and a distressed look, all the time he was raving up and down the studio. She must have hated the girl, and been rejoiced at her disappearance; but she never showed it. ‘You would be an awkward rival,’ (I thought to myself) ‘even to a handsomer woman than I am’. However, I determined not to despair too soon, and made up my mind to follow my plan just as if the accident of the girl’s disappearance had never occurred. I smoothed down the master sculptor easily enough—flattering him about his reputation, assuring him that the works of Luca Lomi had been the objects of my adoration since childhood, telling him that I had heard of his difficulty in finding a model to complete his Minerva from, and offering myself (if he thought me worthy) for the honour—laying great stress on that word—for the honour of sitting to him. I don’t know whether he was altogether deceived by what I told him; but he was sharp enough to see that I really could be of use, and he accepted my offer with a profusion of compliments. We parted, having arranged that I was to give him a first sitting in a week’s time.”

“Why put it off so long?”

“To allow our young gentleman time to cool down and return to the studio, to be sure. What was the use of my being there while he was away?”

“ Yes, yes—I forgot. And how long was it before he came back ? ”

“ I had allowed him more time than enough. When I had given my first sitting, I saw him in the studio, and heard it was his second visit there since the day of the girl’s disappearance. Those very violent men are always changeable and irresolute. ”

“ Had he made no attempt, then, to discover Nanina ? ”

“ Oh, yes ! He had searched for her himself, and had set others searching for her, but to no purpose. Four days of perpetual disappointment had been enough to bring him to his senses. Luca Lomi had written him a peace-making letter, asking what harm he or his daughter had done, even supposing Father Rocco was to blame. Maddalena Lomi had met him in the street, and had looked resignedly away from him, as if she expected him to pass her. In short, they had awakened his sense of justice and his good nature (you see I can impartially give him his due), and they had got him back. He was silent and sentimental enough at first, and shockingly sulky and savage with the priest—— ”

“ I wonder Father Rocco ventured within his reach. ”

“ Father Rocco is not a man to be daunted or defeated by anybody, I can tell you. The same day

on which Fabio came back to the studio, he returned to it. Beyond boldly declaring that he thought Nanina had done quite right, and had acted like a good and virtuous girl, he would say nothing about her or her disappearance. It was quite useless to ask him questions—he denied that any one had a right to put them. Threatening, entreating, flattering—all modes of appeal were thrown away on him. Ah, my dear! depend upon it, the cleverest and politest man in Pisa, the most dangerous to an enemy and the most delightful to a friend, is Father Rocco. The rest of them, when I began to play my cards a little too openly, behaved with brutal rudeness to me. Father Rocco, from first to last, treated me like a lady. Sincere or not, I don't care—he treated me like a lady when the others treated me like——”

“There! there! don't get hot about it now. Tell me instead how you made your first approaches to the young gentleman whom you talk of so contemptuously as Fabio.”

“As it turned out, in the worst possible way. First, of course, I made sure of interesting him in me by telling him that I had known Nanina. So far it was all well enough. My next object was to persuade him that she could never have gone away if she had truly loved him alone; and that he must have had some fortunate rival in her own rank of life, to

whom she had sacrificed him, after gratifying her vanity for a time by bringing a young nobleman to her feet. I had, as you will easily imagine, difficulty enough in making him take this view of Nanina's flight. His pride and his love for the girl were both concerned in refusing to admit the truth of my suggestion. At last I succeeded. I brought him to that state of ruffled vanity and fretful self-assertion in which it is easiest to work on a man's feelings—in which a man's own wounded pride makes the best pitfall to catch him in. I brought him, I say, to that state, and then—*she* stepped in, and profited by what I had done. Is it wonderful now that I rejoice in her disappointments; that I should be glad to hear any ill thing of her that any one could tell me?"

“But how did she first get the advantage of you?”

“If I had found out, she would never have succeeded where I failed. All I know is, that she had more opportunities of seeing him than I, and that she used them cunningly enough even to deceive me. While I thought I was gaining ground with Fabio, I was actually losing it. My first suspicions were excited by a change in Luca Lomi's conduct towards me. He grew cold, neglectful—at last absolutely rude. I was resolved not to see this; but accident soon obliged me to open my eyes. One morning I

heard Fabio and Maddalena talking of me when they imagined I had left the studio. I can't repeat their words, especially hers. The blood flies into my head, and the cold catches me at the heart, when I only think of them. It will be enough if I tell you that he laughed at me, and that she——”

“Hush! not so loud. There are other people lodging in the house. Never mind about telling me what you heard; it only irritates you to no purpose. I can guess that they had discovered——”

“Through her, remember—all through her!”

“Yes, yes, I understand. They had discovered a great deal more than you ever intended them to know, and all through her.”

“But for the priest, Virginie, I should have been openly insulted and driven from their doors. He had insisted on their behaving with decent civility towards me. They said that he was afraid of me, and laughed at the notion of his trying to make them afraid too. That was the last thing I heard. The fury I was in, and the necessity of keeping it down, almost suffocated me. I turned round, to leave the place for ever, when who should I see, standing close behind me, but Father Rocco. He must have discovered in my face that I knew all; but he took no notice of it. He only asked, in his usual quiet, polite way, if I was looking for anything I had lost, and if he could help

me. I managed to thank him, and to get to the door. He opened it for me respectfully, and bowed—he treated me like a lady to the last! It was evening when I left the studio in that way. The next morning I threw up my situation, and turned my back on Pisa. Now you know everything.”

“Did you hear of the marriage? or did you only assume from what you knew that it would take place?”

“I heard of it about six months ago. A man came to sing in the chorus at our theatre, who had been employed some time before at the grand concert given on the occasion of the marriage. But let us drop the subject now. I am in a fever already with talking of it. You are in a bad situation here, my dear—I declare your room is almost stifling.”

“Shall I open the other window?”

“No: let us go out and get a breath of air by the river-side. Come! take your hood and fan—it is getting dark—nobody will see us, and we can come back here, if you like, in half an hour.”

Mademoiselle Virginie acceded to her friend's wish rather reluctantly. They walked towards the river. The sun was down, and the sudden night of Italy was gathering fast. Although Brigida did not say another word on the subject of Fabio or his wife, she led the way to the bank of the Arno, on which the young nobleman's palace stood.

Just as they got near the great door of entrance, a sedan-chair, approaching in the opposite direction, was set down before it; and a footman, after a moment's conference with a lady inside the chair, advanced to the porter's lodge in the court-yard. Leaving her friend to go on, Brigida slipped in after the servant by the open wicket, and concealed herself in the shadow cast by the great closed gates.

“The Marchesa Melani to inquire how the Countess d'Ascoli and the infant are this evening,” said the footman.

“My mistress has not changed at all for the better since the morning,” answered the porter. “The child is doing quite well.”

The footman went back to the sedan-chair; then returned to the porter's lodge.

“The Marchesa desires me to ask if fresh medical advice has been sent for?” he said.

“Another doctor has arrived from Florence to-day,” replied the porter.

Mademoiselle Virginie, missing her friend suddenly, turned back towards the palace to look after her, and was rather surprised to see Brigida slip out of the wicket-gate. There were two oil-lamps burning on pillars outside the door-way, and their light glancing on the Italian's face, as she passed under them, showed that she was smiling.

CHAPTER II.

WHILE the Marchesa Melani was making inquiries at the gate of the palace, Fabio was sitting alone in the apartment which his wife usually occupied when she was in health. It was her favourite room, and had been prettily decorated, by her own desire, with hangings in yellow satin, and furniture of the same colour. Fabio was now waiting in it to hear the report of the doctors after their evening visit.

Although Maddalena Lomi had not been his first love, and although he had married her under circumstances which are generally and rightly considered to afford few chances of lasting happiness in wedded life, still they had lived together through the one year of their union tranquilly, if not fondly. She had moulded herself wisely to his peculiar humours, had made the most of his easy disposition, and, when her quick temper had got the better of her, had seldom hesitated in her cooler moments to acknowledge that she had been wrong. She had been extravagant, it is true, and had irritated him by fits of unreasonable

jealousy ; but these were faults not to be thought of now. He could only remember that she was the mother of his child, and that she lay ill but two rooms away from him—dangerously ill, as the doctors had unwillingly confessed on that very day.

The darkness was closing in upon him, and he took up the hand-bell to ring for lights. When the servant entered there was genuine sorrow in his face, genuine anxiety in his voice, as he inquired for news from the sick-room. The man only answered that his mistress was still asleep ; and then withdrew, after first leaving a sealed letter on the table by his master's side. Fabio summoned him back into the room, and asked when the letter had arrived. He replied that it had been delivered at the palace two days' since, and that he had observed it lying unopened on a desk in his master's study.

Left alone again, Fabio remembered that the letter had arrived at a time when the first dangerous symptoms of his wife's illness had declared themselves, and that he had thrown it aside after observing the address to be in a handwriting unknown to him. In his present state of suspense, any occupation was better than sitting idle. So he took up the letter with a sigh, broke the seal, and turned inquiringly to the name signed at the end.

It was "NANINA."

He started, and changed colour. "A letter from her," he whispered to himself. "Why does it come at such a time as this?"

His face grew paler, and the letter trembled in his fingers. Those superstitious feelings which he had ascribed to the nursery influences of his childhood, when Father Rocco charged him with them in the studio, seemed to be overcoming him now. He hesitated and listened anxiously in the direction of his wife's room before reading the letter. Was its arrival ominous of good or evil! That was the thought in his heart as he drew the lamp near to him and looked at the first lines.

"Am I wrong in writing to you?" (the letter began abruptly.) "If I am, you have but to throw this little leaf of paper into the fire, and to think no more of it, after it is burnt up and gone. I can never reproach you for treating my letter in that way; for we are never likely to meet again.

"Why did I go away?—Only to save you from the consequences of marrying a poor girl who was not fit to become your wife. It almost broke my heart to leave you; for I had nothing to keep up my courage but the remembrance that I was going away for your sake. I had to think of that, morning and night—to think of it always, or I am afraid I should have faltered in my resolution, and have gone back to Pisa.

I longed so much at first to see you once more—only to tell you that Nanina was not heartless and ungrateful, and that you might pity her and think kindly of her, though you might love her no longer.

“ Only to tell you that ! If I had been a lady I might have told it to you in a letter ; but I had never learnt to write, and I could not prevail on myself to get others to take the pen for me. All I could do was to learn secretly how to write with my own hand. It was long, long work ; but the uppermost thought in my heart was always the thought of justifying myself to you, and that made me patient and persevering. I learnt, at last, to write so as not to be ashamed of myself, or to make you ashamed of me. I began a letter—my first letter to you—but I heard of your marriage before it was done, and then I had to tear the paper up, and put the pen down again.

“ I had no right to come between you and your wife even with so little a thing as a letter—I had no right to do anything but hope and pray for your happiness. Are you happy ? I am sure you ought to be ; for how can your wife help loving you ?

“ It is very hard for me to explain why I have ventured on writing now, and yet I can't think that I am doing wrong. I heard a few days ago (for I have a friend at Pisa who keeps me informed, by my own desire, of all the pleasant changes in your life)—I

heard of your child being born ; and I thought myself, after that, justified at last in writing to you. No letter from me, at such a time as this, can rob your child's mother of so much as a thought of yours that is due to her. Thus, at least, it seems to me. I wish so well to your child, that I cannot surely be doing wrong in writing these lines.

“ I have said already what I wanted to say—what I have been longing to say for a whole year past. I have told you why I left Pisa ; and have perhaps persuaded you that I have gone through some suffering, and borne some heartaches for your sake. Have I more to write ? Only a word or two to tell you that I am earning my bread, as I always wished to earn it, quietly at home—at least, at what I must call home now. I am living with reputable people, and I want for nothing. La Biondella has grown very much, she would hardly be obliged to get on your knee to kiss you now ; and she can plait her dinner-mats faster and more neatly than ever. Our old dog is with us, and has learnt two new tricks ; but you can't be expected to remember him, although you were the only stranger I ever saw him take kindly to at first.

“ It is time I finished. If you have read this letter through to the end, I am sure you will excuse me, if I have written it badly. There is no date to it, be-

cause I feel that it is safest and best for both of us, that you should know nothing of where I am living. I bless you and pray for you, and bid you affectionately farewell. If you can think of me as a sister, think of me sometimes still."

Fabio sighed bitterly while he read the letter. "Why," he whispered to himself, "why does it come at such a time as this, when I cannot, dare not think of her?" As he slowly folded the letter up, the tears came into his eyes, and he half raised the paper to his lips. At the same moment, some one knocked at the door of the room. He started, and felt himself changing colour guiltily, as one of his servants entered.

"My mistress is awake," the man said, with a very grave face, and a very constrained manner; "and the gentlemen in attendance desire me to say——"

He was interrupted, before he could give his message, by one of the medical men, who had followed him into the room.

"I wish I had better news to communicate," began the doctor gently.

"She is worse, then?" said Fabio, sinking back into the chair from which he had risen the moment before.

"She has awakened weaker instead of stronger after her sleep," returned the doctor, evasively. "I

never like to give up all hope, till the very last, but——”

“It is cruel not to be candid with him, interposed another voice—the voice of the doctor from Florence, who had just entered the room. “Strengthen yourself to bear the worst,” he continued addressing himself to Fabio. “She is dying. Can you compose yourself enough to go to her bedside!”

Pale and speechless, Fabio rose from his chair, and made a sign in the affirmative. He trembled so, that the doctor who had first spoken was obliged to lead him out of the room.

“Your mistress has some near relations in Pisa, has she not?” said the doctor from Florence, appealing to the servant who waited near him.

“Her father, sir, Signor Luca Lomi; and her uncle, Father Rocco,” answered the man. “They were here all through the day, until my mistress fell asleep.”

“Do you know where to find them now?”

“Signor Luca told me he should be at his studio; and Father Rocco said, I might find him at his lodgings.”

“Send for them both directly. Stay! who is your mistress’s confessor? He ought to be summoned without loss of time.”

“My mistress’s confessor is Father Rocco, sir.”

“ Very well—send, or go yourself, at once. Even minutes may be of importance, now.” Saying this, the doctor turned away, and sat down to wait for any last demands on his services, in the chair which Fabio had just left.

CHAPTER III.

BEFORE the servant could get to the priest's lodgings a visitor had applied there for admission, and had been immediately received by Father Rocco himself. This favoured guest was a little man, very sprucely and neatly dressed, and oppressively polite in his manner. He bowed when he first sat down, he bowed when he answered the usual inquiries about his health, and he bowed for the third time, when Father Rocco asked what had brought him from Florence.

“Rather an awkward business,” replied the little man, recovering himself uneasily after his third bow. “The dressmaker, named Nanina, whom you placed under my wife's protection, about a year ago—”

“What of her?” inquired the priest eagerly.

“I regret to say she has left us, with her child-sister, and their very disagreeable dog, that growls at everybody.”

“When did they go?”

“Only yesterday. I came here at once to tell you, as you were so very particular in recommending us to take care of her. It is not our fault that she has gone. My wife was kindness itself to her, and I always

treated her like a duchess. I bought dinner-mats of her sister; I even put up with the thieving and growling of the disagreeable dog—”

“Where have they gone to? Have you found out that?”

“I have found out, by application at the passport-office, that they have not left Florence—but what particular part of the city they have removed to, I have not yet had time to discover.”

“And pray why did they leave you, in the first place? Nanina is not a girl to do anything without a reason. She must have had some cause for going away. What was it?”

The little man hesitated, and made a fourth bow.

“You remember your private instructions to my wife and myself, when you first brought Nanina to our house?” he said, looking away rather uneasily while he spoke.

“Yes; you were to watch her, but to take care that she did not suspect you. It was just possible, at that time, that she might try to get back to Pisa without my knowing it; and everything depended on her remaining at Florence. I think, now, that I did wrong to distrust her; but it was of the last importance to provide against all possibilities, and to abstain from putting too much faith in my own good opinion of the girl. For these reasons, I certainly

did instruct you to watch her privately. So far, you are quite right ; and I have nothing to complain of. Go on."

" You remember," resumed the little man, " that the first consequence of our following your instructions was a discovery (which we immediately communicated to you) that she was secretly learning to write ? "

" Yes ; and I also remember sending you word not to show that you knew what she was doing ; but to wait and see if she turned her knowledge of writing to account, and took or sent any letters to the post. You informed me in your regular monthly report, that she never did anything of the kind."

" Never, until three days ago : and then she was traced from her room in my house to the post-office with a letter, which she dropped into the box."

" And the address of which you discovered before she took it from your house ? "

" Unfortunately I did not," answered the little man, reddening and looking askance at the priest, as if he expected to receive a severe reprimand.

But Father Rocco said nothing. He was thinking. Who could she have written to ? If to Fabio, why should she have waited for months and months, after she had learnt how to use her pen, before sending him a letter ? If not to Fabio, to what other person could she have written ?

“ I regret not discovering the address—regret it most deeply,” said the little man, with a low bow of apology.

“ It is too late for regret,” said Father Rocco, coldly. “ Tell me how she came to leave your house ; I have not heard that yet. Be as brief as you can. I expect to be called every moment to the bedside of a near and dear relation, who is suffering from severe illness. You shall have all my attention ; but you must ask it for as short a time as possible.”

“ I will be briefness itself. In the first place, you must know that I have—or rather had—an idle, unscrupulous rascal of an apprentice in my business.”

The priest pursed up his mouth contemptuously.

“ In the second place, this same good-for-nothing fellow had the impertinence to fall in love with Nanina.”

Father Rocco started, and listened eagerly.

“ But I must do the girl the justice to say that she never gave him the slightest encouragement ; and that, whenever he ventured to speak to her, she always quietly but very decidedly repelled him.”

“ A good girl !” said Father Rocco. “ I always said she was a good girl. It was a mistake on my part ever to have distrusted her.”

“ Among the other offences,” continued the little man, “ of which I now find my scoundrel of an

apprentice to have been guilty, was the enormity of picking the lock of my desk, and prying into my private papers."

"You ought not to have had any. Private papers should always be burnt papers."

"They shall be for the future; I will take good care of that."

"Were any of my letters to you about Nanina among these private papers?"

"Unfortunately, there were. Pray, pray, excuse my want of caution this time. It shall never happen again."

"Go on. Such imprudence as yours can never be excused; it can only be provided against for the future. I suppose the apprentice showed my letters to the girl?"

"I infer as much; though why he should do so——"

"Simpleton! Did you not say that he was in love with her (as you term it), and that he got no encouragement?"

"Yes: I said that—and I know it to be true."

"Well! Was it not his interest, being unable to make any impression on the girl's fancy, to establish some claim to her gratitude; and try if he could not win her that way? By showing her my letters, he would make her indebted to him for knowing that

she was watched in your house. But this is not the matter in question now. You say you infer that she had seen my letters. On what grounds?"

"On the strength of this bit of paper," answered the little man, ruefully producing a note from his pocket. "She must have had your letters shown to her soon after putting her own letter into the post. For, on the evening of the same day, when I went up into her room, I found that she and her sister and the disagreeable dog had all gone, and observed this note laid on the table."

Father Rocco took the note, and read these lines:—

"I have just discovered that I have been watched and suspected ever since my stay under your roof. It is impossible that I can remain another night in the house of a spy. I go with my sister. We owe you nothing, and we are free to live honestly where we please. If you see Father Rocco, tell him that I can forgive his distrust of me, but that I can never forget it. I, who had full faith in him, had a right to expect that he should have full faith in me. It was always an encouragement to me to think of him as a father and a friend. I have lost that encouragement for ever—and it was the last I had left to me!

"NANINA."

The priest rose from his seat as he handed the note back, and the visitor immediately followed his example.

“We must remedy this misfortune as we best may,” he said with a sigh. “Are you ready to go back to Florence to-morrow?”

The little man bowed again.

“Find out where she is, and ascertain if she wants for anything, and if she is living in a safe place. Say nothing about me, and make no attempt to induce her to return to your house. Simply let me know what you discover. The poor child has a spirit that no ordinary people would suspect in her. She must be soothed and treated tenderly, and we shall manage her yet. No mistakes, mind, this time! Do just what I tell you, and do no more. Have you anything else to say to me?”

The little man shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

“Good-night, then,” said the priest.

“Good-night,” said the little man, slipping through the door that was held open for him with the politest alacrity.

“This is vexatious,” said Father Rocco, taking a turn or two in the study after his visitor had gone. “It was bad to have done the child an injustice—it is worse to have been found out. There is nothing

for it now but to wait till I know where she is. I like her, and I like that note she left behind her. It is bravely, delicately, and honestly written—a good girl—a very good girl indeed!”

He walked to the window, breathed the fresh air for a few moments, and quietly dismissed the subject from his mind. When he returned to his table, he had no thoughts for any one but his sick niece.

“It seems strange,” he said, “that I have had no message about her yet. Perhaps Luca has heard something. It may be well if I go to the studio at once to find out.”

He took up his hat and went to the door. Just as he opened it, Fabio’s servant confronted him on the threshold.

“I am sent to summon you to the palace,” said the man. “The doctors have given up all hope.”

Father Rocco turned deadly pale, and drew back a step. “Have you told my brother of this?” he asked.

“I was just on my way to the studio,” answered the servant.

“I will go there instead of you, and break the bad news to him,” said the priest.

They descended the stairs in silence. Just as they were about to separate at the street door, Father Rocco stopped the servant.

“How is the child?” he asked, with such sudden eagerness and impatience that the man looked quite startled as he answered that the child was perfectly well.

“There is some consolation in that,” said Father Rocco, walking away, and speaking partly to the servant, partly to himself. “My caution has misled me,” he continued, pausing thoughtfully when he was left alone in the roadway. “I should have risked using the mother’s influence sooner to procure the righteous restitution. All hope of compassing it now rests on the life of the child. Infant as she is, her father’s ill-gotten wealth may yet be gathered back to the church by her hands.”

He proceeded rapidly on his way to the studio, until he reached the river-side and drew close to the bridge which it was necessary to cross in order to get to his brother’s house. Here he stopped abruptly, as if struck by a sudden idea. The moon had just risen, and her light, streaming across the river, fell full upon his face as he stood by the parapet wall that led up to the bridge. He was so lost in thought that he did not hear the conversation of two ladies who were advancing along the pathway close behind him. As they brushed by him, the taller of the two turned round and looked back at his face.

“Father Rocco!” exclaimed the lady, stopping.

“ Donna Brigida !” cried the priest, looking surprised at first, but recovering himself directly, and bowing with his usual quiet politeness. “ Pardon me if I thank you for honouring me by renewing our acquaintance, and then pass on to my brother’s studio. A heavy affliction is likely to befall us, and I go to prepare him for it.”

You refer to the dangerous illness of your niece ?” said Brigida. “ I heard of it this evening. Let us hope that your fears are exaggerated, and that we may yet meet under less distressing circumstances. I have no present intention of leaving Pisa for some time, and I shall always be glad to thank Father Rocco for the politeness and consideration which he showed to me, under delicate circumstances, a year ago.”

With these words she curtsyed deferentially, and moved away to rejoin her friend. The priest observed that Mademoiselle Virginie lingered rather near, as if anxious to catch a few words of the conversation between Brigida and himself. Seeing this, he, in his turn, listened as the two women slowly walked away together, and heard the Italian say to her companion——

“ Virginie, I will lay you the price of a new dress that Fabio d’Ascoli marries again.”

Father Rocco started when she said those words as if he had trodden on fire.

“ My thought ! ” he whispered nervously to himself. “ My thought at the moment when she spoke to me ! Marry again ? Another wife, over whom I should have no influence ! Other children, whose education would not be confided to me ! What would become, then, of the restitution that I have hoped for, wrought for, prayed for ? ”

He stopped, and looked fixedly at the sky above him. The bridge was deserted. His black figure rose up erect, motionless, and spectral, with the white still light falling solemnly all around it. Standing so for some minutes, his first movement was to drop his hand angrily on the parapet of the bridge. He then turned round slowly in the direction by which the two women had walked away.

“ Donna Brigida, ” he said, “ I will lay you the price of fifty new dresses that Fabio d’Ascoli never marries again ! ”

He set his face once more towards the studio, and walked on without stopping until he arrived at the master-sculptor’s door.

“ Marry again ? ” he thought to himself as he rang the bell : “ Donna Brigida, was your first failure not enough for you ? Are you going to try a second time ? ”

Luca Lomi himself opened the door. He drew Father Rocco hurriedly into the studio, towards a

single lamp burning on a stand near the partition between the two rooms.

“Have you heard any thing of our poor child?” he asked. “Tell me the truth!—tell me the truth at once!”

“Hush! compose yourself. I have heard,” said Father Rocco, in low, mournful tones.

Luca tightened his hold on the priest’s arm, and looked into his face with breathless, speechless eagerness.

“Compose yourself,” repeated Father Rocco. “Compose yourself to hear the worst. My poor Luca, the doctors have given up all hope.”

Luca dropped his brother’s arm with a groan of despair. “Oh, Maddalena! my child—my only child!”

Reiterating these words again and again, he leaned his head against the partition and burst into tears. Sordid and coarse as his nature was, he really loved his daughter. All the heart he had was in his statues and in her.

After the first burst of his grief was exhausted, he was recalled to himself by a sensation as if some change had taken place in the lighting of the studio. He looked up directly, and dimly discerned the priest standing far down at the end of the room nearest the door, with the lamp in his hand, eagerly looking at something.

“ Rocco ! ” he exclaimed—“ Rocco, why have you taken the lamp away ? What are you doing there ? ”

There was no movement and no answer. Luca advanced a step or two, and called again—“ Rocco, what are you doing there ? ”

The priest heard this time, and came suddenly towards his brother with the lamp in his hand—so suddenly that Luca started.

“ What is it ? ” he asked, in astonishment. “ Gracious God, Rocco, how pale you are ! ”

Still the priest never said a word. He put the lamp down on the nearest table. Luca observed that his hand shook. He had never seen his brother violently agitated before. When Rocco had announced, but a few minutes ago, that Maddalena’s life was despaired of, it was in a voice which, though sorrowful, was perfectly calm. What was the meaning of this sudden panic—this strange, silent terror ? ”

The priest observed that his brother was looking at him earnestly. “ Come ! ” he said in a faint whisper—“ come to her bedside ; we have no time to lose. Get your hat, and leave it to me to put out the lamp. ”

He hurriedly extinguished the light while he spoke. They went down the studio side by side towards the door. The moonlight streamed through the window full on the place where the priest had been standing alone with the lamp in his hand. As they passed it,

Luca felt his brother tremble, and saw him turn away his head.

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Two hours later, Fabio d'Ascoli and his wife were separated in this world for ever; and the servants of the palace were anticipating in whispers the order of their mistress's funeral-procession to the burial-ground of the Campo Santo.

PART THIRD.—CHAPTER I.

ABOUT eight months after the Countess d'Ascoli had been laid in her grave in the Campo Santo, two reports were circulated through the gay world of Pisa, which excited curiosity and awakened expectation everywhere.

The first report announced that a grand masked ball was to be given at the Melani Palace, to celebrate the day on which the heir of the house attained his majority. All the friends of the family were delighted at the prospect of this festival; for the old Marquis Melani had the reputation of being one of the most hospitable, and, at the same time, one of the most eccentric men in Pisa. Every one expected, therefore, that he would secure for the entertainment of his guests, if he really gave the ball, the most whimsical novelties in the way of masks, dances, and amusements generally, that had ever been seen.

The second report was, that the rich widower, Fabio d'Ascoli, was on the point of returning to Pisa, after having improved his health and spirits by trav-

elling in foreign countries ; and that he might be expected to appear again in society, for the first time since the death of his wife, at the masked ball which was to be given in the Melani Palace. This announcement excited special interest among the young ladies of Pisa. Fabio had only reached his thirtieth year ; and it was universally agreed that his return to society in his native city could indicate nothing more certainly than his desire to find a second mother for his infant child. All the single ladies would now have been ready to bet, as confidently as Brigida had offered to bet eight months before, that Fabio d'Ascoli would marry again.

For once in a way, report turned out to be true, in both the cases just mentioned. Invitations were actually issued from the Melani Palace, and Fabio returned from abroad to his home on the Arno.

In settling all the arrangements connected with his masked ball, the Marquis Melani showed that he was determined not only to deserve, but to increase, his reputation for oddity. He invented the most extravagant disguises, to be worn by some of his more intimate friends ; he arranged grotesque dances, to be performed at stated periods of the evening by professional buffoons, hired from Florence. He composed a toy-symphony, which included solos on every noisy plaything at that time manufactured for children's

use. And, not content with thus avoiding the beaten track in preparing the entertainments at the ball, he determined also to show decided originality, even in selecting the attendants who were to wait on the company. Other people in his rank of life were accustomed to employ their own and hired footmen for this purpose; the marquis resolved that his attendants should be composed of young women only; that two of his rooms should be fitted up as Arcadian bowers; and that all the prettiest girls in Pisa should be placed in them to preside over the refreshments, dressed, in accordance with the mock-classical taste of the period, as shepherdesses of the time of Virgil.

The only defect of this brilliantly new idea was the difficulty of executing it. The marquis had expressly ordered that not fewer than thirty shepherdesses were to be engaged, fifteen for each bower. It would have been easy to find double this number in Pisa, if beauty had been the only quality required in the attendant damsels. But it was also absolutely necessary, for the security of the marquis's gold and silver plate, that the shepherdesses should possess, besides good looks, the very homely recommendation of a fair character. This last qualification proved, it is sad to say, to be the one small merit which the majority of the ladies willing to accept engagements at the palace did not possess. Day after day passed on; and the

marquis's steward only found more and more difficulty in obtaining the appointed number of trustworthy beauties. At last, his resources failed him altogether ; and he appeared in his master's presence about a week before the night of the ball, to make the humiliating acknowledgment, that he was entirely at his wits' end. The total number of fair shepherdesses with fair characters, whom he had been able to engage, amounted only to twenty-three.

“Nonsense !” cried the marquis, irritably, as soon as the steward had made his confession. “I told you to get thirty girls, and thirty I mean to have. What's the use of shaking your head, when all their dresses are ordered ? Thirty tunics, thirty wreaths, thirty pairs of sandals and silk stockings, thirty crooks, you scoundrel—and you have the impudence to offer me only twenty-three hands to hold them. Not a word ! I won't hear a word ! Get me my thirty girls, or lose your place.” The marquis roared out this last terrible sentence at the top of his voice, and pointed peremptorily to the door.

The steward knew his master too well to remonstrate. He took his hat and cane, and went out. It was useless to look through the ranks of rejected volunteers again ; there was not the slightest hope in that quarter. The only chance left was to call on all his friends in Pisa who had daughters out at service,

and to try what he could accomplish, by bribery and persuasion, that way.

After a whole day occupied in solicitations, promises, and patient smoothing down of innumerable difficulties, the result of his efforts in the new direction was an accession of six more shepherdesses. This brought him on bravely from twenty-three to twenty-nine, and left him, at last, with only one anxiety—where was he now to find shepherdess number thirty?

He mentally asked himself that important question, as he entered a shady by-street in the neighbourhood of the Campo Santo, on his way back to the Melani Palace. Sauntering slowly along in the middle of the road, and fanning himself with his handkerchief after the oppressive exertions of the day, he passed a young girl who was standing at the street-door of one of the houses, apparently waiting for somebody to join her before she entered the building.

“Body of Bacchus!” exclaimed the steward (using one of those old Pagan ejaculations which survive in Italy even to the present day); “There stands the prettiest girl I have seen yet. If she would only be shepherdess number thirty, I should go home to supper with my mind at ease. I’ll ask her, at any rate. Nothing can be lost by asking, and everything may be gained. Stop, my dear,” he continued, seeing the girl turn to go into the house, as he approached her.

“Don't be afraid of me. I am steward to the Marquis Melani, and well known in Pisa as an eminently respectable man. I have something to say to you which may be greatly for your benefit. Don't look surprised; I am coming to the point at once. Do you want to earn a little money?—honestly, of course. You don't look as if you were very rich, child.”

“I am very poor, and very much in want of some honest work to do,” answered the girl, sadly.

“Then we shall suit each other to a nicety; for I have work of the pleasantest kind to give you, and plenty of money to pay for it. But before we say anything more about that, suppose you tell me first something about yourself—who you are, and so forth. You know who I am already.”

“I am only a poor work-girl, and my name is Nanina. I have nothing more, sir, to say about myself than that.”

“Do you belong to Pisa?”

“Yes, sir—at least, I did. But I have been away for some time. I was a year at Florence, employed in needlework.”

“All by yourself?”

“No, sir, with my little sister. I was waiting for her when you came up.”

“Have you never done anything else but needlework?—never been out at service?”

“Yes, sir. For the last eight months I have had a situation to wait on a lady at Florence, and my sister (who is turned eleven, sir, and can make herself very useful) was allowed to help in the nursery.”

“How came you to leave this situation?”

“The lady and her family were going to Rome, sir. They would have taken me with them, but they could not take my sister. We are alone in the world, and we never have been parted from each other and never shall be—so I was obliged to leave the situation.”

“And here you are back at Pisa—with nothing to do, I suppose?”

“Nothing yet, sir. We only came back yesterday.”

“Only yesterday! You are a lucky girl, let me tell you, to have met with me. I suppose you have somebody in the town who can speak to your character?”

“The landlady of this house can, sir.”

“And who is she, pray?”

“Marta Angrisani, sir.”

“What! the well-known sick-nurse? You could not possibly have a better recommendation, child. I remember her being employed at the Melani Palace at the time of the marquis’s last attack of gout; but I never knew that she kept a lodging-house.”

“She and her daughter, sir, have owned this house

longer than I can recollect. My sister and I have lived in it since I was quite a little child, and I had hoped we might be able to live here again. But the top room we used to have is taken, and the room to let lower down is far more, I am afraid, than we can afford."

"How much is it?"

Nanina mentioned the weekly rent of the room in fear and trembling. The steward burst out laughing

"Suppose I offered you money enough to be able to take that room for a whole year at once?" he said.

Nanina looked at him in speechless amazement.

"Suppose I offered you that?" continued the steward. "And suppose I only asked you in return to put on a fine dress and serve refreshments in a beautiful room to the company at the Marquis Melani's grand ball? What should you say to that?"

Nanina said nothing. She drew back a step or two, and looked more bewildered than before.

"You must have heard of the ball," said the steward pompously. "The poorest people in Pisa have heard of it. It is the talk of the whole city."

Still Nanina made no answer. To have replied truthfully, she must have confessed that "the talk of the whole city" had now no interest for her. The last news from Pisa that had appealed to her sympathies was the news of the Countess d'Ascoli's death,

and of Fabio's departure to travel in foreign countries. Since then, she had heard nothing more of him. She was as ignorant of his return to his native city as of all the reports connected with the marquis's ball. Something in her own heart—some feeling which she had neither the desire nor the capacity to analyze—had brought her back to Pisa and to the old home which now connected itself with her tenderest recollections. Believing that Fabio was still absent, she felt that no ill motive could now be attributed to her return ; and she had not been able to resist the temptation of revisiting the scene that had been associated with the first great happiness as well as with the first great sorrow of her life. Among all the poor people of Pisa, she was perhaps the very last whose curiosity could be awakened, or whose attention could be attracted by the rumour of gaieties at the Melani Palace.

But she could not confess all this ; she could only listen with great humility and no small surprise, while the steward, in compassion for her ignorance, and with the hope of tempting her into accepting his offered engagement, described the arrangements of the approaching festival, and dwelt fondly on the magnificence of the Arcadian bowers, and the beauty of the shepherdesses' tunics. As soon as he had done, Nanina ventured on the confession that she

should feel rather nervous in a grand dress that did not belong to her, and that she doubted very much her own capability of waiting properly on the great people at the ball. The steward, however, would hear of no objections, and called peremptorily for Marta Angrisani to make the necessary statement as to Nanina's character. While this formality was being complied with to the steward's perfect satisfaction, La Biondella came in, unaccompanied on this occasion by the usual companion of all her walks, the learned poodle Scarammuccia.

"This is Nanina's sister, sir," said the good-natured sick-nurse, taking the first opportunity of introducing La Biondella to the great marquis's great man. "A very good, industrious little girl; and very clever at plaiting dinner-mats, in case his excellency should ever want any. What have you done with the dog, my dear?"

"I couldn't get him past the pork-butcher's, three streets off," replied La Biondella. "He would sit down and look at the sausages. I am more than half afraid he means to steal some of them?"

"A very pretty child," said the steward, patting La Biondella on the cheek. "We ought to have her at the ball. If his excellency should want a Cupid, or a youthful nymph, or anything small and light in that way, I shall come back and let you know. In

the meantime, Nanina, consider yourself Shepherdess number Thirty, and come to the housekeeper's room at the palace to try on your dress to-morrow. Nonsense! don't talk to me about being afraid and awkward. All you're wanted to do is to look pretty; and your glass must have told you you could do that long ago. Remember the rent of the room, my dear, and don't stand in your light and your sister's. Does the little girl like sweetmeats? Of course she does! Well, I promise you a whole box of sugar-plums to take home for her, if you will come and wait at the ball."

"Oh, go to the ball, Nanina, go to the ball!" cried La Biondella, clapping her hands.

"Of course she will go to the ball," said the nurse. "She would be mad to throw away such an excellent chance."

Nanina looked perplexed. She hesitated a little, then drew Marta Angrisani away into a corner, and whispered this question to her:—

"Do you think there will be any priests at the palace where the marquis lives?"

"Heavens, child, what a thing to ask!" returned the nurse. "Priests at a masked ball! You might as well expect to find Turks performing high mass in the cathedral. But supposing you did meet with priests at the palace, what then?"

“Nothing,” said Nanina, constrainedly. She turned pale, and walked away as she spoke. Her great dread in returning to Pisa, was the dread of meeting with Father Rocco again. She had never forgotten her first discovery at Florence of his distrust of her. The bare thought of seeing him any more, after her faith in him had been shaken for ever, made her feel faint and sick at heart.

“To-morrow, in the housekeeper’s room,” said the steward, putting on his hat, “you will find your new dress all ready for you.”

Nanina curtsyed, and ventured on no more objections. The prospect of securing a home for a whole year to come among people whom she knew, reconciled her—influenced as she was also by Marta Angriani’s advice, and by her sister’s anxiety for the promised present—to brave the trial of appearing at the ball.

“What a comfort to have it all settled at last,” said the steward, as soon as he was out again in the street. “We shall see what the marquis says now. If he doesn’t apologize for calling me a scoundrel the moment he sets eyes on Number Thirty, he is the most ungrateful nobleman that ever existed.

Arriving in front of the palace, the steward found workmen engaged in planning the external decorations and illuminations for the night of the ball. A

little crowd had already assembled to see the ladders raised, and the scaffoldings put up. He observed among them, standing near the outskirts of the throng, a lady who attracted his attention (he was an ardent admirer of the fair sex) by the beauty and symmetry of her figure. While he lingered for a moment to look at her, a shaggy poodle dog (licking his chops, as if he had just had something to eat) trotted by, stopped suddenly close to the lady, sniffed suspiciously for an instant, and then began to growl at her without the slightest apparent provocation. The steward advancing politely with his stick to drive the dog away, saw the lady start, and heard her exclaim to herself amazedly :—

“ You here, you beast! Can Nanina have come back to Pisa ? ”

This last exclamation gave the steward, as a gallant man, an excuse for speaking to the elegant stranger.

“ Excuse me, madam, he said, “ but I heard you mention the name of Nanina. May I ask whether you mean a pretty little work-girl who lives near the Campo Santo ? ”

“ The same, ” said the lady, looking very much surprised and interested immediately.

“ It may be a gratification to you, madam, to know that she has just returned to Pisa, ” continued the

steward, politely ; “ and, moreover, that she is in a fair way to rise in the world. I have just engaged her to wait at the marquis’s grand ball, and I need hardly say, under those circumstances, that if she plays her cards properly, her fortune is made.”

The lady bowed, looked at her informant very intently and thoughtfully for a moment, then suddenly walked away without uttering a word.

“ A curious woman,” thought the steward, entering the palace. “ I must ask Number Thirty about her to-morrow.”

CHAPTER II.

THE death of Maddalena d'Ascoli produced a complete change in the lives of her father and her uncle. After the first shock of the bereavement was over, Luca Lomi declared that it would be impossible for him to work in his studio again—for some time to come at least—after the death of the beloved daughter, with whom every corner of it was now so sadly and closely associated. He accordingly accepted an engagement to assist in restoring several newly discovered works of ancient sculpture at Naples, and set forth for that city, leaving the care of his work-rooms at Pisa entirely to his brother.

On the master-sculptor's departure, Father Rocco caused the statues and busts to be carefully enveloped in linen cloths, locked the studio doors, and, to the astonishment of all who knew of his former industry and dexterity as a sculptor, never approached the place again. His clerical duties he performed with the same assiduity as ever ; but he went out less than

had been his custom hitherto, to the houses of his friends. His most regular visits were to the Ascoli Palace, to inquire at the porter's lodge after the health of Maddalena's child, who was always reported to be thriving admirably under the care of the best nurses that could be found in Pisa. As for any communications with his polite little friend from Florence, they had ceased months ago. The information—speedily conveyed to him—that Nanina was in the service of one of the most respectable ladies in the city, seemed to relieve any anxieties which he might otherwise have felt on her account. He made no attempt to justify himself to her; and only required that his over-courteous little visitor of former days should let him know whenever the girl might happen to leave her new situation.

The admirers of Father Rocco, seeing the alteration in his life, and the increased quietness of his manner, said, that as he was growing older he was getting more and more above the things of this world. His enemies (for even Father Rocco had them) did not scruple to assert that the change in him was decidedly for the worse, and that he belonged to the order of men who are most to be distrusted when they become most subdued. The priest himself paid no attention either to his eulogists or his depreciators. Nothing disturbed the regularity and discipline of his

daily habits ; and vigilant Scandal, though she sought often to surprise him, sought always in vain.

Such was Father Rocco's life from the period of his niece's death to Fabio's return to Pisa.

As a matter of course, the priest was one of the first to call at the palace and welcome the young nobleman back. What passed between them at this interview never was precisely known ; but it was surmised readily enough that some misunderstanding had taken place, for Father Rocco did not repeat his visit. He made no complaints of Fabio, but simply stated that he had said something, intended for the young man's good, which had not been received in a right spirit ; and that he thought it desirable to avoid the painful chance of any further collision by not presenting himself at the palace again for some little time. People were rather amazed at this. They would have been still more surprised if the subject of the masked ball had not just then occupied all their attention, and prevented their noticing it, by another strange event in connexion with the priest. Father Rocco, some weeks after the cessation of his intercourse with Fabio, returned one morning to his old way of life as a sculptor, and opened the long-closed doors of his brother's studio.

Luca Lomi's former workmen, discovering this, applied to him immediately for employment ; but

were informed that their services would not be needed. Visitors called at the studio, but were always sent away again by the disappointing announcement that there was nothing new to show them. So the days passed on until Nanina left her situation and returned to Pisa. This circumstance was duly reported to Father Rocco by his correspondent at Florence; but, whether he was too much occupied among the statues, or whether it was one result of his cautious resolution never to expose himself unnecessarily to so much as the breath of detraction, he made no attempt to see Nanina, or even to justify himself towards her by writing her a letter. All his mornings continued to be spent alone in the studio, and all his afternoons to be occupied by his clerical duties, until the day before the masked ball at the Melani Palace.

Early on that day, he covered over the statues, and locked the doors of the work-rooms once more; then returned to his own lodgings, and did not go out again. One or two of his friends who wanted to see him were informed that he was not well enough to be able to receive them. If they had penetrated into his little study, and had seen him, they would have been easily satisfied that this was no mere excuse. They would have noticed that his face was startlingly pale, and that the ordinary composure of his manner was singularly disturbed.

Towards evening this restlessness increased ; and his old housekeeper, on pressing him to take some nourishment, was astonished to hear him answer her sharply and irritably for the first time since she had been in his service. A little later her surprise was increased by his sending her with a note to the Ascoli Palace, and by the quick return of an answer, brought ceremoniously by one of Fabio's servants. " It is long since he has had any communication with that quarter. Are they going to be friends again ?" thought the housekeeper as she took the answer up stairs to her master.

" I feel better to-night," he said as he read it : " well enough indeed to venture out. If any one inquires for me, tell them that I am gone to the Ascoli Palace." Saying this, he walked to the door—then returned, and trying the lock of his cabinet, satisfied himself that it was properly secured—then went out.

He found Fabio in one of the large drawing-rooms of the palace, walking irritably backwards and forwards, with several little notes crumpled together in his hands, and a plain black domino dress for the masquerade of the ensuing night spread out on one of the tables.

" I was just going to write to you," said the young man, abruptly, " when I received your letter. You offer me a renewal of our friendship, and I accept the

offer. I have no doubt those references of yours, when we last met, to the subject of second marriages, were well meant, but they irritated me ; and, speaking under that irritation, I said words that I had better not have spoken. If I pained you I am sorry for it. Wait ! pardon me for one moment. I have not quite done yet. It seems that you are by no means the only person in Pisa to whom the question of my possibly marrying again appears to have presented itself. Ever since it was known that I intended to renew my intercourse with society at the ball to-morrow night, I have been persecuted by anonymous letters—infamous letters, written from some motive which it is impossible for me to understand. I want your advice on the best means of discovering the writers ; and I have also a very important question to ask you. But read one of the letters first yourself : any one will do as a sample of the rest.”

Fixing his eyes searchingly on the priest, he handed him one of the notes. Still a little paler than usual, Father Rocco sat down by the nearest lamp, and shading his eyes read these lines :—

“ Count Fabio :—It is the common talk of Pisa that you are likely, as a young man left with a motherless child, to marry again. Your having accepted an invitation to the Melani Palace gives a

colour of truth to this report. Widowers who are true to the departed do not go among all the handsomest single women in a city at a masked ball. Reconsider your determination and remain at home. I know you, and I knew your wife, and I say to you solemnly, avoid temptation, for you must never marry again. Neglect my advice and you will repent it to the end of your life. I have reasons for what I say—serious, fatal reasons, which I cannot divulge. If you would let your wife lie easy in her grave, if you would avoid a terrible warning, go not to the masked ball ! ”

“ I ask you, and I ask any man, if that is not infamous ? ” exclaimed Fabio, passionately, as the priest handed him back the letter. “ An attempt to work on my fears through the memory of my poor dead wife ! An insolent assumption that I want to marry again, when I myself have not even so much as thought of the subject at all ! What is the secret object of this letter, and of the rest here that resemble it ! Whose interest is it to keep me away from the ball ? What is the meaning of such a phrase as— ‘ if you would let your wife lie easy in her grave ? ’ Have you no advice to give me ?—No plan to propose for discovering the vile hand that traced these lines ?—Speak to me !—Why, in Heaven’s name, don’t you speak ? ”

The priest leant his head on his hand, and, turning his face from the light as if it dazzled his eyes, replied in his lowest and quietest tones :

“ I cannot speak till I have had time to think. The mystery of that letter is not to be solved in a moment. There are things in it that are enough to perplex and amaze any man ? ”

“ What things ? ”

“ It is impossible for me to go into details—at least, at the present moment. ”

“ You speak with a strange air of secrecy. Have you nothing definite to say ?—No advice to give me ? ’

“ I should advise you not to go to the ball. ”

“ You would ! Why ? ”

“ If I gave you my reasons, I am afraid I should only be irritating you to no purpose. ”

“ Father Rocco ! Neither your words nor your manner satisfy me. You speak in riddles ; and you sit there in the dark with your face hidden from me—— ”

The priest instantly started up and turned his face to the light.

“ I recommend you to control your temper, and to treat me with common courtesy, ” he said, in his quietest, firmest tones, looking at Fabio steadily while he spoke.

“ We will not prolong this interview,” said the young man, calming himself by an evident effort. “ I have one question to ask you, and then no more to say.”

The priest bowed his head, in token that he was ready to listen. He still stood up, calm, pale, and firm, in the full light of the lamp.

“ It is just possible,” continued Fabio, “ that these letters may refer to some incautious words which my late wife might have spoken. I ask you, as her spiritual director, and as a near relation who enjoyed her confidence, if you ever heard her express a wish, in the event of my surviving her, that I should abstain from marrying again ? ”

“ Did she never express such a wish to you ? ”

“ Never. But why do you evade my question by asking me another ? ”

“ It is impossible for me to reply to your question.”

“ For what reason ? ”

“ Because it is impossible for me to give answers which must refer, whether they are affirmative or negative, to what I have heard in confession.”

“ We have spoken enough,” said Fabio, turning angrily from the priest. “ I expected you to help me in clearing up these mysteries, and you do your best to thicken them. What your motives are, what your

conduct means, it is impossible for me to know ; but I say to you, what I would say in far other terms, if they were here, to the villains who have written these letters—no menaces, no mysteries, no conspiracies, will prevent me from being at the ball to-morrow. I can listen to persuasion, but I scorn threats. There lies my dress for the masquerade : no power on earth shall prevent me from wearing it to-morrow night ! ” He pointed, as he spoke, to the black domino and half-mask lying on the table.

“ No power on *earth* ! ” repeated Father Rocco, with a smile, and an emphasis on the last word. “ Superstitious still, Count Fabio ! Do you suspect the powers of the other world of interfering with mortals at masquerades ? ”

Fabio started, and, turning from the table, fixed his eyes intently on the priest’s face.

“ You suggested just now that we had better not prolong this interview,” said Father Rocco, still smiling. “ I think you were right : if we part at once, we may still part friends. You have had my advice not to go to the ball, and you decline following it. I have nothing more to say. Good night ! ”

Before Fabio could utter the angry rejoinder that rose to his lips, the door of the room had opened and closed again, and the priest was gone.

CHAPTER III.

THE next night, at the time of assembling specified in the invitations to the masked ball, Fabio was still lingering in his palace, and still allowing the black domino to lie untouched and unheeded on his dressing-table. This delay was not produced by any change in his resolution to go to the Melani Palace. His determination to be present at the ball remained unshaken; and yet, at the last moment, he lingered and lingered on, without knowing why. Some strange influence seemed to be keeping him within the walls of his lonely home. It was as if the great, empty, silent palace had almost recovered on that night the charm which it had lost when its mistress died.

He left his own apartment and went to the bedroom where his infant child lay asleep in her little crib. He sat watching her, and thinking quietly and tenderly of many past events in his life for a long time, then returned to his room. A sudden sense of loneliness came upon him after his visit to the child's

bedside ; but he did not attempt to raise his spirits even then by going to the ball. He descended instead to his study, lit his reading-lamp, and then opening a bureau, took from one of the drawers in it the letter which Nanina had written to him. This was not the first time that a sudden sense of his solitude had connected itself inexplicably with the remembrance of the work-girl's letter.

He read it through slowly, and when he had done, kept it open in his hand. "I have youth, titles, wealth," he thought to himself sadly ; "everything that is sought after in this world. And yet if I try to think of any human being who really and truly loves me, I can remember but one—the poor, faithful girl who wrote these lines !"

Old recollections of the first day when he met with Nanina, of the first sitting she had given him in Luca Lomi's studio, of the first visit to the neat little room in the by-street, began to rise more and more vividly in his mind. Entirely absorbed by them, he sat absently drawing with pen and ink, on some sheets of letter-paper lying under his hand, lines and circles, and fragments of decorations, and vague remembrances of old ideas for statues, until the sudden sinking of the flame of his lamp awoke his attention abruptly to present things.

He looked at his watch. It was close on midnight.

This discovery at last aroused him to the necessity of immediate departure. In a few minutes he had put on his domino and mask, and was on his way to the ball.

Before he reached the Melani Palace the first part of the entertainment had come to an end. The "Toy-Symphony" had been played, the grotesque dance performed, amid universal laughter; and now the guests were for the most part fortifying themselves in the Arcadian bowers for new dances, in which all persons present were expected to take part. The Marquis Melani had, with characteristic oddity, divided his two classical refreshment-rooms into what he termed the Light and Heavy Departments. Fruit, pastry, sweetmeats, salads, and harmless drinks were included under the first head, and all the stimulating liquors and solid eatables under the last. The thirty shepherdesses had been, according to the marquis's order, equally divided at the outset of the evening between the two rooms. But as the company began to crowd more and more resolutely in the direction of the Heavy Department, ten of the shepherdesses attached to the Light Department were told off to assist in attending on the hungry and thirsty majority of guests who were not to be appeased by pastry and lemonade. Among the five girls who were left behind in the room for the light refreshments, was

Nanina. The steward soon discovered that the novelty of her situation made her really nervous, and he wisely concluded that if he trusted her where the crowd was greatest and the noise loudest, she would not only be utterly useless, but also very much in the way of her more confident and experienced companions.

When Fabio arrived at the palace, the jovial uproar in the Heavy Department was at its height, and several gentlemen, fired by the classical costumes of the shepherdesses, were beginning to speak Latin to them with a thick utterance and a valorous contempt for all restrictions of gender, number, and case. As soon as he could escape from the congratulations on his return to his friends, which poured on him from all sides, Fabio withdrew to seek some quieter room. The heat, noise, and confusion, had so bewildered him, after the tranquil life he had been leading for many months past, that it was quite a relief to stroll through the half-deserted dancing-rooms, to the opposite extremity of the great suite of apartments, and there to find himself in a second Arcadian bower, which seemed peaceful enough to deserve its name.

A few guests were in this room when he first entered it; but the distant sound of some first notes of dance-music drew them all away. After a careless look at the quaint decorations about him, he sat down

alone on a divan near the door, and beginning already to feel the heat and discomfort of his mask, took it off. He had not removed it more than a moment, before he heard a faint cry in the direction of a long refreshment table, behind which the five waiting-girls were standing. He started up directly, and could hardly believe his senses, when he found himself standing face to face with Nanina.

Her cheeks had turned perfectly colourless. Her astonishment at seeing the young nobleman appeared to have some sensation of terror mingled with it. The waiting-woman who happened to stand by her side instinctively stretched out an arm to support her, observing that she caught at the edge of the table as Fabio hurried round to get behind it and speak to her. When he drew near, her head drooped on her breast, and she said, faintly, "I never knew you were at Pisa: I never thought you would be here. Oh, I am true to what I said in my letter, though I seem so false to it!"

"I want to speak to you about the letter—to tell you how carefully I have kept it, how often I have read it," said Fabio.

She turned away her head, and tried hard to repress the tears that would force their way into her eyes. "We should never have met," she said, "never, never have met again!"

Before Fabio could reply, the waiting-woman by Nanina's side interposed.

“For heaven's sake, don't stop speaking to her here!” she exclaimed impatiently. “If the steward or one of the upper servants was to come in, you would get her into dreadful trouble. Wait till to-morrow, and find some fitter place than this.”

Fabio felt the justice of the reproof immediately. He tore a leaf out of his pocket-book, and wrote on it: “I must tell you how I honour and thank you for that letter. To-morrow—ten o'clock—the wicket-gate at the back of the Ascoli gardens. Believe in my truth and honour, Nanina, for I believe implicitly in yours.” Having written these lines, he took from among his bunch of watch seals a little key, wrapped it up in the note, and pressed it into her hand. In spite of himself his fingers lingered round hers, and he was on the point of speaking to her again, when he saw the waiting-woman's hand, which was just raised to motion him away, suddenly drop. Her colour changed at the same moment, and she looked fixedly across the table.

He turned round immediately, and saw a masked woman standing alone in the room, dressed entirely in yellow, from head to foot. She had a yellow hood, a yellow half-mask with deep fringe hanging down over her mouth, and a yellow domino, cut at the

sleeves and edges into long flame-shaped points, which waved backwards and forwards tremulously in the light air wafted through the doorway. The woman's black eyes seemed to gleam with an evil brightness through the sight-holes of the mask; and the tawny fringe hanging before her mouth fluttered slowly with every breath she drew. Without a word or a gesture she stood before the table, and her gleaming black eyes fixed steadily on Fabio, the instant he confronted her. A sudden chill struck through him, as he observed that the yellow of the stranger's domino and mask was of precisely the same shade as the yellow of the hangings and furniture which his wife had chosen after their marriage for the decoration of her favourite sitting-room.

“The Yellow Mask!” whispered the waiting girls nervously, crowding together behind the table. “The Yellow Mask again!”

“Make her speak!”

“Ask her to have something!”

“This gentleman will ask her. Speak to her, sir. Do speak to her! She glides about in that fearful yellow dress like a ghost.”

Fabio looked round mechanically at the girl who was whispering to him. He saw at the same time that Nanina still kept her head turned away, and that she had her handkerchief at her eyes. She was

evidently struggling yet with the agitation produced by their unexpected meeting, and was, most probably for that reason, the only person in the room not conscious of the presence of the Yellow Mask.

“ Speak to her, sir. Do speak to her ! ” whispered two of the waiting-girls together.

Fabio turned again towards the table. The black eyes were still gleaming at him from behind the tawny yellow of the mask. He nodded to the girls who had just spoken, cast one farewell look at Nanina, and moved down the room to get round to the side of the table at which the Yellow Mask was standing. Step by step as he moved, the bright eyes followed him. Steadily and more steadily their evil light seemed to shine through and through him, as he turned the corner of the table, and approached the still, spectral figure.

He came close up to the woman, but she never moved ; her eyes never wavered for an instant. He stopped and tried to speak ; but the chill struck through him again. An overpowering dread, an unutterable loathing seized on him ; all sense of outer things—the whispering of the waiting-girls behind the table, the gentle cadence of the dance-music, the distant hum of joyous talk—suddenly left him. He turned away shuddering, and quitted the room.

Following the sound of the music, and desiring be-

fore all things now to join the crowd wherever it was largest, he was stopped in one of the smaller apartments by a gentleman who had just risen from the card-table, and who held out his hand with the cordiality of an old friend.

“Welcome back to the world, Count Fabio!” he began gaily, then suddenly checked himself. “Why, you look pale, and your hand feels cold. Not ill, I hope?”

“No, no. I have been rather startled—I can’t say why—by a very strangely dressed woman, who fairly stared me out of countenance.”

“You don’t mean the Yellow Mask?”

“Yes I do. Have you seen her?”

“Everybody has seen her; but nobody can make her unmask, or get her to speak. Our host has not the slightest notion who she is; and our hostess is horribly frightened at her. For my part, I think she has given us quite enough of her mystery and her grim dress; and if my name, instead of being nothing but plain Andrea d’Arbino, was Marquis Melani, I would say to her, ‘Madam, we are here to laugh and amuse ourselves; suppose you open your lips, and charm us by appearing in a prettier dress!’”

During this conversation they had sat down together, with their backs towards the door, by the side of one of the card-tables. While d’Arbino was

speaking, Fabio suddenly felt himself shuddering again, and became conscious of a sound of low breathing behind him.

He turned round instantly, and there, standing between them, and peering down at them, was the Yellow Mask!

Fabio started up, and his friend followed his example. Again the gleaming black eyes rested steadily on the young nobleman's face, and again their look chilled him to the heart.

"Yellow Lady, do you know my friend?" exclaimed d'Arbino, with mock solemnity.

There was no answer. The fatal eyes never moved from Fabio's face.

"Yellow Lady," continued the other, "listen to the music. Will you dance with me?"

The eyes looked away, and the figure glided slowly from the room.

"My dear count," said d'Arbino, "that woman seems to have quite an effect on you. I declare she has left you paler than ever. Come into the supper-room with me, and have some wine; you really look as if you wanted it.

They went at once to the large refreshment-room. Nearly all the guests had by this time begun to dance again. They had the whole apartment, therefore, almost entirely to themselves.

Among the decorations of the room, which were not strictly in accordance with genuine Arcadian simplicity, was a large looking-glass, placed over a well-furnished sideboard. D'Arbino led Fabio in this direction, exchanging greetings as he advanced with a gentleman who stood near the glass looking into it, and carelessly fanning himself with his mask.

“My dear friend!” cried d'Arbino, “you are the very man to lead us straight to the best bottle of wine in the palace. Count Fabio, let me present to you my intimate and good friend the Cavaliere Finello, with whose family I know you are well acquainted. Finello, the count is a little out of spirits, and I have prescribed a good dose of wine. I see a whole row of bottles at your side, and I leave it to you to apply the remedy. Glasses there! three glasses, my lovely shepherdess with the black eyes—the three largest you have got.

The glasses were brought; the Cavaliere Finello chose a particular bottle, and filled them. All three gentlemen turned round to the sideboard to use it as a table, and thus necessarily faced the looking-glass.

“Now, let us drink the toast of toasts,” said d'Arbino. “Finello, Count Fabio—the ladies of Pisa!”

Fabio raised the wine to his lips, and was on the

point of drinking it, when he saw reflected in the glass the figure of the Yellow Mask. The glittering eyes were again fixed on him, and the yellow-hooded head bowed slowly, as if in acknowledgment of the toast he was about to drink. For the third time the strange chill seized him, and he set down his glass of wine untasted.

“What is the matter?” asked d’Arbino.

“Have you any dislike, count, to that particular wine?” inquired the Cavaliere.

“The Yellow Mask!” whispered Fabio. “The Yellow Mask again!”

They all three turned round directly towards the door. But it was too late—the figure had disappeared.

“Does any one know who this Yellow Mask is?” asked Finello. “One may guess by the walk that the figure is a woman’s. Perhaps it may be the strange colour she has chosen for her dress, or perhaps her stealthy way of moving from room to room; but there is certainly something mysterious and startling about her.”

“Startling enough, as the count would tell you,” said d’Arbino. “The Yellow Mask has been responsible for his loss of spirits and change of complexion, and now she has prevented him even from drinking his wine.”

“ I can't account for it,” said Fabio, looking round him uneasily ; “ but this is the third room into which she has followed me—the third time she has seemed to fix her eyes on me alone. I suppose my nerves are hardly in a fit state yet for masked balls and adventures ; the sight of her seems to chill me. Who can she be ? ”

“ If she followed me a fourth time,” said Finello, “ I should insist on her unmasking.”

“ And suppose she refused ? ” asked his friend.

“ Then I should take her mask off for her.”

“ It is impossible to do that with a woman,” said Fabio. “ I prefer trying to lose her in the crowd. Excuse me, gentlemen, if I leave you to finish the wine, and then to meet me, if you like, in the great ball-room.”

He retired as he spoke, put on his mask, and joined the dancers immediately, taking care to keep always in the most crowded corner of the apartment. For some time this plan of action proved successful, and he saw no more of the mysterious yellow domino. Ere long, however, some new dances were arranged, in which the great majority of the persons in the ball-room took part ; the figures resembling the old English country dances in this respect, that the ladies and gentlemen were placed in long rows opposite to each other. The sets consisted of about twenty

couples each, placed sometimes across, and sometimes along the apartment ; and the spectators were all required to move away on either side, and range themselves close to the walls. As Fabio among others complied with this necessity, he looked down a row of dancers waiting during the performance of the orchestral prelude ; and there, watching him again, from the opposite end of the lane formed by the gentlemen on one side and the ladies on the other, he saw the Yellow Mask.

He moved abruptly back towards another row of dancers, placed at right angles to the first row ; and there again, at the opposite end of the gay lane of brightly-dressed figures, was the Yellow Mask. He slipped into the middle of the room ; but it was only to find her occupying his former position near the wall, and still, in spite of his disguise, watching him through row after row of dancers. The persecution began to grow intolerable ; he felt a kind of angry curiosity mingling now with the vague dread that had hitherto oppressed him. Finello's advice recurred to his memory ; and he determined to make the woman unmask at all hazards. With this intention he returned to the supper-room in which he had left his friends.

They were gone, probably to the ball-room, to look for him. Plenty of wine was still left on the

sideboard, and he poured himself out a glass. Finding that his hand trembled as he did so, he drank several more glasses in quick succession, to nerve himself for the approaching encounter with the Yellow Mask. While he was drinking he expected every moment to see her in the looking-glass again; but she never appeared—and yet he felt almost certain that he had detected her gliding out after him when he left the ball-room.

He thought it possible that she might be waiting for him in one of the smaller apartments, and, taking off his mask, walked through several of them without meeting her, until he came to the door of the refreshment-room in which Nanina and he had recognised each other. The waiting-woman behind the table, who had first spoken to him, caught sight of him now, and ran round to the door.

“Don’t come in and speak to Nanina again,” she said, mistaking the purpose which had brought him to the door. “What with frightening her first, and making her cry afterwards, you have rendered her quite unfit for her work. The steward is in there at this moment, very good-natured, but not very sober. He says she is pale and red-eyed, and not fit to be a shepherdess any longer, and that, as she will not be missed now, she may go home if she likes. We have got her an old cloak, and she is going to try and slip

through the rooms unobserved, to get down stairs and change her dress. Don't speak to her, pray—or you will only make her cry again, and what is worse, make the steward fancy—”

She stopped at that last word, and pointed suddenly over Fabio's shoulder.

“The Yellow Mask!” she exclaimed. “Oh, sir, draw her away into the ball-room, and give Nanina a chance of getting out!”

Fabio turned directly, and approached the Mask, who, as they looked at each other, slowly retreated before him. The waiting-woman, seeing the yellow figure retire, hastened back to Nanina in the refreshment-room.

Slowly the masked woman retreated from one apartment to another till she entered a corridor brilliantly lit up and beautifully ornamented with flowers. On the right hand this corridor led to the ball-room; on the left to an ante-chamber at the head of the palace staircase. The Yellow Mask went on a few paces towards the left; then stopped. The bright eyes fixed themselves as before on Fabio's face, but only for a moment. He heard a light step behind him, and then he saw the eyes move. Following the direction they took, he turned round, and discovered Nanina, wrapped up in the old cloak which was to enable her to get down stairs unobserved.

“Oh, how can I get out! how can I get out!” cried the girl, shrinking back affrightedly as she saw the Yellow Mask.

“That way,” said Fabio, pointing in the direction of the ball-room. “Nobody will notice you in the cloak: it will only be thought some new disguise.” He took her arm as he spoke to reassure her, and continued in a whisper,—“Don’t forget to-morrow.”

At the same moment he felt a hand laid on him. It was the hand of the masked woman, and it put him back from Nanina.

In spite of himself, he trembled at her touch, but still retained presence of mind enough to sign to the girl to make her escape. With a look of eager inquiry in the direction of the Mask, and a half suppressed exclamation of terror, she obeyed him, and hastened away towards the ball-room.

“We are alone,” said Fabio, confronting the gleaming black eyes, and reaching out his hand resolutely towards the Yellow Mask. “Tell me who you are, and why you follow me, or I will uncover your face, and solve the mystery for myself.”

The woman pushed his hand aside, and drew back a few paces, but never spoke a word. He followed her. There was not an instant to be lost, for just then the sound of footsteps hastily approaching the corridor became audible.

“Now or never,” he whispered to himself, and snatched at the mask.

His arm was again thrust aside; but this time the woman raised her disengaged hand at the same moment, and removed the yellow mask.

The lamps shed their soft light full on her face.
It was the face of his dead wife.

CHAPTER IV.

SIGNOR ANDREA D'ARBINO, searching vainly through the various rooms in the palace for Count Fabio d'Ascoli, and trying, as a last resource, the corridor leading to the ball-room and grand staircase, discovered his friend lying on the floor in a swoon, without any living creature near him. Determining to avoid alarming the guests, if possible, d'Arbino first sought help in the ante-chamber. He found there the marquis's valet, assisting the Cavaliere Finello (who was just taking his departure) to put on his cloak.

While Finello and his friend carried Fabio to an open window in the ante-chamber, the valet procured some iced water. This simple remedy, and the change of atmosphere, proved enough to restore the fainting man to his senses, but hardly—as it seemed to his friends—to his former self. They noticed a change to blankness and stillness in his face, and when he spoke, an indescribable alteration in the tone of his voice.

“ I found you in a room in the corridor,” said d'Arbino. “ What made you faint? Don't you remember? Was it the heat?”

Fabio waited for a moment, painfully collecting his ideas. He looked at the valet; and Finello signed to the man to withdraw.

“ Was it the heat ? ” repeated d’Arbino.

“ No, ” answered Fabio, in strangely hushed, steady tones. “ I have seen the face that was behind the Yellow Mask. ”

“ Well ? ”

“ It was the face of my dead wife. ”

“ Your dead wife ! ”

“ When the mask was removed I saw her face. Not as I remember it in the pride of her youth and beauty—not even as I remember her on her sick-bed—but as I remember her in her coffin. ”

“ Count ! for God’s sake rouse yourself ! Collect your thoughts—remember where you are—and free your mind of its horrible delusion. ”

“ Spare me all remonstrances—I am not fit to bear them. My life has only one object now—the pursuing of this mystery to the end. Will you help me ? I am scarcely fit to act for myself. ”

He still spoke in the same unnaturally hushed, deliberate tones. D’Arbino and Finello exchanged glances behind him as he rose from the sofa on which he had hitherto been lying.

“ We will help you in everything, ” said d’Arbino, soothingly. “ Trust in us to the end. What do you wish to do first ? ”

“ The figure must have gone through this room. Let us descend the staircase and ask the servants if they have seen it pass.”

(Both d'Arbino and Finello remarked that he did not say *her*.)

They inquired down to the very court-yard. Not one of the servants had seen the Yellow Mask.

The last resource was the porter at the outer gate. They applied to him ; and in answer to their questions, he asserted that he had most certainly seen a lady in a yellow domino and mask drive away, about half an hour before, in a hired coach.

“ Should you remember the coachman again ? ” asked d'Arbino.

“ Perfectly ; he is an old friend of mine.”

“ And you know where he lives ? ”

“ Yes, as well as I know where I do.”

“ Any reward you like, if you can get somebody to mind your lodge, and can take us to that house.”

In a few minutes they were following the porter through the dark, silent streets. “ We had better try the stables first,” said the man. “ My friend the coachman will hardly have had time to do more than set the lady down. We shall most likely catch him just putting up his horses.”

The porter turned out to be right. On entering the stable-yard, they found that the empty coach had just driven into it.

“ You have been taking home a lady in a yellow domino from the masquerade ? ” said d’Arbino, putting some money into the coachman’s hand.

“ Yes, sir ; I was engaged by that lady for the evening—engaged to drive her to the ball, as well as to drive her home.”

“ Where did you take her from ? ”

“ From a very extraordinary place—from the gate of the Campo Santo burial-ground.”

“ During this colloquy, Finello and d’Arbino had been standing with Fabio between them, each giving him an arm. The instant the last answer was given, he reeled back with a cry of horror.

“ Where have you taken her to now ? ” asked d’Arbino. He looked about him nervously as he put the question, and spoke for the first time in a whisper.

“ To the Campo Santo again,” said the coachman.

Fabio suddenly drew his arms out of the arms of his friends, and sank to his knees on the ground, hiding his face. From some broken ejaculations which escaped him, it seemed as if he dreaded that his senses were leaving him, and that he was praying to be preserved in his right mind.

“ Why is he so violently agitated ? ” said Finello, eagerly, to his friend.

“ Hush ! ” returned the other. “ You heard him

say that when he saw the face behind the Yellow Mask, it was the face of his dead wife?"

"Yes! But what then?"

"His wife was buried in the Campo Santo."

CHAPTER V.

OF all the persons who had been present, in any capacity, at the Marquis Melani's ball, the earliest riser on the morning after it was Nanina. The agitation produced by the strange events in which she had been concerned destroyed the very idea of sleep. Through the hours of darkness she could not even close her eyes; and, as soon as the new day broke, she rose to breathe the early morning air at her window, and to think in perfect tranquillity over all that had passed since she entered the Melani Palace to wait on the guests at the masquerade.

On reaching home the previous night, all her other sensations had been absorbed in a vague feeling of mingled dread and curiosity, produced by the sight of the weird figure in the yellow mask, which she had left standing alone with Fabio in the palace corridor. The morning light, however, suggested new thoughts. She now opened the note which the young nobleman had pressed into her hand, and read over and over again the hurried pencil lines scrawled on the paper. Could there be any harm, any forgetfulness of her

own duty, in using the key enclosed in the note, and keeping her appointment in the Ascoli gardens at ten o'clock? Surely not—surely the last sentence he had written—"Believe in my truth and honour, Nanina, for I believe implicitly in yours"—was enough to satisfy her this time that she could not be doing wrong in listening for once to the pleading of her own heart. And besides, there, in her lap, lay the key of the wicket-gate. It was absolutely necessary to use that, if only for the purpose of giving it back safely into the hands of its owner.

As this last thought was passing through her mind, and plausibly overcoming any faint doubts and difficulties which she might still have felt, she was startled by a sudden knocking at the street door; and, looking out of the window immediately, saw a man in livery standing in the street, anxiously peering up at the house to see if his knocking had aroused anybody.

"Does Marta Angrisani, the sick-nurse, live here?" inquired the man, as soon as Nanina showed herself at the window.

"Yes," she answered. "Must I call her up? Is there some person ill?"

"Call her up directly," said the servant, "She is wanted at the Ascoli Palace. My master, Count Fabio ——"

Nanina waited to hear no more. She flew to the

room in which the sick-nurse slept, and awoke her, almost roughly, in an instant.

“ He is ill ! ” she cried, breathlessly. “ Oh, make haste ! make haste !—he is ill, and he has sent for you ! ”

Marta inquired who had sent for her ; and on being informed, promised to lose no time. Nanina ran down stairs to tell the servant that the sick-nurse was getting on her clothes. The man’s serious expression, when she came close to him, terrified her. All her usual self-distrust vanished ; and she entreated him, without attempting to conceal her anxiety, to tell her particularly what his master’s illness was, and how it had affected him so suddenly after the ball.

“ I know nothing about it, ” answered the man, noticing Nanina’s manner as she put her question, with some surprise, “ except that my master was brought home by two gentlemen, friends of his, about a couple of hours ago, in a very sad state ; half out of his mind, as it seemed to me. I gathered from what was said that he had got a dreadful shock from seeing some woman take off her mask and show her face to him at the ball. How that could be I don’t in the least understand ; but I know that when the doctor was sent for, he looked very serious, and talked about fearing brain-fever. ”

Here the servant stopped ; for to his astonishment he saw Nanina suddenly turn away from him, and

then heard her crying bitterly as she went back into the house.

Marta Angrisani had huddled on her clothes, and was looking at herself in the glass, to see that she was sufficiently presentable to appear at the palace, when she felt two arms flung round her neck ; and, before she could say a word, found Nanina sobbing on her bosom.

“ He is ill—he is in danger ! ” cried the girl. “ I must go with you to help him. You have always been kind to me, Marta—be kinder than ever now. Take me with you !—Take me with you to the palace ! ”

“ You, child ! ” exclaimed the nurse, gently unclasping her arms.

“ Yes—yes ! if it is only for an hour,” pleaded Nanina—“ if it is only for one little hour every day. You have only to say that I am your helper, and they would let me in. Marta ! I shall break my heart if I can’t see him, and help him to get well again.”

The nurse still hesitated. Nanina clasped her round the neck once more, and laid her cheek—burning hot now, though the tears had been streaming down it but an instant before—close to the good woman’s face.

“ I love him, Marta—great as he is, I love him with all my heart and soul and strength,” she went

on, in quick, eager, whispering tones. "And he loves me. He would have married me if I had not gone away to save him from it. I could keep my love for him a secret while he was well—I could stifle it, and crush it down, and wither it up by absence. But now he is ill, it gets beyond me; I can't master it. Oh, Marta! don't break my heart by denying me! I have suffered so much for his sake that I have earned the right to nurse him!"

Marta was not proof against this last appeal. She had one great and rare merit for a middle-aged woman—she had not forgotten her own youth.

"Come, child," said she, soothingly; "I won't attempt to deny you. Dry your eyes, put on your mantilla, and, when we get face to face with the doctor, try to look as old and ugly as you can, if you want to be let into the sick-room along with me."

The ordeal of medical scrutiny was passed more easily than Marta Angrisani had anticipated. It was of great importance, in the doctor's opinion, that the sick man should see familiar faces at his bedside. Nanina had only, therefore, to state that he knew her well, and that she had sat to him as a model in the days when he was learning the art of sculpture, to be immediately accepted as Marta's privileged assistant in the sick-room.

The worst apprehensions felt by the doctor for the

patient were soon realized. The fever flew to his brain. For nearly six weeks he lay prostrate, at the mercy of Death ; now raging with the wild strength of delirium, and now sunk in the speechless, motionless, sleepless exhaustion which was his only repose. At last the blessed day came when he enjoyed his first sleep, and when the doctor began, for the first time, to talk of the future with hope. Even then, however, the same terrible peculiarity marked his light dreams, which had previously shown itself in his fierce delirium. From the faintly-uttered, broken phrases which dropped from him when he slept, as from the wild words which burst from him when his senses were deranged, the one sad discovery inevitably resulted—that his mind was still haunted, day and night, hour after hour, by the figure in the yellow mask.

As his bodily health improved, the doctor in attendance on him grew more and more anxious as to the state of his mind. There was no appearance of any positive derangement of intellect, but there was a mental depression—an unaltering, invincible prostration, produced by his absolute belief in the reality of the dreadful vision that he had seen at the masked ball—which suggested to the physician the gravest doubts about the case. He saw with dismay

that the patient showed no anxiety, as he got stronger, except on one subject. He was eagerly desirous of seeing Nanina every day by his bedside; but, as soon as he was assured that his wish should be faithfully complied with, he seemed to care for nothing more. Even when they proposed, in the hope of rousing him to an exhibition of something like pleasure, that the girl should read to him for an hour every day out of one of his favourite books, he only showed a languid satisfaction. Weeks passed away, and still, do what they would, they could not make him so much as smile.

One day, Nanina had begun to read to him as usual, but had not proceeded far before Marta Angrisani informed her that he had fallen into a doze. She ceased, with a sigh, and sat looking at him sadly, as he lay near her, faint and pale and mournful in his sleep—miserably altered from what he was when she first knew him. It had been a hard trial to watch by his bedside in the terrible time of his delirium; but it was a harder trial still to look at him now, and to feel less and less hopeful with each succeeding day.

While her eyes and thoughts were still compassionately fixed on him, the door of the bedroom opened, and the doctor came in, followed by Andrea d'Ar-

bino, whose share in the strange adventure with the Yellow Mask caused him to feel a special interest in Fabio's progress towards recovery.

"Asleep, I see; and sighing in his sleep," said the doctor, going to the bedside. "The grand difficulty with him," he continued, turning to d'Arbino, "remains precisely what it was. I have hardly left a single means untried of rousing him from that fatal depression; yet, for the last fortnight, he has not advanced a single step. It is impossible to shake his conviction of the reality of that face which he saw (or rather which he thinks he saw) when the yellow mask was removed; and, as long as he persists in his own shocking view of the case, so long he will lie there, getting better, no doubt, as to his body, but worse as to his mind."

"I suppose, poor fellow, he is not in a fit state to be reasoned with?"

"On the contrary, like all men with a fixed delusion, he has plenty of intelligence to appeal to on every point, except the one point on which he is wrong. I have argued with him vainly by the hour together. He possesses, unfortunately, an acute nervous sensibility and a vivid imagination; and besides, he has, as I suspect, been superstitiously brought up as a child. It would be probably useless to argue rationally with him on certain spiritual sub-

jects, even if his mind was in perfect health. He has a good deal of the mystic and the dreamer in his composition ; and science and logic are but broken reeds to depend upon with men of that kind."

"Does he merely listen to you when you reason with him, or does he attempt to answer?"

"He has only one form of answer, and that is unfortunately the most difficult of all to dispose of. Whenever I try to convince him of his delusion, he invariably retorts by asking me for a rational explanation of what happened to him at the masked ball. Now, neither you nor I, though we believe firmly that he has been the dupe of some infamous conspiracy, have been able as yet to penetrate thoroughly into this mystery of the Yellow Mask. Our common sense tells us that he must be wrong in taking his view of it, and that we must be right in taking ours ; but if we cannot give him actual, tangible proof of that—if we can only theorize, when he asks us for an explanation—it is but too plain, in his present condition, that every time we remonstrate with him on the subject we only fix him in his delusion more and more firmly."

"It is not for want of perseverance on my part," said d'Arbino, after a moment of silence, "that we are still left in the dark. Ever since the extraordinary statement of the coachman who drove the

woman home, I have been inquiring and investigating. I have offered a reward of two hundred scudi for the discovery of her; I have myself examined the servants at the palace, the night-watchman at the Campo Santo, the police-books, the lists of keepers of hotels and lodging-houses, to hit on some trace of this woman; and I have failed in all directions. If my poor friend's perfect recovery does indeed depend on his delusion being combated by actual proof, I fear we have but little chance of restoring him. So far as I am concerned, I confess myself at the end of my resources."

"I hope we are not quite conquered yet," returned the doctor. "The proofs we want may turn up when we least expect them. It is certainly a miserable case," he continued, mechanically laying his fingers on the sleeping man's pulse. "There he lies, wanting nothing now but to recover the natural elasticity of his mind; and here we stand at his bedside, unable to relieve him of the weight that is pressing his faculties down. I repeat it, Signor Andrea, nothing will rouse him from his delusion that he is the victim of a supernatural interposition, but the production of some startling, practical proof of his error. At present he is in the position of a man who has been imprisoned from his birth in a dark room, and who denies the existence of daylight. If we

cannot open the shutters, and show him the sky outside, we shall never convert him to a knowledge of the truth."

Saying these words, the doctor turned to lead the way out of the room, and observed Nanina, who had moved from the bedside on his entrance, standing near the door. He stopped to look at her, shook his head good-humouredly, and called to Marta, who happened to be occupied in an adjoining room.

"Signora Marta," said the doctor, "I think you told me some time ago, that your pretty and careful little assistant lives in your house. Pray does she take much walking exercise?"

"Very little, Signor Dottore. She goes home to her sister when she leaves the palace. Very little walking exercise indeed."

"I thought so! Her pale cheeks and heavy eyes told me as much. Now, my dear," said the doctor, addressing Nanina, "you are a very good girl, and I am sure you will attend to what I tell you. Go out every morning before you come here, and take a walk in the fresh air. You are too young not to suffer by being shut up in close rooms every day, unless you get some regular exercise. Take a good long walk in the morning, or you will fall into my hands as a patient, and be quite unfit to continue your attendance here.—Now, Signor Andrea, I am

ready for you.—Mind, my child, a walk every day in the open air, outside the town, or you will fall ill, take my word for it !”

Nanina promised compliance ; but she spoke rather absently, and seemed scarcely conscious of the kind familiarity which marked the doctor’s manner. The truth was, that all her thoughts were occupied with what he had been saying by Fabio’s bedside. She had not lost one word of the conversation while the doctor was talking of his patient, and of the conditions on which his recovery depended. “ Oh, if that proof which would cure him could only be found !” she thought to herself, as she stole back anxiously to the bedside when the room was empty.

On getting home that day she found a letter waiting for her, and was greatly surprised to see that it was written by no less a person than the master-sculptor, Luca Lomi. It was very short ; simply informing her that he had just returned to Pisa ; and that he was anxious to know when she could sit to him for a new bust—a commission from a rich foreigner at Naples.

Nanina debated with herself for a moment whether she should answer the letter in the hardest way, to her, by writing, or, in the easiest way, in person ; and decided on going to the studio and telling the master-sculptor that it would be impossible for her

to serve him as a model, at least for some time to come. It would have taken her a long hour to say this with due propriety on paper; it would only take her a few minutes to say it with her own lips—so she put on her mantilla again, and departed for the studio.

On arriving at the gate and ringing the bell, a thought suddenly occurred to her, which she wondered had not struck her before. Was it not possible that she might meet Father Rocco in his brother's workroom? It was too late to retreat now, but not too late to ask, before she entered, if the priest was in the studio. Accordingly, when one of the workmen opened the door to her, she inquired first, very confusedly and anxiously, for Father Rocco. Hearing that he was not with his brother then, she went tranquilly enough to make her apologies to the master-sculptor.

She did not think it necessary to tell him more than that she was now occupied every day by nursing duties in a sick-room, and that it was consequently out of her power to attend at the studio. Luca Lomi expressed, and evidently felt, great disappointment at her failing him as a model, and tried hard to persuade her that she might find time enough, if she chose, to sit to him, as well as to nurse the sick person. The more she resisted his arguments and

entreaties, the more obstinately he reiterated them. He was dusting his favourite busts and statues after his long absence with a feather-brush when she came in ; and he continued this occupation all the while he was talking—urging a fresh plea to induce Nanina to reconsider her refusal to sit, at every fresh piece of sculpture he came to ; and always receiving the same resolute apology from her, as she slowly followed him down the studio towards the door.

Arriving thus at the lower end of the room, Luca stopped with a fresh argument on his lips before his statue of Minerva. He had dusted it already, but he lovingly returned to dust it again. It was his favourite work—the only good likeness (although it did assume to represent a classical subject) of his dead daughter that he possessed. He had refused to part with it for Maddalena's sake ; and, as he now approached it with his brush for the second time, he absently ceased speaking, and mounted on a stool to look at the face near and blow some specks of dust off the forehead. Nanina thought this a good opportunity of escaping from further importunities. She was on the point of slipping away to the door with a word of farewell when a sudden exclamation from Luca Lomi arrested her.

“Plaster !” cried the master-sculptor, looking intently at that part of the hair of the statue which lay

lowest on the forehead. "Plaster here!" He took out his penknife, as he spoke, and removed a tiny morsel of some white substance from an interstice between two folds of the hair where it touched the face. "It *is* plaster!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Somebody has been taking a cast from the face of my statue!"

He jumped off the stool, and looked all round the studio with an expression of suspicious inquiry. "I must have this cleared up," he said. "My statues were left under Rocco's care, and he is answerable if there has been any stealing of casts from any one of them. I must question him directly."

Nanina seeing that he took no notice of her, felt that she might now easily effect her retreat. She opened the studio door, and repeated, for the twentieth time at least, that she was sorry she could not sit to him.

"I am sorry too, child," he said, irritably looking about for his hat. He found it apparently just as Nanina was going out; for she heard him call to one of the workmen in the inner studio, and order the man to say, if anybody wanted him, that he had gone to Father Rocco's lodgings.

CHAPTER VI.

THE next morning, when Nanina arose, a bad attack of headache, and a sense of languor and depression, reminded her of the necessity of following the doctor's advice, and preserving her health by getting a little fresh air and exercise. She had more than two hours to spare before the usual time when her daily attendance began at the Ascoli Palace; and she determined to employ the interval of leisure in taking a morning walk outside the town. La Biondella would have been glad enough to go too, but she had a large order for dinner-mats on hand, and was obliged, for that day, to stop in the house and work. Thus it happened, that when Nanina set forth from home, the learned Poodle, Scarammuccia, was her only companion.

She took the nearest way out of the town; the dog trotting along in his usual steady, observant way, close at her side, pushing his great rough muzzle, from time to time, affectionately into her hand, and trying hard to attract her attention, at intervals, by barking and capering in front of her. He got but

little notice, however, for his pains. Nanina was thinking again of all that the physician had said the day before by Fabio's bedside: and these thoughts brought with them others, equally absorbing, that were connected with the mysterious story of the young nobleman's adventure with the Yellow Mask. Thus preoccupied, she had little attention left for the gambols of the dog. Even the beauty of the morning appealed to her in vain. She felt the refreshment of the cool, fragrant air, but she hardly noticed the lovely blue of the sky, or the bright sunshine that gave a gaiety and an interest to the commonest objects around her.

After walking nearly an hour, she began to feel tired, and looked about for a shady place to rest in.

Beyond and behind her there was only the high road and the flat country; but by her side stood a little wooden building, half inn, half coffee-house, backed by a large, shady pleasure-garden, the gates of which stood invitingly open. Some workmen in the garden were putting up a stage for fireworks, but the place was otherwise quiet and lonely enough. It was only used at night as a sort of rustic Ranelagh, to which the citizens of Pisa resorted for pure air and amusement after the fatigues of the day. Observing that there were no visitors in the grounds, Nanina

ventured in, intending to take a quarter of an hour's rest in the coolest place she could find, before returning to Pisa.

She had passed the back of a wooden summer-house in a secluded part of the gardens, when she suddenly missed the dog from her side; and, looking round after him, saw that he was standing behind the summer-house with his ears erect and his nose to the ground, having evidently that instant scented something that excited his suspicion.

Thinking it possible that he might be meditating an attack on some unfortunate cat, she turned to see what he was watching. The carpenters engaged on the firework stage were just then hammering at it violently. The noise prevented her from hearing that Scaramuccia was growling, but she could feel that he was, the moment she laid her hand on his back. Her curiosity was excited, and she stooped down close to him, to look through a crack in the boards, before which he stood, into the summer-house.

She was startled at seeing a lady and gentleman sitting inside. The place she was looking through was not high enough up to enable her to see their faces; but she recognised, or thought she recognised, the pattern of the lady's dress, as one which she had noticed in former days in the Demoiselle Grifoni's show-room. Rising quickly, her eye detected a hole

in the boards about the level of her own height, caused by a knot having been forced out of the wood. She looked through it to ascertain, without being discovered, if the wearer of the familiar dress was the person she had taken her to be; and saw, not Brigida only, as she had expected, but Father Rocco as well. At the same moment, the carpenters left off hammering and began to saw. The new sound from the fire-work stage was regular and not loud. The voices of the occupants of the summer-house reached her through it, and she heard Brigida pronounce the name of Count Fabio.

Instantly stooping down once more by the dog's side, she caught his muzzle firmly in both her hands. It was the only way to keep Scarammuccia from growling again, at a time when there was no din of hammering to prevent him from being heard. Those two words, "Count Fabio," in the mouth of another woman, excited a jealous anxiety in her. What could Brigida have to say in connexion with that name? She never came near the Ascoli Palace—what right, or reason, could she have to talk of Fabio?

"Did you hear what I said?" she heard Brigida ask, in her coolest, hardest tone.

"No," the priest answered. "At least, not all of it."

“ I will repeat it then. I asked what had so suddenly determined you to give up all idea of making any future experiments on the superstitious fears of Count Fabio?”

“ In the first place, the result of the experiment already tried has been so much more serious than I had anticipated, that I believe the end I had in view in making it has been answered already.”

“ Well; that is not your only reason?”

“ Another shock to his mind might be fatal to him. I can use what I believe to be a justifiable fraud to prevent his marrying again; but I cannot burden myself with a crime.”

“ That is your second reason; but I believe you have another yet. The suddenness with which you sent to me last night, to appoint a meeting in this lonely place; the emphatic manner in which you requested—I may almost say ordered—me to bring the wax mask here, suggest to my mind that something must have happened. What is it? I am a woman, and my curiosity must be satisfied. After the secrets you have trusted to me already, you need not hesitate, I think, to trust me with one more.”

“ Perhaps not. The secret this time is, moreover, of no great importance. You know that the wax mask you wore at the ball was made in a plaster mould taken off the face of my brother’s statue.”

“ Yes, I know that.”

“ My brother has just returned to his studio ; has found a morsel of the plaster I used for the mould sticking in the hair of the statue ; and has asked me, as the person left in charge of his work-rooms, for an explanation. Such an explanation as I could offer has not satisfied him, and he talks of making further inquiries. Considering that it will be used no more, I think it safest to destroy the wax mask ; and I asked you to bring it here that I might see it burnt or broken up, with my own eyes. Now you know all you wanted to know ; and now, therefore, it is my turn to remind you that I have not yet had a direct answer to the first question I addressed to you when we met here. Have you brought the wax mask with you, or have you not ?”

“ I have not.”

“ And why ?”

Just as that question was put, Nanina felt the dog dragging himself free of her grasp on his mouth. She had been listening hitherto with such painful intensity, with such all-absorbing emotions of suspense, terror, and astonishment, that she had not noticed his efforts to get away, and had continued mechanically to hold his mouth shut. But now she was aroused by the violence of his struggles to the knowledge that, unless she hit upon some new means of quieting

him, he would have his mouth free, and would betray her by a growl.

In an agony of apprehension lest she should lose a word of the momentous conversation, she made a desperate attempt to appeal to the dog's fondness for her, by suddenly flinging both her arms round his neck, and kissing his rough hairy cheek. The stratagem succeeded. Scaramuccia had, for many years past, never received any greater marks of his mistress's kindness for him than such as a pat on the head or a present of a lump of sugar might convey. His dog's nature was utterly confounded by the unexpected warmth of Nanina's caress, and he struggled up vigorously in her arms to try and return it by licking her face. She could easily prevent him from doing this, and could so gain a few minutes more to listen behind the summer-house without danger of discovery.

She had lost Brigida's answer to Father Rocco's question; but she was in time to hear her next words.

"We are alone here," said Brigida. "I am a woman, and I don't know that you may not have come armed. It is only the commonest precaution on my part not to give you a chance of getting at the wax mask till I have made my conditions."

"You never said a word about conditions before."

“ True. I remember telling you that I wanted nothing but the novelty of going to the masquerade in the character of my dead enemy, and the luxury of being able to terrify the man who had brutally ridiculed me in old days in the studio. That was the truth. But it is not the less the truth, that our experiment on Count Fabio has detained me in this city much longer than I ever intended, that I am all but penniless, and that I deserve to be paid. In plain words, will you buy the mask of me for two hundred scudi ? ”

“ I have not twenty scudi in the world, at my own free disposal. ”

“ You must find two hundred if you want the wax mask. I don't wish to threaten—but money I must have. I mention the sum of two hundred scudi, because that is the exact amount offered in the public handbills by Count Fabio's friends for the discovery of the woman who wore the yellow mask at the Marquis Melani's ball. What have I to do but to earn that money if I please, by going to the palace, taking the wax mask with me, and telling them that I am the woman. Suppose I confess in that way ! they can do nothing to hurt me, and I should be two hundred scudi the richer. You might be injured, to be sure, if they insisted on knowing who made the wax model, and who suggested the ghastly disguise— ”

“Wretch! do you believe that my character could be injured on the unsupported evidence of any words from your lips?”

“Father Rocco! for the first time since I have enjoyed the pleasure of your acquaintance, I find you committing a breach of good manners. I shall leave you until you become more like yourself. If you wish to apologize for calling me a wretch, and if you want to secure the wax mask, honour me with a visit before four o’clock this afternoon, and bring two hundred scudi with you. Delay till after four, and it will be too late.”

An instant of silence followed; and then Nanina judged that Brigida must be departing, for she heard the rustling of a dress on the lawn in front of the summer-house. Unfortunately Scarammuccia heard it too. He twisted himself round in her arms and growled.

The noise disturbed Father Rocco. She heard him rise and leave the summer-house. There would have been time enough, perhaps, for her to conceal herself among some trees, if she could have recovered her self-possession at once; but she was incapable of making an effort to regain it. She could neither think nor move—her breath seemed to die away on her lips—as she saw the shadow of the priest stealing over the grass slowly, from the front to the back of

the summer-house. In another moment they were face to face.

He stopped a few paces from her, and eyed her steadily in dead silence. She still crouched against the summer-house, and still with one hand mechanically kept her hold of the dog. It was well for the priest that she did so. Scarammuccia's formidable teeth were in full view, his shaggy coat was bristling, his eyes were starting, his growl had changed from the surly to the savage note; he was ready to tear down, not Father Rocco only, but all the clergy in Pisa, at a moment's notice.

"You have been listening," said the priest, calmly. "I see it in your face. You have heard all."

She could not answer a word: she could not take her eyes from him. There was an unnatural stillness in his face, a steady, unrepentant, unfathomable despair in his eyes, that struck her with horror. She would have given worlds to be able to rise to her feet and fly from his presence.

"I once distrusted you and watched you in secret," he said, speaking after a short silence, thoughtfully, and with a strange tranquil sadness in his voice. "And now, what I did by you, you do by me. You put the hope of your life once in my hands. Is it because they were not worthy of the trust that discovery and ruin overtake me, and that you are the instrument

of the retribution? Can this be the decree of Heaven? or is it nothing but the blind justice of chance?"

He looked upward, doubtingly, to the lustrous sky above him, and sighed. Nanina's eyes still followed his mechanically. He seemed to feel their influence, for he suddenly looked down at her again.

"What keeps you silent? Why are you afraid?" he said. "I can do you no harm, with your dog at your side, and the workmen yonder within call. I can do you no harm, and I wish to do you none. Go back to Pisa; tell what you have heard, restore the man you love to himself, and ruin me. That is your work; do it! I was never your enemy even when I distrusted you. I am not your enemy now. It is no fault of yours that a fatality has been accomplished through you—no fault of yours that I am rejected as the instrument of securing a righteous restitution to the Church. Rise, child, and go your way, while I go mine, and prepare for what is to come. If we never meet again, remember that I parted from you without one hard saying or one harsh look—parted from you so, knowing that the first words you speak in Pisa will be death to my character, and destruction to the great purpose of my life."

Speaking these words, always with the same calmness which had marked his manner from the first, he looked fixedly at her for a little while—sighed again

—and turned away. Just before he disappeared among the trees, he said “Farewell;” but so softly that she could barely hear it. Some strange confusion clouded her mind as she lost sight of him. Had she injured him? or had he injured her? His words bewildered and oppressed her simple heart. Vague doubts and fears, and a sudden antipathy to remaining any longer near the summer-house, overcame her. She started to her feet, and, keeping the dog still at her side, hurried from the garden to the high road. There, the wide glow of sunshine, the sight of the city lying before her, changed the current of her thoughts, and directed them all to Fabio and to the future.

A burning impatience to be back in Pisa now possessed her. She hastened towards the city at her utmost speed. The doctor was reported to be in the palace when she passed the servants lounging in the courtyard. He saw, the moment she came into his presence, that something had happened; and led her away from the sick-room into Fabio’s empty study. There she told him all.

“You have saved him,” said the doctor, joyfully. “I will answer for his recovery. Only let that woman come here for the reward; and leave me to deal with her as she deserves. In the mean time, my dear, don’t go away from the palace on any account until I give you permission. I am going to send a

message immediately to Signor Andrea d'Arbino to come and hear the extraordinary disclosure that you have made to me. Go back to read to the Count, as usual, until I want you again ; but, remember you must not drop a word to him yet of what you have said to me. He must be carefully prepared for all that we have to tell him ; and must be kept quite in the dark until those preparations are made."

D'Arbino answered the doctor's summons in person ; and Nanina repeated her story to him. He and the doctor remained closeted together for some time after she had concluded her narrative and had retired. A little before four o'clock they sent for her again into the study. The doctor was sitting by the table with a bag of money before him, and d'Arbino was telling one of the servants that if a lady called at the palace on the subject of the handbill which he had circulated, she was to be admitted into the study immediately.

As the clock struck four Nanina was requested to take possession of a window-seat, and to wait there until she was summoned. When she had obeyed, the doctor loosened one of the window-curtains, to hide her from the view of any one entering the room.

About a quarter of an hour elapsed ; and then the door was thrown open, and Brigida herself was shown into the study. The doctor bowed, and d'Arbino

placed a chair for her. She was perfectly collected, and thanked them for their politeness with her best grace.

“ I believe I am addressing confidential friends of Count Fabio d’Ascoli ?” Brigida began. “ May I ask if you are authorized to act for the Count, in relation to the reward which this handbill offers ?”

The doctor, having examined the handbill, said that the lady was quite right, and pointed significantly to the bag of money.

“ You are prepared then,” pursued Brigida, smiling, “ to give a reward of two hundred scudi to any one able to tell you who the woman is who wore the yellow mask at the Marquis Melani’s ball, and how she contrived to personate the face and figure of the late Countess d’Ascoli ?”

“ Of course we are prepared,” answered d’Arbino, a little irritably. “ As men of honour, we are not in the habit of promising anything that we are not perfectly willing, under proper conditions, to perform.”

“ Pardon me, my dear friend,” said the doctor ; “ I think you speak a little too warmly to the lady. She is quite right to take every precaution. We have the two hundred scudi here, madam,” he continued, patting the money-bag. “ And we are prepared to pay that sum for the information we want. But” (here the doctor suspiciously moved the bag of scudi

from the table to his lap) "we must have proofs that the person claiming the reward is really entitled to it."

Brigida's eyes followed the money-bag greedily.

"Proofs!" she exclaimed, taking a small flat box from under her cloak, and pushing it across to the doctor. "Proofs! there you will find one proof that establishes my claim beyond the possibility of doubt."

The doctor opened the box, and looked at the wax mask inside it; then handed it to d'Arbino, and replaced the bag of scudi on the table.

"The contents of that box seem certainly to explain a great deal," he said, pushing the bag gently towards Brigida, but always keeping his hand over it. "The woman who wore the yellow domino was, I presume, of the same height as the late Countess?"

"Exactly," said Brigida. "Her eyes were also of the same colour as the late Countess's; she wore yellow of the same shade as the hangings in the late Countess's room, and she had on, under her yellow mask, the colourless wax model of the late Countess's face, now in your friend's hand. So much for that part of the secret. Nothing remains now to be cleared up but the mystery of who the lady was. Have the goodness, sir, to push that bag an inch or two nearer my way, and I shall be delighted to tell you."

“ Thank you, madam,” said the doctor, with a very perceptible change in his manner. “ We know who the lady was already.”

He moved the bag of scudi while he spoke back to his own side of the table. Brigida’s cheeks reddened, and she rose from her seat.

“ Am I to understand, sir,” she said, haughtily, “ that you take advantage of my position here, as a defenceless woman, to cheat me out of the reward ? ”

“ By no means, madam,” rejoined the doctor. “ We have covenanted to pay the reward to the person who could give us the information we required.”

“ Well, sir ! have I not given you part of it ? And am I not prepared to give you the whole ? ”

“ Certainly ; but the misfortune is, that another person has been beforehand with you. We ascertained who the lady in the yellow domino was, and how she contrived to personate the face of the late Countess d’Ascoli, several hours ago, from another informant. That person has consequently the prior claim ; and, on every principle of justice, that person must also have the reward. Nanina, this bag belongs to you—come and take it.”

Nanina appeared from the window-seat. Brigida, thunderstruck, looked at her in silence for a moment ; gasped out, “ That girl ! ”—then stopped again, breathless.

“That girl was at the back of the summer-house this morning, while you and your accomplice were talking together,” said the doctor.

D’Arbino had been watching Brigida’s face intently from the moment of Nanina’s appearance, and had quietly stolen close to her side. This was a fortunate movement; for the doctor’s last words were hardly out of his mouth before Brigida seized a heavy ruler lying, with some writing materials, on the table. In another instant, if d’Arbino had not caught her arm, she would have hurled it at Nanina’s head.

“You may let go your hold, sir,” she said, dropping the ruler, and turning towards d’Arbino with a smile on her white lips and a wicked calmness in her steady eyes. “I can wait for a better opportunity.”

With those words, she walked to the door; and, turning round there, regarded Nanina fixedly.

“I wish I had been a moment quicker with the ruler,” she said, and went out.

“There!” exclaimed the doctor: “I told you I knew how to deal with her as she deserved. One thing I am certainly obliged to her for: she has saved us the trouble of going to her house, and forcing her to give up the mask. And now, my child,” he continued, addressing Nanina, “you can go home, and one of the men servants shall see you safe to your own door, in case that woman should still be lurking

about the palace. Stop! you are leaving the bag of scudi behind you."

"I can't take it, sir."

"And why not?"

"*She* would have taken money!" Saying those words, Nanina reddened, and looked towards the door.

The doctor glanced approvingly at d'Arbino. "Well, well, we won't argue about that now," he said. "I will lock up the money with the mask for to-day. Come here to-morrow morning as usual, my dear. By that time I shall have made up my mind on the right means for breaking your discovery to Count Fabio. Only let us proceed slowly and cautiously, and I answer for success."

CHAPTER VII.

THE next morning, among the first visitors at the Ascoli Palace was the master-sculptor, Luca Lomi. He seemed, as the servants thought, agitated, and said he was especially desirous of seeing Count Fabio. On being informed that this was impossible, he reflected a little, and then inquired if the medical attendant of the Count was at the palace, and could be spoken with. Both questions were answered in the affirmative, and he was ushered into the doctor's presence.

"I know not how to preface what I want to say," Luca began, looking about him confusedly. "May I ask you, in the first place, if the work-girl named Nanina was here yesterday?"

"She was," said the doctor.

"Did she speak in private with any one?"

"Yes; with me."

"Then, you know everything?"

"Absolutely everything."

"I am glad at least to find that my object in wishing to see the Count can be equally well answered by

seeing you. My brother, I regret to say——” He stopped perplexedly, and drew from his pocket a roll of papers.

“ You may speak of your brother in the plainest terms,” said the doctor. “ I know what share he has had in promoting the infamous conspiracy of the Yellow Mask.”

“ My petition to you, and through you to the Count, is, that your knowledge of what my brother has done may go no further. If this scandal becomes public it will ruin me in my profession. And I make little enough by it already,” said Luca, with his old sordid smile breaking out again faintly on his face.

“ Pray, do you come from your brother with this petition ?” inquired the doctor.

“ No ; I come solely on my own account. My brother seems careless what happens. He has made a full statement of his share in the matter from the first ; has forwarded it to his ecclesiastical superior (who will send it to the archbishop), and is now awaiting whatever sentence they choose to pass on him. I have a copy of the document, to prove that he has at least been candid, and that he does not shrink from consequences which he might have avoided by flight. The law cannot touch him, but the church can—and to the church he has confessed. All I ask is, that he may be spared a public exposure. Such

an exposure would do no good to the Count, and it would do dreadful injury to me. Look over the papers yourself, and show them, whenever you think proper, to the master of this house. I have every confidence in his honour and kindness, and in yours."

He laid the roll of papers open on the table, and then retired with great humility to the window. The doctor looked over them with some curiosity.

The statement or confession began by boldly avowing the writer's conviction that part of the property which the Count Fabio d'Ascoli had inherited from his ancestors had been obtained by fraud and misrepresentation from the church. The various authorities on which this assertion was based were then produced in due order; along with some curious particles of evidence culled from old manuscripts, which it must have cost much trouble to collect and decipher.

The second section was devoted, at great length, to the reasons which induced the writer to think it his absolute duty, as an affectionate son and faithful servant of the church, not to rest until he had restored to the successors of the apostles, in his day, the property which had been fraudulently taken from them in days gone by. The writer held himself justified, in the last resort, and in that only, in using any means for effecting this restoration, except such as might involve him in mortal sin.

The third section described the priest's share in promoting the marriage of Maddalena Lomi with Fabio ; and the hopes he entertained of securing the restitution of the church property through his influence over his niece, in the first place, and, when she had died, through his influence over her child, in the second. The necessary failure of all his projects, if Fabio married again, was next glanced at ; and the time at which the first suspicion of the possible occurrence of this catastrophe occurred to his mind, was noted with scrupulous accuracy.

The fourth section narrated the manner in which the conspiracy of the Yellow Mask had originated. The writer described himself as being in his brother's studio, on the night of his niece's death, harassed by forebodings of the likelihood of Fabio's marrying again, and filled with the resolution to prevent any such disastrous second union at all hazards. He asserted that the idea of taking the wax mask from his brother's statue flashed upon him on a sudden, and that he knew of nothing to lead to it, except, perhaps, that he had been thinking, just before, of the superstitious nature of the young man's character, as he had himself observed it in the studio. He further declared that the idea of the wax mask terrified him at first ; that he strove against it as against a temptation of the devil ; that, from fear of yielding to this

temptation, he abstained even from entering the studio during his brother's absence at Naples, and that he first faltered in his good resolution when Fabio returned to Pisa, and when it was rumoured, not only that the young nobleman was going to the ball, but that he would certainly marry for the second time.

The fifth section related, that the writer, upon this, yielded to temptation rather than forego the cherished purpose of his life by allowing Fabio a chance of marrying again—that he made the wax mask in a plaster mould taken from the face of his brother's statue—and that he then had two separate interviews with a woman named Brigida (of whom he had some previous knowledge) who was ready and anxious, from motives of private malice, to personate the deceased Countess at the masquerade. This woman had suggested that some anonymous letters to Fabio would pave the way in his mind for the approaching impersonation, and had written the letters herself. However, even when all the preparations were made, the writer declared that he shrank from proceeding to extremities ; and that he would have abandoned the whole project, but for the woman Brigida informing him one day that a work-girl named Nanina was to be one of the attendants at the ball. He knew the Count to have been in love with this girl, even to the

point of wishing to marry her ; he suspected that her engagement to wait at the ball was preconcerted ; and, in consequence, he authorized his female accomplice to perform her part in the conspiracy.

The sixth section detailed the proceedings at the masquerade, and contained the writer's confession that, on the night before it, he had written to the Count proposing the reconciliation of a difference that had taken place between them, solely for the purpose of guarding himself against suspicion. He next acknowledged that he had borrowed the key of the Campo Santo gate, keeping the authority to whom it was intrusted in perfect ignorance of the purpose for which he wanted it. That purpose was to carry out the ghastly delusion of the wax mask (in the very probable event of the wearer being followed and inquired after) by having the woman Brigida taken up and set down at the gate of the cemetery in which Fabio's wife had been buried.

The seventh section solemnly averred that the sole object of the conspiracy was to prevent the young nobleman from marrying again, by working on his superstitious fears ; the writer repeating, after this avowal, that any such second marriage would necessarily destroy his project for promoting the ultimate restoration of the church possessions, by diverting Count Fabio's property, in great part, from his first

wife's child, over whom the priest would always have influence, to another wife and probably other children, over whom he could hope to have none.

The eighth and last section expressed the writer's contrition for having allowed his zeal for the church to mislead him into actions liable to bring scandal on his cloth; reiterated in the strongest language his conviction, that whatever might be thought of the means employed, the end he had proposed to himself was a most righteous one; and concluded by asserting his resolution to suffer with humility any penalties, however severe, which his ecclesiastical superiors might think fit to inflict on him.

Having looked over this extraordinary statement, the doctor addressed himself again to Luca Lomi.

"I agree with you," he said, "that no useful end is to be gained now by mentioning your brother's conduct in public—always provided, however, that his ecclesiastical superiors do their duty. I shall show these papers to the Count as soon as he is fit to peruse them, and I have no doubt that he will be ready to take my view of the matter."

This assurance relieved Luca Lomi of a great weight of anxiety. He bowed and withdrew.

The doctor placed the papers in the same cabinet in which he had secured the wax mask. Before he

locked the doors again he took out the flat box, opened it, and looked thoughtfully for a few minutes at the mask inside, then sent for Nanina.

“Now, my child,” he said, when she appeared, “I am going to try our first experiment with Count Fabio; and I think it of great importance that you should be present while I speak to him.”

He took up the box with the mask in it, and beckoning to Nanina to follow him, led the way to Fabio's chamber.

CHAPTER VIII.

ABOUT six months after the events already related, Signor Andrea d'Arbino and the Cavaliere Finello happened to be staying with a friend, in a seaside villa on the Castellamare shore of the Bay of Naples. Most of their time was pleasantly occupied on the sea, in fishing and sailing. A boat was placed entirely at their disposal. Sometimes they loitered whole days along the shore ; sometimes made trips to the lovely islands in the bay.

One evening they were sailing near Sorrento, with a light wind. The beauty of the coast tempted them to keep the boat close in shore. A short time before sunset, they rounded the most picturesque headland they had yet passed ; and a little bay, with a white sand beach, opened on their view. They noticed first a villa surrounded by orange and olive trees on the rocky heights inland—then a path in the cliff-side leading down to the sands—then a little family party on the beach, enjoying the fragrant evening air.

The elders of the group were a lady and gentle-

man, sitting together on the sand. The lady had a guitar in her lap, and was playing a simple dance-melody. Close at her side, a young child was rolling on the beach in high glee: in front of her a little girl was dancing to the music, with a very extraordinary partner in the shape of a dog, who was capering on his hind legs in the most grotesque manner. The merry laughter of the girl, and the lively notes of the guitar were heard distinctly across the still water.

“Edge a little nearer in shore,” said d’Arbino to his friend, who was steering; “and keep as I do in the shadow of the sail. I want to see the faces of those persons on the beach without being seen by them.”

Finello obeyed. After approaching just near enough to see the countenances of the party on shore, and to be barked at lustily by the dog, they turned the boat’s head again towards the offing.

“A pleasant voyage, gentlemen,” cried the clear voice of the little girl. They waved their hats in return; and then saw her run to the dog and take him by the fore-legs. “Play, Nanina,” they heard her say. “I have not half done with my partner yet.” The guitar sounded once more, and the grotesque dog was on his hind legs in a moment.

“I had heard that he was well again, that he had

married her lately, and that he was away with her and her sister, and his child by the first wife," said d'Arbino. "But I had no suspicion that their place of retirement was so near us. It is too soon to break in upon their happiness, or I should have felt inclined to run the boat on shore."

"I never heard the end of that strange adventure of the Yellow Mask," said Finello. "There was a priest mixed up in it, was there not?"

"Yes; but nobody seems to know exactly what has become of him. He was sent for to Rome, and has never been heard of since. One report is, that he has been condemned to some mysterious penal seclusion by his ecclesiastical superiors—another, that he has volunteered, as a sort of Forlorn Hope, to accept a colonial curacy among rough people, and in a pestilential climate. I asked his brother, the sculptor, about him a little while ago, but he only shook his head, and said nothing."

"And the woman who wore the yellow mask?"

She, too, has ended mysteriously. At Pisa she was obliged to sell off everything she possessed to pay her debts. Some friends of hers at a milliner's shop, to whom she applied for help, would have nothing to do with her. She left the city alone and penniless."

The boat had approached the next headland on the

coast while they were talking. They looked back for a last glance at the beach. Still the notes of the guitar came gently across the quiet water ; but there mingled with them now the sound of the lady's voice. She was singing. The little girl and the dog were at her feet, and the gentleman was still in his old place close at her side.

In a few minutes more the boat rounded the next headland, the beach vanished from view, and the music died away softly in the distance.

LAST LEAVES FROM LEAH'S DIARY.

3d June.—Our stories are ended: our pleasant work is done. It is a lovely summer afternoon. The great hall at the farm-house, after having been filled with people, is now quite deserted. I sit alone at my little work-table, with rather a crying sensation at my heart, and with the pen trembling in my fingers, as if I was an old woman already. Our manuscript has been sealed up and taken away; the one precious object of all our most anxious thoughts for months past—our third child, as we have got to call it—has gone out from us on this summer's day, to seek its fortune in the world.

A little before twelve o'clock last night, my husband dictated to me the last words of "the Yellow Mask." I laid down the pen, and closed the paper thoughtfully. With that simple action the work that we had wrought at together so carefully and so long, came to a close. We were both so silent and

still, that the murmuring of the trees in the night-air sounded audibly and solemnly in our room.

William's collection of stories has not, thus far, been half exhausted yet ; but those who understand the public taste and the interests of bookselling better than we, think it advisable not to risk offering too much to the reader at first. If individual opinions can be accepted as a fair test, our prospects of success seem hopeful. The doctor (but we must not forget that he is a friend) was so pleased with the two specimen stories we sent to him, that he took them at once to his friend, the editor of the newspaper ; who showed his appreciation of what he read in a very gratifying manner. He proposed that William should publish in the newspaper, on very fair terms, any short anecdotes and curious experiences of his life as a portrait-painter, which might not be important enough to put into a book. The money which my husband has gained from time to time in this way, has just sufficed to pay our expenses at the farm-house up to within the last month ; and now our excellent friends here say they will not hear anything more from us on the subject of the rent until the book is sold and we have plenty of money. This is one great relief and happiness. Another, for which I feel even more grateful, is, that William's eyes have gained so much by their long rest, that even the doctor is surprised at

the progress he has made. He only puts on his green shade now when he goes out into the sun, or when the candles are lit. His spirits are infinitely raised, and he is beginning to talk already of the time when he will unpack his palette and brushes, and take to his old portrait-painting occupations again.

With all these reasons for being happy, it seems unreasonable and ungracious in me to be feeling sad, as I do just at this moment. I can only say in my own justification, that it is a mournful ceremony to take leave of an old friend; and I have taken leave, twice over, of the book that has been like an old friend to me—once when I had written the last word in it, and once again when I saw it carried away to London.

I packed the manuscript up with my own hands this morning, in thick brown paper, wasting a great deal of sealing-wax I am afraid, in my anxiety to keep the parcel from bursting open in case it should be knocked about on its journey to town. Oh me, how cheap and common it looked, in its new form, as I carried it down stairs! A dozen pairs of worsted stockings would have made a larger parcel; and half-a-crown's worth of groceries would have weighed a great deal heavier.

Just as we had done dinner the doctor and the editor came in. The first had called to fetch the

parcel—I mean the manuscript: the second had come out with him to Appletreewick for a walk. As soon as the farmer heard that the book was to be sent to London, he insisted that we should drink success to it all round. The children, in high glee, were mounted up on the table, with a glass of currant wine a-piece; the rest of us had ale; the farmer proposed the toast, and his sailor-son led the cheers. We all joined in (the children included), except the editor—who being the only important person of the party, could not, I suppose, afford to compromise his dignity by making a noise. He was extremely polite, however, in a lofty way, to me, waving his hand and bowing magnificently every time he spoke. This discomposed me a little; and I was still more flurried when he said that he had written to the London publishers that very day, to prepare them for the arrival of our book.

“Do you think they will print it, sir?” I ventured to ask.

“My dear madam, you may consider it settled,” said the editor confidently. “The letter is written—the thing is done. Look upon the book as published already; pray oblige me by looking upon the book as published already!”

“Then the only uncertainty now is about how the

public will receive it?" said my husband, fidgeting in his chair, and looking nervously at me.

"Just so, my dear sir, just so," answered the editor. "Everything depends upon the public—everything, I pledge you my word of honour."

"Don't look doubtful, Mrs Kerby; there isn't a doubt about it," whispered the kind doctor, giving the manuscript a confident smack as he passed by me with it on his way to the door.

In another minute he and the editor and the poor cheap-looking brown paper parcel were gone. The others followed them out, and I was left in the hall alone.

Oh, Public! Public! it all depends now upon you! The children are to have new clothes from top to toe; I am to have a black silk gown; William is to buy a beautiful travelling colour-box; the rent is to be paid; all our kind friends at the farm-house are to have little presents, and our future way in this hard world is to be smoothed for us at the outset, if you will only accept a poor painter's stories which his wife has written down for him After Dark!

THE END.

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