



MARIETTA

T. ADOLPHUS TROLLOPE

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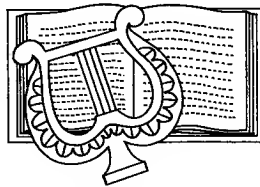
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In Memoriam

Ruth Candler Lovett

1935-1964



M A R I E T T A.

A Novel.

BY

T. ADOLPHUS TROLLOPE,

AUTHOR OF

“LA BEATA,” “FILIPPO STROZZI,” “A DECADE OF ITALIAN WOMEN,” ETC.

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MARIETTA.



CHAPTER I.

UP TO TOWN TO SEE THE LANDLORD.—IN TUSCANY.

A SPECIAL beauty, and a character peculiarly its own, was held in the days of Dante to mark the Tuscan valley of the Casentino; and its rich woods and abundant waters have still the same charm which they possessed five centuries ago, intensified by the glorifying halo which the genius of the world-poet has thrown around the spot. The "Casentino" is the name of that part of the upper valley of the Arno which lies between its source in the flank of Falterona—that stalwart bulwark of the main chain of the Apennine—and the point where the river, sweeping round the base of a long and lofty spur of the mountains called the Prato Magno, begins to shape its course towards Florence in a direction almost exactly the reverse of that in which it has been previously running. And this far jutting spur of the Apennine, which thus lies between the upper and the lower valleys of the river for a distance of about twenty-five miles, is in fact but the prolongation of the huge mass of Falterona itself. So that to come out of the Casentino to Florence, it is necessary to cross the neck of this high ground, striking the river again in its lower course, some twelve miles above the capital; unless, indeed, the traveller prefer to follow the entire devious course of the Arno, which would make his journey, from the centre of the Casentino to

Florence, some seventy or eighty miles, whereas by the excellent road across the mountains, the distance is not above forty.

It was by this latter road that farmer Carlo Palli, and his son, Giovanni, were travelling up to the capital on a May morning, in one of the earlier years of this century. *Farmer Palli*, I have said, because the familiar idea associated with that title conveys to an English reader, most readily, an adequate picture of the outward man and social status of the wealthy Casentino agriculturist. But, strictly speaking, Signor Palli was not a farmer, but a "Fattore," or agent, or land-steward. He cultivated and entirely managed the large estates of the Marchese Ferdinando Perini, but he did not farm any part of them; that relationship between landlord and cultivator being unknown in the Casentino, as in most of the other parts of Tuscany.

The estates, which had been acquired by the father of the present marquis during the time of the French occupation,—for the Perini were quite new men, turned up to the top of Fortune's wheel by some of the rapid and strange whirls characteristic of that period,—were situated not far from Poppi; the picturesque little town which, perched with its old castle on the top of an entirely isolated rock, in the very middle of the valley of the Casentino, seems to be the natural capital of the rich and smiling district beneath and around it.

The residence of the *Fattore* was raised a little above the level of the rich plains on the last slope of the mountain enclosing the valley. It consisted of a stern and melancholy looking square old feudal fortress tower, around which a confused crowd of barns, and stables, and outhouses, and pigsties seemed to be performing a *debrailé* dance, in mockery of the grey and gloomy senior in the centre of them;—a picturesque dwelling enough, and looking, as seen from a distance in the valley, more like a village than a single habitation. As *Querceto*—for that was the name of Signor Palli's homestead—was only a few miles from Poppi, and therefore situated in the very middle and most fertile part of the Casentino, it is clear that he had about twelve miles to travel before reaching the bottom of the long and steep ascent, which climbs the mountain ridge above described.

The Fattore, and his son, had started from home with the earliest light of the May morning, and it was not more than half-past six when they began to ascend the first of these zig-zags, by which the well-engineered road winds its way up the steep side of the Apennine. They had done the twelve miles in somewhat less than an hour and a half, and the active, well-fed, and well-groomed pony which drew the light *calessino*, in which they travelled, settled himself to his work against the collar, and stepped out as freshly and willingly as if he were but at the commencement of his day's journey. An excellent and most useful race of animals are these nimble and fine-limbed, yet hardy and enduring little Tuscan ponies; and the traveller who can succeed in emancipating himself from the laws and customs laid down for the forwarding of gentlemen tourists on their way, sufficiently to secure one of them and a *calessino*, instead of a *vetturino* with his regulation cumbrous carriage, with its two or four meagre horses, may calculate on leaving the "leathern convenience" at least half a day's journey behind him in four-and-twenty hours. But he must content himself with such a carriage as that in which Carlo Palli and his sturdy son are now coming up the hill. It consists of as light a pair of shafts, springs, and wheels as can be put together with sufficient strength to support a backless seat, just sufficient for two persons, fixed about fourteen or fifteen inches above the axle. Sometimes this simple vehicle has a light floor for the feet of the sitters; but more frequently the place of this is supplied by a network of rope for greater lightness. Neither the carriage itself nor the seat has any back, but the latter is generally made of great width, and supplied with a thick cushion, so as to resemble very much the seat in a Venetian gondola. There are many less comfortable seats in this world than that of a Tuscan *calessino* the reader may rest assured.

Had it been otherwise, indeed, it may be safely assumed that Signor Palli, the wealthy Fattore of Querceto, would have found some other means of conveying his portly person to the capital. But he felt not the least temptation to abandon the traditional *calessino*, the favourite means of locomotion with Tuscans of all classes. But *calessini*, like other things, may be made to indicate very clearly the standing and social condition

of their possessors; and that of Signor Palli was *point device* in every respect. The handsome little pony's harness was highly ornate. A long red worsted tassel hung on each side of his head. Every portion of the harness was studded with large-headed brass nails, as bright as rubbing could make them. The narrow little saddle, on which the shafts hung, rose into a peak nine inches high, similarly ornamented. The reins were of bright red worsted cord, half an inch in diameter. The body of the little carriage itself was not painted, but of the natural colour of the wood highly varnished; and the broad amply-cushioned seat was covered with a very handsome and gay-coloured bit of new-looking Brussels carpet. Very evidently to all Tuscan eyes the *calessino* of a well-to-do Fattore!

And the appearance of the occupants of the carriage was equally indicative of their being first-class specimens of their kind. The father might be about five-and-forty, and the son some twenty years of age; and they were so strikingly alike, that the only difference between them seemed to be the greater width, breadth, and circumference of the former. Face, shoulders, chest, stomach, hands, feet, had been developed into at least fifty per cent. of increased horizontal extension in the case of the senior. But they were the same middle height; they had the same ruddy bronzed hue of health in their round faces, the same short stiff black hair, the same large round bright brown eyes and brilliant teeth; which, together with frank-looking, well-formed mouths, and firm broad chins, entitled both of them to be considered unquestionably handsome men; and the same genial, good-humoured expression of countenance—human types, in short, as wholly unlike that which forms the popular English notion of an Italian as could well be; unlike also to the population of the cities and of the other parts of Italy, but very common among the rural classes in Tuscany.

Later in the day, when they have doffed their upper wrappings, such differences of costume as become the different stages they have reached on their life-journey may be remarked. But now, as they begin to mount the hill, both still sitting in the carriage, instead of getting down to warm themselves and ease the good little horse (for they are Tuscans and not Englishmen), the likeness of the two figures is completed by perfect similarity

of dress. For the daybreak hours are still cold in the Casentino, the climate of which is considerably more rigorous than that of the lower valley of the Arno; and father and son are both muffled to the eyes in huge chocolate-coloured great-coats, turned up and seamed with green, and garnished with high collars of black sheepskin.

“The seasons have never been the same they used to be, ever since the French dogs came into Tuscany,—may apoplexies catch them!” said the father, as the good little horse subsided into a walk, when he began to feel the hill. “I wish I may never cross the Consuma again, if it is not as cold this May morning as if it were January!”

“It is freshish,” replied his son, pulling up the fur collar of his coat around his ears. “But *I* was on the Consuma” (the highest point of the pass over the mountain is so called) “at four o’clock in the morning last January, and the hairs on my lip were so many icicles, per Bacco! They say the seasons *are* changing; but I for my part do not think the French have anything to do with the matter.”

“Changing!” grumbled the senior; “I should think they were! *altro!** Why, when I was your age, we used to harvest in the Casentino at the time they do in the Valdarno now-a-days.”

“Have a cigar?” rejoined his son, rummaging in the pocket of his great-coat for a twist of paper containing a dozen or so of the long, slender, black cigars made of German-grown tobacco, and supplied at something under a farthing apiece, by a paternal Government, to its people, by every class of whom they are consumed in incredible quantities. “Have a cigar?” said the young man, thinking, apparently, that the readiest mode of proving to his sire that the world was not yet gone altogether to the bad. “Here, I will give you a light,” he added, as he drew a match unprotected by any box from his waistcoat pocket, and proceeded to light it, holding the flame within the hollow of his two hands, used lantern-wise, in a manner that must have scorched any palms less hard than horn.

* *Altro*. “Other.” The sense of this ever-recurring Italian expression is, “other than,” or “more than, that;” and is equivalent to “I should think so!” “You may say that!” &c.

So the burly Fattore, who, as soon as the pony had begun to walk instead of trotting, had tied the reins to the iron rod that formed the side of the carriage seat, and sat with his arms folded across his broad chest, accepted the propitiatory offering; the young man lighted another cigar for himself, and they pursued their way up the zig-zag road between the chestnut woods, for a while in silence.

It is a singularly pretty bit of road, that gradual ascent from out of the Casentino to the high and bleak range of country which separates it from the Valdarno. The two valleys are strikingly different in the character of their scenery. In the upper valley, more closely confined and by higher mountains, the chestnut on the lower slopes, and the beech and pine on the higher flanks of the mountains, give the tone of colouring to the landscape, instead of the olive which, by its predominance, imparts the pervading grey tint so peculiarly characteristic of the scenery around Florence. The prevailing colour of the soil too in the Casentino is red, instead of the pale marl and stone tints of the Valdarno. The characteristic cypresses, which make so remarkable a feature in the remembrance of every visitor to Florence, are almost entirely absent from the landscape of the Casentino; and, in a word, the greater abundance of water, the greater prevalence of rain, and the colder climate, combine to give to the higher valley a greener, more pastoral, and less markedly southern character than that of the storied environs of Florence. To northern eyes, which have not yet acquired a feeling for the altogether peculiar and somewhat colourless beauties of Florentine landscape, the scenery of the Casentino would appear by far the more beautiful of the two singularly contrasted valleys. And, indeed, if the outward eye only be consulted, if memory and association be allowed no voice in the appreciation, the Casentino greenery and pine-clad mountain-tops must, perhaps, be allowed to eclipse the grey world and purple-hazed hills of the "Flower of Cities" on the Arno.

Before their cigars were finished, the Fattore and his son were emerging from the dusk and the shelter of the chestnut woods into the broad morning light and shelterless bleakness of the upper part of the hill, and the sun was rising in grand splendour over the tops of the main chain of the Apennine.

“I say, Babbo,” * quoth Giovanni, suddenly, “I shall have to sit upon the wheel presently. You should not take above three-quarters of the seat!”

“Three-quarters! *figliuolo mio!*” returned his father, with a great haw-haw; “if the saints give me grace to go on for the next five years as I have for the last, I shall certainly need the whole *calessino* to myself. To God be the praise! But, Madonna Santa! I am as empty as a friar’s wallet, when he starts from his convent. Wait till I get my breakfast, and then see about sitting on the wheel!”

“We’ll be at the Consuma in less than an hour now,” said the young man, “and then we will see whether old Aunt† Assunta has got a juicy ham from the oak woods round Prato Vecchio in prime cut.”

“And if she has not one in the primest cut, she shall cut a fresh one, per Bacco!”

“And the pretty Ninetta shall fry us such a platter of rashers.”

“Good! And you won’t poke your nose too close over the fire as she is doing it; do you hear, *figliuolo mio!* Aha! you thought I did not see, the last time we came over from Florence! Set a thief to catch a thief! It won’t do, Nanni,‡ my boy. Remember, we have other fish to fry in *that* pan than any that can be caught on the top of the Consuma!”

“Yes! I know all about it, Babbo! Your heart is set on making a match between me and cousin Laura; but don’t you set too much store on what, so far as I can see, there’s little chance of. Laura won’t look at me, as I have told you, and another too, before now. But as for little Ninetta there, at the Consuma, I never thought about her half a minute after she was out of my sight, pretty girl as she is.”

“That is all very well. But as for Laura,—we shall see! we shall see, *bambino mio!* But what about the wine?” he added suddenly, turning to a more immediately pressing matter;

* “Papa,” or “daddy,” rather; the universally used familiar address of a Tuscan son of any age or class to his father.

† The Tuscan familiar phrase in speaking of an old woman;—mother so and so, as we should say.

‡ Short for Giovanni.

"I cannot drink Aunt Assunta's vat-washings, you know, *perdinci!*"*

"Possess thy soul in peace, my father," returned the young man; "I have a flask of excellent Pomino, very carefully secured under the seat here. It is some of that which Tonino, the Bishop's Fattore, sent us as a present two years ago.† I hope the Bishop drinks as good."

"That, it seems to me, is truly too much to hope, my son," replied the jolly Fattore, with a sly chuckle. "'Twere odd indeed if a Fattore did not know the choicest barrel, and odder still if, knowing it, he did not prefer it for his own use. I suspect friend Tonino of no such stupidity; nor do I think he would send me aught save the best. And right glad shall I be to have a flask of it for breakfast this cold morning. Bravo, *figliuolo mio!* Good boy! If you steal a kiss from Ninetta while she is frying the ham, I won't look; always understanding, mind you, that the remembrance of it is to last no longer than you spoke of just now."

And by this time the steepest part of the ascent had been climbed; and the pony, unadmonished save by a word, started off at a brisk trot, and soon brought the travellers to a stand before the low-arched doorway of a long, low, whitewashed building, in which Assunta Dei and her pretty daughter received travellers, at the Consuma.

It was not long before the pony was comfortably enjoying his mess of meal in the stable, and the Fattore and his son were seated opposite each other, with a smoking pile of rashers, and the flask of Pomino between them. We will not inquire too anxiously into all that may have passed during their preparation in the frying-pan. It was undoubtedly natural enough that Nanni should get as close to the fire as he could after his cold drive; and his father was quite as good as his word; for he was

* *Perdinci* is a sort of euphuism used by those who scruple to say "Per Dio." It is elliptical for "Perdinci Bacco." And it has been suggested that the word was originally a corruption of "Per Dionisio Bacco." *Se non è vero, è ben trovato.*

† The small farm, which produces this choice wine, belongs to the Bishop of Fiesola, and is situated in the valley just under the Consuma on the right hand of our travellers.

busily engaged in inspecting the ham, from which Aunt Assunta was cutting the rashers, and insisting, with very perfect knowledge of the subject, in directing her knife to select the choicest portions of the joint.

For awhile the two travellers were wholly occupied with the business of "restoring" themselves after their cold morning drive. But when this had been satisfactorily accomplished, two-thirds of the generous Pomino still remained in the flask. For the legal contents of a Tuscan flask, be it known, are seven pounds' weight of wine, or, in words conveying a more definite idea to an English mind, somewhere about half a gallon. And the two Casentino rustics, though as sober men as any teetotalers, had no idea of leaving a drop of the precious liquor behind them. They were in no wise pressed for time; for they did not intend to reach Florence that night. The good little nag would have done the journey, but it would have been rather too long a one for him; and comfortable Carlo Palli had no notion of overworking either man or beast. Besides, the Fattore rather liked the opportunity of supping and passing the evening with his old friend the parish priest of San Clementi at Pelago, a little town about twelve miles from Florence. It was his usual custom to do so, on his visits to the capital. The journey was thus made an easy one, and the arrangement was pleasant to all parties concerned, the pony included. Besides, as the Fattore said, "What is the use of tiring oneself? Surely we have every reason to think, blessed be the Madonna, that to-morrow will be as good a day as to-day." So the farmer and his son had plenty of time to finish their flask of wine at leisure, while the pony rested after his morning's stage.

"Nanni, my son," began the Fattore, as they sat with the flask between them, "to do thee justice, I don't know a boy just out of his teens with a better judgment in the matter of a flask of Chianti or Pomino than thou hast; but truly in some things thou art little better than a gaby."

"May be!" replied Nanni, in no wise nettled; "this wine is the right thing any how. I am safe to know that. As for the other things, I suppose I am as you say, for cousin Laura told me exactly the same thing the last time I was in Florence."

"Humph! She did, did she? And thereupon thou showedst thy wisdom by concluding that the girl will none of thee! Now listen to me, *figliuolo mio*. If the noble and wealthy Marchese, my respected master, had a son of thy inches, and as much of a gaby, we will say, as thou, dost thou think that Laura would say him nay?"

"How can I tell?" returned Nanni; "I would say no ill of Laura. But titles and riches do dazzle girls, we all know."

"Don't talk to me about titles," answered his father; "they are coin that can buy very little now-a-days, in the Tuscan market at least. But if my brother Beppe had to choose for his daughter between his nephew Nanni Palli on the one hand, and the Marchese Perini's heir on the other, I know which he would choose. But then elderly jewellers, who have done a good trade in money lending for the last ten years, are not apt, I suppose, to be dazzled, as thou sayest, by wealth."

"I should have thought uncle Beppe a man to look sharply after the main chance, I confess," said Nanni; "and that is why I can't think, that in such a case as you suppose, he would choose as you say."

"Can't think! Then thank the saints that thou hast got a father who can think for thee. Now listen; for it's about time that thou shouldst know which stone the cat lies under. Thou knowest the fat lowland meadows of the Stagneto, I suppose?"

"*Altro!* All along the bank of the river from the Fossa del Prato to the chapel of San Simone. I should think so. The best land on the estate."

"Much the best," said the Fattore, smacking his lips as he set his glass down with a ring after a long draught; "I am glad thou knowest that much. Well! the Stagneto meadows will be found to stand in the registrar's books, not in the name of the noble Marchese Perini, but in that of one Carlo Palli, a hard-working old fellow, tolerably well known in those parts."

"You don't mean that you have bought the Stagneto?" asked his son.

"Bought the land and paid the hard cash seven years ago. Dost thou chance to remember the Vigna del Vescovo, and the

tillage land stretching away behind it up to the edge of the chestnut wood?"

"To be sure. I set aside half a dozen barrels of last year's vintage off the Vigna del Vescovo for home use only yesterday. The best wine on the property."

"Very right, my boy. Who has so good a right to the best as the owner? The Vigna del Vescovo, and the corn lands behind it, and the wood behind them, changed hands some five years since. They are mine now."

"Why! father, it is half the estate!" cried Nanni, opening his large handsome brown eyes to their widest extent.

"Well," said his father, "if you add the home close and the old house which I bought last year, I suppose it is about half,—about half; and the best half certainly."

"Then, after all," rejoined Nanni, "my father's heir, and the Marchese's heir, whoever he may be, might seem to Uncle Beppe not so very different in point of expectations."

"That don't quite follow, Nanni, I think! There's the title, you know!" said his father, with a sudden affectation of humility. "Still, I take it, brother Beppe, if I know him, would be apt to think more about the title-deeds to the other half of the lands. And do you know, between you and me, I have a strong idea that Beppe Palli, the jeweller, on the Ponte Vecchio, has some very special knowledge respecting those same title-deeds."

"What should he know about them? He is no lawyer," said Nanni, altogether mystified.

"My own idea is that they are in his own strong box, in the iron safe let into the wall in the little room behind the shop on the pier of the bridge," returned the Fattore, drily.

"Why should they be there? What for? I don't understand," asked the young man, innocently.

"Why, *perdinci Bacco!* thou art a gaby after all, *figliuolo mio,*" returned his father. "Did you ever know a man to ruin himself half, and then stop? Do you suppose such an animal as Perini, who could spend all the money in Rome, but never earn a penny, who is no more good on earth than a stoat, and deserves nailing to a barn door, just as much, do you suppose that such a man could come to any end except beggary?"

Che, che! * If Carlo Palli owns one half of the Perini estates, Beppe Palli owns the other half; or may do so, as soon as he thinks fit to foreclose."

"And the *padrone?*" asked Nanni, with a little touch of anxiety in his voice.

"*Padrone!*" echoed the Fattore, with such a sneer as only an Italian can put into a single word; "Padrone! The Marchese Perini is a beggar, I tell you—or but little better, at this hour."

"But, father," returned Nanni, hesitatingly and timidly, "are not you afraid that is, will not people say that the Marchese was ruined, if not *by* being in your hands, at least *while* he was in your hands and in Uncle Beppe's?"

"People will say," and as he spoke the farmer raised his head and shoulders from their easy slouch over the table into a fiercely erect attitude, while his jolly round face assumed an expression of which it might have been supposed incapable, and his eye gleamed with passion,—“People will say, Giovanni Palli, that the worthless man was ruined because he was worthless; . . . that he was born to be ruined, and all the saints could not have saved him from it; that the land should belong to those who can and will work on it, and manage it, and not to ignorant gamblers, incapable of even learning the produce of an acre of vineyard, or the day's work of a yoke of oxen. They will say, that the fool Perini has gone the way they are all going, the whole kit of them up there in Florence, turning night into day, and too idle to visit their own estates from year's end to year's end. The land is going from the Signorini to the Fattori, and all right it should! Why, is it not the same thing all round? Look at Borini, the Fattore of the Guadi estates there below Arezzo! Look at old Ambrosio Tani in the Chianti! Look at our friends Bastiano Barbani, and his brother Giacomo, in the Valdarno here below us! Is not the same thing going on all over Tuscany? And right it should! . . . So now,” he added, relapsing into his attitude and manner of easy *bon-homme*, “finish the flask, give me another cigar, tell Assunta

* “What! what!” an exclamation for ever in the mouth of a Tuscan, and generally equivalent to “Pooh! pooh!”

to give us some coffee, go and look after the pony, and don't talk or think any more nonsense about the Marchese, or about Laura."

So Nanni got up, and set himself dutifully to obey all these various behests of his sire,—the first to the letter, and the more difficult last injunction, as far as it was in his power to comply with it. It was impossible for him, as he went out to the stable to see if the little horse had eaten his allowance of meal, and had been properly groomed, not to have his head very full of a very unwonted crowd of thoughts jostling each other in his brain, and making very puzzling confusion in that ordinarily placid and undisturbed mind. This sudden revelation of his father in the character of a wealthy landed proprietor, and of himself in perspective in the same position! He had been accustomed from his birth to all the comfort and careless well-being that abundance and quite easy circumstances could give. But to be a gentleman of large estate was something very different from this! As to the means by which such a result had been attained, notwithstanding the doubt which had on the first hearing of the news rushed up from the bottom of his heart to the surface, it is not to be supposed that he was more delicately scrupulous than was the general tone of public feeling in the world in which he lived. It was quite true, that the process by which the land was passing from the imbecile hands of an utterly worthless and incapable aristocracy into those of the often dishonest, but often also merely sharp, active, and shrewd agents, who managed their affairs, was going on rapidly on all sides. Hardly a year passed without some noble name, sometimes fine old historic names written in every page of the history of the old Republic, sinking out of sight like a falling star out of the firmament, and that of some new man of plebeian name and extraction rising into the social heavens in its place, and on its ruins. And the old names were wonderfully quickly forgotten;—all the quicker, if, as in the case of the Marchese Perini, the ruined man was himself but the creature of yesterday;—and the new names were admitted to take their places in the society of the rich, and in the respect of the world in general, with very smooth-sailing facility. Nanni was contented to suppose that it *was* all right, as his father said;—and thought "no more nonsense" on this head.

And then his mind reverted to that other subject, on which he was commanded to think as sensibly. As to the views of his father and his uncle, the matter was now all clear enough, and it was easy to think sensibly with regard to that portion of the subject. He was the only child of Carlo Palli, who owned half the Perini property. His cousin Laura was the only child of Beppe Palli, who held mortgages over the other half. Yes! the thing was clear enough! And here Nanni's agricultural mind went off into a whole series of very rational agronomical reflections on the pity and disadvantages of not keeping the property united. The large and admirable accommodation of all kinds at the homestead! what would the other half of the estate do without them? Then what murder to cut off the little torrent, which came down through the upper pastures from the meadows, which so needed its waters! etca. etca. etca. Yes! yes! His father was right enough, the lands ought to be kept together . . . and indeed were necessary for the support of the family name, now that it was to become that of "*Signoroni di alto ceto*."*

And thus far our friend Nanni thought "no nonsense."

But then his thoughts reverted to Laura, and he set himself to consider whether he was indeed desperately and irremediably in love with her. The fact of his agricultural speculations having spontaneously preceded the thoughts of his cousin in his mind did not seem to enlighten him on the subject, as it perhaps might have enlightened a more practical psychological inquirer. Nanni reflected on Laura's beauty, called up in his mind's eye the graceful picture of her light and sylph-like figure, thought of the sweet music of her silvery laugh, compared her by a rapid *coup d'œil* of memory with all the other girls he knew, and finally decided that he certainly was, and fully purposed being, madly in love with his cousin.

But what of Laura's feelings towards him? She always welcomed him kindly, and seemed glad to see him when he came to Florence; but that, he felt, was not exactly what was needed. There was no forgetting the number of times he had been mortified by the ring of that silvery laughter, directing its music, not with him at others, but with others at him. He remembered

* "Great gentlemen of the high class."

all the little railleries, and even the frank good-humour--too frank by half for his aspirations. He could not unsay to himself what he had said to his father, that Laura would never "look at him." At all events she never "had looked at him" yet. Would the change in his position and prospects make a change in this respect? That is what remains to be seen, said Nanni to himself, as he sauntered into the little inn, to rejoin his father.

"Pony ready, Nanni, my boy?" said his father. "I believe I have had just the smallest taste in the world of a nap. Have you got that place on the wheel ready? for there is a jolly lot of ham and wine here that will want room on the seat. Haw! haw! haw!"

So they started on their way down the long descent into the Valdarno, with the deep-shadowed woods of Vallombrosa on their left, and the more distant mighty mass of Falterona on their right; and the pony trotted warily down the hill with the utmost discretion, though the farmer, who held the reins, was fast asleep within five minutes after leaving the inn, while Nanni, with a cigar in his mouth, was absorbed in meditations on the various considerations which would make it "murder" to separate the two halves of the Perini property.

And nothing more was said between the father and son that evening; for the former slept nearly all the way to Pelago, where they spent the evening and night under the hospitable roof of the priest of the church of San Clemente.

On the next morning early they purposed starting to do the twelve miles which remained of their journey, so as to have the day before them when they arrived at Florence.

CHAPTER II.

THE PONTE VECCHIO.

EARLY the next morning, but not so early as had been their start on the day before, the Fattore and his son were again on the road; and the stout little pony was as fresh and willing as ever. An hour and a half sufficed for the twelve miles to

Florence, and that notwithstanding the last four or five had to be performed amid a crowd of vehicles of all sorts, all bound for the city, among which the stout farmer had to find his intricate way by a series of dodgings and crossings enough to break the heart of a more artistic whip, to whom the English "rule of the road" is the golden rule of life.

Despite, however, all the activity of hand and eye needed to preserve the fragile little *calessino* from constant risks of collision with market carts and timber waggons laden with the produce of the forests of Camaldoli, the farmer found time to have a little further talk with his son before they reached the gate of the city.

"I think I won't go to Beppe's this morning, Nanni," began his father; "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll get a bit of breakfast at the Pappagallo,* and I'll go to my brother on the bridge, and you shall go and make Laura a visit in the Borgo de' Greci."

"Had I not better go with you to Uncle Beppe's shop, Babbo," said his son; "I am afraid it will be too early for Laura."

"Not a bit of it! Show her that you make yourself at home in your uncle's house. Besides, I have business to speak with Beppe on, that needs only four eyes for the doing of it."

"Is it about the affairs of the Marchese, Babbo?" inquired Nanni.

"It is, *figliuolo mio*; and I don't mind telling you the purport of it. It is only the old story. The spendthrift wants more money;—always the same cry—money, money, money! He'd bankrupt the mint in a month, if you'd let him! The old story! But the difference this time is,—where is the money to come from?"

"But if, as you say, he is already a beggar?" suggested his son.

"Pretty nearly, my boy! Pretty nearly, I said. He is not quite at the end of his tether. When he is, I take it, it will pull him up rather sharp."

* "The Parrot," a hostelry behind the Palazzo Vecchio, much used by the country people, especially those from Signor Palli's part of the country.

“ But if one half of the estate is sold, and the other mortgaged all it will bear ?” again argued Nanni.

“ Nay ! you are too much in a hurry, Nanni ;—too hard upon the poor man. There is the palace in Florence—one of the real grand old palaces, bought by his father near about the same time that he bought the estate—Palazzo Perini, as he calls it, and Palazzo Lunardi as all the rest of Florence calls it. The Palazzo Lunardi,” he added, after a little pause, “ is worth twenty thousand crowns if it’s worth a soldo ;—dirt cheap at twenty thousand crowns !”

“ And has the Palazzo no liabilities on it ?” asked the young man.

“ As yet, none. He has left that for the last mouthful ! Your Florence Signorone always parts with the land first, and holds by the palacè to the last.”

“ And if he wants money now, then, it must be raised on that security ?”

The Fattore nodded his head slowly three distinct nods, and then said :

“ That’s just it, my boy ! a lawyer could not have stated the case more exactly.”

“ And will Uncle Beppe lend him on mortgage of the Palazzo ?”

“ That remains to be seen and to be talked about. And now you know what I am going to Florence for, and what I want to talk to your uncle about in the little room behind the shop on the bridge. Madonna Santa ! To think of all the talks with four eyes,* and no more, that have gone on in that little room, and the long faces that have come out of it ! And now, *figliuolo mio*, to show you that we will henceforth have no secrets between us, you tell me what Laura says to you at home in the Borgo de’ Greci, and I’ll tell you what her father says to me in the shop on the Ponte Vecchio. But mark ! not a word of all I have told you to Laura, as yet.”

“ All right, Babbo !” said Nanni ; “ but it’s nothing new or secret that I shall have to tell. Here we are at the gate, and, *per Bacco !* may wait an hour to get through, unless we bustle for it.”

* “ A quattr’ occhi ” is the familiar Tuscan phrase for a tête-à-tête.

About an hour afterwards the father and son parted at the door of the Pappagallo, where they were both, as well as the pony, well known and warmly welcomed guests, on their separate errands, as arranged.

We will, for the present, leave to their own devices the lovers, or, as perhaps it might be more accurate to say, the representatives of the two halves of the great Perini property, and proceed to be present at the interview between the two brothers on the Ponte Vecchio.

Everybody who has ever seen Florence has seen and must remember the Ponte Vecchio. There is not a more striking or characteristic bit in the whole city, than that strangely quaint and picturesque specimen of the arrangement so common in the old-world cities of Europe,—a bridge turned into a street by the erection of houses on either side of it, in the place of the modern parapet. Old London Bridge went the way of all the works of human hands, and even its successor has fallen before the onward march of improvement. But things do not move so quickly in Florence,—or, at least, have not hitherto done so. And even in these latter days, when young Florence is competing with other cities in the race of embellishment and modern-idea'd changes, if all the city were polled on the question of substituting a new fabric, however fine, for the venerable Ponte Vecchio, with its double row of queer little old-fashioned shops, and still queerer little dwellings over them, I hardly think that a dozen voices would be found in favour of the change.

There is a break in the row of houses on either side at the crown of the bridge, which adds much to its picturesque beauty. All the Prout-like charm of its old, many-angled and many-tinted buildings, is by this means combined with that of a most lovely view in both directions, either up or down the river. In the latter direction there is the architecturally beautiful Ponte Santa Trinita, and the stately line of the palaces on the Lungarno for foreground; and for background, first the rich, deep greenery of the Cascine, and far away in the distance the admirably varied line of the high Carrara mountains. Looking up the river, the rich foreground, composed of the grand architectural masses of Vasari's Uffizj on the left hand, and the

long line of the backs of the dwellings, rising sheer out of the water, and having their fronts in the Via dei Bardi, on the right hand,—an assemblage of objects shabby enough in the eye of a reforming and beautifying architectural surveyor, but invaluable in that of a sketcher,—is backed by the steep but garden-covered slope of the hill of St. Miniato, and, after including the charmingly picturesque outline and colouring of the old city corn-mills, with their weir across the river, is shut in by the vine-covered tops of the Chianti hills. All this feast of beauty is offered to whosoever stands on the top of the Ponte Vecchio, and will take the trouble of only turning his head to the right and to the left to receive and enjoy it.

On the up-stream side of the bridge, the discontinuation of the houses, which shows the above landscape, does not, as on the opposite side, involve a complete discontinuation of building. The space left between the houses on that side is spanned by an open arcade of three arches, on the top of which is carried that strange corridor which unites the Palazzo Vecchio with the Pitti. This characteristic contrivance of those latter days in Florence, when it was a matter of course that the Sovereign should be hated by and should fear his subjects, was built when, in place of the old rulers of the republic dwelling in the Palazzo della Signoria, a despot had his home in the Palazzo Pitti. The long private passage in question may be seen coming out from a corner of the former building, and by a bridge so high in air as not to catch the eyes of the passers in the intervening street beneath, unless they look absolutely skywards, gaining the neighbouring pile of the Uffizj. The vast extent of this edifice helps the mysterious passenger,—spy, *sbirro*, headsman, assassin, lady fair, or Ducal Highness, less “Serene,” mayhap, than usual,—on his secret way as far as the up-stream end of the narrow Via degli Archibusieri, which skirts the river from the Uffizj to the Ponte Vecchio. The private way is carried along the tops of the high houses of this street, crosses it by an arch at the further end at the corner of the bridge, creeps along the roofs of the houses supported by its time-defying piers, spans the interval at the crown of the bridge by means of the arcade above mentioned, resumes its course along the top of the bridge houses, leaps another street, the Via dei Bardi, and

so pursues its way to the Pitti, passing through the church of Santa Felicità, *en route*, and piously opening to the traveller by this secret road a view of the high altar, and affording him an opportunity, possibly much needed, of doing a hurried genuflection, and getting—or, at least, asking—a blessing on his errand. Finally, this most melodramatic of passages reaches its destination in most appropriately melodramatic style, entering the Pitti by a concealed door, opening in the niche of a colossal statue, which most effectually hides it, and would hide at need any one entering from it.

But the scene from the crown of the old bridge was as fair in God's daylight, whatever steps were skulking along the secret path above; and the variety of mysterious affairs and meetings—queer enough some of them—which took place in the quaint little houses on the bridge, interfered in no wise with the palace secrets, their so-near neighbours.

In the old republican days, when there was no secret passage overhead, there was also little business of a secret nature in the buildings below. For in those times the bridge tenements were occupied by the Florence butchers—men whose affairs do not lie much in the way of secret transactions. But from the time when a Medicean despot decreed that the bridge should no longer be inhabited by butchers, but that in their place the goldsmiths and jewellers of the city should congregate there, the case was otherwise.

Many a spendthrift heir has, in those queer-shaped little back rooms hanging over the river, urged the certainty of his speedy succession to the coffers of a sexagenarian sire, on the consideration of some cautious septuagenarian Shylock, who could not see the force of his arguments. Many a desperate gambler has there found the means of staking the last fragment of his ancestral possessions on a card. Many a fair and noble dame, with her heart-pulses louder than her light footfall on the flagstones, as she crept in the dusk hour to the bridge instead of to the confessional, has come thither with heirloom gems in her hand, on errands the least blabbing of which would have made it preferable to her to throw herself from the Shylock-den into the dark rushing water beneath it, rather than stay to complete her bargain.

“Mysteries of Florence! being annals of the back shops on the Ponte Vecchio!” Phew! what a record (if one could but get it) of passions raging torrent-wise through every channel, save the normal one! of unrevealed smirchings of noble names and scutcheons, still deemed stainless! of the all too-quickly-revealed final ruin and obliteration of others! of heroic female devotion suicidally revenging itself for having been made incompatible with duty by flinging all its pearls before swine! of every form of human vice and meanness, and of some forms of human virtue and heroism!

A place more characteristically adapted to be the scene of such a series of histories than the interiors of these strange little houses, unlike any other dwellings in the world, it is difficult to conceive. In front a shop window, contrived after the fashion of the half-stall shop windows of a couple of centuries ago, and closed at night by an enormous horizontally-hinged shutter, projecting out from the front of the building some two or three feet, contains the chief part of the stock in trade of the dealer. A very narrow door, just wide enough for one average-sized figure to pass, is contiguous to the window, and gives access to the shop. This is very small, and in most instances is occupied by the bench and tools of one or two working jewellers rather than by the manufactured results of their labour. A wonderfully small and narrow doorway opposite to that opening on the street leads to the back room, still smaller than the shop, but constituting the sanctum and main scene of the business of those denizens of the bridge, who add a less avowable trade to that of a manufacturing jeweller and goldsmith. In those houses which are built on the massive piers of the bridge, these back rooms stand on the jutting portion of the pier, take the irregular triangular or other queer form of the substructure which supports them, and are somewhat larger than those of the houses which rest on its arches. In the case of these latter, the little back dens are supported by beams projecting in a slanting position out of the solid stonework of the bridge, and are thus suspended over the stream, to which a trap-door in the floor of them would give direct access.

It was in one of the somewhat better houses, standing on one of the piers, on the up-stream side of the bridge, that Giuseppe

Palli, the jeweller, and very sufficiently well-known wealthy money-lender, dwelt at the period of this story.

Giuseppe Palli, the brother of our friend the Fattore, and the father of one of the most beautiful girls in Florence, was by no means one of the worst of his tribe. On the contrary, he was probably one of the best of them; and there was little, if anything, in his transactions, that required mystery or secrecy, as far at least as *he* was concerned. He held it evident, that when a man wanted money very much, it was a very sufficient proof that the risk of lending it to him was great; and he dealt in risks, understood the nature and qualities of them, and priced them accordingly, with very tolerable fairness. The old Catholic doctrine that no usance whatever could be unscrupulously received for the use of money, cast a deep shade of infamy over the trade of a money-lender, which, as is invariably the result in similar cases, soon taught the majority of the members of a class pronounced infamous by the popular voice to become justly deserving of infamy. Long after the Church had ceased to denounce the taking of interest actively, though, of course, her doctrine on the matter could not be changed, the old stigma remained, and continued to produce the old effects; and even yet the obsolete unreasoning absurdity is not so thoroughly extinguished as to enable men to perceive that it must be equally sinful to take payment for the use of a house as for the use of a sum of money.

So Giuseppe Palli, the well-known accommodating jeweller on the Ponte Vecchio, suffered in some degree from the ill reputation of his trade; though in truth a gentleman in difficulties might have fallen into far more dangerous hands in certain other of the little rooms hanging over the Arno, and no man could say aught worse of him, than that he demanded the same punctuality from his debtors that he practised in his dealings with them, and exacted the pound of flesh, which was by contract his, at the time when it became due. It is true that the value of such risks as friend Beppe dealt in, cannot be ascertained as regularly and accurately as that of a bale of calico or a bushel of corn; and true, also, that the needs and circumstances of his customers were of a nature which prevented them from availing themselves of the protection afforded by the competition of an open market. And both these circumstances must ever tend to

make any trade affected by them a less strictly honest one than others carried on under different conditions. Still I do not think that on the whole Beppe Palli's clients reached their final ruin much more quickly than in the necessary and legitimate order of things : their vices would have brought it about. He had realised a handsome fortune, certainly, in the course of some five-and-twenty years. But he was a careful and industrious man, rising up early and late taking rest ; always gave Mother Church her dues, and kept two wax candles burning before the picture of the Virgin in a conspicuous place in the *front* shop ; so there was a blessing on his industry ; and he thrived accordingly.

He was by ten years the jolly-looking Fattore's senior ; and the two were as strikingly contrasted in outward appearance and manner as any two men could well be. Indeed, they were but half brothers, having been the children of different mothers. But (being both more than well-to-do in the world) they always called themselves and felt as brothers. While the burly Fattore might have passed for an Englishman, if you had dressed him like one, the jeweller could never have been taken for aught save the pure-blooded scion of a Latin race. His figure was tall and slender, and his face was long and slender. There was nothing really noble in the features of it ; but there was much that we northerners are wont to consider aristocratic. The forehead was high and white, but extremely narrow. The Roman nose was very long and very slender, hooked at the end, and with a delicately-cut nostril. A large and magnificently brilliant, but very deep-set eye, under a well-defined thick black eyebrow ; hollow cheeks, with prominent and high cheek bones ; thick and fleshy, but firm and remarkably well-cut lips, with a very strongly marked cleft in the lower one ; a perfectly well-shaved face and lip ; a long and pointed chin ; a small head, with very little back to it ; long, slender, white hands ; irreproachably white linen, and neat toilet of never-varying finest black cloth coat and trousers, and black satin waistcoat ; long, narrow, well-polished shoes and black silk stockings ; together with a gold double eyeglass, more frequently in his hand than on the bridge of his nose. Such was the "*signalement*" of Signor Giuseppe Palli, drawn with an accuracy which, I flatter myself, might

move the envy of a passport clerk. As for his general manner and deportment, it is sufficient to say, that he looked a good deal older than he was, and that, if he had been presented to a mixed society as senior blue stick in waiting to the King of Spain, or as the General of the Jesuits in mufti, everybody would have been struck by the perfect congruity of his character and appearance.

He and the Fattore knew and appreciated each other thoroughly, and valued each other highly. But though both were men of shrewd and somewhat more than ordinary intelligence, and though Carlo, the younger, was quite as strongly persuaded in his own heart that he, Carlo, was the better and nobler man of the two, as Giuseppe was that *he* was a much superior creature to his rustic brother, yet it so happened that the latter, do what he would, could not help being imposed on and morally walked over and patronised by his dignified and courtly brother.

“If I could but get Beppe into a fustian jacket, brown kersey shorts, and ribbed worsted stockings, I am sure I could crow the loudest!” the worthy farmer said once to his wife. And it is very probable that he was right. But the jeweller never gave him or any man that chance.

“May I come in, brother?” said the Fattore, almost hermetically closing the little doorway between the front shop and the sanctum behind it, as he wedged himself sideways through the narrow aperture rarely passed by such burly and thriving specimens of humanity.

“Ha, brother Carlo! Welcome to Florence. Come in, come in;—that is, if you can; for I think you find it more difficult each time you come up to town. Your fine Casentino air and country living will oblige me to widen my door before long. All well at Querceto?”

“All well, brother, thank you! Have you leisure to give me half an hour this morning for a little talk on business?”

“Always at leisure for such a purpose, my good brother; and always glad of the opportunity to tell you so. I suppose the business is on the old subject?”

“The old subject and the old story, Beppe. But, between you and me, the story is so nearly at an end, that I don’t think

you will have to widen the door for me, let me fill out as fast as I may. The story is nearly told out; and when it is, why my visits may be made in the Borgio dei Greci, instead of this doll's house, which, craving pardon of you and of the old bridge, is more like a weasel's hole than the dwelling of a Christian."

"It is a weasel's hole, brother, which has served me to realise as good results of my labour in, as those which you have found in your broad fields. The brain, brother Carlo, requires less space for its operation than the hands need. So now for the business in hand. The dice have been playing the noble Marchese false again! Is not that it?"

"Never was such a run of ill luck. But the Marchese says that it is impossible that it should continue any longer; it would be against all the calculation of chances! It may be. I don't understand such matters."

"Nor I, I am sure, brother Carlo! the saints be thanked for it! The Marchese then wishes to try fortune again?"

"Just so, brother Beppe, with a view of recovering, as he says, all that he has lost." And the fat farmer's jovial features relaxed as he spoke into a broad grin, which was answered by a little furtive smile of the eye rather than the lip of the elder brother.

"Well," returned the latter, with a slight shrug, and playing with his gold eye-glass as he spoke, "I suppose it would not be deemed handsome for those who—when all accounts are closed—will have been—more or less—more or less—the gainers by his misfortunes, to refuse him the means of taking his revenge, as I believe it is called. But it is necessary to be cautious. It would not be right towards him to lead him into debts beyond the possibility of discharging them. That, indeed, is the worst of all misfortunes," said the dignified old gentleman, raising his white left hand with out-turned palm deprecatingly, and gravely shaking his aristocratic-looking head. "We must be careful, brother Carlo, of our client's honour."

"Look well to the security, you mean," replied his more unsophisticated brother; "that of course."

"Yes! that of course . . . of course," replied the elder, gravely nodding. "What is the nature of the Marchese's present proposal?"

"Oh, you know their ways, Beppe! He writes to me that

he *must* have some money—a good round sum. He leaves it to me—to us, that is—to find the best mode of raising it.”

“A task, my good Carlo, that becomes simplified in proportion to the smallness of choice in the matter.”

“You may say that, *per Bacco!* When the lands are all gone, one comes to the house. ’Tis the natural order of things.”

“It is, indeed, the natural order of things with our spendthrift nobles,” said the jeweller, with uplifted hands and eyes; “what times! what times we live in! What would the old fathers of the Republic have said to such lives as their descendants live? In truth, there seems nothing for it but the Palazzo.”

“It must come to that, sure enough,” said the other. “But for this time there is one other resource I thought of, which ought to be cleared out of the way, as I may say, before coming to the Palazzo.”

“Cleared out of the way, Carlo! what a strange fellow you are! Ha! ha! ha!” laughed the citizen brother, quietly, and this time with his mouth, and *not* with his eyes. “And what is this resource, may I ask?”

“Why, there are the diamonds, the Scopa family jewels, you know, which the late Marchese bought at Rome, when the old Cardinal died. They must be worth the price of a *podere** or two.”

“Ay, the diamonds. Yes, brother Carlo, they are worth the price of a *podere* or two, and not very small ones either. But . . . they are fine stones. Would you like to see them? They are in my strong box in the wall there.”

“You don’t mean it!” cried the Fattore, his broad face flushing into purple with anger. “So then my noble *padrone* sought to steal a march upon me, did he?”

“Not a bit of it! Don’t put yourself in danger of an apoplectic stroke for nothing, brother Carlo. The Marchese thinks that the jewels are safe in Casa Lunardi at this moment. But the Marchesa came here in such a state one night that she really discomposed me by the excess of her agitation. She had the diamonds with her! What could I do? A woman of that class in distress is more than I can bear to see. I gave her the

* Tuscan for “farm.” The Tuscan “*poderi*” are, for the most part, small.

full worth of the jewels—the full worth. But they *are* superb stones.”

“So the Marchesa has put her hand to work, has she? Well, if there are two tapping at one barrel, one driving his spigot in at each end, it can’t be long in coming to the lugs! It seems we have come to the house, then?”

“’Twould seem so, indeed.”

“And about the house? It is a fine property. I should say that the Palazzo Lunardi was a good purchase at twenty thousand dollars, brother Beppe.”

“More, brother! more! The Virgin forbid that I should ever depreciate the value of a mortgageable property. The estimated value, for purpose of mortgage, of the Palazzo Lunardi, is twenty-two thousand six hundred scudi. One becomes acquainted with little facts of this sort in my line of business. The valuation for purchase of mortgage, you understand; that is, due deduction made for possible depreciation of property, for four years’ interest, as by law allowed, for possible legal expenses in the process of foreclosure, etc.—Twenty-two thousand six hundred scudi. But you are aware, I presume, brother Carlo, that the interest accruing on former loans is secured on the Palazzo; for the sums contracted for were paid over in full: no deduction made from the principal on account of interest. I never do that sort of thing. It does not suit me. I prefer proper and separate security for the interest. The sum, therefore, which could still be advanced on the Palazzo is very much smaller than that I named.”

“Well, there is no good in our wearing our lungs out to talk of what we know the end of. What can we advance on the house with justice to ourselves and to the Marchese? I must go to him *al tocco*,* to tell him the upshot of the matter.”

“In one word, then, brother Carlo,—though truly your country-mannered abruptness almost takes one’s breath away; in one word, I should be ready to advance on the Palazzo Lunardi and its dependencies as much as twelve thousand scudi; twelve thousand scudi, but not one soldo beyond.”

“Very good, brother; and now I will go to the Marchese.

* The Tuscan phrase for one o’clock; it is not known in other parts of Italy. *Tocco* is “touch;” *i.e.* one touch of the bell.

To tell you the truth, I think you are going almost beyond what is prudent. But you know best."

"Good-bye, *Carlo mio!* We shall see each other by-and-by in the Borgo dei Greci. I *have* named an outside sum; but I always strive to deal liberally by an old client. *Addio!*"

"Yes!" the money-lender muttered to himself, as his brother squeezed himself through the little door and closed it behind him; "yes! a very pretty thing to leave it so that he could find the means of raising another miserable thousand crowns or so upon the house, and so letting a stranger into the affair! Oh, brother Carlo! brother Carlo! If ever a man *had* a pumpkin in place of a head . . ."

And the General of the Jesuits in mufti put his gold eye-glasses on the high bridge of his long nose, and sat down before a huge ledger.

CHAPTER III.

THE PALAZZO LUNARDI.

THE Palazzo Lunardi was one of those fine old historical mansions which the Florentines will not permit to change their names, let the ancient family from which the name came have been ever so long extinct or forgotten, and the building have passed through ever so many changes of modern owners. In vain the new possessors of it, the Marchesi Perini, father and son, had done everything in their power to make the new name supplant the old one, and cause their own house to be called by their own name, instead of by that of the long-since ousted former proprietors. It was a hard case. Palazzo Perini it was, as far as law, and legal registry, and the payment of hard cash could make it. And yet nobody in all Florence, but the new masters, called it anything save the Palazzo Lunardi. Every shopkeeper, every hack-carriage driver, every street-bred *gamin*, knew the Palazzo Lunardi; but all utterly ignored the Palazzo Perini.

And now, before the second generation of the new name had

passed away, it seemed likely to turn out that the Florentines had done well not to adopt it; for, as we have seen, the time appeared not to be far off when the old mansion would have to change owners yet again.

It was a noble old house, rearing its dark grey stone front high in air above the more modern buildings that surrounded it, in an out-of-the-way nook in that ancient part of the city between the back of the Palazzo della Signoria and the Convent of San Firenze. There is no part of Florence, with the exception of the recently-built quarters of the city, in which such old historic mansions with old historic names may not be found, often embedded in, and were it not for their towering height, concealed by the construction of later generations agglomerated around them. It was not a situation which a new man, with new riches, new ideas, and a new-minded wife, would have selected for a residence. And the Marchesa Perini often sighed for a more modern, yellow-faced, square-windowed palace in the Via Larga. But the thrifty, money-getting father of the present spendthrift Marchese had bought the grand old palace for a sum that would never have sufficed to put the roof on it; and after all, when you were once inside it, and had mounted the long and somewhat steep stairs that brought you to the "*piano nobile*," or first floor, there was no mistake about its being "*nobile*" indeed; and the rooms were such as few, if any, of the coveted more modish mansions possessed. So the huge Perini porter, in the gorgeous Perini livery, invented by a tailor of rainbow-eclipsing taste, continued stationary in the repainted and bedizened doorway; the quiet narrow old streets in the vicinity echoed at all hours of the night to the roll of carriages; and on every Saturday night the old grey face of the *palazzo* blushed from end to end of its wide extent with the flare of lights, and the whole neighbourhood was crowded with the equipages of the fast-going portion of the Florentine aristocracy, thronging to the Marchesa Perini's weekly receptions, at which neither the splendidly-illuminated ball-room, nor even the half-lighted, queer-shaped little nooks found only in houses of similar antiquity, and serving in this nineteenth century most admirably for the reception of a little sofa just large enough for two, and no other article of furniture

beside, were the most exciting or most eagerly sought attractions. And the gaffers and gammers of the quarter, as they gossiped Tuscan-wise on their doorsteps, took a malicious pleasure in predicting that the Lunardi would before very long be avenged on those who had dispossessed them, by seeing the new dynasty more ignominiously deposed after a very much shorter reign.

As for the old possessors, the Lunardi themselves, there had never existed a male or female of the race who would have changed the old house which bore their name, for any other that human hands had ever built, or who would have consented to have it removed bodily, had it been possible, to any other situation. For was there not the Loggia de' Lunardi in the immediate neighbourhood—long since built up and turned to other uses, it is true; but still the name remained, as indefeasibly its own in the mind and on the tongue of every Florentine born beneath the shadow of the Campanile, as if its once beautiful arches were still open, and long-robed and hooded nobles of the "*con-sorteria* dei Lunardi*" were still wont to assemble there for pleasant discourse, or in family council? Was not the spot still called the *Canto† dei Lunardi*, and known to the whole city by no other name? Did not the venerable old walls still bear the scars of more than one stout encounter with civil broil, when the Lunardi had held their own against the raging efforts of the insurgent populace? Were there not still at either corner of the huge sombre front of the pile, high in air above the adjacent houses, the two massive stone escutcheons, with the dear old canting device—a crescent moon, with flames rising from the point of either horn? Yes! there they were still, eyesore as they were to the new owner; for buy the house as he might, he could not buy, nor could the former owner, even had he wished it, sell the right to remove those time-honoured historical memorials. Scientific jurists may think of such jurisprudence what they please, but the historian and the lover of antiquity will appreciate the old Tuscan rule, which forbids the destruction of all such relics of the past. The Marchese Perini might

* The various branches of the great Tuscan families, and those closely allied with them, were thus collectively called.

† *Canto*—corner.

take down the old house, and build a new one from its foundations! Alas! yes, he might do that; for it was his. But those old indestructible arms, those landmarks in Florentine history, the footprints, as it were, of those who were lords of the soil before him, must—will he, nill he—reappear on the new face of his new house.

To any one who had a spark of the sentiment of historical association and veneration, it would not have appeared strange that the old Lunardi should have held with tenacious affection to their hereditary home, and have felt, when the dreadful hour came in which they were compelled to dispossess themselves of it, as if the last drops of their long-descended blood had been wrung out of their hearts. It was one of those strikingly characteristic piles of building which impart to the Tuscan cities the special style and character peculiar to them, and which are, to those acquainted with the annals of the country, typical of the entire course of its social and political history.

The walls, as high as the spring of the massive vaulting which supported the first floor, were built of huge masses of rough-hewn stone, in the manner known to builders as “rustic,” though its earliest use is especially characteristic of *civic* architecture. The upper part of the walls above this was of ashlar stone, in regular courses, black with the passage over them of the weather of centuries. The building consisted of the “*terreno*,” or ground floor, with huge vaulted cellars beneath its whole extent; “*piano nobile*,” or first floor, containing almost all the portion of the house personally occupied by the masters of it; a “*secondo piano*,” or second floor, containing rooms almost as fine as those on the *piano nobile*, and often used in Tuscan families, living after the patriarchal fashion of the old *noblesse*, for the accommodation of a married son, a dowager mother, a younger brother, or other such-like portions of the family; and above this an open *loggia*, consisting of a huge roof, projecting far over the street on naked beams, with grotesquely-carved extremities, and supported on stone pillars in front, and at the rear by a third story, containing a whole nest of smaller rooms, some of which were rendered pleasant by opening on the *loggia* in front of them.

The frontage of the palace had five enormous round arched

windows on the first floor, and on the *terreno* four such, and a similarly arched door in the place of the centre one. It was a door reached by five steps from the pavement, and not a carriage entrance, such as those of the palaces of a later generation. For the Palazzo Lunardi was built before carriages were dreamed of in Florence; and the litter of the noble mistress of the house could be quite well carried up the steps on the shoulders of its bearers, and deposited for my lady to alight in the huge gloomy hall at the foot of the large but steep and sombre staircase. On either side of this doorway the two enormous windows were defended by iron gratings of immense weight and strength, which exceedingly increased the prison-like and frowning gloom of the physiognomy of the house. On the floor above, the ancient, small-paned, heavy-beamed windows had been removed by the present owner, and replaced by light modern casements; and the stern aspect of the frontage further mitigated by the addition of bright green "persiane," or sun-shutters, to all the windows.

At the back of the house there was a small but very pleasant garden, enclosed by a *loggia* running round three sides of it, that on the side of the house forming, in fact, a part of the *terreno*, and the two others being at right angles to it. The garden, therefore, was no wider than the house, and was nearly square, the bottom being shut in by the high side wall of a neighbouring church, founded by the Lunardi, and containing the bones of many generations of the family.

This little garden, it will be seen, was very small, so much so as hardly to deserve the name. But it contained some half a score of treasures, the price of which would, in these days, have more than equalled that paid by the elder Perini for the house. Built into the wall of the church, at the bottom of the little space, was a magnificent circular piece of the workmanship of Lucca della Robbia,—the portrait of Rodolpo de' Lunardi, Gonfaloniere of Florence, surrounded with a garland of flowers, fruits, and foliage of inimitable truthfulness, and in perfect preservation. Under one of the lateral *loggie* were two subjects in *basso-relievo*, by the hand of Donatello, one representing Astancollo de' Lunardi presenting the model of the church founded by him to the Virgin; and the other embodying a still

earlier family legend, which told how Lunardo Lunardi beat off the attack of three gigantic Saracens in the Holy Land. The opposite *loggia* was adorned by a very grand representation of the Annunciation, in *terra-cotta*, by Orgagna, and by two portrait busts by Nicolo Pisano, representing the gaunt and elongated figures of some contemporary male and female Lunardi. Beneath that *loggia*, which formed a portion of the house itself, there were two full-sized statues between the windows; one by Desidero da Settignano, of a Lunardi who was a General of the forces of the Republic: and the other by Benedetto da Marano, representing another of the race in his robes as a Cardinal.

But all these treasures had not been counted at the value of old stones even in the estimate of the price paid for the house; nor indeed, had they been removed for the purpose of turning them into money separately, would they at that day have paid for the expense of moving and selling them.

It has been said that the gossips of the quarter in which the Palazzo Lunardi was situated speculated, with the malicious satisfaction of people whose sympathies were all with the former owners, on the probability that the property would ere long pass away from those who had succeeded them. And it has been seen how likely it was that their feelings on the subject would be gratified. If the blind goddess should but continue a little longer to avert her smiles from the Marchese, it was clear that about a quarter of a century would see the commencement and the close of the Perini dynasty. For it was not more than twenty-five years before the date of the conversation between the brothers Palli on the Ponte Vecchio, that the father of the present Marchese had bought the house of the impoverished Conte de' Lunardi.

Twenty-five years ago the long-dreaded and at last inevitable hour had arrived, when absolute necessity had compelled the Conte Rinaldo de' Lunardi, then an old man in his seventieth year, to sell the family palace, the last remaining fraction of the once ample property of his family. The ruin of the Lunardi had not been, like that of their successors in the property, a rapid process consummated in a few years. No reckless profligacy of living had occasioned it. Like many another ancient Tuscan family, they had been undergoing a slow but ever pro-

gressing process of ruin for many generations. For several generations the noble Lunardi had been exclusively consuming, and in no degree producing, members of society. The social system in which they lived had "no career" for such as they. Fathers, sons, brothers, uncles, cousins, had to be kept alive, in some sort after the fashion of gentlemen, out of the proceeds of the family property. And the Lunardi had always been much too true to the traditions and habits of their caste either to be capable of looking after and managing their estates, or to be careful and exacting masters of those who did so for them. They sighed, grumbled, but let themselves be robbed; and retrenched their expenses year after year, not dreaming that any other possibility was open to them than to eat, in perfectly aristocratic idleness, such bread as was put into their mouths for them. So the Lunardi's "*Fattori*" grew richer, and the masters grew poorer, generation after generation; and the land was sold acre after acre, till nothing remained but the old palace. And then gradually debts accumulated, and money came slowly upon the family mansion; and so the inevitable end was raised but surely on.

The Marchese Rinaldo was an old man of seventy, when at last the bottom of the long hill was reached, and he had to relinquish the last bit of the possessions of his ancestors. To an English family of ancient name, the necessity of parting with their London mansion would be by no means the bitterest drop in the cup of ruin. The parting from the long-owned provincial acres, and the old country home with its ancestral trees,—this would be the sharpest pang to the descendant of one of William the Norman's followers. But to a Florentine of ancient name all this is different. The ancient glories of his race have been all civic glories; their wealth probably civic wealth; the old city residence is the emblem and embodiment of his greatness to the eyes of his countrymen, and the palladium of the family fortunes. And when this is gone, the family is sunken indeed, and the glory has departed from it.

And, unhappily, the old Conte Rinaldo had been a man especially calculated to feel the blow which had fallen on him with exceeding bitterness. Though quite as incapable of doing any good thing to arrest the decline of his family as any of his

brother nobles, though wholly ignorant of any knowledge available for any such purpose, he was not, as almost all his fellows were, either a vicious, or a totally idle, or an entirely uninformed man. He had been all his life a sedulous student and lover of the history and antiquities of his native city. Probably no man of his day had so intimate and accurate an acquaintance with the family histories and genealogies and alliances of the noble Florentine families as himself. As for the annals and story of his own family, and the old family parchments and records upon which they were founded, his knowledge of them was the result of worship rather than of mere study. No wealth would have tempted him to change his family name and history for those of any one of the names ennobled in times subsequent to the Medicean supremacy. Really gentle blood, he would say, can assign no date to the period of its becoming such. The record of a time when a name was not noble, is an indelible blot on an escutcheon. History knew nothing of any time when the Lunardi were not noble.

It will be readily imagined that, to a man of this class of mind, whose intellect and imagination had been fed during a lifetime on such studies and thoughts, the final downfall of his family was dreadful. In fact, he never recovered from the blow. The decree, which pronounced that his place should know him no more, that the bit of Florence which had been Lunardi ever since the city was a city should no longer belong to him or his, was more dreadful than a sentence to a thousand deaths. He lingered, a stricken and very miserable man, for five years after the sale of his ancestral home, and died broken-hearted just about twenty years before the date of the events related in the last chapter.

The Conte Rinaldo had been left a widower early in life, with one only daughter; and it had been for several years a matter of deep regret to him, that his one child was not a son. But as the years went on, he saw cause to be more than acquiescent in the decree which had given him, as the sole companion of his mature life and the prop of his age, his little Marietta. For, indeed, the continuance of the Lunardi line and blood in the male branch did not entirely depend on the issue of his own loins. Had that indeed been the case, no amount of comfort

and happiness which he might have found in his daughter's sympathy and love, no tenderness that the close companionship of the father and daughter might have given rise to in his heart, would have been any compensation to him for failure in that one paramount object. Happily it was not so.

The Conte Rinaldo had been the eldest of three brothers. The second was the Canon Giacomo de' Lunardi, of whom more will be heard in the following pages. The third had held some small office under the Grand Ducal Government, on the slender salary of which he had married, when the death of his elder brother's wife, leaving only one female child, rendered that step necessary for securing the overriding object of providing a male heir to the name and title—and nothing else—of the Lunardi race. Happily both he and his wife had died very soon after having accomplished the object for the sake of which he had dared to face aristocratic starvation with a patrician partner in the desperate enterprise. The son thus left an orphan was, as a matter of course, received into the house and family of the Conte Rinaldo, who felt strongly that his brother had done his duty in life nobly, and who set himself to educate his nephew in all the articles of the true Lunardi faith, and especially to place before him the paramount duty of treading in his noble father's steps, and assuring by an early marriage the continuance of the race descended in unailing right line from Lunardo Lunardi the Crusader.

Duly impressed with this view of the object of his creation, and with a clear perception of his path of duty in the world, the conscientious young man married early in life; and having, Phoenix-like, transmitted to an heir the sacred deposit of nobility entrusted to him, he too died, as his young wife had done in giving birth to the precious Phoenix, in whom the hopes of the house of Lunardi were henceforward concentrated. The great nephew thus born to the Conte Rinaldo, first saw light in the *secondo piano* of the old ancestral palace; and of course continued to make part—the most important part of all—of his great uncle's family, where he remained, as his father had remained before him, an orphan child. The little Sebastian—that was the name selected for him, as being one of those most frequently recurring in the family tree—was as fine and likely

a child as could be wished for the hopes of a noble house to rest on. Indeed, his father had not died so prematurely from any defect of constitution. His life had been of a kind which any calculator of the chances and risks of mortality would have deemed as safe from casualties as any existence could well be. He rarely stirred beyond the city walls, unless for a lounge in the neighbouring *cascine* ; never mounted a horse ; never quarrelled with any man ; and the only danger which could within the limits of possibility threaten him, seemed to be that, common to all "landlubbers on shore," of a roof tile falling on his head. Yet fate found him out, and picked him off by an accident singular enough. One of the huge heavy-framed portraits in the great central hall of the palace suddenly fell from its place, high on the wall, and killed him on the spot, as he stood engaged in his favourite occupation of gazing at the features of the bygone generations of his ancestors.

The Conte Rinaldo was much disquieted by the circumstance, deeming it a portent of evil augury to the house of Lunardi, until a friend of the family, with whom the reader will make acquaintance by-and-by, gave a different reading to the omen, by pointing out that the original of the picture which had thus fallen from its high place in the Lunardi galaxy, had been one who had blemished the fair escutcheon of the family by a smirch of heresy, in the troublous times when the pestilent doctrines of the Reformation had been prevalent in Italy.

But there were portents in the Lunardi sky about that time of a very much more significant kind, which did not admit of being explained away in any such ingenious manner. The old family lawyer shook his head very gravely, when consulted on the possibility of raising a further small sum on the security of the palace. Brother Giacomo, the canon, good easy man, was willing to let any portion of his ecclesiastical revenues which his brother chose to take, go towards the maintenance of the family. But all that this source could supply was a sufficiency to keep the daily wolf from appearing absolutely at the door, and no relief could be hoped from it towards alleviating the pressure of debt. In short, the eve of the fatal day, long foreseen, yet never looked in the face, had arrived ; and it became clear that the birth of the young heir, and the death of his father so rapidly

following it, were the last events which the old Conte, who with reverential care carried on the family chronicle from year to year, would have to relate as having taken place on the scene of all the previous record.

These were sad circumstances enough for the heir to all the Lunardi honours to be born under. Yet this birth and the promising appearance of the child was a great comfort and consolation to the Marchese amid his sorrows. That the sun of the old Lunardi glory should have set—that a dark night-season of obscurity was at hand—though to be followed some day, as he trusted, by a glorious returning dawn—this was sad and painful. But that the race should have become extinct—that all should be over, and the name of Lunardi no more be a familiar sound in Florence—that would indeed have been like the end of the world and crack of universal doom. It was all the difference between death with a firm belief in an immortal life beyond the grave, and the blank horror of annihilation.

So the little Sebastian was cherished as fondly, and watched over as anxiously by the old Conte his great uncle, and by his cousin Marietta, after their expulsion from the Eden of Palazzo Lunardi, as he could have been had the family honours to which he was heir been in their palmiest state. But the old Conte survived the shock of his misfortune only some five years. He had been a hale and vigorous old man previously to the blow; he became a withered and shrivelled pantaloon after it.

This sad and cheerless period of five years between the deposition and the death of the Conte Rinaldo, which brought him from sixty-five to seventy, his daughter Marietta from thirteen to eighteen, and his great-nephew Sebastian from one to six, years of their respective ages, was passed by the little family in a small and cheap lodging, not far from the Palazzo, in the house of one Simone Boccanera, then a young working jeweller, in the employment of Giuseppe Palli, the well-known goldsmith on the Ponte Vecchio. And their place of retreat was singularly well chosen in one respect. For Boccanera—who was in many respects a queer man, with queer tastes for one of his class, and much queer, out of the way information—was himself, as he declared, probably with perfect truth, the lineal male descendant of a family once powerful and famous, in the days of

the old Republic. Though the decline of *his* family, from near the apex to very near the base of the social pyramid, had occurred so long ago as to have been generations since accepted by them as an accomplished fact, neither to be reversed or sorrowed over, yet a handsomely-painted wooden escutcheon, emblazoned with the Boccanera arms, occupied a large portion of the wall of his work-room; and he was much addicted to the same sort of studies and researches which had made the business of the Count's life. Thus it came to pass that the stricken and ruined patrician was treated with a degree of respect, deference, and appreciating sympathy which contributed much to alleviate the sorrows of his last years. This community of tastes and feelings between the old noble and the young artisan, and the soothing tribute of respect rendered on the score of that quality on which his own self-estimation was based, led to a kind of companionship between the jeweller and his lodger which in truth was of no small comfort to the latter.

And there were long conversations between that oddly-contrasted couple of men, in the little meanly-furnished room, with the jeweller's working bench on one side of the window and the old Count's easy chair on the other; while Marietta, then rapidly growing into beauty of a very high order, sat by and listened, with her great earnest eyes flashing out triumph or indignation, as the old-world histories flattered or offended her Lunardi-taught ideas of right and wrong—conversations that might have been worth recording, were time and space elastic. Specially they were so when the little party, as frequently happened, was increased by the presence of a very handsome youngster, then about eighteen years old—the same who, lad as he was, so ingeniously expounded the omen of the fallen picture to the Count's relief; one Guido Guidi, the son of an old friend of the Lunardi family. The young man was wont to join in the conversation of the old noble and the jeweller, very evidently at no disadvantage. His knowledge of the history of his country, if less intimate with detail than that of the Conte Rinaldo, was of a far larger and more vigorous grasp. His sympathies and theories were, or seemed to be, all in accordance with theirs; and he too came of a very noble race. But there was a tone of shrewd appreciation of the real value of names and men, a

practical, bold view of things—like his who deemed the world his oyster, to be opened by his own sword, or wit—and a hard, sarcastic, and at times almost cynical estimation of the nature and worth of the aims of men, and of the obstacles in their way, in the conversation of this young man, which contrasted curiously with the somewhat feeble acceptance of the world, as it was made for them, which characterised the ideas of the other two.

The handsome youngster talked well, and Marietta, as she sat and listened, rewarding each bold self-relying sentiment with a flash of her large dark eye, a flush of her fair young cheek, and an approving smile on the curve of her proud lip, received as a rich and congenial soil receives the seed, the new views and ideas which were generated in her mind by the action of a strong intellect and energetic will on the subjects of her life-long meditations, and the objects of her life-long idolatry. That such smiles were the guerdon for the sake of which the young man spoke, and that the attraction which brought him to the humble lodgings of the working jeweller was not entirely the hope of comforting the declining years of his father's old friend in those days of his adversity, need hardly be told.

And after five years of the pale life, the chief events and excitements of which have been thus cursorily indicated, the old count died, and was, as literally as he could have wished, gathered to his fathers, in the vaults of the little church of Sant' Anselmo dei Lunardi, at the back of the palace.

And this death took place, as nearly as may be, twenty years before the date of the incidents narrated in the preceding chapters; the surviving members of the Lunardi family being then the deceased Count's younger brother, the Canon Giacomo de' Lunardi; his daughter Marietta, then in her eighteenth year; and his great-nephew Sebastian, who had just completed his sixth.

CHAPTER IV

ON THE THIRD FLOOR OF PALAZZO LUNARDI.

ON that May morning, just about twenty years after the death of the Conte Rinaldo, and about five-and-twenty after the sale of the Lunardi Palace to the Perini, on which, as has been narrated, stout farmer Palli and his handsome son came up to Florence on business likely to cause the old palazzo to change hands once again ere long, the Fattore, on leaving his brother Giuseppe in his shop on the bridge, after their confidential business talk, went directly to the palace to communicate as much of the result of that conversation as was necessary to the Marchese.

The nature of the talk he had just had with his brother made it natural that the Fattore should look about him, as he entered the palace, with a more scrutinising eye than he might otherwise have done. And his observation led him to modify the opinion he had expressed of the imprudent liberality of his brother's estimate of the value of the property. It was very clear to a less shrewd observer than the Fattore, that whoever might become the purchaser of the palazzo now would have a very different sort of bargain from that which the Perini had when they bought it, a quarter of a century ago. Then it had been in a state of dilapidation, the result of the neglect of many years, caused by the ever-increasing impoverishment of the old family. Now everything was in perfect repair and excellent order. The late Marchese Perini had spent a very considerable sum of money on the building; and now, despite the pecuniary position of the present owner, there was every outward appearance of wealth and abundant means.

For the ruin of such men as Perini is altogether a different sort of process from the ruin of such people as the Lunardi. There is all the difference between the two catastrophes that there is between death by apoplexy and death by starvation. And the body in the former case, as figured by the bankrupt man's belongings, has all the appearance of robust and florid health.

Thus everything was in a high state of preservation in the Palazzo Lunardi. The big porter at the door was as gorgeous as ever ; the black and white squares of marble on the floor of the entrance-hall, which under the present dynasty had replaced the old bricks worn by the feet of citizens of the Republic, were as clean and smart as hands could make them ; the recently-painted staircase was ornamented by a handsome stair-carpet, the first it had ever known in the long course of its existence ; the front door was fastened by modern and smooth-going locks and brazen bolts, instead of the old-fashioned iron hold-fasts extending diagonally from the door jambs to huge hooks in the doors, which had served the former owner and his ancestors ; the foot of the staircase was closed by a smart and costly glass screen and doors, instead of opening directly on the huge entrance-hall ; the antechamber at the head of the stairs was furnished with handsome settles of carved walnut-wood, and with a tall footman yawning on one of them ; and the noble master of the mansion was, though it was past one o'clock, still in bed, as farmer Palli was informed by the latter piece of furniture.

So the Fattore had to wait for his interview with *il padrone*, as he called him in speaking to the footman ; which he did very contentedly. A Tuscan never objects to waiting for any length of time, especially if there is any possibility of spending it in chat. He is thus authorised and justified in delaying to proceed to whatever business he may have on hand ; and that is always a benefit to be thankful for. Carlo Palli therefore sat down very contentedly to gossip with the servant till the Marchese should be ready to receive him. But as " we others " are apt not to be equally patient, and as it is hardly necessary for us to be present at the interview between the ruined gambler and his man of business, seeing that we know already pretty well what had to pass between them, and the upshot of it, we will take the opportunity of making our way up two more flights of stairs in the palazzo, and looking in at the third floor.

This third floor occupied, as has been mentioned in describing the palace, only that part of the building which fronted the garden, the rest of the space on that floor being taken up by an open *loggia*, after the old Florentine fashion. This *loggia* faced the east, and from its altitude above three suites of rooms, each lofty enough

to make at least two floors in a modern Parisian house, commanded a magnificent view of the Vallombrosa and Chianti hills. It was thus either on summer evenings or on winter mornings a very pleasant place, and went far to repay the inhabitants of that third floor for the length of stair they had to climb to reach it.

This third floor was divided into two apartments, both possessing some rooms opening on to the *loggia*, which thus had to be enjoyed in common between them, and both let to different humble tenants. It was no special measure of thrift in the Marchese thus to make something of part of his noble residence. He was childless; the two lower floors and ground floor were far more than he and his Marchesa could occupy; and under these circumstances it was quite a matter of course in Florence for the *maestro di casa* to let the rooms above.

Having climbed the long stair, the last flight of which, leading from the level of the second floor to that of the third, was yet steeper than the lower portions, but still of solid stone to the top, we find two stout but modest-looking doors, on one of which is a neat brass plate, bearing the inscription, in cursive letters, IL CANONICO GIACOMO DE' LUNARDI.

Pulling the worn and faded tassel of a little bell-pull at this door, a tinkle is heard on the other side of the plank, and the door is presently opened by a lad some fourteen years old, somewhat incongruously clad in a striped blue linen jacket, no waistcoat, shiny black camlet breeches buckled at the knee, very coarse black worsted stockings, and thick low-cut buckled shoes; evidently a seminarist, chorister, altar-server, or suckling of the church of some sort.

The small and all but entirely dark entry on which the outer door of the apartment opened, gave access to two or three other doors, barely distinguishable by the feeble gleam which struggled in through a borrowed light, opening on the great staircase. One of these doors, however, on being opened, admitted a flood of pleasant sunlight, for it gave entrance to a good-sized and cheerful room, lit by two large windows opening down to the ground on to the pleasant sunny terrace, or *loggia*, which has been described.

There were two persons in the room; but passing them by

for the moment, we will step out through the open window on to the terrace, both because the magnificent view and genial sunlight on that May morning naturally invited any one entering the apartment to do so, and because it is proper, in the first place, to make acquaintance with the master of the dwelling.

There, basking in the sunshine, in a huge easy chair, with a little table by his side, and complacently watching the shadows as they chased each other over the forest-clothed Vallambrosan mountains in the far distance, sat the Canonico Giacomo de' Lunardi, a hale and healthy-looking old man of eighty-five. On the little table by his side lay a violin with its bow, and some sheets of MS. music. Like his ecclesiastical serving-lad, the Canon had, both for economy and comfort sake, discarded the straight-cut single-breasted black cloth canon's coat, as soon as he had returned from his morning mass, and replaced it by a loose short jacket of rather coarse blue cloth, which contrasted somewhat strangely with the remainder of his correct ecclesiastical attire. His huge, three-cornered hat, carefully brushed, might be seen hanging on its appointed peg in the sitting-room; but he wore the clerical black skull cap, from beneath which his abundant white locks flowed down on either side. His brother, the Conte Rinaldo, had been a tall spare man, so much so as to have become almost gaunt in his later years. But Canon Giaeomo was of a more happy and thriving temperament, and had in his old age grown to a comfortable roundness of cheek, of stomach, and of calf. Neither was he, in expression of face and in feature, a genuine Lunardi. There was neither the dark eye, nor the high-ridged nose, nor the long sallow cheek. It was a still bright and clear, though mild, blue eye, that wandered pleasedly over the landscape, as he sat with his head a little on one side, a half smile on his good-humoured and somewhat thick lips, and his hands folded on the commencement of the protuberance of his waistcoat.

A more pleasing presentment of advanced old age than that offered by the figure of the old Canon, as he sate in the profound peacefulness of that sunny terrace, far out of reach of the street noises of the city below, it would be difficult to imagine.

"Of what is the old man thinking?" as he gazes over the distant hills. Probably, that it is getting near dinner time, and

that he has some hopes,—of a mild kind, quite prepared for resignation in case of disappointment,—that Marietta is going to give him a salad with that pigeon which he spied being taken into the little cupboard of a kitchen, as he entered the house on returning from his mass.

The whole style and appearance of the apartment and its contents spoke very clearly of narrowly restricted means and careful, saving economy. But the poverty was not sordid poverty. Everything about the person of the Canon and his dwelling was clean and neat, and orderly, giving unmistakable evidence of the presence of female care, and that of a woman good at the womanly duties of a housewife.

In the hill villages, among the chestnut woods of the Tuscan Apennines, more than one little isolated community may be found, where people will tell you that it is noon when *il Signor Curato* is hungry, the very tolerably regular movement of his reverence's digestion affording the most ready and trustworthy means at hand of calculating the march of time. But in Florence, where church clocks abound, the old Canon could not make it dinner-time when he pleased, and had to wait till the appointed hour arrived.

Meanwhile the reader may make acquaintance with the two persons who were in the sitting-room that he passed through to reach the *loggia*.

They were a man and a woman, nearly about the same age, and both were still strikingly handsome. Marietta, for she it was, was now eight-and-thirty, and the Reverend Canonico Guido Guidi, a member of the Chapter of San Lorenzo, was, as the attentive reader already knows, some three years older.

Twenty years ago we caught a passing glimpse of these two, then lad and lass, in the spring-tide of their lives, under circumstances which seemed to indicate that a love attachment was likely to form itself between them, if it had not already been implanted in either heart. But if love there had been between them, it was very evident that its course had not run smooth; for here was the gentleman, very unmistakably vowed to the celibacy of the priesthood; and there was that undefinable and inexplicable something about Marietta which stamps a spinster in advanced life. In fact, Marietta was still Marietta de'

Lunardi, that rare phenomenon in the social life of Italy, an old maid; still rarer, when it is added, one who had possessed extreme loveliness, and was yet, at the ripe age of eight-and-thirty, a very beautiful woman.

The Canonico Guido Guidi, for his part, was, perhaps, now a more strikingly handsome man than he had been a good-looking lad twenty years ago. Yet those women, whose love springs out of their moral, as much as out of their physical, nature, would have instinctively been less likely to think him loveable now, than had they seen him as he was then. The means by which one moral nature speaks silently, instantly, uncontradictably to another are very subtle, and often escape all our means of analysing or accounting for them. There were, no doubt, good grounds, though it was so impossible to state them, for the antipathy felt to that Dr. Fell, consigned to so unenviable a proverbial immortality. And it might have been equally difficult to give "the reason why" many a man and woman would have felt repelled, instead of attracted, by the fine classic features and really noble presence of the Canon Guidi. His finely proportioned and manly figure, which spoke decision and energetic will in every movement, attitude, and outline, was set off by every advantage of costume compatible with the exigencies of his profession. But there was no symptom in it of that desire to sink the priest, as far as possible, and to suppress to the utmost permissible degree the distinctive peculiarities of ecclesiastical attire, which may be observed in certain of the Roman Catholic clergy, who would fain run their race against gay and gallant lay rivals at a less disadvantage in the matter of outward presentment. Canon Guidi dressed, and stepped, and looked, and bore himself every inch a dignified priest of his church. But every portion of his attire was of the finest quality and in the nicest condition, perfectly well fitting, and worn with grace; and as he stood upright and well planted as a guardsman, but with less of stiffness, and more of dignity and ease, many a wearer of the all-concealing trouser and boot might have envied the ecclesiastical privilege of displaying such a leg, ankle, and foot, in a well-drawn silk stocking and elegantly-shaped pump, with its gilded silver buckle.

Marietta, as has been said, was still beautiful; nay, there are

many men who would have said that she was more beautiful now in her womanhood than she had been when the bloom of girlhood was on her cheek. Nor was there, in her case, anything in the inner nature hid beneath the attractive surface, which warned the beholder of dangerous and unlovely qualities by that mysterious action of sympathies and antipathies, which has been adverted to in speaking of her companion. In Marietta there was nothing repellent to moral sympathy, unless, indeed, a certain expression of strength of will and force of resolution, visible in the well-cut modelling of the firm and well-developed chin, might be considered as such. Yet there was nothing more of this than what is admired in men. But it detracted somewhat from the softness of character which we are apt to require that women should possess, while we quarrel with many of the necessary accompaniments and results of it. Yet, though the entire bearing, port, and figure of Marietta de' Lunardi was that of a Juno rather than of a Venus, the expression of the features taken in its entirety was not deficient in sweetness or gentleness. Notwithstanding that expression, which has been noticed, and which would have led a physiognomist to expect a character endowed with firmness approaching obstinacy, and an unconquerable tenacity of purpose, there was yet often on the beautifully-curved lips of the large and admirably-modelled mouth a somewhat sad smile that had much of tenderness in it. And though the large dark eye could still at times flash out the eloquence of unschooled passion from beneath the strongly-marked black eye-brow, which contrasted with the marble whiteness of the pure and lofty forehead; while in its more wonted mood it wore the expression of that concentration and self-absorption which indicates the domination of a fixed idea, and the habitual presence to the mind of some one master-passion and overruling object; yet, when her thought was brought back to dwell on those near and dear to her, there was often a look that told of a nature which might have thrown all the vigour of its vital powers into blossoming forth in love, had not the force of circumstances combined with certain other qualities of the idiosyncrasy to divert the life-sap of the rich and strong organisation to other objects, and passions of a different order.

She was somewhat above the ordinary stature of women, slender in figure, with long, elegantly-formed feet and hands, but with a well-developed width of shoulder and fulness of bust:—a magnificent specimen of Nature's handiwork, and none the less calculated to make a deep impression on any man who looked on her, that her cheek was marble-white, her abundant black hair flecked here and there with grey, and her habitual manner subdued and tinged with a hue of serious sadness.

Considering the circumstances under which Marietta and Guidi have been represented as meeting in their young days, many years ago, and those under which they are now again found together, as also the somewhat indifferent character attributed in such matters to Rome's bachelor priesthood, it may be as well to prevent the possibility of any misapprehension by stating simply that there neither was, nor had, at any time, ever been anything in their relationship to each other inconsistent with the strictest propriety. That they were on terms of intimacy, however, was evident from the nature of their *tête-à-tête* conversation. The window between the room in which they were, and the *loggia* under which the old Canon was sitting, was open indeed; but the easy-chair was placed back away from the window, in the sunniest corner of the *loggia*; and there was no possibility that conversation in the room should be overheard.

"And how stands the account, Signora?" said the priest, who was standing with his back to the hearth, and leaning his shoulders against the mantle-shelf, while Marietta was sitting at a table in the middle of the room, with one or two large account books before her, with which she had been occupied before he had come in; "I have not seen it since the affair of that Roman investment I was fortunate enough to find for you was settled."

"Each year they go somewhat better than the year before, of course, Guido. I have been constant; and the multiplication table never deceives one!" replied Marietta, with a cold, sad smile.

"You *have* been constant;—constant in purpose and in effort for twenty years. Very few women or men either can say as much. It is a long space for a never-flagging pull against an up-hill path, Marietta."

"Were the hill steeper, and the path much longer, I should not flinch from the collar, Guido. The end will come; and God knows that I am in no hurry for it to arrive, since the reaching it involves that dear old man's death."

"Must that needs be so?" asked the priest.

"I think so! I have thought much of it; and have more than once of late endeavoured to feel my way with him. And I am convinced that all might be lost by attempting to induce him to act; especially taking into account the trouble about Sebastian, and the certainty, as things stand at the present moment, of meeting with impediment instead of co-operation from him."

"The matter is a thorny and complex one, certainly," replied the priest, musingly. "Still the old man has been so passive in your hands;—was so twenty years ago, and is surely likely to be much more so now."

"He has been passive, dear simple-hearted old man! because there has never been question of anything of any interest to him,—of anything he cared for. But I feel sure that now,—things being as they are unhappily with Sebastian,—if my uncle knew my secret, he would insist on throwing away all the great hope that has been so patiently laboured for."

"Twenty years ago," replied the priest, after musing in silence for a minute or two, "Sebastian could have given you no trouble; the game was in your own hands; and your influence over the Canon was all powerful. It is very questionable whether it would not have been the wiser course to have made him a partner in your enterprise from the beginning."

"And how much happier a life I should have led, had that been possible! Ah! *how* much happier!" exclaimed Marietta, clasping her long slender fingers, and gazing with a painful expression into vacancy, as her thought travelled back the path she had passed. "But from the beginning," she continued, speaking apparently rather to herself than to her companion, "I deceived him, or let him remain in error rather, for no deceit was ever necessary, because I came to feel that no help could be hoped from him in working out the sacred object. The first use I made of the influence you speak of, when my dear and ever-revered father died, was to induce him to occupy this apartment

in the home of our ancestors, rather than seek one elsewhere. It was necessary for him to leave his old quarters, when Sebastian and I came to make part of his family, and fortunately our good Boccanera ascertained that these rooms were to let."

"No great influence was needed so far, it seems to me, my friend," rejoined the priest with a half sneer.

Marietta, without appearing to heed him, and still speaking rather to herself than to him, continued,—

"I could not have done better for him. It is a great length of stair for him certainly; but notwithstanding his great age he manages it without anything that can be called suffering, and the enjoyment of the *loggia* is everything to him. I think that his life has been comfortable, and his home not an unhappy one here. Dear, good, gentle-hearted uncle Giacomo!"

"As sunny a *loggia* might be found in Florence for money, I fancy, where an old man would not have to climb one weary step for every year in his life pretty well to reach it," returned Guidi, in the same cold hard tone; "and I have a notion that dear, gentle-hearted uncle Giacomo would appreciate very keenly a somewhat increased scale of expenditure on his daily table. It is never of any use, Marietta *mia*, to deceive ourselves with regard to our actions and the real motives for them, whomever else we may find it necessary to deceive."

"Nor have I ever deceived myself, nor sought to do so, Guido," returned Marietta, looking up into his face with a calm unflinching eye, and without the slightest access of colour on her marble-like cheek. "Do I deceive myself as to the one sole object for which I live, and have lived, and for the accomplishment of which, as far as lies within the power of my utmost effort, I am so deeply responsible,—I, and I alone, from the time that I was left sole depositary of so great a trust when my father died? It is never for one hour, waking or sleeping, absent from my mind. I know the aim, I know the means, I know all the pain,—I may say the agony, at times when faith in the aim has grown faint within me,—that it has cost me to use those means; I know that had the cost been suffering ten fold as great, I should not have been found wanting. No! I do not deceive myself."

"But why say that the responsibility which you took on your

shoulders was left to you alone? Was there not always the Canonico? Was he less charged with the duty due to his race and blood?" returned the handsome Canon of San Lorenzo, looking down from his standing position into the pale face of Marietta, as she sat with her books before her at the table opposite to him, with the cold scrutinising eye of one who speaks neither to ask information nor express opinion of his own, but solely to explore and sound the heart of another.

"Nay, Signor Canonico," replied Marietta, looking up at him, as a slight curl passed over her finely-chiselled lip; "now you are speaking words which another indeed might speak, but which from you have no sincerity in them. You at least know, if no other on earth knows, how truly I say, that my great duty was laid upon my shoulders alone. Besides the reverence I owe and feel for my father's brother and the chief of our house, I love my uncle deeply and tenderly. It would be impossible for any one to live with him for twenty years and not to do so. He has a thousand qualities that deserve and attract love; but for the great end for which I live, you know well how totally and absolutely he is useless. And this, too, has been not the least among my trials. And he a Lunardi! But that is too old a sorrow to be suffered to press itself into the foreground now. From every flask you can but have the measure of wine it has been formed to contain!"

"And truly your books there, my thrifty Marietta, can show, I take it, that from the old flask in question has been poured out a measure of very goodly abundance. Is it possible that in all these years no notion, no suspicion of the real truth has ever crossed his mind?"

"No shadow of a thought upon the subject has ever occurred to him: of that I am sure. Nor have I, as regards his comforts, any remorse——" the word seemed to startle her as it fell upon her ear from her own tongue. "Remorse!" she said, interrupting herself, and raising her superb head and eyes proudly, "*remorse* I could have none to feel in any case! Is not the duty to which I am avowed paramount? And if I were weak enough to feel any such, would it not be part of my duty to bear *that* also, let it gnaw as it might, for the attainment of the end?"

“Nay! the old man has doubtless fared better in your hands, Marietta, than he would have fared without your truly Martha-like care. But you want to play Mary to him as well.”

“And I do claim to have played both parts, and played them well and sincerely. When, after my venerated father’s death, we came to live at my desire here, my uncle insisted on putting everything into my hands. His *governante*, he said, had, he was sure, always robbed him, and prevented him from contributing as largely as he could have wished to his brother’s assistance. Now there would be but one purse, and one interest; and I must be a good housewife, and make the most of what there was. I did so, to the best of my ability. I knew then, as much as I know now, the end and object and duty of my life on earth; but I perceived only very confusedly and uncertainly any means for the accomplishment of it. They revealed themselves to me only gradually.’

“The revelation, I presume, was mainly found in the last page of your household accounts for that first year,” interrupted the priest, with the same cold half sneer.

“I set myself to the task before me to the best of my abilities,” continued Marietta, unheeding his interruption, “and in the spirit of one whose whole life had been a perpetual struggle with poverty. I took a girlish delight in exercising the new power committed to my hands, and in nursing up the favourable result to be proudly shown at the end of the year. Yes! to be shown in triumph to my uncle! For I had no conception as yet that Providence had placed in my hands the instrument with which my appointed task was to be accomplished. When, at the end of the year, I carried my accounts, showing a very considerable balance of income over expenditure, to my uncle, I could not persuade him even to look at them. He patted me on the head, and bade God bless me; said if I was contented he was happy; told me to go and buy myself a new dress, since there was money in hand, but to continue to be careful, as he should probably require another cassock next year. Since that day I have carried no accounts to my uncle.”

“But have continued to be *very* careful, as he bade you—eh, Marietta?” said the priest.

“From that time I began to work for my object by the

means thus put into my hands ; and for twenty years I have been, as you say, *very* careful—careful from morning till evening, and from year's end to year's end."

"And now how stands the sum total of the results?" asked the priest.

"You must be tolerably well able to guess them, Guido," she replied, as a slight smile of subdued triumph passed over her face. "They are far beyond what I had dared to hope at the commencement of the long, unturning path. My uncle's additional preferment, the benefice in the Mugello to which he was appointed soon after we came here, and the little chapelry in the city, that you obtained for him more recently, have helped much to forward the work. The investments found by you have all turned out well ; and by the end of this year I shall be able to command some thirty-five thousand scudi. Is not the goal well-nigh reached, Guido?"

"Why, that would seem to depend on various circumstances," answered the priest, speaking slowly, and looking at her fixedly the while, "over some of which you have no control."

"But the possession of the means is the chief point," replied Marietta, quickly. "That secured, I can use a little more of the patience that has stood me in such stead already. In your judgment, is the sum I have named sufficient?"

"For the purchase of the palace? I should think it was certainly more than the price of it. But ——." Here his reverence hesitated for a few seconds, then continued: "But there must be two parties to a sale. The present owner must be desirous of selling, as much as you are of buying, you know."

"But is there not reason to believe that such is likely to be the case some one of these days?" asked Marietta. "Besides common report, I have heard as much from yourself."

"Yes, one of these days! But which of them is the question; and it may be an important one," said the priest, speaking the last words in his turn more to himself than to his companion. "You think it still necessary to leave the old man in error as to his pecuniary position?" he added, interrogatively.

"It is impossible to venture on doing otherwise," returned Marietta, with prompt decision. "Not that he, dear old man, would be angered or pained," she continued, "or would care

whether thirty-five or thirty-five thousand scudi were in question. But the difficulty would lie with Sebastian. It would be impossible to prevent the old man from employing this money in the manner which would appear to him necessary for the securing what the boy thinks his happiness."

"Yes, I agree with you, that that would be probable," said Guido.

"It is hard, is it not," resumed Marietta, passing her hand across her high, pale brow, with a sigh, "that he on whom all my care, and toil, and hopes centre should be himself the most formidable stumbling-block in my path? And yet I love the boy dearly—very dearly."

"He *is* a boy," returned Guido, "and boys will seek their happiness otherwise than older heads and hearts would seek it for them. There have been others, Marietta, besides Sebastian, who have dreamed that the highest happiness earth can offer was to be found in the path by which he is bent on seeking it."

"And some there have been, Guido," she replied, with a sad solemnity of tone, "who have deemed such a thought no dream, yet have steadfastly put it away from them; who have comprehended that they had higher objects to live for than the pursuit of their own happiness."

"Steadfastly enough," said the priest, with a sadness which had yet a barely perceptible tone of sneering cynicism in it. "Steadfastly enough! Not more ruthlessly did Abraham raise the knife for the slaying of the first-born, than did you lay on the altar of your idolatry the happiness of two human lives, twenty years ago. Have all those years brought with them no moments of regret for the irrevocable decision;—no doubts of the wisdom of it?"

"None," returned Marietta, solemnly, raising her face to meet his gaze as she spoke, with a clear, open brow, and firm, calm eye, which seemed to challenge an inspection of her inmost heart; "neither doubts, regrets, nor wavering. No one moment of those twenty years has passed at which I would not have, had it needed, repeated my decision, and consecrated myself anew to my appointed vocation."

"You deserve success, Marietta," said the priest, gazing at her with a speculative curiosity mingled with admiration.

“And have I not nearly won it?” she returned, while, for the first time during the conversation, a flush crossed her pale cheek. “Happiness!” she continued, “what is happiness? Can the yielding to an inclination bring the joy born of devotion to a duty? Had I listened to your pleadings, Guido, and consented to give my life to other objects than that to which it was vowed from the cradle upwards, should I have found happiness, think you—even the happiness of one unpoisoned hour?”

“I say again, Marietta, that you merit success,” said he, sadly.

“But why talk of two lives laid on the altar of my duty?” she continued. “Have you not also found a path of duty which would have been incompatible with the fate you were then so eager for?”

“Duty!” said the priest, with a stronger expression of the cold sneer which had more or less flavoured the whole of his conversation, but which his companion did not seem to mark. “Yes, it is a grand word, with a marvellous tonic power in it to some minds. Yes! I have found a path—of duty, which is not without its satisfactions of its own kind. Well, at all events it is wiser to look forwards than backwards. I think it must be nearly the old gentleman’s dinner time, is it not? I will just go and make my salutations to him, and then proceed on my path—of duty. *A rivederla, Signora!*”

CHAPTER V.

THE TWO HALVES OF THE PERINI PROPERTY.

WHEN Carlo Palli, the *fattore*, and his son Nanni parted at the door of their inn, the *Papagallo*, in order that the former might go to his business talk with his brother, the rich jeweller and money-lender on the Old Bridge, Giovanni half reluctantly proceeded to obey his father’s behest by visiting and—so far as he should find himself enabled to do so—making love to his cousin Laura, the jeweller’s only child and heiress.

To those who were in the confidence of Giuseppe Palli, or had any intimate knowledge of his affairs, this heiress-ship was known to be a very important matter. But such persons were very few indeed. There was his brother the Fattore; they had worked together too much to have many secrets from each other. There was his cousin Giuditta, a childless widow, who had kept his house for him for many years. There was his confidential man of law; and his partner Simone Boccanera,—partner only to a small extent of interest in the strictly jeweller's department of the business, the management of which was entirely in his hands. From being a foreman in the shop he had been admitted by Giuseppe Palli to partnership some fifteen years before the time of which we are speaking, when the more profitable part of the jeweller's business had become sufficiently developed to require his whole time and attention. Besides these there were, perhaps, half a score or so of ruined spendthrifts, who had reason to conclude that there must be a considerable depth of water in an apparently small pool, into which sundry copious streams emptied themselves, and from which but very slender rills went out.

It was not the policy of Signor Giuseppe Palli to allow himself to become notorious as a very wealthy man. A prejudice, which the money-dealer knew to be anti-commercial in its ignorance, and felt to be unjust in its sentiments, weighed too heavily on his profession for it to be desirable to call the attention of the world more than was necessary to the wealth which had been accumulated by the exercise of it. The jeweller's house and style of living, therefore, were essentially modest and unostentatious,—a course which was rendered the more desirable to him from the nature of his plans with regard to his daughter. The Fattore, as has been seen, had thriven, if not quite so abundantly as his city-bred brother, yet very creditably. And it had long been understood between the two brothers that the foundations of the future greatness of the house of Palli could not be more advantageously laid than by availing themselves of the ruins and the site of the great Perini property as a sub-structure, and raising their edifice thereon in common.

Had these things been otherwise,—had the policy of the money-lender led him to adopt a shorter and more showy path

In making his approaches towards the social summities, Laura, the wealthy heiress, might have been a very conspicuous personage in the microcosm of Florence, instead of the obscure and simple little tradesman's daughter she seemed. In no society in the world was the maxim, that the ill savour which may have attended the process of getting money does not adhere to the money got, ever more religiously believed and exactly acted on than in Grand-ducal Florence. And had Laura been presented to the world as heiress to the wealth she was in truth destined to inherit, she would have had no lack of noble suitors at her feet, even if they had had to make their way behind her father's counter to get to them.

Nanni Palli had, as we have seen, been that morning admitted by his father, to a very considerable extent, into the number of the select few who knew the real position of the Palli affairs, and understood the family policy. And to do him justice, he had at once recognised the wisdom of his senior's intentions. It will be seen, when the reader comes to make acquaintance with Laura, that it was natural enough for her cousin to have been well inclined to let cousinship blossom into a little flirtation, even if it had not lain in the path of duty so to do. And for the last year or two he had not neglected such opportunities as his visits to Florence had afforded him of doing so. But now it had become clear that the paths of pleasure and duty were coincident in this matter. It now behoved him to set to work in a serious and business-like manner on the enterprise which he had hitherto merely played with as an amateur.

Yet it was almost reluctantly that the young man betook himself to his task. He had decided in his own mind, upon the Consuma the day before, as may be remembered, that he unquestionably was very much in love with his cousin; but he had avowed to his father that his merely amateur advances had met with very little encouragement. And now, if it be indeed true that "faint heart never won fair lady"—though for my own part I utterly disbelieve in any "never" throughout the whole of this subject—if the proverb be trustworthy, it did not seem that his success was likely to be greater. For assuredly Nanni's heart, though far enough from faint in general, was faint in this matter.

Yet it might have seemed to any one who knew the errand

on which Nanni was bound, and the circumstances attending it, that judging from those appearances, which are held to count for so much in such matters, a likelier youth to speed well on such a quest could hardly be found. We have seen that he was a stalwart and good-looking young fellow even as he was muffled in his travelling wraps on the *Consuma*. And now, as he steps out of the *Papagallo*, after having kept his father half an hour shouting for his breakfast, while he was changing his country costume, which was quite the thing in the Casentino, for a more city-like style of toilet, Nanni Palli is seen to be in reality a very handsome man.

Light, crisp hair, with a glint of the sunshine in it; large, well-opened blue eyes, with a whole world of laughter and good-humour in them; a ruddy brown cheek of health's own hue; a large full-lipped mouth, expressive of genial honesty and kindness in every movement of its every muscle; and a firm, broad, round chin, made up one of those faces that a child instinctively loves and trusts. The forehead was somewhat low; but then, thank heaven! every woman is not a phrenologist; nor, happily, is a large development of brain at all needed in the majority of cases for gaining woman's love.

In dress Nanni differed but little, as he sallied forth on his expedition, from any well-to-do Florentine young man of his age. Yet there was some subtle difference in cut or shape, or a somewhat freer use of colour, perhaps, or a something in gait or bearing, which unmistakably marked the countryman. Those whose eyes were practised in scanning Florentine men and manners would have seen also in his personal advantages—in his broad shoulders and large chest, in the ruddy glow of the cheek, in the planting of the foot on the ground, in the freer and more easy carriage of the head and limbs, certain proof that the young man was a countryman, and no Florentine born. For the difference of race between the Cockney born under the shadow of Giotto's Campanile and the Tuscan *contadino*, especially him of the upper valley of the Arno, is very striking, and all to the advantage of the latter.

The Borgo dei Greci, in which the jeweller's house was situated, and to which Nanni accordingly now bent his way, is a narrow and unpretending street in the immediate neighbour-

hood of the large *piazza* of Santa Croce. There are, however, several good and solid mansions in it, as indeed there are few streets in Florence where such are not found, and one of the best of these belonged to Signor Giuseppe Palli. All the tradespeople and acquaintance of the jeweller called it a *palazzo*, but he called it simply a *casa*, though assuredly it merited the former appellation better than many a dwelling to which it was by universal consent applied. The entire house belonged to Signor Palli, but he inhabited only the first floor of it, and let the remainder. He would have preferred himself to occupy the second floor in preference, and to have let the first, but had yielded on this point to the wishes of his daughter. The street door of the house always stood open during the daytime, but at the inner end of the entrance passage there was a door of open wooden trellis-work which closed the access to the staircase. By the side of this inner door there were four bell-handles arranged one above the other, and marked "Terreno," "Primo Piano," "2do Piano," "3o Piano." Laura had wished that a brass plate with "Giuseppe Palli" inscribed on it should be placed against the *primo piano* bell; but this was a piece of ostentation to which the jeweller could not consent. To live in a *primo piano* was bad enough, but to boast of doing so was too much.

To Nanni, however, no such indication was needed. In reply to his ring, the wooden-barred gate was opened by invisible hands; and by the time that he had mounted to the *primo piano*, he found the Signora Giuditta in person at the door of the apartment, waiting to admit him;—in person, for the old man, who was the jeweller's cook, footman, and *factotum*, was out at market *a fare le spese*, making the purchases for the day's housekeeping; and the servant girl was busy making the beds, and was, indeed, besides prohibited generally by Signora Giuditta from answering the door-bell, for fear that she should find an opportunity of spending five minutes in gossip—a danger which the old lady thought it more proper to incur herself.

"Signor Nanni!" exclaimed the cheery, active, red-apple-faced little old woman; "why, dear heart! who would have thought of seeing you in Florence this blessed morning? Laura! here is Nanni! Come out to him." (This was shouted

at the top of her voice, and was intended to mean, "don't come out whatever you do; but run into your room and make any little changes desirable in your toilette for the receiving of such a guest.") "And is the Fattore come up; and how did you leave your dear mother, the good soul; and what has brought you to Florence; and how is the corn crop looking in the Casentino; and was it very cold coming over the Consuma; and what have you got in that basket?" pointing as she spoke to a little flag basket which Nanni had in his hand, and at last pausing for an answer to her final question.

"See for yourself, Aunt Giuditta," said the young man, addressing her by the common familiar appellation very generally applied to elderly females in Tuscany; "my mother sent the contents, whatever they are, to you. You townfolks, you know, like to taste a bit of country produce now and then, something more like what God made it than what you get from your rogues of Florence dealers."

"A pair of fat fowls, one of the Fattoressa's own cheeses, a dish of trout,—what beauties!—and a bottle of *Vin Santo*!" cried Signora Giuditta, as she excitedly examined the contents of the basket. "But come in, and let us talk a bit! What can Laura be doing?"

So the old lady bustled before him into the principal sitting-room, a large and pleasant chamber at the back of the house, looking into a small shady garden, which the jeweller had treated himself to the expense of filling with choice camellias. Besides the ordinary articles of furniture, and the indispensable piano, there was at one of the windows a small table, with a variety of drawing apparatus upon it, which had evidently been in recent use. But the artist was no longer there. It would seem, that whatever might be the degree of favour or disfavour with which she looked on our friend Nanni, he was at least deemed worth expending so much shot on as was involved in taking the warning her duenna had given her. Besides this drawing-table, there was another near it with modelling tools and materials on it; and what was still more unusual in a room devoted to the domestic use of the ladies of a middle-class Florentine family, there was a small bookcase in one corner of the room filled with books. But if a visitor had had opportunity or

curiosity to examine them, he would have found them to be all of one class. There was a well-thumbed copy of Vasari's Lives, the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini, three or four collections of engraved gems, and one or two works on the art and practice of ornamentation. The collection of music, too, which accompanied the piano, was much more abundant than what might generally be found in Florentine rooms of a similar class.

"Why, where on earth can Laura be gone?" cried Signora Giuditta; "she was here a minute ago, working at her everlasting drawing things. She will be here in a minute, no doubt."

Nanni was, if the truth must be told, somewhat relieved by the temporary absence of his cousin; but had she remained in the room, the worst of the matter would have been got over by this time, whereas now he sat and watched the door by which she would enter with considerable nervous apprehension, while the old lady ran on with an interminable string of questions about the farm and his mother, and his journey to Florence, etc., etc., etc.

Presently the door opened, and Laura stood framed in the doorway.

A very beautiful girl in the first blush of developing womanhood!—very beautiful certainly; yet it was not every man who would have been much struck by her; and many, after they had been struck by, and had observed her, would have found sundry points to criticise in her appearance. The head, many would have said, was too small for the rest of the person; and the mode in which the abundant and glossy black tresses of her hair were bound *à la Grècque* succinctly round her head, added to this appearance. But it was impossible to deny that that charmingly-shaped little head was carried on its possibly too slender, but still beautifully-shaped neck, with rare grace and elegance. The features were small;—perhaps, again, it would be said too small for the height of the figure. But they were cut and moulded with exquisite delicacy; and if the profile was not of the purely classical Greek type, it was only because there were indications of intellect in it which are incompatible with the somewhat inane perfection of that style of beauty. There

was a fulness about that part of the wide and pure forehead which was immediately above and beneath the straight and strongly-marked but delicately-slender black eyebrow, which indicates a strong development of the perceptive faculties, and is generally found to characterise artistic organisations. The long almond-shaped eyes of the deepest shade of violet, which ordinarily lay couched tranquilly observant beneath the shelter of their remarkably long and regular silken lashes, rarely flashed with passion ; but could on occasion quit their habitual expression of calm and meditative observation, deepening at times into dreamy reverie, to become liquid with the eloquence of a tenderness so infinite, that any one fortunate enough to have caught them in their tell-tale mood, and capable of reading their language, would have needed no further observation to assure him that a moral nature lay below, deep down beneath thick piled concealing strata of maiden timidity and bashful reserve, exceptionally rich in vigour of moral sentiment,—richest of all in its infinite capacity of loving.

In consequence, doubtless, of some error or ignorance or other in our methods of managing the elements of human character and human happiness entrusted by the All-wise and All-good to our moulding, beautiful and delicate, yet large and profound, moral organisations of the type that has been partially and imperfectly described above, are very frequently found combined with undue and excessive delicacy and fragility of bodily constitution. In Laura Palli this was not the case. The eye of one accustomed to detect the manifestations of still latent malady would have been satisfied with the pure, yet not too transparent, hue of the cheek, by the elasticity of the light yet firm gait, and by the graceful vigour of every movement of the very slender but well-knit figure, that every function of the animal economy was in normal and healthy activity. And the subtler skill which traces abnormal bodily conditions in their effects on the manifestations of character, would have been equally well satisfied, by a bright joyousness of bearing, which only a thoroughly healthy nature could combine with the meditative tendencies that have been previously remarked on, by the expression of arch humour which often curled the full rich lips, and by transient gleams of fun and merriment that would

occasionally laugh out from the more habitually thoughtful eyes.

How so bright and richly endowed a creature should have been the daughter of that dry-hearted, aristocratic-looking, old, money-getting machine, Giuseppe Palli. But there, we are getting quite out of our depth, "*Les races se féminisent*," says the French philosopher. And possibly our little social arrangements, as well as Nature's vast and unchanging laws, may contribute somewhat towards the apparent manifestation of the phenomenon. How this may have been in the case in question I know not. Livia Palli, Laura's mother, had passed from off the scene many years before those on whose reminiscences these pages are based knew any of the persons concerned in them. There is her tombstone, however, visibly extant in the cloister of St. Mark's; Signor Giuseppe Palli thereon states, that she was an admirable wife and exemplary Christian; and having recorded this testimony, he never said anything more about her. We are left free to suppose, therefore, that the rich and genial nature of the money-lender's daughter was all inherited from her mother, "*Livia Palli, nata Carlini*."

A more charming vision than Laura appeared, as she stood framed for an instant in the dark wooden doorway, where we left her to discourse on her perfections, could not well be imagined. Head too small! Figure too slender for its height, rather above the average! Neck, perhaps, a thought too long and slender! Bah! Where was ever seen form of human mould, in which a critic, inclined to carp, could find no possibility of doing so? Such as she stood there before Nanni, with her long, slender figure, well defined by a sort of brown, artist-like blouse, close buttoned round the delicate throat, as closely at the exquisite little wrists, and gathered by a belt around her waist, it may be safely affirmed that he would not have trusted any critic, were it Apelles himself, with the altering of her, either to add or to take away a hair's breadth in any direction.

"I ran away to wash my hands, Cousin Nanni, as soon as I heard who was at the door, for they were all over chalk; but I have not changed my blouse, you see, so I make no stranger of you. Welcome to Florence! How goes all in the Casentino?" And she held out to him a charming rose-pink little hand, long

and slender, like the rest of her, with frank good-humour as she spoke.

“All quite well, Signora Laura,” said Nanni, stepping forward to take her hand, blushing up to the roots of his hair as he did so. “Father and I came from Pelago this morning. He is gone to speak on business with my uncle on the bridge, and he would have me come here to you.”

“That was very kind of uncle Carlo to us; but very hard upon you, my poor Nanni,” returned she, with a wicked laugh in her eye. “Of course, you wanted to amuse yourself at Florence, and I don’t wonder at your feeling it a bore to be sent to this dull house, only it is rather cruel to tell us so.”

“I, cousin? I never said so!” urged poor Nanni.

“I thought you said your father *would* have you come here,” returned Laura, putting a strong emphasis on the word.

“Because I said to father, ‘Babbo,’ said I, ‘it will be too early for cousin Laura; had I not better go later in the day?’”

“Ah! but it is a bad way, cousin Nanni, to put off the disagreeables. Best to get them done and over; and then one is clear for more pleasant things.”

“Now, cousin Laura, you know that’s not it. You know that all I care to come to Florence for is to come here. You know that when I go back to the Casentino I can think of nothing but when I can come up next. Don’t you know all this, Laura?”

This speech was an immense and unprecedented effort on the part of poor Nanni. He had hardly ever said so much, and certainly nothing half so tender, before. It was clear that he was most conscientiously minded to do his duty after the manner in which his father had laid it down for him. And the short, quick, observant glance, that for an instant chased the light-hearted merriment from her face, showed that Laura took note of the change. But the previous expression returned in the next moment, as she replied,—

“Indeed, cousin Nanni, I neither know nor believe anything of the kind. I fancied that there was another house in this neighbourhood, not one hundred yards from the Arco di San Pietro, that would have been more likely to be in your thoughts, when you are far away in the Casentino. Come, now, cousin

Nanni, out with the truth. Have you been to the Boccaneras this morning, eh?"

"I go to old Boccanera!" stammered Nanni, again blushing all over his bronzed face and forehead. "What should I go there for, cousin Laura?"

"What for? Why to whisper a word in pretty Caterina's ear, to be sure;—and that word not to tell her that your father insisted on your going to her."

Poor Nanni was now utterly discomfited, and very ill at ease.

"I declare, cousin Laura," he said, "that it is very hard to say such things of me, and very unjust, too. Is it fair, now, Aunt Giuditta; I ask you?"

"You ask Aunt Giuditta because she knows so much about the matter, I suppose: is that it, Nanni? But why should you want to deny your liking for Caterina Boccanera. I am sure there is no reason to be ashamed of it."

"I declare, Cousin Laura, I have no more thought about Caterina than I have about——"

"Then I declare that you ought to have; and more than that, that you must be a very insensible fellow, Nanni, not to think about her. I think a great deal about Caterina. She is one of the prettiest girls in Florence, and not far from the best of all."

"Caterina is a very pretty girl, there is no denying that, if one wanted to, which I am sure I don't; and I dare say she is a very good girl too. But——" and here Nanni looked up at the ceiling and down on the ground, and then hard at Aunt Giuditta, as if imploring her assistance, and showed general signs of distress,—“but,” he continued, with a determined effort, “one cannot think much of one girl, however good and pretty, when one's heart is quite full of another a thousand times lovelier.”

And then Nanni felt that now he had been and done it.

"Meaning me, of course, cousin Nanni? Well, really, that is a very pretty speech, and deserves a very low curtsy in return for it," said Laura, rising as she spoke, and making a magnificent and very gracefully executed curtsy. "Really, Nanni, you are improving," she continued, "and you are quite welcome to practise any amount of love-making on me; for it may be advantageous to you, and it won't make any difference to me, you know."

"Now, Laura, you are really too bad," interposed Aunt Giuditta. "What has Nanni said or done that you should treat him in this manner? There are greater ladies than you in Florence, I'll answer for it, who would be proud to be admired by Nanni Palli. No difference to you, indeed! I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself!"

"Why, what can I say to him?" rejoined Laura; "and how can any such talk make any difference to me in my position?"

Aunt Giuditta stared, and Nanni was startled into asking quickly, "What position, Laura; what do you mean?"

"Why! do not you know, cousin Nanni?" replied Laura, with sad seriousness of voice and manner, while a furtive laugh glanced out of the corner of her eye; "don't you know that it has been decided that I am to take the veil? Yes! I am going to become a nun in the convent of the Theresians. The ceremony is to take place very shortly, and I shall make a point of your presence in the chapel."

Aunt Giuditta opened her eyes to their utmost extent in mute astonishment at this announcement; and, "You don't mean it?" faltered poor Nanni.

"Oh, yes, I do mean it!" rejoined Laura; "or it is, at all events, very possible that I may come to mean it very seriously, one of these days. So you see that all such fine speeches are thrown away upon me, as I said; and that you would be far wiser to carry them to Casa Boccanera. And I don't see what is the harm of saying that, Aunt Giuditta, I am sure!"

"Harm!" re-echoed the old lady. "I don't know what has come to you to-day, Madamigella Laura, for my part! And the Theresians, too! A pretty story, truly, for Giuseppe Palli's daughter. But don't you heed a word she says, Signor Nanni. Queer chancey things, girls are!"

"I do think that it would be a thousand pities for you to go into a convent, cousin," said matter-of-fact Nanni; "and I don't think my uncle would ever consent to it, that's more. But what could make you think of taking the veil, cousin Laura?" he added, with curious interest.

"A vocation, of course!" she replied, looking at him seriously, but with a furtive smile on her lip; "a vocation for passive obedience and singing matins at midnight."

“ But you might do your passive obedience, without going into a nunnery for it,” argued Nanni, who began to think that if the two halves of the Perini estates were to be re-united, it would have to be accomplished by an exercise of parental authority on the part of his uncle.

Laura remained silent for a while after this home thrust, and then said, “ Which would you rather, Nanni, marry a wife not of your own choosing, or remain a bachelor to the end of your days ? ”

“ Which would I rather ? ” repeated Nanni, slowly and carefully, like a man who has had a riddle proposed to him ; “ which would I rather, marry a wife of my own choosing, or remain

” but at that point he was interrupted by a ringing at the door-bell, and Aunt Giuditta hastened to anticipate the maid in opening it.

“ Here is Signor Sebastiano de’ Lunardi ! ” said she, returning the next minute with a young man about the same age as Nanni Palli, but of appearance as singularly contrasted with that of the young farmer as the outward presentment of one man can well be with that of another.

CHAPTER VI.

WHICH SHALL IT BE ?

A CONSIDERABLE amount of insight into the character of any woman might have been obtained, and a shrewd guess as to the category of temperament to which she belonged have been hazarded, by any one who could have got her answer to the question, which of those two young men, Giovanni Palli or Sebastiano de’ Lunardi, she thought the handsomest. The polling of the votes of a large and varied female constituency on the question would have been so even that the contest would have been a close and doubtful one up to the close of the poll. To either party it would have appeared a wonderful and incomprehensible thing that their opponents should be able to

contest the matter with them for a moment. The red ribbons—those would have been the Palli colours—would have most contemptuously scouted the claims and arguments of the other party. And the sky-blue streamers, which would have been selected as their badge by the Lunardi faction, though more capable of appreciating the good points of the rival candidate, would have deemed it truly preposterous to put advantages which they would not have attempted to deny into competition with those of their own favourite.

My own impression is, that the reds would have had among them a greater number of voters on the shadier, and, of course, wiser, side of thirty years of age; and the blues a majority of such as had not arrived at those years of matured discretion. I am not sure, however, that this proportion might not have been reversed if voters in short frocks and trousers had been admitted to the poll.

There was unquestionably very much to admire in the outward forms and features, and in the inward and more or less spiritual graces expressed by them, of both these curiously contrasted young men. Each had what the other lacked. Ah! why not combine the two into one phoenix, and win all votes and sympathies! Amiable Utopist! Nature has declined to attempt such combinations. In mythologies and romances we have, it is true, winged horses and miraculous self-contradictory heroes. But what an ugly brute is Pegasus in comparison with Eclipse!

Sebastian was a very little taller than Nanni; but the greater slightness of his build made him seem much more so. Though fairly healthy, well-proportioned, and active in his movements, an eye practised in estimating such matters would have seen, at half a glance, that Palli could have crushed him in his gripe and tossed him out of the window as if he had been a baby. His hair and beard were fair in colour, and fine in texture. The latter, unlike the strong light brown and stiff curls which the young farmer wore trimmed closely in the form of a segment of a circle around his jolly good-humoured face, was cut to an elongated point beneath his chin; and the former, retreating so as to leave bare the entire temples, showed the large and lofty expanse of a very white and very beautifully-formed forehead, on the sides of which the pale-blue lines of the veins were very

visible. The eyes were blue, like those of Palli, but they were, when at rest, of a tint several shades fainter. They were, however, far more subject to changing than those of the young farmer. In fact, they were rarely tranquil for many minutes together, those strange fascinating eyes, which so irresistibly magnetised organisations in any degree attuned to accord with those of their owner! Every passing emotion, every fleeting idea seemed to mirror itself, as it passed, in those large limpid eyes, which would dilate and contract, pale and deepen in colour, and run through the whole gamut of passion in expression with the fickle mobility of cloud-shadows across a sunny sky.

The lower part of the face, the jaw, cheeks, mouth, and chin, were almost of the pure Greek statuesque type, so beautiful in form that it seemed a pity that any part of the outline should be hidden by a beard. There was infinite sweetness about the varied phases of the expression of the mouth, but the entire face did not give one the impression of strength. A physiognomist would have been apt to say of him, as the dying patriarch said of the son whose nature he had carefully marked, "Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel." Unhappily, the same observer might have also read in the lines and moods of that mobile countenance a very strong desire of excelling. The two qualities are disastrously united in the same idiosyncrasy with strange frequency, demonstrating, by the production of misery, error somewhere in our breeding or educational processes.

To excel is assuredly excellent, but it is not the best thing the world has to offer by a very great deal. And it would behave any heart that might assume the duty and acquire the right of sharing the joys and sorrows of that not thoroughly well-balanced nature, to find the means of bringing it to feel and to acknowledge that there was better happiness in store within its reach, than that which it strove to catch at, even at the cost of reiterated agonies of failure.

Yes, clearly enough, this delicate love-inviting nature would need support from a yoke-fellow and life companion. Not incapable of giving support in many cases and circumstances, it would yet often require it in turn; and the helpmate fitted for Sebastian would be one who could be leant on, as well as lean.

Stalwart Nanni Palli, on the contrary, stalwart in body, and stalwart in character, with his strong right arm, wide chest, clear steadfast eye, and firm broad chin, was very visibly the man to buckler her he loved against a thousand, not only of foes, but of cares, weaknesses, and sorrows. That was a nature always to give and never to ask support—within the sphere and range of its capabilities.

And if we had been able to commit the indiscretion of reading down at the very bottom of Laura's maiden heart, and had copied the above estimate of the characters of the two men from what we found recorded there, it would have stood very much as at present it stands written. She had known them both for many years, the heir to all the blood of all the Lunardi almost as long as her cousin. For in those days, when the ruined Conte Rinaldo had lodged with Simone Boccanera, the then young foreman of Giuseppe Palli, a certain degree of acquaintanceship had grown up between the elders of the Palli and Lunardi families, but a much greater degree of intimacy had ensued between the younger branches, both the boy Lunardi and the girl Palli being baby friends of two contemporaneous scions of the Boccanera race.

Sebastiano was entering the room eagerly, and quite at his ease, when the unexpected sight of Nanni Palli there evidently disconcerted him, and made him feel shy and embarrassed. The two young men were acquainted with each other, and there was no sort of dislike or ill-feeling between them, though it was impossible that there should be much of mutual comprehension.

Laura was at the window, seated at her drawing table, at the farthest part of the room, when he came in; and though she looked up with a pleasant smile, she had not risen from her seat to receive him. But perceiving in an instant the little change of manner which has been noticed, she immediately got up and went across the room to meet him, holding out the little slender hand she had so frankly placed in her cousin's brown broad palm, but not so boldly and unreservedly bringing it into contact with the small nervous hand which, now almost as timidly as her own, came to meet it.

However, the hand-shake and the salutation were performed; and Sebastian, having first bowed to Nanni, and then returned

on second thoughts to shake hands with him, to the great mystification and wonderment of the young farmer, seated himself at the far end of the room.

"I came, Signora Laura," he began, "to bring you an old trinket belonging to my uncle, which the *Gobbo** Boccanera came to our house to ask for. He said you wanted such a thing for a design you were engaged on for the shop. I hope it may be of service to you."

"Yes, I told the *Gobbo* that I thought it very likely the Canonico might have something of the sort. I am trying to contrive something in the good old style to turn these big irregular-shaped pearls to account. If Simone Boccanera had his way, I should do nothing but work hard for the shop all day."

"Why do you let him bother you with it at all, cousin Laura?" said Nanni. "I am sure I would not in your place. Uncle Beppe cannot want you to soil your pretty fingers with clay and chalk, and things."

"Oh, I would not give up my drawing and modelling. And I like nothing better than to see my fancies put into permanent materials at the shop. But master Boccanera has the most outrageously exaggerated notion of the value of my designs; and administers his flattery by insisting on my working very hard sometimes."

"Well, I declare it is a shame!" said Nanni, "and I shall tell my uncle so."

"And do not *you* think I am very hardly used," said Laura, with a glance of mock distress at Sebastian.

"I fear me, Signora, I must range myself on the part of the enemy, and follow Signor Boccanera's example of preferring the work to the ease of the artist," replied the young man.

"And *you* have no mercy for my poor hands, besmirched with clay and charcoal, and chalk-dust, '*gnor* Sebastiano," returned Laura, giving him a laughing side-glance.

"As if such hands and fingers as those were made for working," said Nanni.

* *Gobbo*, humpbacked. The word is very constantly used in speaking of one so deformed, without any notion of ridicule, reproach, or even discourtesy.

“ Well, I am afraid they were,” rejoined Sebastian.

“ There’s a hand made for work, and ready for it,” cried Nanni, holding out his great broad hand, with some pride in its strength and vigour, “ but it don’t look much the same sort of machine as the hand of my cousin.”

“ Nor is the work expected from it the same,” replied the other, mildly.

“ But it would spoil such fingers as Laura has,” urged Nanni, with an admiring look at the objects of his defence.

“ I do not think that any mischief has been done them yet,” said Sebastian, smiling; “ and they have produced a good deal.”

“ Ah! you don’t see it,” said Laura; “ but cousin Nanni is more critical, and looks closer.”

And so the talk went on with such like mild raillery and sparring, after the fashion of lads and lasses under similar circumstances. No word of greater interest or importance was said between them, than such innocent prattling as that in the specimen recorded. And yet, if an observant listener, and one not altogether an outer barbarian in such matters, had been present, he would have been able to form a very shrewd guess of the state of things existing between the parties. Such looker-on at the game would have felt strongly persuaded that if pretty Laura was fancy-free as regarded her cousin, she was hardly equally so with regard to the noble scion of the house of Lunardi. He would have convinced himself that the heart of the latter had been wholly and utterly given into the keeping of the jeweller’s daughter; it would have been perfectly clear to him, that the two perfectly well understood one another; but he would have remarked that, despite this, the manner of the young patrician was very far from that of an assured and accepted lover. It was, on the contrary, timid, at times almost depressed, and by no means confident. It would have been still more clearly evident to such supposed spy on the little party, that, though the handsome young farmer was very certainly bent on making himself as agreeable to his lovely cousin as he could, it would not be matter of heartbreak to him when he should discover that his efforts were in vain. It was further plain, either that he had not convinced himself of that fact, or

that he had no suspicion that Sebastian was in anywise the cause of it; or finally, that he was of too loyal, frank, and kindly a nature to hate him for it. For, although there was, as has been said, a little sparring between the young men—all very much to the advantage of the favoured lover, as such tilting matches played in such lists are apt to be—they were evidently on good terms with each other, and there was no serious ill-will or bad blood between them.

Aunt Giuditta meanwhile had cares with reference to the dinner to be prepared for the Fattore and his son, who would of course dine that day with them, heavy on her mind, and she kept alternating her superintendence between the drawing-room and the kitchen. On one occasion of her thus leaving the room, Laura followed her; and the result of their private conference was apparent, when the old lady, on returning to it, said very graciously:

“The Fattore and Signor Nanni are going to dine with us to-day; they came up from the Casentino this morning. It would give us much pleasure if you would join us, Signor Sebastiano.”

“You are very kind,” said he, with a flush of pleasure, as he spoke his thanks to one lady, while he looked them to the other; “I should very much like to come. But I must walk home with the Canonico from vespers, you know; that is my daily duty. I meet him at the door of the Duomo as he comes out. But when I have seen him home, I can run off, and be in time for your dinner-hour here.”

So it was settled that he should dine with them shortly after the hour at which the Fattore expected to get away from his interview with the *padrone* at the palace.

“And there’ll be a dish of trout such as you don’t see every day in Florence, I can tell you; though I say it who should not, for I caught them every one, cousin Laura, with my own line. But they are prime ones. There is not a brook in the Casentino like ours for trout.”

“They are as lovely fish as ever were put on a dish, that I will say,” chimed in Aunt Giuditta.

“And now good-bye, Laura, till dinner-time; for I must go and look up a fellow who owes a lot of money for timber. Good-

bye, cousin Laura," said honest Nanni, as he committed the unpardonable piece of bad generalship of leaving his rival in possession of the field of battle.

"What a dear, good, honest fellow cousin Nanni is!" said Laura, as soon as the door had closed on him. "I must have you estimate him at his due worth, Bastiano *mio*!"

"I think I do, Laura. I always thought him a kindly, loyal nature," returned her lover.

"Ah! but I have been thinking, my friend, that this good feeling and good will may be very important matters to us."

"Ah! Laura, Laura! You are more hopeful than I can be!" sighed her lover.

"Then I must have hope and courage for both!" replied she, with a bright and sunny smile. "But you let yourself be too faint-hearted, my Bastiano," she continued. "Have you not faith in me?"

"But that is all I have, Laura *mia*," he replied. "Faith in you! Yes, all faith in your affection, in your firmness, in your courage! But I have no faith in anything else!"

"None in yourself, Bastiano?" she said, shaking her head at him gravely. "If you have not, I have!"

"How can I have faith in myself, Laura? What have I done to generate or justify it? I am a ruined noble—ruined, I suppose, because ruin was what we prepared for ourselves and deserved—and I am as incapable of mending that ruin as any of the other ruined heirs of noble families around me. I attempted to do something in music, the only path which seemed open to me, and in which I seemed to myself capable of doing anything; and you know with what success! What faith can a man have in himself, whose life is a chronicle of incapacities and failures."

"It would be no longer faith, but certainty, my friend, if you had from the first found nothing but success. But an artist, more than any other man, my Bastiano, should have faith in himself—abiding and self-sustaining; not vain self-satisfaction, easily contented; not complacent assurance that the goal has been reached, but hopeful self-reliance on the capacity for reaching it!"

"Ah, Laura, you are my Egeria, you are my inspiration!"

he cried, as he caught in his the beautiful little hand she had raised in the earnestness of speaking. And, indeed, a better impersonation of an inspiring Egeria could hardly be imagined than the tall, slender figure in its simple brown holland blouse, with one hand and demonstrative forefinger raised in air, flushed cheeks, and animated, but gravely earnest eye.

The upraised hand was dropped, but not withdrawn from his grasp; and the calm, large eyes darkened to the deepest tint of the violet, full of overflowing tenderness, yet grave with the instinctive consciousness of power and force of will, looking earnestly into his, as seeking to infuse into them the contagion of their own hopeful firmness.

“You know,” he continued, “how often your strength has strengthened me; how I have striven to hope when you bade me hope; how, in the absence of all other hope, at least that of your approbation has been sufficient to sustain me; how your counsels and helpful words have made possible to me what, without them, would have been impossible. But, Laura, all this does not touch the one vital point of all. If that were safe, I think—I know that I could have faith, and labour faithfully; the world would be all bright to me, and disappointed ambition be only the spur to fresh effort.”

Here the little hand was withdrawn from his, and again raised up in admonition.

“Have faith, I have said, Bastiano, in yourself. Have faith also, I now say, in me.”

“Boundless faith!—no devotee had ever faith in his saint more boundless than I have in your priceless affection, my Laura! But in your power to rule your destiny and mine?

Is it not only too clear to see the purpose for which your cousin comes here? Is it not too evident that that purpose is approved and shared by your father and by his? Is not your lot marked out for you? It needs no great cunning to see it. Why, is it not natural—the two cousins—the only son and the only daughter? The putting together the family property? It is clear, self-evident, a matter of course! So safe a matter of course that your father never dreams of the possibility of seeing aught objectionable in my visits here.”

“Now, *Bastianino mio*,” she said, slowly shaking her head,

with a sad smile, "is there in the wide world another save yourself who could extract matter for unhappiness and discontent from the fact that you have not been forbidden the house? *Davvero, davvero, questo è proprio tuo.*"*

"Nay, Laura, not that," he answered; "but can it be, that I should not be sharp-sighted for every augury and omen that threatens my all of happiness in this life? Can you at all figure to yourself, I wonder, what the world would be to me—what it will be, when you are definitely taken from me and given to another? For a man to protest that he cannot live without the woman he loves is a very common phrase, and very much of course. But do you not *know* that, in sober earnest, I could not live? You know well that I should never raise my hand against my own life any more than against that of another. But there would be no need of hands. I could not live! What would be art, ambition, hope, sunshine, air, the world, if I lose you? Say, rather, what will they be when I do lose you? I cannot blind myself!"

And he let his head fall on his breast as he spoke, with an attitude and expression that would have made an invaluable study for an Adam passing from out of the gates of Paradise.

But the sweet daughter of Eve beside him would consent to share in no such hopeless banishment.

"*Bastianino mio,*" she said, after a pause, as her hand timidly stole out to take his, while her eyes veiled themselves entirely beneath their long lashes, and her face was bent towards the ground, "your desponding nature drives me to say what, perhaps, a girl should abstain from saying, and what surely you ought not to need to be said. But as I truly would give my life, were it needed, to make your happiness, so I will sacrifice any feeling, that . . . that would prevent my saying what may bring you comfort. Do you not know, my Sebastiano, that the world would be as much a hopeless void to me without your love, as it could be to you apart from me? It may be that my father and my Uncle Carlo have formed a project of a marriage between Nanni and me. But to me nothing has been said as yet on the subject; and I do not think that my

* Truly, truly this is exactly thine own.

father would attempt to constrain me against my will. I do not think that dear, good Nanni would persevere in a suit that made me unhappy. But if it were otherwise—if sorrow, and contention, and reproach, and anger have to be endured, I can endure them. Sebastian, I will be no wife, if I be not thine. Have you now faith in me, my poor Sebastian ?”

She looked up as she finished speaking, and her eyes met his. There was the slightest shadow of mild reproach mingled with the unspeakable wealth of affection which welled forth from their depths. Sebastian marked it, and felt that he had more than deserved it. But it was not in him to repent of the shortcoming which had had for result to draw forth words which had poured new life into his veins.

“My own Laura! Generous, noble, loving, courageous,—giving of your strength to sustain my weakness. That I should say ‘My Laura!’ and yet dare to grumble at my fate. How much more happiness have I even now than I have ever deserved? I will be strong! my Laura. I will deserve your affection and your generous devotion! I will have faith! Can you forgive me for having lacked it?”

Laura made no reply in words; but if the half loving, half arch, sly side-glance with which she looked up at him had been truly translated, it might have been read to signify, that if she had not been able to forgive him for having lacked faith and courage seventy times seven, she would not have cared to discuss the matter now.

“But the opera you are now at work on, Bastiano; you have had no vexation with regard to that. You know what your uncle said of the quartette at the end of the first act?”

“Yes, Laura; and I was very much pleased. But still, you know, though my poor dear uncle is a real judge of music, yet the musical world is not what it was in his day! and then, you know, all my geese are swans to him, dear old man!”

“But my father spoke very highly of it too; and he knows what good music is, and had no prejudice in the matter.”

“Beyond the courteous desire of agreeing with and pleasing my uncle.”

“Oh! you unbelieving Thomas! I am sure *I* thought it the most exquisite quartette I had ever heard; and you won’t

suspect *me* of any prejudice in the matter," she added, with a bright smile.

"Certainly not," he replied, in the same vein; "in you I am sure to find a stern and rigorous critic; and that, you know, is what we artists always profess to wish for. I wanted to have a little talk with you about the idea of the chorus preceding the quartette. But I must run away to the Duomo. I would not have my uncle miss me at the door, when he comes out from vespers, for anything."

"Why, you don't mean it is so late as that!" exclaimed Laura, jumping up. "How the time has slipped away! And there is my drawing as much advanced as it was three hours ago! And I have lost all the morning! No! not lost, I hope, Sebastian!" she added, as, changing her tone and expression of face in the rapid manner peculiar to her, she looked into his eyes with one of those calm and soft but serious glances, which had so eloquently enforced her previous remonstrances and exhortations; "not lost, I trust. I have given you some comfort, my Bastiano; have I not? And you will be good, and trustful, and not despondent, will you not?—trustful in me and in your own self."

"My own sweet monitress! I *will* strive to be all you would have me, Laura! I will begin by trusting that I shall be able to profit by your lesson of this morning. I will be hopeful!"

"And now run to meet your uncle. And I must get ready and help Aunt Giuditta to make ready for receiving our guests. If her heart had not been very intent on that matter, we should hardly have had so uninterrupted a talk, my friend! Now run; I had no idea it was so late!"

"*A rivederti fra poco!*" he said, as he took her hand once again, before hurrying down the stair.

Sebastiano was in time not only to meet the old Canon at the side door of the Duomo, opposite to the *Sasso di Dante*, on the southern side of the nave, by which his uncle invariably quitted the church, but at the door of the sacristy inside the huge building.

"I do not feel as if I needed an arm to-day, my dear boy," said the old man, cheerily, as he came out from disrobing himself. "I feel as firm on my legs as the Campanile there, which

is older than even I. Not but that I should be scorry to miss the companion of my walk."

He paused as he reached the door of the church, and slowly facing about, bowed reverently in the direction of the high altar before crossing the threshold.

"There is poor old Canon Geloni's chair, waiting for him," he continued, as he pertinaciously refused his great-nephew's arm in descending the one or two steps; "he is ten years my junior,—ten years if he is a day; I was a canon eleven years before he belonged to the chapter, and he is obliged to have a chair, though he has not half so far to go as I have, and not a quarter of the stairs to go up to get home. Poor man! I have very much to be thankful for! And not least for the kind folks and kind faces that are around me when I do get home, *Bastianino mio*; poor old Geloni has nobody at home but his housekeeper!"

"I sometimes think, uncle, that those stairs at home are getting a little too much for you."

"Not a bit of it, my boy! not a bit of it! It is my exercise that keeps me in health. If our good Marietta did not know that, she would never let me live there. It is the exercise that keeps me going! And one other thing,—one other thing that poor old Geloni has not got. There is no violin on his table at home, waiting to welcome him. It is our divine art, my Sebastian, that is the solace and support of my old age; and it is not every old *primo* who has such a *secondo* always at his elbow, and always ready to indulge an old man's old-fashioned tastes, as I know who!"

"Dear uncle! what should I know of music if it had not been for you?"

"Ta . . . ta . . . ta! You have it in your blood, my boy! Music is born in one man, as much as gout is in another. I don't say that I may not have counted for something in the formation of your taste. We have been useful to each other, my Sebastian!"

"But your tastes are not old fashioned, uncle; quite the contrary," returned the younger musician; "who appreciates the grand music of Beethoven as you do?"

"Truly, my boy, the German is a grand fellow; a great master, indeed. Perhaps he has obtained orchestral effects

which had never been equalled before. And I do, as you say, appreciate his symphonies. But I can't give up my Boccherini, —divine, soul-elevating Boccherini. What can surpass in ravishing melody and noble sentiment the quartettes, the sestuos, the quintettes of the sublime Lucchese! ”*

“ But I love Boccherini as well as you do ; and am always, for my part, as ready for an evening with him as with Beethoven. Beethoven is more dramatic in feeling and treatment.”

“ May be so, my boy ! And I tell you what, Sébastian, I want to try that last quartette of his that came last week. Don't you long for it ? When will Marietta let us have an evening, eh ? Just as if she was not always ready and willing to procure me a pleasure, dear, good, kind Marietta ! What a daughter she has been to me ! and what a mother to you, my boy ! What should we ever have been without her ? ”

“ Helpless enough, both of us, I dare say, uncle. I don't think that either you or I have a very special talent for house-keeping. Marietta has been the providence of the family. But I would give much—if I had it—to make our dear Marietta think that there may be some things in this world worth living and working for besides the honour and glory of the Lunardi name. You know, uncle, that I have cause to wish it.”

“ And I wish it too, with all my heart, for your sake, my dear boy ! ” replied the old Canon ; “ but what would you have ? Her father, my poor brother Rinaldo, was just like her. I suppose it is born in some people, as I said music is in others. She was born and bred in no other thought from the cradle upwards than how to raise up the family to its old position. And then all the family misfortunes ! Poor Marietta ! She was as good a daughter to my poor, dear brother as she has been good as daughter, housekeeper, friend, and nurse to me ! I wish I could bring back honour and glory to the old name, for her sake, Heaven bless her ! But I must leave that to you, young sir ! You are the hope of the Lunardi race, and of our dear Marietta now ! ”

“ Yes ! ” replied the young man, with a deep sigh ; “ I wish with all my heart it were not so.”

* Boccherini was born at Lucca in 1740.

“But Sebastian, my dear boy, I don’t see how poor Marietta can either make or mar your matters with the wealthy jeweller’s daughter. If you had her good wishes ever so much, the rich man would not be more likely to give his daughter to thee, my poor boy.”

“That is true, uncle,” returned Sebastian, with a deep sigh. “But we should then, at all events, be of one mind in a house; and I should not have the pain of thinking, that one whom I love as I do Marietta was anxiously bent on frustrating my own dearest hope! Would that she could be brought to see things as you and I do, my dear uncle, and value them with our balances!”

“And I would that I had the power of helping thee, my Sebastian. Thou knowest how proud and happy I should be to see thy pretty Laura a daughter of our house. No Lunardi ever mated with a worthier, I trow! But as things are, it is seeking sorrow to no profit to talk with our Marietta on the point. Best leave it in silence! And now, my dear boy, I will accept of your arm to help me up the stairs.”

So the old man went into the room opening on the terrace, in which we were present at a conversation between Marietta and her friend and confidant, the Canon Guidi of San Lorenzo, intent on sounding his niece on the subject of his projected quartette party; and the young man raced back in all haste to his engagement at the house of the jeweller.

CHAPTER VII.

THE QUARTETTE PARTY.

THE dinner at the jeweller’s passed off better than might, perhaps, have been anticipated from all the circumstances of the individuals composing it. For the elders of the party, of course, the dish of Casentino trout, and other matters of Aunt Giuditta’s providing, sufficed to secure a satisfactory amount of happiness. And how excellent and desirable a thing, my

friends, it is, to have driven one's barque through the troublous breakers that tossed it so about in the early part of our voyage, and to have reached the calm and tranquil waters, wherein a dish of trout and a flask of Montepulciano may be safely trusted to make our contentment!

The two brothers and Aunt Giuditta enjoyed their hour. There was no doubt or mistake about it; for their digestions were good. But of the younger trio, Laura and her two admirers, was there one who could say that the little festival had afforded them the pleasure they had each anticipated from it? So sad and troublesome a thing, my friends, is it to have one's twenty-fifth year still before one! And the jackanapes who hints at sour grapes is a puppy, who will find out his mistake some day.

As for Sebastian, if I had been in his place, I would have excused myself from accepting that invitation to dinner; or rather, if he had been in my place—which is a very different thing—he would have done so. What could he expect? Of course, he jumped at the hook—stupid gudgeon as he was—seeing nothing but the brilliant shining fly, represented by the prospect of passing an hour in the presence of his idol. Of course, under the circumstances of the case, he had an hour of wretchedness. It was not in the nature of things that it should be otherwise, given the position and relationship of the parties present on the occasion. Of course, the unreasonable simpleton sat on thorns the whole time. Of course, the position, which justified and indeed required Nanni to be assiduous before his father and uncle in the duty of making love to his cousin, while he, poor penniless patrician, dared not, in the same presence, make any love at all, was intolerable to him. Of course, every word and glance of kindness and friendly intercourse between the cousins was a stab to his heart. Of course, his misery was very faithfully expressed on his by no means illegible features; and, of course, as poor Laura could only venture, every now and then, and not every minute, as he would have had her, to give him a transient and furtive but eloquent glance of encouragement and comfort, he was discontented with her as with all the rest of the world.

Good, honest Nanni, though far from being equally miserable,

and though not wholly incapacitated by rebellious feelings from taking his share of the enjoyment of the good things before him,—for he had lived in the open air of the fields, and his nervous system had been thus fortified, you see,—was yet not altogether happy and at his ease. In the first place, he had the consciousness that he was doing badly what he had to do, and was anxious to do well. His feelings towards Sebastian were very much more kindly and free from gall than, it may be feared, those of the sensitive artist were towards him. Still he did not understand nor altogether like his presence there. His uncle, it is true, was, as he well knew, a violinist, and in the habit of making one in the little quartette parties at the old Canonico's lodgings; and he supposed that the footing of the young musician in the house was due to this community of tastes, and to the acquaintanceship between the families, which having arisen long years ago, out of the connection with the Boccaneras which has been mentioned, had been continued and improved by means of their musical sympathies. Still it did seem to him that that pale thread-paper of a youngster kept looking at Laura in a way he could not quite understand. Probably, it was only their town-bred way of doing the genteel thing. It was not to be supposed that such a girl as Laura could look with favour on such a washed-out stripling, with bean-water* instead of blood in his veins. Pshaw! That was quite out of the question. And besides, for a penniless musician to think of Laura Palli! A pretty thing indeed! No, there was no cause to trouble his head about the young man, and his queer ways, and his looks. If it was the fashion for folk to turn up the whites of their eyes like slaughtered sheep, the lad was quite welcome to do what he liked with his eyes, for him!

Still Nanni was not at his ease. The frank, easy, open-hearted, cousinly kindness of Laura's manner to him, while it made him like her all the better, yet somehow or other caused him instinctively to feel that it was not the exact thing that was wanted, and it was not precisely the footing on which it behoved him to stand with his cousin, and did not seem to have any tendency to lead towards that. And then again, honest, jolly Nanni was made a little uncomfortable at moments by a

* A common Tuscan phrase.

kind of suspicion that he made an inferior figure to the town lad in the way of talk; that he often could not understand the drift of his cousin's conversation; that it turned frequently on matters of which he knew nothing, and in which he took no interest; while that fellow there was quite at home in it all. Not that he thought that women cared much for talk in a man; they liked to do the talking themselves. But then he could not help remembering that, somehow or other, he did talk with Caterina Boccanera; that, in fact, when with her he did most of the talking, and that her manner to him was altogether very different from that of cousin Laura. And he had a very shrewd suspicion that the style of Caterina's intercourse with him was more after the matter of that natural to a girl who has no objection whatever, but rather the contrary, to your making love to her.

So the dinner was a failure also, as far as poor Nanni was concerned.

As to Laura, it is abundantly clear that she had no pleasant time of it, while seated between Nanni and her uncle, and opposite to Sebastian; she had to do her duty as hostess to her guests with cheerful courtesy, and to oppose light-hearted raillery and frank laughing cousinship to Nanni's not very hard-pushed attempts to establish a tenderer style of intercourse between them, while keeping all the time a nervous watch over the conduct of Sebastian, dreading that he should expose himself to observation by the air of misery which he could not conceal, bleeding at heart for all that she knew he was suffering, and vigilantly spying every favourable opportunity for darting across to him a telegraphic glance of consolation.

No! assuredly Laura did not enjoy that dinner party, despite the fineness of the trout and the excellence of the wine. But then she alone had probably never expected anything much better from it. And she had manœuvred for Sebastian to be invited, only to save him from the torments she well knew he would inflict on himself, if left to poison his imagination with pictures of her cousin making love to her during his enforced absence.

Dear, courageous, tender-hearted Laura! It is a small matter to pity and make allowances for weaknesses and follies which we share and sympathise with. The next thing is to comprehend

and uncontentuously pity those to which our own happier or stronger temperament is a stranger.

Surely, my elderly friend, you must rejoice with me in having got past the time when sorrows of this sort could interfere with our enjoyment "*veteris Bacchi pinguisque ferinae!*" Of course you do!

The dinner, however, came to an end, like other things; the Fattore and his son, after taking their coffee and one miniature glass of choice old brandy after it, returned to their inn, intending to start on their journey homeward, and get as far as Pelago that night; and Sebastian immediately afterwards took his leave, having lingered a moment to invite Signor Giuseppe Palli, on the part of his uncle and his cousin Marietta, to come with his violin and have a little music on the following evening.

"My cousin will be much pleased, Signora, if you would accompany Signor Giuseppe, and accept our music as a substitute for all other entertainment," added the poor lover with downcast eyes, and blushing as he spoke at the falsehood he was uttering. For he full well knew how very far from welcome Laura's presence in the house was to Marietta.

Both invitations were graciously accepted—Laura remarking with her tongue that there was nothing in the way of music that she liked better than to hear two such violinists as the Canonico and her father together, and feeling no sort of compunction as she said it; perhaps, because she satisfied her conscience by adding a clause with her eyes, which brought the compound statement, thus made, somewhat nearer to the truth.

And then, Signora Giuditta having slipped away to see to the due disposal of the fragments of the feast, the jeweller and his daughter were left together for a few minutes before the former returned for his rarely omitted hour of evening attendance at the shop, or rather in the mysterious little sanctum—if a spot which had such small claims to sanctity in any way, may so be called—behind it.

"I was pleased to see thee and Nanni such good friends, my daughter!" said the old gentleman. "He is in truth a fine and well-grown youth, and his father has nought but good to say of him. Of course, thou rememberest that he is thy uncle's only child, as thou art mine, Laura. And Carlo Palli, let me whisper in your ear, is very comfortably well off;—very comfortably

indeed!—more so than most folks may think. And all that will some day come to Nanni, joined, my child, to all that must some day” a sigh “some day come to thee, would place the family of Palli in such a position that thy children, my Laura, might take their places among the best in the land. A word is enough to the wise, and I think thou wert never of the foolish sort, my Laura. I was pleased, I say, to see so good an understanding between thee and thy cousin.”

And therewith the money-lender walked off to his place in the middle of his web, to sit and watch for whatever flies might be taken in ; while Laura took out her drawing and modelling tools, and sat down to give as much of her mind to the work on which she was engaged as she could contrive to call off from wandering over every incident of the dinner, and ever returning to dwell and ponder on her father’s parting words.

It was about nine on the following evening, after the jeweller had returned from his evening sitting in the spider’s web on the Ponte, that Laura and he set forth to walk to the Palazzo Lunardi—his precious *viola* having been sent before by a trusty messenger.

The quartette parties, which made the delight of the old Canonico’s existence, were almost invariably thus composed. The old man took the first violin. He was a consummate musician, and had once been a first-rate performer. Now the quartettes might have been better given if he had been content to hold the second place. But who would have hinted at deposing him ? His dignity as first fiddle was not less dear to him than that of his position as head of the House of Lunardi had been to his brother. The latter was cast down from his pride of place, but the good old Canon held his happily to the end. Happy are those whom facile pleasures and humble aims content. Blessed are the poor in spirit ; for theirs is the better share of the kingdom of this world, as well as the entirety of that other kingdom promised to them.

The second violin was the province of Sebastiano ; and, however high might have been the appreciation of his performance by an exclusively musical critic, the most charming part of it to others would have been the assiduous and skilful care with which the young man waited upon the somewhat enfeebled execution of the old one, and was ever watchful to efface him-

self so far as might be necessary to avoid all risk of effacing the octogenarian performer.

The tenor fell to the lot of Signor Giuseppe Palli. It was the only relaxation which the careful and business-absorbed old gentleman allowed himself; and he was an excellent player. He always wore his double gold eye-glass on the high ridge of his long nose when playing; always sat with his long rigid person, clad from head to foot in glossiest black, perfectly erect, and his narrow high grey head, with his prominent cheek-bones, pinched temples, and tall retreating forehead, thrown up; always beat time with the toe of one long narrow gold-buckled shoe; and was, it may be hoped at such moments, liberated for awhile from thoughts of foreclosures, bad debts, and twenty per cent. For many years he had been in the habit of taking the same part in the old Canon's quartette parties; and quartette players know the advantages and pleasures of being thoroughly acquainted with and habituated to each other's play. The acquaintance had begun at the time when the Conte Rinaldo and his family had gone, at the period of their final downfall, to lodge in the house of the jeweller's then foreman, Simone Boccanera, and it had ripened into greater intimacy than would have been likely to have arisen but for this community of tastes and pleasures.

The violoncello was the share of the Canon Guido Guidi, and none of those who were well acquainted with his reverence would have doubted, however ignorant of music they might have been, that the handsome priest played well. Whatever Guido Guidi did, he did it well. As in the case of the money-lending jeweller, music was the one relaxation which he permitted himself from the assiduous cares incidental to that course of life which he considered as, or chose to substitute for, the path of duty. The reader may have remarked the tone in which he spoke to Marietta of the objects to which his life was devoted, and the temper in which he applied the term "duty" to them. For the Reverend Guido Guidi was fully persuaded of the truth of the dogma he laid down to Marietta on the same occasion;—that whomsoever else it may be expedient to deceive, it is never expedient to deceive one's self.

The two Lunardi, the old Canon and his great nephew, may

be said to have lived for music ; it was to them not a relaxation, but a main object of existence ;—in the case of the young man avowedly so. Yet it is probable that the two amateur players, so to distinguish them, were—not the most perfect musicians in their organisation, but—the most thorough masters of all that fingers can do with bow and catgut.

When the jeweller and his daughter reached the old Canon's third floor, they found Guidi and his violoncello already arrived. Marietta had done her utmost to make her one sitting-room into as neat and comfortable a little music-room as possible. In one corner was the stool used by Guidi, an old-fashioned, church-looking reading-desk for his music, and his violoncello reposing with its long neck and little head in the corner. The old Canon was sitting in his accustomed arm-chair at the table in the middle of the room, with a huge pair of spectacles of tortoise-shell on, looking over a quantity of music, most of it in MS. And on this occasion the old gentleman was properly equipped in his straight-collared, single-breasted, somewhat threadbare, but most carefully brushed canon's coat, and looked a gentleman every inch of him.

It is a singularly subtle thing—that looking like a gentleman ! There was Signore Giuseppe Palli ;—the outward appearance of the man has been described. He had all those marks and characteristics of shape and formation which are held to give aristocratic appearance ; even his features were cast, though not in a noble or love-attracting, yet in a dignified and somewhat imposing mould. Moreover, he had every advantage of habiliment that superior quality, cut, and condition could confer. And there was the old Canon, with his fat round-about figure, his kindly, mild, old rosy face, and his threadbare coat. And yet not only would any gentleman have felt that the old Canon was the gentleman of the two, but what is infinitely more curious, many a man of the lower classes would have intuitively felt the same.

Sebastian was standing at the back of the Canon's chair, with one hand on his further shoulder, so that his arm encircled the old man's neck, while with the other he was assisting him in seeking what he was looking for among the music on the table. He was standing thus exactly opposite to the door as

the jeweller and Laura entered, and a bright sunny beam of pleasure flashed from her eye as it fell upon the prettily composed picture of the octogenarian priest and his fondly attendant great-nephew. The ray shot into Sebastian's heart with an effect like that of a cordial. He understood to a nicety all the feelings that had gone to the generation of it, and responded to them before leaving the old man to greet the new comers by stooping his head till his bright blonde locks mingled with his uncle's long straggling silver tresses, and touching the bald crown of the old head with his lips, as much as to say, "Is not he a dear old fellow! I see you can understand that I should be fond of him!"

Guidi and Marietta the while had been on the terrace, the window leading to which was standing open. They were leaning over the parapet in front, and conversing in low tones, as they looked down on the feebly-lighted city beneath them. As they heard the opening of the door of the room behind them, and the entrance of the guests, whose arrival they were awaiting, they turned and re-entered the sitting-room.

Guidi saluted the rich jeweller with a low bow, and a courteous smile, and then, turning to Laura, began to say something complimentary with reference to her presence at their music. His manner was polished, easy, and graceful. But so are all the movements of a cobra capello; and they do not inspire confidence, trust, or liking, for all that.

Marietta on her part was cold, distant, and lofty in her manner to Laura. It was impossible for her to be discourteous to her guest in her own house, if it had been Marietta's way to fail in courtesy to any one. But standing with her simple, sad-coloured, plain-made cotton dress, and wholly unadorned, though scrupulously neatly-arranged black head, flecked here and there with grey, before the beautiful girl, almost, but not quite, as tall as herself, and elegantly dressed, she somehow or other contrived to make Laura feel as if she were some very humble and insignificant little personage indeed, graciously permitted to approach the presence of royalty, but warned by never-ceasing emanations of "the majesty that doth hedge" a queen from ever forgetting for an instant the immeasurable distance which separated them from each other. Not many girls, know-

ing their own position and that of one thus treating them "*de haut en bas*" in this style, as well as Laura did, would have been inclined to tolerate so crushing a courtesy. But Marietta was Sebastian's cousin—stood almost in the place of his mother—and that was quite enough for Laura.

And then the welcome of the old Canon was of a very different kind. "What! Miss Laura! You are come to hear our catgut-scraping? This is really kind of you, my dear, and very flattering to an old fiddler half-way between eighty and ninety; for I know it is only to hear me that you have come. Sebastian here may think just what he likes about it, but I know that it is the old man that you are come to hear. Well, we must do our best—we must do our best!"

While the old Canon was prattling thus, as Sebastian stood behind him, and Laura was stooping down to take his hand in front of him, they had a long and satisfactory conversation—with their eyes; but all that had passed between their tongues had been "Good evening, Signora Laura. It is very kind of you to come to us;" and, "Many thanks, Signor Bastiano. I shall be delighted with your music. I promise myself a very pleasant evening."

"And what is it to be, Signor Canonico, to begin with?" said Guidi to the old man. "Suppose, before touching the new pieces from the barbarian, we go over one of the old favourites."

"With all my heart," replied the old man; "I can never be tired of my divine Boccherini—never. He is always to my old ears first and best. But the barbarian is a very fine fellow too."

"Quite true, sir!" returned Guidi; "the time will come when the name of the German will eclipse that of the Lucchese! But that is the way of the world. Beethoven—Bah! What a name for a human being! How strange that those Germans should have music in their ears and their brains, and so little of it in their language! Beethoven will have his day, and be eclipsed in his turn!"

"I would rather forget that if I could, than dwell on it," said Sebastian.

"Better not to forget what *is*, my friend Sebastian, for the

sake of imagining something which is not, in this matter as in others!" returned the younger priest.

"But my Boccherini will remain the father of the quatuor," said the Canon; "nobody can take that glory from him. The German, fine as he is, can only walk in his steps. So here goes for a quartette of the immortal Lucchese. See here, Signor Palli. Here is one of the earlier quatuors—one that was performed that memorable day at Lucca, when he had just returned from Rome. It was the first quartette I had ever heard—the first that any of the audience that day had heard! I shall never forget it, never! To think I should have outlived poor Boccherini!"

So the quartette was performed; and Marietta and Laura were the audience. And though the octogenarian leader dragged his time perhaps a little once or twice, and called forth from the magisterial-looking gold-spectacled tenor a monitory vibration high in air of his bow, together with a corresponding movement of his foot, strongly accentuated—if one may use such a metaphor—on the brick floor, yet on the whole the performance was highly satisfactory; and Marietta and Laura got up a little timid feeble attempt at a clap at the conclusion.

"Ah!" said the old Canon, "it was well said, that if the Almighty wished for earthly music, he would choose the strains of Boccherini! For grand and soaring religious sentiment, I know nothing like him; and I sometimes think, that if the modern German master has found out the way to get somewhat more, perhaps, out of the fingers, he gets less out of the heart than our sublime Lucchese!"

"As for that, most reverend sir," observed his fellow priest, the Canon of San Lorenzo, "music would be found, probably, to get out of any heart, as you say, just what it finds there ready to come out."

"They are great masters, first-class minds, both of them, sirs," said the jeweller, carefully wiping the strings of his instrument with a silk pocket-handkerchief as he spoke; "I won't say that either is superior to the other; but for my own part, I think I like the Italian best in his adagios, and the German in his allegros."

“Of course, old Boccherini is a favourite with me,” said Guido, “because he has done so much for my own instrument. I think nobody has followed his practice of turning a quartette into a quintette by doubling the violoncello. Yet how admirably the idea has answered in his hands! What additional dignity and suavity at the same time he has obtained by it!”

“Admirable! delicious!” cried the old man; “but my boy there, Bastiano, is a heretic. He prefers the German. I suppose young folks always do, and always will, think all that’s new better than all that’s old.”

“You know, uncle, that I love our Boccherini as well as you do,” replied the young man; “but I confess I think that Beethoven fills out more completely all my notions of what music should be and express. My mind and ear seem to me to accompany Boccherini, but to strain after Beethoven. The one is a congenial friend with whose mind I am familiar, the other a mighty seer whose profounder meanings are not wholly within my mental grasp.”

It is probable that neither of his fellow performers felt the force of the young composer’s distinction, or fully comprehended his meaning. But Marietta looked earnestly at him with her large, sad, meditative eyes, as he spoke; and Laura made it appear to him utterly immaterial whether the whole musical world agreed or disagreed with him in his notions, by giving him an animated smile of intelligence, and a barely perceptible little double nod, which, with the accompaniment of a slight lifting of her straight, long, dark eyebrow, very eloquently told him how cordially she agreed with him in his estimate. There was more than enough in that little interchange of feelings to send him to take his part in the quartette of the new German master, which the old Canon was looking out among the heap of music on the table, with an *estro* of delighted inspiration.

And then the Beethoven quartette was performed; and then Guido gave them one of Boccherini’s sonatas on the violoncello; and then they had another quartette; and then Sebastian, at his uncle’s request, very eloquently supported by a glance from Laura, performed a “Notturmo” of his own composition, which was to be introduced into his opera. And then the ecclesiastically-clad servant-boy brought in an ancient brass tray, with

half-a-dozen glasses of lemonade and a few little biscuits on it; and each guest took his glass, and sipped with as much contentment as if it had been of the rarest juice of the rarest grape on earth. And the chat became general the while; and Sebastian ventured to tell Laura that he had attempted to compose some words for his nocturn which he should wish to be permitted to bring to her for her criticism; and then there was one more quartette before the guests departed; and the old Canon went off to his bed, declaring that he had never passed a pleasanter evening. Guido had walked off with the jeweller and his daughter, so that, when the old man went to bed, Marietta and Sebastian were left together.

The latter stepped out through the open window on to the *loggia*, to enjoy the beauty of the night, and the May moon just rising over the black forest-covered ridge, under which Vallombrosa is nestled among the pine-woods.

Marietta after a few minutes followed him, and stepping noiselessly up to his side, as he stood by one of the columns looking out dreamily into the night, laid her hand upon his shoulder before he was aware of her presence.

“Is it not a charming spot, this *loggia*, Marietta?” said he, as he turned round at the touch of her hand. “I would not change this ‘*terzo piano*’ for any ‘*primo*’ in the city from which I could not see my favourite Vallombrosa hills!”

“I should have thought there was a better reason than that, Sebastian, for unwillingness to change this poor lodging for any other in Florence—unless it were for an apartment in this palace more worthy of the master of it.”

“Ah! pardon, cousin Marietta,” returned he, “I was not thinking of the house in that point of view, or I would not have said anything to grate against your feelings on the subject. But you know, dear Marietta, that I am not the master of it, and never shall be.”

“You were not thinking of the house in that point of view!” rejoined his cousin, in a voice more of sorrow than of anger; “and I, Sebastian, have never ceased thinking of it ‘in that point of view,’ as you phrase it, for the last twenty years. Night and day, I think that these old walls, which shelter us, are the same that have sheltered our forefathers any time these

five hundred years. Is there nothing sacred to you in this spot, Sebastiano, Conte de' Lunardi,—sacred beyond any other spot on all earth's surface?"

"I suppose I take less interest in the house than I might otherwise do, cousin Marietta," replied Sebastian, *naïvely*, "from knowing that it can never be anything to me. It is gone from us, my dear cousin; let us not think so persistently on the matter as to covet what belongs to another, and can never belong to us."

"You talk of what you know nothing about!" retorted Marietta. "But tell me, Sebastian," she added, suddenly, after a pause, "if by any strange vicissitude of fortune or fate, it were to come to pass,—anything, you know, may be imagined as a supposition,—if by any freak of fortune it were to happen that you were so far restored to the position of your ancestors as to be once again the possessor of these dear old walls,"—she seemed to multiply her words, as if she hesitated to come to the point on which her heart was fixed; but at length, proceeding with sudden directness and earnestness, added, "would you, in that case, still wish to blur the unstained escutcheon of our house by forming an alliance with the daughter of a plebeian money-lender? Answer me, Sebastian!"

"Dear Marietta!" said the young man, with compressed emotion, "how can I answer you truthfully without answering you painfully? And I would so fain return you only pleasure for all the care, all the kindness, all the love you have lavished on me, from my cradle upwards. You have been more than mother and sister, combined in one. Dear, dear Marietta!" and he took her hand in both of his, as he spoke, and pressed it to his bosom.

"Yet let me have your reply to my question, and truly, be it painful or not," continued Marietta, with a touch of hardness in her manner.

"It seems unwise to me, my cousin, to go thus in search of sorrow gratuitously. I never can possess Palazzo Lunardi again, any more than I can bring back the time of the Crusaders, and again earn glory in the Holy Land. But since you will have a true answer to your bootless question, I say, that if all the blood of all the Lunardis that ever lived

“Stop! Sebastian!” cried his cousin, in a short sharp voice, as if suffering from sudden bodily pain; “stop! do not speak so of the race. It is blasphemy in my ears! I cannot hear it. Shape your protest otherwise, I pray you.”

“Well, then, Marietta, I will say without any protest, simply that I neither should nor could consider any earthly rank, title, fortune, position, possessions, or nobility, could make me one quarter worthy of the love of her you speak of.”

“I would fain, Sebastian, be more tender of your feelings than you have been of mine. Understand, then, that the principles of high and noble duty, which compel me to strive against you in this matter, have in nowise reference to the worth of the lady in question, or of her love in the sense in which you use the terms. Do you not see, my Sebastian, that in so speaking we are merely talking at cross purposes. Surely you must perceive that the most entire persuasion of her possessing every most peerless charm and virtue is perfectly compatible with recognition of the fact that Laura Palli is, on grounds of quite a different order, not worthy to be your wife. Granted that she be all you think her,—and I have no wish even to imagine that she is not so,—would it be less true that you would by such an alliance blot the hitherto unblotted escutcheon, which it is your first and highest duty to transmit to your descendants stainless, as your noble fathers have transmitted it to you?”

The moon sailing high over the Vallombrosan woods had by this time risen sufficiently to illumine the *loggia* and the figures of the two cousins standing in the front of it. The grand and commanding figure of Marietta might have been taken for that of an inspired Sibyl, as deeply moved by the earnestness of her appeal, her face became flushed, the expression of her eye intensified, and her delicately-formed, though not small, hand raised in air, with upward-pointing finger, as though her thought were that the trust she spoke of was confided to her keeping by Heaven itself. Sebastian listened to her words in silence, while his gaze wandered abstractedly far away over the distant hills, and an expression of pain, increasing as his cousin proceeded, settled on his face. He remained silent for awhile after she had ceased speaking, and walked to the other extremity of the *loggia* and back to her before replying.

“ You say I am not tender of your feelings, my cousin !” he said at last, “ yet God knows how often I have striven not to wound them. But how can I reply to you, my Marietta, without doing so ? Too truly you say we are talking at cross purposes ! How can it be otherwise ? Our whole minds, alas ! are too far sundered in this matter. I cannot bear to speak out sentiments and thoughts which sound, as you have said, like blasphemy in your ears. But in truth, to my judgment, you are asking me to sacrifice my every chance of happiness not to the happiness of another, but to a vain and empty idea ;—to offer it up on the altar of an idol in which I cannot believe. Can it be that a living heart is of so little, and the worship of a name, of which some day, Marietta, I or one of mine must be the sole bearers, of so great value ?”

“ Happiness !” exclaimed Marietta, pressing her two hands on her forehead as she spoke ; “ Happiness ! What has one of us to do with happiness till our duty to our race be done ? Say that you are called on to sacrifice happiness ; has the duty been laid on your shoulders only ? I was younger than you, Sebastian, when I too made the sacrifice. Do I preach what I have not practised ? I too, Sebastian, could have talked of a living heart, and the value of it, once. I too was tempted by visions of happiness. It was my higher happiness to turn from them once and for ever. Was there no wrenching of heart-strings, think you, when I put away from me with unrelenting hand all that other women live for and die for ! Living heart ! Do you suppose that this heart is of stone ? If you think it is so now, do you suppose it always was so ? Was there no agony in the struggle, think you ?—no hard fight to win over the pleadings of a girl’s heart during the long night watches in yon chapel of our ancestors, where, with my knees on the gravestone of Lunardo Lunardi, I sought and found courage to deny myself, and live only for my duty towards the illustrious dead, whose blood is in my veins ?”

“ My poor Marietta !” said Sebastian, taking her hand, and looking with infinite pity into her eyes, softened now by the memories that had been recalled to her mind ; “ my poor Marietta ! one noble heart, then, has been immolated on the altar already !”

“ You know,—in part you know what my life has been, Sebastian !” she continued more calmly. “ I have not had much in it of what is generally called happiness. But I have been faithful ! For twenty years I have been faithful ! Now, at least, the hours spent among the memorials of our race in that their resting-place are not hours of self-accusation or humiliation. The spirits of our forefathers, as they look down on me among their sepulchres, know that I have been true to their blood, and that when my bones shall be laid with theirs, the spirit of one true Lunardi will join the band of the illustrious dead !”

In the little church which has been spoken of as forming the boundary of the garden of the Palazzo, and which had been built by one of the family, there were a great number of the tombs and gravestones of past generations of the Lunardi, with two or three full-length statues, and several busts in the different costumes of the times in which they had lived, knights in armour, grave magistrates in doctoral caps and capes, and dignified citizens with the long gowns and hoods of the best ages of the old Republic. Among these Marietta was wont to spend many an hour in prayer and meditation of the kind that may be easily imagined. And when she spoke, as above represented, to Sebastian of the spirits of the past generations of the Lunardi, or when similar thoughts were passing through her mind, the visions which really presented themselves to her imagination, as the persons who were to approve of her conduct and welcome her, were the likenesses of those venerable old figures cut in stone, on which her eye had so often rested. Persons whose minds are less exclusively occupied with the things and thoughts of this visible world may find such a confusion of ideas, however lurking and latent in the mind, difficult to conceive. But these are tricks which an imagination wholly immured in matters, thoughts, and interests of the finite and temporal order is apt to play.

It was Marietta's turn, as she ceased speaking, to seek the calm of a minute's silence ; and she, as Sebastian had done a minute or two before, walked away from him to the further end of the *loggia*. Returning to him presently, she said, in a calmer tone,—

“Yes! my Sebastian; my life, too, has been a struggle, a long fight, sometimes a hard one. Shall it have been all in vain?”

And saying this, she placed her hands on his two shoulders, and kissing him on the forehead, turned to leave the *loggia* without waiting for any reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARIETTA'S NIGHT WALK.

MARIETTA went straight through the sitting-room to her little chamber behind it, which looked into the garden, stopping only to light a small brass hand-lamp from the tall, classically-shaped Tuscan *lucerna* that stood burning on the table, as the quartette-players had left it. But she did not go at once to bed. Unlocking a little cupboard in the wall near the head of the bed, above the small door of which a Madonna in ivory, of no vulgar execution, stood on its ornamental bracket against the wall, she took out her account books, and placed them, together with the lamp, on the little table. Then having closed the cupboard, she knelt before it, and before the image of the Virgin above. Of course, the act of worship was intended wholly for the latter. But Marietta's heart was so inextricably, so irrevocably bound up with the contents of the little receptacle thus placed immediately under the blessing and the protection of the Holy Virgin; the thoughts and hopes, that rarely strayed far away from that hoarded deposit, were so inseparably mixed up in her mind with every lofty sentiment of duty; and the objects connected with and represented by it were so sacred in her eyes, so entirely deserving of the approbation and blessing of Heaven,—that the reverent genuflection, and the earnest and impassioned supplication which followed it, would have been perceived by those who know what heart-worship really means, to have been directed to the one fully as much as to the other object.

Yes! Marietta truly worshipped the idea and the aim repre-

sented by the account books stored away for now nearly twenty years in that little cupboard in the wall, and she verily worshipped no other thing or thought. She said truly that she lived only for that idea and aim. And she did so, not after the manner of those who pursue indeed a life-object with equal eagerness, but who at the bottom of their hearts recognise the truth that something else should be lived for, and who hope some day to live for that something else. No! Marietta could form no other wish or hope for her last hour on earth than that she might be solaced in it, at least by the consciousness that she had faithfully expended the freshness of youth and the energy of mature age, ungrudging self-sacrifice, and untiring labour, in the struggle, and at most by the blessed triumphant thought that her life-struggle had not been wholly ineffectual to the sacred object.

Not even the books of Giuseppe Palli, the money-lender, could have been kept with more orderly exactitude and business-like precision than those of Marietta, Contessa de' Lunardi; nor assuredly could the avaricious old money-getter have sat down to the examination of them with more gloating satisfaction. Indeed, it may be safely assumed that he had less of enjoyment in the task. *He* did not place the Virgin over his iron safe! *He* did not kneel in prayer before turning to the figures that denoted the rolling up of his gains. His ideal was in truth but a poor one in comparison to that of the more visionary fanatic of the two. Assuredly, one may feel much sympathy with the one, and none at all with the other counter up of interest and compound interest. Yet neither soul could have thus walled itself in with untransparent thickness of the finite, the temporary and the material, without passing through a process fatally drying and hardening.

Poor Marietta! And for the matter of that, why not "poor Giuseppe Palli!" too?

Marietta was soon deeply absorbed in her accounts, though she had only taken down the books to put the time to profit, while waiting for Sebastian to be quietly in bed. For her talk with him had left her in need of another strengthening inspiration, to which she intended to have recourse before going to rest.

The tale told by the books was a very satisfactory one. There was the sum total of the hoardings of previous years accurately brought down to the end of the last—*SCUDI FIORENTINI*, 35,475. There was the accruing interest on this sum for the current year to be added, or at least for the first six months of it, now very nearly due; and there were the savings from the Canon's income for the same period. These were a trifle less than they had been for the previous corresponding quarters. The old man had required some slight increased expenses for his comfort, and Marietta had permitted the outlay, abstaining from the purchase of a much-needed dress for herself, in order, as far as might be, to meet it without detriment to the hoard. Still there was a small falling off. And had it not been that the great end seemed well-nigh reached, Marietta would have severely schooled herself for the weakness of having permitted her affection for her uncle to interfere with the paramount claims of duty.

As it was, she only sighed as she noted the deficit, and said to herself, "Poor dear uncle Giacomo! He has done much, tho' ignorantly, for the cause. May it be counted to him in extenuation of his fatal apathy."

Being sure that by this time Sebastian was in bed, and probably asleep, Marietta replaced her books in their cupboard, and carefully locking it with a small key that never left its place on the ring of slight gold chain around her neck, proceeded to the task, or rather the pleasure, for the enjoyment of which she had been waiting. This was simply a stroll through such parts of the palace as were open to her at that hour. It was a frequent practice with her to indulge in a progress of this sort through the passages and staircases of the building so sacred in her eyes, and the possession of which she coveted with so absorbing a passion. What was her object? What is the object of the miser whose treat is to have out his bags of gold and gaze on them? He cannot enjoy the excitement of counting up the contents. It has been too often done already, and the tale is too well known. But at least he may feast his eyes; he may ascertain that every loved piece is duly present; and Marietta's pleasure was akin to this.

I almost despair of enabling English readers to appreciate fully the feelings with which an Italian noble regards his ances-

tral palace in his native city, and which, in such a case as that of Marietta, would naturally be intensified to a degree of fanatic passion little short of decided monomania. It would need an entire dissertation on the rise and progress of the mediæval Italian municipal ties, and of the habits of thought and passions generated by that history, to set the matter in its true light. One understands that a Cavendish may be proud of Chatsworth, that a Howard should feel keenly the glories of Arundel, or a Berkeley rejoice in the venerable pile which gives him his name. But the connection between the English owner and his house is far from being the same, and the affection with which the stones are regarded by him very far from as intense in kind, nor even altogether similar in character, to the feelings with which the Italian regards his ancestral *city* residence. The connection between the man and the building is not the same. If Chatsworth were burned to the ground to-morrow, the social standing of the Dukes of Devonshire would remain what it was before the calamity. But to the apprehension of an Italian, the destruction or the alienation of the palace, which is the outward and visible embodiment of himself and his family as a constituent part of the social system, is equivalent to a decree which abolishes him and his for ever. It is the dreadful sentence equivalent to the old curse, "His place shall know him no more."

When, at Florence, the palace of the Uberti was razed to the ground, in the thirteenth century, as a punishment for treason to the Republic, the ground on which it had stood was deemed so accursed that when, thirty years later, the *Palazzo della Signoria* was to be built, it was determined to construct it in the irregular shape to be seen to this day, rather than to make it regular by including within its foundations a part of the accursed space on which the family mansion of the Uberti had stood.

When, at Forli, in the fifteenth century, the great family of the Orsi had outraged the high-handed and despotic Caterina Sforza by treason beyond all hope of pardon, the worst part of the punishment awarded to the aged head of the family by his enraged sovereign lady was, to be compelled to stand by and witness the demolition, stone by stone, of the family mansion, while the public executioner asked him from time to time "Do you mark well the spectacle, O Orso?" That the old man was

finally put to death, after witnessing the destruction of his home, was felt by all persons concerned, either as principals or spectators, to be a comparatively poor and weak part of the lady's vengeance.

Such stories are illustrative of the feeling with which an Italian noble family's city home is regarded by themselves and their countrymen. It is more to them than a property; it is a symbol, an embodiment, and a record. It is all that his epaulettes are to a soldier, its flag to a regiment, his shield to a knight, his name on the roll to an attorney, her fair fame to a woman, his credit on change to a merchant. And it is more than any or all of these, because the memories attached to it comprehend all that is valued and revered in the past; and the hopes, of which it is the centre, comprise every aim and ambition for ourselves and those whom we love better than ourselves, in the future.

In all things, save the simple and primary wants and impulses of our nature, men feel as they have been taught and bred to feel, not only by those who have the immediate teaching of them, but by all the influences of the social system around them, and by the traditions and inherited idiosyncrasies of past generations of their ancestors. Italians feel this family-palazzo-worship more intensely than one of ourselves can well realise, notwithstanding all the words that have been expended in illustrating the sentiment; and Marietta was, from special education, special character, and special position, calculated to feel it with an intensity exceptional even among her own people.

So she set forth to enjoy her solitary tour of inspection of that fondly loved incarnation—or petrification rather—of all the Lunardi glories; those much venerated walls, the forcible divorce from which had been like the pressure of the life-drops from out the heart, and the glorious re-acquisition of which she so fondly trusted was near at hand. Taking the small hand-lamp in one hand, and a huge key from a nail in the wall of the passage outside her door in the other, she passed through the outer door of the apartment in the occupation of her uncle, and proceeded to the head of a small back stair in an angle of the garden front of the building. Descending this, which reached only to the level of the second door, she came to a door at the

bottom of it, which opened on the terrace formed by the *loggia*, which, as has been described, ran along the side of the garden. But the big key was not needed to open this. It was only shut by a latch, and Marietta, setting down her lamp on the last step, passed out on to the terrace in the moonlight. She traversed the entire length of it, till she came at the farther end to a door in the wall of the church, which shut in the garden; and to this she applied the big key.

It gave entry to a small sort of gallery, not larger than a box at a theatre, which occupied one side of the special Lunardi chapel, and was so placed as to command a view of the high altar at the other end of the church. And from this gallery a very narrow stair, contrived in a corner of the chapel, afforded the means of descent into the body of the church. A similar arrangement, intended to enable the members of a family to attend the functions of the church almost without quitting their own palace, and without appearing in public, is very common in cases where an old family mansion is in contact with a church, and especially when the latter is in any way, by right of foundation, benefaction, or otherwise, connected with the owners of the former.

On taking the apartments on the third floor, Marietta had made the old Canon request the key of this door of communication with the church from his landlord the Marchese Perini; and the favour had been granted without any difficulty. Neither the Marchese nor his lady wife cared much for frequenting churches; and when the latter did perform the duty of perfunctory attendance at a mass, she preferred to hear it where she could be seen of men, and of as many and as aristocratic men as possible. So she went on such occasions in all state to the "Santissima Annunziata," and had not the least inclination to avail herself of the opportunity of privately attending mass in an obscure little church in an unfashionable quarter of the town.

To Marietta the possession of this key was a source of much gratification. Even the delusive sense of occupying the Lunardi gallery in the Lunardi chapel, at the ordinary services of the church, was something. But Marietta put the key to other and more precious uses. Often, at some hour when she was tolerably certain of finding the little church empty, would she steal

away from her home, and enjoy an hour's prayerful meditation on the subjects nearest to her heart in the sacred presence of the ancient effigies of the family. Often, too, would she indulge in similar curiously mingled spiritual and mundane reveries in the night hours, when the silence aided the powers of imagination, and when the uncertain and ghostly moonlight favoured the feeling that she was, indeed, in the presence of those worthies of her race whose effigies were half life-like in the pale stone around her. It was her habit to seek strength and inspiration from such converse at times, when the path before her had seemed too steep, when her faith and courage had wavered, and she had felt that she needed the (at least, fancied) support of some kindred sympathy, some approving encouragement to proceed on the long and solitary way which stretched out between her and her far distant object.

That object was now nearer—almost within her grasp it seemed; and though it might well be that she would yet need the support, under all and any difficulties that might yet arise in her path, it was not Marietta's intention to enter the church to-night. She could not refrain from opening the little low door in the wall, however, and looking in to that last home and resting-place of those beloved and revered ones to whom she deemed herself to be so closely bound, and for whose sake she was content to labour so unremittingly. She paused in the little gallery for a few moments, while her lips moved in the utterance of an unvoiced prayer; and then, crossing herself before again closing the door, she descended into the garden by a stair at the extremity of the *loggia*.

For there were objects of Marietta's worship in the little garden also. The statues and busts, and *bassi-rilievi* representing the *fasti* of the Lunardi history have been noticed in a former chapter. All these were objects of infinite care and love to this true daughter of their house; and it was a subject of constant anxiety to her to see that no carelessness or Vandalism of the stranger had suffered injury to reach them. She paused for a few seconds before each of these venerated memorials, lovingly removed a cobweb from one, and brushed away an accumulation of dust from another; and so passed through the unlocked door from the garden into the great hall on the ground floor.

The modernisations and improvements which had been effected in different parts of the ancient building, were matters of infinite offence and disgust to Marietta; and not the less so that that she was well aware that they would have the effect of raising the price which she would have to pay for putting the Lunardi in possession of their own again. In the great hall the old brick pavement, worn into inequalities by the feet of many a generation of the noble citizens of Florence, had been replaced by a smart new flooring of black and white squares of marble. Marietta scowled as she spurned the polished marble with her foot.

"But it is as well," she muttered to herself, "that the dear old bricks should not be profaned by traces of the incomings and outgoing of the pedlar's son! He prefers material which shows no traces of the steps that pass over it. Well, again! No trace shall remain of the passage of him or his! He shall pass away, and the disgrace of his presence in the home of the Lunardi shall be as a hateful dream, to be forgotten in the light of the daytime so near at hand."

The fine new glass door at the foot of the great staircase was an especial matter of disgust to the daughter of the old house. "The vulgar, ignorant upstarts!" she thought to herself, "how should they know the meaning or comprehend the sentiment of the free simplicity of the grand old life? A Lunardi might need to leave open way to a crowd of friends, dependents, clients, suitors. A Perini may need to shut it against a process-server! And is it not plain to see the hand of Heaven in the rapid ruin of the low-born intruder? Is it not Heaven's own doing which puts into my hands the opportunity of righting all that has been so foully wrong? Not in vain did my pious forefathers build yonder church which bears their name; nor in vain have my knees worn the stones which they laid at the altar's foot."

There remained in the hall four or five full-length portraits of members of the Lunardi race, and two huge, carved walnut-wood escutcheons, painted with their arms and device. And it had been a terrible dread, ever haunting Marietta, that the new proprietor would remove these in the course of his improvements. But they made part of the panneling and ornamenta-

tion of the hall, and it would have been necessary, had they been removed, to re-arrange the entire partition and lining of the walls. The considerable expense which this would have entailed had probably been the means of saving them, as well as the ceiling of cross-beams, with the Lunardi arms painted in the panel, which formed the roof of the hall. And Marietta satisfied herself yet once again that all these objects were duly in their ancient places ; and pleased herself with the thought that the danger was nearly over now, and little likely to befall. Sadly, but calmly, and with open brow and clear, unclouded eye, Marietta paused awhile before each of the old pictures, gazing up into the well-known features by the moonlight streaming through the windows of the hall, as if enjoying the consciousness that she had the right to stand before them as a true Lunardi, faithful through all to her duty towards them and their race.

The odious new glass doors at the foot of the staircase were shut and locked, so that Marietta could extend her progress of inspection no further ; and after slowly and thoughtfully pacing up and down the hall in the moonlight, three or four times, she proceeded to retrace her steps, and returned to her humble room on the third floor by the same route by which she had descended.

“ The day of restitution is near ! ” she murmured to herself. “ Would it were come ! Would to God that that dear old man were worthy and capable of sharing in the triumph and the joy ! Would, ah ! would that he were ! But my noble father's spirit will be present with me that day. And when the next line in the old register to that which chronicles thy death, my father, shall record the re-purchase of the Palazzo by ‘ Marietta, Contessa de' Lunardi, daughter of the above, ’ thou wilt smile on thy child, and confess that thy teaching of twenty years was not thrown away on a wholly barren soil ! ”

As, with these thoughts working in her brain, Marietta passed by the little door of communication with the church, the wind slightly moved it, and called her attention to the fact that on coming out of the church she had omitted to lock it. She now did so, not thinking that it mattered much whether it were locked or not, as the church itself was empty and locked up ; but merely

because the custom was that it should be locked; and having done this, she took her lamp from the step where she had left it, and climbing to the humble apartment on the third floor, regained her chamber.

She was proceeding to undress herself to go to bed, when her eye was caught by a sheet of paper covered with figures on the floor. She took it up, and found that it was a kind of abstract or recapitulation, in her own handwriting, of the results of the long series of accounts in her ledger. It showed the net amount which had been saved in each year, the accruing interest, and the grand total of her wealth. She had drawn it up a day or two ago for her own satisfaction, and had left the sheet loose in her account-book, from which it had evidently fallen without her having noticed it, when she had been engaged with her accounts before leaving her room. She thought how fortunate it was that she had observed it, as the leaving it lying about there *might* have ruined all the plans for which she had so long striven; and a flush came over her as the idea passed through her mind. She determined not to run any such risk for the future; and, blaming herself for having thus wantonly repeated on a loose sheet a secret which was sufficiently and more safely recorded in her account books, at once destroyed the truant paper.

But as she was in the act of doing this, it suddenly flashed across her mind that she had left the door of her room shut, and that she had found it open on her returning. She stopped short in what she was doing and reflected. Yes! she was certain,—she thought she could be quite certain—that she had closed her door. Was it possible that any human being could have been there since she had left it? Her first impulse was to ascertain if Sebastian was in his bed and sleeping. And she turned to go to his room to make sure of this. But a second thought upbraided her for having supposed for an instant that Sebastian could have acted the part of a secret spy on her actions. Had he chanced to discover her absence from her chamber at that hour, he would most unquestionably have waited her return. It was yet more impossible to suppose that her uncle should have left his bed, found her away from her room, and then quietly returned to his own. And as for the little chorister servant-boy,

he did not sleep under their roof. After reflecting on all these points, Marietta came to the conclusion that she must have shut the door imperfectly, and that the wind had blown it open. And fain to content herself with this explanation, she completed the destruction of the tell-tale loose leaf, and at length went to her bed.

CHAPTER IX.

LAURA AND CATERINA.

A FEW days after the quartette party at the Canon's apartment, Laura set forth a little after noon to pay a visit to her friend Caterina Boccanera. She had completed the design on which she had been engaged on that morning, to the entire satisfaction of Signor Simone Boccanera, and of her father, who, however, did not pretend to be any great judge of such matters. Master Simon, the junior partner, *was* a very competent judge, and a somewhat difficult one to please. On this occasion he had signified his perfect contentment; and in truth the ornament, as imagined by Laura's ingenuity and taste, was a pretty thing. Master Simon expressed his approbation mainly by a demand for more of the same quality. But Laura insisted that her father should pay her for her work by forthwith putting in execution a little plan she had been bent on for some weeks past. And Giuseppe Palli, who rarely made any very obstinate resistance to her wishes, and who, moreover, was by no means averse to his share in Laura's scheme, had consented to her demands.

The jeweller possessed a small *podere*,* with a very prettily situated villa on it, near La Lastra, some two or three miles from Florence, up the hill towards Bologna. The old gentleman's theory with respect to this possession was, that he went out there to enjoy a little country air and exercise every Sunday and Saint's day, and also spent there two months of *villeggiatura*

* Tuscan for a farm, or small estate.

in the season of the great heats. But his practice was hardly ever to go near the place. Where the heart is We know! And Giuseppe Palli's heart was unquestionably in the little back den behind the shop on the Ponte Vecchio.

Yet the villa at La Lastra was a very charming spot. It was at a considerable distance from the high road to Bologna, on the left hand of one quitting Florence; and it stood on a jutting prominence of the flank of the Appennine, so as to command a view of the Valdarno, both upwards towards the Chianti Hills, and downwards as far as the mountains behind Pistoia.

Now Laura was bent on a little party at the villa:—a nice little dinner—music, moonlight rambling in the garden, and flirtation afterwards;—a very pretty programme, it will be admitted. Of course I shall not be misunderstood to mean that our Laura, a very excellent young woman, and a heroine into the bargain, was guilty of misprision of flirting, plotting it in cold blood as cynically as I have stated it. We all know that well brought up young ladies never, never could be guilty of such a thing; and of course Laura would lose caste if I admitted it on her behalf. Let it be clearly understood, therefore, that I do not admit anything of the kind. Perhaps I may venture to say that she thought that “the amusements of the evening might be varied by pleasing conversation.”

The guests were to be, firstly, the members of the quartette party. There was some little difficulty about the old Canon. For carriages could approach the villa no nearer than the nearest point of the Bologna road, and that left a good half mile to walk. But that was not farther than the Canon walked every day in Florence. The old man himself had protested that he did not in the least fear the walk, and that he should enjoy the party above all things. Some difficulty also had been experienced with Marietta. It was not that she at all disliked Laura personally; but she felt that evil might arise, and no good could come from intimacy between her family and that of the jeweller. She wished to discourage all such foregatherings as much as she could. But what could she do? It was better on the whole that she should be there to see what took place, than that the evil should grow up and increase unchecked by her eye and

influence. So Marietta had finally consented to be of the party.

Nanni Palli was also to be there. His uncle in consenting to the party had made a point of not fixing the day until they should know when his nephew, Nanni, could be in Florence. And as it happened this condition did not cause any difficulty; for the jeweller got the next day a letter from his brother telling him that Nanni would be in town in a day or two, bringing with him the deeds for the new mortgage, which, as his brother would observe, had been drawn in exact conformity with his directions.

Besides these persons, with all of whom the reader is more or less acquainted, Laura had determined on asking her father's partner, and his family. That noun of multitude in this case comprised only two individuals besides the working jeweller himself;—his daughter Caterina, and his son Alessandro, better known as Sandro, and best of all as the "Gobbo" Boccanera. There was no other member of the Boccanera family, for he, like his senior partner, had been a widower for many years.

Simone Boccanera belonged to a type of idiosyncrasy much less rare among the Italians than among our more diffident, more doubting, and less self-contented selves. He had the happiness of having raised his occupation into a passion, unless indeed it is to be supposed that he had succeeded in turning a passion into an occupation. He was well convinced that art was the first and highest scope of a human being; and doubted not that his own was the highest branch of art. He was an ardent admirer of the past, but from an exclusively artistic point of view. He had carefully preserved the notices and authorities that showed his descent from noble ancestors; and was pleased to have the great painted escutcheon which nearly covered one wall of his little sitting-room. But he considered that his art was calculated rather to give lustre to his name than *vice versâ*; and the only pedigree which he would really have greatly prized would have been one which should have given him one of Vasari's worthies for an ancestor. He was withal a queer-mannered, awkward, silent man, perfectly inoffensive, incorruptibly honest, and not altogether devoid of that perception of humour which is one of the special charac-

teristics of the Tuscan people, as contradistinguished from the other races of Italy.

Caterina was, as Laura had said of her, one of the prettiest, and one of the best girls in Florence. She was small in person, lithe, elastic, and active as a mountain goat in her movements, and her type of face was essentially Tuscan, forehead broad, though not very high, jaw and chin narrow, and the latter a little protruding, and the entire form of the face rather triangular than oval; but brilliant large black eyes, very abundant dark brown tresses, a well-defined black eyebrow beautifully pencilled, a perfectly and purely white but not transparent complexion, and irreproachably beautiful teeth, sufficed to impart a very considerable share of beauty of the *piquant* sort to this little face. The eye, large, well-opened, and lustrous as it was, did not at all resemble the somewhat heavy, voluptuous, but ever and anon passion-lighted eye of the Roman woman. There was more of intellect in it. It was alive with vivacity, animation, and *espiègterie*, rarely with passion. There was an infinity of French *malice* in the expression of the entire face, but not a shadow of English malice. And altogether the little person who hung it out as the ensign of what was to be found within, was one quite as likely to become the object of a *grande passion* as many a mistress of greater pretensions to the more classical forms of perfect beauty. As for her moral and intellectual qualifications they were merely the reflex of those of her brother, and will be best understood from an understanding of his character.

The Gobbo Boccanera was rather a peculiar personage; and the special turn of mind which made him so was more peculiar and uncommon in those days in Italy than at the present time. He had imbibed enough of the French ideas, which had only recently ceased to be the entirely dominant ones in Italy, to be a radical in state, and a free-thinker in church matters; and yet was so close a student of his country's history, and so enthusiastic a lover of her ancient glories, that the French occupation had been gall and wormwood to him, and he cordially hated the people, which had furnished the ideas and doctrines on which his own mind and opinions had been formed. He hated the priests too, making, however, a notable exception

in favour of his reverence "*Il Signor Canonico Giacomo de Conti di Lunardi,*" in consideration firstly of the noble old Florentine blood which flowed in his veins; secondly, for the sake of Auld Lang Syne, when the late Conte lodged with his father in the days when the latter was but a working foreman, and when the good Canon had been a frequent visitor there, ever kindly and good-natured, and ever ready to impart any instruction he could to the young ones of the family, a kindness which the Gobbo very particularly appreciated; and thirdly, because good old Canon Giacomo was one of those happy men who carry about with them a passport with a very notable and detailed *signalement*, backed by Nature's own hand and seal, and "inviting and requiring" all men, women, and children whatsoever to admit him at once into their hearts, and accord him their special love and affection. No human being *could* hate Canon Giacomo. So the Gobbo derogated from his principles in that special case. But he made up for it by an intensified dislike of that other Canon, the Reverend Guido Guidi, of the Chapter of San Lorenzo.

In outward appearance the Gobbo, poor fellow, was a *gobbo*; and what more can be said! His face, however, was not *gobbo*; and had it been placed on other shoulders, it was one which a woman, ay, or a man either, would have been likely to look at a second time. It was his sister's face exaggerated. The forehead was broader and more massive, the jaw and chin sharper, the eye yet larger and more full of intellect, the eyebrows heavier, bushier, and, if possible, blacker. It was, with all that, not a face devoid of beauty; and if Sandro Boccanera had belonged to that country, wherever it may be, in which the stature of men is measured from the bridge of the nose upwards, he would have been deemed a remarkable man.

These were the members of the family, whom Laura set off to visit at an hour when she was sure of finding them all at home; and we already know that the object of her visit was to invite them to the projected festival at the villa.

Italians of all classes are, in consequence of some difference or other between their social system and ours, altogether devoid of that feeling which, among English people, causes both high and

low to be disagreeably conscious of a certain sense of restraint in the presence of their superiors or inferiors ;—the social superiors being often quite as uncomfortably impressed by it as the inferiors. Propose to an Italian man or woman, boy or girl, any party of pleasure, and their glad acceptance of it is checked by no fear of the probable presence of greater and grander folks than themselves, and by no forecasting misgivings as to their inability to appear in raiment as shining and with circumstances as imposing as the latter. Still less would they be tormented with any doubts as to their own proficiency in all the small matters which go to make up the manners and bearings of the polite world. “ We are educated people ! Are we not Tuscans ? ” would be the thought which, if unexpressed, would be found at the bottom of their notions on the subject. And the “ education ” which the thought would refer to would be found to be comprised in the simple persuasion of the fact that when people meet together for social purposes it is the place and duty of everybody to say and do all they can to make themselves agreeable, and give pleasure to those around them ;—to look hard at all that their neighbours wish to be seen, and obstinately shut their eyes to all that they would wish to be concealed ;—to tread on no corns, and to flatter every man or woman’s special vanity as far as they know it ;—never to speak of a cord within a mile of a man whose great uncle’s third cousin was hung ;—and to accept all tributes to their own vanities and self-loves trustfully, gratefully, and unquestioningly.

And sad it is to say, my moralising friend, that the desperate wickedness of the human heart, and the fallen condition of our nature, are such, that the observance of such maxims does absolutely produce a very agreeable sort of society ;—more agreeable often, it is to be feared, than certain higher-toned ideas and loftier qualities succeed in achieving !

The invitation accordingly, of which Laura was the bearer, was accepted by the Boccanera family with gladness. Old Master Simon declared that it would be just the opportunity he wanted to look for the leaves and sprigs of a certain wild shrub of the heath kind, which he had been thinking would furnish the idea for a new and admirable setting for a brooch ; and he should have an opportunity of consulting the Signora

Laura about it on the spot. The Gobbo promised himself, at any rate, a first-rate musical treat, perhaps the valued privilege of a little talk with La Signora Marietta on the subjects so dear to both of them ; and, possibly, an opportunity of playing, either by word or deed, some malicious trick at the expense of the Reverend Guido Guidi.

As for Caterina, her eyes sparkled in her head, as she said, "One never sees you, Signora Laura, without being sure to hear something agreeable. I do so love a day in the country,—and then at the Signor Padrone's villa ! It will be delightful !"

But Caterina did not know yet the whole interest attaching to the proposed festival, and when Laura, putting her arm round her waist, whispered, "Come with me into your bed-room, Caterina *mia* ! I want to have a talk with you ;" she wondered much what the business in hand could be.

The two girls went off together ; the queenly Laura, a head taller than her companion, like a delicate and graceful Italian greyhound beside a pretty, little, playful, bright-eyed King Charles spaniel. When they had reached the safe retreat of Caterina's little chamber, and were standing, still with arms encircling each others' waists, at the foot of the bed,—which was the same thing as standing at the little window,—Laura said, "I have not told you all the party that are to be at the villa, Caterina *mia* !"

"Who else ?" replied Caterina. "What matters ? It is sure to be charming. There is only one of those you did mention whom, between you and me, Signora Laura, I don't much like, and that is *Il Reverendissimo Signor Canonico Guidi*. Sandro cannot endure him !"

"No more can I, my friend, between you and me. But I must endure him, and so must Signor Sandro, for the nonce. He is our tenor, you know, and we must all admit that his *viola* is very endurable. But it was not about any Canonico that I wanted to speak to you. I don't suppose that one or two, more or less, of *them* would make much difference to you."

"To be sure not ! or anybody else either, as long as those are there whom you *did* mention. But who is it that you wanted to tell me of,—me, especially more than the others there ?" said Caterina, with some rising curiosity.

“Well! if there is *nobody* that would make any difference to you,” rejoined Laura, withdrawing her arm from the other’s waist, and placing a hand on each of her shoulders, as she looked smilingly but piercingly into her eyes; there is certainly no need to tell you anything about anybody. But I *did* fancy that away over the Consuma yonder——”

Here Caterina’s eyes dropped before her companion’s scrutiny, and the blood rushed up all over her pale forehead and among the roots of her black hair.

“Ah, yes! I thought there *was* somebody,” continued Laura; “well, he is to be one of the party at the villa.”

“But you have not yet told me whom you mean, Signora Laura,” said little Caterina, making an effort to recover her composure and keep her secret.

“In the first place,” rejoined Laura, pushing her advantage, “I won’t be called ‘Signora,’ and in the second place, *carina*, I won’t tolerate such transparent hypocrisy. Whom can I mean? There are so many men on the other side of the Consuma mountain, are there not? Now, Caterina, you must come to confession, for I came here to-day that we two may have no secrets between us.”

“But, Signora——”

“No! I told you I won’t be called so.”

“Well! what must I say then?” asked Caterina, taking one of Laura’s hands in both of hers, and stooping her head to lay her cheek on it, “Tell me what to say, and you shall be obeyed.”

“Say, Laura, to be sure; and if you are very good, and you think I deserve it, you might say, dear Laura!” returned the other.

“That, at all events, comes easy,” said Caterina. “Dear Laura! you are——”

“That is right! And now, dear Caterina, go on with what you were going to say about him on the other side of the Consuma.”

“But, *davvero, davvero*,* Sign——!—I mean, Laura, dear,—I was not going to say anything about him!”

Brava, la Caterinuccia! At all events, we have got so far as to admit a definite ‘him’ as the only ‘him’ on the other side

* “Truly, truly.”

of the Consuma that you and I can have to speak of. And having reached that point, if you won't speak about him, I suppose I must."

"But what more can there be to be said, dear Laura, when you have told me that he is to be at the villa," pleaded Caterina, who began to have considerable fears that something disagreeable was behind.

"There is much more to be said, Caterina, which, it seems to me, might be said with advantage to both of us, if you would be as frank and confiding as I wish to be."

Now this was hardly fair in our dear and peerless Laura; for the confidence she was asking was the confession of an unavowed love, and the confidence she was disposed to give in return was the avowal that she was, as regarded the gentleman in question, entirely fancy free. And it will be felt that this was not an equal bargain. She had strong reasons to believe, however, that the avowal she had to make would be, if not so difficult in the making as that she wished to extract from her friend, yet fully as valuable to her as any confidence the latter could repose in her could be to herself. So she pushed on her attack.

"Come, now!" she continued, "I am quite sure that my cousin Nanni has been very thoroughly captivated by the pair of eyes that I am now looking into;—and small blame to him!"

"Oh! Laura, how can you say so? I am sure I have no reason to think—"

"No lies! Caterina dear! It is to be full confidence between us, you know!" interrupted Laura.

"Well! that is, I mean to say,—and it is true, if it was to be the last word I should ever speak, Laura,—Signor Nanni never said any word to me that could give me any right to think—that he thought—anything in particular."

"But suppose that I had happened to know that he did think something very particular; what then?"

"Why, then, *carissima Signora mia*," answered Caterina, with a little touch of rebellious resentment, at having the secret, scarcely confessed by herself to her own heart, forced up from its depths in this manner, "in that case, unless Signor Nanni

sent you here with a commission to speak in his name, I think it would be better to say nothing about any such guesses as to his sentiments."

"Nay, now that is naughty of you, my Caterina! You are angry with me! Silly one, am I not striving for your good?"

"If you mean, Signora Laura, that you are kindly warning me not to long for grapes which hang out of my reach, I must beg you to believe that the warning, however kindly meant, is not needed!"

"There! we have got back to Signora again; and you are positively in a passion, Caterina! Why, what a little spitfire you are! No, Signora, it was not by any such warning that I sought to do you service. But why will you not speak on the matter, Caterina *mia*, as if we had but one interest and one mind on the subject?"

"Precisely, because we necessarily have two, *Signora mia!*" said Caterina, driven to stand at bay. "I also happen to know where Signor Nanni's homage is due. No doubt it is duly paid there, with the full approbation of the lady and the lady's family."

"But, supposing once again—if you are not in too furious a state of mind to suppose anything—that this homage was in truth duly paid, but was paid very much against the grain by the cavalier, and very much to the annoyance of the lady,—what then, Caterina *mia*?"

"Why on earth should it be paid at all then?" asked Caterina, beginning to be rather mystified.

"Why, you simpleton, for the reason you have already mentioned yourself—the approbation of the respective fathers on both sides. Now, do you see the whole of the matter, you very peppery and unreasonable little lady?"

Caterina did now begin to see "the whole of the matter," and various new lights and new thoughts flashed in upon her in consequence; but she was rather at a loss what to say to her friend in reply to her question.

"But, Laura dear," she said at last, again taking her friend's hand in both hers, as before, "it is my turn to say now, 'What then?'"

“ Well, I am glad we have got back again to ‘ Laura dear,’ in the first place. Upon that footing we may examine the matter a little further,” said Laura, stooping to give her friend a kiss on the forehead. “ You see, my little Kate, the state of the case is simply this. Nanni’s father and mine have thought naturally enough that it would be a very convenient thing to keep the family property together by making a match between the only son of the one, and the only daughter of the other. And nothing would be better if only Nanni and I could see our happiness in such an union. But we neither of us do. Nanni, poor fellow, comes doing the suitor to me in obedience to his father ; but it is very easy to see that his heart is not in the work. As I have said already, it is elsewhere, Caterina ; and if you were as honest with me as I am with you, you would admit that you know very well where it is to be found.”

“ But again I say, dearest Laura, even if I were to admit that I might possibly make some guess as to its whereabouts, what then ? ” asked poor Caterina, rather piteously.

“ What then ? Why, that’s the question, Caterina. I do not intend to marry my cousin. Between you and me—quite between you and me for the present, Caterina *mia*—you may depend on it that such a marriage will never take place. I have ideas of my own, my friend, of one’s duty in such matters ; and I do not hold it to be my duty to marry a man whom I do not love, and who himself loves another.”

“ But, dearest Laura, you make little ado to settle it all your own way. But as to this loving another ? Truly, honestly, in all confidence, Laura dear, I have no reason—hardly any reason to suppose that Signor Nanni ever thought seriously of me.”

“ Hardly any reason ! Well, you have some reason—eh, Caterina ? But you see poor Nanni has been in difficulty. He would fain have given you more reason, but his orders, and I dare say his own interest too, as he understands it, were to woo me. And the little reason that you admit he has given you to think that he likes you has come from his inclination getting for a moment the better of his prudence. I see it all clearly, trust me.”

“ But still, even if you were quite right, Laura, I stick to my ‘ What then ? ’ You may be determined not to have him ;—and

even that seems to me a bold determination ;—but you cannot expect me to determine to have him—even if he were ever to ask me.”

“ Well ! supposing such a case,” replied Laura, while all trace of levity and archness left her face, and her eyes assumed the grave concentration of expression they so often wore ; “ supposing such a thing, I think I should expect you to come to that determination, and act on it.”

“ You frighten me, Laura, with your words and with your looks. For the love of heaven, think of your father ! He is a good man, but very stern, and accustomed to do his own will. Think of Signor Carlo, the *fattore* ! And think of poor little me ! What am I ? I have noble blood in my veins, but not a penny in my purse ! If it were the Signora Marietta I had to deal with, that might count for something ; but with your father——”

“ With my father and with his brother that would weigh but little,” interrupted Laura, who, though wholly without any prejudices of her own on the subject, yet felt a little stroked the wrong way by her friend’s very innocently intended remark ; “ with them, and perhaps with some others, even of those who shone most largely in the advantage, I am afraid the noble blood would not avail much. I fear me the article was too much discredited by its failure to save a Bourbon king from the scaffold. Yet it may be, Caterina *mia*,” she continued, drawing herself up to her full height, and poising her exquisite little head proudly on her slender neck, while a slight flush came over her cheeks, “ it may be that there is a kind of noble blood which might avail to decide the question. But let us understand one another. Do you mean to say that you should shrink from accepting my cousin’s hand, were he to offer it to you, from a sense of duty, or from a fear of others ? You were speaking but now, I think, of your noble blood !”

Caterina looked up at her friend with genuine alarm in her countenance. The last allusion of Laura mystified her. She did not at all comprehend what she meant. And she was not accustomed to render a precise and accurate account of her motives, such as that she was now called upon to furnish at a minute’s notice, even to herself, and still less to another ; and least of all on such a subject.

"Mean to say!" she stammered, looking up piteously into her friend's face; "you scare me, Laura. I did not mean to say anything!"

"But, Katie dear, the first thing necessary is to mean something, and to know your meaning yourself. If my cousin Nanni were to propose to you to marry him to-morrow, what should you say to him?"

"I should be horribly frightened, Laura!"

"Should you say to him, 'I can listen to no such proposals, because I am convinced that your father would not approve of them, and it is my duty to conform myself to his will in the matter.'"

"Perhaps that is what I ought to say, Laura!" sighed poor Caterina.

"If you think so, so should you do," returned Laura; "there can be no doubt about that. I for my part do not think so. When one considers what is the kind of interest my Uncle Carlo could have in the matter of his son's marriage, and what is the kind of interest he himself and she whom he marries would have in it, it seems very clear to me that the wishes of the people to be married, and not those of anybody else, should decide the matter."

"I declare that seems true, and plain too, when you come to think of it so. But I never had thought of it," returned Caterina.

"*I think,*" said Laura, with an air of solemn mystery, as if she were the adept of a secret sect indoctrinating a novice with some new and awfully heretical truth, "*I think that it is wrong—not right for any girl, or any man, to be commanded, or persuaded, or threatened, or frightened into marrying anybody against their own personal feelings and wishes. I think it so wrong, that nothing should ever induce me to such compliance. And Caterina,*" she continued, drawing closer to her, and dropping her voice to the solemn whisper befitting the communication of a new and strange heresy of the most tremendous kind, "I believe that half the misery and wickedness in the world comes from people marrying one another for other reasons than love."

"Laura!" cried Caterina, opening her large eyes to their utmost extent, and evidently quite overwhelmed by the strange-

ness of these notions, and by the largeness of the new view of life of which they gave her a faint glimpse. "But if nobody thought about if there were no I mean if everybody married everybody"

"Stop a minute, Caterina," cried Laura; "I did not say that everybody ought to marry those they love, but that nobody ought to marry those they do not love."

There was a silence for a few minutes between the two girls after this tremendous profession of faith; till at length Caterina, still speaking in an awed tone beneath her breath, asked timidly:

"How came you to think such things as these, Laura? How was it that you found out so much that other girls never dream of?"

"I'll tell you, Caterina," returned the jeweller's daughter. "I have read and thought about these matters a good deal. I was not convent-bred, to begin with, you know! My father was a good deal in France, when he was young, and he hates convents and nuns and friars. Then he always let me, and indeed wished me, to read many books such as our Italian girls never see; and I have read many. And where do you think I got several which gave me my principal ideas on these matters?"

"Are there books about such subjects?" asked Caterina, naively; "and where did you get them?"

"They were lent me by your brother, Sandro! You know he and I were always great friends."

"I know you have always been very kind to him, as to all of us, Signora Laura,—*cara* Laura, I mean," she added, laughing, as Laura held up a reproving forefinger,—"and I know that Sandro has a quantity of books, French most of them, which he is always reading; but I little thought they were about marriage. What can he want with books about marrying, poor fellow!"

"Perhaps there are other things in the books that interest him more. Signor Sandro has read and studied a great many things, I can tell you! But now, *cara mia*, let us think of our own affairs. I have told you my own way of thinking on some matters, which I never told to any other human being yet; but I do not feel at all sure that it will turn out that my Uncle Palli would wish to thwart Nanni's inclinations in such a matter."

"But all this time, *Laura mia*, you are forgetting that I do

not at all pretend to know what his inclinations are!" said Caterina, hanging her head.

"I think I see clearer than you do in the matter, my friend. Lookers-on, you know, they say, see most of the game. Notion is, that if Nanni were set free from all thought of the necessity of making up a match with me, you would soon see clearly too."

"But have you ever told Signor Nanni . . . as much as you have been telling me."

"No! I have never had any opportunity of doing so. He has never said anything to me which would call for such an answer. But Nanni is as good and true-hearted a fellow as ever breathed. We have always been excellent friends. And I have almost made up my mind to take him for a third in just such a consultation as we have been having now."

"Laura! what are you dreaming of?" cried poor little Caterina, in great alarm; "for the love of all the saints don't say a word to Signor Nanni,—at least not about me. I told you truly that he had never given me any right to imagine that he had ever a serious thought about me! Now promise me, Laura, that you won't . . ."

"I promise you, most faithfully, my dear, that I will say no word and hint no hint that could by any possibility compromise you in any way. *Che! diammine!** Be quite at rest on that point. And now, perhaps, you will admit that the other members of our party at the villa might interest you sufficiently to make it worth while to tell you that he is to be there!"

"*Davvero, davvero, Laura mia,* you have put so many new and strange thoughts into my head, that it seems to be all whirling round; and I feel very glad to have a little time to think before the day of the party comes."

"Well! dear Caterina, *do* think! And, meantime, be quite sure that I should as soon bite my tongue off as say a word which you would not wish said to Nanni. What I wanted chiefly was to be sure that if he came here to woo there would be a fair prospect of success for him. And that, Caterina, I

* A common Tuscan exclamation, difficult to render. "What! could you think it!" is only near the mark.

have ascertained," added Laura, with a sly laugh in her eye, as she looked in her companion's face from under her eyelashes.

"I am sure I have said nothing, Laura, to give you any such certainty," rejoined Caterina.

"Oh, no! nothing at all. Nevertheless, I have picked up the certainty somehow. And now, *levo l'incomodo*,* *Signora*. We will meet again before our great day comes, to settle about our order of going."

"Good-bye, dear Laura! you are very kind and very good to your poor little friend. I always knew that; but now I feel as if I were in a maze, out of which you alone can help me."

"We will try to find the clue to it! Good-bye, Caterina!"

And so the two girls parted, and Laura hastened home to be in readiness, and see that all else was in readiness for her father's dinner-table, when he returned from the shop at his usual hour.

CHAPTER X.

THE PARTY AT "SCHIFANOIA."

THE projected party at Signor Giuseppe Palli's villa at La Lastra had been finally fixed to come off on a Sunday about ten days after the conversation which has been recorded in the last chapter. It was one of the last days of May, and the weather was all that could be wished, just hot enough to make night in the open air delicious, but not so hot as to have destroyed the greenery of the country, or to make an afternoon drive up the hill, by which the road climbs out of the Valdarno to commence its way across the Apennines to Bologna, intolerable.

It had been arranged that all the party should assemble at Signor Palli's house, in the Borgo de' Greci, and start thence;

* A Tuscan phrase used by a visitor concluding his visit. Literally, "I remove the inconvenience." It would hardly, now-a-days, be used "in good society," unless jestingly.

and the rich man, instigated by Laura, and minded to do the thing handsomely, if it were done at all, had allowed his daughter to let all the guests understand that the host received them at his house in town, and begged that they would take no thought about the means of their transport to the villa.

By two o'clock in the afternoon the whole party had assembled in the Borgo. There were three of the Lunardi family, the aged Canon, Marietta, and Sebastian; three Boccaneras, Ser Simone, his son Sandro, the Gobbo, and his daughter Caterina; four of the Pallis, Signor Giuseppe, the host, his daughter Laura, his nephew Nanni, and his cousin and housekeeper "Aunt" Giuditta; and his reverence *Il Canonico Guido Guidi di San Lorenzo*;—in all eleven persons: and there, standing ready at the door, were three hack carriages for the conveyance of the party.

But how were the eleven to distribute themselves in the three carriages. This is always a matter involving considerable difficulty upon such occasions, and requiring very able generalship on the part of him or her—(the latter it should be; a marshal of the other sex is sure, in these cases, to get into the most fatal difficulties, and have the wrong man in the wrong place;)—on whom the responsibility of command falls.

In the present case, the difficult duty naturally fell on Laura. And she had, on due deliberation, fully settled it all in her head that morning, without, however, feeling sure that she would be able to have all exactly her own way.

"Let me go in the carriage with you, cousin Laura!" said Nanni; "I have so much to say to you.—You and I and Aunt Giuditta, eh! That will do very well."

"With Caterina for fourth; we must have four you know,—at least two of the carriages must;—that is what you would wish, *non è vero, Nanni!*" laughed Laura. "But we must not put all the ladies together, you know," she continued; "and besides, I must think first of the Signor Canonico."

"I think I had better go with my uncle, Signora Laura, if it is not inconvenient," said Marietta.

"Let the Reverend Signor Canonico and the lady Marietta be seated in the first carriage, Laura," said her father, somewhat pompously, with a very graceful bow and a wave of his

long white hand towards them as he spoke. "I will go with Signor Guido in the second."

The handsome Canon of San Lorenzo was standing in conversation with the master of the house at one of the windows of the sitting-room. He was not quite so tall as the somewhat gaunt, but still dignified figure of the old jeweller; but as the two stood there, any one would have said that the admirably proportioned figure of the priest was exactly what a man should be, and that any height in excess was a defect. He had, immediately on arriving, contrived, with the perfect ease and skillful tact of a thorough man of the world, to get into a conversation with Signor Palli, which interested the latter; for Signor Guido Guidi had a habit of making himself exceedingly agreeable to such men as the wealthy jeweller. It has been remarked that few men in Florence knew the wealth of the cautious old gentleman to be anything like what it really was. But the Reverend Guido Guidi had a very tolerably accurate notion of the true state of the case. For such members of the priesthood as the Canon of San Lorenzo, rarely in a Catholic country remain ignorant of any social facts which it imports them to become acquainted with.

So Signor Palli said to his daughter, "His reverence Canon Guidi and I will go together in the second carriage." And the handsome Canon bowed low with an air and a smile of the utmost gratification.

"My dear, good Marietta takes too much care of me," said old Canon Lunardi; "but I need be no tie upon anybody; I need less looking after than some folks half a score of years my juniors."

When Nanni had boldly preferred his claim to accompany his cousin, Sebastian had only ventured a furtively pleading look at his divinity, to which no immediate answer could be returned. And now Marietta said, "I think, Sebastian, if the Signora Laura will permit it, that you had better come with us. My uncle is always more comfortable for having you near him."

"Not a bit of it!" cried the old man. "I don't want him. Dispose of him just as may be most convenient to the rest of the party, Signora Laura!"

"I was going to crave permission of the Signora Marietta

to be allowed to accompany her and the Signor Canonico," said the Gobbo, very modestly. "But if that would disturb any other arrangements——"

"Not at all! If the *molto reverendo*, Signor Canonico, is quite sure he does not need the attendance of Signor Sebastian," said Laura, stepping up to the chair in which the old man was sitting, and stooping over him as she spoke.

"Quite sure, my dear!" returned he; "and we shall be delighted to have my old friend, Sandro Boccanera, with us,—shall we not, Marietta?"

"Shall we go down stairs, then?" said Laura. "You are to go in the first carriage, Signora."

Marietta was a little disconcerted at having failed in separating Sebastian from his mistress; though she still hoped they might not be together.

So the old man went down leaning on Marietta's arm, and the rest of the party followed, Guidi and the jeweller bringing up the rear, and talking together as they descended the wide staircase.

Old Simon Boccanera, after a very formally courteous salutation had passed between him and his senior partner with low bows on both sides, had taken little notice of anybody, and had received as little beyond a kind smile and shake of the hand from Laura. It was not from any feeling of shyness on his part—that is a malady almost unknown to Italians—nor from any neglect on the part of his companions. But the strange, self-absorbed man was, as usual with him, only present in the body, and not above half present in the mind. He had found on a side table a scrap of old engraving of some arabesque ornament, which Laura had been experimenting on by filling it in with colours. And his whole mind, forthwith seizing on the aliment most perfectly adapted to its habits and idiosyncrasy, was entirely engrossed with the speculation on combination of form and colour which the fragment of paper suggested to him. When the others began to descend he followed them, still thinking but little where he was, and still holding the engraving in his hand.

"Ah! Signor Boccanera," said Laura, "you have been ferreting out my secrets, as you always do. But I was only trying some fancies of mine about the combinations of colours."

"Yes, Signora Laura, I see. But it seems to me, that if a black ground——"

"You are very right to carry the paper with you, Signor Simone. You will study the matter, and we will talk it over."

And so the old Canon was handed into the carriage; Marietta took her place by his side; the Gobbo, as had been settled, placed himself opposite to them, and his father, without any word having been said by himself or anybody else on the subject, followed him and took the fourth seat in an abstracted manner, with the half-coloured engraving still in his hand.

There was no objection of any kind to the selection of a place he had thus made, and the first carriage drove off, so far simplifying Laura's task.

"*Sua Riverenza* and my father will go in the second carriage," said Laura; "and Aunt Giuditta and I will go in the other. My father would not permit us to sit on the front seat, and yet I don't like him to have the sun on his back."

"I am to be in the carriage with you, cousin Laura, you know!" said Nanni; and Sebastian looked very disconsolate, thinking that the fortunes of the day were going sorely against him.

"And where will you sit, dear Caterina?" continued the *generalissima*. "These gentlemen will not be content if we have all the ladies in one carriage."

"If I shall not disturb the conversation between Signor Palli and his reverence," said Caterina, rather ruefully, but with the best grace she could muster. Upon which his reverence, with a graceful bow and most courteous smile, holding the door of the carriage in one hand, motioned her with the other to the vacant seat by the side of Signor Palli, who had already got in, and was sitting bolt upright, with his gold eyeglass in his hand, with which he waved her a very majestic permission, rather than invitation, to place herself by his side.

So poor Caterina was forced to accept this place of honour; Guidi followed her into the carriage, taking the place in front of the jeweller; and the coachman seeing that four persons only remained for the other carriage, and well pleased to have but three for his own horses to pull up the hill, shut the door, and was getting ready on his box to go on after the first carriage.

Sebastian began to think that things were looking a little better; but Nanni would have preferred putting his rival—as he instinctively felt him to be—into the fourth place in the second carriage. The fair and able general, however, had not quite finished her dispositions yet.

“Do look at these wretched horses, cousin Nanni,” she said, pointing to those of the third carriage; “don’t let them drive off. Stay a minute! It is quite clear that those horses ought to have the four to draw, and ours the three only. *Non é vero?*”

“*Già davvero!*” he answered, quite pleased at the prospect of having matters all his own way; “I don’t think these cats would get up the hill at all with a full load!”

“Well, then! look here, Nanni!” said she, turning aside with him a moment. “Do be a good fellow, and go with them. Caterina there will be so disappointed if you don’t! Just see how forlorn she looks.”

“And you want to be rid of me, cousin; is not that it?”

“Not so! But I am at home, and I must think of others before myself.”

“And I looked forward so to the drive with you, cousin!”

“But you wanted to come with me to please *me*, Nanni, I know. Now won’t you, to please me, do as I would have you? There is a good fellow! Now, be sure and make yourself as agreeable to my little Katie as you can. And here is a secret in your ear,—but a fast secret, mind!—she would never have come at all, if I had not told her you were coming up from the Casentino, and were to be with us.”

So Nanni, scarcely knowing whether to be pleased, or the reverse, found himself, at all events, under the necessity of obeying. Nor, despite all business-like considerations, could he help feeling exceedingly flattered by the very evident change in the pretty Caterina’s face and bearing, when this unexpected piece of strategy was operated in her favour; a change which seemed strongly to corroborate the not strictly true assertion which Laura had made respecting her motives for being present. So the second carriage departed, with its two pair of passengers in no very discontented mood; and the two *tête-à-tête* talks, which following, interrupted each other as little as either party could have desired. It may be that the courteous priest’s

attention may have wandered for a moment now and then from the somewhat slow discourse of his companion and *vis-à-vis*, to take note of what was passing between the young people; for the clergy of the Catholic Church have a very strong thirst for information on all that is going on around them, especially with regard to matters of the kind which now fell under the extremely intelligent observation of Canon Guidi.

Nanni and Caterina were, on their side, wholly innocent of intruding in any way, either by tongue, ear, or eye, on the conversation of their elders. And when the drive was at an end, Nanni, if he had been more in the habit of rendering an account of himself or his own thoughts and feelings than was the case, would have caught himself thinking what a pity it was that the Perini property could not be kept together by means of a different love-making than the very up-hill one he had been set to work on.

When the second carriage had driven off with its freight, Aunt Giuditta, and Laura, and Sebastian were left still standing on the pavement, about to get into the carriage with the wretched bad nags. It was very evident that the other two carriages would be much a-head of them on their way up the steep hill.

Sebastian was radiant, as he handed the ladies into the old shandrydan, which became, in his eyes, the most glorious triumphal car that ever mortal sat in.

"Are you grateful, Signore?" whispered Laura, as he handed her in, after having first done the same by Aunt Giuditta.

"Do you ask me for information's sake?" he answered in the same tone, emphasising his meaning, lover's fashion, on the hand he held in his.

How much better ladies could get in and out of carriages if men would only let their hands, arms, and elbows alone! Much more easily to themselves,—much more conveniently! But how excellent is the fiction that they cannot do so! What would society do if it were abolished? How many fond hearts find it exceedingly difficult to put into words all that may be put by the mutest booby into a squeeze of the hand! It is a great and important institution, that handing of the daughters of Eve hither and thither. It has, like everything else human, its evils as well as advantages; and there *are* handings that the

stronger, and far more the weaker sex would fain escape from. But would they be content, for any consideration, to lose the chances provided by the institution once and for ever? Not a bit of it! Let us keep the courteous custom, my friends, and make the most of it.

"No!" returned Laura; "I ask you, if I am to speak the truth, not for information, but for admiration. I think my strategy deserves some."

"Some! Napoleon might take a lesson from you in the marshalling of his forces!"

"And yet, friend, you were all in the woeful mood just now, up-stairs! Do you think I did not mark you? You had no faith in me, *Bastiano mio!* either in little matters or great matters!"

"Nay, Laura, I *am* behaving better now. But as for this morning's drive, I never dared to imagine that I should have had such a pleasure as this!"

"What a shame it is," said Aunt Giuditta, "to send out such a pair of horses as these; I declare the others will be at the villa an hour before us!"

"We will try to be patient, Aunt Giuditta," said Laura. "Signor Sebastiano must do his best to render the drive as little tedious as may be."

"But he can't prevent the sun from burning us as brown as chestnuts, I suppose, can he?" grumbled the old lady, who was not altogether pleased with the arrangements for the drive. "And to sit here to be dragged through the dust at a foot's pace! I shall be in a fidget all the way; for Signor Giuseppe won't know what orders to give till I come."

And so saying, Aunt Giuditta subsided gradually, and was as fast asleep as a model *chaperone* should be, under the circumstances, before they were half a mile from the city gate.

And Laura and Sebastian each felt and declared that they had such an infinity of things to say to the other, and that now was an opportunity for saying them such as could not be surpassed, and might not occur a second time for many a long day,—and yet they wasted many of the precious minutes in silence, or in words which had but little more, or, perhaps, less, of meaning in them. And what is the use of attempting to put

what they said into type? One has but command over an unlimited supply of question stops, marks of admiration, italics, and breaks. And after one has done one's best with these, eked out with every possible inventory of attitudes, glances, and expressions, would not every silliest lad and lass who have ever loved be ready to testify that all our efforts were nothing worth, and that the description was pale, colourless, and feckless, when compared with their own quite inexpressible recollections of the reality? There were the happy pair, sitting in the broiling sunshine between two stone walls, painfully dragged along the up-hill road ankle deep in dust, in a wretched, jolting, old hackney *calèche*, by two miserable jades of horses! But half a century later, the memory of that drive lived in the hearts of both of them, as of a time too heavenly and exquisite for words; a memory which made the sunshine of after years dim in comparison with that bygone glory,—which represented the fairest scenes of earth as poor and common-place, by the side of that glorified bit of dusty road!

Sleep then, good kindly *chaperones*, sweet and opportune slumbers! and have mercy, wretched kill-joy interlopers of the *de trop* genus! Pause before you are guilty of destroying happiness which it is as much in your power to kill as it is to crush a butterfly, but which it is equally beyond your power to create or to give!

Notwithstanding the slowness of the horses, whose incapability had so strongly excited Aunt Giuditta's indignation, the spot at which the path to the villa branches off from the great Bologna road was reached all too soon. For nearly half a mile a very beautiful terrace path, commanding a view of the Valdarno flooded with the afternoon sunshine, had to be traversed on foot before the villa could be reached. And this path was quite narrow enough, and rough enough, and in some parts steep enough, to have justified the offer and the acceptance of a great deal of assistance in the traversing of it. But then Aunt Giuditta had to be waked up, and to be accompanied in the walk, and that circumstance altered the aspect of the matter very notably. However the *chaperone* could not be left sleeping in the carriage, so she had to be waked up and got out of it. And thus by the time the trio had joined their predecessors at

the villa, the two who had been wrapped into the seventh heaven, had time to subside, and put their necks again into the yoke of their respective positions.

“SCHIFANOIA,” as the jeweller called his villa, and as it was very legibly labelled on the stone gate-posts of the entrance, was placed in a situation that really merited the appellation. The signification of the word is a “Refuge from trouble.” The Italians are very fond of giving such kind of names to their villas, and of representing to themselves the pleasures of a country life according to the Horatian style of language and thought. But it is more an imagination than a reality with them. Either the old jeweller had no troubles to escape from, or he sought some other place of refuge from them. For he rarely came near his “Schifanoia!”

The little property was entered by as handsome an iron gateway as if the most superb equipages might be expected to seek entrance at it, although no wheeled vehicle could come near the place. Within this was a small court-yard, on one side of which a low parapet wall defended it from the edge of the rock on which the house was built, and which made that part of the side of the Apennine quite precipitous. Over this low wall the view of the Valdarno towards the Chianti hills to the right, and the Vallombroso mountains to the left, ranged over an exquisite landscape. In this court-yard was the front entrance to the house, and the corner of an out-building, which jutted out from it, was so placed as to touch the edge of the precipice, and thus cut off all passage further than the court, except through the house. On the other side of this corner was a small garden, also with a low parapet wall along the edge of the precipice, and with a verandah or *loggia*, into which the principal rooms opened.

When the three last comers entered the court-yard, nobody was to be seen ; but they could hear the voices of the rest of the party from the other side of the corner.

“I warrant me, Signor Giuseppe has done nothing towards getting the dining-room in a fit state to dine in,” said the lady Giuditta, ringing a tremendous peal at the house door. “I must see to everything, or nothing is done. I ought to have been in the first carriage instead of the last”

And the "Martha"-like old lady bustled away as soon as the door was opened, to see that shutters were unclosed, chairs and tables dusted, and everything in good order for the feast. As to the kitchen department itself, that gave Aunt Giuditta no uneasiness, for the old cook from the Borgo de' Greci had been sent up the night before, and his mistress knew that he could be relied on within his own dominions.

Laura and Sebastian passed through the house to join the rest of the party, who were assembled in the *loggia* and terrace garden on the other side of it. And truly a more charming little paradise it would be difficult to meet with. A genuine "Schifanoia" it might well have been to any owner capable of flying from his cares. But there are men to whom no refuge of the sort is available or even welcome,—men, who not only ride ever, as Horace says, with black care sitting behind them, but who insist on always carrying a pillion for the intruder. And Signor Giuseppe Palli, had he confessed the truth, would have admitted that he was a happier man sitting in his spider's web den amid his books on the Ponte Vecchio, bolt upright in his speckless suit of black, with his double gold eye-glasses in his hand, than he was here in his own "Schifanoia," equally rigid and bolt upright in his chair, equally specklessly black, and with the gold eye-glasses still sporting dignified action in his aristocratic-looking white hand. A certain amount of satisfaction he had, as he sat in a large chair brought out from the house on the angle of the terrace overlooking the lovely view beneath them—the city with its long line of crenelated walls, its dominating cupola and subject spires and towers of every degree—the rich dark-green extent of the Cascine woods—the glistening silver cord of Arno gliding away to the turn at which it enters a gorge in the hills at Signa, seven miles below Florence;—and beyond all this the thickly populated and fertile valley stretching as far as Pistoia, twenty miles away;—a certain amount of satisfaction in the consciousness of possession, as he recounted to Canon Guidi, and his nephew, Nanni, standing beside him, how the Prince of Torrenorcica, from Naples, had wished to become the purchaser of this villa, when it had been sold by the old Tanarini at the time of their break-up, but that he had taken a fancy to it. Laura liked it! "*Che volete?*" It was a folly for a poor

tradesman like him; but one could not always be thinking of business! And perhaps before very long, when Mistress Laura should have a home of her own—(here a glance and a very slight wave of the eye-glass towards his nephew)—he might leave the business to the care of his old friend Simone there, and come and live here in peace and quietness for the rest of his days. An old woman to make his soup and his bed would be all he should require, and “my old friend, Don Pancrazio—(there he comes)—to look in and play a game of dominoes, and have a little quiet chat of an evening! An old man wants but little, Signor Canonico, and that but for a little time! And it is well after an active life to have an interval for a little thought before the end comes.”

As if the old spider had left himself any capability of seriously thinking about anything save flies, up to the latest rattle of his latest breath!

But this was the way he played his part before himself and others, appropriately in those few and tedious “Schifanoia” hours.

The Don Pancrazio, who entered the garden from the house, as he was speaking, was the *curato* of La Lastra, and had been invited by Signora Giuditta to make up the party to a dozen. He was a priest of the kindly, genial, florid-faced, jovial sort, as ignorant as a schoolboy, and as open-hearted, very much like a jolly farmer newly caught and dressed up in canonicals for the nonce,—a clerical type very common in the country villages of Tuscany. He always wore a shabby round chimney-pot hat, keeping his fluffy triangular beaver for going down to Florence on occasions when it was necessary to meet his bishop; a straight-cut frock coat, a pair of shining camblet inexpressibles, coarse worsted stockings on his jolly round calves, and thick laced-up shoes, innocent of any orthodox clerical buckle. He always went to sleep while hearing confessions, always gave plenary absolution when he waked up at the end of them, clapped all the young fellows on the back, chucked all the girls under the chin, took very good care to be present at all the jollifications of his richer parishioners, but was equally sure not to be absent from the homes of the poorer in their times of trouble and sorrow.

A stronger or more striking contrast could not well be found between two men of the same profession and the same country, than between the jolly country parson and the learned, dignified, gentlemanlike, and eminently clerical Canon of San Lorenzo. A synod of bishops would have declared without a dissenting voice that the Reverend Guido Guidi was a credit and an honour to the Church to which he belonged; while the same authoritative body would assuredly have shaken their grave heads at much both in Don Pancrazio's appearance and in his conduct. And of course it is not for heretics and laymen to impugn any part of so competent a judgment. Yet thus much, heretics, laymen, and foreigners may rest perfectly assured of, whatever the big-wigs at Rome may think of the matter, that the Reverend Guido Guidi, and the like of him, have done much to bring their Church into the troublous and dangerous position in which she finds herself; while the *curato* Don Pancrazio and his peers are the men who will save, if it be saved, the Roman Catholic Church from being swept from the face of the country. For the whole population of La Lastra would rise in open-mouthed rebellion against any Government so irreligious as to deprive them of the invaluable spiritual consolation of Don Pancrazio's sleepy absolutions; but few men could be found in Florence to object to the most summary and complete abolition of Canon Guidi and his compeers.

Don Pancrazio stopped short and made a profound bow to the assembled company as soon as he had emerged from the *loggia* into the garden. Then advancing to the corner of the terrace where the master of the house was sitting, he made just such another to him, and then shook hands with him. Then he bowed equally lowly to the sleek and glossy Canon, who sat beside him, who returned the compliment by a very slight inclination.

"It is a festival that don't come often in the calendar to see you at 'Schifanoia,' my good and much-esteemed sir!" said Don Pancrazio; "and we must make the most of it when it comes. Yonder is the Signora Giuditta! I must go and thank her for kindly thinking of me!"

Meantime Laura and Sebastian, after replying to Nanni's somewhat scoffing inquiries as to their journey up the hill behind

those two broken-down brutes, had joined another group at the other end of the terrace. There a chair had been placed for old Canon Giacomo, and Marietta was standing by his side, while the Gobbo had seated himself on the low wall of the terrace close to them.

"Well, uncle, how did you manage the walk? Are you tired? I ought to have been there to give you an arm," said Sebastian.

"My dear boy, I enjoyed the walk immensely; not one of them more, I'll be bound. And I am not a bit tired, only as hungry as a Franciscan of a Saturday night. I didn't want your arm, my son! *Che!** Your arm was better employed, I guess. And what could I want, when I had the care of my Marietta!"

"Still I could have wished that you had remained with us, Sebastian," said Marietta.

This was ungracious enough towards Laura, who had come up with him, and was standing near. But Marietta had no wish to be gracious to her; and had spoken for her rather than for Sebastian. And Laura understood all this perfectly well. Instead of taking up in any way the gauntlet thus thrown down to her, however, she said to the Canon, stooping over his silver locks, like a tall slender lily drooping over a grey old moss-grown stone,

"I dare say, Signor Canonico, that Signor Sebastian and the Signora Marietta often dispute which shall have the pleasure of waiting on you, and you would be puzzled to say which takes most care of you! But for my part I always fancy that there can be no tending like the tending of a woman."

"You are right enough there, my dear," returned the old man, taking Marietta's hand as she stood by him. "If it had not been for my Marietta, I should have died a dozen years ago. It is only her care and tenderness that keeps me alive."

Marietta made no reply; but with her disengaged hand gently smoothed the long white locks at the back of the old man's neck.

"But, Signora Marietta," said the Gobbo, in a singularly soft

* *Che!* "What!" "Pooh!" An ever-recurring Tuscan exclamation.

voice, "you must not forget to finish what you were going to tell me of that little villa that stands so naked on the hill-side there beyond Petraia. Pardon me, Signora Laura and Signor Sebastiano, but there can be no treat, I think, for a Florentine equal to looking over the Valdarno from such a point as this with such a cicerone as the Signora Marietta to read you off the story of every stock and stone in it."

"It were a pity," answered Marietta, "if all the history of all we see were not stored in some better mind and memory than mine, Signor Sandro. But I was going to say that, when that villa was confiscated, after the fight at Montemurlo, by the tyrant Cosmo, and Lionardo Cigoli, the owner, was beheaded, the well in the court-yard, which had never been known to fail, dried up, and remained dry till a century and a-half later, when a Cigoli recovered possession of the property. Then the well flowed again, and has never failed since. That is all!"

Marietta had turned, in telling her story, towards the Gobbo, so that the Canon was behind her; and he took advantage of the circumstance to execute in pantomime a sort of *staccato crescendo* movement as with the bow of a violin, expressing, for his own and Sebastian's satisfaction, his opinion of his niece's history. And Sebastian telegraphed back his appreciation of the old gentleman's criticism, at the same time raising for an instant a monitory forefinger, with a glance at Marietta. From all which it would have been clear to a looker-on, that there were subjects on which the sympathies of the old man and the young one were more in accordance than those of either of them with their relative. In the Gobbo Boccanera she had a kindred mind and an eagerly willing disciple.

Don Pancrazio meanwhile, when he had gone to pay his respects to the Signora Giuditta, had been taken by her into the house to assist her in seeing that all was in due order for the serving of the dinner; and he now appeared in front of the *loggia*, and taking off his hat with a flourish, intoned in a magnificent great bass voice:

"*Signori e Signore! In tavola! in tavola! in tavola! in tavola! Signori e Signore, buon prò! buon prò!*" *

* Literally, "Ladies and gentlemen! to table! to table! may it well profit you!"

"Bravo, Don Pancrazio!" cried the old Canon, rising alertly from his chair. "I never heard the call to table more gladly!"

"Nor I!" said Nanni. "I shall dine for six; I am as hungry as a hound!"

"Very reverend sirs!" said the master of the house, rising, and very magnificently motioning to the two dignitaries to precede, "pray honour my poor house by accepting a collation." And so saying he led the two canons—the elder still leaning on the arm of Marietta—into the house, leaving the rest of the party to follow as they liked.

In the centre of one side of the table sat Signor Palli, with Marietta on his right hand and Canon Guidi on his left. On the other side of Marietta was her uncle, and next to the magnificent Canon of San Lorenzo, Master Simone, somewhat to the disgust of the former. Aunt Giuditta had assigned that place to the Gobbo; but he, having no affection for the priest, and not at all coveting the honour proposed to him, adroitly put his father, who was mooning absently round the table, into the place in his stead. Next to old Canon Lunardi was Caterina; and Nanni, very much in the position of a donkey between two bundles of hay, sat between her and Laura. On the other side of Laura was Sebastian; next to him the Gobbo, and then Aunt Giuditta, with Don Pancrazio on her other side, who thus completed the circle by having Simon Boccanera between him and Guidi.

And then the dinner began by the handing round of a vast variety of those introductory dainties which the Italians fancy serve as whets to the appetite, such as anchovies, pickled cucumbers, uncooked ham, slices of tunny fish in oil, sausage with garlic and without, olives, small strips of red herring uncooked and served in oil, etc., etc. Then followed the "*minestra*," the "*fritto*," the "*umido*," the "*arrosto*,"* with their proper accompaniments, in due order. After that the "*dolce*" in sundry kinds, and a very multifarious dessert.

Only Tuscan wine, but excellent in quality, was put on the table till the roast lamb and roast fowls came. Then some execrable stuff, calling itself sherry, was produced, which everybody present supposed to be something very fine, though none

* Soup, fried food, stewed food, roast.

of them cared to drink it, and some very fair champagne. With the *dolce* came two or three sorts of Italian sweet wines.

And everybody talked and laughed aloud, and made the banquet a far noisier affair than would have been deemed at all decorous among graver and less child-like people. And though the party was composed, as the reader knows, of very heterogeneous social elements, nobody was the least oppressed by the superior social status of his neighbour, or laughed the less loud on that account; nobody seemed to have any desire at all to blink or ignore the fact that the object of the meeting was to get all the enjoyment possible out of it, and nobody felt it *infra dig.* to admit that he liked eating and drinking, and chattering and laughing.

Before they came to the dessert, they began drinking healths to each other in the interval between the removal of one dish and the appearance of its successor. And after every health proposed, Don Pancrazio, unsolicited, and apparently as *ex officio* toast-master, chanted, striking the table with his hand to command attention, and looking around with shining rosy gills to invite any voice to join him, "*Evviva! Evviva! Evviva! Evviva! Evviva! Evviva! Buon prò!*"

And by the time the long repast had been brought to a conclusion, the amount of noise was such that any Englishman would have felt not the slightest doubt that all the party were considerably advanced towards intoxication. But he would have been most entirely mistaken. Most of the party had drank one-third of wine to two-thirds of water, the wine being pure unbranded juice of the grape to begin with. No! they were all perfectly sober when they left the table; but they made none the less noise for that.

As soon as they had taken their coffee, they all strolled out into the garden, except the old Canon, who declared that he must have half an hour's nap before he should be ready for his violin. The others dispersed themselves in twos and threes on the terrace, or among the shrubberies.

While Sebastian, at Signor Palli's request, occupied himself with looking out the music they proposed to execute, the Gobbo Boccanera joined him, and entered into conversation with him. Meantime Marietta observed Laura and Nanni go off towards

the shrubbery together, to her great satisfaction. Had the *tête-à-tête* drive of that morning resulted in a break of all that might ever have been between her and Sebastian? Had they recognised the impossibility of ever coming together for better for worse?—so entirely and palpably for *worse*, that the impossibility of any such union was so very evident to her! Heaven grant it might be so! One huge difficulty and stumbling-block would thus be removed out of her up-hill but destined path.

Poor little Caterina also had marked the same pairing off with very different feelings. She had, however, a very complete faith in Laura, and could not help feeling a suspicion that this colloquy between the two cousins might be the working out of the audacious plans which Laura had in part revealed to her. If so, she hardly knew whether for the moment to feel more of consolation or nervous trepidation from the thought. Surely Laura would say nothing that could hurt her maidenly feelings as regarded Nanni, or place her in a position of humiliation as regarded his family. No! She could trust dear Laura! she repeated to herself. And then there was lurking at the bottom of her heart a tinge of that uneasy feeling, ineradicable from the breast of any daughter of Eve, which prompted the thought, that there could not but be danger in this solitary *tête-à-tête* conference between her beautiful friend and the incomparable, the irresistible Nanni! In short, poor little Caterina passed the after-dinner hour in a state of very uncomfortable, nervous fidget, and treated unlucky Don Pancrazio to very short answers, and very much at cross purposes, when, as he was lounging on the terrace with an after-dinner cigar in his mouth, he made sundry well-meant advances towards a little of that semi-pastoral, semi-flirting sort of talk, by which the pastors of his church, and perhaps those of some other communions, are wont to make manifest the extra importance which they attach to such souls of the weaker sex as inhabit very pretty clay tabernacles.

The master of the house and Canon Guidi were pacing up and down the terrace in an elegant and dignified manner, still in close conversation; and the Gobbo was, while talking with Sebastian in the sitting-room, watching them out of the open window, and thinking that he should much like to know what such a pair could have to talk so much about together.

And then, after an hour or so, the little party re-assembled; the music-desks were set near the open windows of the sitting-room, the quartette party rosined their bows and tuned their instruments, and the others disposed themselves, those in the room who really wished to listen to the music, and those who liked it only as an accompaniment to their own *sotto-voce* chat, in the moonlit *loggia* outside.

For my own part, though a quartette of Beethoven's is a delight to me, I think I should have contented myself with as much of it as I could have enjoyed through the open terrace windows, so exquisitely lovely was the evening hour in that terrace *loggia*, with all the Valdarno and fair Florence bathed in the moonlight beneath it!

And they all enjoyed themselves in their different ways more perhaps than often falls to the lot of all the component parts of a pleasure party. Laura was one of the indoor division—perhaps because she deemed it proper to be by the side of Aunt Giuditta, possibly because the room contained some other attraction, which acted on her more or less consciously. The members of the quartette party were, of course, at their posts. Don Pancrazio got into disgrace by snoring, but was too hardened to be afflicted by the circumstance. Marietta and the Gobbo had a long talk, sitting together at the angle of the garden terrace, which commanded the more entire view of that world of villas, which Ariosto estimated to be equal to Rome twice told. And Nanni and Caterina (the latter now very much reassured as to the nature and results of that suspicious *tête-à-tête* between the two cousins) perhaps enjoyed the hours most of all, as they sat, unobserved, save by the all-observing eye of the Gobbo, under the *loggia* just outside the window.

It was late before the seniors of the party declared it time to return to Florence. The quartette players protested that they never had a more successful or more delightful meeting; and to some of the rest of the party that evening turned out to be one never to be forgotten.

CHAPTER XI.

BUSINESS TALK OF THE PONTE VECCHIO.

As soon as the Canon had gone to his morning mass on the following day, leaning on the arm of Sebastian, Marietta quickly put on her shawl and bonnet, with its thick veil, and set forth on a solitary walk to the Ponte Vecchio. There she went to the shop of "Giuseppe Palli and Simone Boccanera, goldsmiths and dealers in precious stones," and asked the man in the front shop (for Ser Simone was not there) whether she could see Signor Palli. The man vanished through the narrow door in the background of the little place, and emerging again in a minute, requested her to walk in.

"You must be surprised to see me here, Signor Palli," began Marietta: "but I wished to speak to you respecting a matter that interests both of us;—nevertheless, if my visit interferes with any more important business, mine can stand over, and I will speak to you at some more favourable time."

"No business can be more important, Signora, than any that you are pleased to honour me with!" returned the polite and dignified old gentleman, rising, and making a very low bow, while he indicated to her a seat on the opposite side of the narrow table at which he had been sitting,—the only seat in the place, indeed, besides his own,—with a wave of the gold eye-glasses.

Marietta sat down opposite him; and felt, as he put his glasses on his nose, and sat with his aristocratic hooked beak and narrow old head bent a little on one side, looking at her like a question stop, and awaiting in dead silence what she had to say, that it was a little difficult to begin. Yet she might have guessed that he would entirely agree with her in what she was going to say, although it was very possible that they might not look at the matter from a similar point of view.

"Signor Palli," she said, after an awkward pause, "I have reason to fear that the acquaintanceship between our families, now of so many years' standing, and which has been the cause of so much enjoyment to my poor uncle, has given rise to

a result which cannot be acceptable to us, and which may very possibly be also displeasing to you."

The old man rapidly ran over in his mind the list of his recent money transactions, but finding nothing that apparently had any bearing on the Lunardi family, he was puzzled. "I am quite at a loss, Signora," he said, "to guess the nature of so disagreeable a circumstance. Pray proceed!"

"One member of our family, Signor Palli, indeed, I may say the most important member of it, is a young man of five-and-twenty, and one member of your family is a very charming—a very amiable young lady!"

And there Marietta paused again. But the old money-lender only said (taking off his glasses, however, as though the matter had already sufficiently revealed itself to him, to need no longer any such aids to close examination); "Laura is much honoured by your favourable opinion, Signora, pray proceed."

"Well! Signor Palli, you must be aware, in short, I am sure that you will give me credit for being anxious not to say anything offensive to a family for whom I have an unfeigned respect; but I stand, as it were, in the position of guardian to Sebastian: you know how things are situated with us; it is a tremendous responsibility; (the jeweller here bowed his head, very slightly raising his eyebrows into two semi-circles, which very plainly said, "Indeed? well, I should not have thought that.") and it is my duty to say in words which I would fain make as little painful as is compatible with clearness, that a marriage between my nephew and your daughter is not one that can be permitted to take place."

"Most assuredly no such marriage can, or, under any conceivable circumstances, could be allowed to take place. Why, my dear madam, should you imagine that there could be anything offensive to me in stating that fact? On the contrary, I am very glad that our opinions tally so well upon the subject. But what is more to the purpose, Signora, permit me to ask what grounds you have for thinking that there is any danger of such a marriage being contemplated by any of the parties concerned?"

"Permit me to ask," returned Marietta, with some little

flavour of hauteur in her manner, "whether nothing has ever fallen under your own observation, Signor Palli, which might have led you to a similar apprehension?"

"Nothing whatever, Signora! and you must forgive me, if I say that any notion of the kind seems to me to be so utterly preposterous, that I can hardly think it likely that it should have been seriously contemplated by . . . any of the parties concerned."

"I am well pleased, my dear sir, that you should so strongly feel the incongruity of any such alliance. But, alas! that I should have to confess it! the distinctions of birth and of rank are not recognised in our days, as they once were, and always should be; and I blush to say that even by one of my own race they might be forgotten in the heat of boyish passion!"

The jeweller replaced his glasses on his nose with more of precipitation than often characterised his actions; and leaning on his two hands placed flat on the little table before him, looked hard and scrutinisingly at his visitor across it for a few moments.

"Ah . . . h!" he said at length; "I *think*, Signora, I understand your meaning; but yet it seems impossible. Excuse me, Signora Marietta, if I ask you to say plainly—and, pray, without the slightest idea of hurting any feelings of mine on the matter—plainly and directly; do you mean that if your nephew Sebastian wished to wed my daughter Laura with my consent, such wedding would not have your approval?"

"Why, certainly it could not, Signor Palli, since you ask me to speak clearly. How could it? Notwithstanding your request, I hesitate to say what seems offensive, though in truth it is only the absurd notions of these modern days that could find any offence in the matter. . . ."

"Quite so, madam! quite so!" said the jeweller, with an air of cordial and pleased assent; "pray go on! I am delighted to hear your sentiments on the subject." And he advanced his head towards her across the table, waiting with a pleasant and courteous smile for her to proceed.

"I was observing, sir," said Marietta, "that in the good days before men's minds had been poisoned and misled by the fatal doctrines with which France has ruined the world, every-

body would have felt it a matter of course, and therefore free from offence in the statement of it, that a marriage of the scion and representative of an ancient noble house with the daughter of a tradesman, however estimable, could not be approved or tolerated by the young man's family."

"Quite true, my dear madam! Quite true! I fully agree with you. And, believe me, my dear madam," the old man continued, bowing his head till his long nose all but touched the table, while he held the out-turned palms of both hands (one of them with the gold eye-glass between the finger and thumb) towards her, "believe me, Giuseppe Palli knows his station, and the distance between him and his and you and yours, lady; knows it so well," he continued, raising himself up from his lowly, bowing position, and throwing himself back in his arm-chair, while he emphasised each separate clause of his ensuing words with a majestic wave of the double eye-glass, "knows it so well, Signora Contessa Marietta de' Lunardi,"—low bow, with eye-glass accompaniment,—"that he would as soon think of uniting his only daughter to a scion—and that scion the representative, as you correctly state—of that ancient and most noble family, as he would of giving her in marriage to a mendicant from Monte Domini."*

A deep and sudden flush rushed over Marietta's face, from the neck to the roots of her glossy, black, though silver-flecked tresses; a flush so dark and angry, that it seemed as if the violent heart-bound had sent all the blood in her body to her head. For one instant there flashed out a gleam from those large, dark eyes, that, to a physiologist, might have said something in evidence of her claim to be the rightful descendant of a race in which the breeding of long generations had made it a part of their organic nature to deem themselves of other clay than common mortals;—a glance that made the money-lender's shrewd old eyes drop before it, and suggested a momentary reflection that there were people within the sound of his voice, and that it was well it was so! It was only for an instant, however. In the next, Marietta's habitual self-command had re-assumed its wonted empire. She pressed one

* The Florentine poor-house.

hand strongly on her heart, and rising slowly to her full height, while her complexion returned partially, not wholly, to its usual perfect white, and the attitude of her noble figure and the carriage of her head assumed, unconsciously, a mien and bearing that might have befitted a Juno, compelled to the degradation of personal communication with a vile but rebellious mortal, she said, slowly and calmly—

“Enough said, Signore! Enough that our aims in this matter are the same. Of the feelings and motives that lead to them it were worse than folly to speak. You are wholly incapable of comprehending my feelings and principles on the subject. And I am, I trust, equally unable to appreciate yours. We will content ourselves with knowing that our intentions and wishes are identical. *You* would not have your daughter married to a poor—a *very* poor, though not, Signora Palli, a mendicant noble: *I* would rather see my nephew in his shroud than see him wedded with . . . your daughter! We are agreed in this, I think.”

“Perfectly and entirely, Madame!” said the jeweller, who had also risen, and stood facing her, with his exceptionally tall figure rigid and upright, his two feet planted with the heels close together, his left hand in the bosom of his waistcoat, and his right holding the never-failing eye-glass, as a man who is making a formal bow holds a cocked hat, “Per . . . feet . . . ly and en . . . tire . . . ly!”

“And we may each count on the co-operation of the other to do all that may be necessary for the prevention of so preposterous an union?”

“For that, Madame, I think I may venture to assure you that no co-operation will be needed. I flatter myself—I confess, I do flatter myself—that you may be quite at rest on the subject. I do not think that I shall need assistance in preventing an alliance which you so justly characterise as truly pre . . . pos . . . terous!”

“I wish you good morning, Signor Palli. I leave you, well satisfied with the result of our interview.”

“Quite so, Madame! Quite so!” said the money-lender, opening the little door into the shop, and bowing low. “I have the honour, Signora Contessa, of wishing you a very good

morning!" he added, as, following her to the door of the front shop, he made her a second most magnificent bow.

Marietta walked home, gloomily thinking that the world was further gone in the fatal malady which she considered to be destroying all that was good and noble in it than even she had supposed.

As for Signor Palli, he remained not so entirely at his ease respecting the subject of his interview with the lady as he had chosen to appear. Not that he was much alarmed. He really did, in his inmost heart, consider a marriage of his wealthy heiress with a pauper noble, who was also an unsuccessful musician, as wholly monstrous and out of the question as he had represented it. And he had great faith in Laura's good sense and right judgment. He had not such entire faith in her passive obedience. There had never been any conflict of wills between them; but he nevertheless felt that he should be very loth to enter on such a contest, and could not conceal from himself that he should have misgivings as to the result of it.

Signor Palli had passed, as has been said, some years of his early life in Paris, at a time when ideas and doctrines were rife there very widely opposed to those which still prevailed in his own country on most of the weightiest questions of social science and manner; and on none more widely than on the degree of authority parents are justified in assuming over their offspring. Signor Palli, as was sure to be the case with a shrewd, hard, ambitious man, conscious of superior energies in the work of "opening the world, his oyster," very incapable of comprehending any other grounds for the superiority of one man over another, and finding himself condemned by the Old World theories and rules to a position of irremediable inferiority, became a thorough-going partisan of the new ideas. And the education of his daughter had been very much in conformity with this profession of political and social faith. In a great measure this action on her mind had been a negative one. Laura had not been subjected to that training and those influences which made well-educated Italian girls what they were, and, for the most part, still are. But she had been taught to read,—by which I mean, to love reading,—and she had

been permitted and encouraged to read largely of the more serious and less objectionable portion of the new French literature. And the father had a very strong feeling that it would be difficult to induce his daughter to act in opposition to any ideas that had assumed the character of principles in her mind.

It may be easily imagined that such a kind of education *might* have produced results very far from desirable. But Laura had been very fortunate in the lady to whom her education had been entrusted; and more fortunate still, in that the good seed had fallen on good ground. The strong meat, which might have been fatal to a weaklier organisation, had, assimilated by a fine mental constitution, produced a moral character as admirable as it was exceptional in that clime and time.

But Signor Palli, as he had climbed the hill of years and of social station, had gradually, as usually happens, modified some of his notions. And moreover, as is equally often the case, he never considered the principles which emancipated him from all redevances of suit, service, or submission to those claiming to be his superiors, as being valid or applicable in like manner to those over whom he would fain exercise authority. But he had very strong misgivings as to his success in exercising it in the matter under consideration. In truth, he had a powerful persuasion that Laura would take no husband of another's choosing. But then he had, as he repeated to himself, no reason to imagine that she would think of throwing herself away on a beggar, for whose nobility she had, he was sure, no greater veneration than himself. The silly woman who had just left him no doubt imagined that her noble beggar kinsman had but to throw the handkerchief to a daughter of "the people" for the offer to be jumped at. But he had no reason to fear any such folly from Laura, and no ground whatever for imagining that it would be more agreeable to her than to himself.

And then he set himself to consider how far he was prepared, if the worst should come to the worst, to exercise the power which he unquestionably had in his own hands. His wealth was his own. But what could he do with it? Was it not valuable only in connection with schemes, and hopes, and ambitions, of all which Laura was the centre figure, and the absolutely indispensable protagonist? Should he, in case of rebellion, prefer

his name to his blood, build all his hopes on his brother's more obedient son, and make him his heir, and the sole foundation-stone of the future Palli fortunes?

The old man turned the matter considering in his mind, but came to the conclusion that he could not do it! Laura was his own, and Nanni was not his own. The sole means by which that ugly clause in our life indentures, about carrying nothing with us out of the world, could be in any degree got round and set at naught, was by leaving one's wealth to one's own flesh and blood, and thus enjoying in anticipation the permanence of it. Left to Laura, it would be still his, and he could look forward to this vicarious possession of it. Passed away to Nanni, it was in truth gone from him, and a few more years would then indeed be the end of all! And he had never had any affection for his brother or his brother's son. He and Carlo had always pulled together very well, and had many transactions to their mutual advantage. And Nanni, his nephew, being the heir to so goodly a portion of the Perini acres, and ensuring by a marriage with his cousin the continuance of the old name (for the old liberty, fraternity, equality man thought much of that), he was evidently the most suitable match on the cards for Laura. But the old money-lender had no such feeling for him as could make the passing of his wealth to him a mitigation of the pang of parting with it. No! he could not disinherit his daughter,—it would come too nearly to disinheriting himself. So with a passing reflection on the beauty of his own disinterested paternal love, he dismissed *that* solution from his mind.

Still he thought—he *did* think—he could trust to Laura's admirable good sense. He could not fancy her guilty of such insane folly as that absurd woman had spoken of. But, after all, it might not be amiss, in case of the worst, to have such aid as she had hinted at to fall back on, let it be set in action by however monstrously absurd prejudices it might.

The jeweller was still ruminating over these thoughts, when he was told by a face peeping through the half-opened door of communication with the shop that another visitor wished to speak with him; and a moment afterwards the Reverend Canon Guido Guidi entered the little sanctum. Signor Palli received his

new guest with his best air of distinguished courtesy, and with a very gracious smile of welcome indicated to him the chair so lately occupied by Marietta. But there was a shade more of understood equality of standing, and of apparent intelligence, between the two men than might have been expected.

Very many more secret colloquies had taken place in that little den hanging over the river, and the master of it was in the habit of considering himself most effectually "tiled" there. And there was little likelihood that it should ever chance to turn out otherwise. Yet it did so happen that the ensuing conference between the dignified ecclesiastic and the money-lender was listened to by other ears than the four belonging to those gentlemen.

For shortly after the departure of Marietta the Gobbo arrived at the shop, and sitting in his corner at his little bench had seen the Canon pass in to his interview with the jeweller. Now these qucer little houses on the Ponte Vecchio have, as any passer over the bridge may observe, a miniature little first floor above the two rooms on the level of the street. It must have been a matter of some ingenuity to contrive out of the small space a staircase by which to reach this upper floor. But the builder has overcome the difficulty by constructing a very narrow ladder-like stair in the thickness of the wall between the shop and the back-room. No stout gentleman or crinolined lady can ever reach that mysterious little first floor; but for mortals of tolerably slender proportions there is practicable access to those two little bits of rooms. In the tenement occupied by Giuseppe Palli, the front room was used as a magazine for various materials and tools connected with the business, —a grindstone among others,—for which it would have been impossible to find room in the shop below. And the persons employed in the latter had therefore frequent occasion to run up and down the little stairs. The back-room, that over Signor Palli's private sanctum, was considered to be the studio of Signor Boccanera, the junior partner. No secrets of any kind were ever transacted there. But the dreamy, artistic-minded Simon would sit there with his drawing and modelling materials, imagining a design for a necklace, or experimenting on a new idea for a bracelet.

Assuredly it would never have occurred to him to take advantage of a knob-hole and a loose tile in the floor to listen to aught that passed in the room below. But it did occur to his *gobbo* son. And when the latter saw the Canon of San Lorenzo, whom he very cordially hated, seek a private interview with his *padrone*, he was assailed by a strong curiosity to know what those two *could* have to say to each other, as a sequel to all the talk he had, with some little surprise, observed between them at the villa, and during the drive the day before. So, his father being absent, he quietly slipped up the little staircase, as quietly closed on himself the door of his father's room, and gave an attentive (and sharp) ear to what was going on immediately beneath him.

"I thought I would look in as I was passing by, but I scarcely expected to find you here this morning, my dear sir, after our late hours at your delightful villa last night," began the priest.

"Business habits, Signor Canonico! The habits of a lifetime" said the other.

"But it is not every man that can continue his habits of a lifetime, and work like a young man, and look like one," returned the Canon, with a complimentary bow.

"Well, I am as ready for business as ever I was," returned the man of money; "the more difficult thing, I find, is to be as ready as formerly for amusement. But your visit, reverend sir, I presume has reference to the former."

"Why, yes; if I should be so fortunate as to bring the matters we were talking of yesterday to such a point as that they should deserve to be called business."

"The distinction is a good one. As you put the thing yesterday, I confess I do not see——"

"Look you, my dear sir; we must start from the right point. We must enter on the question, quite understanding that it cannot be treated altogether on the usual business principles. It must be considered as an exceptional case. And I should never have dreamed of proposing such a case to the consideration of a mere ordinary (money-lender, he was going to say, but substituted the convenient generality) man of business."

“ But, indeed, my good sir, I claim to be no other than that,—a man of business, who conducts his business on the most ordinary principles.”

“ But still, one capable, I *think*, Signor Palli—one capable of comprehending that exceptional advantages may sometimes be found by departing from ordinary rules. I quite understand that presenting myself here simply as a canon beneficiary of San Lorenzo, I could not expect you to give me the sum I want on my merely personal security.”

“ I am afraid it would be very widely out of the ordinary course of business to do so,” remarked the jeweller, shaking his head with a quiet smile.

“ Quite so! *A chi lo dite?** But that is not quite the case with the proposition I have the honour to lay before you. The money required is for a certain purpose, with which you are well acquainted. It is to be expended in a manner which will enable me to repay it easily, and which will justify me, on the strictest commercial principles, in paying a very handsome price for it!”

“ Even an usurious price, Signor Canonico!” said the old man, putting his eye-glass on his nose, and looking up with a mock air of innocent inquiry.

“ Bah! You know better, my dear sir, than to imagine that I attach any importance to that obsolete rubbish, as absurd as it is impracticable! All that can result from refusing to pay for any article what it is fairly worth under all the circumstances of the case is, that you won’t get the article.”

“ It has seemed so to my poor judgment,” said the jeweller, with a slight shrug, and a deprecatory wave of his glass.

“ My proposal, Signor Palli, would contemplate paying the full value for the accommodation required.”

“ But there are risks,” rejoined the money-lender, “ which no amount of per centage can induce a prudent man to encounter. I always prefer to take, rather than to give, the long odds. But that is a matter of temperament—merely a matter of temperament. The question, as it presents itself to my mind, Signor Canonico, is not so much what is the per centage you should

* “ To whom do you tell it?” A common expression, equivalent to “ Do you think I don’t know that?”

pay for the accommodation you wish, as what are the chances of repayment of the principal sum?"

"Why, my good friend, even if you doubted, as I am sure you do not—but even if you doubted of my honour and good faith, I should be bound——"

"Pardon, if I interrupt you, my dear sir, to say that any such doubt is out of the question. The doubt rests not on your good will, but on the possibilities of the case. This money is to be sunk in an investment which can be reproductive only in one way. A certain sum duly expended at Rome—I neither ask nor wish to know how expended—would probably secure to you the advancement you are bent on attaining. That point gained, you would be able and willing to repay me my advance, together with a due remuneration for the risk I should have run. But forgive me if I observe, that the whole thing turns on the amount of that probability."

"For that, Signor Palli, I can only refer you to your own judgment of me. I consider the probability a perfectly safe one. Do you think me the man to be bubbled out of my money?"

"But you might very judiciously, if I would let you run a greater risk with *my* money than you would with your own," said the jeweller, with a courteous smile.

"True" if it were altogether your money, Signor Palli; but remember that, if I were so deluded into lending the money lent by you, I could not wash my hands of the matter and remain a free man. You would have my bond, and there is my canonry. It would not be a good speculation for me to risk losing the money advanced, though it did come in the first instance out of your pocket and not out of mine."

"There is truth in that; and I do *not* think that you are a man to throw away hard cash, which is a certainty, after a delusive hope of the kind."

"And permit me to remind you," put in Guido, eagerly, as he thought he saw the usurer inclining to look favourably on his suit. "I am quite aware that a man in your position, Signor Palli, is quite as likely to be able to be of use to his friends as any other whatsoever. Still, it may be worth taking into the account that I should, when my expectations shall be crowned

with success, be in a position which might be occasionally, you know, of no slight advantage to one who had so materially assisted me."

"That also is true, and in such a case may doubtless be allowed to count for something," replied the jeweller, gravely, but with, perhaps, the slightest tone in the world of sarcasm in his voice, as he added, "although we men of business, Signor Canonico, are not, to say the truth, accustomed to balance such very unknown amounts as gratitude against the known amounts of £ s. d. And I confess that I do not see very clearly how my poor and humble affairs could come within the sphere of your reverence's influences."

But, even as the old man was speaking, it suddenly occurred to him that the man he was talking with might be the very person of all others to be useful in the matter that was occupying his anxious thoughts when the Canon entered. Intimate as he was with the Lunardi family,—intriguing, scheming, holding the confidences and the secrets of all around him, as of course such a man wearing such a habit would do,—unscrupulous and enterprising as the jeweller knew him to be,—might he not be just the man to be able to assist him at need in finding some means of rendering a marriage between Sebastian Lunardi and his daughter impossible? All the father's meditations on the matter, after Marietta had left him, had tended to awaken no little misgiving on the subject. Although he repeated to himself again and again that it was not to be imagined that Laura could be guilty of any such absurdity, he could not get rid of a feeling that it behoved him to provide against the possibility of such a contingency, and to seek such safety from some other source than the mere exercise of paternal authority, if the regrettable case should ever arise of a difference between him and his daughter on such a subject.

Yet the fact was, if the hard old man had been capable of comprehending his daughter's nature, and the principles and feelings that would infallibly regulate her conduct, under the circumstances in question, that his authority and Laura's affection for him would have had greater power than he thought for; though not, perhaps, to the extent of imposing on her a marriage which she deemed forbidden by her allegiance to yet

higher sanctions and obligations. But these were matters beyond the ken of the shrewd and knowing money-lender.

His thoughts on the subject were necessarily bounded by his own mental horizon; but they were, within those limits, prompt and decisive. And even while the Canon was replying to his last somewhat caustic words, they grew into a purpose.

"Well!" said the latter, "perhaps you are right, Signor Giuseppe! You have a large experience, and doubtless your views are the fruit of it. Yet you know the old fable of the mouse and the lion. It might be that if not a canon of San Lorenzo, yet the chaplain and confessor to——"

"Nay! nay! Signor Canonico, you mistake me," returned the jeweller, with a courteous wave of the gold eye-glass. "Trust me I have sufficient knowledge of men and things to be aware that your old fable does not at all express our relative positions, nor the amount of possibility there might be that your reverence might, even without looking forward to what we hope for the future, have it in your power to render me assistance, for which I should be grateful."

Canon Guidi saw at once that he *was* needed for some purpose or other, and his hopes of a favourable issue to his business grew strong.

"If only I were so fortunate as that such should be the case," he said.

"There are cases," resumed the other, "in which the most valuable help a man can give his friend is his counsel. And I need hardly say that for sound advice there is no man to whom I could wish to apply so much as to yourself, Signor Canonico."

"And I trust, my dear sir, that I need hardly say how much flattered I should be by your calling on me in any case,—in *any* case, however confidential,"—and here he directed a meaning glance, accompanied by a slight nod of his head, towards his companion;—"in any matter, however confidential, in which I might be of use."

"The fact is," said the jeweller, "that it has occurred to me, even while we have been talking, that there is a subject on which I *should* be glad of a word of advice from you."

This was accurately true; but the Canon Guidi, being a very knowing man, felt no doubt that it was a falsehood, and that the

money-lender had been driving at this from the beginning of their interview. He merely bowed his head with grave courtesy in reply, and assumed the attitude of an attentive listener.

"The matter is, as you say, Signor Canonico, a strictly confidential one. But I know that I can trust you implicitly. If I ask your good offices, you, you know, may have need of mine."

Of course this was perfectly well understood to mean, "I can trust you, because my compliance with your application for money will depend on your good faith." But the money-lender's spoken words were accompanied by a most graceful bend and an engaging smile, and were responded to by the priest in like manner.

"You may easily suppose, Signor Canonico, that my principal object in life is my daughter. She is my only child; and to see her well and judiciously settled is, I may say, all I have to live for!"

The Canon bowed his acquiescence.

"Now I have some reason to think," pursued the jeweller, "I have, quite between ourselves, Signor Canonico, some reason to imagine, I say, that a common friend of ours, who, however estimable and honourable a person we both may know him to be, would not be considered by me a suitable match in all respects for my daughter, is inclined to pay attention to her
ah in that point of view; . in that point of view, you know!"

"Our excellent young friend, Sebastian de' Lunardi, you allude to, I presume, my dear sir," said the Canon, nodding his head, as if he quite knew all about it.

"You were aware then——" cried Signor Palli.

"Of nothing more, my dear sir," interrupted the Canon, "I beg you to believe, than what my own superficial observation, enlivened by the remarks you have already made, may enable me to guess."

"At all events, Signor Canonico, you have guessed right. Now you will see that such a marriage——"

"Quite out of the question! My dear Signor Palli, the idea would be preposterous. Why, the young man—excellent young man he is—has absolutely nothing, absolutely not wherewithal to buy his daily bread, if the life of his aged great-uncle should drop."

"I felt sure that you would see the matter in that light. As a father, you see——"

"Of course! of course, my dear sir! But your daughter? Have you any reason to think——"

"Not at all! Not the least! And I have every reason to believe that Laura would have too much common sense to think of such a thing. But one cannot always reckon on a girl's mind, and it is well to be safe. In fact, I would rather not leave all to the confidence I have, though it is strong, that Laura would do rightly in such a matter."

"I see, I see, my dear sir! You are quite right. One cannot take too many precautions in such a case."

"Ay! but what precautions to take? That is the question. I am happy to think, you see, that there is no such danger at present as would justify any such strong measures as might possibly—there is no knowing in these cases—produce the very evil we wish to avoid."

"Perfectly right, and very judicious, my dear sir. Permit me to think over the matter a little, and also to take a little time to observe these young people. Perhaps I may be able to be of some service to you—and them. You will allow me to call on you again, and——"

"You will do me a great favour, Signor Canonico! Meantime, I will think over that other matter, and I dare say we may be able to help each other."

The priest understood the terms of the bargain quite as well as if an indenture had been drawn up between himself and the jeweller. If he, Guidi, could be the means of putting an end to all danger of a love match between Sebastian and Laura, then, and on that consideration, the money-lender would advance him a sum of money, of which he had urgent need for the prosecution of certain views of professional advancement, the path to which a golden key judiciously applied to the right lock might open to him.

"I trust it may be so, my dear sir. I will think over the matter. And now I will wish you good morning. I will call again. *A rivederla!*"

So the two gentlemen separated: and Signor Palli once again accompanied this second guest to the outer door of the

shop, and bestowed on him one of his most magnificent bows at parting.

And the Gobbo Boccanera, two minutes afterwards, slipped quietly down from his ambush to his accustomed place in the corner of the shop.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT CANON GUIDO THOUGHT, AND WHAT HE SAID.

THE Gobbo had overheard all the conversation between the Canon and his *padrone*, but he was not very much wiser in consequence than he was before. A far smaller degree of observation and penetration than fell to his share would have sufficed to let him into the secret of Sebastian's love for his principal's daughter. And that the latter should be exceedingly opposed to any such marriage for his wealthy heiress was so much a matter of course as to be no news to him. That the Signor Canonico wanted to borrow a sum of money was nothing very strange nor very interesting. And that the jeweller might suppose that such a man as the Rev. Guido Guidi, intimate as he was with the Lunardi family, might have some influence in preventing such a marriage was natural enough. Upon the whole, the Gobbo knew little more than he knew before.

He was, however, somewhat struck by hearing the assertion that Sebastian de' Lunardi would not have bread to eat if the old Canon should die. He was struck by this, because he happened to know that the Lunardi possessed the sum of 35,475 scudi. Now, though this was, perhaps, no very large sum in proportion to the wealth of his employer, still—to talk of wanting daily bread!—*altro* che pane!* It would seem, then, reasoned the Gobbo, that the existence of this handsome sum was unknown both to the jeweller and the priest. It was

* A common Tuscan exclamation. "Altro," or "altro che,"—other, other than, so and so, is nearly equivalent to "I should think so!" The meaning in the text would be, "Bread, indeed, I should think so!"

rather strange that such a fact should be made such a secret. Who were the parties to whom the knowledge of it was confined ?

But while the Gobbo speculates thus, the reader may ask, how had he become acquainted with Marietta's well-kept secret ? And the circumstance may as well be explained at once.

When Marietta returned to her room after her night-walk through the palace, some days previously, and found the door open, which she thought she had left shut, her remembrance had not deceived her. She *had* left the door securely shut, and she did find it open on her return. There had, therefore, been an intruder during her absence : and that intruder was none other than the Gobbo Boccanera. The fact was, that having on the preceding evening been engaged in copying the inscriptions in the Lunardi chapel (for the Gobbo was intently bent on making a collection of Florentine monumental inscriptions, and was in the habit of giving all his leisure hours to the work), he had by chance been locked into the little church ; an accident which, when he discovered it, affected him very little. He had remained there very contentedly, amusing himself with endeavouring to picture to himself the life and body of those old times when the stone effigies around him had played their part on the living scene, till he had been disturbed by the noise of Marietta's key in the lock of the door communicating with the palace. He had seen her enter the gallery for a minute, and quit it without locking the door behind her. His first and most natural impulse was to address her ; but a second induced him to watch all that he could see, without allowing himself to be seen.

Poor Sandro Boccanera was as honest-hearted and good a fellow as might be : wished harm to nobody, unless it were, perhaps, a little to the handsome Canon of San Lorenzo, and least of all to the Lunardi, and that especial object of his respect and admiration, the Contessa Marietta. But he was afflicted with an intense curiosity to know the affairs of all the people who composed his little world, and by a desire, if possible, to hold the power of exercising an influence upon them. It is a speciality of temperament which may be observed frequently to accompany the physical misfortune with which he was afflicted.

Perhaps it is that the small possibility of exercising the power which all men love, by any more direct and obvious means, tempts such persons to seek the indirect influence which may be acquired by knowing what is sedulously kept from the knowledge of others. To the Gobbo Boccanera it seemed a very tempting thing to hold wires in his hands, by skilful pulling of which at the right moment he might direct, and in some degree rule, the movements of sundry tall and straight-backed men and women. And as to any chivalrous feeling which should have taught him that there was something which he ought to have felt as dishonouring in such means of extending his information, it might as well have been expected from a red Indian.

So when Marietta quitted the church, and omitted to lock the door behind her, the Gobbo stole up the little stair into the gallery, watched her take her way from the terrace down to the colonnade below, observed the light of the lamp she had left at the bottom of the stair leading to the third floor, and had thus ascended to her room, with the locality of which he was perfectly well acquainted, led merely by curiosity to discover the meaning of this strange nocturnal excursion. Looking into the room he had instantly observed the loose sheet on the floor, and in a minute had made himself master of the secret of Marietta's hoarded wealth. That it was a secret from the Canon and from all others he could not, of course, guess. But it appeared to his mind a very valuable piece of information, more especially as it surprised him greatly. And he stole back again to the church, highly contented with the booty of secret intelligence he had acquired.

There was exceedingly little danger that the secret should by his means be revealed to others; for the value of it to him consisted in being, as far as possible, the sole proprietor of it. And now the conversation which he had overheard between Signor Palli and the Canon Guidi proved to him, as he imagined, that it was not shared by either of them. And this circumstance, as far as regarded the Canon, struck him as very remarkable.

Beyond this he had acquired little new information from his eavesdropping in the little room over the jeweller's den.

Could he by any ingenious contrivance have continued his

spying, so as to overhear the musings of the priest, as he walked home from the Ponte Vecchio to San Lorenzo, he might have surprised some more valuable secrets. But to spy the secret mind of Canon Guidi was an achievement to be accomplished by few, and far above the power of the Gobbo Boccanera.

“To keep that boy and girl asunder!” mused the priest to himself, as he paced thoughtfully homewards. “Humph! it might be an easier work to bring them together, despite that old fool, who has just found out what he ought to have known months ago. If one had only the boy to deal with! But, if I mistake not, the Signorina Laura, gentle and yielding as she seems, may prove of less malleable stuff. Would Marietta throw the boy over, and give up her game as lost, if the lad were to marry the old usurer’s heiress? If so, that might be the better game. Thirty-five thousand scudi! What potentialities do there not lie in the handling of such a sum! But no! Not she! It would be a bitter pill to swallow; but she would swallow it. No! *that* won’t do! If such a marriage were to be made, Marietta would tell the old man all, certain of his gladly smoothing all things by handing over the money to the boy. And then the game would be up as regards the thirty-five thousand scudi! Then as to the palace! The money would lose nine-tenths of its value in Marietta’s eyes if the hope of obtaining the old house were gone. And she will never get it! These Palli brothers have eaten up Perini clean between them. They will not let the palace escape them; not they! It will never come to an open sale; and if it did, a few thousand scudi, more or less, out of that old money-lender’s coffers would not stand in his way. Poor dear Marietta will never have Palazzo Lunardi! Poor Marietta! Well! it is the way with all of us! We live for an aim, which recedes before us till the grave opens between us and it! But what of that? The pleasure is in having an aim to live for! *Andiamo avanti! Avanti!** The Palli mean to grip Palazzo Lunardi hard and fast! No doubt of that! But suppose Perini’s final catastrophe arrive before the old man’s death! And, *per Bacco!* he may live till past ninety! Suppose the Palli should

* “Let us go forward! Forwards!”

be the owners of Palazzo Lunardi, and every hope of ever repossessing it were gone to the winds, while the old Canon yet lived, what would Marietta do then? Tell him the whole truth, and lay the money at his feet. Not a doubt of it. To be able to throw off the secret that has weighed on her life like an incubus, despite her high resolution, would be the sole drop of consolation in her disappointment. She would do it as sure as fate! And what would the old man do? Toss the securities and the bonds and the mortgages to his nephew, with a 'Go, my boy, and be happy with the girl you love!' No doubt of that either! Yes! the worst of all would be, that Perini's final break-up should occur before the old Canon's death. But how near is that consummation at hand? That is the question,—and one to which I must find the answer; no difficulty about that! That final break-up *must* not come till after the old man's departure. Means must be found for delaying it awhile; it can't be long; a year or two! Or, indeed, the other thing

(There are suppressions even in our secret thinkings, as well as in our talk!) Ay! in any case, Perini must hold or appear to hold the property till the old Canon is gone. Meantime, Master Sebastian cannot be allowed to marry Miss Laura! Neither the little game nor the great game will admit of it. And it is well that the same play, which may win the smallest stakes, in the shape of the so-much-needed advance from old Palli, is also the best on the cards for the larger object. No! no! my young friend Sebastian! We must put a spoke in that wheel! The boy is as weak as water! Suppose he could be rendered as incapable of becoming the progenitor of a line of Lunardi as I am of transmitting to posterity the name of Guidi! Ay! that would be the stroke to play! And it might perhaps be managed! Faith, the tonsure is a useful thing at times, as the world goes!"

And with that thought in his head the handsome Canon turned in at the door in the corner of the *piazza*, in front of the church of San Lorenzo, which leads to the cloisters of that collegiate church, and, ascending by the marble stair in the corner,—the same which leads to the celebrated Laurentian library,—pulled a key from his pocket, and let himself in to his comfortable set of clerical chambers.

Seating himself in a luxuriously easy chair, in a very clerical-looking study abundantly furnished with books, among which were many that had external appearances of modernness, and a by no means orthodox or venerable look about them, he rang a little hand-bell, which was answered by a nice, clean-looking old lady, in a dress almost monastic in its appearance, from being composed entirely of black and white. A nicely starched muslin kerchief was folded three-cornerwise over the back part of her head, leaving the broad bands of silvery-grey hair visible in front.

"Let me have my chocolate, *Annunziata*; give me a biscuit with it, and a glass of *Vin Santo*.* I have to go out again presently."

His reverence took his collation thoughtfully; drank his glass of *Vin Santo* after it, still apparently in deep thought; took a second glass, and then began to pace up and down the little chamber.

"I ought to be at vespers this afternoon," he muttered to himself, stopping in his walk opposite to a printed paper suspended against the wall; "I can't afford to be remarked on for negligence of such matters. But I should like much to set about the work I have undertaken, at once; and I do not know how I could fall in with the youngster so conveniently as by meeting him at the *Duomo*, when he has been with his uncle to vespers. I could then take a turn with him, and do my work by the time he wanted to meet the old man after the service. Yes! that must be it. *Annunziata*! I have need of rest. I will sleep awhile. Wake me before the hour of vespers."

The service called "*Vespers*," is usually performed very much earlier in the day than the name might lead one to imagine. It is an afternoon rather than an evening service in most Italian churches. So it was several hours before "the twenty-four," as Italians still call the hour of sunset, when the *Canón* of San Lorenzo met Sebastian at the door of the *Duomo*, as he returned from accompanying his uncle to the sacristy.

"Signor Sebastiano! Well met!" said the priest, accosting

* The sweet liqueur wine, made from the choicest Tuscan grape, is so called.

the young man. "To say the truth, I came here on purpose to fall in with you, knowing well that I should find you at your accustomed task. How wonderfully the dear old Canon wears!"

"Truly, he does, Signor Canonico!" replied Sebastian; "I see little change in him from year to year."

"And who should see it, if you do not, constant as you are to your task of accompanying him in his daily walk. You never miss it, I think. But it must be a great bore, having to be always at hand twice a day!"

"Not to one who has as little to do, alas! as I have. Besides, what would I not, and ought I not to do for the dear old man? What has he not been to all of us?"

"In truth, it has been well that he has had the means of offering the Signora Marietta and you a home; but that home cannot last for ever; cannot in all human probability, last much longer! And the fact is, my dear young friend, that it was a consideration of this certainty which brought me here to speak to you to-day."

"It is very good of you, Signor Canonico, to spend any of your thoughts on us. I confess that it is too painful to look forward to ——"

"Of course, my dear sir, of course, it must be so! Yet it is absolutely necessary to look the future in the face. And as an old friend of the family, I have, I confess, contemplated, with considerable anxiety, the prospect before my valued friend, your cousin Marietta, and yourself."

"It is not a brilliant or a consoling one, sir, I own," said Sebastian, somewhat dryly, with a sigh which he could not suppress.

"I assure you," continued the priest, "that it is a subject which has often oppressed my mind painfully. But I should not have needlessly sought to afflict you by forcing it on your attention, and if I have done so, it is because an idea has occurred to me which I think ought not to be dismissed without, at all events, laying it before you."

"Truly, your reverence is very kind. I have no means ——"

"Nay, my dear boy! The tie which binds me to your family is older than you are. But now listen to me. The matter is

shortly this. There is now vacant at Rome the place of Master of the Chapel to one of the richest conventual churches of the city. It is a position which would afford you and your cousin a comfortable maintenance, while it would give you ample leisure and opportunities for the practice and study of your favourite art."

"At Rome!" exclaimed poor Sebastian, in a tone which seemed to indicate that such a banishment from his native city did not strike him as altogether a charming prospect.

"Yes! at Rome, the capital of the world!" continued the other. "But such a thing is not to be had simply for the asking. The case is this. The community in question have always preferred an ecclesiastic for their Master of the Chapel, if they could get one; but as the services in their church are, perhaps, the best attended in all Rome, it is a *sine qua non* with them to have a competent musician. Now it is not always an easy thing to unite these two requirements. You see, therefore, how it stands, *Signore mio!* Though I have no idea that I should have influence enough to obtain this appointment for a mere lay nominee of my own, against plenty of other lay candidates, I think,—and indeed I have little or no doubt on the subject,—that my recommendation of a good musician in orders would be gladly accepted. What do you think of it?"

"Really, dear sir, I don't know how to thank you for so kindly thinking of me—of us, and of our interest. But I hardly know it is so unexpected ——"

"Of course! of course! The matter requires mature consideration. There are difficulties in the way, undoubtedly."

"With regard to the possibility of obtaining the post you refer to?"

"No! not so! not that. I was thinking of your cousin Marietta. You know her peculiar ideas and views."

"But there is nothing that could be considered derogatory ——"

"Not in the least! Of course not! A position tenable by a priest in orders is always tenable by a gentleman. It is not that. But my dear and valued friend, La Contessa Marietta, you know, would probably see with regret the destruction of all possibility of the continuance of the family by sons of yours."

“Poor Marietta!” sighed Sebastian; “she lives in a world of illusions!”

“Nor have I by any means overlooked the circumstance,” continued the priest, “that many a man may have insuperable objections to entering a state which makes marriage out of the question. I have thought much of this.”

“In truth,” returned Sebastian, blushing painfully as he spoke, “I am, perhaps, hardly prepared to say at so short a notice ——”

“Nay! as I have said, it is a matter requiring much consideration,—mature consideration. May I take a friend’s privilege,” he continued, after a pause, “and speak frankly and openly to you on this subject?”

“You have, indeed, shown yourself a friend, my dear sir! I am sure it would ill become me not to hear with respect” faltered poor Sebastian, with painful misgiving as to what was coming.

“Frankly, then, my dear young friend, I am well aware that you have formed an attachment which is in every respect creditable to your heart and your understanding. In truth, one living as much among you all as it has been my good fortune to do, must have been blind not to see it. And others have seen it as well as I.”

He paused a few moments, but Sebastian kept his eyes fixed on the ground, and said no word.

“Believe me,” continued Guidi, stopping in his walk, and turning so as fully to face his companion; “believe me, my dear boy, I would not have come to tempt you with the proposal I have made, had I not the means of knowing but too certainly that an union between you and Laura Palli can never take place.”

A low groan, like that of one in bodily pain, escaped from the young musician, but he made no reply.

“It is but too clear, my poor friend, that such a marriage is and must ever be impossible. There is no extremity to which her father would not resort to prevent it. You would hardly wish to gratify your passion at the expense of making her you love a penniless outcast, bringing as her dower from her father’s house only a father’s curse. Then, again, you know how fatally

such a marriage would afflict your cousin Marietta. Believe me, nothing but sorrow and misfortune to all concerned could come from an union between you and the daughter of Signor Giuseppe Palli."

Again the tempter paused awhile, and looked fixedly, and with an expression of pitying sadness, into the eyes of his victim.

"It is true! it is all true!" groaned he, looking up at length into the Canon's sympathising face; "there is no word of all you have said that I can gainsay. But, Signor Canonico, it is a hard and very bitter truth. Yet how could I ever have failed to see it?"

"It may be," continued the priest, divining the probability of an influence he might be called on to combat; "it may be that the lady herself, led into error by her affections, may have equally failed to see the matter as it really is. And if this be so, I am sure you would feel, without any need of my prompting, that the decision, which must remedy the error into which you have fallen, should come from you. The devotedness of such a girl as Laura Palli would hesitate before no sacrifice. But it would be unworthy, indeed, of one professing to love her to permit her to consummate it!"

"True! too true! It is all true—all clear as daylight;—fool that I am, that I should need to have it told me by another! Signor Guidi, I know that you speak the truth, and God forbid that I should be insensible to the considerations that you set before me! By God's help, I will strive to do rightly in this matter. I, too, am a Lunardi. And Marietta shall own that I also am capable of self-sacrifice, after my own fashion, for the honour of the name I bear. I will think of these things," he added, putting out his hand to the Canon in a dazed and dreamy sort of manner; "and believe me, dear sir, that I am grateful to you for your kindness. I must go now. It is nearly time for me to meet my uncle, as he comes out from vespers."

"Go! my dear young friend!" said the priest, taking his hand in both his own; "go! and think over these matters, as you have said. I am sure you will do what honour and right feeling require of you. Rely on me as on a firm and sympathising friend. And remember, *Sebastiano mio*, that the man

who thus counsels you to sacrifice love to honour and rectitude, has trodden himself the steep and stony path he commends to you. Love as you may, young sir, your love is not stronger than that which I once felt for your cousin Marietta! But duty stood between us! And the sacrifice demanded by it was made."

"*A rivederla, Signor Canonico!* we will speak together of these matters again."

"And, Signor Sebastiano," said the priest, turning again, "the last words I spoke remind me that, for more than one reason, it will be best that you should not speak of this conversation of ours to the Contessa Marietta; for this reason especially, that the considerations I have been laying before you, and the similarity of the cases, would needlessly recall painful recollections to her mind, and open again wounds never wholly healed."

"I will not forget your caution, Signor Canonico. *Addio!*"

So they parted, the older man well pleased, to return to his solitary home in the College of San Lorenzo; and the younger in the state of mind which may be easily imagined, to await his uncle, as usual, at the door of the sacristy in the Duomo.

CHAPTER XIII.

MARIETTA AND THE CANON OF SAN LORENZO.

It was about six weeks after the conversation related in the preceding chapter had taken place, and Florence was in the full enjoyment of her summer-tide holiday. For in the City of Flowers it is holiday time when the *cicale** sing, not only because the heat counsels lazy rest, but because the absence of visitors from the "Etrurian Athens" causes a cessation of all the multifarious occupations connected with ministering to their

* The *cicada*, or tree-grasshopper. In the hot weather these insects fill all the air with a stridulous cry, produced by the action of a portion of their structure peculiar to their kind.

wants, which make so large a portion of the business and work of the fair city. All the strangers, little guessing the delights of a Florence summer, have followed the routine of the fashion, and have gone off to baths, to the seaside, to the mountains, or to their northern homes; and Florence, half empty, is left to live her own life, follow her own devices, and enjoy herself after her own quiet *far-niente* fashion.

The Marchesa Perini is away at some fashionable bathing-place; and the great receptions, which used to make such noise and disturbance o' nights in the quiet quarter in which the Palazzo Lunardi is situated, are over. The whole of the front first-floor windows are no more a blaze with light, from end to end of the palace. But there is one window belonging to a small chamber at the furthest extremity of the suite of rooms, in which a light may be seen on most nights, even till the early dawn puts to shame its pale, rakish, unwholesome-looking glimmer. There is no throng of carriages at the door, but four or five guests—generally the same—may be seen to enter quietly about the Ave Maria, and to quit the grim old palace in the grey morning light. They are the Lunardi avengers:—a Russian prince, an English nobody, a Greek count, a German baron, or such like; a chosen band of friends, who do not permit the summer heat or the winter cold to interfere with the work, which is being carried on in the little room at one corner of the palace. The Marchese Perini labours hard, night after night, and wipes the cold sweat from his forehead, for Fortune still frowns, and “the luck” still, contrary to all the doctrine of chances, and to all that could be expected, continues to go against him. The Marchesa's applications for cash, from her summer retreat, begin to be very unsatisfactorily responded to; and there are sundry other symptoms that the avengers have so far at least done their work as to have well-nigh ousted the Perini dynasty from the old palace, let the successors be who they may.

The process thus in regular course of execution on the first floor was too normal and ordinary in its nature to be worth any closer observation. Let us betake ourselves rather to the third floor, and look on there at the anxieties, hopes, and fears set in motion by the anticipation of the approaching catastrophe.

Though it still wanted some hours of noon, the day was already hot; and the old Canon, somewhat fatigued with his morning duty at the cathedral, was asleep in his carefully darkened room. Sebastian was sitting in the little closet, lighted by a small garret window in the roof,—fortunately in its northern slope,—which was his chamber, with a little bit of a table before him, just large enough to support a sheet or two of music and an inkstand, and a little piano at his elbow, which nearly occupied the remainder of the confined space. He was labouring at the completion of the score of his opera; and feeling at every pore that intellectual as well as bodily labour is carried on at a disadvantage with the thermometer standing at ninety in the shade. The success of the work on which he was engaged was, as he felt it, a matter of life and death to him. For his meditations on the conversation he had had, now some six weeks ago, with the Canon of San Lorenzo, had resulted in a determination to let his answer to the proposal then made to him depend on the success or failure of his work. Not that the success of it could at all alter his position as regarded his hopeless love for Laura; but it might so far open such a prospect of the possibility of finding a maintenance for himself as would justify him, he thought, in declining the friendly Canon's proposal, and thus escaping that final end-all—the submitting to the fatal tonsure—which was to shut out all possibility of hope for the future. If his opera was successful, he would try yet another struggle with the world. If it failed, he would give up the game, and accept the priest's offer. It was, indeed, a struggle for life or death that was going on in that little oven of a room under the roof. It was a time of painful, horribly painful anxiety for the poor young composer. And he was not one of those whose strength or whose vanity makes them sanguine—to whom success seems easy of achievement and failure not upon the cards. There were moments when his own work seemed so worthless to him—so empty, flat, and poor—that he mocked himself with bitter irony for having ever dreamed that he had that in him which could achieve what should be worthy of admiration. But these were not the moments of composition. They were those of critical after-thought. Those hours of struggle and of creation in the closet under the roof were not

unhappy hours. While Imagination and Fancy were busy in their laboratory, and the work of creation was in process, questions of success or failure, of the approval or disapproval of others, were forgotten. His work was no longer a means to an end, but was itself his sole end and object.

But then came hours of reaction from the excitement of the work, and all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and hope died within him. And of late he had had fewer opportunities of recurring for aid, strength, and inspiration to his Egeria. Since the conversation between Marietta and the jeweller on the Ponte Vecchio, it had somehow been brought about that there had been less intercourse between the two families than usual; and Laura and Sebastian had met but once by chance at the house of Simone Boccanera—honestly by chance—for though it would have been easy to have arranged interviews on that neutral and yet friendly ground, as no declared and recognised prohibition to meet had been issued by the higher powers, there had not seemed any necessity for recurring to such a step. And besides, the perfidious appeal the false Canon had made to Sebastian's feelings of honour in the matter of leading Laura into trouble and sorrow for the sake of his love, had had its effect. Partly influenced by these considerations, and partly by the moody and despairing melancholy which was overcoming him, and which he yet was conscious that he should be ashamed to manifest to her, he had felt more disposed to shun than to seek her.

Marietta, on the morning of which we are speaking, was in their small but pleasant sitting-room, and Canon Guidi was with her. The *Persiane** were closed, for the sun was beating full on the *loggia* outside, and the half-light thus produced seemed to be specially fitted for the confidential nature of the conversation that was passing between them. The Canon was sitting in the large arm-chair usually occupied by the old master of the dwelling, near the window, but with his back to it, so that his face was almost in darkness. Marietta had in talking risen from her chair, and was standing with one elbow resting on the mantel-shelf, and her forehead leaned upon her hand.

* The large and heavy green wooden blinds, with which almost every window in Florence is furnished, are so called.

The Marchese Perini, downstairs, was drifting fast to irremediable ruin, and of course *he* was not happy. Sebastian, at his labour in the next room, was rendered temporarily insensible to his troubles by it, as by a dream; but *he* was certainly not happy. It would have been unreasonable to expect him to be so! But Marietta, one might suppose, ought to have been happier. The great object of her life, that for which she had lived with exclusive constancy for twenty years, seemed nearly to be won. For twenty years she had been striving to obtain money enough to purchase the home of her ancestors. She was now in possession of a sum more than sufficient for the purpose. The goal seemed nearly reached. Yet Marietta, as she neared it, had become nervous, anxious, excited, restless, but by no means happy. In truth she had latterly become a good deal changed. While the aim of all her efforts was yet distant, she had plodded on with quiet, unwearying, uncomplaining constancy. The pale monotony of a joyless life, heaping up a pile of undistinguishable days till they had accumulated into the mountain of twenty years, had been borne with tranquil patience. She had been satisfied with the consciousness that she was, however slowly, yet unceasingly, moving onwards in the direction of her goal. But now that that goal was neared, now that the prize seemed almost within her grasp, a feverish and impatient restlessness had succeeded to the dull calm in which she had lived so long. Obstacles, possibilities, chances seemed to arise and present themselves to her mind, which she had never contemplated while the end was yet in the far future. The long-nursed hoard had reached the destined proportions; the only difficulty which she had considered as such in the earlier stages of her enterprise had been overcome; and still she could not stretch out her hand to receive the reward of her long constancy. Still baffling slips between the cup and the long thirsting lips seemed to threaten her, and make her path, which had hitherto been clear and direct, if steep and painful, puzzling and uncertain for the future.

Had her life-long struggle been simply the fight with material circumstances, and the self-denial needed for the accumulation of the fund she required,—had there been no moral

burthen calmly and resolutely borne, though never unfelt by the galled and cicatrised but still wrung conscience,—had she not been weighted during all her long course with the load of a secret, most carefully to be guarded from those she loved the most, she would not have been the victim of the nervous irritability which now assailed her. Ah! the weight of that well-kept secret! Could she but have dared to share it with those who were equally interested in it with herself!

Again and again, at long distant times, she had essayed to feel her way, to sound the old man's simple mind, and judge whether she dared unload her bosom of the weight which so grievously oppressed her. Had she been able to decide on doing so, during the earlier years of her life beneath her uncle's roof, she might in all probability have succeeded in inducing the easy and simple-minded old man—not to participate in her views, for his nature was too differently constituted for him to feel or comprehend them—but to acquiesce in them. But later, as the secret became heavier to bear, it had become more clearly impossible to reveal it. For Marietta felt that nothing would have induced her uncle to sacrifice the happiness of his darling Sebastian to what would have appeared to him the whim of an unsound mind.

So Marietta had carried the load of her secret burthen alone;—alone, save the participation of it with him whom she had once tenderly loved in the days long past, before she had vowed herself to the superstition which now monopolised her entire being;—whom she still leaned on, but with a feeling more akin to fear than love; but without whose assistance and co-operation she would hardly have succeeded in accomplishing the results at which she had already arrived.

She had carried her secret alone, and had grievously felt the burthen of it. Was she conscious that it was the violence done to her moral nature which made the weight so oppressive? Had there been any moments of self-accusation, or even of doubt? Marietta might have laid her hand upon her heart and answered, with open brow, not one! Remorse had never been absent from her heart for twenty years. But at no moment had any gleam of repentance entered it. She had never *changed her mind*. That which she had thought good,

desirable, and right at the moment when she had first conceived the idea of deceiving her uncle, she thought so still. At any given point in her long path, she would, had it needed, have begun it again anew. She truly and honestly thought that she was acting rightly; but she did not feel she was. All her intelligence approved, commended, and urged her on her path. The less easily erring heart rebelled. But intelligence suggested that the quelling of this rebellion was a merit the more. And all Marietta's ethics had taught her that when mind and heart are in conflict, virtue assigns the victory to the former.

But this virtue was not its own reward; and Marietta was not happy.

"What is Sebastian doing?" asked Guido, abruptly, after a silence of some minutes.

"Labouring at his opera, poor fellow, in the next room. I have marked a change in him of late. He works harder, and with more constancy, but seems more oppressed and sadder than ever."

"It is that silly love affair, which, of course, is impossible, for a hundred reasons. And he, probably, is beginning to feel it is so."

"Poor Sebastian! I love him so dearly, and am so sad for his sorrow."

"Did you ever before feel the same pity for another, Marietta?" asked the priest, looking up into her face as she stood by the mantel-shelf, and speaking in a tone of sadness which contrasted with the almost cynical hardness of manner which was usual with him in his conversations with Marietta.

"I have felt it before now for two persons, Guido," answered she, speaking slowly, and with a cadence of melancholy and almost of reproach in her voice; "but I walked straight on then, though I was but a girl of twenty, in the path to which duty pointed, without stopping or turning aside to listen to the pleadings of pity; and I must do the same now."

"But something else may be needed this time besides walking straight on," returned the Canon, with a return to his sarcastic manner; "I have a notion that disappointment in this matter may lead the youngster to take some rash step, which would little suit your views and hopes."

“What is it you are thinking of?” asked Marietta, anxiously.

“What if he should do even as that other youngster did, when duty forbade you to listen to your pity for him in like case? What if he should fly for refuge to the covert of the cassock?”

Marietta started from her attitude of tranquil sadness, and gazed on the speaker as though his words had struck her speechless.

“Not that!” she cried, after a minute’s pause; “anything but that! That would, indeed, be fatal! No! rather than that,” she continued, after a further pause, “I would at once tell all, and give up the home to save the race. But can no better means be found to prevent so fatal a step? You are fertile in counsel, Guido. Tell me! Speak!”

“For myself I found no better counsel when similarly bestead,” returned the priest. “It may be, however, that we may find the means of averting such a disaster—at all events for a time. But despair is a counsellor difficult to argue against. And it would be well that the upshot should not be too long delayed. Well, for this reason; and, indeed, one way or another, inevitable for another reason. The game is being played out quickly,—too quickly, perhaps, downstairs.”

“Has anything new come to your knowledge?”

“About Sebastian?—Nothing new. I fancy the idea I spoke of has been in his head for a good while past.”

“I have heard him drop a word to such an effect more than once, when he was more than usually disheartened and desponding, but never dreamed that he had any real purpose of the sort. Poor Sebastian! In any case *that* must not be. But I meant to ask if you had heard anything new about the affairs of the man downstairs.”

“Only this;—that he must have very nearly reached the end of his tether. When I left you the evening before yesterday, I met on the stairs two or three fellows going to their nightly work. I knew one of them by sight; one of those vultures who are rarely seen, save in the neighbourhood of a carcass which is nearly ready for the picking. And the others were birds of the same feather. The end must be very near.”

“That is to say, that the palace will very shortly be offered for sale?”

“It would seem so. Perini is assuredly an utterly ruined man.”

“Very shortly,” repeated Marietta, quitting the spot where she was standing opposite to the Canon, and walking across the room to a little sofa in the obscurity of the further end of it. She sat down for an instant; but getting up again nervously after a moment, she again crossed the room, and placing herself in a chair by the side of that of the priest, but so situated that the half light that came through the *Persiane* did not fall on her face, repeated, “Very shortly! But do you not see, Guido, that the *how shortly* may become an important question?”

The priest paused a little before he replied and then said, slightly pushing back his chair as he spoke, so as to enable him to see his companion’s face, as far as the faint light would permit: “It would be difficult probably to ascertain, with any accuracy, the terms which he may be able to make with his creditors. If his creditors are men of the stamp with those I saw on the stair, no forbearance and little patience is to be expected from them. But we do not know exactly how he is situated. Only thus much is certain,—that the hour you have been looking forward to for twenty years has very nearly arrived at length. Does its near approach alarm you, Marietta?”

“You speak of hours!” she said, almost in a whisper, while a sudden flush was as rapidly succeeded by a cold perspiration on her brow. “Gracious Heaven! Guido! Do you not see the difficulty?”

“Be it what it may, let us look it in the face, my friend,” said the Canon, calmly.

“What if Palazzo Lunardi be offered for sale before that is, during the life of my uncle?”

“In that case, the funds which you have accumulated at such cost of care and sorrow would be valueless to you. The labour of your life would be lost, Marietta that is if, as you said some time since, you have made up your mind that it is impracticable to make the Canon a sharer in your plans.”

“Utterly out of the question! Whatever it might have been once, it is, at all events, now that Sebastian’s happiness,—or

what he chooses to consider such,—might be promoted by throwing the money saved so painfully for so sacred a purpose into the coffers of that insolent money-dealer—it is altogether hopeless. If my uncle found himself to-morrow the possessor of a million, he would give it all to purchase the bauble Sebastian has set his heart on.”

“The position is a difficult one, it must be confessed,” said the priest, with a quietude of manner which contrasted disagreeably with the evident agitation of his companion. “Who could have anticipated that the extraordinarily prolonged life of your venerable uncle should prove the means of destroying so fair a prospect of restoring his family to their own position? It is a strange fatality!”

“Can it be!” said Marietta, sinking her voice almost to a whisper, and speaking rather to herself than to her friend and confidant,—“can it be, that I must come to be impatient for my uncle’s death?”

“Never let the habit of deceiving others lead us into the more dangerous practice of deceiving ourselves, Marietta. I think that what you allude to has already come!”

“No! not so! I deny the insinuation, Guido. I do not desire that dear old man’s death.”

“You only desire that the palace may not be sold during his life? Is not that the distinction?”

“Of course, I wish—oh! how eagerly I wish—that things should continue as they are for the present.”

“But since that cannot be since this wretched Perini has done his work quickly; since the good fortune which made a spendthrift gambler the owner of your ancestral home, rather than some other, from whose hands it would not have again escaped, has put the restoration of the Lunardi name within your power, provided you seize the golden opportunity, and since that opportunity cannot be seized till after the death of one who has lived ten years beyond the appointed span of human life, I do not see how it can be that his death should not be regarded as very opportune.”

“God help me! for I am hard bestead!” groaned Marietta, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands as she spoke.

“Let us, at all events, see the matter clearly, my friend No

good can come from shutting our eyes to the reality of the circumstances, Marietta," he said, taking her hand in his as she sat beside him. He felt that it was as cold as marble, and relinquished it, as he continued in a more gentle voice: "I think you are afflicting yourself unreasonably in this matter, my dear friend. You are not your usual self this morning. The nearness of the great hope for which you have lived and laboured has unnerved you. Let us look at the subject calmly, and above all, truthfully to ourselves. We have two events to consider,—the sale of the palace, and the death of your more than octogenarian uncle. Both must shortly, very shortly occur. Should the former be the first to happen, all the aim and object of your life, and the reward for the sacrifice of yourself and not of yourself alone, Marietta will be lost and gone for ever. Should the latter event precede the former, the dear hope of your poor father and yourself will be realised; the sacred duty to which you have vowed yourself will be accomplished; and, by the constancy and courage of the Contessa Marietta de' Lunardi, the fine old family of which she is a scion will have been restored to its former splendour. Can it be, then, that we should not wish the second of these two events to occur before the first? And inasmuch as we have reason to think that the first will very shortly happen,—as we have no means whatever of deferring it, and as we are anxious that the second event should happen first why, I think that it must be admitted that we are impatient for it."

"Your logic is very cruel, Guido. It knows no inconsistencies. But the heart is often inconsistent. I would wish the sale of the palace to be further off, and not my uncle's death nearer."

"But if the sale of the palace is near, must be near, and *cannot* be put further off," persisted the Canon, "must we not wish the other event to be nearer? And is there anything really shocking in wishing that a life so protracted should not be further prolonged till it last just long enough to effect such great mischief? Is it in any way reasonable to desire that all the prospects we have in view should be lost, for the sake of a few unenjoyable months to be added to the sum of nearly ninety years? Do you imagine that the old man himself sets

so great a value on a few remaining days? Would your father have wished his life to have been continued at such a cost?"

"He would rather have died a thousand deaths. But my uncle is a different man. Yet I have loved him very dearly. And when I think of that mild and venerable old head, with its silvery locks and cheery smile,—when I remember his simple pleasures, and his loving, trusting nature, it is horrible to me to think that I wish him dead. No! no! I cannot wish that!"

"You would rather that it should occur without your having consciously desired it! Do you not see, Marietta, that all these equivocations of the heart are unworthy of you, and of the great cause you are serving? Were the issues of life and death in your own hands, and were you anxious to act rightly, worthily, reasonably, holily, would you add a few months to such pale life as must be that of one who has lived four-score-and-five years already, at the cost of the ruin which must ensue from it to such a cause? Would you not close the shears on the fragile thread, which must so soon snap of itself?"

"I thank God that I have no such power to use, no such choice to make, no such fearful duty to decide on! It is already horrible enough to me to be compelled, as you have been compelling me, Guido, to feel that it may be that his quick removal would smooth the way to the fulfilment of that which every most sacred duty binds me to desire with my whole heart. This, I say, is inexpressibly dreadful to me as it is. But I will not allow myself to wish his days shortened. It may not be needed. I will pray that it be not. I can but do my part, and leave the issues in God's hands."

There was something apparently displeasing to the priest in these words. An expression like a dark shade passed over his handsome countenance; and he rose from the large chair in which he had been hitherto sitting, and took a couple of turns across the little room, measuring its floor in three or four strides. Then, stopping before the middle of the vacant fire-place, drawing up his fine and commanding figure to its full height, and folding his arms across his chest, he stood facing Marietta, who remained sitting in the chair she had taken, with her forehead supported on her head, and her elbow resting on the

table. After looking at her fixedly for a minute or two, he said, in a harder and colder tone than he had yet used—

“You will leave, you say, the issues of this matter to God. It is the common language of those who have not the energy, the industry, the courage, or the virtue to use the faculties which God has given them to shape the issues of events for themselves. The words have a pious sound; and the weak and the slothful cheat themselves with them. But they cheat no one else: neither their stronger and better fellow-men, nor the God whose best gifts they refuse to use. As regards the expediency of the prolongation of yonder old man’s life, you say that you have neither power to use, nor choice to make, nor duty to decide on, in such a matter. But how stands the fact? Does the judge who condemns his fellow-man to the block, or the soldier who strikes him down in fight, find such to be the case? They have a power, and a choice, and a duty. They use the power, make the choice, perform the duty.”

“I do not understand you, Guido. What question is there here of judge or soldier? I do not follow the sense of your observations.”

“Are the judge and the soldier the only persons who have the lives of others in their power? Are they the only persons who use, and in every age have used, that power? Is not similar power given to most of us in the world?—a power to be used, observe, like every other, under responsibility for its due and justifiable use,—under a responsibility grave in proportion to the greatness of the trust. Most men have entrusted to them power over the lives of their fellows. Most men are manifestly unfitted to exercise such power, and are therefore wisely forbidden to use and restrained from exercising it. It does not follow that all men are so forbidden and restrained; though human laws, in their manifest and necessary imperfection, can make no attempt at distinguishing the exceptions.”

“Guido! What words and thoughts are these!” cried Marietta, almost breathlessly. “I do not understand you! I dare not think I understand you. Did God say only to some men, ‘THOU SHALT DO NO MURDER?’”

“Beware, my friend,” rejoined the priest, in a tone of lofty authority, emphasising his words with a warning forefinger as

he spoke—"beware how you venture on the dangerous and forbidden ground of interpreting the words of Holy Writ according to your own unassisted judgment! See now the error into which misconception has led you. The law, 'Thou shalt do no murder,' is eternal, universal, and assuredly admits of no exceptions. But what is 'murder?' To take life for the gratification of hatred and malice is to do murder. Even the thief, who kills for the sake of plunder, is guilty of the mortal sin of robbery, but not of murder, if he be void of personal ill-will towards the man he slays. Surely you have not now to learn that the value of every human act depends upon the *animus*—the intention with which it is done, and on the object proposed to himself by the doer. See to what sad confusion and dangerous blundering the sin of tampering with the Word of God by unauthorised and ignorant interpretations is sure to lead. Speak no more of murder. Malice and hatred, I trust, are little likely to have any part in aught that either you or I may in any matter think right to do or to leave undone."

All this was said with an air of lofty authority and domineering superiority, which beat down Marietta under the weight of it. She felt somewhat mystified, and understood herself to be rebuked for the presumption of quoting Scripture to a priest, with much the same reason as she might have been had she offered counsel to a sick man in the presence of a physician. So she answered humbly—

"I have doubtless blundered, and misunderstood your meaning in some way, Guido. Indeed, I hardly know how all this talk arose: it seems to have no connection with the matters we were previously speaking of."

"I was only correcting you on a matter of fact, my friend. You said that you had no power to use, or choice to make, in the matter of your uncle's living longer or dying sooner. I pointed out to you that, as a matter of fact, your statement was incorrect; that was all. You know my habit of always looking at things, as nearly as I can, exactly as they are. You *have* the power you spoke of; therefore I did not let you say, without correction, that you had it not. I said nothing of the expediency of making use of that power."

"God forbid! God forbid! But the idea dropped into my

imagination by the suggestion is too horrible and too painful. I pray God that it may pass from my mind and my memory."

An acute physiognomist might have read the slight shadow of a smile which passed over the handsome mouth of the Canon of San Lorenzo, as Marietta spoke, to indicate a doubt whether the prayer thus fervently uttered would be granted. But he said:

"Be it so, Marietta! It is absolutely necessary, however, that you should consider well what steps you will take in the crisis which seems approaching. Meantime I will endeavour to obtain some more accurate information as to Perini's position, and the probabilities of the results it may lead to. Perhaps, when I next see you, we may be in possession of such facts as may enable us to talk more practically."

And so saying, the handsome and dignified ecclesiastic took his departure, leaving Marietta in no enviable state of mind. She remained sitting in the chair, and in the attitude in which he left her, immersed, not so much in anything deserving to be called deep thought, as in an evil, dream-like sense of tanglement, perplexity, and difficulty, girdled all around by a vaguely perceived outer circle of horror, towards which her mind shrinkingly held back from all approach. And as often as she strove to concentrate her faculties on the practical consideration of the events that were hurrying forward to their consequences around her, the horrible phantom which the priest had conjured up and presented to her imagination, and which her exorcism had failed to lay, stood in the path of her thought, and scared it back for refuge to aimless wandering in the thick jungle of difficulties.

If it were only all a long time off! Ruined men often did go on inexplicably for years. Perini might have a turn of luck! A few years!—a year or two! . . . One short year mayhap would suffice! Eighty-five! . . . eighty-six, indeed, in two months' time!—all but eighty-six! A great age, at which prolonged life could hardly be hoped. Impossible to deny that his death would smooth all difficulties!—Ha! was she wishing it? Was Guido right so far then? Nay, but to take in her own hand the distaff and the shears! to clear the embarrassed way horror! Back, back, unbidden thoughts, from *that* road! What! Practise against that confiding and trustful old man's life! Become a murderess! There was madness in

the thought. The hideous deed was doubly black from the very ease with which it might be done! Yes, easy enough to prevent that white old head from raising itself again from the pillow—to dull the cheery twinkle of the dim but still kindly eye—to make the ruddy cheek livid! An unsuspected drug, so easily given by her hand, would do all this! And the death would occur in time to save all! What! was this temptation? Was the foul fiend tempting her? Was he even then snaring her soul? Temptation! No! Mere monstrous fancies, whose strange hideousness attracted the mind to dwell on them! Easy! Yes, 'twere easy enough! As easy as for the mother to stop the life that drew its nourishment from her own breasts!

“Are my hideous imaginings turned into legions of fiends swarming up into my mind! O God! Lead me not into temptation; but deliver me from evil!”

Marietta uttered the last words aloud; and, clasping her forehead with her two hands, and straining back the abundant masses of hair from her temples, she threw herself on her knees before the table at which she had been sitting.

And Marietta's heart prayed for the deliverance of which she had so much need, though with small self-consciousness of the prayers she uttered, or of the Being to whom they were addressed. But it was not this time to the Virgin or to St. Giacomo de' Lunardi.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DIGNIFIED ECCLESIASTIC; AND AN UNDIGNIFIED SPECIMEN
OF THE SAME ORDER.

THINGS *did* continue to all outward appearance as they were, in accordance with the wish Marietta had so fervently expressed, for the remainder of the summer. Either Fortune had treacherously, as his her wont, suspended for awhile the sure progress of the Marchese Perini towards his doom, or his accommodating friends, the Palli brothers, had judged that the

quantity of rope already supplied to him was not quite sufficient to ensure the satisfactory performance of the task of hanging himself; or the drowning Marchese had managed to find some temporary assistance by desperately catching at some of those straws which sometimes will suffice to keep a sinking man's head above water for a brief period. At all events, the end was not quite yet.

Marietta, however, seemed to have gained little from the reprieve. There are few, if any, ills in this world of which the ever-present fear is not worse than the actual presence. Night after night during that, to her most miserable summer, she had watched from her *loggia* the ever-punctual arrival of those sinister guests of the Marchese, who were to spend the live-long night, as she well knew, in pushing on towards the catastrophe, to which she now looked forward with dread and horror. Morning after morning, as the old Canon came forth from his room, rosy, hale, and hearty, and declared himself to have passed an excellent night, and to be quite ready for his morning walk to the Duomo, horrible doubts, followed by agonising self-examinations, as to the genuineness of the gladness she professed in the old man's continued health, tormented her. Was it possible to shut her eyes to the fact, that the most paramount considerations required that his life should come to its term before the work being pushed on so rapidly down stairs on the first floor should be completed? Was she not bound by every duty to wish that such might be the case? Yet to be conscious that every pleasant word of morning greeting was a black and treacherous lie—to think that every sign of vigour and vitality the cheery old man manifested was unwelcome and odious, was too horrible and intolerable. No, it was not so! she would passionately repeat to her own heart. Could she wish any ill to the dear, kind, simple-hearted being whom she so truly loved, and had so lovingly tended for twenty years?

The troubled and perplexed contest, which was thus unceasingly going on in her mind, was very evidently undermining Marietta's bodily as well as her mental health. All the strong calm, which had been so characteristic of her life, was gone: she was excited, nervous, restless. Her cheek became habitually tinged with a hectic flush, and her large, dark eye

hollow. If only by dying herself, she could have smoothed away the difficulties, and could in dying know that Palazzo Lunardi was again owned by a Lunardi,—if, by dying herself, instead of being compelled to watch for the death of another, she could have accomplished this, how gladly would she have hailed the change!

It was now about the middle of September, perhaps the most delightful of all the months in the year at Florence. It is still warm enough o' nights for any portion of them to be passed in the open air; and the days are no longer too fiercely hot to be agreeable. The Cascine woods are putting on their gorgeous parti-coloured autumnal livery; and the glorious sunsets are draping the sides and folds of the Apennine which makes the northern wall of the happy valley of the Arno, with a mantle of regal purple. Huge piles of water-melons, like heaps of green cannon-balls for monster ordnance, are seen at the gates of the city, waiting for the retail dealers, who establish, in every corner of the city, stalls, covered with an upholstery of vine-leaves, and adorned by a skilfully constructed background formed of the circular sections of the fruit. The happy significance read now-a-days in the bright green of the outer rind, the white of the intermediate flesh, and the ruby red of the pulp of the fruit within, had not dawned on Italy at the time of our story, or had a meaning which had been rendered odious to the peoples of the Peninsula. But, meaning apart, there was the same street decoration of pyramidal piles of the great, round, brilliant-coloured fruit then as now; and the grandfathers of the generation, who are now made happy in their hour of evening idlesse by a huge semi-circular slice of the cool and refreshing fruit, were crowding round the vendors' tables, spending their "*quattrini*" in the same cheap luxury.

The days shorten at that season very rapidly in those latitudes almost void of twilight, and the vesper services at the Duomo and other churches had been altered to an earlier hour in the afternoon.

It was at this pleasant time of the year that the Canon of San Lorenzo, on coming back from his church to his comfortable rooms in the building over the cloisters, said to the old lady whom we saw waiting on him on a former occasion—

“ Annunziata, I expect the priest of San Simone, who wishes to consult me on a point of theological difficulty. Bring a bottle of *Vin Santo*, some sweet biscuits, and a couple of glasses. And, while his reverence remains with me, let us not be interrupted.”

Very shortly afterwards the expected guest arrived, and was ushered into the Canon's presence by Dame Annunziata, who, as far as might be judged by a look she bestowed upon the visitor, as she quitted the room, did not deem him by any means a worthy recipient of the *Vin Santo* in the Canon's cellar. In truth, the *curato* of San Simone was not a man of prepossessing exterior. And the two priests formed as strong a contrast in their persons as in the style of their dress and appointments. The Canon, as we know, was a model, not only of manly comeliness, but of a perfectly clerical turn-out. The *curato* looked like a dissipated street-sweeper dressed up in the very dilapidated second-hand clothes of a clergyman. A stranger would have been perfectly astonished that a priest could go about the streets of a metropolitan city in a guise so very disreputable. But Don Serafino was not much worse in this respect than many another of the cloth to be met with in the cities of Italy. He was miserably poor; and, unlike the almost entirety of his equally poor congregation, did not care to stint the inward for the sake of the adornment of the outward man. A Tuscan of either sex is almost always willing to do this; and the consequence is, that there is not a city in Europe which can show so decently and neatly clad a population, though the decency has often to be attained at the cost of submitting very heroically to very short allowance even of daily bread. The clergy are an exception to this rule. Of course those who are well provided for rejoice in fine raiment as well as in other luxuries. But those whose means are scanty (and they are many, and were, at the date we are concerned with, more) generally prefer to provide sufficiently for the inner, before they think of the adornment of the outer man.

A very dirty, unwashed, unshaven, greasy, deboshed-looking figure was Don Serafino; and he entered the comfortable room and the imposing presence of his more fortunate fellow-priest with every mark of being vividly conscious of the great social difference which separated them.

The magnificent Canon, however, received his guest very graciously, placed him at the opposite side to himself of a tolerably large table, filled him a glass of *Vin Santo*, set the bottle between them, carefully closed the door, and drew the curtain with which the doorway was garnished before it, and then at once proceeded to the business he had in hand.

"I was very glad to hear, from your note of this morning, my good friend," began the Canon, "that you have at last succeeded in getting us the information we require. It is important, and I shall not fail to report your services in the right quarter."

"I humbly thank your reverence," returned the other, bowing low, as he sat; "the job was a rather difficult one, and——"

"Did you ultimately succeed in getting what we want without directly asking for it; or were you obliged to instruct the girl to get at the facts?"

"I feared I should be obliged to do so; but fortunately it turned out otherwise, and it came spontaneously."

"Much better so! go on: how did it come about? The girl, you say, is the mistress of the Marchese's valet?"

"That is it, your reverence, and she has been my penitent for years, indeed, I may say, ever since——"

"Never mind that; come at once to her last confession."

"Of course I am to understand, most reverend Signor Canonico, that the revelations I make are for the service and advantage of the Church. The seal of confession, you know——"

"Of course! of course! we know all that. I have told you that this information is needed for purposes in which the Church is deeply interested. You need speak only of such parts of your penitent's confession as touch the points in question. The rest is, of course, sacred. Is the delicacy of your conscience satisfied?"

"Perfectly! perfectly! my most reverend sir."

"Very good; then fill your glass, and go on."

"I had urged the girl to press her lover on the subject of marriage, thinking it likely that that might lead at least to some mention of the circumstances we were in quest of; and in fact I was not disappointed."

"Very judiciously managed, my good Don Serafino. Go on!"

"Well, sir, when the girl spoke to the man on this point, it seems he alleged as a reason for not complying with her wish, or at least for deferring it, the probability that his present service might soon come to a conclusion. Here I saw that we were upon the right track; and as it was a question of repairing a sin and a scandal by marriage, as your reverence sees, of course I could have no difficulty in directing her to obtain further information."

"Excellently well thought, and well said, my good friend. Your ability as a confessor ought not to pass unnoticed. Go on!"

"I thought it right, therefore, to refuse her absolution till she could satisfy me that she had done her utmost to induce her lover to marry her; and directed her, with this view, to affect disbelief of his statement of the precariousness of his position, to require him to give his reasons for thinking so, and to bring me the result."

"Bravo, Don Serafino! You deserve to hear confessions elsewhere than at San Simone. Well!"

"Well, your reverence, the girl did her part to perfection; and out it all came. Her lover's place with the Marchese Perini was not worth six months' purchase. The whole concern was going to the dogs. The Marchese was a ruined man, as full of nails* as a church door. But what reasons had he for saying all this? Could it really be true?—'So true,' answered the fellow, 'that I felt it to be my duty to myself to pay particular attention to a long talk there was here only last week, between my master and the old money-lender of the Ponte Vecchio. I tell you,' says he to the girl, 'he is regularly throttled.†'"

"But did she get from him the details of the conversation?" asked the Canon; "that is all that is of any importance to us."

"Your reverence shall hear; I don't come here to waste your reverence's valuable time for nothing. The Marchese sent, it seems, for this Palli, who I find is a money-lender on the bridge, to get a further advance of cash from him. The *strozzino* objected that the Marchese had no security to offer. The latter spoke of the palace. Palli swore he had already

* *Chiodi*, "nails." Tuscan slang for debts.

† *Strozzato*, "throttled," *i. e.*, in Tuscan slang, squeezed and strangled by usury, as if taken by the throat. A usurer is called a "*strozzino*."

advanced upon it quite as much as it was worth. Perini disputed this, and protested that the palace should be publicly sold to ascertain what could be realised from it. This did not appear to suit the views of the money-lender : for after much disputing they agreed that in consideration of the sum of two thousand scudi to be paid down to the Marchese, the Palazzo is to become the absolute property of Signor Palli, if the amount for which it is mortgaged be not paid off in full within six months from the day in which a convention to this effect should be signed. 'And two days after,' said the man, 'sure enough came old Palli with his money bags, and a notary with his papers. And so my master, with two thousand scudi in his desk, thinks himself as rich as the Grand Turk, and means to pay off all long before the six months are over. But I know a precious deal better than that. In six months' time we shall all be kicked out of Palazzo Lunardi, as sure as eggs at Easter. And what is to become of us then, *cara mia*, if we go and get married?' And I think," said Don Serafino, in conclusion, "that that about includes the information your reverence was desirous of obtaining."

"Admirably well done, my excellent friend! A Cardinal's chaplain could not have managed the matter better. Trust me to report your zeal favourably in the highest quarter. You must not be left at that miserable San Simone. Come, finish the *Vin Santo*, and then we will both go to our important occupations. I dare say you find the day too short for the duties of it, as I do."

"Truly your reverence may say so! Day and night—night and day. I declare I think the people down at San Simone believe two or three o'clock in the morning to be the only canonical hours for receiving the last sacraments. They are always at it every night!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the sleek Canon, pleasantly. "You should teach them, my good Don Serafino, to show their charity towards the Church by dying at more reasonable hours!"

And so, after a little of such professional talk, the bottle of *Vin Santo* was emptied, and the Canon bowed out his dirty visitor.

"Now we know where we are, and what we have to count

on," said he to himself, as he sat down in his great easy-chair to think over the facts he had just learned; "and that is well at all events. For six months all holds on; and that is the end of your reprieve, my poor Marietta. Six months hence Palli takes open possession of the palace; and so ends once and for ever the romance of your life! Well, *that* is not my fault, at all events. I have no means of preventing it, if I were ever so anxious to do so. But before these six months expire something else must expire. Humph! Some *thing* else! Ay! that is the question! But a very foolish one! For what is the use of questioning when one is sure to get no answer. . . If death be followed by a better life, of a surety the old man there is ripe and well prepared for it! If by a long sleep, is it any wrong to send him to his rest peacefully, calmly, painlessly, instead of leaving him to win his way to it almost as soon, but through pain and suffering? But it will be difficult to make Marietta see this! Strange, that even powerful minds are so enthralled by the common prejudices, which make the mental atmosphere in which their lives have been passed, that clear, unclouded reason is powerless to affect them! I foresee it will be a difficult matter to bring her to the needful point. And it is cruel to think of the disappointment awaiting her, when the deed shall have been done, and the mental agony which it will cost her shall have been incurred. Poor Marietta! I would fain temper this cup to thee, were it possible. But there is no other way. Sebastian in orders, the old man disposed of, the Palazzo finally gone for ever, and Marietta writhing and cowering—very possibly her reason tottering—under the consciousness of what will appear to her tortured imagination a horrible crime;—all gone, all fallen, crumbled away; the whole edifice of her life-dream vanished even as a dream; nothing remaining after the wreck, nothing left, save the hard and solid thirty-five thousand scudi! and then I think I see my way. How infinitely worthless this laboriously-gathered money will seem to her then! And how humiliating to think that I must work to my aims by means of such dross,—that thirty-five thousand little bits of silver should be able to achieve what all the power and energy of this brain and hand could not achieve unaided by it! Well! we must use

the tools that are offered to our hands. . . . Six months!" continued the Canon, muttering to himself, as he walked, with his hands clasped behind his back, up and down his study, apparently in deep thought, pausing every now and then, with his eyes fixed on the ground. "Six months! We are now midway in September; our six months' grace will bring us to the middle of March, . . . just the end of Carnival!—a very merry carnival it will be, I suspect, to some of us! Well, is it my fault if this best of all possible worlds has so arranged its affairs that one man's weal must needs depend upon his neighbour's woe? Six months! There is plenty of time, but not too much for all that has to be done in it!"

And with that the handsome Canon brought his meditations to a close, and calling to Annunziata to bring him his reading-lamp, sat down to work on a little Latin treatise "On Papal and Episcopal Reserved Cases," on which he was engaged, and which was destined to contribute to the same end for which those bits of silver the learned divine was just now moralising on were also needed. Both were destined to serve, in their kind, the work of the Canon's ecclesiastical advancement. And the book "On Reserved Cases," by the Bishop of Hippopotamos *in partibus*, has since become a stock book in the seminaries of the Peninsula.

CHAPTER XV.

LAURA AND HER FATHER.

THE information which reached the Canon of San Lorenzo, in the manner which has been seen, was as accurate as that gathered by similar means for the use of the vast joint-stock company, calling itself the Catholic Church, usually is. The terms of the contract concluded between the jeweller and the ruined gambler were exactly as the Marchese's valet had stated them. Of course, if Signor Palli had foreclosed on the mortgage, in the first place, the palace would have necessarily been put up to public sale; and in the second place, such a step could not have

been taken for some time to come. Therefore, although it was on the cards that the property might not have produced more than had been already lent upon it, yet it might have brought more ; and at all events Signor Palli would have been exposed to the competition of anybody who might take a fancy to the fine old house. The jeweller was well contented, therefore, to make the matter all safe and smooth at the cost of a couple of thousand scudi ; and Perini would have consented to anything to obtain that sum in ready cash. As for the chances that the gambler would within six months be in a position to pay off the debt on the house, and so escape from the toils, it never occurred either to the jeweller or to Canon Guidi to reckon that contingency at all among the possibilities of the case.

Signor Palli had returned home to dinner on the afternoon of that day, a week or so previous to the date of the interview between the two priests, on which he had concluded his bargain with the Marchese, in a very good humour. He was exceedingly well pleased with his morning's work, and was amusing himself with sundry schemes for the improvement and beautification of the old house, and flattering himself that he would be more successful in causing it to change its old name to Palazzo Palli than the present owner had been in supplanting the ancient name.

He fully purposed that the palace should make a part of the dowry of Laura on her marriage with her cousin. The young folks should establish themselves in the fine old patrician residence, and the money-lender and the Fattore would enjoy the play from behind the scenes, but appear as little on the stage as possible. As for himself, he would have a modest room on the second floor ; perhaps he would be more independent in the little apartment on the third floor, now in the occupation of old Canon Lunardi. He was getting an old man, and the *loggia* on the third floor was a charming spot for an old man to sit in and sun himself. Then he should be a good deal at Schifanoia. He would give up the business to old Simone Boccanera, and make up his mind to "*fare vita beata.*"*

So Signor Giuseppe Palli came home to dinner on that

* A characteristic Tuscan phrase, signifying a life of complete leisure.

delightful September afternoon in a very pleasant frame of mind. He was rarely wont to be expansive to his daughter on matters connected with his business affairs,—or, indeed, on any others, for that matter,—being by nature an unexpansive man; but he judiciously made a point of leaving in his den on the Ponte Vecchio, if not all thought, at least all mention, of the affairs connected therewith. On the present occasion, however, he could not forbear saying, as soon as he had swallowed a few spoonfuls of soup,—

“*Figlia mia*, if I mistake not, I have made a good day's work this morning; and it is a matter which concerns thee.”

“Concerns me! *padre mio*,” said Laura; “and what can it have been? Oh! I guess. You have sold the famous necklace, which old Simone and I spent so much time over? I know *maestro* Simone will take all the credit; but I protest the idea of the design was mine. And you sold it well, you say!”

“Never mind about the design for the necklace: you and old Simone may settle that matter together as you like. It is of other matters than necklaces that I have to tell you.”

“Now, papa! you really do puzzle me. A day's work that concerns me! What can you mean?”

“Why, does not every day's work concern you, as far as that goes. *Laura mia*? What do I work early and late, and grow rich for, if not for you, do you think? Do you suppose that I have not got all that I shall ever want for any need of mine?”

“I should think so indeed!” put in Signora Giuditta; “it is a small matter that folks of our age need, God knows.”

“Yes! Giuditta, and I could manage to rub on with less than what there is,” returned the old gentleman, who perfectly comprehended the intention of his *governante's* little speech. “Do you not know, Laura, that it is not for myself that I have laboured to grow rich?”

Now Laura, in truth, knew nothing of the kind; and though she should have been told that all her father's wealth was to be settled on her to-morrow, still she could not have blinded herself to the fact that, if it were so, it would be because that was the mode in which most gratification could be got out of the money for himself.

Fathers are very apt to set up claims for gratitude from their

children on grounds of this kind, which will hardly bear examination. The only way in which a money-getter, who has rusted all his capacities for enjoyment out of all possibility of using them, can still get any pleasure out of his hoards, is by attorneyship of the *alter ego*, his son. And the real whereabouts of such men's hearts may be ascertained from the determination they may ordinarily be observed to manifest that their gains shall be enjoyed by their heirs after the fashion imagined by themselves. When a father is ready to surrender his plans and notions, as to the employment of the wealth he leaves behind him, in favour of the different ideas of him who is to possess it, then he may talk of gratitude, and flatter himself that his heart is not wholly selfish.

No such notions as these had consciously passed through Laura's mind. But she could not help being haunted by a vague feeling that what her father wished was his own will and pleasure, and not hers. She thought it quite right that it should be so,—was perfectly contented that her father should seek his own happiness and do his own pleasure; but there was an element of unbending truthfulness in her nature—an element which often depends in part on the nature of the intellect, as well as on that of the moral sentiments—which made the declaration, that all his money-getting toils were for her sake alone, repugnant to her. So she only answered—

“*Padre mio!* I am sure that you always give me all, and more than all I need.”

“But that is nothing to the purpose of my news to-day, *figliuola!* Some day or other you will want a home of your own; eh, Laura? Well, suppose I should tell you that I have bought a house to-day; a house which I hope soon to see you mistress of.”

“Ah! I see! A doll's house you mean, papa. When will it be sent home?” said she, laughingly.

“I am not jesting, Laura. And it is no jesting matter, I can tell you.”

“But I am sure, papa, that Aunt Giuditta will tell you, without any jesting at all, that I am not fit to be the mistress of any other.”

“Fie! Laura!” said the lady thus appealed to; “what I

should say would be to tell you to listen respectfully to what your Signor father has to communicate to you."

"I am sure, Aunt Giuditta, I am quite ready to do so. If I seemed less curious about the new house my father speaks of than I should be, it is only because we have been so happy and contented here."

"It is all very well for you to talk in that way, Signorina Laura; you who sit in the drawing-room all day like a duchessa, with your bits of chalk, and your pencils, and rubbish. But I know that the kitchen smokes to that degree that it will be a mercy of heaven to be quit of it."

Now the fact was, that all this little skirmishing on Laura's part, was simply an attack of pickets preparatory to the great battle, which she foresaw was threatened, on the dreaded subject of her cousin Nanni. She understood perfectly well the meaning of that word dropped by her father, about seeing her mistress of the house he had bought. And he, enlightened as he had been by his interview with Marietta, feared that he, too, understood her thus shying like a frightened horse at the first hint of the subject. So he said, in reply to Aunt Giuditta's observation, preparing himself on his side for a struggle of which he was perhaps in truth as much afraid as his daughter,

"If the kitchen chimney smokes, cousin Giuditta, it must be looked to. I was not speaking of anything which would lead to our quitting this house for the present. As to Laura, I cannot doubt, that with regard to her due and proper establishment in life, she will, when the fitting time shall arrive, show that deference and obedience to the wishes and counsels of her father which I expect from her."

The latter part of this speech was delivered with all the magisterial dignity which befitted such a *paternale*.* The knife and fork with which the jeweller was discussing his *frittata* had been laid down, and the double gold eye-glass called into requisition to emphasise each clause; and, as he concluded the last phrase, he placed the instrument on his nose, and sitting bolt-upright in his chair, without resuming his knife and fork, evidently "paused for a reply."

* A *paternal* lecture. A Tuscan phrase for a reprimand.

Laura, thus forced to accept battle, hoped that she should be able to comply with his wishes.

This was said in so mild and gentle a voice that Signor Giuseppe was encouraged to think the present opportunity a favourable one for bringing his forces into line, and provoking the main battle—if battle there was to be. For he almost began to hope that there might be none.

“Able! Laura,” he said. “Nay, it is little likely that I should ask anything from you that you are unable to comply with. And, in truth, what do I ask at all but what must evidently be for your own best interest and happiness. You must know that, Laura. Now listen, *figliuola mia!* the house I spoke of will not be mine for six months to come. It is a palazzo, which the proudest of our nobles might be glad to call their own; one of the real fine mansions of old Florence! I will tell you the name of it anon. I shall enter into possession of it in six months from this time. And my fondest hope is to see you and your cousin Nanni ready to assume your positions as master and mistress of it.”

“Alas! *padre mio*, when I spoke but now of my willingness to obey you in all I could, I own my heart misgave me that it might be just this that you were desirous of.”

“Am I to understand, Laura, that you are perfectly ready to do as I would have you, in all points, except precisely the only one I care a straw about.”

“It would be very painful to me that you should think so, *padre mio*,” said Laura, with a deep sigh, looking up into his face for the first time since the beginning of the conversation.

“It is, however, very clear that there is but one way of preventing me from thinking so! Pray allow me to ask what possible objection you can have to the arrangement I propose to you? Is it not the most natural thing in the world,—my brother’s only son, and my only daughter? Your uncle Carlo, let me whisper in your ear, is a warm man—a very warm man. My own industry has not been unsuccessful. Is it not a good and reasonable object to make such an union as keeps the Palli property together? You must see this, Laura. Then your cousin Nanni is as likely a young fellow as any girl could wish,—a good lad, and one who would make a good husband. Is there

anything you can gainsay in all this, Laura? Do you not know the truth of all I have stated?"

"Indeed, papa, I can gainsay no word you have said. My cousin Nanni is, I truly believe, as good a fellow as any in Tuscany, and——"

"Once again, then, may I be permitted to ask what possible difficulty there is in the way of my proposal?"

Now it would have been easy for Laura, had she chosen to do so, to escape from her present position by suffering all the blame and the responsibility to fall on Nanni. But this would have been in contravention of the terms of the understanding come to by the cousins in the course of that afternoon walk along the shrubberies of Schifanoia, now some three or four months ago. When upon that occasion, from Laura's initiative, she and Nanni had, after some little beating about the bush, come to a frank mutual understanding, and had finally determined on rebellion against the parental decrees, which destined them for each other, it had been agreed that each was to take his and her fair share in the difficulties and dangers to which that rebellion might give rise. Neither party was to escape at the expense of the other. Laura was not to get off by protesting that she was willing if Nanni were only equally so; and Nanni was not to excuse himself to his father by declaring that Laura would not have him. Such were the terms of the contract; and now Laura was determined to observe them honourably.

So she was obliged to answer her father's direct attack by saying,

"Indeed, father dear, I can give no other reason than the simple one, I do not love my cousin well enough to wish to marry him. I have a great regard for Nanni; I *do* love him as a cousin, but I could not love him as a husband."

"Mere girlish nonsense; as old as the hills. All the girls talk in the same strain; but reasonable marriages are made all the same; properties are kept together, family interests are looked after, and no hearts are broken that I could ever see. No! Look you, Laura, there is only one real reason which would make a girl persist in resisting such an establishment as I have been proposing to you. That is,"—and here he looked

across the table hard and sternly into her eyes,—“that is, a fancy for some other person. I trust that, at least, you have not suffered yourself to be inveigled into any such folly and indiscretion.”

“I feel sure, dearest father, that you are mistaken in this,” replied Laura, somewhat jesuitically avoiding her father’s question. “I am sure that very many women would far rather continue single than marry one whom they did not love with a very different sort of love from that which I feel for my cousin.”

“Still you do not answer my question, Laura,” said her father, with increased sternness.

Thus driven to bay, Laura remained silent for a minute, while a deep blush covered her neck and cheeks and forehead, and her eyes were bent upon the table. But at the end of that pause she looked up, and, though still blushing, said calmly,

“There are some points, *padre mio*, on which one’s heart, I think, ought to be left to one’s own private examination. It is often difficult enough to get to understand it clearly even one’s own self. Very often it would not only be painful, but impossible to give to another, even to a father, an accurate and truthful account of its feelings.”

“I should like to know,” returned the old man sarcastically, “whether I am right in translating all that trash to mean that you are determined to walk off with the first beggar that may happen to suit your fancy, without consulting your father or any one else? Because, look you, Laura! in that case, I have an observation or two to make respecting *my* feelings, which, you may depend upon it, I, for my part, understand perfectly clearly. I do not intend that the wealth which I have earned by the steady industry of a long life of labour should be thrown away to enrich some scheming noble beggar, who would kindly consent to take my daughter off my hands for the moderate consideration of inheriting all I possess.”

“Believe me, my father,” said Laura, flushing, and raising her head with a proud movement, “no such event is in the least likely to happen.”

“Very good!” replied her father, coldly; “but if you will permit me, my daughter, I prefer to state the matter in somewhat stronger terms. No such event,—no event, mark me!

which I should consider such,—*shall* under any circumstances happen. Now, listen to me for a moment! You have been my object, and your welfare my aim, through life! It is for you that I have toiled late and early; for you that I have heaped up wealth. Is it not evident to you that such is the truth? Do I want it? Do I use it? I eat simply, drink simply, live simply. All my wants are supplied for a small sum. But I have laboured, and continue to labour, to conquer a different place in the world for you than that which I have occupied. I would have my daughter among the first instead of among well nigh the last in the land. Does it seem to you, Laura, that all this demands no return of gratitude? Does it seem to you well to overthrow for a caprice the hopes and plans of a lifetime? Is all my care for you, all my ambition, not for myself, but for you, to be requited only by disappointment and sorrow?"

It was very rarely that anything approaching to interchange of feeling, demonstration of affection, or words of tenderness, passed between the jeweller and his daughter. She had always been treated indulgently, all her wants abundantly supplied, all her wishes—they were never other than modest and easily gratified—complied with.

But it is a great mistake to suppose that such treatment, which is compatible with utter estrangement of heart, can ever stand in the place of community of feeling and loving companionship. Love can be purchased only by love. No amount of benefits conferred, except in so far as they may be received as evidences of love, will obtain it. They may obtain the gratitude of the mind, not the love of the heart. And least of all can the natural supply of all a child needs at a parent's hands—supplies which come to it as naturally as the breath of life comes to its lungs—be expected, despite all the well-meaning nonsense which our household words are full of on the subject, to be rewarded with the affection which never pays any debts save those in kind.

Yet Laura loved her father far better in reality than he loved her. For hers was the richer nature, and had more to give. But it was the spontaneous love of a gentle heart for that which was nearest to it, nourished rather by what it gave than by what it received; by all the little cares and household tendings of

every-day occurrence, and not in any smallest degree by the bribe of an enormous heritage. The jeweller's appeal, therefore, failed to strike the responsive chord in his daughter's heart at which it was aimed. But not so the mention of his sorrow and disappointment. The notion of causing him affliction was very painful to her ; and, after a minute's pause, raising her eyes sadly to his face, she said—

“If the sorrow and disappointment you speak of may be remedied, dearest father, by my assurance that I will never marry any one without your consent, I can freely give it to you.”

Laura spoke calmly and firmly, though sadly. The promise she offered to her father was no result of the conversation then passing between them. The meditations on the subject which had followed the mutual avowal of her and Sebastian's love for each other, had long since led her to this conclusion. No authority or compulsion should force her into a marriage not of her own choice. But neither would she, on the other hand, so far defy her father's authority and disregard his wishes as to give her hand to any man without his consent.

Such a promise was more than her father had in his inmost heart expected. He knew right well that he might implicitly trust it, and he most gladly accepted it. Acting, however, on the same principles which would have guided him in his dealing with a debtor who came unexpectedly to pay an instalment on a debt long since booked as a bad one, he only said—

“So far, so good ! But that does not tell me, Laura, that you will do as I would have you in this matter.”

“Even if it should ever come to pass,” returned Laura, “that my happiness should seem to me to be involved in making a marriage to which unhappily I should not be able to obtain your consent, my father, I would, as I have said, sacrifice that happiness rather than act in disobedience to you. But I cannot promise to carry obedience so far as to consent to act in direct opposition to a higher law than even that of a father. I cannot marry against the dictates of my heart. Let us make this compromise, my dearest father. Do not urge me to act in this matter against my inclination and my conscience, and I will never yield to my inclination against your wishes. Dear father, be content with this !”

“I have said—so far, so good, Laura,” replied the old man, rather doggedly than fiercely. “I will not yet believe but that you will see reason to change your mind about your cousin.”

And so the father and daughter separated, the former to return to his spider’s hole on the Ponte, and the latter to meditate on the means of bringing her father to accept Sebastian as a son-in-law. For though Laura had not the slightest intention of ever breaking the promise she had given her father, she by no means gave up the hope and expectation of obtaining his acquiescence at last in the only marriage she could ever consent to make.

And thus the information as to the arrangement about Palazzo Lunardi, which the jeweller had been on the point of communicating to Laura, remained untold; and the results that would probably have arisen, from her knowledge of these facts, to change the course of subsequent events, remained in the great category of things that might have been.

CHAPTER XVI.

MARIETTA FIGHTS A HARD BATTLE.

It was rarely that many days had passed during the last twenty years without a visit from the Canon of San Lorenzo to the apartment on the third floor in the Palazzo Lunardi. In the course of all these years his confidential intimacy with Marietta, and the share he had taken in the great task of her life,—the amassing of the hoard destined to the re-acquisition of the palace,—had made these visits natural, and almost necessary. The great work could hardly have been accomplished as far as it was accomplished, without his aid. The mere putting aside of her yearly savings into a box, however safely guarded, would not have sufficed by a great deal to raise the accumulated treasure to the amount it had now reached. In continually investing the money to the best advantage, Guido had exercised a faithful and exceedingly intelligent stewardship. And the

talk, and consultations, and speculations, arising from this subject of interest, had been the constant subject of their conversation. Then, again, there were the musical meetings of the old Canon; so that, what with one thing and the other, a week in which the little family on the third floor did not see Canon Guidi was an exceptional thing in their quiet and monotonous lives.

The work, however, as far as skilfully putting penny and penny together could accomplish it, was now well-nigh done. The hoard had reached the goodly proportions judged to be sufficient for the purpose in view, and the now-or-never for the attainment of that purpose was near at hand. In these circumstances Guido Guidi was not the man to allow the influence, inevitably acquired by the part he had played in preparing for the *dénouement*, to be diminished for want of assiduously keeping it up. Having presided over the accumulation of thirty-five thousand scudi, he was not at all inclined to lose sight of that creation of his care and clever management.

Nevertheless, a week, from the day on which he had acquired the information the reader is acquainted with from the priest of San Simone, went by without his returning to Palazza Lunardi. He had promised Marietta to obtain for her the information which he was now in possession of from a sure source; and he fully intended to communicate to her a part—not all—of what he had ascertained. Yet he did not hasten to do so.

Was it that he had not fully made up his mind as to his own intended course of action? Was it that he wished to give Marietta time to forget some of the impressions he had made on her at his last visit before seeing her again? The Canon Guidi was not one of those men who are apt to be long in determining on their conduct, when the grounds of action are once known to them, or who, when they have decided, vacillate in carrying their intentions into execution. Nor was it, on the other hand, likely that the Canon should imagine that there was any possibility that the words which had fallen from him at his last interview with Marietta would ever be forgotten by her. She had breathed a fervent prayer that her mind might be cleansed from the remembrance of them; and he had echoed her prayer with a meek and sympathising "Amen." But there might have been detected, by a sharper observer than poor

Marietta, a certain smile on his lip, unshared in by his eye, as he uttered the pious word, which would not have seemed to a skilled reader of the human countenance to imply either an expectation or a wish that the prayer he professed to join in should be granted.

When the Canon Guidi sowed seed, he usually did so with the expectation and intention that it should produce its crop duly in kind. And the words he had dropped on that occasion into Marietta's mind had been seed assuredly intentionally sown. He knew right well that few minds, if any, have the power of rejecting at will idea-seed once sown on their surface in well-chosen time and season. He knew that the mind's surface is, under such circumstances, absorptive to a wondrous degree of activity—that the idea-seed is then swallowed in as soon as scattered—that germination infallibly follows—and that, let the ensuing growth of weeds be plucked up and cast out as often and as perseveringly as they may, a tap root of them will yet remain, ever sending up new shoots, and only by long-continued and repeated efforts, if ever, to be eradicated.

And we should probably be doing more justice to the able Canon's character, if we conclude that his week's absence from the Palazzo Lunardi was intended by him to give time for the effects of his last conversation there—not to be forgotten—but to operate according to their kind. And if these had been his intentions and expectations, he had not been deceived in them.

Not that it is to be supposed that the dark hints and abominable theories of the subtle priest had made any progress towards bringing Marietta's mind into conformity with his own on the subject, or inducing her even to contemplate the possibility of her consenting to perpetrate the atrocity suggested to her. But he knows little of the action of the nervous system who does not comprehend that, short of this, her mental condition might be very strongly and prejudicially affected by the poison dose that had been administered to it.

The undeniable fact of the desirability of her beloved uncle's speedy death, for the success of her long and dearly-cherished hope, had been kept constantly before her mind. And the constant struggle to keep this in the background of her thoughts,

which had of course the certain effect of retaining it conspicuously in the van of them; the unavailing effort to prevent it from horribly and odiously obtruding itself every time her eye rested on the ruddy, hale cheek of the old man, and took note of the green vigour of his age; the dreadful conviction that seemed to force itself upon her with increasing irresistibility as the days ran on, that the old man's strength and health would ruin all her hopes: all this kept her mind in a continually feverish state of nervous excitement, which, if continued long enough, would probably have ended in madness. Then the mere lapse of time, gliding on fast and unceasingly towards the inevitable, while she remained in ignorance of what each day was bringing forth, added much to the mental fever which was consuming her. Why did Guido leave her so long without communicating any of the information he had promised to seek? She had felt his departure a great relief when he had left her alone at the conclusion of his last visit. But now she was painfully anxious for his return. She felt as if, left there in that quiet, monotonous home, the most important events might be consummated while she was kept from all knowledge of them. In short, the week of Guido's absence had been passed by Marietta in a state of restless misery and anxiety, tending as surely to weaken and injure the moral tone of her mind as it did to wear out and fever her body. She dreaded the Canon's coming, but yet expected it with the sick impatience of irrepressible longing.

At length he came.

He chose for his visit the hour at which he knew that the old Canon would be taking his siesta after dinner, before setting forth on his evening expedition to vespers.

Marietta was alone in the little parlour, sitting at the open window, from which the morning sun had passed away, and gazing vacantly on the far blue line of the Vallombrosan hills. She rose to her feet with a start as the priest entered, but immediately reseated herself, and, pressing her hand to her bosom, gasped out—

"What news have you? Thank God you are come, Guido! Tell me quickly!"

"My dear friend!" replied the priest, calmly, "you agitate

yourself needlessly! Why should you suppose that I have any news to tell you?"

"Did you not go hence, promising me that you would ascertain the time . . . the time that remains! . . . Oh! God! that it should come to this! Speak, for Heaven's sake! What time have we?"

"Really, my dear Marietta, your anxiety for the conclusion of this business excites you unreasonably!"

"Guido! did you not tell me . . . show me that things were urgent? Have you found out nothing?"

"I come to tell you the result of my inquiries. As far as my information goes, I believe it may be depended on; but I have no news—we knew before that the time was short!"

"Speak, Guido, quick! How much time?"

"I have reason to believe, Marietta, that the palace will be sold by the creditors of the Marchese at the expiration of six months from the present time!"

Marietta's first sensation on hearing this was a feeling of relief. So continually had her mind been dwelling on the nervous dread which had been oppressing her, that the catastrophe was hurrying onward to its completion, that six months seemed a long relieve.

"Six months!" she said; "six months! I had feared it might have been sooner! We have half a year, then, before us safe?"

"And many things may happen in half a year, as your thought is now suggesting to you, my friend."

Marietta was conscious that the tingling blood mantled in her cheek, as he finished speaking, but she only said in reply—

"And you think that this information may be depended on, Guido, without the chance that matters may be changed by any fresh act of the Marchese?"

"You may receive the intelligence as certain, Marietta. The affair no longer depends on the Marchese. The Palazzo is to be sold this time six months. And observe, Marietta, I did not only say that it will not be sold before, but it assuredly will be sold at that time."

"In six months!" repeated Marietta, thoughtfully.

"Yes; in six months. That will bring the time just about to the end of the Carnival. How is my old friend this morning?"

"My uncle is well;" said Marietta, without venturing to raise her eyes to the face of her companion.

"Ah! in his usual health, I suppose. It is long since he has had any illness whatever, is it not?"

"It is several years since he had anything of consequence the matter with him," answered Marietta, feeling an irritation against her questioner which she could hardly suppress the outward manifestation of.

"It frequently occurs, however," said Guido, slowly, and looking straight into the eyes of Marietta as he spoke, "that lives, apparently so vigorous and untouched by malady, are ended quite unexpectedly to those around the patient, and most favourably and fortunately for himself."

"It may be so! But I would rather avert my mind from any such event as that to which you seem so perseveringly determined to direct it; and let it rest upon the certainty that I need not even think of the subject for the next six months."

"Need you not? Excuse my importunity, Marietta, if I suggest that if you put off all present consideration of the matter, consideration may be altogether useless when the moment for action shall have arrived."

"Gracious heaven, Guido! What is it you would have me do? What consideration of mine can avail aught in the matter? Even if you should succeed in compelling me to feel that I wish that the death of that unsuspecting old man may befall before six months are past and gone, what besides my misery and anguish of mind would be gained by doing so?"

"When last we spoke together on the painful parts of this subject, Marietta, and I felt it to be my duty to point out to you the means at your disposal for the accomplishment of the solemn task to which you have devoted yourself, and for the execution of which you have pledged yourself to the dead, you prayed that my observations might pass away from your mind. Your prayer was an earnest one, and, had it been a fitting one, it would doubtless have been granted. It has not been granted. The considerations I then laid before you have *not* passed away from your mind. Am I not right in saying so, Marietta?"

"Spare me, Guido!"

"I would fain spare you an undying remorse, my friend—

far, far more intolerable than the torments of your present vacillations."

"Vacillations, Guido! Great heaven! has it come to this? I protest and swear no shadow of a vacillation on the subject of the horrible idea you scared my soul with has ever passed across my heart or brain!"

The priest, looking down into her upturned eyes,—for he had now taken his former place, with his back to the chimney-piece, and Marietta was sitting on a low chair near the table opposite to him,—smiled the compassionate smile of superior knowledge, and slowly shook his head, while, with the vibratory motion of one raised forefinger, he made the significantly expressive Tuscan sign of negation.

"Had you indeed succeeded," he continued, "in casting from your thoughts the ideas which I then laid before you, I should have been unwilling to pain you by again referring to them, because I should have known, in that case, that it would have been fruitless to do so. But as I perceive that you have given them much meditation, I think it may help to enlighten your mind upon the subject, if I remind you of the position you will stand in, supposing you fail to accomplish your object."

"Spare me, Guido! What could I have done?"

"Nay, but Marietta, you have done too much to permit of your halting short of the goal. There are causes of action which success, and success only, can justify. To rehabilitate the noble line of your forefathers, to fulfil the life-long object and dying wish of your father, was an object the holy nature of which abundantly justified the means you have taken to obtain the funds needed for the purpose. But failing in that object, and that by your own weakness, how do you stand with regard to the money you have thus gathered together? You have wronged your uncle of the sun! The curse of ill-gotten wealth would cleave to the money! Falling from the position of a heroine, the martyr of a hallowing purpose, you sink to that of the false steward who robs his master! This money put to its appointed use, makes your name the noblest among the recorded ladies of your race: unconsecrated to that end, it damns you to the infamy of being the first that ever disgraced the Lunardi blood!"

Poor Marietta's confessional-trained conscience failed to see through the transparent sophistry of all this; and the well-aimed bolt went home to her heart. Flinging herself forward on the table, she hid her face in her hands. She moaned aloud, as the priest stood carefully watching the working of the poison he had been administering. Presently she said, in a low voice,

"Go now, Guido! my head is whirling, and my brain is on fire! Leave me awhile, that I may strive to think, if that be yet possible to me. Go, Guido; but come again soon. You make me fear you horribly; but do not let me remain days alone,—alone with my thoughts, for I can speak to no one but you!"

"I leave you, then, Marietta, for awhile. I will return, and hope that your mind may be able to look at these matters in their true light, and calmly. Trust to my friendship, Marietta, to lead your conscience aright. We will talk of this again shortly. Adieu, for the present."

And the priest, passing her as she lay with her face prostrate on the table, smiled triumphantly as he left the room.

Marietta remained in the position in which the Canon of San Lorenzo left her, striving to bring the surging chaos of agonizing thoughts, which had been presented to her mind, into some degree of subjection to the powers of her reason,—and striving very unsuccessfully,—till she was roused by her uncle, who had waked from his siesta, coming into the room. She sprang up to meet him, and was at once struck by an absence in his look and manner of the cheery brightness of health usual to him. He seemed flushed and unrested by his sleep, and his eye was heavy.

"Do you feel unwell, uncle? You are not looking like yourself after your nap this afternoon!" said she, as taking his hand tenderly she placed him in his easy chair. There was no shadow of a taint of hypocrisy in the tenderness of her act and accent, for she loved the old man dearly. But some devil prompted in her heart the consciousness of a speculative curiosity as she marked narrowly the fever flush on his cheek; and oh! how loathingly Marietta hated herself at that moment for the thought, that would uprear its hateful head.

"I don't feel quite well, dearest," said the old Canon. "My

head aches a little. But I dare say it is nothing to signify. A little touch of indigestion probably!"

"But you look fevered, dear! Heaven grant that you are not going to be seriously ill!"

And Marietta blushed painfully over all the neck and face as she spoke the words, and struggled hard to shut her mind against the suggestion, which would make them traitorously false.

"No, no! I think not. I dare say I shall be better this evening. My walk to vespers will do me good. But Marietta, darling," the old man continued, taking her hand, as she hung over him, and looking up into her face, "Eighty-six years make a complaint from which one must not expect to recover,—save by one way. A small matter will shake over-ripe fruit from the tree, you know."

"But still, such health as yours, uncle, Nay, nay, we are not going to lose you yet!"

"Well, darling, I hope not. I am ready, but in no hurry to go. And I am sure, if care and love can keep an old man alive, you will keep me with you."

"And you enjoy life, do you not, uncle?"

"Oh, yes! I am well content to live as long as God pleases. But, as I said, I am also content to go;—or should be so, dearest, but for your sake. I do hope I may live till our dear Sebastian is in a position to give you a home, my Marietta!"

"Dear uncle!" Marietta murmured, as her eyes filled with tears.

"You see, Marietta *mia*," continued the old man, "there is so much that dies with me. That is the worst of it. And I often blame myself, my dear child, for not having contrived in the course of such a long life to lay by some provision for you afterwards. But Heaven help me, I was never good at such matters. I trust that Sebastian may do well yet. He has plenty of talent. Trust me, Marietta, that boy has talent enough to make his way. But I would fain live a year or so longer, till he has got his foot on the ladder, for your sake, my own darling."

"God bless you, my dear, dear uncle and His will be done!"

“Amen! And now, my dear, if you will call Sebastian, I’ll be thinking of being off to the Duomo. I feel as if I had talked myself better already; and I am sure my walk will do me good.”

The stormy sea of tumultuous thoughts and feelings with which Marietta was left to do battle in the solitude of her chamber, when Sebastian and her uncle had gone out, may be readily imagined.

Was he going to be seriously ill? Was this the beginning of the end? Had her half-breathed prayers then been so soon heard? No; she had *not* prayed for her uncle’s death. Her heart had expressed its wish amiss! Her prayer had been heard awrong! Yet, if her uncle coveted life only for her sake, and under the delusion of a mistake, it might be a happy release from infirmity and pain to come! Ah! could he but know all the truth! The dear loving-hearted old man! “No; I will make no prayer, save Thy will be done! Thy will be done! Oh, God! Thy will be done!” And flinging herself on her knees by the side of her bed, she struggled to shut out all wishes and thoughts by forcibly keeping her mind within the refuge of that one safe anchorage: Thy will be done!

On returning from vespers, the Canon professed to feel much recovered. And the fevered look had left his cheek.

Ha! was it some watchful devil that dashed a pang of disappointment through her heart, and then tortured her with the consciousness of it?

That night Marietta spent several hours of it in her favourite haunt, the Lunardi chapel, in the church of S. Giacomo. In vain she tried to inspire herself with the belief that the spirits of her ancestors were approvingly conscious of her sufferings for the restoration of their name! All her soul was dark, and in tumult. She felt as if she could not venture to allow her mind to formulate a wish, or utter a supplication, lest it should contravene a duty or be guilty of a horror. All her soul could do, was to cling blindly, and with the desperate grasp of him who flies from his pursuer to the altar, to that refuge from volition, “Thy will be done!”

CHAPTER XVII.

HER FATHER AND HIS FATHER.

CARLO PALLI, the *fattore* (who had the management of the estates still nominally belonging to the Marchese Perini in the Casentino), and his son were grumbling a little at the cold when we first made their acquaintance at sunrise on a May morning, travelling in the Fattore's smart little *bagavino*, drawn by his fast-trotting Maremma pony, from their home amid the chestnut-trees in the upper basin of the Tuscan river, to the capital amid the olive-groves in the Valdarno. But if the rawness of the spring morning had then pinched and purpled the broad-faced farmer's jolly red nose, painted by the pure juice of many a big-bellied flask from the Casentino vineyards, the journey over that bleak range of mountain which separates the upper from the lower valley was a much severer bout towards the end of October, at the same hour of the day. Arno, being in no hurry, makes a circuit of a hundred miles or so, for the sake of keeping in the sheltered lowlands, wanders away leisurely through pleasant places under the walls of sunny Bibbiena, within sight of smiling white Arezzo, and knows nothing of the very different climate of the highlands it encircles. But men, even in Tuscany, having less time on their hands than shining rivers, cannot afford to follow the pleasant travelling habit of the Arno, even to avoid rough winds and wintry weather. In truth, crossing the Consuma in an open gig before sunrise, towards the end of October, is no joke; and would very considerably modify the ideas of many a stranger in Italy, who had pictured to himself that land of promise as a clime of perpetual summer, and who might have a few hours previously left olive-circled Florence basking in its mellow autumnal sunshine.

The stout Fattore and his son, however, knew right well what they were going to face, when they started from their comparatively snug homestead in the valley beneath Poppi—though the climate there is a very different one from that of the lower Valdarno—and they muffled and wrapped and great-coated accordingly. Nevertheless, they were right glad to find

themselves in the shelter of the little inn on the top of the pass, with the worst part of their journey done, a roaring fire of Casentino oak-roots in the wide hearth, and the materials for a solid breakfast before them.

They were going up to Florence, on a very similar errand to that on which they were bound in the previous spring. Love and money, the two great motive powers,—or rather, as it should be put on the principle of “*seniores priores*,” money and love,—these, as before, were the objects of the journey. The old man, as usual, was in pursuit of the former, and the young one, as usual, in pursuit of the latter; and, as usual, their views on the combined subjects did not altogether agree.

Matters had moved on a little in respect to both these two great departments of human affairs, as they affected the travellers, since they last journeyed that road together. The Fattore felt quite sure that his *illustrissimo padrone*, the Marchese, was not likely to lessen the speed of his down-hill progress as he got nearer the bottom; and he was for sundry reasons desirous of being in at the death. It was a long time since he had heard from his brother; and as he had a much higher opinion of his town-bred brother's business talent and shrewdness, than he had of his perfect loyalty and uprightness, he had begun to be a little anxious about the state of matters. Therefore he had determined to go and see for himself how all stood.

Of the position of Nanni's affairs, with regard to that other junior department of the business of life, the reader knows somewhat more than his father did. Nanni, like a wise general, had considered that the defence is always a more advantageous position for the weaker party than the attack. On returning home, therefore, to the Casentino, from his last visit to Florence, after the party at his uncle's villa and his memorable conversation with his cousin Laura, he had said no word to his father of the conspiracy against paternal authority then hatched. When the Fattore and his son had talked over the matter at their breakfast-table at that same inn on the occasion of their former journey, Nanni had felt indeed little inclination for the task assigned to him of wooing his town-bred cousin, and was impressed by a strong conviction that his efforts in that direction would be fruitless. But he recognised the expediency of such a

marriage, if it could be achieved, and was fully purposed to attempt the enterprise. All this was now changed. But his father conceived the position of matters to remain the same.

In thus waiting till the moment for open resistance to his father should be no longer avoidable, Nanni, it must be admitted, had scarcely been so loyally true to the terms of the convention between them, as Laura had. For whenever any conversation on the subject had chanced to occur between his father and himself, he had spoken much of his persuasion that Laura would not "look at him," as he phrased it; and although he did not scruple to let his father understand that he was not eagerly bent on the match, yet he did not, as Laura had done, openly declare that he would make no such marriage, and honestly base his refusal on his own disinclination for it.

This was what he ought to have done; but did not do, for lack of courage. For women are ordinarily braver than men in the face of any danger equally estimated by both of them; and the notion that the reverse is the fact, is mainly propagated by its being customary for men to represent themselves as more courageous, and for women to protest themselves more cowardly, than they really are.

"I say, Nanni, my boy, go into the wood-house, and bring an armful of logs thyself. The old woman is as stingy of her fire as the folks are in Florence. But, *per Bacco*, one needs a blaze here, and a jolly good one too! I never," he continued, as Nanni came back loaded with logs, and heaped them on the fire, "was so nearly frozen in my life. What a blessed bit of country this Prato Magno is, to be sure!"

"Ah! but were it not for the Prato Magno," returned Nanni, "we should be sweltering up in the Casentino in summer, as they are in Florence."

"You've always a word to say for the Casentino, Nanni, let it be how it will."

"Yes; I love the chestnut woods, and the *macchie*,* and the green fields. I should be sorry to live in Florence, I should!"

* *Macchie*, literally "stains." The word is commonly and very picturesquely used to signify woods, in Tuscany; the phrase being suggested by the dark patch-like appearance made by a wood when seen amid a wide expanse of sunny open country from an eminence.

“ Well, I like the country best myself; but what will Laura say to that, eh, my son?” returned his father, seizing an opportunity to turn the conversation to the matters that were uppermost in his mind.

“ Well, I don’t think Laura will have much to say to the matter, father, one way or the other. I have told you over and over again that that cock won’t fight;—but you won’t believe me.”

“ No; I don’t believe a word of it! Or, if it won’t, I believe it is all your own fault. I know what girls are;—or did know in my time. And I suppose the breed of them isn’t much altered. But you are too much of a gaby, you are, Nanni, my son; and you don’t stand up to her.”

“ Mayhap you’d get tired, Babbo, yourself of standing up, as you call it, if so be you were bowled over every time you did stand up?”

“ Don’t tell me!—a parcel of rubbish! Besides, when all is said and done, the girl must do as her father would have her. And Giuseppe’s mind is quite one with mine on the subject. You may be quite sure that a parcel of girl’s rubbish won’t stand between my brother and his will.”

“ Ah! I tell you what it is though, Babbo,” said Nanni, thus pushed to his entrenchments, “ I am not the man to marry a girl that’s forced on him that way. I can find plenty who wouldn’t need to be forced by their fathers, nor by their mothers neither, if that’s all! So if my city uncle Giuseppe thinks he is going to choose a lad for his lass, to please nobody but himself, he may look to somebody else than Nanni Palli. And if I know aught of the stuff you are made of, Babbo, I don’t think you would have taken a wife on such terms.”

There were one or two points in this speech specially calculated to produce the effect which Nanni would have desired, if he had thought of any result at all. In the first place, it appealed to a sort of rough sense of independence, and countryman’s jealousy of being dictated to and managed for by town-folk;—a very prominent feeling among the country population of Tuscany. In the next place, it seemed to imply a kind of pretension on the part of Giuseppe Palli to override and settle the affairs of his country brother and his family. And this was

a point on which Carlo, the younger brother, was very sensitive. Although the plan of the marriage in question had been his own quite as much as it had been his brother's, yet no sooner was the idea of its being carried into effect by the will and authority of his brother, overriding his own side of the house as it were, suggested to him, than a certain degree of inceptive resistance was called into action in his mind. So he answered his son, with his mouth very full of broiled ham and bread the while.

"As for that, Nanni Palli, I do not tell thee to take a wife at thy uncle's bidding, not I! He is very fond of bidding other folk. Giuseppe Palli thinks his shop the middle one of the Ponte Vecchio, and the Ponte Vecchio the centre of the world! But we don't want him to play the *maestro di casa** for us, down in the Casentino. Not but," continued the farmer, after swallowing a long draught of wine,—“not but what you are a gaby, my son Nanni, for not knowing how to bring your pretty cousin to her bearings.”

"Well, but, father, suppose the fact were that I did not like Laura—in the way of making her my wife that is—a bit better than she likes me?"

"Then, my son, thou art doubly an ass!—first, for not falling in love with as pretty a girl as is in Florence; and next, for not understanding on which side thy bread is buttered."

"Laura is a pretty lass; and I am sure I would be the last to say nay to that. But may be there are others that need not fear to stand along-side of her for all that. And I'll tell you where it is, *Padre mio*," continued Nanni, boldly, after a pause, during which his mind was earnestly engaged in meditating on the philosophy of the matter; "a fellow is dencedly apt to think them prettiest that give most signs of thinking him worth being pretty for."

"Oho! that is the stone the cat lies under, is it!" said the senior, shutting one eye, and fixing the other upon his son's face, with a gaze that was meant to be profoundly penetrating. He proceeded, before speaking further, to ruminate leisurely

* "House steward." As such a functionary is very apt to get the entire management of a family into his hands, *fare il maestro di casa* is a very common expression, to signify ruling all a person's affairs for them.

over a huge mouthful of bread and ham, and then, after taking a long pull at his glass, he continued: "Well, Nanni, my son, this is where it is, look you! One man may lead a horse to water, but twenty can't make him drink, as you may have heard me say before. And it's true of a horse, let alone a mule; and you, my son, though you are not a bad boy in the main, to give the devil and the priest their dues, are about six times more headstrong than any mule I ever saw. *Altro che mulo!* a mule is a sensible beast in its way, and chooses its path with judgment."

"Well, father, as far as that goes——"

"Let me finish what I have got to say, Nanni. I can't go on any faster, for this loaf is crusty, and not convenient for talking. I was going to observe that you will inherit a tidy lot of acres, and a bit of money to work them with, from your father; and if you don't inherit any of his sense, it isn't my fault; and we must give God thanks for all things. May be when a man is born with his bread, and his butter too, ready earned for him, it is more in the nature of things and more fitting that he should be a gaby. No doubt it is gentlemanlike; and you will have enough to be 'gentleman.'"

"Well; but, I say, father, if you come to that——"

"But I haven't come to it yet. Let me say out my say. Stand up, Nanni!"

Nanni obeyed, wondering what was to come next, and rather suspecting that his father was going to sentence him in form to marry his cousin, with all the ceremony of a criminal court.

"Six foot two, if you're an inch!" his father proceeded, eyeing him critically and complacently; "broad in the shoulder, fine in the loins! as well-grown a fellow as there is this day in the Casentino! And should not I deserve to have the blight on every acre of the land, if I was to fly in the face of Providence and grumble because thou art a fool! Sit down, Nanni, my son, and finish thy breakfast."

"But is it certain, father," said Nanni, argumentatively, as he obeyed his father's last behest; "is it quite certain that a man is a fool for marrying a girl he likes, and letting alone another that he don't like—at least not in that way?"

“ If he was not a fool, his liking and his interest would not travel different roads ; that is my notion,” replied his father. “ But this is the upshot of it, Nanni. Thou wilt have the best half of the acres at home there, whether thou marriest thy cousin Laura, or no. I have shown thee how to put the other half to them, and help thyself to such a wife as most men would jump at into the bargain. I have shown thee the water ; if thou wilt not drink it, I know very well that I cannot make thee, and I am not going to trouble my rest or spoil my digestion over it. Any way, I shan’t be sorry to let my brother see that we can do without him, and that all the world can’t be ruled exactly to please him. Nevertheless,” he added, after a pause, “ I have a kindness for Laura ; I like the girl, and should have been well pleased to have her for a daughter-in-law. And, any way, Nanni, before thou goest to do a fool’s trick, bide a while, and think it over. May be some glimmer of sense may come to thee ! ”

Nanni did finish his breakfast with great appetite and a light heart, in no wise cast down by his father’s estimate of his capacity, but exceedingly delighted to find that he was likely to have his own way in the matter of marriage far more easily than he had dared to hope. Different causes contributed to bring about the result. Though it did certainly seem to his father a very great pity that the different parts of the Perini property should not continue to be united, his heart was not so set on the building up of a great Palli family as that of his more ambitious and less Epicurean brother. Then, as has been hinted, he enjoyed the idea of playing for once the great man to his brother, compelling him to sue, and finally throwing him over. But lastly,—and this was, perhaps, the strongest reason of all,—he was perfectly determined, as he said, not to suffer himself to be vexed about the matter : not to suffer it to spoil the enjoyment of one day’s dinner, or one night’s rest, or one hour’s pleasant equanimity.

And such philosophical and calculating care for a man’s tranquillity of mind and placidity of temper is peculiarly characteristic of Tuscan habits and ideas. A certain Epicurean philosophy is very common among all classes of the people. And they habitually look on mental disquietude, anxiety, and

care, as certain and positive evils to be avoided as sedulously as our less sensitively shrinking people do the more palpable and material ills of life. And the real fact is, that all the passions of the mind make their effects felt so directly, so immediately, and so certainly on the bodies of this nervously organised and excitable race, that they dread the result of them in a manner quite surprising to the more robustly constituted idiosyncrasies of the north. It is by no means an uncommon thing to hear a stout healthy man in any rank of Tuscan life protesting that he must physic himself to remedy or to avoid the ravages of any one of the more common mental emotions, a fit of anger, or a spell of anxiety. They absolutely do so physic themselves, and absolutely need it. The familiarity of the people with the phenomena of the agency of mind on matter is shown by many a phrase in their common speech. "*Mi fece fare cattivo sangue,*" is an ordinary mode of expression, meaning simply, "he made me angry."

Thus Fattore Carlo Palli was neither further sighted in his tender care for his own equanimity, nor wiser in his Epicureanism than the rest of the world around him, when he determined that he would not allow his mind to be tormented by what he could not help considering as his son's folly.

So the breakfast at the Consuma was finished without any further unpleasant conversation; and the father and son again took their places in the *bagavino* to perform the remainder of their journey. As upon the former occasion, they slept at the house of Carlo Palli's friend, the priest at Pelago; and got into Florence early the next morning. As before, also, Nanni and his father separated after their breakfast at the *Pappagallo*: Nanni to follow his own devices—for his father, true to his resolution, said not a word to him about Laura; and the Fattore to seek an interview with his brother on the Ponte Vecchio.

"It is a long time, brother, since I have heard from you," began the Fattore, when the contrasted pair of brothers were closeted in the little den behind the shop, and had exchanged their brief and not very expansive greetings; "and I thought that I would take a run up and see how matters are going on."

"Well, brother Carlo, there can be nothing, I think, to make any change in the position of your interests. The mortgage bonds stand as they did, of course. It might, perhaps, be worth

your while to see if you could come to some arrangement with the Marchese, by which the open sale of the estates might be avoided. It might be better for both parties, better for both parties, you know."

"Yes; that might be a good move; though I fancy it would be difficult to make a sale at a short notice over my head. But I was thinking about the palace, brother. What are we to do about the mortgage on the old house? It would be much more likely that a purchaser might come forward to make a bid for that."

Now, had it not been for the conversation between Laura and her father, which has been detailed in a former chapter, from which the jeweller had gathered that it would in all probability be necessary for him to give up all hope of the projected alliance between his daughter and her cousin, the "we" in the Fattore's speech would have been all very well. Supposing that marriage to have been a matter of course, as both parties had imagined it to be when they last spoke together, Giuseppe Palli would have been quite willing that the mortgage on the palace should be a joint affair, as Carlo had understood it to be. But if no such marriage was to take place, the jeweller's views were altogether changed. In that case he had no idea of dividing so desirable an acquisition with his brother, and had long since determined that the arrangement he had come to with the Marchese should be on his own sole account. So he said, in reply to his brother's last remark—

"It is very kind of you, brother Carlo, I am sure, to be so alive to my interests. But to tell you the truth, I do not think that I am apt to need anybody's assistance in looking after them. I have already taken, with regard to the palace, the steps which I was recommending you to think of respecting the land."

"The deuce you have! Trust you for never letting a chance slip! But I wonder you did not write to me a word about it. I make no doubt that you were quite right, brother; but one likes to have a word in the management of one's own concerns, you know. I should have liked to hear the terms you gave him, and the time."

"But what I have done regards the palace alone."

“So I hear you say, brother; but I should have liked to have been consulted all the same.”

“Consulted!” said the elder brother, with a shrug of his shoulders, and a quiet complacent little laugh; “why, I confess, my good Carlo, that notwithstanding the very high opinion which, as you are perfectly aware, I have always had of your high capacity and business talents, it has never entered into my head to seek the advantage of supplying the deficiencies of my own judgment by having recourse to yours. Ha! ha! ha!”

“It is always your way, Giuseppe, to make so many round-about phrases, that a plain man like me loses his way in them. Perhaps that’s what they are meant for. But I say, I ought to have known the terms made with the Marchese. If I find half the cash, I suppose I have a right to have a word in the spending of it!”

“You find half the cash! Why, what are you dreaming about, brother Carlo? Did I ask you to find any cash?”

“But if the affair is between us——”

“Between us! my dear brother! The Palazzo Lunardi is mortgaged to me. I advanced a sum of money on it. I have deemed it advisable to let the owner of the property have a further sum on making it over to me, conditionally only on the repayment of the capital so advanced, with interest—with all arrears of accruing interest—by a certain day. This is all clear and plain, I hope!”

All the burly farmer’s philosophy would not save him here from making, as he would have phrased it, a very great deal of bad blood. He would have given something to have avoided the fit of anger, which he could not control, and which he knew would entail a physicking, if nothing worse. The blood rushed into his face and neck, as he said—

“You don’t mean, Giuseppe, that you have taken advantage of the confidence I had in you to keep this affair to yourself, and shut me out of it? Was it not all settled here between us?”

“My impression undoubtedly was, brother, that this mortgage on the palace was to be my affair; and I have acted under that impression. But, after all, what will it signify in the end, my dear brother? If your boy marries my girl, will it not come to the same thing in the end?”

Notwithstanding his anger, the Fattore was still sufficiently prudent to feel a difficulty in replying to this. He would have liked to tell his brother, that he and his daughter might go to—shall we say a stage beyond purgatory?—together! that his son could do better than marry the daughter of a *strozzino*,* though unhappily she was his own cousin! &c. &c.

But, notwithstanding what had passed between him and his son on the subject the day before, the farmer was unwilling to throw up all chances of the family marriage, which had so much to recommend it. He remembered all that Nanni had said about Laura's rejection of his addresses, and felt convinced that his brother's determination to get the palace into his own hands was the result of much such a talk between his brother and his niece as had passed between him and his son; and his rage was no little increased by the reflection. He felt sure that his brother's last words were dictated by the most cynical hypocrisy. And his disgust at it made him anxious to meet it with equal hypocrisy, if it were in his power to do so! But he was much at a loss how to reply to his brother's plausible words.

"That is all very well, brother Giuseppe!" he said, doggedly. "But since it is all the same thing, why not share the affair between us? What is the good of playing a dirty trick for nothing?"

"Fie! fie! brother Carlo! I must not let you use such phrases as that. I never play dirty tricks at all, and therefore cannot say that I certainly do not play them for nothing. But you are losing sight of what I said. I remarked that it would all come to the same thing *if* your boy married my girl. But, you see, I prefer, that if that should not turn out to be the case, Palazzo Lunardi should become the property of Laura, and not of Nanni Palli. A prudent man, brother Carlo, looks to all the possible chances on the cards. There *are* sometimes slips between the cup and lip, you know."

"At all events," returned the Fattore, sullenly, "I think even you must feel that you have not behaved to me brotherly or handsomely in this matter."

* Literally a "throtler," from *strozzare*, "to throttle." The word is used to signify an usurer

“Brother Carlo,” replied the jeweller, with a pleasant smile, throwing himself back in his chair, and crossing one long, black cloth-covered leg over the knee of the other, so as to show the silk stocking and elegantly made shoe with its small golden buckle on the foot so exposed to the best advantage, while a deprecatory wave of the gold double eye-glass eloquently expressed the speaker’s profound sense of his own vast superiority in intelligence and station to his rustic brother,—“Brother Carlo, I am afraid, that experience of the world does not justify us in thinking that brotherly treatment, as you say, is exactly that which one man would wish to receive from another. Surely I have behaved to you in a much more satisfactory manner than the first brother did to his younger! Ha! ha! ha! And then, my dear Carlo, as to handsome treatment, I really do not know what is meant by the phrase. Probably your notion and most men’s notion of handsome treatment is treatment somewhat better than what they would be disposed to show to others. Eh, brother Carlo? These phrases, you see, have little meaning for plain common-sense men. Handsome! I don’t pretend to handsomeness in anything. If my conduct is upright and straightforward, that is enough for a plain tradesman like me.”

During this long speech, in the delivery of which his brother seemed to take infinite relish, the Fattore had fancied that he saw a scheme for stealing a march upon his elder in this matter;—a bull-terrier’s attempt to surprise a weasel napping!

“Well!” said he, “I like to do things handsome myself, as well as to be done handsome by; but then I am country bred, which no doubt makes all the difference.”

“Just so, brother, *all* the difference!” said the city man, with a smiling bow.

“Any way,” continued his brother, “it would be folly for us to fall out, when it is so clearly the interest of both of us to act together and remain friends.”

“I think so, indeed,” acquiesced the jeweller, with a shrug of the shoulders.

“We both fully intend that the marriage you have spoken of shall take place, and our property shall thus be kept together?”

“That is most certainly my wish, as it always has been.”

“ And I can assure you it is my wish, and my intention also. Now, I like, as I said, to do things what I consider handsomely. It is my way. We in the country like that sort of way. Now look here, brother. Let me be the mortgagee of the Palazzo entirely, including the agreement you have lately made with the Marchese. I will find the money; and you can withdraw your capital to make it useful elsewhere. And I on my part will at once settle the property on Nanni, and on his children by your daughter—the Palazzo to be theirs on the day of their marriage. I hope you will think that a handsome offer.”

“ Indeed it is! So much so, my dear brother,” said the jeweller, who now at once perceived that his brother felt certain that the marriage would never take place, “ that I really should not be justified in accepting it. Nay, nay! we city men, if we do not talk about behaving handsomely, still know what is just and fair. That would not be fair on you. Both the boy and the girl will bring with them a very pretty contribution to the common fund; and I have set my heart on making the young couple a present of the Palazzo. For, to let you into a secret, Carlo, I too had determined to put them in possession of the house on their marriage-day. We are not all of us such bad fellows in the city, after all; eh, brother Carlo?”

And the old money-lender looked at his brother with his head on one side, and one eye closed, with an expression the real meaning of which was: “ I hope you find yourself detected and floored! You thought to make *me* jump at such a clumsily-baited hook as that, did you?”

The former felt that he *was* floored; and that all hope of ever possessing Palazzo Lunardi had passed away from him and his for ever. He felt sure that his brother had discovered Laura's unwillingness for the match, and that poor Nanni had said no more than the truth in his frequent declarations that it was labour lost to make love to his cousin, for that she “ would not look at him.” He had great difficulty in so far controlling himself as to abstain from coming to an open rupture with his brother, and indulging himself by pouring out the torrent of abuse which was shut up in his heart, and which he felt was making it necessary for him to submit to be blooded as soon as he should get home. But he contented himself with

saying, doggedly, as he took up his broad-leaved farmer's hat to go—

“Well! *fratello mio*, I suppose you know your own affairs best. But it strikes me, that you do not feel quite so certain that this marriage will ever take place. If it should not, I trust my niece may do as well elsewhere. As for Nanni, there is no want of advantageous matches for him, let me tell you. Nanni's bid for, he is. And let me whisper in your ear, brother Giuseppe, that if you have got the lion's share up here in the city, I have not got the jackal's share in the Casentino. Trust Carlo Palli for knowing which is the sunniest vineyard, and the fattest pasture land, if he knows nothing else.”

“I am sure I shall be well contented with my share,” returned his brother, with a courteous smile, “especially as it is your way to do things handsomely, you know, down in the country; eh, brother?”

And so they separated, the Fattore muttering as he walked off the bridge—

“He makes me sick, *per Bacco*, with his smiling, cool, self-satisfied, hypocritical ways. I begin to think Nanni's in the right of it, to have nothing to say to the lot of them. He can stand well enough on his own ground, thank the saints! And yet, when one thinks of the division of the land, *per Bacco*, it is a pity too!”

“Ha! ha! poor Carlo,” sneered the other to himself, when left alone in his den, as unruffled as he had been before the conversation. “Poor Carlo! there is a man without heart enough to be open-hearted, and not brains enough to be close-hearted. And he to think of getting round *me* in that silly way! If I could have but been sure of Laura,” thought he to himself, “I could have made him put his head into a nice noose. If I had offered to let him in to half the mortgage on the condition that whichever party declined the marriage should forfeit the half share of the palace, he would have jumped at it like a gudgeon at a fly. For I see plainly enough that Nanni has learned from Laura that there is no chance for him with her; and he probably is looking out elsewhere. Ay! that would have been a very pretty stroke, and would have served Master Carlo right well. But Laura would not have acted her part in the play! I

might have been the bitten instead of the biter. *Pazienza!* One can make the best of the cards in one's hand!"

And with these thoughts the old gentleman turned calmly to the inspection of his ledgers.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TWO COUSINS.

MEANWHILE the conversation which had passed between Laura and her father had not left her in a tranquil or happy state of mind. Her first feeling—when, after her father's departure to his accustomed evening attendance on his business, she was able to think over what had passed between them in the freedom and tranquillity of solitude—had been one of satisfaction at the degree of mutual understanding at which they had arrived. It was a comfort to her to feel that at least there was now no farther any secret between them as to her determination to reject the proposals of her cousin. She did not attach much importance to her father's parting expression of hope that she would think better of this decision. She felt sure that he knew her well enough to expect no such change of sentiment from her, after what had been said. She had little doubt that he was convinced that the proposed match must be given up. He was no longer living in a fool's paradise of false hope on this point. She had performed the principal duty of letting him know that she could not conform to his wishes on this subject; and this was certainly a great comfort. That she had thus far acted rightly, that it *was* her duty to make this resistance, she had no doubt at all. No motive, no consideration, could make it right or pardonable for her to suffer herself to be persuaded or coerced into marrying one man, when she had given all her heart to another. This was clear, and all was right so far.

But was it equally certain that she had done well in giving the spontaneous promise which she had offered to her father? She had bound herself by a solemn promise to make no marriage

without his consent. Was this entirely consistent with her duty to another, and with another promise which she had made? She had told Sebastian to rely on her; she had promised to be strong for him, as well as to be faithful to him. Had she been so? She vividly recalled that conversation, now some months ago, when she had reproached him for his want of trustful and hopeful courage, and had dared to offer her strength in support of his weakness. Had she justified her appeal to his confidence in her affection? Again and again her mind went over all her code of ethics, and argued the case against her heart, which reproached her for deserting her love. And she ended by coming to a conclusion which justified herself. She thought that she had made up her mind, that reason was right and heart wrong in the matter. She could not bring herself to think that she owed nothing to her father on this point; that she should be justified in seeking her own happiness at the cost of blighting the remainder of his life; that it would be right for her to follow her own judgment in this matter in open defiance of his opinion, and wish, and authority. Yes! She thought she had acted rightly. And if Sebastian were there that minute, she would still have bid him trust and hope, as she still trusted and hoped herself. Suppose Nanni married to another, and all hope of that marriage therefore at an end; suppose Sebastian to have achieved some portion of the success his genius merited, and to have shown himself to be something better than a mendicant patrician; suppose too, above all, that her constancy in refusing all other proposals should have convinced her father that he must accept the successful composer for a son-in-law, or none at all; was it not to be expected that he would, under such circumstances, yield, and give his consent to a marriage with the man of her choice? Surely he would do so! No time would be too long to wait! Courage! patience! constancy! and the goal should be reached at last.

Nevertheless, go over the ground as often as she would, she could not recover her usual tone of cheerfulness. The promise she had given seemed to stand as an impassable barrier between her and her happiness, which had not existed before, and which had been raised by her own act. Not that she repented of the act. She was quite decided that, were the thing to be done

again, she would again do as she had done. She was convinced that she had acted rightly, but the conviction did not suffice to make her happy.

She was sitting at her drawing-table with an unfinished design before her, trying to occupy her mind as well as her fingers with the work, but vainly striving to withdraw her thoughts from the subject which had become their habitual pre-occupation, on that October morning on which farmer Carlo and his son arrived, as has been seen, in the capital. She little expected to see her cousin ; for the Fattore had judged it expedient, with a view to the business he had in hand, to arrive at the shop on the Ponte Vecchio unannounced. But Nanni, on parting with his father, when the latter went to his interview with the jeweller, had betaken himself to his uncle's house with considerably more alacrity than when he had before made a similar visit, with the consciousness that he was going to the up-hill work of making love to his cousin. Now he was anxious to tell Laura of the conversation he had had with his father on the journey. His conscience had rather reproached him with having failed in carrying out his contract with her as thoroughly and fairly as he ought to have done, in the matter of taking on himself his share of the responsibility of breaking off the marriage their seniors were bent on bringing about. And now he was eager to tell her that he had spoken out to his father.

Laura jumped up from her drawing, as he came in, and ran across the room to meet him.

"Cousin Nanni ! who dreamed of your coming to Florence ?"

"I did, cousin Laura ; I have dreamed of coming to Florence many a time of late. But I only dreamed it ; for I knew nothing of our coming till the night before we started. Babbo made up his mind to come all of a sudden. You may guess I made no objection !"

"I am so glad to see you ; for, do you know, Nanni, I have got something to tell you !" And Laura nodded her pretty little head gravely, as she stood facing Nanni and looking up at him, while he held both of her hands in his.

"And I am so glad to see you, cousin Laura ; for, do you know, I have got something to tell you !" said he, nodding his head in imitation of hers.

“*Davvero* ?* Out with it, Nanni. I suppose you and Caterina——”

“*Che! che!* † No such luck! But what is it you have to tell?”

“No, no! you speak first. I can keep my secret till you have told yours.”

“No! you speak first. Didn’t you say first you had something to tell?”

“Well! we must not waste our time in nonsense; for Aunt Giuditta will come from her marketing in a minute, and then we can’t talk, unless she goes out into the kitchen.”

“Make haste then. Has anything happened?”

“Only this, Nanni! that I have been a brave girl, and stood to my colours. The other day my father came home quite in high spirits, and said that he had bought a house, which he hoped to see me mistress of very shortly. You can guess what that meant. So out it all came.”

“You did not say a word of Caterina?”

“*Che!* do you think it? No, I merely spoke for myself; and gave no reasons. I said that you and I were excellent good friends and cousins, and that we could never be more.”

“Bravo, Laura! and how did my uncle take it?”

“It was painful, very painful to me, Nanni; but it had to be said, you know. He was not violent. He is never violent. But, you see, he could not enter into my feelings on the subject; and I am afraid he thought that I was acting very badly.”

“But if you felt sure, Laura——”

“Yes! I know that it is right; otherwise I would not have said all I did that day up at Schifanoia, that day which has made us fast friends for ever—has it not, Nanni?”

“For ever, dear cousin! fast friends, instead of very badly fastened man and wife. That is about it.”

“No! I have no doubt at all about it. It was right so far. But none the less for that, it was very painful to me to grieve him. He has always been a very good father to me, Nanni.”

* “Indeed.”

† “What! what!” equivalent to “Pooh! pooh!”

“ But did he threaten you ? Did he speak of forcing you in any way ? ” said Nanni, with an anxious interest in his manner which, despite her small inclination for mirth at that moment, brought an amused smile on Laura’s lips, as she answered, with a slight flavour of archness—

“ Don’t be alarmed, cousin. He won’t force me. We are not in danger ! ”

“ Oh no ! ” rejoined Nanni, simply, and without the least comprehension of the meaning of his cousin’s smile ; “ we are in no danger, so far as that goes. And that brings me to what I had to say to you, cousin. I’ve been and done it too ! ” added he, raising his eyebrows and nodding his head up and down with much significance.

“ Have you told your father ? ” asked Laura, with quite as much interest in her manner as he had manifested.

“ I did. Yesterday morning, while we were at breakfast at the inn on the top of the Consuma, I spake out. ”

“ Did you make your farther clearly understand how very intolerable such a marriage would be to your feelings, cousin Nanni ? ” asked Laura, demurely, with a touch of female coquetry, just sufficient to prove the trueness of her descent from mother Eve.

“ Not I ! ” said honest Nanni, with invincible simplicity ; “ where was the need of telling any lies about it ? ”

Laura was on the point of saying something which a second thought induced her to suppress. As it was, she only replied, looking up into his face with a franker smile than her last—

“ But what did you tell him then, Nanni ? ”

“ Well ! he said something about your father’s intention that the two branches of the family must be united—willy, nilly ; and then I told him plain enough, that I was not the man to take a wife who was forced upon me against her will, and that for all my uncle might say ‘ shall be,’ I should say for myself ‘ shan’t be.’ That’s what I told him. ”

“ But was that quite fair play, Nanni ? That was leaving all the responsibility of the refusal on my shoulders, you know, which was not according to our agreement, ” said Laura, not feeling at the bottom of her woman’s heart any great resentment against her cousin for his mode of putting the matter.

“ But what could I say, you know ? ” argued Nanni, without a shadow of slyness or second meaning in his voice or in his mind. “ What could I say, when Babbo went on about your being the prettiest girl in Florence, and one that any man, barring a born fool, would jump at for a wife ? I couldn’t gainsay it ; how could I ? If I had told him that to my mind you were plain and *poco simpatica*,* he would not have believed a word I said. Lord bless you ! he knows better than that, Babbo does. I *did* give him to understand, that I knew one who, if she wasn’t first, was any way second to no other, be she who she would ; and one that I thought might not need any father to force her.”

“ Oh ! you did come to that, did you ? Well done, Nanni ! I would have forgiven you, if you had said, as I am sure you think, and ought to think, that she is for you far the first in all Florence, and all Tuscany. Well ! and now it is my turn to ask how *your* father received your communication.”

“ Well ! there was not much to complain of. Babbo takes most things easy. He told me I was a born fool ; too big a fool to know what was good for me, and too obstinate a mule to listen to those that have wit to know better. Of course, I was not a-going to make more words by gainsaying anything of that.”

“ But did my uncle come to see that it could not be ? Do you think he has given up the idea of such a marriage ? Because, if so ——”

“ Well ! I think he is pretty much off it. For there is another point, that counts for more than you think for with him. You see he came to think that my uncle was minded to force the match whether or no, out of his own head like. Now, you see, Laura, we country folk don’t like being ridden over, and our affairs settled for us, without either ‘ with your leave ’ or ‘ by your leave, ’ by city-bred people in that way. Babbo has always had a bit of a notion in the back part of his mind, that my uncle plays the elder brother a little too strong, you see.

* “ Not agreeable.” But that phrase does not give a quarter of the meaning of *simpatica*, which a Tuscan, in speaking of a girl, uses positively, and not relatively only to the speaker. It is the highest praise that can be accorded to a woman, and means that she has all the qualities which can make a man fall in love with her.

And this partly put him up to be ready to say 'no,' if your father said 'yes' a bit too loud, you understand."

"Is my uncle gone to the Ponte Vecchio this morning?" asked Laura.

"Yes! he went straight off to have a talk with your father, when I came here."

"I trust to heaven they will not come to a quarrel about it. That would be a fresh trouble!"

"Oh! not they! They know better than that."

"But, I say, Nanni, what business had you to come here, sir, directly on arriving at Florence, before you had been somewhere else first? I shall tell Caterina of you."

"Tell away, Laura. In the first place, I came here directly because I was in a hurry to tell you all about the talk between Babbo and me yesterday morning. In the next place, don't you see, that ten to one at this time in the morning Caterina's alone in the house, with nobody but that little slip of a servant-girl;—or may be all alone, if the girl has gone out. And being all by herself in the house, it would not do, don't you see? I shall go there when her father and the Gobbo come home at mid-day."

"To think of you becoming a model of discretion, Nanni! But when do you mean to say the important word in Caterina's little ear? The way seems open, since your talk with your father. I think, if I were you, I should take the opportunity before your father, perhaps, may be in a different humour."

"I was thinking of speaking quietly to the Gobbo, Laura *mia*. What do you advise? What kind of a creature is he, the poor Gobbo? Caterina is very fond of him, any way."

"Of course I don't know much, but from what I have seen, I like poor Sandro Boccanera. I think you would do well to trust him. And, indeed, it's ten to one that he knows all that you could tell him about his sister and you, just as well or better than you do. He has a wonderful knack of knowing all about everybody's business, has the Gobbo Boccanera."

"You think I might trust him to keep a secret?"

"I think you might safely; but why keep it a secret, Nanni, and for how long?" asked Laura, meditatively.

"Why, for one thing, you see, poor Simone might be afraid

of getting into hot water with your father about it. If it were once well settled that there was to be nothing between you and me, but they all know—of course all Florence knows that that is what has been looked to.”

“But, on the other hand, you see, Nanni *mio*, the knowledge that you were betrothed to Caterina Boccanera might make matters much easier for me with my father. Don’t you see, Nanni?” said Laura, pleadingly.

“Aha! my pretty cousin!” said Nanni, making her a low bow, “that’s where the hare breaks cover, is it? You *have*, then, certain matters to be made easy—you too? When I told you that day up at Schifanoia, that it was not fair for you to know all my secrets, and tell me no word of yours in return, you protested you had no secrets to tell.”

“Certainly, I had none to tell; for I did not mean to tell any! But what have I said to make you suppose that I have any secrets either to tell or to keep?”

“Come, now, Laura, play fair! there is a good cousin! I have been open with you.”

“But why are you so persuaded that I have anything to tell?”

Ah! I see it! You think that nothing save some previous attachment could have made me insensible to your addresses; is not that it, cousin Nanni?”

“May be that is it; and may be it isn’t! Never mind what I think it! Come, out with it, Laura! Why, how can we help one another, as perhaps we might, if you keep all to yourself, and won’t put any confidence in me?” pleaded Nanni, half piqued.

“Confidence, Nanni! Have I not treated you with the utmost confidence?”

“It has been a very one-sided sort of confidence between us, I think! I have told you all, and you have told me nothing.”

“I am sure I spoke the truth when I said that I had no secret to tell,” replied Laura, with her eyes bent down on the little drawing-table by the side of which she was standing, while she began nervously fingering the things upon it.

“What! back to that again, Laura? You won’t trust me then? Is that to be the last word?” said Nanni.

“What is the use of telling what you must know very well

already?" pleaded Laura, with her eyes still riveted on the table.

"I? I have not a notion what you mean. Nobody has ever told me anything, upon my honour. *Davvero, davvero*, Laura! I have never heard a word about it."

"But there are other ways of knowing without being told, cousin. Do you mean to say that you can't guess?"

"Not I! I never was good at guessing. I always give up directly. So you may as well tell at once."

"No! you must guess. You can't guess wrong," faltered Laura.

"What nonsense. Do I know him?"

"Oh yes! you know him. You have seen him here," said Laura, blushing, as she directed the blundering seeker so nearly to the locality of her hidden treasure.

"I know him, and I have seen him here!" repeated Nanni, ponderingly, in a manner which showed that his ignorance on the subject was genuine.

Laura was irritated at his slow want of comprehension. She was provoked at his not having perceived that which she would have at the time been much annoyed at his perceiving; and which she had used all possible precaution to veil from his observation.

"Yes, you know him, and you have met him here at dinner. And now, if you don't know, I shall tell you nothing more."

"Here at dinner! Why, you don't mean young Lunardi?" cried maladroit Nanni.

"Why not, pray?" cried Laura, firing up in an instant, and raising her head and eyes to flash a defiant look at him. "Is there any reason why any girl should not be proud of the love of Sebastian de' Lunardi?"

"Nay, I never said so, or thought so, Laura; so you need not look at me in that way! Only it seemed so so out of the way!" stammered her cousin, aware that he was making a mess of it, but vainly attempting to find some inoffensive word to express his feeling.

"Out of the way! And why, pray, out of the way?"

"Well, I don't know!—out of *our* way. He is a noble."

“ True ! That circumstance might have kept some people apart. It has not kept us apart. I love him neither more nor less for his noble ancestry ; and I do not think he would like me a bit the better if I were descended from the Queen of Sheba. Anything else out of the way ? ”

“ Don't be so fierce about it, cousin Laura ! I did not mean to say anything against him, nor anything to offend you. But then, in the next place, I fancy he has little or nothing in the world to live on.”

“ Has Caterina Boccanera got much ? ”

“ Nay, but that is different, you know. Come now, Laura, you must admit that that is a different thing. I shall have money, if Caterina has none.”

“ Well, cousin Nanni, and, as my father tells me, I shall have fortune, if Sebastian has none.”

“ Ah ! but will my uncle like that his money should go where there is none to match it ? ”

“ I might ask whether *my* uncle will like *his* money to go where there is none to match it,” urged Laura ; “ but all these considerations,” she continued, “ may be difficulties in the way to be got over, but cannot be reasons either for or against a man himself, or against a woman either.”

“ And I am sure I never meant to say anything against Signor Sebastian himself. May be,” he added, meditatively, and speaking rather to himself than to his cousin, “ may be he is stronger than he looks ! ”

“ Stronger ! ” echoed Laura ; “ he is strong enough for his occupations. It is not every one who has to pass his life looking after oxen and ploughs, you know, Nanni ! ”

“ That's true,” said Nanni, simply. “ I believe he is a musician, is not he ? ”

“ Yes, he is a composer. He has an immense talent ; and will, I hope, live to make a great name.”

“ I am sure I hope he may, if that is what he wants, for your sake, Laura.”

“ But I hope you will come to wish it for his sake. I must have you and Sebastian great friends, Nanni *mio*.”

“ With all my heart ! I only wish his line of business was anything I could be of use to him in.”

"That's not so unlikely as you may suppose, Nanni. A time is coming presently when I think you might be of much service to him, if you were disposed to."

"What is it? Only you tell me, Laura, and you shall see whether I am disposed or no!"

"Why, it is this. We are looking forward very anxiously to the success of an opera which he is at work on. It is to be brought out at the beginning of Carnival. Very much may depend on the success of it. And the success does not always depend altogether on the merit of the work. A good party of stout friends in the theatre!—you understand! Sebastian won't hear of taking any such means. He is too high-minded to do what the others do. We must not say a word to him about it. You understand?"

"All right! Mum is the word! And when the time comes, just you give me the hint, and I will bring you half-a-dozen lads from the Casentino that will make more noise with their clapping than a whole theatre full of Florentines!"

"Bravo, Nanni! And now that is the last of my secrets; you know them all now."

"That is something like fair play," returned he. "And now I shall run off to Caterina, for it's near mid-day, and the men will be home to dinner. *A rivederla stasera!*"*

CHAPTER XIX.

NANNI OBTAINS A "YES."

THERE were reasons beyond the rules of ordinary etiquette, not very rigorously observed by the classes to which Caterina Boccanera and Nanni Palli belonged, which made the latter prefer to delay his visit till the hour at which his mistress's father and brother would be at home. Laura had attributed his delicacy wholly to this cause, feeling some surprise that he

* "Adieu till this evening."

should think it necessary to be so punctilious. But the fact was, that the Gobbo had found means to let the handsome young farmer see that his visits and attention to Caterina were not acceptable to her family. Poor old Maestro Simone lived far too much in the clouds to see or occupy himself much about such terrestrial matters. But the Gobbo was wide awake enough; and quite disposed to take good care of his pretty sister in this respect. Had Nanni Palli, the well-to-do son of the rich *fattore* in the Casentino, been understood to be a free man as regarded matters matrimonial, of course the only possible objection to him as a suitor to Caterina would have been the too great superiority of his social position to hers; a difference which, after all, was not so great as to involve any insuperable obstacle to a marriage between them. But everybody knew that Nanni Palli was destined for his beautiful and wealthy cousin, the jeweller's heiress; and the match was too evidently a natural and desirable one for any one to doubt that it would be carried into effect.

Under these circumstances the Gobbo felt, reasonably enough, that Nanni Palli had no business to be dangling after his sister; and sharp words had of late passed between him and Caterina on the subject, in consequence of his having observed that she was inclined to afford the handsome Lothario an amount of encouragement and opportunity which he deemed by no means right or prudent. Nor was it at all like Caterina to be guilty of anything of the kind. Though full of animation, spirit, and fun, laughter-loving as Venus herself, and disposed to enjoy to the utmost that licence of associating with the young of the other sex which the habits of society deny almost entirely to girls of the classes superior to her own in Italy, Caterina had never run any risk of permitting her name to be coupled with that of any one of the young men of her acquaintance by the gossips of their quarter. And to do her justice, it must be said, that if Nanni had contrived to effect a lodgment to a more or less serious degree in her heart, that fact had tended to make her more instead of less cautious and discreet in her intercourse with him, on the frequent occasions of his visits to Florence,—till latterly.

The reader, who remembers the conversation between her

and Laura, previous to the party at the jeweller's villa, will be able to guess at the reason of this difference. But Caterina had more solid ground on which to base the difference of her conduct towards Nanni than was furnished by that conversation alone. They had gone up the hill to Schifanoia in the morning, and had returned down the hill in the evening, in the same carriage opposite to each other. But a vast deal more love-making had been put into the short drive down the hill than into the long drive up. This, perhaps, is in some degree a general law in the matter of morning journeys to, and evening returns from, picnic parties. But it was not merely in obedience to such a law that Caterina and her lover—now avowedly such—had put the time to so much better profit on the second opportunity. That *tête-à-tête* walk of the two cousins in the Schifanoia shrubberies had intervened between the two drives; and the result was, that Nanni spoke out—or rather whispered in, for his uncle was sitting by his side—in a manner which he had never ventured to use before. And the previous conversation with Laura had prepared Caterina to listen to him as she never would have done before. But as Nanni did not judge it to be prudent, or, to say the more exact truth, as he could not yet screw his courage up to the point of declaring his intention of rebelling in the matter of the family-marriage scheme, poor Caterina was placed in a false and uncomfortable position before her family. And the resolution of speaking with the Gobbo, which Nanni had announced to his cousin, had been taken with the view of putting himself on a proper footing with Caterina's relatives, now that his explanation with his father enabled him to do so.

It was but a few minutes after the clock of the Piazza had sounded mid-day, that Nanni reached the door of the house occupied by the Boccaneras; and he feared that he should have to wait yet awhile for their return; for he was quite determined to make no attempt to see Caterina in their absence. But the Tuscan artizan, if he be punctual in nothing else, is punctual in quitting his work, be it what it may, at the blessed hour of noon. And in a minute or two Nanni saw his uncle's partner and his son coming leisurely along the street towards their home.

“ Good day, ’gnor Simone ! good day, Sandro ’” said Nanni, as they came up. “ I arrived in Florence only this morning, and I came to call on you, you see, one of the first things.”

“ We saw your excellent father, Signore, on the bridge this morning. He came to speak with the *padrone*,” said Master Simon.

“ I have the honour to wish you a very good day, Signor Nanni. Your *Signore Padre* had business with his brother, my father’s partner, as my father has remarked. I presume that that business was the object of your visit to Florence ?” said the Gobbo, in the wordy and stilted manner which he affected, and which was a little intensified on the present occasion by the feeling of hostility that had been engendered in his mind towards Nanni.

“ Yes ! that was what brought my father to Florence. But that need not have brought me, you know. My business is of a pleasanter kind, I guess ;—and the main part of it was to pay a visit to you.”

“ We are very highly honoured by your obliging condescension, Signore ; but if, as is perhaps not improbable, any part of your attention was intended for my sister, I fear that she will not be able to profit by it to-day.”

“ No ! this time, Signor Sandro, my visit is mainly meant for you. I want to have a talk, you and I together. And if you will spare me a few minutes, whilst Maestro Simone goes in to see if the dinner is ready, I shall take it as a kindness. We can take a turn in the Piazza Santa Croce.”

The Gobbo was much puzzled to guess what was coming ; but he was rather gratified by the notion that a well-made fellow with a straight back should have in some way or other need of him ; and specially pleased by the idea that he was to hear a secret of some sort ; since Nanni evidently did not choose to speak before his father. So he replied, with a magnificent wave of the hand—

“ Signore, I am at your service. Lead on, I attend you ! Father, Signor Palli and I have business together. Go to dinner, I pray you, and do not wait for me. It may be I may be detained.”

“ *Che ! che !* I won’t keep you many minutes. What I

want to say is soon said, when once one has made up one's mind to say it. Look here, my dear fellow; you have thought that I have been looking too much after *La Caterina*, haven't you?"

The poor Gobbo rather liked being called "my dear fellow" by a strapping young chap of six feet high; but he thought that the familiarity was somewhat out of place upon the present occasion, so he answered—

"I will not deny, Signor Palli, that I *have* thought that it would be more prudent if, under the circumstances, you were to take somewhat less notice of my sister. You will forgive my saying that perhaps you may naturally, in your position, fail to appreciate as highly as we do the duty of maintaining the reputation of an ancient name spotless. We of noble blood are wont to attribute a great—the rest of the world may possibly think an exaggerated—importance to these matters."

"What! are you noble too? *Per Bacco!* well, I am glad of that too, for a certain reason," cried Nanni, who had never happened to have heard of the claims of the working jeweller to descend from an ancient and noble stock.

"Sir!" cried the Gobbo, "I do not understand you. I know not what reason you may have to rejoice in the fact, which most unaccountably appears to reach you now for the first time. But I shall take leave to tell you, that ignorance of that fact, sir, does not imply a very perfect acquaintance with the annals of our country."

"No doubt! I make no doubt but you are right! But if we begin about the annals of the country, dinner will be cold before you get back! You shall tell me all about that another time. Let's come straight to the matter in hand. You said this minute that you did not like me to be about your sister so much 'under the circumstances.' Now, I want to know what circumstances you mean. That seems to me the way to go straightest at it."

But the Gobbo, like a true Florentine, was unused to go straight, as countrified Nanni phrased it, at the object of his discourse. Your true Florentine cockney likes talking too well to cut it short by going directly to the aim and end of it. Then also he has so many *riguardi* to pay attention to—so many

considerations to bear in mind—so much caution to use, lest this person should by possibility be offended, or that other person by any chance have his susceptibilities wounded—so many laws of conversational etiquette to observe,—that he can rarely be induced to say exactly what he means and all he means in plain, straightforward, and therefore short words. He deems it even coarse and uncourteous to do so. He don't tell you a fact; he allows you to understand it. He shrinks from the audacity of expressing a decided opinion; but carefully metes out to you a sufficient amount of hints—and not more than sufficient—to enable you to divine his sentiments. To all which, in the case of the poor Gobbo, had to be added a special fondness for the wordy pomposity of the diplomatic style of intercourse. So that bluff Nanni's rude country fashion of discourse scared and scandalised him, and made it difficult for him to treat the matter in hand after his own method.

“It surprises me that your worship* should find it necessary to recur to me for an explanation of the phrase,” he said, after a pause; “surely your worship must be aware of circumstances in your worship's position which might have the effect of giving rise to the difficulties which I have had the honour of pointing out to your worship's notice.”

“I say, 'gnor Sandro, let us drop the *vossignoria*. You'll get back to dinner all the sooner. And never mind what I am aware of or not aware of. I want to know what your notion of the matter is. So never mind the *riguardi*, and speak it out plain.”

“*Signore mio*,” said the Gobbo, thus urged, “there are attentions which, as it appears to me, might be flattering to the family of a well-born maiden, if paid by one unbound by other ties, but which take a different appearance when proceeding from one who is already betrothed to another.”

“That is to say, as I understand, that I ought not to make love to *La Caterina*, because I am engaged to be married to another person?”

“Since it is your worship's pleasure to put the matter into

* “*Vossignoria*” would have been the Gobbo's phrase. It is impossible to give in English an exact conversational equivalent,

words so painfully direct, I will admit that that is my meaning."

"Very good! now, *caro mio*, listen to me. Can you keep a secret?"

This was bringing the conversation on ground more to the Gobbo's taste, and he answered more readily—

"Anything, my dear sir, that you may think fit to confide to me will, I can undertake to assure you, be as safe in my breast as in your own."

"My secret need only be kept for awhile. Listen! Signor Giuseppe Palli, the jeweller, and Signor Carlo Palli, the *fattore*, may say and think what they will; but Laura don't mean to marry me, and I don't mean to marry Laura. What do you say to that?"

"Truly, Signore, I am much surprised,—I confess that I am greatly surprised. But since you have chosen to honour me with your confidence, Signor Nanni, may I ask the reason why you and the Signorina have determined on on pursuing a different line of conduct from that which had been marked out for you both?"

"Aha, friend Sandro! there we come to the greatest secret of all! Hark in your ear! Why? Because it so happens that we both love somebody else."

"Dear me! both! how strange a fatality! And *La Signorina Laura*, you say, she is in the same mind?"

"We understand each other, I tell you! We have talked it all over together, bless you. We are the best friends in the world, Laura and I are."

"And so you have agreed together that you won't have anything to say to each other?"

"That is just about it. And now, Signor Sandro Boccanera, you see I am unbound by other ties, as you call it."

"In your own eyes; but not in those of your *Signore Padre*. What will he say, when he is made aware of your determination? and, *per Bacco!* what will the *padrone*, that is to say, what will my father's partner, the Signor Giuseppe, say?"

"Well! my father knows it all pretty well by this time. And I take it my uncle is not very far off from having found out as much. Laura has told him her mind on the matter; and I sus-

pect he knows her well enough to be pretty sure that he must take her at her word."

"It must have been a very bitter pill to him! I know enough to be very sure of that! And, since you wish me to be made acquainted with these circumstances, may I ask, my dear sir, who is the man who has been fortunate enough to obtain the affection of *La Signorina Laura*? I have but little doubt that I can guess who it is; but perhaps you may wish that I should know the fact with certainty."

"No; that's Laura's secret. I am come here to tell you mine. It's odd, though, that you should think you can guess the man!" said Nanni, remembering how far he was from making the same guess.

"Ah! perhaps lookers-on see most of that game, as well as of others," said the poor Gobbo, with a sigh; "but, as you say," he continued, "that we are not to speak of *La Signorina Laura*'s secret, let us say no more about it."

"Well, now, *amico mio*, let us see whether you can be equally sharp at guessing my secret. Who do you suppose it is I love well enough to make me content to give up all the advantages of a marriage with my cousin? For advantage there would not be a little, let me tell you. Can you guess this too, Sandro *mio*?"

"Well, Signor Nanni, I won't pretend to say that I do not guess whom you mean; but truly I should never have dreamed of making such a guess half an hour ago!"

"But now you do guess; and that's enough. And now that we have at last got to the point," said Nanni, with an expression of having suffered much fatigue in the process of doing so, "what do you say about my going back home with you to pay your sister a visit? From one unbound by other ties, you know;—how was it you said it? But I take it you meant there was no harm in an honest man paying his court to a girl, if his meaning was upright and honourable. Wasn't that it?"

"Signor Palli, you speak frankly; for my part I love frankness and plain speaking. I will therefore say that I do not see, as far as the bearings of the question are now before me, any reason why I should not admit that my meaning was as you state it."

"My dear fellow, listening to the talk of you Florentines often puts me in mind of hunting down a hare, that keeps doubling and doubling, and won't run straight for a hundred yards together. But one runs into them at last. So now, to run you to earth, I ask whether I may hope for the approval and countenance of your father and yourself in begging Caterina to be my wife? yes or no?"

The stalwart farmer stopped short in his walk, and facing about, stood planted firmly on his two feet in front of his small companion, as if to prevent him from doubling about any further in his discourse, and force a direct yes or no out of him.

"*Signore mio!*" cried the little man, thus pushed, shrugging his shoulders yet higher than nature had placed them, with his intelligent triangular face and great handsome brown eyes turned up to meet the downward look of tall Nanni, and his two hands held out with their palms turned upwards, "*Signore mio*, what would you have me say to you? That such a marriage as you speak of would be more than all our modest ambition could wish for my sister is clear enough. But will there not be difficulty with your excellent father; and very possibly also with your highly respected uncle, who is also my father's partner in business? Will these gentlemen be likely to approve your choice? For you must permit me to observe, my most highly valued sir, that although the marriage you contemplate would be, as I have said——"

"Don't say it over again then, there's a good fellow!" pleaded Nanni.

"Pardon me, *padrone mio calendissimo*,* it is necessary that I should speak my sentiments. Though a marriage between *vossignoria* and my sister would be in every respect all, and more than all we could wish for her, neither *La Caterina* for herself, nor her family for her, would consent to her entering a family against the will of its chiefs."

"Not against my father's consent;—that is reasonable. But you do not mean to say that if my father was agreeable, you would stop to ask what my uncle thought about it? *Miseri-*

* "My most to be revered master."

cordia !* If you come to that, what would become of a man who had half-a-dozen uncles !”

“I am not prepared to say that if your *Signore Padre* were fully consenting to such a match, the approval of your uncle ought to be deemed absolutely an essential condition. But in the position in which we stand with reference to your respected uncle, it would be, perhaps, difficult to make such a marriage in defiance of his wishes.”

“Well, ’gnor Sandro, I won’t deny that my father wished me to make a match of it with my cousin Laura. That was his plan. It was all settled with my uncle ; only it wasn’t all settled with Laura and me. And now my father knows that it is not to be. I’ve told him my mind on the matter, and he has told me his. But he don’t expect any longer that I and Laura are to be man and wife. And I tell you, he won’t stand out against my wishes in the matter. I have no fear of having his consent. And as for my uncle, look you, if I am not to marry his daughter, I fancy it won’t make two straws difference to him what becomes of me in the matter of marriage or any other. That’s what I think.”

By this time the two young men had recommenced their walk up and down the Piazza in front of the great doors of Santa Croce. They walked in silence a few paces, when Nanni said suddenly—

“Well ! now I suppose I may come back with you, and see what *La Caterina* will say to me, eh Sandro ? Are you willing to have me for a brother-in-law ?” he continued, putting out his hand to the Gobbo as he spoke.

Poor Sandro took his hand in both of his, and looking up into his companion’s bluff, handsome, jolly face with a sad smile in his large brown eyes, said—

“It is little good I can be, such as you see me, Signor Nanni, either as a brother-in-law or in any other way, God help me ! But you know the old story of the lion and the mouse ; and if you will call me your friend, I shall be proud, if I should ever have an opportunity, to show myself such !”

“Done, and done ! for a bargain !” cried Nanni, striking

* A common Tuscan exclamation, of which it is difficult to give the full force. “A pretty story, indeed !” perhaps comes near it.

his great broad palm on the slender emaciated hand of the Gobbo; "and don't you think to belittle yourself. I have heard tell of a country where they count a man's height from the bridge of his nose upwards. And faith, in that country you would be the taller man of us two."

"It is very kind of you to say so," returned the hunchback; "but I am afraid that country must be too far off for me ever to hope to see it."

"Well! I have heard people talk of your cleverness, I can tell you, without going far from where we are now standing. Brains are a very fine thing, and that's just the article I am short of, by all accounts."

"I doubt your being very short of them, *amico mio*, though may be you have not used yours as much as I have mine. 'That makes all the difference.'"

"Well! you help me with your brains, and if ever you want the help of a stronger fist than your own, there is one that you may use whenever you need it. Is it a bargain?"

"Done, and done again!" answered the Gobbo, with a brighter smile than before. "If the brains are as good after their kind as the fist is, I will be content."

"I dare say I shall need you oftener than you are likely to need me. I want you to begin your part of the bargain at once. You must undertake to plead my cause with your father. I can tackle *La Caterina*, Heaven bless her, myself. I think, somehow or other, one can talk to a girl when one's very fond of her without having any brains; but when one goes to the same job against the grain," continued Nanni, reflecting on the difficulties he had experienced in his courtship of his cousin, "it's surprising how clever one must be to do it well!"

"As for my father," replied the Gobbo, letting the philosophy of love-making pass, as being a matter on which he had no experience of any value to offer, "he will of course feel, as everybody else will, that all the advantage is on our side in such a marriage. I wish it were less entirely so! We are but very poor folks, 'gnor Nanni; we have nothing to boast of, save indeed of an old name and a line of noble ancestors. You will at least give your children noble blood by one side of the house, Signor Palli!" said the Gobbo, dwelling with pleasure,

excusably enough, on the one thing in the world he had to be proud of.

"Ay! To be sure! that's a fine thing. I must tell Babbo of that. You have lots of ancestors then, Sandro *mio*, I suppose?" asked Nanni, meditatively.

"There are all their names written in the pedigree of the Boccanera family," answered the Gobbo, pompously. "There are no great number; but I think I can remember them all in their order."

"Can you though, indeed!" rejoined Nanni, devoutly hoping in his secret heart that his brother-in-law *in posse* would not begin to recite the bead-roll then and there. "I suppose, though," he added, after a minute's meditation, "I must have had ancestors, too! I *know* I had a grandfather. For I can remember him now; and a fine old man he was; six foot in his stockings, if he was an inch! But may be a grandfather don't count. You don't think much of your grandfather, I reckon, in your family."

"My grandfather, rest his soul, was no great thing; only a poor working jeweller like my father."

And so Nanni remained in the humbled conviction that grandfathers were useless in the way of ancestors.

"And now, *caro mio*," said Nanni, as they came to the door of the Boccanera's house, "I'll tell you how it shall be. I'll wait here, and you shall go in and see how the land lies, and manage so that I can speak to Caterina alone. I've never right down asked her to be mine yet; and to tell you the honest truth, I am all of a quake at the thought of doing it. I had rather not come in at all, than not see her alone."

"I'll contrive it," said the Gobbo; "never fear! I'll be back in a minute."

"You may have all the house to yourself, if you like," said he, returning almost immediately, "for Babbo has finished his morsel,—'tis but a morsel he ever eats,—and is gone to take his cup of coffee at the *café* round the corner of the *mercato*. I will get my bit in the kitchen; and there is Caterina all alone in the room."

"Did you tell her anything? Did you say I was there?" asked Nanni, with much anxiety.

"Not a word! She fancies you are on the other side of the Consuma, and two to one she is thinking of you now."

Thus encouraged, Nanni ventured to enter, and stepping up the stairs as if he were a burglar dreadfully afraid of being heard, knocked at the door of the family sitting-room.

*Chi è ?** said a voice Nanni knew every note of right well, in answer to his knock; and added in the next instant, without waiting for any reply, "*Passi pure!*" †

And in the next instant Nanni stood in the only presence of which he felt the slightest fear. And nearly, not quite, the same might be said of Caterina.

She jumped from the chair on which she had been sitting near the window, engaged on some description of needlework, and hastily concealed the article on which she had been employed in the bosom of her dress, as girls invariably do when they have any small matter to hide at a short notice.

"Signor Nanni!" she cried, flushing up to the roots of her raven-black hair, "who would have dreamed of seeing you to-day!"

"May I come in, Caterina?" said Nanni, blushing as hotly as she did, and much more embarrassed in his speech.

"I suppose that means, *Signore mio*, 'may I stay in,' for it is too late to ask, it seems to me, if you may come in."

"Well then, Caterina, may I stay in . . . for a short time. I have come to speak to you."

"I am glad to hear that, at all events, 'gnor Nanni," said Caterina, with a sly demureness, "for the last time I had the pleasure of seeing you, if I remember right, you did not do much in the way of speaking at all."

"I had nothing to say then, Caterina," replied Nanni, with the utmost simplicity; "but this time I have."

Caterina's heart began at this point in the dialogue to beat with a force that communicated a movement to the bit of white muslin which covered her bosom sufficient to have betrayed secrets to a more practised and close observer than honest Nanni, who had quite enough to do to think just then of what

* "Who's there? Come in any way."

† *Pure* has an infinite number of shades of meaning; and may here be best perhaps, rendered as in the text.

he was saying and doing himself, without giving any part of his mind to watching others.

"But I do not know, Signor Nanni," said Caterina, looking down on the brick floor, on which she was busily tracing the lines of the bricks with the point of her foot, "I do not know whether you may stay here long enough to say anything. For my father, you know, will be back from the *café* in a minute, and I do not know where Sandro is; but he will be here directly, and you know, Signor Nanni——"

"Sandro is come in," said Nanni, "I came in with him. We have been having a walk together, and I came here with a message from him."

"A message from Sandro!" cried Caterina, her thoughts suddenly taking another turn. "Is there anything the matter? Why does he not come himself? Where is he?"

And so saying she was making for the door to call him, and Nanni saw that in another instant he would either have to say his say before Sandro, or to leave it unsaid.

Urged by the imminence of his danger, Nanni crossed the little room in a couple of strides, and placing himself with his back to the door, said—

"Caterina! will you not listen to me then?"

Then Caterina became quite sure that her first instinctive feeling had been the right one, and she knew very well what the nature of the "message" Nanni had to deliver was to be.

"But if Sandro gave you a message for me, 'gnor Nanni, I suppose there is nothing that he may not listen to," said she, hypocritically.

"Oh yes! he knows all about it, Sandro does. But it is to you only, Caterina, I mean to say it is I only *don't* you know what it is I wish to say to you, Caterina?"

"Holy Virgin! How can I guess, *Signore mio*? A message from Sandro! Oh, I know,—that he is going to the *Arena Goldoni** to-night, and that I must not expect him home to supper."

The little hypocrite! It was too bad. But cats *will* sport with mice before they eat them; and an angler would not thank

* An open-air theatre at Florence.

you for a fish landed without any "play." But poor Nanni's matter-of-fact simplicity was too absolute to afford much sport.

"No, Signora, Sandro said nothing about the *Arca Goldoni*. It wasn't that."

"What can it have been then? I am sure I can't guess, 'gnor Nanni."

"Not if you were to think of the day up at Schifanoia, and the drive down the hill in the evening?" pleaded poor Nanni.

"Ah, what a pleasant day that was! I often think of it," shuffled his little tormentor.

"Well, then, I am sure, dearest Caterina, putting two and two together, you ought to be able to guess my errand here to-day."

"Putting *two* and *two* together!" repeated Caterina, with an emphasis upon the noun number, which ought to have made Nanni's course clear before him. But though he had boasted that no brains were necessary to him for the carrying on of a conversation with his Caterina, he was now at a loss for the need of a small allowance of "that article," as he phrased it.

"Yes; when I say putting two and two together," he stammered, "I mean that what I said then should lead you to guess what it is I want to say now."

"If that is it, 'gnor Nanni, perhaps the best way would be to say over again what you said then. But I think I hear Sandro coming out of the kitchen."

Thus spurred, and rendered desperate by the irresistible provocative prettiness of Caterina's *mignonne* figure, as she stood, still busily engaged in following the zigzag lines of the bricks on the floor with the point of a most exasperatingly pretty little foot, and shooting wickedly murderous glances from under the long lashes of her laughing black eyes, Nanni turned at bay.

"I forget what I said, but I know that, coming in at the gate at night, while uncle and the priest were talking to the *finanzilra** at the carriage window, that is what I did!" he cried suddenly, encircling her waist as he spoke with his arm, and imprinting a very thoroughly-delivered kiss on her cheeks.

* The *Octroi* men at the city gate, who have to be satisfied that the carriage contains nothing liable to *octroi* before it can enter the city.

"For shame, Signor Nanni!" said Caterina, disengaging herself; "is that the way to——"

"Yes, that is the way to ask you to let me do the same always, whenever I like, say once every ten minutes, and never to let anybody else do the same. Yes, that is the way to ask you to be my wife, Caterina; for, *per Bacco*, I don't know any better!"

"And is that the message you had to bring me from Sandro, 'gnor Nanni?"

"Any way," said Nanni, looking rather shamefaced, "he knew that was what I was come to say to you."

"And did he approve of your intention of saying it?"

"Yes, he did. You may ask him all about it. We had a long talk, Sandro and I. Oh, Caterina, Caterina *mia!* if you will only approve too, it is all right."

"And your father, Signor Carlo, Nanni, and your uncle, what will they say?"

"But what do you say? I will answer for the rest. My father and I understand each other. What do you say, Caterina?"

"Why, *Signore mio*, if they all agreed, it would not become me to stand out and say no."

"Then you say yes? But say it, dearest, with your own sweet lips!"

"Mind, Nanni," said Caterina, in a grave manner, "I said *if* all the others were agreed."

"Well, so be it. If my father and yours consent, you will not say no?"

"No," said Caterina, laughing; "will that do?"

"No; say yes, if it's only to show that you can say yes!" replied Nanni, who had by this time recovered the use of brains sufficient for the occasion, and who had got his great strong arm again round Caterina's lithe little waist. "Say yes!" he repeated, as, not seeking this time to escape from his arm, she held up her face towards his with lips tightly closed, as if to refuse the utterance of the desired word. That was certainly the meaning of their position; but it did also give them very much the appearance of inviting a kiss. Nanni bent his face slowly and gradually towards them. "Say yes!" he repeated,

giving her a little shake with the arm which was round her waist, and still bringing his lips nearer to hers. "Say it!" and when there was not above half an inch of distance remaining between them, so that the breath of the required monosyllable was more felt than the sound heard, the "yes" was uttered, and the deed instantaneously sealed and delivered in due form.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CANON OF SAN LORENZO ON BUSINESS AT HOME AND AT ROME.

THE Collegiate Chapter of San Lorenzo was proud of its decidedly distinguished member, the Rev. Canon Guido Guidi. He was well known to be a rising man. In the first place, gentlemen were rare—and are still rarer now, than they were in the early years of this century—in the ranks of the Tuscan church. And the Rev. Guido Guidi was undeniably a gentleman, by birth, by connection, by culture, manners, and outward semblance. And the church generally made the most of its few aristocratic members. They were used as the show specimens of the establishment, and were put accordingly in the most conspicuous places. The Chapter of San Lorenzo, once a very aristocratic foundation, with princes on its rolls in the palmy days of church and state, was well aware that in its present humbled condition it counted no man in its ranks who could be compared to the Rev. Canon Guidi as a show priest; and it made much of him, and founded hopes upon him accordingly. In the next place, the gentlemanlike Canon was—what was a still rarer phenomenon in the church of Tuscany, and rarest of all when found in combination with the other advantages which have been rehearsed—a man of learning, attainments, and literary tastes and habits. No wonder that such a man should be marked out for honours and advancement. There was no knowing how important might be the lustre which would probably be reflected by such a member on the chapter. A red

hat was by no means the utmost point to which such a man as the Canon Guidi, so placed, might reasonably aspire. He had already obtained distinction as the author of one or two small works on professional subjects, which had been very favourably noticed at Rome. And it was known that he was now engaged on a learned work on the interesting topic of the reserved cases of the confessional, from which much was expected.

When, therefore, in the course of November in the year in which the circumstances here narrated took place, the Canon made known to his colleagues of the chapter that certain inquiries and researches necessary to the prosecution of the work on which he was engaged made a journey to Rome indispensable to him, every facility was at once accorded him for the purpose.

In the course of the month, or thereabouts, which had elapsed since the date of that visit to the third floor of Palazzo Lunardi, a detailed account of which has been given, and which, as it will be remembered, had left Marietta in so painful a state of nervous excitement and mental struggle, the Canon had frequently repeated his visits. He never failed to make minute inquiries after the state of the old Canon's health, observing that it was generally at the fall of the year that persons in extreme old age were observed to fail,—that the end of a life so prolonged was usually painless,—more like the quiet extinction of a lamp in which all the oil has been consumed, than any forcible disruption of the body and soul;—and that the most perfect apparent health was not, at such an age as that of Canon Lunardi, to be trusted as any guarantee for prolonged existence, as one of the usual circumstances of death in extreme old age was apt to be its suddenness. He did not upon any of these occasions enter again formally on the subject of his last conversation with Marietta; but he was careful ever to keep before her eyes the rapid lapse of the time of grace which remained before the sale of the palace was to be effected, and, consequently, the hope of her life accomplished or frustrated for ever; and thus he provided that the fever of her mind should be constantly fed by fresh fuel, and that the usual effect of a protracted struggle between principle and the desire for any object longed for with an intensity almost touching monomania, should do its work on her soul. In such cases, as Canon Guidi well knew,

principle is rarely victorious, unless the victory has been snatched by a *coup-de-main* early in the fight.

Often, during that supremely miserable time, had the unhappy woman feared that reason, which held the balance in her mind with so uncertain and vacillating a tenure, would wholly fail her. Often, during her long vigils in the chapel, where she would pass hours of the night, would she fancy that the effigies of the dead around her upbraided her for her culpable and cowardly weakness in shrinking from the accomplishment of the duty to which she had vowed her life. She would humble her spirit in the dust for having dared to oppose her ignorance and the blind instincts of her heart to the superior knowledge of so tried a friend and so competent an adviser as the Canon of San Lorenzo. She would return to her tear-steeped pillow, determined to conquer the weak nature within her,—to be true to her trust, to her blood, and to her vow. She would resolve at Guidi's next visit to put herself entirely in his hands, and walk blindly by his guidance towards the sacred end she had proposed to herself. And as often, when she rose fevered, unrested, from her bed in the morning, and had to meet her uncle, receive his affectionate and cheery greeting, say words of affection, far from unfelt, in return, and do her daily ministrings to his well-being and comfort, she hated herself with a loathing of the night thoughts that had dominated her soul during the hours of their ascendancy, and poured out her whole heart in supplications to be delivered from the possession of them.

The fearful struggle had worn her to a shadow. Her tall and spare but finely formed and commanding figure began to stoop a little at the shoulders. The rich black tresses, which still made admirable contrast with the marble whiteness of her pure and clear, but bloodless complexion, were more noticedly touched with silver-grey lights on the surface of the large bands in which she wore them,—wonderfully so, considering the shortness of the time in which the change had been operated! The mild and melancholy expression which had been habitual in her large, dark, liquid eyes, was now rarely to be seen there. It was changed for the fitful lustre of fever, marking alike the nervous restlessness of the mind, and the ravages made by the struggle on the body.

There were few to mark these changes ; for the intercourse with the Palli family had almost wholly ceased of late. Sebastian, poor fellow, was too much occupied with his racking anxieties and sorrows, and with his labour on the forthcoming opera, on which he had staked so much, to be watchful of the changes in a face seen daily and hourly. And the Canon, though he did at times gaze wistfully into her face, when it chanced that the light so fell upon it as to make it visible to him, was past the time when the failing faculties of all kinds take much heed of those changes in another to which they are so blind in themselves. The Canon Guidi saw the daily increasing alteration in Marietta, and understood all the significance of it ;—saw it with a passing sigh of regret, that *that* sacrifice also should be necessary for the straight and unbending treading of the path on which he had to walk ; but knowing his own purpose, and comprehending the means by which it might be advanced, saw it with approval.

One day, in the course of these visits to Palazzo Lunardi, the Canon Guidi found occasion to speak with Sebastian in Marietta's absence. Gently and kindly reminding the young man of the conversation they had had together some weeks before in the Piazza del Duomo, he asked him if he had come to any determination on the subject. The young composer replied with perfect frankness, that the more he had reflected on all the Canon had said to him, the more he had been forced to admit to himself the entire truth of all he had urged ;—that, nevertheless, the step proposed was one that he would fain avoid if possible, if only from the fact that it was an irrevocable one ;—and that he had made up his mind to give himself the chance of success in the work on which he was now engaged. He was not altogether without hope that he had done something better than he had before achieved. He had put his whole heart into the work, had laboured conscientiously ;—if he were rewarded with any measure of success, he proposed still to seek for independence and a maintenance for himself and Marietta from his profession ; if he failed, he would then be ready to admit that the game was over for him, and would avail himself with deeply-felt gratitude of the Canon's kindly-proposed plan.

And Guidi did not by any word seek to dissuade him from

his determination. On the contrary, he acquiesced in it with apparent approval.

"The appointment," he said, "is not to be filled up till towards the end of Carnival; and by that time you will probably know how you stand. When is your opera to be brought out? I wish I could do anything to contribute to its success. But that is a world, you know," he added, with a smile, "beyond the ken of the cassock. There I am powerless. Should you change that world for another, I may be able to help you,—not only at starting. When is it to come off, and where?"

Sebastian named one of the small theatres, of which there are so many in the spectacle-loving City of Flowers; and said that the *impresario* had promised to bring his opera out at the beginning of Carnival.

"That will do excellently well!" rejoined the priest. "You will then know your fate in time to decide on my proposal. I heartily wish that your opera may have all the success you wish, *because* you wish it, my dear boy. And, after all, one can only wish a man to be happy according to his own notions. Otherwise, I should say I wish you might fail; for I am very sure the career I am proposing to you is, under all the circumstances of your case, the better one. *A rivederla!*"

It was a few days only after this conversation that the Canon was to start for Rome. On the evening of the day before his departure, as he was busy in his study making his preparations for his journey, aided by his *governante* Assunta, there came a ring at the Canon's door.

"Go, and see who it is, Assunta," said the Canon; "I expect a Signor Gualandi; if it is he, show him in. If it is any one else, I am not at home."

And a minute afterwards Signor Francesco Gualandi, a stout, florid little man, whose appearance was rather of the shabby genteel order, walked into the Canon's cosy room, making a very low obeisance as he entered.

"Good evening, Signore!" said the dignified ecclesiastic, returning the salutation with the easy courtesy of an affable superior; "pray do me the favour to take a chair. You find me in the hurry incidental to a somewhat sudden departure for Rome—a call on business, which will not detain me long, I hope."

“If your reverence would prefer to put off my little affair——”

“Oh, no! I can spare you the minutes which will suffice to say the few words that are needed. Shut the door, Assunta, and do not let us be disturbed. I requested you to call upon me, Signore, because I wished to tell you, before leaving Florence, that I have, I think, succeeded in smoothing over for the time your little difficulty.”

“Oh! your reverence is too condescendingly kind! How can I ever thank your reverence sufficiently!”

“No thanks at all are due or needed, Signor Gualandi,” returned the Canon, somewhat loftily. “I have acted as appeared to me right and just; and I trust that you will be careful in future to justify my intercession.”

“Doubt it not, your reverence! doubt it not. It has ever been my endeavour——”

“I believe so. When I spoke with you first, at the request of my friend the Curate of Sant’ Ambrogio, I was struck by the right feeling you expressed on the subject, and was thence induced to see the minister in your behalf.”

“Ah! your reverence has the gift of reading a man’s heart!”

“It is a faculty gained, as others are, by practice, my good friend. Now the matter stands thus, Signor Gualandi,” continued the Canon, rising from his chair and standing with his back to the comfortable wood fire, which was blazing on the low hearth, while his visitor sat with his hat in both hands on the edge of his chair, at some three or four yards’ distance; “you have been *impresario* of the theatre you now hold for a short time only, I believe?”

“Only for two seasons, your reverence.”

“And your relations, as I understand, with the authorities have been always heretofore satisfactory?”

“Never a word, your reverence——”

“And you have no idea who has thought it his duty to make the representations to the minister which have caused your present difficulty?”

“I know no more than your reverence does who it could have been!” said the little man, throwing up his eyes and hands, with the hat still in them, to attest the verity of his assertion. And in doing so he missed the smile which passed over the

priest's handsome face as he made the comparison. Had he observed it ever so acutely, however, he would never have guessed that it was caused by the fact that his reverence was perfectly well informed of the whole matter. For the truth was, that an anonymous complaint of the tendency of certain representations at Signor Gualandi's theatre had been made by his own parish priest, the Curate of Sant' Ambrogio, who had subsequently offered to procure for him the favourable intercession of the Canon of San Lorenzo; and who had done both these things at the request of the reverend Canon himself.

"No matter!" continued the latter; "I have examined the pieces which seem to have given some scandal, and perhaps there are some expressions in them which might have been better avoided. You see, Signor Gualandi, a very lamentable degree of freedom and much irreverence for things and personages to whom reverence is due, prevailed under the political system which has happily come to an end;—a relaxation in your theatrical world, as in all else. Now it is the highly laudable desire of our present legitimate rulers to correct all this, and restore as quickly as possible the tone of the public mind in such matters. These things are watched, and very rightly, by jealous eyes at present; and I am not surprised that some well-meaning person has deemed it his duty to call the attention of the authorities to the passages I have alluded to. However, I so spoke to the minister, who was good enough to attribute considerable weight to my opinion on the subject, that no further inconvenience will follow from the complaint which has been made. Be circumspect and careful for the future, and you will hear no more of the matter."

"Your reverence may depend on me to exercise the utmost vigilance; I can assure your reverence——"

"Good. I doubt not you will be prudent. And now I think I need not detain you any longer. Good evening."

"*Levo l' incommodo,* riverenza!*" said the *impresario*, rising. "I would that I knew how to thank your reverence."

"As I have said, Signor, no thanks are necessary. I wish you good evening."

* Literally, "I remove the inconvenience;" a common phrase of leaving in Tuscany, especially from an inferior to a superior.

And Signor Gualandi bowed himself back to the door, which he was on the point of closing behind him, when the Canon said suddenly,—

“ Oh, Signor Gualandi! By-the-bye, it strikes me that there *is* a matter in which you might be useful to me,—or rather indeed not to me, for it is no affair of mine, but to certain personages with whom it is good for you to stand well. You understand me?”

“ *Mio padrone! padronissimo!* Anything in my power I am sure I should be too happy.”

“ It has just occurred to me that it is at your theatre, if I mistake not, that an opera is to be brought out next Carnival by a young man, a certain Signor”—(and here the Canon referred to a paper which he took from a rack on the mantel-shelf)—“ a certain Signor Sebastiano de’ Lunardi. Is it not so?”

“ Your reverence has been rightly informed. I have made such an arrangement with the gentleman your reverence refers to. I do not think there can be anything objectionable in the work proposed; but I need hardly say, your reverence, that if——”

“ That is not the point in question in this case, Signor Gualandi. It is this. There are reasons why it is wished that the young gentleman in question, who, as I am informed, and as you perhaps are aware, belongs to a noble and ancient family, though one now impoverished,—there are reasons, I say, that make it desirable that this young man should not enter on the career which he proposes to himself. I need not tell a man of your experience in the world, Signor Gualandi, that young men are often apt to take steps in the outset of life which it is sometimes very difficult for their friends to prevent, but which, nevertheless, their best advisers would fain dissuade them from. Doubtless you are aware that, since the happy restoration of order and legitimate rule in this country, it has been very wisely a great object with the government to foster and uphold as far as possible the old noble families of Florence; and——”

“ *Basta! Ho capito!*” * cried the *impresario*, delighted at

* “ Enough! I understand.”

having it in his power to do anything agreeable to "the authorities." "*Basta!* Signor de' Lunardi shall put no opera on my boards; that your reverence may rest assured of."

"Nay, Signor Impresario," rejoined the priest; "that is not exactly what is wished. A refusal on your part to accept this work would only lead to new attempts to produce it elsewhere, very likely under auspices less respectable than yours. And the matter would thus be rendered worse, instead of mended. No; it is necessary to disgust the young gentleman with the career which he proposes to himself, and which he doubtless thinks is one all of roses and laurels. You could tell him a different story, eh, Signor Gualandi? But he will believe no such story. Young men must buy their own experience! No; what is desired by those whom you would wish to oblige is, that the work should be produced, and should meet with egregious failure,—you understand me? A thorough *fiasco** would cure the youth of his ill-advised ambition, and send him to some career which his friends might see him adopt with pleasure. Do you see?"

"Perfectly, your reverence, perfectly; and your reverence is no doubt right in your observations," replied the *impresario*, with a rather rueful and blank expression of countenance. "And certainly it would be very easy to afford the young gentleman the salutary lesson you speak of. But it is rather a hard thing to——"

"Well, well, say no more, Signor Gualandi. The business, as I said, is none of mine. I will report to persons interested in this young man that you decline to aid them in this matter."

"Not so, not so, your reverence! I entreat your reverence neither to think nor to say anything of the sort. I was only about to venture the remark that such a measure would be attended with some little loss of credit, and a more considerable sacrifice of money. I think little of the first. We are used to such mishaps; and we can curry favour with the public rather than otherwise by immediately withdrawing the piece disapproved of. But put it on the boards how we will, a loss of money there must be. And, I confess——"

* A cant phrase for a break-down, or failure.

“Oh, as far as that goes, I have no doubt that I could arrange that you should be indemnified for any such loss. Of course, there can be no wish that you should be victimised in the matter.”

“I am distressed beyond measure, Signor Canonico, that my circumstances should compel me to advert to that aspect of the matter,” said the *impresario*, well pleased at the prospect of being able to turn a penny by the *fiasco*, which might very possibly have occurred at his own cost, if things had been left to themselves; “but your reverence is very good to take my position into consideration in this respect. *Lasci fare a me!** Trust to Francesco Gualandi to prepare as complete a *fiasco nelle regole*† as ever an unlucky composer had. I shall be happy to contribute to the young gentleman’s cure, and glad to be the means of sending him to some better trade than ours.”

“That is all, then, that need be said on the subject. You may be assured that your compliance will not be forgotten in certain quarters. Of course, I need hardly caution you that no word of this conversation should ever reach any other ears. Were it otherwise, inconveniences might follow which I should regret to have exposed you to.”

“*A chi lo dite! Riverenza! Non dubiti, nò!*”‡ said the *impresario*, putting one dirty forefinger to the side of his rubicund nose.

“Good evening, then, Signor Gualandi. We have perfectly understood each other.”

“I have the honour to wish your reverence a very good evening and a prosperous journey!” returned Signor Gualandi, bowing himself out. And this time he was not recalled; the real object of the fictitious complaint against the *impresario* and of his interview with the Canon having been thus achieved.

“Ten to one,” muttered the Canon to himself, as the door closed on his visitor, “that I might have safely left the result of my young friend’s music to its own merits. But when a

* “Leave me alone to manage it.”

† Literally, “in the rules,” *i.e.*, a regular, thorough failure.

‡ “To whom do you say it? Let your reverence have no doubt about it, none.” *A chi lo dite* means, “Am I a man to whom such a caution is necessary?”

little diplomacy may make a probability into a certainty, it is wise to throw no chance away. So now, my friend Sebastian, I think we may bespeak a cassock and three-cornered hat for you. And what could I have done better for the lad," mused the priest, "if I had no motive save his own welfare?"

On the evening of the third day after the date of the above conversation, the wretched, ill-contrived wooden box, which called itself the diligence from Florence to Rome, with its six miserable, under-sized horses, its rope harness and mud-bedraggled exterior, interior, conductor, postilions, and passengers, jolted through the filthy ill-paved streets of Rome, after having duly undergone its hour or hour and a half of purgatory at the gate, while the resigned and patient, but miserable and over-tired passengers opened their trunks and packages scattered about in the mud of the road, and bribed the officials of the gate to spare them yet worse treatment. Wearily, lamely, fecklessly, incapably, but with unceasing salvos of whip-cracking, which expressed the postilions' triumphant sense of the feat they had performed in arriving at all, the wretched vehicle was dragged at a slow walk to the vast folding gates of the "Privileged Pontifical Diligence Office," and swallowed up by the cavernous archway, while the heavy doors were closed behind it; here more delay, more searching, more bullying, more bribing, more torment of all sorts, were in store for the unfortunate travellers, who were pounced on as they descended from the vehicle by the cocked-hatted officials of the priest-king's gendarmerie.

But a sudden and remarkable change of manner came over those grim warriors when a gold-buckled shoe, followed by a well-proportioned black silk stockinged leg, was seen putting itself forth from the murky interior of the conveyance. Off went the cocked hats, while an obsequious arm was held at either side to assist one of the privileged and dominant caste to alight; and the Canon of San Lorenzo,—his outward man somewhat the worse for his journey, but still looking a dignified priest in every inch of him,—affably availing himself of the proffered aid, stepped gracefully forth, and passed unquestioned between the saluting soldiers, spoke a word or two to their superior officer, who came forward with a bow to meet him, and

was very speedily assisted together with his belongings to a hack-carriage, and forwarded to his destination ; the gendarmes, custom-house officers, postilions, porters, and nondescript loiterers bowing profoundly as he drove off, and then returning leisurely to perform their office upon the envious lay victims who were left behind.

The more fortunate Canon's *fiacre* took him to a small house in the neighbourhood of the Sapienza, which was the home of a reverend professor in that celebrated university, busied then, as now, in teaching that the sun moves round the earth, as proved by the miracle of Joshua among other evidences of the same truth, despite the opinion adopted by some people to the contrary. The Reverend Marco Brizzini was an old friend and college mate of the Canon of San Lorenzo, and hospitably made his house the Florentine priest's home during his stay in the Eternal City.

"How long a spell do you propose to give us, this time, Guido?" asked his friend, after the first greetings had passed between them.

"I hope not more than a couple of days, Marco. I have urgent need to be at home again as soon as may be."

"Why, Guido, one would think that you had all the business of the Sacred College on your shoulders; you are always in such a hurry."

"In fact, my friend, I have just at present many things to think of, besides my little work, which I am anxious to have in the press by the end of the year. My business here has been prepared for me; and I shall only need to have a little conversation with my learned friend the Superior of the Jesuits. He expects me to wait on him to-morrow."

And so, after a social supper, and a little chat, the over-tired Canon went to his bed.

The next morning early, after making a careful toilette, he sallied forth alone and on foot; and instead of proceeding at once to the House of the Jesuits, as might have been expected from what he had said to his friend the professor, took his way towards that remote part of the city in the neighbourhood of the Temple of Vesta, and of the house which is pointed out as that one inhabited by Rienzi. Walking forwards from the

latter towards the former of these buildings, as a person would in continuance of his way from the centre of the city, the Canon's eye soon lighted on the figure of a man standing with his back turned towards him, and his hands clasped behind him, gazing apparently at the beautiful little building called the Temple of Vesta. Pursuing his walk in such a direction as to keep him exactly behind this individual, he approached till he stood not more than a yard behind his back. Still the man continued gazing at the Temple of Vesta, with his hands behind his back, and neither turned round nor moved.

"Will it be a fine day, sir?" said the Canon, standing immediately behind the stranger. But the latter did not reply or move a limb.

"Will it be fine out of doors to-day, sir?" asked the Canon again, with the same result.

"Will it be fine indoors?" he repeated, in the same quiet tone. And then the man, still without answering a word, or turning his head, began to walk leisurely forward; and the Canon, appearing to take no further special notice of him, followed him at a little distance.

The stranger soon turned towards the right, taking a direction away from the Tiber, and after a long walk, during the course of which he had never once turned his head, paused before the door of a small low building in the road leading from the Lateran to Santa Maria Maggiore. There, still without turning his head, he thrust out one arm, and pointed to the door; and, having stood thus a few seconds, pursued his walk.

The Canon stood still until his conductor, whose face he had never seen, and who had never seen him, was out of sight in the distance, and then stepped up to the door which had been indicated to him, and knocked at it three distinct knocks. At the third it was opened by the pulling of a cord, and the priest entered and carefully closed it after him.

The whole of the small space on the ground-floor of the little building was occupied by a narrow stair and one room. A single glance was sufficient to show that there was no human being in that part of the house. There was, in fact, nothing whatsoever in the room; and the bare stone walls showed clearly that nobody could be concealed there. The Canon,

after assuring himself of this at a glance, proceeded to mount the stairs, which brought him to another room on the first floor. And it was plain that these two rooms and the stair constituted the whole of the building.

The upstairs room was as entirely empty and unfurnished as that below. But at the side of it, furthest from the one window, which was partially boarded up, so as to make the light in the chamber very dim and imperfect, a portion of the space was divided off by a wooden partition; and in this partition there was a small shelf, like that used by the cash-takers at a theatre, and above it an aperture just large enough for a hand to pass.

"Two, seven, nineteen," said the Canon, advancing into the chamber.

"Right," said a voice from behind the screen, and then added, "Five, nine, twelve."

"Right," replied the Canon.

"Pay the fee!" said the voice, and the Canon drew from his pocket two hundred dollars in gold, and placed the coin on the little shelf. An old and wrinkled hand was put forth through the aperture, and the money was taken in, and apparently counted; for in a minute or two the voice again repeated, "Right;" and then saying "*Ecco la roba*,"* the hand placed on the shelf a small packet neatly wrapped in white paper.

The Canon took it, and after looking at it for a moment with an earnest glance, put it into an inside breast-pocket, and then uttered the single word, "Directions."

"One packet weekly to produce the effect desired in two months."

"Good!" said the priest, and proceeding to leave the house as he had entered it, he followed the road to Santa Maria Maggiore, and soon returned to the inhabited part of the city.

The other matters with which the Reverend Guido Guidi occupied his two days at Rome need not detain us. He did visit the Superior of the Jesuits, and did consult him about some points to be treated in the work on "Reserved Cases." He saw sundry other personages of more or less weight and

* "Here are the goods."

eminence in the Church, and left on the mind of every one of them the impression that the well-bred and distinguished Canonico of San Lorenzo was a man fitted to rise to the higher spheres of the hierarchy.

And on the evening of the eighth day from that on which he had left Florence, the Canon entered his study again, and the first thing he did was to transfer the white-paper packet from his breast-pocket to a secret drawer, in a little cabinet, of which the key was fastened by a gold chain around his neck.

CHAPTER XXI.

NANNI TURNED CONFESSOR.

WHEN Nanni had returned to the *Pappagallo*, after the triumphant conclusion of the decisive visit to his mistress, related in a former chapter, he had found his father in a state of extreme irritation against his brother. He was determined to return to the Casentino the next day. Nanni had intended to remain for a few weeks in Florence. But when he broached this scheme to his father, the Fattore had insisted on the necessity of his son's being at home for the vintage. And Nanni could not deny that it was the very last time of the year at which he ought to be from home.

"Nay, *figlio mio!*" said he, "go thou home with me to-morrow, and help me see to the vintaging; and as soon as ever the wine is in the vats, thou shalt come up for a spell at Florence, and go a-courting to thy heart's content,—for I know that is what thou'rt after."

"Very well, *padre mio*; so be it! And to tell you the truth, after I had had a talk with my cousin Laura this morning——"

"Tell me naught of thy cousin Laura! I want to hear nothing more of any of the lot of them. I tell thee, Nanni, thou shouldst not marry thy cousin, not with my consent, if she and her father were to come a-begging for thee on their knees!"

"Why, what's gone wrong with my uncle, Babbo? As for

Laura, I'll go bail she has neither said nor done anything she shouldn't."

"You don't mean to say," cried his father, turning sharply round upon him, "that you intend to run that contrariwise as to be making up to Laura just when my mind is off it?"

"Not I, Babbo. There is no love-making between Laura and me, and never will be. But she is a good girl, and a good cousin for all that. But what is wrong, I say, with uncle?"

"Why, they have swindled us out of our share of the old Palazzo!"

"What old Palazzo?" asked Nanni, innocently.

"*Cospetto!* the palace, Palazzo Lunardi, to be sure. When Perini is sold up, the palace must go of course, and it ought to have been between us by all right and justice! We're swindled! that is all, *figlio mio!*"

"And will uncle Giuseppe have the palace? Has he bought it out and out, or only lent money on it?"

"He has lent money on it, on the understanding that it is to be unconditionally his, without any putting up to sale, if the money is not paid by the end of Carnival. Oh! he is sure of it enough, never fear!"

"Then, if Laura marries Sebastian, Nanni was going to say, the palace will go back to its old owners once more. But he checked himself, and only thought it, instead of saying it.

This conversation had taken place on the afternoon of that October day on which the Fattore and his son had reached Florence. On the following morning they started on their return to the Casentino. But the farmer was as good as his word; and as soon as ever the work of the vintage was over, he made no difficulty in allowing Nanni to come to Florence for a few weeks, exhorting him only not to go near his uncle. And Nanni had come up for his holiday much about the time of the Canon Guidi's return from Rome.

This time, immediately on arriving, his first visit, as may be imagined, was to Caterina; and they arranged with the Gobbo that they should go all three to hear an opera, which was then making a *furore*, at the same theatre, as it chanced, at which Sebastian's work was to be brought out.

Nanni had passed nearly the whole afternoon with his love, finding no difficulty now in talking from one hour's end to another. But about six o'clock, knowing that his uncle would by that time have gone back to the Ponte Vecchio after his dinner, he ran off to pay a visit to Laura, promising to return in time to go with Caterina and the Gobbo to the theatre at eight.

Laura was sitting at her drawing-table as usual; but her pencils were lying idle, and she sat with her chin leaning on her hand in an attitude of listless reverie, very unlike her usual habits.

"Oh, Nanni! I am so glad to see you! I am so glad you have come to Florence. How long are you here for?"

"Well, I mean to take a spell of holiday. Babbo don't want me just now. I dare say I shall stay here till Carnival, and a bit beyond."

"Bravo! I shall be so glad to have you near me, Nanni."

To tell the honest truth, poor Nanni, on hearing the warmth with which his cousin spoke, was for a passing moment troubled with a doubt whether she were going to be so false to him as to bring their intercourse back again into the phase of love-making. But he quickly dismissed an idea so injurious to his cousin's loyalty.

"Why! Is there any way I can be useful to you, Laura?" he asked, simply.

"Nothing, especially at the present moment, that I know of, dear Nanni; but it will be a comfort to be able to speak to you now and then. I have nobody whom I can speak to of the things that my heart is full of. And somehow or other I have been dispirited of late. Yet I often tell myself that matters are looking better on the whole, instead of worse. But I am anxious about Sebastian. I never see him now; and I know that he has need of encouragement. He will be losing all heart and courage, I fear."

"We are all at sixes and sevens, it seems!" returned Nanni, trying to look more serious than was his wont. "Even you and I can't well see each other as freely as we might wish. My father gave me only one charge when I came away, and that was, not to have anything to say to my uncle; and I dare say that he would not be over pleased to see too much of me."

"Nay, I don't think that, Nanni. But I feared, from a few words my father said, that he had had a quarrel with your father. He never says much; and I have no idea what it is that has gone wrong between them."

"But I have though. My father is not much of a one to keep secrets; and out it all came as soon as ever I saw him. He was as angry as ever I saw him about anything!"

"And what was it about, for Heaven's sake; not about you and me?"

"No, thank goodness! As far as I understand it, the matter was this:—It seems that the Marchese Perini has mortgaged the palace to my uncle to its full value; and that somehow or other my father supposed that he was to be for half in the affair. But my uncle has kept it all for himself. And no doubt it was Palazzo Lunardi he meant when he spoke to you about having bought a house for you to be mistress of."

"I to be mistress of Palazzo Lunardi! Oh, Nanni!"

"You may depend upon it that is it. And don't you see, Laura, as long as they thought that you and I were going to be one, it was all very well; the palace would have been between us like. But so soon as they began to find out that wouldn't do, then each began to want the old house for himself. And no doubt, when you told your father that you would none of me, he took steps to secure the house. That, I take it, has been the story of the matter."

"Well, Nanni, it isn't I," said Laura, with a sigh, and putting her slender little hand into Nanni's broad brown palm as she spoke, "it isn't I who have had any part in preventing the house from becoming yours some day. I wonder whether Caterina," she added, while a smile succeeded the cloud on her face, after her own April-day fashion, "will owe me a grudge for standing between her and the mistress-ship of Palazzo Lunardi?"

"Oh, Laura, how can you talk in that way!" said matter-of-fact Nanni. "You don't know Caterina. She jealous of you, or wanting anything that is yours! I tell you this," continued he, with a sound in his throat as if he were swallowing a very big pill, while his great clear brown eyes filled with moisture, "there does not exist a more unselfish, a more gene-

rous-hearted " and poor Nanni became, probably for the first time in his life, somewhat long-winded in his eloquence.

" Dear Nanni, I know it all! Bless your dear simple heart, I was only jesting. But think of me coming to be owner of Palazzo Lunardi!"

" Well, I *have* thought of it," returned Nanni; " and this is what I have thought, Laura: that it would be funny enough, and pleasant enough, if it was to come to pass that there should be no need of changing the old name at all; if Palazzo Lunardi were to be Palazzo Lunardi in good earnest once again, eh?"

" I see your meaning, dear cousin. And yet do you know, Nanni, one of my troubles is that a marriage between Sebastian and me would be as unacceptable to his family as to my father."

" *O Bello!*"* exclaimed Nanni, " why, when the old Canon is gone they won't have bread to eat!"

" Nonsense, Nanni! Don't talk in that way! As if Sebastian was not sure to make his way to a far superior position to any we can boast of!"

" But whom do you mean by his family? There is only the old Canon, who can't count for much, and his cousin, the Signora Marietta."

" And it is just that cousin, Signora Marietta, that I am afraid of. The old Canon, dear old man, would wish nothing but to see his nephew and everybody else in the world happy. But the Contessa Marietta is a terrible woman. You know, Nanni, that I am not given to be overmuch afraid of people in general. Well, I am afraid of the Contessa Marietta. Somehow or other she makes me feel as if I were a little school-girl, and a very naughty one too, whenever I am in her presence. You may talk about bread to eat; but if she had neither rag to clothe her, nor morsel to keep body and soul together, trust me the Contessa de' Lunardi, as she calls herself, would not be one bit less proud or less unbending than if she were crowned and on a throne."

" Poor thing!" said Nanni. " There's some at *Bonifazio*,† they tell me, that *do* crown themselves with straws and rubbish."

" And yet the old Canon loves her; and Sebastian loves her

* Equivalent to "that's a good one!" an exclamation of surprise and dissent.

† The Tuscan Bethlehem Hospital.

well. But he has such a large and gentle heart, that he would love any one that entered into his daily life! I can tell you, Nanni, in my turn, that you do not know Sebastian."

"Not much! But I mean to know him better. But you don't mean to say, Laura, that he would wait for the consent of that poor mad woman, his cousin? I don't intend to wait for any consent of my uncle, or cousin either, Laura, I can tell you."

"You are very brave now, *amico mio!*" said Laura, with an arch smile; "but it seems to me that you wanted more than a cousin's consent, you wanted a little of her help to put you in a position to be so bold! But jesting apart, Nanni, I do not suppose that Sebastian would consider his cousin's consent indispensable; nor should I. But still the fact is, that that melancholy-eyed, never-smiling Contessa Marietta does exercise a powerful influence over both Sebastian and the old Canon."

"Well, it is very odd. I am not apt to feel much *soggezione** with most people; but to tell the truth, the few times that I have been in company with the Signora Marietta, I have not felt as if I could speak to her as I could to other people. I felt afraid of her in a sort of a way—I think it is because she is mad. I have heard folks say they have felt the same thing when they went to see the poor souls at Bonifazio."

"But all this time you have told me nothing about your visit to Caterina. I have been too selfishly thinking of my affairs all the while. I guess, from the way you speak of her, that you did not find her too cruel."

"She is a deal too good for me, Laura; that is all I can say about it."

"Don't you remember, when we last parted, you were going to see her, and had made up your mind to speak to her brother? And then you went off to the Casentino in such a hurry that I never heard the result. Now tell me all about it. Did you see the Gobbo?"

"Yes; I took your advice and told him all about it."

* The feeling of being overawed or repressed by the presence of any one. The phrase is constantly in the mouth of the Tuscans.

“ And you found him as I said, a man of sense and a very good-hearted fellow ? ”

“ I think so. He's a man of so much sense that I could not understand half he said. And then he's such a fellow for talk ! He goes on just like a book, and would never stop at all, if you'd let him, it's my belief. But I like the Gobbo for all that.”

“ At all events you understood each other ? ”

“ He understood me ; and that was what was mainly needed.”

“ And *he* had no objection, I suppose, to having you for a brother-in-law.”

“ Faith ! but he had though, lots of objections. He wanted father's consent, and uncle's consent, and but what he wanted most of all was your consent. That is, he wanted to be sure,—to know that there was nothing between you and me.”

“ I hope you gave him my consent.”

“ I did. I told him that you would not have me at a gift ; and that I did not think of you, seeing that my mind was elsewhere. And then he wanted to find out whether you had any other in your eye. Oh ! he is terrible for wanting to know all about everything, the Gobbo is. But I told him I was come there to tell my own secrets, and not to talk about other people's.”

“ Thanks, dear Nanni, for your discretion. But, do you know, I think it would not be a bad plan to take the Gobbo into my confidence. I have a great idea of his head ; and I am sure he is to be trusted.”

“ Well ; I think it would be a good move. We parted the best of friends, the Gobbo and I. And then, bless you, he has got ancestors too, it seems, like your *damo* ;* and understands all that sort of thing. I spoke of grandfather, thinking to make the family look as respectable as I could. But, Lord love you ! they don't think anything of grandfathers in those old families. Seems they don't count for ancestors ! ”

“ But what did you do with Caterina herself, Nanni ? Come now, tell me all about it.”

“ Ah ! ” replied Nanni, taking a very long breath ; “ that was a very different sort of a job from talking to the Gobbo ; *altro !*

* Sweetheart.

Anybody might have talked to him, that could understand what he was driving at;" added he, leaving it to be inferred that it was not every man who could have brought the other interview to a successful termination.

"But tell me how you did it, Nanni; come now?" said Laura, coaxingly.

"Well, I *did* it! I screwed it out of her; though she held very hard! But it is no manner of use telling any one how you did it; for it is one of those things, you see, that can't be done by rule. I have read books on purpose, that tell you how to do it. But I might as well have saved my money and the trouble of reading. I did it quite different when I was about it."

"Screwed it out of her, Nanni! What do you mean? What did you screw out of her?"

"Why, you know what I went there for, cousin Laura!"

"You went to tell Caterina how much you loved her, I suppose."

"Then you never supposed a greater mistake in your life, cousin Laura."

"What do you mean, Nanni? You are getting quite mysterious, which is what I should not have expected from you. What *did* you go to Caterina for?"

"What does Signor Sebastiano come here for, cousin Laura; come now?"

"He never does come here now!" said Laura, very ruefully, with a deep sigh.

"Well, when he did come, what did he come for, I want to know?"

"Well, I suppose he came here," replied Laura, bending her head to hide a little smile provoked by her appreciation of the comparison suggested to her, "I suppose he came here to tell me what I thought you went to Casa Boccanera to tell Caterina."

"And was all the telling on one side, cousin Laura?"

"Ah! Why, cousin Nanni, you are practising to set up for a father confessor."

"Well; you confess yourself, if you want to shrive me. Was all the telling on one side, I say?"

"Perhaps not!" said Laura, dropping her long black eye-

lashes over her eyes, and picking up a pencil from the table that stood near her, as she spoke, and drawing lines with it in her absence of mind on a bit of paper.

"I should think not!" returned Nanni. "And perhaps you liked to hear him tell what he had to tell?"

"Perhaps I did, Nanni!"

"Well then! Do as you would be done by! That's my notion, and a good rule all the world over. And that is what I screwed out of Caterina. But it took a deal of screwing!"

"But it came at last, eh Nanni? And perhaps you liked it when it came?"

"Ah!" said Nanni, with a long breath, like a person smelling some exquisite perfume; "Ah! It is a mighty pleasant thing to tell, but there is one thing twenty times sweeter, and that is, to be told! At least that's my mind; I don't know how you find it."

"And so it is all right, and all settled now between you and Caterina?"

"All right! barring Babbo's consent. But he won't stand out, specially when he comes to know Caterina."

"And aren't you very happy, cousin Nanni?"

"Pretty near as happy as a man can be, cousin Laura! I never did a better day's work in my life than that day that I screwed it out of Caterina, God bless her!"

"I believe it with all my heart, Nanni; and with all my heart I wish you joy. And it pleases me to think that I had some hand in bringing your happiness about."

"That you had indeed, cousin Laura. *Altro!* I shall never forget it! But then I should never have done for you, you know. I am too rough in the grain, as a man may say," rejoined honest Nanni, who conceived that his cousin's claim to having contributed to his happiness alluded to her refusal of his addresses to herself.

Again Laura turned aside her head, very unnecessarily, to hide a smile, as she answered—

"We were both right, Nanni, and we shall contribute more to each other's happiness as cousins and fast friends, than we should have done as man and wife."

"No doubt of it, cousin. And I wish with all my heart that

I could do anything to bring your matters with Sebastian to as good a point as my own."

"Thanks, dear Nanni! I am sure you do. There is one thing I told you, remember, about the opera."

"Yes, I have been thinking about it; I shall not forget."

"But I am not easy about Sebastian, Nanni; I am afraid of his being cast down and disheartened. It is a thing that men of genius like Sebastian are very subject to."

"Ah! I was afraid he was not strong," said Nanni, with much sympathy. "Poor fellow, he don't look it!"

"But you, who are strong, Nanni, strong in happiness and in hope,—I have been thinking that you might be of use to him."

"In the way of his complaint?" said Nanni, rather dubiously. "If I can any way help him, only you tell me, Laura, what to do. You don't know how great a pleasure it would be to me to do it."

"I should like you to see him, Nanni, and talk to him, and tell him to be of strong heart."

"I had rather it was anything to do than to talk," said Nanni, thoughtfully. "You tell me what to say, however, and I'll do my best."

"What did you say was the sweetest thing in the world to hear, just now, Nanni?" said Laura, looking down, and again having recourse to her pencil.

"Oh, I know! only, to make it what it should be, it ought to be done by *the* person."

"But as that cannot be, Nanni, you must be my messenger. Tell him that no hour passes in which I do not think of him. Tell him how anxious I am to hear of him; how earnestly I beg of him to be of good heart, and to hope. And tell him, Nanni," she continued, putting her hand into his, as if giving a solemn pledge, "tell him that never, never, never, under any circumstances, come what may, will I be the wife of any man save him."

"It shall not be my fault," said Nanni, nodding his head with great seriousness of manner, "if he is not made quite certain of that much."

"Speak to him of his opera, cousin; tell him that ——"

"I've got a thought!" interrupted Nanni, eagerly. "I'll tell

you what will be fifty times better than my speaking to him. Let's set the Gobbo to talk to him. He's my friend. He's to help me, whenever a job that needs brains is in hand. Let the Gobbo talk to him. Let me tell my brother-in-law that is to be all about it. You may trust him. It's all in the family, like. May I tell the Gobbo?"

"I think your idea is a good one, cousin. I have a great respect for Sandro Boccanera, as I told you before. I should like him to see my poor Sebastian, and to be friends with him. Yes, you may tell the Gobbo my secret, Nanni," she added, with a smile, and a little blush. "But you will go to Sebastian too, won't you, Nanni? I am sure you will help to cheer him up. And perhaps," she added, with a sly glance, "you may know what sort of things Caterina says to you better than poor Sandro could divine them."

And so it was settled that Nanni and his brain-gifted friend should both go, and go often, to see Sebastian, and carry him such cheer as either was most able to impart.

And Nanni, feeling somewhat the weight of his new ambassadorial responsibilities, ran off to accompany his beloved and her brother to the theatre.

CHAPTER XXII.

GENEALOGY AND PHYSIOLOGY.

NANNI found *La Caterina* and the Gobbo waiting for him; and they went off together at once to the little theatre, which chanced to be that conducted by our acquaintance Signor Gualandi, at which poor Sebastian's pre-condemned opera was to be brought out.

"And where have you been, 'gnor Nanni, I should like to know?" said Caterina, with a pretended pout; "I think *vos-signoria* might have given us another half hour, instead of running it to the very last moment."

"*Anima mia*, I was with Laura" (a somewhat more pro-

nounced pout, only one quarter pretended on the part of Caterina). “Nay! Caterina *mia*, you will not grudge the half-hour when I tell you what we were talking of. Poor Laura is not so happy as we are. I will tell you all about it, by-and-by, after the opera.”

They paid their half paul—twopence-halfpenny sterling—per head at the door; and it being a grand occasion, and the magnificent Nanni being paymaster, a further sum of half a paul each admitted them to the *posti distinti*, which we call the stalls. And the Gobbo paid critical and intelligent attention to the music, while his companions were, in their own and my opinion, infinitely better engaged. What long-since-forgotten music it may have been which they heard who knows? For the Gobbo, from whom the main facts of this history have been principally derived, though retaining a special recollection of the evening, could only remember that it was some worthless trash which bored him to death. It may be, however, that the Gobbo was an unduly severe critic upon this occasion. For both Caterina and Nanni, though unable to recall the precise title of the piece, always declared that they had never heard music equal to it since.

The Gobbo, as they returned home, declared, in the language of Florentine artistic criticism, that the Prima Donna was a cat, and the Tenore a “*cane, che suonava a scorticare le orecchie*,”* and vowed it was a shame to put such people on the stage to disgust the public. Perhaps it may be thought that the Gobbo was demanding too much for his twopence-halfpenny in expecting to hear accomplished singers for that sum. But such is not altogether the case now, and was still less so then, in Florence, where the present writer has heard, for half a paul, or some such sum, more than one of the greatest singers of the day, in the first freshness of their voices, to greater perfection than the reader may probably have heard them afterwards for his half-guinea.

Nanni walked home with the brother and sister to their door; and when they reached it, proposed sending to the neighbouring *café*, before they separated, for three *ponci*, † to warm them,

* “A dog, who sang out of tune enough to skin one’s ears.”

† Punches.

while he told them, as he had promised Caterina that he would, all about his visit to his cousin Laura. Old *maestro* Simone had come home from his evening stroll to the *café*, and gone to bed long since ; so they had the sitting-room of the little lodging to themselves. The working jeweller's maid-of-all-work, who came yawningly from her sleep over her *scaldino*,* to let them in, was despatched on this errand, and shortly returned with three small tumblers of a steaming light-red liquor, very sweet, very mawkish, and flavoured, or rather scented, with an infinitesimal dose of an alcoholic liquid of anomalous nature, known to the *café*s and their guests as *Rhum*,—pronounced “*roomey*,”—three little tumblers, which might sicken, could scarcely, one would think, cheer, and most unquestionably could not inebriate anybody. They were consumed, however, with perfect approbation by the trio of Tuscans ; while Nanni, deeming Caterina to be included, as a matter of course, in Laura's permission to speak of her affairs to the Gobbo, explained to the latter the brain-work which, according to the convention between them, he wished him to undertake.

“I did not think, 'gnor Sandro, when we agreed, the other day, that if ever I wanted a turn of brain-work, and if ever you wanted a job that needed a stout arm, we would help one another ;—I say, I did not think that I should so soon come to claim your promise.”

“It can't be too soon, Signor Nanni ; that is, if the matter in hand be not of a nature to afflict you.”

“Well, yes, it is of that nature, Sandro. I suppose most head-work is of such a nature. People don't trouble their heads much when they are happy, I fancy.”

“*Santa Madonna !* Nanni ! What is it ? Has anything gone wrong ? You frighten me !” said Caterina, who fancied that anything that afflicted Nanni must needs have reference to the one matter that sat nearest to her own heart.

“No, *cara mia !* nothing has gone wrong, at least with us. But Laura is not happy, and my heart is uneasy for her sake.

† A small earthenware pot, with a high arched handle over it, filled with ignited braise and hot ashes ;—an abominable contrivance, unhealthy and dangerous, which Tuscans of almost all ranks have constantly in their hands or under their feet in the winter.

I told you, you know, Caterina *mia!* as we were going to the theatre, that I would tell you all about it afterwards."

"It's nothing bad, I hope," said the Gobbo; "I have a very great regard for the Signora Laura!"

"Don't you remember asking me," said Nanni, "when I was telling you that I wanted that is, that I hoped that day, you know, that we had a long talk in the Piazza Santa Croce;—don't you remember asking me who it was that Laura liked a deal too well to have anything to say to me, even if I had ever thought of her?"

"I remember perfectly well, Signor Nanni. And you replied, with a discretion which, permit me to say, I appreciated, that you were there to tell your own secrets, but not your cousin's."

"And what secrets of your own had you to tell, Nanni?" asked Caterina.

"Oh! mine were terrible secrets. Sandro knows all about them."

"And won't you tell me, Nanni?" pouted Caterina.

"In your ear, then!" and he stretched out his head as he spoke towards her, while she, half timidly, and in all probability knowing perfectly well what was coming, but affecting the most lively curiosity, bent her face towards him.

"That was my secret!" he cried, suddenly delivering a smacking kiss on her cheek; "And now I am sure, *anima mia*, you won't ask for my secrets again in a hurry, will you?"

"For shame, Nanni! I won't let you play such tricks. If I did not think you were going to tell me something wonderful!"

"But what *were* you going to tell us, Signor Nanni?" said the Gobbo, taking more interest in the real secret to be told than in this lovers' pastime.

"Why! *amico mio*, Laura has a great opinion of your cleverness, and she wants to confide to you the same as she told to me. She thinks you might and would help her, or help her *dama*, which comes to the same thing."

"Your cousin, Signor Nanni, is not deceived in me; and anything in my power is most heartily at her service. I am justified then in asking now who is the gentleman in question?"

"Why! you don't mean to say, Sandro, that that is the secret you wanted to be told? Well! I should have thought

that you might have known that without any telling! But men *are* so slow to see what is under their noses!"

"And pray, sister, who is the person that your own superior sharpness has pointed out to you? Or did the Signora Laura, more likely, tell you herself?"

"*Che!* that was not probable. And there was little need of it. After that day at Schifanoia *I* had no doubt about the matter."

"Did you discover any other secrets of the same sort that same day, Caterina?" asked Nanni, with demonstrations of intense slyness of meaning.

"Lookers-on see most of the game, they say, 'gnor Nanni. I looked on, and saw that of the Signora Laura."

"If we are to talk in earnest, *amici miei*," said the Gobbo, "let us have no more beating about the bush. Signor Nanni, I shall be glad to hear what the Signora Laura wishes you to communicate to me."

"Well, then!" returned Nanni, resolutely turning his shoulder towards Caterina, so as to shut out the temptation of any further straying from the direct path of the story he had to tell, and facing round towards Sandro, "the case is this wise. Laura and I were intended for each other by our parents, as you no doubt know. But we never took to the notion much ourselves, neither of us. And Cousin Laura soon spied out somehow what somebody else—pointing with his thumb over his shoulder as he spoke—could not see till she was told it as plain as two and two make four, and then made a difficulty of believing it."

"I am not sure I believe it now, as far as that goes," put in Caterina.

"Now, sister, if you interrupt Signor Nanni any more, I shall ask him to allow me to accompany him to his lodging, and hear what he wishes to tell me as we walk!"

"I am not going to interrupt; not I, Sandro. I think I shall go off to bed," said his sister; but she did not move.

"Signor Nanni, I am all attention," said the Gobbo, bowing with grave courtesy.

"Well!" resumed Nanni, "Laura, I say, found out whereabouts my heart was, and told me so. And we talked it over together."

"*Grazie, * Signore mio ! Padrone !*" † said Caterina, over his shoulder.

"Now, Caterina, be quiet, do, for a minute. We are engaged on business," remonstrated the Gobbo. "Proceed, Signor Nanni."

"So, said I to Laura," continued Nanni, heroically resisting the temptation to accept Caterina's challenge to a sparring match, "'Fair play is a jewel, cousin ! You know all my secrets ; but you tell me none of yours.' And for awhile she stood to it that she had none to tell. For they are like one another as two furrows in a field, girls are."

"*Grazie, Signore !* I am not gone to bed yet, though you seem to think so !"

"As like one another in the matter of standing out ; they don't care for a fellow, I mean," continued Nanni, thus admonished ; "but at last I got her to own that she and young Lunardi, Sebastiano you know, had given their troth to each other. Well, once her secret told, she was not loth to talk of it. And then she said that she was unhappy,—her father, my uncle, would not hear of it ; and she could not see him to talk to him ; and how he was apt to be down-hearted by reason of being so clever, and she was very anxious about him ; and she wished if I could I would see him, and let him understand that she was true to him, and always would be through thick and thin, come what might, and try to put a good heart into him. And so, as she went on talking in that way, it suddenly came into my head, 'This is a job for a man with brains. Sandro would be the man for it ten to one more than I.' And I told Laura as much ; and she jumped at it. She has a great notion of you, Sandro, Laura has. 'So,' says she, 'tell him all I have told you. Tell him I would take it kind of him if he would see Sebastiano, and try to be of comfort to him.' And that's about the whole of the story."

"Which I could have told for you, *Signore mio*, in two words to your hundred !" said Caterina.

"*Anima mia*, why didn't you then ? I wish you had," said poor Nanni, simply.

* "Thanks."

† "Master." The word is used thus by itself to signify, "At your service !" or, "Please yourself !" &c.

“Why is Signor Giuseppe, your respected uncle, so averse to the marriage of his daughter with the Signore de’ Lunardi, once he has made up his mind to give up the match he had first intended?” asked the Gobbo, thoughtfully.

“Why, that stands to reason,” answered Nanni. “Naturally my uncle, who is a warm man, would wish to give his only daughter to somebody who could put money to his money. My uncle thinks more about money than we do in the country,” he added, hurriedly, recollecting the circumstances of his own proposed wife in this respect; “he wants a rich son-in-law, and these Lunardi have nothing—not bread to eat, it seems, when the old Canon dies.”

The Gobbo mused over this statement a minute or two in silence. It seemed clear, then, that Sebastiano knew nothing about the thirty-five thousand scudi, the existence of which he had become acquainted with by so strange a chance. Nobody knew better than he that the old Conte de’ Lunardi, Marietta’s father, had died worth less than nothing. And, indeed, he had seen enough in the paper he had read to know that the sum he knew to be now in the possession of the Contessa Marietta was the product of yearly accumulations. But what could be the destination of it, if not to Sebastian? How could Sebastian’s evident ignorance of the existence of it be accounted for? There was some mystery in the matter, which baffled his conjectures and vividly excited his curiosity. He very quickly, however, made up his mind to say nothing about it to Nanni, partly because a secret was a treasure, which the Gobbo’s peculiarities always disposed him to keep wholly to himself; but chiefly because he would not run any risk of doing mischief to Marietta or her plans, whatever they might be.

At length he said, “And the Signora Laura, nevertheless, is determined to give her hand to no other?”

“*Altro che!* determined! And Laura will stand to her word, you may depend upon it. And uncle Giuseppe will find out that he must have Sebastiano for a son-in-law, or none at all. You’ll come and see him, Sandro?”

“Certainly, I will do anything that you and *La Signora Laura* wish; but I do not see that there is much good to be done.”

“She wants you to speak to him, too, about an opera he is

writing. It seems that his heart is set on the success of this opera ; and, indeed, so is Laura's too, for that matter. They both hope that he may better his position by it. It don't seem to me as if a man could do much by such work as that."

"Nay! I don't know that," replied the Gobbo ; "success at that, as at most other things, is likely to be well paid. The question is, has the Signore Sebastiano the talent to make a success?"

"Laura is convinced that he has ; and that is one of the things that she wants us to help him in."

"In what way?"

"Why, the opera is to be brought out next Carnival at the theatre we were at to-night. He has got a promise of that."

"And that already is a success that many another would be only too happy to reach!"

"But the thing is to make it go down with the public, you see. Now, if we had a good strong party of friends in the theatre, don't you see? I am as good as another at clapping my hands, and crying '*bravo! brava! bravi!*'"

"Ay! we might lend the piece a helping-hand in that way, no doubt. I dare say I could bring a good party of friends."

"And I would bring up a lot of boys from the Casentino—fellows whose hands are hard enough to do any quantity of clapping."

"When shall we go and see him, Signor Nanni?"

"We can go to-morrow morning, if you will. But, you see, we must manage so as to see him quietly alone, you know. And that reminds me that I have not told you all poor Laura's difficulties yet. You would hardly believe it ; but it seems, from what Laura says, that his family are as much against any such marriage as my uncle is!"

"Objections to family alliances may arise from very different reasons," observed the Gobbo, rather sententiously.

"About ancestors, you mean!" said Nanni, with great simplicity ; "that's just it!"

"The Conti dei Lunardi," rejoined the Gobbo, majestically, and with an air of recognised superiority, "are justified in scrutinising somewhat narrowly the blood with which they ally themselves. There does not exist this day in Florence a purer

and nobler race than theirs. But I confess that I had always thought the old Canon singularly—and may I venture, without offence, Signor Nanni, to say, lamentably?—indifferent to all such considerations.”

“Offence, *caro mio!*” cried Nanni, stretching out his hand to the little man. “If ever you mean to offend me, Sandro, you must tell me so plainly; or else ten to one I shall never guess it from what you say. What is it to me what the old Canon thinks about his ancestors? But my notion about it is this—look you! I think a man’s wise to get all the pleasure he can out of his ancestors; but if I had ever so many myself, I would not let them stand in the way of my happiness.”

“*Noblesse obligé!*” said Sandro, loftily.

“What! do you understand French?” said Nanni, gazing at his brother-in-law *in posse* with exceeding admiration. “What a thing it is to have brains! I don’t know any speech but Tuscan. But I guess your meaning to be, that they can’t help being nobles. And that’s very true. But I was going to say, that it’s not the old Canon who’d stand in the way, but the Lady Marietta.”

“Ah! I see!” said the Gobbo; “the Lady Marietta *has* a high sense of what is due to, and what is expected from, the scions of an ancient race. And your cousin has reason to think that the attachment of Signor Sebastian would be discountenanced by the Contessa Marietta?”

“Not a doubt of it! And she is afraid that Sebastian might find difficulty in going in the face of her. They all seem afraid of the Contessa Marietta, *per Bacco!*”

“I have a great respect for the Contessa Marietta myself,” said the Gobbo, gravely.

“But you don’t mean to say, Sandro, that if a man’s ancestors have so managed their affairs that he has not bread to eat, he ought to refuse bread, pretty thickly buttered too, when it is offered to him, for no reason except for their sake?”

“No! I don’t say that!” replied the Gobbo, after a thoughtful pause; “and methinks, Signor Nanni, that you should know that I don’t say so. Perhaps practical wisdom,” he continued, speaking more to himself than to Nanni,—“wisdom of a higher kind than that of merely knowing on which side one’s bread is

battered,—requires us to subordinate our feelings and imaginations on this subject to other considerations.”

Nanni had subdolosly stretched out his hand sideways during this speech, to administer a squeeze to a rosy little hand that timidly stole out half way to meet his, and was, notwithstanding such aiding and abetting, punished for his audacity by a pinch of the ear from the rosy little hand's fellow. But being much ashamed at the evident detection of this by-play by his wise brother-in-law, and feeling himself called upon to continue the conversation, he said, doubtfully—

“One would think, now, that Laura's blood was good, to look at her!”

“Ay! that's the point! You have hit the nail of the difficulty on the head, Signor Nanni, with the most accurate perception of the knot of the matter!” said the Gobbo, considerably more to Nanni's surprise and mystification than satisfaction.

“No! Have I, though?” said he, with a tone of alarm in his voice.

“To be sure! It's just that. Genealogy and Physiology”

“*Misericordia!*” muttered Nanni, interjectively.

“are too often at odds with each other, you see. If we arrange society wholly in accordance with the requirements of the former, we are apt to get tripped up by the latter. Look, as you say, at the Signora Laura, and look at some other folks!” concluded the Gobbo, rather bitterly.

Nanni did look at him hard for a minute before speaking; and then he said—

“Sandro, I'll be honest! If I hit the nail on the head, as you said, *Corpo di Bacco!* I hit it without seeing it. And I have no more idea of what you are talking about now than if it was all Arabic!* I told cousin Laura that you'd be the man to talk to Signor Bastiano. And, may be, what you have been saying would be good for him. What time shall we go to-morrow?”

“Suppose we say at eleven,” replied Sandro. “I will get away from the shop an hour before dinner-time; the old Canon

* “Arabo” is, rather curiously, often used by the Tuscans to signify anything very outlandish and strange.

will be taking his *siesta*; and we shall probably find Signor Bastiano in his room."

"Very good. So be it!" said Nanni. "But I had better not come for you to the Ponte Vecchio."

"Perhaps not. I'll meet you, say at the Caffé Elvetico."

"Good! I'll be there at eleven."

So good nights were said; Caterina lighted Nanni down to the street-door; and if I had been there I should have asserted the right of *seniores priores*, and walked out, turning my back on the young people, and looking straight before me.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NANNI'S EMBASSY.

THE next morning Nanni was true to his tryst at the Caffé Elvetico, and had not finished his tiny cup of coffee before the Gobbo came in.

"Will you take a cup of coffee before we go to our affair, Sandro?" said Nanni, after they had exchanged greetings.

"Not this morning, if *vossignoria* will excuse me," returned the Gobbo; "for it would be well for us to go to Palazza Lunardi at once. To-day is the festival of Saint Leonard. And I happen to know that *La Contessa Marietta* will at this hour be engaged in the chapel of the family at the church of San Giacomo de' Lunardi. It would be as well to make our visit during her absence."

"Certainly! By all means!" said Nanni, with much alacrity. "Let us go at once. I had quite as lief do our errand when Signora Marietta is not there."

And so saying, he threw down his two crazie, about five farthings sterling, on the little oval brass tray, tinkled his spoon against the glass of water which stood by the little brass porringer which had held the modicum of coffee, and the two young men walked out of the *café* without waiting for any more formal settlement with the waiter, and leaving him to pick

up the tray and the money at his leisure, after the easy-going Tuscan fashion.

"You go in first," said Nanni, as they stood at the door of the old Canon's apartment, on the third floor; "and explain what we have come for. I have a very slight acquaintance with Signor Sebastiano."

"Nor have I much. But doubtless the nature of our mission will ensure us a welcome."

The door was opened to them by the ecclesiastically-dressed little servant-boy mentioned in a former chapter, who informed them that his Reverence the Canon was taking his *siesta* as usual, that the Signora Marietta was at church, as the Gobbo had foreseen she would be, and that the Signor Sebastiano was in his own chamber, very busy.

Il Beato Leonardo,—for, strictly speaking, that worthy, who is commemorated on the 27th of November, was no saint, but only a "*beato*," who is to a canonised saint much as a K.C.B. is to a G.C.B. *Il Beato* Leonardo had been—or would it be more correct to say was? (the difference, as the judicious reader will perceive, involves a point of theology of no small difficulty and interest)—*Il Beato* Leonardo had been, and perhaps still was, the patron of a certain Cardinal Leonardo de' Lunardi, who lived towards the end of the seventeenth century, and who had founded an anniversary mass at the altar of the family chapel in the church of San Giacomo de' Lunardi, in honour of his patron and of himself. And this anniversary service the Lady Marietta made a point of attending, as the Gobbo knew well. The Cardinal had been minded to do the thing handsomely: it was a "grand mass," and the Lady Marietta, therefore, was safe till past mid-day.

Signor Sebastiano was very busy in his own chamber; but the visitors, nevertheless, requested the little servant to tell him that two gentlemen wished to speak with him, and were immediately invited to walk into the musician's tiny *sanctum*.

This little chamber has been already mentioned; but, for the clear understanding of what follows, it is necessary that the reader should be made more accurately acquainted with the geography of the small apartment. There were three rooms in the front, looking into the pleasant sunny *loggia* which faced to the south-

east. The middle one of these was the sitting-room. That on the left hand of it, as one entered it by the door opposite to the terrace window opening on to the *loggia*, was the Canon's bedroom; and that on the right hand Marietta's bedroom. These two chambers were accessible only from the middle room. Behind these three rooms ran the centre wall of the house, for a great deal of the space on this third floor was occupied by the *loggia*; and this wall was enormously thick. On the other side of it, at the back of the sitting-room, was the entrance hall, all but dark, but as large as the sitting-room itself. The two rooms at the back of the chambers of Marietta and the Canon would also have been as large as those good-sized rooms, if a part of the space had not been occupied by two dark closets, one on either side of the entrance, and thus lying between the two bedrooms at the front and the rooms behind each of them. Why these dark holes should have been constructed at the cost of spoiling the two back rooms it would be difficult to imagine, unless it were in obedience to the rule which seems to have been imperative on all the architects of the buildings contemporary or thereabouts with Palazzo Lunardi, to waste as much space as possible. Of these two dark closets, that behind the chamber of Marietta was used as an appendage to the little kitchen, which was again behind that. This dark scullery, therefore, was between the kitchen and Marietta's room. The other dark closet, that to the left of the entrance hall, lay similarly between the Canon's bedroom and the chamber occupied by Sebastiano. But, inasmuch as the description here given would imply that the space at the disposition of the architect had been divided symmetrically and by rectangularly arranged walls, and as such a distribution would have been utterly inconsistent with the traditions and practices of the old Florentine builders (whose descendants never, to the present day, build a house with right angles if they can possibly avoid it), it must be explained that the wall which divided the entrance hall from the chamber of Sebastian and the dark closet behind it, was sloped at such an angle as to make that side of the closet which adjoined the Canon's room about a foot longer than the latter, so as to encroach that much on the hall, and to cause so much of the space of the closet to be behind the

sitting-room, instead of being entirely behind the Canon's room. It seemed that the architect had scrupled to injure the privacy of the two side rooms, which were probably intended for sleeping chambers, by seeking any light for his dark closets by borrowing it from them. But he had availed himself of the bit of that closet on the left hand, which projected behind the centre room, to get a glimmer of light for it by opening a very small window high up in that part of the wall between the two rooms.

The closet thus partially lighted was used by the present occupiers of the apartment only as a receptacle for a number of old family portraits, which, at her father's death, Marietta had contrived to save from the brokers. They were too numerous, and many of them too large, to be hung on the humble walls of their present dwelling; and they had been stowed away, forgotten by everybody save Marietta, in that dark lumber room, when the Canon had first moved into his new home in the house of his ancestors. There they were, those poor old Lunardis, huddled into the corner of their whilome dwelling, stacked against the wall some twenty or thirty deep, with some of the lighter and smaller frameless canvases heaped on the top of the layer of their relatives below, in such wise as to block up the little window entirely, and cause the existence of it high up in one corner of their sitting-room to be forgotten by the inhabitants.

“Signor Boccanera, Signor Palli, ” said Sebastian, rising from his piano as his very unexpected visitors entered; “I hardly know, *davvero*, whether I can ask you to sit down, for I am afraid I have not the means to offer such hospitality. Here is one chair, Signori——”

“And I'll sit on the bed by you, Signor Sebastiano; and Sandro shall have the chair, because he is the man that is going to do the talking;” said Nanni, breaking through his intention not to be the first to speak; for he saw by his heightened colour that Sebastian was embarrassed, and was in a hurry to relieve him.

“Since you are so kind, Signori, ” hesitated Sebastian. “Otherwise, I might have asked you to take the trouble of walking into the next room.”

"Oh, no! let us stay here; I like sitting on a bed of all things," said Nanni.

"Signor Conte," began the Gobbo, with a courteous bow from the chair, "we have taken the liberty of waiting on you, bringing with us our credentials from one for whose sake we venture to hope that our visit will not be unwelcome."

"Pray believe, Signore, that you need no credentials from any one to make your visit welcome," replied Sebastian, wondering more than ever what was to come next.

"*Signore mio*," struck in Nanni, observing that Sebastian's manner towards them was stiff and embarrassed, and instinctively divining the cause of his marked coldness, with a fellow-feeling that for once rendered him quicker witted than his clever companion, and guessing the means of at once putting them on pleasanter terms together; "*Signore mio*, in the first place, I come to claim your congratulations. I am sure," he added, intending to put a special meaning into his manner, "I am quite sure that it will give you pleasure to hear that I am going to be married."

But Sebastian's jealous fears gave a very different meaning to the intelligence from that intended by honest Nanni. And he became perfectly livid in the face, as he gasped out, "Signore!

I am glad that is, I thank you for the intelligence, which . . ." and the drops of perspiration stood on his brow as he spoke.

"And Sandro here," continued Nanni, understanding what was passing in the other's mind as clearly as if he had been the most cultivated scholar in the world, "my brother-in-law that is to be, I hope very shortly, was kind enough to accompany me."

"Your brother-in-law!" stammered poor Sebastian, not daring to feel sure that he understood him aright.

"Yes; that's to be it! And very happy shall I be to call him so. You know *La Caterina*, I think, Signor Sebastiano? Do you not wish me joy?"

"With all my heart, my dear Signor Palli, but——"

"Ah! I thought you would," said Nanni, winking one eye hard, with a not very successful attempt at an expression of intense slyness; "I thought you would with *all* your heart."

"Indeed I do," replied Sebastian, whose thoughts were still

in a whirl of confusion; "indeed I do, but . the intelligence is so sudden I thought that I had supposed——"

"That the old folk were going to have it all their own way without taking any count of which way their son's and daughter's hearts jumped. That's what you thought, wasn't it, Signor Sebastiano, eh? But that did not suit my book, you see! And it did not suit my cousin's a bit better, Signor Sebastiano; and Laura thinks you ought to have known as much; and she sent me here to tell you so. So there's the cat out of the bag. Yes! this is to be my brother-in-law, and I hope you won't object to me for a cousin-in-law. Will you shake hands upon it?"

And Nanni thrust out his great broad hand with a meaning in the action, and in the frank, cheery smile that mantled in his jolly sun-burned face and handsome large soft eyes, which would have disarmed the suspiciousness of an Old Bailey attorney.

The poor nervous musician trembling all over with agitation and excitement, caught the hand extended to him in both his long thin white hands, and said, while the tears filled his eyes—

"How can I thank you, my dear friend! And she sent you to me! Dear, dear Laura! And you, Signor Boccanera, did Laura speak to you?——"

The Gobbo, who had been told that he was to accompany his friend specially to do the talking, and who was never apt to be in the background when talking was the business in hand, had begun to feel somewhat impatient at Nanni's so unexpectedly taking the stroke-oar in the conversation, and seized the opportunity offered him of taking the lead.

"Not on the present occasion, Signor Conte! I was apprised by my friend, Signor Palli, that it was the wish of *La Signora Laura*, for whom I have the greatest possible respect, that I should wait on you. The lady was good enough to think that I might, perhaps, be able to express to you more adequately than my excellent friend and intended brother-in-law the entirety of the devotion with which her affections are fixed, and . I may say, concentrated——"

"The long and the short of it is," cut in Nanni, impatiently, "you be true to Laura and she'll be true to you, ay, to the death; despite fathers or cousins, or riches, or poverty! yours

and nobody else's, come weal, come woe! And that, *amico mio*, from such a girl as Laura, though she is my own uncle's daughter, is, to my thinking, a fair share of happiness for one man, as the world goes, be the rest how it may."

"In fact, Signor Conte," resumed poor Sandro, a little discomfited (and it was rather hard, considering that he had been told he was to go there on purpose to talk), "I can have no hesitation in confirming the somewhat . . . I may, perhaps, say, unornamented announcement of my friend, Signor Palli, that such *are* the sentiments of the very amiable young lady in question."

"I true to Laura!" exclaimed Sebastiano.

"Not that it forms any part of our commission—and I am sure my friend Palli will agree in this view of the matter, if he will obligingly express himself somewhat less precipitately—to submit to you, on the part of the lady, Signor Conte, the smallest doubt as existing in her mind of the perfect fidelity of your affection," observed the Gobbo, with diplomatic caution.

"Ah! but this is where it is, Signor Sebastiano; to be true to Laura you must be true to yourself. A man, you see, has no right to give up the game when he's got a partner!"

Honest Nanni, who only had it in his mind to preach against the tendency to discouragement and faint-heartedness of which Laura had spoken, had no idea how home a thrust he had made. But Sebastiano little doubted that the Canon of San Lorenzo had allowed what had passed between them to be known to some one, who had repeated it to Laura. Was it not, indeed, probable enough that he might himself have communicated to Laura, or her father, his interview; for it was evident that the Canon's idea was, that it would be better in every way that all idea of a marriage between him and Laura should be definitively abandoned. And the priest had led him honestly to think that he was most generously and honourably doing his duty by Laura in giving her up. But the blunt truth of Nanni's words put the matter in another light before his mind.

"There is truth in what you say, Signore Nanni," replied Sebastiano, with a deep sigh; "but may it not be questioned, on the other hand, whether a man is acting well who drags the woman he loves into misery and misfortune with him? Ought

he not rather to give her up and bear the burthen of his destiny alone ? ”

“ It is impossible, Signor Conte, to gainsay the magnanimity of such a sentiment,” began the Gobbo ; “ nevertheless——”

But Nanni, who had never talked so much consecutively in his life before, and who admitted afterwards to the Gobbo that he was astonished at himself, and did not know what had come to him, once more interrupted him—

“ No, Sandro ! not impossible to gainsay it, because I do gainsay it. If a woman would fifty thousand times rather share your misfortune than another man’s fortune, do you call it magnanimous, or—to let alone such big words—any way hearty and loving, to leave her to break her heart, because it hurts your pride to think that you have not been able to do any better for her ? I don’t ! ”

“ I will think, my dear friend,” said Sebastian, much moved, “ I will think of what you say.”

“ But, perhaps, there may be no need of thinking of such things at all,” rejoined Nanni. “ Why talk of misfortunes before they come ? Laura hopes great things from the opera I hear you are going to bring out.”

“ Ay ! here it is ! ” said the musician, pointing to the leaves on the piano. “ Heaven knows ! Sometimes I hope ; sometimes I have no hope. The time is drawing very near now.”

“ What day is it fixed for, Signor Conte ? ” asked the Gobbo.

“ The third of January. It is to be the second piece for the Carnival season.”

“ Is it in rehearsal yet, Signor Conte ? ”

“ Not yet ; we shall begin the rehearsals about the middle of next month. Signor Gualandi assures me that will be quite time enough.”

“ He has seen the work, of course, Signor Conte ? ”

“ Oh, yes ! He declares that he has great hopes from it. He professes to like the music himself, much.”

“ And you may be sure that he is sincere, for he would not have accepted the piece otherwise,” said Nanni.

“ And the judgment of an experienced *impresario* must be a very shrewd one,” rejoined the Gobbo. “ If anybody can tell what will please the public, he must be able to do so.”

“And yet many operas utterly and disgracefully fail,” said the composer with a sigh. “Believe me, my friends, it is a horribly nervous thing, a veritable agony for a composer—the first night of a new work. There you must be in the orchestra,* visible to every eye in the house, obliged to give every faculty of your mind to the orchestra and the singers, yet painfully striving to catch the slightest indication of the feeling of the public, and conscious all the while that the stupidity or incompetency of others may at any moment wreck you! Ah! trust me, it is a veritable martyrdom!”

“Proportionably great must the triumph be,” remarked the Gobbo, “when your work is accepted by the public, and you receive the applause and admiration of your fellow-citizens. Ah! that must be a very delightful moment, worth the labour of many a night, and the anxieties of many a day!”

“Yes!” sighed Sebastian, “there are the pleasures for the conquerors as well as the pains for the vanquished.”

“It is never wise, Signor Conte, if you will pardon me for saying so,” returned the Gobbo, “to take up sorrow at interest, as the saying goes. Let us not anticipate the possibility of failure. I have heard enough to be quite sure that your talent is a real one. How many very competent judges do we know who have esteemed it such. And then as to the little stratagems and manœuvres of the theatre, you may be very sure that your friends will not be backward in giving you a helping hand.”

Laura's caution to Nanni about not dropping a word of any such friendly plot to Sebastian, it will be observed, had not been communicated to the Gobbo,—fortunately, as the matter stood.

“My dear friends,” cried Sebastian, with great eagerness, “for Heaven's sake do not attempt anything of the kind. You are little versed in the ways of our theatres, Signor Sandro, if you suppose that the tactics which we hear so much of from Paris could be put in action here. Believe me, that a more certain way to ensure the failure of any piece at an Italian theatre could not be found than the appearance of any attempt

* Until quite recently the composer of a new opera was in Italy always expected to conduct it in person.

to get up a factitious approval. It would be instantly resented by the public. Why, do you suppose, is the approval of an opera at Milan, Venice, or Florence, felt by the musical world throughout Europe to stamp it permanently with a reputation that no success at Paris would suffice to achieve for it? Only because it is well known that a purchased success pronounced by a packed jury is possible at Paris and impossible in Italy. And whence does this remarkable difference arise?"

"I confess, Signor Conte, I am at a loss to what circumstances to attribute such a fact."

"Why, simply to the existence of the *corsie** in our theatres, those genuine arenas for the criticism and judgment of the true public, which our *impresarii* would so gladly get rid of, but of which an Italian public knows the use too well to part with them."

"And what is the use of them?" asked Nanni, in his ignorance of the habitudes of Florentine life.

"Why, just this, Signor Nanni," replied the musician; "don't you see that the judgment pronounced thus becomes a collective and a motived one instead of one based on the lead of a few individuals guided either by caprice, or by friendship, or by enmity? Don't you see that the opportunity thus secured, and so amply used in our theatres, of communicating impressions, conferring, comparing opinions, and exercising superintendence over the honesty of them, makes just all the difference? Where every individual of the audience is fixed in his place, with a stranger probably on either side of him, the judgment of the public may be, and almost infallibly is, determined by the lead of a few noisy individuals, who act either in obedience to preconcerted determination, or wholly independently of each other. An author's fate is very differently decided in the *corsie* of our theatres. He must with us abide the reasoned, compared, and combined judgment of the men most capable of judging him. And depend upon it, my kind friends, that any attempt to evade or over-ride this judgment would be so resented as to

* The ample passages around the seats in the pit, left vacant so that continual circulation and movement in them is practicable (and in fact always practised) in Italian theatres, are so called.

condemn any author so unadvised as to attempt it, to a certain and ignominious *fiasco!*”

Sebastian had just ended his exposition of the difference between the circumstances under which theatrical criticism exists on the northern and on the southern side of the Alps—a statement of the facts of the case quite as true at the present day as in the first quarter of the century—when the three young men heard a ring at the door of the apartment, and in the next minute could distinguish the voice of the Rev. Guido Guidi asking if the Signora Contessa Marietta were at home. The boy replied, that she was gone to mass in the neighbouring church; whereupon the Canon said that he would step in and await her return in the *loggia*.

It struck the Gobbo as strange that the priest should not have been well aware that Marietta was at the church. Even he had, as has been seen, been well aware that at that hour on that day she would certainly be so engaged. And it seemed very unlikely that the Canon, whose intimacy in the family was so very much closer, should be ignorant of the fact. Very probably the same idea suggested itself to Sebastian, who must have known that the priest was far too old and intimate a friend of his cousin for him not to be aware of her habit in this respect. Whether it were any feeling arising from this circumstance, or whether it were caused by the consciousness that the little party in the artist's chamber had been expressing opinions and hopes very strongly at variance with the views of the Canonico with regard to Sebastian, some feeling there was which induced all three of the young men to agree, by means of mutual glances, and the interchange of some of those telegraphic gestures so familiar and intelligible to Italians, that they would keep quiet where they were, so as not to let the new comer know that they were there.

Some further conversation then took place between the composer and Nanni, as to the absolute necessity of his abstaining from any such friendly attempts to contribute to the theatrical success of the former as he had contemplated; and from that they passed to talk of the probabilities and possibilities of Signor Giuseppe Palli's being induced to give his consent to a marriage between his daughter and Sebastian, speaking together in a manner which rather threw out the Gobbo from the conversa-

tion. It seemed, therefore, to be only a natural consequence of this, when he said suddenly—

“Signor Conte, does not that little door in the wall of your chamber communicate with the closet where the family pictures are stored away?”

“Yes! but I never use it. The closet is pretty well filled with the old pictures!”

“Might I have a look at them while you are finishing your talk with my friend Nanni? You know how much interest I take in such matters. May I?”

“Oh, yes! certainly. Better not make much noise though,” he added, with a look which plainly said, “Remember that he is there!”

“Never fear, I will be as still as a mouse.”

So the Gobbo slipped into the dark closet, shutting the little door behind him, and thus shutting out almost all the little light there was; which would have seemed odd to Sebastian and Palli, if they had happened to think about the matter.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CANON AND THE GOBBO.

THE Gobbo was as good as his word in making no noise in the closet. Sebastiano and Nanni heard no sound on the other side of the thin partition which divided the closet from the chamber, and still less, of course, could any have been heard in the sitting-room through the immensely thick wall which divided it from the back part of the building. Sebastian and Nanni continued their conversation in low voices; and as the two young men gradually became more friendly and more confidential in their talk on the subjects which had so powerful an interest for both of them, they almost forgot all about the Gobbo in the closet.

Had they not done so they might have wondered much at his prolonged absence, for assuredly the closet was not a place well adapted for the examination of pictures. But, although it was

perfectly true that Sandro Boccancra was very fond of such old family memorials, and had his memory stored with a vast mass of genealogical lore, which made them particularly interesting to him, the truth was that it was another speciality of his character, and a different taste, which had prompted him to find an excuse for ensconcing himself in the closet. He had marked long since, and perfectly well remembered, the little window, which, blocked up as it was by some of the lighter pictures which had been heaped on the edges of their more massive companions on the side of the closet, was yet visible enough though not very conspicuous on the side of the sitting-room. And the chance afforded by this means of spying the movements of the Canon of San Lorenzo, at a moment when he could least suspect that any eye was upon him, had tempted the Gobbo with a power he could not resist.

In the first place, he hated the Rev. Guido Guidi, and believed him to be always engaged in some mischief or other. In the next place, his curiosity, always on the alert, had been especially excited by the fact, he had ascertained from overhearing the conversation between the Canon and the jeweller on the Ponte Vecchio, that the former was engaged in thwarting the marriage, in favour of which his sympathies were now enlisted. Further, he could not help suspecting that Guidi must be acquainted with the secret of Marietta's treasure, which evidently was unknown to Sebastian; and he was anxious to ascertain if it was on the present occasion part of the purpose of the Canon to hold communication with the old man who was sleeping in the chamber to the left of the sitting-room.

No sooner had he shut the door of the closet upon him, than profiting by the faint ray of light which found its way through the window, he began noiselessly and with cat-like daintiness of movement and dexterity to remove the small pictures which blocked up the window. This done, he ascertained that the massive frames of the lower tier, standing one against the other, some ten or twelve feet deep, would bear his weight, and lightly stepping on the top of them found himself with his face close to the one dusty frame of glass that formed the little window. So placed, with the dark closet behind him, there was no possi-

bility that he should be seen from the sitting-room, even if the Canon had chanced to raise his eyes to the forgotten little window.

There was no one in the room when he looked into it. Had the Canon gone into the old man's chamber, or merely stepped out on to the *loggia*? Or had he possibly taken advantage of Marietta's absence to enter her room,—perhaps to inspect those secret accounts? At all events, by remaining in his present position patiently for a short time, it was probable that he would be able to ascertain at least thus much.

In the sitting-room the cloth was laid for the family dinner at mid-day. There was the old Canon's place at right angles with the window—unmistakeably his, for the great arm-chair was placed ready for him—while one ordinary rush-bottomed chair was set on the opposite side of the table, and another facing the window. This latter was probably Marietta's place, for there was only a *carafe* of water beside the plate, while at the old Canon's right hand there was a small quarter-flask of wine, and at that of the person opposite—of course, Sebastian's place—there was a larger and more ordinary flask.

“I suppose she drinks only water,” thought the Gobbo to himself, drawing, according to his habit, all the information he could from what was before his eyes; “but they give the old man some good wine. No more than is right too! I dare say there is something choice to comfort the old fellow's heart in that nice little flask—his daily portion, no doubt. Our friend Sebastian takes a more ordinary drink. There is a little roll too, I see, under the old man's napkin; and a loaf of second bread for the others. Marietta takes care of the old man, as it's right enough she should, but spends as little as may be upon herself and cousin, it would seem.”

The Gobbo had carried his observations and deductions thus far, when, somewhat to his disappointment, he saw the Canon enter the room from the *loggia*. He had not been to the old man then, nor had he been intruding into the Signora Marietta's chamber. After all he had been merely lounging in the *loggia* while expecting her return from mass. Is he going away though, without waiting for her? He walks across the room to the door, and puts his hand to the lock; but apparently

only to try it, and assure himself that it is shut. Strange enough! The Gobbo's hopes of seeing something worth spying are beginning to revive again. And what's this? The reverend gentleman steps lightly across the room yet again, and this time to the door of the chamber occupied by the Canon. What can he be going to do or say to the old Canon of the Duomo, that should induce him thus to assure himself of his privacy?

But no, he is not going to enter the old man's room! He puts his ear to the door; his object, apparently, is only to ascertain that the old Canon is not stirring. The Gobbo was more and more entirely unable to guess what was to come next. The Canon went to the window, cast a glance into the *loggia*, as if to assure himself that no living creature was by any possibility in it, although but a minute before he had entered from the *loggia* himself;—and having satisfied himself that no eye was there, nevertheless closed the terrace window. Did he think that in shutting out the full light of open day, he also shrouded himself from the gaze of another Eye?

He stood for a minute after he had closed the window, with his face towards it, and consequently with his back turned to the eye that was watching all these movements with absorbing interest. He was apparently doing something which needed the light, for his head was bent, and the Gobbo could see, from the position and movement of his arms, that he was in some way using his hands.

Presently he turned, and stepping up to the table prepared for dinner, with a quick and light step, took up the small flask which flanked the plate laid for the old master of the house, and withdrawing the small tuft of straw which closed the mouth of it, poured into it, from a little white paper packet he had in his hand, . . . something;—doubtless, as the Gobbo thought from the action and the paper, a powder. Placing his thumb on the small mouth of the flask, he gave the contents of it one shake, then replaced the straw-tuft, which did duty for a cork, and after occupying in doing all this less than a minute, returned with as quick and light a step to the window, and cast a hasty glance round the room. He opened the window as it had been before, looked out into the *loggia*, listened for an instant once

again at the door of the old Canon, and then passed out into the entrance hall, where the Gobbo heard him call the servant lad, and say to him—

“Tell the Signora that she has been longer at church than I had anticipated. I cannot stay now, but will call and see her to-morrow in the afternoon.”

And so saying he walked off.

A very few seconds had been allowed to the Gobbo, as will have been observed, to recover from the extreme amazement into which that which he had seen had thrown him, and to determine on his own course of action in the emergency. But these few seconds had sufficed him for the purpose.

Of course to an Englishman the line of conduct to be pursued under the circumstances seems clear and simple enough. Of course he would “give immediate information” of what he had seen; he would at all events on the instant tell the facts to those nearest him, and in all probability would deem it his duty to “call in the police.”

Another than the Gobbo might even in Florence have communicated the startling facts of which he had been witness to the two young men, his own friends and companions. But as for the myrmidons of the law! *Che!* A very pretty thing to make an accusation against a priest, and one in the position of the Canon of San Lorenzo!—an accusation, which, if anything, was a charge of intent to poison! “Where should I be before nightfall?” the Gobbo would have asked, if any one had proposed to him a line of action so wholly in disaccordance with Tuscan ideas and habits. “Where should I be? In the Bargello to be sure!” But the flask, the bodily evidence of the truth of your assertion? “Oh! there would be small difficulty about that. The flask would disappear very shortly, never more to be heard of, unless indeed one filled with perfectly pure wine were brought forward by the police in vindication of the character of a Very Reverend Canon, and a nobleman, and for the suppression of scandal, and the due punishment of Jacobins and suspicious persons.” Even in these days a Tuscan rarely dreams under any circumstances of voluntarily having anything to say to the police. Bad indeed, in their estimation, must the evil be, which would not be rendered worse to all parties

concerned by letting the police have anything to do or to say in the matter!

But the Gobbo could not bring himself to share so great and important a secret with any one!—at all events not yet, till he had had time to consider the matter in all its bearings, and to savour the pleasure of knowing himself the sole depositary of such a piece of information. Had Guidi remained in the house, he might have been compelled to say at once what he had seen, although it would have taxed his moral courage very severely to have done so. For the Gobbo never contemplated for an instant suffering the old man to drink the draught which he firmly believed to be poisoned. But, as it was, the departure of the priest facilitated a scheme for meeting cunning by cunning, which he had instantly conceived.

The moment he heard the door of the apartment close behind the Canon, he came out from his hiding place, not by the door opening into the chamber of Sebastian, but by another, which communicated with the entrance hall. Then entering the sitting-room, and calling the servant, he asked the boy some question about the view from the *loggia*,—was that long steep ridge of tiles there the roof of such a church? or some such matter; and then turning from the window, as if about to leave the room, he said—

“So the old gentleman takes a glass of choice wine, I see. I dare say now there is something very good in here!” touching the little flask as he spoke.

“I believe you!” said the boy; “that’s the best wine in the Albizzi cellar, that is. The Signora buys it on purpose for the old gentleman. I have to fetch it every two or three days.”

“Then I tell you what I wish you would do, my boy. I should like very much to get a little such wine for my old father. If you’ll run and get me just such a quarter flask as you get for the Canon, I will give you a couple of crazie for your trouble. It’s close here; you won’t be gone ten minutes.”

“But that wine costs two lire the flask! it does, *davvero!* That makes six crazie for the quarter flask, you know.”

“Very good. Six crazie for the wine, and two for yourself, makes a paul. Here is a paul. Now run as fast as you can, and come back to me here. I will open the door in the meantime, if

anybody comes. And if the Signora Marietta returns, I will tell her what you have gone for. Off with you!"

And if Marietta had returned before the boy came back, the Gobbo would have told her that seeing a flask of superior wine on the table, placed there evidently for her venerable uncle, he had been anxious to get some of the same for his father, who needed a glass of good wine; and he would still have trusted to chance for the surreptitious accomplishment of his design of removing the poisoned flask, and replacing it by the other. If, however, he should not be able to contrive this, then he would be obliged to confide to the Signora Marietta the entire truth. For of course, in any way, he had no intention of suffering the old man to swallow the potion prepared for him by the Canon of San Lorenzo.

As it was, however, his messenger returned with the quarter flask of wine before Marietta had come home. The boy gave it him at the door, and leaving him to rejoin his friends in Sebastian's room, vanished into the little kitchen. Whereupon the Gobbo lost not a moment in substituting the newly-purchased flask for that which stood by the side of old Canon Giacomo's plate.

He then returned to Nanni and Sebastian, and merely said, that as soon as he had heard the Canon of San Lorenzo go away, he had come out of the closet by the door opening into the entrance hall, and seeing a flask of wine specially placed for the old gentleman, had asked the boy to run and procure him a sample of the same for his father's use.

"Yes," said Sebastian, "my uncle needs at his time of life a glass of really good wine,—the true old man's milk, you know, Signor Boccanera. I hope it may suit your father. I believe it is one of the best growths of the Casentino."

"In that case I think I ought to know something about it," put in Nanni; "I know every vineyard in the Casentino, and I should like to see what sort of stuff it is. But why didn't you tell me, *amico mio*, that you were looking out for some good wine. I could have helped you to it."

"A thousand thanks! 'gnor Nanni," said the Gobbo, still clutching the flask in his hand; "but I should not have dreamed of troubling you for so small a matter. When I want a dozen

*some** or so of genuine Casentino growth, then perhaps I may take advantage of your kindness."

But you see the thing is," returned Nanni, "that when once the wine gets into your Florentine cellars, it seldom comes out again just as it went in. Let me taste a mouthful of what you have got there; I should like to see what sort of stuff it is."

But the Gobbo clutched his little flask tighter than ever, and was for a moment rather at a loss what to say to his future brother-in-law. To let him taste the wine was of course out of the question. Who knew how potent might be the drug he had seen put into it?

"At home, 'gnor Nanni," he said at last, "I shall have the pleasure of taking a glass with you. Here, without giving trouble to *Il Signor Conte*, we have no glass, and——"

"*Che!* we don't make so much fuss about tasting a flask of wine in the country. Give me the flask. I will put my lips to it, and one mouthful will soon tell me what it is."

"But, 'gnor Nanni," said the poor little man, hesitating and colouring up, "I don't know, to tell the truth. You must excuse me. The fact is, my dear father is sometimes very particular, very odd, and he might not like to see that his flask of wine had been tasted."

"Odd indeed! *per Bacco!*" rejoined Nanni, staring with great surprise; "well, say no more about it; I only wanted to serve you."

"I am quite sure of that, 'gnor Nanni," said the Gobbo, much distressed, and looked a telegram to his friend to take their leave, as he added, "I will explain to you, . you will understand that . my reason is——"

And so the two brothers-in-law *in posse* took their leave of the composer, promising to call on him again soon, "as soon," whispered Nanni, "as I have any word to bring you from her, which will not be long."

When they had reached the street, and were walking towards the Boccanera's home, while the Gobbo carried his jealously-guarded flask beneath his cloak, Nanni broke out, "I say,

* *Soma*, "an ass's or horse's load;" *i.e.* two barrels, one slung on either side. Each barrel contains twenty flasks, of seven pounds weight of wine each. This is legal Tuscan wine measure.

friend Sandro ! why the devil would you not let me taste the wine ? You said you would explain. What is the meaning of it ?”

“So I will explain, my dear friend,” replied the Gobbo, after a silence of a minute or two, during which he rapidly determined on his course of action—“so I will explain, but not now. On the contrary, I own to you that there is a mystery in the matter of the greatest interest. But you must allow me to keep it a mystery, ’gnor Nanni, for a little while. Be very sure meanwhile that it is no part of the mystery that my dear father would not be too proud to give you a glass from his flask, if it was the last he was ever to drink. But you remember our promise, my dear friend ! We are to help one another on all occasions, I with the head, and you as the man of action. And I want your help now, ’gnor Nanni ; I want it very badly. And I must ask you to do what I want of you, without asking why or wherefore, on my solemn promise that all the mystery shall be revealed to you before long, and that you will approve of what I am doing.”

“*Misericordia !*” exclaimed Nanni, utterly amazed ; “does Caterina know the mystery, Sandro ?”

“Not a word ! Nor shall I say a word to her about it.”

“Has it anything to do with her ?”

“Nothing at all !”

“And may I tell her about it, when you tell me ?”

“Yes ; then you may tell her everything.”

“Well then, I’m content, if it’s nothing very terrible you want of me,” said Nanni with an air of resignation ; “what must I do ?”

“The first thing, ’gnor Nanni, is much more disagreeable for me to ask than for you to do. I am not in the habit of asking such things from anybody, and you may conclude that the object which drives me to it is urgent. I require twenty pauls this day. It is a small sum ; but it so happens that I have not so much by me, and cannot get it without being asked questions that I cannot answer. Will you lend it to me ?”

“*Che c’è da far tanti discorsi ?*” * cried Nanni, taking a couple of dollars from his pocket ; “if that is all, it is easily done, and most welcome.”

* “What is the need of making so many words about it ?”

“ But it is not all, my dear friend. We must go and lay the money out in more of the same wine, that I have here in my hand. In truth, I could do that by myself, but I need your help for what is to come afterwards.”

“ *Santa Madonna!* Have you lost your senses, Sandro, about this blessed wine, that you won't let me taste? Why, man alive, if you want a barrel of good old wine for Maestro Simone, do you think I should not have pleasure in sending up a *soma* to Caterina's father, let alone any other motive?—and a better sample, I'll go bail, than what you can get at a Florentine retailer's.”

“ Dear Signor Nanni! you are very good. But that would not serve the purpose. We must buy a few flasks of the same wine at the Albizzi cellar; and we must get a number of quarter flasks, just like this one, and put all the wine into them.”

“ Well!” rejoined Nanni after a pause, during which an expression of complete stupefaction and inanity had been creeping over his face; “ if I can guess what you have got into that long head of yours, I am a saint! It can't be,” he added dubiously, “ that you have gone out of your senses all of a sudden, eh?”

“ No! trust me, Nanni, I am quite in my senses. And remember that it is all to be explained to you before long.”

“ But shall I understand it when it is explained to me? for I doubt it!” remonstrated Nanni.

“ Oh, yes! you will without any difficulty at all. But now let us go after the wine. And when we have bought it, I must bring it home two flasks at a time under my cloak; and you must keep Caterina engaged, so that I can get it into my own room without being seen by anybody. My father will be at the shop.”

“ Ay! that part of the job I'll do for you with all my heart, 'gnor Sandro. But I never knew that you were a man who cared about wine,” added Nanni, somewhat gravely. “ It is an ugly habit drinking wine on the sly in one's own room.”

“ Signor Nanni, *a chi lo dice?** Be reassured. I shall never put my lips to a drop of the wine.”

* “ To whom do you say it?”

“ Well! if you aren’t enough to puzzle a priest! I don’t believe I shall ever understand what you’re up to! Any way, I’ll be as good as my word. Come along, *caro mio*, let’s buy the wine, if it is to be done.”

So the wine was bought; and then the Gobbo carried it, a couple of flasks at a time, and safely deposited it in his own little room, while Nanni was quite as good as his word in keeping Caterina so engaged as to prevent her from observing or interfering with her brother’s movements.

Then the Gobbo proceeded to find a number of quarter flasks just like that one he had removed from the Canon Lunardi’s table. These he bought, and carried similarly to his room; promising himself to do the necessary decanting work from the large flasks into the little ones that night.

When he had done all this, he went into the sitting-room where Nanni and Caterina were, and said, with an air of extreme business-like authority—

“ Caterina, my sister, may I pray you to retire for a short space to your room? I have to speak to Signor Nanni on important business, which cannot conveniently be deferred.”

“ Why, what is in the wind now, Sandro? There never was such a one as you for having secrets; but your secrets are never worth knowing, that’s one comfort! I’ll go; and I won’t even listen at the door to overhear you! *A rivederci*, Signor Nanni!”

“ What, aren’t the secrets all over yet, *caro mio*?” said honest Nanni, half cross at having been so interrupted in his previous occupation. “ Surely you can’t have brought all the wine home yet?”

“ Indeed I have, ’gnor Nanni, and the quarter flasks too, as like as two peas to that I saw on the Canon’s table.”

“ But why should they be alike? Don’t dry up my soul* by talking to me about what you do not mean me to understand. It is quite enough to understand what is meant to be understood. Now, what’s to be done next in this blind man’s game?”

“ Only one thing more, ’gnor Nanni; and believe me, you will not only understand it all, but entirely approve of all that I have done.”

* *Non mi seccate l’ anima*, a common form of expression for “ don’t bore me.”

"Well, what's the next move in the dark?"

"Nothing more to be done to-day. But every day for some time to come, beginning with to-morrow, a watch must be kept on the apartments of the old Canonico, at the same hour of the day that we were there;—say from eleven till about half-past twelve; and if his reverence the Canon Guidi goes there at that hour, I must have notice of it directly. I can keep the watch myself, say four days in the week. But I could not well be absent from the shop and from home every day. It would lead to remark. Therefore, my dear Nanni, I must ask you to help me. I know it is imposing a trouble and a bore on you. And all I can say is, that the object really is a very important one; and that you will assuredly approve afterwards of all that has been done."

"I must watch the Palazzo Lunardi, and give you notice if the Canon Guidi goes there between eleven and half-past twelve in the morning. Is that it?"

"Precisely!"

"Well! It's all very mysterious, and very like walking in the dark. But as I have begun, and given you my promise, I will go through with it, and do your bidding. But I shall expect, *amico mio*, that the upshot will show that there was some real sense in all this mystery-making; or else I shall not let you lead me a dance in the dark again."

"I am content that you should say more than that, Signor Nanni! If you do not find that there is sense, and good sense, and, as I said before, a sense that you will fully approve of, in all that I am doing and asking you to do, why then never be led by me again, never put any trust in me again, and set me down for a busybody and an ass!"

"Very well! we'll play out the play this time at all events; because, you see, Sandro, I *have* great confidence in your sense. You have been absent from the shop to-day. I will take the duty of watching the house to-morrow, from eleven till half-past twelve; and if the Canon Guidi enters, I am to let you know?"

"To let me know with the least loss of time possible. I will take care not to be absent from the shop."

"Would it do, if I found somebody to keep watch for me, who would come and tell you directly? It is rather

a bore having to stand there in the street for an hour and a half!"

"A very great bore, 'gnor Nanni, and I wish I could take it on my own hands altogether. But I am afraid I must ask you to do it yourself. I cannot trust any one else. You don't know all that depends on it. It is a question of . . . I must say no more at present. But believe me, you would never forgive yourself if anything were to go amiss by reason of a failure in any part of my plans."

"*Misericordia!* Are you in your right senses, Sandro? Are you, though, for certain? I declare you frighten me. Your plans . . . buying wine . . . and watching houses . . . and I should never forgive myself if anything was to go wrong! I'll be shot if my head don't go round with it all. Well, any way, my part is simple. If that priest of San Lorenzo enters the apartment of the Canonico Lunardi, any time between eleven and half-past twelve to-morrow, you shall know the fact at the Ponte Vecchio within five minutes afterwards. Will that do?"

"That is it exactly. And I am so grateful to you, dear Signor Nanni, for trusting to me. You will not repent it."

So the watch on the old Canon's house having been thus settled, the two queerly-matched friends parted.

Of course, the reader comprehends that the necessity of maintaining this watch arose from the probability that the Rev. Guido Guidi might repeat the operation in which the Gobbo had seen him engaged. In which case it would become necessary again to defeat it, by the same means which had been used on the first occasion.

If the English reader will persist in thinking that it would have been far simpler and easier to "give information" at the Florentine Bow Street, I can only say that he has a very imperfect conception, not only of the manner in which the spies and rogues, who in those days stood in the place of a police in Tuscany, were in the habit of managing their affairs, but also of the peculiarities of the Italian, and especially of the Florentine character and habits of thought;—a character and habits of thought doubtless formed, as regards such matters, by the nature of the rule under which they lived.

The Gobbo has lived to see a very different order of things

prevail in Italy and in Tuscany. But men rarely can free themselves from habits of thought which have been the familiar furniture of their minds for half a century or more. And the Gobbo to the present day looks back on the manner in which he managed the "delicate" affair—that is his epithet—in question, as a masterpiece of prudence and judgment.

CHAPTER XXV.

DEMETRIO GAZZINI, SEMPLICISTA.

THE Canon Guidi, it will be remembered, had promised on going away without seeing Marietta, on the morning of the 27th of November, to call in the afternoon of the next day. Nanni, therefore, watched in vain for him in the morning. As soon as ever the stipulated time was accomplished he started off to the Ponte Vecchio to report the result to the Gobbo.

"So far so good!" said the latter; "to-morrow I will undertake the job myself. We shall see."

"I hope we shall!" said Nanni; "for at present I see nothing at all. Are you going home to dinner now?"

"Why no! not directly. I have a little bit of business to attend to."

"Because I was going to say I would walk with you and say a word to Caterina. I think I deserve that, after standing like a sentry on a post for an hour and a half."

"Well! go you by yourself, 'gnor Nanni. Two to one you will find her alone. My father will have eaten his mouthful and gone off to the *café*. If not, he will be delighted to see you."

"I think I will go then," said Nanni. "May I tell Caterina how I have been passing my morning?"

"*Che!* not a word. We should neither of us have a moment of peace till we had told her everything."

"That would be hard upon me, any way, seeing that I know nothing."

"Best say nothing about the matter, then; and, Signor

Nanni, have the kindness to tell La Caterina that I shall be home for a bit of dinner in half-an-hour. *A rivederci.*"

Nanni went off to indemnify himself by a pleasant hour for the disagreeable one he had passed hanging about the entrance to the Palazzo Lunardi; and, as soon as his back was turned, the Gobbo, having first put on his cloak, took from a little cupboard under his work-table,—hiding it under his cloak from the eyes of the boy, who alone remained in the shop at that hour,—the flask which he had carried off from the Canon's table.

A cloak is a garment of indispensable utility in a land of poor gentility, such as Italy was for so many generations—taking rank, indeed, almost as an essential social institution among a people much engaged in keeping up appearances under difficulties, which necessitates the concealment of many things under a decorous exterior. How many deficiencies of toilet are hidden, how many derogatory occupations performed, beneath the cover of the all-sheltering cloak! How many an historically named Marchese, far too noble to work and far too poor to marry, duly entitled to wear all sorts of decorations at his button-hole, if only he could find the button-hole to wear them at, has reached his garret beneath the tiles of the palace built by his ancestors; and, on carefully doffing and hanging up the cherished cloak, emerged from beneath its friendly shelter in a tattered old jacket, with his dinner on a skewer in one hand. For a social system which has seen better days there is no garment like the cloak.

The Gobbo Boccanera had, perhaps, fallen too far, poor fellow, from the condition of his noble ancestors, to have cared much about carrying a flask openly in his hand through the streets of Florence, had the purpose in hand not been a secret one on other grounds. But as it was, he was very glad to conceal the little flask beneath his cloak, as he proceeded with it from the Ponte Vecchio to a queer dark little shop in the dark little street which runs parallel with the Arno on the southern side, between the Ponte Vecchio and the Ponte Santa Trinita. There seemed to be hardly anything in the shop, save a few queer-shaped bottles and a bundle or two of dried plants; and over the door of it was written, "Demetrio Gazzini, Semplici-

cista;" a *semplicista*, or dealer in simples, being a trade not wholly driven out of the world in Florence by that of the modernised apothecary, and requiring, or supposed to require, some knowledge of botany and its kindred sciences in the professor of it.

This Demetrius, the simplicist,—who had chosen this humble calling rather because it permitted him to ramble about the country and live a desultory life after his own fashion, in a manner which would have been incompatible with any regular exercise of the medical profession, than because he could not have duly qualified himself for the latter, for which he had been intended, had he chosen to do so,—this Demetrius was an old friend and school-mate of the Gobbo. He was all alone in his little den of a back-shop, looking on to the river, eating a dinner which seemed perfectly in keeping with his character as a simplicist, or dealer in herbs, when Sandro entered.

"Look you here, Demetrio *mio*," said he, after they had exchanged a word or two, producing the flask, "I want a turn of your skill. You must find out for me what this flask contains, and ask no questions, and say no word of me or my flask to anybody. I know I can trust you, and you know you can trust me."

"All right, Sandro! hand over the flask. It looks to me as if this would be a very appropriate mode of ascertaining the contents of it," said the *semplicista*, raising the flask to his mouth as he spoke.

"No!" rejoined the Gobbo, laying his hand on the other's arm, "I have too great a regard for you to let you discover an answer to my question in any such way. Does the smell say anything?"

"The smell is strongly in favour of my method of analysis," said Demetrius. "I should say a clear case of as capital a flask of Chianti as I ever met with."

"A diagnosis extremely creditable to your accurate knowledge of simples, of one kind at least!" returned Sandro. "Nevertheless we will, if you please, inquire a little further into the matter. Have you the means of ascertaining whether any and what substance may have been added to this wine?"

"That depends on what the substance may be, friend Sandro. If anything of a mineral nature have been used to tamper with

it, I shall probably have little difficulty in detecting it. But if you have any reason to suspect anything, you must not conclude that the wine is all right because I fail to detect anything."

"Very good! when can you give me the result of your trial?"

"Look in this evening as you come from the shop. I'll see to it."

"*A rivederci dunque, stasera.*"*

In the afternoon of that day the Canon of San Lorenzo paid the visit he had promised to Casa Lunardi. The Canon Giacomo was absent at vespers, whither he had been accompanied by Sebastian. So Marietta was alone.

"I was sorry to have missed you yesterday, Guido! but I thought you must have remembered that it was the festival of *Il Beato* Leonardo, and that I never miss the function in the family chapel on that day. It is one of the very few and very small marks of respect for the memory of my forefathers which I am yet able to pay."

She spoke in a dreary, utterly dispirited, and cold manner, in the tones of which the practised ear of so acute an observer as the Reverend Guido Guidi did not fail to detect a certain degree of alienation in the speaker's mind as regarded himself.

"I had not forgotten it, Marietta. I am not in the habit of forgetting things that interest you nearly. But I hoped you might have been home from the church a few minutes earlier. I was not able to come at any other hour yesterday."

"Your stay at Rome has been as short as your departure was sudden."

"Yes, happily. I am very anxious to have the little work on which I am engaged printed by the end of the year. I came upon a difficult point in the matter—a point which, indeed, has never been finally decided by the Church; and I was very desirous of consulting some of my learned friends at Rome, especially the Superior of the Jesuits, upon the subject. A few hours' conversation was all that was needed."

"It seems a small need to have required so great an exertion as a journey express to Rome. Was it not possible to consult the learned theologians in question by letter?"

* "Adieu, then, till this evening."

“As to the exertion, Marietta, he who aims at reputation must never even stay to count it. And as for your other suggestion, there are points on which I might be able to obtain the sense of men in whose judgment I have confidence, but on which they might not be willing to commit themselves by giving their opinion in writing.”

“A bolder manifestation of opinion might be more calculated to win respect for the opinion held.”

“Prudence is a great virtue, Marietta,” retorted the priest, sarcastically. “But I want to ask you about your venerable uncle. How has he been while I have been away?”

“As usual, dear old man! well and cheerful as ever.”

“The most trying season to old persons is now at hand. A generous diet is more than ever necessary for them in weather which makes demands even upon the reserved forces of the young. Does he retain his appetite?”

“Yes, indeed! I see no change in him.”

“And take his wine? Nothing is more important to a man of his age than a modicum of really good and generous wine.”

“I am sure of it. And we make a point of getting him the best we can. He has his separate flask at dinner every day.”

“What quantity does he take?”

“The fourth part of a flask as regularly as possible. A quarter flask is always put on the table, and he always finishes it.”

“Yes! that is enough, and not too much. And he always gets to the bottom of it?”

“Oh, yes! his habits in such things are as regular as clock-work, dear uncle Giacomo! And I can declare, Guido,” continued Marietta, suddenly changing her tone and manner, “with my hand on my heart, and as if I were standing before the judgment seat of God—I can declare, that to the best of my power and ability, I have neglected nothing which can contribute to the old man’s comfort and well-being.”

“Why should any such solemn protest be needed on such a subject, my dear friend? Although we have talked over the circumstances, that might seem to make it desirable that your uncle’s life should not be prolonged, we came to the conclusion, that the issues of life and death were matters that must be left entirely in the hands of Providence. As far as we can see at

present, it does seem as if the decease of the Canon within the next few months could alone enable you to attain the aim of your entire life. To us it does undoubtedly seem so! But God only knows. We must be content to leave the matter in His hands. He will shape the result as in His wisdom He shall find best. Let us await it with what patience we may."

"I strive to do so, Guido. And I rejoice that you yourself should have come to such a frame of mind."

"I never, I hope, was in any other frame of mind, Marietta. Perhaps you do not separate with sufficient accuracy the domain of conduct from that of speculation. The latter cannot be too free—I had almost said too lawless. The former is ruled by far severer laws."

And Marietta, feeling that she did not above half comprehend the general proposition which the priest was laying down, was inclined to imagine, that she must have been in error in supposing him to have, on a former occasion, intended to convey a meaning which had haunted her with so horrible an obsession, and against which she had struggled so fearfully.

And now she trembled with the violence of her emotion, as the priest so easily and placidly spoke of its appearing desirable that her uncle's life should not be prolonged! Yes! it was easy for him to speak in the calm stock phrases of religion on the subject. His life had not been dedicated to one sole dear hope, now being wrecked under his eyes, as the post was all but gained! How could she avoid wishing anxiously for her uncle's death? As for the idea of raising a murderous hand against his life, that had been banished, she said to herself, with a sufficiency of reprobation. But the other horror remained. And how could she clear her heart and conscience of the hideous thought?

The Canon Guidi, however, had attained the real object of his visit. He had in the first place ascertained, as he supposed, that the poisoned wine had been all drunk by the intended victim, and that he might safely calculate on subsequent doses being equally consumed. He had been anxious also to know whether any effect on the old Canon's health had already made itself observable. He was in entire ignorance as to the mode of operation of the poison, further than that it was warranted to do its office in the time specified. But he was not at all surprised

at finding that no perceptible result had as yet followed the exhibition of it. After a few minutes more conversation with Marietta, and a few devout expressions of a hope that things might be so ordered by a merciful Providence as to bring about the fulfilment of her pious wish and object in God's good time and season, he left her. And the thought that was in his mind, as he descended the stairs from the third floor, was, that if the catastrophe, be it how it might, were to be delayed much longer, and the present state of suspense and struggle in Marietta's mind be prolonged, the finale would be her death before that of her octogenarian uncle.

For in truth Marietta was terribly changed. And the Canon's absence for more than a week made the change more noticeable to him than it had been before. She stooped habitually, and was apt to press one hand against her side as she walked. Her broad and finely-developed chest had become flat and sunken between her shoulders. Her cheeks were hollow, and their former statuesque whiteness was changed for a settled hectic patch of pink. Her large dark eyes seemed more lustrous than ever; but they were sunken beneath the finely-marked black eyebrow; and an anxious craving expression, at once haggard and restless, shot out from the depths of them. The twofold agony of seeing the cherished hope of her life, for which she had laboured and suffered so much, snatched from her when it seemed all but within her grasp, and of knowing that the only thing, which could avail to prevent this was the death of one she loved so truly and reverentially—of having this nightmare conviction constantly before her mind, with that clear unavoidable perception of it which Guidi had taken such cruel care to set before her, was playing sad havoc with both mind and body. Had her heart and conscience allowed her to admit and acquiesce in the acknowledged hope, that the winter might end a life, necessarily on its utmost verge, in time for the accomplishment of her aim, her state of mind would have been less dreadful. There would still have been the torturing suspense, the keen anxiety, all the horror of watching the old man's face from day to day in the hope of seeing in it the signs of ailing. And in such a programme there was surely misery enough. But as the case stood with her, there was the dreadful unceasing struggle not to hope

or the only means to that end, which she hoped so fervently; the determination not to wish for the old man's death; the continual, ever-renewed morbid examination of her heart, to ascertain whether any such hideous feeling lurked there; the self-oathing that the suspicion of its latent presence caused her; the impotency of all this struggle to remove any portion of the strong ever-abiding consciousness that the great end was desired by her with a fierce and consuming desire. There was too much reason to fear, that the "Thy will, not mine be done," which came so frequently and with such fervid force from her lips, as she knelt in the solitude of her chamber, or of the chapel in the neighbouring church, was accompanied by an unavowed proviso, lurking at the bottom of her heart, and harboured there almost without the connivance of her consciousness, to the effect, that the Divine will invoked with such efforts at sincerity, was to be somehow or other not incompatible with the ultimate restoration of Palazzo Lunardi to its ancient owners. It is in such cases that the human heart is indeed desperately deceitful.

That evening, on quitting the shop on the Ponte Vecchio, the Gobbo returned, as had been arranged, to his friend the simplicist.

"I've quite changed my mind as to the proper manner of testing your wine, friend Sandro!" said the latter, as the Gobbo entered the dusky and unfurnished little room which the poor herb-dealer called his shop; "*Per Bacco!* I should be sorry to put my mouth to your flask!"

"You've detected the poison then?" replied the Gobbo, eagerly.

"Quite enough to make me very careful to have nothing to do with *that* vintage. But to tell you the truth, the job you gave me was rather too difficult a one for my small chemical appliances. I cannot undertake to say what there is in that flask; or rather to say what there may not be in it. I have detected the presence of more than one poisonous mineral substance. But there are other ingredients which I do not understand, and which it would require a far better analysis than I can make to ascertain the nature of. But if all you want to know is, whether that wine has been poisoned or not, I can tell you without any doubt about it. It is no mere case of doctoring.

The wine has been intentionally poisoned ; and my belief is, by some carefully prepared and highly composite drug."

"*Basta!* That is sufficient knowledge of the matter for me ; and I am much obliged to you, Demetrio *mio*," returned the Gobbo ; "I had very strong reason to believe that the wine was poisoned ; and as to its being a highly composite poison, that is likely enough too, for it is a highly composite villain who has done it."

"Well, but you will take care, I suppose," said the simpli-
cist, putting the flask, which he had carefully sealed, into his friend's hand, with some little hesitation in his manner, "you will be responsible that no mischief comes from that cursed flask. There is no smell to warn one, and I should think probably no bad taste. Anybody might drink it."

"Make yourself easy, my friend ; you know you may trust me. And if poor Sandro Boccanera had not had his eyes somewhat wider open than other folks, this flask of poison would at this hour have been doing its work in a Christian man's intestines. You have sealed the flask, I see. That is good. Give it to me ! I will take good care of it, I promise you."

And so the Gobbo carried the guilty flask carefully home under his cloak, and placed it in the same little safe cupboard with the other (unsealed) flasks which he had that morning purchased and prepared.

On the next day the Gobbo kept watch himself on Casa Lunardi for the hour and a half, which he calculated might possibly elapse between the preparation of the table for the old Canon Giacomo's dinner, and the time at which he sat down at it. And his watch was as fruitless as that of Nanni on the preceding day. No Canon of San Lorenzo hove in sight. On the day after, Nanni loyally mounted guard, though not without some murmuring to himself, that the Gobbo, wise as he was, should not lead him into such a fool's errand another time, unless he succeeded in giving a very satisfactory reason for all his mysterious doings on the present occasion.

On the Saturday the Gobbo was on the watch, with a quarter flask of wine ready under his cloak, when the magnificent Canon of San Lorenzo walked up to the door of the Palazzo

Lunardi, about ten minutes before the dinner hour of the family on the third floor.

“Oh ho! Now for the second dose!” thought the Gobbo.

He allowed the Canon to pass up the staircase, without having observed him; and then following at a distance of one flight of stairs, he hid his flask behind a statue in a niche at the angle of the second flight, and joined the Canon at the door of the Lunardi's apartment, before it had been opened to him.

“I have the honour of wishing your reverence good morning,” said the Gobbo, with a profound bow.

“Good morning, Signor Boccanera. Are you about to visit our friends here?”

“That is my purpose, Signor Canonico. The Lady Marietta is kind enough to permit me to see her occasionally, to speak of some subjects of inquiry in which we take a common interest.”

“Indeed!” said the dignified priest, somewhat superciliously, as the door was opened, and the two visitors entered together.

They found the Signora Marietta in the sitting-room. The table was duly prepared for dinner, and the little flask was in its place by the side of the old Canon's plate. But he had not yet come out from his room, and Sebastian was at work in his own chamber.

“I called chiefly,” said the priest, taking up his usual place with his back to the fire-place, without sitting down, “to ask after our aged friend. The days are getting very cold. How does he stand it?”

“Oh! perfectly! I don't think he feels the cold at all. He will be here in a minute, and you will see him looking as well as one could wish.”

Guidi fixed a cold, hard look on Marietta, as she said this, which caused the blood to rush painfully into her face, and tingle in her veins. But she had spoken with sincerity;—at least she had intended to do so; and did with all the sincerity she could. The Gobbo would have been likely enough to observe the priest's look and the result it produced, had he not kept his eyes fixed on the flask on the table. It seemed as if he feared that the dangerous priest of San Lorenzo might convey his deadly drug into the flask even before his eyes, if he took them

a moment off it. But Guidi remained standing on the hearth at a safe distance from the table.

"I wanted to tell you, Signora, of some notices of the elder branch of the Cerchi family, which I happened to come upon the other day," said the Gobbo to Marietta, who had received him courteously. "But if your ladyship is engaged at present

"he continued, slightly bowing towards the priest.

"Perhaps we *could* talk of it more conveniently at some other time," said poor Marietta, who, although no interview between her and Guidi ever passed without occasioning her many a heart-stab, and increased subsequent trouble of mind, yet had a nervous restless craving for his visits, as those of the only human being to whom she could speak of all that was filling her heart and brain. "I should take great interest in the subject you speak of some other day," she added.

But the Gobbo did not get up from his chair, nor manifest any signs of going. Though the last man in the world to be slow to obey such a hint on any other occasion, nothing short of force could have expelled him from that room just then, until either the younger Canon should have left it, or the older Canon have drunk his daily flask of wine. He was a good deal embarrassed, however, how to keep his ground; and his manner seemed the stranger to Marietta from his not looking at her as he spoke, but keeping his eyes constantly fixed on the dinner-table.

After a little hesitation, he said, "If the Signora Contessa will permit me, I will stay a minute to pay my respects to the Rev. Signor Canonico Giacomo, since he will be here so shortly. It is some time since I have had the honour of kissing his hand; and it is one which I think much of."

The Canon Guidi and Marietta glanced at each other, the former with an undisguised look of contempt and aversion on his handsome lip, the latter with a wan cheerless smile, and an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulder. And a minute afterwards the Canon said—

"I wish you a good morning, then, Signora, since I cannot have the pleasure of speaking with you on the subject we had to converse on. Perhaps another time I may be more fortunate."

And so saying he stalked out of the room, without vouch-

safing the slightest salutation to the poor Gobbo. Sandro was much distressed, . but there stood the old gentleman's flask of wine, as good as when it came from the cellar, and he had the satisfaction of thinking that he had out-generalled his magnificent and formidable adversary. Beyond this satisfaction, however, his trouble and strategy had been needless. For the Canon had not come that day with any felonious intent. The week had not elapsed since the administration of the first dose, and if the Gobbo could only have known the directions that had been given in the lone house at Rome, together with the packet of powders, he might have limited his watch to once a week.

As soon as the Canon was gone, Sandro felt that he might venture to take his eyes off the flask on the table. Raising them accordingly to the face of the Lady Marietta, he was struck by the expression of illness and suffering so legible there.

"I fear, Signora Contessa," he said, "that your ladyship is suffering. I pray you to ascribe the liberty I take to the great regard and respect I have always felt for your noble family and yourself; but in truth this winter does not seem to have set in favourably for your ladyship. Assuredly you are not well, and I supplicate you to take care of yourself."

"In fact, my good Sandro, I am not well! I have suffered much of late. I have had much trouble and anxiety. We all have at one time or other, and must each bear his burthen as best he may. *Basta!* What was it you were going to say to me?"

The Gobbo, in reply, was beginning to trump up some story about the subject he had mentioned,—no difficult task to him, stored as his memory was with such matters,—when he was saved the trouble by the entrance of the old Canon.

In him Sandro's quick eye could detect no such signs of ill-health as were but too plain in the face of his niece. The old man, more than half-way between eighty and ninety, seemed as hearty and as cheery as ever.

"Have you had a good sleep, uncle?" asked Marietta, rising to meet him.

"Ay! my child! I have slept well, and am ready to eat well and drink well. I fear, my Marietta," he added, tenderly taking her hand between both of his, "that you cannot

say as much for yourself. Your hand is hot and dry. I fear, my darling, that you are suffering!—Signor Sandro, good day to you. How goes the world with you and yours?”

“We have nothing to complain of, your reverence, thank God! I made bold to await your reverence’s rising from your *siesta* to pay my respects, and ask after your health.”

“I have nothing to complain of, God knows, and God be thanked, not even of my six-and-eighty years. I only wish my Marietta carried her two score as lightly as I do my four score.”

And so, after a few more words of mutual courtesy, the Gobbo “removed the inconvenience,”* as he said in his Tuscan idiom, and took his leave.

The following Wednesday was the 4th of December, and was the day week from the date of the first poisoning of the Canon’s wine. And it is probable that the priest of San Lorenzo had selected that day for his weekly operation, as besides the especial function on St. Leonard’s Day, Marietta was in the habit of attending a short morning service at eleven o’clock on every Wednesday. On that day accordingly the Gobbo, again chancing to be on duty as watchman, shortly after eleven saw the Canon of San Lorenzo enter the Palazzo.

On this occasion the Gobbo did not follow him up the staircase. He also knew that Marietta was absent, and he determined to await till he came down, thinking it probable that he would do his errand and quit the house without waiting for her return, as he had done on the previous occasion. Should he be disappointed in this, and should the Contessa return before Guidi left the palace, he would then go up with the pretext of giving her a paper of notes on the Cerchi genealogy, with which he had specially prepared himself, in case of needing such an excuse. It turned out, however, as he had expected. After having been upstairs a very short time, the Canon returned, and left the house, and no sooner was he round the first corner, than the Gobbo ran up the stairs, and taking the flask of wine from behind the statue, where he had left it safely ensconced since his last visit; and telling the boy at the door

* “*Levo l' incommodo*” is a common mode of ceremonious leave-taking.

that he thought he had dropped a paper in the *loggia* the last time he had been at the house, and would be glad to see if he could find it there, stepped quickly through the sitting-room, through the window on to the *loggia*, returned through the room, and while the boy was closing the window, deftly changed the flasks as before, and carried off that which had been intended for the Canon beneath his cloak.

Another visit to his friend the simplicist produced the certainty that this flask had been dealt with in the same manner as the previous one. It was accordingly sealed as that had been, and consigned to the same place of safe keeping.

Of course, after this the watch was not slackened. It is needless to detail the different little stratagems to which the Gobbo had recourse to accomplish his purpose. It is sufficient to say that he successfully changed six flasks, the last of them having been removed by him on Wednesday the 1st of January, when both Marietta and the Canon were in the room. Of course if any of these little schemes had failed, or if on the latter occasion he had been seen, or had found himself unable to attempt the substitution unseen, he would have been forced to speak out, and bring forward the evidence of the flasks he had already secured. But such was not the case. Besides these six flasks, he had also carried off two flasks on days on which the Canon had visited the house during the hours of suspicion, which his friend reported to contain no poison. But these were accidents, as the Gobbo said to himself, which might happen to the most practised and competent detective. It was best to be on the safe side.

All this mystery and conspiring, crowned with the triumph of so signally outwitting that detested grand gentleman, the Canon of San Lorenzo, was a source of extreme gratification to Sandro Boccanera. He had enjoyed few weeks of his life so keenly as those which had passed while engaged in his conflict of cunning with the priest. But the game was not an equally amusing one to poor Nanni, who had to play it blindfold. And a good deal of coaxing and a great many assurances had been needed to induce him to continue his part in the Gobbo's arrangements.

Poor Nanni was uncomfortable and anxious on another

matter. He had screwed up his courage to write to his father of his matrimonial projects ; and had received in reply only a very short letter from the Fattore, saying that he purposed being in Florence a few days after the *Capo d' Anno*.*

It was now, therefore, time to expect him, and Nanni was looking to his arrival with no little alarm and misgiving. It was on the morning of the 3rd of January that the burly Fattore, very blue with the cold, very hungry, and very cross, presented himself at his son's lodging, just as the latter was on the point of leaving it to go to his breakfast.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHAT CATERINA COULD DO, WHICH LAURA COULD NOT DO.

POURING out a torrent of welcome, and making the greatest possible demonstration of his delight at seeing his father in Florence, Nanni induced him with some difficulty to come into the house he was on the point of leaving, and upstairs to the room he occupied. But when they had reached the little bedroom on the third floor, with its bed, washing-stand, two chairs, and bare walls, the burly farmer's wrath broke out.

"Well! I do say,—as I have said to others, I say it to you to your face, Nanni, you are the most undutiful, the most abominable the most cruel and unfeeling son that ever an unfortunate father was cursed with!"

"Oh, father! don't say so! I am sure when you come to know her——"

"Her, indeed!" roared the Fattore, "you can think of nothing but yourself and your own affairs, you selfish wretch! Is this the way you receive your father, when he has come through ice and snow to see you?" and he looked round the room, as he stood in the middle of it, as if it presented the liveliest picture of the abomination of desolation. "Where were you going, sirrah, when I met you at the door?"

* "Head of the year," *i.e.*, New Year's Day.

"I was going to the *café* to get my breakfast, father," faltered poor Nanni,

"Ay! you can think of your own breakfast," sneered his father with intense bitterness; "but whether your poor old father is starved, or frozen, or both together, you care little."

"Will you come with me to the *café* then, father?"

"*Café!* Are you mocking me, sirrah! *Café!* after such a journey as I have had over the Consuma!"

Nanni thought he saw a gleam of light in the darkness of the prospect before him. At all events he perceived the only means which might perhaps mend the threatening aspect of matters. And suddenly an idea dashed into his head, which he hoped might possibly even turn the paternal stormy weather into a favouring breeze.

"I'll tell you what, father," said he, "while you take off your coats and wash your hands I'll run and see about some breakfast for you."

"Hands be d——d!" growled his father. "It ain't my *hands* that are empty!"

"But, father, come now, just make yourself comfortable, and I will be back before you can say '*Ave Maria.*'"

"Comfortable! here! I don't want to say '*Ave Maria.*' You are going to leave me in this hole, and bolt after your own breakfast, unnatural son as you are!"

"No, father, I am going after *your* breakfast."

"I'll be . . . blessed if I breakfast here then, so now you know."

"Here! of course not. I'll be back in no time!" cried Nanni as he left the room.

"If you are not," bellowed his father after him "I'll never speak . . ."

But Nanni was already half way down the stairs. He had great hopes that a judicious peace-offering of creature-comforts, if presented without too great delay, might change the current of his parent's feelings. But it was not the easiest thing in the world to find in Florence the means of setting before the hungry farmer, at a very short notice, what his Casentino-bred ideas would consider a very good breakfast, with acceptable surrounding circumstances. No fragments of food brought up half cold

on little bits of plates one after the other, in the cold room of a *ristoratore*, to be eaten at a wretched little table with a marble top, would serve the turn. Nor would it do to order a breakfast at an hotel, and wait an hour while the cook prepared it at his leisure, and the waiter proceeded to kindle two sticks in some desolate and unhomely-looking room, as miserable as six prim straight-backed chairs, and a dirty cruet-stand, flanked by two worn-out plated candlesticks on a huge sideboard, could make it. No; that would not do. But Nanni had his idea, and thought he saw how it might be turned to good account.

He ran as hard as he could to the house inhabited by the Boccaneras, and reached it just as the Gobbo was leaving it to follow his father who had gone before him, to the Ponte Vecchio.

"Sandro! my dear fellow," he said, quite out of breath, "I've got a mystery in hand now; and it's your turn to help and ask no questions,—at least, not till there's time to answer them."

"Of course, *amico mio*! but what a hurry you are in!"

"Yes; listen. My father is in Florence. I want to bring him here to breakfast. You must help me to get a right good meal. I shan't let him know whose house it is. You must give him the sitting-room all to himself. Caterina must keep out of his way till after he has breakfasted. There is a large open hearth in your sitting-room. The first thing is to make a jolly great fire there big enough to roast an ox."

"All that seems easy enough, *caro mio*. Come in, and speak to Caterina."

"Yes; but we must be very quick. You must let the shop wait for you for half an hour, and help us."

"Anything I can do"

And then the nature of the business in hand was explained to Caterina; as far at least as it had been explained to her brother. She was not a little alarmed at being told that Nanni's father, on whom so much of her hopes and fears depended, and whom she had never seen, was coming to breakfast there almost immediately; and she was quite ready to agree to that part of Nanni's scheme which required her to keep herself out of the old gentleman's sight.

Nanni urged the utmost possible speed in making their pre-

parations. The one maid was set to heap a huge fire on the hearth, such as had not burned there for many a long year. Caterina busied herself with preparing a table in front of the fire, with a fine and spotless white cloth, and one napkin laid in front of the easy chair by the ingle-nook.

“If I run and get some prime ham, do you think you can cook it in rashers here?” asked Nanni.

“That I will undertake,” said the Gobbo. “You bring the ham, and in ten minutes afterwards it shall be hissing on the table in such rashers as might tempt the Pope on a Friday.”

“I could get some *brocette*,” added Nanni, alluding to those savoury preparations so much liked by the Florentines, which consist of a variety of tit-bits of meat, bacon, small birds, and bread, placed in inviting alternations of colour and flavour on a long skewer, with the leaves of sundry aromatic plants intercalated between each morsel.

“Yes, we can cook them too in no time. And if you like, ’gnor Nanni, Cecco Battista, at the *café* close by, would send you in an excellent *frittata*.”

“Capital! let *La Nina* order it, and a good jorum of hot coffee at the same time. I’ll run for the other things.”

And Nanni was off like a shot; and very soon returned laden with paper packages, containing the ham and the *brocette*, besides some nicely-sliced Bologna sausage and cold tongue, and a bit of prime Gorgonzola cheese;—materials for a breakfast fit for the Pope, as Caterina declared.

“And, Sandro,” said Nanni, taking him aside, “have you any of that wine of the Albizzi cellar left? If you have, put a flask of it on the table. We can get some more afterwards.”

“All right! there are five quarter flasks in the cupboard. I will get one of them.”

“One of them! For Heaven’s sake don’t put a quarter flask on the table! The sight of it would spoil all. It must be a whole flask.”

“Well, if it must, I’ll put four of the quarters into a big flask.

“Do; we can supply the others again at leisure. And now I am off to bring him here. You will have the ham and things ready by the time I am back. Don’t let him see you or *La Caterina*.”

And Nanni hurried back with all the speed he could make to his father, who did not appear to have been measuring the time of his son's absence by saying *Ave Marias*, certainly. At least, if he had, they had not produced any of the tranquillising or beneficial effects attributed to such pious employment of time.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, to leave me shut up in this cursed dog-hole, famished with hunger and cold, while you go off to your breakfast? Don't you think it is too bad? But if I don't——"

"I have not been to breakfast, father. I've been getting your breakfast," pleaded Nanni. "Come along, father, it is all ready."

"Ready! why, it's little I want, God knows. Why could you not let me have a mouthful at once, famishing as I am?"

Nanni made no reply; but led his father, grumbling to himself all the way, to the Boccanera's house, and rang the bell. The Fattore wondered where his son was taking him; and how any breakfast was likely to be found there. But he was too cross to ask any questions, and only growling to himself as he entered, "What the devil's sort of an *osteria** is this, I should like to know?" suffered himself to be led into the room that had been prepared for him.

He had to pass the door of the kitchen to reach this room; and that door was not quite pulled to. There was a space of about an inch between it and the door-post; and on the inside a little hand carefully held it in this position, and a pair of bright black eyes were brought to bear on the unconscious farmer as he passed. The black eyes took eager and rapid note of the face and figure of the new comer, scanning every feature and the expression of it, as a culprit in the dock may be supposed to scan the face of his judge. The result of her scrutiny was not reassuring to poor little Caterina. She saw a broad purple face under a broad-leaved whity-brown hat, screwed into an expression of intense ill-humour. The large coarse mouth had the expression of that of a bull-dog in the moment previous to his spring at the throat of his foe. There was a black scowl on the heavy corrugated brow; and on the whole the broad

* Inn, or tavern, from *oste*.

bluff farmer looked a man to whom every gentler feeling was unknown,—a tyrant from whom neither mercy, sympathy, nor relenting was to be expected. For the farmer was very hungry.

Poor Caterina's heart sunk within her as she looked.

"Here they are, Sandro," she said in a whisper to her brother, who was busy with his culinary operations at the fire. "Are the rashers ready? Oh, me! he looks dreadfully savage. He will never, never consent, Sandro; one would be a fool to think it. He as rich as a Turk, too! Let *La Nina* go in with the *frittata* directly, and come back for the rashers."

But if Caterina had been able to follow the arbiter of her destiny with her eyes, into the room prepared for his entertainment, she might, perhaps, have seen grounds for a gleam of hope. In truth, it was impossible for the eyes of a cold and hungry man to light on a more pleasant prospect than that which greeted the cross Fattore as he entered. A blazing wood fire was roaring on the capacious old-fashioned hearth. The daintily spread table looked extremely appetising, and the great chair in the corner between it and the ingle deliciously inviting.

"Humph! this looks something like!" growled the hungry man, as the savage expression of his mouth somewhat relaxed. "I am perished with cold!" he continued, as his son made him seat himself in the great chair; "and a good fire is a good thing; but one can't eat fire. Here's a bit of dry bread, any way; and that's more than I expected!" he added, cutting a crust from the loaf on the table as he spoke, and eating it ravenously.

Nanni, casting an anxious look towards the door for the appearance of the more appetising materials of the breakfast, poured out a full tumbler from the flask, and handed it to his father.

"Pretty sort of wine one is likely to get in a place of this sort," growled he, as he took the glass, which he emptied at a draught. But when he had done so, rolling his tongue in his mouth as he put the glass down, he looked hard at his son in the face, and gave three measured nods. At the same moment the servant girl entered with a large dish of steaming rashers, and an omelette, or *frittata*.

"There's worse wine than that in Florence; ay, and what's more, there's worse wine in the Casentino. But I always did say that much for you, Nanni, that you knew a good glass of wine when you tasted it! And here comes the girl with a brave dish of rashers. Ay, ay! juicy and tender. Why did you not tell me, Nanni, that you had a good breakfast ready for me? You would have saved me from getting into a passion. Come, my son, you are going to breakfast with me, I hope. Come, give us your fist, and turn to; the rashers are right good, I can tell you."

So the Fattore and his son discussed the good things together; and presently the *brocette* were brought, and drew forth a fresh eulogium from the former. Then came the coffee and a cigar; and then the old gentleman, restored to perfect good humour, and feeling in charity with all men, stretched out his legs before the fire, and began to think of inquiring where he was.

"Well, it is not an *osteria* of any sort, Babbo! They are some good kind people, friends of mine, and I thought they would give you a more comfortable breakfast than one could get at the *Pappagallo*."

"More comfortable! I believe you! I never had a better breakfast in my life, or saw things better done and more comfortable. Why, that table-cloth and napkin there your mother would be proud to put on her table."*

"Yes, they are thrifty and comfortable people. The family consists of a widowed father, a son, and daughter. It is the daughter who keeps all straight here; and a clever active body she is. But you'll guess, father, that I want to talk to you about other things. I want to speak to you, you know, about my marriage."

"And that's what I am come to Florence to hear, my son! Now it is all off with Laura, and shouldn't be on again with my consent,—not if Beppe Palli was to beg me on his knees,—I shall make no difficulty, so you choose a respectable girl, come of respectable people, and not quite a beggar."

* There is no possession of which the Tuscans, especially the country people, think more than of a stock of linen, mostly the produce of the spinning of the good housewife and her fore-mothers; for the prized store passes from generation to generation, and is accumulated, to the great pride and joy of the household, beyond all possible power of using it.

“ Well, father! I’ll tell you more about it as we walk——”

“ But ought not I to say a word of thanks to these good people here? Don’t let them think that a Casentino *fattore* does not know how to behave himself.”

“ I fancy the father and son are both away at their business by this time. But I can see if the daughter is there,” said Nanni, leaving the room.

“ Is he satisfied with his breakfast, Nanni dear?” asked Caterina, eagerly, as he came into the kitchen.

“ Delighted, *anima mia!* and now you must come and let him thank you for it.”

“ Oh, Nanni! not now!”

“ Yes; now this minute. But listen, darling! he don’t know a word yet about you and me.”

“ And are you going to tell him now?” asked Caterina, in great alarm.

“ I don’t know! we shall see. It must depend on how things go, Come along!”

Caterina shrunk with terror from the idea of being presented to the terrible and unamiable-looking old man, whose appearance she had so accurately studied through the kitchen-door. But she was very agreeably surprised on entering the room, where the farmer was still sitting in the great easy chair enjoying his cigar, to find there a totally different person from the forbidding individual she had seen enter. A more hearty, cheery, jolly, benevolent-looking old gentleman than he now appeared, Caterina thought she had never seen; and she could not get over her surprise at the metamorphosis.

The farmer rose from his chair courteously, as she entered the room, and taking off his broad-leaved beaver, which in country fashion he had retained while sitting at breakfast, he said with good grace enough—

“ Signorina, I do not know how to thank you sufficiently for your hospitality. Should you or any of your family ever come into the Casentino, I do hope I may have an opportunity of seeing you under the roof of old Carlo Palli, the *fattore*, near Poppi. No difficulty in finding me.”

“ You are very good, sir! I trust you found your breakfast to your liking, sir?”

"Never enjoyed one more in all my days, my dear young lady. I make you my compliments upon your housekeeping."

"You are good to be so easily pleased, sir; we are but poor folks."

"Poor folks! *per Bacco!* And what sort of linen do rich folks have on their tables then, I should like to know? I never saw a choicer cloth than that on a table."

"It is one of my own spinning, sir!" said Caterina, hainging down her head, and blushing with pleasure, for she well knew that the excellence she was owning to was, especially in such eyes as those of her hoped-for father-in-law, the highest that a notable girl could claim.

"Ho! ho!" cried the farmer, taking up the end of the cloth and examining it. "And this is your spinning, is it? *Davvero, davvero!** I compliment you upon your work, Signorina! And allow me to tell you, there are worse judges of a bit of linen than Carlo Palli!"

"I think I could show you, sir, a *finimento di tavola* † finer spun and more even than that;" rejoined poor Caterina, who may surely be excused for wishing to put her little merits forward on this occasion, knowing as she did that she was on her trial for life or death.

"Ay! indeed!" returned the Fattore; "those must be famous little fingers! I should like to think there was a chance of your ever coming our way. But, *Santa Maria*, I dare say that you would think going to stay in the country much about as pleasant as going to Trespiano!" ‡

"I, Signor Palli! I dote on the country. I should like to live in the country all the year round for my part."

"*Davvero!* well! perhaps some day we may see you on the other side of the Consuma. Pray explain to your respected father, Signorina, how much I and Nanni are beholden to him for his hospitality. *A rivederla, Signorina!*"

And so, bowing himself out, the farmer and his son went down the stairs to the street-door.

"Now for this affair of thine, my son. First you must tell

* "Truly, truly!"

† Complete service for the table, *i.e.* cloth and napkins.

‡ The Florentine public cemetery.

me all about it, and then I suppose you mean to do me the honour of presenting me to the lady."

"Yes," said Nanni, "I shall hope to do that."

"Nanni, my son, to say the truth, my mind misgives me. To give thee thy due, as I said but now, thou knowest a good sample of wine as well as any man in Tuscany. And it's a good gift,—a very good gift. But in the matter of choosing a wife, I doubt me thou art not up to the mark. There goes a deal of brains, Nanni, to the job of choosing a wife,—more than thou thinkest, lad. For if you choose them by the eye, it is like trying a beast in the stable. And put it, that you've walked 'em through the byre and looked at 'em in the field, still Nanni, my son, it's ill buying a beast till you've seen it with its yoke-fellow. How will it work under the yoke? That's the question, you see, Nanni."

"Ay, father; but you can't try the yoke on 'em before you buy, you know."

"That's just where it is, Nanni; that's why marrying needs a deal of gumption,—more, I fear me, than thou hast in thy noddle. And that's why, I say, my mind misgives me. And I've the proof that you don't know a good one when you see her, as your old father does with half an eye."

"What proof? What do you mean, father?"

"Why, there are your friends that have just given us a breakfast. Stands to reason you must know them well; wouldn't have taken me there in that way if you didn't. And there, if I don't mistake, you've passed by a good one."

"Why! how do you mean, father?" said Nanni, as unconcernedly as he could. But his heart leaped into his throat as he spoke.

"How do I mean! Why, look at that lass that I was talking to a minute ago. If you had half the eye for a pretty face that your old father has, you'd have known that she is as pretty a girl to begin with as anybody might wish to see, whether in town or country. Then she knows how to keep a house tidy and comfortable about her, young as she is, and with no mother. The breakfast she gave me was as good as a six years' character for a young woman. It was a credit to any housewife, and she a young girl with no mother! Then look at that linen, her own

spinning! I say that I'd wager the best yoke of oxen on the farm that you have made a worse choice than that girl would have been, always supposing that they are decent respectable people."

"Oh! as for that, there is not a more respected and well-looked-on family in Florence."

"Then I'd stand to my bet that you've been and done worse than make up to the young woman who put that breakfast on that cloth of her own spinning."

"Do you think so, father?"

"Not a doubt of it! I tell thee, Nanni, thou hast not head enough to go choosing a wife for thyself. I'll wager thy silly heart has been caught by some fine flaunting miss, with a white city face and a silk gown on her back, and no more sense in her head nor use in her hands than a picture out of a book. Thou had'st done better to let thy father choose for thee!"

Nanni remained silent for awhile. He was for the second time that day conceiving an idea. Perhaps he had caught the trick of doing so from his association with the Gobbo.

"Father!" he said, stopping short in his walk, and facing round in front of the farmer, "I have a very great mind. I know, I feel that there is truth in every word you have been saying. I have a very great mind to be ruled by you in this matter after all! I do think you have a deal more judgment than I. I will follow your advice. There is no harm done yet. I have not given any troth anywhere else. I'll be ruled by you and marry Caterina there—that's her name—if she will have me. All you say of her is as true as gospel!"

"Ah! you are beginning to see which hat the best of the family brains lie under, at last. But mark, Nanni, I said, supposing these people were creditable and respectable folk, you know. Who are they?"

"Why, you know the father, and have known him all your life, I should say, or leastways have known his name—Maestro Simone Boccanera, my uncle Giuseppe's partner: no doubt about the character and respectability of the family any way!"

"Old Boccanera, my brother's partner! And that is his daughter! *Per Bacco!* why did not you tell me before whose house it was?"

"Old Simone was not at home. . . You had never seen the daughter, . . . and I was thinking of your breakfast more than anything else."

"Old Boccanera's daughter! Yes, respectable enough!" said the Fattore, cogitating. "Well! ha! ha! ha! ha! I like the notion. It would be a very tidy slap in the face to my overbearing brother. We pass over the senior partner to prefer alliance with the junior. I like the notion, I say."

"Well, father; I'll be ruled by you. But don't let a good resolution get cold! Mayhap my mind might go back again. Let us strike while the iron is hot. Come! and let's talk to the girl at once. You'll do it fifty times better than I should."

"Oh, I should, should I? maybe I might. Well, we'll see. Turn about, and let's go back again."

So the father and son walked back to the house they had left, and again presented themselves at the door of the apartment on the second floor. But it struck Nanni that it was absolutely necessary to find the means of saying a word to Caterina to explain the nature of the case, and give her her cue. So merely saying to the girl who opened the door—"My father wishes to speak to the girl who opened the door—" "My father wishes to speak to the Signorina; will you show him into the sitting-room?" he slipped into the kitchen, where, luckily, Caterina was still occupied in putting her household matters in order, after the extraordinary feast of the morning.

"Darling," he whispered, making the most of the opportunity afforded by the necessity of doing so; "listen, quick! You have regularly won my father's heart. He has not an idea that there has been anything between us; thinks it's somebody else I am after. Says he, 'You'll do worse, I'll be bound, than marry that girl that got my breakfast for me this morning.' So I made believe to knock under to him, and to marry you all out of obedience to him. Do you see? Come along in! He's come here to ask you. Come, quick!"

"But, Nanni, who is it then that he thought you loved?"

"Oh! anybody! nobody in particular! how can you stop to talk of such nonsense now? Come in and speak to him."

"Must I come just as I am, Nanni?"

"To be sure, *anima mia!* you could not look nicer. Come at once. He will suspect something if we stay talking."

“Oh, Nanni! I am so frightened. What shall I say?”

“Answer what he says, that’s all. Come!”

And so Caterina, blushing like a rose, and feeling very much inclined to cling to Nanni for support, was ushered into the presence of her future father-in-law.

“Signorina,” said the Fattore, as she entered, “you must allow me to tell you that it was due to my son’s stupidity only,—he is a good boy enough, and well-meaning, Nanni is, but not bright, poor fellow!—that I did not recognise you this morning as the daughter of my old friend, Signor Boccanera. I had no idea who my hospitable hosts were.”

“My father will be pleased to hear that you have honoured us so far, Signor.”

“I hope to have the pleasure of thanking him in person. But this morning, Signorina, I have returned to speak on a little matter of business with you yourself. In fact I am here to do for Nanni what he would take a twelvemonth or more to do for himself. But I am one of a different sort;—a plain man, who speaks his mind plain and short. Now the matter is this: I told you before who I am; you have heard of old Carlo Palli, the *fattore* in the Casentino, eh?”

“*Altro!*” said Caterina, with a bright smile. “I can’t recollect the time, Signor, when I did not know the name of Signor Carlo Palli, the brother of our Signor Giuseppe.”

“And your father, no doubt, knows that the old Casentino *fattore* is a tolerably warm man, and his only son—there he is—a very good fellow in his way,—although he does look rather like a gaby as he stands there, colouring up to his eyes and biting his nails,—a good fellow, a prime judge of a yoke of oxen or a flask of wine, honest, and over six feet in his stockings;—the old fellow’s son, I say, will be a better man still; the owner of as pretty a bit of land as any in the Casentino. Well! under the circumstances, Nanni Palli has come to the time when he should look out for a wife.”

Here the old gentleman paused, and looked hard into Caterina’s face, which, despite its owner’s utmost endeavour, and to her very great distress, was, as she felt, becoming as hot as fire, and, as she knew, was assuming the colour of it. Finding herself compelled to speak, she said as tranquilly as she could—

"I always understood, Signor, that is, it was generally said, that Signor Nanni was to be married to his cousin, the Signora Laura?"

"A great many things are generally said," continued the Fattore, "which are all lies and nonsense. It may be that such a marriage was talked of; and it may be that some folks would have been glad enough to jump at it. But the fact is, that Nanni would not have his cousin Laura."

But honest Nanni's loyal heart could not be bribed by any mean little vanity to stand this. So he said, at all hazards—

"Nay, put it fair, father! If I would not have Laura, which is true, it's quite as true that she would not have me. We were quite of one mind about it, Laura and I."

"You are a fool, Nanni, my son, if ever there was one," said the farmer, looking not a little provoked at his son's being guilty of the folly, as it seemed to him, of crying stinking fish. But Caterina gave him a smile, in which, beneath a slight effervescence of "malice" at top, there was a vast deal of solid warm love and admiration beneath it.

"Any way," continued the Fattore, "there is to be no marriage nor thought of a marriage between Nanni and my brother's daughter. That's certain. And so, as I said before, my son is on the look-out for a wife."

And again the farmer paused and looked hard into Caterina's face. I suppose that such was the method of "popping the question" in the Casentino half a century before the period at which those events occurred. It seemed as if the farmer expected a bidding for the situation thus announced to be vacant. Poor Caterina was much puzzled what to say, and it was only after a long pause that, finding it absolutely necessary to say something, she ventured to remark that, "she did not doubt that Signor Nanni would have little difficulty in suiting himself."

"There, my dear young lady," replied the farmer, "you are quite out,—never made a greater mistake in your life! He is not capable—Nanni is not—of doing anything of the sort for himself. I believe he has cast his eye on some worthless silly baggage or other, with very likely not even a pretty face to recommend her; for Nanni don't know a real pretty girl when

he sees one. His old father *does!*” and the Fattore stared with all his eyes into Caterina’s face, to make his intended compliment unmistakable and acceptable.

“So I,” continued the Fattore, with a bow to the young lady, “being a pretty good judge in those matters,—or leastways, was once considered to be such,—I says to Nanni, ‘Nanni, my son, you are but a gaby, especially at such jobs. You would do better to take a wife of your old father’s choosing.’ And says Nanni, ‘You are right, father, sure enough. I am no judge myself. Do you choose a wife for me.’ So says I——”

“No, that wasn’t it,” interjected Nanni, who felt that this portion of his father’s statement absolutely required correction. “Father said to me, ‘Why not marry the girl that got my breakfast for me this morning?’ And *then* I said, ‘Well, father, I am willing to be ruled by you in the matter.’ That’s how it was.”

“And does not that come to the same as I said?” retorted his father. “What do you put *your* oar in for? Any way, Signorina, he has let the cat out of the bag. My notion was as he says. Before I knew who you were, I had seen enough to know what Nanni would never have found out without my help—that you were the girl to make a good wife. And when I knew you were the daughter of my old friend, Maestro Simone Bocconera, I was more pleased with the notion than ever. So now you know pretty well what my present business is. I am here, Signorina, to ask your hand in marriage, on behalf of my son, Nanni Palli.”

And the Fattore paused for a reply.

“And he thought,” said Nanni, when he afterwards related all that passed on this occasion to his cousin Laura, “he thought he was going to get a straightforward answer to his question. Lord bless you! for all his talking, I knew better! I should never have screwed it out of her if I had gone to work in that way!”

Caterina, in her embarrassment and distress, cast a look imploring assistance from Nanni, and made a little quarter of a turn towards him, as if to imply that she awaited what he had to say himself on the subject. But Nanni, feeling it to be unfair that he should be called upon to attempt the “screwing out” process a second time for mere form’s sake, and that under cir-

cumstances when he could not conveniently have recourse to his own method, punished her by saying stolidly—

“I stick to my word, Signorina. I am ready to be ruled by my father in this matter.”

But Caterina would not stand this, and was determined to give him a Rowland for his Oliver; so she darted a look of laughing reproach at him out of the corner of her eye, and then hanging her pretty head very demurely, and addressing herself to the Fattore, she said—

“Surely, Signore, it would ill become me to imagine that I could succeed where the Signora Laura has failed! I have not vanity enough to think myself equal to her in any respect.”

“I don’t know that,” returned the farmer; “but, any way, what does it signify talking in that way, if he can like you and can’t like her?”

“I have heard Signor Nanni say he did not love his cousin; but he did not say the rest of what you said, Signore.”

“What! I didn’t” ejaculated Nanni; and then suddenly recollecting that he was abandoning the part he had to play, he looked exceedingly sheepish and confused, and giving Caterina a furtively imploring look, relapsed into silence.

“No! you didn’t,” rejoined his father; “of course you didn’t! and why the devil don’t you? Why don’t you speak to the young lady? Are you such a gaby that you must stand by and see your father speak for you?”

Poor Nanni was thinking whether such a fate had ever happened to a man before as to be thus condemned to go twice through the operation he had with so much difficulty, but so triumphantly, achieved once already. Was it fair that he should be expected to squeeze it out of her a second time? Caterina, for her part, seemed quite determined to have a *da capo* of the squeezing-out process, for she remained silent, very demurely awaiting what either father or son should say next. But Nanni’s sense of justice rebelled within him against this tyranny; and he said stoutly—

“When a man is asking a girl to be his wife out of his own head, it’s in place for him to tell her how much he loves her; and I should think, as far as I can tell, that there would be nothing pleasanter than to tell her so twice over, ay, or fifty

times over. But when he is marrying to obey his father, it seems to me all he has to say is that he is willing, and that he will be a good husband to the woman his father chooses."

In declining, however, thus distinctly to make love at command, Nanni accompanied his allusions to the pleasure of repeating the task fifty times over under other circumstances by a very eloquent look, which, though furtively delivered, reached its address in all its force, and very strongly inclined Caterina to be merciful in the use of the "situation."

"Was there ever such a block seen?" said his father. "But don't you fancy that it takes a clever fellow to make a good husband? Nanni is not bright, poor fellow; but you trust me, Signorina, he has been a very good son, and he will make a very good husband. He will, though I am his own father. And as to what you say about you and Laura, why, bless you, there's a many things you can do that Laura can't."

"There are so many that she can do, and that I can't, Signore, . . . and . . . I can only think of two that I can do which she cannot."

"Ay, and what are they?" said the farmer. "You tell me those, and I'll be bound I'll find ever so many more. What are the two?"

"Well," said Caterina, "I may fairly say that Laura cannot spin a thread of twenty *braccia* without an inequality in it."

"That I'll be bound she can't. That's number one. Now for the other?"

"Oh, I won't tell you the other; it's a great secret."

"Oh, come, you must tell. What can it be? I dare say there are fifty things; but I am curious to know the one you admit yourself. Come, out with it!"

"Oh, indeed, indeed I must not tell that. I could not do it!"

"*Per Bacco!* But I must know. What can it be? Did Laura ever try to do it?"

"I think she did."

"And she could not manage it?"

"No, she gave it up."

"Did you find it very difficult?"

"Oh dear no! I did not try at all. It came quite naturally to me."

“ Could you always do it ? ”

“ No ; I only learned quite lately. I've only just had the finishing lesson that makes me perfect.”

“ Ah ! I guess ! It's frying rashers. And you may say, my dear, that your lesson of this morning has made you perfect.”

“ But it isn't frying rashers,” said Caterina, with a laughing look at Nanni.

“ Oh, *per Bacco !* what the devil can it be ? Come now, Signorina Caterina,” said the Fattore, “ we'll settle it in this way : if you will be my daughter-in-law, the sign shall be your telling me this wonderful secret, like a dutiful daughter. If you don't mean to have anything to say to us, then you shall keep your secret. Now then, what is the second thing you can do that Laura can't ? ”

Thus pressed, Caterina stole a pink little hand out sideways towards Nanni, and hanging her head, faltered out—

“ It's not so good as frying rashers. It's only loving Nanni.”

* * * *

“ And, *per dinci Bacco !* ” said Nanni, when he was telling all this to Laura afterwards, “ it was she who squeezed it out of me that time. And Babbo said, says he, ‘ Why Nanni, I'm blessed if you are not like one of our Casentina water-courses—as dry as sticks for months, and then all of a moment down comes the water with a rush, and we are all in a flood ! ’ Babbo said ; but he never guessed that we had played the same game before.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

A FIASCO.

WHILE Nanni's anxieties were being thus brought to a happy termination, those of his friend Sebastian were approaching the culminating point. The representation of his opera, on which so much depended, was fixed for the evening of Sunday, the

5th of January. Everything which lay in his power—as the composer repeated to himself for the hundredth time, as he lay down to rest late in the small hours on Saturday night, after once again going over the whole score—had been conscientiously done. With infinite difficulty, patience, and long-suffering, the discontents, the exigencies, the rivalries, the whims, of the singers, the conductor, the manager, the orchestra, the prompter, the call-boy, the lamplighter, the advisers, the friends, the critics, the green-room haunters, had been, as best might be, composed. There was to be a last rehearsal on the morrow morning; and then the great question not only of the composer's success or failure as a musician, but of his whole life and every interest in it, was to be decided. Little of healthy rest was to be expected by a man under such circumstances. But Sebastian slept, as condemned men will on their last night. He slept from utter exhaustion of mind and body; but it was a feverish sleep, from which he started ever and anon out of dreams of being the centre of a hissing and hooting universe.

The last rehearsal passed off very tolerably well. At all events the *impresario* was contented, and prophesied a complete success. Signor Gualandi had no fears for the result, he said. The music was *good*, and good music always made its way. He knew the "*monde*" of his theatre. Nothing would do *there* but genuine classical music. His esteemed young friend's opera was genuine classical music; and he for his part expected great things from the opera. Of one thing, at all events, *Il Signor Conte de' Lunardi* must have been able to assure himself, that no pains or expense had been spared in putting the piece upon the stage.

The old fellow with the scythe and hour-glass justified himself to Sebastian for his practice of never altering his pace to please anybody, during the hours of that Sunday afternoon. For the poor nervous composer would have been hard to please, had the running of the sands been modified to suit his own caprices. The passing of each successive hour appeared to him intolerably, inconceivably slow. Yet the evening approached with frightful rapidity. The minutes, so slow in going, seemed to have flown with extra speed as soon as they were gone.

At home he had but scant sympathy to support and comfort him. The old Canon, indeed, wished him success with all his heart and soul, and was fully persuaded that he would succeed. But the old gentleman's taste in music was old-fashioned;—had been formed on quite other models from those then in vogue; and he was wholly ignorant of the theatre, and its ways and its exigencies, and almost, indeed, of theatrical music. All his ideas on the subject were drawn from very different sources. And then, the greenest fourscore-and-six scarcely retains a sufficiently strong hold of the world and its hopes, fears, and interests to afford a very efficient sympathy to those who are in the midst of the hurry and the heat of them.

As to Marietta, in this matter again her heart was drawn in two opposite directions, and had to endure an additional load of suffering accordingly. It was dreadful to think of the agony of disappointment and despair which would overwhelm Sebastian in case of failure. Yet how wish for his success, when it would be the means of encouraging him to persist in his hateful and unworthy hope of marrying a low-born usurer's daughter! As to the result which was likely to follow from Sebastian's failure, as regarded the scheme for taking priest's orders,—a result which would have been more fatal to Marietta's hopes than even the marriage with Laura,—of this imminent danger of course Marietta knew nothing.

Sebastian went to the theatre early in the evening; and was in the midst of the bustle incident to such last minutes, when he was told a gentleman was at the door asking to see him.

“As if I had not enough on my back at such a moment as this, without being tormented by strangers! What the devil can anybody want with me?” he muttered, as he went, in no very good humour, to a wretched little room with bare white-washed walls scribbled all over in pencil and charcoal with names, dates, doggerel verses, and caricature heads, and two rush-bottomed chairs for furniture, which served at Signor Gualandi's theatre for a reception-room for those who came to speak to any of the playhouse world. There the irritable composer found Nanni waiting to speak to him.

"I know you must be busy over head and ears, 'gnor Sebastiano,

"Yes! In truth I am afraid I must ask you to defer to another moment "

"No! *amico mio!* what I have got for you, you want now. I have been to your house to find you, but missed you, and so came here. I have been with Laura. 'Tell him from me,' she said, 'that I make no doubt that he will have the success he merits. He will understand why I cannot be there to witness it. But tell him, above all, that want of success is no proof of want of merit; and that if fortune were to declare against him in a thousand such trials, it could have no effect on the ties which bind him and me to each other, save to draw them closer than ever. Tell him I am his, and his only, in good hap and ill hap; and if it were possible to be more fondly so in the one than in the other, then I should be more fondly his in the latter.' I thought it would do you good to hear that, 'gnor Bastiano. I could face most things with such a message as that from Caterina, I know, for my own part. And so I would not fail to bring it to you."

"And God bless you for it, my dear friend! It is good, indeed, to possess such a love! But to avail oneself of it unworthily! Thanks, my good Signor Nanni, thanks! And now I must run; the minutes are slipping away."

When Sebastian entered the orchestra from the little door under the stage, a few moments before the rising of the curtain, he was received by a not very general or loud round of applause. But it was sufficient to make it necessary for him to turn towards the house and bow to the audience before seating himself at the desk of the conductor, with his back to them. In the moment thus occupied his eye took note of more than it seemed to him possible that it should have observed in so brief a space. He saw Nanni, and Maestro Simone, and the Gobbo, and Caterina, in a box on the *ordine nobile*,* as it is called, and recognised various other friends in different parts of the house. But especially his eye rested on two faces in far distant parts of the

* The *ordine nobile* in Italian theatres is the tier of boxes second from the floor of the house.

theatre, neither of which seemed, to his nervous and overstrained mind, to be of good augury to him. Close to him, in the stalls behind the orchestra,—so close that it seemed to him difficult to avoid making his salutation to the house personal to the old gentleman himself,—sat Signor Giuseppe Palli, bolt upright in his seat, with one knee crossed over the other, and with his double gold eye-glass in his hand, with which he was emphasising the discourse he was holding with some one, not known to Sebastian, in the seat next to him. Almost at the same moment, as it seemed to him, he saw—in the most distant part of the house, in a box in one of those upper tiers rarely used much in Italian theatres, except on occasions of great attraction, and answering in position to the galleries of our theatres—he saw, and instantly recognised, the face of the Canon Guidi. There he was, wrapped in one of those dark blue cloaks that may belong either to a priest or a layman, and which serve almost as a disguise to those of the former class who do not wish to appear prominently as ecclesiastics. Not that the theatre is altogether forbidden ground to the priesthood even now, although they rarely appear there. But at the time of which I am writing it was much more common to see ecclesiastics in the theatres of Italy. It seemed, however, on the present occasion, that the Canon of San Lorenzo did not wish to attract attention; and his cloak, as well as the position he had selected in the theatre, seemed to have been adopted with that view. Sebastian, however, was sure that he was not mistaken. There sat the priest alone in his box, and wrapped in his cloak.

The subject of the opera was one of those stories taken from ancient history which were so commonly selected for such purposes about the period in question. It was something or other from the Persian history—there is good reason for remembering so much, as we shall see—but beyond that fact the subject of the piece has been forgotten.

There was a delay in drawing up the curtain; and ha! what is this? the corner of the fateful canvas is lifted, and the *impresario* himself steps forth upon the stage. Regrets exceedingly to have to state, message that instant received at the theatre . the lady who was to take the second female part (a special favourite with the audience, from whose singing

Sebastian and his friends had hoped much), has been taken suddenly ill! wholly impossible for her to appear; part shall be taken by Signora—— (an aged *utilité*) at a moment's notice; . . . indulgence of public, etc., etc., etc. And the *impresario* bowed himself out backwards behind the scenes.

The "gentle public" is a very gentle public in Tuscany, and rarely manifests its displeasure at a disappointment of this sort as energetically as a British audience is often apt to do. Nevertheless, it was very evident that the people were discontented. And somewhat more latitude in the manifestation of its sentiments is usually assumed by the public in the smaller theatres of Florence than is ever permitted in the calm and aristocratic precincts of the Pergola, which is to Florence what the Queen's Theatre is to London. There were unmistakeable signs of ill-humour among the audience, and more than one voice was heard demanding that the opera should be withdrawn.

It is easy to imagine what poor Sebastian's feelings were under this cruel blow. It seemed as if Fate itself fought against him! He nerved himself, however, to the task before him to the utmost of his power, by vigorously refusing to allow his mind to travel onwards before the immediate present. He would give his whole thought to the score before him, and shut his eyes to the coming catastrophe, be it of what nature it might.

In a few minutes more the curtain was drawn up, and the business of the evening began. Unhappily, towards the middle of the first act the missing singer was wanted on the stage, and the miserably inefficient substitute who had been provided to fill her place came on,—of course giving the music in a manner which, as the wretched composer said to himself, was enough to secure the condemnation of any work ever written. Nevertheless, the opera went on without any very decided signs of disapprobation from the audience. The music was really fresh, and by no means without merit. And once or twice, before that fatal substitute had come upon the scene, an *aria* by the tenor, and a duet between him and the *prima donna*, had been rewarded with some little faint applause, which had sufficed to keep hope alive in Sebastian's sinking heart. But

the house, if not bitterly hostile, was inattentive and indifferent. There was a vast deal of noise and chattering. The people clearly were not interested in what was being performed before them, and were ready to find the amusement which the stage did not afford them in any other way they could.

And thus the work which was to make its author's fortune, and pluck him back from the abyss of despair that yawned before him, dragged on—undamned—to the end of the first act. He escaped from the orchestra for a few minutes to swallow a glass of water; for the theatre seemed to him like a fiery furnace, and he was parched with thirst. He was there in a little room off the passage, under the stage, flushed and haggard-looking, wiping the perspiration from his brow, when honest Nanni ran round from the front of the theatre, and made his way to say, if he could, a word of comfort to him.

"It is going admirably, dear Sebastian," he said, dropping the formality of the "Signor," in his anxiety to express his friendly feeling. "What an infamous shame about *La Freccia!* (the missing actress.) But they all feel it so; and it will help you rather than otherwise, I am sure. Is there much for her in the second act?"

"No! Luckily nothing at all. She does not come on in the second act."

"Bravo! You'll see, we shall do very well yet! Courage, my dear friend, courage!"

"God bless you for your kindness, at all events, Signor Nanni. At least it is a comfort to feel that there is some one among all that sea of heads and faces that wishes one well. Now I must go back. Thanks, thanks!"

And the composer hurried back to the stake of his martyrdom, and the curtain rose for the second act.

This opened by an announcement made by the *primo basso* coming hurriedly on the stage with the news—"E' spento *Arbace!*"* He had scarcely sung the words in the surprised sort of tone in which such things are uttered on opera stages, when, from the most distant part of the theatre, a powerful and much deeper bass intoned the words, "*Requiescat in*

* "Arbaces is dead."

Pace!"* with an absurdly prominent emphasis on the two syllables which made the unlucky rhyme.

It was more than was needed to send the listless audience into a general roar of laughter. The people laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks—and it was all over with Sebastian's opera! The remainder was hurried over amid laughter and jeers at every moment; and such agony on the part of the unfortunate composer as may be conceived but cannot be described: and the "*fiasco*" was as complete and decided as even the Canon of San Lorenzo himself could have desired it.†

When at last the curtain fell among derisive laughter as cruel as ever were the cries for blood and slaughter rising from the spectators of a Spanish bull-fight, Sebastian's first sensation was that of intense relief. To be able to rush away into darkness and solitude and silence seemed to him at that moment all that he wished or needed. While the curtain was yet dropping he left his seat, and making his way along the squalid passage, lighted only by one glimmering oil lamp, which led from the entrance of the orchestra to the back door of the theatre, he rushed out into the night, and sped away from the scene of his agony, with no other object in his brain than to avoid the light and the presence of any human being.

A minute after he had thus left the theatre, Nanni was round at the back door to meet him; but he was too late. Not a soul, however, was yet leaving the theatre by the actors' door when Nanni reached it, and concluding, of course, that Sebastian had not yet come out, he determined to wait for him there. Presently the various people engaged in the business of the theatre began to pass out by twos and threes. And Nanni patiently waited, keeping a vigilant watch as they streamed past him.

"But he won't be chattering with any one!" thought he to himself. "He will come out alone, I'll bet, poor fellow!"

But at length the last laggards were leaving the place, and

* "Let him rest in peace!" or, "there let him lie!" as it might be Englished.

† This incident is a fact. An opera of very considerable merit completely failed several years ago at Venice, entirely in consequence of the circumstance related in the text.

no Sebastian came. And it was not till the man, whose duty it was, came to lock the door, and assured Nanni, in reply to his questions, that no soul remained within the theatre, that he reluctantly came to the conclusion that Sebastian must have escaped before he had got round from the front to the back door. He was not a little annoyed at this ; for he knew partially what the hapless composer must be suffering, and knew also that it was not good for a man at such a moment to be alone. Laura, moreover, had charged him, in case the result of the evening was unfavourable, not to lose sight of Sebastian, but to bring him back with them to the house of the Boccaneras.

Nanni returned to the party who were waiting for him at the front of the theatre, and telling them of his ill success, proceeded to accompany his friends home. But when they reached the door, he said—

“ I am uneasy about him, Sandro ; and Laura will blame me if I do not find him to-night, somehow. He must be dreadfully cut up, poor fellow ; and that is the time when one wants a friend. Look here ! May be he is gone straight home—most likely. Do you run to Palazzo Lunardi, and see if he is there. I will go to my uncl’s. It is possible he may have gone to Laura, knowing that my uncle would go to the *café* before returning home.”

So leaving Caterina to go upstairs with her father, the two young men went off in different directions. But both errands were fruitless. When the Gobbo returned from the Palazzo Lunardi, he found that Nanni had already come back from Casa Palli, and, to his no small surprise, that he had brought his cousin Laura with him.

“ I am afraid papa will be angry if I am not home before he returns,” she said to Caterina ; “ but there could be no harm in my coming out with Nanni, and papa has never made any objection to my coming to spend an evening at your house. In any case I can’t help it ; for I must see Sebastian to-night.”

“ But what can you say to him, poor fellow ! ” said Caterina, sadly. “ What remedy is there ? ”

“ If there is no remedy, I can grieve with him. But there is much I want to say to him. You do not know him ! You don’t know how much he needs a sympathising word and a supporting

hand. At all events, I feel that my proper place in his present misfortune is to be near him. I could not let this night go by without making an attempt to see him."

And then came the Gobbo with the intelligence that Sebastian had not been home. The little party looked at each other; and the Gobbo was the first to speak.

"Can he have gone with the Canonico di San Lorenzo?" said he; "I know his reverence was in the theatre. I saw him in an upper box."

"Oh, no!" said Laura; "what could have induced him to seek the society of such a man at such a moment?"

"I don't know," said the Gobbo, thoughtfully; "but I will go and see if Signor Sebastiano be at San Lorenzo."

And so saying, he took his hat and cloak again, and went out on his quest.

His way from the Santa Croce quarter of the city to that of San Lorenzo took him through the Piazza del Duomo,—the great Cathedral Square, the bleakest and dreariest spot in the city on a winter's night, where the north wind is always, in accordance with the old Florentine legend, restlessly roaming round the walls of the mighty fabric.* There, as the Gobbo came to the corner of the Via del Proconsolo, which leads into the Piazza, he saw in the comparatively deserted part of the open space at the east end of the church a solitary figure, leaning against the rail which encircles the building, in the dark shadow of one of the jutting chapels which form the buttresses of the vast dome.

A few steps further enabled him to be sure that it was Sebastian. The spot was just that where he had walked with the Canon of San Lorenzo, when he had declared that he would prefer seeking refuge under the cassock to dragging Laura with him into the abyss of his own misfortunes.

* Once on a time, many years ago, says the legend, the devil and the Wind were taking a walk together. They came to the Piazza del Duomo; whereupon the devil said to the Wind, "I have a little business with the canons inside. Just wait for me here, till I come out." So the devil went into the church, and the Wind waited outside—and has been waiting there ever since; for the devil's business with the canons is not concluded yet—nor is likely to be for a long time to come.

The Gobbo hastened to him.

"Signor Conte," he said, "I have been seeking for you. Forgive me for intruding on your privacy, and for venturing to say that this is not a moment to absent yourself from your friends. They are very anxious to have you among them."

"A disgraced man has no friends!" groaned Sebastian, in the bitterness of his heart.

"A disgraced man has none, perhaps," returned the Gobbo, in his sententious way; "but an entirely undisgraced man in unmerited misfortune may have friends, the extent of whose affection he would never have known, but for his misfortune. There are such friends now eager to bear their share of the sorrow that has fallen on you."

"Excuse me! I cannot share it."

"And yet the Signora Laura charged me not to return without bringing you with me!"

"Laura! she was not at the theatre; it was one pang of agony spared me! Where is Laura now, that you have spoken with her?"

"She is at my father's house. She came thither with Signor Nanni, because at all hazards she could not rest this night without seeing you, Signor Conte."

A low moan, like that forced from a man by excess of physical suffering, escaped from the despairing musician. "God help me, and strengthen me to do that which is right!" he cried, pressing both his hands to his throbbing temples.

"You will come to her, Signor Conte, will you not?" said the Gobbo, pleadingly.

"I will come with you, my kind friend."

And so they walked together to the house of the Boccaneras without any further word having been spoken between them.

Strength can stand alone; weakness needs support:—an undeniable truism! Yet it was the weakness and not the strength of Sebastian's character, that made him shrink from the presence of those of whose sympathy and affection he was well assured. It was the quivering sore of wounded self-love, which could not bear the touch of the gentlest and most loving moral surgery. It was moral weakness which prompted him to drag himself away from all companionship, with the arrow sticking in

his side, and lay him down to die, if die he might, in solitude and despair. A more self-supporting strength would have enabled his heart to open itself to sympathy. Probed, too, to the bottom, it would have been found to be self-love, rather than a true spirit of self-sacrifice, which urged him to renounce his love, rather than link the object of it with his failures and misfortunes. A stronger and less morbidly subjective nature, a larger power of sympathy, a just appreciation of the generosity and exigences of another's love, as well as of those of his own, would have bidden him to accord and not to refuse to a woman's love the exquisite delight of self-forgetfulness and devotion. People are apt to err in their speculations on this matter, importing into a higher sphere the simpler and more self-evident morality adapted for the guidance of a lower order of moral natures. Certainly those more coarsely constructed idiosyncrasies which act only by the more simple and primal moral motors, may find their highest nobility in refusing the self-sacrifice of another. But then, those are cases in which all the parties can explain their meaning in plain words, and it is clearly recognised and understood what *is* sacrifice, and what *is* fortune, and what misfortune. All these matters are not so plain when spoken of with reference to those more complex moral machines constructed throughout on the principle of duplex action. And we come upon cases in which the truest self-devotion consists in the acceptance of devotion.

The trio, consisting of Laura, Caterina, and Nanni, who had been anxiously awaiting the result of the Gobbo's expedition, heard steps along the street, in the stillness of the night, and heard them stop at the door.

"Here they are!" cried Laura; "Sandro has found him. Caterina, dear, I must see him alone! I must speak to him as one can only speak *à quattr'occhi*.* How can you manage it for me, dearest?"

"We will go into the kitchen, Laura, dear! Signor Nanni will not mind. Tell my brother, when he comes up, to join us there."

Nanni did not "mind" at all. So he and Caterina slipped

* "With four eyes," *i.e.* tête-à-tête.

off into the kitchen as the Gobbo came upstairs with Sebastian. They entered the room where Laura was, together. But when the Gobbo saw that she was alone, he had too much delicacy of tact to need any telling to leave Sebastian with her.

Saying merely, "Here is the Signor Conte, Signora; I met him in the Piazza del Duomo," he shut the door on them, and went to the others in the kitchen.

"My Sebastian!" said Laura, rising, and putting out her hand to him, "Is this well? Is it well done to run from your friends—from those who love you, at such a moment as this? I *could* not rest without seeing you this night; and came here with Nanni that I might do so."

"Laura! Laura!" exclaimed he, throwing himself into a chair, and burying his face in his hands upon the table; "it is all over! I sought to be alone because my lot is too miserable to involve any one else in it."

"Sebastian! What words and what thoughts are those? Are not your sorrows my sorrows, and your joys my joys? Are not mine all yours? Is it not worse than idle to talk of separating them?"

"Laura, dear, dearest, ever dearest Laura, I dare not take advantage of your love to lure you on to misfortune, and sorrow, and ruin."

"Sebastian, would any misfortune that could happen to me cause you to desert me?"

"I trust in God that it would not," he replied, in a subdued manner.

"I *know* that it would not. But why, then, would you have me behave differently to you?"

"I would not have you behave differently, dearest and best Laura. But it is another thing for me to permit you to sacrifice yourself."

"But would *I* not accept your devotion, think you, into whatsoever sorrow, trouble, poverty, I had fallen? Would I forbid you to be true to your faith and your truth? Nay! that would I not! I should be proud of the pleasure which it would cause you to be true to it through good hap and ill hap!"

"But, Laura! the duties of a man are different in such cases.

It is my duty to protect you from the evil your own generosity would entail on you."

"Oh, Sebastian! does not your own heart teach you better than to talk to me of a protection that would break mine? Is this the courage, the constancy, you promised me?"

"Laura! I am broken-hearted. I have no courage! Fate fights too hard against me."

"Why, what, after all, is the mishap that has befallen? Shamefully, infamously, your opera has been sacrificed to the ill-luck of a singer's illness, and a silly jest. The work remains unjudged. Will not all Florence know that it is so? Surely, surely, there is no cause here for abandoning hope?"

"It is not my first failure, as you know too well, Laura. Last time there was no sick singer, and no foolish rhyme. But the fate of my work was the same. I have no hope!"

"For my sake, *Bastianino mio*, do not say so. Have hope, for my sake!" pleaded Laura; "for, trust me, if you despair, it is despair for me also. And now, my own love, my only love, I must hasten home. I came here because I was greedy to have my share in your trouble, Sebastian; it is my right;—and because I hoped that it might have been a solace and a support to you to be told, even though you know it well already, that I am yours, Sebastian, your own—gladly, rejoicingly, triumphantly yours, if you will accept my love; yours still, but with a broken heart if you reject it. God keep you, my beloved, and open your heart to my words!"

"God bless you, dearest! Let the morrow bring what it may, it cannot be that such words as you have spoken should fail to pour balm into my heart. For, Laura, I do love you well, and would fain assure myself that I love you better than myself. But I have no power of thinking to-night. My head swims round; and the voices in the theatre are still ringing through my ears! But I will strive to think. God bless you, dearest!"

And so Laura left him and returned to her home with Nanni; while the Gobbo volunteered to walk home with Sebastian. The poor musician would have fain been alone. But he could not reject the well-meant kindness of poor Sandro.

They walked almost to the door of Palazzo Lunardi without

a word having been exchanged between them, when the Gobbo said suddenly—

“Shall you see his reverence the Canonico Guidi to-morrow, Signor Conte?”

“Most likely I shall,” said Sebastian, greatly surprised at the question.

“Not certainly,” persisted the Gobbo.

“I propose seeing him. But why do you ask, Signor Sandro?”

“Why, the fact is, there is a reason, Signor Conte; would you grant me a favour, and be contented to know why I ask it by-and-by; a great favour!”

“There are not so many men to whom I could grant anything that I should refuse, Signor Sandro. Besides, I owe you something for what you have done this night.”

“Well, then, Signor Conte, you must promise me to put off seeing the Signor Canonico for a day or two.”

“A strange request enough! What in the world—”

“Trust me, Signor Conte, I do not speak without a reason, as you will know before long. But I put it as a favour to me.”

“Well, so be it! In truth, I feel little inclination to see anybody. I promise you, Signor Sandro!”

“*Basta!* A thousand thanks Signor Conte! I have my reasons. Good night!”

And the Gobbo returned briskly home; while Sebastian, thinking over all the high hopes that were in his heart when last he came down those stairs, climbed, with heavy steps and in a sort of numbed and half-stupefied state of mind, to his garret.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MORROW OF THE FIASCO.

DESPITE the fundamental difference in their minds and natures, the diversity of their tastes and pursuits, and the discrepancy of their views, there had always been a strong mutual affection

between Marietta and her cousin Sebastian. To her he was, in the first place, and before all else, the presumptive head of the Lunardi family, and the heir to at least its ancient glories, its memories and traditions. He was invaluable to her as the pivot and centre-point of all her aims and hopes and schemes. He had been a docile and affectionate child in the years gone past, and, more recently, a loving helpmate in the task of cherishing and taking care of their venerable uncle, and smoothing the declining path of his prolonged old age. To Sebastian, Marietta had stood in the place of a mother; and the reverential affection natural to such a relationship, and which the character of Marietta was so well calculated to foster, coloured with a tinge of deference the more equal companionship of their later years.

But notwithstanding these sentiments, and partly perhaps because of them, Sebastian shrank sensitively from meeting his cousin on the morning after the break-down of his opera. Nor did she, when she had heard the result, look forward to the meeting without trouble. Both knew how partial and imperfect was the sympathy which Marietta could have for the unsuccessful composer in his sorrow. It suited Marietta's views that her cousin should suffer this failure and discouragement. It powerfully helped to ward off the marriage which was the subject of her most pressing fear and trouble concerning him, and contributed much to disgust him with a career which she would fain have seen him abandon. Yet she grieved for the agony she well knew he must be suffering; and grieved the more in that she could not with frank sincerity condole with him. And all these contradictory feelings were perfectly well comprehended by Sebastian.

He had forced himself to be at his accustomed post for the performance of his daily morning duty of accompanying his aged uncle to his morning mass, steeling himself to the necessity of telling the old man of his misfortune. But Marietta had remained in her room, and he had left the house without seeing her.

The old Canon heard Sebastian's faltering account of the previous evening's *fiasco* with less appearance of caring much about it than seemed possible or natural to the young man. He knew his uncle loved him and would have done anything

in his power to make him happy. But he did not know the effect of six-and-eighty years in diminishing the importance of such hopes and fears and pains to the mental eye of one over whom so many successive generations of them have passed, and are now but as the falling leaves of past autumns. "Better to deserve success than enjoy it;" "try again, and better fortune next time;" "perseverance sure to triumph," etc., etc. Such stock phrases and encouragements, chirped forth in a cheery voice, were all that the old Canon had to offer. And probably Sebastian suffered less from the conversation conducted in such a tone than he would have done from a more sympathetic appreciation of his sorrow.

When he returned to his home, passing hurriedly through the streets with a nervous dread of meeting some one with whom he would have been obliged to speak, and feeling, as he shut the door behind him, like a hunted animal that has reached its covert, he heard from the servant-boy that the Canon Guidi was with the Contessa Marietta in the sitting-room; and hastened to shut himself up in the solitude of his own little closet, there to shed hot tears over the blotted and corrected and re-corrected sheets of the music which strewed the little piano.

Guidi, of course, had to speak to Marietta of the event of the previous evening:—enlarged on his own pain as he had watched the progress of the inevitable *fiasco*; condoled with her on the sorrow it must be to her to witness that of her cousin; but pointed out that in this case too, as usual, our troubles rightly understood are sent as blessings; and feeling sure that Marietta must agree with him, that Sebastian's best friends must view his failure in that light.

But the Canon of San Lorenzo's real business at Palazzo Lunardi that morning was to seek news of the old Canon's health. He began to feel surprise and some little uneasiness at the absence of all change in the old man. To his frequent inquiries Marietta's answer was always the same;—her uncle was as usual, and seemed to be in the enjoyment of perfect health. These frequent inquiries made with a particularity beyond that of the ordinary courtesies of intercourse, did not surprise Marietta; they only saddened her. She thought she

fully understood the feeling which prompted them. The time at which, according to her expectation, the palace would be in the market for sale was drawing fearfully near; and she supposed that Guidi was still trusting to the wintry weather and the course of nature to bring about within the necessary time an event which in any case could not be far distant.

On his side Guidi was surprised that no symptom of failing should have yet shown itself in the old man. Six doses of the deadly drug obtained by him had now been administered out of nine, and no effect was perceptible. Still he admitted no doubt of the ultimate result. He supposed that the effect must be cumulative; and that the object of the division of the doses, and of the long time prescribed to elapse between the giving of them, must be intended to defeat any attempt to trace the crime by *post mortem* examination. It had occurred to him once lately to advert to the possibility of some miscarriage in the administration of the poison. Was it possible that some suspicion had been aroused in the mind of Marietta? or that any mischance should have led to a discovery of the poisoned wine? But a moment's consideration of Marietta's character, and of her manner to him in their frequent interviews, caused him to discard such a notion as wholly impossible.

The struggle in the heart of Marietta had meanwhile been striving to shape out for itself the possibility of a different exit from the position of affairs, and another possibility of achieving the success of her hopes. The time for the final success or failure of them was at hand. Her uncle was, thank God!—yes, she *would* say, thank God!—as little likely to die within the next few weeks as he had been at any time in the last twenty years. And oh! what a relief, what an escape from a weight that was crushing the life out of her, would it be, if it were possible to contemplate the realisation of her hope and her uncle's life and health as not incompatible!

For this to become possible only two things were necessary;—that she should make up her mind to confess to the old man the deception that had been practised upon him for the last twenty years, and the existence of the hoarded sum, which had resulted from that deception; and secondly, that she should induce Sebastian to fall in with her views, to give up all thought

of Laura, and to join her in inducing their uncle to consent to the use of the money for the purpose for which it had been hoarded. That there could be no difficulty in obtaining this consent, if only Sebastian would join in desiring it, she felt quite sure. She had succeeded in making up her mind to the painful task of informing her uncle of the real state of the case, if only the other point could be compassed. That was absolutely necessary. Was it possible? If Sebastian persisted in declaring that his happiness could only be secured by such a marriage; and if the Canon were to be made aware that he possessed in the savings of his life the means of facilitating that marriage, the money would assuredly go for that purpose. And this was a contingency Marietta was not prepared to endure. If only Sebastian could be brought to act reasonably in the matter, and accept the position, which the painful struggles of her twenty years of self-denial, toil, and concealment had earned for him! These meditations had been growing and taking more definite form in Marietta's mind for some time past; and now, if ever, the time appeared to have come for ascertaining what hope there might be of getting Sebastian to act in conformity with her views. The failure of his opera must have made his marriage with Laura more hopeless than ever; must have led him to despair of his own efforts to raise him from the hopeless position of dependence in which he was now living. If ever, this was the moment to find him inclined to admit new ideas and new hopes for the future into his heart.

As soon, therefore, as Guidi had left her, after having inquired for Sebastian, and been told by Marietta that he had shut himself up in his room to avoid seeing any one, she paused for a minute to collect her thoughts, and then stepping lightly across the entrance-hall, knocked at Sebastian's door—

“Who is there?” asked a dull and desponding voice from within.

“It is I, dearest Sebastian! Do not persist in avoiding to speak to me. I would fain comfort you.”

“That I am sure you would, Marietta, were comfort to be had!” he replied, as he opened the door to her; “but I see not in what quarter to look for it.”

“May I come in?” said Marietta, pausing at the door. “I

do not wish to pain you by forcing conversation on you while your heart is too sore to endure it; but if you can bear with me, I would fain talk this sorrow over with you."

"Dear Marietta! I know well the generous tenderness of your affection; I know that your heart bleeds for my failure, though your views and opinions would hardly permit you to wish for my success!"

"I do, indeed, feel for you, my dear boy. Believe me, your sorrow, from whatever cause, is my sorrow. I know," she added, while her voice sank almost to a whisper, and she dropped her eyes from looking him in the face, "I know, too, that this misfortune must have destroyed the last lingering hope of compassing the marriage on which your heart is set. You know my feeling with regard to it;—yet it is not impossible for me to sorrow with your sorrow over a vanished hope."

"You also, then, see it in that light, my cousin? You feel that a disgraced and unsuccessful man, with no prospect save that of beggary before him, cannot honourably hold a woman in Laura's position to engagements made under different circumstances?"

But though the temptation was strong, Marietta was too honest to make the most of what appeared to be his mood of mind upon the subject.

"Nay, Sebastian!" she replied, "I must not let you talk in that strain. Nothing has happened to you which brings disgrace with it. Nor can I pretend to think that in a marriage between the Conte de' Lunardi and Laura Palli, the inequality would not be all in favour of the lady. But I spoke, Sebastian, with reference to her father. You must have lost the hope of reaching such a position as might induce him to consent to the match."

"Do you deem it needful, Marietta, to remind me of that fact?"

"Oh, Sebastian, do not speak to me in that tone, and with that reproachful look! Do you not know that your happiness is dearer to me than my own, and that I would do anything to compass it, provided only that that happiness be compatible with considerations that ought to be paramount to all others in your mind as in mine?"

“But alas! my Marietta,” said Sebastian, more gently, “it is precisely on that point that we see things differently. That which seems paramount to you, I cannot feel to be so.”

“I know it, Sebastian; and it has been the unhappiness of my life—one of the great unhappinesses of my life—that it should be so. You do not know—you cannot and never will know, nor do I wish that you ever should know—what it has cost me to see that you had staked your happiness on making an alliance which would have been fatal to all my hopes for you and for our family—fatal to the performance of the sacred duty you owe to yourself, to all of us, and to the long and noble line of which you are the last scion.”

“But, Marietta, it is like talking to me in a language I do not understand. Do me the justice to believe that if I could have recognised what you hold to be sacred duties as such, I should not have been deaf to your preaching of them.”

“I know all that, Sebastian; and I should not have chosen this moment for merely going over once again the ground that we have so often and so fruitlessly travelled over together. But since circumstances, quite as much independent of my will and out of my power as of your own, have made the marriage on which your heart was set impossible, may it not be that we may at last come to wish the same thing, and enjoy at least the priceless blessing of acting in concert and aiming at the same end? And now, my Sebastian, you see why I spoke to you of the impossibility which must have forced itself even on your mind that a marriage between you and Laura can ever be.”

“I understand now, Marietta; you came to secure the wind-fall of good-hap blown to you by the storm which has laid me low.”

“Sebastian!” she said, laying her hand on his shoulder, as she stood over him in the stooping attitude which was now become habitual to her, while he sat before the little table strewn with blotted sheets of music, his forehead leaning in disconsolate guise on his hand, and a tear gathered in her eye as she spoke—“Sebastian, your sorrow makes you unjust to me. God, who sees my heart, knows that my feeling respecting this marriage has not prevented my heart from aching for your pain. My own troubles—and I have enough of them—have not so

engrossed me as to make me forgetful of yours. My heart has bled for you, Sebastian; and was with you in all the agony you have suffered during the past night. Indeed, indeed, you did me wrong in speaking as you did just now."

The tear that had been trembling on Marietta's eyelash fell, as she ceased speaking, on Sebastian's hand. He looked up to her face with surprise, for tears were an unusual phenomenon with Marietta. With her, sorrow was dry-eyed, and all the more searing to the heart and brain. But Sebastian's unkind injustice had touched some gentler source of emotion than was ever stirred by Marietta's ordinary sorrows.

Sebastian looked up quickly, and was touched.

"Forgive me, Marietta," he said, taking her hand, "forgive me. Sorrow makes us cruel."

"In that case, indeed, no tigress should be crueller than I," said Marietta, with a deep sigh. "But, indeed, Sebastian, I would not be so to you. Oh! if I could but have the happiness of wishing all that you wish, of opening my heart to you, of labouring together with you for the same objects!"

"Would that it could be so, Marietta!"

"And why should it not be so, since circumstances beyond the control of either of us have, by making the marriage you wished impossible, removed the only obstacle to our agreement?"

"It is necessary, for the prevention of further sorrow to both of us, Marietta," replied Sebastian, after a pause, "that we should clearly understand each other. It could only lead to future disappointment and fresh trouble if I suffered you to remain in any delusion. You speak of ends and views, and working towards an aim. I fear me, cousin, that that aim involves not only the breaking off of all notion of a marriage with Laura, but also the formation of some other tie. Is it not so, Marietta?"

"Unquestionably so! and why not? All my hopes and plans are centred in you, Sebastian; the only remaining scion of our house, as you must well know. But you do not know all the circumstances of your position. You do not know all that I could tell you if once we were so united in aim that I could open all my heart to you."

“As I said, Marietta, it is useless to allow you to build plans based on a false hope. What you are contemplating can never be. My union with Laura is impossible, you say. Grant that it be so! But do not base schemes on the supposition that I shall ever unite myself to any other. For they will fail you.”

“This is the language of disappointed love, my Sebastian. Time will close the wounds that are now fresh in your heart. And you will not then be deaf to the claims of honour and duty.”

“Marietta!” said Sebastian, rising from his chair, and speaking with solemnity, as he looked intently into her eyes, “I should be deaf to the dictates of honour indeed, were I ever to act as you would propose to me. Words have passed between me and Laura which bind us together as indissolubly as any marriage vow could do. Laura will never wed another, be assured. Nor shall I! The honour of our name is dear to you, Marietta—would you have me sully it?”

Marietta put both her hands to her temples, and turned to leave the room. “There is no hope!” she said. “Forgive me, Sebastian, for having pained you!”

“There is no hope!” she repeated, when she had reached her own chamber. “Father!” she cried, as her eyes rested on a portrait that hung by her bedside; “father! I have not been wanting; but Fate is stronger than I.”

Sebastian, left to himself, returned to his previous position, with his head resting on his hand, and his elbow on the table, and continued to chew the cud of his bitter fancies. Had it not been for the promise he had given to the Gobbo, he could have gone to seek an interview with the Canon of San Lorenzo, who would assuredly expect him. Yet he was glad to defer that interview. When he had left the theatre in the first violence of his despair, on the previous night, he would have been ready to close at once with the priest's proposal. But his conversation with Laura had occurred since that time; and though it could not be said to have resuscitated the germs of hope in his heart, it had led him to feel that it would be unpardonable in him to take a step which would kill the hope that Laura was able still to keep alive in her own breast.

Then his mind recurred to the strangeness of the request the Gobbo had made. What could be his motive? Was it possible

to suppose that he was aware of the proposals that the priest had made to him? And if he were, what could be the meaning of his wish to postpone the acceptance of them? Could he suppose Laura to be aware of the step he contemplated? and was the Gobbo acting at her request? And if so, why should Laura seek to put off his interview with the Canon for a few days? What difference could a few days make?

While these thoughts were passing through his mind, and he was vainly endeavouring to find some solution for the doubts suggested by them, he heard the voices of Nanni and the Gobbo asking to see him at the door. His first impulse was to refuse to receive them. But he remembered that on a former occasion they had come to him together as messengers from Laura. It might be that they were now there on a similar errand. At all events it would be necessary, if not that day, at least the next or succeeding day, to overcome his repugnance to see and talk with them. So he opened the door of his room, and asked them to come in.

“Signor Conte,” said the Gobbo, in his formal way, “if merit commanded success, we should be here to congratulate you. It does not in this world, and we come to condole with you instead.”

“I wish I had the head of the stupid brute who sung out in that way within length of my arm!” said Nanni. “It was shameful!”

“Thanks, friends, for your kind sympathies! I had given up all hope, Signor Nanni, before that unlucky rhyme upset the house. They would not have been so easily set against the work, if it had been worth anything.”

“Nay, Signor Conte! excuse me, there you are wrong!” said the Gobbo. “Similar accidents have happened with similar results to works which were good, and which were afterwards recognised to be so. Whose opera was it at Milan?—I forget the composer’s name; but I remember the story; and I know that the opera was afterwards successful. Well, the tenor has to come on in the second act as his own ghost. ‘*Son spirito incorporato!*’* he sings. Unfortunately, the tenor happened to be an immensely fat man. The audience could not resist the

* “A disembodied spirit am I.” The anecdote is fact.

joke ; and the opera was ruined—for the nonce. These are accidents to which the theatre is liable, Signor Conte.”

“I do not pretend to any monopoly of ill-fortune, dear Signor Sandro ; and I am sensible of your kindness in taking such a view of my failure. But you know enough, Signor, to be aware that if my theatrical *fiasco* was all I had to trouble me, I could meet fortune with more courage.”

“But Sandro here,” put in Nanni, “will persist in maintaining that you and Laura may likely enough bring your matters to port* sooner than either of you think for. What the devil should Sandro know about the matter? you will say. And so I say to myself. But somehow or other, I begin to think he knows something about everything. A very long-headed chap is my brother-in-law that is to be, Signor Bastiano ; wonderful ! Anyway here he is to speak for himself, if you can make anything out of him. And to tell you the truth, that is what I have brought him here for this morning.”

“My friend Nanni,” said the Gobbo, with much enjoyment in his manner, “has altogether too high an opinion of any talents I may possess. But the fact is, Signor Conte, that chance *has* brought to my knowledge certain facts,—certain remarkable facts, I may say,—which hm do lead me to hm . form an opinion that hm circumstances are occurring which hm . may lead to results hm in some respects differing hm from the anticipations which some persons may have been led to form of them.”

Nanni looked at Sebastian with a stare of inquiry, as much as to ask him if *he* could make anything out of these enigmatical utterances of his wise brother-in-law, at the same time slightly nodding his head, and moving his elbow in the direction of the Gobbo, as claiming Sebastian’s admiration for the wonderful display of brain-work they were witnessing.

“Do *you* know anything of the circumstances to which Signor Sandro alludes ?” asked Sebastian of Nanni.

“*I!*” said Nanni, “I have not the least idea of the meaning of a word he says ! but then I am not a great hand at understanding.”

* *A buon porto*, a common Tuscan phrase for succeeding in anything.

"I can't say that, on the present occasion at all events, I am any better," remarked Sebastian, somewhat drily.

"*Signori miei!*" cried the Gobbo; "it is true that I have not spoken with such perfect lucidity and clearness as I could wish to do. But I pray you both to bear with me yet a little while. I am not at liberty to speak more clearly at present;—not at present. I *do* think it probable that the position of the Signor Conte may shortly be found to be a different one from what he imagines it. It was for that reason I took the great liberty of making the request I did last night. I cannot say more at the present moment; and I must entreat the Signor Conte not to speak to any person of my having said thus much."

"Oh! I feel no temptation to speak to any one on the subject, I assure you, Signor Sandro. May I at least ask how soon you contemplate being able to bring these riddles to a solution?"

"Very shortly; in a few days, I trust. Meantime, Signor Conte, I have to ask patience, your good construction, and that you will take no resolution regarding . . . regarding your future,—till then. Have I your promise, Signor Conte, and your kind thoughts?"

"The latter, unquestionably, my dear Sandro!" replied Sebastian, somewhat comforted in mind, in spite of the dictates of his judgment, by the Gobbo's mysterious hints; "and therefore," he added, "the other promise may go with them."

"Thanks, Signor Conte; thanks! I trust, ere long, to show you that I am not altogether talking nonsense. And now, *leveremo l'incommodo*," added the Gobbo, as he and Nanni rose to take leave of the musician.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE GOBBO'S COUNSEL.

FOR some days past Sandro Boccanera's mind had been at work, endeavouring to piece together the sundry bits of information which chance had thrown in his way respecting the affairs of his friends the Lunardi. The Canon Guidi was bent on pre-

venting the match between Sebastian and Laura, being incited thereto by her father : that was fact number one. This same Canon Guidi was engaged in an attempt to poison the aged head of the Lunardi family : that was fact number two. The Contessa Marietta was in possession of a very large sum of money ; and yet Sebastian considered himself, and was considered by the jeweller, to be penniless and wholly unprovided for : that was fact number three.

The Canon Guidi apparently thought the same of Sebastian's position. Did he really think so ? Did he share Marietta's secret ? That she did not share his terrible one, Sandro felt perfectly sure. And what bearing had these facts upon each other ? He felt, on consideration, strongly persuaded that Guidi was aware of the existence of the property possessed by Marietta ; and that the design of putting an end to the old Canon's life had some reference to this money. Guidi, therefore, was plotting treason of some sort against Marietta. There was every reason to suppose that he was in her confidence ; and yet, as Sandro felt perfectly sure, she was not in his confidence.

The result of his meditations was a determination to communicate to her the facts of the poisoned wine. It was running a risk to do so ; but he thought that Marietta knew him well enough to believe his testimony, supported as it would be by the production of the drugged flasks.

The next point to be decided was, how he was to find an opportunity of speaking to her on the subject. It was absolutely necessary to secure a private and uninterrupted interview with her ; and that was rather difficult. He remembered the painful embarrassment he was placed in the last time, when the Canon Guidi and Marietta so evidently wished to get rid of him ; and he was not disposed, if it could in any way be avoided, to risk a repetition of the same annoyance.

After some reflection, he determined to endeavour to meet her in the church of San Giacomo. He was well aware that she was in the habit of frequenting it in the night ; and nothing was easier than for him to remain in the building when it was closed at "the twenty-four."* The only difficulty was that, as he had

* Sundown. The old Italian way of reckoning the hours ; still used in the case of the hour of the " 24," but obsolete in every other.

no means of knowing when Marietta was likely to pay one of her accustomed visits to the chapel of her ancestors, he might chance to watch several nights in vain. Nevertheless, he determined on this plan; and made up his mind to begin it that same night,—the one subsequent to the *fiasco* of Sebastian's opera at the theatre, that is to say, and succeeding to the day of his and Nanni's visit to the composer.

When the church was closed at an hour after sundown, the Gobbo remained in a corner concealed behind one of the monuments in the Lunardi chapel. There was not the least danger that he should be observed, even if the darkness had not helped to conceal him; for the careless sacristan never dreamed of so much as even looking round the unfrequented little church. He went to the lamp hanging before the principal altar, and laying his keys upon the marble altar-rail the while, trimmed the wick, and poured a little oil from a cruse into the lamp. The Gobbo had forgotten that the same process would have to be performed for the lamp that hung before the altar of the Virgin in the Lunardi chapel; and when the man came to do it, he thought that he must have been seen. He stood close in his corner, however; and the sacristan having done his job, without raising his eyes from the lamp, quitted the chapel, left the church by the western door, and turned the key in the lock.

The Gobbo, as soon as the man was gone, stepped into one of the confession boxes, as being the most comfortable seats afforded by the scanty furniture of the humble little church, and intended to employ the time which must elapse before Marietta could come, if she should come at all that night to the church, in meditating on all the possibilities of the circumstances, the riddle of which he was bent on solving, and in conning over what he meant to say to her. One point, also, on which he had not made up his mind was, how he should first accost Marietta, if she should come into the church, so as not to startle and alarm her too violently. And while he was meditating on this, he fell fast asleep in the confessional.

Now, it so happened that fortune was favourable to the Gobbo's wish of obtaining a private interview with the Contessa Marietta. It was her wont, as has been said, often to seek comfort and strength under her trials and disappointments from prayer in

the chapel of her family ; and she preferred the night hours for the purpose, both because it was then that her cares and desponding thoughts, undisturbed by the duties of the day, pressed most heavily on her, and because she could then most easily absent herself for any length of time unobserved, and also be sure of finding the little church wholly unoccupied.

Why could she not have found the same comfort from prayer in the solitude of her own chamber ?

Those who would ask such a question are not acquainted with the practices and consequent habits of thought and feeling taught and engendered by Roman Catholic devotion. The whole system of pious practices, which constitutes the practical part of the Romanist religion, is based on the inculcation of the belief in the special holiness of certain localities, and the peculiar efficacy of prayer there offered up. Of course, the natural and necessary tendency of all such ideas is to localise and therefore to materialise the object of worship : and whatever theories respecting the saintly office of intercession, and the difference between worship and adoration, may be invented and put forward by professional theologians to justify and excuse their teaching in these matters, no one who has ever lived among a believing Roman Catholic population can doubt for a moment that the persons represented by the material figures there visibly present in the places where prayer is said to be especially efficacious—even if not, as is often assuredly the case among the most ignorant and gross-minded, the very wood, stone, or picture itself—are to the popular mind the real, sole, and ultimate objects of supplication,—and of supplications more fervid and intensely sincere than the same minds would be capable of addressing to an incorporeal and unfigured Deity.

To Marietta, no spot on earth's surface was so sacred as the little chapel of the Lunardi family in the church which had been raised by the piety of a member of it. It was her Mecca—her Holy of Holies. The dust beneath its sculptured and inscribed flagstones was to her heart and imagination more awfully holy ground than any other ever trodden by the foot of man. The marble statues of the worthies of her race were not entitled by any decree of her Church to receive her worship. But it will not appear surprising to those who know how easily the ill-

trained mind sinks into idolatrous materialism, and with how great difficulty it soars to the purity of communion with an absolutely spiritual Being,—it will not to such, I say, seem surprising if, by a very easy and slight movement on a very slippery descent, Marietta unavowedly, and half unconsciously, did in fact address her supplications inclusively, though not perhaps exclusively, to those venerable effigies of the persons who, according to the fantastic imaginings of her monomania, had themselves so great an interest in them.

Of course, Marietta was most disposed to seek the consolation of these nightly communings with the idols of her imagination when most the chances seemed to be going against her in the great struggle to which she had devoted her life. And the disappointment she had undergone in her interview with Sebastian that morning had been a bitter one; so bitter as to leave, as far as Marietta could see before her, little other resource or comfort save such as might be found in the superstitious devotion which dictated her night visits to the church of San Giacomo de' Lunardi.

That night accordingly, when the Canon and Sebastian had gone to bed, and the little servant had gone to his home for the night, Marietta took her hand-lamp, and the key which opened the door from the terrace into the private gallery in the family chapel, and descended the back-stair. She passed into the gallery, and from thence, by the little stair contrived in the corner of the chapel, descended, lamp in hand, into the body of the church.

She was on the last step of this little winding stair, and was in the act of stepping out from it on to the pavement of the chapel, when she was suddenly startled by a sound that seemed almost close to her. Now, though Marietta's mind was not quite open to the ready reception of any superstitious imaginings, yet she was too familiar with the place in which she was, it was too dear to her, and her thoughts were too much accustomed to dwell among its appearances, and the ideas they were calculated to suggest, with a feeling of fellowship and benevolent communion, for her to be assailed by superstitious dread. She would have been in no degree incredulous as to any audible or visible manifestation which it might have pleased the spirits

of the dead who lay around her to vouchsafe to her. But such would not have been to her an object of terror. Towards those past generations of her ancestors, who had, according to her creed, so great claims upon her, her conscience was at all events void of offence. She had been a liege and faithful daughter of her house ; and felt herself on that soil to be among approving and sympathising friends and kinsmen.

She was not terrified, therefore, but greatly startled by the sound that had reached her, and she paused with her foot on the step, holding the lamp above her head to see if its light could enable her to distinguish any one in the chapel. While she thus paused, the sound was heard again ; and this time it seemed exceedingly like a snore.

But who could be in the church at such an hour ? and whence did the noise proceed ? She stepped out into the chapel, and listened for a repetition of the sound. There it was again ; surely somebody snoring ; and now, as it seemed, not in the chapel, but in the body of the church. Gently stepping out from beneath the arch that separated the Lunardi chapel from the rest of the building, and still holding the lamp above her head, she was able at the next repetition of the sound to trace it clearly to one of the confessionals that stood against the opposite wall of the nave, at right angles to the high altar.

Guided by the noise, she crossed the little nave, and bringing her lamp to bear full on the centre compartment of the confessional, recognised, to her immense astonishment, the Gobbo fast asleep in the priest's seat. She stood a minute spell-bound by surprise, and considered whether she should awake him or not, when the effect of the light on his upturned face decided the doubt for her. Sandro opened his eyes suddenly with a start, and in an instant remembered perfectly well all the circumstances of the place and the occasion, save that his first impulse was, not to account for where he was, but to apologise for having been asleep.

Most people have a strong dislike to being caught asleep when sleep has been involuntary.

“ Signora Contessa ! ” stammered the little man, “ truly I am shocked that I have allowed sleep to overcome me thus. I assuredly had no intention of sleeping. ” And as he spoke he

rose and came out of the confessional, bowing profoundly to the astonished Marietta.

"Signor Sandro Boceanera!" she exclaimed, "you here at this hour!"

"In fact, Signora Contessa, I was weary. It is difficult for a weary man to keep awake in solitude and stillness."

"But how came you to be here, either awake or asleep, Signor Sandro? That is what I cannot understand."

"Signora, I will tell you frankly. I came here, and remained purposely when the church was shut up for the night, in the hope of meeting you here. I knew you were in the habit of coming hither frequently in the night-time, and I determined on taking that means of seeking an interview with you."

"But, Signor Boceanera, it would surely have been easier, as well as fitter, to have come to me in my home. You know that I am always glad to see you."

"Your ladyship has always been most kind, most condescending to me. But there were difficulties in the way. I wished to have the opportunity of speaking to your ladyship without the chance of being interrupted. And that was not easy to find. I trust that your ladyship will admit, when you shall have heard what I wish to say, that the importance of the matter is such as to justify the means I have taken."

"But how did you know that you would meet me here this night?"

"I did not know it, Signora. I determined on watching here every night till I should be so lucky as to see you. Fortune has favoured me. This is the first night of my watch."

"At all events, you were of opinion yourself, Signor Sandro, that the conversation you wished to have with me was of sufficient moment to justify a great deal of trouble in obtaining it."

"In truth, Signora, it did so appear to me; and I think that, when you have heard me, you will not think differently."

"Signor Sandro, it is now many years that we have known each other, and I have always felt a respect for you and your worthy father, not only on account of your kindness to us in days past, which has never been and will never be forgotten by me or mine, I trust, but also on account of the old and gentle

blood which flows in your veins. I have always flattered myself, too, that you entertained a respect for my family, and feelings of kindly sympathy for us in our misfortunes. For these reasons I will not refuse to give you the attention you ask, although you must be aware that the very strange way you have taken to ask it would assuredly prevent me from granting as much to any other."

Thus saying, Marietta placed the lamp she held on the marble top of the railing that encircled the high altar, and seating herself on one of the benches that stood against the wall on either side of the confessional, awaited what the Gobbo might have to say to her.

"Signora," he began, "I am fully sensible of your condescending kindness and of the confidence you are placing in me. If, in the course of our conversation, I shall be obliged to appeal to them yet further, allow me to assure you that in the end you will give your approbation to the course I have taken."

"I am quite disposed, my friend, to think that I may do so. In the meantime I am ready to give you all my attention."

Now, it had been a matter of long and anxious deliberation with the Gobbo in what manner he should commence and conduct the conversation he had sought. He had come there with the intention of revealing to Marietta the atrocity of the Canon Guidi; and he still held to his purpose of doing so. But he had made up his mind not to do it directly and without preparation. He wanted to feel his way. In the first place, he was there to obtain as well as to give information. There were sundry points on which he was anxious to obtain enlightenment; in great measure induced, it must be admitted, by his natural love of intrigue and mystery, and the mania for knowing all about everybody's affairs and secrets; but in great part, also, by the hope of being seriously useful to people for whom he had a veritable respect and regard. In the next place, it was a serious thing to make the charge he was about to prefer against a man in the position of the Canon, and that to a person who was, and had been for more than twenty years, an intimate friend of the accused. It behoved him to be very careful, or he might easily do more mischief than good. Besides all this, the Gobbo had a very large gift of the cautious diplomatic spirit which prompts a

negociator to keep the cards in his own hand hidden while he strives to obtain a peep at those in the hand of the other player. Acting therefore on these various considerations and impulses, the Gobbo began the conference.

“Signora, circumstances have led to my seeing the Signor Conte Sebastiano more frequently of late than I previously had the good fortune to do ; and, I may add, have led also to my enjoying a certain measure of his confidence. And I have been much grieved to observe that the Signor Conte is far from happy.”

“Surely, Signore, you did not think it necessary to seek this interview with me to give me that information ?”

“Not so, Signora ! I mentioned that I should have to appeal to your favourable construction to acquit me of impertinence. And what I would speak of is the cause of the Signor Conte's sorrow ?”

“Alas ! the cause is but too notorious. You must be aware, Signor Sandro, how much my poor cousin had set his heart on the success of his opera.”

“But the failure of it is not the only nor the main cause of his present despondency. It is of that other cause I would speak, Signora.”

“I will not affect to be ignorant of your meaning. But I am at loss to imagine what advantage can arise from speaking of the unfortunate passion which has so misled my cousin as to make him desirous of forming a connection so wholly unworthy of his position.”

“Should you deem it right, Signora, to oppose such a marriage under all circumstances ?”

“Assuredly I should, under every conceivable circumstance. And it surprises me much, Signor Sandro, that you, of all men, should ask me that question. I had imagined that your opinions and mine, on such a subject, would have been in unison.”

“Signora, I am proud to think that in the main they are so. The preservation and perpetuation of an ancient historical name and lineage would be as keenly felt a desire with me as with yourself. And I would prefer that this end should be accomplished by intermarriages between races equally distinguished and long descended. But, Signora, I would not lose sight of

the first object, because it might be found incompatible with the second. In the times in which we live there is no possibility of holding, or at least of continuing to hold, such a position as the heir of an ancient line should hold, without the aid of wealth. Look at the example of the aristocracies which promise fairest to keep as good a position in the coming as they have in the past generations. None of these have refused to recruit themselves, both as regards blood and as regards property, from the classes below them. Is it not wiser to avail ourselves of the money-getting talents and habits of these, rather than to run the risk of becoming, as so many a fine old name has become, extinct from atrophy?"

"But even if I were inclined to think that there was reason in what you say, Signor Sandro,—and I will not assert that there is none,—it would be equally useless to discuss or even to think of this matter. Strange as it may seem to you or me, so all-absorbing has the power of wealth become, that even if we were willing, Signor Giuseppe Palli, the jeweller and money-lender on the Ponte Vecchio, would not be willing that his daughter should marry with the heir of the Counts dei Lunardi!"

"It cannot be expected that such persons should appreciate the value of noble birth and purity of race. And Signor Palli, as I have reason to know," continued the Gobbo, furtively eyeing Marietta closely as he spoke, "supposes the Signor Conte to be wholly without the means of contributing anything towards the maintenance of a wife and family."

"All Florence, alas! knows but too well that such is the case," replied Marietta, with her eyes on the ground.

"Signora Contessa," replied the Gobbo, after a pause, and speaking in a lower tone, "I think I may venture to say that I know your ladyship's noble nature sufficiently well to feel sure that property in your hands can be destined to no other use than the upholding and restoring of the family."

Marietta started as he spoke, and shot a sharp short glance of inquiry into his eyes. Before dropping her own again, she said—

"Property in my hands! What is your meaning, Signore?"

The Gobbo kept his eyes also fixed on the ground, not

venturing to look at the lady, as he replied, keeping in some sort to the letter of the truth, though scarcely to the reality of it—

“Signora Contessa, it was without any intention of imperintently prying into your secrets that I acquired the knowledge that you are the mistress of a very considerable sum of money.”

Marietta felt a sudden cold all over her, and then in the next moment a rush of blood, which flushed her face, and made her glow from head to foot.

“Can it be that *he* should have betrayed me?” she said, speaking rather to herself than to her companion; and rising to her feet, from the bench on which she had been sitting.

“I know not to whom your ladyship alludes,” returned the Gobbo, timidly and submissively.

“The information that has reached you, Signor Boccanera, Heaven knows by what means, must have been derived from his Reverence the Canonico Guidi.”

“Signora, referring to the words which this moment escaped you, I feel myself bound to say that I have reason to think that his reverence *has* betrayed you; though I have not any grounds for believing that he has done so respecting the matter of which we are speaking.”

Marietta put both her hands to her temples, straining back from them the braids of her silver-flecked black hair, with an action habitual to her in moments of deep emotion, and turning as she stood towards the high altar, seemed for a moment to be engaged in mental prayer. Then turning quickly round to the Gobbo, and this time looking him full in the face, she said—

“And may I ask, Signore, to what use you have put or intend to put the knowledge, however it may have been acquired, which you have obtained respecting my affairs?”

Had Marietta at that moment replied to Sandro's last words by demanding in what respect she had been betrayed by the Canon of San Lorenzo, he would have no doubt communicated to her the momentous facts which he had come there with the intention of telling. But her paramount interest in the other inquiry had caused her to let the other matter pass, to be returned to afterwards.

“You cannot, I trust, imagine for an instant, Signora Contessa, that any secret of yours, however it may have come to my knowledge, would be less safe with me than with yourself. I have put my knowledge of the fact in question to no use whatever, nor should I ever dream of putting it to any use, save that of enabling me to serve your ladyship and your family,—and that only by means of conferring with yourself.”

Marietta remained silent for a few minutes, covering her eyes with her hand, and leaning her elbow on the pedestal of a statue that stood at the corner of the altar railing. Then raising her head, she said, putting out her hand to the Gobbo—

“It is all very strange! but, my good Sandro, I do and will believe what you say. I do believe that you would aid and not mar, as far as in you lies, the object I have at heart. But you spoke as if you had counsel to offer, and I see not whence any hope or help is to come.”

The Gobbo felt infinitely relieved as he hurriedly took the long thin hand held out to him, and with the old-fashioned Tuscan homage of an inferior to a superior, stooped to kiss it.

“I cannot tell you, Signora, how great a comfort and consolation your words are to me,” he said, as the tears gathered in his eyes. “Had I not been so before, I should be bound to your service now for ever. And your condescension emboldens me to say what was in my mind. Taking everything into consideration, Signora Contessa, and bearing in mind the facts I had the honour of suggesting to you when we were speaking of the reasons for and against such a marriage as that of the Signor Conte with the Signorina Palli, I would humbly put it to you, whether the future fortunes of the house of Lunardi might not be more effectually cared for by making such a marriage than by rejecting it? Endowed by such a fortune as that in your ladyship’s possession, old Giuseppe Palli would probably be only too glad to welcome such a proposal, especially as he will doubtless find it very difficult to compel his daughter to any other alliance.”

“You know not what you are talking of!” cried Marietta, nervously taking a few hurried steps across the nave of the church towards the Lunardi chapel, and as suddenly returning to where the Gobbo remained standing. “You know not that

that money is sacred,—that it would be sacrilege to divert it to any other purpose than that for which it has been accumulated.”

And again her agitation made her cross and recross the little church with a hurried step before she continued—

“Listen, Signor Boccanera! for I think that you can understand the principles and feelings that have ruled me in this matter. When my dear and ever-venerated father died, now more than twenty years ago, exiled from the home of his ancestors by misfortunes long and courageously but vainly baffled with—died broken-hearted at the ruin and fall of his house, and at the thought, that never was still by night or by day, that the home of his ancestors was gone from him, and that his place would know him no more—he left to me the sacred legacy of his sorrows, and the yet more sacred duty of devoting my life to the struggle, even if a hopeless one, to do somewhat towards repairing the misfortunes of the family. Who was there but me?—me, a young girl of barely twenty years. I accepted the task, not with any hope of doing much, but with the deep feeling that, whether it were much or little, it was to that aim and that thought that my life was due. I was not spared the trial of temptations that might have, . . . but it is needless to speak or think of that, . . . I banished all thoughts save one. By degrees a hope and a possibility opened itself before me. Providence was pleased to bless the singleness of my heart and my endeavour. That good and simple-hearted old man yonder made me the mistress—insisted, against my wishes in the first instance, on making me the absolute mistress—of his house and all he possessed. His income, properly managed, was much larger than sufficed to supply the wants of all of us, and that income was shortly afterwards largely increased. By little and little, by strict economy and rigorous self-denial, by judicious management, and by the blessing of Heaven, the sum of which you have spoken was amassed. Are you aware of the amount of it?”

“I am aware,” replied the Gobbo, with downcast eyes, “that it exceeds the sum of thirty-five thousand scudi.”

“Your information is correct. And can you not imagine with what aim that sum has been amassed? Can you not

guess what hope, like a sacred star, distant but always fixedly shining on the edge of the horizon before me, supported me through those long and dreary years of monotonous daily petty savings, still beckoned me onwards with its steady and unwavering though far-off light, and exalted into a high and noble enterprise the petty daily cares which, without such an object, would have been the sordid struggle of a miser? Can you not guess it? Do you not feel what must have been the one undying desire of the disinherited daughter of such a line as mine, thrust forth from the soil in which it had taken such deep root and flourished so proudly for more than six hundred years;—the desire of the heart, panted after as the fever-stricken wretch pants for water, which grew upon me in its all-consuming intensity as the possibility of attaining it seemed to increase? For what, think you, was the painfully accumulated hoard stored up, which year by year it has been my reward to dedicate on my knees in yonder chapel to its sacred destiny? Look at those venerable effigies of my forefathers, whose blood runs in my veins, statesmen of their country, generals, princes of the Church, the glories of our race, sleeping there under the vaults raised by their piety, and beneath the shadow of the ancestral home which bears their name, and which did for six centuries mark their place in the land, but now marks only their fall and forfeiture of it! How often on my bended knees on those stones have I offered up to the grieving spirits of those illustrious exiles the tribute destined to be the means of restoring the race and the name to its place in Florence! And now,—now, when at last the long-toiled-for prize seems almost within my grasp, when a just Providence has decreed that the low-born profligate who has intruded himself into the home of the Lunardi shall himself be thrust out, and the Heaven-willed opportunity arises of restoring the grand old name to its place and its honours,—now you would speak of diverting the means for this deliverance to other objects!"

Marietta, while she thus poured forth the deepest feelings of her heart, had been standing in front of the altar, so that the light of the hand-lamp, which she had placed on the balustrade that encircled it, fell exactly on her tall figure drawn up to its utmost height, and on her pale face eloquent with her emotion,

and long tresses disordered by her previous agitation. In the midst of more pressing thoughts the artistic imagination of the Gobbo was struck by the strangely picturesque form, which, standing there in the slender pencil of light amid the surrounding gloom, might have furnished an admirable study for a prophetess in the moment of inspiration. She had unconsciously raised her voice in speaking till the vaults of the little church re-echoed the vibrations of its full contralto tones; and the deep, unbroken stillness which succeeded to it when she ceased speaking, produced by the force of contrast an impression of solemnity on him, and probably on herself also. He remained silent for some minutes, while she crossed the nave of the church, and entering the Lunardi chapel, knelt down on a faldstool before the altar of San Giacomo de' Lunardi.

Sandro, after a minute or two, stepped across and stood by the pillar of the arch that divided the chapel from the body of the church, till she arose from her knees.

"Signora," he then said, "you do me justice in supposing that I can appreciate the feeling and the motives that have actuated you. But you spoke of an opportunity arising which might enable you to achieve your purpose?"

"Certainly I did! This man—the pedlar's son—Marchese as he calls himself—has, it seems, ruined himself so completely that the dear old Palazzo must once more come into the market for sale. I am given to understand that it will assuredly be sold about the end of Carnival. Then there exists but one difficulty, . . ." said Marietta with a deep sigh.

"But, Signora Contessa," interrupted the Gobbo, "I fear, I greatly fear, that you have been led into error in this matter. It is true that Perini is ruined, utterly ruined, and that Palazzo Lunardi will pass out of his hands; but, dear Signora, it will not be openly sold. It will never come into the market. I am well acquainted with the whole transaction. Signor Giuseppe Palli is Perini's chief creditor; and the Palazzo will pass into his hands. Indeed it may be said to be his already, subject to the redemption of it by Perini before the end of Carnival, which is out of the question. Palazzo Lunardi becomes the property of Giuseppe Palli; and it is but too sure that he will not let it slip through his fingers."

Marietta had sunk on a bench against the wall of the chapel as the Gobbo spoke. She seemed perfectly overpowered by this sudden extinction of every possibility of attaining the purpose of her life.

"Then all is lost,—all is over!" she groaned. "Betrayed, deceived, fooled! But it cannot be that the Reverend Canon Guidi was aware of the arrangement of which you speak. He imagined that the Palazzo would be sold?"

"Not so, Signora! If the Canonico Guidi led you to imagine that it was possible that you should become the purchaser of Palazzo Lunardi, he has been false to you also in this. He well knows that at the end of this Carnival it will become the property of Giuseppe Palli."

Marietta groaned aloud.

"In what a miserable delusion I have lived!" she cried, "and now all is over! all is lost! my life has been thrown away!"

"But, dearest Signora, it seems to me that, on the contrary, the very circumstances that seem to oppose themselves to your plans, furnish the means of carrying them into effect."

"What can you mean, or be dreaming of? Have you not yet understood the only aim for which I have lived?"

"Bear with me an instant patiently, Signora Contessa," said the Gobbo, in an excited manner, very different from his usual stilted pomposity, while his eyes glistened with eagerness. "For what purpose," he continued, "do you imagine Signor Palli is so anxious to possess the noble old palace? For what but the endowing and establishing his only child? If the palace belongs to Giuseppe Palli, it will belong to Giuseppe Palli's daughter, . . . and to his daughter's husband. Do you not see a ray of light in the darkness? Surely the way, the only way, by which your object may be attained is to use the handsome fortune at your disposal for the purpose of promoting the marriage of the Signor Conte with the heiress of the Palazzo Lunardi. Does not this seem so to you, Signora Contessa?"

As the Gobbo spoke, and his idea gradually developed itself, Marietta's attention became more and more intently riveted on his words. She remained, when he had finished, for a short space silent, and absorbed in intensely concentrated reflection.

At length, suddenly seizing the Gobbo's arm with a hand trembling with nervous emotion, she said in a low whisper—

“Would the man sell his consent, think you, for thirty-five thousand scudi?”

“It is a handsome fortune, a good deal more, to the best of my judgment, than would suffice to purchase the palace, if it were for sale, but it is certainly small in proportion to the wealth that will be one day the heritage of the Signora Laura. Yet I feel little doubt that Signor Palli would consent to the match, since it is the best thing that he could do. The Signora Laura, you may rest assured, will consent to no other marriage.”

Again Marietta remained silent for awhile, before she replied—

“Yet, my good Sandro, it would not come to the same thing. The palace would be part of the wife's dowry, would be settled on her, would appear as hers in all acts and in the archives for ever more.”

“If the rest were arranged, I think there would be little difficulty in settling all that matter as you would have it. Signor Palli is a practical man who looks only to solid interest. If a marriage were determined on between the Conte Sebastiano and the Signora Laura, he would probably make no difficulty about taking your ready money as a part of the bride's portion, and allowing the Palazzo to become the absolute property of the bridegroom.”

“In that case, indeed, my task would have been accomplished, my life's labour would have its full and sufficient reward, and I could say, ‘*Nunc dimittis servam tuam, Domine,*’ with a tranquil and easy heart. How can I enough thank you, my kind friend, for your truly invaluable information and counsel!”

“Speak not of that, Signora Contessa! Do you not suppose that I too shall have my share in your rejoicings?”

“In truth,” continued Marietta, reflectingly, “the Signora Laura is not in all respects the alliance I would have chosen. But *Basta!* I shall have too great reason to be thankful if I can by her means work out my object.”

“And your ladyship must permit me to observe,” rejoined the Gobbo, “that if unhappily the Signora Laura is deficient

in noble birth, it is in truth the only deficiency which can be alleged against her, as a desirable match for the Conte Sebastiano. And the very considerable wealth—more, probably, than your ladyship thinks for—that she will be heiress to, cannot but be deemed a very favourable circumstance as regards the restoration of the fortunes of the family.”

“ True, my friend! It is most true; and I ought to be very thankful. If this last hope does not melt into disappointment beneath my hand, I *shall* be most thankful.”

“ Does your ladyship agree with me in thinking that it would be desirable to lose as little time as may be in entering into communication with Signor Giuseppe Palli?”

“ Surely so, surely. But it will be necessary . . . there are certain arrangements, . . . ” said Marietta, hesitatingly, as she reflected that there yet lay between her and her object the extremely painful task of making her uncle aware of the deception that had been put upon him for the last twenty years, and of his present real position. It was not that Marietta had any fear of the old man’s making any difficulty whatever about using the money for the purpose of enabling Sebastian to marry his beloved; but the confession that had to be made was a very painful one.

“ I trust,” continued Marietta, “ to be able to speak to Signor Palli the day after to-morrow. Perhaps you will kindly let me see you in the afternoon of that day.”

“ At what hour, Signora Contessa?”

“ We will say at three, if that will suit you, Signor Sandro.”

“ I will not fail to wait upon your ladyship at that hour on the day after to-morrow.”

“ And now, my friend, before we part, there is another point on which I want you to enlighten me. You spoke of my having been misled—purposely misled—by his Reverence the Canonico Guidi. It is more than twenty years that I have considered the Canonico my assured and intimate friend. It is very painful to me to think that I should have been deceived in this. Yet, from what you have said of his knowledge of the arrangement entered into with Signor Palli about the Palazzo, I know not what to think!”

And then the Gobbo pointed out to her at length how the

Canon of San Lorenzo had been perfectly well aware of the destination of the palace, and further, how he had striven—a still worse treachery in the eyes of Marietta, if possible—to induce Sebastian to enter into priest's orders. But he did not tell her of the more serious accusation of the poisoned wine. Finding that for the present, at all events, it was not necessary for any special purpose to do so, he had followed the secret instincts of his nature in retaining that secret yet awhile longer in his own keeping.

When they were at length about to part, it was between one and two o'clock in the morning; and Marietta said, after again and again fervently thanking the Gobbo for his counsel and helpful interference, "But what will you do, Signor Sandro? How will you leave the church? I have no means of letting you out through the house without waking the porter."

"And I should not well know where to go if you did, Signora. I should not like to disturb the house at home at this hour. No, I will remain here; as, in any case, I should have done if I had not been so fortunate as to see you to-night. I shall do very well wrapped in my cloak in this confessional here. I have no doubt that I shall sleep very soundly. And I shall have no difficulty in leaving the church without attracting any observation when the sacristan has opened it before daybreak to-morrow morning."

So Marietta took up her lamp, and stole back to her chamber by the hidden stair in the corner of the Lunardi chapel, and the door communicating with the terrace, with a very much lighter heart than she had ever trodden the same way before. Nevertheless, she did not go to her bed to sleep; for most of the remaining hours of the night were passed by her in thinking of the confession she had to make the next morning to her uncle, and striving to consider how best she might open the matter to him. But she ended by finding herself obliged, as people mostly do in such cases, to leave the manner of the dreaded conversation to the inspiration of the moment.

As for the Gobbo, he was fast asleep within five minutes after Marietta had left the church.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CANON'S AUDIT.

IT was the aged Canon's custom, on returning from his morning mass at the Cathedral, to enjoy an hour or so with his violin before taking his mid-day repose. And this was the time at which Marietta had determined to make her confession to her uncle. It was the first moment at which she could conveniently do it, and she was too nervously anxious to have it over not to seize the earliest possible opportunity for the task.

The old man had returned from his morning duty cheery and in good humour as usual, and was already seated before his music desk, spectacles on nose, and his beloved instrument in hand, when Marietta came into the room, in a state of trouble and agitation that must have been visible to any sharper eyes and more awakened attention than those of the old Canon.

"Good morning, my child. How art thou, my Marietta, this morning? Do just see if thou canst find me, among the music there, that last thing which came from Germany."

"Yes, dear uncle, I will, in a minute. But first I want to speak to you on another matter."

"Nothing amiss with the piece of *signale*,* I trust. It was a lovely picce, and I have been looking forward to it, I can tell thee."

"No, uncle, it is a more serious matter than that. Uncle, I have a confession to make to you."

"Thou wilt have to carry it elsewhere, my child. I'll none of it. I've given up confessing for the last twenty years. And I'll warrant me thou hast no great matter to confess."

"Indeed, uncle," rejoined Marietta, with a deep sigh, "it is a great matter, and one which must be confessed to you."

The old man looked up over his spectacles with a momentary glance of some little surprise; but the matter was not of sufficient interest to interfere with the operation of tuning his

* Wild boar—a favourite winter delicacy in Florence.

violin. And Marietta had to continue her confession amid the twangs, and squeaks, and grunts incidental to that process.

"Indeed, uncle, it is a very serious matter. I have been deceiving you, uncle, for many years past."

"Deceiving me, my child?" *ping! pang! pong! pung!* "It has been a very pleasant deception then!" *pung! pung!* "and has answered marvellously well. Prithee, keep it up a little while longer."

"Nay, uncle, that cannot be. I have led you into error respecting the amount of your income."

"Are we in debt, child?" said the old man, suddenly interested, and for the first time taking his attention from his instrument.

"Not so, uncle; on the contrary."

"And have we not enough in hand to go on to the end of the quarter?"

"More than enough, uncle. You have more than you are aware of."

"Brava, Marietta! In that case, what do you say to a bottle of *Vino di Cipro* after the *cignale*, to-day, eh, eh?" and the old gentleman winked pleasantly as he looked up, and playfully tickled her behind the ear with his bow. "A sealed bottle of *Cipro* once in a way, eh, Marietta *mia?*"

"Alas! my dear uncle, you might have had that and many other things every day, and I have not given them to you."

"Every day! Nay, that would be unreasonable. Let a feast be a feast!"—*ping! pang! ping! pang!*

"But, uncle, it is not a question of a bottle of wine one day or every day. You might have lived in far greater comfort in all ways. You have been deceived in the results of the yearly accounts for years past."

"What do you mean, child? Do let me have my bit of music in peace. I don't want any better comfort than that. What do I know about the blessed* accounts?"

"But, uncle, I tell you that you have been kept in ignorance of the disposal of your income for these twenty years, and it

* *Benedetto* is a very constantly used Tuscan euphemism when the exact reverse is meant.

is absolutely necessary that the true accounts should now be made known to you."

"Twenty years' accounts! Marietta, are you mad? My remaining life would not suffice for the labour. Have you kept all sorts of trouble from me for twenty years, to bring it on me in a lump, and break my back with it when I am near ninety?"

"But only the results, dear uncle!"

"The results have been, that I have lived very happily for twenty years, and may perhaps live a few more, if you will only let me have the quiet enjoyment of my fiddle in peace. Now, do pitch the accounts to the hm other room, there's a dear girl. What signify the accounts if we have enough to go on?"

"Only just to show you the true position in which you stand, uncle."

"My dearest Marietta, look here! You have kept accounts—and all for me, my poor child!—till it has become a mania with you. I, having never kept any, have an equal aversion to them. Habit is everything in this life. But we ought not to impose our habits on each other. Mine are too old to be changed. I am sure I could never make up my mind to bother my head with the accounts of the passing week; and as to having any dealings with the ghosts of dead figures of lire and scudi spent and gone twenty years ago, I absolutely refuse; I couldn't do it, my dear. It would make an end of me at once. And I do so want to try this *fantasia!*"
piree! piree! pang! pang!

"You won't refuse, for my sake, when I ask it of you, uncle, just to look at least at the final balance?"

The old man gave a vicious glance at the neat little heap of account books, which Marietta had brought into the room with her, as he said in reply, "Needs must, I suppose, when *somebody* drives! Well, my child, just go into my room and bring me my snuff-box. You will find it in one or other of the drawers. If one must do such work, one must at least have a pinch of snuff to keep one awake."

The old gentleman knew perfectly well that his snuff-box was in his coat-pocket, and that Marietta would therefore be detained

a minute or two by her vain search for it. She dutifully went on her errand, leaving the little pile of account books on the table. But no sooner had she quitted the room, than the Canon, chuckling to himself with intense enjoyment, rose with wonderful alertness from his chair, and seizing the little packet, neatly tied up as it was, opened the door of the closed earthenware stove, in which a brisk fire was burning, popped the obnoxious books in, and closed the stove. When Marietta came back, saying that she could not find the box anywhere, her uncle was again seated, violin in hand, before his music-desk.

"I can't find the box, uncle! I have looked in all the drawers."

"Dear me! here it is in my pocket; how stupid I am getting!"

"Why where are my books?" said Marietta, looking about; "I thought I left them on the table here! How very strange!"

"Did you take them into the bedroom in your hand?"

"No! I certainly left them here on the table! Where can they possibly be?"

"Things are generally very apt to get out of their proper places; perhaps sometimes they may find their way into the proper place!"

"What do you mean, my dear uncle?"

"Why, my dear, to judge by the roaring I hear inside the stove, I should not wonder if your books had got into the best place for them!"

"Oh, uncle!" cried Marietta, rushing to the stove, and opening the now heated door with the tongs. And there was the heap of account books, over which so many, many hours of rejoicing, of disappointment, of remorse, of castle-building had been passed, still retaining in part the outline of its form, but reduced to a collapsing mass of glowing tinder.

"Ah! they will never break any man's heart any more!" said her uncle, with an expression of intense satisfaction; and he executed a triumphant flourish on the fiddle as he spoke.

"Oh, uncle!" cried Marietta again, looking perfectly aghast at the *auto da fé!*

"My dear, you must forgive me! Self-defence, you know!

I could not bring myself to undergo the torment you proposed to inflict on me. So now then for the *fantasia* in peace and comfort!"

"But, at least, I must tell you, uncle," said Marietta, driven to bay, "that you now are the owner of more than thirty-five thousand scudi!"

"What!" exclaimed the old man, looking at her, with his bow suddenly arrested in mid-air.

"The savings of your income during the twenty years we have lived here amount to the sum I have named."

"You must be crazy, Marietta *mia*. The abominable accounts have addled your brain!"

"Not so, uncle! I am stating a certain fact. I can show you all the vouchers and securities for the money" *

"No! Not that! I will believe you without that! But, Marietta, how is it possible?"

"By constant saving, by keeping you in this poor apartment when you might have lived with every comfort in a much better one, by constantly putting out every penny saved to interest, and by much good fortune in the means found for investing the money, it has been possible."

"Why, Marietta! you ought to be finance minister of the Empire! Who could ever have dreamed of such a thing? But, my child, finance ministers always know what to do with their revenues. What are we to do with ours? What did you say was the amount of it?"

"Between thirty-five and thirty-six thousand scudi, uncle."

"Holy Virgin! It seems incredible! What on earth do you mean to do with it? And mind, Marietta, once for all I wash my hands of it! I did not save it up; and I won't be responsible for the use of it. That is but fair."

"I had thought, uncle," said Marietta, with her eyes fixed on the ground, "that perhaps you would like that this money should be used for the purpose of rendering possible the marriage on which, as you know, our Sebastian says his happiness depends."

"And a capital thought too! Ay, indeed! If this sum of money will do the business, then indeed it will not have been saved for nothing. But to think that all this time I have not

played a note! Now, do you go to Sebastian, my Marietta, and settle it all with him, and let me have half an hour in quiet, there's a darling! And I say, Marietta," he added, as she was about to leave the room, "we may have that bottle of *Vino di Cipro* with the *cignale* to-day, eh? For once in a way, you know, eh?"

So Marietta, with a lighter heart and a more open brow than she had worn for many a long day, went to tap at the door of Sebastian's chamber, on a very different errand from that on which she was bent when on the previous day she had done the same thing.

It will not be necessary for us to be present at this second interview. Sebastian's extreme surprise, his delight, his gratitude to both his uncle and cousin, may be very readily imagined. As soon as he had realised the astounding facts, and overwhelmed Marietta with the expressions of his joy and thankfulness, he wanted to run off instantly to his mistress. But that Marietta could not allow till she had had her interview with Signor Palli. She wished now that she had fixed that same day for the purpose. She had pictured to herself the scene with her uncle as a different one from what it had turned out; and had imagined, that after it she should not have been in a condition to transact her business with the jeweller, even if her uncle should have authorised her to enter on such a negotiation. As it was, she would fain have gone off on her expedition to the Ponte Vecchio forthwith. She was obliged, however, to restrain both her own and Sebastian's impatience till the morrow; and, instead of allowing him to carry his good tidings to Laura's feet, to despatch him in quest of the bottle of *Vino di Cipro*, which was all that the aged head of the family claimed as his own portion of the family fortune.

The meeting, too, at dinner, between the Canon and Sebastian,—the justice done to the choice wine and the wild boar's chine,—the mutual gratulations and glorifications of Marietta and her wonderful stewardship,—and the old Canon's chuckling account of the way in which he escaped once and for ever the infliction of the accounts, must all remain unchronicled. And we must hurry on to the morning of the following day.

The Canon was gone to his mass. Sebastian had accompanied

him as usual, rather marvelling that the old man did not seem more elated at the new prospects of happiness opening before him, although he had given his all to secure it as freely as if that all had been merely his blessing, just as he had marvelled at his imperfect sympathy with his previous distress—for five-and-twenty cannot comprehend the relation in which six-and-eighty stands to the world; and Marietta, having commended the apartment to the vigilance of the little boy in black camlet, knee breeches, and black worsted stockings, set off to walk to the Ponte Vecchio.

As on the previous occasion, the Signora Contessa Marietta de' Lunardi was courteously begged, on asking if she could see Signor Palli, to give herself the trouble of stepping into the little den behind the shop; and, as before, she found that most aristocratic-looking of money-lenders sitting weaving his dangerous webs, like an old father-long-legs, in most unexceptionable glossy black broad cloth.

The old gentleman had little doubt but that the object of the lady's visit was to unsay a great deal of what she had said on the occasion of her previous interview with him in the same place. He thought that in all probability the step that proud lady was thus taking was the result of communication between his daughter and the family of her lover, and expected to have set before him, with all the eloquence the lofty-mannered Contessa could command, the advantages of a connection with a family so noble, and the hopelessness of inducing his daughter to form any other alliance. And to all such representations the jeweller was prepared to oppose the most courteously cutting and decided negative. It was not that he was not fully aware of the difficulty he was placed in by the second of the above arguments, and of the strength imparted by it to the case of the adversary. But he had no intention of giving up the game—at all events yet awhile. There was, at least, all the chapter of accidents in his favour. The young man looked delicate, and might die,—would to Heaven he might! He might prove inconstant,—better still! In short, an hundred things might happen. In the meantime he was quite sure of his daughter's promise to make no marriage without his consent. And his present best policy was clearly to make it evident that not

the slightest chance existed of his ever being induced to give that consent.

The old gentleman rose to receive his guest with a most courtly bow, and waved an invitation with the double eye-glass to her to take a seat in the only chair in the little den besides his own, on the opposite side of the table. Then, pushing his chair a little backwards, throwing his long person back in it, as he shut the Russian leather-bound account-book before him, crossing one knee over the other, and holding the eye-glass ready for action in one hand, he made a little wave, accompanied by a slight inclination of his narrow, shrewd-looking, old grey head, as a sign to the lady to enter on her business.

Now, although Signor Giuseppe Palli would never have failed on any account to receive a lady, and especially a Contessa, with a most profound and courtier-like salutation, above all in the presence of the men in his shop, or of the people passing his shop-door in the street,—and though he would have deemed it quite unworthy of himself to use any modes or phrases, in speaking to such a person, inconsistent with the most polished courtesy, of outward form and manner,—yet it was in the nature of the money-lender to be in substance as insolent to a ruined aristocrat as he could be servilely smooth to one in the process of ruining himself. And being irritated by the treaty of alliance which he suspected between his daughter and these beggared Lunardi, he was prepared to show himself so in his conversation with Marietta.

“I wish to speak to you, Signor Palli,” began Marietta, “on the subject which, as you no doubt remember, was discussed between us on the occasion of my last visit here.”

“I am sorry, Signora Contessa, that you should have thought it worth while to do so. It appeared to me that the topic was finally disposed of.”

“We parted on that occasion,” continued the lady, “in perfect accordance as to our views and wishes on the subject; and I trust we may be equally fortunate now.”

“If your ladyship’s views remain the same, I can answer for there being not the remotest chance of any alteration taking place in mine. But, in that case, I confess I hardly see the necessity for any further discussion on the subject.”

"The views and wishes of all of us, Signor Palli, are subject to change from change of circumstance. And though the grounds of the objection I felt, and frankly expressed to you, with reference to such an alliance as we were speaking of, are among the few things that are immutable, yet reasons may arise strong enough to over-ride that objection."

"Really, Signora Contessa," said the jeweller, with a smile eloquent with the most sarcastic irony, and bowing profoundly as he sat, while the gold eye-glass, with a magnificent sweep of the arm, was pointed towards his own exquisitely plaited shirt-frill,—“really your ladyship is too benignantly condescending. Unhappily, the objections which I on my part humbly, yet perhaps with frankness equal to your own, had the honour to submit to your consideration, are, though certainly not based on grounds which are immutable in their nature, yet such as no reasons will over-ride."

"Yet those objections, Signor Palli," said Marietta, quietly, and with no appearance of having noticed anything offensive in the jeweller's manner, "may be, I presume, changed by circumstances, though not over-ridden by reasons?"

"At all events, Signora, I am not aware of any change of circumstance in the least likely to bring about such a result."

"It is exactly because you are not aware of any such circumstance, Signore, that I am now here to inform you of it."

The jeweller raised his eyebrows, and almost imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders.

Marietta proceeded imperturbably—

"The motive of your objection to a marriage between your daughter and my cousin was based on our want of wealth, was it not, Signor Palli?"

"You compel me, Signora Contessa, to go over again ground which it was painful to me to touch on at all. It was not so much the want of what may be called wealth, as the entire absence of any property whatever,—the destitution, I am obliged to say!"—(he had the word "beggary" on his tongue, but was afraid to utter it)—“to which the Conte Sebastiano is reduced, which made me feel it my duty to reject all idea of such a suitor for my daughter. I was compelled to point out to you, Signora, that the nobility of ancestry, which

appears to constitute the whole of the Signor Conte's available possessions, represented in my eyes a value somewhat less than that of the smallest coin extant; in my eyes, I say. I may be wrong; but such is my valuation."

No speech could be much more distasteful than this to Marietta; yet she did not feel in any danger of losing her temper, but continued the thread of her discourse with the most perfect equanimity.

"I am quite aware, Signor Palli, of your ideas on that subject, and have no wish to discuss them with you. But I may conclude, from what you have said, that if the Conte Sebastiano de' Lunardi were not without I will say a fair competence, then your objection to such a marriage would not be over-ridden, but would cease to exist."

The jeweller shrugged his shoulders, protruded his nether lip, and raised his eyebrows, in the manner of a man who wishes to express his utter indifference to any subject proposed for his consideration.

"Might we not," said he, "employ our time to more profit, Signora, than in discussing hypothetical cases, which are scarcely likely to become actual ones. Forgive me for the suggestion, but I cannot afford to give my time to merely agreeable conversation."

"I have no intention, Signor Palli, of occupying your valuable hours, or my own, with any such idle amusement. My business here to-day is to make you aware of the circumstance that the hypothetical case, which you naturally enough deem so improbable, has in point of fact occurred. The Conte Sebastiano de' Lunardi has become the owner of a moderate competence. Under those changed circumstances he again submits to you an offer of his hand for your daughter."

"I must confess, madam, that your statement completely takes me by surprise," said Signor Palli, who, at Marietta's announcement of Sebastian's changed fortunes, had indicated his renewed interest in the conversation by raising himself bolt upright in the chair, and placing his double eye-glass on his nose. "May I presume to inquire the source of of so gratifying an alteration in the Signor Conte's prospects?"

"I should *not* presume," Marietta could not resist the tempta-

tion of saying, "to inquire of Signor Palli, respecting the sources of the Signora Laura's fortune," and the money-lender was surprised by the very unusual and forgotten sensation of growing red in the face, as she said it; "nevertheless, I have no objection," she continued, "to tell you that the means now at my cousin's disposal are the result of my uncle the Canonico's savings from his income."

The jeweller bent his head gravely at this announcement. "It is very gratifying," he said, with a touch of sarcasm in his tone, "to know that the Signor Conte has such a resource to stand between him and absolute want. But perhaps I may be excused, under the circumstances, for adverting to the fact that my daughter's fortune will be, I may say, a large one. And, to speak frankly, it *does* seem to me that any . . . a . . . results from the source you speak of, cannot be such as to justify me in a . . . regarding them as worthy of any consideration, . . . in relation to the topic of our conversation, . . . in relation, I mean, to that topic:" and he looked at Marietta over his eye-glasses as he spoke.

"My uncle's life has been a very long one; and his ecclesiastical revenues have been considerable. Perhaps I may venture to add that the sums resulting from his economy have been judiciously managed."

At each clause of this sentence the jeweller gravely bent his head in sign of attention.

"But, perhaps," continued Marietta, "the better way would be to state plainly and simply the amount of the sum at my cousin's disposition."

"Assuredly, my dear madam, the better and the only way. Without that we are only talking in the dark."

"The sum which the Conte Sebastiano can command is somewhat more than thirty-five thousand scudi."

"Thirty-five thousand scudi!" exclaimed the money-lender, startled into an accent of genuine surprise, which in the next instant he was much ashamed of for having manifested. "It is, indeed, a large sum, a very large sum to have been amassed by such a means . . . but a very small one, you will forgive me for saying, as the fortune of a pretender to my daughter's hand."

"I have not asked, and do not ask any question as to the amount of the Signora Laura's fortune," returned Marietta, retaining her calm self-possession, despite a twitch at the heart at her companion's last words; "and it is for you, Signor Palli, to consider how far the same motive may weigh with you which influences the Conte Sebastiano's relatives in this matter—the difficulty, namely, of inducing either the proposed bridegroom or the proposed bride to acquiesce in any other arrangement."

"Signora, without admitting the existence of any such difficulty on the lady's side—altogether refusing, observe, to entertain the notion of any such difficulty on our side of the question—I am yet ready to allow that the existence of such a sum as you speak of in ready cash, did I understand you to say? however inadequate in proportion to the lady's fortune, may yet merit a certain degree of attention. Am I right in conceiving you to have spoken of ready cash?"

"Perfectly right, Signor Palli. The amount is in ready money, absolutely available at the shortest notice."

There was a pause of a few minutes, during which Marietta was anxiously doubting whether her cause was won or lost, while the jeweller was rapidly coming to the conclusion that, in truth, he could do no better than accept the proposal before him, and that, considering all the circumstances of the case, it was well, very well, that the matter was no worse. Was it not, in point of fact, just thirty-five thousand scudi saved out of the fire;—just so much gained? For what could he have done but yield, after a more or less protracted struggle, in any case?

"But will you permit me, Signora Contessa," said the jeweller, breaking silence, "to ask an explanation of a circumstance which appears to me puzzling. Since this money was in existence, wherefore did you make no allusion to the fact on the occasion of our conversation here a few months ago?"

"You forgot, Signor Palli," said Marietta, with a slight smile, "that I was at that time equally anxious with you to put an end to all idea of a marriage between my cousin and your daughter."

"True, Signora! But, nevertheless, it seems strange that you should have allowed me to remain in ignorance, when that ignorance led me to . . . to . . . to consider——"

“To designate my cousin and myself as beggars, Signor Palli. I remember, now you remind me of it. I am afraid that you will find it difficult to understand the explanation of the puzzle; . which is simply that—supposing no connection to be projected between us—it was perfectly indifferent to me whether you considered the Lunardi as beggars or not.”

And it was true that Marietta felt such indifference. Her reply, however, was, as the reader is aware, not quite true. But she could not explain to Signor Palli the real causes of her secrecy; and the temptation to let the *roturier* understand that all his insolences to her were as arrows shot at the sun was a strong one.

The jeweller bit his lips; and did not believe a word of what she said.

Marietta then went on to open the question of the Palazzo Lunardi, saying that she had been informed that he was in fact the purchaser of it from the present proprietor; and explaining that it was the wish of her family, as a mere matter of feeling, —a whim,—that in case a marriage were arranged between Sebastian and Laura, such a portion of the sum she had named as might be deemed equivalent to the value of the palace should become a part of the dowry of the bride, while the palace should be the property of the bridegroom.

To any such arrangement, provided no difficulty should arise respecting the valuation of the palace, Signor Palli, who saw, plainly enough that Marietta's proposal must be accepted, and was at the bottom of his heart right glad to get so well out of what he had, ever since his conversation with his daughter, looked on as a very bad business, professed to see no objection.

He should, he said, have the honour of laying the flattering proposal of the Signor Conte before his daughter; and if the Contessa would furnish him with the information necessary to enable him to satisfy himself respecting the property she had spoken of, he would have the honour of communicating with her on the subject at an early day.

And so that important interview ended.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE "SCRITTA."

It is in no wise necessary that Signor Palli's communication of his views to his daughter Laura, when he returned to dinner that day at his usual hour, should be narrated at length. And Marietta's report of the result of her interview with the jeweller to Sebastian may be equally left to the reader's imagination. There can be no difficulty in picturing to ourself the reception of the tidings by either the lady or the gentleman. But there was another person whom the same news reached almost as quickly, who was very differently affected by the information.

It so occurred that some of the details furnished to Signor Palli by Marietta, respecting the sum destined to become the fortune of Sebastian, led him to seek certain explanations from the Canon of San Lorenzo, as having been the person engaged in the investment of the money. And it thus happened that the Reverend Guido Guidi was among the first persons who learned the news of the proposed marriage.

Three things were thus made certain to him, and two others probable.

The certainties were, first, that he had lost the game, as regarded the hope of causing the thirty-five thousand scudi to remain in Marietta's hands useless, or well-nigh useless in her eyes, when all hope of recovering Palazzo Lunardi should have been lost, and the only heir to the name in priest's orders; secondly, that the infamous crime which he had perpetrated was useless and objectless; and, thirdly, that no purpose could be served by administering to the old Canon any more of the drug. He hoped, indeed, that it might turn out that the entire number of doses was needed to produce the effect, and that by discontinuing them his conscience might be spared the weight of so atrocious and gratuitous a murder.

The two probabilities which the news of the proposed marriage presented to his mind were, first, that Marietta had discovered his treason to her in the matter of persuading

Sebastian to take orders; and, secondly, that she had also discovered that he was aware of the arrangement which had been come to respecting the passing of the Palazzo into the hands of a new master.

And for all these reasons the Canon determined to pay a visit to his friends on the third floor of Palazzo Lunardi, to feel his ground, and ascertain how he stood. For, despite the failure of his plans, the Canon had no wish at all to quarrel with persons in the position that Sebastian and his wife would hold in society, as the wealthy owners and inhabitants of the Count's ancestral palace.

"I have been extremely surprised," he said, as he and Marietta were once again alone together in the little sitting-room in which he had so often tortured her, "to hear a piece of news which, at all events, I should have expected to hear, if it were true, from none but yourself, Marietta. What is this about the arrangement of the marriage we were so anxious to prevent?"

"It is true, Guido. The marriage is arranged to take place. Altered circumstances have altered my wishes on the subject. I too have been more surprised than I will express to you by learning that you have been for some time past aware that it was arranged between the Marchese Perini and Signor Palli that the Palazzo should pass from one to the other by private contract, so that in no case could it have been possible for me to become the purchaser of it."

"Holy Virgin! can you be serious, Marietta, in what you are saying? I know anything of this arrangement? I swear to you that I hear of it now for the first time. How should I have heard of it? Am I in the confidence of Signor Palli or of the ruined gamester down stairs? In truth I have reason to complain that you could have harboured such a suspicion for an instant."

"It would be a very great relief to my mind, Guido, to think that I had been in error in doing so. My information was derived from one who I am quite sure did not intend to deceive me. But it is possible he may have been deceived himself."

"A very little reflection must, I should think, suffice to convince you that such must have been the case."

"But alas! Guido, is there not another matter in which you have—Heaven above only knows with what motive—played me false even more cruelly?"

"What in Heaven's name do you allude to? Pray do not wrap your accusations in riddles."

"None can know half so well as you, Guido, all my hopes and all my feelings, with regard to Sebastian; and yet you would have caused him, had your efforts to persuade him to such a step been successful, to take priest's orders!"

"Pshaw! I really wonder that you can make such an accusation to my face! That is what a man exposes himself to by seeking by every available means to second a woman's wishes. Was it not a paramount object with you to cut short every idea and every possibility of this marriage? The greatest difficulty in your way lay in the constancy and resolute determination of the girl. What was the most likely, the only means of shaking that constancy? What but to give her reason to believe that she was given up by her lover; that he had failed in his constancy? And how attain that object? By requesting the young gentleman to change his mind, I suppose! By suggesting to him the propriety of forthwith falling in love with somebody else, perhaps! Much good you would have done by any such means! *My* plan was a feasible one. A man does not make up his mind to take orders on Monday, and accomplish his intention on Tuesday. But his despairing mood properly worked might have led him to the intention of entering the Church. The announcement of that intention properly used would, if anything could, have bred resentment in the lady, and induced her to give him up. The danger would thus have been tided over, and you would have been in plenty of time to guard against any possibility of the suggested notion being really acted on. Was it likely or even possible that he would have sought to carry out such a scheme save by my assistance and intervention? I had the game safe enough in my own hands. And really I am ashamed to have to defend myself against so absurd a suspicion as that you have been induced to admit into your mind by setting forth such a number of self-evident propositions."

"As I said before, Guido, nothing would be more gratifying

to me than to find that I had thought amiss in this matter. It is very bitter to be forced to see a treacherous foe in one who for twenty years has been considered an intimate and trusted friend."

"I must say, Marietta, that I think such a misconception ought to have been impossible to you."

"Perhaps it ought to have been so," said Marietta, submissively and thoughtfully. "You must pardon me, Guido, for an error which has already worked its own punishment by making me suffer acutely."

"May I ask, then, if you still deem me worthy of your confidence, how the affair stands at present?"

"When it became known to me, not only that the Palazzo could never be bought by me, but that it was destined to become a part of the dowry of Laura Palli, I was led to see that the sole hope of accomplishing my object lay in making instead of marring this marriage."

"It needed, indeed, but little penetration to see that, as soon as the facts were known. It only remained to ascertain whether the sum at your command was sufficient to bribe old Palli to consent."

"Precisely so! And that I have done. I need not tell you that Giuseppe Palli's daughter is not in all respects the person with whom I could have wished to see Sebastian ally himself. But, taking everything into consideration, and duly appreciating the narrow escape I have had from seeing my hope altogether shipwrecked, I may be very thankful that matters have turned out as they have."

"Indeed I think you may!" retorted the priest, somewhat sneeringly. "And may I further ask," he continued, "from whom you received the important information which enabled you to bring your boat to port thus prosperously?"

"It was Sandro Boccanera, the Gobbo, who told me the facts of the case, Guido. Doubtless he became acquainted with them through his father's connection with Signor Palli."

A very dark shade passed over the Canon's face, as he replied: "I was not aware that you were in the habit of consulting the Gobbo on your family affairs, Signora."

"Nor have I been, Guido, as you know very well. But you are also well aware that his acquaintance with all of us is of very

old date, and that he has on all occasions manifested a sincere respect and regard for our family," replied Marietta, evading any more precise reference to the circumstances of her interview with Sandro.

Nor did the priest seek to push his inquiries any further upon this point. Though sufficiently ill-pleased at the miscarriage of his own schemes involved in the success of those of Marietta, and feeling no small animosity against the Gobbo for his share in bringing about this result, though he little guessed how great and important that share had been, the Canon of San Lorenzo was quite decided not to quarrel, if he could avoid it, with the Lunardi or the Palli family. And after a little further talk, in the course of which, having apparently recovered his good humour, he congratulated Marietta warmly on the bright prospect of success now open before her; and, making a few inquiries as to the arrangements to be made with regard to the property on either side, and the day fixed for the signing of the contract, he took himself off.

By the time the necessary inquiries had been made, the necessary information given, and the necessary papers drawn up, it was coming towards the end of the Carnival. It was determined, therefore, that in the case of both the events which were to come off,—the marriage of Nanni and Caterina, that is to say, as well as that of Sebastian and Laura,—the "*scritta*," or contract, should be signed at the end of Carnival, and the weddings take place shortly after Easter.

This signing of the *scritta* is a ceremony which forms a more prominent feature in the arrangements which accompany marrying and giving in marriage in Italy than is the case among ourselves. In the first place, though a considerable interval often intervenes between this ceremony and the real tying of the knot, it is practically held to close the door on the period during which after-thoughts and changes of purpose are still permissible. The "troth" is then held to be given and accepted on either side, and though nothing has been done legally binding until the actual celebration of the wedding, "society" would very severely reprobate any drawing back after the signature of the *scritta*, except on very weighty grounds indeed.

Then, in the next place, this *scritta*, which often regulates a variety of matters respecting the future life of the married couple,—such as, for example, in some cases, the number of dishes to be daily set on the family board, and occasionally still stranger matters, which we islanders would never dream of introducing into such a document, or thinking about at such a time,—this important *scritta* is not to be signed in a dingy attorney's office, or in a five minutes' interview at home with a gentleman who brings a blue bag full of papers in a hackney coach; but is a festal though mighty formal affair, which always takes place at the habitation of the bride. There, on an evening designated for the purpose, assemble the relatives and near friends of both the parties, all *en grande toilette*; the bride is dressed “in a concatenation accordingly,”—(a kind of silken garment so called, my dear young lady, made of some delicate material, with lace and jewels; very becoming, as I am given to understand),—and is placed in great state on a sofa by herself, as on a throne, where all the attendant multitude bow before her, a doubtless gratifying though somewhat unamusing introduction to the honours “society” reserves for the venerable corps of matrons.

Of course, this *scritta* and its attendant ceremonial are among the privileges of “property.” “*Cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator.*” Those who possess nothing do not trouble themselves with conveyancers. And, accordingly, our poor Caterina, being a tocherless lass, would naturally have neither art nor part in such mysteries. But Nanni insisted upon being generous. He had lands and goods if she had none. And though usage would in such a case have made anything in the way of what we call “settlement” unnecessary, Nanni persuaded his father to allow him to endow his bride elect with such a dowry as should need the execution of a *scritta*, after the fashion of the lords and ladies of creation. And it was settled that this formality should be accomplished at the Casa Boccanera, on the evening previous to that fixed for Laura's *scritta* to be signed, so that Nanni and his betrothed might be among those present at it.

Among the various little matters of preparation for these two ceremonies, there was one insisted on by the Gobbo which

puzzled his friend Nanni fully as grievously as any of the other mysterious doings in which he had unwillingly taken a part. Taking an opportunity when they were safe from interruption, Sandro took Nanni into his chamber, and showed him, as it appeared to him, six quarter flasks of the wine they had bought, carefully sealed up.

"Now, 'gnor Nanni," said the Gobbo, who, notwithstanding the close relationship in which they were shortly to stand to each other, could not break his habit of giving his brother-in-law the "Signore," "we shall, please Heaven, very soon be at the end of all our mysteries; but there is yet one thing more you must do for me."

"No more sentry-work, I hope, Sandro?"

"Nothing of the sort, 'gnor Nanni. It is only this. You must convey those six quarter flasks into the house of Signor Giuseppe, your uncle; and you must find some place where they can be at hand, under lock and key, where I can get at them when I wish. I shall want to do so on the evening of the Signora Laura's *scritta*. Mind, they *must* be locked up and I must have the key."

"But how am I to manage all that, I should like to know? I am not over much at home in my uncle's house!"

"It can easily be done with the help of the Signora Laura. She will help us. We will tell her that it is for a whim of mine to make a surprise for the guests on the evening of the *scritta*. And in fact that is the exact truth."

"Well! your whim is a queer one, and not a little troublesome, friend Sandro. May not we have a taste of this wonderful wine here at *our scritta*?"

"Not a drop of it for all the world!" replied Sandro. "All the six little flasks must go to Casa Palli, as I said."

"Well, if they must, they must; we'll play out the play, as I said, this time, any way."

And by the intervention of Laura, who fancied that it was merely some joke of Nanni and his friend, intended to make a laugh on the evening of the *scritta*, the flasklets were duly ensconced in a little cupboard, just outside the door of the drawing-room, of which the key was consigned to the Gobbo.

The final settlement between the Marchese Perini and Signor

Palli, by which the former was expropriated, and Palazzo Lunardi became absolutely the property of the jeweller, took place at the beginning of the last week of Carnival. And the fateful evening, which was to be made memorable by the betrothal of Laura and Sebastian, and by the full accomplishment of Marietta's "dream of life" for twenty years, in accordance with the agreement between her and Signor Palli, by virtue of which the Palazzo Lunardi became the property of the Illustrissimo Signore Conte Sebastiano de' Lunardi, in consideration of the sum of twenty-eight thousand scudi paid to the said Signore Giuseppe Palli,—the fateful evening appointed for all the signing and sealing, that was to make these arrangements *faits accomplis*, was fixed for the last day of Carnival,—the Tuesday, that is, before Ash-Wednesday.

Nanni and Caterina had been duly betrothed on the previous evening; and the famous service of table linen, yet finer than that which farmer Palli had seen on the morning of his auspicious breakfast in Casa Boccanera, which little Caterina had boasted of, and which was the pride of her heart, was duly and honourably mentioned in the contract. It has, no doubt, been mentioned again in another contract before now; for Caterina has been a grandmother these ten years,—ah me! how quickly they run, these years, as one trundles down the hill!—and I dare say the famous table-service, as unused as ever, has passed from the walnut-wood press of the mother to that of the daughter,—and ten years hence will probably change hands once again.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening on the Tuesday when the invited guests began to assemble at the house of the jeweller.

The aged Canon Giacomo, the Contessa Marietta, and the Signor Conte Sebastiano de' Lunardi were the first to arrive, and were received by the father of the bride and La Signora Giuditta most courteously. The manner of the jeweller towards the bridegroom was marked by the most courtly urbanity and distinguished cordiality. Nor did this marked change in his manner towards the young man involve the slightest embarrassment of feeling or bearing, or the least consciousness of hypocrisy on the part of the wealthy jeweller. It appeared to him

quite proper and a matter of course that a penniless and unsuccessful musician should be treated in a very different manner from the possessor of thirty-five thousand scudi. And of course his relatives shared in the reflected light; though it is but fair to admit that Signor Palli had always been courteous and respectful to the aged Canon.

He had somewhat greater difficulty in receiving as welcome guests his brother and nephew. Not that he much regretted now that the projected marriage between the cousins had been broken off. For, in the first place, he was well aware that Laura was not likely to deviate from the determination she had expressed to him upon the subject; and, in the next place, although the wealthy money-lender felt and expressed a very hearty contempt for penniless nobility, he was not blind to the advantage of it when allied with wealth, or to the aid which the Lnnardi name and rank would contribute to the placing his daughter in such a position as he would fain have her occupy. It was not, therefore, that he had any grudge against his brother or nephew on this score; but simply that words had passed between them, which made it unpleasant to meet them as guests in his own house. The bluff farmer, however, if he harboured any ill feeling, was contented with such gratification of it as could be derived from ostentatiously setting forth the excellencies of his daughter-in-law, and the good fortune of his son in having at last met with such a wife. Nanni, on his part, was as cordial, and as much at his ease, and as boisterous, as complete contentment and happiness could make him.

Then came Signor Simone Boccanera, with his son and daughter; the father, carefully arrayed in his Sunday suit, and, much puzzled by that circumstance, could not divest himself of the impression that he was about to attend mass. The daughter was radiant with the happiness of high spirits; and as soon as she had made her formal salutation to the master of the house, ran away to seek Laura, who had not yet made her appearance. As for the Gobbo, it might have been supposed that all the management of the business in hand rested on his shoulders, to judge from his air of bustling, business-like pre-occupation.

The lawyers on both sides were careful to be a little after their time, in order that it might appear that their hours were

fully occupied, and together with the last of them to arrive, came the notary.

Last of all, immediately after them, came the Reverend Canonico Guido Guidi, who completed the party. The handsome Canon, by far the most elegant and aristocratic-looking of the assembled group, was as bland and courteous as usual, especially so to his brother ecclesiastic, Canon Giacomo, and to the father of the bride. His manner was, as usual, perfect in its easy self-possession and affable dignity. Nevertheless, a closer observer than any of those present were likely to be on that occasion, if we except perhaps Sandro Boccanera, might have perceived that the magnificent Canon was not in reality thoroughly at his ease. He had an unpleasant sense of all the important business in hand having been arranged and settled without any participation of his; and the remembrance of the latest conversations that had taken place between him and Sebastian was embarrassing to him. He could not but think it probable that Sebastian must have become aware that he, the Canon, was acquainted with the secret of Marietta's wealth, at the time that he was urging on him to give up every hope, and hide himself from the world beneath the cassock. Nevertheless, the Canon was not a man to give up any game till it was absolutely lost. So he put the best, and that an admirably good, face upon the matter; said everything that was most appropriate and most agreeable to every one; and "looked like the time" to perfection.

When all were assembled, the bride and Caterina came in together; the former radiant with beauty and happiness, and quite unaware of any reason for suppressing the frank expression of it. As soon as she had received in due form the severally tendered compliments and felicitations of every one present, the business of the evening was begun by the notary reading the contract of marriage, which included all the arrangements that we should understand by the term "settlements." The document was of course as lengthy as approved legal science could make it, and occupied a good deal of time in the reading, although the practised performer read it in a low voice, and with such rapidity as to be utterly unintelligible, except that as often as the names of any of the parties mentioned in the instru-

ment occurred, he pronounced them with a pausing emphasis and distinctness, as if those were the only words which needed to be clearly and intelligibly expressed to his hearers.

When at length it was concluded, the signing had to be done; and then there were more congratulations and felicitations; and then the professional gentlemen took their departure, while the others of the party remained to supper. It was the last night of Carnival; and this was an additional reason for making merry and doing ample justice to the good things that had been provided by the care of the Signora Giuditta.

The assembled party were perfectly well inclined to see out their Carnival in proper orthodox style, and the supper was a merry one. At length it was time to think of separating. The last minutes of the expiring Carnival were running out, and the time of fasting, of repentance, and of ashes, was at hand. But before the city clocks boomed out the death-knell of the Carnival, it remained to employ the last moments of the time of revelry in drinking the health of the bride. Signor Palli glanced at his watch and then at the *Gobbo Boccanera*. Whereupon the latter rose to his feet and addressed the company.

"*Signore e Signori*," he began, bowing gravely to all around the board, "I have requested and obtained from Signor Giuseppe Palli, our host, and my most worthy patron, the honour of proposing on this auspicious occasion the health of the bride, the Signora Laura Palli. It may be thought perhaps that this honourable office would have more appropriately fallen to the lot of my valued friend and future brother-in-law, the Signor Nanni Palli. But under the peculiar circumstances in which he is at present situated, he perhaps felt that his mind and heart were too full of another object to permit of his doing adequate justice to the merits of another lady."

Here Nanni cried "Bravo, Sandro!" and administered a hand-squeezing to Caterina, who sat next him, under the table, while she became crimson, and replied by a jerk of her elbow, expressive of the most intense affection.

"Not that I would pretend," continued the Gobbo, "to insinuate that I am capable of doing justice to the theme entrusted to me. Far, very far from it! I feel all that I fain would say on the subject, but it is a very different thing to be

able to say it. There are cases in which the more we feel the less we can say. I have had the honour and happiness of knowing the Signora Laura for nearly two-thirds of my life and the whole of hers. I leave it to you to guess, then, ladies and gentlemen, how much I might say were I not restrained by the presence of the lady from speaking of her in those terms in which all speak of her in her absence. And there is the less need for any feeble eloquence of mine on such a subject, inasmuch as all here assembled have enjoyed the same opportunities with myself. There is no person here present, I think, who has not known the Signora Laura from her birth upwards. And it is a peculiar and notable circumstance on such an occasion as the present, that all the party assembled have known each other for an equally long time. Among such old and well-tried friends I may be dispensed from saying more of what you all know, and may proceed at once to propose to you to drink health and happiness to the Signora Laura Palli. The wine, Signori, which the Signora Giuditta has set before us is excellent. But I am sure she will pardon me for having ventured on this occasion to prepare a little surprise for the company. I am going to propose the health of the bride elect in a certain special wine, which has chanced to come into my possession, and which, I think you will all admit, is something quite out of the common way and worthy of the occasion. Have I your permission, Signora Giuditta, to produce my flasks?"

"With all my heart! 'gnor Sandro. There is more than one good judge of a glass of wine here, and they shall say which is best, your wine or mine. But where can yours be? I have seen no strange flasks here!"

"They are in the little cupboard in the wall outside the door, Signora, of which I have the key here. I was obliged to let the Signora Laura into my secret, and she gave me the key of the cupboard.

So saying the Gobbo left the room, and in an instant returned bringing with him six sealed quarter flasks, which he placed before his chair at the table. Then taking from the sideboard one of those large Venice glasses of the *Renaissance* period, which formed its principal ornament, he proceeded to pour into it the whole of the contents of one of the small flasks.

"I have no very large supply of this rare vintage, as you see, Signori; but there will be more than enough for the purpose in hand. One, two, three, four, five, six quarter flasks. Those are all I have got, . . . as yet," he added, looking hard at the Canon of San Lorenzo. "And I did not get them all at one time," he went on. "This first came into my possession on Wednesday, the 27th of last November, and the five following Wednesdays brought me the other five. It cost me a great deal of trouble and watching to get them; but, thank God! here they are. And now to begin with our most honoured guest, I first hand the goblet to the Reverend Signor Canonico di San Lorenzo. Drink, I pray you, Signore Canonico, the health and happiness of the Signora Laura Palli, and her auspicious union with the Conte Sebastiano de' Lunardi!"

Guidi, who had been betrayed into starting slightly when the six quarter flasks were produced, had become perfectly livid in his countenance as the Gobbo had proceeded in his speech. And when the eyes of those present were directed to him by the concluding words, the changed and terribly menacing expression of his features was painfully evident to every one. But by the time the Gobbo had ceased speaking, and when he handed him the huge goblet, the priest had recovered his self-possession.

"Our host must excuse me," he said, "if I decline to be the first to put my lips to a beverage so mysteriously produced, and of which so extraordinary an account has been given. The young man who offers us this wine in such a strange fashion, says that we all here have known each other for twenty years or more. I am proud to call many of you my friends of such a date. But I must confess that, whatever knowledge I have had of Alessandro Boccanera during that time,—and I am apt to know more of people who cross my path than they are often perhaps aware of,—what I have known of Alessandro Boccanera, I say, does not encourage me to place such confidence in him as an invitation so strange and so mysterious requires."

For an instant or two the assembled company looked at each other in silence and consternation, as the Canon pushed the glass from him on the table. The silence was broken by Nanni.

"Seems to me," said he, "that your reverence is in the right of it not to drink any more wine. I think you must have had a glass too much already. What! Sandro Boccanera a poisoner! Give me the glass. I'll be the first to drink my cousin's health in Sandro's wine."

And as he spoke Nanni stretched out his hand to the glass, and was about to raise it to his lips. But the Gobbo put his hand on his friend's arm, saying, as he did so—

"Not a drop, Signor Nanni! Let no one touch a drop of the wine which the Signor Canonico has the best of reasons for refusing. And now, *Signori miei*, since it is necessary to speak clearly, let me tell you the history of that wine of which his reverence knows better than to drink. On Wednesday, the 27th of last November, I, being in the house of the Signor Canonico de' Lunardi, and in the closet between the chamber of the Conte Sebastiano and the front rooms, as the Signor Conte and my friend, the Signor Nanni, will no doubt remember, looked through the window between the closet and the parlour, and then and there saw his Reverence the Canonico di San Lorenzo put a powder into the quarter-flask of wine which stood ready on the table prepared for the Signor Canonico de' Lunardi. His Reverence the Canonico Guidi then left the house, and I having, by means of the servant lad, who can testify to the fact, obtained another quarter-flask of the same wine, secretly changed the two flasks, carrying away with me that which had been poisoned by the Canon Guidi, and leaving in its place that which I had caused to be brought. I had the flask so carried away analysed by a competent chemist the same day, and ascertained that it was beyond all doubt poisoned. By dint of unceasing watching, and many stratagems, I succeeded in similarly changing flasks, poisoned by the Canon Guidi, on five other occasions. I caused all these to be analysed, and here they are!"

The effect produced upon the little party by his statement, falling like a thunder-bolt among them, may be readily imagined. No one spoke a word, but all looked from the Gobbo to the Canon, awaiting the reply of the latter to the astounding accusation brought against him. Marietta alone covered her eyes with her hands, and moaned audibly.

"He who would poison a man near ninety must needs be very impatient!" said the Canon Giacomo, after a long pause.

"I do not think," said the Canon of San Lorenzo, who was now perfectly self-possessed and apparently at his ease, "that there has been any intention here of poisoning your reverence. I will not for a moment suppose that any one here can be so ignorant as to give a moment's credence to the absurd story which that ill-advised young man has thought fit to imagine. You have all here known me, as he reminded you, for more than twenty years, and I do not think that you will be inclined now to believe on any such testimony that I, Guido Guidi, a Florentine noble, a priest, and Canon of the Chapter of San Lorenzo, am a poisoner! Go, tell such a tale in Florence, and see how it will be received. But the wine is there. He says that it has been analysed. If it has not, it can be." And here the magnificent Canon looked down on his small and insignificant-looking accuser with a severe and searching glance. "It can be analysed to-morrow. And if it shall be found to contain poison, as it possibly may, there will be little doubt in the mind of anybody, especially of the public of Florence and the criminal tribunals, by whose hand it has been placed there. For what purpose has this misguided young man done this villainy? It is not for me to form any conjecture upon such a point. It is, unhappily, a well-recognised fact, that persons physically disgraced by nature as this unfortunate young man is, are apt to nourish odious sentiments of jealousy and hatred against their more happily-formed fellow-creatures, and to be led away by a wicked desire to avenge the slight of nature against nature's better-loved children. The intention in this case has evidently been, not to poison my aged friend, but to concoct a malicious and absurd accusation against me. It may be, that the wine is not poisoned at all. But if it be, and if the circumstances of the case go to prove that the poison was placed in it either by the hand of the Canonico Guido Guidi, or by that of Alessandro Boccanera, the deformed working jeweller, . . . I think that it is likely to go hard with the latter."

"Your reverence speaks like a book!" said Nanni, being, much to his own surprise when he thought the matter over afterwards, the first to speak; "and no wonder! It's your trade to

do so. But I tell you fairly, I for one believe that Sandro saw what he says he saw. And if there is a question whether he or another be guilty of poisoning, I'll go bail he is not the guilty man. A crooked back don't make a man a scoundrel, let your reverence say what you will; and I'm blessed if a straight back is any surety for his being an honest one."

"Signor," returned the priest, "you are a very young man; and you speak like one. I have too much respect and regard for your worthy uncle and your father to have any wish to take note of your words. But let me tell you, that the office of bail for that misguided youth's innocence in this matter, which you are so ready to take upon yourself, might turn out to be a very unpleasant, not to say a dangerous one. But I am willing to forget your inconsiderate words and to leave you to correct your impressions by the opinions of all the rest of the present company."

Marietta here raised her head from her hands for the first time since the Gobbo had made his startling accusation. Her face was lividly pale, and her features drawn into hard lines by an expression of intense suffering.

"Not so, Guidi!" she said, in a low voice, which nevertheless fell with strange distinctness on the ear of every one present. "Not so! I cannot be guilty of the dishonesty towards Signor Boccanera of holding my peace. I cannot leave him to suppose that my opinion is such as you assume it to be, or deprive him, when accused by you, of my testimony in his favour. Bethink you what reasons *I* have for judging which is the poisoner of you two. Have you forgotten all the words with which you seared my heart and my brain?"

The priest looked at her, as she spoke, with a glance of startled surprise, which settled into an expression of the most deadly malignity as he replied—

"I forget nothing; but am at a loss to understand the meaning of your words. This matter, however, begins to assume a more serious appearance than I had at first imagined. And I cannot fail to perceive in what has taken place indications of a conspiracy, which those who are more practised in dealing with criminal matters than I am will not fail to trace home to the authors of it. My duty is, however, clear. I demand that

those flasks of wine, sealed as they are, be consigned to the authorities of the criminal police to-morrow, that their contents may be properly analysed. Should they be found undrugged, it will be a case of calumny and defamation for which that poor fool will have to answer. Should the wine, on the other hand, prove to be really poisoned, it will be for him to account for the possession of it, and to answer for the criminal attempt on my life, in having offered it to me to drink. He may then, if he thinks fit, repeat the highly probable tale which he has told to-night. Let him abide the result of doing so! Let him see whether the present government is disposed to pass lightly over the attempt of one, not favourably known for orthodox opinions or devotion to the Church, to blast the character of a man in my position by monstrous calumny, harmless indeed from its absurdity, but not the less guilty in its vile intention. Let him see whether a criminal tribunal in Florence will consider his unsupported accusation against me as a satisfactory explanation of the fact of his offering me poison to drink."

The handsome and dignified Canon looked round, as he finished speaking, upon the appalled and amazed faces of the little company with an air of superb triumph and defiance. He might in truth well do so; and those he addressed knew that he might well do so. There were not wanting, it is true, a variety of circumstances, which, aided by the testimony that Marietta, and Nanni, and the Semplicista might have given, would have gone far towards leading an acute criminal lawyer, and a jury anxious only to arrive at the truth, to a right conclusion from the facts. But in Tuscany, at the period in question, it was a very different matter. And every one there present knew perfectly well that if the matter as it stood were made the subject of a criminal investigation, it would beyond all question go very hard with the Gobbo. Nor would Florence have been at all a desirable place of residence afterwards for any of those who seemed inclined to endorse his story, or who had any reason to know the real truth of it. All the party, in short, knew well that the Canon of San Lorenzo, driven to bay, would be far too dangerous a quarry to be meddled with.

The prudent host was, under the influence of this feeling, the first to speak.

“Signor Canonico,” he said, “your reverence will, I am sure, believe how exceedingly painful it has been to me that this unpleasant scene should have taken place beneath my roof. It is clear, . . . quite clear to my humble comprehension, that some . . . hem! . . . some misunderstanding, shall I say, has taken place. Misunderstandings, we all know, will happen, and it is unwise, when such is the case, . . . clearly unwise, I say, for the parties, under such circumstances, to adhere obstinately to their own impressions. Now, if your reverence will permit me to make a suggestion, with the object of avoiding further unpleasantness to all parties, and of preventing scandal,—which, as your reverence knows better than I do, it is our bounden duty to prevent,—I would propose that these unlucky flasks of wine, which my partner’s son has brought here as a joke—evidently a silly and very injudicious joke—should be forthwith emptied into the sink, and the entire incident forgotten.”

“Signor Palli,” replied the Canon, with lofty dignity, “you speak with the discretion and sagacity which I should have expected from you. But, as you must be well aware, you are asking a great deal of me. You are requesting me to make a very great concession—a far greater concession than a vindictive man would be inclined to grant; greater, I may add, than a man in a less unattackable position than my own could afford to grant. *I* can afford to despise any such attempts to injure me, and well knowing their impotence, may leave them to bring their own punishment on the author. And I am *not* a vindictive man. I am, moreover, sensible that if this matter were made public, a large portion of the painful results would fall on several here for whom I have a true respect and regard. I am therefore willing to consent, Signor Palli, to the request you have made to me; and I trust that my clemency and generosity in so doing will bring home to the evil heart of the fabricator of this monstrous story a just sense of the atrocity of his conduct. Let the flasks be emptied! Let the incident be forgotten! I hereby pledge you my word to take no further steps in the matter.”

The assembled guests either kept their eyes fixed on the plates before them, or stole furtive glances of astonishment and

inquiry at each other ; while the poor Gobbo looked piteously from one to the other in the most utter perplexity and stupor. Nobody ventured to speak a word ; but Nanni got up from his seat and took a chair by Sandro's side. It was a small matter ; but to the day of Nanni's death, at a ripe age, Sandro would have gone through the fire for his brother-in-law, in consequence of that little action.

"Signor Canonico, do me the favour to step with me a moment," said the jeweller, gathering the poisoned flasks in his hand ; "we will together witness the destruction of these flasks, which have made already mischief enough. All the mischief, probably, which they are capable of doing," he added, in an undertone, as he and the Canon left the room together, "but more than enough,—more than enough."

"I trust that you are aware, my dear sir," said the Canon, after the flasks had been carefully decanted into a sink, "that I have consented to overlook and forget this matter out of regard for yourself, and from that motive only. And now I will wish you good night. It is getting late, and I will not return to the party in the next room. My presence would only serve to give pain to some among them, and I have no desire to give pain. Good night !"

"The Reverend Canonico is gone," said the master of the house, returning to his guests. "He declined to return hither."

And then all present felt as if a weight and a spell had been taken off them ; and everybody began to speak at once, and many hands were stretched out to grasp those of the poor Gobbo.

"You don't believe, then, that I am a calumniator, and a liar, and a poison-dealer ?" he said, in a faltering voice, and with tears in his eyes.

"Believe it !" cried Nanni ; "save me from ever drinking with his Reverence Canon Guidi !"

"*I know* that Sandro Boccanera has spoken the truth," said Marietta, sadly and solemnly. "I know that he has preserved my uncle's life ; and it shall be my care to let each one of you, who care to learn the truth, know all that our family owes to his kindness, his uprightness, his courage, and his ability."

Sandro could not speak in reply to these words, but he

rushed up to Marietta's side, and kneeling on one knee, kissed her hand.

"To think that such a man should play such a *basso* as he did!" cried old Canon Giacomo.

"Do *you* believe me to have spoken the truth, Signore?" said the Gobbo, addressing himself to the jeweller.

"My dear Signor Sandro, I believe that it is sometimes a very dangerous thing to speak the truth. I believe his Reverence the Canon of San Lorenzo most implicitly when he says that if this ugly matter went before the tribunals it would go very hard with you, whether you had spoken the truth or not. I believe that you would have been far wiser, having removed the poisoned wine successfully, to say nothing to anybody, and that we shall all be far wiser to say as little more about the matter as possible."

"But we have not drunk Laura's health all this time!" cried Nanni.

"I think Sandro's health ought to come first," said Laura; "I feel inclined to pledge it in a bumper myself."

"So do I. *Brava, figlia mia!*" cried the old Canon.

And so the Gobbo's health was drunk with all the honours; and then that of the bride elect; and then, Lent-tide having already commenced for the last half-hour or more, the party separated.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CONCLUSION.

THERE remains little to be told of our story. Nothing, indeed, of the facts of the history which this volume was intended to relate—that of the recovery of the Palazzo Lunardi, as I have chosen to call it, to its ancient possessors, by the self-devotion and life-long struggle of a lady of the family. Her work is done—her success complete.

At the end of Lent the two marriages were concluded prosperously and happily in all respects. Nanni and Caterina, of

course, went off to their home in the Casentino; but they spent a week or so every Carnival with their friends in Palazzo Lunardi. The Gobbo continued in his old home with his father as long as he lived, which was not above two or three years; and after his death he accepted a room in the third floor of the Palazzo, and has lived ever since as a member of the family—*maestro di casa*, I believe he calls himself; and amply earns his salt, I take it, by managing Sebastiano's affairs for him, while he is living in a world of crotchets and quavers.

Il Conte Sebastiano and his wife of course took up their residence in the palace, and have increased and multiplied till there is no present danger that the name of Lunardi should fail in the land. The unlucky opera, it may be mentioned, was performed with entire success the following Carnival. No *prima donna* fell ill when the wealthy amateur Conte's opera was to be performed; and as the unfortunate words, "*Spento è Arbace*," had, as a concession to the popular feeling, been changed to "*Arbace è spento*," no burlesque rhyme was suggested to anybody, and the work was found to abound in merit.

When old Simone Boccanera died, Signor Giuseppe Palli, being deprived of the assistance of his partner, *did* at length what he had been so long declaring he would do;—he finally retired from business, and went to live at his villa of Schifanoia. But this *retiring* is not a step which all men can venture on with safety. And Schifanoia became to the retired man of business a more complete "refuge from care" than he had calculated. For, before the first year of his absolutely unoccupied leisure was over, he, too, followed his junior partner.

Of course, the venerable Canon Giacomo could have but a few more years to live. He outlived the jeweller, however, and outlived his ninetieth year. As long as he lived Marietta continued, of course, to live with him; and they remained in the old apartment on the third floor. No entreaties of Sebastian and Laura could induce the old man to leave the apartment in which he had so long, and, as he said, so happily lived. He could not give up the sunny *loggia* with its outlook over the Vallombrosan hills; and as for climbing the stairs, if he were to miss that exercise on his daily return from mass, he should never have an appetite for his dinner.

And when the old man at length was gathered to his fathers in the Lunardi chapel, Marietta still persisted in inhabiting the same little apartment! That had been the scene of all the hopes, the fears, the struggle, and the interest of her life, she said, and she wished nothing else than that the same familiar home should be the haven of her rest. Not that she did not take an active and eager interest in every part of the old mansion, constantly visiting each portion of it, and watching over its conservation with an affection that seemed to attach itself to every stone of the fabric. She succeeded in very soon causing the removal of the offending glass doors at the bottom of the great staircase, and I suspect that, if she had been left entirely to her own devices, she would have torn from their hooks in the walls the fine new windows with their large panes which the abominated Perini man had substituted for the old ill-fitting and little-light-giving casements. But this Sebastian could not be got to consent to. To her also fell the congenial task of continuing the entries in the book of family records, in which the last event mentioned had been her father's death. The pleasure with which she inscribed on the pages the next entry, recording the re-purchase of the palace, may be easily imagined, and it was with scarcely less satisfaction that she added to the record in due time the birth of an heir to Palazzo Lunardi and the renovated fortunes of the house. But the occupation that was perhaps most dear to her of all was the restoring and beautifying of the Lunardi chapel in the church of San Giacomo. Many hours of her life were spent there, and there she now rests beneath a handsome monument to the memory of "MARIETTA COMITISSA DE LUNARDIS," with a somewhat lengthy lapidary Latin record of the embellishments executed by her in the chapel; a modest rendering of the "*Si monumentum quæris, circumspice,*" to which, in truth, Marietta was well entitled, even if the glance around comprised the neighbouring palace.

As for the Reverend Guido Guidi, his work on "Reserved Cases" received the distinguished approbation of the highest authorities at Rome. He was made, as has been already stated, Bishop of Hippopotamos *in partibus*; became, as he had specially ambitioned to become, confessor to the most exalted personage in Tuscany, and was in time promoted to an impor-

tant bishopric with cure of souls, and eventually received that crown of ecclesiastical earthly glory—A RED HAT. During the whole of the long career marked out into stages by these successive promotions and successes, the Canon, Confessor, Bishop, Cardinal, pursued the dignified tenor of his prosperous way, approved, admired, respected, envied, honoured. And when he died, men put a fine marble with a magniloquent inscription over his grave, and hung a red hat by a long cord from the lofty vault above it.

This was his reward ; a due and fairly earned one. Do not let us grudge it to him ; or fancy that our moral sense, or poetical or other justice is outraged by the record of such a proper and normal series of circumstances. Industry and intelligence will produce wealth. Temperance will produce health. Decorum and fair seeming will produce honour, and station, and respect. The race *is* to the swift on the special race-course on which each race is run. But if you enter for the "Wealth" sweepstakes, you must not expect the "Health" cup for your running in that race, however swift. If you go in for nobility of nature and high moral worth, you must not expect to receive your prize in cash.

The Canon Guidi did run well in the race for which he entered himself ; and won its prizes accordingly.

Nothing could be more imposing, richer, more decorous, fair-seeming, grander, than the splendid scarlet mantle which draped the majestic figure of his Eminence as he stepped in state before the eyes of the admiring crowd. But as to what passed in the heart that beat beneath the mantle, and the thoughts that were busy under the scarlet hat—and as to the question whether you or I, reader, would accept the grand mantle and the hat, with all the good things that go with them, on the condition of accepting with them his Eminence's heart, and his Eminence's head, with the feelings and thinkings of or belonging to those Right Reverend organs—why that is another matter.

THE END.

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